

'IT'S LIKE A SWISS CLINIC AND A TOP LONDON HOTEL COMBINED'

THE TIMES ARCHITECTURE CORRESPONDENT JONATHAN MORRISON INVESTIGATES THE RETIREMENT HOMES SO SWANKY YOU'LL WANT TO MOVE IN RIGHT AWAY - WHATEVER YOUR AGE

WITH FACILITIES SUCH AS a Himalayan rock-salt sauna, indoor swimming pool, Pilates suite, wine cellar, cinema and beauty parlour, as well as a private dining room, you would be forgiven for thinking that you're in a country club or a five-star hotel, but definitely not in a retirement home.

Welcome to Auriens, the latest and smartest of a new generation of "later living residences" where the tired linoleum floors, threadbare furniture and wilting sandwiches have been replaced by a level of luxury that borders on the palatial.

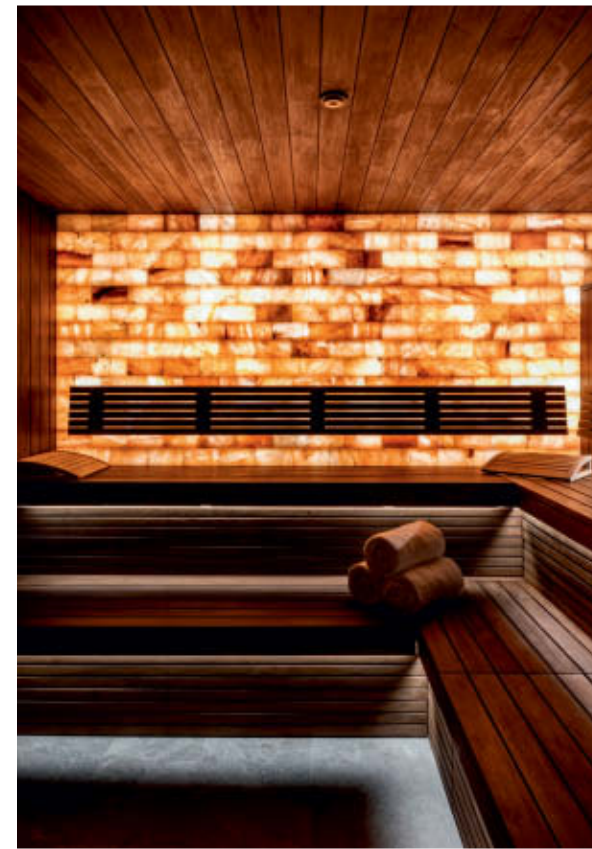
Here, just off the King's Road in Chelsea, the retired pay an average of £3,000 a week not only to rent an apartment but to avail themselves of amenities ranging from a stylish bar and a dog-grooming parlour to a spa with infrared lights that help with cell regeneration. Residents can command the attentions of nutritionists, personal trainers and Ben Williams, the physiologist for Sir

Ben Ainslie's America's Cup team. A concert pianist comes in every morning to play a 1929 Steinway, the reading room was designed by David Linley and a chef was recruited from the Savoy. Plus the staff, headhunted from the best hotels, are on hand 24/7 to help with any problems, from fussy-eating demands to filling out tax returns.

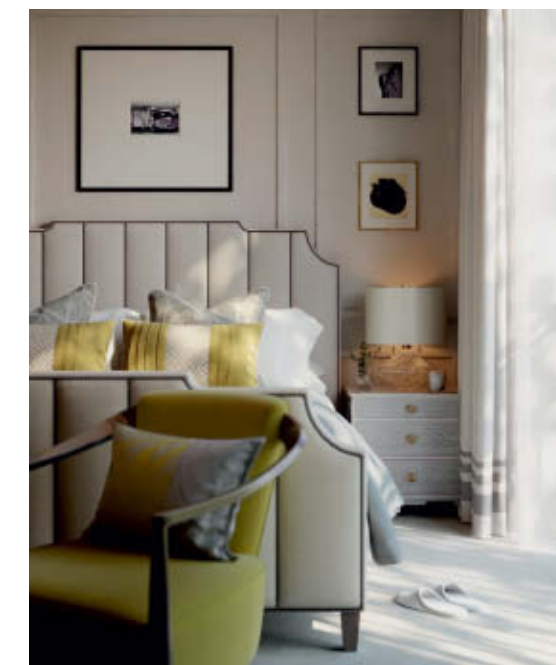
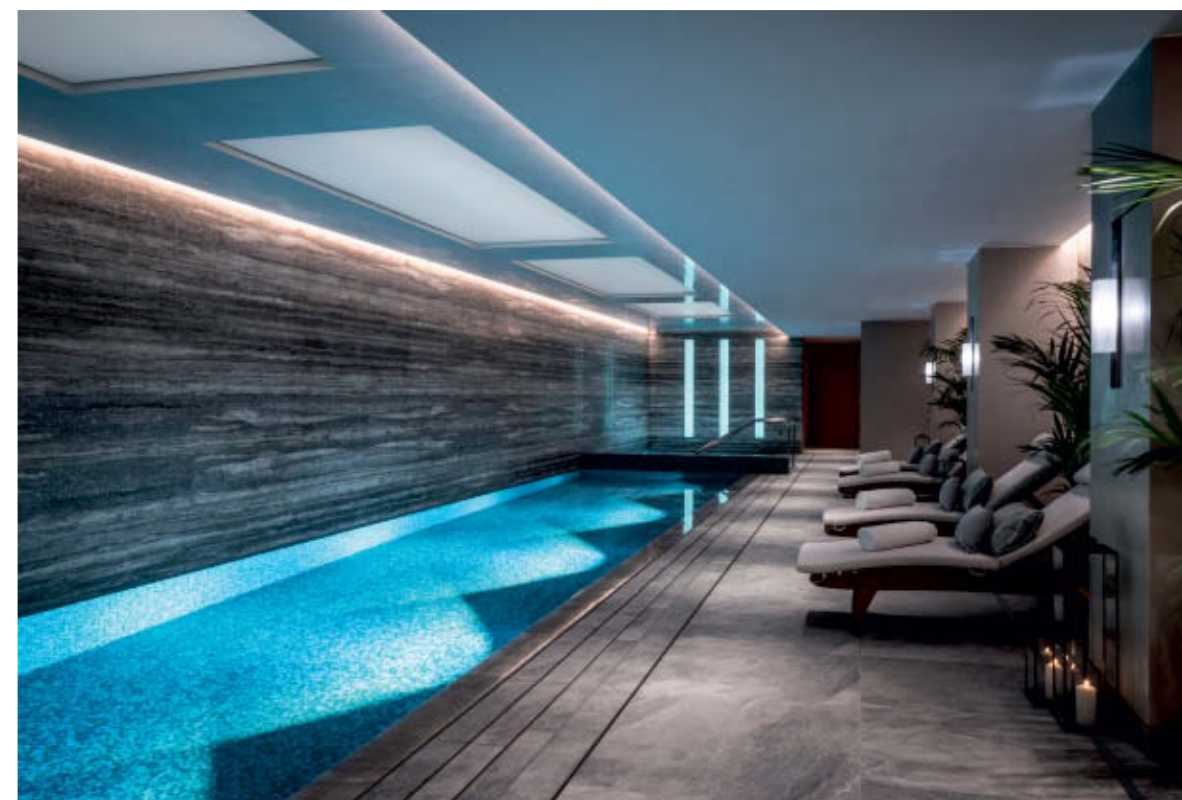
"The inspiration was me thinking, 'What's Mum going to do when Dad goes?' and concluding, 'She'll have to move into Claridge's,'" says David Meagher, the chief executive of Auriens. "There wasn't really an alternative to these top-end hotels and, while you'd get luxury, and living in London and being close to the theatre and museums made sense, there wasn't any sense of community.

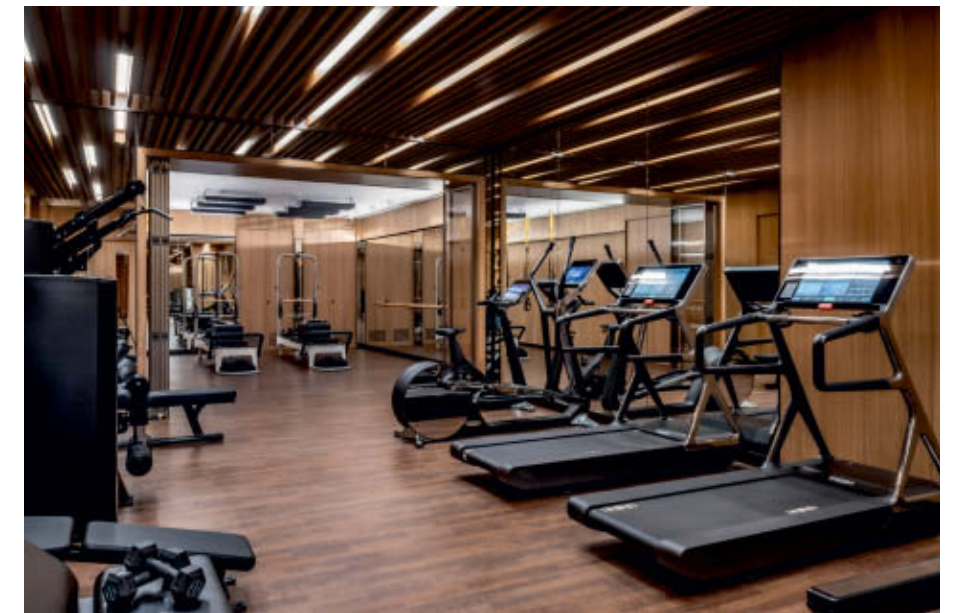
"We wanted to help people like our parents make the most of their later years, with the lifestyle that the wealthy want and the care that older people need. It's like a Swiss clinic and a top London hotel combined. People are looking to avoid a needs-based

Clockwise from below: the sauna at Auriens in Chelsea; an apartment within the complex; the cinema; a bedroom; the pool



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The speakeasy at Auriens. Right: the gym. Opposite: the reception hall

move and a lot have personal experience of that with relatives or friends, so this helps them to ‘future-proof’ themselves.”

Given the price tag and a degree of name-dropping – the garden is by Andy Sturgeon, a Chelsea Flower Show winner, and the attached nursing firm, Draycott, looks after non-specified royals – it may have been inevitable that a certain amount of envious sniping would occur. Meagher denies allegations that it is a caviar care home for oligarchs and does nothing to benefit local residents. “There are no billionaires with Ukrainian girlfriends, and there’s no caviar,” he says. “We’ve not been targeting overseas markets and, in fact, there has been zero interest from places like Russia or the Middle East. Eighty-one per cent of our residents were living within a mile of us.” Instead, he says, “we’d argue it’s good for the local area because we’re taking someone out of their large house and releasing it to the market. And we’re relieving pressure on the local hospital, where people would otherwise end up having treatment.”

Michael Voges, the executive director at Associated Retirement Community Operators, says that Auriens may offer other, more far-reaching, benefits. Just as the technologies pioneered by

Formula One cars eventually trickle down to the family hatchback, high-end retirement communities may demonstrate exactly what is possible. “People want to stay in their communities and not go into care homes,” he says. “People are crying out for better options that offer connectedness and a degree of independence, so hopefully some of these things percolate through.”

What happens after retirement is certainly not an issue that is going away, given the demographics of this country. The number of over-65s in the UK is forecast to increase by 20 per cent to 12 million by 2027. The number of people over the age of 90 is expected to rise by 33 per cent – to more than 750,000 people – over the same time. The figures in the capital are even larger, according to the estate agent Knight Frank: there are almost 1.1 million people aged 65 or over in Greater London, but that number is set to increase by 30 per cent in the next ten years to 1.4 million. According to projections by the Greater London Authority, the over-80 population in Kensington and Chelsea alone will increase by 44 per cent in the next ten years. Finding better ways to accommodate them and keep them healthy for as long as possible is critical, not least because of the burden an ailing elderly population could place on the NHS.

Russell Pedley, of Assael Architecture, thinks that it may be possible, via homes such as Auriens, to revitalise the high street. He’s working on schemes in Purley, Croydon and Chobham that aim to achieve just this. “Previously, there wasn’t much research done on where people would like to retire to and they were banished to the outskirts,” Pedley says. “Yet retirees are aspirational. People want to be connected to centres, places with culture, like high streets, where they can mix with their communities rather than age in large homes and relative isolation. You can’t blame people for holding on to their homes instead of downsizing if they look around and can’t see anywhere else they’d like to live.”

Eugene Marchese, an architect who heads Guild Living, which specialises in campus-style retirement communities, agrees: “There just aren’t many good examples of next-generation third-age living. But it’s not only about having nice restaurants. People want to know they can retain their independence, that their family will be near them and can stay with them, and that, given the average entry age is 78, their coming physical, emotional and cognitive changes can be accommodated. That still doesn’t really exist in the

UK, even though the first baby-boomers turn 75 this year.” Marchese, who is Australian, points out that proper retirement communities are much more common elsewhere. In the US, he says, where entry fees range from \$100,000 to \$1 million and monthly fees are often \$6,000, there are 2,000 communities with 700,000 residents, accounting for about 5 per cent of over-65s, while in Canada it’s 6 per cent, in New Zealand it’s 5.4 per cent and in Australia 4.9. In the UK, however, it’s about 0.5 per cent.

And it’s not really because of a lack of money either. Already, an estimated £40 billion of housing assets in central London is owned by the over-65s, who could also partially avoid inheritance tax by liquidating earlier. There are an increasing number of options for downsizers: Auriens is offering a rental model, but there are many schemes where residents buy a small apartment designed for their needs and top up with care packages as necessary. The biggest operator of these in the UK is the Audley Group, which has 14 villages with about 100 residents each, six more in development, and offers properties ranging in price from £300,000 to £1 million with fees averaging £8,000 a year. By 2031 it plans to have 50 sites.

Residents can enjoy the usual luxuries such as high-spec gyms and restaurants, but Paul Morgan, Audley’s managing director, believes it is the level of service that really appeals. “The market is huge and interest from consumers is increasing massively,” he says. “Most people are really looking for a good quality of life and the reassurance that they will be looked after in later years. They want to get as much

enjoyment as they can, network and make new friends. Our mantra is to help people live better for longer, but also give them a safety net – the idea that they have a home for life.”

The new kid on the block is Riverstone, which has two sites opening in Kensington and Fulham next year, with apartments priced between £860,000 and £3 million. It has a similar model for monthly fees and ambitions to expand to ten locations. “With our rivals, we are filling a valuable gap in the market, and there’s room for all of us,” Jason Leek, the chief executive, says. “We offer an environment that provides stimulation and like-minded people. The

demand is there: people enjoy downsizing and living in these sorts of places. To be honest, it’s just about making their lives as easy as possible.”

It’s a sentiment that is echoed by Stephanie Hoppen, the mother of Kelly, the interior designer, and one of the well-heeled residents at Auriens. The former art gallery owner, who is in her mid-seventies, gave up a four-bedroom apartment in Chelsea after being won over by a combination of the sauna, swimming pool and incredible food.

“I couldn’t move away from Chelsea,” she says. “But it was just such a hassle to run my apartment. This way I never have to speak to EDF again.”

In Greater London the over-65s are set to increase by 30 per cent in the next ten years to 1.4 million, and the over-80 population in Kensington and Chelsea alone by 44 per cent

SIM CANETTY-CLARKE