Opening August 20, 1959, Polo Park Shopping Centre was Manitoba’s first large-scale shopping mall. An impressive sculptural program was created as part of its original design. During the 1950s, shopping centres were a new type of commercial space in Canada. As part of the surge of development in Winnipeg following World War II, Polo Park was placed in proximity to suburban districts for the convenience of the residents. Project developers envisioned it as an up-to-date “life centre” geared towards suburban families. It would provide a variety of stores, entertainment, and plenty of free parking spaces. The local architectural firm Green Blankstein Russell and Associates was hired by David Slater Ltd. to create a luxurious, functional, and convenient space. They fulfilled the client’s vision with a sleek, spacious, open-air, Modernist building. Architecturally, Polo Park followed the shopping mall typology, established by earlier American prototypes. However, the inclusion of artwork in shopping centres had not been standard practice. While a shopping mall may seem like an unlikely venue for contemporary art, Polo Park Shopping Centre featured an extensive and original modern sculptural program. The inclusion of artworks “the man on the street would enjoy” served to beautify and customize the space.[[1]](#footnote-1) To refute charges that Modernist architecture in the city was careless and homogeneous, and to ensure a pleasant, restful atmosphere and a memorable visit for patrons, four local artists were commissioned by the architects to participate in the design of the project. Amongst these artists was Richard Williams, the Director of the University of Manitoba School of Art at the time, and a talented professional artist. Williams contributed two artworks to the shopping centre: *Birds in a Bluff* [fig. 1], an abstract wood and metal “birdwall,” and *Mock Wall* [fig. 2], a geometric pre-cast concrete construction. These sculptures were intended to be playful, engaging pieces and were created specifically for the shopping centre. Thus, Polo Park offered an example of the Modernist integration of sculpture and architecture. The artists worked alongside the architects from the early stages of the project to produce a harmonious experience and used their sculpture to enrich the space as a whole. Upon completion of the project, Winnipeg was heralded for its patronage of good design and received national attention for Polo Park.

Richard Emerson Williams was born September 5, 1921, in Dormont, Pennsylvania.[[2]](#footnote-2) Williams created artwork from an early age. He was interested in three-dimensional forms and what he could create in space. He attended the Carnegie Institute of Technology from 1940 to 1943, where he completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in sculpture. After graduation, he joined the United States Air Force as an aircraft mechanic, servicing B24 bombers until his discharge in the spring of 1946. After that phase in his life was complete, Williams worked briefly as a full-time, professional artist with help from a new business army tax credit available to former soldiers.[[3]](#footnote-3) He set up a studio in his parents’ attic, but was unable to make a living. To supplement his income, in 1946 he taught art classes at the Georgia State College for women in Milledgeville. He enjoyed the work and stayed on until 1950. At that time, Williams was advised to upgrade his education in order to acquire a more permanent post, and returned to school to pursue a Master’s degree. With the help and encouragement of Jim McDonough, his superior at Georgia State, he selected the University of Iowa, in Iowa City, where he specialized in printmaking and worked under the guidance of Mauricio Lasansky. He graduated from the University of Iowa in 1954 with a Masters degree in Fine Arts.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Prior to his arrival, Williams knew very little about the city of Winnipeg or the Canadian art scene. He was looking for a professional occupation and seized the opportunity to assume the Director’s position at the University of Manitoba School of Art. Williams knew Iowa alumni were in Winnipeg and met with William Ashby McCloy, the Director, several times before being offered and accepting the position.[[5]](#footnote-5) Williams was dedicated to continuing the modernization of the School begun by McCloy. While many of the American instructors stayed for only a few years in Manitoba and all of his Iowa predecessors had left before his arrival, Williams settled in Winnipeg permanently, gaining Canadian citizenship in 1969. He held the position of Director from 1954 to 1970 and continued to teach until his retirement from the University of Manitoba in 1987.[[6]](#footnote-6) Williams contributed enthusiastically to the enrichment of the art scene in Winnipeg and Canada.

Richard Williams came to Winnipeg during a period of change. At the end of the Second World War, North America experienced an economic boom and many cities began a process of urban reorganization. At this time, urban populations were shifting from older, more centralized neighbourhoods to newly developed suburban areas. The city of Winnipeg was experiencing its second major building expansion.[[7]](#footnote-7) A sharp population increase, brought about especially by the formation of new families, caused a housing shortage which led to a campaign of building. Winnipeggers were increasingly migrating away from the city centre and into newer peripheral communities such as St. James, East and West Kildonan, St Boniface, and St. Vital.[[8]](#footnote-8) The pioneering Canadian urban planner Eugenio G. Faludi explains in his 1949 article “The Trend in Shopping Centres” that “the unprecedented development of urban land that has taken place in recent years around the larger population centres of Canada indicates that a decentralization process of metropolitan communities has already started. The single ‘territorial body’ of some cities, such as Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg, and Vancouver is slowly expanding into a solar system of self contained but not self governing satellite communities.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This was certainly true of Winnipeg and contributed to the development of Polo Park.

Another significant factor in urban and retail development after 1945 was the increase of mobility in the general North American population. There was an immense increase in car use and ownership. Norman Pearson writes: “from 1951 onwards the dominance of the motor car was reflected in rapid changes in the structure of urban shopping.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Downtown Winnipeg’s older, narrow streets, and limited parking areas resulted in traffic congestion that acted as a deterrent to shoppers. Also, the city’s decision to eliminate streetcars in 1955, in favour of diesel-fuelled buses resulted in a more flexible type of vehicle that could venture further from the city centre.[[11]](#footnote-11) Gradually, developments that accommodated the motor vehicle were undertaken. In 1947 Wildwood Centre, located in Fort Garry, was the first commercial development in Winnipeg that was designed to better accommodate the car-driving public. This project signalled a change and was ahead of its time.[[12]](#footnote-12) It was followed by other neighbourhood-level shopping centres such as the South Winnipeg project in 1955, the Silver Heights Shopping Centre in1958, and West Kildonan Centre in 1958. At Polo Park, free parking and access to major traffic routes were promoted as attractions in customer service.

There have been three main stages in the development of shopping malls in North America: the uncovered mall, the enclosed mall, and the megamall.[[13]](#footnote-13) As well, three types of shopping centres, categorized by size, are recognized: the neighbourhood, the community and the regional mall.[[14]](#footnote-14) Polo Park Shopping Centre is classified as a regional centre, the “largest type of shopping centre, and it provides complete comparison shopping facilities in depth and variety. It closely resembles the downtown in its array of stores and services, providing 30-60 businesses in one location.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The mall experience was first available to North American shoppers in 1923 with the opening of the Country Club Plaza in Kansas City, Missouri.[[16]](#footnote-16) By 1935, “the general pattern of most present day centres had been set—a rectangular arrangement with the largest stores at either end, designed so the stores complement one another with a full range of merchandise available.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Following World War II, huge regional shopping centres emerged as the leading building type. Northgate Shopping Centre, designed by architect John Graham and located just outside of Seattle, was the first regional shopping centre to open in North America.[[18]](#footnote-18) It was not until the 1950s that shopping centres became popular in Canada. The first Canadian shopping centre, Park Royal Shopping Centre in West Vancouver, opened in 1950.[[19]](#footnote-19) In 1956, Victor Gruen, an American émigré architect, invented the enclosed mall, today’s standard shopping centre. He believed his idea would help new urban populations, stating, “It is our belief that there is much need for actual shopping centres—market places that are also centres of community and cultural activity.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Public artwork in shopping centres was included to augment the quality and character of the space. At first, shopping centres were embellished with elaborate decorations. Jesse Clyde Nichols, the developer of Kansas City’s Country Club Plaza, designed his shopping centre with an ornate Spanish theme. It was decorated with courtyards, towers, and red-roofed, stucco buildings. Nichols personally selected artwork “to adorn the Plaza’s streets and sidewalks; antique sculptures, columns, tile-adorned murals, wrought iron and fountains.” [[21]](#footnote-21) On the inclusion of artwork, Mr. Nichols stated:

In some of our shopping centres, as well as in our residential neighbourhoods, we have installed objects of art, and believe it has given identity and appeal which is helpful to our merchants. These include such features as small pools, benches, sundials, wellheads, statues, fountains, and vases, and in our second floor corridors we have spent considerable money on adornments such as tile plaques and pictures.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Later, the architectural norm became “the simple, modern design with arrangements giving greater flexibility and adaptation to changing requirements.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Artwork, along with landscaping, was often included in shopping centres as beautifying agents but was never defined as a necessary component. Mr. Hugo-Brunt writes, “Developers primarily are concerned with financial returns, not aesthetics. Most centres are characterized, therefore, by conservatism, an unwillingness to experiment, poor design and monotony.”[[24]](#footnote-24) However, in his essay concerning the allied arts, Alan Jarvis, editor of *Canadian Art* wrote, “where the businessman does possess inherent taste and understanding of, and respect for, the artist, the architect, and designer the result can be prodigious.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Such was the case in the original Polo Park development, with its incorporation of a professionally designed program of public art.

The Polo Park Shopping Centre was planned as a gathering place for Winnipeggers to shop and spend their leisure time. The completed development consisted of 40 shops, a Simpson-Sears department store, a bowling alley and two grocery stores, Dominion and Loblaws.[[26]](#footnote-26) Over 3,500 parking spaces were available free of charge to Polo Park shoppers. It was the first regional shopping mall in the city and the largest in Western Canada [fig. 3].[[27]](#footnote-27) This new suburban shopping centre was conceived as a joint venture between Simpson-Sears and Polo Park Centre Ltd. On March 29, 1954, the partners, led by David Slater, signed an agreement with J. Speers to purchase the land on which the Polo Park Race Track operated.[[28]](#footnote-28) This land was desirable for its large size and proximity to Portage Avenue and suburban neighbourhoods. The mall type was chosen by David Slater Ltd. after a scouting tour of major North American shopping centres. The architects’ initial concept for the project was a functional and attractive, enclosed shopping mall for the city. However, Mr. Slater felt, “that Winnipeg did not lend itself to the covered mall because closing in the 1000 foot one-storey mall would give the effect of a tunnel,”[[29]](#footnote-29) in any case, finances did not allow for an enclosed mall.[[30]](#footnote-30) Instead, the architects designed two rows of covered stores with entrances on the exterior and interior of the plaza. The stores were joined by a central, open, concrete courtyard and the Simpson-Sears department store which served as the northern anchor. Construction began on the original Polo Park mall in 1956.[[31]](#footnote-31) It was a fourteen-month building project, “one of the largest in Winnipeg” at that time, at a total cost of 15 million dollars.[[32]](#footnote-32) The centre featured widened walkways which accommodated pedestrian traffic and which were partially sheltered by an overhang roof. Yet, the uncovered courtyard proved to be impractical in the harsh, prairie climate. Four years after it opened, G.B.R. would be approached again to enclose the mall, the first of several renovations that would alter its design beyond recognition.

A comparable Canadian retail development was the Don Mills Convenience Centre. In 1953, the developer E.P. Taylor, the architects John B. Parkin Associates, and the landscape architect Macklin Hancock, planned the Don Mills urban development, situated just north of Toronto. It was the first entirely planned community in Canada.[[33]](#footnote-33) Don Mills is known for its exceptional planning and was used as a model for future community building. The community’s shopping centre, Don Mills Convenience Centre, was established in 1955. Originally, it was intended to serve the local community as the commercial and cultural focus of this “urban village.” The shopping plaza was a one-storey open-air retail strip. Its first incarnation did not feature any public artwork, only Modernist architecture and landscaping: “the Convenience Centre’s covered walkways, landscaped open spaces and outdoor courtyards create a graceful, pedestrian-oriented civic centre even as it celebrates competitive merchandising.”[[34]](#footnote-34) In the early 60s, it was expanded to become a regional centre, with 85 stores at the height of its popularity. At that time, two ceramic murals were commissioned to adorn the renovated Don Mills Centre. In 2006, The Cadillac Fairview Corporation announced that Don Mills Centre would be demolished in order to build a new complex named “Shops at Don Mills,” which opened on April 22, 2009.[[35]](#footnote-35) It is instructive to note that the original artwork was not lost. Both murals were fully restored and transferred to the new centre to preserve the centre’s heritage. They are currently on display alongside newly commissioned art.

From the early stages of the Polo Park Shopping Centre project, the architects wanted sculpture to be part of the design. The architectural firm responded to a critique by Professor George Swinton, who warned that due to careless building, Winnipeg was becoming an “ugly city.”[[36]](#footnote-36) With the permission of the developers, G.B.R. challenged Swinton to assemble a group of artists and create public art to beautify the Polo Park development. A *Winnipeg Tribune* article reported that “C.N. Blankstein, of Green Blankstein Russell and Associates, says his firm always desires to beautify commercial centres with such works of art and on this occasion the owners agreed to give local artists an opportunity to dress up the shopping centre.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Public art was incorporated into the building project in order to ensure a high-quality atmosphere for shoppers. The developers hoped that the end result would be “the country’s most beautiful shopping centre.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Williams became involved with the Polo Park development through Swinton, his friend and colleague at the School of Art.[[39]](#footnote-39) In total, four artists formed the group: Duane W. Eichholz, James S. Willer, George Swinton and Richard Williams were put on retainer and given near-complete freedom to design sculpture specifically for the Winnipeg development. The only instruction provided was to “design something three dimensional that would be compatible with the architecture.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Swinton stated, “The architects have given our group full scope. We are working together and this feeling of responsibility rather than subordination is extremely important to us as artists.”[[41]](#footnote-41) According to Williams, “this had never happened before in Canada. We were working alongside architects almost as if we were their team.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Williams remembered the early stages of the project fondly. The group met regularly to work on the project. They decided that they would create a kind of “concrete garden” and drew up plans on how best to fill the space.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Initially, the artists proposed designs for mall furnishings and sculptures to adorn Polo Park. However, budgetary constraints and liability issues restricted what was produced at the shopping centre. In the end, seven artworks were commissioned. James S. Willer a Winnipeg commercial artist who specialized in concrete designs, created two works: a large pre-cast concrete *Sundial* [fig. 4] situated at the south entrance, and a pair of hanging *Screens* [fig. 5],concrete blocks cast in stainless steel which hung on the east and west entrances. Swinton designed an abstract fountain in concrete entitled, *Acrobats* [fig. 6] which was situated in the centre of the mall. Also positioned near the centre of Polo Park was Duane W. Eichholz’s *Bronze Lady*. Richard Williams’ *Mock Wall* was placed at the north entrance of the mall and *Birds in a Bluff* was located approximately thirty meters from it.[[44]](#footnote-44) Modern, mainly abstract art, was created for Polo Park because it was seen as up-to-date and attuned to the building design.

The artists secured separate contracts with the developers but financial arrangements were handled by G.B.R. The firm allotted a significant amount of money to the sculptural decoration of Polo Park Shopping Centre, paying each artist a retainer fee of two hundred and fifty dollars per month, assuming the cost of all materials and labour, and providing on-site studio space. The selected artists completed the work in three stages. First they supplied the firm with preliminary sketches. Next they produced three-dimensional models of the selected designs. Finally, they worked with contractors and designers to coordinate the completion and installation of the final works. The date of completion was set for May 1, 1959.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The artwork was designed to be functional, aesthetically pleasing, and memorable. Shoppers could use these landmarks as meeting places and orienting agents. Willer accounts for his screens by saying, “[they] are there to tell customers East from West. Two cocks crowing against a rising sun indicate East. Conversely, an owl preparing for flight shows the West entrance to the ‘Centre.’”[[46]](#footnote-46) The orienting function is also apparent in Miller’s *Sundial*, where he aimed for “dramatic simplicity” and a collaboration of “form and function.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Miller describes a sundial as a precise time machine and therefore conceived of the work as a “clean and geometric form” in a new material. The pre-stressed concrete, an innovation in engineering, allowed the vertical sculptural elements to be completely unsupported and achieve the effect desired by the artist. George Swinton describes his fountain by saying, “My sculpture is intended to be strictly functional. It is a fountain with the play of acrobats as subject matter. Nothing more nor less profound than this is intended. The play of acrobats has a definite association with the play of water. No doubt those who cannot see the play of acrobats will recognize the pieces as a fountain.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Duane W. Eichholz, lecturer at the School of Art and an Iowa University graduate in ceramics and sculpture, was also interested in the quality of the space when he designed his six-foot sculpture, *Bronze Lady*. He explained that *Bronze* *Lady* is a “’reality’ abstracted from nature and tradition. It is meant to be experienced as something richer than a nervous neon sign.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Richard Williams had numerous ideas for sculpture at Polo Park. He sent his initial sketches [figs. 7-16] to the architects along with a note [fig. 17] indicating an early preference for interactive, playful works. The sketches are quick gestural drawings, presumably from life, and depict several different subjects, mainly figures at play. *Father* [figs. 18-19], “a concrete play sculpture for crawling on and under” is a simplified male figure down on his hands and knees which invites the viewer to play like a child. The repeated imagery implies the artist is working out his idea. Williams’ tendency is to reduce and abstract his forms, simplifying his lines and playing with connectivity and volume in space. Once the artist had solidified his concept, he drew out his ideas [figs. 20-25] and then constructed a small detailed maquette of each artwork [figs. 26-27], with the assistance of a student. Williams’ submitted his sketches and model to the project designers, who made architectural drawings to scale based on his work.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The artist’s final work is a continuation of earlier ideas based on play but is more demure. These abstract sculptures do not have a kinetic element but do contain life and energy. They invited participation from the viewer. The artwork directs and mediates the flow of shoppers. It serves as a meeting point, resting place, or even a climbing structure. Yet, these sculptures should not be dismissed as decorative landmarks. Williams’ constructions are engaging works of art that reinforce the function of the outdoor concrete courtyard as a pedestrian space. The artist worked with the group concept of a public garden or park, traditional public spaces, when designing his sculpture for the new commercial development. As a result, Williams’ artwork matches the energy emitted by the shoppers and reinforces the concept of Polo Park as a public recreation centre.

Richard Williams’ *Birds in a Bluff* is a two-and-a-half-meter tall, abstract depiction of birds roosting in trees. It is constructed from laminated British Columbian red cedarwood, (the same material traditionally used to make totem poles), and stainless steel, on a concrete base.[[51]](#footnote-51) Its material and subject gives it an organic quality but Williams created a sculpture that interpreted and expressed a basic subject without replicating nature. The artist describes *Birds in a Bluff* thus: “There should be no difficulty in recognizing the subject, but it must be remembered that this is a sculpture in wood and not an ornithological study. My intention was to express the simple charm of the subject in terms of robust form from this land.”[[52]](#footnote-52) *Birds in a Bluff* entertains the viewer; the dynamic little birds are playfully perched on the five sculpted trees. The block-like sculpture has been delicately carved with irregular indentations. The fluidity and elegance of the curving surface and natural material are aesthetically pleasing. Although placed next to a rest area in the courtyard for peaceful observation, there is no set viewing point for this sculpture. In fact, some of the birds are placed sideways. Multiple perspectives encourage engagement with the sculpture, as different angles reveal different facets of the piece. This work is intended to attract people by adding life, beauty, and interest to the space. Williams cites Japanese-American Modernist sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), as an inspiration for his “birdwall.” Noguchi was interested in “plastic and spatial relationships” and created abstract artwork influenced by nature, science, and non-western art in diverse materials such as wood, metal, and stone during the early to mid-twentieth century. He wanted to “bring sculpture into a more direct involvement with the common experience of living.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The artist-designer created gardens, playgrounds, parks and urban spaces, as well as individual sculptures. Williams’ piece resembles Noguchi in its subject, interactive quality, organic simplification of forms and handling of space, as well as its materiality.

*Mock Wall*, Williams’ second sculpture at Polo Park, is a cast concrete construction with limestone aggregate. It consists of two repeated units, seven of one type and four of the other. In total, eleven pieces are joined to create the “fake wall” which reaches approximately three feet high. Willams ordered the custom pieces from a local company called Supercrete Ltd., the same firm that fabricated James Willer’s sculptures. Its geometric, hard-edged style seems to reflect an International mode of abstraction and differs significantly from “birdwall.” *Mock Wall* is reminiscent of cubist-constructivist work by the American Abstract Expressionist sculptor Ibram Lassaw (1913-2003). Lassaw created non-objective work in three-dimensions. The artist is best known for his abstract open-space sculptures in welded, unfinished metals.[[54]](#footnote-54) The exploration of space was a deliberate pursuit by Williams as well. Richard Williams states,

I was concerned with designing two simple interlocking elements which could be used to construct a wall-like sculptural unit—not a somb[re] monument but a form to stimulate the imagination. The piece helps to define a walk-way between two stores, and if at times it seems to participate in the bundle-laden rush from door to door, this is an aspect of both its function and its humor [sic.].[[55]](#footnote-55)

While simplistic, *Mock Wall* also possessed a playful quality. In correspondence, Williams refers to this sculpture as “Play Wall.”[[56]](#footnote-56) It also resembles some of Noguchi’s designs of playground equipment. Richard Williams intended the sculpture to be interactive and fun. The repeated geometric forms are reminiscent of a jigsaw puzzle. When constructing the sculpture, Williams liked how the pieces fit together and could be arranged in different combinations. Upon closer inspection, an anthropomorphic quality emerges in this piece that may relate to the artist’s early sketches of figures at play [Fig. 28]. The artist’s final solution achieved a pleasing balance and an interesting mediation of space for the shopping centre.

The style of Richard Williams’ artwork at Polo Park demonstrates the artist’s interest in and awareness of contemporary modes of Modernist art production. Williams was in tune with the important developments of the era, as seen in his use of abstraction, reduction, interactivity, and the handling of space. In Winnipeg, which was still catching up to Modernist streams of thought, the program at Polo Park was viewed as something radically different and cutting edge by the public. In fact, one Winnipeg art critic was so upset by the Polo Park program that she asked “Are These Sculptures Art?”[[57]](#footnote-57) Williams was exploring themes pursued by sculptors in major American centres like New York and San Francisco. Although Williams’ sculptures were not ground-breaking by international standards; this does not diminish the success or importance of these artworks. It is the manner in which the artists harmonized the sculpture with the architecture at Polo Park which is most interesting and significant. William’s sculptures at Polo Park were not selected from a greater body of work or carried out as a personal investigation of a theme or idea. Rather, they were conceived specifically for the shopping centre project. Each artwork reflects the style and interest of the individual artist but first and foremost they were designed to further the purpose of the project.

*Canadian Art* magazine printed a two-page feature on the sculpture program at Polo Park in their November 1960 issue on “architecture and allied arts.” The short write-up accompanied photographs of four pieces of sculpture from the Winnipeg shopping mall. It reads:

The work on these two pages shows the effective results which can be obtained when the architect and the sculptor plan together to produce a unified design, a design where sculpture compliments and reinforces the architectural concept. These pictures show the work of three Manitoba sculptors, George Swinton, Richard Williams, and Jim Willer, who worked in co-operation with the architects *Green Blankstein Russell and Associates* on the Polo Park shopping development in the Winnipeg area. Plans for the sculptures were initiated right from the beginning and grew as an integral part of the over-all design.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Aside from the exclusion of Duane Eichholz, this was an accurate description of the project at Polo Park. Winnipeg’s Polo Park Shopping Centre was a unique and important venture for Canadian design. It was a collaboration between artists and architects that led to a unified scheme of public art that extended the aesthetic and the purpose of the modern building. The relationship of sculpture and architecture was a pertinent question at this time. Alan Jarvis states: “looking closely at the Canadian scene it is clear that the architects have played a key role, first of all in selling his client on a good building design, then on the importance of using sculptors or muralists.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

The original Polo Park Shopping Centre was regarded as more than just a commercial development. It was an achievement and an expression of modern culture in greater Winnipeg. As the project neared completion, excitement and curiosity were building. Local newspapers published numerous articles, advertisements, and photographs describing the many features of the coming shopping centre. In the *Winnipeg Tribune* we find the following:

Winnipeg’s new Polo Park shopping centre has several features which make it one of the most attractive commercial areas in Western Canada. Green Blankstien Russell and associates have designed the centre so that stores are separated by a wide mall which runs down the middle of the shopping centre. In order to give a restful appearance which contrasts sharply with the hubbub of normal shopping, the mall has been decorated with several art works and landscaping.[[60]](#footnote-60)

The sculptural program was deemed a major highlight of the facility. On August 20th

1959, the honourable Duff Roblin, Premier of Manitoba, and Mayor Stephen Juba cut the ceremonial ribbon and declared the shopping centre officially open. Shopping centres were still a relatively new phenomenon in Canada, making Polo Park a significant enterprise. The opening of Polo Park was attended by thousands. It was marketed as a three-day family-oriented event. Family entertainment, including pony rides, clowns, a high-wire trapeze act, Ramthyree the baby elephant, as well as special promotions and door prizes were offered to shoppers. On the first day of the opening, the Winnipeg Free Press reported huge traffic problems in the area: "Cars by the thousands jammed the parking lot and the adjoining streets at the Polo Park shopping centre Friday night...Around 8 p.m., there were so many cars trying to get in and out of the centre that it seemed as if downtown Winnipeg must be empty."[[61]](#footnote-61) This observation accurately predicts the decline of Winnipeg’s downtown district and the emergence of Polo Park Shopping Centre as the city’s centre for goods and services.

The response to the modern shopping centre and its sculptural program was mainly positive. The 1960 monograph *Winnipeg Architecture* by the local artist and architect John W. Graham describes the Polo Park shopping centre project thus:

Planned to accommodate the Simpsons-Sears department store it includes a shopping mall containing a range of shops and related facilities. The inclusion of a number of pieces of sculpture, handsome in themselves enriches the total group and emphasizes the pedestrian movement within the complex in contrast to the vehicular movement around and beyond it.[[62]](#footnote-62)

The group’s efforts were praised in several publications, and Richard Williams’ work was singled out as noteworthy. An article in the *Toronto* *Globe and Mail* reported that Williams’ sculpture at Polo Park was cited as a “good example of art in the urban architecture of the Americas,” by New York architect Paul Danaz at an international conference on art and architecture.[[63]](#footnote-63) The success of the Polo Park project, led to other opportunities for the artist.

Unfortunately, today, none of the original sculptures survive at Polo Park Shopping Centre. Each artwork met a different fate, but sadly, both *Birds in a Bluff* and *Mock Wall* were destroyed. “It was infuriating,” states Williams.[[64]](#footnote-64) First *Birds in a Bluff*, Williams recounts, unexpectedly disappeared, “the second winter it suddenly wasn’t there, it was removed.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Williams explained in correspondence with Alan Jarvis:

Sorry to relate that Birds in a Bluff was taken down by the proprietors several months ago. The piece was adjacent to a seating area and was meant to encourage the shopper to come to a semi-stop and rest. Evidently it performed too well. Many people approaching from the south took it as a full stop with the result that business at the supermarkets just north of the piece suffered. Since its removal more shoppers are actually going the full length of the mall to these stores.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Williams enquired about the sculpture’s whereabouts and was told that it was preventing pedestrian traffic between the two stores and had been placed in storage. When Williams requested to see the artwork, it was nowhere to be found. The artist contacted the architects, looking for answers but they had only been informed a day or so after the sculpture had already been removed from its location at Polo Park. Unfortunately, the artists’ contracts did not include a buy-back option and therefore Williams had no legal rights to his own artwork. Williams does not know the details behind the destruction of *Mock Wall*, but he remembers seeing a pile of concrete rubble near the vacant site of the sculpture. Initially he was told that the artwork would be temporarily removed while the building was undergoing renovation, but it too disappeared.[[67]](#footnote-67) These examples are indicative of a greater trend of disrespect and undervaluation of public art in Winnipeg.[[68]](#footnote-68)

The sculpture program created at Winnipeg’s Polo Park Shopping Centre was a rare and important venture in Canadian design. The developers patronized the Winnipeg arts community, hiring local artists and architects to create a commercial and cultural centre for the city. Polo Park Shopping Centre, the province’s first regional shopping mall, was a significant enterprise in the history of greater Winnipeg. The architectural firm Green Blankstein Russel and Associates was selected to design a modern building that would be functional and aesthetically pleasing. Following accusations of ugly and monotonous building in Winnipeg, professional artists were enlisted in the project to beautify the retail centre and ensure a high-quality space for patrons to enjoy. Local artists, Duane Eichholz, George Swinton, James S. Willer and Richard E. Williams formed a group and worked with the architects to create a coherent ensemble. *Birds in a Bluff* and *Mock Wall*, executed by Richard Williams, were abstract sculptures created for the shopping mall. Williams was excited by the project, and found inspiration for his artwork in public life and contemporary art practices. He produced dynamic, imaginative, and engaging sculpture for the public’s enjoyment and benefit in the centre court of Polo Park Shopping Centre.

*Illustrations*

1. Richard E. Williams, *Birds in a Bluff*, 1959. B.C. red cedarwood and stainless steel, Polo Park Shopping Centre. Photograph by Henry Kalen. From: Alan Jarvis. ed. “Richard Williams, Jim Willer, George Swinton,” *Canadian Art* (November 1960), 364.

2. Richard E. Williams, *Mock Wall*, 1959, pre-stressed concrete, Polo Park Shopping Centre. 17 October 1959. From: Richard Williams Fonds, University of Manitoba Archives. Inv. PC 223 MSS 263 A08-18, Box 11, Folder 2, photograph 5.

3. Polo Park Shopping Centre, c. 1959, aerial photograph, *Winnipeg Tribune*, 19 August 1959.

4. James S. Willer, *Sundial*, pre-stressed concrete, Polo Park Shopping Centre, n.d. Photograph by Henry Kalen. From: Alan Jarvis. ed., “Richard Williams, Jim Willer, George Swinton,” *Canadian Art* (November 1960), 363.

5. James S. Willer, *Screen*, metal, Polo Park Shopping Centre, n.d. Photograph by Henry Kalen. From: Alan Jarvis. ed., “Richard Williams, Jim Willer, George Swinton,” *Canadian Art* (November 1960), 364.

6. George Swinton, *Acrobats,* n.d. Polo Park Shopping Centre. From: Richard Williams Fonds, University of Manitoba Archives. Inv. PC 223 MSS 263 A08-18, Box 11, Folder 2, Photograph 8.

7-16. Richard E. Williams, sketches for sculpture at Polo Park Shopping Centre, n.d. From: Richard Williams Fonds, University of Manitoba Archives. Inv. PC 223 A08-18, Box 6, Folder 5.

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