



Fashion's favourite **ARCHITECT**

He's on first-name terms with fashion's elite, he skis in leather, loves opera, and has been accused of vandalism for his plans to renovate Burlington Arcade.

Peter Marino is many things, but he's not boring

INTERVIEW Stefanie Marsh **PORTRAIT** Jude Edginton

OH DEAR. What a tedious stick-in-the-mud of a country Britain must seem when viewed through the keenly progressive eyes of one of the world's leading architects. Peter Marino – his very name will make your blood boil if a) you are a fellow architect, or b) you are one of this country's traditionalists – is the man who, according to the newspapers last year, was on the brink of “defiling” Burlington Arcade, of 1819, off Piccadilly.

To read reports of Marino's supposed proposals for the shopping arcade, one would have thought that he was intending personally to desecrate the Mayfair landmark, which houses antiques shops and makers of fine patisserie. “Disgraceful mutilation” were the words that Michael Winner used when the new owner, a European investment company, announced its plans to spend £5 million on a refurbishment, helmed by Marino, a man – it had not gone unnoticed among the site's antiques dealers >>

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— who specialises in designing high-end fashion boutiques. The papers crowed “vandalism”, then cheered when Westminster Council eventually rejected the plans due to public pressure. The trendy New York architect had been vanquished. But who is this leather-clad narcissus? He is famous in America; nobody I spoke to at Burlington had ever met him.

With hindsight, I wonder whether the protesters really understand what Marino had wanted to do to the arcade. The actual plan was to paint the walls, do something about the slippery granite floor and tidy up the electrics. Marino also got as far as commissioning Antony Gormley to make a statue to perch outside, but that too was banned by the council for being “inappropriate” and “too modern”.

Perhaps what frightened people most were Marino's clothes. When I meet him in a posh Knightsbridge hotel he looks, as he always does, as if he's just escaped from a gay biker club (he's married with a daughter). The menswear designer and photographer Hedi Slimane once made him a leather jacket, and he immediately ordered four. The one he is wearing today is his own creation. The black leather cap stays put throughout the interview; the crucifix around his neck is a good-luck charm against motorcycle accidents, he says.

In an earlier e-mail exchange, his PR had testily warned me against bringing up the Burlington fiasco, but Marino seems perfectly happy to wade in. “Only the British,” he fumes, in his lispy, strange-accented English, “could object to painting the ceiling, cleaning up the old electric lighting — which is illegal — and polishing the floor. Not a façade was to be touched. Not by a centimetre! And the British press went berserk, saying I was desecrating a national monument.” Defiantly, he adds: “Certain tenants decided, ‘We are going to f*** the landlords [by going to the press].’ I don't give a rat's ass whether they get the ceiling painted or not. You're going to get your rent increases whether you get a better ceiling or lighting or not, you morons.” Well, he certainly has a temper.

One of the most tedious pitfalls of interviewing famous people is how they tend to be honest only about nice, uncontroversial subjects, but not Marino. Marino on the Paris Opera: “It feels and sounds like a f***ing insurance company.” On Richard Rogers'

Hyde Park towers: “I hope this doesn't sound arrogant but I would have done a much better job.” On the Gherkin: “Really? You want me to look at it for the next ten years? I don't even want to look at it for the next ten minutes.” On his peers: “It's all about ego.” On Norman Foster: “Did you see the film his wife made of him?” he sniggers. “It's hilarious! She's flying around the Gherkin in a helicopter with a single-string violin playing in the background ... Well it's extremely phallic to begin with, but flying around it?” He lets out a wheezy laugh, reminiscent of Muttley's.

I'm sorry, dear vendors of Burlington Arcade, but it is a joy to hear Marino let rip. Oh, I'm sure he can be a nightmare to work for, indeed he has that reputation, but in a profession well known for its unbelievable pretentiousness his ribald dart-throwing borders on delightful. Plus — and this is important — I do believe he cares.

Marino, born some time in the Sixties, grew up poor, in Queens. As a child he would build whole cities out of whatever he could fish out of the



From left to right: Dominique Issermann, Marc Newson, Charlotte Stockdale, Peter Marino and Ellen von Unwerth, at the Chanel ready-to-wear autumn/winter 2010 show at the Grand Palais, Paris, March 2010

rubbish and once went trick or treating in a breastplate of armour that he'd made out of the lids of 100 old tuna tins. He studied architecture at Cornell in New York, and somehow found himself romantically involved with Andy Warhol's secretary, before making over the artist's townhouse.

He did houses for Yves Saint Laurent and the Agnelli family (of Fiat fame) — and, sacrilegiously for an architect, he prefers function over form. (“It. Has. To. Work.”) His breakthrough project was Barneys in New York, where he chimed with the fashion designers there, who commissioned him to design their flagship stores, too. He's done elaborately luxurious boutiques — concept stores — for Ermenegildo Zegna, Céline, Fendi, Chanel, Lancôme, Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior, all over the world.

If you're a high-end fashion designer your go-to architect is Marino — if you can afford him. He also designs beach clubs, luxury shopping centres and a lot of homes, as well as yachts. But shops are his niche, a specialism that, I suspect, the Norman Fosters of this world probably looked down on until people such as Rem Koolhaas started doing them.

What a pity that his winning design for an opera house on Palm Beach was capsized by the economic crisis. His critics might have gone less berserk when he was quoted as saying that he had no interest in building things to last. “That really upset me,” he says. “I mean, come on, aren't we all adults?” His greatest achievement, in his view? His Chanel tower in Ginza, Tokyo: one of its enormous glass windows doubles as a television. It had never been done before. “I've always thought about what I would put on my tombstone. ‘I invented a new type of glass.’ Well, I'll go for that.”

Marino, who is mad about opera and motorbikes and collects enough classical bronze sculptures for the Wallace Collection to have exhibited them last year, says that he likes to wear a lot of black leather just because it's more comfortable than cotton. Does he blend in? “Who cares? I'm the only guy I think you'll ever meet who skis in black leather.” Another hearty, feral laugh.

What delicious fun it would be to see him go head to head with Prince Charles. Marino passionately hates the preservation lobby; the tendency to preserve everything makes you rigid and old, he says. In London, too, “You've got to get rid of that attitude that everything needs to be saved.” His tone becomes sadder. “There's almost this belief in Western society that we could never do anything new that's good. In China it's the opposite. New is good. And if you want to compare societies,

which do you think is more vibrant?”

I mention his voice. It is definitely the weirdest thing about him. He speaks with a partly British, semi-Victorian accent. Un-American vocabulary, such as “undies”, keeps cropping up. Why? “I'll tell you if you turn that thing off,” he says, eyeing the recorder. It stays on, but he tells me anyway, with some discomfort. “I didn't speak well and my parents got me a speech coach.” An English speech coach? “Yes. I had a problem speaking.” I assumed, like the biker thing, that the voice was put on. Perhaps it is. Either way, the voice, the fetish gear, the early poverty would have mixed his chances of becoming one of the world's top 100 architects had he been brought up in Britain.

What are my lasting thoughts on this encounter? I wish he'd built that opera house; I'm alarmed by his views on charming Chinese neighbourhoods; but I can understand why he might think there's something parochial and rather dreary about a country that can't tolerate a paint job for fear of the unknown. **EW**