



Wigglesworth's home was designed to be as flexible as possible without many walls

ASK AN ARCHITECT

SARAH WIGGLESWORTH

Twenty years after she and partner Jeremy Till completed their pioneering eco home, the Straw Bale House, the London-based architect talks us through a renovation that is just as innovative

What qualities do you think make a good home? A home is like an overcoat; it has to fit you, it has to suit you and it has to keep you comfortable. It also has to reflect your values. I'm a believer in architecture that is bespoke, unique to people and the things that interest and excite them. But there are some big universals, too, like comfort, fresh air, great daylight and a lovely view.

What were your original priorities when you designed your home? We felt we needed to take responsibility for the environment. We wanted to use the building as a research project, to push the envelope by experimenting with waste materials. As it was a self-build, we tried to use simple techniques so that the house would just bolt together. The idea was for it to be quite flexible internally, without many walls, so you could carve out little spaces within it.

What materials did you use to build it? We chose products with very low embodied energy like straw bales, sandbags, recycled concrete and gabion walls. We used timber in the walls, recycled newspaper for insulation and we used steel, which has far less embodied energy than, say, aluminium. We were interested in a new aesthetic for green architecture, with these quite fat walls. It was quite shocking for people at the time.

After 20 years in the house, why did you decide to change the design? A house needs to be future-proof. I was in my forties when we designed this house; now I'm in my sixties and I have different needs. But we really liked living here and we wanted to stay put, perhaps until we die, so we had to make it age-friendly. Also, the green movement has really sharpened up since we learned to be sustainable architects, becoming more data-driven and scientific. What was cutting-edge 20 years ago had become average, and we wanted to get it back up to being cutting-edge again.

How did you make your house more sustainable? We appointed an environmental consultancy to look at all aspects of the building and decide where we should target our efforts. It was mainly around airtightness and insulation. We had to pick the house apart very carefully to get all the joints taped up and put seals around all doors and thresholds. We even had to insulate our larder door. As a result, we've

halved the amount of uncontrolled ventilation and cut our carbon emissions by 62 per cent.

How did you make your home more age-friendly? We made some modifications downstairs to accommodate a kitchen, so the ground floor can now be a different suite, with its own kitchen, ►



PICTURE: IVAN JONES

ARCHITECTURE

bathroom, bedroom and living room. That means if we needed a carer, they could be live-in and almost independent. We also added more storage, but we've kept all the good aspects, like lovely light and quality of space.

Is it possible to age-proof your home without compromising on design quality? I think we've proved you can do it. Having said that, most of the kit you can buy, from grab rails to toilets, is very crudely designed and quite medicalised. We had to work quite hard to find, for example, some grab rails to put in around our bath. There certainly is a market for some better designed equipment. Just because I'm older doesn't mean that I've lost my aesthetic sense or that I identify with someone who's infirm.

What difference has the renovation made to you? It's an amazing comfort to know that we could still live here even if we were incapacitated or needing care. Although it doesn't look that

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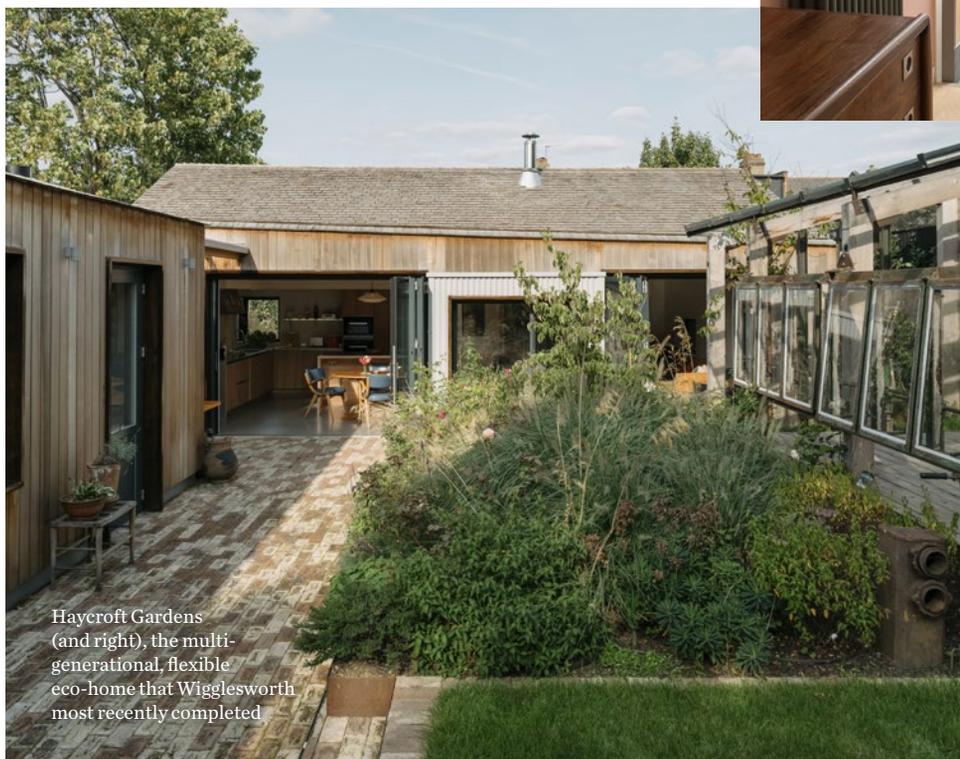
different, it feels much more solid, well-built, cosy and comfortable.

What tips would you give to others planning to future-proof their homes? Look at every aspect of your building and think how you could improve it through better insulation. Airtightness is also key if you can do it, but you need proper ventilation with that. We've got two mechanical ventilation and heat-recovery systems in our building, which control ventilation and recycle the heat. And if you're thinking of putting a new boiler in, put in an air-source heat pump instead. That's going to be a revolution in how we heat buildings in the future.

What other projects have you worked on recently? We've also completed an eco-house for three generations of the same family, allowing them to take care of each other. That's another example of how you can make a home age-friendly. I think it's got some nice resonances for the Covid situation, too. swarch.co.uk **ED**



From above To make the house future-proof, a downstairs suite, including kitchen, was created, which can be used by a live-in carer if needed; the interiors were also updated to be more sustainable using the latest materials and concepts, without compromising on design



Haycroft Gardens (and right), the multi-generational, flexible eco-home that Wigglesworth most recently completed



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