

## Property's people pleaser

CAROLINE TAKLA'S COMPANY THE COLLECTION LLP DEVELOPED OUT OF HER DESIRE TO HELP FRIENDS GET EXACTLY THE PROPERTY THEY WANTED. WE CHAT TO THE WOMAN WHO MAKES IT HER BUSINESS TO MEET HER INTERNATIONAL CLIENTS' EVERY DEMAND. BY KATE WHITE

**C**aroline Takla set up her Mayfair-based buying agency The Collection LLP six years ago and has gone on to acquire luxury properties for clients ranging from Forbes list billionaires to Bollywood stars.

The entrepreneur graduated from University College London in 1999 with a BSc in physiology and pharmacology. After working for patent and trademark attorneys Mathys & Squire LLP, she decided to pursue her passion for property.

She cut her teeth as a trainee negotiator at Townends in Ealing and was promoted to the role of sales manager in just 18 months. After three years with the agent she moved to Hamptons in Paddington.

"I speak Arabic and in Paddington at that time about a third of everybody who walked through the door required somebody who could communicate with them in that language," she explains.

"It was quite a unique selling point for the office and actually a lot of instructions were won on the basis of those skills. It meant that I was consistently one of the top three performers at Hamptons."

She then moved to Hamptons' new Notting Hill office before joining the agent's international arm in Grosvenor Square. In 2006 Hamptons was acquired by global real estate giant Emaar Properties.

The Dubai-based company was developing thousands of properties on the north African strip and Takla was given responsibility for the Morocco portfolio. She regularly travelled to Tangiers and Rabat to sell units to the UK and local markets.

However, the appeal of prime London property proved too strong and she soon moved on to Chestertons' Hyde Park office, before moving to Black Brick to set up its new Middle Eastern desk.

Her time with the Mayfair-based buying agent was the perfect stepping stone to setting up her own agency. "Throughout my career I'd often have friends and family ask me to find them a property," she says.

"I would say to them, 'Of course I'd be delighted to help, but I can only sell you what's on my books.' I thought, I'd love to be a personal property shopper and find people exactly what they want.

"In 2009 the dollar was strong against the pound, and of course all my Middle Eastern clients were dollar-based. I thought it was the right opportunity to set my business up and the rest, as they say, is history."

Takla founded The Collection LLP in October that year and now has five staff, who speak an impressive number of languages including Arabic, Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Urdu and Russian. The company is a boutique property consultancy that offers clients four distinct services: search and acquisition, after-sales service, property development and managed sales.

"If you're looking for a home or an investment you can come to us, tell us exactly what you want to buy and we will find it and buy it for you on the best possible terms, making sure that the deal progresses seamlessly," Takla says.

"More than 90 per cent of our clients don't live in the UK. Therefore they are totally reliant on us to be their eyes and ears on the ground in London."

The Collection LLP also offers an after-sales service that ensures clients who live abroad and might only visit their property two or three times a year can rest assured that their asset is being properly maintained.

It also has a development arm that buys an asset on behalf of a client, negotiates the terms, tenders contracts, appoints a contractor and project manages the development, before appointing the most appropriate agent to help the client exit.

"Often you'll go into a new development and think, 'Wow, this is amazing, but if only the bathroom was here, or the kitchen was this much bigger,'" she says.

"We understand exactly what buyers want because they communicate that to us on a daily basis. We can harness that information and put it into a property."

The fourth service, which is gaining in popularity, is managed sales, where the company acts as a proxy to engage multiple estate agents on a client's behalf on the basis that whoever introduces the buyer will win the commission.

The Collection LLP can assist clients in many ways, says Takla. "In a competitive market, it's crucial to work with a buying agent. In Mayfair in particular, there are fewer than 100 residential property transactions a year. The pool of available property is so limited and if you don't live here, you're not really going to be the first person an agent calls.

"We also have an excellent track record with a lot of the agents in Mayfair. They know us, they know our clients are credible, they offer us properties before they hit the open market. We really care about our clients. All of us have an international background and we're able to respond to clients culturally as well as intellectually, which is incredibly important."

Middle Eastern buyers are extremely active at the "very top end of the market", says Takla. "However, they are less active in the lower price brackets. In 2011, we had the Arab Spring and there was an influx of money from the Middle East, specifically Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. While the situation in Syria hasn't been resolved, Egypt has seen stability reinjected with a new president and there hasn't been that need for people to get money out of their home countries.

"That being said, Middle Eastern clients have been buying properties in London since the 1970s and there is a real love affair with London property."

Middle Easterners like Mayfair for a number of reasons, she says. "In the Middle East, the rulers are very recognisable. In London, they love the fact that they can walk around like normal people. They also love our weather, which sounds ridiculous, but in summer, the Gulf states can experience temperatures of up to 50°C, which is just unbearable.

"They also like the cultural and historic offering. History and a love for the arts is definitely something that has been gleaned from London."

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