

How property developers hope to reflect international clients' tastes



The properties at Holland Park Villas have been designed for an international market

By Zoe Dare Hall

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It's either the ultimate on-a-plate convenience for the time-poor super-rich, or risks falling into the trap of cultural stereotyping – but a new luxury development in north London has designed six show flats each tailored to a specific nationality.

The residences at Buxmead on The Bishop's Avenue - Hampstead's billionaires row - cost from £6.9m-£15m, and the development's show flats include The Rosewood Apartment, aimed at Europeans with its contemporary, eclectic and fun décor that mirrors a quirky London boutique hotel, and the Garden Apartment for Middle Eastern buyers – more formal and classical in style, “which will appeal to exuberant personalities who like to make a statement and entertain in style,” says Marisa Varma, head of design at Buxmead's developers, Harrison Varma.

There is also the Walnut Apartment whose American walnut joinery, book-matched marble and iconic Italian furniture have been designed with Russians in mind. And there is The Regency Apartment, whose traditional British look – “a modern take on a conventional Regency interior style” – is likely to appeal to Asian buyers, thinks Varma.

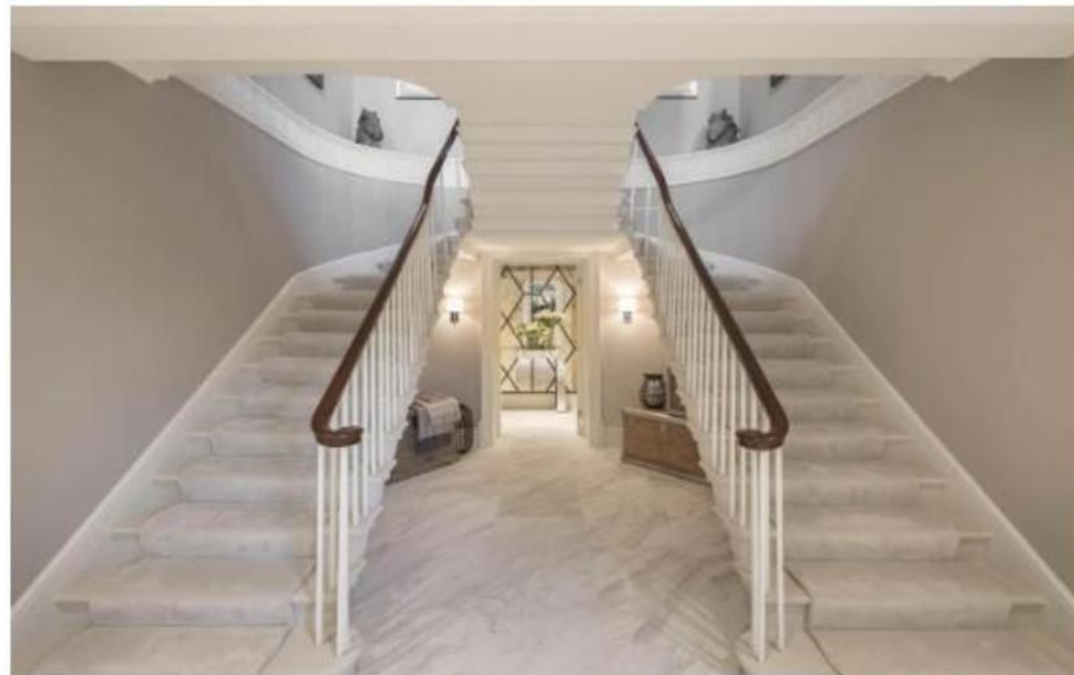


Buxmead in Hampstead, north London, which has homes designed to appeal to different nationalities CREDIT: RICHARD GOODING

“We have residents at Buxmead from around the world, including Kazakhstan, South Africa, Russia, Iran and the UK, and we have found that most of our international buyers are looking for a ready-made solution,” Varma explains. “They are busy, often in-and-out of the country and tend not to have contacts in the UK. Often buying their second, third, fourth or even fifth home, they don’t have a lot of possessions or furniture, so we came with up the idea to create several turn-key show apartments to appeal to different nationalities and their way of living.”

It's nothing unusual to have several show flats in a luxury development styled by different designers. Holland Park Villas in Kensington called on the contrasting styles of Rosa Uniacke and Studio Ashby, while Nova in Victoria recruited Amos and Amos, Morpheus, FLINT and Bowler James Brindley.

But Buxmead's strategy of specifically appealing to different nationalities has never been seen before in any UK development, according to Stephen Lindsay at Savills, who are joint agents for the scheme with Aston Chase and Glentree Estates.



'There is certainly a difference in style when it comes to certain nationalities' says Rebecca Tucker of Suna Interior Design. Their Ancaster Gate project starts from £4.45m CREDIT: KNIGHT FRANK

This approach will feed the imagination of different nationalities, adds Glentree's director, Trevor Abrahmsohn, whose client base is resolutely global and rarely interested in anything with less than six or seven noughts on the end.

Some agents, however, are wary about leaping to such cultural conclusions. You also wonder whether tailoring the design to certain tastes further limits an already small pot of super-rich buyers.

"My experience is that buyers do not want to be put into a box, even less so if the box associates them with an entire country," says Alisa Zotimova, founder of AZ Real Estate, a consultancy based in London and Moscow. "Part of the appeal of London is its forward-thinking, cosmopolitan nature, so creating specific apartments aimed at certain nationalities feels like a step backwards."



Apartments at London's Landmark Place have been specifically designed to attract international buyers

And there's no accounting for people's taste. "Some Russians, Arabs and Indians favour opulent interiors with rich textures and the 'bling' factor. Equally, some of these buyer groups, based on their education and lifestyle influences, currently prefer the stripped-down Nordic aesthetic. To pigeonhole them by nationality can be risky," says Zotimova.

Others think the Buxmead approach makes total sense. Knowing your target market is crucial when designing luxury show homes, "particularly when these are overseas buyers," says Rebecca Tucker, director at Suna Interior Design.

"There is certainly a difference in style when it comes to various nationalities and our approach to design is often heavily influenced by location or postcode – for example, a Surrey country classic or a high-end Chelsea pad. So it could be argued that widening this out to appeal to buyers from a certain country is a smart move."



This £4.75m property in Pont Street, London has been designed around the principles of vastu shastra

She adds that in the same way that a ‘New York’ feel can be achieved in a property’s design, “it could be possible to identify key factors that define the expectations of buyers in terms of cultural, local, regional or national influences.”

One cultural requirement that few in the property business can argue with is the desire among many Chinese and Indian buyers to adhere to the principles of feng shui or vastu shastra. “For believers of these ancient methodologies, these are non-negotiable. We recently had an applicant refuse to buy an otherwise perfect house because the staircase curved the wrong way,” says Christian Warman, director of Tedworth Property, a central London agency.

These “superstitions”, comments Caroline Takla, director of luxury developer One Point Six, are the primary driver for buyers. “They trump superficial design in most cases,” says Takla, who has recently worked on a vastu-compliant flat on sale for £4.75m - in Chelsea’s Pont Street. It scores highly on the vastu front with its south-east facing kitchen, a bedroom that faces north-west and an entrance hall whose orientation will supposedly bring prosperity and social cohesion to residents.



Holland Park Villas in Kensington, called on the contrasting styles of Rose Uniacke and Studio Ashby

“Luxury developments can really be thought of as property couture in that developers should know who they are designing for from day one,” says Takla.

“Like creating a couture dress, you can’t begin to shape a property without a buyer profile in mind. This is usually based on lifestyle rather than nationality, but you can consider certain cultural superstitions and locations known to be popular to certain nationalities. And an open-plan kitchen, however ‘tailored’ the interior is to them, is unlikely to attract an Indian or Middle Eastern buyer.”

Of course many overseas buyers want their London property to look like London. That’s partly the point – along with the eye-watering capital gains they can expect over the years. “They appreciate the quirky edge that London city interiors offer, allowing them to feel a part of their cosmopolitan surroundings,” says Stacey Sibley, creative director at Alexander James Interior Design.



The Riverwalk development features London-inspired decor by Alexander James Interiors

While Sibley agrees there are some cultural differences - Russian buyers typically bring their art collection with them, so they are often drawn to show homes designed around large artworks - much else is international, such as the demand for lock up and leave convenience, the appreciation of the very best fabrics and furnishings and the ease of being able to buy a dressed show home exactly as seen, down to the teaspoons.

They may then rip everything out and start again, of course. But that's another story.