

Art and Nature

CLIVE ADAMS

A new Centre is being established to integrate Earth and imagination.

THE VISION OF the proposed Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World is one of exploring how, through the arts, we can gain a deeper understanding of the natural world, of our place within that world, and of the relationship between the arts and the natural sciences.

The natural world nourishes our imaginations and spirits as well as our bodies. It is a primary inspiration for many contemporary artists, photographers, designers and craftspeople. The forms of nature continue to inform our architects and engineers, as they stimulate literature, music and dance. As a society, we connect ourselves with nature by walking in the countryside and through gardening. It is because of this wide appeal, together with the current interest in the issues that surround the future of the countryside, that it seems both feasible and relevant to create this new Centre.

During the twentieth century, Western society has become increasingly isolated from the planet which we inhabit. Its geology, flora and fauna have become virtually irrelevant to the lives of most city-dwellers. We too easily forget that our relationship with the natural world remains fundamental to our own destiny. Technological innovation has also resulted in increased specialism, and the arts and the natural sciences have become divergent and hermetic.

Although one might trace the inspiration for this new Centre from the ecological and environmental art movement which emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s in Britain and America, it is the wider



Poltimores

recognition of our complex relationship with the natural world that provides the most urgent need for such a Centre. Its uniqueness lies in the holistic and unifying concept, rather than on any model of an existing gallery, arts complex or sculpture park. The Centre is a major opportunity for the cross-fertilization of ideas between disciplines and for people of different ages, backgrounds and cultures to come together in a spirit of creative endeavour.

IN PRACTICAL TERMS, the challenge over the past four years has been to find a site or building that best fitted the concept of the project and had good accessibility for the widest audience and the greatest potential of being viable. Devon was chosen because it contains some of Britain's wildest and most spectacular countryside and has, in recent years, attracted a significant number of artists working in new ways in relation to the land.

Poltimore House lies just five miles from Exeter. The earliest parts of the house date from the late sixteenth century and a new front was added in the early eighteenth century, partly enclosing a central courtyard. The Treaty of Exeter, marking the end of the Civil War in the South-west, was signed there in 1646. The house remained in Lord Poltimore's ownership until 1942 and has been used by schools and as a hospital. Following a fire which gutted a wing built in 1908, the house deteriorated, and was finally

acquired by the Building at Risk Trust in 1997.

The new Centre is now undertaking a development study, supported by the National Lottery through the Arts Council of England with partnership funding from East Devon District Council and English Heritage. During this stage, and until it establishes its own charitable trust, the project is managed by a steering group set up by the District Council. Consultants and advisers have been identified whose expertise ranges over the artistic programme, education, audience development, business, marketing, architecture, landscaping, transport and fundraising.

Announcements were placed in the art press relating to the various commissioning opportunities for artists and makers. Some 290 applications were received and twelve shortlisted artists invited to visit Poltimore at the end of last October. Garry Fabian Miller, an artist living on the edge of Dartmoor, whose photograms investigate the transparency and colour of natural forms and phenomena, was chosen as lead artist and has been given an RSA Art for Architecture Award to work in collaboration with the architect, landscape architects and other commissioned artists.

The Centre will open in 2002. It will provide galleries, a study centre, bookshop, café and study bedrooms within an area of around 2,000 square metres. Two outbuildings within the thirteen acres of gardens will be used for studios. The artistic

and educational team is currently developing a provisional programme for the first three years and for the pre-opening period. The Centre would welcome suggestions for exhibitions, events, courses and conferences, particularly those spanning various artforms and between the arts and natural sciences. Please write to: Clive Adams, 2 Swains Court, Fore Street, Topsham, Exeter EX3 0HH. ●

Clive Adams worked at Arnolfini in Bristol. He has represented many nature artists, including Andy Goldsworthy and Peter Randall-Page.

FRONTLINE

Hunger in America

LOIS ROBBINS

A creative response to poverty in the midst of plenty.

PEOPLE ARE OFTEN surprised to learn that hunger exists in America. Since many US social programmes were dropped during the Reagan years, hunger in America has been on the increase. As in other countries, the gap between rich and poor has been widening. Thirty-five million Americans now live below the poverty line.

One American organization that has found a creative way of raising funds for local food banks and soup kitchens is the *Imagine/RENDER* Group, based in Oxford, Michigan. Founded by husband-and-wife team, Lisa Blackburn and John Hartom, in 1990, the organization is a non-profit group whose mission it is to create positive and lasting social change through the arts, education and projects that build community. In 1990 the *Imagine/RENDER* Group originated the Empty Bowls Project. It began with a simple meal for the staff of the school where John teach-

es. The meal consisted of soup and bread, with the soup served in bowls that had been made by John's ceramics students. Each person was asked to donate what they would have otherwise paid for lunch and to keep the bowl they had chosen, as a reminder of all the empty bowls there are in the world. The money collected was then given to the local food bank, a charitable organization which gives food to people who don't have enough.

That was the beginning of a phenomenon which has now grown to international proportions. The *Imagine/RENDER* Group developed an information packet for other groups wishing to organize Empty Bowls meals, and John and Lisa gave presentations at conferences, sharing the idea with anyone who would listen. They intentionally left the concept open-ended, encouraging people to utilize their creativity to adapt the Project within their own context.

Today, close to \$2 million has been raised to combat hunger through Empty Bowls projects. In true grassroots fashion the Empty Bowls Project has grown to encompass projects in every state in the United States and several other countries as well. In 1991 Empty Bowls were presented to every person in the United States Congress, and in 1992 Empty Bowls were used as part of an Oxfam America Hunger Banquet, at the United Nations.

In 1997 and 1998, over 3,000 people were served two Empty Bowls meals at each of two General Assemblies of the Unitarian Universalist Association, raising nearly \$20,000 for hunger at each event. In 1998, on World Food Day, October 16, a hundred Empty Bowls meals were served in the state of Michigan. Though the idea began as an effort to address hunger in America, it has spread to other countries as well. The *Imagine/RENDER* Group has had reports of Empty Bowls meals being served in New Zealand and Canada, and groups in a number of other countries have expressed an interest in holding Empty Bowls events.

Though the *Imagine/RENDER* Group does ask for feedback on Empty Bowls meals, many have taken place without the Group's knowledge; people have heard about the idea and just decided to do it, so the ac-

tual amount of money raised for hunger using this concept is probably quite a bit higher than *Imagine/RENDER*'s estimates.

The idea "has legs" for several reasons. The fact that it's decentralized is one. Although the *Imagine/RENDER* Group welcomes contributions, the Group asks that all money raised at an Empty Bowls meal be donated to an organization fighting hunger. Usually the money stays in the community where it was raised, but some groups elect to donate it to international organizations.

The tree which fills the arms grew from the tiniest sprout . . . the journey of a thousand miles commenced with a single step.

LAO TZU

Another reason for its rapid expansion is that it connects artists, or the artist within each of us, with a powerful purpose. Artists are often asked to contribute bowls. They, and ceramics students who sometimes make bowls for Empty Bowls meals, are filling an actual need with the products of their work. Sometimes meals are done in stages, with people making their own bowls one week, glazing and firing them the next week, and inviting their friends to an Empty Bowls meal the week after that. Thus, the giver is connected with the gift in a profound way.

Another reason it works is that it is a powerful advocacy tool. Each event provides a venue for educating communities about local, national and international hunger.

Whatever the reasons, the Empty Bowls Project is an energetic concept for capturing dollars for hunger; a concept that has caught the imagination of thousands the world over. ●

For more information, or for an Empty Bowls packet, call (248) 628-4842, or write to Empty Bowls, 2691 Noble Road, Oxford, MI 48370, USA, or on the web: ImagineRender@aol.com.

Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World in Devon

Clive Adams is reknown for running galleries in Bristol and Wales. He supervised the restoration of the Mostyn Gallery in Llandudno. Now he has plans for an Art and Study Centre in Devon. As a recent member of the L&A Network, he is writing about the project which he and his wife have been working on since 1994.

'Our vision is to establish a gallery and study centre which explores how, through art, we can gain a deeper understanding of the natural world, of mankind's place within it, and which shows that the arts and natural sciences are complementary and not divergent specialisms.

Since the mid-seventies I have had a deep interest in the work of artists such as Long, Fulton, Nash, Finlay and Goldsworthy, and in studies of the natural world which enrich everything from design, architecture and engineering to horticulture and medicine.

We felt that Devon, with its spectacular moors, rolling hills and rugged coastline could offer interesting possibilities, and we were encouraged by the success of the Tate in Cornwall. Several key artists live or work in Devon; here one thinks of Long's walks on

Dartmoor, Virtue's paintings of South Tawton, Randall-Page's sculptures in the Teign Valley and the photographic work of Miller and Derges.

Finding a suitable location within the county hasn't been easy, but we have had tremendous help from South West Arts, the County and District Councils, and an Arts Council Lottery Fund has helped to pay for consultants. An original option on a National Trust estate in North Devon proved untenable, however, sixteen other sites were assessed and then narrowed down to three. Finally, Poltimore House in rural East Devon was chosen.

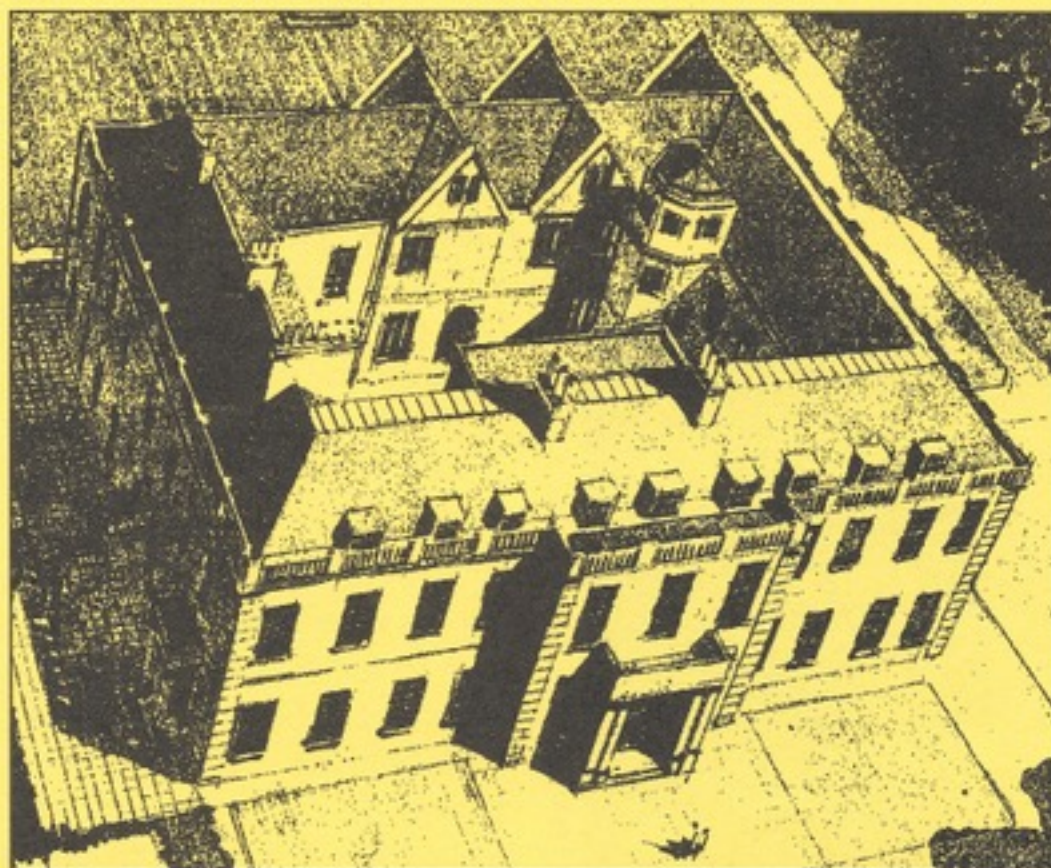
Poltimore House, set in 13 acres of gardens, dates from the late 16th century, with an early 18th century front enclosing the courtyard. The Treaty of Exeter was signed here in 1646, ending the Civil War in the South West. The

house remained in Lord Poltimore's ownership until 1942 and has since been used by schools and as a hospital. Arson, theft, vandalism and decay have been fought by the District Council, and recently it was acquired by the 'Buildings at Risk' Trust (BART). We are working in close co-operation with these organisations.

The Centre is likely to be managed by a trust and will cost around £3 million. BART are awaiting the result of an application to English Heritage for a repair grant. Within six months the Centre should be ready to apply for a capital grant from the Arts Lottery Fund, and an intensive period of fundraising has already begun. The house will provide five galleries totalling 471 square metres and a study centre of 309 sq metres, including a bookshop, studios, a café and thirteen study bedrooms.

The Centre is scheduled to open in spring 2001, and I do not encourage anyone to visit the house and garden just yet. But I would be very pleased to hear from anyone who would like more information.' CA

Write to Clive Adams, CCANW, c/o 2 Axehayes Farm, Clyst St Mary, Exeter EX5 1DP.



Axonometry of the 16th century building that will house the exhibition and study centre. Drawing by Richard Carmen

Drawing courtesy of Niall Phillips Architects

Clive Adams will be talking to L&A Network members at our 5th anniversary meeting in October (subsequent to the AGM). See back page for details.