

## VENUE REVIEW

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LOCATION: MAYFAIR VENUE TYPE: HYBRID

# Molton House

Nick Valentine re-defines 'house party' with an extravagant conversion of a 5-storey terrace tucked into Soho's fashion district

**C**limbing over workmen and stacks of wood to ascend the five staircases of a poky Georgian terrace, it is hard to imagine that this seeming shell of a town house will open next week as London promoter Nick Valentine's latest £2 million celebrity driven members-only club. But then again, Valentine probably never imagined that the 50th birthday party they had planned for Simon Le Bon in the venue two weeks before would ever have pulled off. After all, a building site is not the customary location for such a high profile bash. But several drapes and a nifty installation later, 200 people were rocking in the basement, probably a little high on paint fumes. "He couldn't do it any later because he was going on tour to South America the following day," explains Valentine. "We dressed the basement just for the night and took it all out again the next day. It was fantastic to see everything functioning and working with people in it, it was a good taste of what's to come."

Nick Valentine's dedication to the London party scene is unrivalled and has led to him becoming somewhat of a beacon for the artistic crowds within

the capital's elite celebrity circle. Although he's already made a strategic dash to the loo halfway through one interview this morning, his creative flow still spills forth as he begins to explore the concepts behind his latest venture, Molton House.

As co-founder of one of London's most renowned and influential members-only clubs, The Cuckoo Club, which set the benchmark for a new breed of luxurious VIP style in the city, Valentine raised the eyebrows of a group of investors who had bought a five-story Georgian town house property on South Molton Street. By a remarkable twist of fate, the venue they proposed to Valentine for development was the very premises that he had enquired after a month before. He explains: "When I came up with the original idea for this, I thought the only place that it would work would be here. I looked into the situation and I was told someone had just bought it and I thought 'fair enough'. But then a month or so later I got the call from the guys who had bought the very same venue, so it's synchronistic really."

Given free reign for the first time to make and

create solely from his own inspirations, Valentine set out to implement his ideas for a sumptuous and exotic multi-functional space, far removed from what he terms are the recent "airport lounge style" bars that have opened in the capital. "Everything is slick and impersonal in those types of bars," he says, "but I wanted to achieve a sense of theatre and drama." Molton House has that ethereal element to it, akin to the experience of Alice in Wonderland, with its ability to appear timeless and transport you to a womb-like haven.

The manifestation of Valentine's ideas came about through revered designers Blacksheep, who had met him during the launch of The Cuckoo Club. Blacksheep has since executed high profile lifestyle projects for diverse brands, including Hermes (London headquarters), avant-garde Voyage (flagship store, Conduit St) and Inamo, as reported in NIGHT Magazine's October '08 edition.

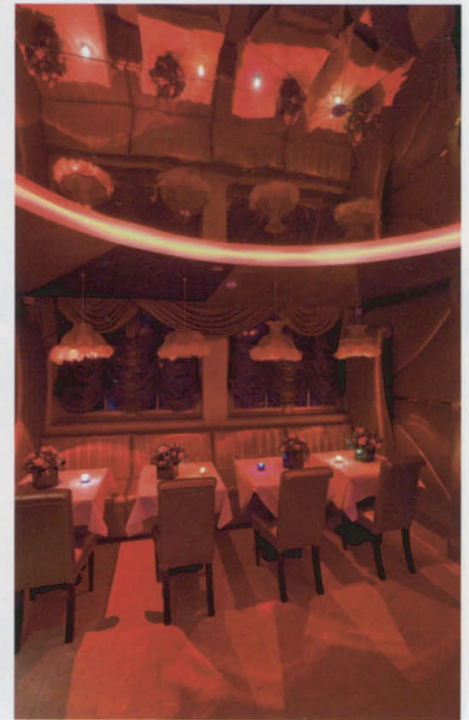
Blacksheep Director, Jo Sampson, gives her first impressions of Valentine's visions: "We thought they represented an interesting eclecticism - a real



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CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE: Nick Valentine sits beneath 5,000 Swarovski crystals in the entrance; Moorish architecture graces the window bay in the exquisite front dining room; a cosy seclusion for VIP parties



maximalist moment that signified we had reached the opposite pole from the large industrial chic superclub era. Nick wanted an environment with real warmth, with the colour tones of Morocco, married with soft curves - but without any self-conscious 'ethnic' feel."

Design, build and technology experts Showtec worked alongside Valentine and Blacksheep during the three-month fit out to execute design and technology ideas. Showtec's Paul Craig, who also operates a number of late night venues, says:

"It's easy to come up with a great idea, but not so easy to execute it, so we make it happen, whether it's flowery feathers or a disco speaker." Showtec produced many of the venue's striking features, such as the huge chandelier in the entrance made up of 5,000 Swarovski crystals. Other delights are the cut ice bars, a stained glass peacock DJ booth, faux snakeskin banisters and ceilings covered in glass spun silk.

An important pre-requisite of Valentine's was that the venue should not have any overriding theme or influence, but should remain outside of any period categorisation. Jo comments: "Nick is a client with very strong views on what he likes and doesn't like in a nightclub environment. His strictures included nothing black, no straight lines and no symmetry! The idea was to create a timeless venue with no single defining theme. It's exciting trying to second-guess such a pure vision, but also a challenge of course to articulate it in a

given space." The décor is primarily defined by its sleek curves and a "Regal and Rhiad" influenced interior. Elaborate bespoke furniture is upholstered with faux snake, stingray and ostrich skin while embossed copper tables and rose tinted glass peepholes add further distinct detail. Valentine's wish that every piece of material and finish were different presented a challenge for Blacksheep, who sourced a total of 167 different fabrics from all corners of the world, each of commercial quality and fire-treated. Some notable pieces are the metal panels from Dubai in reception and the top of the range glass-beaded wallpaper. The quality of the fit out by main contractor Tetry Construction and the attention to detail by Blacksheep and Showtec makes for rich surroundings. Says Showtec's Paul: "The finishes on the floors are some of the best I've ever seen, it's superb, hats off to them."

The shapes and colours throughout the space can be attributed to Valentine's research into Moorish architecture, which is the articulated Islamic architecture of North Africa and parts of Spain and Portugal. The rich browns, reds, oranges and golds offset by the Bristol blue is very much derived from a North African feel. Valentine describes another influence: "The other is kind of Elvis wild at heart, with the snakeskins and the stingray skin, so it's a bit rock and roll. It's two things that shouldn't really go together, but I think they work well." A sense of high fashion and art is infused throughout the venue - Valentine has

even reserved wall space for art pieces from Ronnie Wood's son's nearby Scream Gallery.

The opening night of Molton House on 20 November saw 200 socialites move freely between the rooms of the old house, grazing its hallways, chatting on the stairs, and eventually descending to the basement for a late night boogie. Never has the house party vibe been so cleverly mastered by a late night venue.

But unlike the free-for-all tendencies of real life house parties, this is one door that's difficult to get through. Access to Molton House is primarily, though not exclusively, for members only at a cost of £500 per year. Valentine has cherry-picked a membership committee to guide the stylistic direction of the venue, which reads like a who's who of London's creative talent, including Alice Temperley, Tracey Emin, Sadie Frost, Jemma Kidd, Alex James, Roger Taylor (Queen,) Paul Cook (Sex Pistols,) John Stoddart, Yasmin Mills, Hon. Henry Cobbold, Steve Jones (T4), Ben Elliott, Leah Wood, Tyrone Wood and James Nesbitt. To become a member you have to be nominated by two other members or a committee member. Keen to dispel any air of pretentiousness, Valentine says: "All I've created is something that I would like to go to because the second you start to create something in terms of what you think people want, you are going to get it wrong. The majority of people in the committee are friends, which have come from me being an old bastard and being part of the



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► London scene for so long! They are from across the arts; film, theatre, fashion, music, literature - just to set the tone of the kind of people I want to come to the club and hangout with."

The venue's location is testament to its character. South Molton Street, near Bond Street, has been a fashion district since the 16th century and features some of London's most exclusive fashion and design outlets, including the celebrated Brown's, whose founder won the V&A award for Outstanding Achievement in Fashion in 2006. Guests at Molton House can enjoy people watching over the street and distant corners of the West End, thanks to large windows at the front, which allow natural light to enhance the building during daytime dining.

Carpeted stairs link the basement club and ground floor reception to the first and second floors - each with an intimate room at the front and back. The first floor includes a cocktail bar and seating area that are open from midday, as well as a sunken DJ booth on the landing, surprising guests when they catch sight of the DJ through a glass panel by their feet and framed behind a stained glass peacock display. The restaurant, situated on the second floor, offers 25 covers and modern European cuisine. The third floor holds a malleable events space suitable for private dining, creative presentations and screenings.

As you ascend Molton House, there is a subtle evolution of styles. Valentine explains: "As you go

up, it gets a bit more grand and sumptuous. The colour scheme gets lighter too, so you start with a very rich red in the hallway and then it changes to brown and pinks; the idea being if you are in full party mood you go to the club bit and if you are feeling like I am today you go and sit in the cocktail lounge with your cup of Horlicks. It's the idea of a one-stop-shop."

On one side of the greeting area a huge key hole shape frames the bottom of the staircase, which reinforces a 'through the keyhole' type of transportation to another world. To the right, a disorientating infinity mirror startles guests as they descend the stairs into the 120-capacity basement club, which is open until 3.30am. A separate DJ booth, dancefloor, reservable tables and state-of-the-art sound system from Funktion 1, installed by Showtec, establish the foundations for a premier late night destination. As a main dealer for Bose, Showtec also installed a Bose sound system around the rest of the venue. In the nightclub, Showtec brought to life a 1,200 point, custom LED ceiling, which covers the walls and ceiling. The team also carried out the implementation of over 200m of flexible, colour-changing LED around the whole venue.

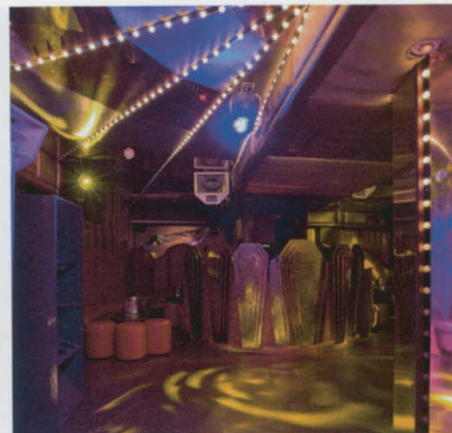
On an operational level, Valentine aims to put the fun back into clubbing, stating it's all become "a bit po-faced". He says: "I don't really want to go into another place where it's the 'best of chill out three', so again indulging in my own weird music

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Sociable chilling space for the cocktail bar; a cubby hole allows guests to peek through on the action; the private dining room's decorative panel ties are a cheeky reference to lacing on a women's corset; a collage of quality materials makes for rich surroundings in the basement club; a peacock shaped DJ booth takes pride of place, surrounded by a Funktion One sound system; ostrich feathers create an elegant centrepiece for the dining table





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## VITAL STATISTICS

Molton House  
43 South Molton Street  
London  
W1K 5RS  
Tel: 0207 4931688  
Owner: Nick Valentine  
Website: [www.moltonhouse.com](http://www.moltonhouse.com)

## Key Contractors

**Interior Designer:** Blacksheep // **Main Contractor & EPOs:** Tetry Construction // **Light, Sound and Visual Installation:** Showtec // **Flooring:** Wilton Carpets, Concept Tiles, HR Johnson, Grestec Tiles, Swedecor, Deralam // **Bars & Fittings:** Cantilever Bars & Concept Bars // **Furniture:** EK Design // **Metal/Acrylics:** Rimex, 3D Foils, Brent Plastics, Merck, Forms and Surfaces // **Wallpaper:** Muraspec, Tektura, Fidelity Europe // **Fabric:** Abbott and Boyd, Majilite, Design Tex, Skia, Panaz, Brands, Ultra Fabrics, Robert Allen, Harlequin, Orchard Fabrics // **Curtains/Blinds:** Bowden Toltit // **Security:** Showtec // **Cloakroom & Entry System:** ID Scan (InTouch and Cloakscan)

## Drinks

**Pouring brands:** Hennessy VS cognac, Beefeater gin, Santa Teresa rum, Gran Centenario Reposado tequila, Russian Standard Platinum vodka, Johnnie Walker Black Label whisky, Maker's Mark bourbon // **Premium draught lager:** n/a // **Standard draught lager:** n/a // **Cocktail list:** Yes

## Technology

**Sound system (ground floor):** 4 x Funktion One Res 2 SH speakers, Funktion One Twin 21" Bass Speaker, Electrovoice SX300 mid top speaker // **Processing and control:** E25 amp for Res 2 SH, E45 amp for 21" bass speakers, Formula Sound AVC2 limiter, QSC amp for monitor speaker, Soundcraft 12 Channel live mixer // **DK Kit:** 3 x Pioneer CDJ-1000 Mk3, 2 x Technics SL1210 Mk2, Pioneer DJM-800 mixer, 2 x Shure SM58 mics // **Sound system (first & second floors):** 2 x Funktion One F55's, 1 x Martin Audio Twin 10" bass speaker, 24 x Bose Free space Surface cubes, 6 x Bose Free space bass units // **Processing and control:** 2 x Cloud CXA6 amps, 2 x QSC amps, Crossover — DBX 223XL, Cloud DCM1 8 channel digital zone mixer, 8 x Bose sound cards // **Lighting:** 4 x Martin Wizards, 2 x Studio Due Nano LED wash moving heads, RGB LED pixel lighting effect, RGB LED colour washing, bespoke fibre optic lighting effects // **A/V Equipment:** ArKaos VJ video graphic software, 50" plasma screen

taste I will put a smile on people's faces, with some disco, opera, bluebeat, motown, funk and soul." There's no doubt Valentine is capable of intelligent programming for a discerning crowd. He hopes to make use of the small integrated live stage in the club to host big name bands, and even create his own unplugged acoustic TV show. Valentine had already secured Carl Barat from Dirty Pretty Things to do an acoustic set for the UK launch party of America's biggest fashion website Glam.com.

Molton House has one of the most sophisticated drinks menus ever seen by NIGHT, which is unsurprising given the kudos of its members and the people behind the bar. General manager Mark Fairweather (formerly of Movida and Amika) has assembled some of the best mixologists working in London, headed by Mikkel Kongerslev (formerly bar manager at Volstead). Kongerslev has created an extensive cocktail list, from pre-prohibition classics to contemporary favourites all with an individual twist. Bar manager, Andreas Tsanos, formerly of Hakasan, Sketch and Long Bar, says: "The ethos behind the cocktail list is to bring back all the forgotten vintage cocktails, with a twist, so we have a lot of flips and sours. We use only fresh ingredients, with a minimum amount of sugar, and balance it with vermouths and bitters. Favourites are the Molton Mule, made of fresh ginger and pink peppercorns muddled with fresh pineapple

and shaken with Russian Standard vodka and topped with ginger beer, or the Sophie Royal, with homemade jasmine syrup with fresh passion fruit pulps shaken with Zubrowka Bison Grass vodka and charged with Veuve Cliquot vintage champagne.

Likewise, the food menu is original and made fresh to order. Head chef, Finlay Logan, who has trained in Michelin-starred restaurants and worked all over the world, has devised an avant-garde, modern European choice of cuisine. Top dishes are butter poached lobster with braised baby artichoke cous cous salad, baby leek, and caramelised leafy lemon, and maldon rock oysters with white radish and apple dice, passion fruit jelly and coconut milk. Finlay says: "When you walk through the door it's very much a wow factor and I want the food to be along the same lines as that. Once a week we'll be changing a couple of dishes per course because I want to keep things moving."

A week later on from the opening night, it is impossible to imagine that only seven days ago this rich and extravagant wonderland was just an empty shell. But the prolonged planning that went into its design is testament to its success. It is Valentine's raw creativity and artistic flair that have prevented this venue from becoming another pretentious London members club. Instead the capital has been blessed with a weird and wonderful house in which to lose themselves. ■