

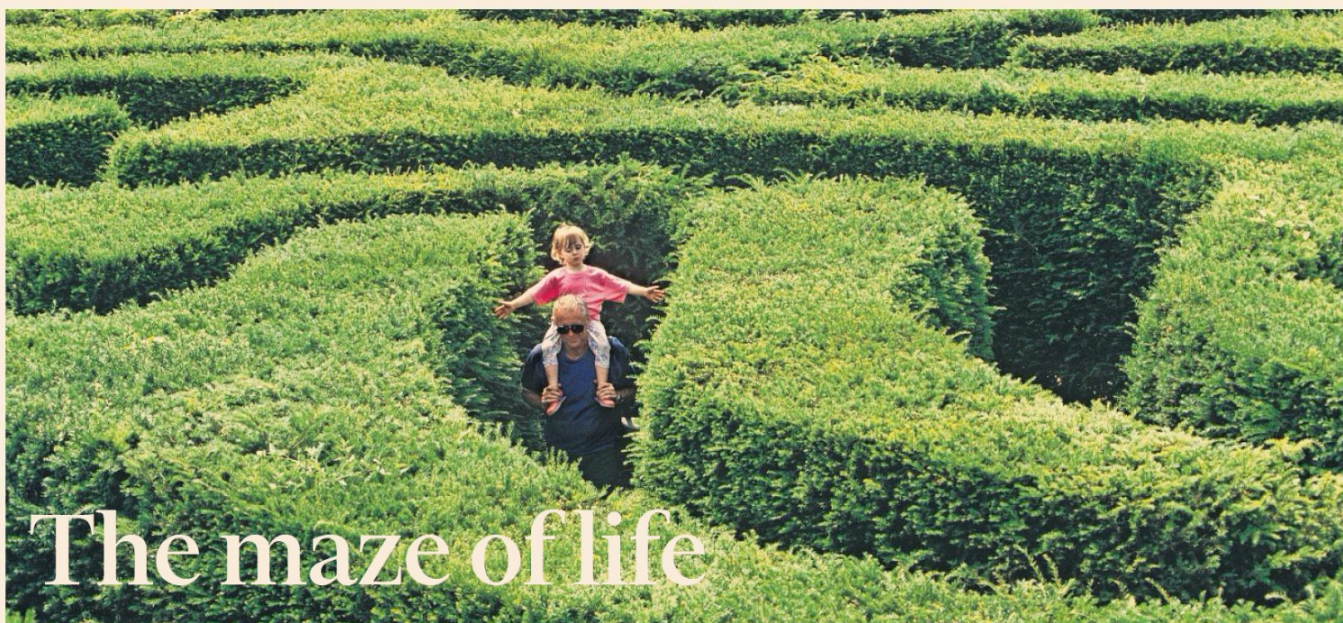


House & Home

FTWeekend

Big spenders in Little Venice The London enclave's record prices — UK PROPERTY PAGE 3

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The maze of life

Labyrinths and mazes are like living stories that let us create order out of chaos – even as technology makes them more complex. By *Alan Knox*

Adrian Fisher wants you to get lost. So much so, he has made a career out of it. For the past 43 years, he has been designing mazes and labyrinths in the quiet village of Durweston near Poole. From atop the tower in the hedge maze at the end of his seven-acre garden, Fisher can look out upon the rolling Dorset landscape he's called home for most of his life. "When I was a boy I designed games and puzzles . . . I just thought building mazes and going from castle to château to palaces and things . . . what a fantastic thing to do! So I built one or two, or several more."

Beginning with a maze commissioned by Lady Brunner at her house in Greys Court, by 2022 this had grown to more than 700 in 36 countries. His work includes the hedge maze at Leeds Castle in Kent that leads the visitor to an underground grotto before exiting through a tunnel and, more recently, an indoor hedge maze in Singapore's Changi Airport. The thread running through Fisher's practice is of mazes and labyrinths as spaces which unite families towards a common goal.

"The more you do internationally, the more insights from one country or one



(From top) Hedge maze at Longleat Safari Park, designed by Greg Bright; stone labyrinth in Canonteign Falls, Devon, designed by Adrian Fisher (right) — Richard Baker/Corbis via Getty Images; Emma Solley, Alan Knox

culture are really fascinating to someone in a different culture . . . very quickly you learn that the whole world works on the basis of families," says Fisher. "[The maze] is an idea, a model of a possible way of looking at what you're doing, what your mum and dad are doing, your grandparents, wherever. What's it all about?"

To find the answers, Fisher initially partnered with a former colleague, the late British diplomat Randall Coate, who died in 2005. Their partnership



culminated in the Marlborough Maze, commissioned in 1987 by the 11th Duke of Marlborough for the grounds of Blenheim Palace. Seen from above, the hedge maze resembles the heraldic stonework on the pediment of the nearby palace portico, with the word Blenheim picked out in yew hedge at the centre.

"He was an absolute master at putting in lots of visual images," says Fisher of Coate. Gaze down upon Coate's Borges Maze from atop the bell tower on the island of San Giorgio

'The whole idea of the maze is to remind you that play is what you started with. Let play prevail'

Maggiore in the Venetian lagoon and you will see the pattern resembles an open book, inspired by a dream Coate had of the Argentine short story writer Jorge Luis Borges.

Where his colleague held the idea that every maze should be full of symbolism when seen from the sky, Fisher advocated the primacy of the maze walker's enjoyment.

"I felt you had to make it a highly entertaining experience . . . the whole idea of the maze is to remind you that play is what you started with. Let play prevail."

In the maze, Fisher assumes the role of storyteller, creating spaces where family and friends can share in a journey that none of them can finish on their own. "One of them spots the symbolism of that, and the other notices the logic of that, and they put those two ideas

together. 'Got it!' The result: they come out feeling better about each other."

The freedom to take a wrong turn, lose your way and start all over again provided by a maze is fundamental to the importance of play for both children and parents alike. "One of the main principles about play is that it represents a safe context to explore and learn where failure doesn't matter," says Dave Neale, a researcher specialising in the psychology of play at the University of Cambridge. "In most contexts in life [failure] is really bad, but in play it's not."

For Hugh Crossley, fourth Baron Somerleyton, the hedge maze at Somerleyton Hall in East Anglia, designed by William Andrews Nesfield in the mid-19th century, retains cherished memories of childhoods spent playing in its unusually wide pathways.

"We'd all crawl through the hedges to create shortcuts," he recalls. "Every children's party had an element of a chase through the maze. Biking and horse riding through the maze was always a great thing and doing it bareback on our ponies was part of our mum's horse agility training."

At Leeds Castle maze, comprising more than 2,400 yew trees and so complex that even Fisher became lost at its opening ceremony in 1988, the freedom to fall is the law of the land. "Families love to battle it out to be the first to conquer the maze, and we often watch as they shout wrong directions to confuse their opponents," Leeds Castle chief executive Helen Bonser-Wilton tells me.

But for the learning experience to remain entertaining, the path through the maze has to be finely calibrated. Too

Continued on page 2

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UK property | New buyers have been prepared to pay record sums in this coveted – though quiet – London enclave. *By Liz Rowlinson*

Interior designer Ed O'Donnell and his partner JP fell in love with Little Venice, in west London, while house-sitting for a friend. In July they sold their two-bedroom Victorian worker's cottage in Brixton, south London, and moved to a large two-bedroom flat with two balconies in a mansion block overlooking the plane trees and tennis courts of Paddington Recreation Ground.

"Brixton is hectic and intense and we wanted somewhere calmer," says O'Donnell. "We feel like we are on holiday here with all the towpath cafés and pubs, and water taxis to Camden. It's much better connected to central London yet feels far less urban."

Where the Grand Union Canal meets the Regent's Canal, Little Venice is sought after for its pretty rows of Regency-style stucco houses with views over coloured narrowboats on the waters below. Proximity to central London – Paddington is a 15-minute walk along the Grand Union Canal – is a draw, especially since the Elizabeth Line has opened, with a 17-minute ride to Canary Wharf.

Although the area is small – bordered by Sutherland Avenue to the north, the A5 to the east and the water to the south and west – a handful of streets offer the sort of properties that persuaded buyers to pay record prices per sq ft this summer.

Between June and August, a five-bedroom stucco townhouse on Warwick Avenue, backing on to the communal Little Venice Gardens, sold for its asking price of £13.95m, or £2,858 per sq ft, beating the previous record of £2,618 in 2016. And on Randolph Road, a garden-backed five-bedroom house sold for £10.5m, or £2,742 per sq ft. A canal-fronted three-bedroom house on Maida Avenue also sold for £8,888,888, or £2,550 per sq ft, to a feng shui devotee.

"Most buyers cross over from Notting Hill because they are priced out, or are upsizing [locally]," says Rosy Khalastchy of Beauchamp Estates, who introduced the buyers to Ian Green Residential, sole agent on the Warwick Avenue sale. "I showed them 25 other



Big prices in Little Venice

(Above) Canalside life, Little Venice; (below) a grand four-bedroom flat on Randolph Road, £8.5m, through Winkworth

Jonathan Harbourne/Alamy



properties in this part of London but the main attraction of that home was the communal garden."

Buying agent Jo Eccles says a younger demographic of fintech entrepreneurs is moving in, despite the lack of upscale restaurants and shops they might find in Notting Hill or Marylebone. "Five

years ago, buyers looking to upsize from Notting Hill or other parts of west London would typically say they wanted St John's Wood but now they say they want St John's Wood or Little Venice."

Although Eccles says the demand for a small number of unique houses has widened, not everything sells quickly

economy and cost of living. But Ian Green of Ian Green Residential, who was also involved in the Maida Avenue sale, insists the best homes are still selling. "Record sales do not correlate with rising interest rates," Green says. At this price level, the rising cost of borrowing "isn't being felt – yet," he adds.

The area's small size makes average property price data very spiky, but per sq ft, values for both flats and houses have been rising over the past two years (up to £1,257 and 1,597 respectively, according to LonRes) – though neither are as high as they were in 2014.

The streets offering communal garden access tend to be most in demand but Blomfield Road, where some houses were built shortly after the Regent's Canal was completed in 1820, has some of the grandest homes that rarely come up for sale.

Marc Schneiderman of Arlington Residential says the best architecturally are on the stretch between Warwick Avenue and Randolph Road. A seven-bedroom

'We feel like we are on holiday here with all the towpath cafés and water taxis to Camden'

– musician Noel Gallagher's house sold in 2020 after four years on the market and a price reduction of more than £3.5m, and three properties currently listed for between £5m and £12.95m on Rightmove had their prices reduced in the past six weeks.

Recent reductions may reflect the growing uncertainty around the

BUYING GUIDE

Paddington station is a 15-minute walk from Little Venice. Warwick Avenue and Maida Vale stations are on the Bakerloo Tube line.

So far this year, 62 per cent of sales have been houses – the highest proportion since 2017 – with an average price of £4.12m, or £1,597 per sq ft, according to LonRes.

What you can buy for ...

£1.075m A two-bedroom raised ground-floor Victorian flat, Marsh and Parsons.

£5m A white stucco, Grade II-listed house with six bedrooms and views of the canal, through Arlington Residential.

detached house sold in 2017 for £12.25m [the previous record] but houses at the A5 end are smaller – a four-bedroom townhouse sold for £2.5m last year.

Among the homeowners who have remained in the area for many years is fashion photographer John Bishop, who moved to Randolph Road from Notting Hill in 1974. "It was a rundown area," he says. "But we loved the wide, leafy avenues and classic, high-ceilinged houses and we saw the potential. This street is still quieter and with less traffic [than Warwick Road] and the whole area has retained its charm." A handful of good independent shops are on Clifton Road but it could do with a Marks and Spencer, he says.

Renters will struggle to find a house in the area, says Melina Karagianni, lettings manager at Marsh & Parsons Little Venice. "We hardly ever have houses to rent, but there are a number of four or five-bedroom flats."

Cunningham Court, a mansion block on Blomfield Road, is popular with renters, as is Aubrey House on the other side of the Regent's Canal. She says that 85 per cent of lets are going for over asking, with what she calls an "average" two-bedroom period flat that would have rented for between £450-£500 per week pre-pandemic, now going for between £550-£650. A comparable one in Notting Hill is £600-£700.

The demand for flats to buy is not as strong as for rentals, and Ed O'Donnell says he got his mansion block flat for "a good price": "We paid £50,000 less than the asking and did well on our house sale so it seems opportune timing."

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Data source: Properties exchanged between 22nd December 2020 and 24th December 2021, John D Wood & Co, data 2022.

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