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FOUNTAIN FIRM'S LIFE AFTER DIANA

By Richard Vaughan

Gustafson Porter's new square in Nottingham city centre does not open until next Tuesday (3 April), but it is already being lavished with praise.

For any other practice, the success of the £12 million Old Market Square scheme might lead to a glut of work coming their way – but not for Gustafson Porter.

Ever since it won the competition for the Diana Memorial Fountain in Hyde Park the practice has been suffering the consequences of taking on this ill-fated scheme.

The firm admits that had it not won the Nottingham commission in 2003, a year before the Diana Memorial opened – before being almost immediately shut after visitors slipped and injured themselves, it is unlikely it would have been considered at all.

Despite a glowing reputation abroad, Gustafson Porter still struggles to find work in the UK, and practice partner Neil Porter says he is not expecting much to change any time soon.

He says: 'Without wanting to sound too negative, I think it will take a while before people forget about the Diana Memorial. It will take some time before our name is no longer synonymous with it.'

There are hazards a landscape architect faces, says Porter, which an architect designing buildings can avoid.

'When a building opens, it can be tested behind closed doors, and all the glitches can be taken care of,' he says. 'But a public square is immediately open to people.'

Of the many lessons the practice learned after the Diana

Memorial, one which above all remains, according to Porter, is managing a client's time aspirations.

And although the Old Market Square scheme in Nottingham was three months late – the problem this time was the delivery of the stone, and nothing to do with the practice – it has been very well received.

The square was last worked on in the 1930s and was subsequently listed, meaning Gustafson Porter needed to acquire listed-building consent to start work on the site.

The original square had to be levelled and a flat market space created, with organic, French and other food markets set to take over the site on a weekly basis.

The practice chose different-coloured stone – sourced where possible in

Europe – to indicate the different sculpted levels and provide resting places or water features to the space.

According to Nottingham Council leader Jon Collins, the new design is 'one of the highest quality... creating an impressive public space for the future'. Collins also says the new square 'is a fantastic asset for the city'.

This is rare praise, but it is worth remembering that Gustafson Porter was chosen for the Diana Memorial on merit, and is still seen as the landscape architect of choice elsewhere in the world.

In fact, the firm has just won a competition to design part of Singapore Bay, and has various impressive projects in the Middle East, but, it seems, the firm will have to wait until the UK forgets Diana. They shouldn't hold their breath.



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1. Gustafson Porter admits it is still suffering fallout from its strife-hit Diana Memorial Fountain

2, 3 & 4. The practice is rebuilding its reputation with the acclaimed Old Market Square scheme in Nottingham



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