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URBAN VILLAGERS

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BEING DIFFERENT

Squire & Partners is perhaps like no other practice, its entrepreneurialism paying dividends in Brixton with its Department Store home, with bars, restaurants, a club, and now workspace. *David Taylor* met them

‘We’re just a little bit different’

So says Henry Squire of Squire & Partners, the practice where he has worked under his father Michael almost since it was formed in 1976 but which is now ‘at a crossroads,’ mulling over further expansion into the over-200-staffer brigade.

And he could well be right. Leaving aside the often-knotty family ties—and early forays into owning Urban Golf centres, bars and restaurants—the firm is now firmly embedded into the Brixton landscape with new offices in an old department store, running a members’ club, more new restaurants and bars, a Post Office and now, workspace too.

What’s more, ‘different,’ it seems, appears to be working.

I meet up with the practice’s senior management team plus the designer of said workspace—the Department Store Studios—in probably the most complicated ‘hybrid’ interview in NLQ’s short history. Henry Squire and fellow partner Tim Gledstone join over Microsoft Teams (the latter walking around Wimbledon Common, attached to his mobile), while partner Murray Levinson and interior design director Maria Cheung are answering in person in an elegant meeting room in the Department Store’s upper reaches. Senior partner Michael Squire, who has done so much to shape the practice and its moves around the capital, is on jury duty, so I catch up with him by phone early the next day.

But it’s testament to the practice’s ease of communication and its popularity as a place to work that this is all pretty seamless. More to the point, the general atmosphere of the place is one of laid-back, airy contentment, imbued with what Michael Squire describes as a ‘family spirit,’ and with the kinds of facilities and space many believe will be necessary for other offices across the city if they are to lure people back to the workplace.

That notion of difference, though, is also perhaps a key to the practice’s success, borne out on its website, where bios—normally exceedingly dull affairs—document quirky things about the staff. Here, Murray Levinson informs all about his illustrious cub scout table-tennis past and Gledstone about the ‘headspins and penguin dives’ it turns out he does into a plunge pool at his new Japanese-influenced courtyard house. We won’t mention Henry Squire’s fact about being the lead singer in rock band ‘The Corky Nips’.

The entrepreneurialism of the practice, though, is definitely a key point. ‘It’s certainly of real interest to us,’ says Levinson. ‘We’ve always had something on the go in the background to focus our minds on what it’s like to be on the other side of the fence.’ Is this empathy? That’s a by-product, Levinson replies, but it’s more about feeding their tendency to be ‘control freaks’ as developers and architects. ‘I think it’s always engrained in our minds about what this other project is that’s going on. I’m trying to think of a time when there’s ever been a void of us not having something going on in the background. And I’m not sure there is.’

Indeed, right from the beginning, Michael Squire did development via a company called Winyard. ‘I’ve always enjoyed not being shy of actually developing as well as designing,’ he says. ‘But it’s always very design-led—we

are always on a mission to prove that design really does create value for you, particularly if you’re taking a long-term approach.’

One of the latest projects in this portfolio is Bellefields—a Mediterranean-influenced restaurant with a nice line in linguine vongole (Michael Squire’s personal favourite dish) now open to the public on the Department Store’s ground floor (and run by another Squire, George). But no sooner than the paint is dry on that one, Levinson predicts that a partners’ meeting will soon be discussing what’s next.

‘It’s something that we’ve always felt passionately about, doing entrepreneurial things,’ agrees Henry Squire on screen. ‘We learn a lot that we can always transfer back to our clients. I think a lot of architects that don’t do it probably don’t understand... you really think about value and whether the money is spent in the right places. But also I think it’s just a fun thing to do, to actually take some risk and do these things and be your own client. It makes you think about things quite differently.’

The ‘new’ generation at the firm directly below have bought into this too and enjoy doing it both for the office and speculatively. It also teaches the firm to stick at what it knows, with the dalliance in indoor golf centres teaching them that hospitality businesses are, in the main, very different and difficult to run.



Squires HQ — The Department Store, Brixton



The latest piece in the Squire & Partners bulging portfolio — The Department Store Studios

Tim Gledstone chimes in here that what they love is the ultimate design freedom and to ‘fully flex’ into what they call ‘total design’—from doors handles to golf racks or the numbers and graphics. ‘There’s a lot of fun and enjoyment and expression that we can choose what to do,’ he says. ‘We gain confidence, as well, with the lessons we have learned each time.’

‘The spirit of the firm remains very consistent in that we are quite obsessed with what we do and what we design’

Another project in this series is a series of new timber-framed studios next to the practice’s Department Store home, which have been masterminded by Maria Cheung (bio fact: she was an extra in *Hackers*). The CLT-framed scheme took inspiration from the Department Store, with broken brick on its angled facades to create depth and interest; opening, sculptural windows; terraces; high floor-to-ceiling heights; and brickwork and timber expressed internally, while the palettes of the meeting and workspaces were inspired by the seasons. Being able to do their own projects, Cheung says, allows them

to satisfy their own questions and thirst for total control of design. ‘But also to demonstrate to our clients, who may not necessarily be as bold, what going that extra mile, doing those extra steps or doing things a bit differently can actually achieve,’ she says. It’s a learning process, but clients can see for themselves the value that is added, and are beginning to ask if they can do the same for them.

What sort of practice is Squire & Partners? How would they describe their output at a dinner party? Are they architects that do a bit of everything? Levinson says there is a tendency for people to try and pigeon-hole them, but they try to evade that. Even if most of the work falls into commercial sector, residential, offices and hotels, look a little deeper and there is ‘an enormous cross-section’ of work. The practice tends to take on projects based on two main criteria, Levinson goes on. Is it an interesting design challenge? And can we have a good time with the person sitting on the other side of the table? ‘Because invariably you are going to spend a lot of time with that person or that team of people,’ he says.

Michael Squire says the practice has gone from kitchen bathrooms with one person at the practice to 200, so obviously has evolved and changed. ‘But I think the spirit of the firm remains very consistent in that we are quite obsessed with what we do and what we design. We also want to share it within the firm—we constantly have design review meetings and discussions that everybody is invited to, which is not necessarily “design by committee and produce a camel”, but we like to hear a cross-fertilisation of ideas.’

The sectors it is in have always been led by the market to some extent, but the practice is comfortable with its broad range. And its interest in development, Squire explains, also serves to help create a long-term value for the partners as a kind of ‘pension fund,’ quite apart from the experience and valuable skills it brings the practice. ‘You start to understand the value and cost of your pen,’ he says.

The move to Brixton from the practice’s previous home in King’s Cross was a major change, not least in the symbolism, but the way it sits squarely within a wider conversation of the 15-minute city, allowing some staff to live, work and play in the area. Henry Squire says that process of moving was partially because it had outgrown its properties in King’s Cross. But it never looked at buying an office building in the typical locations, like Clerkenwell and Moorgate. They knew it had to be zone two to be affordable, and the move to Brixton was down to a number of reasons. Henry and Michael have lived in nearby Clapham for a large portion of their lives so knew the area well. ‘But the two main reasons were this building and the opportunity that we had,’ Henry says. ‘We just knew that we’d seen something incredibly special.’ Even if it was a ‘punchy’ purchase, it is a very accessible place via the Victoria Line, meaning you can be at Green Park, for example, in 10 minutes. But people have a perhaps ‘historic’ view of the area and, Gledstone adds, it adds to the practice in that design is clearly making a positive change to an area.

In King’s Cross they were finding their creativity being stifled by the computer. ‘I think this is happening in offices all around the world; people are just getting stuck down the rabbit holes, and not talking as much as they should, not meeting as much as they should not sharing, not sketching.’ So when they started looking for space they wanted twice as much, rejecting a clean desk policy in favour of pinning stuff up more, and it helped that Gledstone fell in love with the building’s old life as a department store. ‘Every project can be like a concession,’ he smiles, with the feeling, walking through the office, of moving from Qatar in one little area—looking at projects, photos and samples—to Knightsbridge or Broadway in another.

From then on, their heart was in it, enhanced by Brixton becoming a ‘creative heartland’ that has been rewarded with Lambeth luring other creative businesses like Jellyfish Films to the area. Using their bars and restaurants, they could also make friends and share ideas, working together to form a creative community as well as a local one. ‘Everything really fell into place. Rather than a Squire & Partners “empire” it’s a department store that has been “given back”,’ says Gledstone. ‘And everyone feels like they share the building.’

How did the staff and industry react? Generally positively. They were a little concerned that staff might feel the journey was too much, but in fact only one person felt that way, and when they made the effort to come down, most of the staff ‘got it’. A measure of its success is that Derwent London has bought a building opposite, perhaps as a result of using the Department Store’s top floor restaurant for one of its away days.

Anyway, King’s Cross had become quite ‘corporate’, says Levinson, whereas Brixton offered an opportunity to land in a more residential area. ‘We wanted to not land like a spaceship but integrate, merge by osmosis. We wanted to be a positive contributor to the community.’ →

In residency

Squire & Partners runs a residency programme at its Department Store Studios, offering a free, year-long membership for two young Lambeth entrepreneurs and their creative ideas. Gabriella Lafor is one of the residency winners for 2021

I’m a TV producer working on everything from documentaries and short films to music videos and branded content. I also freelance as a production co-ordinator for the BBC, Channel 4 and ITN Productions. Such experience has enabled me to execute award-winning projects which showcase untold stories and champion positive and accurate representations of black British life.

I am driven by challenging institutional status quos which frequently create barriers to access for ambitious creatives from African, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds. As one of the first recipients of the David Lyle Foundation scholarship in 2019, I have been exploring international television markets, understanding what pushes the business forward and developing ideas which showcase under-represented experiences.

An overarching goal is to improve the esteem of black British communities, something we can only achieve when there is a dedicated space centred on black talent and stories — reminding us how far we’ve come and to spark excitement for our futures.

In 2020 I founded Line Light, a talent resource dedicated to creating viable opportunities for black and brown creatives in the British television industry. In 2021 we partnered with iZen UK to identify new talent and provide funding and development for television concepts.

To strengthen our reputation in the industry, we will launch a streaming platform to showcase new programmes from the diaspora. Built around an innovative blockchain model, Line Stream will become the first destination for fresh talent, new voices and unheard stories: a place to celebrate diversity within our communities.

It will be at the Department Store Studios — perfectly located in the melting pot of culture that is Brixton — where Line Stream will become a reality. Over the next 12 months, I plan to host screenings, networking dinners and development workshops. Most of all, I’m looking forward to connecting with a progressive professional community who share my commitment to pioneering change.



They engaged with the emerging Brixton Design Trail, adds Cheung, using the building's facade early on as a canvas for local artists. Domus supplied all the tiles for one artist, whose piece is still in place on site. They encouraged graffiti artists and built skate ramps, both of which helped them engage, along with work with the Brixton BID to find what sort of companies might be interested in using their space. One such was Volcano, which was roasting coffee in Wandsworth before it moved in; another was Claudia Wilson, a very connected music store owner who runs Pure Vinyl on the ground floor. Finally, the practice's work relocating and redesigning the Post Office was another addition to the community. As the mayor once said to Michael Squire, he recalls: "If you open your arms to Brixton, Brixton will open its heart to you." And that is what has happened to us.'

What of the dread word 'gentrification'? How do they react when it rears its head when discussing Brixton? 'It's a horrendous word,' says Henry Squire. 'It has a political context that I think is just wrong. I think, you know, you're just regenerating.' The political connotations are that people come in, take everything, give nothing back and push people out. Which is why they have tried to interact and do outreach. 'We've really tried to embrace the local community, to work with them, to interact with them and to allow them into our building and share our space. We're trying to become part of what is here and not impose something new and thereby change it.'

Perhaps other department stores will also go this way, suggests Gledstone, becoming mixed use, with a multi-range offer open seven days a week from 7am to 12pm. Uses are merging much more, and Squire & Partners is looking at how it can make buildings, particularly workspace and mixed use, work better for societies and more sustainably, rather than as offices that are dead and dark for so much of the week. 'It is an example we're looking to use to influence change in many of our projects,' he adds. 'And a lot of our clients are also really interested in how their projects can bed themselves into communities in the way we have.'

Clients are going to have to get more involved, says Henry Squire, not least because people are demanding more

from their office buildings, requiring a certain amount of central management. 'There is a quiet revolution happening,' he says, in much the way that residential went through a cultural shift 15 years ago when swimming pools and gyms started going in. All the 'lifestyle' stuff.

Henry Squire says he 'desperately' believes in the office and that people do need and want to get out of their own front room, but offices do have to change to roll with that. 'They're going to move from battery farming to free range,' he suggests. Michael repeats the phrase later, adding that although it's convenient to work at home, it just isn't healthy to be living your life on your keyboard. 'And coming out into the world is,' he says. Have we changed so much in a year and a half? Some 90 per cent of staff are back working in the Squire's office. 'We offer them a pretty decent place to work.'

The conversation turns to the often-thorny issue of succession, not least when it applies to practices with family members. Is it harder or easier having a family connection? Henry pauses. 'It was very difficult for a little while,' he admits. He and Gledstone were made partners fairly early, and he appreciates this backing from Michael, but because they were 'young, precocious and arrogant' they pushed the senior partner in places he didn't want to go. 'But actually, we've come out the other side and think we're a very strong unit, the four of us. We're very different people and therefore push each other in different ways.' Michael says they have had their moments of friction, of course, and it is tricky, that father-son relationship. But the partners are all good friends and also, Michael says, balanced people, commending Henry's strong communication skills, Gledstone's flair and Levinson being 'just a very good architect'. In addition, they have one 'old boy with grey hairs', and just having the one is quite valuable, smiles Michael.

The partners' contract says they have to be out in 10 years' time anyway, and at 50 Squire junior admits they have to think about the next generation behind them. He recalls his dad being 'wiped out' in the big crash of 1989 when the practice went from about 80 staff to six. 'It was the razing of the crops and he had to grow again,' he says. Nowadays it stands at 200, with a 'huge structure'. Succession is about being bold, says Henry Squire, bringing new ideas forward. 'We will be brave,' says Levinson. Including on gender balance? 'It's all about picking the right person at the right time.' It's also actually about capability as an architect, Henry Squire adds, 'not meeting quotas'.

The practice is, though, conducting an exercise on where it goes next, size-wise. 'We're at a crossroads,' says Henry Squire, between growing to 300 to 400 or shrinking to 150. 'We've had a clear direction for a while and now it's a moment of reflection. What do we want the next 10 years to look like?' Michael Squire says it never wanted to become a 'working drawing factory' or a really big practice, because it all becomes a bit dead and dull, affecting the 'spark and spirit'. It is torn between the two ambitions, but will find a way.

A good team, though, needs diversity across the team, as well as empowering staff to feel they are part of it and able to contribute, not just told



Healthy outlook — the practice's Ark for Noah's Ark Children's Hospice in Barnet

'do it all night and I'll be back in the morning'. Leadership of each team needs to be strong too, to ensure that they all think they are working on something that is worthwhile and that they are proud of, Levinson adds. And there's the fun that they like to have, says Gledstone: the friendship right across the office, the unstructured team away days and office trips. 'We try not to take ourselves too seriously,' adds Levinson. 'Hence why I wore this shirt today for your cover,' laughs Henry Squire. Michael adds that there is a real emphasis on trying to be 'more than just a collection of individuals, but a group that supports each other, talks to each other, communicates and has a shared ambition.'

But on a more serious note, the only slight fly in the ointment is the practice's recent £1.5 billion plans for a scheme at the Budweiser brewery, thrown out the day before my visit. Levinson says it is deeply disappointing, and a 'real lost opportunity for such a mixed-use scheme. Mortlake needs a place.' It is a residential area without a sense of place and this scheme offered a chance to get that before the mayor's intervention (after a recommendation of approval from GLA officers and minded to grant from Richmond), in a nutshell because the project is not 35 per cent affordable housing.

Henry Squire comes in here to suggest that it is 'the politicisation of planning, which has become so much more evident in the past 10 years than it ever was before,' not least because of social media. Some of that is positive but planning has become more difficult. Might businesses be put off to the

extent that they try elsewhere, even during a housing crisis? The beauty debate promises more of the same. 'I just think government should step back,' Henry Squire adds.

So, what's next for this very different kind of practice, with its entrepreneurial soul? Gyms? 'Oh, I don't know,' says Henry Squire. 'I think we might just go into a holding pattern for a while. We've committed pretty heavily, and the world is a fairly chaotic place right now.' They'll just let this settle. 'There's no doubt that we'll do something else, but it will be in the architectural, property sphere, rather than a business sphere. I imagine it will be property development, but it will be trying to explore new technologies, perhaps MMC, perhaps ways and means of building more efficiently, because there is still a lot of nervousness about it. And the more that people do it, the less nervousness there is.'

Michael Squire, now 75, still enjoys being part of the team and will go on until he's not required, but puts that 10-year vision slightly differently: 'I think we will be a very successful London architectural practice,' he says, 'because we do have something quite unique in having a real passion about design, but also having a very clear commercial head and understanding of what the developers' objectives might be. And I think that balance is quite special.'

Ultimately, Squire & Partners is a bit of a one-off. 'We're not in the architectural community in that way,' says Henry Squire. 'We're not in the in crowd, somehow or another. I don't know why that is. We just think of ourselves as a little bit different. And Brixton is a bit of a mark of that.' ●



A wide portfolio — the Msheireb Downtown Doha masterplan