

FEBRUARY 2007  
£3.40

# HOUSE & GARDEN

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO STYLISH LIVING

## COMFORT ZONE

- JANE CHURCHILL AT HOME
- SOFT, LUXURIOUS THROWS
- HOW TO CHOOSE A WOOD-BURNING STOVE

EXCLUSIVE  
DIRECTORY  
OF LEADING  
GARDEN  
DESIGNERS

PLUS  
SUNNY FLAVOURS FOR  
WINTER COOKING





# insiderlifestyle

LIZ ELLIOT meets architect Thomas Croft

PHOTOGRAPHS GRANT SCOTT | PATRICK FETHERSTONHAUGH



Thomas Croft divides his time between London, where he lives in a mews house in Notting Hill (top left and right), and a converted eighteenth-century barn in Kent (below). The barn belonged to Thomas's parents, for whom he masterminded its conversion in the Eighties. It was originally part of a family farm and stands in a sunken garden laid out by Thomas's grandfather. From his office in London (middle left, with colleague Harriet von Fritsch), Thomas works on projects both in the capital and the country - currently including the restoration of a nineteenth-century house in Lansdowne Walk (opposite)





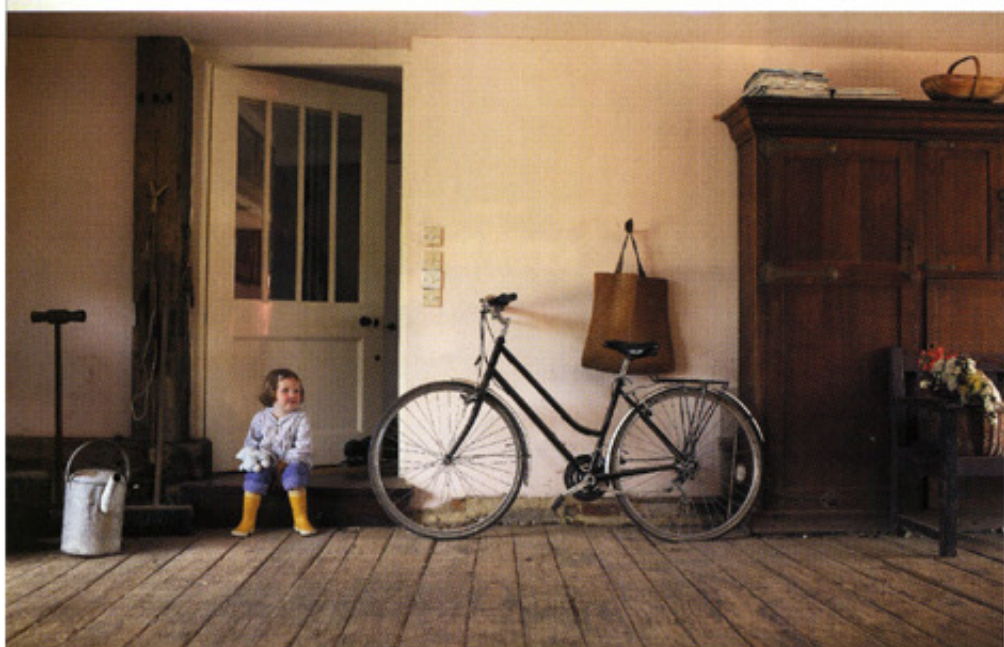


Thomas Croft is an architect. His works include the acclaimed Royal Yacht Squadron Pavilion in Cowes, Timothy Taylor's first gallery, and a string of private houses for thoughtful clients including Richard Curtis. He is currently working on a modern study and archive centre in The Georgian Group's Adam-designed headquarters in Fitzroy Square. His strength lies in being able to marry original, new design with period architecture and to enhance rather than obliterate the details and lines of the past.

His London base is a mews house in Notting Hill, which he shares with his wife, Max, Assistant Foreign Editor at *The Guardian*, and their four-year-old daughter, Kitty. 'I lived in Notting Hill when I first came to London. Then when Max and I married, we had a rather groovy loft in Edgware Road, but it was too urban for me. I think your mental map of a city is fixed from where you first landed, as it were, so I came back to this area. We found what I consider to be an urban "cottage" with its own parking.' The house also has a spiral staircase – 'it's a bit John Steed, don't you think?' Thomas asks, referring to the *Avengers* hero of the Sixties. The family spends weekends and holidays at The Barn House, near Whitstable, which Thomas converted in the Eighties for his parents' retirement. He also has that most enviable possession, a family beach hut – overlooking the sea at nearby Tankerton.

While architecture is Thomas's first love, he is also passionately interested in contemporary art and in particular the contemporary arts charity Artangel, of which he is a private patron, or 'angel'. Although its projects are primarily artist led, the charity aims to encourage participation from groups of collaborators who are not necessarily targeted by conventional displays or education. As Thomas explains, 'Being an angel is a way of helping to create art rather than simply buying it, which is where the public's attention is usually focused. It gives me a chance to be involved in a positive way.'

One project took place on September 30, 2006: Artangel chose the south-coast town of Margate to retell the story of Exodus. The town was selected for its diverse population and proximity to >



Thomas designed 'a house-within-a-barn'. The front door (below left) opens off an internal 'terrace' or undercroft that retains the original barn floor – and can be used for children's tea (below right). The undercroft, dining room (opposite middle) and downstairs sitting room (above left and middle right) overlook the garden, romantically planted with mature topiary (opposite bottom). On the first floor is a large drawing room (opposite top), furnished with paintings, china and furniture inherited from Thomas's parents. At the top of the barn, a ladder leads to an attic bedroom (top right)





Thomas (above) is a patron of contemporary arts charity Artangel. In September, he travelled with Max and Kitty to Margate for Artangel's re-visiting of the story of Moses and the Israelites - centred on the burning (below) of *Waste Man*, a consumer-waste sculpture by Antony Gormley. OPPOSITE Thomas has a beach house at Tankerton, near Whitstable, where he, Max and Kitty spend time year round

Dover, the main entry point to Britain for immigrants and asylum seekers. The book of Exodus was chosen since it tells of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

On the day in question, Thomas, Max, Kitty and several friends joined a procession threading its way across the town to a disused fairground where *Waste Man*, a 25-metre-high sacrificial figure made of consumer waste and built by the sculptor Antony Gormley, was symbolically burnt at sunset. The day finished with a concert of songs based on the 10 biblical plagues and written for the event by songwriters such as Brian Eno and Rufus Wainwright.

Thomas was educated at The King's School, Canterbury, within the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral, which remains one of his favourite buildings in this country. 'Perhaps the proximity and the architecture of the Cathedral, not to mention the school itself, have had some bearing on my eventual profession; it certainly encouraged a love of history, which is absolutely essential in my work.'

Thomas was born in Kent, but in the eighteenth century his forebears lived in North Yorkshire with estates in Oporto, Portugal, trading in a variety of goods including the port to which the Crofts gave their name. 'Croft Port came into its own during the Peninsula Wars,' he explains. 'There was naturally an embargo on French wines, and port became a substitute. My great-great grandfather knew the area very well and spoke perfect Portuguese, which allowed him to gather information from behind enemy lines. This, in turn, was passed on to Wellington's headquarters. After the war, Portugal was devastated by the slash-and-burn policy pursued by both armies, and John Croft successfully lobbied the British parliament for £140,000 relief funds for the Portuguese who had lost their livelihood during the war.'

For his good work and services to intelligence John Croft was made a baronet; Thomas is the 6th Baronet. Family tradition >







FROM TOP With client Nigel Fox, Thomas looks at Poldhurst Barn near Canterbury. At Vitsoe in Wigmore Street in London, Thomas discusses the finishing touches of the shop's renovation with Vitsoe's Mark Adams. Canterbury Cathedral, close to where Thomas went to school, remains one of his favourite buildings



decrees that each baronet should be called either Thomas or John.

During the early twentieth century, the family lost control of the business to successively larger multinationals until, five years ago, it was bought by family-owned Taylor's. However, the Croft family still maintains a non-financial interest. Last year, Thomas was asked to open the visitors' centre in Oporto, to which he had donated several thousand eighteenth- and nineteenth-century letters, Sir John Croft's Georgian court dress and other artefacts; he is now designing a second visitor centre at Croft's Quinta da Roeda in the Douro Valley.

With no opportunity of following a career in the port trade, Thomas decided on architecture. He studied at The Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment at University College London and the Royal College of Art. As a student he won the British Institution Architecture Prize and a Bartlett Travel Award, which took him to New York to study with Richard Meier & Partners where he worked on designs for The J Paul Getty Museum. Back in London, he worked in the offices of Rick Mather, John Pawson and decorator John Stefanidis.

From John Pawson he learnt that it is the sensual aspect of the space that an architect creates rather than the walls he uses to define that space that is important. From John Stefanidis he learnt how to work alongside an interior designer constructively: 'It provides another interpretation to an architect's scheme and is often a very productive partnership.'

'I was working in New York when my parents announced that they wanted me to build them a house in an unconverted barn which had been part of a family farm since the Twenties. I agreed, although converting a barn offers limited opportunities to change anything. My solution was to change the exterior as little as possible, and make the barn into a form of "container" in which the new house was to sit – a sort of twentieth-century boat in an eighteenth-century bottle.'

Today, half of the barn remains in its original state. On arrival you enter via the great central doors through which farm carts were once driven, with on your right a huge area for bikes and general storage. The original worn threshing floor has been kept: it runs the length of the barn, out into the romantic, overgrown sunken garden planted by Thomas's grandfather in what used to be the farmyard. The front door to the house itself is inside this central space to the left, emphasizing the idea that the house is subservient to the original barn.

Within the encasement of the barn Thomas built a two-storey house. Downstairs are an open-plan hall, a sitting room overlooking the garden, a kitchen and dining room. Upstairs is a larger drawing room, a small study and two bedrooms with a perilous third bedroom above, built for only the very brave and reached by ladder.

Thomas describes the barn's furniture as 'organic': 'These are not the pieces I would choose today if I were starting from scratch, but they are what I grew up with and they link me to my past – I like the continuum. The other day I found all my old Corgi toys drawn up in serried ranks on the floor; Kitty had discovered them and was re-creating her own world with my original pieces.'

It is this continuum that is central to Thomas's life and work. 'The challenge of introducing new design within a building with strong collateral settings is one that I relish. In both art and architecture old and new coexist: it is the mark that you make to the whole that matters' □

#### ADDRESSES

Artangel 31 Eyre Street Hill, EC1 (tel: 020-7713 1400, website: [www.artangel.org.uk](http://www.artangel.org.uk)) • Croft Port (website: [www.croftport.com](http://www.croftport.com)) • The Georgian Group (website: [www.georgiangroup.org.uk](http://www.georgiangroup.org.uk)) • Thomas Croft Architect 9 Ivelbury Court, 325 Latimer Road, W10 (tel: 020-8962 0066, website: [www.thomascroft.com](http://www.thomascroft.com)) • Vitsoe 72 Wigmore Street, W1 (tel: 020-7935 4968, website: [www.vitsoe.com](http://www.vitsoe.com))