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Wigglesworth blurs
the boundaries of
home and office

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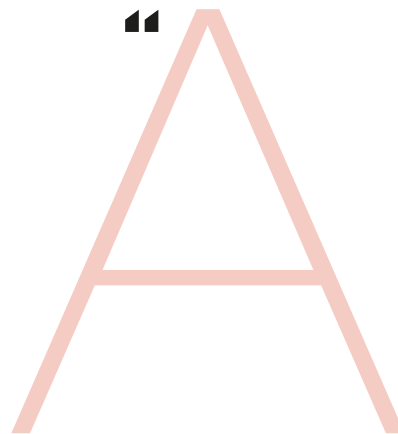


THOUGHT

*Over 25 years in practice,
Sarah Wigglesworth has been
refining her architectural vision
– mostly from her unique
London home and workspace*

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HIBA ALOBAYDI

IMAGES BY
ALUN CALLENDER



building has integrity just like a man. And just as seldom.” Writer and philosopher Ayn Rand’s poignant sentiment regarding the state of the built environment, penned 76 years ago, continues to resonate with the struggles many architects face today. Creatively crippled under the slow but steady piling of client constraints, regulatory restrictions and an increasingly problematic political climate, an architect can often do but one thing to retain his or her commission: compromise, compromise, compromise. That is why when, once in a generation, the constellations of construction align and a practice manages to emerge from these socio-political trials unscathed, with its vision intact, the resulting building becomes the stuff of architectural legend.

As Sarah Wigglesworth reflects on her practice’s 25th anniversary, she fondly recalls the serendipitous series of events that led to the establishment of her award-winning eco-home office, Stock Orchard Street, back in 2001. “Well, it happened by accident really. We scaled up the ambition of the project ☺

← Wigglesworth
inside her office





← Wigglesworth aims to foster a sense of belonging in the practice

“I felt embarrassed that as a female architect I was associated with a home. As women, we struggle to assert our identity in the workplace”

because we ended up with more land than we expected, so the agenda behind living and working on the same site all ensued from that.” Initially, Wigglesworth and husband Jeremy Till set out to build themselves a home, not a home office. It was only after purchasing the Stock Orchard Street site in Islington, north London, at auction that the extent of the plot revealed itself to be much larger than originally anticipated.

“I was working from home at the time and it seemed like the perfect opportunity to create an office we could expand into.” Wigglesworth explains nonchalantly, but admits she was at first reluctant to resign herself to the confines of a home office. “In the early years, I didn’t like working from home at all. I felt embarrassed that as a female architect I was associated with a home. I think, as women, we struggle to assert our identity in the workplace and I felt I needed to have a workplace that distinguished itself as not allied to the home but, in reality, I couldn’t really afford that.”

Over time, Wigglesworth’s initial misgivings faded, replaced by an unapologetic pragmatism – what some might consider her defining trait. “I don’t give a damn what people think about my allegiance to my home now and I think part of that confidence has come from building this building because we made it with ☺



*“Architecture has
to embrace the
unpredictability of
the ‘social event’”*

a really clear agenda: to establish an ecological model of living.”

Looking to proven precedents, such as van Heyningen and Haward Architects’ purpose-built home office in nearby Tufnell Park, soon dispelled qualms Wigglesworth had as to whether or not the merger of her personal and professional lives was viable and, more importantly, sustainable. From this, both Till and Wigglesworth learned that for their live/work arrangement to succeed it would be important to clearly demarcate the areas associated with each but not to rule out the fact that, on occasion, the two may overlap. In fact, Wigglesworth’s first-hand experiences, in the seven years prior to occupying Stock Orchard Street, had taught her that this was an inevitability.

Before establishing its current office, Sarah Wigglesworth Architects occupied

the attic of a four-storey house in Upper Holloway. Due to the lack of space, meetings would take place on the ground floor, in what Wigglesworth referred to as the “front room”. “It had a dining table in it that used to receive all the packages, brochures, samples, literature and both personal and work-related mail – everything got dropped on the table and that became the basis for the idea about how living and working get combined in our current home office.”

Wigglesworth, of course, refers to Stock Orchard Street’s defining dining-cum-conference table, and the blurred boundary it occupies, between home and office, that informed the overall execution of the scheme’s plan.

Inspired by the multifaceted nature of the table in her previous home, Wigglesworth set out to interrogate this notion ☺

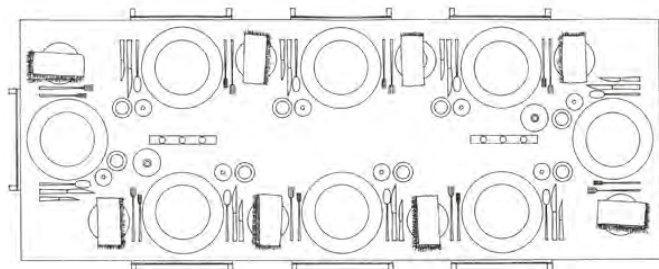
↑ Domestic and work
spaces are demarcated
but may be blurred

↓ Wigglesworth uses
drawing to explore the
building’s possibilities

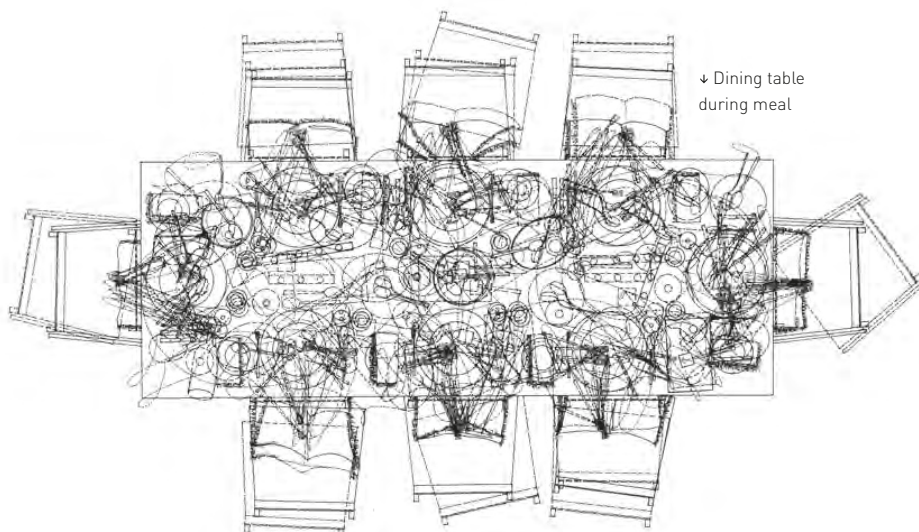


“We made it with a really clear agenda: to establish an ecological model of living”

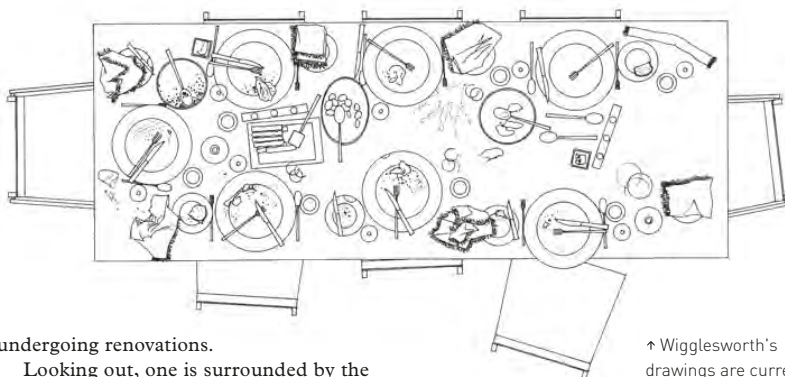
↓ Dining table before meal



↓ Dining table during meal



↓ Dining table after meal



↑ Wigglesworth's drawings are currently available to purchase as limited edition prints at the V&A show FOOD: Bigger than the Plate

further through the development of a set of drawings. The first in the series depicts the dining table laid in anticipation of the meal, the second traces all movement happening during and the third illustrates the scene after. “To my mind the first drawing, which is static, represents the way architects think about space but what we wanted to do is think about it as the second trace – i.e. as a backdrop for a dynamic social event.”

That’s what Wigglesworth aimed to achieve at Stock Orchard Street and its plan is a translation of that trace of the dining table. “Architecture has to be able to accept the dynamism and embrace the unpredictability of the ‘social event’ and not mind the mess and the dirt that is left at the end of it.” That is something that can be said of Wigglesworth – she does not mind the mess or the dirt.

“Sorry about the noise, but I’ve got builders in as you can see from the mess out there!” she explains, gesturing toward the large window overlooking the street: Stock Orchard Street is currently

undergoing renovations.

Looking out, one is surrounded by the building’s nitty-gritty materiality in all its unadulterated glory: straw-bale insulation, sandbag walls and gabions filled with recycled concrete. “We did apply some aesthetic judgment but essentially we were more interested in going: right, what is the logic if we follow all this through? What sort of building do we end up with? And living with that no matter what it looked like.” Till and Wigglesworth’s dedication and determination to push the envelope of



ecological design was spurred by a trip to America, on the Fulbright Scholarship, back in 1991. Having witnessed the magnitude of consumption in the United States, both sought to prioritise the implementation of an environmentally ethical ethos for the, then, newly formed practice.

By their own admission, neither knew much about green architecture prior to designing Stock Orchard Street but their can-do attitude and sheer resolve willed the building into existence in what Wigglesworth describes as “the culmination of 15 years of thinking, writing and teaching”.

Guided by models such as Walter Segal’s low-energy, self-build blueprint, the couple spent two years conducting research into more sustainable methods of construction. Wigglesworth’s command of the natural materials and processes that comprise Stock Orchard Street’s structural make-up becomes increasingly evident as our

conversation continues: “The bales are nearly half a metre thick but one of the reactions we got was: ‘Why is it so fat? How can you waste all that space?’ But actually, if you want to reach the kind of U-values we’ve got you’ve to build a wall at least 500mm thick. You can’t do it any other way.”

Wigglesworth continues: “We were interested in an architecture that moved away from the obsession lots of architects have with minimalism and making things look like they stand up without trying. We were like, let’s make it really fat, really bulky and do the very opposite.”

Stock Orchard Street’s expressive, tactile honesty belies its ingenuity. After all, 23 years ago it must have been hard to imagine a building like this. Yet, despite the generally positive reaction over the years, some felt, with the plethora of ideas woven into the building’s fabric, it was a surprise the building didn’t burst at the seams: “A lot of people felt that we should have been more ☺

↓ Architects share tables in a relaxed, open-plan workspace





← Wigglesworth's office exemplifies the practice's work to clients

economical with the ideas we tried to convey. The way I see it Stock Orchard Street is building capital in the bank that we can draw down into different projects. That was very much the case with Mellor School [the practice's 2015 primary school in Stockport] and our more recent project, Haycroft Gardens."

Haycroft Gardens is a private residence in north London designed to house three generations of the same family. Completed earlier this year, the multi-generational dwelling anticipates both the short and long-term requirements of its occupants, much like Stock Orchard Street's current renovations aim to do for Wigglesworth, her husband and her practice. "One of the reasons we're doing this work at the moment is because we're making it ready for our old age. We're making provision for it now."

This level of foresight is, perhaps, unsurprising considering Wigglesworth's forte: designing sustainable schools, civic and community centres. Designing for the future. When asked why her practice gravitates towards such commissions, she replies: "Because they aim to foster a sense of belonging... a sense of family." She pauses: "It's funny, after 25 years I consider my practice to be like family and maybe Stock Orchard Street played some part in that."

She reflects: "While I do think it's sad we've never had an opportunity to do something as radical again – I'm not unhappy about that. I think, in a way, it preserves its uniqueness... its integrity. I still very much enjoy living and working here and these renovations are to ensure I can continue to do so."

It would be fair to say Sarah Wigglesworth seeks to future-proof her architecture the same way she does the planet – one building at a time. ■