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Edifice COMPLEX

Harry Handelsman brought loft living to London; now he wants to create a community in the capital's most expensive skyscraper. *Frankie McCoy* gets the high-rise lowdown

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON BAILEY

‘Imagine, the government probably thought, if Harry Handelsman is brave enough to come here and build the most expensive building in the UK, maybe we’ll invest £1.1 billion in Stratford,’ grins Harry Handelsman. That sum is going to fund the recently announced East Bank, a huge cultural powerhouse in E20 housing outposts of the V&A and Sadler’s Wells. That ‘most expensive building’, meanwhile, is Manhattan Loft Gardens: the monolithic high-rise that towers above it all. It is the most ambitious project that Handelsman, the developer behind Chiltern Firehouse and the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel, has put his money to yet.

Gliding up from a giant building site between Westfield shopping centre and Stratford International train station, Manhattan Loft Gardens is a 42-storey monolith, a double-cantilevered tower with 248 furnished residential apartments and a 146-room hotel over the first six floors. Architects SOM designed it, the high-rise pros behind New York’s One World Trade Center and Dubai’s Burj Khalifa, the world’s tallest skyscraper. Residents will be able to avail themselves of two ‘destination’ restaurants, including Allegra, the 180-cover new project on the seventh floor from the Firehouse’s much-lauded Patrick Powell; a high-end gym and private members club; three sky gardens, and a 24-hour concierge.

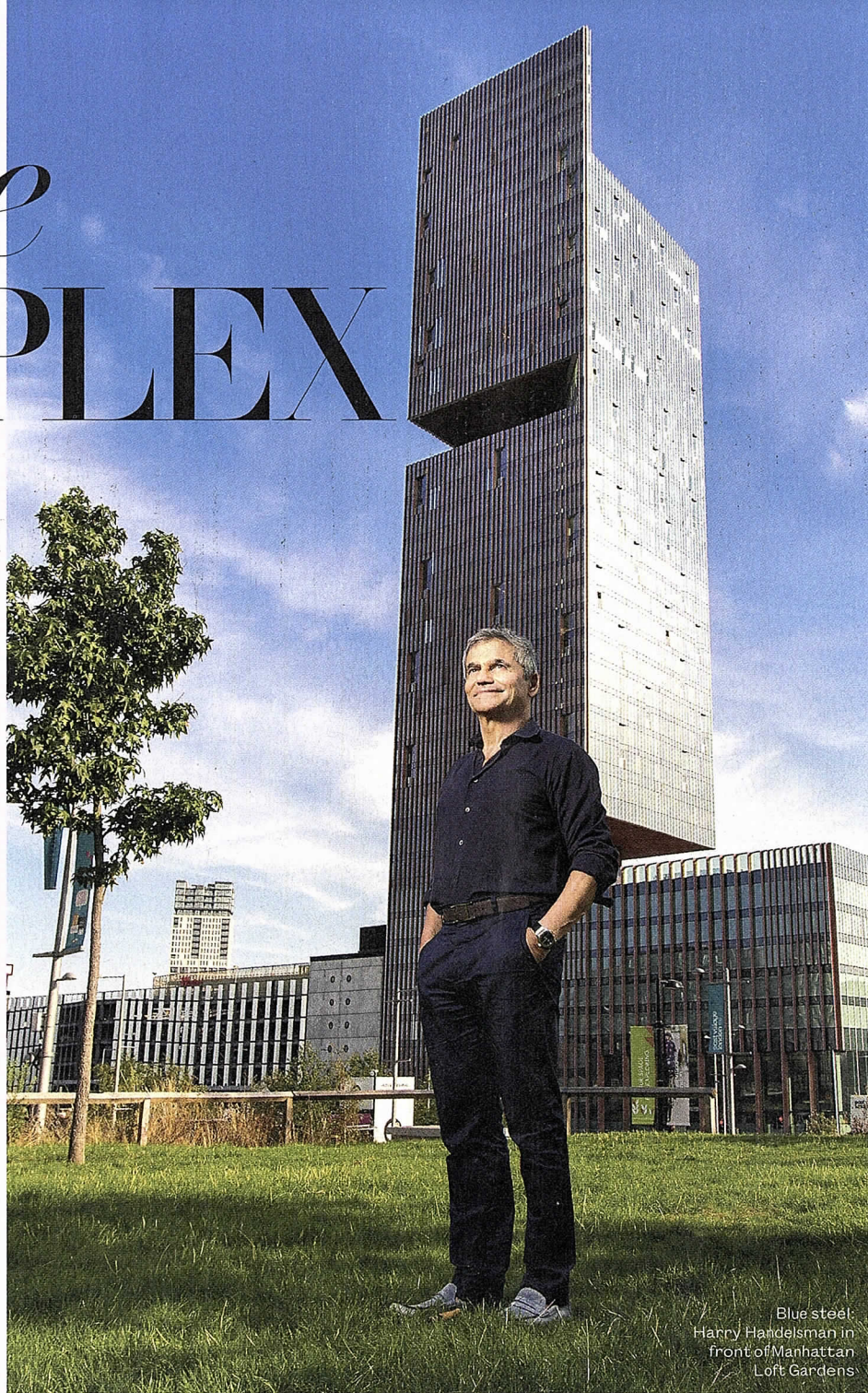
So far, so generic luxury apartment block. But Handelsman’s concept shoots way above mere extravagance. At MLG he wants to create a ‘vertical community’. He is ‘pissed off’

at the way apartments in luxury blocks are ‘all sold overseas because it is a way of making money. So how do I create a vertical community?’ The answer is, design a building specifically to make people socialise.

Take the triple-height lobby, designed by Space Copenhagen, which will also be a social hub complete with 10-metre bar and lounge area. ‘I want people to come in here with a smile on their face, to stop for a drink with a friend.’ Then there’s those sky gardens, cut into the building on the 7th, 25th and 36th floors, which replace balconies at MLG and are ‘a way of starting communication which isn’t aggressive.’ The overall effect of all this hoped-for communality is less luxe

loft, more live-in Google HQ. Or, for the more paranoid, JG Ballard’s *High-Rise*.

Handelsman calls his new building ‘completely crazy’. ‘Because I’m young I’m still ambitious,’ he wheezes wryly (he won’t tell me his age, although the internet seems to concur that the diminutive German is 69). Handelsman, who inherited his Polish financier father’s business on the latter’s death in 1982, spent 25 years as ‘one of those horrible guys, an investor’ in property in burgeoning areas of London: ‘converted churches, interesting things’. In 1992 he set up the Manhattan Loft Corporation and introduced London to the idea of New York loft living. Really, he says, he was capitalising on the



Blue steel:
Harry Handelsman in
front of Manhattan
Loft Gardens



Handsman inside one of the Manhattan Loft Gardens apartments

"I wanted to create a vertical community, so I designed a building specifically to make people socialise"

Fashion and University College London in the works. But when it comes to enforced communality, surely the average Londoner would hate being made to talk to strangers? Handsman disagrees. 'What the English have is the incredible phenomenon of clubs, whether that's Soho House or the Groucho. Everyone wants to be a member of a club because they want to be with like-minded people. So why wouldn't you want to live with like-minded people?'

So what kind of person would be a member of the MLG club? 'Anybody who wants something special,' he says. 'We don't want snobs. We want to be friendly.' Tenants are not as rich as you'd think, either. Loft rents start at £1,512 per month — hardly outrageous for London. 'The apartments are not cheap, you can buy far cheaper in Stratford, but in overall terms they're not expensive.'

Even so, Handsman is aware of the clashes regeneration can spark and insists he wants the local community to feel part of MLG. It's hoped that the ground floor Stratford Brasserie, headed up by Ben Harrington, formerly of Soho House Group, will become a hub for locals. 'The idea is to give them a sense of belonging.'

Besides, most of the flats aren't for sale anyway. 200 of the 248 flats will be rented out, in part to prevent 'someone from Asia coming here and choosing something like they're at a check-out counter'. More interestingly, the flats can be rented for extremely short periods, starting from a week — something which has roots in the impossibly glamorous idea of living in a hotel, à la Coco Chanel at the Ritz in Paris. As Handsman puts it, 'this is the next level of Airbnb'. Each flat has access to all the hotel's amenities, including room service, private butler service and cleaning. The target audience is the minimalist millennial generation, who value experience over possessions, whose jobs see them moving countries frequently — or who simply get bored with living in one rubbish rental flat after another. There is 'energy' in the temporary, as Handsman puts it, and it goes hand in hand with the idea of communal living. 'When I lived in a dormitory at university I was very happy because we were always hanging out in other people's rooms,' he says. 'Why should that stop when it comes to slightly more luxurious living?'

success of films set in lofts, like 1990's *Ghost* (a loft, in case you're wondering, refers to the conversion of old warehouses into high-ceilinged, über-chic flats).

Handsman started by making down-trodden Clerkenwell des-res, transforming a former industrial building into 23 highly covetable lofts — the first London had seen. Then he brought up Bankside which, pre-Tate Modern, was 'a no-go area', and where he completed building on Bankside Lofts in 1998, creating a buzz around the area which is still reverberating today. Countless lofts across town followed, as did celebrity flytrap Chiltern Firehouse in 2014, the Marylebone restaurant and hotel which is still drawing A-listers to its flame four years later.

Then there was the 10-year, £200 million restoration of the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel, into which Handsman

says he ploughed more than £10 million of his own money. Of the original source of his wealth, Handsman says only that his father was 'a trader dealing primarily in goods imported from the Far East'. But surrounded by the cacophony of drilling, Handsman explains that he is the sole investor in Manhattan Loft Gardens, a building which, if it is the UK's most expensive, must be costing more than the £1.15 billion Shard. This money, he says, comes from a 'family trust'. He doesn't elaborate.

Personal funding means that he can be as 'crazy' as he likes when it comes to building his 'vertical community' from scratch. The area itself represents less of a maverick move: E20 is regenerating at high speed post-Olympics, with V&A East scheduled to open in 2021, a second Sadler's Wells theatre and new campuses for the London College of