

THE OFFICE REMIX

■ The Ministry of Sound's creative director talks to **Simon Creasey** about its new co-working office venture

When the Ministry of Sound nightclub opened its doors in 1991 in a former bus depot at Elephant and Castle, it transformed the UK clubbing scene. Until that point, clubbers faced a choice between illegal raves in a field in the middle of nowhere and one of the myriad garish nightclubs that sprung up in the 1970s and 80s.

The Ministry of Sound broke the mould and now, the founders of the business are looking to do it again, this time in the co-working space. In music parlance, they want to take that original white-label idea and remix it for office space. And they don't just want to open one site - their ambition is to open multiple locations across the world.

Property Week visited the company's first co-working site, located around the corner from the nightclub, to find out more.

The Ministry of Sound acquired the leasehold to 79-81 Borough Road last year. The building was originally owned by diary manufacturer Letts, but after it vacated it was used as a university campus and latterly as an office by Ipsos MORI.

The idea to venture into co-working grew organically, says Simon Moore, the group's creative director. After the company sold its record business to Sony, the group's offices were half empty, he says, so

they decided to sublet the space. "It wasn't set up as a new business," says Moore. "It was just 'let's get some people in and see how it works'. But very quickly it became apparent that people liked being in the office even though we weren't really doing anything. People liked the atmosphere and how it all worked and very quickly we saw there were a lot of people out there like us who wanted somewhere nice to work."

In the same way the business started out on a mission to cater for people with musical tastes whose needs were not being met by the existing nightclub scene, it is now on a mission to provide co-working space for a creative audience whose needs are not being met by current office providers, says Moore.

Despite his confidence that he has hit on a winning concept, he admits the project got off to a bit of a false start as the original design team, which had been brought in off the back of their strength in designing offices, failed to meet Ministry's brief.

"My worry was that if you appoint a company that designs offices you will get offices and I didn't think that's what

this project was about," says Moore.

Fortuitously, he got chatting to a friend at a wedding who worked for the design and lifestyle magazine *Monocle*. The friend told him about an architecture practice called Squire & Partners, whose transformation of a former department store in Brixton into its own office had featured in the publication.

"Ministry approached us after seeing the Department Store, where we had taken a raw, derelict building and left a lot of the evidence of that in as part of the interior," says James Halliday, associate, interior design, at Squire & Partners. "That was what they were trying to achieve here."

Within a few days, the architecture practice was signed up and after delving through the nightclub's archives they started working alongside Moore to develop an identity for the co-working space.

"We came up with this idea that we call 'premium raw', which is the creative strategy for everything in the building," says Moore. "It doesn't matter if it's a fragrance, interiors, furniture, art, uniforms - everything goes through that filter."

This unique approach is evident throughout the 50,000 sq ft building, which opened its doors in July. Remnants of the building's past have been retained, such as the original flooring, doors and staircases, much of which had been hidden behind materials and fittings introduced by past tenants.

Original features

"When we first saw the building, it was partitioned to within an inch of its life and there was nothing left of the original character of the building," says Moore. "It was all just stud walls, false ceilings and fake floors. What we've done is take out what everyone else had put in and taken it back to what it once was so you can see what was there originally. What we've done with this project is we've revealed the historic soul of the building."

Somewhat surprisingly, the Ministry of Sound branding is nowhere to be seen in the building, which has been christened The Ministry, although anyone who visited the nightclub would recognise some of the branding cues, says Moore.

"When the Ministry started it was all about the sound, and design was kind of irrelevant," he explains. "All the money was spent on the sound system and acoustics and that meant aesthetics were secondary. Because it was an old bus garage, there was

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Low key: there's no overt branding at The Ministry



Upscale venue: The Ministry provides members with a bar and a cinema

loads of rawness in there and it was really stripped back. That, paired with the high quality of the sound, gave it this interesting mix of premium and raw that we have here."

Moore thinks the lack of overt branding is better for members. "It's less of an imposition for the people who are here," he says. "You don't feel that you are at a Ministry in the way you would if you were at a WeWork or Second Home or something like that. It just allows people in here to breathe. They can put their own stamp on the building."

In addition to four floors of co-working space capable of accommodating around 800 people, the building also features a private members' club on the lower two floors that office occupiers have access to. The club includes sample studios, a 40-seat cinema, a generous event space and a powder room with tequila bar, plus a bar, restaurant and private dining room.

"One of the things that helps to set this apart a little bit is that the people behind it have lived and breathed this world for a long time," says Moore. "They understand how creativity works and how community works and that's different from a lot of companies. It means that when we came to decide what would be in this place it was not hard. We just thought

'what would we like in this place?'"

As with any good nightclub, access to the workspace and private members' club is controlled - it's very much a case of 'if your name's not down, you're not coming in'.

"It's to our advantage that it's a small place," says Moore. "What it means is we can be very, very picky about who comes in. It's purely for people in the creative industries, but we've been creative in that definition because it's not just design companies and ad agencies - there are some interesting tech companies upstairs."

Members only

Unlike some co-working operators, the company does not intend to accept corporate shekels.

"All sorts of people have already been turned down," says Moore. "Some people wanted to bring 80 to 100 people in one go, but it's not good for the community. A lot of other people say they curate a community of like-minded people but they don't; they let anyone in."

He estimates that the workspace will be full in a couple of months and says membership of the club is

filling up nicely. The company has deliberately taken it slowly for the first few months as this is a completely new direction and one that it intends to ultimately replicate across the globe.

"Even before we started this, the plan was not to do just one," says Moore. "It was to do one, get it right and then grow it into some other ones so we would end up with a worldwide network of these sorts of places."

He says they have already looked at a number of sites both in the UK and internationally. "We're just waiting for the right one. It's a patience thing. We've seen buildings that are available and we could get and everybody is very eager to do another because this

has gone so well, but everyone has held off because the right building has not come up yet."

Moore adds that as well as opening more sites in London, the company has a "hit list" of other locations it is eyeing - typically featuring a large creative community - such as Barcelona, LA and New York. While the plan is to scale up, he stresses that it is not a cookie-cutter approach.

"The DNA will be the same, but

the execution will be different," says Moore. "The way I look at it is like the title sequences for Bond films. You can spot them a mile away. Some might be animation, some might be filmed, but they are linked by DNA and that's what I want to get to with this. The DNA will be the same but the execution can be flexible."

As well as opening sites in other cities globally, he thinks there is also scope to open industry- or sector-specific co-working locations as well as other variations. "I don't think we could justifiably rule anything out at the moment, because the people involved are massively entrepreneurial," says Moore.

Those people are Lord James Palumbo, co-founder of the Ministry of Sound, and company chairman Lohan Presencer, who took over the day-to-day running of the business in 2008. "Lord Palumbo and Lohan are both fascinated about how this project could develop further, not necessarily under this brand but in terms of other guises that we can do it in. All these questions we are toying around with at the moment."

If they get it right and people respond to their co-working offer with the same fervour they did their nightclubs, they could have another hit on their hands, while those currently riding high in the co-working charts slip down. ■

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