homespace

Some houses are so perfect, they make your jaw drop. Tom Dyckhoff visits The Lawns, shortlisted for next weekend's Stirling Prize, and the most important house built in Britain for years. Main picture by Chris Gascoigne

ROOM AT THE TOP

SAM PIYASENA/TBG

John Sorrell clicks a button and listens, entranced, to the hum of his electrically powered windows as if it were Mozart. "It's all," he says, with a pause, "in the details." He slides back his cupboard doors with the kind of precision only money can buy. The crisp, sharp edge stops as required, not a millimetre out of place. He does the same with the fireplace grille. And the electrically powered blinds. And the door handles, which fall back flush with the door. (Design types don't really like handles that stick out.) It brings tears to the eyes. It's all perfect.

John and Frances Sorrell's house, The Lawns, seems as if it is designed to make you envious; the kind of house you gawp at from afar and think, "Blimey, who lives there?" I doubt very much that you could find a home that is so "of the moment", in terms of design, anywhere else in Britain. It has it all: a garden planted by Dan Pearson (all textures, tones and no colours), and subtle, quietly murmuring water sculptures by William Pye. The house, completed last year by architects Nick Eldridge and Piers Smerin, is a sexy, impeccably detailed jewel, shimmering in an other-worldly light; it is so perfect, so neat, so well made that almost anything else it comes into contact with looks slightly shabby in comparison.

This designer house comes complete with designer owners. John and Frances, dressed, as all designers should be, in monochrome threads (impeccably cut, naturally) and glossy hair, rival Richard and Ruth Rogers as the It couple of the design world (though, self effacing as they are, they would shudder at the description). Until last year, John was chairman of the Design Council, turning a fading 1950s-style quango into the epitome of New Labour slick. And until the late 1990s, the couple ran Britain's foremost design agency, Newell & Sorrell, before selling up to commission this house and to set up The Sorrell Foundation, "a think and do tank", says John, "to inspire creativity in young children". Yes, they're definitely It. In fact, if, as a struggling young designer, you were to find yourself around their capacious dining table for a slinky little supper party, I think you could safely assume you were struggling no more.

But there's more. They live not just in an impeccably detailed paragon of contemporary modern design, but one that, to boot, has been nominated as the country's greatest new building. Nobody really expects The Lawns →

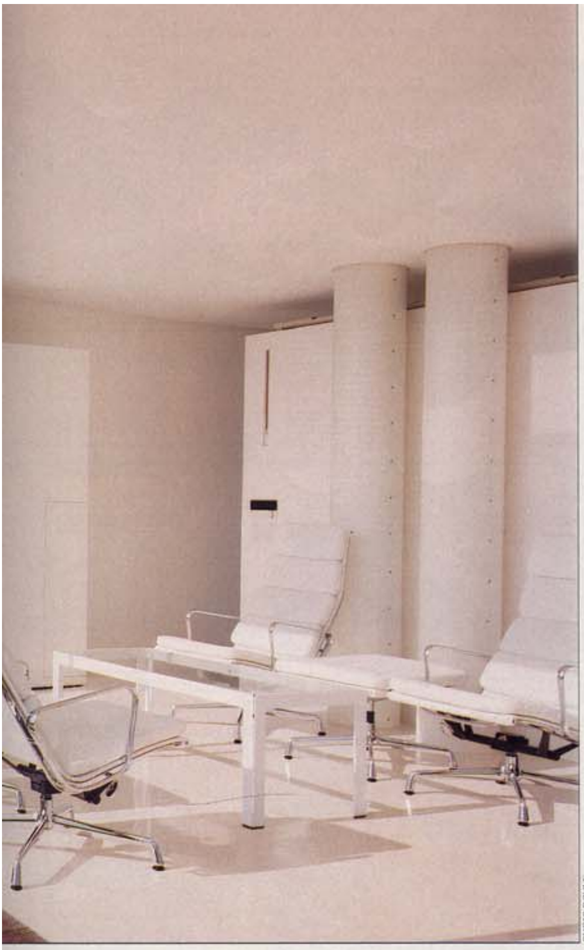
Sky high: John and Frances Sorrell (above left) wanted a home in which to live and work. So architects Eldridge Smerin designed work and home spaces which cleverly interlock without colliding, culminating in a 'thinking space' studio on top (right)

CHRIS DOYLE

to win the £20,000 Stirling Prize next weekend. (A private house is unlikely to win; and it has hefty competition from Nick Grimshaw's lauded Eden Project and five others.) Still, says John, it's quite nice to live in an icon; and, anyway, "most of the designers on the shortlist are friends. It'd be embarrassing to win."

It's easy to see why it was nominated. For a start, it's a starkly modern urban house in Britain, until recently a feat in itself. It's also a starkly modern urban house in the quaintest, cutest part of London's Highgate Village (where all houses, by local decree, must look like 18th-century vicarages). And it's just a few doors down from the fearsome Highgate Society (Eldridge and Smerin must be crafty diplomats).

Box of tricks: The home is not entirely new, but built around an existing 1950s house (left). The design means it is flooded by bright, sometimes blinding, light (right, the studio)



CHRIS DOYLE

It's one of the most important houses built in Britain for decades, a sign that even diehard conservatives now have, if not a liking, then a respect for modernism after the silly style wars of the 1980s. Ten years ago, this house simply would not have been built.

It convinces because the complex, clever architecture convinces. With all its eyecatching glass and impeccable detailing, you'd think the place would be bloodless. But it's not. It's ripe for a French farce, equipped with neat flaps, hidden cupboards and surprising sliding or double-jointed doors that appear from nowhere. It's a giant, three-dimensional puzzle made from four sets of spaces (one for the children, one for the grown-ups, one for the family, and one for work) which wind around one another, and can be closed off so that the four worlds need hardly ever meet. "Not that the children are riotous," says Frances. "It's just if we have clients round, we don't want them tripping over skateboards."

There's another trick. Despite appearances, this is not a new construction, but one built around an existing 1950s house, itself built on top of the basement of a Victorian home. "Layers upon layers," says Frances. "We moved in just to get the feel of it and became rather attached." Its hefty walls still peep from beneath the steel and glass.

You'd never guess at this complexity. It's all done with such ease, such sleekness. It's all surfaces, sheen, shine and reflections. And white, very white. In fact, it gets whiter and more glassy as you rise to the top-floor studio ("our thinking space"). The Eames chairs are white, the cabinets and floors are white, the furniture is white. Or glass. It is so very white that, at times, when the sun streaks in from the south, it is blinding, ethereal. You can't quite tell where the house ends and the clouds begin●

The Stirling Prize, sponsored by the Architects' Journal, is broadcast on Channel 4 at 8pm on October 21.