

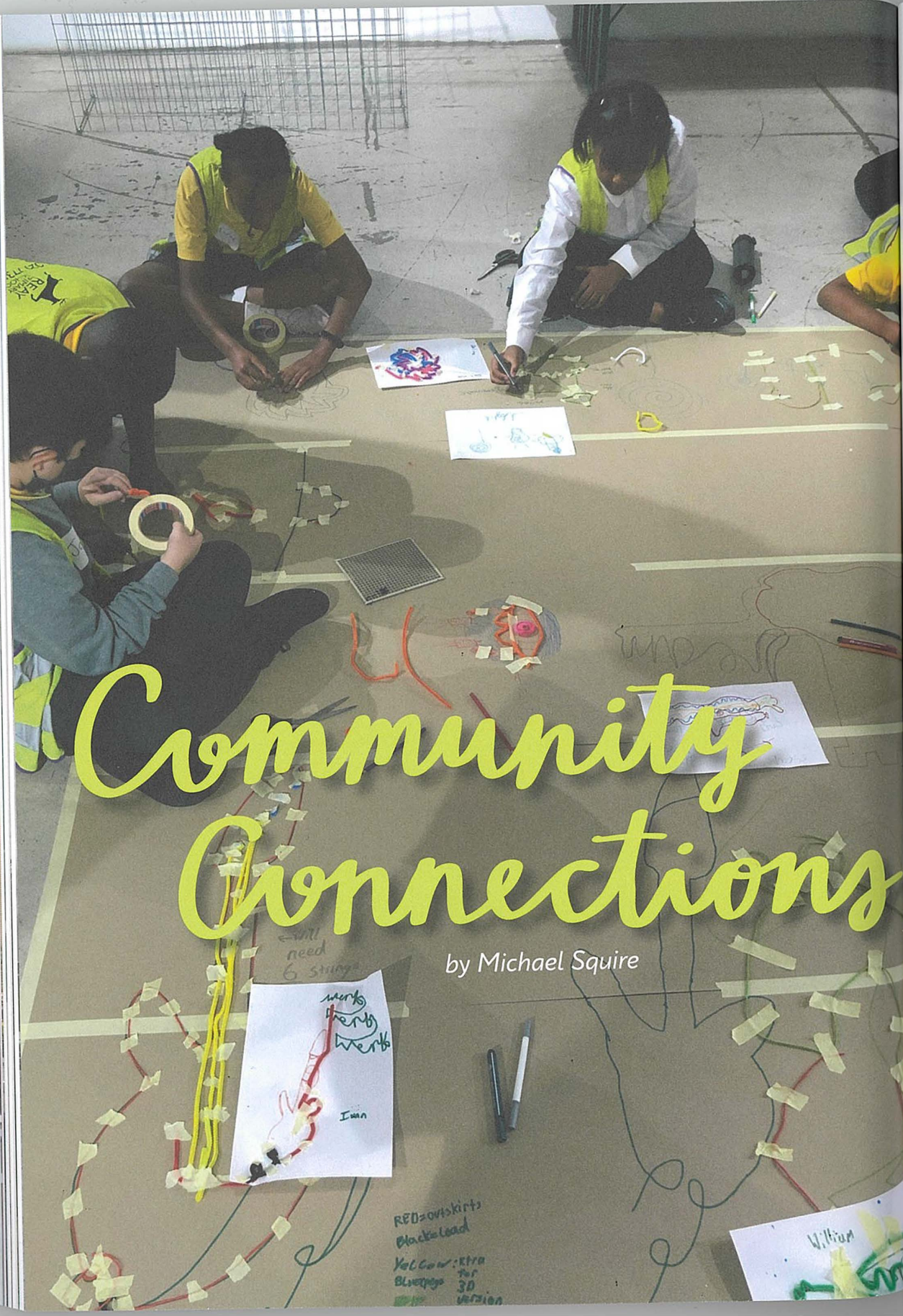
NO.  
476

**THE JOURNAL OF THE  
LONDON SOCIETY**

*Connect*

**THE  
LONDON  
SOCIETY  
EST. 1912**

2022



# Community Connections

by Michael Squire

Squire & Partners reimagining of a former department store in Brixton has had far-reaching effects on the local creative, business and residential communities.

When we took the decision in 2015 to move our 200-person practice to The Department Store in Brixton, arriving at the formerly derelict Edwardian building two years later, we committed to create meaningful connections in our local area. As one of Brixton's largest employers, we wanted to be a positive and engaged neighbour to both the business and residential communities.

Brixton is a fantastic location for creative businesses as an area with a distinct history and identity with a thriving food, drink and music scene. However it also faces significant socio-economic challenges. Our contribution to the neighbourhood needed to be impactful and provide long-term benefits.

As we were refurbishing the building, many locals stopped and took the time to share their memories of the building in its former guises, including people who had worked and shopped at the upmarket Bon Marche department store, or squatted and partied in the abandoned building! The Department Store clearly had a place in Brixton's collective memory, and we knew this emotional connection was an important local treasure.

We asked ourselves how we could contribute to the area and have a welcoming 'open door' so memories could continue to be made at The Department Store. Accessibility for local people was key, as well as our role as responsible custodians of the building by including a series of community assets in its reincarnation, from the neighbourhood Post Office to a new home for a longstanding local vinyl trader. We chose independent and South London based businesses with connections to the area over chains, accepting that sometimes this meant charging less than market value for the spaces.





Reinstating the fully glazed storefront, which had been boarded over for decades, allows views into not only our studio reception area but also active making and event spaces. Our basement floor, Downstairs, has been created as a generous space for exhibitions, markets and talks. Hire is offered at community rates for locals and the majority of events are free and open to the public.

Having an early open dialogue with local people and organisations was essential to finding out what was needed, and where we could help. Lending our design skills to realise community projects has resulted in several 'drawing board' ideas being progressed and a new Education and Community Centre for the local Grade II\* listed Brixton Windmill being delivered.

We have built a network of relationships with local primary schools and youth centres through regular creative collaborations – such as the award winning Winter Windows series, now in its fifth year – education workshops and studio tours. Our 40 plus work experience placements each year offer 50% of opportunities to local secondary students, and we regularly host a stand at their school careers fairs.

Opportunities were created for young people in higher education or entering into work. Students at South Bank University technical college were set live design briefs, including workshops, to create a series of adaptable furniture pieces for Brixton Windmill's Community Centre and a social media challenge was set up for creative youth network Livity.

Squire & Partners were invited to become members of the Brixton BID (Business Improvement District) and take an active role in shaping the area as an attractive destination for culture, socialising and work. When the pandemic hit in 2020 we pivoted our modelshop efforts to create bespoke visors and scrubs for local NHS hospitals and doctors' surgeries. The modelshop team have also created unique award trophies for local art shows and one-off sculptures for charity auctions.

We tap into annual events to create platforms for community collaborations such as Brixton Boundaries and Who Cares for the London Festival of Architecture, which explored how local people experience their neighbourhood.



The next phase of our investment in Brixton is The Department Store Studios, a new local workspace created as a platform for business supported by a programme of networking and wellness activities. Recognising that opportunity doesn't always present itself to those with ideas and talent, we initiated The Studios Residency in January 2021. Following an open invitation to local entrepreneurs under 30, we 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 designer Coco Cripps. The Studios will run the Residency annually to ensure that access to opportunity is sustained in the long term.

We take great joy and pride in being an active member of the community in Brixton. The approach to Brixton was unique, because there is nowhere else like it, one size definitely doesn't fit all when it comes to local connections. Our actions do not form part of an ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) policy or a short term plan

to soften our arrival. They are born from a longstanding commitment to be good neighbours and use our skills to benefit others.



Michael Squire is a senior partner at Squire and Partners which under his direction has won a significant number of design awards, and established a reputation for contemporary crafted developments within sensitive urban locations. He is one of four partners leading the practice, his 40+ years of experience being invaluable in underpinning conceptual design and planning within the office.