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The rise of the hyperlocal workspace

By Michael Squire | Fri 1 May 2020



The office has gone through huge changes over the past 30 years. Traditionally, leased offices have been in central locations with terms skewed in the landlord's favour, for example long lease lengths and the responsibilities of risk and cost sitting with the tenant.



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Original serviced office operators such as Regus changed the landscape in terms of offering all-inclusive rents and short flexible leases, but didn't necessarily address how enjoyable a space was to work in.

A new generation of flexible offices pioneered by WeWork came with added design personality – workspaces were densely packed for efficiency, but promoted social

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interaction with attractive shared spaces and events to engage tenants. However, their rapid growth and largely formulaic approach to design often meant that they were seen as impersonal – what had been cool soon became corporate. At the same time, larger, established landlords were tapping into the flexible working model as employees started to demand more from their workplace.

While most operators have now raised the bar on office design, hyperlocal workspace is the next chapter in the flexible workspace story and reflects the notion of local community and the trend towards people choosing to live and work in the same neighbourhood.

Squire & Partners has firsthand experience of the benefits of a hyperlocal workspace, having moved from Kings Cross to The Department Store in Brixton in June 2017. This previously derelict, now reimagined Edwardian retail building provided creative studios for our 200-strong office.

Transport connectivity, affordability and the strength of Brixton's creative community were some of the main reasons for the move. Many of our staff who rent decided to relocate to south London to more affordable areas with good connections to Brixton. Before the Covid-19 lockdown, a large proportion of our office staff commuted on bike or foot, enjoyed the local independent shops and businesses, and had access to a huge variety of food outlets during the working day. The creative community in Brixton is inspiring and we relish being a part of it – we have collaborated on events, workshops and installations to grow meaningful relationships. Three years on from our arrival we are now developing our own local co-working development next door.

Having worked as architects and designers on the launch of some of London's most innovative local flexible workspace models – such as The Ministry in Borough for Ministry of Sound, and People's Mission Hall in Whitechapel for purpose-driven operator x+why – we have explored essential ingredients that create spaces fostering engaged communities, and why the concept of hyperlocal workspaces is growing in popularity.

Design works best when inextricably linked to the location and context - drawing inspiration from the heritage and culture of a site, building or community – rather than having a single concept that is replicated across multiple locations. For us, the cookie cutter approach fails to address the nuances of different neighbourhoods and therefore risks creating a disconnection with local audiences. In central business districts a blanket approach may have more success, but in residential neighbourhoods, the need to connect with the community is more important, as there is an additional level of emotional investment from those living and working in the same area.

In creating our new local workspace – The Department Store Studios – our aspirations as architect and developer are exactly the same. The aim is to design a development which creates value in every sense – community, desirability, practicality, flexibility and above all, enjoyability. Our collective experience in the design of workplace, hospitality and modern lifestyle all come into play.

The design of The Department Store Studios is a direct response to Brixton's strong and unique identity which embraces creativity, diversity, music, food and socialising. We have drawn on our 'home office' approach, a balance of life and work which prioritises human comfort and creativity over a conventional sense of productivity.

The Studios is conceived as a platform for fledgling businesses in Brixton, offering space to grow and the chance to become part of a supportive community of local



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creative talent. Our collective knowledge of Brixton has helped us tune into this and create something we believe will create a community of people with shared purpose and vision.

Our commitment to the wider Brixton area will come through a free year-long residency for a young Lambeth resident to have a dedicated workspace and a mentoring programme to help them grow their business idea. In addition, all member organisations will sign a charter committing them to our values of supporting the broader community through skills sharing and engagement in initiatives with young people locally. At the time of writing this, Covid-19 is demonstrating to many of us just how valuable local community is, and our approach as a boutique, local operator will prioritise these relationships, to foster and grow a supportive and inspiring network to build on and support Brixton's community.

Through moving into The Department Store, the wider benefits of hyperlocal working have become clear to us, from the increased day-time business trade brought about by relocating a team of 200 to the area; to supporting local artists, businesses and community groups with event, maker and retail space; and helping to attract a diverse mix of creative industries to Brixton – a key driver for Lambeth Council in the coming years.

The way we work was changing long before this pandemic hit – many of us can work from anywhere and are no longer confined to a desk – but Covid-19 has proven to the world how much people thrive on social interaction, collaboration and community.

For us, the next chapter of The Department Store is personal because it builds on our own community. I am sure there will be many impacts felt to the office once we make it through all of this, but we believe a well-designed workplace must amplify these essential human needs, and that the future is local.

Michael Squire is a partner at Squire & Partners

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