

And now for something a bit DIFFERENT

Unconventional homes are all the rage in France, and they're easier to bag than you might think, explains **Sophie Gardner-Roberts**

What does your dream home in France look like? According to a survey we conducted last summer, our readers prefer older, renovated houses located in the countryside. I thought I did too, until I started looking into *biens atypiques* and fell in love with some incredible and unusual properties.

These unconventional properties are either new architect-designed homes or what French estate agents call lofts, describing converted commercial or industrial spaces such as old factories, shops, warehouses and anything that had a former life as a non-residential building.

These properties are generally spacious, with high ceilings and large windows, and often have mezzanines to make the most of the

height inside. Sometimes they retain traces of the building's former history with elements such as exposed factory beams, pillars, old archways or large warehouse doors. Contemporary architect-designed properties can be unusually shaped, incorporating modern architectural elements and, as current tastes go, sleek and stripped down designs.

Whether you like the style or not, these properties tend to have the wow factor and a big dose of cool. *Vive la différence!*

Loft at first sight

With such niche specifications, *biens atypiques* are usually marketed by agents who specialise in lofts, converted workshops and architect-



€1.1m

Hidden behind a rather innocuous facade in Melun in Seine-et-Marne, this incredible loft is housed in a former printing works. There are four bedrooms and three bathrooms, with the living space is spread across 800m². There's an indoor swimming pool and a central garden and outdoor-patio with the original metal beams exposed. There's also an independent studio and workshop and two garages, providing good rental potential. (*ateliers-lofts.com*)

designed new builds. So it makes sense to seek advice and guidance from the experts.

Ateliers Lofts & Associés has been selling *biens atypiques* for the past 20 years and focuses exclusively on loft conversions, contemporary townhouses and artists' workshops and studios.

"Unusual residential properties are currently in the spotlight", explains director Olivier Thonon. "Our clients are passionate people who react to *coups de coeur*. They are often professionals in the fashion, finance, cinema and advertising industries. But they all love



€645,000

This spacious loft apartment is set within a building dating back to the 13th century, and which was once part of an old hospital in central Lyon. This impressive property was converted into an apartment in 2010. There are four bedrooms, one of which sits on an impressive mezzanine overlooking the main living room. Old stone doorways and vaulted ceilings blend with stylish architect-designed bookshelves and a shiny new kitchen. (*espaces-atypiques.com*)



€1.395m

This former artists' workshop is housed in an elegant 19th-century building belonging to the famous Lido cabaret in the 8th *arrondissement* of Paris. It was tastefully renovated by an architect who created a spacious living room with a 4m-high ceiling and exposed beams. You'll find an office, two ensuite bedrooms, another shower room and dressing room on a mezzanine and a modern, fully equipped kitchen. (*espaces-atypiques.com*)

architecture, interior design and travel.

"Our British clients especially look for the Parisian spirit in specific districts which they choose for their picturesque aspect; but they also invest in the countryside, searching for architectural value and sea views. The Riviera, Brittany and the north of France are in high demand," he explains.

Another specialist in the field is Espaces Atypiques, whose clients are mostly art enthusiasts from France, though 10-15% are foreign buyers. "They are hedonists, *bon vivants*

who have artistic sensitivities, either through their work or their hobbies," says founder Julien Haussy. "They love anything that is rare and a little different."

Buyers of unconventional homes are more likely to succumb to *coups de coeur*, says Julien. Indeed, many of his clients are willing to compromise on location in order to find their dream loft and his Parisian buyers won't hesitate to move further out into the suburbs where industrial or commercial conversions are easier to find. "In the last five years, demand for these interesting homes has soared in France," he says. "They are very fashionable and, just like with cars or clothes, people want to own something that's different, if they can."

Buyer beware

Because of the industrial or commercial pasts of these properties, the buying process is a little different to that of traditional residential homes. Before doing anything, you must make sure that the building's use (*affectation*) can be changed. The *affectation* of a property might be industrial (a workshop, factory, warehouse), commercial (a shop, gallery) or residential (a house, apartment block).

If you are purchasing a commercial or industrial property to convert yourself, you first have to check at the *mairie* that the local urban plan (*Plan Local d'Urbanisme*) will allow you to turn it into a residential property. Some *communes* will want to keep commercial

buildings as they are to help attract shops to the village, for example. If the property you are looking at is co-owned as part of a *copropriété*, you will have to check the rules and obtain unanimous authorisation from all owners within the *copropriété* to change its use. Make sure the property can be linked to various utilities such as mains drainage (if available), electricity and phone lines.

If you are thinking of changing the structure or façade of the building, or if the works are taking place in an area with a surface of over 150m², you will need to apply for a *permis de construire* and use an architect.

Neil Vesma, a France-based architect and columnist for *FPN*, has worked on these kind of industrial spaces before and says buyers need to be aware of a few things before embarking on conversions. "These industrial buildings can be more expensive to convert because of various factors," he explains. "The size is one thing; these are unconventionally large buildings so you need to think about how to deal with that. Many industrial sites have a lot of glass, which is expensive, and you have to think about heating; making these homes comfortable is a little more difficult."

Even if the property you've bought is smaller than 150m², an architect's advice will be invaluable. Neil says people tend to get excited by the details but fail to visualise how the space will work holistically, and end up with uncomfortable rooms. "You need somebody who understands space," he explains, adding that you could always hire an architect for just the planning application process, and not as



€1.15m

Overlooking a planted courtyard, this Parisian property was transformed from old stables into a comfortable home in the 10th *arrondissement*. Large arched windows bring in plenty of light and character. There is one large ensuite bedroom with a terrace; a kitchen with access to an underground laundry room and wine cellar; and a living room leading to an office with an impressive glass roof. (*espaces-atypiques.com*)



€3.9m

This vast *maison d'architecte* is located in the 15th *arrondissement*, close to the Georges Brassens park in Paris. Boasting 334m² of living space, the house is cleverly arranged over seven floors (there's a lift to help you get around) with high ceilings, a mezzanine over the lounge and many glass elements flooding the house with light. There are four bedrooms, three terraces overflowing with plants, a wine cellar and two garages. (*ateliers-lofts.com*)



the project manager, to save some money while ensuring your project is sound.

Around 10% of properties for sale via Espaces Atypiques are conversion projects and Julien says the agency can offer the services of an architect and even help buyers visualise their dreams thanks to 3D imagery.

If you are buying a property which has already been converted, you must check the *affectation* has been correctly changed to residential. You must also make sure that no work has been conducted or any areas annexed from a *copropriété* without authorisation. Your estate agent or *notaire* should be able to help.

It might be an idea to conduct a survey of the building before you sign the *compromis de vente* for peace of mind, particularly if the property is smaller than 150m² in total.

Money matters

As expected, architect-designed houses, or *maisons d'architectes*, usually have a high-end specification and are therefore expensive. Many lofts for sale are located in cities, with Paris taking up a large slice of the market, but you can find some interesting options in the countryside too, including former barns. The further out from the city centre you go, the better the bargains and the more conversions you can find.

"In the Marais, where prices are currently around €9,000/m², a 100m² loft would cost around €1.2m-€1.5m," estimates Julien Haussy. "In the 19th *arrondissement* however, prices are a little lower at around €7,000-8,000/m² and then if you go to Montreuil, east of Paris, you can find lofts for sale at €5,000/m²."



€1.25m

Located near the holiday hotspot of Cap-Ferret in Gironde, this sleek architect-designed villa is set in grounds of 2,000m² in the heart of a pine forest. Boasting seven bedrooms, the house is organised around the large pool and offers quirky rooms bathed with light thanks to large modern windows. A separate room contains a traditional Moroccan hammam and a jacuzzi overlooking the garden. (*espaces-atypiques.com*)

Despite the average budget of Espaces Atypiques' buyers being €563,000, a fifth of the properties they have for sale are on the market for under €300,000, which, incidentally, is also the average budget limit for most of the respondents to our survey.

Of course, one of the great advantages when purchasing a converted property or a newly

built contemporary home is that you have little or no work to do and can move in immediately.

Investment opportunities

Unconventional homes attract plenty of curiosity and admiration, and they can offer interesting returns on investment too. In terms of short-term rentals, unusual homes are in high demand, particularly through peer-to-peer holiday rental platforms such as Airbnb. They stand out from the crowd and have potential for other ventures such as running an artists' or writers' retreat.

An unusual property might also catch the eye of a film company, for example, and you could rent out your home to a film crew for a few days. Depending on the size and character of the property, you could be looking at earning nearly €2,000 a day according to the property platform SeLoger. "The press are constantly looking for unusual, stylish properties and cinema productions really like places with a strong identity," explains Olivier, from Ateliers Lofts & Associés.

Another way to make a good return on your investment is to buy a commercial or industrial property

TIPS

- Make sure the property use can be, or has been, changed
- Check urban planning rules before starting a conversion project
- Seek advice from specialist agencies and hire an architect
- Stay true to the primary function of the property now: to be lived in



in its original state, convert it to a home and then sell it on. Julien Haussy, of Espaces Atypiques, reckons half of his clients do this, over the course of about four years. "We're talking about people who love projects like these," he says. "They love househunting, finding an exceptional property to convert and then working on it. It's a labour of love."

With the promise of being unique, elegant and awe-inspiring, *maisons atypiques* have certainly caught my eye. ■

€1.16m

Originally built in 1600, this convent has been converted into a beautiful home in the centre of Dijon, in Côte-d'Or. Offering 400m² of living space, the property is accessed via a private courtyard. Inside, the ancient archways and contemporary metal roof structure create a unique atmosphere. There are two ensuite bedrooms, a large reception area with a fully equipped kitchen and two other vaulted bedrooms. (*espaces-atypiques.com*)

Also on the market



€129,000: Set on a peninsula 5km from a village in Orne, this 18th-century flour mill has been partially converted and needs finishing (Ref: 459295)



€635,000: A stylish barn conversion with five bedrooms in Lot-et-Garonne; large grounds with country views and a pool (Ref: 455968)



€169,060: Behind a seemingly traditional façade is a contemporary warehouse-style conversion that needs finishing in Dordogne (Ref: 443990)



€455,000: This Nice apartment is housed in part of the former restaurant of the Palais l'Hermitage. Newly converted, it has one bedroom (Ref: 459275)



€381,500: A 17th-century house with salt pool, ideal for holiday rentals, plus an amazing barn conversion in Tarn-et-Garonne (Ref: 458529)



€490,000: This 14th-century convent is located in a Plus Beau Village in Haute-Vienne; it's been restored and tastefully modernised inside (Ref: 457552)

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