

Urban renewal

Philippe Starck? So 2001. This designer showpiece has been given a gritty makeover

BEYOND THE BROCHURE

KAREN ROBINSON



The door to the penthouse in a fashionable northwest London building swings open, you step inside, and... those of a claustrophobic disposition had better look away now. Because you're in a box. Really. A wooden box, about the dimensions of a small shed. No windows, no door handles — just a solitary brown light switch to relieve the featureless walls of rough oak planks. Then the door closes behind you and unbidden memories of, shall we say, the biggest news story to come out of Austria in recent years come rushing in. So you can imagine the relief when a bit of pushing and leaning reveals that some of the planks are in fact doors, and that they lead to the rest of the newly done-out 1,952 sq ft duplex.

Before we proceed, however, a bit of background. We're in the Yoo Building, a former telephone exchange. It was converted into flats in 2001 and launched with much fanfare by the first (and still the only) British residential developer to be anointed by the hand of Philippe Starck, the unquestioned high priest of turn-of-the-century design. Starck's style has been everywhere, from puzzling (sorry, "iconic") kitchen appliances to Miami hotels.

The building's lobby is still pure Starck, with rather camp lamp shades and a single exaggeratedly oversized Louis-whatever chair that combines elaborate silvered carved wood and plump purple velvet upholstery. Though barely more than 10 years old, it's a look that feels as dated as 1980s tart's-boudoir swagged and tailed curtains.

So the building had already broken new ground for its location in St John's Wood, a discreetly well-off suburb within handy distance of the West End, where the courtly manners and cultured conservatism of old Mitteleuropa linger in its gracious mansion blocks. But what's going on in Yoo's two-bedroom, two-bathroom penthouse takes the spirit of *épater le bourgeois* to a whole new level. The Starck interiors — gleaming white walls, kitchen and bathrooms, pale wood floors, minimalism pure and simple — have been expunged in favour of a look that brings a distinct bit of rough to the well-mannered neighbourhood.

The "distressed cement" walls of the kitchen/living area on the upper floor have undergone a special treatment, with plastic stuck on, then pulled off again to create the desired effect —

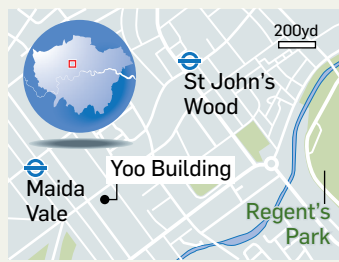


The penthouse in this former telephone exchange has been stripped of its Starck-designed decor



Penthouse 1, Yoo Building, London NW8, £2.95m

What is it? A two-bed penthouse on the fifth and sixth floors of a building previously developed by Philippe Starck in genteel St John's Wood, northwest London
Who is selling? Aston Chase; 020 7724 4724, astonchase.com



which, according to Natasha Lane, asset manager of the developer, Manor Property, was to look "like an underground car park with rendered pillars".

To further see off any possible hint of cosiness, the oak flooring is stained grey and floor-to-ceiling curtains of dark metal bead strips pull out to divide kitchen from living space. Traditional storage facilities in the kitchen have been ditched in favour of four large handmade wooden bins.

There's a brick-slip wall in the master bedroom. Everything feels a bit oversized, and there are not only two basins in the master suite (set into a plank of elm with the bark still on it), but two showers, side by side, in industrial-looking steel tubes rising up from the grey-veined white Calacatta marble. The vibe is raw, rough and more than a bit butch. And it's not cheap.

If the flat sells for its asking price of £2.95m, it will set a record for the building of more than £1,500 a sq ft. And Emmanuel Langley, founder of Manor, is confident that his unique touch with interiors will see that it does. Manny, as he's known, spoke to me from his skiing holiday to explain his refreshingly original approach to making over property for a profit.

He's already de-Starcked and sold several flats in the Yoo Building, each one to a unique design and each time, he says, "pushing the boundaries on price". With this penthouse, he has "tried to bring a bit of east London to the opulence of St John's Wood".

Manny, who started out as an estate agent, admits he has "no formal training", but relies on "a team around me who create my dreams". And, wood-lined dungeon-effect entrance halls and walls that re-create the indefinable *je ne sais quoi* of a car park notwithstanding, there is a serious idea at work here. Manny is robustly dismissive of the Starck legacy in Yoo, whereas, he says: "In 10 years' time the penthouse will read as it reads today, because a lot of what I've used is from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. It's a mix. I'm not trying to define a period as a design."

While he concedes that his style "is not for everybody", he reckons there is "young money" around that "appreciates design". That "creative wealth" is his target market. Conventional developers, he says, lose touch, and end up employing teams to create what they see in magazines. Manny does it differently: "I dress in Japanese labels and try to be quite directional."

I'm not entirely sure what that means, but I'll give you an example. In a recent project, a house in nearby Primrose Hill, he employed a theatrical set designer who spent four days on one bathroom wall to create the effect of 1930s wallpaper that had been only partially stripped off.

Titter ye not, though. He sold the house to a rock guitarist, who paid a 15% premium over the neighbourhood's already stratospheric prices.

➔ If you would like Karen to cast her critical eye over a property you are selling, email btb@sunday-times.co.uk

ASK THE EXPERTS

The solicitor

I am the owner-occupier of a ground-floor flat. The flat above is rented out, and since 2004 there have been various leaks into my home. Last April my kitchen was ruined by a water leak from the boiler above, and last month I had a large damp stain in my bathroom where the shower seal above had rotted. I could claim on the buildings insurance policy, but have to pay the £250 excess every time. How can I make the landlord act more responsibly?

H Gray, by email

Leaks are a common feature of flat ownership. The party responsible will usually be the person who can be proved to have caused the damage, although that is not always a straightforward matter. A claim can often be made against the owner of the flat under the terms of the lease, even if they didn't directly cause the damage. Specific advice would need to be taken about these terms.

Taking action against the current occupiers of the flat is unlikely to help in the long term because tenants come and go, but nor is the flat owner likely to have much control over tenants. You can ask the owner to reimburse the excess and, if they will not, try to retrieve the money through moneyclaim.gov.uk, which is designed to process small claims.

➔ Ed Cracknell is a solicitor at Russell-Cooke LLP; russell-cooke.co.uk

The planner

We have a large back garden and would like to extend our end-of-terrace house by about six metres under the proposed new permitted development rules. All news regarding them seems to have dried up, though. Should we apply for planning permission in the usual way?

I O'Reilly, by email

The government's proposal to increase the limits for rear extensions to terraced and semi-detached houses from three to six metres was the subject of a formal consultation at the end of last year, and the government looks set to publish its formal proposals in April. I suggest you wait to see how they might affect your plans before submitting an application for planning permission. You might find that revising your plans to fall within any new permitted development rules will make them more certain.

➔ Michael Haslam is a director of Michael Haslam Associates; hmhaslam@btinternet.com

Do you need help from one of our experts? Email your questions to propertyexperts@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice is given without responsibility