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Tall is now the talk of the town

Once the city seats of landed gentry, townhouses are rising in popularity and catching the eye of developers, says **Tory Kingdon**

In William Thackeray's 1848 novel *Vanity Fair*, there is a description of the dully goings-on in the Sedley family's townhouse. "That second-floor arch in a London house, looking up and down the well of the staircase and commanding the main thoroughfare by which the inhabitants are passing; by which cook lurks down before daylight to scour her pots and pans in the kitchen; by which young master stealthily ascends, having left his boots in the hall, and let himself in after dawds from a jolly night at the Club; down which miss comes rustling in fresh ribbons and spreading muslins, brilliant and beautiful, and prepared for conquest and the ball."

The townhouse has long been associated with family life but it hasn't always denoted the classic terrace we know today. Instead, the term was used to describe the city residence of nobles and landed gentry - a second home away from their country seat.

Early townhouses were grand, usually detached properties built to

Sky high: this seven-storey Georgian house is £14 million with Harrods Estates

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Glazed: the penthouse at Bakery Place, left, which is on the market for £2.225 million with Savills; a Crittall roof lets in the light in a north London extension designed by Bilec Halligan Architects, right



The Crittall comeback

The industrial invention used on the Titanic is now in vogue again. *Tory Kingdon* explores the latest looks

The most common feature of modern property design in recent years has undoubtedly been the open-plan layout: the desire for large multi-functional spaces flooded with light rather than smaller, separate rooms. There is, however, a limit to the number of walls that can be demolished before your home starts appearing like the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Appealingly spacious? Yes. Liveable in? Perhaps not. This is why traditional Crittall is

'You can zone things without locking them away'

staging a comeback – and not just as windows, but as walls and doors too. Developers, designers and canny home owners are using these steel-framed partitions to create floor plans that feel both light and inclusive but retain an element of separation. The sturdy, slim-profile frames, as well as looking rather good, tap into the current trend for all things industrial. The manufacturing technique was introduced in the mid-19th century when Sir Henry Bessemer developed a process for hot-rolling steel. It was in 1800 that Francis Henry Crittall, an ironmonger



in Essex, first used this method to create steel-framed windows. Crittall was trademarked and continued to expand into manufacturing in the United States, China and Europe. The strength and durability of the metal frames trumped traditional wooden ones for industrial buildings. The malleability of the alloy also meant that, by the Thirties, Crittall was being used in a variety of different buildings, adapting to more innovative art deco and cubist designs. Crittall was used on the Titanic and can still be found in the Houses of Parliament and the Tower of London.

Green: a Crittall-enclosed courtyard in a Chelsea town house, for which Knight Frank is asking £37.5 million

The look is by no means new. But it is enjoying a moment back in the spotlight, as is evident from a number of refurbishments and developments. At Bakery Place, a former Victorian bakery in Battersea (priced from £625,000 with Savills) a Crittall-type system has been used to divide spaces and create rooms within rooms.

"You can go into studies or other rooms that are entirely steel-framed and get some peace and quiet. But you're still part of the flat and you still benefit from the natural light that flows through the space," says Will Hermann, the developer behind Bakery Place. "You can zone things without locking them away."

In a four-bedroom house in Pavilion Road, Knightsbridge, on the market for £5.25 million with Knight Frank, a Crittall screen separates the entrance hall and the kitchen/dining room. This works well, says Hermann.

"You have a space for hanging coats and putting away shoes, but you still get that feeling of walking into a large, open-plan space when you walk through the front door." The buzzword for layouts like these in development terms is "broken plan" – not open but still segmented in some way.

As well as being used practically to delineate spaces and allow for a greater flow of light, steel-framed constructions are being adopted as a design feature. French doors can be replaced by Crittall walls for an art deco aesthetic and installing steel windows can create a more urban look. A Crittall construction can even be used as a shower enclosure to create a feature in a bathroom.

"Crittall references a more interesting property that might have had a previous life as a factory or an industrial building," says Dara Huang,

founder of Design Haus Liberty, a design and architecture practice based in Clerkenwell, who frequently uses Crittall in her work.

Of course, in Clerkenwell and other once industrial areas of London, original versions of the feature can be found in abundance. Savills is selling a former Victorian warehouse in Shoreditch for £2.5 million. Its authentic steel-framed windows and doors, combined with its open layout and exposed brick walls, will no doubt form a large part of its appeal.

Modern London's love affair with loft conversions and warehouses has contributed to the popularity of the feature elsewhere. In a less likely setting – a £37.5 million town house in Cresswell Place, Chelsea, for sale with Knight Frank – a Crittall frame has been installed around a courtyard at the centre of the house.

The design trend is unlikely to fall out of favour anytime soon. Striking but minimalist, the look complements other trends, from mid-century modern to Scandi-style, both of which show no sign of abating. What's more, the architectural feature has good eco-credentials, with recycled steel being widely used in production. Whether in windows or partitions, it is also strong, durable and thermally efficient.

"Young buyers and even the older generation of home owners who appreciate the idea of a less traditional, more inclusive way of living are drawn to this look and feel," says Huang.

"Crittall is not only practical but looks great. It's lasted this long behind the scenes. I think we're likely to see more and more of it."