

No accounting for taste

It's the most hyped block of flats in London, but what's One Hyde Park like inside? Big, bland and very beige, says **Peter Conradi**

Today's super-rich are different from you and me, to update F Scott Fitzgerald's rather overused adage: they are obsessed with privacy, large lateral spaces with beige interiors that remind them of their favourite six-star hotel, and with coffee-table books, ideally about art, fashion or exotic holiday destinations, scattered liberally over every horizontal surface.

At least, that's the impression left by a tour of One Hyde Park, the development of super-luxury flats in Knightsbridge that, since its glitzy launch party this month, has been seized on as the embodiment of the rise and rise of the oligarch class — even as the rest of us brace ourselves to slide back down into the double dip.

We have an appointment to visit the £60m five-bedroom show flat on the eighth floor — or rather AA Gill, better known from other sections of this paper, has an appointment. Sadly, the message has failed to get through to Nick Candy, who, with his brother, Christian, is the driving force behind the project. And when it does, Nick is not a happy man.

Indeed, a chill air descends on our hitherto amiable lunch in Bar Boulud, the upmarket bistro in the neighbouring Mandarin Oriental hotel, which seems to serve as a kind of upmarket canteen for those associated with the project. "We don't want Gill. He's only going to rubbish it," says Candy's PR minder. "No, not Gill," the man himself affirms.

Candy, 37, who steps out with Holly Valance, a former Neighbours star, is wary of the press. Understandable when there is as much at stake as there is with this, the most expensive block of flats in British history — physical confirmation of the Candys' ascent to the summit of the London property market, which they entered 16 years ago when they bought and did up a one-bedroom flat in Earls Court, with the help of a £6,000 loan from their grandmother.

Amid the fawning stories that accompanied the launch, there was a hint of dissent: notably claims by one newspaper last weekend that the developer, Project Grande (Guernsey), has sold just two of the 86 flats. And that one of the two, widely reported to have been bought by Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani, the prime minister of Qatar, for £135m, actually changed hands for a mere £40.5m.

Nonsense, according to Candy. "We've already sold £900m of property — more than 60% of the flats by area," he insists. "The most recent sales are at more than £6,000 per sq ft." That's about 30 times the cost of the cheapest property in London. And those who have already paid deposits, of 20%-50%, are all

expected to have completed by the end of next month. "Nobody has dropped a deposit yet. The developers would be very happy if they did, since they could keep it and sell the property again."

As for the apparent £90m discrepancy in price, it was the result of a mix-up between two flats, Candy insists. The mystery owner — whom Candy, halfway through the meal, comes close to confirming is indeed the sheikh — has paid £135m, and that was just for the shell. Add in the cost of the fit-out and the bill will come close to £200m.

We've not come here to haggle over figures, but to get an exclusive tour of the four interlinked glass and steel towers that make up the development, described by Lord Rogers, of the architects Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, as "a 21st-century monument", and rather cruelly by one contributor to a property website as "council blocks with bits of a shredded-up caravan stuck on the front".

I was hoping we might have used the service tunnel that will allow waiters from the hotel's restaurants to deliver room service to residents, but, sadly, Candy prefers to take the pavement. (The tunnel is apparently one of the development's main draws. Although many of the flats have not one but two lavishly equipped kitchens, the kind of people who will live here will want to be able to order in their food ready cooked.)

We pass the retail units on the ground floor, ready to receive their tenants. A Sainsbury's Local, perhaps, or a Pret? No, there will be a branch of the Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank (the first in Britain), a Rolex boutique and a showroom for McLaren's new £170,000 supercar, the MP4-12C. "I've got one on order," says Candy. Recession? What recession?

We also pass Gill, who arrives for his 1.30pm viewing only to be turned away. As if anyone with £60m to spend is going to be put off by a thumbs down, however eloquently phrased, from the restaurant critic of *The Sunday Times*.

But then, as I said, Candy is wary of the press. Gill declines my offer to be introduced.

And then, sans Gill, we're off into the lobby, all glass and marble and steel, and the first of many sculptures: a pair of shiny suits of armour.

"In honour of the local barracks," Candy explains. "Chelsea Barracks?" I quip. (The Candys, we should recall, were involved in a messy court case last year, in which they sued their erstwhile Qatari partners for scrapping the £3 billion redevelopment of Chelsea Barracks after Prince Charles



The developer Nick Candy in the £60m show flat. Its balconies have views of Knightsbridge and Hyde Park



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denounced the design). No, the "local barracks", comes the curt reply.

In fact, the lobby is indistinguishable from that of any super-expensive hotel, with several of the building's 60 dedicated staff standing around trying to look busy. Not that many of the residents will come this way. Even fewer will use a new entrance to Knightsbridge Tube, built as part of the project.

Instead, they will drive, or be driven, in their Merc 600s or Maybachs into the glass and steel car lift and down into the basement, from which they will be whisked to their flats. Such is the obsession with privacy, even their furniture will be shielded from prying eyes: removal vans will use a separate lorry lift that can take up to 40 tons.

Before we're allowed into the show flat, Candy wants to show off the communal facilities, on the ground floor and in the basements: there's a private dining room seating 50, a cinema room



Some of the flats have double-height ceilings



Francesco Guidicini



The service charge on the flat is about £126,000 a year

from every window: to get it right, they built a replica of one of the towers in wood up to first-floor level in a field in Essex. To perfect the interiors, an entire four-bedroom flat was erected inside a warehouse in Hendon, north London.

We move to the master bedroom suite, measuring an over-the-top 2,000 sq ft, with a sitting area and his'n'hers dressing rooms and bathrooms. "This is bigger than some people's houses," says Candy (though not his, one imagines). A statue showing a high jumper in mid-Fosbury flop may be intended to inspire bedroom gymnastics. If that doesn't work, there's a full-frontal view of Harvey Nicks across the road.

If I had £60m, would I spend it on this flat? Certainly not. There are plenty of places in London with more charm and character than these rather ugly alien impositions, which look as if they have been uprooted from Dubai or Shanghai and plonked down amid Knightsbridge's Victoriana. (Although they're still an improvement on Bowater House, the monstrous 1950s block that was there before.) And there would be cash left over to buy somewhere in Cap Ferrat, Gstaad and the Caribbean.

One Hyde Park, however, was not designed with me — or, I suspect, you, dear reader — in mind. Although Candy insists that 10% of the properties sold so far have gone to Britons, most of them entrepreneurs, the majority of buyers will be Arabs, Russians and other members of the international super-rich, for whom a flat here, however pricy, will be a fourth or fifth home, used for those few weeks a year when they and their entourage set up in London. Among those said to have bought a flat there is Vladislav Doronin, the Russian property tycoon dating Naomi Campbell.

So what do the small band of agents who specialise in selling in such palaces think? "It is certainly the best block of flats in England — beautifully run and managed," says Gary Hershman, head of Beauchamp Estates, responsible for some of the biggest sales in the capital. "You have to look at the details — the furniture, the chandeliers. It's second to none. You must have a lot of courage to build such a development."

Charles McDowell, a top-end London buying and selling agent, agrees. "The finish is very good — you've got the finest handmade everything in it," he says. He has shown three potential purchasers around, but "they didn't buy because the views into Hyde Park were not what they wanted. They also had difficulty getting around the price. You could have a much bigger flat on Eaton Square, where it's £4,000 a sq ft, compared with £6,500 in One Hyde Park".

Off the record, agents are less complimentary. "I think it's a hideous development," says another top-end agent who has visited several times and would rather not give his name. "It boasts secrecy, discretion and privacy, yet they throw a launch party for 500 people, with photographers and camera crews. I would get angry if I had spent £6,000 a sq ft and saw this kind of thing happen."

The agent's request for anonymity is understandable: viewings are strictly controlled and, before being allowed in, potential buyers must give their names and other details, which are then entered in the development's database.

"It's easier to get in to see the Pope," the agent says. I suppose I should be grateful Candy granted me — if not Gill — an audience.

How One Hyde Park adds up

■ There are 86 flats within four diamond-shaped pavilions, including four penthouses that are up to 30,000 sq ft in size.

■ Owners have access to a 21-metre ozone swimming pool, a squash court, a golf simulator and a virtual games room. Other communal facilities include a library, a cinema, a spa, steam rooms, wine cellars, two gyms and a private dining room seating 50.

■ The veteran American artist James Turrell was commissioned to design a colourful LED lighting display for the perimeter of the glass pavilions.

■ More than 15 types of stone have been sourced from Italy, Turkey, France, Belgium, Brazil, China and Egypt for the decoration.

■ The building is heated and cooled using geothermal boreholes 140 metres deep.

■ A team of 60 staff, trained by the Mandarin Oriental, will be on site 24 hours a day, providing round-the-clock room service from the hotel kitchen, as well as housekeeping, valet and concierge services. An underground tunnel connects the development to the hotel and there is a car lift (below).

■ The building will house a Rolex boutique, a McLaren car showroom and a branch of the Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank.



— "You can invite people here and nobody will know they're here" — and a library (where the reading material is confined to the aforementioned coffee-table books), as well as a 21-metre ozone pool, a selection of spa and massage rooms, and two gyms: one for people who like to exercise in public; the other for those shy about flashing thighs and pecs.

All these facilities don't come cheap, you won't be surprised to hear: the service charge on the flat we're about to visit will be an eye-watering £126,000 a year.

After a flash of the security pass (leave your flat without it and you could end up trapped in some dark corner of the basement), we are finally on our way to the eighth floor of Pavilion C. (The four blocks are called pavilions, rather than towers.) Through the glass of the lift, I catch a sight of potential buyers: an impossibly tall and glamorous young woman with a couple of children and a somewhat less attractive husband.

So what does £60m buy you? The largest expanse of lateral space in London — more than 9,000 sq ft of it. Difficult to visualise? It's more than 160ft end to end — almost half the length of a football pitch. But who, however rich, could want — let alone need — quite so many of these vast, soulless rooms, all opening off each other? At one point, I became detached from our little tour group and

suffer a moment of panic; then I pad off in a random direction in the hotel slippers we've had to put on at the front door, and eventually find them again.

The floorplan makes the flat look like a giant bow tie, or perhaps a cruise ship moored eight floors up. And there is something of the floating gin palace about it: the decor is huge slabs of marble and wood ("All the internal doors are solid timber; there's no MDF," says Candy — though at £60m, you wouldn't expect it), and the attention to detail is extraordinary: the marble has been cut so that the grain all runs in the same line.

There are other clever touches: copper alloy fins projecting from the sides of the building ensure that, however far out you stretch, you can't see next door's balconies. A tradesman's entrance prevents the hired help from mingling with dinner guests — and provides a discreet exit.

The fittings are typical of expensive hotels: giant beds covered in pillows of different sizes and consistencies, more coffee-table books, of course, and, just to add that homely touch, framed photographs. Unlike most people's family snaps, however, everyone in these pictures is drop-dead model gorgeous.

The blocks are set at an angle to give views of Hyde Park (partially spoilt at some levels by the trees) or the street

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ST Nick Candy gives us an exclusive video tour: thesundaytimes.co.uk/homevideo