

FT HTSI (UK) Friday 27th March 2020
Property Special: New House Rules

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Once bland and beige, the show home has recently had a radical makeover. *Ruth Bloomfield* visits the new designer spaces you'll want to move straight into

Show flats are the shop windows of new apartment buildings, but traditionally they've been more one-size-fits-all than directional. Legions of cushions positioned symmetrically on seating, arrangements of scented candles and a determinedly neutral "colour" palette – they present a ubiquitous vision of five-star-hotel style. The traditional strategy has been to offend nobody – but not is it likely to excite.

But in London's ultra-competitive property market, developers are gradually overcoming their fear that personality can be a turn-off for house hunters – and are increasingly seeking collaborations with creatives who offer a fresh vision that's more aligned with modern, often playful, design trends. "Everything used to be so homogeneous and without personality," says Caroline Takla, founder of property consultancy The Collection. "The fabrics and finishes were very 'look but don't touch'.

Luxury is being redefined, but there's no compromise on quality – it's just much more relaxed and informal."

Over the past six years, Sophie Ashby has established herself as the go-to girl for developers looking to take a more adventurous approach to interior design. Ashby is known for her vibrant, globally influenced style. She is married to the fashion designer Charlie Casely-Hayford, and designed his eponymous Chiltern Street store selling ready-to-wear and tailored clothing, as well as modernist and antique furniture, artworks and objects. Her eclectic aesthetic has helped sell homes everywhere, from the ongoing multibillion-pound regeneration at Greenwich Peninsula to the super-prime Holland Park Villas development completed in 2017. She launched a collection of furniture – first conceived for such projects – in 2018 with the curated online emporium The Invisible Collection.

Currently, her interiors can be seen at Hexagon Apartments in Holborn, where the three-bedroom



Clockwise from top left: the living room, stairs and television room in Wasabi Wasabi show apartment at London's Television Centre



This page: the Rokasanda Ilinic-designed penthouse show apartment at Gasholders, in King's Cross – the living room (right) features art by Cassine Denervaud

show apartment features sweeps of painterly colour, spacious sofas with mismatched cushions and arrangements of interesting objects. With the feel of a creative home, the £4.45m apartment is currently under offer with Strutt & Parker. Nonetheless, there's the opportunity to recreate her look at other homes in the building, priced from £1.07m.

Fashion designer Rokasanda Ilinic studied architecture and design before following a career in womenswear, but it is her fashion sensibility that is most evident in the creation of a highly personal and subtly feminine space in the penthouse show apartment at Gasholders, a landmark building by developer Argent at the heart of the regeneration of King's Cross. Soft shades of berry, coral and pink are set against a backdrop of earthy neutrals, and original artworks adorn the walls, including a monumental abstract mural by French artist Caroline Denervaud. The three-bedroom, split-level residence is on the market via gasholderslondon.co.uk at £7.75m – and, unusually, this price includes all the furnishings.

Most property experts will tell you that a great show apartment is a crucial tool when selling a home. Developers spend on average £150 to £200 per sq ft in central London for a two-bedroom, 1,000sq ft apartment despite, in most cases, handing over the property with just the "developers' finish" (plain white walls and a fitted kitchen, bathroom and flooring). "They are hugely important," says Mark Pollack, sales director of estate agent Aston Chase. "However experienced you are in terms of looking at property, when you see a bland, empty space it is quite uninspiring." He believes that a key impetus behind the shift from the high-end-hotel aesthetic is a change in central London's buyer demographic – a profile that is getting younger, with fewer wealthy buyers from Eastern Europe and China. "There's a move away from the grey-and-taupe schemes conceived for turnkey apartments for the Eastern European market," he says. "In a challenging market people have to work harder. They have to be more creative."

Being more creative can involve sourcing talent from around the world. Patricia Urquiola, the renowned Spanish architect and designer, has made her London residential design debut at Lincoln Square, a new 10-storey building close to Lincoln's Inn Fields accommodating 221 apartments, which is completing this spring. She's designed the glamorous resident amenities (the pool, spa, cinema, private club, snooker room and on-site library) in a fusion of bronze mesh

SOFT SHADES OF BERRY, CORAL AND PINK ARE SET AGAINST A BACKDROP OF EARTHY NEUTRALS

gilding, frosted glass, timber and marble, in addition to two of the show apartments, each designed to appeal to distinctly different markets. The first, which has been dubbed Curious Minds, has a refined, bohemian feel. The hallway is decorated in Pierre Frey's Rituel Ayo wallpaper, a monochrome print based on graphic African art, while colourful pops of its Diamond fabric have been used on the chairs in the bedroom. In the Family apartment, meanwhile, original artworks and bright fabrics act as a foil to furniture by Chelsea-based designer Julian Chichester. Prices for properties at the development start at £1.55m, while those looking to secure one of the penthouses can expect to pay from £7.5m.

The acknowledgment that one design does not fit all is sparking new ingenuity. The concept of "multiple show





by Anni Albers add interest underfoot. The home is currently for sale for £7.6m.

Marc von Grundherr, director of Benham & Reeves estate agents, sees the "multiple showcase" as an attempt to "cover every base". As he points out, the concept was pioneered back in the early 2000s at The Knightsbridge, central London's first really super-prime development. The combination of a lively market, ultra-luxury design and, of course, location helped the building break price ceilings in the capital.

Today, housebuilders still tempt buyers with statements of luxury, but increasingly it's with a twist. Chelsea Waterfront, where some 700 new homes – of which 414 will be offered for private sale – are being built close to the southern tip of the King's Road, is a perfect example. Here, design group Morphews was given a brief to provide something "completely different" for the show apartment – while ensuring that most expensive homes were not "put off" at a site where the most expensive homes have an eight-figure price tag (residences range from £1.02m to £13.8m, while the show apartment is priced at £9.2m). In response, the studio created a clean, neutral backdrop, layered with interesting pieces that nod to the site's heritage as the former Lots Road Power Station. The standout, nonetheless, is the garden room, where a "living wall" of faux plants forms a backdrop to a bespoke lounge bed suspended from the ceiling. There's the odd touch of humour too – an outdoor rowing machine is positioned on the terrace overlooking the Thames.

But even within the confines of one city, different locations require different aesthetics, says Alexander Lewis, development consultancy partner at Knight Frank. For instance, at Twenty Grosvenor Square – a redevelopment of the former Mayfair headquarters of the US Naval Forces Europe – the "twist" is subtler. The aim is to "stand the test of time" rather than chase trends, says Andrew Dunn, co-founder of developer Finchamton. "It's traditional but adapted to the way people live today," he says of its distinctive gentleman's club aesthetic, noting that the firm is often asked to revamp other homes owned by buyers around the world. To date, around three-quarters of the 37 residences at Twenty Grosvenor Square have been sold to house hunters from the UK, India, Scandinavia and North America, at record prices from £17.5m (plus an annual service charge of £14.50 per sq ft).

Finally there's Clarges Mayfair – one of the most successful super-prime developments of recent years – with a show apartment (currently on sale through Wetherell at £6.5m) designed by the equally super-prime Martin Kemp Designs. Kemp, formerly creative director at Candy & Candy, has worked on homes, yachts and private jets (for Tom Ford and Roman Abramovich among others), and in this kind of exalted territory nothing too experimental is on offer, design-wise. Yet, even here, the decor is far from safe or neutral. Rich deep tones of taupe and bronze set the scene. And personality abounds. ■HTS

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apartments" has been most enthusiastically adopted by the developers of Television Centre in London's White City, where a series of design teams have been commissioned to demonstrate just how flexible the space can be. Fashion designer Bella Freud and Maria Speake of architectural salvage and design company Retrovius channelled a 1970s vibe to deck out a duplex with handmade rugs, bedspreads and vintage pieces highlighted by blocks of retro wall colour – the Instagram-worthy space received much press attention. And Fran Hickman – the interior designer who began her career at Soho House, before envisaging Moda Operandi's flagship London showroom and Goop's first pop-up in the capital – stamped her signature style on a three-bedroom home at the development with a palette of walnut, black basalt and jewel-toned furniture.

This January saw the unveiling of the development's latest show apartment, a four-bedroom penthouse by Waldo Works – the Farringdon interior-architect firm behind the National Gallery Cafe, not to mention the homes of celebrities such as Jade Jagger and Cara Delevingne. The apartment takes its design cues from postwar British style, translated into a monochrome palette accented by pops of brighter colour and a spiral staircase, which sits at the heart of the space. A double helix-shaped paper sculpture by artist Deepa Panchamia sits on an adjacent living room wall, while abstract Christopher Farr rugs with designs



Clockwise from top: the living room in the Fran Hickman-designed three-bedroom home at Television Centre. The show apartment at Chelsea Waterfront by design group Morphews. The master bedroom in the show apartment at Clarges Mayfair, by Martin Kemp Designs