





White heat

Sophie Hicks's London house artfully combines cool minimalism with the practicality of family life. By Sally Brampton. Photographs by Edina van der Wyck

Sophie Hicks is wearing a cream shirt and grey trousers. Nothing surprising in that, except that she has been wearing the same outfit – or variations of it – for nearly 20 years. Her hair is cut in the same short back and sides, and her face

Main picture, the living-room of Sophie Hicks's London home that she has reduced to its barest components. Above, Sophie Hicks in front of a mud mural by Richard Long

is free of make-up. Nor does she ever seem to age; she looks like a beautiful but interesting boy, although she is 37 and the mother of three children – Arthur, nine, Edie, seven, and Olympia, who is two.

Her appearance is interesting on two counts. The first is that she was once a fashion editor –

and a very well-respected one too, with stints on *Harpers & Queen*, *Vogue* and *Tatler* – yet even a decade of constant exposure to fashion has done nothing to change her personal style. The second is that the rigorously edited style of white shirt, man's tailored suit and cropped hair acts as a metaphor for a mind that is cool,

uncluttered and infinitely composed. It is the perfect sensibility for architecture – which is her second career and one she performs with the same skill that she once brought to fashion.

Sophie Hicks frightens people – even resolutely cool urbanites. It is partly her exterior, which can seem intimidating, but also her determination, which is unflinching. Her first job was on a teenage issue of *Harpers & Queen* in the late Seventies. She was still at school, doing her A-levels. 'I decided it was what I wanted to do so I kept pestering Willie Landels, the editor. I was prepared to do anything, be dogsbody, anything.'

She ended up in the fashion department. Liz Walker, who was then fashion editor, says, 'She amazed me. I've never seen such determination. I don't think we actually paid her any money but she bought herself a Claude Montana suit which must have cost her a fortune. Then there was the hair, of course. You couldn't fail to notice



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her. Nobody could. She must only have been about 17 but she was completely resolute in her ideas. As she still is.'

The immediate impression is that Sophie Hicks suffers fools badly. She smiles. 'I don't think I scare people enough.' A degree of intimidation is useful to an architect. Changes are costly in building work, and a client who dithers over the colour and texture of marble or wood can dislodge an assembly line of contractors like an errant ball in a ninepin bowling alley. 'A bad decision at the beginning can cause havoc,' she says.

The truth is that she is shy, which in part accounts for the monochrome wardrobe. 'I don't dislike colour but I wouldn't put it on me because it's like saying, "Look at me, I'm here." ' Once you get past the shyness, she's warm, extremely funny and slightly bemused by her own reputation. The style of her work is like the woman herself, edging towards minimal, but with a warmth that rescues it from the soulless asceticism of the Pawson school. She rejects the idea that there is a masculine or a feminine sensibility to architecture, but admits that being a woman may be an advantage: 'You might better understand the practical things.' With three children under the age of nine, you'd be hard pushed not to.

Among her better known clients are Yasmin and Simon Le Bon, whose family



house in south-west London she remodelled. They also have three children and are attracted to the manner in which Hicks effortlessly blends pragmatism with aesthetics.

Other clients include Neil Mendoza and William Sieghart, co-founders of Forward Publishing. Their offices were Hicks's first commission, while she was still a student at the Architectural Association, and she has since done both the Mendoza and Sieghart family homes.

Her own house is laid out on clean, practical lines. Enormous windows flood the place with light; white shutters and walls, and pale wooden floors heighten the cool airiness, but the sofas are covered with



Clockwise from top left, in the bathroom traditional fittings blend effortlessly with contemporary furniture; in some rooms Sophie has banished architectural features such as fireplaces; the living-room; Sophie with her youngest child, Olympia

artists' canvas and the bookcase filled with a jumble of well-thumbed books.

The serenity of the main room is given a sharp jolt by a Catherine-wheel of startling colour, a spin painting by Damien Hirst that hangs above the fireplace. Another artist's wheel, this time a mud mural by the landscape artist Richard Long, is plastered to the wall of the dining-room. It is made from a tub of mud from the River Avon, applied by the artist in an inky circle of handprints. Hicks loves it for its 'slap-on precision', and it is that quality of craft combined with streamlined modernism that characterises her approach.



A commission to design the new Paul Smith shop has recently brought her back into the fashion fold. It is a project that she says is, 'a bit eccentric'. She looks marginally astonished at the very idea, but from the plans laid out on her desk – the collection of marble, wood, stone and velvet – you sense it will be an eccentricity tempered by rigorous taste. Mad, but beautifully so. The shop is laid out on the plan of a townhouse (which indeed it is, and conservation orders demand it remain so), with each room describing a different department – menswear, womenswear, bespoke tailoring. The eccentric element is to be found in a glass and acrylic

staircase that bisects the house and is lit at night, oozing pink or blue radiance through the shop. Light and transparency are Hicks's trademarks. Another quirk is the shocking pink velvet that will line the walls of the men's tailoring room. Against it will hang suits of grey, black or pinstriped navy. The conventional cream or white walls of the retail trade will not do for Paul Smith.

'Too predictable,' Hicks says, folding a sample of pink velvet against the grey flannel of her trousers with the experienced twist of a fashion veteran. A clever idea, it echoes brilliantly Paul Smith's signature of subverting classic

tailoring with shockingly contrasted linings.

The commission was a surprise. 'He rang out of the blue and said, "Hello, it's Paul Smith. What are you doing these days?"' The idea that Paul Smith didn't know what Sophie was up to is unlikely – she is a woman whom the fashion (as well as the fashionable) crowd keep a constant eye on – but his affectation of ignorance allowed him to sound her out. 'He came up to the office and just chatted. Then he came again. And again. Finally I said, "Please do come as often as you like – but what do you want?"'

The obvious route would have been for Smith to have appointed one of the

The pale colours are occasionally broken by splashes of colour such as Damien Hirst's startling spin painting. Behind the sofa is a radiator by Bisque

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fashionable architects such as John Pawson or Norman Foster, who have already been commissioned to design a number of high-profile fashion shops, but he sensed in Hicks a kindred spirit who has 'a love of tradition and classics but realised in a new way'. But in the end, he says, the choice was simple. 'I've always liked her and her style.'

The move from fashion to architecture was the result of an epiphany that Hicks underwent when she was working with the designer Azzedine Alaïa, one of the most revered names in fashion. They were en route to LA to photograph Madonna when a call came through from her agent to say that the star had changed her mind.

'I had to find somebody for them to photograph, the whole team were already in mid-air.' A suitably celebrated body was found but the experience precipitated a sea-change. 'That trip summed it up. Fashion is great fun but it's too mad and hectic. I thought, I can't stand it any longer.'

She applied to the Architectural Association and was asked to turn up for an interview with her portfolio. Not possessing one, she took a notebook of the sort that every fashion editor fills with

sketches during the round of international collections. 'They were full of weird misshapen bodies without heads or feet, because there's never any time to draw them. I said, "I'm afraid this is all I've got." ' Her application was accepted. She laughs, 'So they do come in useful after all.'

She paid for the course by styling fashion photographs. In her third year she was given her first commission, and by the time she came to do her finals, she had her own company, offices and three jobs on the go. 'It was pretty hectic,' she says with considerable understatement. At the same time she had got married and given birth to two of her three children.

Architecture is not an easy option, certainly not as a second career. The training is long (seven years) and the work requires infinite patience. But her fashion background, she thinks, has been an advantage. 'There is a general feeling in architecture that a building must be functional, that it must have an integrity, but that good looks don't matter. I can follow the process through and see if it's going to look hideous. Some people can't. It's not that they've done anything wrong, it's simply that they don't see that a metal

Hicks in her west London office, where she is currently designing the new Paul Smith shop in Notting Hill Gate

canopy supported by red poles might look ugly and that if you did that same canopy in glass to let light flood in and used plain steel posts it would look more pleasing. Beautiful is a taboo word. It's very taboo.'

Fashion is a taboo word, too; its very transience makes it the polar opposite of architecture. 'The fashion world is filled with people who work for now, this moment, because next week is too late.' Even so, it is a perspective that she feels grateful to have gained. 'Building is such a slow process, you can feel very bogged down. It helps me step back a bit from that.' But she is wary of people who approach her because of her background, supposing her to be a 'trendy architect'.

A vice-president of the Architectural Association, Hicks also works with the Royal Academy designing space for exhibitions of contemporary painting, a passion of hers. She designed the *Sensations* exhibition and is presently working on the installation for the Picasso ceramics exhibition, due to open in September. There is nothing trendy in Hicks's dedication to her work. Quite the opposite. Her future looks as permanent as the buildings she creates. ■