

SWANKY and Stratford are two words you wouldn't normally see together but by the time property developer Harry Handelsman has finished, the east London district's reputation could be transformed.

Handelsman, 65, a German-born Canadian, pioneered loft living in London and has been ahead of the curve since he moved here from Toronto in 1983. His instinct for spotting an undervalued area and building something there that generates vibe and provides focus has proved a winning formula – for him and for Londoners.

He bought a Clerkenwell warehouse for £435,000 in 1992 and sold 23 Londoners the concept of loft living. His company's name, Manhattan Loft Corporation, suggested easy-going urban glamour.

He has never sold cheap: he sees uplift over the horizon and factors it into the price. In his early days, he says, sniffy estate agents told him the value he put on his apartments "was nuts". But the flats sold anyway.

Bankside Lofts next to Tate Modern followed in 1995. "It was previously a no-go area," he says, "but I didn't look at that, I just looked over there." He points across the river to the dome of St Paul's and the City beyond: "Everything important was so close." He turned an old Sixties office block and a Victorian cocoa mill into a 132-flat development with a new 15-storey tower. Designed by Piers Gough it was then the tallest residential new build in London.

PASSION FOR ST PANCRAS

After that came a development in Fulham, also by Gough, then a residential tower at West India Quay, a stroll from Canary Wharf. Again, at 33 storeys, it was the tallest UK residential tower at the time.

Handelsman takes risks and has a passion for property. He helped transform St Pancras by restoring the Midland Grand Hotel. "It could have bankrupted me but I was passionate to do something no one else would touch." In 2004 he won permission for a £150 million refurbishment of the 19th-century hotel, a Grade I-listed Sir George Gilbert Scott masterpiece, to create a five-star 244-bedroom hotel – now the St Pancras Renaissance – with several destination bars and restaurants, and 68 fabulous flats atop,



Here's one I made earlier: Harry Handelsman at St Pancras Renaissance; Manhattan Loft Gardens, above, with 248 flats



thing held up with cantilevers. It will be clad in glass and vertical terracotta sun baffles that make striking, changing patterns. There will be a hotel and a triple-height 15,000sq ft lobby with a brasserie and bar open to all, while 248 flats will range from studios to double-height lofts, to a £10 million penthouse that's already sold to a British buyer.

GARDENS IN THE SKY

Non-residents can use the lobby and the sixth-floor hotel restaurant set in a 20,000sq ft garden. However, Handelsman says: "I don't want pizza deliveries going through my lobby," so there's a back entrance, too.

The British love their gardens, he says, but don't use balconies the way Europeans do. "Drive around London and look up, and they're empty or used for storage. But go into a communal garden on a sunny February and everyone is there. So there'll be gardens where the residents can meet up. Apartments in towers can be lonely. This is your home, where you are going to spend a lot of your time, so I think, how can I make that really enjoyable for you?"

He lives in a penthouse north of Hyde Park with his partner, Elizabeth Compton-Batt, and their daughter, Allegra, 14. He negotiated for the Stratford site in 2009-2010, but when planners saw his designs, "they thought I was insane". He says his tower is unique. He effectively cut out 40 per cent of the possible space with his gardens and cantilevers, and then sliced the top – "the most valuable part" – in half again. Planning took 15 months and building started in June last year.

Handelsman personally oversees the designs of each flat. At 440sq ft, even the studio is generous, and certainly well designed. Every flat can hold a huge sofa and painting. They have oak floors, solid oak detail, dark mirrors, good lighting, double doors that fold right back into recesses, a mirrored bathroom cube, and most have a huge double American fridge. "If you don't want it, I'll give you £6,000 back."

All flats have floor-to-ceiling glass walls somewhere, and as they get bigger they get super-glamorous. They are selling off-plan starting at £500,000. Building finishes in 2018.

Then Handelsman will fire up another area. "I need to have fun," he shrugs. "If you don't, what's the point?"

■ manhattanloftgardens.co.uk

Harry's in E20

St Pancras Renaissance Hotel, Chiltern Firehouse in Marylebone – now it is Stratford's turn for the Handelsman treatment. By **Philippa Stockley**



Where residents can meet: Handelsman's new 42-storey tower has three gardens

including penthouses. It was very high spec and obviously high risk, but since its 2011 completion it has been a catalyst for the area, now joined by refurbished King's Cross station, and Granary Square's emergence nearby.

PROJECTS WITH PRESENCE

Which brings us – via Chiltern Firehouse hotel and restaurant, a runaway success that pepped up Marylebone – to Stratford. Pre-Olympics and the promise of Olympicopolis, this was one of the grottiest parts of London, and therefore catnip to the Manhattan Loft Corporation chief executive, who bought a site next to Westfield, opposite the station in E20. Stratford is like King's Cross – in the next four or five years it will be THE place in east London. "You have to create a building with presence, quality and excitement, you can change an area and raise the ante," says Handelsman. "If the locals endorse it and it becomes a destination, it will be a success."

With architect-engineer SOM – builder of the world's tallest tower, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai – interior designer Studio KO, and landscape architect Martha Schwartz, he is building **Manhattan Loft Gardens**, a 42-storey residential tower with three gardens cut into its sides, the whole





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