



“ THE LOST ARC “

THE SUNDAY TIMES - SEPTEMBER 2016

The lost arc

Designed by John Nash, flattened during the Blitz and rebuilt as dingy offices, Park Crescent now offers last-word-in-luxe flats for wealthy downsizers. **Caroline Scott** takes a tour

There are several royal crescents in Britain – the most famous is the sweeping Georgian curve in Bath, built between 1767 and 1774. There's one in Brighton and another in Holland Park, but none of them, strictly speaking, was commissioned by an actual royal. Park Crescent, on the other hand, an arc of grand, neoclassical townhouses overlooking Regent's Park, was built on a bona fide, money-no-object regal whim, a monument to extravagance, opulence and vanity.

John Nash, the architect responsible for Buckingham Palace, Clarence House and half of Regency London, conceived it as a playground for his patron – the Prince Regent, George, Prince of Wales. The brief was to create a new summer palace, including luxurious, sumptuous homes for the prince, his family and friends, and it went wildly over budget.

In 1820, the Prince Regent became George IV and moved into Buckingham Palace, so plans for Regent's Palace were shelved. But the crescent, with its lavish cream stucco frontage and huge sash windows, was already completed, and over the years became home to aristocrats, ambassadors and business tycoons.

Today, nothing of Nash's original remains – it was flattened during the Blitz. The facade was laboriously rebuilt in the 1960s, and the interiors were carved up into flats and dreary offices. In 2013, Chris Lanitis and Charles Gourgey, directors of the upmarket property developer Amazon, bought the eastern terrace for a reported £47m cash – without planning permission. They have since restored it to a semblance of its former glory, creating 20 immaculately conceived luxury homes priced at £3.95m-£16m.

"Where there's risk, there's reward," Lanitis says with a glint in his eye. But there have been no royal takers so far, and not so much as an oligarch or a Middle Eastern prince. He has his gimlet gaze fixed firmly on what he calls the north London downsizers' market. "There are a

lot of empty-nesters in St John's Wood, Hampstead, Highgate and beyond, who are rattling round enormous family houses worth £10m-£15m," he says, unbelievably making the middle range here – about £7m – sound like affordable housing for the rich.

After a while, one uberhix flat looks pretty much like the next: big slabs of bookmatched marble, an overemployment of dark veneers and greige paint, and an almost cynical use of *verre églomisé*. They never strike me as places you'd actually like to live. But Lanitis has achieved something different. He has furnished each apartment as a ready-to-move-into show home, using four designers – 1508 London, Oliver Burns, Taylor Howes and Design Haus Liberty. And with those vast sash windows, they all feel fresh and full of light.

Apart from some terrible fake bay trees and box balls, and a hideous non-living wall costing £180,000 (the upkeep of real plants being too laborious an exercise), Lanitis hasn't stinted on the finishing, either. The bespoke furniture and fittings in each flat are worth "in the region of half a million".

"Forty grand's worth of chandelier here," he says, as hundreds of shards of crystal are tickled by a plume of cold air from an air-conditioning unit hidden in the ceiling coffers of the basement flat. When Park Crescent officially launches next month, there will be "museum-quality" art on the walls via a collaboration with the Frieze art fair. "A lot of wealthy people own art that they store because they can't hang it in their apartments," Lanitis says – not a problem here, with ceiling heights up to 12ft 6in.

Eight of the flats have already been sold and two are under offer. No 12 has been bought by an art dealer, who has sold his house in Hampstead Garden Suburb and come into town, "where all the buzz is".

The area is already a magnet for artists and designers: Tom Ford has a home on York Terrace, Damien Hirst owns one on Hanover Terrace, and the fashion designer Stefano Gabbana has a property on Regent's Park Road. Sacha Baron Cohen has a place on Chester Terrace – a far cry from Ali G's Staines. Yet Park Crescent, considered by many to be the "jewel in London's crown", has unbeatable cachet.

The residents will have access to two private gardens, eight acres in all, modelled on the grounds of – where else? – Buckingham Palace and connected by "the nanny's passage", a foot tunnel that runs under the thundering Marylebone Road. There they'll find a croquet lawn, a children's play area, deckchairs and a barbecue area – you can toddle down with your blanket and wicker hamper, or throw a party here if you like.

The biggest home – 4,100 sq ft of vaulted fabulousness, with an interior by the design house 1508 – seems especially designed for spectacular entertaining. "This table is bespoke, you'll never see another like it," Lanitis gushes, stroking an 8ft slice of Calacatta marble. "The designer went to Italy, picked the stone, shipped it in."



SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL
 Think the pictures are luxe? Take a video tour of Park Crescent, on tablet or at thesundaytimes.co.uk

TIMES+
 Join us on Thursday for an exclusive look at Tom Ford's new runway colour collection. Book at mytimesplus.co.uk



Cream of the crop Park Crescent, in central London, was built for the Prince Regent in the early 19th century



OPEN HOUSE

For architectural enthusiasts, London Open House is like Christmas come early. The annual event, held next weekend, allows the great unwashed to have a peek inside the capital's grand piles and cutting-edge creations. The 2016 talking points include the Vex House, in Stoke Newington, a curving, warped layer cake of a residence by Chance de Silva, and the Makers House, in Hackney, Liddicoat and Goldhill's cool asymmetrical design in dark Danish brick.

Open House also opens doors to some of the capital's secret history. This year's curiosity is Pennington Street Warehouse, in Wapping, open to the public for the first time in 200 years (londondock.co.uk). Once a rum warehouse, it is now part of St George's London Dock development, a 15-acre site formerly occupied by News International — "Fortress Wapping" — but soon to be the site of 1,800 homes, a public square and a waterfront promenade. The first block, Clipper Wharf, will be ready to move into this autumn.

The grade II listed warehouse and its vaults will house a mix of restaurants, bars, galleries, shops and offices, and will add historical gravitas to the scheme's seven new blocks.

openhouselondon.org.uk

As well as exclusive, handmade furniture, the flat has big joinery units with TVs popping out, banks of silk velvet sofas, even a shiny grand piano thrown in. This is such a vast lateral apartment that the handmade rug beneath our feet curves, following the gentle arc of the crescent. In one of the bedrooms, the carpet replicates the veins in the marble on the bathroom wall.

"I'm all about detail," Lanitis says. "I chose designers who mainly work with private clients — they're in tune with what people want."

There are four bedrooms in this flat, as well as his- and-hers dressing rooms. In the master bedroom, a four-poster bed appears to be floating. The price? "Ballpark £16m." And that's before he finds out whether he's got planning permission to create a 1,000 sq ft roof terrace, complete with glass lift shaft, which he imagines will add at least £2m to the asking price.

"Imagine the dinner parties you could hold here," he says. He isn't the sort of man to risk leaving anything to the imagination: not only has he commissioned a scale model of the crescent, he's made a movie, hiring actors to show potential buyers what the lifestyle of the perfect family, living in the perfect home, might be like.

As the husband and wife draw up outside Park Crescent in their sports car after a morning's grocery shopping, the concierge arrives and hauls the Harrods and Fortnum & Mason carrier bags out of the boot. The children are seen having a picnic in the private garden, rather than arguing over who snaffled the last Kit-Kat, followed by a game of doubles on the tennis court with mum and dad. Who does this? Not us, and not the super-rich either, I bet, but that's not the point.

Lanitis isn't just selling flats, he's selling dreams. And oddly, for all their bling and endless demand for bookmatched marble and silk velvet, it's ordinary family life that the wealthy aspire to — just without the drudgery and mess.

The official launch is on October 6, to coincide with Frieze; there will be a glass marquee in the garden, with a bar and a DJ, and the fully dressed residences will be showcased with gallery-level art hanging on the walls, as selected by Victoria Golembiovskaya, chief executive of the art dealers House of the Nobleman. Expect to see works by Warhol, Dali, Modigliani, Hockney and Bridget Riley.

"Chagall, Damien Hirst, Picasso. And what's the other one called? Forgive me, art isn't my thing," Lanitis says vaguely. But he knows his market. Would-be buyers can snap up the flat, the furniture and the paintings on the wall. It'll be the most glam, most luxurious launch in the capital this year, but if you're a downsizer from Hampstead, there'll be nothing left.

Prices at Park Crescent start at £3.95m. The remaining units will be showcased on October 6. For further information, contact Knight Frank (020 7861 5321, knightfrank.co.uk) or Aston Chase (020 7724 4724, astonchase.com), or visit theparkcrescent.com

There will be gallery-level art, via a collaboration with the Frieze art fair. Expect works by Warhol, Modigliani, Dali, Hockney and Bridget Riley



Eight of the 20 flats, priced at between £3.95m and £16m, have already been sold. The fixtures and fittings in each one cost about £500,000

TAYLOR HOWES

LONDON

TAYLOR HOWES

LONDON

TAYLOR HOWES

LONDON

TAYLOR HOWES

LONDON

49-51 CHEVAL PLACE, KNIGHTSBRIDGE, LONDON, SW7 1EW
+44 (0)207 349 9017 | www.taylorhowes.co.uk