My Modern House: architect Sarah Wigglesworth and head of Central Saint Martins, Jeremy Till, reflect on 20 years at their experimental sustainable home in north London

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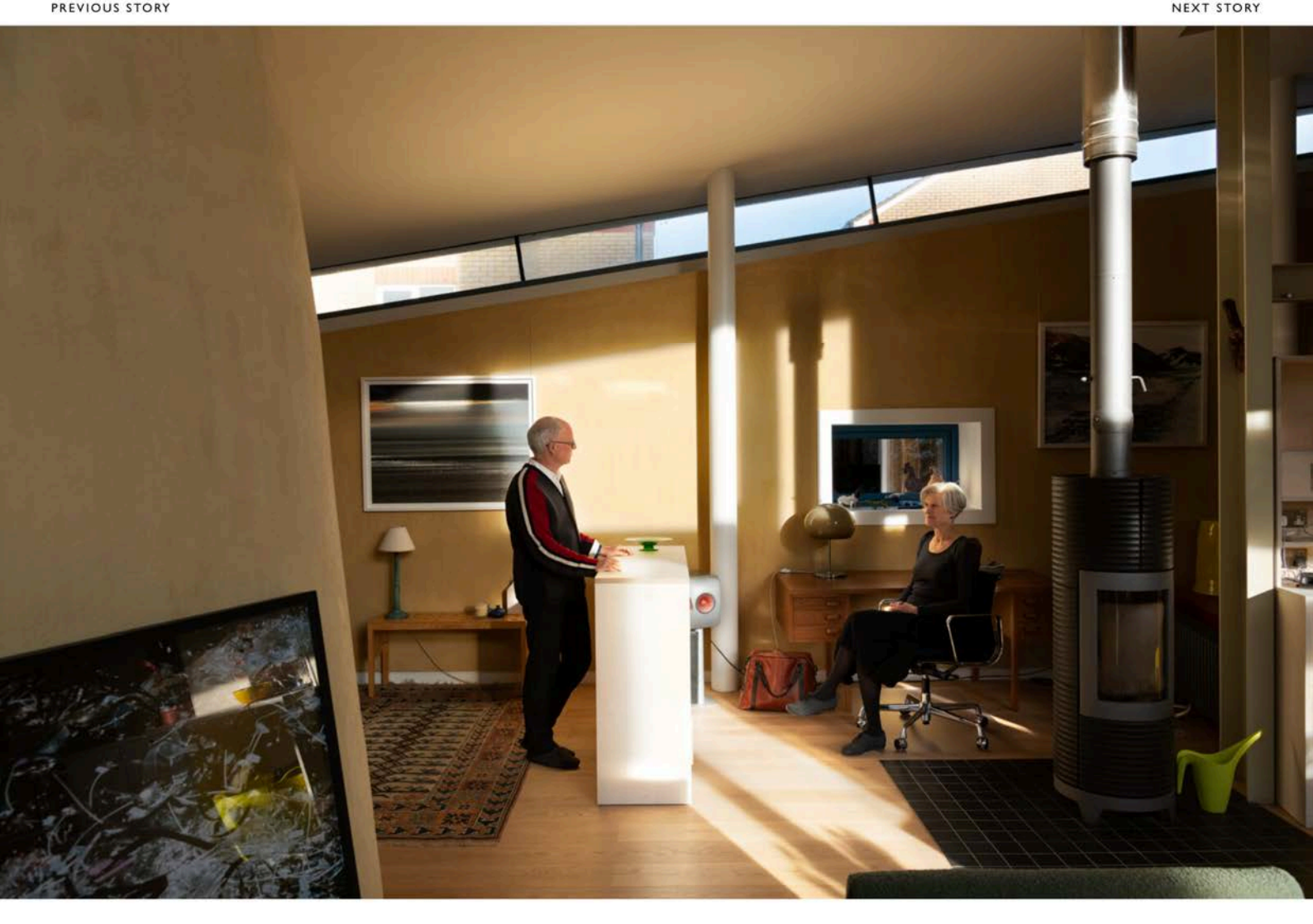


We're sharing select stories from issue one of The Modern House Magazine, which you can pick up a copy of here. Architect Sarah Wigglesworth and head of Central Saint Martins, Jeremy Till, divided opinion when they revealed their experimental self-designed home in 2000. Twenty years later, and just after a major refurbishment, has the world finally caught up with these trailblazers? Charlie Monaghan investigates.

"Architecture is the only discipline in which you're not allowed to have too many ideas. If you're a philosopher, having lots of ideas is quite a good thing, but not in architecture," explains Jeremy Till, wryly, in the library tower of his and Sarah Wigglesworth's home on Stock Orchard Street in Islington, north London. He's taking aim at the first published review of the couple's house, which suggested that the design had "too many ideas" and was even "self-indulgent". If the same critic could bear witness to this scene – the head of one of London's most renowned art colleges discussing the shortcomings of architectural criticism surrounded by books on feminist architectural theory in his soaring staircase-cum-bookshelf – they would, I imagine, be tempted by some cheap metaphor about ivory towers.

But I'm equally sure Till wouldn't care. "Too many ideas? Guilty as charged," reads his rebuttal, in which he argues against a "tendency of architectural puritanism" in Britain especially, where "awkward moments, inconsistencies and hybridity are ruthlessly edited" in the pursuit of "mature" architecture. It's a case the couple have been mounting in their academic writing and teaching posts since the early 1990s. Work such as their co-penned The Everyday and Architecture, a reappraisal of successful architecture according to its humdrum realities and lived experiences, sought to take the spotlight off of monumental buildings to celebrate the ones used for daily life.

It was around that time that the couple acquired their land on Stock Orchard Street, a large infill site bordering a busy railway line and then home to an old forge, just off Caledonian Road. The scale of the project would have been intoxicating for even the most conventional white-box modernist architect but for Wigglesworth and Till, who were practically bursting with ideas, the project represented the ultimate testbed. "The design process became a sort of purging of thought experiments that we'd been playing with… and they all came out. Which is probably where the 'too many ideas' thing came from," explains Wigglesworth.

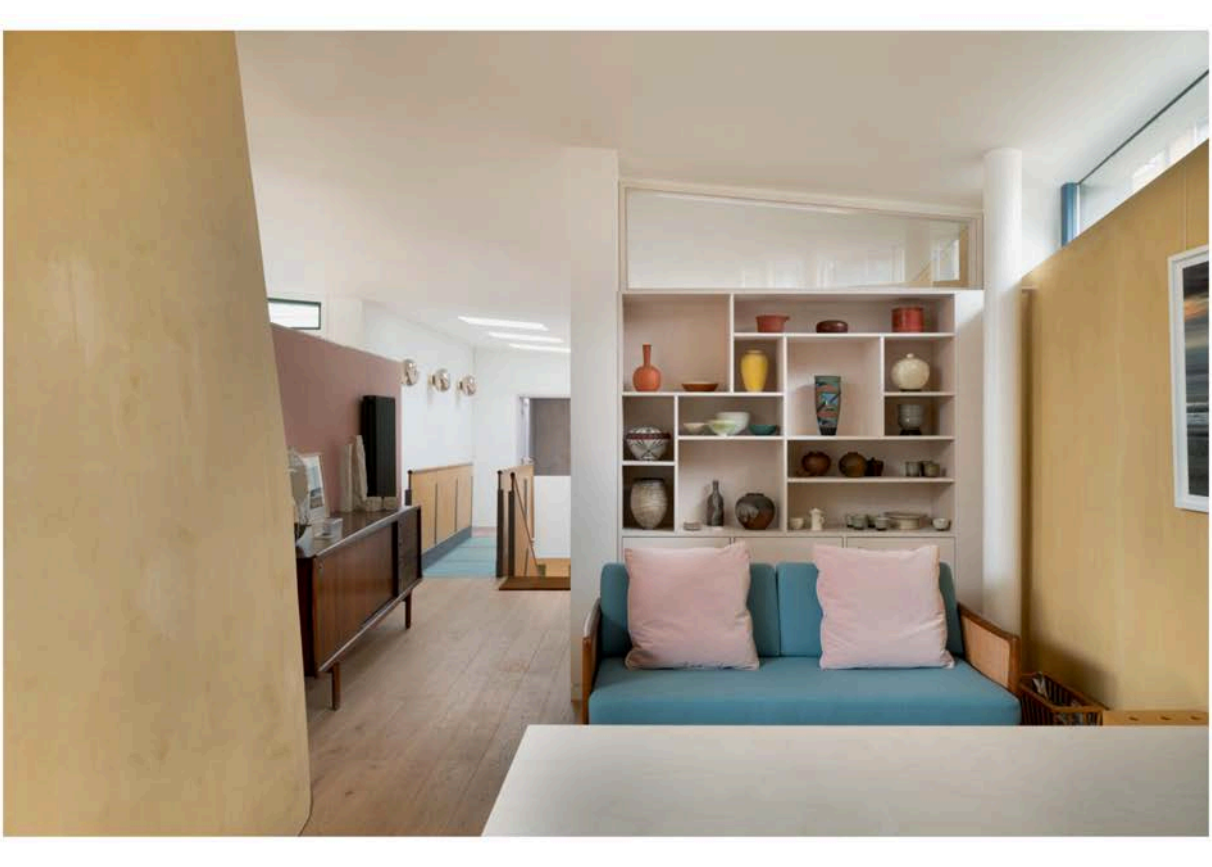
 

The finished building, a live-work complex comprising a substantial home and a studio for Wigglesworth's eponymous practice, though, is successful precisely because of all its seemingly disparate elements, which it somehow manages to harmonise. Take the exterior elevations, for example: a veritable patchwork of materials that runs the gamut from the hi-tech (spring-loaded concrete stilts to dampen vibrations from the train tracks) to the prosaic (sandbags, recycled concrete and old railway sleepers). Or indeed one's very first encounter with the building. The front gate is made from willow hurdles woven through a galvanised steel frame that serves as an inspired prelude to the symphony of the ancient and modern beyond.

And it's not just the material palette that's subject to the game of architectural touché. "As academics, we were obviously very aware of the canon, so there are lots of references to architectural styles, but not in a systematic way," says Till, pointing to the fact that the stilts that support the office might appear like slender modernist columns à la Corbusier if it weren't for the chunky gabion supports filled with recycled concrete that they're wrapped in. "We set things up to undermine them," explains Wigglesworth, "like factoring in a big open-plan modernist main space and then sticking straw bales in the walls."

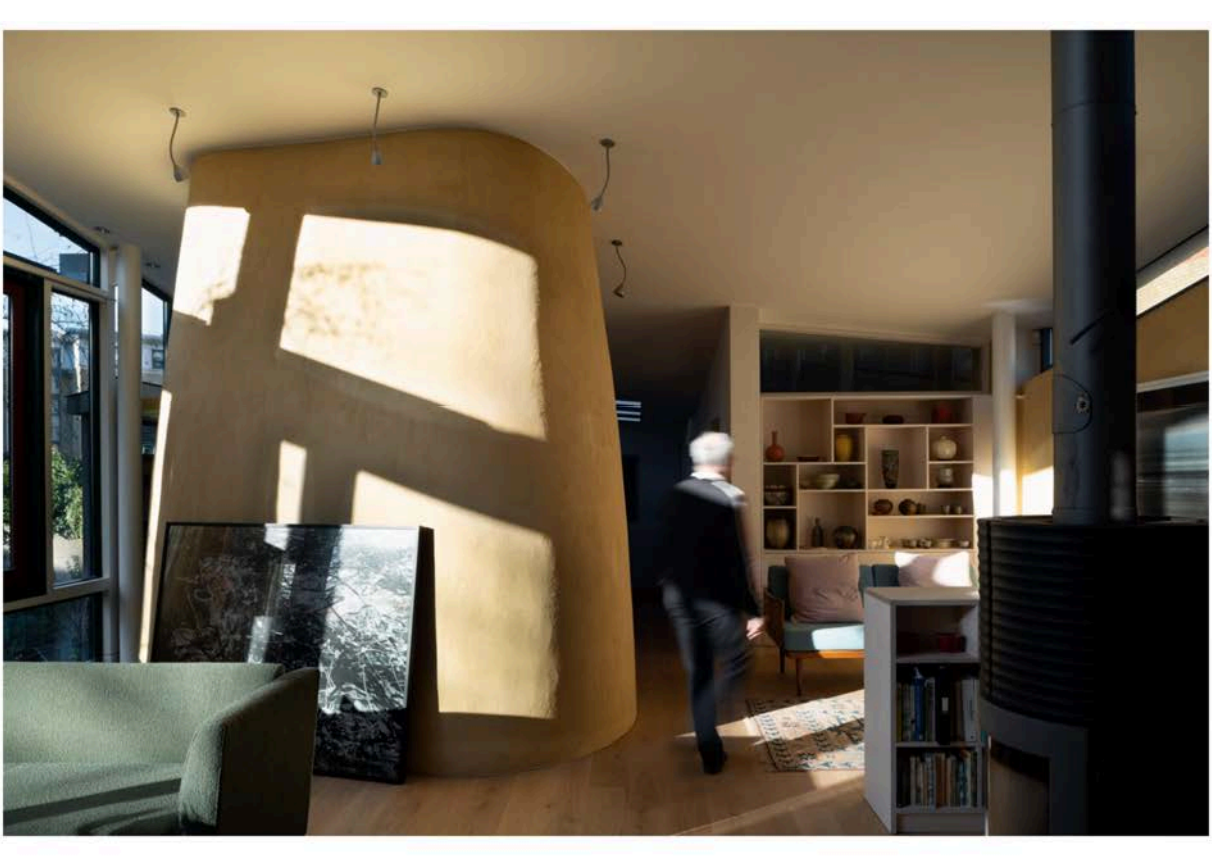
Ah yes, the straw bales, which lent the house its nickname – The Straw Bale House – when it was completed, and for good reason. The half-metre thick bales, sourced from a farmer, are illustrative of the ingenuity and resourcefulness Wigglesworth and Till applied to constructing their home, but also of the way they sought to celebrate age-old wisdom. "We tend to think of technology as being the cutting edge," says Wigglesworth, "whereas we were interested in relearning what was being forgotten." Straw bales, used in construction for hundreds of years, proved a cheap, easy-to-install building material that performs well to this day, as does the air-cooled walk-in larder, which keeps even perishable dairy products cool throughout the year.



Such eco-friendly innovations may seem fairly expected 20 years on, but the pair were nothing less than pioneers at a time when sustainable design was in its infancy. Their needle-pushing didn't stop at the technology they used, however. Through the project's far-reaching press coverage, and, crucially, their participation in the first season of Grand Designs, the house shifted the public's perception of what sustainable architecture could look like. "When it won the RIBA Sustainability Award, it was up against a very serious piece of architecture. The judges told us ours was more important because it actually made the ideas accessible and visible to a wider audience," says Till.

Another break from its drab-looking contemporaries was how Till and Wigglesworth thought about, engaged and lived in their house. "We could have got bogged down with minimising the volume-to-surface ratio, but they weren't key concerns when we were building it and, in some ways, they're not our key concerns now," explains Wigglesworth. "One of the things that I think is really important about sustainability is that sense of wellbeing, ownership, enjoyment and care that you have with a building that you love. If you don't value your environment, you don't have those relationships with your surroundings. In the summer when the leaves are dappling light into this place, it's absolutely gorgeous. It's just a beautiful space to live in."

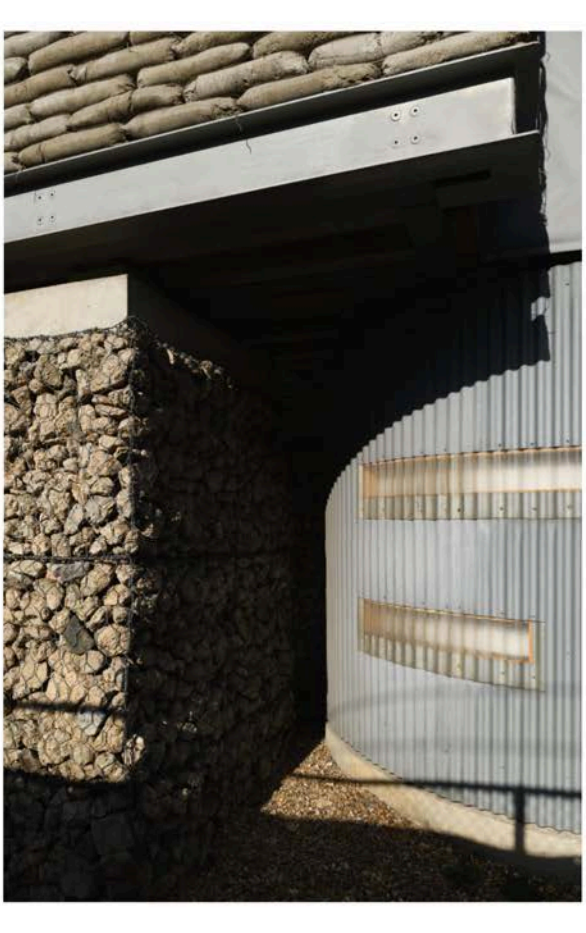
The idea of investment and care as being important factors to a sustainable home was proven in reality last year when they completed a major renovation to the house. Thinking about their future, the couple decided they don't ever want to move. "All the research shows that people live much longer and happier lives when they're in their own home and they have autonomy and agency. We don't want to end up institutionalised in a care home," explains Till. While a long way from the prospect of a care home, it's about anticipating what lies ahead, they explain. "My advice to people in a home they love is to get on with adapting it early," says Wigglesworth. "Getting older is an inevitability, but it's best to face it and make your home work for you."



Here, that meant changes like switching to electric hobs ("so we don't have to worry about leaving the gas on"), repositioning the ovens so they won't have to bend down, creating a mini flat on the ground-floor bedroom wing that could function independently from the main house if needed, and replacing some of the hardware with newer, better-performing technology. "Annoyingly, the only thing people notice is that we got the furniture reupholstered," jokes Till.

In some ways, though, their consideration of the future of the house began long before their refurbishment last year. "I've always thought that buildings are provisional," explains Wigglesworth. "We're always learning from the experience of living here. We always wanted this building to change over time and if it was too perfect, it wouldn't have been able to do that." In an age defined by instant gratification and short-term returns, the couple's forethought, where experiential knowledge and the acceptance of imperfection are embraced, might once again prove that they are ahead of the curve.

It's not hard to see why they want to spend the rest of their lives here. Even on a cold, greyish day the living spaces are bright and optimistic thanks to large, south-facing glazing. Outside, a productive garden provides vegetables six months of the year. "Sustainable design doesn't end at construction, it's about how you live in a house too," says Till. There's a feeling of life here and, as the couple show me around, the sense of being in a home that is loved and appreciated is palpable. "It gives us daily joy. It's an amazing privilege to design your own building and then live in it," beams Till.

It would be easy to say that it doesn't matter that the architectural fraternity ultimately "got" Stock Orchard Street, that the reviews soon became more flattering, with headlines asking, "Is this the most influential house in a generation?" a more common sight today. It would also be easy to say that the house doesn't need theorising, that its success ultimately lies in that it engenders a more visceral, direct response than what can be communicated in an academic paper. But its real success is that it is able to do both. A house built upon esoteric ideas, which massively progressed what sustainable architecture could look like and which is still questioning how we occupy our homes is only the more successful for being a beautiful, easy to live in, light-filled and comfortable home.

One anecdote sums up the home perfectly. "At one point our builder told us we'd have to find a way of saving 10 per cent of our budget because the design just got too ambitious. We took the plans, laid them on a photocopier and did a 5 per cent linear reduction, which then squared becomes 10 per cent overall reduction. It was just a really quick way of losing some area," laughs Wigglesworth. The solution, much like the house itself, is clever, witty and imperfect, handled with humour and charming beyond measure.

MY MODERN HOUSE

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