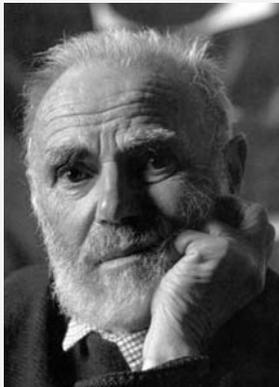




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# Victor Pasmore 3 December 1908 – 23 January 1998



The British artist Victor Pasmore was one of the most influential abstract artists working in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. Today, his work can be found in many private and public collections around the world including Tate Britain; the Royal Academy of Arts, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The British Council; Yale Centre for British Art and numerous regional British galleries.

Despite showing exceptional artistic talent in his youth, Victor Pasmore worked as a clerk at London County Council, attending evening classes at the Central School of Art. In the 1930s, he exhibited with the London Group and the London Artists' Association.

His earliest landscape paintings reflect his admiration for the paintings of Turner and the French Impressionists. He also co-founded Euston Road School with fellow artists William Coldstream and Claude Rogers, working directly from nature and drawing inspiration from Sickert's Urban Impressionism

Pasmore's earliest abstract paintings were painterly and rich in colour. Later he turned to collage and the construction of reliefs, pioneering the use of new materials such as Perspex. One of the effects of which was to bring his works into close relation with modern architecture.

In 1952, Pasmore was appointed leader of the art course at Kings College, Durham, based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. There he developed a general art and design course inspired by the Bauhaus movement that became the model adopted for higher arts education across the UK.

In 1955 he was appointed consulting director of architectural design for Peterlee Development Corporation.

The work of the Peterlee design team on the Sunny Blunts estate bears the strong imprint of Pasmore in its human scale and integration of buildings with the landscape. The centrepiece of the estate was Pasmore's abstract public art structure, the Apollo Pavilion.

It was a controversial design which attracted much local criticism. However, Pasmore remained a staunch defender of his work, returning to the town to face critics of the pavilion at a public meeting in 1982.

If we take a sheet of paper and scribble on it vigorously we become involved in the process of bringing into being something concrete and visible which was not there before. The shape and quality of what we produce is the outcome of forces both objective and subjective: a particular tool, a rotary action and a human impulse. The more we concentrate on this operation the more we are drawn into it both emotionally and intellectually. But as the line develops organically, in accordance with the process of scribbling, we find ourselves directing its course towards a particular but unknown end; until finally an image appears which surprises us by its familiarity and touches us as if awakening forgotten memories buried long ago. We have witnessed not only an evolution, but also a metamorphosis. <sup>1</sup>

Victor Pasmore

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue introduction to Victor Pasmore - The Space Within - New Paintings 1968-69, The Marlborough Gallery, London, 1969.

## Prizes and Awards

- 1959 Awarded C.B.E.
- 1963 66 Trustee of Tate Gallery
- 1964 Awarded Carnegie Prize for Painting at Pittsburgh International
- 1969 Honorary degree of Doctor of Letters awarded by University of Surrey
- 1971 Wins prizes for graphics at International Graphics Exhibition in Krakow, Poland, and Ljubljana, Yugoslavia
- 1972 Gold Medal at Frederikstad International Graphics Biennial, Norway
- 1982 Made Companion of Honour
- 1983 Elected Royal Academician
- 1985 Honorary doctorates from Royal College of Art, London, and University of Warwick

# The new towns programme

New Towns are planned communities constructed in a previously undeveloped area and aligned with traditional settlements that have evolved over time.

The term New Town is now used in the UK to refer to towns developed after World War II under the New Towns Act 1946.

It can be argued that the UK New Town programme is one of the most successful urban policies of post-war Britain. Many aspects of the programme are recognised by students and practitioners of planning and urban studies as models of best practice.

However, New Towns have had their critics. They were disparaged for their rushed construction, tendency to feature car-oriented layouts and for the fact that the new communities often did not automatically gel.

While many issues were addressed in the later New Towns (the third generation towns in particular had substantial resources invested in developing a social infrastructure), New Towns continued to receive poor press.

## History

The New Town programme reflected a spirit of social reconstruction after the Second World War and grew from the need to provide the population with both houses and jobs. Housing was an area in which the post-war Labour government felt that it could achieve social unity.

However, although the Conservative government which took over in 1951 maintained Labour's ambitions, the spiralling costs of the programme resulted in stringent limitations in building costs.

The aspirations of the New Towns initiative, with their emphasis on green and open quality and their successful balance between living and working, was inspired by the garden city movement launched by Ebenezer Howard and Sir Patrick Geddes.

Howard's book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* was a source of inspiration to planners, legislators and politicians alike.

In October 1945 Lord Reith was appointed chairman of a New Towns Committee that concluded that the building of New Towns were best delivered by development corporations, financed by the Exchequer.

The New Towns Act 1946 provided the government with the power to acquire land within defined, designated areas and to build New Towns.

The New Towns were not intended to be suburbs or industrial estates but rather self-contained communities combining the convenience of town life with the advantages of the country. They would have their own local shops and amenities and art was regarded as a vital aid to ensuring that all classes would benefit equally.

Of the 11 New Towns designated in Britain between 1946 and 1955, eight were London overspill or satellite towns. But a number were built for other reasons.

Aycliffe (1947) and Corby (1950) were designed to provide better quality housing for existing employment areas and Peterlee (1948) was intended to provide an urban centre and alternative employment options for a mining area.

By the late 1950s some of the earliest New Towns were coming to the end of their main development phase. The 1946 New Towns Act envisaged that as the towns grew the development corporation would eventually transfer any remaining assets to local authorities. In the end the government's solution was to create the Commission for the New Towns, which from 1961 was responsible for managing and disposing of the land and property assets of the defunct English development corporations.

In May 1999 the Commission for the New Towns merged with the corporate functions of the Urban Regeneration Agency to create English Partnerships, the government's national regeneration agency. In December 2008 English Partnerships became part of the Homes and Communities Agency.

### Art

Development corporations used art as part of the structural design of the towns they were commissioned to build. What is striking about Peterlee is that very early in its development there was a very serious commitment to the role that art could play.

Other New Towns also attempted to incorporate public art and cultural programmes into their urban planning with mixed methods and varying results. A massive range of artworks ranging from concrete hippos to bronze statues, as well as dancing children, giant flowers, a dinosaur, a horse and chariot and crocodiles were all created. The concrete cows in Milton Keynes have become a well-known landmark

In Harlow the architect in charge of the design of the new town, Frederick Gibberd, founded the Harlow Art Trust and used it to purchase works by leading sculptors, including August Rodin, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Washington New Town incorporated an art centre and gallery.

## Peterlee new town

It was in the palmy days of the late 1940s, when this country was standing on the threshold of a New Britain, that the town of Peterlee was conceived – a planned community in which miners could enjoy the same standards and amenities as other people in more favoured circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Architects Journal

Peterlee is unique among the new towns in that it was requested by the people through their political representatives - though whether a majority of the people living in the surrounding colliery villages actually wanted a New Town to be built is debatable. It can be argued that the building of Peterlee was also at the expense of redevelopment of nearby colliery villages.

A deputation met with the Minister of Town and Country Planning after the Second World War to put the case for a new town in the district. The minister, John Silkin, responded by offering a new town for 30,000 residents who would be drawn from the surrounding villages in east Durham.

The Peterlee Development Corporation was established in 1948 under the direction of A.V. Williams with the Russian modernist architect Berthold Lubetkin responsible for design. Lubetkin's original ambitious master-plan for towering blocks of flats was rejected as unsuitable, given the geology of the area which had been weakened by mining works.

Lubetkin resigned in 1950 and new designs that drew inspiration from the low-rise Garden City principles were submitted by his replacement Grenfell Baines.

Recognising that the project was losing momentum A.V. Williams also appointed Victor Pasmore as consulting director of urban design. Williams believed that the artist could contribute a degree of imagination and invention that would revitalise the building limitations imposed by the development corporation.

The result of Pasmore's work at Peterlee was a sequence of housing schemes that he described as 'a synthesis of architect and artist in which common factors ...were pooled in the interests of a common end'.

He was clear that his contribution was as an artist and that, working alongside architects Peter Daniel and Franc Dixon, both he and they would operate as specialists, pooling ideas. They developed the Sunny Blunts estate, a 300 acre site in the south-west area of the main town. Pasmore's contribution to the development was therefore much greater than simply designing the Apollo Pavilion.

Their work at Sunny Blunts bears the strong imprint of Pasmore and is related to his paintings and reliefs. In its elegance of design, human scale, and integration of buildings with the landscape, it still ranks as one of the most successful architectural developments of the period.

Instead of being planned in conventional style along the contours, these houses are planned across them, against a gentle slope, thereby effectively challenging the landscape in spite of the small bulk of the individual units; and it is on this that their unusual geometry is based. This is one of Victor Pasmores many contributions; he takes part in every stage of the design procedure, from the grouping of building on the site to the choice of finishing materials and colours.<sup>4</sup>

Work on the Apollo Pavilion started in 1969 and was completed in 1970.

Standing in the centre of Sunny Blunts estate, it was named after the Apollo Space Programme, a symbol of adventure, hope and optimism.

<sup>3</sup> Anon. Housing in Peterlee New Town. Architects Journal. February 1961

<sup>4</sup> Housing at Peterlee New Town, County Durham. Architect A T W Marsden, The Architectural Review April 1967 by J M R



## The Apollo Pavilion

Situated in Peterlee, County Durham, the Apollo Pavilion was designed by the artist Victor Pasmore. This controversial piece of art is a rare example of a large-scale experiment in the synthesis of art and architecture in the UK.

Victor Pasmore described it as:

an architecture and sculpture of purely abstract form through which to walk, in which to linger and on which to play, a free and anonymous monument which, because of its independence, can lift the activity and psychology of an urban housing community on to a universal plane.

The structure, which spans a small man-made lake, is made of reinforced concrete, cast on the site. The design comprises large geometric planes of concrete with the only decoration being two painted murals. In its original form, the pavilion provided a pedestrian link between the two halves of the Sunny Blunts Estate.

Early photographs of the estate reflect the optimistic, cohesive approach to planning undertaken by the artist and architects. The pavilion was never seen as a stand alone artwork but as an integral part of the estate's design within the landscape.

After 1978, when ownership passed from Peterlee Development Corporation to District of Easington Council, lack of resources to maintain the pavilion saw it fall into disrepair and become a target for vandalism and anti-social behaviour.

Repairs to remedy defects to housing carried out in the 1980s also paid little heed to the spirit or intent of the original radical designs, and the pavilion came to look out of place in its surroundings with many believing it to be an eyesore.

The pavilion's fate remained in the balance for some years and demolition was considered after one local district councillor, Joan Maslin, mounted a campaign against the work. As a compromise, the local authority agreed in 1985 that the stair access would be removed and the structure used for planting.

In 1998 English Heritage and the Twentieth Century Society recommended the structure be given listed status, however, this failed due to lack of public support.

Anxious to ensure that this only surviving element embodying the idealism of its time lived on, concerned local residents and members of the artistic community formed a steering group in 2002 to ensure its future.

The spotlight was focused on the Apollo Pavilion in 2004 when the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead commissioned Jane and Louise Wilson to make a video installation featuring the structure.

A major step in returning the Apollo Pavilion to its former glory came in 2008 when District of Easington Council was awarded a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore the landmark.

Completed in July 2009 this work involved reinstating the feature lighting and staircase allowing access to the upper level, in addition to restoring the two hand-painted murals. The surrounding area was also re-cobbled and a reed bed and plants added to the west end of the lake.



It stands today as a fascinating example of how contemporary artists can translate their concerns into wholly architectural terms, and how even the restricted budget of a new town is able, given the necessary degree of commitment, to yield funding for a purely imaginative feat.

Richard Cork

Apollo Pavilion Restoration, 2009

Consultants: Burns Architects, DTA Consulting Engineers LLP, RNJ Construction Consultants

Main contractor: Makers Freyssinet

## Abstract art

Of all the arts, abstract painting is the most difficult. It demands that you know how to draw well, that you have a heightened sensitivity for composition and for colours, and that you be a true poet. This last is essential.

Wassily Kandinsky

From the Renaissance to the middle of the nineteenth century, art in the western world was underpinned by the discovery of perspective and a preoccupation with depicting the visual world

In the nineteenth century the arts and crafts of non-European cultures such as China, Japan and Africa became more accessible to artists. This art had different ways of looking at the world and describing visual experiences. At the same time artists discovered the art of earliest peoples: signs and marks on pottery and inscriptions and paintings on rock that were simple, geometric and linear and that had a symbolic or decorative purpose.

By the end of the nineteenth century many artists felt a need to create a new kind of art that would somehow reflect the changes taking place in technology, science and philosophy. They had begun to doubt the sincerity and usefulness of classical art, with its emphasis on technique and its dependence of nature as a model to depict. Many felt the art of painting had reached a dead end in terms of inspiration and innovative thought. The Impressionists were a fresh wind, but their emphasis on first impressions failed to convince men like Van Gogh and Gauguin and ultimately Picasso, who perceived Impressionism as shallow and sought more powerful means of expression.

Three art movements contributed to the development of abstract art - Romanticism, Impressionism and Expressionism. Then in the early 1900s Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque started the art movement known as Cubism. They believed that all of nature could be reduced (abstracted) to basic shapes – cubes, spheres, cylinders, and cones.

Their art led to the pure abstract art created by artists such as Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich and Naum Gabo. Since then abstract art has formed a central stream of modern art.

Abstract art uses form, colour and line to create interesting compositions. In its purest form in western art, an abstract art is one without a recognisable subject, one that doesn't try to look like something. Instead just as music is patterns of sound, visual art is patterns of form, colour and line. It is completely non-representational.

Asked to give a reason, for the layman, for abstract art: 'Oh, yes', he said, 'I can give you the reason. It's pure painting just as a work by Mozart is pure music.'<sup>1</sup>

A number of theoretical ideas lie behind abstract art. The idea of art for art's sake, Plato's concept, that the highest form of beauty lies not in the forms of the real world but in geometry. Also generally classified with abstract art are figurative abstractions and paintings that represent things that aren't visual, such as emotion, sound, or spiritual experience. Figurative abstractions are abstractions or simplifications of reality, where detail is eliminated from recognisable objects leaving only the essence or some degree of recognisable form.

There are many different abstract styles including Cubism, Neoplasticism, and Abstract Expressionism and there are many abstract artists who painted in these styles. For example, two of the most famous cubists were Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. One of the best examples of Neoplasticism is the work Piet Mondrian. The most famous examples of Abstract Expressionism include the work of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock.

The British abstract painter Ben Nicholson and the Spanish Surrealist painter Joan Miro were obvious influences on Pasmore's work. It is also interesting to compare Pasmore's early exploration of abstraction, around 1950 that lead to his first constructed reliefs in 1952, with that of Mondrian's work between 1912 and 1919.

<sup>1</sup> Reasons for Abstract Art, Mr Victor Pasmore Discusses its Nature and Prospects. The Times, 13 August 1958.

## Activity Sheets

The following sheets contain some suggested activities for your students built around a visit to the Apollo Pavilion and some questions that can help them explore and develop ideas and understanding of art and architecture.

The activities outlined are intended to encourage young people's creativity, to think and talk about the physical world and the structures in it and to explore and develop their ideas.

We hope that these activities encourage your pupils to:

- Learn about colour, line, texture and shape
- Look at and talk about the work of artists and architects
- Learn about visual and tactile elements such as colour, line and shape and use a range of materials in their own work.

We hope that older pupils will be inspired by the Apollo Pavilion to:

- Investigate different styles of art, design, architecture and approaches to town planning
- Develop their ability to discuss and analyse artworks and to explore the basic elements of the visual language
- Reflect upon their own experiences and identities in their communities and explore ways of representing them creatively.

We would also like to encourage your pupils to identify and record how the Apollo Pavilion and the Sunny Blunts estate has changed over time, both physically and in relation to the local environment. Considering public places as dynamic entities that reflect changing times can help pupils come to see the built heritage as something living and relevant.

## Activities for Primary School and Keystage 1 and 2 pupils

1. Make a drawing of the Apollo Pavilion. Now make a painting from imagination of a another building beside water.
2. Find different materials that you can use to use to make pictures of buildings beside water.
3. Look at the colours used in these artworks by Victor Pasmore. Can you find these colours in the landscape around the Pavilion or your school? (VP Construction, see sheet A).
4. Look at the shapes in this painting. What do they remind you of, what do they make you think about? How does this painting make you feel? (The Snow Storm, see sheet A).
5. Use the Apollo Pavilion website ([www.apollopavilion.info](http://www.apollopavilion.info)) to find out information about Peterlee and the Apollo Pavilion. Can you find photographs of these places as they used to be? Take photographs of these places today.
6. Make rubbings and prints based on different surfaces found in and around the Pavilion, eg concrete finishes, wood grain. Explore how these prints can represent different surfaces or parts of buildings or landscapes.
7. What can you see if you look really closely at a wall in the Pavilion. Feel the wall, what texture can you feel? Can you make a drawing of a section of the wall?
8. Make a classroom display about the Apollo Pavilion.

## Questions and activities suitable for Keystage 3 pupils

1. Compare a painting by Victor Pasmore with those of other 'abstract' painters by using the Abstract Art Time Line, books and the internet. Make notes in a sketch book and try to imitate the various styles.
2. Make studies in your sketchbook about buildings close to water. Add drawings of the Apollo Pavilion reflected in the lake at different times of the day and in different weather conditions.
3. Look at the shapes in this painting (The Harmony of Opposites, 1985, see sheet A). What do they remind you of? Where else in the landscape around the Pavilion can you see similar shapes?
4. What is art, what is architecture, what do they have in common? When does a building become a work of art?
5. Do you know the names of any other new towns in the UK? If you were designing and building a new town what would you put in it? What would the houses look like? Where would you put the roads? Would you have parks?
6. What different textures can you identify in the Apollo Pavilion and the surrounding landscape and houses. Which are natural and which are manufactured?
7. Design a structure that sits across water and use a computer to model it.
8. Choose a part of the Apollo Pavilion that interests you, and draw it or make a simple sketch of the whole building. Record some of the architectural details using a camera.

## Ideas for work and activities suitable for pupils beyond Keystage 3.

1. What and who most influenced Victor Pasmore in his approach to the Sunny Blunts estate? What do you think inspired his designs?
2. What do we mean by the built environment? What were Victor Pasmore's proposals and in what way were they different? In what way are his proposals relevant to our understanding of the built environment today?
3. The attached photographs are taken at different periods. Can you identify the places? How different are they today? (see Sheet B)
4. What do the attached images say about relationship between art and architecture and the environment? (see Sheet B)
5. Compare two paintings (Choose one by Victor Pasmore and an appropriate painting that relates to your national curriculum studies). How do they fit into the development of art in the 20th century?
6. Try drawing simple vertical and horizontal outlines of the Pavilion and the other structures and natural features around it to get a feel for the height, width and volume of these structures.
7. Consider the materials used in the Pavilion, How do the surfaces vary eg textured, rough, smooth, reflective? How do man-made elements relate to natural elements, are they in conflict or harmony?
8. Describe the architectural style of the Apollo Pavilion.

## Abstract art timeline:

1850 1907

Philosophical debate questions the established values of classical art.

1905 1915

Pablo Picasso and Georges Braques create Cubism. Henri Matisse's and the Fauvists act as a bridge between Post-Impressionism and Expressionism.

Picasso's 1907 painting Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. version O) inspires many artists (Wassily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger)

1910

First signs of pure abstract art (Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian).

1912 1925

Piet Mondrian and Russian artists create of pure abstract art. Amedeo Modigliani sets the benchmark for abstract portraiture.

1925 1945

Period characterised by geometric abstraction (the Dutch artistic movement De Stijl) and painterly automatism (Joan Miró).

1945 1960

Painterly automatism becomes the more radical Abstract Expressionism (Mark Rothko).

1960 1980

Abstract art with design characteristics - Op Art, Pop Art and geometric abstraction.

1980 Today

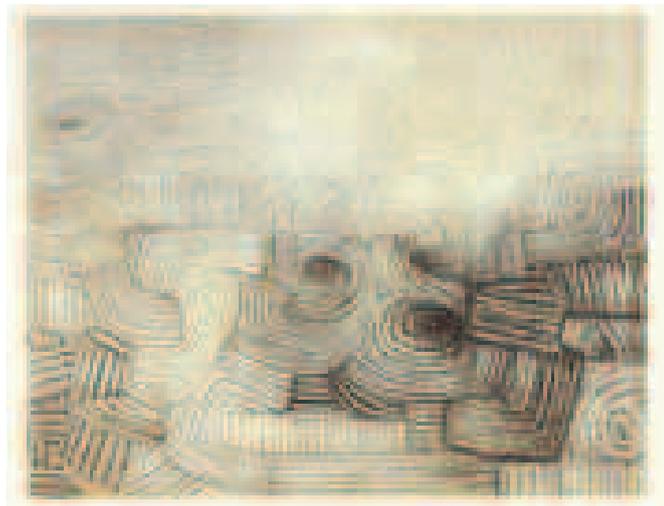
Postmodernism



VP Construction



Wandering Journey, 1985



The Snow Storm



The Harmony of Opposites, 1985



Further images created by Victor Pasmore

