

Despite its difficult past, this house is now
a comfortable light-filled home for two.
Photographs by Philip Sayer

ME+MY HOUSE
THE CRYSTAL
PALACE





Sarah Gull (left) notes how the inside and outside feel more intimately connected than at their previous Georgian house



Right: the same sized steel lattice trusses are used for the perimeter and exposed internal structure throughout the house, attached to a regular grid of slender steel columns

Previous pages: the house's slim over-sailing roof and prominent tie-bars have an industrial aesthetic which is softened by planting

Above: the front door is flanked by a bathroom and utility room; on either side is a wall of Vitsoe shelving in the living area



Although it's now an elegant and comfortably liveable home for two, the Crystal Palace has not always been a gleaming success. In 1977, Michael and Patty Hopkins were working on a new steel-framed storage building for the Greene King brewery in Bury St Edmunds. A local entrepreneur, Peter Tracey, then commissioned them to design him a house a few hundred yards away. Both house and brewery lie just to the south of the city's historic centre, and despite their very different functions, both make prominent use of shallow latticed-steel trusses to cover expansive open spaces (the practice later developed this technology to create the Patera building system – see page 10).

The Greene King building, whose chimneys can be seen from Sarah Gull's garden, won RIBA and *Financial Times* awards for its carefully refined detailing and precise proportions, but Tracey fell out with his architects over the house, and the resulting design compromises were so significant that they have never regarded it as one of their works. They even opposed listing it, on the grounds that it was not an authentic Hopkins building. In particular, they were opposed to the insertion of a solid panel around the top of the exterior walls, rather than the intended glass, which would have allowed the roof trusses to be clearly visible. The overcladding of parts of the steel frame with

timber and the use of uPVC double glazing above the central courtyard space – conceived as a modern version of the atrium in a Roman villa – was also at odds with their original intention of elegant structural expression. Following Tracey's divorce just four years after his house was completed, it was sold to a local dentist, Michael Lightfoot. At first, Lightfoot was more interested in a nearby field suitable for his sheep than in the house's extraordinary architectural potential, but soon he became fascinated by his 'almost-Hopkins' house. Although he had neither the budget nor the lifestyle to revert to its original aims (with four children, the need for internal partitions

THE ARCHITECT HAS ENSURED THAT THE HOUSE'S STRONG CHARACTER IS STILL APPARENT

was more pressing) he knew that he had stumbled on something special. He contacted Michael Hopkins, who came to visit and advise. In 2010 the whole of the original five-acre plot was sold to the Roman Catholic Church, who wanted the field as an extension to the





playground of their primary school. They sold off part of the land as a development plot, but were unsure what to do with the house itself. It sat empty, and by the time it was offered for sale, it appeared almost derelict.

Sarah Gull and her husband Stephen were already living in Bury St Edmunds, in a large Georgian town house she describes as ‘rather shabby’. Their three children had left home, and they were keen for a change that went beyond fresh paint and carpets, but Sarah, a consultant gynaecologist at the local hospital, still wanted to be able to walk to work. Proximity to Cambridge was also important, as Stephen was Professor of Physics at St John’s College, and

Sarah was Director of Studies for Clinical Medicine at Lucy Cavendish College. These restrictions made them open to what at first seemed an unlikely option. Being able to hone the building to suit the needs of a couple rather than a family allowed architects Project Orange the scope to rediscover much of the house’s original spirit, while the previous compromises that had been made meant that there was no call for a strict conservation approach.

Making the house more sustainable was a priority, and James Soane of Project Orange says that sorting out the services was critical: ‘The original technology was innovative but basic (for instance, the window seals were made from the

same material as bicycle inner tubes). The heating in the ceiling had never worked – and over the years new services were just tagged on.’ Rooftop solar panels and a heat exchanger under the house have now discreetly delivered major improvements. James would have liked to introduce more windows that open, but unfortunately this proved too expensive, and some air conditioning had to be fitted after overheating in the first summer.

The builder on the project had previously built James’s own house, and did ‘an extremely good job in respecting the original construction and working with us to solve numerous details to achieve the clean lines and simple design.’

Although mainly known for new-build work, James obviously enjoyed getting to know the Crystal Palace intimately, and has ensured that its strong character is still apparent. This is not an approach that upstages the original.

Replacing the atrium roof would have been too expensive, and demolishing the bedroom extension would have resulted in an unwelcome loss of floor space, but the bedroom is located where it is least intrusive, and the insertion of timber baffles beneath the uPVC glazing is remarkably successful in minimising its impact. The atrium now houses the looms Sarah uses to weave natural fibres, and the dappled sunlight from above is ‘both beautiful and energising’.

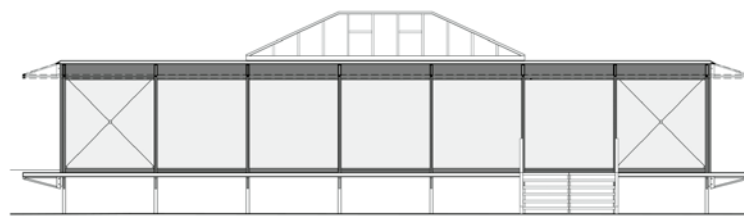
Left: newly acquired modern furniture, such as the Breuer Wassily chairs sit comfortably next to a Victorian sofa



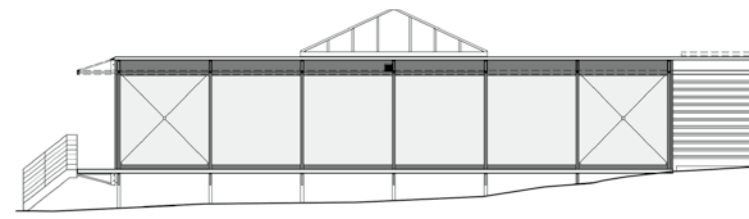
Previous pages: the central atrium is now Sarah’s weaving room. The new timber screen minimises the impact of the conservatory-style glazed roof

Above, from top: the kitchen, housed in a two-part ‘pillar station’ with Sarah’s study area beyond; Stephen’s ‘pillar station’ demarcates a small sitting area at the far side of the atrium; all the floors are new, with wood block floors in the living areas and terrazzo tiles in the atrium

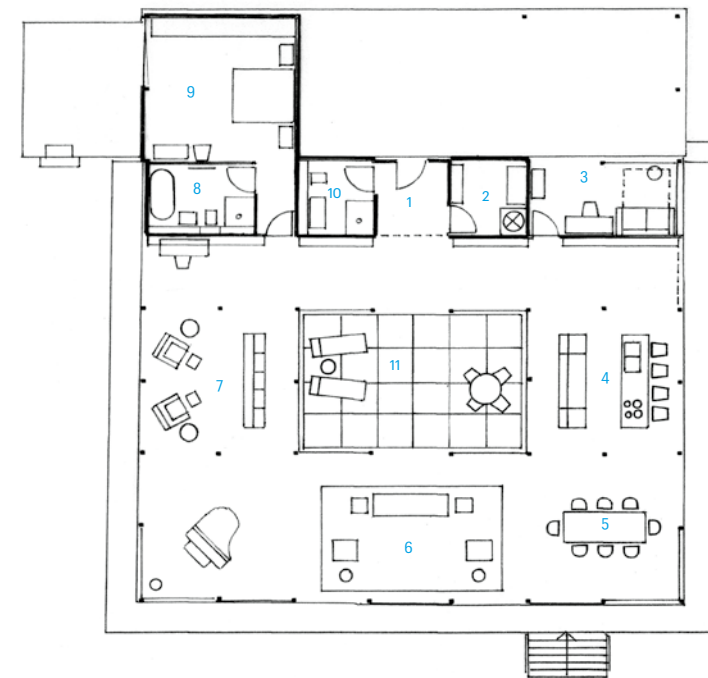
SOUTH ELEVATION



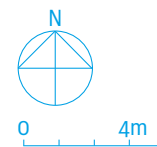
EAST ELEVATION



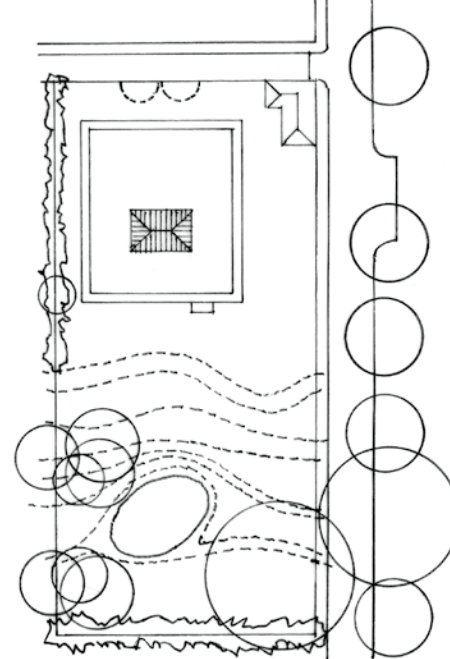
FLOOR DIAGRAM



1. Entrance/lobby
2. Boiler room
3. Study/bedroom
4. Kitchen
5. Dining area
6. Living area
7. TV area
8. Bathroom
9. Master bedroom
10. Bathroom
11. Courtyard



SITE PLAN



BIRKEN HAWARD



Left: on this side of the house is the kitchen and dining area, and also Sarah's study. Right: raw weaving materials, including madder, woad and weld dyes and nettle fibre, come from the water meadows nearby. Their organic nature contrasts with the pristine qualities of the Crystal Palace



Much of the raw material for this comes from the 15 acres of overgrown water meadows a short walk away, which she has recently bought. There are coppiced hazels perhaps two thousand years old growing from ancient banks, and picturesquely decaying railway carriages. Although this feels like a very different environment from the Crystal Palace, the intense quality of the light and the parallels with the basic structure of the carriages (steel frame with infill) seem to give living in the Crystal Palace a direct relationship with the landscape.

The living area is one free-flowing space, but Sarah and Stephen each have their own primary

zones, focused on two newly introduced 'pillar stations'. Stephen's freestanding structure houses a TV and bookshelves, while on the other side of the atrium Sarah's office area sits beside a tall structure of kitchen storage and a lower island with oven and fridge. She likes the proximity of desk and kitchen, and says it's the easiest kitchen she's ever worked in: 'It's like a laboratory.' But – despite the deployment of several bits of discarded operating-theatre furniture – the atmosphere is definitely not clinical. There is a calm order softened by the evidence of two lifetimes' worth of diverse interests and a love of beautiful things. In the

heat of summer, Sarah took over the covered car-port as a comfortable informal seating area.

Moving to the Crystal Palace triggered a massive clearout of possessions deemed superfluous, and finding new homes for treasured objects clearly became a playful and enjoyable process, in part inspired by Sarah's experience when she took on the role of Curator of Fine Art at Lucy Cavendish College. She took advice from Michael Harrison, Curator of Kettle's Yard house museum in Cambridge: the merits of 'hiding, moving things around and borrowing' to keep things fresh. It worked at the College, and it works well here.

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