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The £100m question

The developer of this north-London mega-mansion claims it's a class apart from its posh neighbours - but can it be really fetch nine figures, asks Jemma Wells.

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Grand designs don't get much grander than this. On the street known as Millionaires' Row — The Bishops Avenue, in Hampstead — snagging is being done on Heath Hall. The Grade II-listed, restored and extended Arts and Crafts home has 27,000 sq ft of living space and 14 bedrooms, and is set in landscaped grounds of 2½ acres, one of the largest gardens in north London.

Its developer, Andreas Panayiotou, is hoping the property, which neighbours those owned by the Sultan of Brunei and members of the Saudi Arabian royal family, will fetch more than £100m, making it one of the most expensive houses for sale in the capital.

"They say it's better to have the worst house on the best street than the best house on the worst street," says Panayiotou, 45, chairman of the London-based Ability Group, and better known as a hotelier and buy-to-let magnate than as a builder of luxury homes. "But it's far better to have the best house on the best street."

Although he won't be pinned down to an exact figure — "How can I put a price on a house for which there is no comparison?" — he is confident that his creation will fetch twice as much as Royal Mansion, a few houses down, which sold in 2008 for just over £50m. Yet Panayiotou, who was raised in the East End by Greek Cypriot parents, and whose wealth was estimated at £250m in The Sunday Times Rich List last year, insists the project is less about money and more about creating a country classic in London, with unparalleled luxury and security. "When I was a lad, I used to drive down this road with my parents," he says. "Over the past 20 years, I've built more than 9,000 apartments and they've all been the same. So this has been very personal."

Panayiotou — who famously sold much of his reported £1bn buy-to-let property portfolio just before the crash — bought Heath Hall (then called East Weald) in 2006 for about £14m, from an undisclosed property company. Back then, the house — which was built in 1910 in ornate Arts and Crafts style for a member of the Lyle family, of Tate & Lyle fame — had an already lavish 19,000 sq ft of living space. It had been owned by the Bank of China for a few decades from the 1950s, with its cavernous rooms used to house a group of employees, but had since fallen into near-ruin. Its delicate brickwork was crumbling and elaborate plasterwork lay in dusty piles on the floor next to shattered fireplaces and tiles.

Panayiotou, a former amateur boxer with a penchant for Tom Ford suits and diamond-encrusted Audemars Piguet watches, says this was the project he'd been looking for. He had at first planned to restore the property as a home for himself, his wife and his five children, building another couple of houses in the grounds to sell on. Then he decided to focus on extending it as a development project, and to stay put at his 25-acre country estate in Epping Forest.

"As soon as I saw this place, I fell in love with it and wanted to restore it to its former glory," he says. "When I told Barnet council what I wanted to do, it was music to their ears."

Directing a team of 120 builders and craftsmen, Panayiotou restored and cleaned the front facade of the three-storey house, with its dramatic round-arched doorway centrepiece. He then added almost 50% to the interior space by building onto the rear.



Heath Hall has 14 bedrooms and 27,000 sq ft of living space

Heath Hall now has 35 rooms, including 14 bedrooms, six main reception areas, a library, a cinema room lined with cream suede walls and a spectacular ground-floor indoor leisure complex, with a white-stone swimming pool, sauna and steam room. There's also an outdoor pool in black stone.

All the plasterwork and fireplaces have been restored in the airy rooms, many of them with delicate features highlighted using white-gold paint — a touch of luxury that cost £250,000. Upstairs, off the master bedroom, an oval bath, cut from a single piece of magenta-veined Italian marble (above), had a price tag of more than £220,000.



The dining room alone covers 1,000 sq ft



The developer, Andreas Panayiotou, in the state-of-the-art leisure complex.



"The costs went completely out of control," says Panayiotou, whose preferred mode of travel is his Gulfstream G450 jet. "But there wasn't a budget. I will spend whatever an asset deserves." The work has cost him about £40m to date. "Anything is resolvable if you have deep pockets," he says. "But having lots of money doesn't mean you have taste."

The hotelier, who has just opened his seventh establishment — the Waldorf Astoria at Syon Park, in west London, which has a butterfly house and offers the discreet services of a plastic surgeon — is at pains to point out that quality, not vulgarity, defines Heath Hall. And it is certainly surprisingly tasteful, with pale Farrow & Ball-hued rooms and a bespoke sycamore kitchen. That said, the purple LED lights illuminating the restored oak staircase, and the Italian statuary placed strategically about the gardens, wouldn't look out of place at Tony Montana's Miami super mansion in Scarface.

Panayiotou says his main focus was making sure that the home was kitted out with state-of-the-art technology. It has a Crestron home-automation system, so "you can sit in your chauffeur-driven car and, at the touch of a button, have the driveway de-iced and your bath run to a specific depth and temperature and your dressing gown warmed up." It can't actually fix you a cocktail, but it can get your butler mixing. Security is, naturally, also a top priority: a steel-walled dressing room on the first floor doubles as a panic room. Heath Hall, in its final stages, is just one of the many houses being redeveloped or refurbished on The Bishops Avenue — there are as many builders' white vans as Bentleys on the street.

"I've seen a lot of buyers here take on properties to renovate," says Trevor Abrahmsohn, managing director of Glentree International estate agency, who claims, over the years, to have sold 90% of the properties on the street. "But they have made a complete dog's dinner of them and had to abandon them halfway through. Heath Hall, however, ticks all the boxes — and goes way beyond."

Abrahmsohn, who has been charged with finding a buyer for Heath Hall from a global coterie of billionaires, says it will go to a Middle Eastern, Indian or Russian buyer. "This will be sold to someone who wants to buy not only a perfect, lovingly restored mansion, but also the British lifestyle. It's not just a home, but somewhere to show the world what a success you are."

So, will it achieve the £100m-plus Panayiotou is hoping for? "You're in uncharted waters here," Abrahmsohn insists. "I imagine that two very rich men are going to sit in a room together and thrash out a deal."

Whoever buys it can expect a personal tour from Panayiotou. "I'm in no rush to sell it," he says, "and I want to show him or her every detail, so they can appreciate it." Will he be forsaking the hotel business to create more ultra-luxurious homes like this one? "No," he says. "It's hard to find this kind of opportunity. I mean, where do you go from here? I'd be extremely lucky to come across another one."

As he walks past a solitary olive tree near the electronic front gates, a nod to his Mediterranean roots, he calls laughingly to his builders to get back to work. "Anyway," he says, "I don't believe in luck."

