# A folly in a London garden

## Jane Dorner

I was sitting in my garden during lockdown summer with my friend Simon Hurst, who is an architect, and I was saying what a bore it was to lug the eight bulky cushions from my rattan furniture into the house whenever it rained. ‘You can’t get any nice storage units,’ I said. ‘What I really want is a folly that will double up as a summer house.’ ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘What sort of thing?’ I already had a Gothic theme going in the garden, with chairs and mirrors and a hornbeam arch, so I came out pat with – Gothic, with castellations, maybe a pyramid. He got out his pencil and before I knew it we were applying for planning permission. I live in a Conservation Area in a house built in 1901 so there are rules.

The Edwardians loved follies, but unfortunately my next-door neighbour did not. Was it not obvious that I had delusions of grandeur, she railed at the Planning Department, getting all her friends to write in and say the same. *My* friends pointed out that kitchen extensions and attic conversions were already a visual challenge to neighbouring sightlines in our road. A few doors down they said, ‘It's good to see imagination and creativity coming to the garden’. We got our permission, albeit with a little bit of compromise to the original height.

I was lucky with my builder, Tadeusz from Poland (arrived at 8 and left at 7), who not only understood Simon’s meticulous plans and drawings but also had a real feeling for solutions to problems, and that proved an asset when it came to the W-shaped merlons topping the castellations that I had, with a regal wave, demanded: so difficult to construct out of plywood, that I felt ashamed when he showed me all eight of them required for this five-sided building. What a lot of work! And all I was doing myself was a bit of light painting, designing the weathervane and lantern, and moving cedar shingles to clad the ply structure from the front garden to the back.

The illustrations show how the building sits in the corner of my garden on some raised decking that occupies the full width of the west-facing end of the garden. The central tower, with its pyramid on top, is at 45 degrees to the base, with one corner cut off, and the proportions are mathematically clever and aesthetically pleasing – I think those two are linked. There is a lot of inside and outside detail: proper drainage (of course), diamond tiling, decorative rosettes, blind windows with mirrored backing, and skirting boards, coving, hand-made hinges, and proper parquet inside (leftover from another architectural project apparently and how lucky I am to have it). There is a celebration of modern technology as well; the Gothic doors, windows and inside cupboard – that which houses the eight cushions – is water-jet-cut from MDF; ‘proper’ joinery would have eaten up my entire budget. And why not cut corners? This is a folly; some deception and sham is part of what a folly celebrates. And celebrate is the word. Simon, friend and architect, calls it the ‘artifice of delightful deceit’. That comes into play in the glazed pyramid as well – it’s not the stained glass that it seems, but its gherkin-like swirl is constructed of peel-on, peel-off leading and coloured film.

Below, within the lantern, I have painted the eight winds from the Temple of the Winds in Athens; my first attempt at grisaille technique using acrylics, and I squeezed in an anachronistic pineapple to symbolise largesse and hospitality. There may be more internal decoration to come, but for the moment I am enjoying the simplicity of the lines and the satisfying angle of the arching. I don’t want to spoil it. But there are already blues to hint a day-time theme within the central square and night-time in the two apses that give off it – some gilded stars on midnight blue, like the mosaics in Ravenna, I thought.

Inside is the cushion cupboard and above it a cabinet of curiosities where I intend to change the display every so often; Victorian ice-cream and jelly moulds fill the space at present. A metal table and two chairs, found in a flea market, sit inside and a chandelier with fake flickering candles can be switched on and off from the house. I have had seven people inside for drinks before dinner, but it is a bit of a squash and that was never in the brief. It is a folly for summer, essentially, with the open doors welcoming friends *al fresco*. Meanwhile, eager guests are coming in twos or threes to coffee or cocktails. It is a wonderful excuse to see friends and I simply love it. I didn’t have a holiday for two years, and won’t this. But I’ve got a folly.