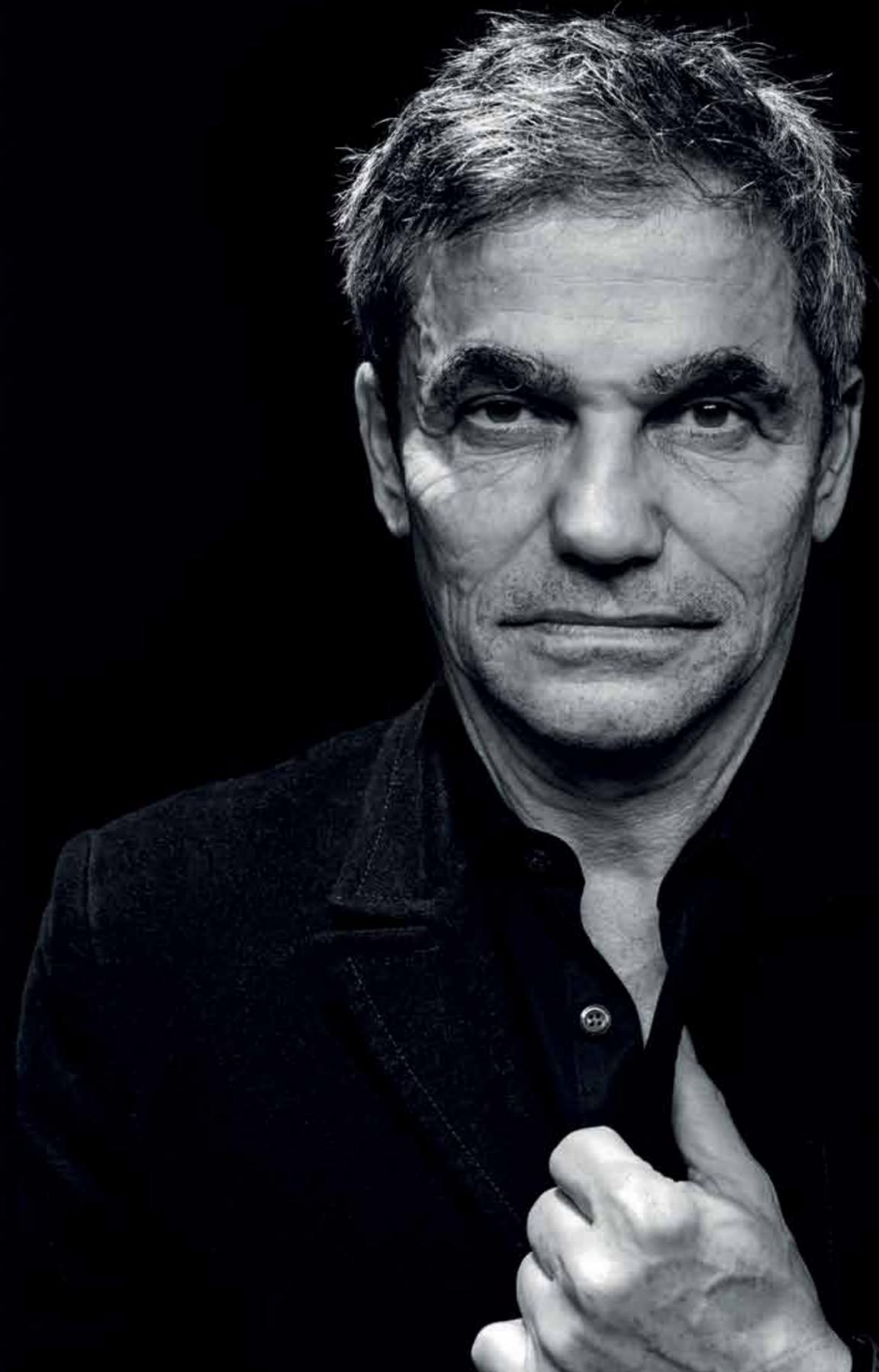


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Harry Handelsman, property developer and creator of loft living, says that the buildings he creates are “an alter ego of myself”. Anthony French-Constant donned his psychoanalyst’s hat in an attempt to find out what makes Harry Handelsman tick

Photography Donald Maclellan



portfolio of such unalloyed success, it would take a very brave man indeed to bet against his vision of a luxury high-rise future set in East London.

"I'm kind of driven," concedes Handelsman. "But also I'm in an industry where the competition isn't very creative. They just want to know how to optimise, how to make money... That probably makes a lot of them far richer than I am, but I'm much more persistent; I fall in love with what I'm doing. The buildings I create are an alter ego of myself."

"Manhattan has been successful because we have always worked in areas that were geographically correct but not yet popular," considers Handelsman. "I think that's part of the fascination of being a developer; you can create an environment that has ramifications for so many people living in its proximity - turn an area from a thoroughfare to a place with its own identity that attracts people."

"I really want people to have a sense of privilege in living there," he continues. "Also, if you live next to the development, there's a perception that it's sufficiently different to be slightly more discerning. By doing that I think you achieve common purpose and can turn it into a community..."

Already breaking the surface of the 150-acre Olympic Park in Stratford, East London, Manhattan Loft Gardens will become a striking, double-cantilevered, 42-storey tower incorporating a triple-height entrance lobby, a seven storey hotel, two restaurants, 248 apartments and lofts, and three eponymous sky gardens.

"I just felt very disillusioned with the amount of high-rise

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Previous page: Harry Handelsman.
Right: Designs for the Manhattan Loft Gardens in London's Olympic Park.
"I wanted to see if I could achieve something positive. To create, in a timeless fashion, a vertical community... If I accomplish that I think it'll be a huge success."

I'm much more persistent; I fall in love with what I'm doing

buildings going up in London," says Handelsman. "In my opinion, they have no purpose beyond the developers making decent money out of them. The motivation is how much? How cheap? What can I get out of it?"

"If people make the sort of huge commitment involved in a purchase, then the developer, if he has a conscience, has a responsibility to the buyer... I wanted to see if I could achieve something positive. To create, in a timeless fashion, a vertical community... If I accomplish that I think it will be a huge success."

"So, for Manhattan Loft Gardens I wanted a better quality. I gave the architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill a brief to come up with something truly exceptional; the finest residential tower in

"I need to be excited, I need to be driven," says Manhattan Loft Corporation CEO Harry Handelsman. "Quite honestly, if I develop Manhattan Loft Gardens and nobody buys, and I go bankrupt, I'll blame the people for not buying. I won't blame myself; I know what I'm doing is right. I feel it... I know it's correct."

"Twenty years ago I offered Londoners a new lifestyle by developing the concept of loft living," he continues. "Today, I believe that the future for London is in high-rise living, and what Manhattan Loft Gardens will do is introduce the concept of loft living within a 42 storey tower. It hasn't been done before, but I think London is ready for something new, and Stratford is absolutely the place to do it."

From the 1992 Summers Street Lofts project in Clerkenwell - via Soho, Bankside, West India Quay, Chelsea, St Pancras, Fitzrovia and Spitalfields - to Hackney and Stratford today, Handelsman has consistently challenged the conventions and preconceptions of the London property market by addressing "the needs of individuals rather than the market". In the face of a



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Interior of the refurbished St Pancras
Hotel in London



Don't copy. Living somewhere should express individuality

Europe... It's just like my brief to the architect for my own home; make me want to live there..."

Handelsman adds: "I had no idea what the cost would be. "And the reality is: yes it is far more expensive than any other tower. But it's a beautiful structure, not a cheese grater or a walkie-talkie, and the interiors are far more expensive and exceptional than most other high-rise interiors, except what I'd call the über developments. And I want equality in the building, so that the only difference between those living on a lower or a higher floor is the view. People seem to like that..."

"When I first started the Manhattan Loft Corporation, the perception was I took the idea from New York. But no developers were actually involved there; it was individual people buying buildings to convert to their own homes. And no money was spent on the common parts; they were still using the same old service lifts to access these fabulous homes..."

"What interests me is giving you a space and looking after the common areas, but for you to define how you want to live," says Handelsman. "I would never furnish an apartment, because that has a lot to do with our own personal perceptions of luxury. I don't want to dictate to you..."

"It would be really disappointing to me if I went into Manhattan Loft Gardens when it was completed and saw the same furniture in all 248 apartments. I would find

that really depressing. Don't copy; living somewhere should express individuality. We're doing the building, you make sure that you use your own integrity by doing what you want to do."

Recognising that loft living 30 floors aloft may not suit everyone, Handelsman stands by his avowed responsibility to his buyers, even unto shunning the occasional sale: "I've had two buyers who came to me and I wouldn't sell them a flat because the fit wasn't right," he recalls. "I didn't think they would be happy living in a high-rise..."

"I believe Manhattan Loft Gardens is going to be pivotal when it's completed in two and half to three years' time," Handelsman considers. "The hotel will be totally different from the Chiltern Firehouse [Handelsman's fashionable restaurant and hotel], yet will have the same draw in a new area. Marylebone was always great, but it didn't have the vibe it has now; we put it on the map as a chic place to be."

"I believe in Stratford, but the name makes people feel it's quite far out. I prefer to refer to it as Hackney East; it's literally just a 10-minute walk from Hackney. Once upon a time Hackney was a place nobody went, and now it's really cool..."