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**I DON'T HAVE A
TELEVISION,
I DON'T WATCH
TELEVISION,
I'M NOT INTERESTED IN
TELEVISION**

TV ARCHITECT SARAH WIGGLESWORTH SPEAKS OUT

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DECONSTRUCTING SARAH

Sarah Wigglesworth, rebel intellectual, fat architect and straw enthusiast, has just accepted an MBE and is about to become something of a television star ... George Hay discusses postmodern irony with her, Frank Bauer takes the pictures





Personal effects

Who's your other half? Jeremy Till, he's professor of architecture at the University of Sheffield. We're celebrating our 25th anniversary this year, or would be if we were married.

Where are you from? Round here! I went to (adopts Mockney accent) Camden High School for Girls.

How do you feel about being Sarah Wigglesworth, Member of the British Empire? The titles are really outdated, but I'm humbled and flattered that someone noticed what I was doing. I thought an MBE was such a lowly little thing that you didn't get invited to the palace, but I'm told you do. I haven't had the letter yet, though.

Describe Jeremy's dress sense (it has been described as "Rupert Bear-like") Idiosyncratic.

THE IRONY OF HER POSITION IS NOT LOST ON Sarah Wigglesworth. Later this year, the quietly spoken architect will play a leading part in regeneration's first foray into the viper's nest of reality television, *The Castleford Project*. But she, for one, won't be tuning in. "I don't have a television, I don't watch television, I am not interested in television," she states, rolling her eyes. "Ninety-nine percent of what's on television is an absolute disgrace. Most of it is crap. We deserve better."

The Castleford Project will involve the four-strong team from Sarah Wigglesworth Architects (along with McDowell + Benedetti, Hudson Architects and DSDHA) being stalked by Channel 4 camera crews as they plan the redevelopment of Castleford, a nondescript town 10 miles from Leeds. The production team will be hovering at their elbows as they wrestle with councils, planners, infracos and quangos. The idea is to fast-track planning decisions, get the buildings up and finish with a *Challenge Anneka*-style denouement some time at the end of October.

So, can they fix it? The answer, at this stage at least, is, er... no they can't. The project is beset by all the usual problems of a regeneration project: endless community consultation, design challenges, unexpected

I LOOKED AT THE CAMERA CREW AND PRESENTER, AND THOUGHT, YOU HAVEN'T GOT A CLUE, HAVE YOU?

delays and fee disputes. It all looks set to be delayed until next year.

Wigglesworth, poised, assured-looking and 46, says she's in the dark about what's going on. "There seems to have been a lot of dialogues with various people, but I'm not sure what they've got to show for it," she says. "I don't think the producers have much conception of how long it takes and how complex it is to build a building, let alone do a town regeneration project."

She finds the sensation-seeking all a bit bemusing. "During the competition, a camera crew and presenter came to our office and said things like, 'God! The competition's ending in a few days - are they going to make it? What are their ideas?' They then turned round and said to us, 'We've got our schedules all set for September. I looked at them and thought,

you haven't got a clue, have you?'"

But it's clear that Wigglesworth is the type of architect who would appeal to a television producer looking for sell. She's obsessively into ecologically sustainable materials - she can talk about straw until the cows come home and eat it - she speaks at conferences with names such as "Boho Britain", and she pursues wacky schemes such as designing with food, and connecting architecture with dance.

A devious producer could have a field day: she could end up portrayed as insufferably right-on, preaching tolerance and tofu from Islington. Or she could be crudely pigeonholed, as when *The Daily Telegraph* described her as "the Tracey Emin of architecture."

But as Wigglesworth talks about the project in her funky, postmodern home next to the rail line on the Caledonian Road, north London, it's clear she knows how the media game is played. "The thing about television is that you sign away all your rights to your portrayal," she sighs, adding that she is unlikely to participate in such a project again. "They can cut and paste silly things you say to make you look a complete idiot if they want to. You have no say at all in how you're represented. I find it very problematic."

So why bother? "I'm interested in

architecture and civic life being given an airing in popular media," she says. "The higher level of debate we get, the better architecture we'll get, ultimately. This is really just a means to try and achieve that."

Another means could be her MBE, awarded this year to her considerable surprise, which she hopes will advance the cause of women in architecture. But other endeavours aimed at raising standards could, like Castleford, lay her open to the charge of misinterpretation. She is endearingly candid about "Boho Britain", the conference last year organised by the American economist Richard Florida to explore the economic payoff of the "bohemian side of cities". The somewhat pretentiously named paper she gave, "A City like Jazz: Creativity in Modern Britain" was, it transpires, given its title by the conference organisers. But despite the "eringsworthy" and "cheesy" packaging, she appreciated Florida's ability to get the message through to a nonplussed audience of civil servants.

"The place was full of people from local authorities and government," she recalls. "I could see them understanding Richard Florida's language, but they didn't understand

me at all. It signified to me that there's a communication gap between what we do and government. It was a real eye-opener; we just don't cut it with these people."

But Boho Britain did touch on a favourite Wigglesworth theme. She's a friend of diversity, innovation and variety, and she's an enemy of from top-down masterplanning and "global identikit communities". So, not surprisingly, she is implacably opposed to the community design codes being pushed by Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and to the "absolutely ghastly" teachings of their intellectual parent, American New Urbanism.

"I'd be happy if there were no codes at all, really," she says. "They're someone's vision of what the world should look like - basically a stylistic straitjacket. I think these things need negotiation and don't need to be the same everywhere."

This combination of creativity and common sense helped her practice to become one of the 11 chosen to design a "school of the future". This was the Department for Education and Skills' attempt to show educational administrators and the construction industry what could be done with the money

available, and it was a considerable coup for such a small practice.

Of the designs on offer, Wigglesworth's was one of the few to realise that budgetary constraints meant that blue-sky thinking, such as installing interactive link-ups to Norway for each pupil, was not feasible. "What we were really designing was a school for today," she says. "We could have been far more radical, but we wanted a basic set of principles that would be simple and very cheap to build." Her primary school scheme came in on budget, unlike, it is understood, many of the others.

Wigglesworth's pride and joy, though, is her house, a tour de force of imaginative postmodernism. It's all about using low-tech materials for high impact. Grand pillars stuffed with masonry form an avenue leading up to the front door, which, like the punchline of a shaggy dog story, is coloured deep pink. The office part is covered with what looks like cheap mattress padding and is topped by a timber-clad tower. A connecting door leads through to a huge living space, divided into kitchen and living room, beyond which lie the bedrooms. It's ace.

The design reflects Wigglesworth's typology for ecological buildings, and severs the association between green buildings and worthiness. She calls the result "fat architecture" because "everything in architecture is always about paring down, making things slim, as transparent as possible - we wanted to do the complete opposite". A glance at the bookshelves groaning under the weight of terrifyingly intellectual tomes such as *The Condition of Postmodernity*, *Gendered Space* and Martin Heidegger's mammoth *Being and Time* - a book that professional philosophers regard as hard work - is enough to appreciate that she takes her postmodernism very seriously.

Her obsession with straw, which provides much of her house's insulation, is justified on ecological grounds. "There are huge benefits from using it," she says. "It's dry construction so it's very quick, it's cheap, and it's environmentally sound. To be honest, I find it hard to understand why more people aren't taking it up: cutting costs and time could be brilliant for the industry."

But is she architecture's Tracey Emin? "I think it's all about being a codebreaker," Wigglesworth says, cryptically. "But it's all nonsense." There's certainly an Emin-like, disregard for modernist pieties in her work. But whereas Emin is rubbished for her supposed frivolity, Wigglesworth's thoughtful demeanour and hard-headed drive demand to be taken seriously.

As indeed she is keen to stress. "Behind everything we've done there's a rigorous exploration of a set of issues," she says. "It's not wilful: everything's been very carefully thought through and planned."

By autumn, she may be wishing the same could be said about *The Castleford Project*.



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