

# THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

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**ECOLOGICAL PROPRIETY**

Störmer in Hamburg Erskine in Greenwich Wigglesworth in straw

HOUSE, ISLINGTON, LONDON  
ARCHITECT  
SARAH WIGGLESWORTH  
ARCHITECTS



Jokes in architecture are not usually good. Unless you're Lutyens, they quickly seem to be solidified embarrassments, as many of the tattered hulks of '80s PoMo demonstrate only too clearly. Little do you expect to find one of the wittiest new buildings in London at the end of a back-street next to a busy railway line. In time, it will be seen as one of the most gallant experiments in eco-architecture of our age. And yet, in a period when so many green architects seem so solemn, so really po-faced, it is light-hearted, full of double-entendres, tenderness for its dreadful sight and for its users.

Stock Orchard Street was a little bit of railway land disposed of when British Railways were so scandalously sold by John Major to a pack of accountants and civil engineers who were more interested in profit than service. But a few good things were dragged from disaster. This is one. The building, at the bottom of a rather run-down Victorian terrace, looks as if it will be a long-standing series of jokes and lessons that will become more important over time.

Time is of the essence in Stock Orchard Street: the house is intended to change as it gets older; it will never be finished, as its architect owners say most heroically. You first understand its odd qualities when you come to the gate, made of willow hurdles in a galvanized steel frame. Two manufacturing cultures are united: traditional craftwork and common or garden steel jobbery. The result, though apparently difficult to achieve, because the tolerances needed by willow workers are very different from those of welders, is a precise statement about what is to follow. The whole house, constructed throughout with similar care, took 350 drawings and nearly two and a half years to make. It is an imaginative combination of what the architects call 'the slick and the hairy'.

Once past the gate, you are faced by a rather formidable front door. You are in a strange arcade of piers made of bits of recycled concrete made rectangular sense with gabions. These main supports of the building have had to have reinforced concrete sacrificial columns in their middles to comply with the fire regulations (the metal cages

would deform in intense heat), but they are more than able to support the loads by themselves. The architects point out that it is environmentally cheaper to have a lorry of broken concrete delivered to a site than to take away a load of site waste. Material from demolished buildings is abundant and cheap.

On top of the gabions are springs in green boxes. They moderate the vibration set up by endless trains, and their ameliorating effect is amplified by a sandbag wall, which provides acoustic mass. The wall was inspired by a dusky wartime picture of London bolstered against the blitz in the Second World War. It is extremely funny and bizarre, with window openings framed in Australian hardwood railway sleepers found on the site. Made with bags full of sand, cement and lime, the wall is intended to decay gradually into a rippling surface of concrete left with the rough imprint of cloth, and the beautiful local wild plants like herb-Robert and Welsh poppy which will surely seed there.

Over the entrance is a silver quilted wall: another sound-reducing device. Silicone faced

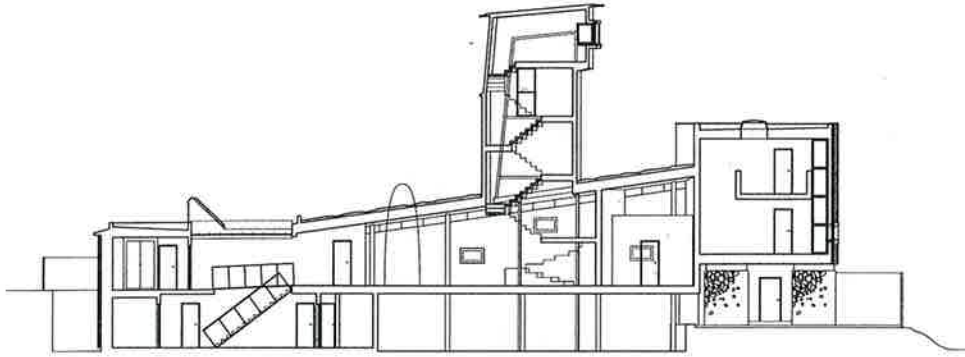
## THE SLICK AND THE HAIRY

**'Slick and hairy', the house made by a pair of architects on a neglected north London site, has many environmental lessons to teach – not least about the nature of wit in building and the importance of imagination.**



1 The sun side, opening itself to heat and light, with bales sexily exposed through polycarbonate.

2 Tower (which will contain library) is a landmark in a run-down inner city suburb.

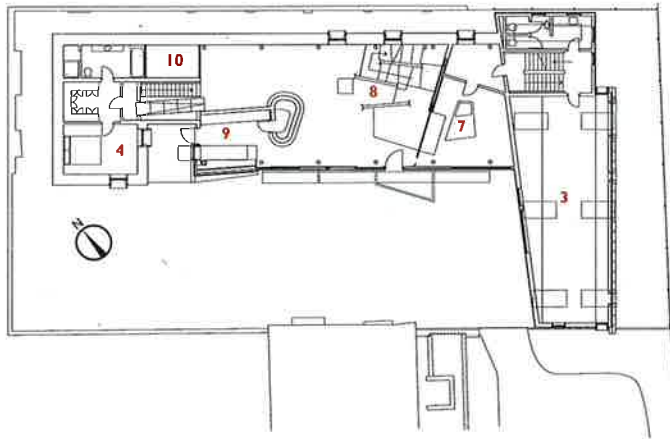


long (west-east) section

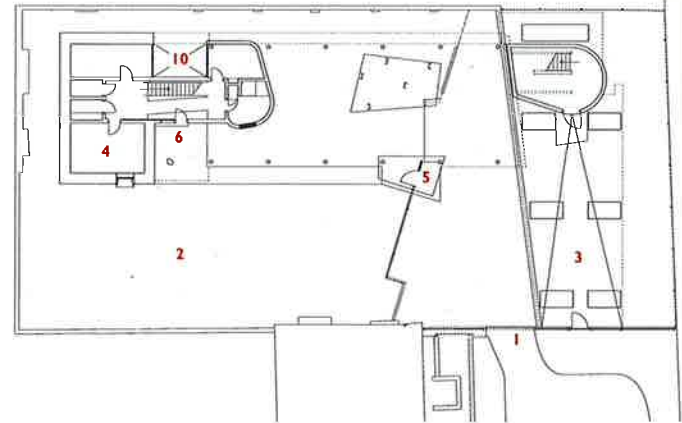


cross section through tower

- |                     |                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 gate              | 6 domestic entrance      |
| 2 garden            | 7 conference-dining room |
| 3 office            | 8 tower library          |
| 4 bed               | 9 larder-kitchen         |
| 5 official entrance | 10 court                 |



ground floor (scale approx 1:450)



first floor



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3

Court carved in back of mass has pool fed by roof water. Intended to be a damp mossy grotto, similar to Soane's courts at his museum, the space is an outdoor room, surrounded by domestic spaces.

4

The sound wall: against the noise of the trains, the architects have buttoned on a quilt, and made a massive wall of sand bags designed to decay with dignity.

