

Hotel building the Easy way

As expected, the EasyGroup's first hotel flies in the face of convention, stealing a modular system from a cruise ship fit-out and using a contractor with a very unusual background. Phil Bishop reports

LAST week contractor Urang finished the refurbishment – three weeks ahead of schedule – of the first EasyHotel, a new concept in hotels from Stelios Haji-Ioannou's EasyGroup. The hotel in Lexham Gardens, Kensington, in the heart of London's museum district, is distinctive for two reasons. It is cheap and it is simple. Rather like the EasyJet airline service, in fact.

It is possible, according to the EasyHotel website, to book a room in this prime location for as little as £20 a night, although you might have to hunt hard to find such an offer. Enter certain dates online and the price is anything up to £175 a night. For this you get a room that is either "small" (80 sq ft), "tiny" (70 sq ft) or "very tiny" (60 sq ft) and is unlikely to have a window. You can just about swing a cat in the "small" rooms, but only a tail-less Manx.

There is minimal service. Instead of a dining room there are vending machines. But there is a bed, pay-per-view television and a shower/WC pod in every room, plus plenty of familiar Easy-orange branding. This is a price-led concept for the budget traveller.

On the outside, number 14 Lexham Gardens is a grand, five-storey Georgian terrace that was previously an 18-room hotel. Urang has ripped out all the old services and converted this space into a shiny new 34-room hotel in just five months.

This has been made possible by the use of a prefabricated walling and ceiling system from the home of the flat-pack, Scandinavia. The only original feature left is the staircase, with its oak bannister and fleur de lys wrought iron balustrades.

Urang secured the £450,000 refurbishment contract against much better-established construction companies and it is by far the largest contract it has taken on to date. Urang director Steve Bushell believes that being a small, young company made it more adaptable to the new building system.

EasyGroup's brand general manager Roger Powell confirms this. He says: "Using a new method of construction we needed a builder willing to grasp a new concept and be flexible in approach."

Each room of the hotel is made up of between 12 and 15 panels for the walls and up to 15 panels for the ceilings. There are no wet trades here except in the stairwell area, where the original walls have been left uncovered by panelling.

The panel system is supplied by Inexa, a Danish company. Ceiling panels are precast steel. The wall panels are a sandwich of pressed steel on plasterboard with a filling of insulation material. They are 100 mm thick, except where they are used against pre-existing party walls – then they are just 25 mm thick.

The wall sections arrive on site numbered, according to plans produced by Inexa and EasyHotel's architect, EPR. The numbers tell Urang exactly where each piece slots into place.

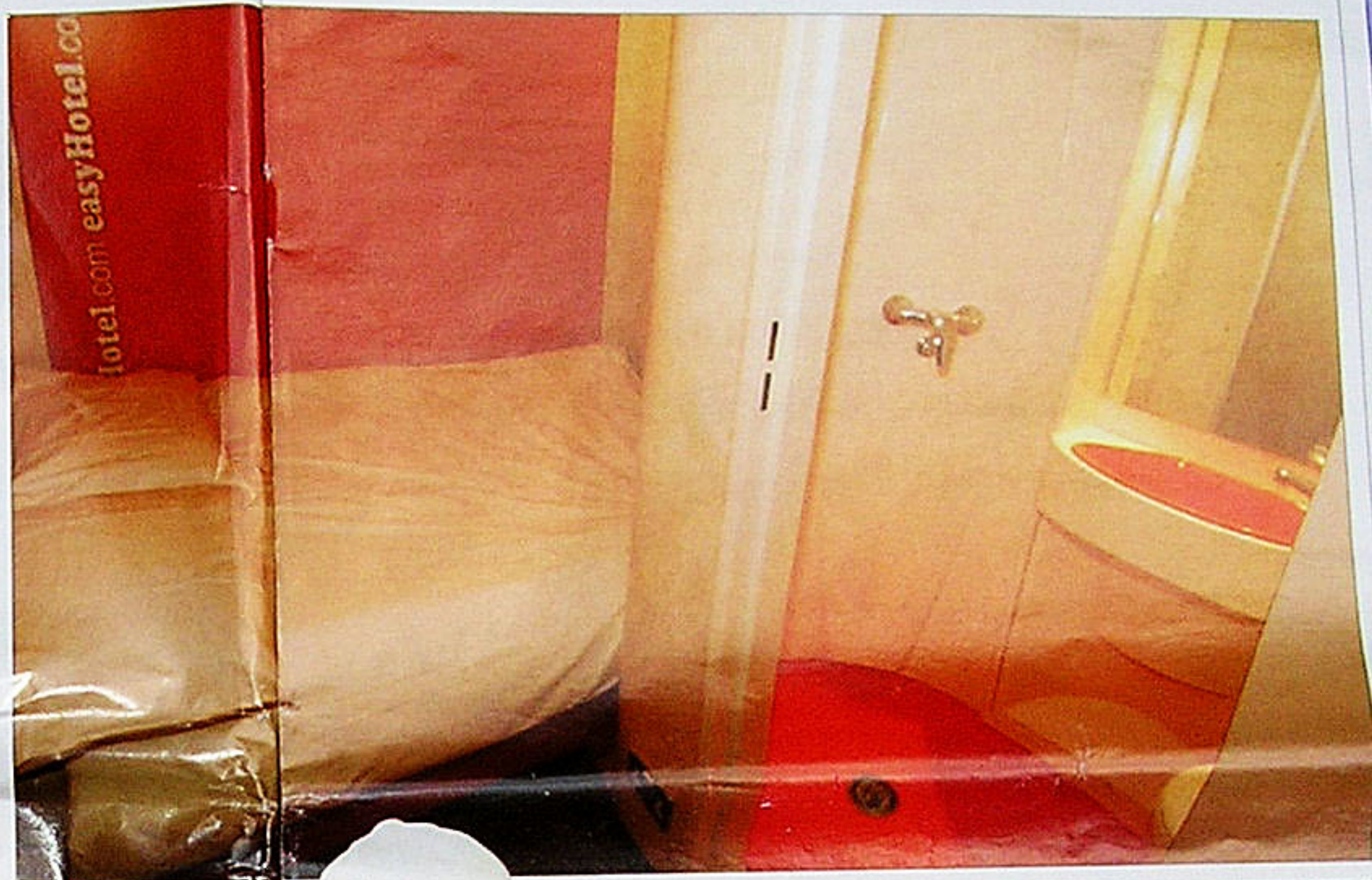
Steel base trays are fixed to the floor and each panel is put in place with a tongue-and-groove connection to the adjacent section. A 50 mm overlap provides a secure fit. The panels are not screwed to each other, only to the base plate and to tracking above.

The panels arrive with a vinyl finish, protected by a plastic film that is peeled off after installation. No further painting or coating is required.

Mr Bushell reckons the system saved six to eight weeks on the contract through the virtual elimination of wet trades and because the walls were being fabricated while the contractor was taking out the old services. Urang started on site in January and began wall and ceiling installation



Urang director Steve Bushell surveys the site



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Client Stelios Haji-Ioannou visits the site

'Using a new method of construction we needed a builder willing to grasp a new concept and be flexible in approach'
Roger Powell, EasyGroup brand general manager

the system is that the building structure needs to be absolutely true.

Mr Bushell says: "The biggest lesson we learned is that, particularly in an old building, you need to measure it to death. There is some flexibility, but within limits."

Urang found that the alignment of one old wall prevented it from fitting five rooms onto the first floor as planned.

Mr Bushell says: "There was a brand manual we had to follow that specified room size. We couldn't go any smaller. It was quite a challenging couple of weeks. We'd have one solution and then look at it again and it didn't quite work."

In the end, through liaison with architects and the walling system supplier, the team came up with a way to configure the rooms so that they all fitted in.

Urang, m'lud

SIX YEARS ago 25-year-old Andrew Marshall set up Urang (as in "you rang, m'lud") as a concierge company for cash-rich, time-poor City bankers, doing their shopping, laundry, whatever. Today it is an up-and-coming building contractor pioneering new construction techniques and technologies. What happened?

In 2001 Mr Marshall was joined as owner and director by Steve Bushell and Paul Cleaver, who, while on a skiing holiday together had decided the concierge business seemed like a good idea. Mr Cleaver, now 32, was working in mergers and acquisitions for Rothschilds; Mr Bushell, aged 34, had a degree in engineering and management, a masters from Cranfield and a background in manufacturing. They successfully persuaded Mr Marshall that they were just the people to help him grow Urang.

Mr Bushell says that a fall in the stock market led to a reduction in demand for concierge services. "But we kept being asked if we knew a good plumber or plasterer," he says. Urang was rapidly in domestic and then commercial property repair and maintenance services, then into building jobs such as kitchens and bathrooms. By focusing on service and customer care, it has grown into a £4.5 million-turnover business with a lot of repeat customers.

Mr Bushell hopes that, now the company has successfully completed work on the first EasyHotel, its biggest project to date, Urang will be well placed for further EasyHotels, when (as planned) the concept is rolled out as a franchise using

the same construction method. Urang is now quoting to work on three health centres in London scheduled to start next year and has submitted proposals based on the Inexa modular walling system that it installed for EasyHotel. Mr Bushell says a key advantage of the system for new buildings is that it is easy to reconfigure the floor layout in the future by moving walls around.

Another benefit, he says, is an environmental one. "As a business we are conscious that the industry consumes an awful lot of material. Environmentally, this system is good because it reduces the need for wet trades and uses less water." Having had a significant role in pioneering modular construction, Urang is now looking to be a pioneer in green construction and energy efficiency. For the health centre bids, it is also proposing a geothermal heating and cooling system.

"I am trying to promote an environmentally sound heating system," Mr Bushell says. "It's a system from Norway. There are 150,000 applications there and nearly 1,000,000 in the USA." A geosystem uses the ground to source and store energy. Boreholes are sunk 100-300 m and a heat-carrying fluid is pumped in plastic pipes through the ground and around the building.

Mr Bushell says the payback is between five and 10 years, even before any Government grants that may be available. New to construction they may be, but the Urang guys are nothing if not ambitious.

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