House REMIX

From RIBA awards to musical scores and Agent Provocateur's interiors, architect Charlotte Skene Catling always plays by her own rules, finds Sarah Crompton

Photographs by Philip Sinden

Charlotte Skene Catling has recurring dreams about houses. "They tend to involve places I've lived in at some point, but I'm discovering odd extensions that lead to strange places. And it's funny how tangible they are."

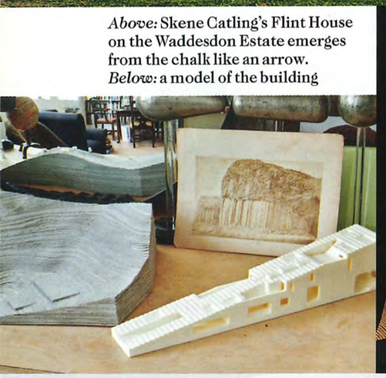
When she wakes up, she carries on dreaming. She's an architect who creates houses that rise from the landscape like visions, at once substantial and barely there. Last year she gained sudden attention for Flint House on Lord Rothschild's Waddesdon Estate, a building that emerges from the chalk like an arrow before its white upper walls vanish into the sky; it won the RIBA prize for House of the Year. This is architecture that hides in plain sight, assertive and imaginative, yet discreet. In 2011, she designed something she even called the Hidden House for her friend the artist Marc Quinn, a curving structure that will blend, once a local planning dispute is settled, back into a sandy hillside in Majorca.

Up until now she has worked mainly with her business partner Jaime de la Peña, founding Skene Catling de la Peña in 2003, although the pair met some years before when they were at university. And if one thing characterises the projects they >

CHARLOTTE WEARS: SHIRT, CHLOE, AT MATCHESFASHION.COM. TROUSERS, SAINT LAURENT, AT BROWNS. VELVET JACKET, FRAME. SHOES, JIMMY CHOO. WALLET, CHARLOTTE'S OWN.

"The reduction of architecture to style is such a mistake. If it doesn't move you, then it is missing something…" Charlotte Skene Catling at home in west London. Hair: Diana Moar. Make-up: Jenny Combs. Sittings editor: Nura Khan

Above: Skene Catling's Flint House on the Waddesdon Estate emerges from the chalk like an arrow. *Below:* a model of the building



Above: a model of the Hidden House in Majorca, showing how it spirals downwards and merges with the hillside. *Right:* "It's always exciting to get something done in a rather unconventional way," says Skene Catling. *Left:* the interior of the Dairy House, a timber-and-glass construction in Somerset, built in 2008. *Below:* strands of greenery envelop the Hidden House, tying it to the landscape. *Opposite:* the sleek interior of the Flint House

JAMES HORNE, CHARLOTTE WEARS T-SHIRT, RAG & BONE, AT NET-A-PORTER. BLAZER, LA PERLA. STRIPED SKIRT, NOZI, AT BROWNS. SANDALS, JIMMY CHOO

have undertaken, it is how hard they are to pin down. There isn't a "signature" Skene Catling building as there is a Norman Foster or a Richard Rogers hallmark, and she feels she doesn't belong in any particular tradition. What she loves about architecture is the way it allows her to bring different disciplines together to make a building that suits both its setting and her client. "I see it as less of a profession and more of a vocation," she says.

We meet in her home, which is also where she works, in west London. It's a place full of objects that suggest other things – cabinets of curiosity, a model of the Taj Mahal in a square glass case, a poster by Quinn. It feels simultaneously lived in and unfinished; rectangles of lilac craft paper are taped to the windows, the colour of blinds Skene Catling imagined ordering when she first moved into her mother's flat in 2006. The blinds never materialised, but the paper remains.

Now she finds herself in another period of flux. "I'm getting married," she says, almost as soon as we sit down for coffee and the kind of cinnamon buns that unwind in a delicious circle. "I never thought I would do that, but…" Her voice trails away, as it has a habit of doing; Skene Catling's ideas arrive so quickly that sometimes her sentences don't keep pace.

He is Adam Lowe, an artist. They met in September. "We had so many friends in common, it felt almost as if there was a conspiracy that up to this point we wouldn't meet," she says. Once they had, there were no doubts, but since he is based in Madrid (where he is part of the team at Factum Arte, a group using new technologies to preserve and make facsimiles of the past), Skene Catling is getting ready to spend more time there, dividing her business between London and the Spanish capital, setting up a new practice without de la Peña. "It's very exciting, I have to say," she says. "Another adventure."

In person, Skene Catling exudes an unforced glamour. She doesn't know her dress size or height; she wears black because "it doesn't show the dirt on a building site", and her clothes are made by people she knows such as Bella Freud or Joe Corré, "partly because they are friends and partly because I like what they make". According to the architect and designer Nigel Coates, her voice – deep, well-modulated – "is the sexiest on the planet."

As for her career, unconventional doesn't really begin to describe it, encompassing as it has illustration, design and music as well as architecture. This may have something to do with an upbringing she describes as "rather chaotic". Her father is the novelist and writer Patrick Skene Catling, a man of a restless disposition who took his family travelling around the world. "We were very often not in school, or in school in the most weird places." For a time they settled in remote rural Ireland, neighbours to Ralph Fiennes's family. Here she was "taught Gaelic, the catechism and the times table. That was it. It was like going back 100 years," she recalls. "We all dropped out and Ralph's mother taught us. We would trace maps and spend a lot of time playing in rock pools, which was great."

Skene Catling's parents split up when she was eight, and she went to live in America with her mother, Diane, the daughter of Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, an American cavalry officer who survived an assassination attempt by sticking his own finger in the bullet wound. He went on to found what would become DC Comics.

Home life in New York was as disorderly as before. "We were known as the Addams Family," she laughs. "Because there were lots of cousins also living in this shambolic house. I remember trying to bring a friend home with me but she was too scared to come. They were all living in these nice suburban houses that I thought were really great."

The stories are colourful in retrospect. But at the time they left her with a strong desire for order. When she finally found herself at Camden School for Girls in London, she resisted the encouragement of the English teachers who had noticed her gift with words and her vivid imagination, and decided instead to study medicine at Guy's.

Architecture was never even suggested. "It was a very mysterious thing at that point," she recalls. But after she dropped out of her degree, and spent a period of time as an illustrator, her destiny came calling. She went to Birkbeck to study the history of architecture, and after that received an MA in architecture from the University of Westminster. Later she taught as well – postgraduate architecture at the Royal College of Art. She also helped found the new London School of Architecture, to train the architects of the future. "I think the thing that appeals to me still about architecture is that nothing is irrelevant," Skene Catling says. "You can actually draw in almost anything to the subject, and on the other hand use architecture as a methodology for exploring almost anything. And that, to me, is incredibly seductive."

Her use of that adjective to describe buildings – things of metal, brick and glass – is revealing. Skene Catling's structures entice you in. In Somerset, in 2008, she transformed a dairy into an alluring home for another friend, once her boyfriend, the art dealer Niall Hobhouse, complete with a luxurious bath house encased by striped timbered walls made of alternate layers of oak and thick glass, allowing half-light to filter into the space during the day, and glow with light in the dark. For a while the Dairy House was rented by Phoebe Philo and her family as their country retreat. Its design was inspired by an erotic novella from 18th-century France, *La Petite Maison* by Jean-François de Bastide. "The girl is seduced by the building, not the man; it's a wonderful little conceit." Those literary references, the sense that buildings tell a story, are characteristic of Skene Catling's work.

After qualifying as an architect, she worked in Berlin with a furniture designer who was restoring an old building. At more or less the same time, she began a long relationship with Malcolm McLaren, former partner of Vivienne Westwood and manager of the Sex Pistols. He was an idiosyncratic thinker on music, style and many matters besides. "He was also the kindest, funniest person," Skene Catling says. "And nothing was impossible to him. It was like looking at the world through this very extraordinary filter, where everything became rather extreme and quite magical. He was a really magical person."

Together they worked on his autobiography, until it became clear that "it was never going to happen. I think writing it would have been a sort of suicide, fixing the narrative would have destroyed him." Inspired by her mother's interest in alternative medicine after she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Skene Catling also collaborated with Chris Corbin and Jeremy King, then running the Ivy, on imagining a place called Eco Lab, a high-end café that would work with nutritionists and doctors to use food as medicine. It opened for just six weeks then closed due to a lack of financial backing. >

"It was the most painful thing," she says. "And it still hasn't been done."

Those years she spent living in Soho with McLaren provided Skene Catling with the social network that still sustains her. As Nigel Coates recalls, "I met Charlotte in some cool, night-time world where many creative folk found themselves in the same maelstrom. I didn't know anything about her architecture then" – the pair went on to teach together at the Royal College of Architecture, and he attests that her academic writing was always the most brilliant – "I just liked her."

It was while hanging out with the YBA set in the Eighties that she met Marc Quinn, who, over the telephone, speaks fondly of his friend. "She is very much her own person, who is doing things her own way, and things no one else would do, which has paid off for her." During the course of our interview I, too, notice that Skene Catling is gregarious yet somehow self-possessed, even solitary – perhaps not surprising for someone who spent swathes of her life working abroad. Quinn observes her special enigma: "Charlotte hides her light under a bushel. She is very shy, in a way, but also very social." And her likability, her reluctance to flaunt her many talents, has been pivotal to her professional success. Ellis Woodman, director of the Architecture Foundation and another friend, says: "Her clients are people who live slightly otherworldly existences, coming from her glamorous connections."

They also provided her with salvation when her career seemed to be faltering, in the shape of McLaren's son Joe Corré, who asked her to design the interior for the Agent Provocateur lingerie shop he was launching in Soho. What began as a few pencil drawings became a signature boudoir style for the brand, and has been exported to shops around the world. That was in 2002. Since then Skene Catling's portfolio has grown steadily, though always with the possibility of taking in the unexpected – a couple of years ago she created the set for a production of Beethoven's *Fidelio* on the site of the former gulag in Perm; a musical score based on the geological chalk line that runs through England is a current preoccupation. "It's always exciting to get something done in a rather unconventional way," she says. "But I do feel we are always doing these strange projects. I don't feel very professional."

And yet, when it comes to discussing the state of modern architecture, Skene Catling turns deeply serious. She believes the power of developers means that the architect's strategic role is being undermined; they are brought in late in the project as "decorators".

"The process of procurement, the volumes of money that are now involved in real estate and urban planning, what's being built and how, has completely altered," she says. "So much of building today is purely to do with money. And once you start using that as the only filter for the value of a site, or an outcome, it changes everything. When I look at London, I think it's incredibly sad the way decisions are made. Once property is viewed simply as an investment rather than as a place to live and as a cultural experience it is…" She pauses. "Well, it's tragic, actually."

Her own interest in creating homes that are a pleasure to live in means she is currently excited about her involvement in a project to create sustainable housing for a community land trust on the South Downs. "Why housing has become so unspeakably grim has always interested me. Many modern estates are so insultingly bad, appalling developer junk. It's not even that cheap, it's not that efficient, it's not sustainable and it's a miserable way to live. So I'm seeing if there's a way to come up with a different typology."

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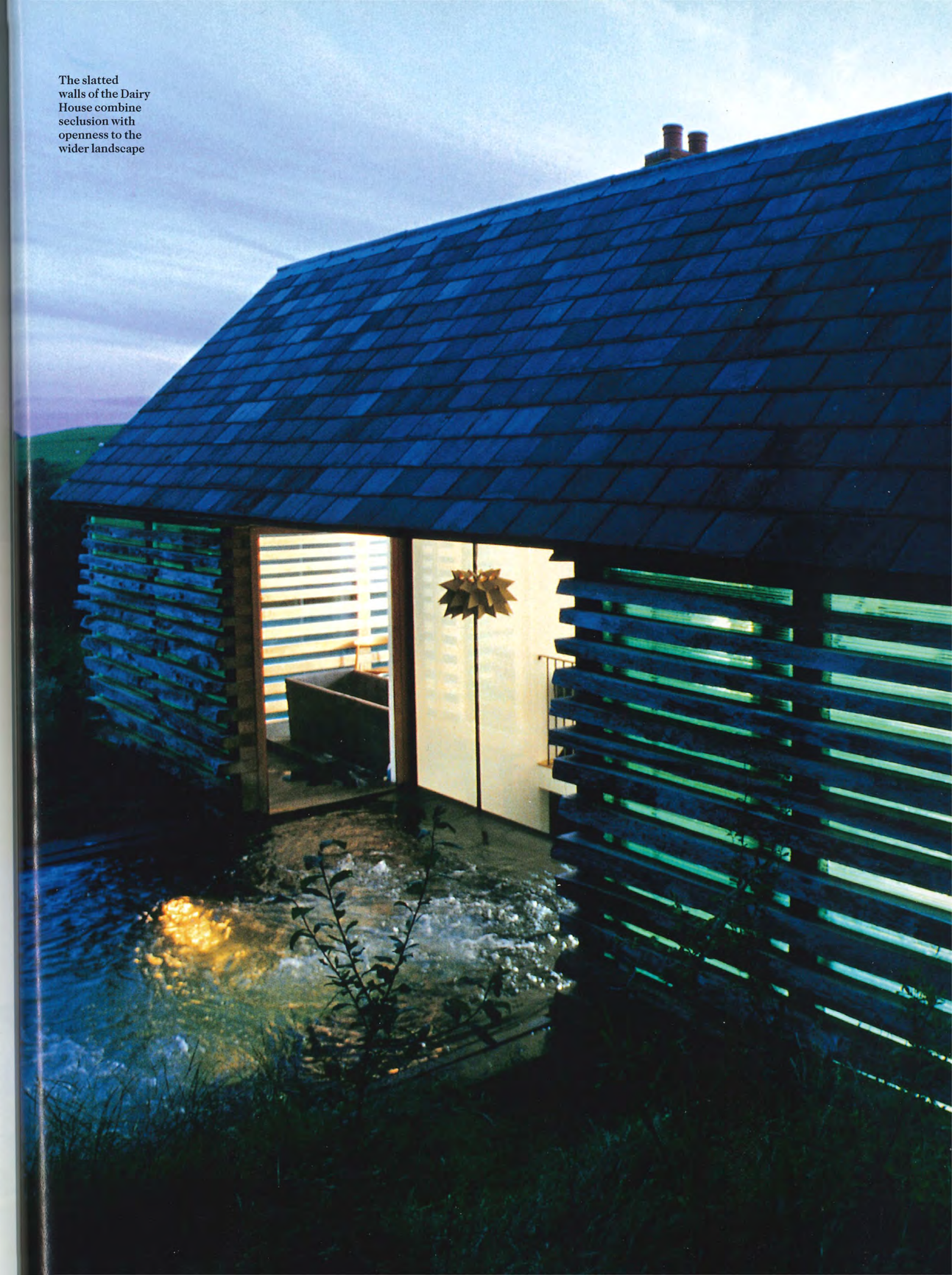
The research she is undertaking involves reading about utopias – "dangerous things" – but also thinking about the ingredients you need for a community to thrive. It is this idea of architecture as empathetic and thoughtful, as a sensitive contribution to the way we live, that Skene Catling loves. Her starting point for building a home is to look at the site and talk to the client. "It's quite forensic, you're looking for clues," she explains. Then, with a team of between four and 10, depending on the size of the project, she will sketch designs and build models, guiding the buyer through the process. "Houses are extremely personal, so there's an undeniable presence that runs through a project. Each becomes a biography of the client in some way, a form of portraiture," she says, thoughtfully. "And then there is the narrative of the site and the brief. Each of these will suggest something. You have to begin with quite an open mind – which is always rather frightening because it's not as if there's a formula that you can walk in and apply."

One example of such open-mindedness came when Skene Catling de la Peña acted as advisers on the development of Robin Birley's club at 5 Hertford Street, in the once-notorious Shepherd Market area, propelling the conversion of 10 Georgian buildings around a courtyard through planning. "We came up with the scheme," says Skene Catling. "We had these mad meetings on site where the whole of the courtyard floor had fallen in, and there was a brothel next door with the madam still there, and rubble and puddles and an absolute derelict wreck. And Robin, completely exquisitely dressed, would suddenly ask whether we thought there should be monograms on the napkins."

Nigel Coates notes how "a lot of women architects feel they have to fight because they are in a man's world. Charlotte doesn't wear that bullish side so much. She just quietly gets on with it." This belief in doing things on her own terms and in her own way – "she is her own greatest creation," says Marc Quinn – has helped her thrive in a profession which is still antithetical to women. Yet, Skene Catling argues, it is theoretically one that should suit them. "I think the reduction of architecture to style is such a mistake," she says. "If it doesn't affect you at a fundamental level, if it doesn't move you, then it is missing something. The sensation of a space – through touch, smell, colour – affects us profoundly. And maybe women are more intuitive about those things."

Women are deterred by the aggression of architecture, particularly when you are dealing with construction. "I've noticed this with my students," she says. "Women are maybe less assertive, less sure of themselves. And the way in which contracts are set up means that once you set foot on site, it's like a gun going off and there is this continual, very aggressive atmosphere – particularly in a recession, contractors often under bid and if things start going wrong they tend to blame the architect. When in fact, to produce interesting things, there does have to be a degree of experimentation, of trying things out." She pauses, thinking about what to say next. "So I think people can get – women can get – a little disillusioned. They want to do something creative and they end up designing toilet blocks for five years, and it's not very stimulating."

In this context, perhaps it is the unusual nature of Skene Catling's career that has enabled her to thrive. She is tougher than she looks, resolute in her pursuit of beauty. The irony is, of course, that she still hasn't built a home for herself. "I know," she admits. "It's very odd. I laugh at it because it was such a motivation for me to learn to be an architect because of all the travelling around I did a child, and me thinking 'If I really want a home, I'm going to have to learn how to build one'. And still I haven't. But maybe at some point…" ■



The slatted walls of the Dairy House combine seclusion with openness to the wider landscape

JAMES MORTIMER/THE WORLD OF INTERIORS