

Sam McNally & Mark O’Callaghan of Echlin on the business of boutique development

INTERVIEW: The team behind a raft of acclaimed PCL projects, including one of Chelsea’s most talked-about new-builds of recent years, Echlin’s Sam McNally and Mark O’Callaghan take on the PrimeResi Q&A...



- **Tell us about your backgrounds. When did you decide to start developing together and what do you each bring to the party?**

Mark’s background was in the fashion industry where he worked at director level with Burberry and Mulberry amongst other well-known fashion houses. He was largely responsible for the meticulous fit outs of the stores worldwide. At the same time, as a sideline interest, he was buying and selling properties in Prime Central London, developing some and retaining others for buy-to-let investment.

My background was in the sourcing and supply of furniture, fittings and equipment to high-end residential projects in Prime Central London, providing bespoke solutions to the UK’s most respected property developers and world’s most reputable design houses. Similar to Mark, alongside my day job, I was developing my own projects and in 2011, labeled by The Sunday Times as “developer to watch”.

We both teamed up in 2012 to form Echlin. The mission was to adopt a coherent approach to property design and development offering an understated aesthetic to the luxury residential property market. Our design approach was not to be fixed nor formulaic, rather tailored to a unique brief in line with each specific environment.

- **In your planning documentation for your Old Church Street scheme you received the support of legendary architect Lord Richard Rogers; how did that come about and what did it mean to you as a team?**

Lord Rogers was made aware of the scheme by one of our commissioned architects. As a local resident who appreciated the design, he wrote a paragraph of support which we included in our planning documentation. It was a huge compliment to us and our architects to have the support from one of the world's most celebrated modernist architects who himself has faced his fair share of planning challenges.

- **How did you find the acquisition process? Did you have to fight off much competition for the site?**

We spotted the former post-war house when passing. Seeing a potential opportunity, Mark and I knocked on the door. The timing was perfect as the owner was looking to move on but didn't want the hassle of selling through a third party. We shook hands and agreed the deal there and then.

- **Given the location on Chelsea's oldest thoroughfare, how were your designs received by the planners? How would you sum up the appetite for modern design in RBKC?**

The planners were in full support of our application; it was only the local residents' disapproval that ultimately resulted in a planning refusal leading us to go through the appeal process. The planners were supportive of our contemporary proposal and appreciated Old Church Street is mixed in its architectural style with both period and contemporary precedents spanning many decades. Ironically, by the time we were going through the appeal process, more of the local residents were in support of the design than against. Now the building is complete, some of the objectors have even complimented the architecture. The house has just been shortlisted for a RIBA award.

- **Which single element of the finished product are you most proud of?**

Using rich and timeless materials to create a unique contemporary landmark town house on the oldest street in Chelsea. The house will go on to symbolise this period of architecture sat within the individual and eclectic streetscape of Old Church Street.



- **Have you designed the project with a particular buyer in mind, or do you believe in keeping your options open?**

On the outset we agree a vision of who our buyer will be and that becomes an integral part of our design brief. However, we ensure all our projects have flexible spaces so, for example, should someone want a living room instead of a dining room, then we ensure all the media and communications services are available to facilitate that change.

- **Are you looking for other sites at the moment? What's your pipeline looking like?**

We are actively looking for interesting sites in central London, new build or refurb, single house or multi-unit. Our next project to come through the pipeline is a unique five-bedroom residence in Holland Park. The house comprises of a Georgian terrace adjoined with two mews buildings to boast stunning lateral living space, internal garage and fabulous roof terraces. Other current projects include a majestic semi-detached period house in Notting Hill and a terraced mansion in the heart of Kensington.

- **What's the most unusual or challenging feature you've ever built into a scheme?**

We are currently working on a private commission where the house has no outdoor space but over 7,500 square feet of internal area. To give the owner private and enjoyable outdoor space, we're cutting out the middle part of the top floor to create a roof garden. The challenge has been to ensure it not visible from street level or the surrounding houses without compromising the design.

- **Are there any 'bonus' features you can see becoming 'must-haves' for HNW buyers over the next few years?**

Part of the excitement of designing for HNWs is that you are working on a global platform. As we currently work predominately in London, we have to make sure our developments satisfy the London market, whilst appealing on a worldwide scale. In relation to "bonus" features this means more than just the latest interior trends or gadgetry. With the new residential towers being built over the City, one thing that has become a must-have in high-end residential is a "concierge" service. With our one-off houses we have responded to this with our own "Echlin Assist" service which offers moving in and maintenance support direct from us, the people who built the home. We have also partnered with Quintessentially on our Old Church Street project, offering 24 hour personal concierge support. The combination of these, creates a total peace of mind for our buyers. We see these services as becoming the absolute must-haves of the future.

- **There's been lots of talk of a construction crunch of late, especially in the luxury sector; have you found it hard to find the right suppliers?**

Alterations to planning policy allowing for permitted development of office-to-resi along with rapidly inflating house prices have created a construction surge. Building costs have increased considerably, predominantly due to the increase in demand rather than the increase in material costs. Recently we were quoted a lead time of four months for London stock bricks demonstrating the demand is exceeding supply. I think we will see more increases to come.

We tend to only work with a small selection of key suppliers and craftsmen who we have close relationships with. Strong relationships like this can help to ensure reliable availability and prevent rising costs due to increased demand. With the current status of construction, we need to give extra attention to careful planning and project programming.

- **Are you looking to create a recognisable 'Echlin' product with your developments, or would you rather each project is viewed as a unique entity?**

Every project is individual so we approach the architecture and design according to the location, demographic and client or prospect purchaser. We do not believe in a fixed nor a formulaic method, nor do we condone the template approach to design; what works in one space may not work in another. In the case of private commissions, we see it as our responsibility to use our experience and expertise to guide our client throughout the design process. For sure, Echlin have certain design characteristics and coherences that will enable you to distinguish our projects but it may not be so glaringly obvious.



- **Which prime resi developers or designers have you taken inspiration from over the years? Are there any developments you wish you had been involved in?**

We have a huge amount of respect for designers and developers that successfully tread new ground and there are dozens of key developments which we'd have loved to have been involved with. As far boutique developers go, we have had a lot of respect for Mike Spink's work over the years. He thinks outside of the box which is refreshing. As for design studios, the late David Collins' remains a favourite. His diversity and ability to create timeless spaces was truly commendable.

- **Where do you see Echlin in ten years' time?**

Designing and developing key landmark schemes not only in London but around the UK and worldwide, from boutique residences to multi-unit projects. We'd like to be a brand recognised for our forward thinking and open minded approach to high-end residential. Over the coming years we would like strong but organic growth ensuring we stay true to our core values.

- **If you could make one policy change to improve the way the property industry works in the UK, what would that be?**

Fundamentally, there are a lot of policy issues for the property industry in the UK. Obviously the largest of these is the planning system, but this is part of the much larger Housing Crisis. It's fact that we have consistently built less than the requirement for several decades and this has inevitably led to an over inflated market and a generation priced out of the market, particularly in London. It's tough, because the planners often support developers' desire to build, knowing that their borough or council has a shortage of housing, but the neighbours obstructions or political fluctuations get in the way.

In London, much has been made of the Mansion Tax proposals, which by many in the industry is seen as ineffectual and punishing the wrong people rather than creating a fairer system. Re-evaluating the Council Tax banding would go a long to level the playing field, in addition to the recent Stamp Duty reform. We categorically must build at all levels of the market, and the public need to understand this, rather than seeing "luxury" developers as the enemy. If the government can come up with coherent policies that incentivise developers to build in all areas of the market, we will stand a better chance of meeting the housing need for all and ultimately see an improvement in the economy.

- **Where would you both personally buy right now, given an unlimited budget?**

Prime London postcodes will always be desirable and any opportunity to work on a prestigious development scheme would be very exciting for us. Having said that, we would only get involved in sites and projects where we believe our expertise and design ethos will add value. There are still areas in Zone 1 that have some catching up to do, including Earls Court and Bayswater. We are currently developing a grand town house on the fringe of Bayswater and Notting Hill. It's a fabulous location being so close to the park, the entertainment in Notting Hill and eateries and shopping of Mayfair.

From purely an investment stance, parts of Zone 3 look interesting particularly where A+ transport links are being sited. It will be interesting to see how East London develops over the coming years. There is excellent potential for some very exciting regeneration projects.

- **What's the best piece of advice you've been given so far?**

Ensure you know and remain focused on your end-goal with each development. This seems straightforward but at Echlin, we operate a symbiotic relationship between design and commercial attitudes. This means we intricately analyse a site and see what its potential could be. For example, is it a crumbling wreck that could be restored to its former glory? Or was it a post-war infill building of uninspiring quality sitting on a prime street – as in our Old Church Street project. Ultimately, we look at each project with a view to adding value, creating something incredible where people want to live. This effectively results in admirable returns for our investors. Bringing these projects to reality is not an easy task, but if you know exactly what you want to achieve, you'll be able to respond to the challenges easier.

echlinlondon.com