

1 Mountain view

This fabulous modern folly designed by Philipp Baumhauer with Karoline Markus is made from planed larch and set in sight of the Bavarian Alps. There are cushioned niches in the sides and on the flat roof, which make it an outsize (and outside) sofa. When not in use, the windows are covered by stainless steel shutters.



JULIEN LANOÛ



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2 Bridging the gap

Dunsborough Park near Ripley in Surrey has a particularly handsome folly-cum-bridge combo – dual purpose is the way to go. It is beautifully placed at the bottom of a series of cascading ponds that culminate at Ockham Mill Stream. The folly was built just before the Second World War by the architect W Braxton Sinclair.



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3 Notable landmark

The Broadway Tower, which sits on the edge of the Cotswolds, was the brainchild of our old chum 'Capability' Brown and built by the architect James Wyatt. It is visible as an eye-catcher from miles away and, from its top, provides spectacular views across many counties. Described as 'Saxon', it features a conglomeration of battlements, gargoyles, balconies and turrets. William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones used to holiday here.



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4 Temporary delight

No one said follies had to be permanent: this is an intricate construction of timber and air, more sculpture than shelter, by British artist Aeneas Wilder. He has created several similar installations across Europe.



James Alexander-Sinclair is a garden designer, writer, broadcaster and founder of into-gardens.com. He has served on the RHS Council for the past five years.

In praise of follies

Kicking off his new design series, James Alexander-Sinclair waxes lyrical about these whimsical garden structures. But is it sheer folly, you may wonder

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Surely," I can hear you ask, having glanced at the title of this piece, "there is no place for such conceits as follies in 21st-century gardens? Anyone who thinks so must be delusional and probably wears velvet knickerbockers and a powdered wig around the house." Well, firstly, let me assure you that my days dressed as a Regency dandy are long behind me and, secondly, stick with me and allow me to explain.

Follies started appearing in gardens during the 17th century and, at the beginning, were simply the remains of previous buildings that just so happened to be loitering picturesquely in the grounds of large estates. Homeowners who envied the crumbling relics in their neighbour's parkland then started building their own. The term 'folly' came to mean a building that has no particular purpose beyond looking good in the landscape: a sort of

architectural Kardashian. They manifested themselves in many forms: a tumbledown dairy here, a ruined chapel there, possibly a glimpse of a turreted roofline through the trees, a crumbling bothy or a mausoleum. In fact, any old whim or fancy was fine. They were very popular as a destination for walks, trysts ("Meet me in the folly," he whispered, his breath hot upon her shell like...) or simply as eye-catchers among trees or distant hills.

Many of these historic follies still remain and continue to give great pleasure: for example, the gardens of Stowe House in Buckinghamshire are scattered with temples and monuments, while Painshill Park in Surrey has a pretty, complete set of follies (including a tower, a hermitage, a Turkish tent, a grotto and a Roman temple). The Europeans were also enthusiastic – Marie Antoinette had a farm at Versailles (where she used to trip ▶

5 Deep meaning

Ten thousand pieces of ten thousand trees make up this folly by Katie Paterson with the architects Zeller & Moye. She has trawled the globe to gather together a miniature forest of samples from the world's trees, including the banyan tree under which the Buddha sat, and the ginkgo that survived Hiroshima. It can be seen this summer at Royal Fort Gardens in Bristol.



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6 Pure pleasure

The Painswick Rococo Garden in Gloucestershire is the country's only surviving Rococo garden. It was made by Benjamin Hyett in the 1740s for one purpose: pleasure. The whole garden is dotted with follies. There is a startlingly icy plunge pool, the Red House and this exedra (a classical reference to a lecture theatre or high-backed bench) that stands at the top of the hill addressing the valley below.



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7 Glass act

A folly at Westonbury Mill Water Gardens in Herefordshire was made by Richard Pim from 5,000 empty wine bottles, which glitter like stained glass in the sunshine. Mr Pim describes all his follies as being "large and completely useless". Perfect.

▷ around dressed as a saucy milkmaid), and Charles Theodore, the Elector of the Palatinate, had an ornamental mosque built in his garden at Schwetzingen Palace in Germany. Nowadays, they are gorgeous curiosities – an illustration of the eccentricity of man. Some have turned into the ruins they were designed to replicate but continue to do their job, for one of the great advantages of a folly is that it does not have to be architecturally perfect to fulfil its destiny. It exists purely for pleasure.

In modern gardens, we are not often in a position to create buildings purely for the sake of a view glimpsed fleetingly through the trees. The sad reality is that most of us have neither the space nor the planning permission. However, we can continue this tradition in our own way with sheds – tool sheds, potting sheds, chicken sheds, storage sheds or garden offices – as there is no

reason why these buildings should not be dual purpose. If you are going to go to the effort of creating a structure, the least you can do is put it in a good place and make it worth looking at. This can be as simple as painting it a different colour or appending various folderols to catch the eye – the only limit is your imagination.

I suppose we could also broadly include tree houses in the category of follies as they tend to serve little purpose apart from amusement and a bit of adrenalin. I'm not talking about small, free-standing playground contraptions but palaces teetering in the swaying branches of trees. They vary from simple platforms made of pallets to fully equipped banqueting halls and modernist hotel rooms. They look good and serve only a mildly decadent purpose.

There is room in follies for lots of architectural playfulness. After all, we don't have to live in them so they can defy many of the



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8 Animal houses

If you were a sure-footed goat used to skipping along precipices and leaping ridges then you might be a tad bored confined to the rolling fields of Britain. Not the goats at Cholmondeley Castle in Cheshire, though, as they have their own folly with a suitably precarious outside staircase provided for them. This is a noble tradition of building architecturally distinguished animal houses. There is, for example, a two-storey tortoise house in the grounds of Wotton House in Surrey and a pigsty based on the lines of a Grecian temple in Yorkshire (now a Landmark Trust holiday let).

Further reading

Contemporary Follies by Keith Moskow and Robert Linn (Monacelli Press, 2012).

Follies of Europe: Architectural Extravaganzas by Caroline Holmes (Garden Art Press, 2008).

Follies: Fabulous, Fanciful and Frivolous Buildings by Gwyn Headley (National Trust Books, 2012).

normal rules; they don't need to be warm, watertight or windproof. They are just the place for experimental helical roofs or teetering pillars as thin as spider legs. For we have one huge advantage over our predecessors: technology. It is possible for us to make things of which they could only dream – I made a grotto of rubber and chains for a television programme once, which was a folly in many senses of the word. So just think what William Kent could have done with glass and Corten steel or how much fun Henry Flitcroft (designer of the Pantheon at Stourhead) could have had with MDF, plastic or fibreglass. Let alone electricity...

Sometimes we take gardening a little too seriously. It should, above all things, be enjoyable and it would be sad if we allowed whimsy in our gardens to perish. Long live beauty without obvious purpose. Long live the folly. □

Useful information

The Folly Fellowship was founded in 1988 to promote 'follies, grottoes and garden buildings'. follies.org.uk

The Painswick Rococo Garden in Gloucestershire has a collection of follies. Open from January to October. rococogarden.org.uk

For something very grand and symbolic, go no further than the great gardens of Stowe in Buckinghamshire. nationaltrust.org.uk/stowe

Westonbury Mill Water Gardens in Herefordshire has a series of garden follies, including the wine-bottle dome (above left), and a giant cuckoo clock. westonburymillwatergardens.com

To really immerse yourself in the folly experience, why not book a stay in The Pineapple lodge in Dunmore, Scotland? landmarktrust.org.uk