

Homes & Property Architecture

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Eco-architect Sara Wigglesworth's home is a fortress defending the green cause, says **Ruth Bloomfield**



WITHIN sight of Arsenal's Emirates Stadium stands another north London icon. From its irregular five-storey tower to its "puffa" cladding, this house by architect Sara Wigglesworth and her husband Jeremy Till, also an architect, is both a landmark building and a well-insulated battleship defending the environmental cause.

The building also makes a statement about environmentally friendly architecture: it does not have to be dull and worthy to be green. "Our agenda was not just a green agenda, about people who knit and eat lentils," says Wigglesworth. "We wanted to make green more interesting and mainstream, to make it something people would want rather than something that had to be forced on them."

The couple, both 52, bought the 20m by 40m site at auction in 2004. Its position, pressed against the East Coast

Chill: air drawn via an undercroft (right), though the larder to vents on the roof (far right), is so cold it keeps ice frozen

'We made the mistake of being honest about our budget. As an architect it was good for me to be a client and to see how hard it can get'

railway line out of King's Cross, so deterred other buyers, they paid only £78,000 for the plot.

It took them three years to draw up the plans for the house ("We talked and talked and talked") and they finally submitted their radical proposals to Islington council in 2007.

The building is L-shaped, with the offices for Wigglesworth's practice (www.swarch.co.uk) alongside the railway. The main house has an undercroft and one main above-ground floor, out of which juts the five-storey tower.

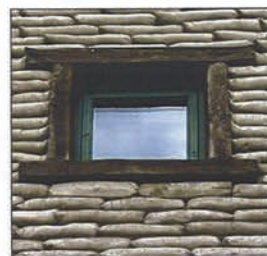
To their astonishment, with no opposition from neighbours, the application sailed through in a matter of weeks.

The "two-year build", which started in 2000, was another story. It took twice as long as planned and ran significantly over budget, coming in at £600,000.

"We had to move into a caravan on the site for nine months. The build was, like so many builders sagas, a nightmare. Builders never tell the truth, or they tell a half-truth. We made the terrible mistake of being honest about our budget and then, of course, it went over and we ran out of money." It was very good for me as an architect to be a client and see how hard it can get."

Green does not have to be grey: walls are clad in quilt (right), and chickens live in the yard (far right) but a smart kitchen (centre) is proof, says Wigglesworth (above), that green homes need not be dull or primitive

THE QUEEN OF GREEN



THE GREEN MACHINE

All the materials were carefully researched for their green virtues. The façade facing the street is clad in a waterproof quilted fabric, attached with eyelets to the frame of the house, making the building look as though it is wearing a puffa jacket. At the back, walls are packed with bales of straw to provide insulation.

The decision to build an undercroft came because, though the plot itself is

flat, the buildings behind it are on a higher level, with a dominant brick retaining wall between. So the couple built their house on "stilts" with enough space for a spare room, office and utility areas below. There is also an open area that leads to a small garden where they grow vegetables and keep chickens.

The main living floor is mostly open plan but "the beehive" – a curved rendered pod – sits in the middle and acts as a cool larder. A neat trapdoor in its floor opens on to the undercroft,

creating a draft that can keep ice frozen, so there is no need for a fridge.

The kitchen is tucked away behind the beehive, with a glittering table made of recycled splinters of glass bonded with resin.

Books line the enclosed wooden staircase that leads up the tower, past a mezzanine gallery overlooking the living room and a door leading out on to the green roof, on which the couple can picnic in summer.

It is, Wigglesworth says, a complete folly. After a steep climb visitors reach

a tiny writing room, where Till goes to be creative. "It's just romantic – it's not meant to be practical."

Wigglesworth and Till wanted their house, which they open for tours twice a year, to be an example of how to enjoy being green.

But has it worked? "Absolutely," says Wigglesworth. "I can't imagine going back to living in a space that had been designed for nobody in particular. We are lucky in that we can live in a space that has been tailored just for us – it is one of the great joys in life."

Photographs by: **Graham Jepson**

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