

Travel

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## Aiming high: what the creator of Chiltern Firehouse did next

Harry Handelsman hopes to create a 'vertical community' in a £300m east London tower



Edwin Heathcote 5 HOURS AGO

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The idea of living in a hotel is somehow simultaneously titillating and nauseating. I don't mean living for a couple of weeks, but proper, open-ended living — Oscar Wilde ("dying beyond my means" at the Hotel d'Alsace in Paris), Coco Chanel (The Ritz, Paris), Bob Dylan (The Washington Square Hotel), Marilyn Monroe and Howard Hughes (both at The Beverly Hills Hotel), Peter Sellers (The Dorchester), and the endless heap of junkies, bohos, beats and celebrity bums who got stuck at New York's Chelsea Hotel. There's something childish about it, never having to grow up and buy a pint of milk or clean your room. But also something seedily glamorous, a reluctance to be bound by the bourgeois rules of domesticity.

Those hotels were all either genteel holdouts from the golden age of the grand hotel or shabby fleapits already inscribed in the bohemian self-mythology of the city. The question is, can you make such a place from scratch?

The place to find out will be The Stratford in east London — a 42-storey, £300m tower which is the latest and most ambitious project from Harry Handelsman, the developer behind the resuscitation of the neo-gothic monster, the St Pancras Hotel, and the paparazzi perennial Chiltern Firehouse. A blend of hotel rooms and apartments available for both short- and longer-term rent, it is an experiment in creating a "vertical community".

“I became rather depressed with all these residential high-rises around the city,” he says. “They’re sold to overseas investors and then that’s it, no one cares. They’re soulless. We wanted to create community here, where people can just wander in from the street and have a meal or a drink in the bar, where someone coming in from New York can meet a guy from around the corner and someone who lives here.”



One of The Stratford's lofts, available to rent long or short term © Luke Hayes

We are talking on a grey Sunday morning, sitting in the huge lobby of the new hotel, which is wedged between Stratford International station, the vast Westfield shopping mall and the former site of the London Olympics. The hotel opened on July 5 — it had originally been planned to launch in time for the games in 2012 but physics and economics got in the way. If the games might have given it a reason to be where it is, you have to wonder why its location makes sense now.

“If you only put beautiful things next to beautiful things it becomes a bit dull,” Handelsman replies with a broad grin. “Sometimes you need something a bit unexpected. You’re not looking at a pretty garden here, you’re looking at people moving through the city and feeling you’re part of that.” As he says that, a young fellow walks by outside the glass behind him, hunched up against the drizzle in his hoodie. He is the only person who walks by during the next 20 minutes or so.





Handelsman's assertion that his new tower is something beautiful also deserves a little interrogation. The huge tower stirred controversy when it was noticed that it looms up behind the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in the sacred view from King Henry's Mound in Richmond Park. To understand the import of this (where random ugly towers pop up like whack-a-moles every few minutes in a city without a hammer), you need to understand the

city's weird planning mechanism. Essentially, you can build a tower almost anywhere so long as it doesn't interfere with a few key views — the famous protected viewing corridors — mostly of St Paul's. This new tower doesn't get in the way of the view of the cathedral, but it does rear up behind it, damaging its integrity. And even though the city only has this one key rule, the authorities somehow missed it. And there it is. Too late now.

It was designed by SOM, the Chicago-born firm responsible for defining the slick steel and glass mid-century modern look of the corporate US and, more recently, the world's tallest tower — Dubai's Burj Khalifa — and New York's tallest tower, One World Trade Center. And it is an intriguing building. Clunky at first sight, it soon reveals itself as far more sophisticated and elegant from closer up.



Harry Handelsman, chief executive of Manhattan Loft Corporation, in front of The Stratford, his new tower in east London © Luke Hayes



Rather than being flat, the walls are serrated, with large sections of slightly angled glass meeting short strips of terracotta. It means the façade changes colour and form from different angles and, inside, also means the curtains having to undulate around the jagged windows. But most distinctive of all are the three-storey slices cut out of the tower's corners at two levels. They create "sky gardens" with incredible views over the city, taking in the clusters of towers at Canary Wharf and the City and everything else beyond (a third sky garden sits on the roof).

The structural engineering behind removing the corners requires some remarkable moves including huge trusses set into some of the apartments. Usually these kinds of spaces would be given over to plant rooms or services, but here the steel is celebrated, the riveted trusses making dramatic diagonal frames for the city views. They are the best apartments. The studios are good too though, a deliberate response to London's notoriously dodgy rental sector, and the doubl-storey apartments a bit of a revelation, leading you down a stair to reveal panoramic corner views.

The cut-outs are intended as the towers' social spaces, places where residents, long and short term, will mingle and lounge, enjoying fire pits, Japanese gardens and stiff breezes. But the integration doesn't go all the way. Hotel guests find their elevators will only take them to the lowest of the three gardens, which seems a shame. Perhaps it's to avoid the problems at hip hotels such as New York's Standard where the bars have become so cool that guests find it impossible to get even a seat at the bar.



One of the three sky terraces at The Stratford, offering panoramic views of the city © Luke Hayes

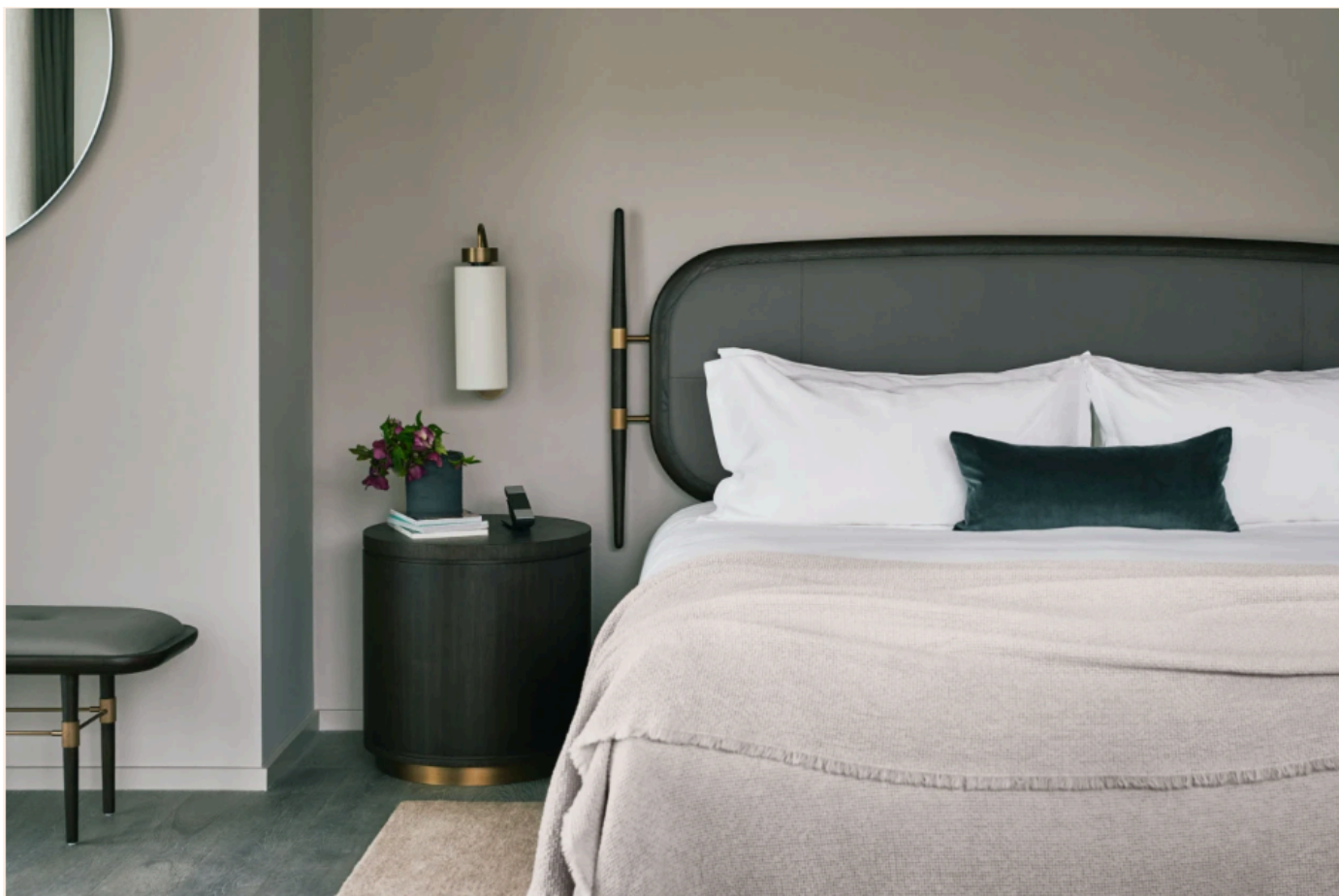


There are 145 hotel rooms on floors one to six, and 248 apartments, all available for rental either long or short term — the minimum being a week. This creates an in-between zone, a new model which challenges Airbnb but that might then attract short-term residents to stay a little longer.

You might think that Brexit and the collapse of the top-end London property market have stymied sales and forced Handelsman into creating a new model but, according to him, this was always the intention. “We wanted to create a hub where people can congregate and feel a sense of privilege,” Handelsman tells me. “To create an architecture that is generous to the cityscape . . . and maybe that is more important than it being commercial.”

Of course it’s a pitch, but Handelsman does have a record in spotting what had been seen as unpromising places — bringing Manhattan-style lofts to Clerkenwell in 1992, then developing a loft building beside the power station that would become Tate Modern, an area that was at the time, as he describes it, “a desert”.

So can he make this bit of Stratford a place? It’s true that the neighbourhood is still emerging but there are signs of life. The former Olympic Village is now a healthy mix of housing with maturing trees and washing on the balconies. Hackney Wick, 10 minutes or so walk away, is a former industrial area now home to artist studios, small galleries and cafés, with a canal on which narrowboats lazily push through carpets of algae. The Olympic Park is heaving with families and, as Handelsman says, “you have the best sporting infrastructure anywhere.” Added to this, the “East Bank” development now under construction will bring outposts of the V&A, Sadler’s Wells, the London College of Fashion and University College within a stone’s throw of the sky gardens.

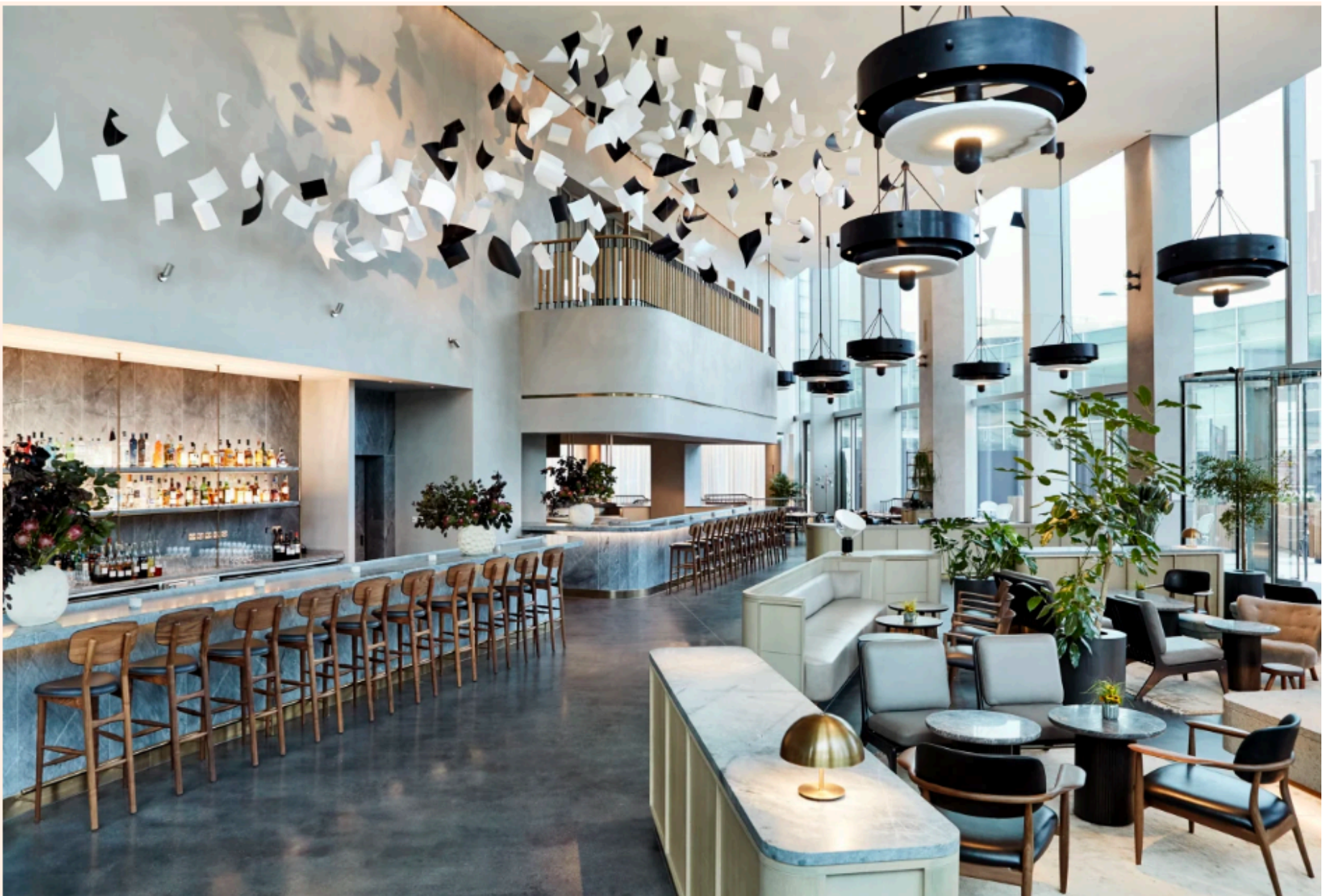


One of the loft bedrooms, which are designed by Studio KO © Rich Stapleton



So what about the hotel itself? The lobby is a good place to start, lively and chic in its Scandi-style modernity. Designed by Space Copenhagen (who did Noma's old restaurant and the new interiors of Arne Jacobsen's Radisson Collection Royal Hotel), the lobby bar and brasserie flow into each other easily and make an open, accessible space. The rooms, designed by Studio KO, are refined and elegant. The bigger ones with corner windows are stunners, their bathrooms alone the size of an average London studio. There is always though, the question of view. My room looked out on to the station roof, the service entrances to the Westfield mall (a spectacle in its own small way) and the concrete railway cutting. There are 15 rooms that look out on to curious mirror-glazed light-wells with, at their centres, a glass globe on a pole with a spinning vortex inside. Quite cool, but a little unsettling.

The main restaurant, Allegra, wasn't open when I stayed but the space is impressive, including an outdoor grill and terrace and an elegant pastry counter. Chef Patrick Powell, formerly of the Chiltern Firehouse, will undoubtedly do well. In the meantime the food in the brasserie is inexpensive and pretty good. There is none of the harsh echo of many overlarge corporate spaces and the whole thing is crowned by a Paul Cockledge installation of black and white curls which evokes a gust of wind picking up a pile of littered paper — rather lovely.



The open, accessible space of the brasserie, which flows into the lobby



Is all this enough to justify claims of a new kind of hospitality? Isn't every hotel a place where people mix and the aparthotel a place where they can linger a little longer? Stratford still feels a little transient so perhaps it is a good place to experiment. I can see the attraction. But there's not much entirely new here. In the 1920s both the hyper-capitalist builders of the New York skyscrapers and the Soviet Communist Constructivists were playing with multifunctional buildings — towers with everything from Turkish baths and newspaper presses to hotels and apartments, and housing blocks with nurseries, communal kitchens and cinemas.

They virtually all, eventually, failed and are now being converted to upmarket apartments with concierges. The success of The Stratford depends on a context that is still forming. But it is an intriguing experiment in mixing a classy cocktail of community, hidden gardens and transience. In a way, it sounds very London.

## Details

Edwin Heathcote was a guest of [The Stratford](#). Double rooms start at £199 per night; one-bedroom lofts from £1,350 for a week and £4,400 for a month