

# &London

A particular take on property | AUTUMN 2013

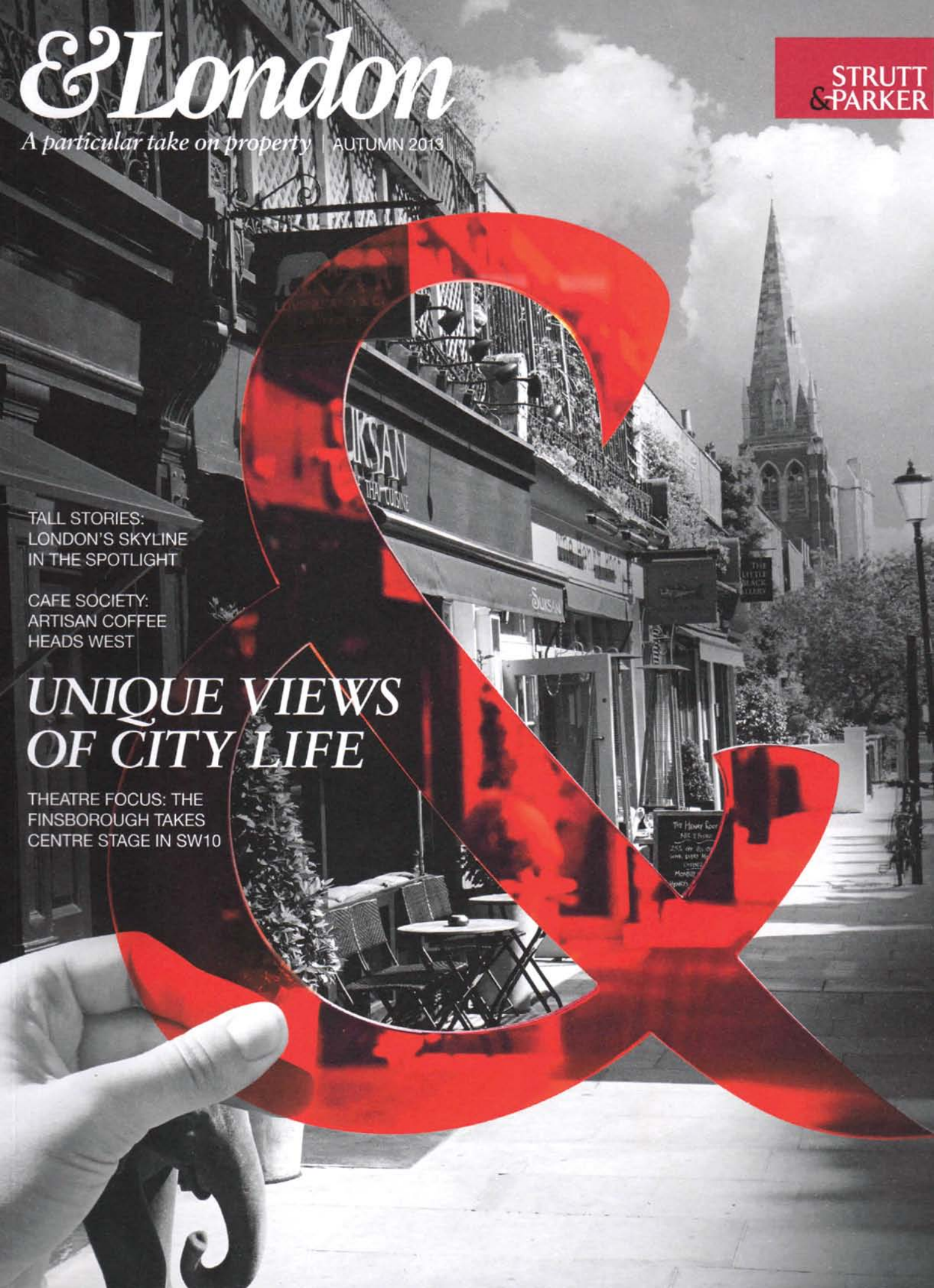
**STRUTT  
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TALL STORIES:  
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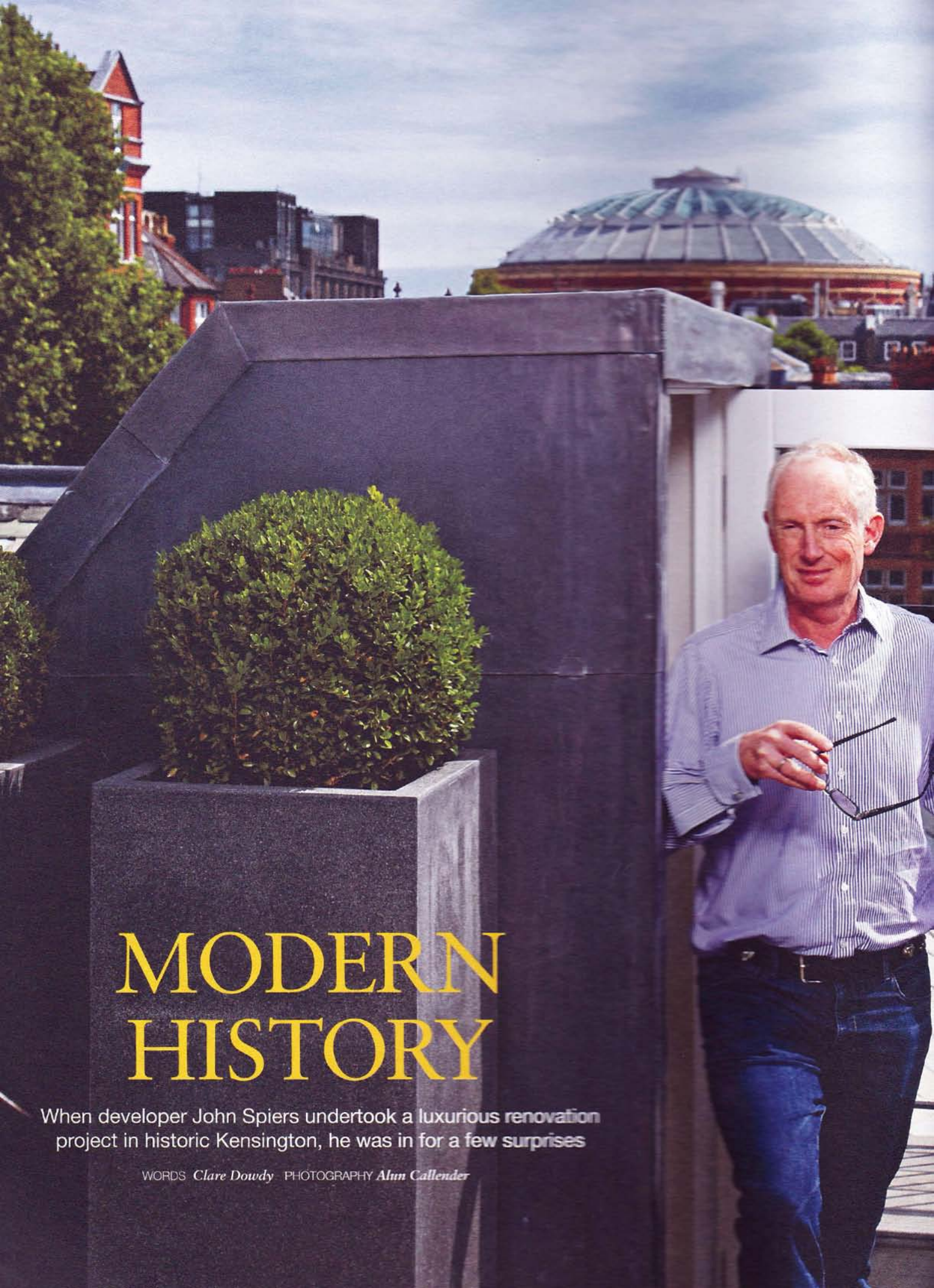
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## UNIQUE VIEWS OF CITY LIFE

THEATRE FOCUS: THE  
FINSBOROUGH TAKES  
CENTRE STAGE IN SW10





A man with short grey hair, wearing a light blue and white striped button-down shirt and dark blue jeans, stands on a rooftop terrace. He is holding a pair of glasses in his right hand. To his left is a large, dark grey, rectangular planter box containing a perfectly rounded, green topiary bush. The background shows a cityscape under a cloudy sky, with a prominent building featuring a large, glass-paned dome. The overall scene is a mix of modern architecture and historic urban setting.

# MODERN HISTORY

When developer John Spiers undertook a luxurious renovation project in historic Kensington, he was in for a few surprises

WORDS *Clare Dowdy* PHOTOGRAPHY *Alun Callender*





As property developer John Spiers (left) tore down the ceilings of his latest acquisition, 6 Palace Gate, in preparation for its conversion into two apartments and a penthouse, he came across something rather unexpected.

When he bought the property in 2010, it was split into ten flats and a doctor's surgery. 'It was a terrible mess, a real rabbit warren, so it was impossible to work out what was in there,' says John. In fact, behind those false ceilings in the raised ground floor's main reception rooms, he discovered detailed plaster decoration and the most amazing Arts & Crafts-influenced murals.

The building was built in the 1870s, in the style of the Second Empire – hence the large cornices and the classical Victorian facade with a Parisian twist. Previous illustrious inhabitants include the first owner, Colonel AWH Meyrick, a Crimean War veteran, and the Hon John Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes, grandfather of explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes. Following conversion into flats in 1925, occupants included the fashion designer Digby Morton, who is credited with transforming the tweed jacket into a fashion item and who had his studio in the basement; Francis John von Habsburg Lothringen, a relation of the last ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; and the writer Countess Olga Priuli-Bon.

The amazing ceilings were apparently commissioned by a William Gillilan, a retired lieutenant in the Royal Fusiliers who, in 1890, tasked the architect Sir William Emerson with

redecorating the interiors. Most of Emerson's career was spent in India, where he had made his name designing the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta.

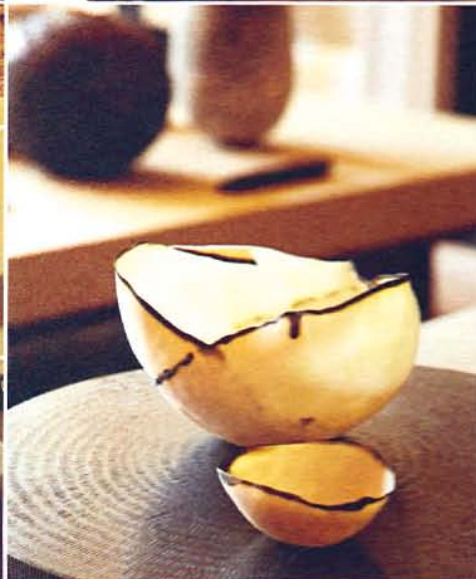
'As a handful of sumptuous apartments, the building will appeal to people who can't find what they want in their price range in Knightsbridge, and are migrating a mile to the west,' suggests John.

All of John's apartments have an individual charm, but Apartment One, with its ornate ceilings, has sparked the interest of international as well as local buyers. 'It's attractive to everybody,' says John. 'A lot of people are keen to live somewhere where they feel connected to London's past.' Which means the original marble floor in the entrance hall and the fireplaces are also going down well, along with the original working shutters. Furthermore, it's Grade II Listed, so John was mindful not to change the original room sizes, doorways and fireplaces.

All three apartments have been furnished immaculately to help prospective buyers picture themselves living there. This was particularly key for Apartment One, says John: 'These rooms are so unusual, it's difficult to picture how you might furnish them. All the furniture is bespoke because the scale is so large – 30ft by 27ft.'

John commissioned interior designer Fiona Barratt – the first time they had worked together – to unleash her flair. Fiona, who lives in Chelsea and is married to ex-footballer Sol Campbell, has designed the interiors >





This page: interior designer Fiona Barratt introduced bold interior details and accessories. Right: the original ceilings are restored, while dramatic space is created with period features and high-spec fixtures and fittings

for a host of London homes since setting up her business in 2006.

'Developments can sometimes look a bit predictable,' admits John. 'However, Fiona used bold colour and eye-catching furniture, including jaw-dropping chandeliers and the wall unit in Apartment One's main drawing room, with its dark oak-veneered bookcase and gold dividers. A brace of round polo stones, which act as coffee tables, and soft furnishings in purple add exciting flourishes.'

All this is married with the apartments' tip-top technology, such as the integrated Sonos music system, the Rako lighting-control system, the Bulthaup kitchen with Gaggenau appliances, and the pop-up 40in Samsung

Smart TV in the bedrooms. And the icing on the cake is its fabulous position – just a stone's throw from Kensington Gardens, the Royal Albert Hall and Kensington Palace.

The reception room has a particular place in John's heart, for its 'grandeur, the beauty of the ceiling and its views over the stone-walled garden'.

This is John's biggest project so far, although he's now converting the former headquarters of the National Trust into a single house in Queen Anne's Gate. Who knows what interior treasures those false ceilings may reveal...

*Apartment One, £6,250,000; Apartment Two, £5,500,000; Penthouse, £5,950,000. All share of freehold. Contact 020 7938 3666*

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