

Chemistry, compatibility, kindred spirits — the vernacular associated with dating has crossed a new threshold, that of the changing world of estate agency. For some off-high street newcomers, where suits are something one only wears to a wedding and clipboards are abhorred, a charming demeanour and the bucolic brook at the end of the garden might excuse a magnolia bathroom suite or liberal deployment of TVs. But be warned: others will, quite simply, cancel you for it (or as one jilted anonymous seller told me, value your home so pitifully that you'll be forced to look elsewhere). In a quest to carve out a niche, it's not unusual for the nouvelle vague of agents to "audition" your property, ruthlessly refusing to list anything not aligned to their aesthetic. Silvery carpets, red Chesterfield sofas and UPVC doors are considered unforgivable crimes to decor, but some are savvily offering styling services to make up for poor judgments in taste. Thought you had the upper hand when it came to shopping around for an estate agent? Think again. Here's what your choice of agent says about your home.

Mr & Mrs Clarke The social agent

Imagine if the clothing company Boden diversified into property sales — you'd expect colourful scatter cushions and a chocolate labrador dozing by an open fire. That's the welcoming look radiated by Mr & Mrs Clarke, a boutique brokerage founded by former marketing executive Paul Clarke and his wife, Alex, six years ago. Disillusioned by the experience of selling their Islington home through a well-known premium agent — "the photos were bland and the descriptions so cookie-cutter"; "it was all very aggressive and transactional" — the Clarkes set about doing things their own way. Sales are overseen by 15 agents nationwide who scour for homes and play Cupid between properties and potential buyers. Around 50 per cent of inquiries are turned down, with Mr Clarke apathetic about those embarking on a valuation comparison exercise. "We want to work with people who really want to sell a house in a mindful way," he says. Potential buyers are vetted just as carefully: "It's about finding one perfect buyer, not lining up a hundred viewings." New listings are shared on Instagram a week before hitting the main portals. **Areas covered:** Nationwide **Commission:** "We offer a bespoke service and our fees reflect that," says Mr Clarke. **Loves:** A house that smells wonderful, from flowers or scented candles but never a plug-in. **Pet hates:** The toilet seat up on listing pictures and unmade beds — there's just no excuse for it. mrandmrsclarke.com

The Modern House The disruptor

It's no exaggeration to say that The Modern House co-founder Albert Hill set the benchmark in contemporary, design-led estate agency when he and Matt Gibberd founded their company 17 years ago (indeed, several founders mentioned used to work for them). Does that rile him? "We're all about celebrating good homes and design, so the more people doing that, the better," he says. The original purveyor of mid-century modern architecture in all its luminous, wood-clad glory has stayed ahead of the pack with a focus on content and community through books, podcasts and weekly home tours, where



Are you good enough for these agents?

COVER STORY

If you have Union Jack cushions or leave the loo seat up, good luck getting onto these discerning brokers' books. By Olivia Lidbury

transacting isn't top of the agenda. It still turns down around half of inquiries, with photographs or video calls the first obstacle to getting to its London-based appraisals team. And contrary to popular belief, the interiors of its listings aren't professionally styled — its clientele really are arbiters of taste. Hill notes how 1980s-designed townhouses are increasing in popularity and the rare, single-storey, glass-fronted California "Case Study" houses continue to endure: "People just go nuts for them, you always get queues around the block for those." **Areas covered:** Nationwide **Commission:** From 2 per cent +VAT **Loves:** People going to town with house plants. They used to have a 1970s association but now they're everywhere. **Pet hates:** Bad lighting — seeing 100 spotlights in a tiny kitchen upsets me. themodernhouse.com

Aucoot The trend-defier

While some agencies have a distinctive look and feel, "I see us like a *World of Interiors* of estate agents," says Aucoot founder John McDavid, who has a beguiling melting pot of properties on his website, ranging from contemporary million-pound apartments to grade II listed houses. Yet even he can't verbalise his filter: "You just sort of know it when you see it." And there's a lot that won't pass muster with McDavid, who turns down more properties than he takes on.



"We don't want to be the biggest agency out there, that would dilute our brand," he justifies. Having been in the industry for over 20 years, he prides himself on offering a personal service with a low fall-through rate: "Making things look good is the relatively easy bit. Navigating the process with someone who knows their onions isn't something people think about enough when choosing an agent." Cash-rich, time-poor City lawyers looking for £2 million+ family homes in the capital form the bulk of Aucoot's clientele, as well as a discreet pool who prefer to transact off-market. And there are those like McDavid who also only "know it when they see it", post-rationalising an area based on a property

Top: six-bedroom Hogbrook Farm, near Leamington Spa in Warwickshire, is on sale for £1.1 million with Mr and Mrs Clarke. Above: a five-bedroom house in South Tottenham, north London, is on the market for £1.4 million through Brickworks

after they've fallen head over heels for it. **Areas covered:** South of England **Commission:** From 2 per cent +VAT **Loves:** People don't use colour enough in my opinion, so I like to see that. **Pet hates:** Generic spaces, as if they've purely been designed via Pinterest. And Union Jack cushions. aucoot.com

The Unique Property Company The proud-to-be-different

As its name suggests, this is not the company to market a bog-standard semi. Home to converted chapels, barges and watermills, its listings will leave you pining for a character property. But extraordinary doesn't have to mean budget-busting; this agency established in 1996 will entertain a petite flat, so long as it has a quirky history or a sea view. Sussex area partner Madeline Cooper (who moonlights as a humanist celebrant and a career coach) prides herself on an un-pushy philosophy, which has endeared her to clients in her rapidly gentrifying home town of Hastings. "We've all been there where the agent barely knows how to open the door, let alone where the light switch is — the bad reputation is entirely justified," she says of the industry's staff. Cooper, on the other hand, has been known to talk people out of a purchase: "It's important to be personal without prying but there was a divorcee who I



Top: this two-bedroom flat in Hackney, London, which recently sold for £1.75 million, is an example of the Modern House's properties. Left: Aucoot has newly sold this four-bedroom home, also in Hackney



Brickworks

The transformer/the makeover magicians

Brickworks co-founder Ellie Rees chooses to pay her (all-female) staff salaries rather than incentivising via commission, feels passionately about for-sale boards — "they're catastrophic for the environment" — and isn't elitist about the type of properties she'll list. Sound too good to be true? It's not a coincidence that most of Brickworks' listings could garner a spread in *Livingetc* magazine — there is help available behind the scenes to those needing to make their homes more photogenic. "Rather than saying your house isn't quite right for us or not beautiful enough, we just say it's not ready to go to market yet," explains Rees, who has a warehouse filled with Ercol daybeds and jute rugs, ready to be deployed by in-house stylists (a former *Vogue* senior editor used the service to inject style into two Ikea-furnished tenanted bedrooms in her Holloway flat; it quickly sold after having languished on the market with a local agent). Rees estimates that properties undergoing its aesthetic nip-and-tuck can enjoy an 8 to 15 per cent uplift. **Areas covered:** London-wide; Brighton and Hove **Commission:** 1.5 to 3 per cent +VAT for staging services and furniture hire. **Loves:** Books — homes without them are just strange. Libraries and studies bring a considered physicality to our digital world. **Pet hates:** Too many wedding photos. Granted, they're really important to you — but nobody else cares. brickworkslondon.com

A five-bedroom house with a 90ft orangery and sea views in Hastings, East Sussex, is on the market for £1.95 million through the Unique Property Company

could see was moving too remotely, and I'd want someone giving me good advice at that point in my life," she reasons. **Areas covered:** The south of England, with the recent addition of Yorkshire. **Commission:** From 1.5 per cent +VAT **Loves:** A house that tells a story, even if that means a bit of mess. **Pet hates:** I'm a bit over grey paint now. uniquepropertycompany.co.uk

Inside the £100m housing market

Estate agents woo the super-rich with Michelin-starred lunches and yachting weekends. But now buyers have to prove their identity, says Helen Davies

London is home to billionaires and some of the world's most expensive bricks and mortar. The global super-rich — the oligarchs and sheikhs, industrial magnates and tech billionaires — have spent the past decade or so outbidding one another to own a trophy home in the capital, pushing prices for mansions above £100 million.

In a few cases this price tag has trickled out to the glitziest of estates in the home counties. This week it was reported that the property tycoon Christian Candy had sold his country estate for approximately £125 million to a Middle Eastern buyer. The Surrey property, which has a superbase housing a car museum, a 25m pool, cinema and dance studio, has been quietly available for three years.

Last year, in a record-breaking deal, the Chinese property billionaire Cheung Chung-kiu, known as CK, paid £210 million for 2-8 Rutland Gate, a 62,000sq ft mansion in Knightsbridge. An unnamed British buyer bought three apartments at the former US embassy to convert into a mega penthouse for more than £140 million, while a 14,000 sq ft penthouse in One Hyde Park sold in May last year for an estimated £111 million.

Welcome to the rarefied world of seven-figure sales. You will never see these homes on Rightmove. In fact, you may never know they happen, and you may never find out who the buyers and sellers are. And then the owner may never even visit their new purchase, preferring to stay in a hotel.

If a £100 million house goes on sale now, there are a handful of estate agents who broker these mega-deals who could list at least 50 prospective buyers with a big enough budget and then shortlist a dozen who might make the move. The agents — whose commission at this rarefied end of the market is 0.5 to 3 per cent — have to prove their worth. Everyone signs a non-disclosure agreement, and after an instruction it is common for the estate agent to receive a legal letter warning that the seller reserves the right to sue if anything goes wrong. It is a high-stakes, high-reward business.

To even get a foot in the door requires getting past a legion of gatekeepers who service the needs of the billionaire and his family, from estate managers to wealth advisers and lawyers. Estate agents woo the entourage with

invitations to countryside shoots, VIP dinners in Michelin-starred restaurants or a yacht in the south of France for the weekend.

Houses are for sale at the right price. Brochures cost thousands — if not tens of thousands — of pounds. Houses lie empty, only to be restyled for a viewing with an hour's notice with fresh flowers and candles, soon to be binned. The calls with the principal — you never call them by their name — will be by encrypted video call at any time of day and night.

"We have seen a renaissance of a new 'Gilded Age', where again technological advances have created billionaires who buy private palaces and build state-of-the-art mega-mansions and country estates," says Gary Hershman, founder of Beauchamp Estates.

He estimates that there are now at least 20 homes in prime central London, either built or under development, in the £100 million range.

The rules of engagement are completely different. Sales might be funded by putting up a yacht as collateral on the mortgage. Finance is cheap. The paperwork is sophisticated and aimed at ensuring privacy. Every time a billionaire invests in a new address, the will is rewritten and the beneficiaries are named.

If they think the buyer or seller of a property is suspicious, estate agents and solicitors involved in property transactions have to report their suspicions to the National Crime Agency. If you are found to be involved in a transaction with a person subject to

sanctions, agents face seven years and up to a £1 million fine.

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The stakes of this high-risk game have risen to higher levels. Earlier this year Michael Gove ordered officials to draw up legislation that would give the government powers to seize British property owned by Russian oligarchs without paying them compensation. On August 1, the UK government announced the launch of the Register of Overseas Entities, whereby individuals will be forced to declare ownership and provide details of beneficial owners.



From top: One Hyde Park; 2-8 Rutland Gate, which sold for £210m last year