

# TOTALLY FLOORED

We catch up with Eelke Jan Bles and Rob Weems, owners of London's most sought-after bespoke flooring company, SOLID FLOOR, ahead of their move back east to Ezra Road.

**T**he story starts in Amsterdam 1994 with a photography student, Eelke Jan Bles, looking to earn some extra money for his studies. "So I opened a shop in the city centre with my friend, supplying timber floors." He tells me this as I admire an oak herringbone floor beneath our feet. "Ah yes, it's all about texture these days, not looking too shiny and polished," he says knowingly. But did he know anything about floors back when he started? "Well, no. But I have designing and making in my blood. My father was a welder, and perhaps I chose wood as the antidote to that." His penchant for wood proved rewarding. Within months, they were hiring staff, and within a few years, Eelke had opened a shop in Clerkenwell, where he was studying at UCL's prestigious Bartlett School of Architecture.

And so Solid Floor was officially born in 1997 – a humble name to reflect humble beginnings. Twenty-five years later, the business has grown to become the go-to bespoke flooring company of the rich, celebrated and 'in the know'. A success that has led to the opening of their latest flagship showroom on Ezra Road, just off the historic Columbia Road. For Eelke, it's come back full circle. "I've had my eye on this building for more than a decade. But it's wonderful for Solid Floor to eventually be back in East London,"

WORDS: EMMA WINTERSCHLADEN



Solid Floor's studio, just off Columbia Road



he reflects. Having expanded to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Richmond, Fulham, Notting Hill and Marylebone over the years, only the latter two showrooms remain, as well as this new one. “We’d lost our soul along the way and wanted to bring it back to a more high-end offering.”

It’s been with the help of Eelke’s long-time business partner and managing director Rob Weems, who came on board in 2003, that Solid Floor has evolved to where it is today. “Rob is the face of the brand,” Eelke says, with Rob adding, “the whole nature of the business has changed from selling floors straight to a customer, to working instead with professional clients, who you can build a long-term relationship with.” And indeed, their client list is impressive, including world-renowned architects and interior designers such as Kelly Hoppen, celebrities such as Madonna and food heroes like Ottolenghi (they decked out his Spitalfields restaurant on Artillery Lane).

As for East London, how has the area changed since Solid Floor was first here? “Well, put it this way. I once rented a floor in Charlotte Road for £90 pounds a week, which was around 4,000 square feet! I lived in a warehouse with eight lofts, and we’d have huge parties on a rota.



Founder Eelke Jan Bles, left, and managing director Rob Weems, below



**Eelke’s EAST LONDON**

**MARE STREET MARKET**  
I’m at least 15 years older than everyone else there but I love it.  
117 Mare Street, E8 4RU

**METROPOLIS**  
Their Sink in the Pink evenings are great. There’s lots of drag and dancing.  
234 Cambridge Heath Road, E2 9NN

**BISTROTHERQUE**  
Fantastic steak and wine.  
23-27 Wadeson Street, E2 9DR

**THE APPROACH GALLERY LLP**  
There’s always an interesting contemporary exhibition on here.  
1st Floor, 47 Approach Road, Bethnal Green, E2 9LY

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There would be a couple of hundred people paying on the door and they’d go on all night with a DJ. You really felt a part of something cool.” And yet, Eelke is still living (and working) here 20 years later, which suggests he still thinks East London is cool? “Well the problem is now it’s hot! Everyone wants to live here.”

Today, despite having an empire built around wooden flooring, Eelke has found his way back to the material of his childhood, and even has a steel workspace under Cambridge Heath arches. “Now I love to combine the two - the natural and the industrial. I’m always making things.” With such creativity and craftsmanship at the heart of the brand, it’s no wonder Solid Floor continues to play at the top of its game, in arguably the world’s most prestigious urban arena. 📍

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solidfloor.co.uk

