

## with John Lees



**MICHAEL DINEEN** talks to architect John Lees of Lees Associates.



And now for a little light relief in these trying times – a glimpse of a location where people are not worried about money.

Yes, there is such a place, and it is right here in debt-wracked Blighty: more specifically in scruffy old Borough, just round the corner from the Elephant and Castle.

This is where John Lees has his architectural practice, and a truly thriving practice it is – for a very simple reason. It produces house designs for super-rich Russians, Chinese, Asians, and Americans who never need to ask Lees and his team: “How much is all this going to cost me?”

For me it was a relaxing experience to sit and view computer generated realisations of some houses in Moscow, which Lees Associates have created for super-rich Russian clients. The camera roamed from room to room, splendidly appointed salons – devoid of people admittedly – and all beautifully prepared for an ultimately opulent lifestyle.

There was no elephant in any of these rooms – except me, of course, the observer who couldn't afford any of this luxury. It was enough to drive anyone to Marxist-Leninism.

John Lees is a genial man who has packed a wide variety of architectural work into the 30 years he's been fronting his own show. He began with a small office in Curzon Street, London W1 where his first client was J.P.Morgan, which sounds suspiciously like starting at the top.

Lees had to create a dealing room at the beginning of the Big Bang, when everyone had to be on a fast learning curve. Did he know about banks and dealing rooms?

“I said to the client, let's work on this together. It's always the best policy because things can go wrong. It's a complicated world.

“Banks needed to be ahead of the competition. I was keeping up with the technology, but at the same time I thought dealing rooms needed to be as warm as pubs, people in them needed to be close. I thought they wanted to be able to shout to each other – like we do here. It's very noisy here. Everybody knows what everybody else is doing. Let's make it enjoyable.”

In addition to a companionable atmosphere John Lees felt that the dealing room should have what he called “plenty of fresh light”. Nice notion, fresh light, as in fresh air!

“Absolutely key.”

At the same time all this was going on, he was beginning work on a house in The Boltons, SW10 for an immensely rich Lebanese client. It was his first encounter with big budget domestic work.

Not surprising that he had a healthy £200,000 profit in his first year as an independent architect. Though since then there have been ups and downs, following the contours of economic booms and busts, and his practice has taken on local authority, civil service, hotel

the hum of a tuning fork, you listen to what the building is saying to you and you make adjustments.”

Currently he is fine-tuning, among others, a country house in Russia. It is in a forest near Moscow and the site is 55,000 square feet. The construction cost is £55 million.

And another of his Russians requires a town house not far from the Kremlin, a family home, which would also be suitable for entertaining at a high level. This plot measures 45,000 square feet and is costing the owner £110 million. I don't know about hum, but I imagine the neighbours will be kept awake at night by the noise of Comrade Stalin spinning in his grave.

Back in London, Lees and his team are at work

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industry and commercial work.

Today the Lees Associates practice is mostly involved with work which is recession proof – the domestic needs of the very, very rich. And these clients he handles in an essentially one-to-one way.

“I'll have lunch, tea and supper with them. Note how they dress and all sorts of personal details. I think about them a lot, but not about the money. A lot of them don't like to talk about the money. Money's only a tool. But I do want to know how they live currently, what their ambitions are, where they believe they are going. The future.

“What buildings do, extraordinarily, is they change the way you live, and it doesn't work the other way round.

“Later I'll probably design four houses, all different for one client and if I'm getting nowhere I'll tell him, go and have another chat and maybe this time he'll suggest something crazy and I'll go away and work on that.

“After it's agreed there's always the tuning, like

repairing – my word not his – one of those precious Grade 1 listed Nash houses at Regents Park. It was, he concedes, “ripped apart” by previous owners and he is “putting it back together the way it was” Cost: £24 million. That's just the repair bill. The house was sold to his client for £50 million, and when it is finished it will be worth £100 million. Time and money well spent, you may think.

One of the reasons John Lees is benefiting from the burgeoning Russian wealth is simply that he is in the right place at the right time; the place being London which is favoured by Russians uneasy about the lawless and violent society they leave behind in post-Soviet Russia.

We may believe we have a high crime rate here, but London's comparative honesty, stability and security – not forgetting the business opportunities, which include bargains in real estate if you are operating at the top end of the market, are all combining to attract immigrants from the more troubled regions of the planet – and their money of course. [Sh](#)