

HOUSE, ISLINGTON, LONDON
ARCHITECT
SARAH WIGGLESWORTH
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Jokes in architecture are not usually good. Unless you're Lutyens, they quickly seem to be solidified embarrassments, as many of the tattered hulks of '80s PoMo demonstrate only too clearly. Little do you expect to find one of the wittiest new buildings in London at the end of a back-street next to a busy railway line. In time, it will be seen as one of the most gallant experiments in eco-architecture of our age. And yet, in a period when so many green architects seem so solemn, so really po-faced, it is light-hearted, full of double-entendres, tenderness for its dreadful sight and for its users.

Stock Orchard Street was a little bit of railway land disposed of when British Railways were so scandalously sold by John Major to a pack of accountants and civil engineers who were more interested in profit than service. But a few good things were dragged from disaster. This is one. The building, at the bottom of a rather run-down Victorian terrace, looks as if it will be a long-standing series of jokes and lessons that will become more important over time.

Time is of the essence in Stock Orchard Street: the house is intended to change as it gets older; it will never be finished, as its architect owners say most heroically. You first understand its odd qualities when you come to the gate, made of willow hurdles in a galvanized steel frame. Two manufacturing cultures are united: traditional craftwork and common or garden steel jobbery. The result, though apparently difficult to achieve, because the tolerances needed by willow workers are very different from those of welders, is a precise statement about what is to follow. The whole house, constructed throughout with similar care, took 350 drawings and nearly two and a half years to make. It is an imaginative combination of what the architects call 'the slick and the hairy'.

Once past the gate, you are faced by a rather formidable front door. You are in a strange arcade of piers made of bits of recycled concrete made rectangular sense with gabions. These main supports of the building have had to have reinforced concrete sacrificial columns in their middles to comply with the fire regulations (the metal cages

would deform in intense heat), but they are more than able to support the loads by themselves. The architects point out that it is environmentally cheaper to have a lorry of broken concrete delivered to a site than to take away a load of site waste. Material from demolished buildings is abundant and cheap.

On top of the gabions are springs in green boxes. They moderate the vibration set up by endless trains, and their ameliorating effect is amplified by a sandbag wall, which provides acoustic mass. The wall was inspired by a dusky wartime picture of London bolstered against the blitz in the Second World War. It is extremely funny and bizarre, with window openings framed in Australian hardwood railway sleepers found on the site. Made with bags full of sand, cement and lime, the wall is intended to decay gradually into a rippling surface of concrete left with the rough imprint of cloth, and the beautiful local wild plants like herb-Robert and Welsh poppy which will surely seed there.

Over the entrance is a silver quilted wall: another sound-reducing device. Silicone faced

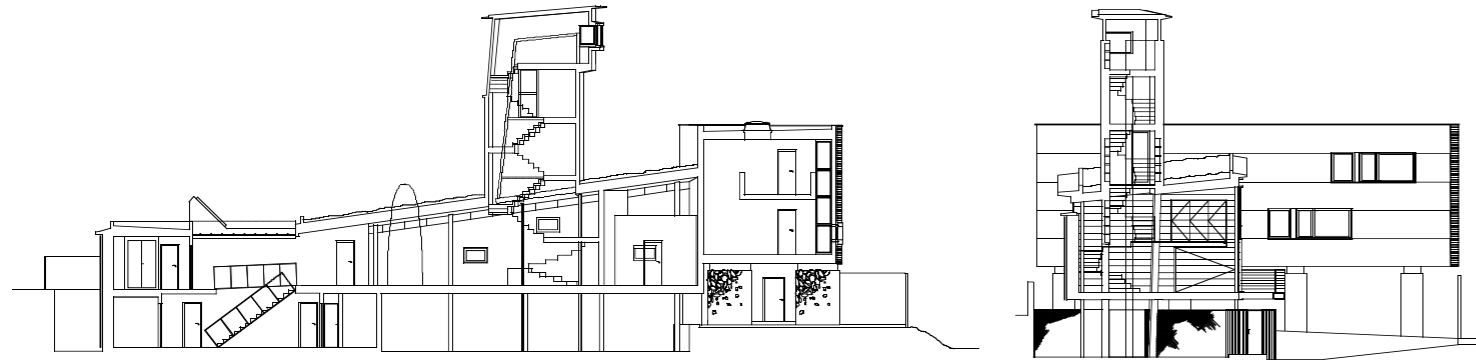
THE SLICK AND THE HAIRY

'Slick and hairy', the house made by a pair of architects on a neglected north London site, has many environmental lessons to teach – not least about the nature of wit in building and the importance of imagination.



1
The sun side, opening itself to heat and light, with bales sexily exposed through polycarbonate.

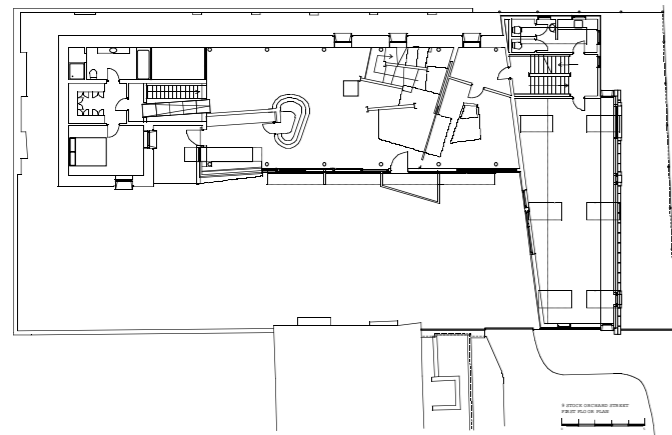
2
Tower (which will contain library) is a landmark in a run-down inner city suburb.



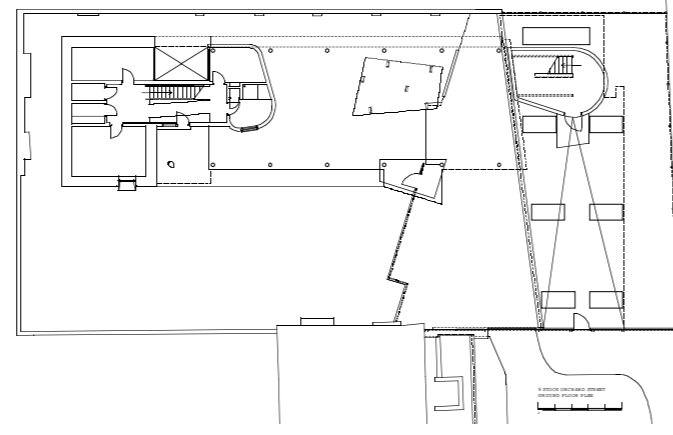
long (west-east) section

cross section through tower

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 gate | 6 domestic entrance |
| 2 garden | 7 conference-dining room |
| 3 office | 8 tower library |
| 4 bed | 9 larder-kitchen |
| 5 official entrance | 10 court |



ground floor (scale approx 1:450)



first floor



3

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3
 Court carved in back of mass has pool fed by roof water. Intended to be a damp mossy grotto, similar to Soane's courts at his museum, the space is an outdoor room, surrounded by domestic spaces.

4
 The sound wall: against the noise of the trains, the architects have buttoned on a quilt, and made a massive wall of sand bags designed to decay with dignity.



4



5



6



7

fibreglass made by a sail-maker is buttoned to the inner building with an insulating layer and inner damp-proof lining. Sarah Wigglesworth says that one day, the cloth may be unbuttoned, and a whole new and completely different kind of cladding will be applied. But that time will be long ahead, when building materials have properties that we can only dimly imagine.

Sand bag and quilt enclose the office part of the plan. L-shaped, the parti is organized round a double-height dining room – a hinge which acts as both a family communal space and (during the day) a place for office meetings. Height is one of the architects' driving concerns: the office or studio has a gallery mezzanine. There is a tower, not yet completed, which is starting to contain the library. At the top of this landmark will be a little study from where the whole of north London will be seen.

Much of the domestic part of the plan is, as Wigglesworth says, 'swaddled in straw bales'. The house is claimed to be the first modern straw building in England, using the natural and mostly ignored highly insulative material. Vertical wood ladders take roof and floor loads and the straw bales are stacked between them. A farmer in the west of England was found who was proud of the

precision of his baling and 550 bales were delivered to London at the almost unbelievably cheap price of £825. Wigglesworth says that 'bales are quick and easy to build with' and that the whole wall was put up in three and a half days by unskilled friends. I worry about vermin, but Wigglesworth claims that perforated metal closures at top and bottom of the cavity that separates the bales from the outer rainscreen will keep out rodents and insects. She will live with the straw and see. Rainscreen is provided by corrugated galvanized steel, which in one place is replaced by polycarbonate so that you can see 'the straw in its golden glory'. A very delicate sensibility is here, where the juxtaposition of 'shiny steel with rough straw' disturbs normal architectural categories 'uniting the slick with the hairy, the fetishized with the repressed'.

The spaces of the residential part are cheerful, for the most part happily looking out over a gradually growing garden through a glass wall facing south that draws heat from the sun and, in hot summer days, moderates it with louvres. The living area is dominated by a most bizarre device; a plastered masonry beehive-shaped larder. Based on the mud-brick structures of mid Africa, the strange bulk bulges itself on you. Inside, temperature

is kept stable and cool by vents at top and bottom. Coolth as opposed to warmth of the hearth becomes the centre of existence. The architects have reversed normal perceptions, as they have in so many other senses.

Less obvious is the way in which they have made two 3000 litre rainwater tanks underneath the house. One gives water to the lavatories; the other irrigates the meadow on the roof, which has wild strawberries as well as local weeds.

No 9 Stock Orchard Street is the most sexy and witty building I have seen for years: fetishistic, full of very clever invention, happy with overlapping story-telling, wild yet tender, ever open to change – tower and garden, green yet industrial. We all live in houses like that in our imaginations. Wigglesworth is actually building one – with jokes that will last, and get more amusing with age. PETER DAVEY

Architect

Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, London

Project team

Sarah Wigglesworth, Jeremy Till, Gillian Horn, Michael Richards

Structural engineer

Price & Myers

Acoustic consultants

Paul Gillieron Acoustic Design

Photographs

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5

Detailing is simple but thoughtful and not too wounding.

6

Tall dining room is for conferences during day and acts as a hinge between office and domestic parts.

7

Living area, from which ladder to library tower ascends vertiginously.