

BEAUTIFUL, HAPPY CITY

London is one of the world's most magnificent cities, but not many can afford to live there. These property entrepreneurs, however, are set to change the status quo. Roll up, says CHARLOTTE METCALF



The London skyline from UNCLE's Elephant & Castle property

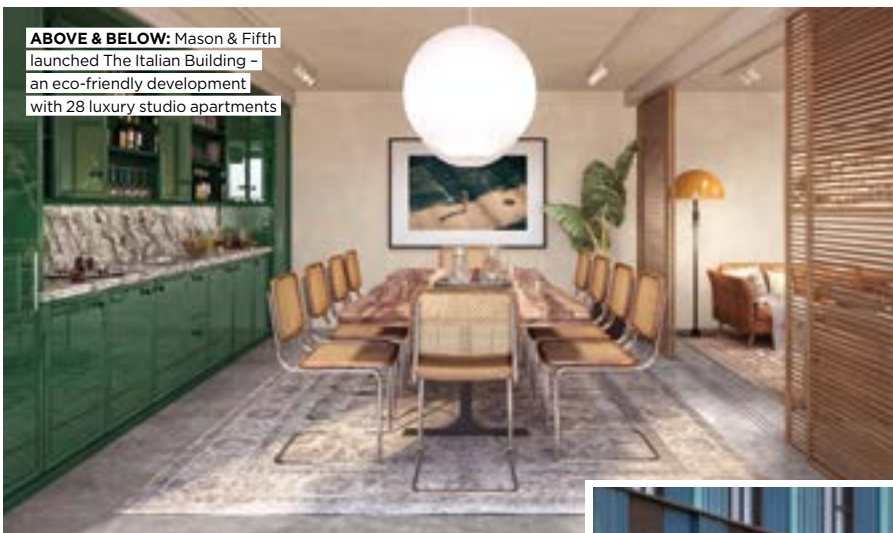
With the political and economic uncertainty that Britain has faced this year, it's not surprising that conversation about property has turned despondent. Whether we're grumbling about the value of our house plummeting or bemoaning our inability to gain a foothold on the property ladder, discussing London property prices quickly leads to gloom. But this issue is celebrating optimism and, while we might be glumly focussing on our own property problems, a handful of clever entrepreneurs is leading a quiet revolution to transform our capital into a happier, healthier and more beautiful place.

Blazing a trail is Pocket Living (pocketliving.com), based in Covent Garden and founded by Dutch-born Marc Vlessing. His mission is to build homes for people he calls the 'city makers' – teachers, nurses, chefs, engineers, designers and web wizards who make London tick. 'Day and night these people are a dynamic force in our city, adding to its vitality and creativity. We exist to help them,' says Vlessing. 'In Holland we think about the middle but here prices are squeezing young professionals out to the edge.' Vlessing believes that cities lose their sense of congregation and purpose if travelling around them becomes too difficult and prohibitively expensive.

Pocket Living achieved a breakthrough when it persuaded planning regulators that 37 sq/m was an acceptable living space. Though extremely compact, Pocket Living's flats are carefully designed to maximise space and can accommodate a couple, even with a small child, representing a big step beyond the typical matchbox-sized flats usually available to first-time buyers.



ABOVE & BELOW: Mason & Fifth launched The Italian Building – an eco-friendly development with 28 luxury studio apartments



Small but perfectly formed: Pocket Living's accommodation maximises space

“homes”, alienating real people who have to live in them. Houses used to be built round village greens, town squares, near churches or high streets and traditional purpose-built Victorian terraces were mostly quite beautiful. Philosopher Alain de Botton calls the majority of our new estates the “turkey twizzlers” of architecture. If we build ugly homes, how do we expect people to turn out when research proves that beauty lifts the spirits and makes people healthier and happier?”

Ben Prevezer would agree, as co-founder and CEO of Mason & Fifth, a company delivering a new ‘conscious communal living concept’ focused around wellbeing. Like Marc Vlessing, he spotted that a new housing model was needed for young professionals. ‘Rents swallow so much of our income so living spaces need to be better,’ says Prevezer. ‘There’s such a prevalent movement around health and wellbeing but it usually starts when you leave your front door and head for the juice bar or gym. Why can’t that start at home? Our ‘well-living’ concept is a combination of healthy, nourishing spaces, a buzzing creative community and a progressive cultural programme to spark radical ideas. Everyone has a hectic lifestyle and young people are resigned to being on the work treadmill, but they also want to rest, reset and engage with like-minded people. We’ve done lots of focus groups and believe our formula will allow London’s renters to live more joyfully.’

In October Mason & Fifth launched The Italian Building near Maltby Street Market and London Bridge. The eco-friendly, sustainable development contains 28 luxury studio apartments with a focus on communal areas. There are housekeepers to keep toiletries stocked and change the sheets, a gym with fitness trainers, a yoga and meditation studio, bike sharing scheme, cinema, cultural programme and planned excursions. Nutrition is key so there’s

a kitchen garden, a resident chef cooking meals and packed lunches for residents and a fully-stocked communal larder. Of the hundreds that have applied, residents are ‘curated’ on the basis of what they’ll commit to the group. ‘You’re joining a community that is focused on living well, having fun and doing better, says Prevezer. ‘It’s about reclaiming the magic of city-life.’

Another company meeting the demand for convenience living is UNCLE, founded in 2017 by Ryan Prince. From his background in hotels and hospitality, Prince’s mission is to take the ‘lord’ attitude out of being a landlord. ‘Renters are tired of being treated like second-class citizens,’ he says. ‘I want to bring the industry into the 21st century.’ UNCLE offers design-savvy apartments in Stockwell,

Plus, all are in areas near enough to central London to make the daily commute bearable. You can only sell on a Pocket Living flat to someone else in the area, preventing wealthy developers from muscling in and raising prices. These are homes for young professionals who want to put down roots and build a community.

In June 2018, chiming with what Pocket Living was already doing, Policy Exchange, a Conservative think tank, published the report, *Building More, Building Beautiful*. It suggested that new houses should be more attractive and built within easy reach of greenery, shops, schools, health and sports centres, thus creating a sense of community. Jack Airey, Policy Exchange’s head of housing, co-authored the report and says, ‘London needs 300,000 new homes a year and we wanted to inject some optimism into the debate over what they should be like. Politicians usually talk about “units” not

New Cross and Elephant & Castle (as well as Manchester). It also guarantees risk-free trials, routine repairs, flexibility to change flats, on-site property managers and great internet speeds.

Then there is Londonewcastle, a design-led, Fitzrovia-based property developer of three decades' standing, described by *The Evening Standard* as 'the Soho House of the property world'. Recent projects include The Otto opposite Hackney Downs and The Makers in Shoreditch and the redevelopment of Goldfinger's Balfron Tower in Poplar. Chapter House, a beautifully refurbished Victorian building in Covent Garden, represents Londonewcastle's first venture into interior design, with 40 new apartments. They now have plans for more than 2,800 new homes over the next five years.

'We feel really optimistic,' says founder and COO Robert Soning. 'It's been great to see The Otto so well received among locals and it's drawn new people into the area because there's nothing like it there, with its views across the city and our attention to detail and the finishes. We're really confident about The Makers and Chapter House too. Holding our nerve and keeping optimistic is the key to getting through this period of ambiguity and undoubtedly there's more than enough to be optimistic about.'

Londonewcastle also prides itself on its Street Art Programme, which allows street artists to invigorate an area culturally by using its buildings during planning and development as vast canvases. So too Native Land, another top development company, breathed new energy into the Thames South Bank with its acclaimed NEO Bankside, comprising 217 apartments and penthouses in four



Londonewcastle recently launched The Otto in Hackney Downs and Chapter House (below) in Covent Garden with 40 new apartments



pavilions near Tate Modern. Known for outstanding residences and mixed-use developments across the capital, from Bankside Yard to South Kensington Tube Station, Native Land has shown an inclusive, caring attitude to city residents by consistently providing affordable homes across the city. Since its formation in 2003 it has contributed £50 million towards affordable homes in several boroughs, many in areas where there is high demand and low supply, like at Cheyne Terrace in Chelsea.

At the top end of the market, London also has much to look forward to. Chelsea Barracks, now Duke of York's Square,

was inaccessible for over 150 years but has been transformed into one of the world's most desirable addresses, with its own club containing business suites, a spa, health club and cinema. PDP London has developed 13 townhouses within the development, carefully preserving London's fine Georgian townhouse heritage while ensuring the spaces are attractive to contemporary buyers who are looking for lateral space, open plan living and five-star amenities.

Cadogan, a property manager, investor and developer with a family history dating back 300 years, is committed to protecting and enhancing the entire area. 'Seeing Duke of York Square transformed from a military base to a leisure destination, including the Saatchi Gallery and an architecturally award-winning restaurant, is evidence of our ability to take a holistic approach to placemaking,' says Cadogan CEO Hugh Seaborn. 'By listening to the community and working closely with our retail partners, we're creating outstanding experiences and places where people want to spend time, like recently completed



Native Land has contributed £50m towards affordable homes



Chelsea Barracks has been opened to the public for the first time in 150 years, giving high-end buyers the chance to invest in a PDP London-designed townhouse

spanning over 28,000 sq/m opposite Buckingham Palace. It encompasses five different architectural styles: 1860s Grade II-listed Italian Renaissance, 1880s French Renaissance and French Beaux Arts, 1890s Queen Anne as well as contemporary design. The property will include 72 apartments, underground parking, a communal courtyard garden, restaurant, health centre with pool and spa, plus concierge. Various facades are being restored and remodelled, including a contemporary frontage onto Palace Street, designed with Squire and Partners. The design references the building's heritage so the exterior translates seamlessly into the interior.

After Policy Exchange produced its 2018 report, James Brokenshire, then Theresa May's housing minister, set up the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, headed by Sir Roger Scruton. It cemented awareness among planners and policy makers that ugly houses are no longer acceptable. Jack Airey points to the aristocratic landowners who are building legacy developments all over Britain – such as the Duke and Duchess of Fife's 8,000-home new town of Chapelton, being built on their Elswick estate in Aberdeenshire.

A forerunner of these developments was Poundbury in Dorset, Prince Charles' initiative. HRH is now championing Nansledan, an extension of Newquay in Cornwall, by a consortium of the region's building companies in partnership with the Duchy of Cornwall. Prince Charles said the development should 'enhance the quality of life, strengthen the bonds of community and place, and give people a sense of pride in where they live.'

This June, the government published *Creating Space for Beauty* and a final report is due by the end of the new year. 'I'm optimistic because politicians from across the board now support this move towards beauty,' says Airey. 'People used to say you can't talk about beauty but now people don't want to shut up about it.' And what could be firmer ground for optimism than that? ■

Pavilion Road, which has become a hub for independent artisans, with a butcher, baker, cheesemonger and fishmonger, making it feel like the heart of a village and uplifting the spirits of neighbouring residents and visitors alike.'

As one of the landowners on the King's Road, Cadogan has taken the lead on unifying the community. 'Retail is facing a seismic shift with the challenge from online shopping,' continues Seaborn, 'so we want to ensure King's Road's heritage as the world's most famous high street, while encouraging an open-mindedness, with a really good mix of retail and leisure, experiences and events.'

Aside from Chelsea Barracks, PDP London has remastered John Nash's Regent's Crescent, representing London's only Grade I-listed new build. With its lofty ceilings and access to beautiful landscaped gardens, Regent's Crescent demonstrates London's superb ability to innovate and adapt its heritage creatively, resulting in world-class contemporary properties.

Then there's Number One Palace Street,



ABOVE & BELOW: PDP London remastered John Nash's Regent's Crescent, London's only Grade I-listed new-build