

# Clutching at straws

Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till have built their house with straw – and it's not about to blow down, says Dominic Lutyens

Mention an eco-lifestyle and images of suburban eco-warriors galumphing about on a waterlogged vegetable patch – à la Tom and Barbara in *The Good Life* – still haunt us. But while environmentalist households, and eco-buildings, have long been marginalised, they're now breaking into the mainstream. No longer does an eco-existence have to conjure up images of hair-shirt hardship. Take BedZed, the much-lauded development in Sutton, Surrey, which, on the glamour front, boasts triple-glazed conservatories and ISDN links and, in eco-terms, solar panels, a wind-powered ventilation system and a combined heat and power plant. Or the virtually complete eco-edifice 9/10 Stock Orchard Street, in north London, home to architects Sarah Wigglesworth and her partner Jeremy Till, which was given the populist stamp of approval when it appeared on TV programmes *Grand Designs* and *Building the Future*.

The duo, however, would be horrified if anyone assumed their home was purely an exercise in environmentalist architecture. As professors of architecture at Sheffield University, they're academics, and, unsurprisingly, the huge L-shaped house – 'your classic frustrated architects' dream home' – playfully mixes conflicting architectural styles. The adjectives 'military', 'primordial', 'theatrical' and 'hi-tech' all crop up in conversation – in addition to 'sustainable'. 'This doesn't look like a traditional green building,' says Wigglesworth. 'We want to bring green architecture into the mainstream by making it more urban and urbane. We've done this by scrambling the categories of hi-tech and low-tech.'

It helps that the building's setting is

ultra-urban: it's flanked both by a railway line and Victorian railway workers' cottages. Yet it also borders on the pastoral: it has a huge garden and, situated at the end of a long alley off the busy Caledonian Road, the house feels removed from the urban bustle (although it has a massive tower, destined to be a library, visible from afar). Its creators don't care if green purists accuse them of wanting to have it both ways. 'We're making a contribution to preserving the environment, however small. What's stopped the green movement from becoming widely acceptable is that it's so moralistic – very all or nothing.'

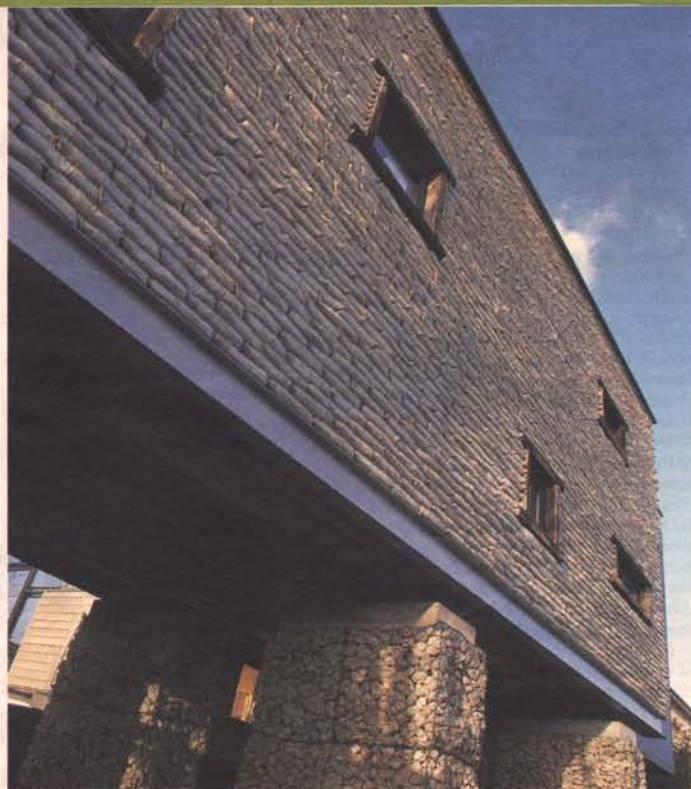
Wigglesworth and Till, who'd previously lived in a Victorian house in Holloway, north London, bought the land in 1994 at an auction by British Rail just prior to privatisation. To their astonishment, they were granted planning permission eight weeks after submitting their drawings.

'This is a conservation area, but Islington's planners were emboldened by the positive reactions to another modern house – Future Systems' Glasshouse, in Canonbury. Tucked away as it is, our house also promised to be very unobtrusive.' The house was completed in August 2000.

The building – a live/work space comprising offices in one wing (No 9) and living quarters in the other (No 10), both raised from the ground by rather surreal columns – meshes elements of the steel-obsessed hi-tech aesthetic with recycled wood and concrete. A wall of 550 straw bales insulates the living quarters, and 'militaristic' cement-filled sandbags and quilted sheets of silicon-faced fibreglass cloth envelop the office spaces (Till and Wigglesworth work on the upper floor, and there's another practice on the lower floor) ▶

**'With its bunker-like sandbags, the house might look hostile, but we don't feel hostile towards it'**





**Sand castle:** (from top) cement-filled sandbags cover the offices to muffle the noise from nearby trains, while the building is supported by huge columns - wire cages filled with lumps of recycled concrete; Sarah Wigglesworth, and her partner Jeremy Till, are professors of architecture at Sheffield University; the kitchen table is made of Ttura, a new material created from recycled bottles



**Green piece:** (main picture) the live and work spaces at 9/10 Stock Orchard Street, north London, successfully bleed into each other - one wing houses the office spaces (No 9) while the other (No 10) contains the living quarters; the L-shaped house (far left) has a huge garden yet is flanked by a railway line and railway workers' cottages

