

Ian COLLINS

IN MY VIEW



Modernism can and must be marvellous

Earlier in the summer, while on a cycling holiday in France, Sara Low failed to join her friends for breakfast. When they went up to wake her they found her dead in bed – one of those sudden and unexpected deaths which may mean perfect peace for the person concerned but complete shock for everyone else.

And for the many friends of Sara in Suffolk and beyond there was also a very particular sadness.

For, after big bureaucratic battles, she had just achieved her dream of building a perfect modernist house in the countryside at Darsham. It is now her epitaph when it should have been her enjoyment.

I met Sara only the once – over dinner at the home of our mutual friend, the architectural writer Fay Sweet – and she seemed then rather lost in thought. Maybe she was absorbed in the pleasure of succeeding against all the odds in doing a beautiful and brilliant and very innovative thing.

After a life of adventure she had lived in the imposing Darsham House for two decades. Some of us would kill, and most of us would thrill, to live in such a Charles II mansion.

But, widowed in 1997, and increasingly drawn to contemporary art, architecture and music, Sara wanted a total break with the past – an easy-to-manage house for the 21st century, where she could live alone but also host weekend invasions of family and friends.

As keen on conservation as on radical design, she had bought back for her Darsham estate a piece of woodland known as the Wilderness, which had then turned into a “rather dreary” fen meadow after the clearance of 150 commercially planted poplars.

This seemed to her a perfect site for a modernist palazzo, especially after a chance conversation with our local MP – John Gummer.

There are few visionaries in politics but I now suspect that John Gummer may be one of them. An excellent green environment secretary (when his philistine mentor, Margaret Thatcher, had declared that precious department a particular bore), he introduced something known as the PPG7 clause. What may sound woeful has proved wonderful.

The simple idea is that a domestic building of outstanding architectural merit should be able to override ordinary planning rules and vetoes.

But the innovation was not yet understood on the ground. Though nice and helpful, the Suffolk Coastal planning officer whom Sara invited to the site told her, basically, that she didn't have a hope in hell. And she believed him, so turned instead to thoughts of buying a smaller house elsewhere.

Then over lunch with a friend she met two young architects, Paul Acland and Paulo Marto, operating as Paul + O Architects. It's fairly easy to change the world over a long liquid lunch and this one ended with that familiar feeling that all things were possible.

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Unusually, the feeling remained when everyone was sober. Sarah and Paul + O then came up with a plan of unabashed modernism, with a succession of box-like blocks giving open-plan living areas and a double-volume galleried library and views through picture windows over woods and fields. It is both strikingly original and like a rural outpost of the Barbican or Kettle's Yard.

With support from architects Sir Michael "The Forum" Hopkins and ninetysomething H T Cadbury-Brown – whose own 1960s modernist home in Aldeburgh is now Grade II listed – plus the very splendid Suffolk Preservation Society, and with lots more advice from John Gummer, the plan was finally approved when Suffolk Coastal councillors went against the recommendation of their officers. Bravo!

Having had a titanic battle with Waveney officers to raise the roofline of my Southwold cottage by all of five feet, with further help from Mr Gummer, I have my own reasons for doubting the expertise of district council officials.

My idea of tight planning laws would rule out the pastiche styles promoted by everyone from the Prince of Wales to Tesco directors and the mass builders of new "homes".

While Sara Low's house demonstrates what can be done on a grand scale, an apparent need for 3m new houses in Britain by 2020 demands that the ordinary must also become outstanding.

New need not mean shoddy. Cheap need not mean nasty. Modern can and must be marvellous.

■ An exhibition of Roger Hardy's garden paintings, in memory of Sarah Low, is at the Peter Pears Gallery in Aldeburgh, September 11-20.

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with the shy eyes, the woman photographed with a compassionate mother.

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