







Left: the kitchen table is the heart of Sarah Wigglesworth's home

## In the kitchen An architect remodels her home for later life

Our living spaces need adapting as we age. Architect *Sarah Wigglesworth* explains the adjustments she has made to the hub of her house

Listening to *A History of the World in 100 Objects* on BBC Radio 4, my attention was caught by a bird-shaped pestle, originating 8,000 years ago in Papua New Guinea. The story of this everyday object – a descendant of which still stands in my kitchen – revealed how humankind developed as farmers and cooks. Skeletal remains found at the burial

sites of women in the Middle East from that time (who were the cooks) show wear and tear to their knees, hips and ankles, caused by the daily physical toil of grinding wheat.

Though there is no need for such physical labour in today's kitchen, we are well aware that it is an environment that can challenge our physical being. In 1926 the architect

Grete Schütte-Lihotsky applied scientific principles to the design of kitchens, aiming to turn them into efficient laboratories for modern living. These ideas still prevail. The worktop height, good lighting, a fresh water supply, hygienic processes for waste disposal, plenty of storage, equipment within easy reach, places to keep food fresh and safe cooking apparatus all help us to make sophisticated meals with minimal effort.

In the late 1990s, I designed a sustainable house for my partner and I to live in, building it from scratch on a neglected site on a street in Holloway, north London (some of you may even remember it from the first series of Channel 4's *Grand Designs*). When designing our kitchen we proposed a simple run of base cupboard units with a stainless-steel worktop – safe for a hot pan and easily cleaned. Above this a stainless-steel shelf acts as a plate rack and a store for pots and pans. A long table forms the other side of the kitchen, sitting in an alcove with bench seating to the far side (left). Horizontal slot windows frame glimpses of the garden. To reduce the scale when seated, lamps are suspended from a canopy hovering overhead. The table is, effectively, another worktop but it is also the setting for informal meals and is the place where people gravitate when they come round. It feels cosy and sensuous, and is the heart of the nurturing home.

The table canopy bounces light onto the worktop from the clerestory above. Lighting the worktop was critical, so the stainless-steel shelf pelmet has strip lights for illumination during darkness. A huge almond-shaped larder, cooled by natural ventilation, stores dry goods, tins, jars, condiments and cooking equipment (page 30). A worktop-mounted gas hob and under-counter oven were complemented by a small fridge. Though the workspace is modest, we feel we got a lot right because it is efficient and practical.

Recently, we undertook a retrofit so that our home could allow us, when the time comes, to ease gracefully into our 'fourth age', the chapter some time after retirement when doing daily activities becomes more difficult. The architecture firm I run, Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, has pioneered ways to design and adapt buildings to be inclusive »



Above: the almond-shaped larder in Wigglesworth's kitchen

» for all ages, thereby reducing the need for people to move into care homes or other institutions. There were lessons I could apply to my own home. In the kitchen, for instance, this meant making sure we could reach things easily and without strain, while keeping us safe. We felt no need to change the basic arrangement, but critically, we replaced the gas hob with an induction hob, ensuring we can never leave the gas on by mistake. We installed eye-level ovens to make bending down unnecessary. Drawers replaced the cupboards for the same reason. Finally, we installed – for the first time – a small dishwasher to help ease the fallout from entertaining. LEDs substituted the pelmet lights providing better brightness and lower energy consumption. Small moves, perhaps, but destined to keep those knees, ankles and hip bones from failing.

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Sarah Wigglesworth is an architect and director at Sarah Wigglesworth Architects

## At the stove Chris Orr RA on art and food

I have always been interested in food. Put it down to being born in 1943 and remembering post-war rationing, then seeing, in my lifetime, a food revolution take place. One of the great blessings of recent decades has been the worldwide interchange of cultures, as lamb rogan josh, sushi and haggis have straddled the world. You can now get an oyster at the airport and mozzarella at the motorway services.

Just so with art. In my youth I had a meagre diet of William Russell Flint (topless dancers), Pietro Annigoni (portrait of HMQ) and Giles the cartoonist. Art school was the taste expander and I learnt to love Picasso and Jackson Pollock. I moved on from Spam fritters to moules marinière. I became omnivorous.

Food and art are not different worlds, as making a piece of art is very like cooking. It became one of my teaching clichés, asking a student about their food habits. My mother was a terrible cook, but my father made up for it, not by superior skill but by generosity of spirit. He laid the dripping thick on the toast. By virtue of his job, schmoozing clients in the print industry, he had an appreciation of the good lunch.

Making a painting relies not only on motor skills, but also on the intuitive determination to seize the opportunities that present themselves. Sometimes what might appear to be a crazy decision is the correct one. Just so in the kitchen. Adding mustard or wine to a dish may be the right move, going easy on the chilli may be the clincher. Feeling that an ingredient is the right one trumps prescriptions. When Diego Rivera made breakfast for Frida Kahlo, would he bring his passion for painting to the task? (Diego Rivera

(*A fry-up for Frida*), 2017, detail; opposite right.)

There is a dispute in our household. I like recipes as suggestions, but when it comes down to the actual cooking, I ignore the written instructions. When I was young I was given a Craft Master Paint by Number set ('You, too, can paint a beautiful picture in oils'). Following the instructions, I got terrible results. To paint you must feast on your subject and allow all of the subliminal influences to play their part and use materials that are pleasing. The theory of painting by numbers is that you cannot make a mistake, but actually the 'mistake' may be the vital spark. A painting evolves as a dialogue between the painter and the painting.

The cookery programme has become a staple of television, but do we all need to be up to the standard of celebrity cooks? Since we all eat, there is a multitude of levels at which satisfying food may be prepared. Equally, there are many, many unsung but clever artists like the regular exhibitors who appear in the RA Summer Exhibition and in smaller galleries around the country.

This raises the question: do we make art or cook to satisfy ourselves, or have we something else in mind? To me, art and food must be acts of generosity. Their purpose is to reach out and nourish. We can't paint with resentment in our hearts or cook with hatred on our tongues.

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Chris Orr RA is a painter, printmaker and former RA Treasurer ([chrisorr-ra.com](http://chrisorr-ra.com)). The RA Artists' Cookbook, featuring 40 recipes by artists, and Orr's *The Miserable Lives of Fabulous Artists* (both RA Publications) are available online at [roy.ac/shop](http://roy.ac/shop)