

subjects. Rowdy spirits would be shaped by architecture and soothed by walkways in the sky.

The cultural moment that led to the design and building of Thamesmead also put modernist sculptures by Hepworth, Chadwick, Moore, Belsky, Clatworthy and others in public squares, on housing estates, outside schools and new public buildings across London. It was a period of civic renewal, where a post-war optimism pervaded everywhere. There was faith that a better society could be possible.

*Draped Seated Woman (1957-58)* by Henry Moore became a well-loved landmark in Stepney. Known as ‘Old Flo’, she proudly represented ‘art for the masses’. Public sculpture for the people of Stepney to freely enjoy. However, such socially minded sentiments and lofty ambitions were not to last. Their fall from grace was cemented once Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979. She famously declared: “There is no such thing as society!” and abolished the GLC in 1986.

‘Old Flo’ somehow managed to grace the Stifford estate until 2012, when Tower Hamlets Council tried to sell her to fill the holes in their decreasing budgets. Public outcry and savvy legal action saved ‘Old Flo’ from being sold; but, as if punished for being such an old socialist, she was moved to a public square in Canary Wharf, surrounded by tall glass towers containing bankers and amassed private capital.

Thamesmead never received a public sculpture. Designs for sculptures were proposed, but the political winds had changed. Thamesmead’s ambition and budget were scaled back; no more big ideas about civic society. Thatcher decided to build Canary Wharf while Thamesmead was recast as a ‘sink estate’ where the undesirables were sent to live. By the end of the 1980s it was plagued by anti-social behaviour, racism and economic stagnation. Neglected and unloved, Thamesmead was considered a failure of social and cultural engineering.

Art as a civilising force was a defining idea of ‘modernity’ and a driving force of the post-war regeneration of the UK. It was this grand narrative of modernity as a socially progressive force that Kubrick was critiquing by choosing Thamesmead as a location for his dystopian film *A Clockwork Orange (1971)*.

The idea that art and architecture are progressive social forces remains questionable today. Our blind faith in modernist ideals couldn’t outlast the economic turmoil of the 70s. These cultural strategies were perhaps too paternalistic, too ‘top down’. And besides, expecting art to change the world is just plain silly.

But despite these apparent failings, the legacy of progressive policy makers in the 1950s and 60s did permanently shape our notions of the civic, and of sculpture. Though 40 years of subsequent neoliberal policies have

hollowed out our public spaces, the social idealism represented by these modernist buildings and public sculptures still has a totemic pull on the UK’s cultural psyche. Nostalgia for a time when big ideas mattered.

How we think about and relate to sculpture today was defined by this legacy as much as it was by sculpture’s historic associations with the church and state. When we imagine sculpture, we do so within an institutional or outdoor civic space. When we think about a sculptural experience, we imagine it in public and at scale. You can’t be intimate with sculpture. Not unless you happen to have the money to own it and the space to put it in.

With the idealism and values that built Thamesmead and put ‘Old Flo’ on a council estate now seemingly gone, we should ask where that leaves sculpture in relation to a place like Thamesmead. What could sculpture offer the people who live in Thamesmead now? Does Thamesmead need sculpture? Does sculpture need a ‘public’? How else might sculpture be constituted if not via its visibility and publicness?

It is 2018. The River Thames is bounded by a wall, the marshes long dried out. An artist is invited to come to a place on the edge of London and think about sculpture and the modernist legacy of the town he is visiting. He arrives in a place undergoing a lot of change. Some of its infamous brutalist architecture has been pulled down. The place where Kubrick set up his cameras has been demolished, but some proud, tall towers still stand. There is no sculpture in any of the public places; no shops or cafes. People complain there is little to do; they don’t go out much. “I’m going to make things, things for people’s homes. Let’s find homes for these things”, he says. Over the next 4 years, the artist made sculptures for individuals to have in their homes.

In his series *Things for Homes / Homes for Things (2018-22)* James Prevett set out to explore what sculpture might be and what sculpture might do. Each sculpture is a composition of unheroic domestic materials, made enigmatic through their casting in bronze. These sculptures are ‘of the home’ just as they are destined for it. They are fun and playful and don’t hide on your side table. They are unapologetic and ask questions. But they are also courteous and polite, being careful not to take up too much of your living room or get in the way of your TV.

At the heart of *Things for Homes / Homes for Things* are conversations with others about our social relationship to objects and the spatial relations these depend on. Prevett’s enquiry is intimate and gentle, occurring as it does on a domestic scale in the homes of people who don’t own art, and perhaps have never cared for it that much before. *Things for Homes / Homes for Things* comes without the expectations and politics that grand publicness entails, but embraces instead the potential for social connection through the making and giving of sculpture to strangers.