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Manhattan transfer: loft living comes to the East End

Harry Handelsman brought New York-style loft living here in the 1990s, and developed the Chiltern Firehouse. Now he has big plans for Stratford

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The doorman in an overcoat and hat ushers him through the high wooden doors — a screen between the waiting paparazzi and any celebrities inside — and a troupe of waitresses flutter around him as he takes a courtyard table outside the Laddershed, a private lounge at the Chiltern Firehouse, in Marylebone, which is probably the most covetable spot in the capital right now. The other diners surreptitiously check him out — they can't place this diminutive man, dressed all in designer black, but they know he must be Somebody.

Right now, London is wild about Harry Handelsman. After all, the co-developer of the Firehouse — the city's hottest A-list hang-out, dreamt up with Chateau Marmont's André Balazs — was still basking in the afterglow of his acclaimed £200m redevelopment of Sir Gilbert Scott's Victorian gothic masterpiece, the grade I listed Midland Grand Hotel, in St Pancras (completed in 2011, and where Lily Cole owns a flat), when the 26-room hotel and restaurant became the talk of the town.

Manhattan Loft Gardens

"We didn't intend to create a phenomenon," says Handelsman, 65, no doubt to the chagrin of his competitors. "We wanted to do something of great note. And we wanted it to be open to everyone." Which is ironic, as it is virtually impossible to get a table unless your surname is Moss or Delevingne.

In his soft pan-European accent (and with the restaurant's recent unfavourable kitchen-hygiene report swiftly addressed, according to his office), Handelsman orders a glass of white wine and a plate of cauliflower florets in a spiced truffle paste, keen to get onto a subject he swears he never tires of: his latest ventures on the London property scene.

His famous back story is not exactly rags to riches — but it is still, ultimately, one aspiring developers can only dream of. The son of a Polish financier who survived the Holocaust, he was educated in Germany, Paris and Canada, and first entered the design hipster's consciousness when, inspired by New Yorkers' ingenious adaptations of disused industrial buildings, he brought the concept of loft living to London in the early 1990s.

Handelsman wants to create a 'garden square in the sky' with MLG (Francesco Guidicini)

Even before the sitcom Friends made us all lust after flexible living in perfectly framed lateral spaces, Handelsman was on the money, taking advantage of the recession and snapping up an old printworks in Clerkenwell for £435,000. His firm, Manhattan Loft Corporation (MLC), created 23 flats, selling them on for up to £245,000 each, and in the process put what was then a sleepy Islington backwater on the map.

Further takes on the theme followed. On Wardour Street, in Soho, a Terence Conran restaurant took the place of the former Marquee club. South of the river, Handelsman proposed the Piers Gough-designed Bankside Lofts, well before Tate Modern heralded the area's new status as a cultural heartland. And in the Docklands, the completion of the 32-storey, 158-flat 1 West India Quay, inspired by American skyscrapers, in 2004 sealed his reputation for having an eye for the next big place — and, most critically for him, as an arbiter of taste.

Handelsman's Midas touch means the property world waits on tenterhooks to hear where he is heading next — and he says he surprised himself as much as anyone when, back in 2010, he announced that his next project would be a double-cantilevered, glass-clad, 42-storey tower, Manhattan Loft Gardens (MLG), right next to Stratford International station, a hitherto soulless east London precinct that was waiting for its big moment in 2012.

"I have to admit, when I heard the Olympics were being held here, I thought, 'Why not Paris?'" he recalls. "Stratford was not a place that really appealed to me. But then I realised that you could get there in 20 minutes by public transport from the centre of London. And, though I am not a mall shopper, the Westfield was clearly going to be fantastic."

So, one must ask, why the wait? After all, at the end of August, the diggers had still barely broken ground on the site. Could it be because the "Olympic bounce", with buyers and investors rushing to capitalise on what was meant to be a new destination, didn't materialise quite as quickly as hoped?

Handelsman is circumspect. While he admits that making Stratford sexy was a challenge, even for him, he insists that the official launch this week of the £200m, 248-flat building, designed by the architects SOM, is spot-on. His vision is "a London garden square in the sky", offering views over the Olympic Park and Zaha Hadid's London Aquatics Centre.

Studio flats at MLG will start at £400,000 and one-bedders at £600,000

"It has been interesting to see how Stratford has 'matured' and developed post-Olympics," he says carefully. "And, as we are hoping to appeal to owner/occupiers and Londoners, rather than the Asian investor market, it is even more important that we get our timing right. With the new zoning of Stratford [its stations will be in zones 2/3 from January 2016], the imminent arrival of Crossrail and confidence in London property as a continued sound investment, I think September 2014 is absolutely the right time to launch MLG."

Although studio flats there will start at £400,000, one-bedders at £600,000 and loft-style spaces at about £950,000 (the average selling price for a flat in Stratford last year was about £200,000), you can't help thinking that Handelsman has once again got it right. Walking round the area may still leave you feeling that you're in an unpeopled computer image, with piped Coldplay music in the ether, but the area is about to receive a huge boost. Sadler's Wells is in talks to create a theatre here, along with the Victoria & Albert Museum and UCL — all part of the clumsily titled Olympicopolis, a new cultural and education quarter based at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, which was announced in July.

In the meantime, Handelsman hopes buyers at MLG will share his opinion that they live in one of the most beautiful skyscrapers in London — he credits his purchasers with having subtle, design-led taste and a sense of community — with the opinion of everyone else not seeming to be of much concern.

"I'm seen as a maverick," says Handelsman, who is also a director of Ealing Studios. "I'm out of the comfort zone of most people. But if I can't build something I love, then I won't do it. I don't see why modern buildings have to be ugly."

Despite such talk, Handelsman chooses to live in a four-bedroom flat in a period house overlooking Hyde Park, overhauled by the architect Sarah Featherstone, which he shares with his long-term girlfriend, Elizabeth Crompton-Batt, and their daughter Allegra, 13. (He has another daughter, Maya, 31, who lives in New York.) It's important, he says, to come home to things that make you smile. The walls are hung with his personal art collection, featuring everyone from Gerald Laing to Sarah Lucas and Anish Kapoor, though his most treasured possession is a Mies van der Rohe chair.

So there's no imminent move to Stratford, then, from leafy central London? "You never know," he replies. "I may well be reserving an apartment or two for myself."

The skyscraper will offer views over the Olympic Park

It's doubtful that Handelsman would live in anyone else's development. While he admires the Shard and the original Centre Point building, he is not happy with the direction London new-builds are taking. "Many developers have that pile 'em high, sell 'em cheap attitude," he says. "But we have a responsibility to the city skyline — and I think we are messing it up."

And Boris? "I have a lot of affection for him," he says of the mayor, "and I endorse his views that London needs housing. But I wish this perception would lead to a good quality of new homes, as opposed to simply numbers of units." He is also keen to set himself apart from the Candys and the Finchattons of this world: "What they do appeals to a different market. Bling has its place — but it's in Versailles or St Petersburg."

So what should we expect next from Manhattan Loft Corporation? With the developer Chatham Works, he is set on making Hackney a world-class "fashion hub" (don't laugh), expanding on the success of the outlet stores already there, which include Pringle and Aquascutum. And while Shoreditch may have been redeveloped, in his view it still lacks an amazing building.

"So let me dream my dream," he says, as he overtips the waitress. "There is room for all of us. And I don't want to have to worry about what everybody else is doing."

Savills (020 7531 2512, savills.co.uk); manhattanloft.co.uk

Harry's words of wisdom

"Many developers have that pile 'em high, sell'em cheap attitude, and try to sell them off quickly to foreign investors. I want to create real homes for real Londoners"

"I couldn't live without my Mies van der Rohe chair"

"Many well-respected architects do some very bad buildings"

"My aim is to be able to achieve a proper sense of community in a tall building"

"There is a place for bling — but it's in Versailles and St Petersburg"

Firehouse fans: Cara Delevingne , Kate Moss and Lindsay Lohan (Michael Buckner/David M Benett/Karwai Tang/Getty)