



Privilege of a city slicker

Bachelor pads have come a long way since the 19th century. **Christopher Middleton** on the rise of sophisticated entertainment spaces for the modern alpha-male

It's a wintry afternoon in London and a grand piano is dangling above the roof-tops of Bayswater. Passers-by glance up as a crane lifts it out of 28 Hyde Park Gardens Mews, taking casual interest in a musical instrument on the move. But they have no idea of its real significance.

To those in the know, the suspended Steinway spells out a very specific message – namely that 34-year-old Sanji Sharma, until recently an investment banker with Credit Suisse First Boston, has finally got a girlfriend.

Three years ago Sharma and his bachelor pal James van den Heule, an investment banker at Citigroup, bought this mews house together. They had it gutted, re-built and fitted with an extra floor at top and bottom; installed a cinema, a hot tub and two garages (for van den Heule's SUV and Sharma's Jaguar); and eventually moved in when the work was finished.

That was November 2005. In November 2006 – 12 long, hard, party-giving months later – the pair decided to sell up. The house had more than done its work in helping Sharma secure a serious girlfriend and the couple now wanted to live together in a place of their own – hence the need to move the piano.

"Was this place instrumental in getting me a girlfriend?" laughs Sharma. "Well, yes, I guess it was. Let's face it, a pad like this is a powerful convincing factor."

The standard of design was as important as the square footage and amenities. This wasn't some shabby old bloke-house, full of mouldering socks and cigarette-singed carpets; it was architectural magazine centre-spread.

"We took the whole project very seriously and put it out to tender with two or three high-profile firms," van den Heule says. "We stipulated that we wanted our bedrooms to be of equal size, though in different materials." (He opted for limestone in his bathroom, while Sharma went for teak and black marble.) "We also knew that when we had parties, people would climb all over the granite fireplace, so we chose to have that specially reinforced."

Most of their furniture came from Italy, with the exception of a £2,500 David Linley leather chair inspired by classic Aston Martin cars. A mirrored central stairwell was an inspired touch, adding both light and a sense of space.

Now, of course, it's all over and while Sharma and girlfriend go off to live in Notting Hill, van den Heule is returning to his other bachelor pad, a Mayfair mews house he's owned for the past 10 years. Mind you, he's got a share of the profits to keep him company; when the pair originally bought 28 Hyde Park Mews, it was worth £1.4m; today it's valued at £4.25m.

This is not an isolated tale. There is, it seems, a whole new breed of design-conscious single, heterosexual, men who know their Dada from their dado rail. "They're young, they've got bonuses in their back pockets and just having a nice car is no longer enough for them," says Alex Michelin, partner at Finchatton, the company that carried out the Hyde Park Mews project. "When it comes to a place to live, they expect the equivalent of a Ferrari. Sure they want that apartment to help them attract a girlfriend but they're not thinking of getting married for a few years yet. In that respect, 30 is the new 20."

Top New York and Los Angeles apartment designer Shane Reilly has also spotted this new type of bachelor. "Basically these guys are settling down but without the partner," she says. "Typically they're in their late 20s or early 30s, working long hours in high-pressure jobs where they're not available to go sofa shopping in the afternoon. They want their designer apartment and they want it fast." And, given that they're usually spending \$1m to £2m with her, she's happy to help them create it.

The bachelor pad is not as modern a concept as one might imagine. Albany Mansion, in London's Piccadilly, was split into 69 single-gentleman apartments or "sets" in 1802 by the Duke of York. These comprised a grand reception room, a grand bedroom and a poky little room on the top floor for the valet. One glance at the list of past Albany residents (the poet Lord Byron,



Domestic lure: a flash car is no longer enough, the wealthy single man needs a statement-making home in which to entertain himself and his guests

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prime minister William Ewart Gladstone, conductor Sir Thomas Beecham) shows that the bachelors here were of the elite, rather than executive, class. In the 1920s a British bachelor pad was the preserve of the privileged gadabout, such as P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster, who resided at Berkeley Mansions, Mayfair, with his indispensable manservant Jeeves.

There are references to men in late 19th century France using their well-appointed residences to attract women; author Jean-Francois Bastine described the dynamic in his 1879 book, now translated and re-released as *The Little House: An Architectural Seduction*. But it was 1930s US magazines that took the bachelor lifestyle – symbolised best by the array of bars, tailors, theatres, barber shops and restaurants frequented by rich young men in New York – and introduced the notion of the bachelor pad.

British sociologist Bill Osgerby has made a detailed study of this phenomenon and says that initially the idea of a man taking an interest in interior design was rather controversial. "Consumer desire and display were precarious waters for articulations of masculinity keen to avoid any hint of effeminacy," he writes in the *Journal of Design History*.

Even in the 1940s *Esquire* and other magazines were at pains to use male-sounding words, such as "streamlined" and "aerodynamic", when describing the look of various pieces of furniture.

It wasn't until the 1950s that the idea of the bachelor apartment really began to take hold and for that, Osgerby credits Hugh Hefner, founder of *Playboy*. As well as featuring naked women in every issue, the magazine also carried regular features on "pads", then "pent-houses". In the very first issue, the editors pinned their colours to the barstool with the following declaration: "We like our apartment, we enjoy mixing up cocktails and an *hors d'oeuvre* or two, putting a little music on the phonograph and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex."

The only fly in the Martini was that hardly any single man could actually afford to live this way. "The hedonistic lifestyle depicted in *Esquire* was an aspirational fantasy," says Osgerby, a professor of media, culture and communications at London Metropolitan University. "The concept of the 'bachelor pad' was always, to a large degree, a mythological concept."

Today, the bachelor flat is no longer

just the province of the terminal day-dreamer or the Hugh Hefner wannabe. What's more, the single man is no longer the lone wolf on the edges of society but one of the herd. The proportion of men living alone in the UK, for example, has risen from 10 to 15 per cent over the past decade, while in New York, 32 per cent of all households are now single-person-occupied. People are waiting longer to get married and, as London property consultant Robert Bailey notes, divorce rates are rising. "There's a lot of older men, 45 and upwards, coming back on to the marriage market after the first one's gone wrong and, not to put too fine a point on it, looking for a 'shag pad'," he says.

Sophisticated apartments, marketed for men, are also now springing up in places where there weren't any before. Jomtien Property in Jomtien, Thailand, is selling a "superb bachelor pad" with teak wood and black tile floors, a plasma television and a two-person hot tub on the 26th floor of a condominium building for Bt8.75m (£130,000). In the UK, the Cardiff waterfront is now lined with one-bedroom apartments priced at £300,000 and up, while a two-bedroom duplex at the top of Beetham Tower, in Liverpool, costs £600,000.

In the world's biggest cities, of course, the going rate is higher. In London, for example, there is a penthouse duplex near Waterloo station with 270° views that was converted by two bachelors and is now on the market for £3.65m. "They took what would have been a standard three- or four-bedroom flat and turned it into a very indulgent two-bedroom apartment," says property consultant Simon Barnes. "This new breed of bachelor isn't preoccupied with how many bedrooms there are like everyone used to be; instead, they want to enjoy the place here and now, rather than worrying about its re-sale price in 10 years' time. It's a more selfish, short-term attitude."

Perhaps the primary requirement of a bachelor pad is convenience. Location is top of the list for most buyers and in Dubai that means an apartment within a self-contained precinct of shops, bars and restaurants and unobstructed views of the water. "You can buy a nice bachelor apartment for just over Dh1m (£150,000) but you mustn't choose a location where they might build in front of you and no one walks any distance in Dubai," says Charles Weston Baker, managing director of Savills Interna-

tional. "Best to buy at somewhere like Dubai Marina."

In Hong Kong, the consensus among single men is to live on Hong Kong Island. "Less than five per cent of young professionals would wish to live on Kowloon side," says Diana Lillauwala, who runs the relocation agency At Home In Hong Kong. Services are also, not surprisingly, key. "Most bachelors like to have part-time help with cleaning and some even employ full-time, live-in maids; the government-stipulated wage is only HK\$3,400 (£220) per month."

In the UK and US, domestic help is less affordable but the next best thing is a concierge. "In London, the traditional doorman has a less active role," says Jonathan Salsbury, of agents Colliers CRE, who's selling riverside apartments at the new Rushmore building, on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "But in New York, your concierge will order taxis, buy plane tickets and book restaurants."

Such perks can be a big selling point for men who care about their living spaces but still prefer going out to staying in. "When we're selling a flat owned by a bachelor, we frequently look inside the oven and find sealed plastic bags full of brand new cooking utensils," says Bailey. "He'll have lived there two or three years and not once cooked a meal."

In Hong Kong, says Sonia Cheng, of homefinders Sallmanns Residential, "bachelors don't tend to... cook, [so] in some of our apartments, an oven is not included, only a microwave."

There are, however, plenty of single unmarried males who use their pads to do more than sleep and throw late-night cocktail parties. In London, older bachelors tend to choose a period flat in "an established area like Kensington or Knightsbridge" and design it "for home entertaining because these guys like to cook," Bailey says. "It might also have a little 1960s-style bar in the corner."

Younger bachelors, meanwhile, look for less conventional spaces to impress guests, seeking out renovated apartments or lofts in unusual buildings and edgier areas, says Caspar Dixon of Urban Space, an estate agency in London's Clerkenwell. "Anyone can install a Philippe Starck bathroom but not everyone can live in a building which has exposed, raw bricks or wooden floors that have been there for centuries," he says. "That sort of thing is priceless."

In either type of home, technology will be a talking point. "These kind of bachelors tend to be early adopters," Michelin says. "It's very much the alpha male thing. They've got all the latest stuff and they want everyone to see it. They like to tell you about how they were able to text their environmental control system from the slopes at Gstaad, so that when they got home, the heating was on and the lights were at just the right dimming level."

Note the word "control", says Osgerby. "Masculinity", he says, "is all about being functional and purposeful, without needless embellishment."

Not all men are blessed with faultless taste, however, and that's where professional designers come in. As well as making practical recommendations – suggesting a utility room to hang, or at least hide, one's washing, for example – they also advise on aesthetics. "You don't want to make the classic bachelor mistake, which is to put a big, ugly TV set right in the middle of the room," Reilly says. "For a girl walking into a guy's apartment, that's a big turn-off."

Still, both she and fellow US designer Elaine Griffin emphasise that the best bachelor pads are uncompromising expressions of personal taste. "Just as you don't want to be wearing your father's suit, so you don't want to live in an apartment that doesn't reflect your style," Reilly says.

"Invest in [something] that pleases you and you alone," Griffin adds, "because when you become half of a married couple, your wife will have the last say on everything that walks into your house."

Therein lies the perennial problem for all bachelors. If your pad has too much girl-pulling power, you'll eventually find one with whom you want to spend the rest of your life. One minute you're playing a solo, the next it's a duet, and before you know it your grand piano is being lifted out by a large crane.