

BRIEFING

Social value is not just for PQQs but should infuse your whole culture

By Michael Squire | 19 August 2021



Michael Squire explains how moving to Brixton from King's Cross triggered a new approach to community engagement for his practice



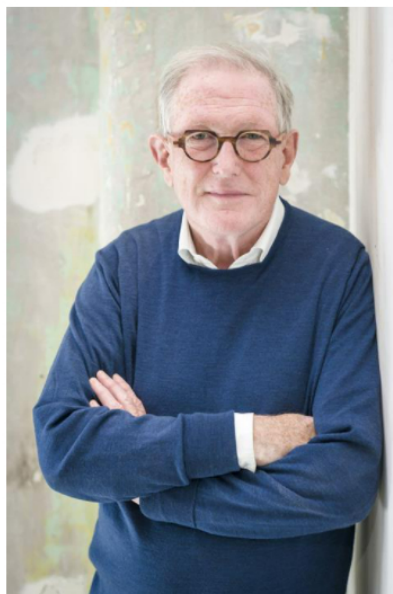
Source: Jack Hobhouse
The Department Store Studios

Being located in Brixton has enormous benefits for us as a practice. Based at The Department Store, where Ferndale Road meets the commercial buzz of the thriving south London neighbourhood, our staff enjoy some of the capital's best amenities and love being part of a community with a distinct history and identity.

But Brixton is also an area with significant socio-economic challenges and, as a relatively large creative business coming to the area, we felt it essential that we made a positive impact on our local community in the short and long term.

The key for Squire & Partners has been to consider what impact we (and other creative businesses) can have on the young people on our doorstep – what skills, space or opportunities can we provide which will be useful to them now and in later life?

The obvious one is design skills, and how these can benefit people and organisations locally. Sometimes an architect's eye and accompanying concept sketch can be enough to get a local vision funded. At other times, pro bono design means a community asset can be built following years of stagnation, as was the case with our [community centre at Brixton Windmill](#) which opened last year. Involving residents and organisations in the design process builds a rich local network and opens up the profession to a wider audience.



Source: Gareth Gardner

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DESIGNING SOCIAL VALUE

Surprisingly our model shop team has also been a key asset in our community, from creating bespoke award gongs for local art shows to scrubs and visors for local hospitals. They have been instrumental in realising some of the creative collaborations with schools and other groups, and the model shop is always the part of the office that gets the most attention during tours.



Source: Jack Hobhouse
The Department Store Studios

The issues surrounding access to the profession for marginalised or disadvantaged young people are well documented and many practices – including ourselves – work with partners such as Blueprint for All, Built by Us and Open City to provide mentoring and the essential “foot in the door”. Recognising that work experience is often given to friends of friends within practices, we took steps to ensure that 50% of our 40+ placements a year were from Brixton and the surrounding areas.

Working with local social impact groups has also been eye opening. We discovered that a perceived lack of social skills or confidence in entering a professional workplace were barriers for many. Sometimes a gesture as small as showing up at the local school careers fair and taking time to explain various roles in architecture can make a big difference, or welcoming students into our workspace to explore and ask questions. Simply showing interest in young people’s passions builds confidence.

We’ve also set live design briefs locally – including workshops to create a series of adaptable furniture pieces for Brixton Windmill’s community centre with South Bank University technical college, and a social media challenge for creative youth network Livvy.





Source: Jim Stephenson
The Department Store Studios

Great rewards have come from giving young people a voice to share how they feel about their future, changes in their neighbourhood or how physical and emotional factors affect their experience of public space. Architects can learn a lot from the eyes and ears of young people. Events like London Festival of Architecture or London Design Festival offer platforms for fruitful creative collaborations, or you could initiate your own as we have with our annual Winter Windows programme.

Event and gathering spaces – large and small – are a valuable neighbourhood resource to local groups, and many architects' spaces sit vacant during and outside standard business hours. Making these resources accessible, and affordable, gives opportunities to engage with local groups.

The latest community venture by the practice stems from our new neighbourhood workspace development next to our offices. At the Department Store Studios we thought about how a hyperlocal workspace could support young people. Recognising that opportunity isn't always available to those with ideas and talent, we launched The Studios Residency in January 2021 – one of the bleakest moments of the pandemic.

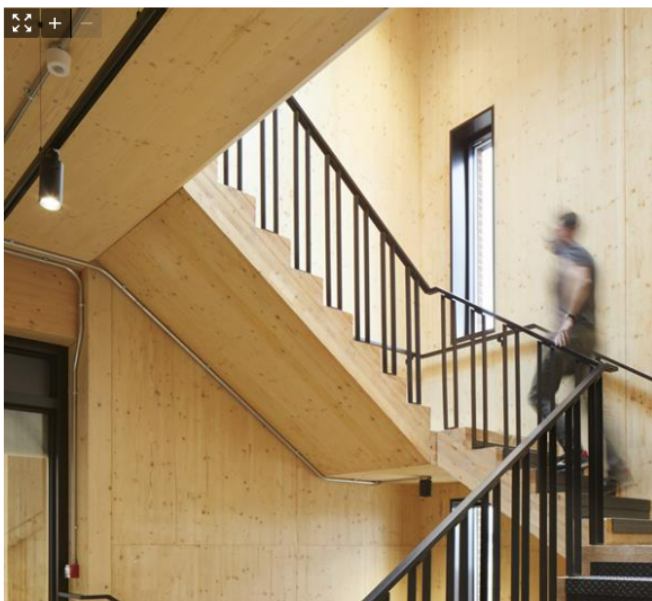
Following an open invitation to local entrepreneurs aged 18-30, and subsequent online judging of six inspiring shortlisted candidates, we've awarded two residency winners free workspace, access to amenities and mentoring for a year to start and grow their creative business idea at The Studios. Our 2021 residency winners are TV producer and champion of black and brown-orientated experiences in the media, Gabriella Lafor, and innovative textile design graduate Coco Cripps.

For us as an entrepreneurial practice, seeing these young people's pitches and supporting them in their first career steps gives us great pride. And for The Studios, the residency welcomes two talented young people to join the network of businesses taking shape. We can't wait to see how Gabriella and Coco progress through their time at The Studios and beyond. The residency will run annually to ensure that access to opportunity is sustained in the long term.



Source: Squire & Partners
Gabriella Lafor, left, and Coco Cripps

Architects gain so much from engaging with young people, and it's time we looked at what skills, space and time we can give back.





Source: Jack Hobhouse
The Department Store Studios

>> Also read: [Brixton Windmill Centre, London, by Squire & Partners](#)

Postscript

Michael Squire is senior partner at Squire & Partners

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