

How London lost its cool



Nathan Brooker

Metropolitan life

I love an Americanism. Only boring people don't. Next time you're talking to someone over 45, casually drop in a "trash can" or a "sidewalk" and see what happens. It adds pep to a conversation.

London's property developers seem to agree. Except, not content with alarming my centrist dad, they're full-on rebranding swathes of the capital.

Here's a quiz: where do you think The Tribeca is? New York, right? Lower Manhattan. Wrong. It's in East Dulwich, SE22. Stroll down Crystal Palace Road and you'll see the 22 flats taking shape behind 8ft hoardings with "The Tribeca" etched in an Art Deco script redolent of *The Great Gatsby*. God knows what Daisy Buchanan would make of Peckham Rye.

What about Central Park? That's in Lewisham. Manhattan Plaza? Poplar. Manhattan Loft Gardens? Stratford.

Others are more insidious. Long and Waterson describes itself as a collection of 119 lofts, apartments and penthouses. It's in Shoreditch on the corner of Long and Waterson streets (much like how an American might give an address as "45th and Madison"). Meanwhile, The Madison is a 53-storey tower on the Isle of Dogs;

residents can join the "Highline" club.

I call them NY-Lon homes – part New York, part London, and totally synthetic. The reason developers go for them, of course, is that – much like the rebranding of Britain after Brexit – they think it makes London sound international and cosmopolitan. It doesn't. It makes it sound insecure.

A 10-minute stroll from the FT office is a fashionable cluster of bars and restaurants under railway arches in Southwark. It's called Flat Iron Square which, I'm told, takes its name from a nearby 19th-century junction and not the Flatiron building in New York. Still, according to the website, it forms the first stop in a line of eatery-clusters that runs across the South Bank along a railway viaduct. They're calling it the Low Line. (Cringe.)

Estate agents are taking up this guff and running with it. A particular favourite is the ongoing rebranding of Holborn, Bloomsbury and St Giles as "Midtown". Ten years ago, when the Candy brothers were involved in buying the Middlesex hospital site in nearby Fitzrovia and rechristening it "Noho Square" – north of Soho – locals reacted with understandable violence. They sent Welsh comedian

Griff Rhys Jones on TV to complain. It worked. The brothers bailed out, the plans were scrapped, and the 291 apartments at Fitzroy Place started selling in 2014 – for £1,700 per sq foot.

And there's the rub. Because, while you may question whether getting upset about naming London homes after parts of New York is that big a deal, it points to a bigger problem. Namely: these homes aren't for the people who live in these places. No kid from Camberwell or Peckham or Brockley is going to mistake Goose Green for Washington Square Park. Neither are they going to fail to notice the flats in The Tribeca cost about 20 per cent more than what Zoopla says is the going rate for their postcode.

The Nylon names are there to appeal to the institutional investors and overseas buyers who might be convinced London is still a global city if bits of it are named after bits of another global city. And the evidence is that – after helping housing unaffordability to rocket to unprecedented levels – a lot of them are refusing to bite. Half the high-end flats launched in London failed to sell last year, according to Molior; and, according to the British Property

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Federation, the number of homes purpose-built to be rented out has grown more than 139 per cent in the past three years. The fact is, since about Q3 2014, London's prime market has been in marked decline. Changes to stamp duty, low oil prices and more stringent anti-money laundering rules for those applying for the UK's golden visa programme took the gloss off London as a place for the super rich.

But it didn't lose London its cool. It might surrender that to Brexit, of course – it's perhaps too early to tell – but what really puts London's cool under threat is when cool people can't afford to live there. The overwhelming majority of these Nylon homes are not affordable. And, if they're bought by investors – who, let's face it, are the ultimate buzzkillers – they're unlikely to be rented out for affordable rates either. The thing is, once you kill a city's vibe, it's difficult to get it back.

And London was a cool place once. It was so cool that it used to be the Americans who pinched our names: Greenwich Village, SoHo, Chelsea. Geez Louise, the city is called New YORK.

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For the custodian of one of the finest private libraries in Scandinavia and the treasures of one of Norway's leading industrialists, Marianne Andresen is remarkably carefree about ownership.

We are sitting in the evening light in the 4,000-volume library surrounded by portraits and landscape paintings, porcelain, cut glass and sculpture. First-edition Henrik Ibsen plays are within arm's reach. Outside, the linden-lined approach is blanketed with snow; inside is lit immaculately with shaded lamps and candles. Clocks chime soothingly.

For Andresen, at 83 years old, recounting comes more readily than showing off the curated wonders of her family house, Smedbraaten. "I try not to get too attached to things," she says. "Things will disappear. Human beings are far more important. It has to do with the way they are connected."

Certainly, the warm welcome is striking at the secluded house on Oslo's Bygdøy peninsula on a winter's night. To make the point, a large number of family photographs are displayed on writing desks and a grand piano.

"Do you want to go straight to work, or sit and relax? Please have a glass of sherry or wine, and smoked salmon," she invites, brightly. I opt for work and we sift through unframed pen and ink

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Photographs by Ilja Chendel for the FT

At Home | Artist Marianne Andresen travelled the world with her late husband, the Norwegian industrialist Johan. At 83, she is still painting – and curating the family's treasures. By James Lamont

'I try not to get too attached to things'

drawings laid out on the 10-person dining-room table for an exhibition in Stockholm in the autumn.

A careful observer with time on her hands, Andresen travelled the world with her industrialist husband Johan, sketchbook in hand. While he diversified the family's investments beyond tobacco into packaging company Elopak and ski-equipment maker Swix Sport, she painted ceaselessly. Her drawings, accumulating for decades in an attic studio, range from studies of her own Bielke family home in southern Sweden, the grand 70-room Sturefors Castle, figures, animals and plants, to Samarkand, Jeddah, Dakar and bull-fights in Portugal.

Ever the itinerant artist, she has just returned from Jordan and the Bahamas. Last year, she held the first exhibition of her lifetime in Oslo, selling nearly 90 paintings to fund scholarships at an international school on Norway's west coast, UWC Red Cross Nordic. Norway's Queen Sonja bought four.

Originally a Swiss-style cottage on a tree-lined rocky outcrop on the far outskirts of Oslo, a stone's throw from the royal summer palace, Smedbraaten was transformed into a more substantial two-storey ochre-coloured Mediterranean villa in 1935 by local architect Arnstein Arneberg.

It was intended as a show house for the Andresen family, which made its fortune from cigarette production after buying J.L. Tiedemanns Tobaksfabrik in 1849. Its interiors were to be filled with Norwegian furniture, paintings and literature. Some of it had an industrial theme. In the library is a chest with two drawers missing. These house silver engraved snuff boxes too valuable to be on display, and behind lock and key elsewhere.

Not long after it was built, the second world war overtook Smedbraaten. During the German occupation her father-in-law, a businessman-cum-conservative politician, was imprisoned, before fleeing in 1944 with son Johan. They escaped via the house's cellar, through a tunnel in the garden, and on to neutral Sweden. "There are so many things in the walls here," says Andresen.

Flight was not before precautions were taken with the collectibles. Fearing the Nazis would loot them, valuable possessions were wrapped and distributed to workers of the tobacco factory to



Andresen's painter's palette, in her studio in the attic



Drawers with silver engraved snuff boxes

conceal in their homes until hostilities ended. Remarkably, all were returned.

The house, she says, served as a "camouflage" for leaders of the Norwegian resistance, Milorg, and was the site of secret meetings with mutinous German officers waking up to Berlin's defeat.

After all that, welcome was not guaranteed at Smedbraaten. Distrust ran high. Though daughter of a count and educated in Ramsgate, Brussels, Stockholm and Munich, Andresen's own acceptance was not assured. She met her Harvard Business School-educated husband in 1956 on a visit to Oslo. It took four years, however, for them to get engaged. One reason was her Roman Catholicism in mainly Protestant Norway.

"There was a reluctance here because I was a Catholic," she recalls. "I sent [Johan] to a Dominican father. He explained that it wasn't that dangerous to marry a Catholic girl. We were engaged quickly and married."

Although her friends have "accepted her religion", she has remained an outsider, mostly as a self-identifying Swede in a country where Danish and then Swedish dominance over the ages rankles. A corner of the library is dedicated to Swedish artefacts including an 18th-century mirror from the workshop of Burchard Precht. In a parlour off the sitting room, she stacks copies of the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet to give her, in her words, a wider view of world affairs.

Oslo was a gloomy place when she first visited in 1947. "Norway was so

poor, and very grey. There was nothing. There was no colour, there were no restaurants. It was far behind Stockholm and Copenhagen. It only began to change in the 1950s," she says.

One of the catalysts was the shipping industry. This boomed from the 1950s to the 1970s making several families, such as the Olsens and Skaugens, rich and brightening the social and cultural scenes for a heady couple of decades. These fortunes were followed by new money from oil and salmon farming.

"I christened two ships," she remembers. "Many of our friends were shipping people. They had a marvellous time. They purchased yachts, travelled everywhere and they had great collections, especially of Impressionist painters. Then it all collapsed at the beginning of the 1970s [when Norwegian owners were upended in the tanker business during the oil crisis]."

The house has hosted its own share of christenings, confirmations, weddings and dinners, and remains a focal point for her family. Andresen's second son Nils was left paralysed from the neck down 20 years ago after a motor accident in a storm in Malaysia. She speaks movingly of how a Houston-based physician helped him defy the odds, walk again and lead an independent life. She repeats several times a childhood question of his: "What are mothers for?" No answer is needed.

Fittingly, we have arrived at a sculpture in the library of a mother and child by Norwegian artist Gustav Vigeland.



The sitting room at Smedbraaten, the Andresen family home



The small dining room with a view towards Oslo



Smedbraaten's exterior



'Mother with Child' by Norwegian artist Gustav Vigeland in the library

Along with a small, fiery landscape by French painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir nearby, it is one of Andresen's favourite things. The Carrara marble is full-moon white and revolves on a pedestal so the viewer can see all angles. The child stands between his mother's crouched legs, looking bashful, almost resentful, as if not quite sorry for some terrible deed. Forgiveness lies in her embrace and the texture of the marble.

"Run your hands over the arms," Andresen instructs. "It is like silk." Indeed, it is.

The tobacco business was merged with the Denmark-based Scandinavian Tobacco Group in 1998 and later sold on to British American Tobacco. Andresen admits that she shed a tear when the last cigarette-making machine was taken out of the now demolished factory. She had married into a family where

smoking was de rigueur. But she recalls how compensation claims and bad publicity took a heavy toll on her husband as awareness grew of tobacco's health risks. He died in 2011.

Now she is preparing the family's possessions for inheritance among her four children – Johan, Eva, Nils and Birgitte, and six grandchildren, all girls.

"We sold a beautiful Munch painting, 'Starry Night', that is now in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. It belonged to Fridtjof Nansen [the explorer and diplomat]. It was always travelling to exhibitions, always somewhere. The proceeds I split among smaller, valuable, first-class pictures." These works will be easier to divide and pass on.

One is the Renoir landscape of a river bank in summer, to which she was attracted by a quality of her own as an artist – spontaneity. "It's a little jewel. I could see that he made it there in that place; it's not an atelier piece. We see it because he liked it. This is something that he [just] had to paint."

Smedbraaten is notable for its animal motifs, more rarefied hunting lodge than learned metropolitan space. Hunting, if not smoking, remains popular for the family. Foxes scamper out from murals, tigers are moulded on ceramic plates and stags escape pursuers in the threads of elaborate Persian carpets.

I prepare to leave, as Andresen tells me what a pity it is we cannot see the garden, her favourite possession of all. The seasons remind her of childhood on the Swedish estate where a timeless farming calendar held sway and pheasants, moose and reindeer abounded.

"Many people ask: 'Don't you want to go to an apartment?', she says of the upkeep of Smedbraaten and five other family properties. "I have so much to be grateful for. I won't leave my garden or my house. Thank you!"

James Lamont is the FT's managing editor

Favourite thing

Teaching six grand-daughters to value small, fragile things is no easy task. Andresen has enlisted the aid of a porcelain dining-table decoration, a Bavarian take on the virtues of Diana, the goddess of hunting. In an illuminated cabinet alongside a largely 18th-century Chinese collection, are mirthful hunting figurines of white Nymphenburg porcelain from Munich. A dog "points" at its prey, a wild boar charges, a man holds out a hare at arms-length and a woman trains a shotgun at her target. "I like the fact that it's the woman holding the shotgun," says Andresen.

