

'A constant search for the layers of history'



Michael Squire, partner, Squire & Partners

When Google and Facebook moved to King's Cross, Squire & Partners moved to Brixton, SW9. With other creative companies likely to follow suit, architect Michael Squire explains what was behind the firm's move to The Department Store.

Why the move?

We were located in King's Cross for almost 15 years and over that time office rents in the area more than doubled.

As we grew, we needed to look for additional accommodation and became aware of the dramatic increase.

We decided to rent our space there and look for accommodation that could provide for future affordable growth. We focussed our search on the Victoria line, which is connected to virtually all other Underground lines.

When Brixton was suggested, our immediate response wasn't positive in terms of location, but we saw the building and explored the location further and realised it had enormous potential.

In addition to the Victoria line, Brixton is part of the London Overground rail network and connects to countless bus routes.

The area has a welcoming and generous community spirit, along with a plethora of independent retail and food outlets in the high street, Brixton Village Market and Pop Brixton. It has the perfect combination of useful amenities and a lively creative cultural scene.

The building we purchased was constructed in 1906 as an extension (connected by tunnels) to the adjacent Bon Marché, the first purpose-built department store in the UK.

After the store ceased trading in the 1950s,



JAMES JONES

Squire & Partners embraced The Department Store's "decayed decadence"

the building was let to a government department, left vacant and used as a squat.

As we slowly removed the layers of institutional mineral-fibred ceilings and laminate floors, we revealed grand plastered ceilings, teak parquet floors and rich Edwardian detailing that had been severely damaged in the intervening years. The potential cost of reparation and restoration was daunting, but we began to embrace its decayed decadence.

Our journey to create The Department Store was guided by a constant search for the layers of history within the building and a desire to reveal them. Many times we wondered if we really wanted to keep the original graffiti skeleton but thankfully we did.

Many of our spaces work twice for us, such as our

and popular local members' bar/restaurant in the evenings and weekends.

What effect has the move had?

The most significant benefit of our building is the asset it has proved to be in attracting talented staff. We have twice the amount of space we had in King's Cross, with the same amount of net outgoings.

An added benefit has been seeing how many of our clients love the building and now recognise the practice as a design-led firm with sound commercial judgment, rather than the reverse.

Community engagement

When we took the decision to move, we were aware of the resistance from some locals to the perceived threat of "gentrification".

We had the advantage

engagement before arriving, leading the charge for the fledgling Brixton Design Trail to become a district of the London Design Festival, getting involved in local design projects and supporting local organisations.

The development of The Department Store included a small number of retail units and we worked hard to host a variety of local businesses, including a community post office, coffee roastery, delicatessen and vinyl shop.

Evolving development

Brixton has the advantages of locations such as Shoreditch and Hoxton, where incremental development creates successful regeneration within the existing physical and social fabric.

Major regeneration projects, such as at King's Cross, can

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seminar space in the basement which becomes a locally used events space in the evenings and weekends, connecting us to the community.

In addition, our rooftop staff cafeteria and social space, which provides excellent £3 subsidised lunches during the week, becomes a profitable

that we were reviving an existing landmark that created employment, as opposed to "yuppie flats", and bringing more than 200 people to Brixton to enhance the local economy during the day, rather than simply use the town as a dormitory at night.

We also sought specific

sometimes be too radical.

To many, Brixton is more about nightlife than offices, but it has all the ingredients for a successful commercial location, and I have no doubt that more local buildings will be regenerated incrementally to bring ever-growing vitality to the area.