



Sense of community: Squire & Partners shares its Brixton base with a café/restaurant, events space, record store and post office

## Architect has more in Store at Brixton HQ

**Squire & Partners is set to extend the award-winning HQ it shares with other occupiers and the community. Noella Pio Kivlehan reports**

When Squire & Partners moved to Brixton in 2017, it wanted more than just an office. Instead, the architectural practice opted to sublet the ground floor of the building to small local businesses and turn the upstairs into a private members' restaurant.

Now the firm is looking to become a flexible workspace provider as well with Bellefields Road, a mixed-use, 17,500 sq ft extension, which will feature 13,000 sq ft of flexible workspace across four floors and 4,500 sq ft of bar and restaurant space on the ground floor.

So what are the benefits of being an occupier, landlord, flexible workplace provider and architectural firm all in one? And

what can other occupiers learn from Squire & Partners' experience?

It was a need for more space, along with a desire to give back to the community, that prompted the firm's move two years ago from King's Cross, where it had been for 16 years, to The Department Store on Ferndale Road in Brixton. At 52,000 sq ft, the Edwardian former annexe to the Bon Marché store was more than double the size of its previous base.

Squire & Partners showcased its creative flair by stripping back the building and restoring features such as the Victorian grand tiled staircase. The practice picked up accolades for its design, including the RIBA London Award and National Award 2018.

"We were looking in a few different areas but essentially fell in love with The Department Store as it offered such an amazing building in which we could house everyone under one roof," says Michael Squire, the firm's founding partner.

The cheaper rent on offer was also an attraction. According to data from Savills, prime grade-A office rent in Brixton can be as low as £40/sq ft compared with £65/sq ft in King's Cross.

"An architect's business is not a hedge fund. We need to be in places that are good-value rent," says Squire.

### Transport links

Excellent transport links helped, too. Direct mainline trains from Brixton station to Victoria take nine minutes, while the Victoria line tube station is only a few minutes' walk from the building.

Another major factor was Brixton's "inherent creative spirit and the strong sense of identity and community", says Squire. "In King's Cross, we never really felt connected. In part, because King's Cross is a railway station, it has an

itinerant population and hasn't got a real community or heart. As we've come to know more since we've been here, Brixton is really a genuine community."

As part of its efforts to become part of that community, Squire & Partners has invited local schools to take part in projects such as 'Winter Windows', where designs by school children are recreated in LED window displays, while numerous events take place in the ground-floor space.

"Downstairs is basic, but it's got a reasonable ceiling height, volume and wide space," says Squire.

"When we were first doing events, we wondered if anyone would come. But there are launch events, a lot of local craft fairs and parties. Groups discussing hardcore local issues and debates now use it."

He adds that while a nominal fee is sometimes charged, "anything genuinely local or charitable doesn't pay anything for the space".

Meanwhile, the members' club on the newly created fourth floor now has 2,000 members, 250 of them Squire employees who get complimentary membership. >>



Creative hub: Squire & Partners is developing an annexe to its HQ that will be let to small businesses



Stripped back: design for the open-plan offices

The rest pay £250 a year.

The members' club area was originally going to be the staff canteen, but Squire says: "I thought we had slightly overdone it as just a lunchtime staff canteen. It had amazing potential to be something more than that."

The additional ground-floor occupiers, such as independent bar and restaurant Canova Hall, record shop and Brixton-native Pure Vinyl, café Kaboola and Volcano coffee, were all handpicked to fit in with not only the building, but Squire & Partners' ideals. The community Post Office pre-dates Squires & Partners' refurbishment and move to The Department Store.

"We had a large US burger chain interested [in Canova Hall's space], but that was not our dream," says Squire. "Canova Hall was a natural fit [because] they bought into our design approach for the building of paring it back and using its basic ingredients."

The Department Store is busy at all hours, with Squire & Partners working throughout the building, diners eating at the top-floor 400-capacity, members-only bar and restaurant, and a post office, record shop, café/restaurant and coffee shop open to the public on the ground floor.

"I've always liked the idea that a building works harder than just

nine to five - it's working in the evening and at the weekend," says Squire.

When the Bellefields Road extension opens next summer, it will be another natural fit with The Department Store. Named after its location on the corner of Bellefields Road and Stockwell Avenue, and in the Brixton Conservation Area, it will have 13,000 sq ft of flexible workspace and 4,500 sq ft of retail. The site had planning permission for residential, but Squire says: "I liked the idea of a creative business hub here."

The flexible workspace in the new building will be aimed at small "creative, young businesses who will be part of our community", adds Squire. Each floor will have offices ranging in size, allowing start-ups and SMEs to grow within the building.

Squire & Partners will also, potentially, use Bellefields Road

as overflow space. "The four partners are resolved not to grow any bigger," says Squire. "But our work isn't consistent. It goes bang - we follow the recessions and the ups and downs of the economy in a violent way. So having a little overflow potential is nice - but it's not our objective to fill that [building] up."

#### Italian restaurant

Squire hopes the ground-floor restaurant will be Italian, his favourite cuisine - he was talked out of making the top floor of The Department Store into a place that just sold Italian food. "I'm still dreaming of my Italian restaurant," he says.

Design-wise, Bellefields Road will have patterned brickwork and contemporary, faceted bay windows, with raw natural finishes and internally exposed brick.

However, the extension will have no physical connection to The Department Store. "It's all sort of *West Side Story* at the back here," says Squire referencing the 1957 US Broadway musical famous for its fire-escape scenes. "We were going to connect them, but they are different levels, so it's just too awkward. But they do share the courtyard. And we see those occupiers very much as part of us."

Bellefields Road tenants will also get complimentary passes to the members-only restaurant on the top floor of The Department Store.

Squire says the practice does not feel any pressure to emulate The Department Store's award-winning design "because we've never been the most fashionable architect in London". He adds: "We've never chased the glory. We've always done what we wanted to do and what we think is right for the building."

What Squire & Partners has done in Brixton is highlight how taking an old, dilapidated building and redeveloping it can help transform an area.

"We were aware that there would be a certain amount of gentrification talk along the lines of: 'What are you guys doing coming down here and putting your posh office in Brixton - you really don't care about us.' But we absolutely had the objective, from the first phase when we were looking at the development, of opening our doors to the local community," says Squire.

Accusations of gentrification are nothing new for architectural firms, but it is rare for a firm to respond by becoming a community-focused landlord, flexible workspace provider and architectural firm all rolled into one. ■



Michael Squire  
Squire & Partners

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