

How to build a workspace brand

Giving people more reasons to spend time in your space can foster a stronger sense of community says Maria Cheung



Over the past few years, Squire & Partners has collaborated with a number of workspace providers to launch flexible offices across London, as well as developing their award winning studio at The Department Store in Brixton. The practice is creating its own flexible office development adjacent to The Department Store, launching in 2020. Director and Head of Interior Design, Maria Cheung shares her thoughts on how to build a workspace brand.

Establishing your USP

In helping workspace operators establish and refine their offer, we have seen how competitive the market is with large and small scale providers vying to attract businesses. It's imperative to create a genuine product in line with your brand ethos, which will provide a backbone for the design and culture of your workspace.

At People's Mission Hall in Whitechapel – for new operator x+why – the core ethos was to attract and support purpose driven businesses, for whom people and planet are as important as profit. Interaction between like-minded tenants was important, so we created flexible social and event spaces where ideas could be shared in both informal and formal environments. Mental and physical wellbeing of staff was a priority, so we provided relaxing garden spaces and a studio for yoga and meditation as well as a

generous allocation of showers and changing rooms.

Understanding the audience

Getting to grips with your target audience from the start will help to inform design and infrastructure decisions early on. The needs of a creative studio will differ from that of a FinTech company – how much privacy or group workspace is required, what IT infrastructure is needed, will the business want to host clients in the building, will they expect catering in-house, how much individual branding will businesses want to display within their space?

We set out to create memorable experiences for both workspace members and visitors, so that businesses are committing to a lifestyle and aesthetic aligned to their business. At The Ministry we provided a series of private dining rooms, recording studios and a cinema as well as generous event and social spaces to suit their socially active tenant mix. At The Frames in Shoreditch, we provided a striking open plan reception floor at ground level where informal meetings and presentations can take place.

Design for your location

The first rule of workplace location is convenience and connectivity, ensuring that building users (and their staff/clients)



Maria Cheung is head of interior design at Squire & Partners



will easily be able to travel to your space. It's also important to consider street presence, and how much you'd like to encourage interaction with the local community – will there be public elements to your offer such as a café needing customers, or do you want to create a more private space for building users. At The Ministry, the first co-working space and members club for Ministry of Sound, we created a deliberately covert identity with minimal street presence and signage.

Responding to context is a key driver in all our projects. We strive to create bespoke products which relate to their situation or the history of the specific building whether in Mayfair, Shoreditch or Whitechapel. With The Department Store in Brixton, a former Edwardian shopping destination, we played on the aspects of retail and display to showcase facets of the practice's work – from the working modelshop and raw building materials to polished interior spaces – to create an original and authentic space.



Design and Layout

The majority of our projects have been for emerging workspace operators, so we have been involved with establishing their brand aesthetic – an opportunity we relish. With more established providers, whilst we recognise that a house style affords a sense of familiarity which many people enjoy, we believe that each location and context should be addressed in the design. A good house style allows for a level of individuality for different locations, and shouldn't stifle creativity. Paul Smith stores are a good example of this – the shops can be very individual but there is an underlying theme of rebellious Britishness, colour and craft.

Layouts must be flexible enough for users to move within spaces, and not feel confined to one desk or area. A variety of easily adaptable units will allow businesses to grow within the space rather than relocate, and can provide a mix of private and open plan areas. In several workspaces we have provided individual privacy booths for calls where discretion is needed. A variety of high and low desking creates a mixture of formal and informal spaces, and breakout areas promote relaxed group interaction.

On top of desk space, you need to consider meeting rooms and how these will be managed between businesses. Staff amenities can include kitchens, a communal lounge, garden or courtyard, event spaces, bike store, showers, changing rooms, lockers, a gym and/or wellness studio.

Acoustics are extremely important in both individual units and communal areas – nobody can communicate effectively in a noisy environment. We use screens and fabrics to diffuse noise and create physical and acoustic separation between spaces.

IMAGES CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:

The Ministry, Borough for Ministry of Sound
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Greencoat House, Victoria for Derwent London
©Gareth Gardner

The Ministry, Borough for Ministry of Sound
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>>> **Customer service is key**

Service sets apart a well-run workspace brand and a conventional office let. Whilst a receptionist behind a desk is no longer a requirement, a convivial and friendly welcome should be established from the moment you walk through the front door – good design should help set the tone.

A successful workspace brand remains flexible to respond to clients and building users, and should be prepared to evolve their offer to suit. A well-managed space caters towards demand rather than what they think people want. All the brands we work with have adapted their offer in the first few months in line with feedback – some moving from open to closed desking, changing food offers, swapping public uses to private, and creating additional social spaces from underused building areas.

With modern technology (such as key fobs) it's easy to collect and use data about how building users are experiencing the building – a commitment to analysing and responding to this data will help to refine your brand.

Programming and Curation

Giving people more reasons to spend time in your space can foster a stronger sense of community, as well as forge closer links between building users. Creative programming, specifically catered to the community of businesses using your space, will draw people together and attract new tenants to the building.



At People's Mission Hall in Whitechapel, x+why curate a programme of events based around issues relevant to their ethically and socially minded businesses, such as social mobility, innovative business models and how to measure purpose. Alongside this, members have access to a wellness programme which combines high energy HIIT classes with yoga and meditation.

The Ministry curates a cultural programme more focussed on music, arts and social interaction. Two 'club floors' were created for informal and formal eating and drinking, as well as an outdoor terrace, screening cinema, recording studios, gym and wellness studio.

IT Infrastructure

It's an obvious one, but your IT infrastructure is absolutely essential. Every business relies on good bandwidth, connectivity and power to operate. Communal areas should have strong and easily accessible WiFi, as well as charging points. At The Frames we worked to achieve a Wired Certified Gold rating from the early stages of design, making sure that the required infrastructure was designed into the fabric of the building from the outset.





IMAGES CLOCKWISE
FROM FAR LEFT:

The Department Store
©James Jones

The Frames, Shoreditch for
Workspace
©Jim Stephenson

The Department Store
©James Jones

People's Mission Hall,
Whitechapel for x+why
©James Balston

The Ministry, Borough for
Ministry of Sound
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The Department Store
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Connections to the Natural World

More than ever, we consider biophilia as an important aspect of wellness in workplaces. Wherever possible we exploit outside space such as courtyards or gardens (or semi-external spaces such as lightwells) where natural light, fresh air and planting can enhance office environments.

At Greencoat House in Victoria, we created a series of vertically stacked naturally ventilated terraces in two existing covered lightwells, furnished with bespoke planters and timber benches to create break out spaces accessed directly from office tenancies.

For The Ministry we created a generous urban courtyard garden with an outside bar and fire pit, offering a unique social space for the various functions held within the space.

The Department Store in Brixton exploits every opportunity to provide external terraces directly off workspaces, in addition to a landscaped south-facing roof terrace with high and low seating, a fire pit and planting which provides herbs and leaves for the restaurant kitchen.

At x+why in Whitechapel, indoor planting forms an integral part of the interior concept as well as a central courtyard garden and areas of green roof. Large potted plants are combined with structures in the workspace and common areas from which plants can be suspended or positioned on shelves.

Any planting or landscaping strategy needs to be carefully managed with regular visits by professionals – we have worked with Cool Gardens (The Department Store), Your London Florist (x+why) and Conservatory Archives (The Ministry). ■

