Living in the Follies of the Past: Design Notebook
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

FOLLIES are the icing on the cake of architecture, the conceits, fantasies and esthetic oddities built not for utility, but for caprice and art. Architectural handbooks and dictionaries define a folly as a functionally useless structure, usually a tower or sham classical or Gothic ruin erected in a planned landscape for purely ornamental purposes — to evoke a kind of cultural and visual nostalgia, or to enhance a view. Their design was often credited to eccentric builders bent on the indulgence of personal esthetic whims; useless and idiosyncratic structures, they were, therefore, follies.

Follies were beloved by the architects and patrons of the 18th and 19th centuries, and were built extensively in

Design Notebook

the picturesque English landscape gardens of that time. Once seen, they are not easily forgotten.

The folly tower of Castletown House, near Dublin, for example, constructed formally on axis with that great Irish Georgian mansion, turns a vast, grassy sweep of natural land into a sophisticated exercise in the perception of distance, form and scale. As the long summer sunset silhouettes the obelisk and fills in the open arches of its base with gilded light, the Castletown folly becomes a magic image that will never leave the mind.

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But some folly-lovers do more than look and admire. Increasingly, follies are being adapted, where possible, as unconventional residences by those to whom this kind of historical architectural romanticism counts as much, or more, than kitchens and closets.

The recent purchasers of a Georgian folly tower built in the 18th century in Little Berkamstead, Hertfordshire, about 19 miles from London, are quite willing to climb 92 feet of spiral stairs every weekend to enjoy round rooms with soaring ceilings, breathtaking Constable-type views framed by oculus windows and arched fanlights in beautiful brick walls that are as much as eight feet thick at their base.

For Marion and David Cooper, a young professional couple who live and work in London during the week, the reward at the top is the sensational vista from a castellated roof that commands the entire county, and is its highest point.

This isn't, of course, just anybody's weekend house. But you don't have to be an eccentric to live in a folly. Romantic, yes, with a love for odd old buildings complete with legends and less than ideal floor plans. Whatever this house lacks in logic or layout is more than made up for by its architectural qualities and surprising spaces.

Known as Stratton's folly, the tower was built in 1789 by a retired admiral of that name; legend has it that he wanted to see his shipping on the Thames. That would, indeed, have made it qualify as a folly, since the Thames is much too distant, but the admiral's telescope would have found many pleasant sights in the adjacent Broxbourne woods and the rolling Hertfordshire countryside. The same beauty remains intact today, protected by the London greenbelt that preserves a verdant ring around the city.

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According to Nikolaus Pevsner, historian and chronicler extraordinary of the English architectural scene, the building was not a folly at all; its construction was used to relieve a period of local unemployment. The same condition is also believed to have applied at Castletown House, and it is quite possible that in many cases esthetics and economics went hand in hand.

After the admiral's death, his tower became a romantic ruin in the best folly tradition, visited by sightseers who left a century of graffiti on the inside walls and the strong wooden doors. Today the tower is a listed historic building, grade three in the British landmark pecking order, protected from demolition and recently converted for modern living.

When the Coopers decided to buy a listed landmark, they found that they had to go to a specialist in "unusual properties," a firm that gives mortgages unflinchingly on such things as folly towers, churches and old mills. But they did not buy their folly on sudden impulse; they had lived in it for three years as rental tenants, growing increasingly attached to its special charms. You might say that they were hooked in a way no conventional house would satisfy.

You don't have to be an eccentric to live in a folly.

The handsomely proportioned Georgian tower is a cylinder on an octagonal base. It has six levels within its 92 feet, including the roof terrace. Five of the levels are filled with a single room approximately 16 feet in diameter and roughly the same height. All are pierced by the stair core and its spiral pine steps.

The ground floor is the kitchen-dining room and the next floor is a bedroom, with a balcony level inserted between the two for a lavatory and bath. The third floor, called the library, is the living room, with the tall, fan-topped windows, and the fourth floor is another bedroom, with oculus windows. A second bath has been inserted between this level and the top floor, which has windows all around, since the bearing masonry is lighter at the top, and is called a sun room or tea room in various descriptions.

The basic conversion was done by the previous owners. Because this is a listed building, the work was carried out with interest-free loans available for restoration and modernization from the Historic Building Council for England, repaid on completion. The plans had to be approved by the Council.

The Coopers have currently embarked on modest changes and careful refurnishing. Interior design drama is not their objective; the building's own drama is quite enough. They have no intention of creating an 18th-century mise-en-scène.

The only major improvement they hope to make is to open one of the blind arches in the tower's octagonal base with a window to match the fine Georgian door, which is currently the only source of ground floor light. This would cause no serious architectural violation and would greatly increase the tower's livability.

The library-living level now has two comfortable new leather lounge chairs and a stereo system that fills the high, round room with glorious sound. Shelves that had been cut to the curve of the walls and installed at the time of the conversion hold books and records.

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Floral-patterned shades are drawn in the arched Georgian windows to control light when necessary, but most windows are open to the views. The lower bedroom has a built-in circular bed and storage units fitted to the wall, left by the previous owners. But the two top rooms are furnished with little yet except birdsong, which is clamorous on these summer mornings.

There are other houses on the estate, but the nearest neighbor is a horse named Sara, who watches over the tower during the week. He accepts the Coopers and their unusual two-bedroom, two-bath retreat much as some equine ancestor must have accepted the admiral and his architectural aberration. Life and logic are fleeting, but folly endures.

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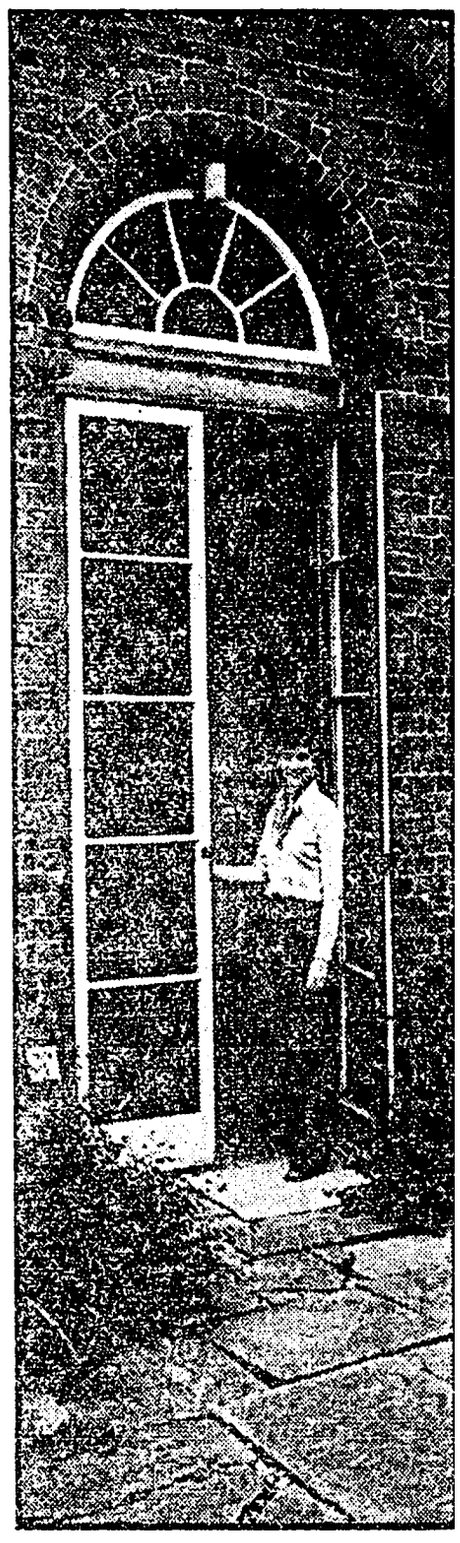
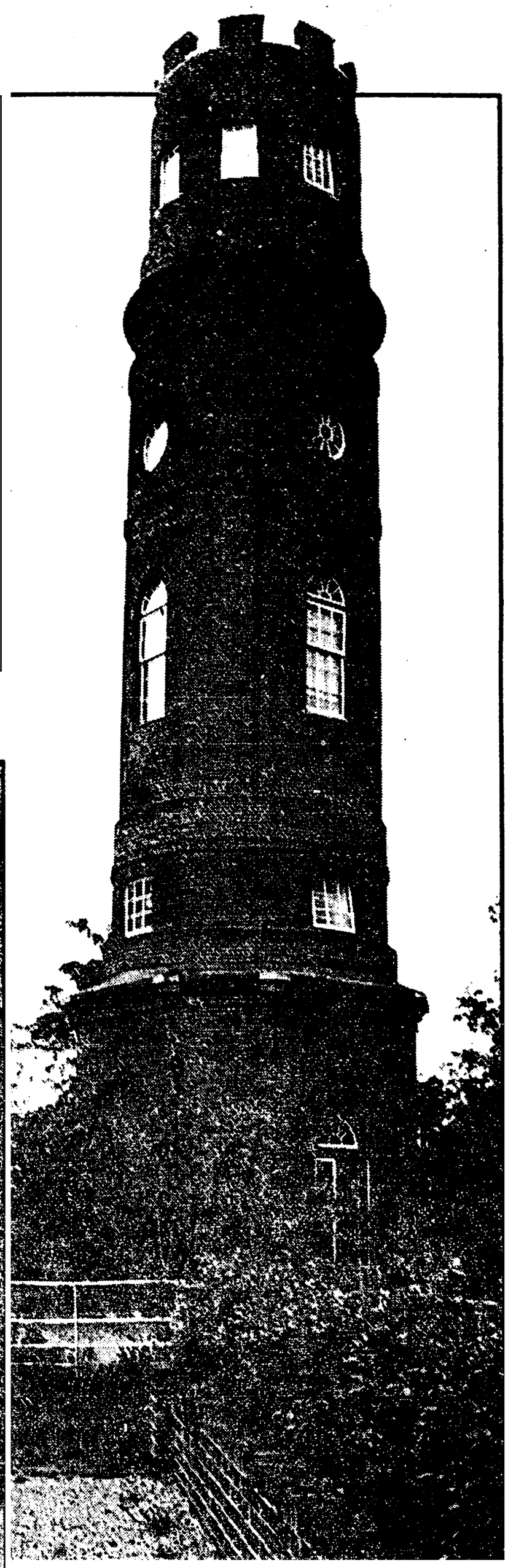
Garth Huxtable

In a Georgian folly tower near London, far right, 92 feet of spiral stairs lead to round rooms and stunning views.





Marion Cooper, left, and her husband, David, bought their weekend retreat after renting it for three years.

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