

A DIVER'S view

No longer just a seaside tourist attraction, the humble aquarium has become an ultra-cool bespoke luxury interior design accessory. Aquarium Architecture floats at the surface of a very niche pool of designer-builders. Founder Roland Horne tells LB how it all happened

Darlings. Next time you're designing a feature wall to go in your subdued bi-tone interior, it's not wallpaper you should be sweating over. That is simply last-century. The cool way to inject colour, movement and a very effective talking point into your room, restaurant, club or yacht is to install an aquarium. Colourful, exotic, robust and reassuringly expensive: an aquarium is the way to customise an interior like no other – and it doesn't even need to affect your square footage. It can be built into a wall. Or, better, it can be the wall.

Aquarium Architecture is a leader in the relatively new field of creating fantasy aquaria as an architectural or quasi-architectural interior design feature. The company designs, builds and installs each one differently from the last, not only in terms of the coral and fish chosen for this rarefied existence – which dramatically affects the overall colouring – but in terms of size, shape and function within a space.

Its work covers a spectrum of aquarium-led design solutions. Sunk into an interior wall, as in one house in the south of France, a small rectangular aquarium looks like another window, but with a vividly multi-coloured, sub-aqua view replacing the blue skies of the Côte d'Azur. In a footballer's house in England there are four piled one on top of another, each one different, to create a room partition. As part of the kitchen/dining experience in a contemporary apartment on The Peak or in Brooklyn, or a high-end restaurant, it's an effective talking point. In the traditionally swagged-and-tailed interior of London club Aspinalls, it's an eye-catching, unexpected detail; and in a brand new Candy & Candy apartment it is the essential dash of colour to offset the 50 shades of taupe.

Company founder Roland Horne, an entrepreneur who has gone from zero in 2006 when he took over a defunct pet shop business, to a turnover of £2m in 2013, explains, "We specialise in saltwater, coral reef aquaria which have evolved into being a high-end luxury accessory for people's homes – we're very much based on this residential business. Our business also includes the ongoing after-care and maintenance of aquaria we have installed."

With a London HQ, the company is shortly to open a studio in Brooklyn, New York; and it has partners in places as diverse as Lagos, Milan and Manchester. Horne describes how, demographically, it tends to be men who drive the purchasing decision, generally self-made, working in finance, oil or football, and aged between 35 and 55. They often source the



business through their iPads, but approach via their architects or interior designers. "We do talk to the clients direct at a very early stage, however, because they are genuinely interested in the process, and we're still there after the contractors have gone because we do all the maintenance as well."

Horne talks about how attitudes to aquarium installation vary from one continent to another. In Europe, for example, it's usually about trying to get an installation into a position where its footprint in an environment is seamless – in a wall or cabinet, where you can't see any of the infrastructure supporting the aquarium. The American approach, by contrast, is to hang the aquarium off the ceiling or do an incredible cylindrical object in the middle of the room to look at, like a piece of art in itself where the fish are of secondary importance.

Yacht-owners are also buying aquaria, typically via the yacht-builder who will approach Aquarium Architecture with a brief during the design/building process: much

of this work emanates from Florence, where Horne has decided to exhibit at a big yacht show in 2015. "Up until now, because we're very niche and specialist, we haven't needed actively to market ourselves. Through working with developers and designers like Candy & Candy, Finchhatton and Kelly Hoppen, we've had enough to keep us busy. But in the last 18 months I've started to feel it's worth going out there a bit more aggressively."

The story began when Horne, who studied economics and describes himself as an aquarium 'hobbyist', approached a company to install one in an aperture in his parents' London home. When they didn't get back to him, he approached a pet shop in Hampstead village, offering to help with their paperwork in exchange for an aquarium. Although there was business coming through the door, the company was in trouble financially, and Horne teamed up with a friend, now business partner, Jeremy Clark, to take it over. "On the day it closed, a Greek guy walked in, invited us to his house in St John's Wood and commissioned us to do an installation. He asked for the quote on the spot to do a massive tank. I quoted him £35,000 and he wrote a cheque for half the money in front of us. At that point we realised this was a business that could work."

From that point on, rather than winging it or wading through endless forums where people shared their aquarium experiences, Horne and Clark brought in specialists. There's now a team of 12 in the London studio, including an in-house architect who deals with the technical and structural aspects, and a team of installation specialists whose backgrounds range from qualified master divers to plumbers. "Our business is structured so that each individual area is very specialised and we only work within these areas."

As for the fish, these are sourced from wholesalers – who knew, for example, that the biggest wholesaler in Europe is based in Hertfordshire? – and for really specialist species they go to Holland. "We're working on a very large installation for a house in Chelsea where they want us to select the corals from farms in Indonesia and Australia – so we'll go out and dive the tables of coral which have been grown to prevent people from damaging the reef."

How much will an aquarium set you back? Prices start at about £25,000 for a freshwater tropical installation; the average is about £50,000 and the biggest project the company has undertaken to date is a giant shark tank which cost its owner £1.2m. They've also done the biggest privately-owned jellyfish aquarium in the world, for a client in Manchester.

"The norm," says Horne, "is an infrastructure tank that forms some kind of architectural partition rather than just being a big piece of glass. But we did do a crazy piece of art once with the artist Pierre Hugin, involving a crab, a hermit shell and a setting that looked like a Martian landscape. It was eventually sold to a Japanese buyer through Marion Goodman's gallery in New York for £250,000."

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