



**Eastern promise:** (main picture) the original soup kitchen would have fed up to 6,000 people per night when it opened in 1902 to service the Jewish poor of Spitalfields. The space has been stripped back; the wood beams are painted grey and the kitchen divides the work space from the living area. The original façade remains (left). The curved pediment above the dates is inset with a relief of a steaming soup tureen

## Kitchen confidential

Spitalfields's Jewish Soup Kitchen is now a home and company HQ. Tamsin Blanchard is bowled over...

In 1902, 6,000 people a night passed through the doors of the Jewish Soup Kitchen in Spitalfields, east London. They would queue up at the door marked 'way in', have their tin filled with the soup of the day, and leave by the exit on the other side. Fast food is not a new idea. These days, a state-of-the-art cantilevered staircase with toughened glass panels obstructs the soup kitchen's original entrance. A huge canvas printed with a computer-generated image by CAD, a local company opposite Spitalfields Market, hangs on the wall. There is still a kitchen in constant use, however. But the shiny stainless-steel pans, fusion woks and chic china plates are a far cry from the industrial soup vats that once simmered through the night. The worktops are limestone and the units are made from varnished MDF – all very 21st-century loft living.

The Soup Kitchen, designed at the turn of the 20th century by Lewis Solomon, is built within a crouton's throw of Spitalfields Market, one of the most hotly debated sectors in London, where the old heart of the quarter that has belonged to the city's Huguenots, the Jews, and now the Bengali community, stands face-to-face with the hi-tech steel-and-glass conglomerates of the City of London.

There's not much call for a soup kitchen to service the poor of the local Jewish community today. They have long since left the area, their synagogues converted into mosques and their soup kitchen transformed into – what else? – luxury apartments. Behind the original grand façade of the ornate red-stone Soup Kitchen

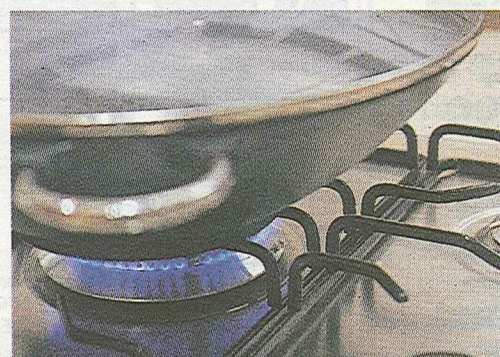
for the Jewish Poor, with both Hebrew and Christian dates 5662-1902 etched into it, is the home and headquarters of Dominic Richards and his company, Q Property.

It is somehow quite appropriate that Richards is in property development. The Maynards Sweet Factory he is developing in Hove, near Brighton (he's dubbed the area Bri-Ho), will go on the market later this year at £400,000 per live/work unit. He describes himself as an early adopter, having moved into Spitalfields four years ago from cosy Notting Hill in west London. His friends thought he was mad, but of course they soon followed suit. The battle rages about the future of Spitalfields Market. Norman Foster's design for a 5,000m<sup>2</sup> office building, which will mean demolishing half of the market, has been met with a manifesto and emotional petitions signed by locals including Tracey Emin, whose studio is just across the road, as well as Gilbert and George.

'The market is gorgeous,' says Richards, who has become a regular of the Sunday melting pot of organic fruit and veg, hippie craft stalls and new and second-hand clothes. Much of the furniture in his home, including the silver 60s lamp, was bought at the market's retro-furniture shop. He is, however, all too aware that Spitalfields has been described by London's *Evening Standard* as 'the new Notting Hill'. It is people like him moving into the area who are changing it from a lively, vibrant zone with its bustling Brick Lane market, curry houses and 24-hour bagel bakery into an area packed with bars, estate agents and coffee shops. It can only be months before ▶



**Above:** Dominic Richards (in checked shirt) and team have a meeting with architect John Kerr (far left) at the end of the hall, which would originally have been the way in. The table has an oak centrepiece from a tree that was blown down in the storms of 1987. The kitchen is made from sprayed MDF, with limestone worktops, while the modern 'chandelier' was commissioned from Ochre. In place of the industrial soup vats, the kitchen turns out tasty morsels for Dominic and his team. **Below left:** a detail of the copper tiles and sleek fittings from the basement bathroom







**Above: a change of atmosphere and a view from the basement bedroom into the bathroom. The feel is more East Asia than East London. Upstairs, architect John Kerr built a shower pod which looks like a curved wall, but houses a hi-tech shower room (right) with a glass ceiling to allow natural light**

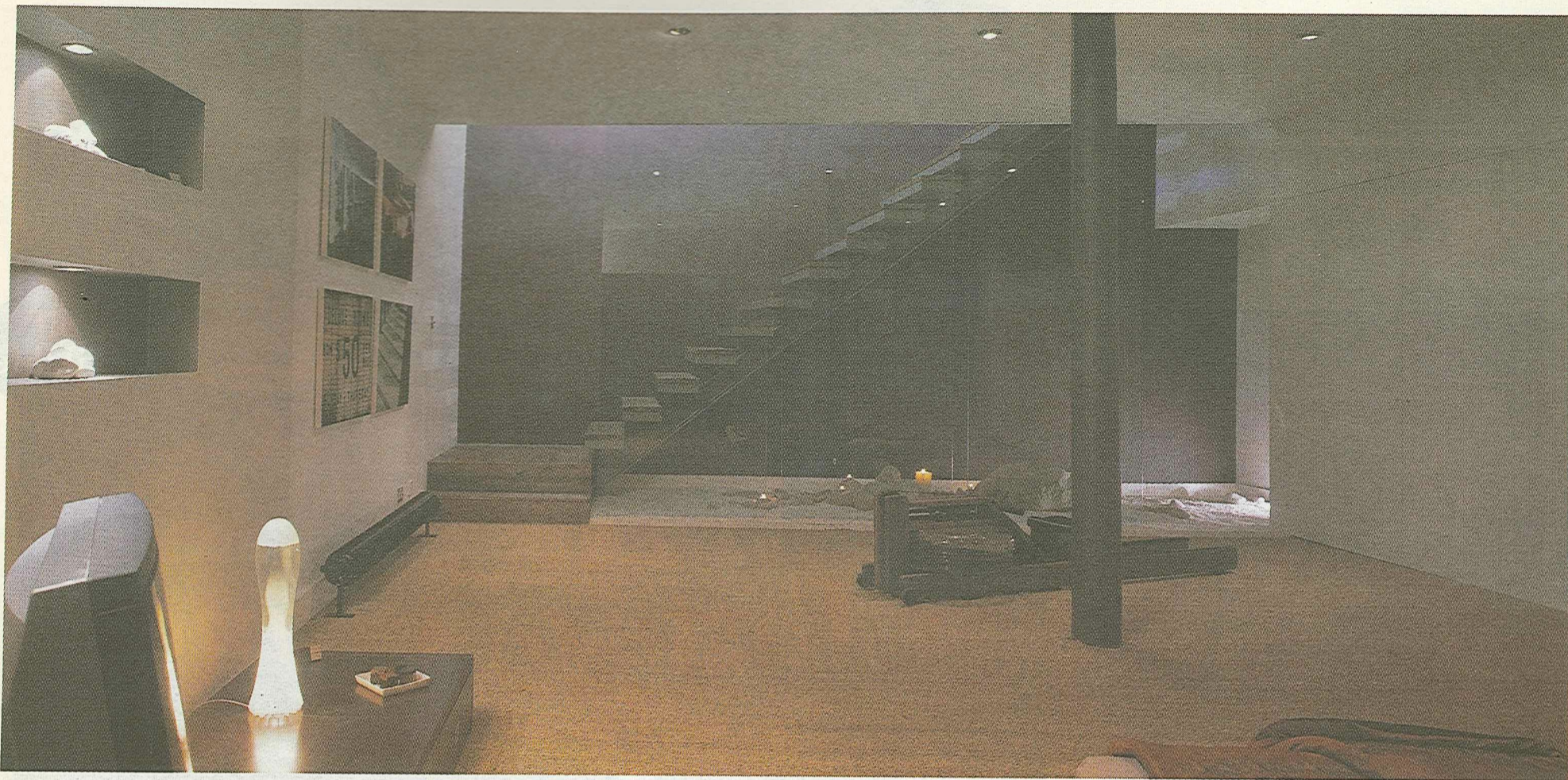


◀ Starbucks moves in.

'The market building is very important,' says Richards. 'It is one of the reasons I moved here. I don't want to feel that I'm living in the middle of Wall Street. At least the Foster building retains the façade of the market. I like the mix of old and new. I think it's really important not to sanitise the area. I'm aware that it's people like me who gentrify an area, but, in the end, it's a fight between the City of London and Canary Wharf.' The City appears to be winning.

'When I found the soup kitchen in 1998, no one had lived here,' says Richards. A developer had already seen the place's potential, however, and had begun a conversion on the Grade II listed building. Richards immediately called on his architect friend John Kerr, and between them they drew up a new plan, putting in a staircase to link the space to the basement below. 'John veers more towards modernism, and I veer the other way,' says Richards, who finds that modernity can often be cold and soulless.

Kerr enjoyed working with the building. 'It's the space that has the quality. The tension between the old and new makes it more dynamic.' It retains its original spacious refectory feel with its amazing vaulted ceiling, and sky lights. Halfway down, a free-standing kitchen divides ▶



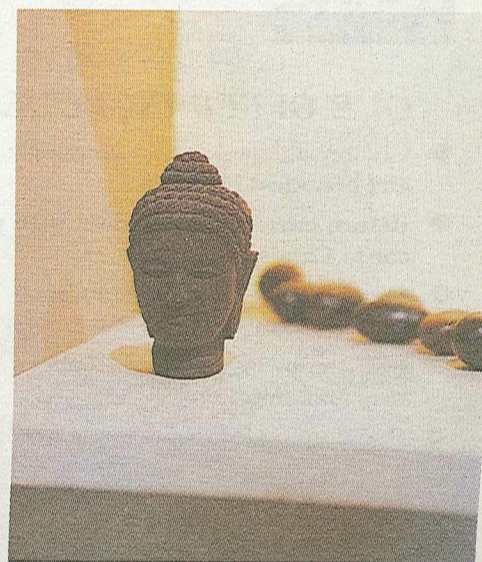
◀ the living area from the work area – a huge table where Richards and his team work on their wireless laptops or discuss the work in progress over lunch. The table itself is the focal point of the space – it's made from a piece of oak that Richards had had in storage since a friend's tree fell down in Suffolk in the storms of '87. Byron the cat (after Byron Bay in Australia) is curled up in a bowl on the table, while Jeremy, Richards's right-hand man and sometime conductor and composer, taps away on his wireless i-Book. Richard, part-cook, part-book-keeper, is the first to arrive each day at 7am. He prepares a cooked breakfast as well as lunch, canapés or dinner, depending on the day. 'It's very much an open house,' he says. He is busy making tabouleh for supper that evening, but, in the spirit of the old building, often makes soup for lunch.

Dominic Richards describes the kitchen as 'modern monastic'. He wanted it to look simple, hence MDF units, made by Kerr, along with the long, steel handles, which, they confess, cost as much as the kitchen.

At the other end of the soup hall, Kerr has built an ingenious shower pod. He calls it a 'modern intervention'. From the outside, it is a curved wall. But the wall conceals a small WC and the shower itself, with its glass door and glass ceiling to let the natural light filters through.

If the space itself is a surprise, so, too, is the basement area. While upstairs is light, brisk and contemporary slick, the basement is darker, warmer and oriental in feel. 'I wanted to keep the downstairs area very different,' says Richards. 'Very private. I needed a retreat.' The original tiled floor has been covered in seagrass. In the space under the stairs, Richards has created an indoor garden with slate and pebbles. A living-room area leads into the bedroom, with its bamboo wall behind the kingsize bed, and then on into the bathroom. 'I wanted it to be like a Japanese bath house,' he says. The bath is slightly sunken and the tiles glint with copper. It has the feel of some very exotic, chi-chi Balinese hotel. 'There is no hint of work downstairs,' says Richards, 'but it is getting more and more difficult for work to end each day.' ■

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**Top: a new staircase was built to link the two floors; behind the toughened glass, in the downstairs living room, is a slate and stone garden. Richards has accessorised his home with the occasional piece of oriental art (above) and modern lighting bought from Spitalfields Market (below). The bathroom (left) is dark and exotic – Richards wanted it to have the atmosphere of a Japanese bath house**

