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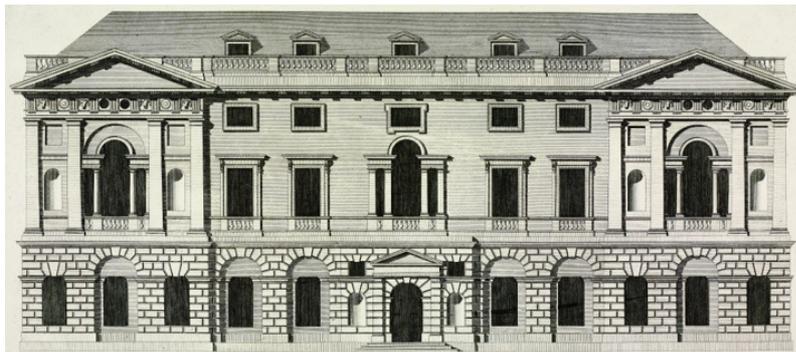
The neo townhouse: These enduringly popular London homes are getting a modern makeover

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London is an architectural patchwork of cottages and terraces, mansion flats, mews and tower blocks. And then there's the townhouse. Definitions vary for this apparently all-encompassing name – for what is a townhouse? Is it no more than a house in town? If so, what is a “town”? Or is it a particular kind of house? Can it be terraced, or is it a standalone property?

And now London has a few more townhouses. Earlier this year, the long-awaited Chelsea Barracks site launched 13 townhouses as part of the £3.5bn new neighbourhood. With roof terraces, orangeries, underground parking and staff accommodation, prices for the properties, which range from 8,000 to 15,000 sq ft, start from £37m. Few such as these, with their own front door and garden, are built today.

Historically, a townhouse did what it said on the tin – provided a house in “town” for a wealthy family who also had property in the country. For the grandest families, these houses were palaces such as Spencer House, commissioned in 1756 for the 1st Earl Spencer (and still extant at 27 St James's Place), and Devonshire House on Piccadilly, built in 1740 for the 3rd Duke of Devonshire.

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Most, though, were built as terraced houses, sometimes around a garden square, with three or four storeys. Being relatively tall and thin in appearance, their rooms stacked logically on top of one another. They had basement kitchens, with high-ceiled reception rooms on the floor above, accessed via a set of stairs from the street, an iron railing separating the public and private. Upstairs were the main bedrooms, and the servants' quarters above those. These terraces were, and are, workable, liveable, homely – efficient, even.



Some of the townhouses at Chelsea Barracks

For some buyers, this kind of property – the townhouse in its pure form – is a marker of success. “I had a client who worked in commodities and he knew exactly what he wanted – a townhouse in Mayfair,” says buying agent Thea Carroll. “He was about to do the deal of his life, he was coming into a lot of money and wanted to mark that with a townhouse.”

‘Not hugely practical’

Not all high net-worth individuals have the same aspirations, of course, and townhouses don’t work for everyone. “The archetypal townhouse, as found on streets such as Wilton Place or Wilton Crescent,” says Carroll, “is not hugely practical. A lot of them need lifts to be installed for the kind of buyers we see. The wealth that has come to London in recent years puts convenience above all else, and convenience has become synonymous with lateral living.” A four- or five-storey townhouse, then, is not so fashionable.

There are still plenty of townhouse devotees, however. Mark Parkinson, a founding partner of property search firm Middleton Advisors, sees a growing number of people who actively want to live in townhouses in regional towns “rather than move out to the middle of nowhere”. He defines the townhouse as “a house in a town, which could be semi-detached, or terraced.

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A townhouse can be any style of house in a town that is not a cottage.” Brendan Roberts, director at London estate agency Aylesford International, agrees that the townhouse needn’t be too grand. “When I think of a townhouse I think of something fairly modest. A townhouse suggests an efficient way of living in town without a particularly excess amount of space.” For Roberts, the London streets that immediately spring to mind

include those to the west of Sloane Square, such as Bywater Street, “where there are terraced cottages over two or three floors with up to four bedrooms.”

These properties still command significant prices, “starting in excess of £3m, but for a townhouse just off the King’s Road that is what you would expect,” says Roberts. Such properties exist further out of “town” too – on the charming streets off Northcote Road in Clapham. “Those houses perfectly qualify as townhouses – they’re just not as central as others,” Roberts adds.

Townhouses in Tornagrain

It isn’t just in London that the townhouse is still well utilised. John Stuart, the 21st Earl of Moray, whose ancestors built part of New Town in Edinburgh, is one of a handful of significant landowners building towns. For the last decade he has been planning Tornagrain, a new town outside Inverness, that will, when it is complete in 50 years, be home to 12,000 people. Townhouses are a key part of the plan for Tornagrain.

“With a large development like ours, as you move into the centre of the town the townhouse becomes more prevalent in the environment,” says Lord Moray. “We haven’t delivered many yet but they will be one of the dominant house types.”

Down in Hampshire, Mark Thistlethwayte, former Cazenove banker and heir to the Southwick estate, which has been in his family since 1539, is building Welborne, a 6,000-house garden village between Southampton and Portsmouth. John Beresford, Thistlethwayte’s managing director, champions the townhouse.



A townhouse in Wilton Crescent, Belgravia

“They will be used in areas where we are trying to achieve a denser form to the development, and also where they will be fronting landscaped spaces. We have a big central park – if we put two-storey homes around there, it might feel weak, so we’re going to need three- or four-storey properties there.”

The townhouse isn’t always the easiest sell, says Beresford. Put a three- or four-storey terrace next to a traditional two-storey house with a garage and a drive, and “people will always opt for the traditional house,” he says. “Since the credit crunch, developers have generally avoided townhouses for that reason – it’s not economic. The downside is that you end up with monotonous developments. You see the big-volume house builder schemes, and all of the properties are on the same level.”

That is where Beresford hopes that Welborne can make a difference. “We might not get the best pound per square foot for a townhouse but it can add value to a wider area – you can frame key spaces in a development using townhouses.” It is a handy tool to have in the architectural box. “It’s like a Sunday roast,” says Beresford. “You want the right proportion of meat and veg. If you had a whole plate of townhouses it wouldn’t be as appetising.”

In Oscar Wilde’s 1895 play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, conversation revolves around the perceptions of town and country. “When one is in town one amuses oneself,” says upper-class Jack Worthing, who lives in the country. Later, the mother of his would-be lover Gwendolen Fairfax, upon hearing that Worthing has a country house “with some land, of course,” says, “You have a townhouse, I hope? A girl like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.”

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