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CLIENT FILE: X+WHY WHITECHAPEL, LONDON

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Flexible workspace provider x+why chose Squire and Partners to create its flagship Whitechapel location in London. FX speaks to co-founder and CCO Phil Nevin about the project



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Words by Pamela Buxton

All Images: Tony Murray, James Balston

What's your background?

I've always been in the property world, first as a residential developer before moving into more commercial development in 2014. In parallel, I've also been involved in social impact as the co-founder and trustee board chairman of Big Change, a children's education and wellbeing charity.

How did you come to open x+why?

I always wanted to unite my interests in property and social change, and started x+why as a business that combined the two when I met my partner, Rupert Dean, who is similarly motivated. We are fascinated by how space, service and community can impact positively on businesses outcomes.

Can you describe the type of workplace you wanted to create?

The office space market is booming, and our differentiator is promoting purpose-driven, next-generation businesses with a natural social purpose that make money but do so sustainably, and in the right way. We believe in the B Corporation approach to balancing profit and purpose. And we want to foster this greater purpose through a stimulating physical space that provides the catalyst for growth.

People expect great service at their place of work, and to be able to do other things there apart from just work. They want to drink great coffee, work out, sit outside, relax, and to be able to attend, learn from and enjoy events. Our spaces provide that.

We have a huge range of members – tech firms, creatives, architects, lawyers – all sorts of organisations, from one person to 130-strong businesses. In total, we have about 50 businesses at our flagship Whitechapel workspace [in London], totalling about 450 people.

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The brief dictated having 'a site-specific concept rather than a cookie-cutter approach'

What sort of research did you do beforehand in terms of visiting other co-workplaces?

I did visit a lot of competitors, and tried to look at both the best and the worst of what's out there. I also looked outside the workspace sector and brought a lot of residential property experience to the project.

What appealed to you about the building when you first saw it?

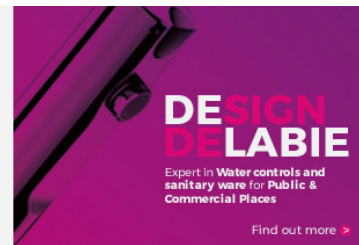
We loved the Whitechapel location. It's somewhere that you can still feel the heartbeat of the city from, but it hasn't been gentrified to the point that prices have shot up like some of the surrounding areas. Whitechapel is still relatively affordable and has a great history as a multicultural and creative area where you've always been able to strive and succeed, which appealed to us. We also liked that the building had been renovated to a BREEAM Excellent standard, and our fit-out fed into that approach.

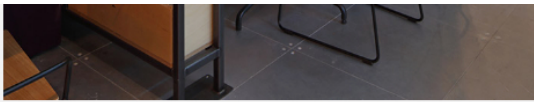


How and why did you choose your architect and graphic designer?

I'd worked with plenty of architects and designers before because of my background in residential development, but for this project Squire and Partners was the preferred practice. Because of the speed of the project, we needed an architect of a certain size who could move quickly, and like a lot of people I'd seen Squire's Department Store building in Brixton and was really impressed. They've really put their soul into that project and it provides their business and their clients with a very creative and inspiring place to meet and work from. I'd say it also feeds into their culture as a business too, and helps them attract best-in-class designers and, in fact, just lovely, talented people to work with.

Another factor was their sister graphic branding agency Mammal. We were concentrating on the mother brand for x+why at the same time as working on the concept for the interior, and it really helped that Mammal sat in the same office, giving us a seamless, single point of call.





How did you collaborate with Squire and Partners on the design vision?

While we had some very clear thoughts at the onset, these evolved throughout the collaboration. We were clear that we wanted a site-specific concept rather than a cookie-cutter approach, and we also wanted to put the design through our business DNA to make sure it fitted our purpose-driven approach.

We struck gold when we delved into the history of the site and found that the building was the original site of the Salvation Army. That led to the building becoming the People's Mission Hall.

We deliberately didn't overspend or veer towards meeting City office expectations. Instead, we wanted to create something that didn't put off locals becoming tenants and we were particularly delighted when MuslimGiving moved in.

We took inspiration from the cultural side of the area – East London Mosque is just few doors down and the area has strong Bengali, Jewish and French communities. It also has very lively markets and we reinterpreted these in booths within the workspace, which were inspired by market stalls. Squire and Partners also created outdoor furniture out of pallets to help meet the budget, and the aspiration to upcycle where possible.

The material choices link back to the area's industrial heritage, and crucially for x+why they are sustainably and locally sourced. The lead colour is an oxblood red, which refers back to the Salvation Army colours.



The brief dictated having 'a site-specific concept rather than a cookie-cutter approach'

What atmosphere did you want to create?

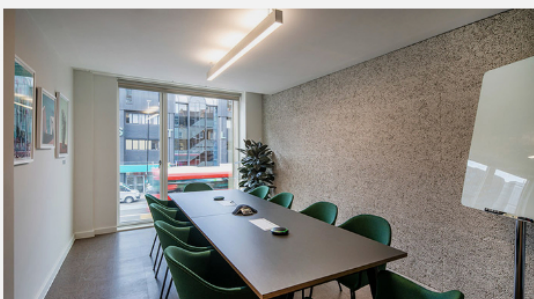
We've tried to create a workplace that suits different moods as we recognise that some of us work better in different atmospheres to others. The front of the building is a bit louder while at the back we have a designated quiet zone. Everything else is in between, including the courtyard – that is a real focal point. In the main social and hot-desking areas we play birdsong, which produces a very calm and productive setting. We've also focused on wellness, with lots of plants everywhere and connections to the outdoors.

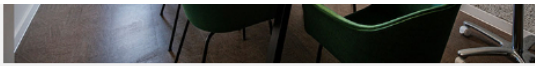
What do you like most about the result?

I'm pleased that it does have a very unique feel. It was very well thought through and detailed by Squire and Partners, who worked extremely well with all our suppliers. A few of these, including art consultancy Artiq, liked the building so much that they ended up moving in themselves.

What did you enjoy most, and least, about being a design client?

I love the design process – that's why I do what I do. I like the people most of all. If you're working with the right people and brief, you can have a very good creative process and that's what we had with Squire and Partners. I found the adjustment to the fast pace quite tough, and something I had to fight against in some instances to make sure we maintained the right level of quality.





Do you have any further design projects in mind?

When the Covid-19 lockdown began we were only a few weeks away from completing our third site, in Spitalfields (which is already 70 per cent pre-sold). Again, this is designed by Squire and Partners. The design for this draws on the Huguenots and their weaving heritage, and features spool-inspired light fittings. We have several other projects in the pipeline that we were able to make progress on in the lockdown. One is in a great, recently developed building on an attractive side alley off Chancery Lane. Another exciting one is at pre-planning stage and forms part of a retail centre in central Cambridge. So hopefully those will follow soon...

We are doing our best to support our members through the difficulties that the lockdown is posing, and we remain optimistic about the future. We think the lockdown will lead to many people re-evaluating the space they need, and to look at more flexible solutions moving forward.
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