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## Richard Angel & Ed O'Donnell on carving a niche in specialist prime resi design

INTERVIEW: The founders of interior design house Angel O'Donnell discuss their first year in business, which has seen them work on prime London penthouses, student houses, and set new standards for the build-to-rent sector.

**R**ichard Angel and Ed O'Donnell launched their interior design business, Angel O'Donnell, just over a year ago. The duo has already carved a niche in the high-end build-to-rent sector, where they take an "holistic" approach to projects – informed by their years of experience in different aspects of the prime residential property space.

*Angel O'Donnell has been running for just over a year now; what have been the highlights of your first 12 months?*

We've had an extremely busy and at times surprising first year. For Angel O'Donnell to be appointed on such a broad range of projects from the penthouse at The Atlas Building (the City's tallest residential building) to the furnishing of the communal areas at 10 George Street, [Vertus' first Build to Rent development](#), and a student housing project in Sheffield to a host of private client work, we feel extremely lucky. Winning our award from the Society of British and International Design on our first anniversary was also a real highlight. To be recognised globally by the industry professional body with a hugely respected judging panel, as being one of the best at what we do, was a huge accolade, especially when we were up against competition from some of the industry greats internationally, it was somewhat humbling. We've got big boots to now fill for 2020!



*How did you meet, and what prompted you to launch an interior design business together?*

We both worked together at a previous design studio and got on fantastically well. Following his previous role, some soul searching and a lot of research Richard (who has held senior roles at notable design houses and development companies such as McLaren Property) realised that there was the potential to offer a better, more commercially astute service in a crowded market but needed a phenomenal designer to compliment his skillset. Richard approached Ed and in October 2018 the doors were open for business and AOD won its first projects shortly thereafter.



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An AOD project in Soho, above the Soho Theatre

**Did launching in such an uncertain political/economic climate affect how you approached the business?**

Of course! We run a very tight ship and keep our overheads very lean and are then able to pass on these savings to our clients. Furthermore, we continually try to think laterally to create opportunity where traditionally it might not exist. At Angel O'Donnell, there is no such word as "can't" and in times of uncertainty, that has stood us in great stead.

*Richard, you're a qualified surveyor who has worked in property development, interior design, hospitality, construction and estate agency. How does that breadth of experience affect how you approach design projects and clients? It must be tempting to weigh-in on aspects beyond the interiors brief...*

***"There are only a handful of designers out there who can say they have achieved planning consent & developed some iconic real estate cradle to grave & are also part owners in a hotel"***

To the contrary that's why clients employ us! We can offer a holistic approach to their projects. There are only a handful of designers out there who can say they have achieved planning consent and developed some iconic real estate cradle to grave and are also part owners in a hotel.

We understand 100% the fundamentals of residential development from build to rent, student housing and build to sell and whilst we don't "weigh-in" we certainly offer well rounded,

intelligent opinion on matters and then it's up to the client whether they wish to take that on board or not.

**Does Angel O'Donnell have a house style or particular aesthetic; what sets you apart from other interior design houses?**

This was something we've thought long and hard about as ultimately design is a fashion and fashions change, whilst many well-known studios do have a particular aesthetic, we made a conscious decision to try to avoid that and moreover create designs for people to live with that is reflective of the occupier. As we work across a range of disciplines from build to rent, student housing and higher end projects our versatility is key. There's a danger that if you have a particular style, that can quickly date and you become a "one trick pony". You've got to be relevant to your audience and our audience can be incredibly diverse, even if our customers are the same, this is particularly prevalent when working for developers. Even with our private commissions, we've actually secured work where other designers have been relinquished from duty for being too dismissive of the client's style choices. It's so important that an individual can express themselves for their own home, it's not up to us as a studio to impart one style onto a client but to bring together the things they like in a cohesive style.



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**You're carving a particular niche in the build-to-rent sector – but specialise in creating “bold and modern” interiors; how can developers and landlords deliver rental properties that have real personality while maintaining broad appeal?**

That's the million-pound question!! Invariably all the build-to-rent schemes have a particular brand standard and target market that they are trying to appeal to and whilst there has got to be broad appeal, the particular target market can be narrowed fairly sizeably in order to ensure the right combination between personality and broad appeal is achieved. Whilst it might sound obvious, much like a marketing company, each and every time we start work on a new project for a speculative development where there is an unknown occupier, no matter how big, we carry out a “get to know our customer” exercise. We shape three or four potential occupiers, asking ourselves leading questions, who are they, what is their name, how old are they, what do they do for a living, even down to what sort of clothes do they wear and where (and how) do they shop? By the end of the exercise, we have built complete profiles on these individuals and know them like a friend. Invariably, during this exercise, we find commonality between them which gives our designs the personality and appeal they require.

**How does interior design for the rental market differ from designing for an end user?**

First and foremost, for the rental market, you have two customers: the client paying the bill and the occupier. An end user is almost always both bill payer and occupier, and designing for their own use, so whilst budget is important, achieving their own style and personality through the design comes first. The challenge for the rental market design is usually the client, rightly so, wants to keep costs to an absolute minimum but create maximum impact. Given that design is such a personal decision, often the client (whether a private individual or decision maker within a corporate) will want to impart their own style choices which could be a polar opposite to those of the potential tenant and occupier. There is an art for us to achieve the delicate balance of meeting the clients wants but also the occupier's needs, that is why our “get to know our customer” exercise is so important.

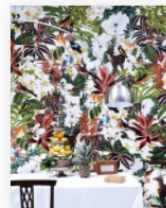
Beyond that, material choices come a close second. End users may want a particular material selection that could be very expensive or particularly delicate which is fine as ultimately it is their responsibility to care for that item through their day to day living aware of its limitations. With the rental market, clearly there is a tenant where there is the potential for not the same level of care and attention, we therefore try to think ahead on this whether it is from hard-wearing floor finishes through to stain resistant fabrics on sofa's and rugs. Everything is thought through and achieved but never to the compromise of the design.

**Are there any key design trends that you are tipping for the high-end build-to-rent sector in 2020?**

We tend to shy away from trends preferring to focus on what is the best design for the space or occupier but there will be a definite movement towards wellbeing, comfort and sustainability. However, there are some materials and shapes that will definitely prove popular in 2020. Marble, cane, textured woods and mixed metals will be the preferred choice of material while curved furniture, patterned fabrics and embossed wall coverings provide the comfort and softness that will balance out the hard surface materials.

**There seems to be growing appreciation of artisan crafts amongst high net worth property owners and tenants. How do you go about sourcing the best, but not necessarily the most well-know, specialist craftspeople?**

It's hard work! Research, research, research! We often get approached directly by the less well-known artisans and once we've tested their products and are happy to recommend them to clients we go onto supply them. We also visit a lot of shows, markets and even graduate exhibitions to find the best and support new or unknown talent. Take Kristjana Williams for example, she's a London-based Icelandic artist, who Ed first specified one of her pieces in 2015; this year she's been identified as one to watch for 2020 having already collaborated with Paul Smith, Penhaligons and Coldplay over the last 18 months.



House Plant Wall Mural by Kristjana Williams

**Angel O'Donnell counts both major league developers (including Canary Wharf Group and Lodha UK) and private individuals as clients, does a corporate brief require a very different approach to a private commission?**

***“It doesn't matter if you're dealing with someone buying a £150,000 property or someone buying a £50m property, you treat them all with the same care, attention & respect”***

Not really, we listen to all our clients and what their ultimate goal is which we set out to achieve. The only major difference is that with a private commission, we receive more requests that are particular to the individual, whether that be design-led or material-led choices. Other than that, we treat all our clients the same and they're all important to us in different ways. We've had commissions that range vastly in budget but from Richard's days in agency, one of the most valuable lessons he learned was that it doesn't matter if you're dealing with someone buying a £150,000 property or someone buying a £50m property, you treat them all with the same care, attention and respect, it's a small world and the client with the small budget at the start could become your largest client in a few years time.



*Your Atlas Building penthouse won best CGI & Visualisation at this year's SBID International Awards. Do most clients prefer realistic computer-generated visualisations to traditional sketches, and how have CGIs changed the design process?*

There are still some that like a traditional sketch but technology is so good now, we need to use it to our advantage and it also helps eliminate any doubt within the mind of the client. For the Atlas Building penthouse, not only did we produce CGIs but we went one step further and turned these into 360 degree views using virtual reality goggles. The augmented reality is so real, that when we met our client at a London restaurant and they put the VR goggles on for the first time, it was difficult for them not to want to physically walk through the apartment and touch things. Just seeing their expressions of amazement was fantastic!

↕ Angel O'Donnell's Atlas Building penthouse



*Which projects are you most proud of, and why?*

To be honest, it is difficult to narrow them down as they've all achieved different things for us. If we had to narrow down to one, it would be the Atlas Building, not just because we won such a prestigious award but also because of the technical challenges faced on it, we don't think we would have been able to overcome those without the truly complimentary skill set between us and fully understanding design, development and construction.

*Where do you see Angel O'Donnell in five years' time?*

It would be easy to say that we'd like to be a "go-to household name" for interior design but for us, that's a little cliché and small picture. In 2016 the global interior design industry was valued at \$121bn, for us we'd like to be fundamental shapershifters within this industry in how society live and how clients procure design services across the spectrum. Whether that is supporting SBID in lobbying government or acting as key thought-leaders in the governance of the industry, we've got big plans, after all, we all want to live, work and play in great spaces and good design should not be limited to the elite few.

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