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Gilbert & George Centre – deceptively magnificent within a slice of the old East End

The artists' museum transforms a former brewery site in a rapidly changing London neighbourhood



Gilbert Prousch, left, and George Passmore outside the new Gilbert & George Centre © Tom Oldham

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Edwin Heathcote 6 HOURS AGO

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The Spitalfields into which the artist duo Gilbert & George moved in 1968 was a down-at-heel rag-trade and fruit-and-veg-market neighbourhood. Some of the old Yiddish-speaking residents were being replaced by young Bangladeshi people and, at night, its streets echoed with the cries of the homeless and the hopeless. It appears, narrated by a velvet-voiced James Mason, in the 1969 documentary *The London Nobody Knows* and in Don McCullin's brutal photos of the dispossessed in 1973.

This neglected bit of east London did not look like the future. Most of it only survived demolition thanks to a vigorous campaign of squatting, protests and publicity, much of it led by architectural historians. It could easily be squatted because the houses, many of which are elegant 18th-century residences once home to prosperous Huguenot weavers, were worthless.

Not any more. Now commodified with its mix of street art, period architecture and vintage stores, Spitalfields has become the self-conscious pivot between the City of London and the East End, providing a kind of wraparound experience embracing [Dennis Severs' exquisitely restored time-capsule home](#), coffee shops, Banglatown and cheap curry houses. It is diverse, young, creative, a place of picturesque decay — London as it would like to be seen.



First floor gallery in the new centre © Prudence Cuming

A new, green-painted gateway has appeared here, just off Brick Lane, with the elaborately wrought initials “G&G”. It feels like a fashion brand, a romanticised, flowery gesture. This is Gilbert & George's new gallery, the centre for Spitalfields' own “living sculpture” — as the couple themselves are sometimes known. The elaborate gates in this slightly scuzzy street might suggest that G&G are taking the mick. But that is very much belied by the royal cipher at its centre reading “C III R” (for Charles III Rex).

Gilbert Prousch and George Passmore are not radicals, they are naughty conservatives — naughty enough that their best-known works include *The Naked Shit Pictures*, *Dirty Words Pictures*, “Sex Pest” and “Fuck the Teachers”. Critical of the default left-liberalism of the art world, the besuited Morecambe and Wise of British art have carved out their own position of Thatcherite, royalist, reactionary deference. They have inspired others along the way (Kraftwerk, for instance, whose identical suits and deadpan stage presence owed much to the pair), but their early oddness has been muted by time into a kind of music-hall Englishness. Safely sly.

Their conservatism has also run through their domestic life; the restoration of their Fournier Street house to Georgian near-perfection has been part of what saved Spitalfields. The couple (who work as one artist) have become as much fixtures of the neighbourhood as the bagel and curry shops, tourist heritage of the most English kind. They eat in the same cafés and cheap restaurants every day and give local homeless people cups of tea. Their studio is by their home and they are still expanding.



Gilbert & George outside their home in Spitalfields, east London © Yu Yigang

Their new museum sits in a courtyard in Heneage Street. This was once a neighbourhood of breweries and their building was just that. A seemingly narrow site, it is squeezed between a pub and a gorgeous red-hued house that once belonged to interior designer Jocasta Innes, an early sign of what became a kind of gentrification.

Designed by architect Manuel Irsara of SIRS Architects (Gilbert's nephew, who also designed the pair's nearby studio), it all looks modest and self-effacing: a courtyard lined with plants, a small, blocky brick-and-timber room running a film about G&G and a few structures which look vaguely post-industrial and, occasionally, suspiciously 1980s.

Visitors are buzzed through the florid green gates and into a small lobby and shop, demure and slick with restored cast-iron columns and exposed brick and timber. You walk through a door and, well, bang. Nothing about the intimate courtyard or the domestically proportioned route has prepared you for the scale of the space within. A large gallery with G&G's vivid, stained glass-like pictures on the walls. The architecture fades away: this is a smooth white box with fine details, nice floors and benches, otherwise quiet in the extreme.

Then up to another gallery, this one somehow even grander, its exposed roof trusses and wrought-iron straps morsels of the building's industrial, workmanlike origins. It looks like an art barn. Then, finally, another gallery downstairs, also at an impressive scale but with a lower ceiling. The pair's pictures, which I had never entirely warmed to, seem to have shed their scatological, infantile obsessions, the shit, sperm and bums, for something more . . . decorative. The first hang is of a 2019 series, entitled *The Paradisical Pictures*, which seems to celebrate the oddness of everyday things when blown up and coloured.



The centre's first hang is a 2019 series, 'The Paradisical Pictures' © Prudence Cuming



Main entrance to the centre, a former brewery © Prudence Cuming

The architecture draws no attention to itself at all, an odd contrast to the works on the walls. Surely, I ask the Italian-born architect Irsara, these old provocateurs must have been tempted to do something a little more extravagant? “This was never intended to be a monument to Gilbert & George,” he says. “It was always about being a place to make their art accessible.”

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And it is accessible. “Art for All”, they call it. In a neighbourhood that has become something so different from McCullin's unsettling urban dystopia, Gilbert & George's gallery will be free to everyone.

“They see their home, their studio, this gallery, themselves as living art,” Irsara says. “It's all one thing.” And in restoring and reviving another small slice of Spitalfields they have ensured that this odd little corner of the city retains at least a little eccentricity and authenticity. Of a kind.

gilbertandgeorgecentre.org