

Grace Adam's 'Masterplan No. 9' addresses questions that arise from Frederick Gibberd's home and the project to build Harlow New Town in the late 1940s in order to create a successful new community from the ground up. Inspired by the title of a Gibberd architectural drawing, the exhibition uses the house and garden as an opportunity to explore the artist's longstanding curiosity about notions of beauty and efficacy. William Morris once declared that you should have 'nothing in your homes that you do not know to be useful and believe to be beautiful.' But the values that inspire the creation of both objects and buildings alter and shift. Nothing in culture is fixed no matter how much we wish it were so.

Gibberd's plan, in retrospect, may appear too assured, even naïve, but the idealism exemplified by Harlow remains as relevant as the years in which it was first conceived and constructed. Similar challenges for architects, designers and urban planners persist. How may we live today? How do we prepare for the future? Above all, how can we build sustainable communities that meet our social and material needs? The desire for urgent social change in the post-war period continues to act as a model.



The Gibberd Garden has become a fitting monument to the man whose role in twentieth-century design encapsulates all that was visionary after the catastrophe of war. Set amongst groves of trees and routes that lead the visitor through a series of outdoor rooms, the sculpture he collected reflects an eclectic, contemporary taste. The house, situated in countryside on the edge of the New Town, is itself an imaginative response to necessity in microcosm. Denied permission to build a new structure, Gibberd adapted the existing one storey building as a satisfying home. This hybrid house reminds us how Harlow New Town was intended to be an adaptation to the surrounding ancient landscape of Essex with views from the Water Gardens and as surviving green wedges for recreational space.

The New Town was a very particular response to urgent social imperatives – for new housing and better living conditions with all the accompanying hope and aspiration of a victorious but exhausted nation. This modernist, almost romantic, belief in progress is still beguiling particularly when we consider how urban environments continue to frustrate the best intentions. The war years produced tremendous difficulties for Londoners, bombed from the sky with new precision and cruel power. Imagine then the excitement of the resident first cycling out from devastated London to look at the new homes being offered by this extraordinary social experiment. It's hard today to locate an equivalent sense of promise.

Grace describes her site-specific work in the garden, 'Small Folly', as a 'sculptural intervention' in dialogue with the columns that Gibberd first rescued after making dramatic incisions into the Coutts bank façade on London's Strand. As you head downhill from the house, you will discover them in a grove, close to the brook. They resemble props from a painting by Turner, cautionary metaphors for the cycles of history, fashion, hubris and decline. For all their nostalgia, these architectural fragments have an ironic quality. They have become 18th century imitations of classical antiquity forever stranded in time as amusing ornaments. This pastiche of Roman ruins is arguably an incongruous choice by Gibberd, a stone's throw away from his progressive urban vision.



Modern Fire Fighting

GRACE ADAM

Masterplan No. 9



Bright New Future



Purple Emperor, Small Copper, Garden Tiger (Pubs of Harlow)



Small Folly (detail)

The adjacent row of four garlanded stone urns seems wholly superfluous even ridiculous, an example of ancient vessels translated into pleasing but dysfunctional copies. Gibberd was surely setting up a joke in this tableau, while at the same time proposing that architecture must respond to the needs of its age. The only role for these anachronistic relics now is to create theatrical entertainment. However, a paradox remains – for all his attachment to the concept of logical progress, Gibberd continues to value beauty for its own sake in the collection of sculpture and salvaged objects that he displayed throughout the garden in the manner of a Georgian aristocrat returning with souvenirs from the Grand Tour. In an interview he once said ‘the design of a town – like the design of a car – is based on function. It has to work smoothly and efficiently. But, as with a car, we like a town to give pleasure to the eye, to be beautiful.’

Grace engages with the irony of this Arcadian surprise by setting up a series of sculptural objects employing recycled wood, which echo features from the columns and urns. One component involves circular wooden slats kebaped together like soft scraps of compressed meat on a spit, their origins and histories lost in the process of stacking them together. Where did these planks once lie? Whose feet have trodden across them? Each one embodies different stories and memories. But here they are reclaimed in a playful fashion to illustrate the contingency of all materials. Cut down, re-assembled and re-sited, the nutty-brown, varnished wood takes the domestic world into the garden – soft, organic grain in conversation with hard Portland stone, stained mossy green.



Small Folly

Another element in this group consists of an eight-sided wooden cylinder. Various chair legs and banisters grow out of it like MDF and mahogany horns on the head of a hunted stag. This mutant object formally mirrors the acanthus leaves in the Corinthian capitals carved on top of the stone columns. Such a clutter of shapes and textures suggests the slippery nature of taste and fashion. Modernism wished to dispense with imitation and quotation, but here in the tranquility of his garden, we discover Gibberd wryly tipping his hat to the past and Grace in turn implying our enduring confusion about what we seek from design.

Within the Gibberd Rooms, Grace has hung a series of watercolours and collages that convey Harlow’s original ambitions. Viewed from a cut embankment at the entrance to an underpass, ‘Modern Fire Fighting’ illustrates a training tower for fire fighters, a tall symmetrical structure in glass and concrete so elongated that it begins to look wobbly. As an amalgamation of sights and sensations, the image proposes how a healthy society anticipates all eventualities. Grace articulates that gap between intention and implementation. Below the tower, delicate lampposts stand ready to generate light for cars descending into a tunnel. An almost Caribbean, turquoise sky heralds a new age of provision. In this imaginary climate, concrete glows instead of turning decrepit with damp.



Real Space

Using collaged paper cutouts interlocking with architectural details made in watercolour, Grace captures the excitement of modernity and an air of accompanying disappointment. Aspirations for a better world may be compromised by sobering realities. In the other works on paper, buildings rise up and cut across sightlines so that we continually experience the built environment as a series of competing geometries and surfaces. To be modern is to navigate a multiplicity of sensations, reminiscent of the astonished Cubists looking out of their Parisian cafes onto a new world. She asks the question what does modernity actually look like and how do we experience it? Is it a series of impressions, a checkerboard of concrete, glass and reflected light? Most importantly, can our hopes for cities be realised?

As consumers and domestic dwellers, we remain attached to the pleasures of knick-knacks and furniture, the voluptuous curve of chair legs. Our homes can never be arenas of perfection but are inevitably corrupted by dodgy taste and yesterday’s objects of desire becoming obsolete. Today’s hip sofa will in turn become a dubious heirloom or scrapyard fancy. In ‘Gibberd’s Chairs’ three armchairs function as if they were illustrations from a sale catalogue offering seductive possibilities for possession. However, there is an uncanny familiarity because the original models belong to the same room. We are reminded that a functional object may assume many forms, styles and materials. Will a chair be round or square, upholstered or bare? Do we want old or new? How do we actually choose objects and what do they represent to us? Gibberd’s collection of Staffordshire dogs methodically arranged on the shelves in one corner nicely illustrates the idiosyncrasies of domestic interiors. This whimsical collection introduces a sentimental disturbance into the cool, efficient shell of his living space. Assembled over many years as a solution to the problem of what to give Gibberd for his birthday, these china animals present a conundrum. Is there a teasing, knowing enjoyment here of kitsch, a guilty pleasure, or on the contrary a timeless appreciation of craftsmanship and tradition?



Gibberd's Chairs

Much contemporary art carries a palpable sense of disengagement and many artists have ceded the social and political debate to other media. Working in tandem with the Gibberd Rooms and Garden, Grace Adam humorously and incisively employs this setting to address the work and ideas of a pivotal moment in British social history. ‘Masterplan No. 9’ suitably unsettles this modest memorial in an enquiry about the beliefs of a particular age while simultaneously saluting those instincts of our better nature to improve society. In the light of recent national events, this impulse is vitally important even if we encounter disappointment and doubt along the way.

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