

Q&A Guy Perry

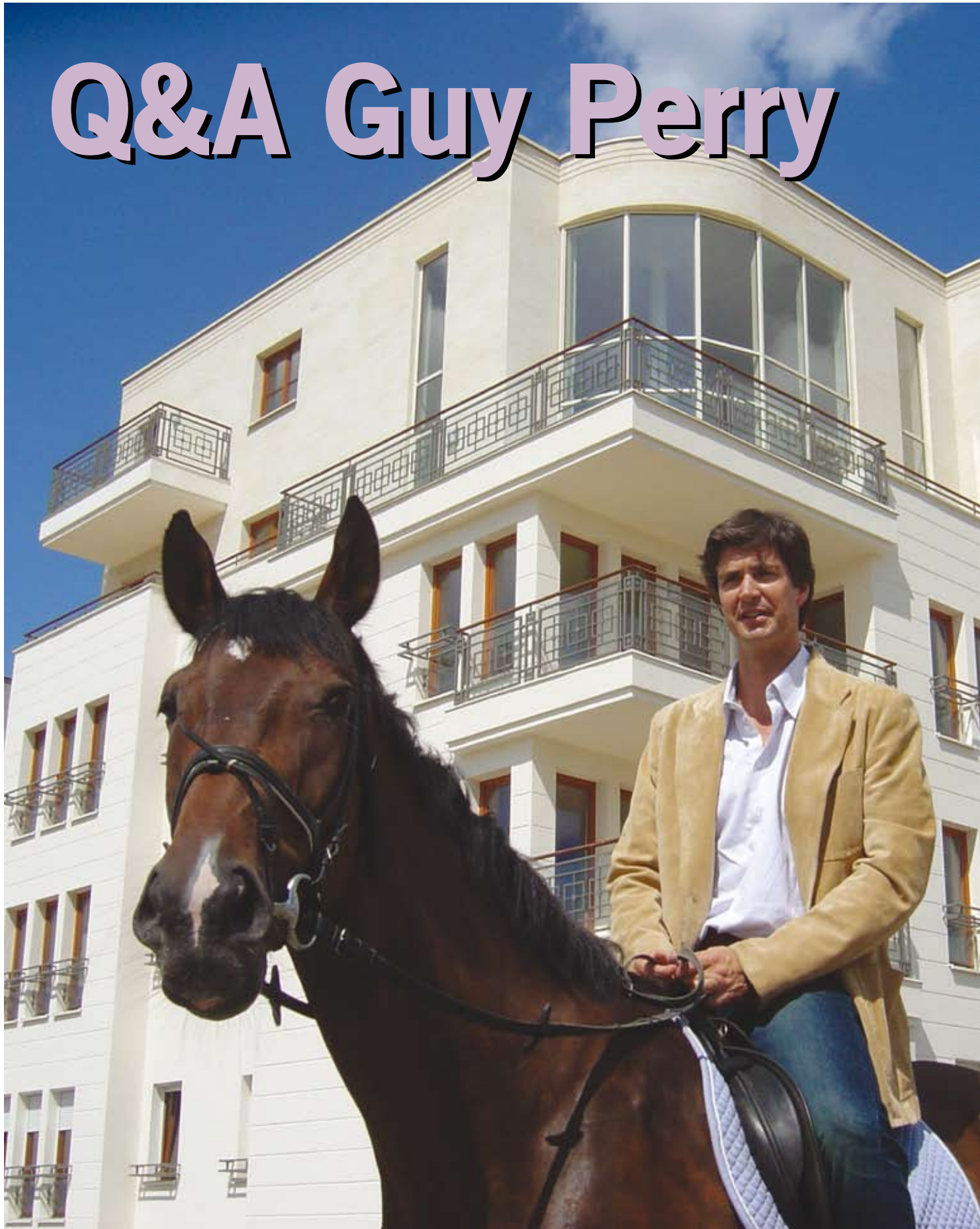




Photo courtesy of INVI

Guy Perry designed a future equestrian trail in Central Europe's largest new mixed-use development, Miasteczko Wilanow. The over 2 million sq m project is well underway.

French-American architect and urban planner Guy Perry worked on five continents before founding INVI, a design and development company that prides itself on “creating places that endure.”

With offices in Switzerland, Brazil, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine and Serbia, the company and its founder bring to Central and Eastern Europe something that has stayed rather hushed in the midst of the development frenzy that has taken over the former Soviet bloc – namely, talk of meeting the environmental challenges of the new millennium in addition to the budget targets of investors.

You can't call Perry a dissenting voice, but the tune he sings varies from the predominant theme. Still, he is getting the word out. Over the past few years he has taught design and development studios at MIT, Harvard University and the University of Toronto. He has given presentations at the United Nations in New York and Geneva, as well as worldwide conferences such as MIPIM, Barcelona Meeting Point, Cityscape and ULI on strategies for sustainable urban development. Here's what he told *PropertyWise* about current trends in architecture in CEE.

Vanya Rainova

You once said that you need a good site, a good project and a good local partner to invest in a country, and you mentioned Bulgaria among several countries where this trio is rarely present. Which one of the three would you say is

typically the weakest link?

One of the biggest challenges in Central and Eastern Europe is finding a good partner, someone who has long-term objectives as opposed to the wish of making an easy fortune out of the first project they do. There are just too many people who want to take off to Cyprus after they do one ➤

A contemporary, yet humanly scaled resort community design among the vineyards in Alupka, Crimea.



Photo courtesy of INVI

► development, or sell one piece of land. They don't see the sense in making a career out of building good places. That's why we often look for young people who would like to become true leaders in development and who understand that reputation is a really important factor in that. Real estate is not like many other professions; when you build something it's there for a long time as a reminder of its creators.

What do you think of the state of architecture in CEE?

Well, there is a lot of developer product, which I don't think is architecture. These are concepts that are imported from abroad, and are often obsolete in the countries they come from. That goes for many of the malls, residential developments and

office buildings. Let's take the example of stairs in an office building. I would imagine the typical modern office building in Sofia has fire stairways, which are to be used only in case of fire. But the stairs are a main event in office buildings, that truly try to create value for their tenants, like Rondo ONZ in Warsaw. They allow for spontaneous encounters and enable people to interact informally. We now observe that the most dynamic progress in business is born out of crossing disciplines that weren't considered compatible before. And in a sense, it all begins at the casual meeting places, like the stairs. Attractive stairs have a more basic economic advantage as well: companies using multiple floors will not tie up the use of elevator banks to move

one or two floors and the staff will be healthier for it.

The thing to do is not take models that were "in" in the US 20 years ago, but look to the more sustainable examples from today and adapt them to your context and investment opportunities. Central Europe has excellent architects, people who are well trained in the history, laws and the local technology of building. The difficulty is that they're often instructed to copy imported building types. Some investors are in for quick cash and they want to minimise risk by building "proven", but often obsolete product. This does not encourage the local architect to take a more sustainable approach which could yield a more profitable product in both the short and long term.

Speaking of that, you know that there has been a boom in the construction of malls in Bulgaria? What do you think of the shopping mall format?

It's interesting – the mall was introduced to the United States by a European, Victor Gruen. (Gruen was an Austrian-born architect who emigrated to the United States and is famous for the design of the Northland Mall, near Detroit, in 1954.) He thought that the American suburb was boring and decided to bring a bit of Europe to it. He created this suburban centre that was going to be a social place with some shopping around it. Then, over the years, shopping took over and the “social place” became purely commercial. We stopped building the shopping-only enclosed mall in the US about 10 years ago. It's a pathology, seeing all these shopping malls being built in CEE when they're obsolete in more advanced markets.

A country like Bulgaria should not be investing millions of euro in buildings that are not going to be useful 10 years from now. You're going to degrade the urban fabric of your community by doing it, too. Detroit is an unpleasant reminder of this, with dozens of shopping malls, many of which are abandoned today. This is simply not a 21st century urban lifestyle pattern we can sustain. I know it is a good short-term business for international shopping-centre developers. But most of them know that it is prohibited to do these kinds of developments in their own countries. You can't build them in the UK or in California any more. Of course,

they'll be popular for a few years, but in Poland we already have some built during the past decade that nobody knows what to do with.

In advanced markets the trend is back to mixed-use developments that may also serve as a sub-centre of the region by being a shopping centre and social heart of an area.

And how about gated communities, which, too, are popular here?

UN have discovered that when society is building a lot of gated communities it is drifting away from democracy. You're creating a

gates? Buy a bullet-proof car? It is unfortunate that the *nouveau rich* feel they have to hide because of their wealth while their children grow up with this distorted perception of life, too often raised in a cultural vacuum. But in the CEE it's a way of life that's desirable because it was taboo, it was unattainable in the Soviet era for all but party members. I remember seeing Dallas reruns in those countries, and that was giving people the idea of what life should be like. No wonder the suburbs of Central Europe begin to resemble American suburbs of the 1970's and 80's.

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false impression of security. Statistically we know there is less crime inside the gates, but when there is crime, the consequences are grave. Once someone is in, that means that person is a pro. Plus, the crime around the gated community actually increases. The chances of being car-jacked outside of your gates are actually higher. The private security service is not empowered to act if you're attacked outside the gate. And how do you want to live? You'll live your entire life inside the

I believe that the best thing to do is to have what's going on the streets be everyone's business. A balanced society is largely self-policing. If you have a city with too many gated communities, I'm not sure it would still be a city by definition.

What makes for a liveable city?

What is most important today is to have a very good mix of uses so that the city has a human scale. In other words, you have to ➤





Image courtesy of INVI

A concept of a coastal resort community at Lozenets, Bulgaria, designed for a development consortium.

➤ look at it as a walkable city. That doesn't mean you'll be walking all the time, but you have to look at European cities, which were basically made for people.

Most cities now are made to serve the motor car. But I think we can't actually afford to live that way. There are the problems with energy supply, with the environmental impact of a car culture and finally, the problem with people's health when they spend hours of driving rather than walking. These are a major downfall of the American urban life of the 20th century. It is not only about environment and energy, though that's what got us into Iraq. It is also about health. Because the modern pedestrian-unfriendly suburbs is one of the main reasons we have unusually high rates of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, etc. With the way cities are laid out, even if you have a decent diet, it's almost impossible to stay healthy. Malls, gated communities and many 20th century office buildings are part of this unsustainable pattern.

For me, the European city is still the finest and most balanced urban model. As in the best examples of current American development, we have to incorporate aspects of modern economy into communities that still have a human scale. The beauty of it is that it is actually a more profitable way to build.

How do we do that?

We are attempting to achieve this 21st century equilibrium in the design and development strategy of a new community project near Warsaw called ➤



Photo courtesy of INVI

A residential street under construction in Miasteczko Wilanow. Dozens of local architectural practices are coordinated by INVI in the making of this new district.

➤ Miasteczko Wilanow. On that 169 hectare site we will provide a mix of uses and services that will include a town centre for daily amenities (with 50 000 sq m of retail), a business park, sports facilities, parks, schools and the largest church built in Poland in the past 200 years. We provide an efficient roadway and parking infrastructure, but not at the expense of the human scale of the neighbourhood. This new community for about 40 000 residents keeps most activities within walking distance.

Look at a city like London. They have not made major road improvements since the Thatcher years. Yet if you live in mixed use

central London and work there, you actually have a wonderful quality of life. When they first priced the entry of cars into central London, people were outraged. Now, they've grown to appreciate it. We simply have to adjust our understanding of what makes for quality of life. Unlike the 20th century, the automobile will play a secondary role in urban development and life quality in the 21st. You can't build a city to accommodate one car a person.

Which is the most liveable city for you and why?

One of my favourites is Paris and I lived there many years. I could take public transportation

or walk to work. You could do everything within the arrondissement. I also enjoyed living in Barcelona for several years. It was wonderful to see how the city got modernised without losing its character. This is something you can learn from and apply in Sofia. How not to destroy the character of a city during its modernisation. In many places the new highways enhanced the urban environment. And, by the way, they did all of it with local architects.

It's interesting you say that, because Bulgaria is often compared to Spain, but not in favourable terms; mostly, it is related to coastal over-construction.

Well, that's true too. There is a lot of large low-quality development in Bulgaria without larger vision. What are people going to do when they come here? What is the annual cycle? July and August are easy, but what are you going to do in October through to May? Cannes is a year round destination, things are happening or can be enjoyed throughout the year. One of the most difficult times to make a hotel reservation or get a golf tee time is Christmas, even though it's cold, eight degrees or so. Traditionally, the Riviera was a winter holiday destination, there is still much to learn from the creation of that destination.

Going back to Spain, yes, similar over-construction did occur there in the 1970s and 1980s. Ghettos were created for Brits and Germans who would come and have very little interaction with the local community or culture. We

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don't encourage these projects and find that those same tourists have now become much more sophisticated and would not purchase that same product today. Those Brits

Corvin Promenade in Budapest, Central Europe's largest urban regeneration project.

and Germans who truly appreciated these places have become their biggest protectors.

And, by the way, something else relevant to your experience in Bulgaria, is that in Majorca they've spent a lot of energy and time fighting tour operators over the last 10 years. Contrary to what many might think, tour operators can ruin a country's chances to be a good tourist destination in the long term. The type of development they promote are often a serious challenge to the preservation of indigenous culture and compromise the natural quality of the locations. Opposed in places like Majorca, they shift their interest to places like Bulgaria. The people tour operators bring typically do not care much about Bulgaria, they just want a cheap destination and most of the money their spending stays with the tour operator back home. **PW**



Image courtesy of INVI