John Glew **Specific architecture: House interior for a family in South London**
by
Mark Pimlott, artist and designer. Professor of interior architecture, TU Delf

It is apparent, as one approaches this Victorian house in south London along a neatly tiled pavement, that something has been altered. A door, surrounded by glass panels, nestles in a red-brick recess. A small step turns one's attention to a black door-bell centred in a silvery bezel, slightly larger than usual. A turquoise-painted door suggests more the colour turquoise than the door's coating of turquoise paint. The frames of the glazed panels around the door, also painted, are particularly white. The numbers in the window over the door—designed by Sigurd Lewerentz—are modest, precise, geometrical and particular. In this approach to the house, which is like a process, one is introduced to a central aspect of its character as it has been determined by John Glew—there is a reality that quietly presents itself to one's consciousness.

This continues as one enters. A stair hall, very much like those one encounters in countless London houses, feels larger than its counterparts. Straight ahead and slightly set back, the stair—apparently traditional—looks like an object sat upon the floor, painted white, luminous. It is lit from a rooflight high above, at the top of the house. A rail on its open side is made of oak, and so becomes evident in both visibility and function by virtue of its contrast with the painted steps. Its balusters are flats of oak oriented in the direction of travel, precariously supporting a deep rail, bluntly terminated by an unadorned post. The oak floor boards of the hall run across the space, making it seem slightly wider to the eye and mind. As one apprehends the space, there are other subtle modifications. One knows aspects of spaces such as these so well that they have become invisible: architraves, skirtings, cornices, panels. Here, all of these are painted matte white and altered to accommodate additions made in an unelaborate way. Or perhaps it is the additions that have been modified. All are quietly visible and present. The space is lit by bare light-bulbs set in brass fittings mounted on the ceiling. The flange is a polished disc set away from the ceiling, which, in reflecting the illuminated bulb, summons up a tiny picture of a halo as imagined and painted by Piero della Francesca. On the white walls, there are pictures, framed pieces of contemporary art, the kind that look like pictured thoughts.

At the end of the hall, there is a view to the garden. The leading edges of a bookcase catch the light and so look like lines of perspective leading to some vanishing point. Just to the right, the suggestion of another space. But one is first drawn to a door in the white wall. There is a white porcelain knob, matte and almost flat in the paneled door, (designed in collaboration with the Danish designer, Tora Urup). Through it, one finds a double room, or two connected rooms, painted white, amply lit by the bay window that one passed on approaching the house. Neither feature skirting boards or cornices of any type. The almost-porcelain glass of a pendant lamp, also designed by Lewerentz, is suspended in the centre of the first room. The nature of the day-light, coming from one direction, causes one to turn towards the second room, connected to the first by a wide and tall opening. The light falls on the blank wall at the back of the second room supplemented by a small window-light high on wall to the right side. Carefully designed cabinets in stainless steel have been placed behind the reveals of both sides of the opening between the first room and the second and are quite invisible until one passes through it. Standing inside the second room, the cabinets face each other mutely. Above the steel cabinets sections of faintly reflective white glass—vitrolite—are adhered to the white painted walls. There are bare light bulbs in brass fittings over each range of cabinets, which like the cabinets and the small high window-light, are invisible from the first room. The impression one receives is of blankness, of flatness, of space of uncertain dimension. The lack of clarity is similar to that induced by the blank panels of Mannerist architecture, or by the work of the contemporary artists Robert Irwin or Doug Wheeler. It is a most peculiar sensation, and much has been done to affect it.

In the hall again, one ascends the white-painted stair to the remainder of the house. As one reaches the first floor with two bedrooms and a bathroom, the stair becomes all white, the balustrade now painted as completely as the stair treads and risers. The flats as balusters change orientation and the whole looks more like a picture of a stair than an actual stair. As one continues upwards towards the master bedroom and bathroom, the stair turns over itself and bends next to the sky-light. One becomes conscious that the underside of the stair is smooth and rounded, and that its forms catch the light so as to suggest illusions of forms of the body. Reaching the top, one looks down through the brightly lit figure of the white-painted stair to the relative darkness of the rest of the house. The stair is more white, more pronounced, more picture-like.

There are many other beautiful details in the house which seem at once obvious, elementary and poetic. In the room with the pendant lamp, the hearth of the fireplace is made of grey bricks set standing on their ends, flush with the oak floor. In the bathrooms, where each element is given its place as an

object, the enameled-steel baths are enclosed in crate-like wooden boxes and the spaces between the boards serve as pulls for deep drawers. In the master bedroom, the light-bulbs with their brass fittings have migrated from the ceiling to the walls above the bed, and tilt themselves towards the bed, hanging their heads, which are covered with aluminium skull-caps. A little room at the back of the house on the ground floor for laundry has an exposed galvanised steel vent pipe and a rhyming ceiling of silver foil that reflects the whole room and its fluorescent light. This room reminds one of Sigurd Lewerentz's studio at Lund and his flower kiosk at Malmö. Another little room beyond it has a door that opens onto a desk set against a small but beautifully proportioned window looking out onto the garden. This room reminds one of Antonello da Messina's painting of St Jerome in his study, and is as miniature as the painting itself.

The work that John Glew has made here does not point immediately to its status as architecture or even design. Those elements that might signify authorship in a conventional way are subdued, if not entirely absent. A convention of the consideration of architecture and design is the search for the signature, for the reification of prosaic functional provision that elevates it from the ordinary. Glew's position seems to be that there is to be pleasure and peace attained from the ordinary itself. This position has great respect in the practice of contemporary art and photography, and has a tradition in architecture here in Britain, where it unfortunately garners less respect. The display of the Ego—with its claims for uniqueness and innovation—seems more attractive to the 'audience'. It is one who is sensitive to the appearance and relation of things that will note the care that has been taken in making this interior. The charge of fragility or invisibility of this work is the perception of an audience that needs the performances of the Ego to make it feel needed.

This work turns on the issue of attention to the World and its things. In this work, ordinary things, which by being tools have become invisible agents for our daily activities, appear and present themselves precisely as those agents. In this interior, ordinary things have particular characteristics, and spaces have specific, conscious qualities. One is conscious of oneself in relation to these objects and spaces. Rather than dwelling upon nuance (those qualities that reveal them to be the work of an author), it is the apprehension and experience of them which is paramount. Here, things are not fetishized; rather, they eloquently express and achieve the object of their existence. John Glew has used picture and allusion in proposing these things—in short, representation—to make their reality evident. There is a relation between this approach and the issue of attention as it pertains to the work of art. In the case of the work of art, that which is attended to is both itself and alludes to—through representation or even abstraction––some other thing or experience which leads the viewer first out of himself and then back upon himself.

John Glew's things and spaces—in this interior and in all his work—cause one (the user, the viewer) to be conscious of one's place and of the agents that figure and act as guides. As a consequence, one becomes more conscious of oneself in the World. As things become more intimately related to the user through their specificity (their present-ness), the user finds reality, rendering him more human. In this properly aesthetic work that is directly linked to the body and its knowledge, one is liberated rather than involved in the worship of objects and arrangements. This work makes space for personal freedom.

London and Den Haag July 2004