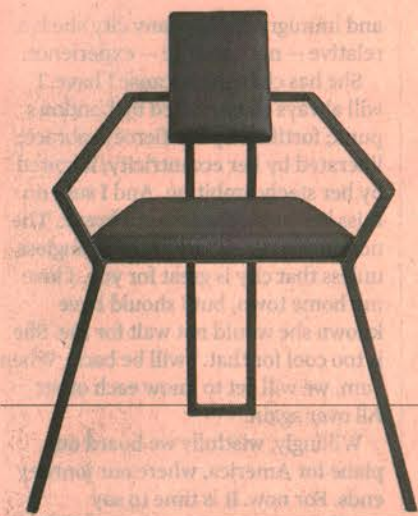




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Life under a wrecking ball

Architecture | Amin Taha's award-winning London home divides critics and is now threatened with a demolition order. By *Dominic Lutyens*

Amin Taha's monumental 15 Clerkenwell Close in London is steeped in architectural and geological history. Designed by his practice Groupwork, the idiosyncratic building comprises a load-bearing limestone exoskeleton with 150m-year-old fossils embedded in its craggy surface. Yet the award-winning structure, lauded by many critics, is under imminent threat of the wrecking ball.

For now, the five-storey development houses Taha's family home on the top floor — crowned by a biodiverse roof garden — and several other apartments, plus Groupwork's studio in the ground floor and basement.

Taha's building, which is in a conservation area, has embroiled him in a protracted dispute with Islington Council, chiefly over the materials used on the façade. It was originally conceived in 2012 as a bronze-faced building but was completed as a stone design in 2017. The authority ruled that the finished structure lacked planning permission and issued a demolition notice, which is currently under appeal.

The FT meets Taha in his double-height subterranean office, where the exposed-brick walls and metal staircase are typical of the post-industrial style that architects' studios and loft-dwellers have brought to Clerkenwell, an area of London full of Georgian buildings, since the 1980s. From there, a glass-fronted lift whisks us to his apartment. But once outside it, he decides on a whim to take me up a short flight of stairs to the roof garden. It's a private spot, and gingerly we circumnavigate the potted plants that block our path. Among the trees and shrubs are two beehives and two bat boxes. "The garden is my first experiment in combining biodiversity with water attenuation by organic rather than mechanical methods," says Taha, 44, as he tops up two pebble-filled dishes with water for the bees.

The garden offers views of Clerkenwell landmarks, including the neighbouring St James's Church. Downstairs in the apartment, which Taha shares

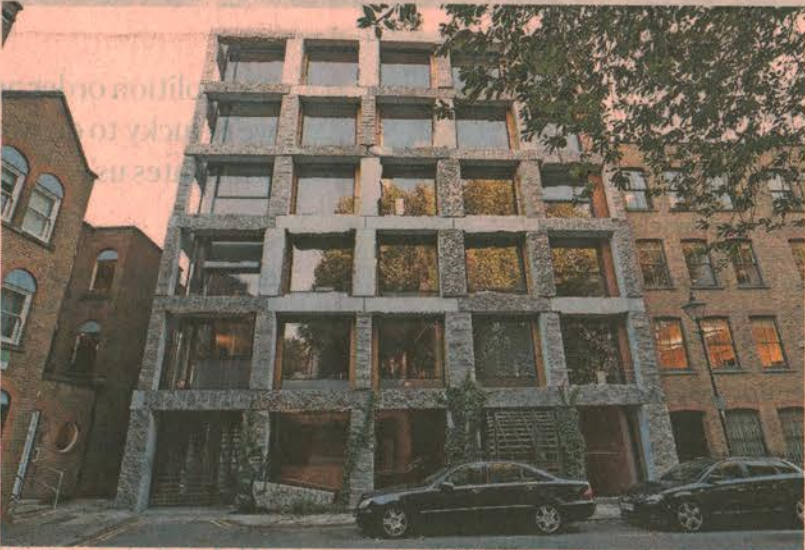
with his wife Sarah Arnold, a painter, illustrator and author, and their 19-month-old son Sacha, he tells me the immediate vicinity was once occupied by a 12th-century Norman nunnery. "It was dissolved by Henry VIII and dismantled over the years. Oliver Cromwell built a brick palace on top." Remnants of the nunnery were later incorporated into St James's Church, which stands opposite Taha's house and which was rebuilt in the 18th century by James Carr in a classical style influenced by Sir Christopher Wren and James Gibbs.

Taha sees 15 Clerkenwell Close as part of this ever-evolving, stratified architectural heritage: "The limestone we've used, sourced in Normandy, is from a similar seam of limestone used for the Norman nunnery and St James's. When the Normans first came to England, they brought limestone across the sea, wrapped in wet rags to stop it calcifying and make it easier to carve. So we're referencing the site's history with the materials used."

The building's rough-hewn stone exterior — which supports an internal glass-fronted structure, obviating the need for columns inside — might look crude to some. Taha is fascinated by construction, and design that draws

'Once cities exceed 2m, the social dynamic changes — people are less open-minded with strangers'

attention to it. Standing at the outer perimeter of his apartment, skirted by windows, he points out how metal bosses link the limestone exoskeleton with the internal floor slabs: "The bosses are grouted into the stone columns at one end, and bolted into the concrete slabs at the other. With no internal structural walls or columns, the floor plan on each level can be totally open-plan. The spaces can be used for offices or subdivided into apartments or



left as one large, entirely flexible flat." While roughly textured, the exterior incorporates regularly sized windows that form a crisply defined grid. When asked which architects inspire him, it is no surprise to hear Taha cite Alvar Alto, Carlo Scarpa and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The copious use of glass and rectangular planes at 15 Clerkenwell Close were hallmarks of Mies van der Rohe's work. The project has an overtly romantic

quality: an Ionic column appears to emerge in a ghostly way from a rectangular piece of rock lying in front of the building, a touch that seems to hark back to 1980s postmodernism, when architects and artists revisited classical motifs. "The Ionic capital relates to the Church of St James and to the Spanish cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, also dedicated to St James, which was built on the temple to Venus with Ionic



(Clockwise from top) Amin Taha; dining area with table and chairs by Sven Ellekær from Kush Interiors; 15 Clerkenwell Close. Photographs by Gabby Laurent for the FT, Nigel Howard/eyevine

capitals," says Taha. To one side of the building is a miniature Arcadia open to the public: a garden landscaped by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan with a pebble-mosaic terrace, ivy-clad pillars, chairs and tables and, says Taha, "plants chosen to chime with the medieval and classical themes". Critical opinion is divided: the building has won two Royal Institute of

Continued on page 2

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House&Home

Capital appreciation



Jenny Lee

Metropolitan Life

It was a fight. Two women. Going at it outside a fish-and-chip shop. A crowd choked the pavement. No one could get past. We watched instead.

Two men tried to stymie the violence. They were too polite — the women too furious. One grabbed the other's hair extensions, yanking a fistful of ropey braids straight out of her head. Apoplectic, the hairless woman stormed the fish-and-chip shop, weaponising a ketchup bottle, spurting sauce in her enemy's face. The hair-yanker — covered in condiment — responded by ripping off her stiletto. Then, like a knight jousting on a horse, she jostled forward on one high heel, wielding the other shoe like a lance. At which point the police arrived and spoiled all the fun.

As we dispersed, one onlooker declared loudly and repeatedly to anyone listening: "This — this is London." Is it? If not, what is? Is London Wordsworth's city — all bright and glittering in the smokeless air? Or is it a fist-fight on the outer rim of the north circular, sullenness and mock-Tudor houses?

Gritty, grandiose, garrulous,

belligerent, for years London yanked my hair and spurted ketchup in my face. I loved it. Life began in Earl's Court — that bailiwick of Australian backpackers. Then Paddington, bailiwick of seedy hotels. We drove to school on the Westway flyover. Past Victorian terraces, past car crashes, past Grenfell Tower. Eventually I decamped to university, then to Paris. Now to Washington DC.

We are back, visiting family and friends. Pressing the flesh, kissing babies. First in Norfolk, then in London. The journey into Liverpool Street station is the usual lunatic asylum. We are — as ever — a few carriages short of a full train. No heat, no lighting, no vacant seats. No explanation.

A wobble of drunks have convened at the buffet and repurposed it as a cocktail bar. I purchase a packet of Mini Cheddars, crouching on the floor by the disabled loo like the good old days. London looms into view. Pollution filters through her evening sky, like chemicals through chromatography paper. The train chugs past Anish Kapoor's helter skelter Orbit tower. Once dazzling,

now dingy. We have both aged.

We are staying in the borough in which we used to live. A vacation which, a year ago, would have been a staycation. Old haunts have closed. New venues have had the audacity to replace them. Vegetarian restaurants have mushroomed across the neighbourhood. But some things have not changed a whit. The bus stops are still perfumed by urine and weed. The streets are still paved with mould. And everyone still says sorry when you bump into them. I miss it all, horribly.

I am roaming the city between meetings like a lost dog, scrounging around for something to do. Should I head somewhere familiar — an old favourite like the National Theatre bookshop? Or be a tourist in my own city and try somewhere new? Naturally I do neither and end up in Starbucks. Paralysed by choice. Furious at my indecision. We have moved on. But so has London. How dare she.

It was unreasonable to expect permanence from the city Disraeli called "a modern Babylon". I left. Others arrived. All the while London steadily constructed and reconstructed herself in the image of her emigrants

The notion of a 'great city' is meaningless unless that city is great for you

and immigrants. Like any city she is a relative — not absolute — experience.

She has changed because I have. I will always be energised by London's punk; fortified by her fierce embrace; liberated by her eccentricity; inspired by her steely ambition. And I sure do miss her pubs. But I need a break. The notion of a "great city" is meaningless unless that city is great for you. I love my home town, but I should have known she would not wait for me. She is too cool for that. I will be back. When I am, we will get to know each other. All over again.

Willingly, wistfully we board our plane for America, where our journey ends. For now. It is time to say goodbye. Writing this column has been wonderful. Thank you all. For the very funny emails you have sent. For the deeply nice comments you have left. For humouring a columnist in House & Home who — let's face it — wrote very little about houses or homes. I have loved it. I will be inhabiting other corners of these pink pages. Please — don't be a stranger. Come find me.

Jenny Lee is tweeting like a nightingale @wingdingjen



(Clockwise from left) Living area with Taha and Lutys; bedroom with Ercol bed; trolley with board games on bottom shelf
Photographs by Gabby Laurent for the FT

Continued from page 1

British Architects awards and was recently longlisted for the biannual Mies van der Rohe Prize — "the European equivalent of the UK's prestigious Stirling Prize for architecture" — and Groupwork was shortlisted in 2017 for the Stirling Prize for Barretts Grove, a London apartment block built from brick with wicker-covered balconies projected dramatically from the outside.

The FT's Edwin Heathcote described 15 Clerkenwell Close as "perhaps the most sophisticated, witty and thoughtful new building in London in years". Building Design magazine disagreed, nominating it for its annual Carbuncle Cup for "the ugliest building in the UK completed in the last 12 months".

"There are also two local residents who strongly object to the stone design as they wanted a brick building and wrote to the council expressing their disapproval," says Taha. "But 370 other locals say they support it."

Taha first moved to the area in the 1990s, having previously lived in Notting Hill. Before 15 Clerkenwell Close was constructed, he and Arnold lived in a 1950s building on the same site.

Compared with the building's dramatic frontage, the interior of Taha's flat is minimalist, its atmosphere calm. Comfortably ensconced in a mid-century-style chair (much of the furniture is in this clean-lined style), he tells me about his peripatetic childhood.

"I was born in 1974 in East Berlin. My Iraqi mum and Sudanese dad met and married while studying medicine there." Was it difficult for them to move to East Germany? "No, they were welcomed: my parents were left-leaning and the government needed more doctors. We moved to the UK when I was a toddler because my uncle worked in the general hospital in Southend-on-Sea."

"My parents then moved from hospital to hospital westwards, until finding work in London. Soon after they worked in Abu Dhabi and my brother and I were sent to boarding school. I later studied architecture at Edinburgh university."

After graduating he moved to London to work with architect Rick Mather. How easily did he adapt? "The first thing I noticed was that whenever I tried to strike up a conversation on a park bench or in a café, people were wary," he says, placing heavy emphasis on the word wary. Does he feel that's changed? "No. Once cities exceed a population of 2m,

Barretts Grove's self-supporting brick façade and cantilevered wicker balconies
Tim Soar



'Demolition order apart, we're lucky to do work that stimulates us'

the social dynamic changes — people are less open-minded with strangers."

That said, he quickly found his feet, landing other jobs at high-profile London practices Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands, Wilkinson Eyre and Zaha Hadid. "At Lifschutz, I worked on a couple of footbridges. I realised bridges are elemental, simple, with decking for pedestrians and cyclists and handrails added on. You're not worrying about a thermal envelope or drainage so much."

This interest in the functional has informed 15 Clerkenwell Close, a key characteristic of which is a stone

superstructure that is load-bearing, not merely an applied façade. There is a polemical aspect to Taha's approach, which becomes apparent when he ruminates on a longstanding British propensity for façades made of a thin veneer that masquerades as a solid structure.

"For the past 250 years, architects have tended to take a 2D drawing of a façade as a starting point when designing buildings, then simply hand this to the contractors. Such façades bear no relation to their structure."

He traces the tradition back to the ideas of German art historian Johann Winckelmann: "He suggested that the Neoclassical language, specifically related to Hellenic Greek architecture, was superior to Roman or Gothic styles. The Hellenic period represented democracy and Winckelmann was working during the Enlightenment, so the idea that the architecture he espoused was anti-monarchist was adopted with alacrity."

The apartment's pared-down interior shares one thing with its flamboyant exterior: a highly bespoke design. "All the custom-made partitions, uniformly made of European oak, are conceived as furniture," says Taha. "You can even remove the kitchen's island to open up the whole floor." This cabinetry houses a utility room, larder, TV, coats and umbrellas and a book collection.

"There aren't enough shelves to put our books, films and objects on," he says. "I'm a bit 'Japanese' in that it should all be put away apart from one object changed once a month — otherwise objects become background wallpaper — so we've reached a compromise."

The partitions are movable, revealing secret routes or new views. The larder pivots 180 degrees, providing access to the main bedroom. "It's a perfect short-cut to the kitchen to make a quick cup of tea if we've got guests but feel unsociable."

The layout can be relatively cellular. The guest bedrooms are arranged in a row with interconnecting doors. "When we have guests, the doors are shut. Otherwise we leave them

open as enfilade doors and can run through them."

Visitors include Iraqi and Sudanese relatives, members of Arnold's Sussex-based family and old school and university friends. "When Sarah's and my family come together, we make up a large group who keep one another entertained reading extracts from favourite books, playing board games and, for those interested, repeatedly watching the same and probably the most obscure films, such as 1970 movie *Start the Revolution Without Me*, starring Donald Sutherland and Gene Wilder."

At 15 Clerkenwell Close, Taha has created his own domain, with home and office under one roof. Yet Islington Council's decision hovers above him like the sword of Damocles. How is the story likely to end? "I don't hold out much hope. But demolition order apart, we're lucky to do work that stimulates us."

Favourite thing

Taha chooses a tea and coffee set by Verona-based ceramicist Anna Grazia Perlini: "I found it in Venice. There's a route with churches, cloisters, bars, bookshops and design stores, including Madera, a tiny shop in Dorsoduro. Francesca, who has run it for as long as I've been visiting the city, fills it with

design classics and work by local, independent designers. Perlini says that after working at a ceramics factory for years and being told to never create pots with delicate extremities as customers are likely to break

them, she set up her own studio to design ceramics for those interested in discovering what porcelain and clay are capable of. This struck me as so much in the tradition of Giorgio Vasari, who describes experimental artistic processes in his 16th-century book, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* — a constant inspiration to me,"



The 15 Clerkenwell Close controversy

According to Taha, "Islington Council's planning officer liked our original bronze design of 2012 but a conservation officer, who has since left, asked for brick or stone to be used instead. In 2013, a brick design was approved. In 2014/15, we submitted a new stone design to the case officer and gained planning sign-off, including for its fossil finishes. In 2016, he retired and the department didn't pass the records on to be uploaded."

"In 2017, the council's enforcement officer, who couldn't find approval documents for the stone design, issued a notice for demolition and rebuilding in brick." This notice was withdrawn when Taha provided copies of approval documents for the stone design, signed by the planning team leader and conservation and case officers.

"The second demolition notice was issued in February 2018, this time

regarding the fossil finishes and the positioning of the stone. But last November, the planning department found the archived files and uploaded all the stone design approval information. The legal officer is yet to look through these and decide whether to withdraw the notice on the back of newly found information."

A spokesperson at Islington Council says: "After an investigation, the council has come to the view that the building at 15 Clerkenwell Close does not reflect the building granted planning permission and conservation area consent in 2013. In the council's view, the existing building does not benefit from planning permission, and the council issued an enforcement notice on 26 February 2018 to take effect on 9 April 2018. The owners of the site appealed that enforcement notice on 6 April 2018, and the case is now with the Planning Inspectorate."