

THE SPACES

PROPERTY | BY EMILY WRIGHT

Meet the entrepreneurs bringing a personal touch to home sales

Their tailored approach is reshaping London's competitive property business



A living room at the Chelsea Powerhouse by interior design studio Angel O'Donnell. Photography: Taran Wilkhu.

London is properly property-obsessed. There are more design-savvy buyers out there than ever, and more sellers who know what they're worth. Industry players need to stand apart. Good news, then, that after years of soulless digitisation, the residential real estate sector is reorganising. A new class of disrupters has emerged, with specialist skills and a tailored approach to business. They're drafting, priming, storytelling, eco-charging, hand-holding and proving that personality, once again, is what makes deals. We've caught up with five businesses mastering design, sale-completion and everything in between, helping move the marketplace into a better space.



James Klonaris and Corey Hemingway, founders of Hemingway&K. Photography: courtesy of Hemingway&K.

It was ‘out of love’ that Corey Hemingway and James Klonaris founded their niche agency Hemingway+K last September, specialising in prime, design-led London home sales. Not out of love for the property sector, says Hemingway, but for architecture, interiors and the way people occupy spaces. The agency’s books are dominated by one-off properties with distinctive characteristics and design style – from FAT Architecture’s Blue House to a Nicholas Ashby-designed flat in Brixton – all filmed and photographed like protagonists in a film. Hemingway says it works, not only because the demand from buyers is there, but because the duo knows exactly how to ‘inject life into the storytelling.’



A home in Primrose Hill sold by Hemingway+K. Photography: courtesy of Hemingway+K.

Hemingway has property in her blood – her parents Wayne and Geraldine ran a successful affordable-housing group, Hemingway Design, and built the family home from scratch. And both she and Klonaris are veterans of design-led estate agencies The Modern House and Inigo, where they learned to use inspiration from fashion and film in capturing the essence of a home. ‘We find the means to effectively communicate each space we sell to an appreciative, understanding and informed audience,’ says Hemingway. In a sea of design-led agencies, theirs is proving a successful strategy. Their listings are steady, ranging in price from £420,000 to £7.9m. Though they’re still London-centric, ‘Some of these homes in farther-flung places are too incredible not to take on,’ says Klonaris. ‘So, where logistics allow, a few may be on the horizon.’

The design-led developers: Vabel



Vabel’s Daniel Baliti and Jeremy Spencer. Photography: courtesy of Vabel.

Jeremy Spencer, creative director of the house-builder and developer Vabel, says well-considered design is 'one of the most powerful influences on modern buying decisions'. So he and co-founder Daniel Baliti have specialised in delivering high-end, design-focused residential schemes from Blackheath to Bayswater. The 300 homes they've created have a razor-sharp focus on interiors, right down to the lighting – ambient illumination is layered throughout every scheme, including on balconies. They use LEDs only, because energy-savers are non-negotiable for many new buyers: aerated taps to reduce water flow, living green roofs and communal landscaping to bolster biodiversity. And unlike many developers, their architects, designers, builders and contractors work in-house, for easy decision-making and cohesive vision.



A kitchen at Vabel's Blackheath new-build. Photography: Billy Bolton.

The strategy is paying off. Projects like the Haverstock development in Belsize Park, north London, have sold out despite tough market conditions. Formerly an interior architect at United Designers, Spencer packs spaces with brushed-bronze hardware, matt ceramic tile and terracotta splashbacks, and prioritises comfortable proportions rather than squeezing in extra rooms where they don't belong 'at the cost of natural light, storage or breathing space'. At the most recent Blackheath residential building launch, purchases have largely been made by 'design-savvy young professionals who are actively choosing feeling over formula', he says. 'In a crowded market, well-designed homes are the ones that stop them in their tracks.'

The stagers: Angel O'Donnell



Richard Angel and Ed O'Donnell of design practice Angel O'Donnell. Photography: Taran Wilkhu.

When an established interior design studio like Angel O'Donnell starts dressing high-end listed homes, you know it's a going concern. These days 'staging' is more than the last-minute *zhuzh* unworthy of a designer's time but rather a sophisticated operation. And tailoring each design scheme to highlight the property's unique assets is key, says Ed O'Donnell, who has staunchly rejected a signature style. 'We launched with a clear mission to approach every project with a blank slate,' he says. 'Many thought we were naïve for choosing not to have a recognisable look, but we stuck to our guns, and it has paid off.'



A show-home at Centre Point by Angel O'Donnell, sold with its furniture and fixtures in situ. Photography: Taran Wilkhu.

With this approach, the practice has been able to create sellable, 'PR-able' looks – most notably in the Powerhouse flats at Chelsea Waterfront, and at Almacantar's Centre Point, where Angel O'Donnell's show-home sold with all its furniture, fixtures and equipment in situ. 'Our designs are commercially successful because they are bold, story-rich and unafraid to stand out from the crowd,' says O'Donnell. When a connection is made between a property and would-be buyer, it becomes easier to 'drive loyalty, positive word of mouth and all-important sales.'

The visualisers: Arya Douge



Arya Douge's Robert Douge and Adam Arya. Photography: courtesy of Arya Douge.

Sometimes the features that make a property special are lost within the architectural aesthetic. In, say, a listed heritage building, new potential can be hard to grasp without some visual cues. Architectural practice Arya Douge traditionally worked with clients who had purchased a property and were ready to renovate. Now, they're increasingly approached to support a home vendor through a high-end sale. 'We are brought in by the vendor's agent to help bring a potential scheme to life,' says co-founder Adam Arya.



Arya Douge's visualisation of a home spa in St John's Wood. Photography: courtesy of Arya Douge.

His firm recently worked on selling a home in St John's Wood that had fallen into disrepair. 'The agents felt it needed a compelling and creative new design approach to demonstrate the potential of the property to prospective buyers,' says Arya. His sketches showed off a new design concept with a refreshing use of space, configuration and aesthetics – including an in-house spa. And he believes they ultimately led to a successful sale.

The closer: Domy



Domy founder Maya Carni. Photography: courtesy of Domy.

No matter how long you trawl for properties online, a successful deal usually requires human connection – and not merely the human sent by a property's high-street estate agency. Maya Carni, a trained architect, is the founder of Domy, a property-search liaison that helps buyers in north, east and southeast London navigate the complex world of residential sales. Carni has leveraged her network of salespeople, developers, mortgage brokers, lawyers and tradesman to help seamlessly nail down deals. And she offers design services to boot, for properties that need work. 'Buying a home is one of the biggest investments of most people's lives, but the agents work for the vendor,' says Carni. 'I have good relationships with a lot of those agents, and often when they have something they want to sell, I get the first call before it even goes on the market.'



The view from a flat purchased by a Domy client. Photography: courtesy of Domy.

Carni acts as buffer between buyers and agents, filtering out properties to find the one that fits the specific brief of her client. Once she's made a match, she connects them and, crucially, remains involved until the buyer has the keys. '[The client] often has a lot of questions and can find things quite confusing,' she says, adding that many are expats or young professionals. 'I am someone to rely on who is on their side.' Her architectural background also means she's able to advise on a property's future design potential. For time-poor buyers, having all that in one bespoke package is a game-changer.