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An interesting development

Gary Linton is a millennial property developer making waves in NW5. **India Block** takes the penthouse tour

We're spoiled for lovely views up here. From Hampstead Heath to Primrose Hill sweeping vistas of the city of London spread out below abound, and estate agents are always quick to point out when a property has a particularly good one. As a property writer, I've seen my fair share of cracking views, but the view from the penthouses astride the Maple Building might have taken the crown.

When fifty luxury flats launched in Kentish Town last year London property pundits pricked up their ears. The area is well and truly in the throes of gentrification, but it's always been a slightly grubbier cousin to the established heights of Highgate to the north or Hampstead to the west.

But it's Gary Linton's ability to look outside the golden postcodes that makes him stand out, alongside his youth. In his early 30s and at the helm of a £440 million property empire the view must be pretty sweet. Surely taking luxury to new locations is a risk?

"Buyers in London now are not as fussy about the area as they used to be, they're more attracted by the scheme as a product, and if the transport links are good," he says. "Some of our buyers didn't know about Kentish town but they've come here, seen the building and fallen in love with the scheme."

The apartments have proved popular with people relocating from the swankier neighbourhoods of Primrose Hill, Hampstead, Highgate and St John's Wood. Others have come from further afield. One buyer, the creative director of a well known clothing brand, has moved from Knightsbridge. Postcode loyalty might be becoming a thing of the past in the London market.

Having seen the main building at their launch in May last year I was curious to see how the seven penthouses turned out. With their discreetly luxurious interiors, courtesy of Gemma Gordon Duff of sister design company Gordon Duff Linton, and some slick features the finished top floors didn't disappoint.

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The wide terraces are perfect for entertaining on a summer's evening.
Picture: DAVID BUTLER

The dual aspect glazing in the open plan reception rooms comes apart at the corners: you can slide each huge sheet of glass back to open the interior on to the wrap around terraces. Some of the bathrooms come with bathtubs and showers next to the floor-to-ceiling glazing, so the new occupiers will be able to bathe with a view.

The show flat would make a perfect party pad, so Linton was surprised when it sold to a pair of downsizers. Sure, they'd crunched the numbers when the project was in its infancy and concluded the downsizer market would be significant, but they hadn't counted on how popular it would prove. The slightly more sober flat next door had gone to a young banker and his girlfriend. Even with a city salary you still need help from the Bank of Mum and Dad to buy a first home these days.

Linton has several other projects on the go, each with a subtly different buyer in mind. There's a boutique development of eight flats in St John's Wood, and a unit of 10 plus three retail



Gary Linton, founder of the The Linton Group.

units in Dalston. He's got planning in for a project on Warren Street in Camden, and office block in Croydon, and one he's keeping under wraps. In Hampstead he has a couple of boutique developments in the works. The newly

launched Parker House in Paddington has a few handfuls of 510 to 700 sq ft for those in need of a more central pied-à-terre. "We try and design the scheme around the buyers we think that will be relevant there, then we try and design the flats around their individual needs," he says.

Linton doesn't fit the mould of the rapacious developer, buying up land to turn a quick buck on off plan flats sold overseas. He has a pragmatic approach to his portfolio. "I'm fussy, we won't just buy sites for the sake of getting projects in," he says. "If it comes tomorrow great, if it doesn't come for two years we'll wait for two years."

But whilst he listens to the data and buyer profiles there's also an emotional element to his work. "I want projects that I'm passionate about, that I love, that I can get excited about. It's about gut instinct. It needs to stack up on paper and be financially viable, but if I don't have that excitement about it then there's something that's not special enough."



The top floor of the duplex offers even more stunning views out over north London.



Winning the huge sheets of glass up to the top of the Maple Building was a technical challenge that really paid off. PHOTOS: LINTON

Technically Linton is a millennial. We belong to the same misfit generation, derived for our penchant for purchasing avocados over real estate. Clearly Linton has a more pragmatic approach to property than his brunching peers, yet he prescribes to the love your work over work to live ethos that those born between 1981 and 1996 subscribe to.

Millennials fall into two categories depending on where they were when the credit crunch hit. Linton was on the grad scheme for international commercial property consultancy DTZ, now bought out by Cushman and Wakefield. He'd completed a summer internship and done an MSC in Real Estate at Cass Business School in the interim.

When the recession bit he changed tack, buying up single flats on Gloucester Road in Kensington and Chelsea, refurbishing them, selling them on and reinvesting the profits. Having raised some equity he developed a multi unit scheme of six

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flats in the same area. Then he started to scout out land in zone 2 for office to residential conversion or where dilapidated buildings could be demolished to make way for new builds. “I built up a pipeline from there, and that really launched the business.”

With all a stack of projects in the pipeline, in 2015 Linton faced the

challenge all young companies must overcome: scaling.

“There was 18 months where it was absolutely terrifying! I’d acquired these sites, raised these investments and built this pipeline that I needed to see out for the next three years,” he says.

“I’d started growing my team, but it hadn’t grown in line with the pipeline of developments so there was this period where it was absolutely manic and frantic.”

The business went from Linton and one employee to 25 people, and he needed to bring experienced project managers on board. “It was a lot psychologically for me to get my head around,” he admits. “There were all these spinning plates and so many different facets of the business. You’ve got to be involved in anything from construction to project management to interior design to marketing to sales to branding to PR.”

With eight or nine projects at any given moment, there’s a lot to keep on top of, but Linton remains intimately involved in everyday decision making. “Property development should not be called property development, it should be called crisis management,” he laughs. “There’s rarely a day without something going wrong.”

Property developers as a species do tend to have a hunted air. I’ve seen no evidence of the usual cushion twitching showmanship of performative OCD, but there’s no denying Linton looks a little harangued underneath the city boy

appearance. What’s his crisis management style, then?

“My style is relatively calm, decisive. I rely on the people around me a lot because the guys that work for me,” he says. “A few years ago I think I flapped, but now I think I’m calmer.”

There’s no such thing as a holiday for Linton. The only time the phones stop ringing is between Christmas and New Year. “My poor patient wife has to accept an almost permanently stressed husband,” he smiles. There is some payoff for the stress, though.

“What I love about the job - and there’s much I don’t love - is when you’re sitting in the show flat in the finished development and it’s selling and the project comes to an end and it all started with an email in your inbox from an agent,” Linton explains.

“What makes me buzz is the fact that I made that happen. I’ve taken that email and turned it into this, with all the steps to take from an email to a finished block of flats that people are living in. I willed it.”

The stress and sleepless nights pay off in the end, although he admits that he fantasises about packing it all in to become a farmer.

Then there’s his personal pipeline; his property lawyer wife is expecting their first child. Well, their first human child. “We have a dog, he’s our first baby. He’s a golden retriever, he’s about 12 months old but he’ll always be our first baby,” he laughs.

“That’s how I deal with a crisis, I take the dog for a walk. He makes me happy.”