On location
'Die Familie Schneider'

Rooms for manoeuvre

Under the aegis of Artangel, mysterious German artist **Gregor Schneider** is building strange rooms in neighbouring houses in Whitechapel. We paid him a visit, leaving all preconceptions at the door. INTERVIEW **SARAH KENT** PHOTOGRAPHY **ROB GREIG**

GREGOR SCHNEIDER PHOTOGRAPHED FOR *TIME OUT* IN THE BEDROOM OF 16 WALDEN ST, WHITECHAPEL. SEPTEMBER 16 2004.

I expected Gregor Schneider to look hunched and pale – as if he had spent years in a dank cellar – but with his blond hair and clear skin, the 35-year-old is a picture of robust health. Despite being dressed all in black – practically standard issue for German artists – he could be mistaken for a skier or a swimming champion.

He wanted to be a footballer, but his career as a centre-forward came to an abrupt end when he collided with a goalpost. He didn't get into art school and was rejected by the army on psychological grounds (for being mentally ill) when he described what he was doing. 'I told them I build rooms that I don't perceive as a room in a room or a room round a room,' he explains, 'that suddenly a wall is there and then gone again.'

He was referring to 'Totes Haus Ur' ('Dead House Ur'), his parents' house in Rheydt, a provincial town near Mönchengladbach. Since they moved out in 1985 he has been transforming the interior into a labyrinthine series of rooms – some apparently normal, some nightmarish. From the narrow hallway several doors and a staircase lead to a sequence of landings, corridors and rooms – some without windows, others apparently lit by daylight, some empty, others looking as if the occupants have just left – disorienting the visitor and conveying an uncanny sense of abandonment.

Word got out, though, and the ongoing project slowly gained Schneider an international reputation. 'Totes Haus Ur' was recreated inside the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2001, though it meant transporting 100 tons of material from Germany for authenticity; you may also have scrambled through its claustrophobic spaces four years ago in the Royal Academy, where it was reconstructed for 'Apocalypse'.

Our meeting is in Whitechapel where Schneider is remodelling neighbouring houses so that, inside, they become almost identical. 'We've borrowed the houses for sixth months from Queen Mary University,' explains James Lingwood of Artangel, sponsor of the project. 'It was important to find premises where we could do what we wanted.' The Georgian terrace has seen better days; some houses are boarded up, others are being repaired.

On my arrival, Schneider rushes into the street to retrieve an abandoned mattress, which he leans against an equally grotty specimen; yet he doesn't seem the impulsive type. Each of my questions is answered with a long pause while he

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stares at the floor, struggling with his English or preparing the perfect response, usually an elusive remark that he refuses to elaborate on.

His intervention, he explains, starts 'when you open the door; I'm building rooms, not houses.' But if you look closely, you can identify the pair he is working on. Freshly painted black, the front doors look ordinary enough, but the bedroom windows have been walled off, and on the ground floor, frosted-glass windows have been installed a few inches behind the originals. Hanging between them, curtains will prevent anyone from seeing in or out.

Work is just getting under way, but it is possible to see the bare bones of the modification. Inside the external walls a series of small, airless and claustrophobic rooms is being built. Walls are papered in Anaglypta bearing floral motifs or abstract designs; ceilings are covered in sound-absorbent polystyrene tiles or the embossed paper typically used in pubs. Hall and landing walls are painted cream and chocolate brown, with dark aubergine in the basement. Names like Jamaican Ginger (a diarrhoea-coloured caramel) and Flame Frenzy can't disguise the dreariness of colours reminiscent of postwar decor.

Fixtures and fittings look as if they have come from B&Q. Fake Regency handles open modern doors, gold switches operate lights covered by circular glass shades and perforated screens hide radiators. Fake EASIpanel tiles line the bathroom and a white shag-pile carpet increases the claustrophobia of the windowless bedroom. 'I'm a little bit of a specialist in rooms,' says Schneider, 'but this project is difficult to plan, because it depends on getting the appropriate materials. In Germany, I build rooms with typical wallpaper, doors, electrical sockets and so on, but it's difficult to build something that will be familiar to Londoners, so I've been asking advice.'

At this stage each room looks normal, though poky. It's hard to tell – and Schneider isn't letting on – whether he plans any features like the room in Rheydt where guests sit at a table beneath an open window and drink coffee. As you sip, the room revolves unnoticed. Half an hour later, you might leave without realising that anything untoward had occurred; but open the door sooner and you could fall down a shaft and disappear into the interstices between rooms – 'as into a black hole,' says Schneider. It's hard to tell if he is speaking actually or metaphorically, but he insists that you might not emerge alive from one room – an airless box lined with lead and soundproofing. If you step inside, the door swings shut and can't be opened from the inside or out.

'Totes Haus Ur' proves the normality (and the security we strive to attain) to be a flimsy illusion that needs to be renegotiated at every turn. 'A room is like a skin,' says Schneider. 'After spending time there you accept it as normal. That's why I keep working on the house because then I remain in the same position as a visitor; as it changes, I know less and less about the place.'

The idea of influencing people's behaviour obviously fascinates him. 'My rooms change the way people feel, think, behave and walk,' he says. 'And they don't know why. There's no apparent stimulus, so it's not a question of recognition – the source of the feeling is invisible.' When I ask what you might encounter in Whitechapel, he is evasive. Before starting his building projects, Schneider was a performance artist (photographs show him covered in a flour-and-water paste that makes him look like something from the mummy's tomb) and, recently, some interiors have been occupied. In 1997 an old woman could be seen lying face down in his exhibition in Krefeld, and, two years later, a bin bag dumped in the 'Wank Corner' of his show in Bremerhaven turned out to contain the artist.

The Whitechapel show is billed as 'Die Familie Schneider in London', and rumour has it that identical twins will perform the same acts in both houses. 'Things will happen all the time in each house,' Schneider says with deliberate vagueness. When pressed, he says that 'a family will live here. Only one person can visit each house at a time, so you will be alone with the family.' But will the doormat say 'Welcome'? ●

Access to 'Die Familie Schneider in London' is by prior appointment. See Events in Art listings.