

Breaking Ground

Sophie Hicks is always up for a challenge—so long as it intrigues her. The fashion editor turned architect is never short of ideas for transforming poetic concepts into concrete realities.

Words by Rachel Summer Small

Photography by Simons Pinckney Finnerty

When it comes to making abstract principles into tangible structures, Sophie Hicks has an innate sense for elegance. Along with sleek, modern residences, the architect specializes in retail spaces for fashion houses with a distinct *savoir faire*. Her visions are rooted in a holistic, imaginative comprehension of what a brand is, was, and can become. “It’s got nothing to do with my taste,” she says. “It’s all about who they are and how I translate that into architectural form.”

A recently completed store in Seoul for a Korean scent brand illuminates how a fantastical-sounding idea—here, an edifice capturing the “ethos of perfume”—becomes reality under Hicks’ lead. It intrigues her how perfumes balance foul and fragrant notes. In the building, the ground floor channels the foul through asphalt, rubber, and raw metal gates, echoing its gritty urban surroundings; a fragrant counterpart emerges in aesthetic as visitors travel up an airy staircase into a bright, ethereal interior. Tasked with devising a retail concept for Phoebe Philo’s Chloé in 2002, Hicks similarly utilized evocative juxtaposition. “The brand had a tendency to look too young and pretty,” she explains. “It needed roughing up.” Untreated plywood wall panels did the trick: “It contrasts very well

with gold-plated furniture, pink marble tabletops, and extremely expensive handbags.”

Hicks is a lifelong Londoner. Disturbed by Brexit, however, she committed to finding a second home base and, in 2023, chose Venice. Does she mine inspiration from the architecture of the Floating City? “I find that the noise of water is very conducive to thinking,” she says, sporting her signature short-cropped haircut and dark-rimmed glasses. “But I don’t look at the architecture and go, *Oh, that brick is going to inspire me.*” So, that’s a no; Hicks’ wellspring of creativity seems to come almost entirely from inward drive plus intuition.

This served her well in her beginnings as a fashion editor, starting at age 17 with Willie Landels at *Harper’s and Queen* and then at *British Vogue*. A chic, charismatic conversationalist with a distinctive androgynous style, she became a trendsetter along the way, even winding up on a 1984 cover of *i-D*. “I was extremely young, so I didn’t have the hang-ups of, *Would I succeed? Is this too difficult?* You don’t worry, because you haven’t yet learned that you perhaps ought to worry,” she reflects. She later worked with Azzedine Alaïa, helping the late designer with a book project between 1985 and 1987. (A few years ago, she reunited with his namesake on international store designs, including its SoHo, New York flagship.)

By her late 20s, she was eyeing her next chapter: “When I saw fashion go full circle, I thought, *I’m starting to feel a bit jaded.* I wanted something that I could do forever, where I would be the creator.” She decided to recenter what had been a long-held interest in architecture, returning to school and launching her practice by 1990. It’s turned personal, too, as she’s since designed a minimalist dream home in London for herself and a modern lake house for her daughter, Edie Campbell. Out of all things, she speaks of her staircase designs with extra vim—rather fitting for someone who makes major life transitions look so graceful. “People have to put one foot in front of the other,” she says. “If you provide a staircase that is irresistible, they’re going to go up.”

