

Pyramids are now 30 years old

It is one of Scotland's biggest artworks, resembling a line of grassy pyramids, viewed by millions of motorists each year as they pass by on the nation's busiest motorway.

This week marked 30 years since the Sawtooth Ramps near Bathgate, West Lothian, were officially completed – and one of the key figures behind it has hailed it an “environmentally friendly art project way ahead of its time”.

The iconic landmark – now widely known as “the Pyramids” – was created as part of the M8 Art Project set up by Art in Partnership to create an “art corridor” on the 60 mile motorway.

Designed by Patricia Leighton, an artist born in Greenock and living in New York, it was commissioned by the American telecommunications company Motorola as part of its project to construct a manufacturing facility nearby.

The grassy sculpture was made from displaced soil from the construction site and consisted of seven 35ft-high ramps measuring 1000ft long.

The near £50 million construction project, including the landscaping and artwork, was handed over on time and on budget on 4 July 1994 – the date set to coincide with Independence Day in the US.

Leighton's vision was of an enormous saw coming out of the

earth with seven perfect edges.

Seven represented a distinct engineering concept of perfection and the shape paid homage to the shale bings of past industries that could be seen in the distance.

Despite her original intentions, motorists quickly referred to the Sawtooth Ramps as the Pyramids and today they form part of what is now known as the Pyramid Business Park.

Bryan Robertson, now Chief Operating Officer of the National Galleries of Scotland, was Project Manager for the construction of the Motorola facility and the Sawtooth Ramps.

He said: "The artwork was commissioned by Motorola with support from Art in Partnership, who had an aim to place artworks along the M8 to make it a more interesting drive for motorists travelling back and forward between Edinburgh and Glasgow.

"Art in Partnership arranged a competition for Motorola to find the most suitable artwork and Patricia Leighton's vision stood out.

"Equally, we realised that it would make good use of the excavated materials from the manufacturing building we were building at the time. So rather than remove the soil off site, we were able to form it into the precise shapes of the artwork.

"The height of the west facing slope meant they had to be reinforced with netting to be able to hold the earth in place whilst the grass grew through to bring the final design to life.

"It is interesting to reflect that the construction and ongoing maintenance solution were very environmentally effective.

“We also agreed with a local farmer to allow his sheep to graze on the ramps to keep them neat and tidy. So it was really an environmental art project ahead of its time.”

The artist’s vision was brought to life thanks to landscape architects Carter McGlynn and the management contractor Laing Construction Ltd, with the help of structural engineers Thornburn Colquhoun.

Mr Robertson, 60, was a keen photographer at the time and was asked to take aerial images of the construction site, which involved going up on a number of occasions in the Irn-Bru sponsored “Eye in the Sky” helicopter.

He recalled: “That really was an amazing experience and a fantastic way to capture the scale of the construction works on the site.”

Artist Patricia Leighton said the Sawtooth Ramps was one of her proudest achievements and was “deserving of celebration” three decades after its completion.

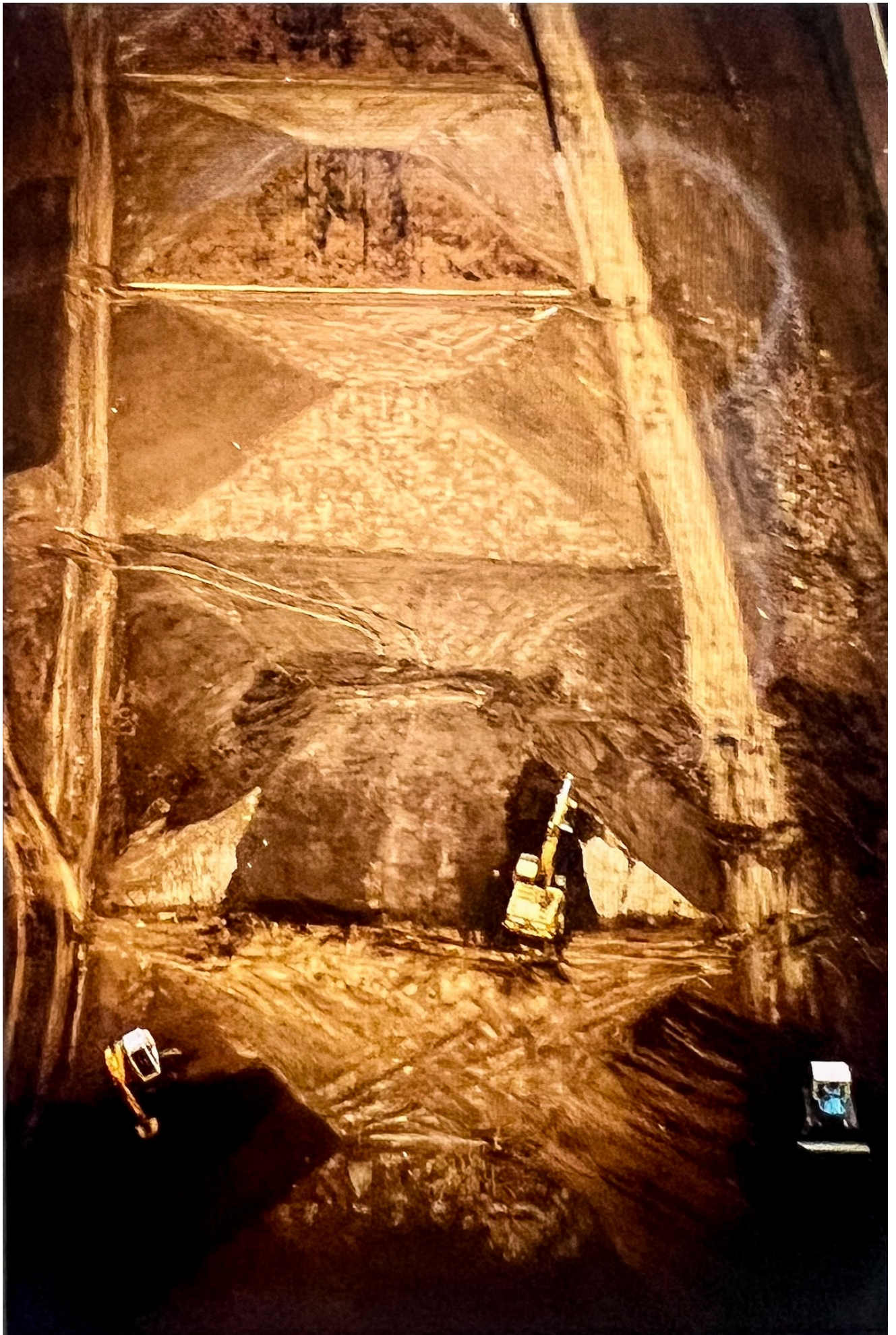
She added: “It looks just as good today as it did 30 years ago thanks to the superb teamwork of all involved.”

In recent years giant poppies have been painted on the ramps ahead of Remembrance Day as a stunning reminder to passersby of Poppyscotland’s annual fundraising appeal.

Meanwhile, sheep grazing on the landmark have been painted in different colours to raise awareness of charities including Breast Cancer Research and World Autism Awareness.



Bryan Robertson



Sawtooth Ramps AKA The Pyramids on M8



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Photo shows Bryan Robertson who was Motorola's Project Manager for the construction



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