

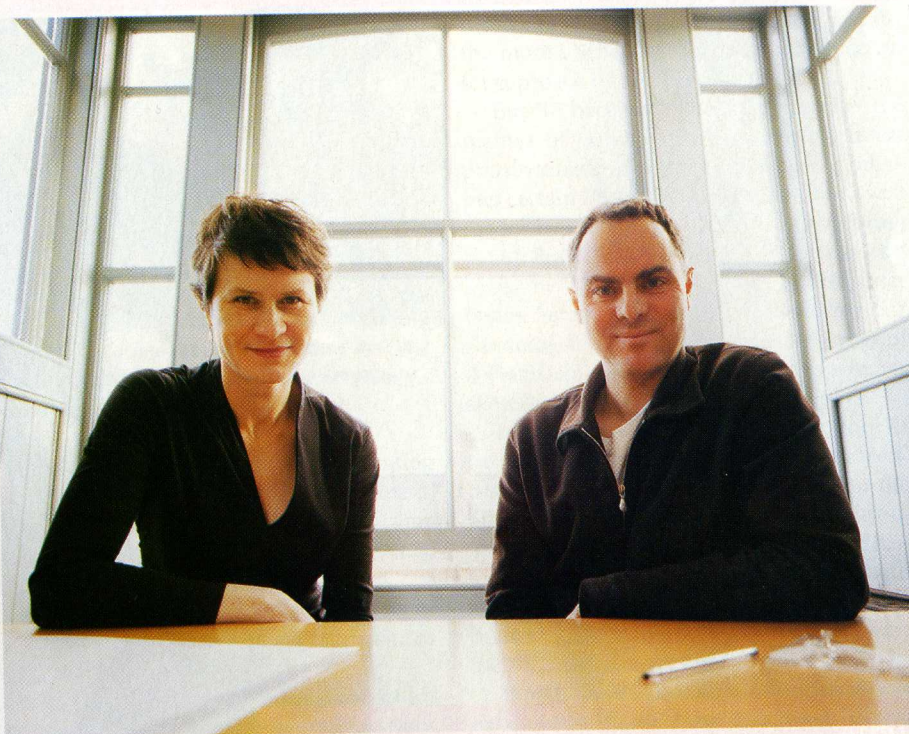
Of all the inseparable couples in architecture, Jeremy Till and Sarah Wigglesworth probably have the most inter-connected lives. Not in that claustrophobic way of couples who spend 23 hours a day in the same room, but because, despite separate responsibilities and enthusiasms, their professional lives are so intertwined. From January this will be even more so, in spite of the fact that they will be spending several days a week in different cities.

Till will be taking up his post as head of the school of architecture in Sheffield, a full-time job but with one day a week to spend on his research – and that research is the straw-bale house that he and Wigglesworth are building on a site in Islington, North London. Wigglesworth, who until recently taught at Kingston where she spent the last two years setting up a masters course, will have a one-day-a-week professorship in Sheffield as well.

This balance of education and practice not only suits the pair – it is also what Sheffield is looking for. The vice-chancellor (a scientist) apparently calls their practice ‘the research lab’. Till explains: ‘A lot of schools are strong in research, but studio culture is completely separate’ – and, says Wigglesworth, ‘lots of people in architectural practice are actually doing research but it is not written up or recognised’.

They believe that their straw-bale house, which has already received a lot of publicity, is a powerful research project. Designed for sustainable urban living, it makes use of cheap materials – as well as the eponymous straw, there are gabions filled with recycled concrete rubble, sandbags containing a sand-cement mixture, and a grass roof irrigated with collected rainwater. The pair will both live and work in the house, the plan for which grew out of an analysis of their dining table. Wigglesworth admits that this is a typical architect’s first house, packed to overflowing with ideas.

One reason they decided to design the house was because they were frustrated in practice by the inability to do the kind of work that interested them. Wigglesworth in partic-



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## Double effort

**Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till have their fingers in innumerable architectural pies – the biggest being education**

RUTH SLAVID

ular finds practice limiting. She studied architecture at Cambridge, with a year out with Levitt Bernstein, which she enjoyed, but after Part II she worked for a number of practices which she found ‘lacking in intellectual stimulus’ before setting up on her own.

She started teaching first at Cambridge, later at Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes) and the Bartlett and then at Kingston. In a perhaps unwitting condemnation of her own education, she says, ‘As an architect I didn’t start to learn until I started to teach.’ Till also did Part I at Cambridge, and

then went to Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster). He was also in practice, including five years as a partner of Peter Currie Architects, a co-operative that concentrated on low-cost public housing.

But teaching has dominated, again at Kingston and then at the Bartlett, where Till became director of the undergraduate course. He became involved with the Stansfield-Smith review group, with responsibility for Part I and Part II. Wigglesworth’s other involvements have included the ‘Desiring Practices’ exhibition and chairing the

nominations panel for the Jane Drew Prize.

But for her and Till, the most significant period was their joint Fullbright Arts Fellowship in 1990. The only time this has been awarded for architecture, it allowed them to spend a year in the US studying the relationship between theory (him) and practice (her). ‘We spent from 9 to 5 sitting opposite each other in the New York Public Library,’ says Till. Wigglesworth adds, ‘For me it was a real chance to find out what I was really interested in. All sorts of ideas began to gel.’

Till is still trying to complete a masters degree in philosophy, and they are so caught up with intellectual ideas, it seems surprising that they care so much about the middle-of-the-road architect. Yet Till says, ‘Architectural education and practice accommodates the top five per cent. There is a huge disappointed middle ground we are not catering for.’

They publish widely, are proud of their own success and the fact that, at 41, they will be the two youngest professors of architecture in the country. Some people criticise them for being nakedly ambitious but they also have their fans. Till has been described as having a brilliant understanding of the process of education. That Wigglesworth has become involved in so many activities is a testament to her competence and popularity as well as her ability to think coherently.

Endearingly, they do not fit as easily into the stereotype of trendy metropolitan architects as their extensive CVs might lead one to expect; their current house in North London (up for sale) feels more like a home than a showcase for ideals; although she dresses in the prevailing subdued stylish manner, he has a penchant for loud checked trousers.

Till and Wigglesworth are evidently keen on self-promotion, but seem to have the intellectual weight and dedication to justify their belief in themselves. Which leaves only one question – with increasing success, which is bound to be accompanied by travel, who will feed the chickens they aim to keep below the platform of their straw house? □