

# My Home

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My Home: Interview with Chris Arnot

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Jeremy Till is a professor of architecture at Sheffield University. At weekends he lives in Holloway, in the home that he designed with his partner and fellow-architectural professor, Sarah Wigglesworth.

Our home has apparently been added to the Knowledge - the test that taxi drivers have to pass before plying their trade. And we don't even have a blue plaque. The nearest we've come to it is a Riba [Royal Institute of British Architects] award for sustainability. Yes, we have a composting toilet, and tanks to store rainwater that irrigates, among other things, a rooftop meadow.

And yes, we have a variety of insulation methods, including sandbags and a wall lined with straw bales. But I think the greenest thing we do is to grow our own vegetables. We're self-sufficient for six months of the year.

It helps that we're both vegetarians, and we keep hens for the eggs. I like the agricultural aspect of this otherwise intensely urban environment. The straw bales, for instance, line a ground-floor bedroom. You can smell it on certain days. We set it in transparent polycarbonate, like an exhibit in a science museum, revealing the secret of construction inside. We had 550 bales delivered from a farm in the Cotswolds for £850.

I also managed to acquire a couple of yew trees for £150 apiece. One of them has been inserted into the line of steel columns leading up to the front door.

The willow hurdles bound around the galvanised steel of the front gate have the same softening effect.

Architects don't normally like hybrids, but we wanted to show that you could be medieval and contemporary, hairy as well as smooth.

I also like the fact that the building is robust enough to accommodate pens and sheds in its foreground, even if one of them is a sauna. There's no shortage of room

for this exterior clutter. Ten years ago, we managed to acquire at auction 800 square metres of central London for just £78,000.

The garden will be even more of an oasis when our hornbeam hedge has grown up alongside the railway line. If we'd put a high wall there, as some people suggested, we'd lose the romance of the passing trains.

The dining room is the pivotal part of the house. It doubles as Sarah's conference room - her architectural practice is next door - and marks the junction between the world of work and the more relaxed realm of domestic pleasure. The room is six metres high, designed to feel like a medieval hall. There's even a minstrel gallery, where a DJ sets up when we have parties.

Some critics have said that there's too much going on in this house, particularly in the living room, with its huge variety of spaces, from the public and grand to the private and intimate. But I make no apology for that. It's fun. And, let's face it, this project began when we were both teaching and writing, and there was pressure on us to put our many ideas into material form.

When I want to write at home, I set off for my study on the top floor of our five-storey tower, collecting books on the way from our vertical library. It's a bit like being in a crow's-nest. This naval allusion seems all the more apt in high winds, when the tower seems to sway a bit. That's because the whole building rests on giant springs, designed to offset vibrations from the railway line.

To cut down the noise from the line, we had one side of the house lined with lumps of recycled concrete, packed together to give the impression of a dry-stone wall. The walls around Sarah's office, meanwhile, are wrapped in silicone-faced fibreglass, puckered and buttoned to look like a quilt.

One of the builders described it as a giant nappy to stop the "architectural shit" from seeping out. And I suspect that one or two taxi drivers might see it in the same way.