

THE INDEPENDENT WEDNESDAY 7 JANUARY 2004

## ME AND MY HOME

MARY WILSON talks to flooring and furniture whiz Eekle Jan Bles



Eekle Jan Bles: 'I love timber because of the different grains, the patterns. You can make it very fine or rough and create any form'

# A way with wood

*Eekle Jan Bles is the founder of Solid Floor, which has showrooms in London and Scotland. The latest one opens in February in Paddington Street, London, W1*

I first got to know Spitalfields, east London, when I was a geography student at the Bartlett College for Architecture and Planning in 1992. The area was a bit neglected then so it was cheap to live and as a student, that is where I ended up. After my studies I went back to Amsterdam, but I missed the drive of London and couldn't settle there, so I came back to Spitalfields. By the time I returned, it was enormously changed. I had started my company, Solid Floor, in Holland in 1990 and by 1997 had an office in Clerkenwell, so it was a convenient place as I could walk to work. I found this building, which is in Fashion Street, but initially the idea was to use it as a warehouse to store the timber I was importing.

"It was very much a rag trade area and had been from day one, although it was the first time that white-collar English workers had started living there, alongside the Bengali community. The building was a warehouse and was full of boxes with no windows at the front, just one little door and at the back they were blocked up.

"I bought the ground floor as a

shell and when I opened up the six windows at the back, I discovered you could see Christ Church, the famous Spitalfields' church and it was a most fantastic view. So I decided I was not going to put the timber there after all, but make it into somewhere I could both work and live. The other side opens into a pretty cobbled courtyard, so I put three large windows in the brick wall and a huge glass door. Because it was originally going to be a warehouse, I had designed the opening large enough to take pallets into the building, so I had the glass doors made to the same size and now in summer, it is great as I can open them right up and bring the outside into the interior.

"Not surprisingly, as I am in the trade, there is a lot of timber in the flat. When I first left grammar school in Holland, I studied photography and did interiors and food, but I didn't feel I had the drive to be a photographer. I also had an intellectual drive to do some more studying, so I did economics, which I found very boring.

"I started Solid Floor in Amsterdam as a Saturday job, buying ends of lines and selling them through a magazine like *Loot*. It became quite successful, so I opened a shop and my interest in timber started from that time, although I have always been interested in buildings. I love timber because of the different grains, the patterns and because you

can mould it. You can make it to be very fine or rough and create any form. Although I find it very difficult to create something from scratch, I like to collect things and create different shapes from what I have and my home is a reflection of this.

"The kitchen units are made with bamboo. Most people think of bamboo as being hollow, but I took slivers of bamboo and planed them down to about 5mm, like a veneer. The back wall of the kitchen is in wenge, which is found through much of my home - I have used it for doors, for my bed and the bed head. The floor is in a wood of the same family as wenge, called panga panga.

"In my bedroom I have a yellow desk, which is curved and narrower at the bottom than the top. It's made out of layers of birch ply and because the wood is so thin, it can be flexible and moulded, but if you use layers and layers of it, it becomes strong enough to sit or stand on.

"I buy most of my timber from Holland. The Dutch have always been great merchants - they have always had to be the middle man and have collected a great variety of different timbers. The rest of the timber comes from Belgium and France. I found the pine console table, which many people think is a fireplace, in a church in Amsterdam. Dividing the living space from my bedroom is a wave-like large wood-

screen, also made of birch ply. This is a series of chairs on top of each other and it is lovely because it always casts a different light into the room depending on the time of day. The plan was that I could move the screen to change the plan of the room, but the reality is that you also have to move the sofa and tables, so it stays in the same place.

"The bathroom is completely different to the rest of the flat, because I didn't want the whole thing looking like a large wooden box. You go down a corridor, which is lined with floor-to-ceiling cupboards - painted in white with no handles, so they just look like a wall and then you walk into a large wet room, which is made totally in concrete.

"I also have a workshop, where I am designing and making a collection of furniture and wooden lights, which I am hoping to launch later this year. So, the flat is full of the stuff I have made and so are the homes of my family and friends, in fact anyone who is happy to store things for me.

"I thought I was a modernist, but now I realise I am more of an eclectic. You start with an empty space, but you only get more stuff, not less of it, especially when you are making things, too. And when I make a piece of furniture, I want to test it first at home."

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