A Tale of Eccentric Living

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The architect Jeremy Till used to live in a relatively normal home. It was Victorian, terraced and in London. It was nice enough, but the only people who wanted a tour were related to him. That was last year. Now Till has three homes, none of which is particularly normal. One is a £37-a-week council flat in the notorious Park Hill estate in Sheffield. The second is a £400,000 house-in-progress being concocted out of straw bales, sandbags and steel in North London. He is wildly enthusiastic about both, although he concedes that it is a bizarre combination. Building Design magazine has parodied this as "parallel shifting", where you trade up and down at the same time. And his third home? I am relieved to hear that this is a caravan that he hates. I do not think I could handle Till being wildly enthusiastic about caravans too.

There is only one obvious link among these homes, he says, and that is him. But I have toured two of them and would disagree: there is a link, and not just the obvious one to do with the Three Little Pigs. For starters, there are the tours. Till is going to get rather good at these. The straw house isn't even finished yet and already there is a queue to view. He says booking in groups saves time. And he is also organising a tour of Park Hill for "heritage open days" next month. Does he think people will really want to tour an estate that is home to more than 2,000 tenants and not a little despair? "Oh yes, I think there will be lots and lots on the day," he says with conviction.

I decide to beat the crowd, so it's off to Sheffield for my personal tour. You cannot miss Park Hill even if you wanted to. It rises out of the hill behind the railway station like a giant concrete zigzag. Till is 42 and head of architecture at the University of Sheffield. He moved in three months ago and is the closest thing that Park Hill has to a celebrity. People call him "the professor" as if we are in a Walt Disney movie. Till is the odd one out here - the only architect, the only professor, possibly the only professional - but doesn't see why that should not change. He says the middle classes should stop being so namby-pamby about it all.

Park Hill is central and cheap, he says, with great views and fairly roomy flats. It has been a listed building since last December and this gives Till huge happiness. He says that heritage is trapped in a "fogey mentality". "Listed buildings are normally inhabited only by aristocrats. The idea that you can list a building for the working classes, well, it knocked their ideas of what heritage is on the head and then all these prejudices come out. Concrete is bad, full stop. Tower blocks are bad, full stop. The Sixties are bad, full stop." Such clichés reveal "appalling snobbishness". The Duke of Edinburgh came to Sheffield and was utterly negative about such things. "Like father, like son," sniffs Till.

Others call Park Hill notorious but Till prefers the word "striking". "In the right sun it can look absolutely wonderful." It is an "artificial cliff-face" and a beautiful one too. I look at the huge wall of grey. The word that springs to mind is "grim". Perhaps I am seeing it in the wrong sun. Or perhaps I am a namby-pamby who is, as Till would say, stuck in the idea that anything that is beautiful has to be a Renaissance painting. Till says Park Hill is an icon. "Park Hill has a huge kind of architectural aura about it. It does! It's kind of an iconic piece and everyone refers to it and all architects know it. It's not like living in a Palladio villa of course." "No," I say. "But it is along those lines. It is. It's like living in a really famous piece of architecture, which is quite compelling if you are an architect."

Till's enthusiasm is catching and I am getting rather fired up by it all. So much so that I almost do not notice the smell in the lift that takes us to his flat. "Don't even think about it," he says as we hold our breath. We emerge on to a walkway that is more like a promenade. "It's big enough for a milk float," he says. Milk float? "That is,

of course, if anyone wanted a milk float any more," he adds. These walkways are called "streets in the air" but they do not really work. No one has personalised their "defensible space". This, evidently, is the bit in front of the door that is both public and private. Till frowns. "Can you imagine having a barbecue here?" he asks. "Sitting out with a glass of chardonnay?" I dare not answer. Till laughs.

His flat is on two storeys. There is a walkway into a kitchen with a balcony. Upstairs there are two bedrooms, a bathroom and a lounge with a pretty horrible blue three-piece. His colleague and partner, Sarah Wigglesworth, had warned me that it wasn't exactly homely. This was a major understatement. I note that the only label on the furnishings is "Sheffield City Council". It turns out that he rents it furnished and so pays about £53 a week, not £37 (both rents include heating). He says the straw-bale house has taken up so much time and cash that he cannot cope with anything else, even a trip to Ikea.

He moved in after seeing an ad that said "Students, why not live in Park Hill?" and was surprised at how quickly it was all arranged. He shouldn't be, though, because this is not a des. res. You do not need any housing points to live here; there is no waiting list. This is not the same thing as young professionals buying council flats in tower blocks.

"That's a completely marketdriven, London thing," says Till. "Only one person in the whole of Park Hill has taken out the option to buy. The saddest thing about it is the infrastructure. There are only two shops for more than 2,000 people. Terrible. It's awful, awful. So there is no huge movement of yuppies moving in and delicatessens opening everywhere. Much to my regret, of course." He says that he and Sarah went to the pub and it was deathly. Then he cheers up. "Actually it was kind of a classic piece because it hadn't been changed in 35 years."

Till heads off to catch the tram to work. His office is on the 17th floor of a tower block that he also thinks is terrific. So, I wonder, do the other residents of Park Hill think this is a striking and beautiful cliff-face that combines the dynamic and the domestic? A man with "Made in Sheffield" tattooed on his right breast is not impressed. A group of 11 and 12-year-olds say the whole place is too old and there are too many drug addicts. There aren't enough shops and people throw eggs. And television sets? Till said he had seen one flying through the air. The children shrug. They want a youth club and, watching them hang about for hours on end, I can see why. I have read that Park Hill has been nicknamed San Quentin by its residents, but this doesn't seem to be the case. I ask at least 20 people about this and all look puzzled. "What is that?" asks Michael, who is missing several teeth. "Who is he?" asks David, who is unemployed (the jobless rate at Park Hill is 19.5 per cent, compared with 8.5 per cent for the city as a whole). David then starts to interview me.

David: So do you live in a posh house?

Me: No, semi-detached but nothing special. It's not listed like this.

David: You kind of people wouldn't understand how we live.

Me: Why not?

David: I've never lived in a house. I don't think you would cope five minutes here. Your kind of living is different than ours.

Me: What do you mean?

David: Well, we live in dumps like this.

The view among the men hanging around the betting shop and supermarket is that the place should be knocked down. But do they think it is beautiful? This stops them. Michael says he prefers Victorian stone buildings. "The professor is an architect so he's seeing it as a building, seeing it as a piece of nostalgia really. Has he had a rubbish bag set on fire outside his front door? We can see what we want to see, can't we? That's what we tend to do."

Up on one of the walkways I talk to Lena Steinert. She is almost 70 and has lived at Park Hill since it opened in 1961. She thinks the professor is on to something. She loves her flat, her neighbours and the whole place. It is central, close to the market and has lovely views. On Sundays she sits on her balcony and listens to the hallelujahs waft up from the church. Every morning she takes Dettol and Fairy Liquid and washes her front step and the walkway in front of it.

She invites me in, saying her grandchildren have just been and so it is a bit of a mess. I negotiate the ferociously polished blue lino on the front step and enter a home so immaculate that it makes you blink. No dust-balls live here, and the lacy circle of a tablecloth hangs evenly all the way round. "I love it here," she says. "I'd never move."

The lifts at this end of Park Hill are on the blink, so I head for the staircase. As I walk past the professor's door I imagine a sticker on it that says: "My other house is a straw-bale extravaganza in the middle of London." It sounds mad but then it is true.

"This is my rural retreat," he says as we head over an extremely noisy railway bridge in a rather rough area of Islington, North London. It does not get any quieter as we sit on straw bales in what may one day be "defensible space" but is now a building site.

The house is U-shaped and most of it is built on top of steel poles set on springs. To our right, however, is the office, which is built on eight pillars of stones encased in wire mesh. These are called gabions. "Normally that would be used at the edge of a motorway," says Till. He doesn't know why they aren't used in more homes because they are so cheap: £450 all in. One wall will be of quilted canvas and look like a duvet, the other will be made of sandbags. "As the sandbags decay they will solidify into lumpy concrete. At least that is the idea. It has yet to be tested."

The straw bales that make up the long back wall are gleaming in the early evening sun. "We did that on Saturday. Took six hours," he says. To our left is the two-storey bedroom wing, also made of straw. This is pretty close to completion and he and Sarah hope to move in next month. They believe straw is a building material of the future - cheap, good for the environment, easy to use - although it was tricky finding the right size of bale as "horses do not care usually". They finally found a "bale obsessive" in the Cotswolds to supply them. I mention that, although straw homes are rare in Britain, I have been in several. Their walls are usually encased in lime plaster and I found them cosy and beautiful too.

Till beams at this and shows me the organic toilet. "That is the first urban composting toilet," he says, pointing to the uninstalled lump of green plastic. "Sh** is the final frontier for most people in terms of eco-ness. A lot of people are prepared to do anything else than be confronted by their own sh**." We stare at this marvel. "It is revoltingly expensive," he says. How much? "£1,500. Outrageous."

Architects, he announces, are going to have a "huge problem" with the house. The profession is obsessed with high-tech, with refinement, with perfection. Till says that no one should spend so much time worrying about shadow gaps. "We are trying to get away from the fetish of detail," he says. He likes the idea of the everyday. He uses the word "raw" a lot. But nor are he and Sarah out to please the "eco-

fundamentalists". "It is not an eco-house. Eco is so wrapped up in a certain sort of conservative values."

He slaps a straw-bale wall. "It is all to do with the slick and the hairy," he says. Evidently this is to do with contrasting the natural (such as straw) with the synthetic. I think this was the point at which I started to feel tired. The house was simply too much to take in. There was a roof that was a meadow, bits are designed to look like a garden shed, and then there is a 16-metre-high folly of a tower. This is a vertiginous library topped by a lookout room. Like a treehouse? "Yes, but we've run out of money so we cannot get to the top."

Officially this house, which surely will become famous, is not a home at all but The Bale Project. It is an eccentric name for a house, but then Jeremy Till - or Rupert Plough as he is sometimes called in Building Design magazine - is an eccentric person. I ask him several times about a link, other than parallel shifting of course, between the two. "Well, I suppose that architects are always accused of building houses and then walking away from them and living in converted Georgian terraces. In Park Hill and this one, I'm not doing that."

Surely this is far too safe an answer. After all, Till has made housing himself almost an extreme sport in the past year. So I have a go. Each of his homes is a project that is way out of the mainstream. Each centres on the everyday: Park Hill is immersed in it, Straw Bale built with it. Both are beautiful, though hardly in a traditional way.

I keep asking Till about a link until, finally, he demands: "You are determined to find a link, aren't you?" Well, I say, there must be at least a conceptual one. "It's not so conceptual to me. I'm living it." And in a whirl of black raincoat, he is gone. But I cannot help thinking that it is all to do with the slick and the hairy and not being afraid of the big bad wolf.