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How Squire & Partners'  
Department Store HQ  
is a shop window for a  
changing south London

# BRIXTON CALLING



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# WHAT'S IN STORE FOR BRIXTON?

In a building that's seen everything from 1900s grandeur to squatters, Squire and Partners' new workspace means the area's latest incarnation is being served

Words by Helen Parton  
Images by James Jones



ABOVE The tramazite reception desk is by Based Upon

BELOW Designer touches include a Mies van der Rohe Barcelona daybed



**“The Department Store is emblematic of the ebb and flow of Brixton’s fortunes and the architect has cleverly documented each of these eras”**

**F**rom a middle-class London suburb in the 19th century, including the first street to have electricity, to a model of modern British multicultural society thanks to the influx of a West Indian community post second world war, Brixton has always been at the centre of innovation and community-driven reinvention.

Now the completion of the Department Store, a workplace for and by architect Squire and Partners, sets the tone for another exciting new era. As you exit the Victoria Line’s southernmost Tube stop and hang a right, you can just about glimpse the crafted glass dome (replacing a dilapidated cupola) that signals the location of this five-storey scheme. It comprises workspace plus shops and eateries and, despite only finishing in the summer, has embedded itself well within the local community.

Cut back to late 2015 and it’s hard hats, hi-vis vests and builders’ boots at the ready as Tim Gledstone, the Squire and Partners architect who headed up this scheme, takes us round what is at this point a rather rundown building. “There was decay hidden under the ceilings – it had almost an apocalyptic look,” he says. As we stand and use our imaginations, he emphatically describes how voids will be cut through the building to give a sense of connection between the floors.

Then he promises a place where architects can make their models and which will be at the front of the building, providing a shop window on Squire and Partners’ work. On his architectural agenda is a roof garden, a hidden courtyard and – crucially – the aim that this would be a truly creative workspace, like Shoreditch’s Tea Building. The reception would be like a piece of art; downstairs in the basement would be an events space. It would rejuvenate the buildings adjacent too – for example, “bring back that idea of the village post office” – and the complex would have local retail outlets and somewhere to get great coffee. In 2017 it is clear that Gledstone and the team have pretty much been true to their design vision.

The building’s own history is as fascinating as the area of London it is located in. The Bon Marché department store, one of three in the area during its heyday, was built in homage to the opulence of the Parisian original. It was financed by local businessman James Smith when he won £80,000 after a flutter on a racehorse named Roseberry came good on a double.

As the shop prospered, in 1906 a new annex was added in Ferndale Road, just round the corner from the original Brixton Road store, giving an extra two floors of retail plus staff accommodation above. After serving briefly as a WW2 bomb shelter, this building became offices

in the 1950s as Brixton’s retail draw diminished. Eventually, after a variety of occupants, it was largely squatted after 2012, which is where Squire and Partners came in – buying the building and a family of others along Ferndale Road.

The Department Store is emblematic of the ebb and flow of Brixton’s fortunes and the architect has cleverly documented each of these eras, whether that’s sourcing some vintage pieces of furniture that discerning Edwardians might have wanted to buy when Brixton was a retail mecca, or retaining some of the street artwork created when it was home to squatters.

Literally and figuratively, the practice tread carefully, stripping the building back, restoring some original features and bringing in some modern tricks of the architectural trade. “We knew when we were able to save the floor, that was a game-changer,” Gledstone explains. The Burmese teak has been restored and creates a feeling of grandeur underfoot on entering from the street. On the outside, the original brick, stonework, stone, marble and terracotta have been revealed and the original Crittall windows restored or replaced with like for like.

Inside, the reception desk deliberately looks like a haberdasher’s display case. A solidly beautiful piece in its own right, composed of tramazite with glass sides and produced by long-time Squire and Partners collaborator Based Upon, its design uses unearthed gems from the Department Store’s history as well as current projects.

The reception is home to items of furniture that date back to the building’s first era, from 1906 to the 1950s. The archives of Danish furniture manufacturer Carl Hansen and Son (“their heritage is similar to ours” says Gledstone) were raided to produce a pair of sofas with personalised brass plaques. A Knoll daybed by Mies van der Rohe makes an appearance too, along with two large-scale rugs by Laguna featuring bespoke patterns by local designer Eley Kishimoto. Like all the best London creative collaborations, the pattern specialist duo – recently known for producing a wrap for Centre Point as well as their fashion work – and Squire and Partners met at a party. The result is a series of patterns that take inspiration from features of the building, for example the windows, with names like Loopy Mushroom and Mushroom Bunch.

But far from feeling like a place in aspic, this is a modern, busy space. During OnOffice’s visit, a local woman comes in to ask what the building is all about – they get that quite a lot, the receptionist tells me after happily explaining the Department Store premise. Members of the public often recall their memories of this being a department store. And, on to more practical workspace concerns, the answer to how you solve the perennial problem of endless Amazon and Asos deliveries arriving for staff? Simply pop them in custom-made storage, @





ready for the time-poor London employee to collect. There's a direct route out to the courtyard, featuring cobblestones salvaged from elsewhere in the scheme and a 70-year-old tree called Russell shipped in especially from Hamburg. Here would be the place where one would make the analogy of Squire and Partners putting down firm roots in the area.

On my penultimate visit, the maker room/modelshop next door is awash with neon signs, ready for the practice's contribution to this year's London Design Festival. This space defies the stereotype of architects as hiding behind computer screens; instead there's a CNC machine, laser cutters, spraybooth, saws and sanders. There's a large "chef's table" made of vintage oak, with more Carl Hansen chairs gathered around it, which in addition to internal meetings has hosted the range of third-sector organisations the architect has partnered with.

Among those in the design industry, Squire and Partners is well regarded for being involved in the Brixton Design Trail, this patch of south London's contribution to flagging up creativity in the capital. And the practice has form in setting up shop in an area and making sensitive inroads into community-driven gentrification rather than blowing in and pushing local businesses out. The practice's previous King's Cross setup in St Chad's Place included a local low-key gem of a cafe, long before anyone knew where the NIC postcode was and when Granary Square was just a glint in the eye of those leading the team at developer Argent.

This community involvement extends downstairs too, via a staircase that has been repurposed from a nearby stable block. When yoga sessions or weekly town hall meetings for staff are not taking place, the space plays host to the local creative and business community – during the nine days of the London Design Festival it held an event series called Under/Exposed.

Architects being among the most cycling-savvy, there is ample space for the two-wheeled good brigade, and the bathrooms are a cut above basic to say the least: bathroomware by Duravit designed by Philippe Starck, taps by Dornbracht (a brand on a lot of people's pipedream Pinterest boards) and bespoke door handles from another high-end supplier, Samuel Heath.

A grand original staircase featuring carved mahogany handrails and green patterned tiles sweeps you upwards from the ground floor to the workspace floors on levels one to three. Flying in the face of hotdesking, here everyone has their own desk, with plenty of space to design and develop projects ranging from a school and community hall in Rwanda to the Bulgari Hotel in London. In this way, each project team can craft and make their own retail-style concessions with temporary displays of current work.

Lighting is a combination of Flos Running Magnet system with a range of beautiful bespoke glass spheres from BTC in either floor lamp, pendant or wall light forms. Eagle-eyed visitors to the first floor will spy a limited edition Louis Poulsen lamp. No office can function without tea, of course, and the ☕



**ABOVE** Voids have been introduced to create a visual connection

**ABOVE LEFT** The original Burmese teak floor has been preserved

**"The practice trod carefully, stripping the building back, restoring some original features and bringing in some modern tricks"**

tea points are also fittingly design-led: essentially copper-lined boxes within a storage wall made of black ply. The tea areas point the way to a secret stair which connects the office floors, each with a seating setup for those get-away-from-it-all-moments.

Those preferring to take the lift can access not only the building's five floors but also the series of half levels in the annex, which engineering-wise must have taken some serious head-scratching. The annex areas are where you'll find the meeting rooms, and here the furniture gets seriously designer: venser tables from Vitra, Arper's Catifa chairs covered in Kvadrat fabric, upcycled Eames Aluminium Group and Arne Jacobsen Series 7 chairs, as well as Fritz Hansen tables, given new life thanks to a charcoal linoleum from Forbo.

Hit the button for the fourth floor and the doors open onto a bit of a showstopper. Clearly building on experience gained from its foray into the food and drink business at King's Cross, @



**“The practice has form in setting up shop in an area and making sensitive inroads into community-driven gentrification”**



**ABOVE** Original features sit alongside modern interventions

**LEFT** Flos Running Magnet lighting in the open-plan workspace

**RIGHT** A bar area with a copper-clad wall leads out to the terrace

**BELOW** A dining room is named after the racehorse Roseberry



**“There’s a private dining room named after Roseberry, the racehorse whose unprecedented wins meant the building got over the finishing line in the first place”**



the practice has created a spacious restaurant and roof terrace, where the lucky 220 employees and guests can enjoy subsidised food and a place to hang out of an evening. It collaborated with Benchmark on the pewter and copper bar, paired with Ercol dining chairs for a double whammy of British brands renowned for their craftsmanship. Inside, diners can relax on pale green leather banquettes, Benchmark stools or a Minotti sofa while, *al fresco*, outdoor furniture from Fermob provides a place to enjoy views of the capital to one end and, to the other, that landmark-in-the-making glass dome. There’s also a private dining-cum-meeting room named after Roseberry, the racehorse whose unprecedented wins at Newmarket meant the building made it over the financial finishing line in the first place.

It’s the perfect place to throw a party, something Squire and Partners did during LDF – Gledstone talked briefly about the Department Store being “less of a fortress and more something that’s friendly and sustainable” before @



**RIGHT** A new rooftop social space was added on the fourth floor

**BELOW** LED lights glow within the crafted glass and steel dome



**“The practice has created a spacious restaurant and roof terrace – a place from which to enjoy views of that landmark-in-the-making glass dome”**



handing over to Binki Taylor of the Brixton Design Trail who spoke of that event's positive impact on the area and the building's part in it. The guest list proved that point too. Beside pleased-as-punch practice staff were people like Claudia Wilson, founder of Pure Vinyl, whose new shop is part of the complex.

Leaving the party, *OnOffice* shares a lift with a gentleman who points out his own contribution: an artwork hung pride of place in reception. As we head to Brixton Village for street food, a place synonymous with the most recent chapter in Brixton's cultural expansion, Squire and Partners can be sure that this building will define the next. ■

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For a full pictorial look around the project [www.onofficemagazine.com](http://www.onofficemagazine.com)