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BRIXTON EMBRACES COMMUNITY IN NEW VISION

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Brixton is showing how to engage with the community and create regeneration that is of its place – rather than 'gentrification'.

That was one of the sentiments to emerge from an **NLA On Location** event that began at Squire and Partners' Department Store studios just off Brixton's high street and moved out into the borough to see some of the projects in the flesh.

Michael Squire kicked off proceedings by saying that one of the key draws of the area, following steep price rises (to an 'astronomical' £75/sq ft) in the practice's former King's Cross base, was its accessibility, the Victoria line offering its staff the ability to 'fly through London'. But it also represented a chance to create residential, restaurants and a co-working building, and to offer something that gave back to its surroundings. It also compared favourably to the 'itinerant population' around King's Cross, Squire added. 'Brixton is a real place, and a real community'.

Lambeth Council's Eleanor Purser suggested that developments in the 'iconic' borough with its 'world class cultural offer' needed to be responsive to their location and be 'with and for the community', or else get short shrift from the council. 'Any intervention – or lack of intervention – which brands itself regeneration has to be really thoughtful and is unlikely to emerge without challenge of critique about its authenticity'.

Purser added that one of the borough's key aims is to increase the office provision with a workspace fund to pump-prime affordable workspace for local businesses, against a 'real appetite to come here' that is being felt from outside firms too.

Tim Gledstone of Squires said that the practice had worked on its existing local creative friendships and then expanded on that when it arrived in Brixton on developing what is effectively a city block including a new 'friendly' post office building as community hub. It then created the Brixton Design Trail to help foster more 'authentic' links, friendships and collaborations with creative businesses and the community. The practice works on history and 'digs deeper' on research when it gets involved on schemes, backed up by lots of community engagements. 'We think each project should be true to where it is', he said.

The Brixton BID, too, has been integral in catalysing investment since 2014, creating a mixed business community, said the BID's Gianluca Rizzo. It has been concentrating on things like safety, greening, developing a wayfinding strategy, improving air quality, activating festivals, twinning with Harlem in New York and creating an 'enhanced' environment. 'It's key to understand the special place that Brixton plays with everyone', he said.



And for Daren Nathan of London Square – which is the preferred bidder for the Growing Brixton Rec Quarter project including 240 new homes and workspace, that interplay with the community was essential. 'Everything we're doing is talking about how we engage', he said, pointing to a new community review panel it has formed, 'co-designing' and working to provide what Brixton wants, and employing a 'community communicator' to help too.

Initiatives like the Brixton Village project are proving successful, its Diana Nabagereka pointing to the many small enterprises and F&B firms that have begun there and since thrived. 'We are proud to say we birth businesses like Honest Burger and like Franco Manca within Brixton Village', she said. 'So it's about just letting people know that opportunity is still there, and we're still open to it'.

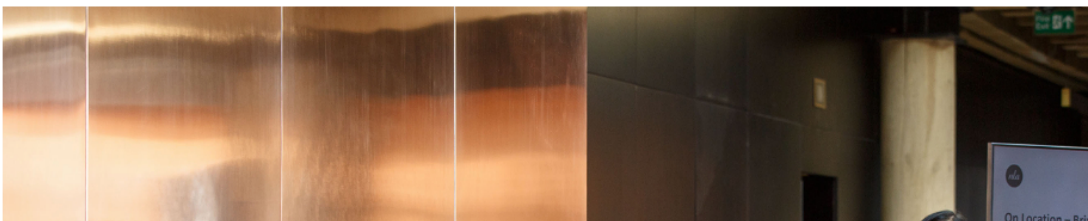
Other successful and global companies, like Jellyfish Pictures, have also chosen to come to Brixton, away from the usual Soho hotspot for visual effects and animation firms. Phil Dobree of the firm said that companies like his have a responsibility to the wellbeing of their staff, and that relocating was part of its B Corp journey. 'There are a lots of things you can do to make your business more worthwhile, like being somewhere like Brixton.'

The Brixton House Theatre, meanwhile, has also proved a source and showcase of local talent, said Gbolahan Obisesan. 'A lot of us will have encountered some form of art that has been quite transformative and profound in our lives, to help us find a path, our tribe and find a space that we're able to be ourselves in and thrive.'

Binki Taylor of the Brixton Project recognised the key need to consult on changes, but since the pandemic when it engages, as well as what is being engaged about has changed. There is now an enormous opportunity to innovate, heal and transform, engage people in dialogue and allow narratives to emerge, she said. 'This is a period of time that is unearthing a deep desire and a demand for a reset on the way we talk with people about the challenges we face.'

But perhaps one thing to take away from Brixton, said Naz Haque of Raw Material was a feeling. 'It's the love', he said. 'You have to be here'. And finally, Oluwatoyin Odunsi of the Brixton House Theatre, said the final thing was integrity. 'Brixtonians are very honest people', she said. 'If they don't feel you, you'll know it. They don't hide it, but if you do well they will get behind you.'

Images: © Luke O'Donovan





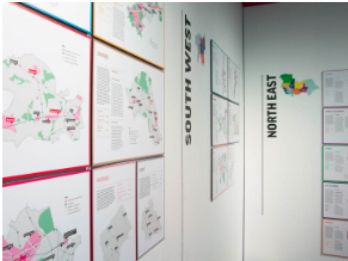
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