



**Soho institutions:** Maison Bertaux (left) and Bar Italia give the area kerb appeal

# SOHO'S SEXY NEW HOMES

The ladies of the night are being encouraged to walk away as Soho becomes popular with house buyers who like a central London hot spot, says **David Spittles**

**'The only squeezing going on here in the future is likely to be developers trying to cram flats into redundant warehouses'**

**N**OT for the first time in its colourful history, Soho is undergoing a residential renaissance. The area's maze of alleys and narrow streets are being billed as an historic place to live with an unbeatable central location.

As the ladies of the night are encouraged to walk away, the only squeezing going on here in future is likely to be by developers trying to cram as many flats as possible into redundant warehouses and commercial buildings. The listed Marshall Street baths is set to become a block of 52 apartments alongside studio workshops and a new leisure centre.

The Georgians and the French Huguenots lived in Soho but its distinctive character changed in Victorian times when the area became a hub for the entertainment industry, and alongside that, entertainment of a less savoury kind. As the sex shops took over the post-war home-owners left but Westminster council wants them back to join their current 2,000 residents. As one local puts it: "The area is edgy and exciting, rude and rowdy, bohemian and vibrant. This atmosphere will not

**Soho swings:** a tourist draw since the Sixties, Carnaby Street (above) has been spruced up by its main landlord, Shaftesbury, which is now turning its attention to nearby Berwick Street. In an area where gardens are rare, Soho Square (right) offers some green space



disappear, this is what people love about the place but what we don't want is anti-social behaviour.'

Property ownership is largely in the hands of a few key freeholders with a rough masterplan for a Marylebone-style makeover to bring variety and individuality to the retail scene and improve pockets of the neighbourhood.

Property company Shaftesbury owns

118 bar, club and restaurant premises in Theatreland and increasingly provides over-the-shop residential accommodation. The company has helped create a boutique shopping quarter around world-famous Carnaby Street, and is now turning its attention to **Berwick Street**, a traditional but scruffy street market.

Fifteen new apartments on the corner with **Peter Street** are the first evidence of regeneration. Prices from £595,000. A penthouse spanning the entire top floor will have a wraparound terrace and green roof. Contact EA Shaw on 020 7240 2255.

**Ham Yard**, a key site behind Piccadilly Circus, has planning consent for 53 flats plus 80,000sq ft of offices, bars and restaurants. Ross Mansoori-Dara, co-founder of City Lofts, a developer that went bust a year ago, is rumoured to have won bidding for the site.

Soho Estates is the area's biggest landlord, and a shake up of its portfolio is expected following the death last year of its founder, sex-trade tycoon Paul Raymond.

## INCREASING DEMAND

Soho's permanent residents are a surprising mix, ranging from families,

professional singles to key workers. Despite housing developments in the pipeline, a supply shortage means there are always eager buyers and renters. Demand has risen in recent years as Soho has become a more fashionable place to hang out, with its gay bars, music venues and members' clubs for the media set. But while the area's vibrant street life is a big draw for revelers, anti-social behaviour is still an issue for residents, says the Soho Society.

But behind the street lights there is a genuine village-community atmosphere, quiet corners and a network of small shops with owners of every nationality who have been there for decades.

Often homes are tucked away from the neon-signed fleshpots, off commercial streets or above shops and offices. Flats dominate; there are only a few freehold houses – check out the early 18th-century gems on Meard Street. Gardens are scarce, meaning roof terraces add greatly to value.

About £350,000 is the entry price for property. A refurbished studio in **Dufours Place** is on the market for £375,000. Call 020 7734 4062. GLP is also selling a five-storey three-bedroom house in Wardour Mews for £1.65 million. The modern interior has an open-plan kitchen with glass staircase and two wine cellars.

But loft-lovers searching in Soho will be disappointed. The nearest thing to the genuine article is a scheme of apartments above the former Marquee Club on **Wardour Street**. Flats here are always in demand, says estate agent LDG (020 7580 1010). Resales are from about £500,000, while rentals range between £350 and £800 a week.

**Denmark Street** (known as London's "Tin Pan Alley" because of the concentration of music publishers and instrument retailers) is said to be the last street in London with original 17th-century terraces surviving on both sides. Sadly, all the premises are now commercial but anyone looking for a bijou office base may be interested in a 650sq ft space available for rent at £315 a week, through GLP

**£1.85 million:** a five-bedroom, three-storey house in Wardour Mews, through GLP 020 7734 4062



**£670,000:** a one-bed flat at Soho Lofts, W1. GLP 020 7734 4062



**£650k:** Dean Street Lofts (far left), W1. A one-bedroom flat. (0800 369 8667)

