



# OLIGARCH CHIC

Gone are the days of garish refurbishments of classical English buildings. Foreign homeowners want craftsmanship and authenticity, writes **Andrea Watson**

**T**he Prince of Wales may come to the rescue of Cornwall's oldest home, Port Eliot House, whose aristocratic owners are struggling to meet the running costs of the 123-room property. Lord and Lady St German are said to be delighted at the thought of selling to a buyer who has proven his conservative credentials when it comes to British architecture.

Yet, were it not for rich foreign buyers, many great English houses might be turned into spa hotels and golf courses.

Russian billionaire Evgeny Lebedev has spent four years and millions of pounds restoring what he calls his "country" »



“OUR PERFECT PROJECT IS ONE WHERE YOU WALK IN AND SAY ‘THAT’S AMAZING, WHO DID IT?’”



**CRAFTED COPILENCE.** Previous pages: Bespoke kitchen by Artichoke, and its craftsmen at work. **Top:** the spa at the Aurelio Lech hotel, Austria, built for the billionaire Oleg Deripaska; **Above and right:** homes in Moscow designed by Oleg Klodt. “Russian taste has changed for the better,” he says.

home in London” near Hampton Court in the grounds of Bushy Park. To be fair, Lebedev is no fleeing oligarch – the owner of the *Evening Standard* and *The Independent* has lived in England for years, yet the point remains, Grade I\* listed Stud House, last restored in the 1980s, was crying out for a saviour. Lebedev hired set designer Patrick Kinmonth to create fantastical interiors that also respect the heritage building, all under the watchful eye of English Heritage. At one point there were more than 50 people on the job,

including surveyors, designers, builders, tradespeople and craftsmen. Lebedev took a close interest in the detail, according to one source, and visited frequently. According to Kinmonth, he was obsessed with authenticity but still indulged in flamboyant gestures, like ordering several pounds of lapis lazuli stone for one room. Notwithstanding midnight blue stone work, tastes among oligarchs seem to be improving. “I’ve noticed a trend for Russians to display their wealth less ostentatiously,” says Andrew

Petherick, director of bespoke interiors firm Artichoke ([artichoke-ld.com](http://artichoke-ld.com)). “At first it was always a huge car and a trophy house because living in Britain they did not have to hide wealth but over the last few years tastes are becoming more refined and elegant, more English.” Petherick certainly has no problem with Russians buying our stately homes. “I’ve seen too many crumbling piles belonging to aristocrats with crumbling fortunes going to rack and ruin,” he says.

There are plenty of examples of the new Russian style abroad too, like the Aurelio Lech Hotel, in Austria, built for billionaire Oleg Deripaska by Reinhard Wolf in 2009. There is nothing remotely brash about the interiors by Mlinaric, Henry & Zervudachi, which, while oozing quality, make the utmost of natural materials to create an understated luxury vibe. Interior designer Oleg Klodt ([olegklodt.com/en](http://olegklodt.com/en)), who has worked in Moscow on several £2m plus projects, adds: “Russian taste has changed for the better. Clients are much more savvy. They tell us they want art deco, or contemporary classical. We never used to see that before. They are more inclined to trust their architect, they are bolder and we can create more interesting projects.”

Artichoke specialises in kitchens that typically cost £130,000 to £180,000 but can run out at much more; in one case the range alone cost £120,000. The firm eschews “signature” styles, preferring (like its clients) anonymity. “Our perfect project is one where you walk in and say ‘that’s amazing, who did it?’” says Petherick. “That’s why developers do not like us, they want a signature kitchen by Mark Wilkinson.”

In really large new-build projects, there’s often no domestic kitchen at all. Given the chance, billionaires who entertain on a lavish scale prefer to have a restaurant-grade kitchen in the basement with a dumb waiter. Artichoke also do libraries, wine cellars, gun rooms and have been

**EXQUISITE DETAIL.** Clockwise from top: Evgeny Lebedev in the entrance hall at Stud House; handcrafted drawers and door knob by master carpenter Luke Houghton

moving a vast chimney just to open up the view of the garden from the front door – the whole job cost a cool £250,000. Artichoke has just completed a £280,000 baroque library for a house in north London. The hand carving was outsourced to a team in India, which was assembled by the legendary master wood carver Ian Agrell, and the gilding added £100,000 to the price. “We added a secret drawer with a 150-year-old malt as a present,” says Petherick. “We often add secret compartments and doors.” That lavish library is just the sort of project that the team at Artichoke enjoys most because it used all their traditional skills. Minimalist interiors are increasingly in demand and, despite appearances, some of them are extraordinarily expensive; neither Petherick nor Houghton like this sort of project. “There is no established skills base when you are working with modern materials,” says Houghton. “There is a lot more room for error with those kinds of projects,” adds Petherick. “It’s high risk using new materials in joinery where there is no proven track record of their performance and durability. But we can make a baroque library standing on our heads.” ■