

Olivier Stockman, 52, managing director of movie studio Sands Films in Rotherhithe, south London, is keen to give a tour of the building before we retire to his study. It is a Grade II-listed Victorian grainhouse, where Stockman lives as well as works, on the south bank of the Thames. We cross the bare floorboards of the 23,000 sq ft premises, a labyrinth of workshops with secret corridors and additional wings.

Parisian Stockman moved to London aged 19 to pursue a career in film-making. "I came here by boat in 1979. I felt I would be free in London to make the films I wanted to make," he says. "Paris was, and still is, very self-conscious, with less opportunity to be individualistic. There were all sorts of attractive things about London and its sense of freedom; another reason that I left France was, of course, to escape military service."

'Properties overlooking the river are now too expensive and occupied by people who do not care for the community'

For a year Stockman lived in hostels across London, working as a cook and then a projectionist until, in 1980, he landed a job as a film-maker at Studio Sands. By 1988 he had played a major role in the production of a six-hour adaptation of *Little Dorrit*, which received two Oscar nominations.

Born in Paris in 1960, he started making films at a very early age. "At 12 I wrote to François Truffaut, after encouragement from my father. I was worried that I might be plagiarising his work and he replied to me from Hollywood." Stockman struck up a friendship with Truffaut and was taken under the *auteur's* wing. "He would give me deadlines, check my scripts and fund my projects – it was hugely encouraging."

Established in 1975 by film-maker Christine Edzard, Sands Films was conceived as a film production company. Today the premises incorporates a wig workshop, set construction rooms, a cinema and a soundstage used by the BBC. Yet it is period costume that has driven its reputation, with intricate pieces made for films such as *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012). There is also a cloth-dyeing workshop, in which Stockman points out part of Keira Knightley's costume for *Anna Karenina* (2012).

Stockman lives on the building's third floor with his wife Annabel, also



Olivier Stockman in the costumes department at Sands Films in Rotherhithe, London

Rick Pushinsky

Expat lives *Paris to London*

On relocation

Izabella Scott meets a film-maker who left France to escape military service

a film-maker, and their adopted children, Chung Chung, 15, and Hua Hua, 13. Both children are "home-eds," taught outside of the school system. "Why? The reason is twofold," says Stockman. "In the 1990s there were no adequate options in Rotherhithe. But also, my wife and I are artists, and our belief in education and culture is different to the 'improvement of earning' [rather than learning] that is often the focus of the school syllabus."

A long-time resident of Rotherhithe, Stockman says the area has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. Rotherhithe, which means "Sailor Haven" in old English, was once a port and home to a thriving artisan community, with shops such as Peter Layton's Glassblowing as well as felt-makers and bookbinders – all of which have been driven out of the area by

rising rents. "Properties that overlook the river have become much too expensive, and are now occupied by people who do not care for the community, nor are willing to take part in it," says Stockman.

Canary Wharf and Rotherhithe's relative proximity to the City makes it a desirable area for London's financial professionals. "Most of our friends now live in Hackney and Brixton," says Stockman, "But there is a little community of people here in Rotherhithe who have put up a fight and tried to hold out against the change. Sands is a big part of that fight."

Just a year ago Sands Films was in peril, with its rent soaring from £75,000

in 2000 to £285,000 in 2011. "It was terrible, we were advised to relocate – but it would be the death of Sands. We are defined by this space, by this unique building," says Stockman. In an attempt to buy the building freehold he set up an Enterprise Investment Scheme, a government plan that allows tax relief for investors buying shares in small companies.

"Four hundred and fifty people have joined us as shareholders, and there is such a wide range of people, from locals, to actors we have made costumes for, across all classes, and all over Europe in fact," says Stockman, who reached his target by close of the year. "It's funny," he adds, "using capitalist tools for collectivist ideas."

After more than 30 years of living in London, Stockman misses little about France. "We have French friends, but I don't necessarily feel French," he says. Does London still hold the same allure as it did in 1979? "Yes, there's still a buzz, and I think it comes from live performance. The British soul is about live performance, and they excel at this – actors, singers, classical musicians. Quality of life may be better in Rome, but the live excitement is here in London."

Buying guide

Pros

- London has a globally renowned reputation for the arts, particularly the performing arts
- For parents who prefer home education, there are well-established support networks
- The crime rate has dropped London-wide by 3.6 per cent, with a fall of 4.6 per cent in Rotherhithe's borough, Southwark

Cons

- London house prices rose 9.7 per cent in 2012 but stayed relatively stable in Rotherhithe. Rents are still liable to increases that can be hard on small independent business
- London is expensive. The average rent for a high-end two-bedroom apartment is one of the highest in Europe at £2,800 per month, compared with £1,925 in Paris or £1,506 in Rome (Mercer, 2012)
- High traffic levels and expensive public transport. The city is not particularly bicycle friendly but is improving

What you can buy for . . .

- £100,000 Nothing
- £500,000 A two-bedroom apartment overlooking the river with a full-time concierge on Rotherhithe Street, SE16
- £1m A three-bedroom duplex penthouse with a rooftop terrace, across the river in Limehouse, E14



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