THE PEOPLE'S ARCHITECT

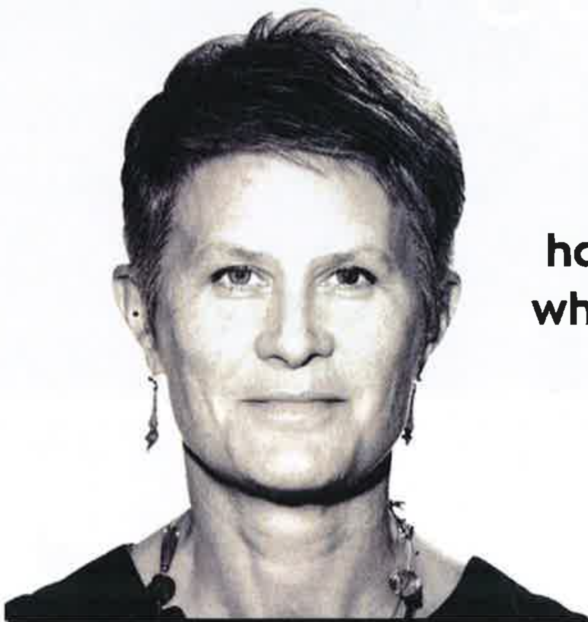

Photo: Timothy Soar

Award-winning architect Sarah Wigglesworth has spent decades re-imagining what sustainable building means.

SARAH WIGGLESWORTH ARCHITECTS AT A GLANCE

Founded: 1993

Location: North London, England

Team Members: 13

Structure: For-profit

Awards: 12 regional and sustainability awards from the Royal Institute of British Architects

Some architects leave their marks in grand, sweeping venues meant for special occasions: think Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House or Frank Gehry's Guggenheim. But it's the ordinary places — our homes, schools, offices, neighborhoods — that truly sculpt us as we rub against them year after year. It's towards those humbler places, the built world of the everyday, that British architect and professor Sarah Wigglesworth has directed her laser-sharp intellect for more than three decades. With her focus on empowering the people she's designing for, her commitment to sustainability in all its nuances, and her willingness to question business as usual, she has managed to simultaneously elevate and subvert the status quo in her corner of the architectural landscape. And while hers is not a household name, the world has indeed noticed, bestowing on her several of the UK's highest architectural honors, including a dozen Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) awards and a medal from the queen. We spoke with her to ponder the meaning of work, the right to good design, and how architects can and should shape the future.

Tell us about how you ended up where you are today.

Sarah Wigglesworth: I always knew I wanted to be an architect. I was just a girl from London, but I went to an extremely old, well-established university in the east of England. Suddenly, I came up against what I'll call "the British establishment" — a lot of quite arrogant people who were very pleased with themselves. My sense of identity really came out; it suddenly turned me into a feminist. I wasn't taught by a single female, at all, my entire career in university. That was the '70s and early '80s, so it wasn't all that long ago. There were very few female architects discussed — it was as if no women had contributed to the history of architecture.

Then I left college and I found a lack of discourse in [architectural] practice. That's when I took up teaching as well. It was a really fantastic ground for trying out things and for discussion, both with other tutors and with students. It forced me to state my position; when you're a teacher, you have to declare what you believe in.

Meanwhile, I'd set up my own practice and was doing very modest work and just learning the craft and making all sorts of mistakes and getting fed up and all the rest of it. But it was a great balance.

Then my partner Jeremy [Till] and I were very lucky to be awarded a Fulbright Fellowship. We were given 10,000 pounds by the Fulbright Commission to go to America for nine months and study anything we wanted. We taught at the University of Pennsylvania for a bit, and then we went on a long trip around the United States. That's when we became sustainable architects.

As often happens when you step outside of your little puddle and get a bit of a perspective, suddenly things became a lot clearer. One of the things that shocked us about America was the profligate lifestyle. A lot of waste, a lot of car travel, a very petroleum-based economy, massive distances, flying around places. We came back thinking, "You know what? Architects really have to start taking responsibility for this." And although we had been taught about sustainable architecture while we were in college, I'd always dismissed it as a bit hippie-dippy and not very mainstream. It seemed like a distraction.

We came back, and within about two years we had decided to buy a site and make a showcase eco-building in central London. We took about two years to learn all about green buildings. We didn't know anything about it. We were thinking up all these completely wacky things to do, like using recycled materials, building breathing walls. When the building was done, architects just didn't know what was going on with it. It probably was completely incoherent. But I still stand by it. We still live and work in that building, and it's been showcased absolutely everywhere.

That's when our practice started winning awards. It all took off, and we've never looked back. We've gone

Mellor Community Primary School's habitat wall was constructed by the community from salvaged materials and is designed to provide habitats for a range of wildlife.

Photo: Beccy Lane of Positive Image Photography

on winning awards for quite a lot of our work. We haven't built that much, but I'm more interested in quality than quantity. I care about working out, "What are we trying to say with this building?" and what we want to learn and research by doing it. Obviously, we need to satisfy our clients' desires and needs. But I'm talking about asking, "What is our identity?" and, "How does that get expressed through the work that we do?"

But all of these things are so accretive. There was never a total epiphany or anything. It was just slow and steady, trying to work out, "How can we contribute in a way that asks some really difficult questions while positing some really interesting answers?" If that's not what architecture should be about, then it shouldn't be about anything.

How are environmental sustainability and community sustainability core to what you do?

SW: In the early days, one used to see sustainability as being rather a technical thing. I am actually very anti the idea that sustainability can be solved simply through technology. We labor in the West under the impression that technology is going to sort out all our ills for us. But that creates a culture of expertise where we experts, i.e., architects, engineers, and so forth, lose touch with communities. We don't empathize with them. We don't understand their problems.

I've come to the conclusion that instead of making everything more and more complicated and technical, we need to make it much, much simpler. Where things tend to go wrong with sustainability is where [the technology] is much too complex and people don't know how to use it. We might find, for example, in a school building, there won't be anybody who knows how to use complex building management systems. If we said, "Okay, let's just have opening windows that can be controlled by the children," it would work so much better. I don't see why we don't do that kind of thing much more.

Also, you have to bring a community with you when you're dealing with place-making. If you take sustainability to mean "something self-sustaining," we need people loving and caring for their environment and feeling that it's an expression of them, and that therefore it can be cared for and looked after. The only way to do that is to involve them. Those feelings are fragile and they take root slowly. But it's really important that this buy-in happens because otherwise the environment that people occupy becomes something they're alienated from.

How does that attitude and that philosophy overlap with feminism and gender?

SW: A lot of the people who control the direction that technology takes tend to be men. And there is a sense in which men approach problems in a fairly abstract and a disembodied way. The feminist critique of that is that we need to re-inject this idea that all understanding is situated and corporeal. It's body-specific and it's culturally specific, and we shouldn't forget that.

But it tends to be that the whole drift of what's regarded as progressive in the architecture and planning world has a technical slant to it, which means that even to critique it is seen as non-progressive.

How does that tension align with your success? You seem pretty well-respected in the architecture community, but I assume that has also been a fight.

SW: It's a juggling act. It's difficult to resolve the contradictions that are inherent in where I'd like to be or the discourse that I'd like to have versus the prevailing doctrines and the expectations of awards or clients or the market. I would say that we are relatively successful but, actually, we're a very small practice. It depends

Takeley Primary School's classrooms are arranged around courtyards. The project won a RIBA award in 2013.

how you measure success. I measure success by, "Am I fulfilled? Am I being true to my own sense of identity and my values?"

It's difficult because there are always compromises involved, but you find these little serendipitous moments. Clients select you because you reflect their values. I'm very aware that being a woman and having my kind of attitudes and demeanor has closed lots of doors, because that's not appealing to certain kinds of people. But, equally, it will appeal to others, and perhaps they're people that I would like to work with because they recognize something in me that reflects their values. There's no point in pretending to be somebody you're not, because you're just going to have a huge identity crisis.

The older I get, the more I feel I'm just lucky to have had any work at all, really. And some people I've met have been incredibly inspiring. Usually, it's a client that's pushing you to produce something absolutely amazing because they're amazing in their own right and you feel they deserve it. But these things do take a while to work out. You need to take time to think about what kind of an architect you want to be.

What has been the impact of Sarah Wigglesworth Architects?

SW: The impact I would quite like to have made is to change the discourse. I don't just mean the kind of debates we're having; I mean a shift in values and what's important about architecture. I think one can do that through teaching, or through lecturing and explaining and writing, which I do. You can do it through your buildings, which I hope we do. The other thing is actually speaking to the public. We have been on television, and although I don't think television is a great medium for architecture, it's really important to get a message about the importance of architecture out there in the general public. Architecture deserves a bit more attention than it gets at the moment. You get acres and acres of books reviewed in newspapers, but you don't get that much architecture discussed. The public needs to be the discerning consumers who say, "You know what? That's not good enough. We demand better." This isn't just about taste. It's actually about quality. "This works, that doesn't," "This is good for me, this isn't," "This makes me feel good, this doesn't," or "This is hostile and this isn't" — those kinds of things.

What specific advice or lessons would you give to someone who is having a similar feeling to what you had when you were in school, of "Yeah, this status quo thing? Not loving it. I know there has got to be more"?

SW: Be bold. The most amazing things can happen if you're bold. There are always compromises in whatever you do; therefore, you've almost got to push the boat out further than you think in order to gain the gains that you really want to achieve.

Even yesterday, we were in a meeting with a client who is really worried about getting planning permission for a private house he wants to build. I was saying, "Look, you're spending a lot of time, energy, effort, and emotion on this project, and in the end you're going to live there. Don't compromise on day one. Go for what you want, because it's worth it, and even if you have to pull back, at least you tried." Who wants to reach the end of their life and think, "I couldn't really be bothered to try?"

What's giving you hope right now?

SW: I'm going to be 60 soon, and for about 30 years now I've been teaching and practicing at the same time. But I've decided to give up academia, and I'm going to go hell-for-leather trying to do what I want and creating the kinds of conditions for good architecture wholly through the practice. It's a really good time for me to focus; architects typically reach their peak quite late in life, after a long apprenticeship and a long period just trying to build a practice and work out how to do what they want. As I move into this part of my life, I feel very competent at what I do. At that level, it has become easier over time. It's not quite such hard work to get work anymore. I'm sure there's going to be some really fantastic stuff to come up in the next 10 to 15 years, and it'll be great to see what that is. I would like to think I've still got one really interesting and great project ahead of me before the end.

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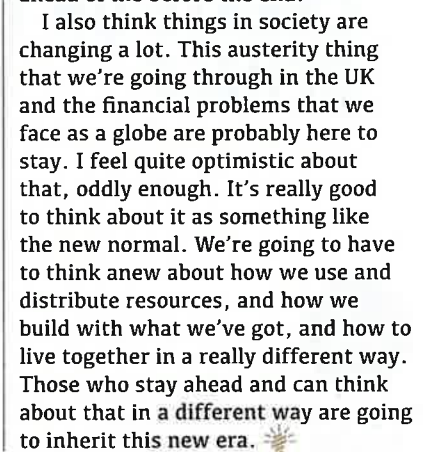

I also think things in society are changing a lot. This austerity thing that we're going through in the UK and the financial problems that we face as a globe are probably here to stay. I feel quite optimistic about that, oddly enough. It's really good to think about it as something like the new normal. We're going to have to think anew about how we use and distribute resources, and how we build with what we've got, and how to live together in a really different way. Those who stay ahead and can think about that in a different way are going to inherit this new era.