

# SQUIRE & PARTNERS

## **The Department Store, Brixton**

### Introduction to The Department Store

After 16 years in King's Cross, London based architects Squire and Partners moved their 220 staff to a new home in Brixton in summer 2017. Having purchased a dilapidated Edwardian department store two years previously, the practice entirely reimagined the space allowing the existing fabric and layers of history to inform the new design.

Collaborating with craftspeople and furniture makers, the restored and extended building provides an exciting array of work and event spaces for the various design disciplines within the practice, and a series of further creative and retail units including a roastery for Volcano Coffee, a café for Kaboola Kitchen, a record shop for Brixton based Pure Vinyl, a community Post Office and Canova Hall, an independent restaurant and bar.

### History of the Building

The Bon Marche department store was built in 1876 by James Smith, a local businessman from Tooting who won £80,000 in prize money when his racehorse Roseberry won an inconceivable double at Newmarket. Inspired by the opulence of the original Bon Marche in Paris, James Smith embarked on creating an unrivalled shopping destination in Brixton, which would also be the first steel framed building in the UK.

Following the success of the main store on Brixton Road, a Ferndale Road annex named Toplin House was added in 1906 to provide two additional floors of retail, with staff accommodation on the upper levels. Underground tunnels linked Toplin House to the main store – one for men, another for women.

After almost 50 years as a retail destination, and a brief stint as a bomb shelter during World War II, Toplin House was sold in 1955 and converted into offices. Along with a collection of adjacent buildings, it was used by a variety of occupiers including the British Refugee Council until 2012 when the site fell vacant and was inhabited by squatters who left their own legacy of street-inspired artwork.

Squire and Partners purchased the largely derelict Toplin House in 2015, as well as a family of buildings along Ferndale Road including a former horse and cart Fire Station.

### Design concept

Approaching the design of The Department Store, Squire and Partners allowed the narrative and history of the existing Edwardian building to guide the process. Stripping the building back to its raw state revealed a decayed grandeur and an extraordinary commitment to craft and detail by the original artisans of the day. The practice sought to reveal and highlight these elements – in their found state – as well as exposing remnants left by more recent inhabitants, whilst adding a series of sensitive contemporary interventions in order to repurpose the building as an inspiring modern workspace.

On the exterior, designs focussed on reversing years of neglect and reactivating the street level through animation and display. Incrementally added shopfronts and layers of paint were removed to reveal original brickwork, stone, marble and terracotta. Metal framed Crittall windows were restored wherever possible, or replaced to match the original. A new rooftop level was added comprising a series of oak framed pavilions with copper shingle roofs, and a crafted glass dome to replace a dilapidated existing cupola.

At ground level a striking reception area and active modelshop animate the street, while a triple height void and central landscaped courtyard provide breathing spaces within the development. Generous social and event spaces are established at lower ground and the new top floor, with workspaces on first to third floors supported by a series of meeting and breakout areas.

The existing fabric of the interior was assessed in the early stages of the project, ensuring that elements such as original 111 year old mahogany and teak parquet flooring, a grand tiled central staircase, a series of cast iron radiators and a remarkable patina of colours which document the building's history could be preserved. A series of voids were cut through the building to create dramatic volumes, and provide vistas between levels.

The office floors offered the opportunity to reveal the many facets of design undertaken by the practice and expose the process of craft and making. Project areas are designed to act as evolving 'concessions' - showcases to the process of design and development. Models, prototypes and explorations document and celebrate a projects journey from concept to realisation. Multiple areas for presentation can be found throughout the office with display cases, shelving, libraries for materials and books, models and explorative studies.

### Building exterior

On the exterior of the building, designs focussed on reversing years of neglect and reactivating the street level through animation and display. Incrementally added shopfronts and layers of paint were removed to reveal original brickwork, stone, marble and terracotta. Metal framed Crittall windows were restored wherever possible, or replaced to match the original. A new rooftop level was added comprising a series of oak framed pavilions with copper shingle roofs, and a crafted glass dome to replace a dilapidated existing cupola.

A continuous run of monochrome herringbone tiles define the perimeter of the development, animating the street and providing a hint of the crafted interior within. A high level illuminated sign at second floor announces The Department Store from Brixton Road.

### Reception

A fully glazed reception area animates the street and visually links to the practice's in-house modelshop, so visitors can view explorative and unformed ideas taking shape. Introducing a new triple height void creates dynamic connections between the first floor workspace, reception area and a Downstairs event space. Through a tiled corridor at the rear, guests can access a central courtyard.

Original Burmese teak flooring dating from 1906 was revealed and restored, complemented by two handmade rugs by Laguna up to 5 metres in length, which feature patterns designed by Brixton based designers Eley Kishimoto following explorations into motifs found within the original building.

A collection of furniture documents design classics produced throughout the lifespan of The Department Store from 1906 to the 1950's, including a pair of Klint Addition sofas with personalised bronze plaques which were revived from the Carl Hansen archives and a Knoll daybed by Mies van der Rohe. Mixed with these classics is an antique display case sourced from specialist furniture company D&A Binder, and two green Munna Babe armchairs.

A 6.5m long bespoke reception desk, conceived as a haberdashery display, was created in collaboration with specialist cabinet makers Interior iD and material artists Based Upon. A series of Tramazite panels - a unique resin/metal composite - are encased within a mahogany frame to create a showcase with an evolving display related to current projects

within the office. Inlaid Novasuede lining and LED lighting highlights objects within, and hidden access panels facilitate seasonal changes.

Hanging above the reception desk are five blown glass pendant lights from a limited edition of six, made for The Department Store by Czech glass studio Lasvit.

New insertions within the space – such as the reception wall, parcel storage and lift lobby – are expressed in black Critall and black stained ply.

The reception area is designed to stage changing installations throughout the year, the first iteration being two Marble Mannequins from Squire and Partners' RIBA Shanghai Windows installation in Xintiandi for Maria Luisa in 2015.

### Modelshop and Making Room

With prime street frontage, Squire and Partners' in-house modelshop reveals the process of experiment and making within the office. Divided into three areas, the modelshop comprises a Workshop, Making Room and Machine Room.

The main Workshop features custom made storage assembled in-house using a blackened tube clamp scaffold system and birch ply shelving, conceived to be easily modified or expanded in the future. The shelving system is combined with a series of upcycled vintage plan chests, benches and tools which have been customised for the storage of specific materials and components. Computers are positioned along flank walls, with digital software including Microstation, Rhino and Illustrator to complement analogue making.

An adjacent Machine Room is equipped with large scale fabricators including CNC routers, laser cutters, 3D filament and resin printers, a carbon filtered spraybooth, rotary screw air compressor and a series of saws and sanders.

The third space is a Making Room designed as a 'chefs table' where completed models can be displayed, enabling project teams and visitors to view models and explore options. Workshops and informal meetings can be held around the 6 metre long vintage oak table with 16 oiled oak Carl Hansen CH88 chairs. Both the Machine and Making Rooms have openable doors to the central landscaped courtyard.

### Downstairs event space

An original cast iron staircase, repurposed from a former stable block within the development, leads off the ground floor reception to a 3,000sqft Downstairs event space which hosts twice weekly yoga classes and office-wide presentations. The stripped back industrial room features a series of refurbished Crittall sliding metal doors, which can be pulled across to conceal storage areas and back of house facilities.

A built in IT system with two 84 inch plasma screens and Bose speakers combine with folding benches and tables to accommodate a variety of event types such as presentations, talks, screenings, workshops and exhibitions. The space is designed to be used by the practice as well as the local creative and business community, and will act as a focal point during the London Design Festival in September when it hosts a nine day event series UNDER/EXPOSED.

### Cycle facilities

Generous cycle facilities are located at lower ground floor level with a dedicated entrance from street level, providing 76 cycle spaces in a Josta double stacking system. A drying

room features a large central bench around which custom made black metal mesh shelving and hanging provides space for clothing and PPE.

Seven individual shower rooms feature a high quality Dornbracht system with inset timber benches and foot tray, a full height mirror and Muuto dot hooks by Skandium. Three toilet cubicles provide Starck 2 WC's, Dornbracht taps and a black ply vanity cupboard.

A communal dressing area offers a vanity counter with individual mirrors and hairdryers, and a photo collage documenting some of the best dressing up moments in Squire and Partners' history!

### Courtyard garden

At the centre of The Department Store at ground floor, accessed via reception and modelshop, is a landscaped urban courtyard providing a link to nature.

The courtyard is lined with cobblestones uncovered during site excavations and a series of granite planks, creating a visual link to the teak floorboards within the building. Rising from the middle of the courtyard is Russell, a 70 year old oak tree selected from the Lorenz von Ehren family's fourth generation nursery in Hamburg, which specialises in mature trees.

Outside seating by French manufacturer Fermob is positioned under the shade of the tree in a series of vibrant colours to animate the space. Bespoke made planters feature a variety of ferns and shade loving plant varieties.

### Workspace

The office floors – on first, second and third floors - reveal the facets of design undertaken by the practice and expose the process of craft and making. Project areas are designed to act as evolving 'concessions' - temporary showcases to the process of design and development.

Models, prototypes and explorations document and celebrate a projects journey from concept to realisation. Multiple areas for presentation can be found throughout the office with display cases, shelving, libraries for materials and books, models and explorative studies. Informal meeting areas are provided in every team to encourage communication and mutual support.

Collaborating with south London joinery company Opus Magnum, the practice developed a bespoke furniture system led by storage needs. Desking is purpose made in birch faced ply with an individual drawer and matt black linoleum top. Above the desks on black steel frames, a series of high level display boxes allow for personalisation and decoration. Storage includes systems designed to shield printers, plotters and binding equipment by providing shelving units for display, books and magazines.

Lighting in the workspaces combines a unique version of the Flos Running Magnet system with a bespoke BTC range of fluted glass spheres used as floor, pendant and wall lights. Additional lighting in meeting and breakout spaces include an exclusive limited edition range of Louis Poulson floor and table lights.

Exposed services ensure that original ceilings and floors could be revealed. Black and copper power/data cables travel through the building in suspended nickel mesh trays, which feed into 65mm wide copper pipes servicing workstations. At the early stages of the design, the whole existing building was 3D scanned and assessed by a robotic laser to create a plan

for servicing. This accurate analysis then informed the exact location of every mechanical and electrical requirement within the building.

Each office floor has a tea point, expressed as a copper lined box encased within a black ply storage wall. Informal tables and seating at tea points and on a series of external terraces encourage interaction between staff. Each tea point also provides an entry point to a 'secret stair', designed to create a connection between the three office floors – for more information see Circulation.

### Interrogating workplace behaviour

An early investigation commissioned by the practice employed SpaceLab to interrogate the firms working practice in their former King's Cross office, and explore how these would translate into the new building. This process went beyond design instinct to explore the science of circulation and modern working practices. Through this process, potential dead or underused spaces could be given a specific purpose – such as tea making or printer points - to increase flow and activity. This user led design approach has ensured that workspace is used effectively and with staff wellbeing in mind.

### Circulation

#### Main stair

A grand central stair was revealed when an existing lift shaft was removed, uncovering striking original elements such as decorative metalwork, carved mahogany handrails and green patterned tiles. These were restored and a new hovering brass handrail added to meet current Building Regulations.

Double height original stained glass windows displaying a variety of organic motifs combine with a new timber framed roof lantern at fourth floor to create a bright naturally lit staircase.

#### Secret stair

Serving only the three office floors, and accessed from communal teapoints, a 'secret stair' is enclosed within a black ply wall. The discrete entry point leads to a winding oak staircase with a hidden seating area halfway between floors, animated with display shelves.

The walled staircase acts as an antithesis to the generous grand staircase and open plan working areas, and provides glimpses of the original building including brickwork adorned with graffiti.

#### Lifts

The Department Store has five floors from basement to fourth, but also incorporates an annex which provides a series of half levels. This dictated a complex lift strategy which serves ten separate levels opening on both sides of the shaft.

Lifts lobbies are defined with a black ply surround, leading to high specification Mitsubishi lift cars lined in green leather with a brass handrail. A bespoke end-grain parquet floor employs Eley Kishimoto's 'As You Like It' pattern.

#### Signage

Following investigations into typography which would have been used when the building functioned as the Bon Marche, revealed as etchings and signage during the construction

process, Squire and Partners created a gold font used to identify meeting rooms, toilets and office floors. The font is solid on glass and used as outline only on timber.

### Found Artworks and Graffiti

Prior to the practice purchasing The Department Store, the building had lain largely vacant for some time, during which squatters and party-goers made use of the space. They left behind a series of artworks and graffiti tags, some of which were retained within the new development to reveal the layers of history and use (or misuse) of the building.

Two large scale artworks are located on the first floor, a singing man encased within a timber framed arch, and a crouching skeleton who can be viewed in the triple height void which runs from basement level to first floor.

### Interior Design dept

Squire and Partners' Interior Design department houses a team of nine as well as the practice's graphics team, in a first floor space which was once part of Brixton's horse and cart fire station. The original timber pitched roof has been exposed and a pine floor dating from the 1800's restored.

The team work with a large number of samples and swatches, as well as project palette trays, so their storage needs were addressed specifically with shelving combined with drawers and hanging rails behind a series of sliding panels used for pin up and display.

Informal meeting areas at high and low level feature upcycled Fritz Hansen tables with new black linoleum tops, white oiled oak Elbow chairs and tall CH56 stools by Carl Hansen. More seating is provided on a large external terrace accessed directly off the Interior Design department.

### Meeting rooms

Meeting spaces are primarily located within the nose of the building, and on each annex level to the rear. The overriding concept was to reveal the raw spaces of each room – which vary from hammered and sandblasted brick, to plasterwork and elaborate mouldings – and then add discrete servicing within a suspended ceiling raft, and AV hidden within a bespoke credenza.

A series of unique credenzas were developed with specialist joinery company Interior iD, to find modern uses for heritage materials such as burr walnut, or methods such as herringbone marquetry. The decorative doors conceal AV equipment and tea and coffee supplies.

A tea tray in each room is curated with contemporary and classic designs, including Stelton and La Cafieire coffee pots, patterned ply tea boxes and a bespoke series of branded ceramics created by Chu Chu.

Various feature tables, including a circular 2.7m diameter radial walnut veneer table from Vitra's Medamorph range, create a focus in each room. Meeting room chairs are selected to respond to individual spaces such as Catifa chairs by Arper, covered with a variety of Kvadrat fabrics to complement the colour palette of each room. Much of the furniture from our former King's Cross office was upcycled including Eames Aluminium Group and Arne Jacobsen Series 7 chairs, and Fritz Hansen tables resurfaced with a Forbo matt charcoal linoleum top.

As well as the enclosed meeting rooms, a series of open spaces are provided on every floor, encouraging informal work and social meetings during the day.

### WC's

Separate male and female WC's are provided on each floor at annex level, with spa quality facilities including hand towel dispensers, high and low level vanity shelves, individual mirrors and bronze taps and faucets from the Samuel Heath Landmark range. Floors feature a series of bespoke patterns digitally printed onto plywood inserts with brass trim set within a pale grey screed.

Individual cubicles in floor to ceiling black ply feature French inspired brass door hardware with a Ferme/Libre lock mechanism. Duravit Starck sanitaryware is complemented by individual high level storage cupboards.

### Upstairs restaurant and bar

A new rooftop social space was added at fourth floor level, based on a series of copper clad roof lanterns supported by a solid oak frame which aligns with the existing building structure, crafted by specialist timber company Carpenter Oak. The 5,000 sqft floor provides a bar, lounge area and dining spaces for the practice's 220 staff plus guests, as well as a landscaped roof terrace. In-house caterers provide subsidised fresh food daily for employees and their guests, with drinks served into the evening.

The bar was created in collaboration with Benchmark as a continuous run of untreated pewter with a copper skirting, and acts as both food and drink service. High solid oak tables provide a relaxed area for eating and drinking, partnered with black timber Ercol bar stools.

The lounge area is marked by a full height copper clad wall housing a wood burner, and two 4.2m x 6m silk/wool rugs created by Laguna using Eley Kishimoto's 'Wired Clematis' pattern derived from an existing stained glass rooflight. A large L-shaped Freeman sofa by Minotti is orientated towards the fireplace around a low black ply coffee table. Other lounge seating includes CH22 and Cuba chairs plus two leather Ottomans by Carl Hansen, and solid oak hourglass shaped stools by Benchmark. Inside and outside play is encouraged with table football in the lounge, and ping pong on the roof terrace.

Dining space is defined by a mixture of pale green leather banquettes and smoked oak chairs around black ply topped tables. A black ply storage wall behind the dining area is designed as a display of curious objects from projects undertaken by the practice, interspersed with copper punched window recesses offering views across the rooftops of south London.

An external terrace, accessed through full height Crittall glazed doors, runs the length of the building and is landscaped with large scale Corten steel planters containing a variety of plants and trees designed in collaboration with Cool Gardens. Outside furniture is from French brand Fermob's Bistro range, and provide tables and seating in a mix of colours.

The separate Roseberry Room provides a large rooftop meeting room which can also be used for private dining, named after the horse which won James Smith his fortune providing the catalyst for the original Brixton Bon Marche. The room opens directly onto the terrace, and features a 3.2m x 7.5m wool rug by KuSan featuring Eley Kishimoto's 'Loopy Mushroom' pattern. A feature dining table was created in collaboration with Opus Magnum using end grain from original pine beams salvaged from the building set within a brass edge, and can be used as a single table or split into three. The table is surrounded by 18 Hiroshima walnut chairs with leather pads by Maruni. A copper lined recess creates a

service area, and a large screen set within a black ply display wall connects to a discrete AV system.

### Dome

An original copper dome at the apex of the building, neglected and compromised over time, was removed and replaced with a bespoke glass and steel structure created in collaboration with Swiss specialist manufacturers Tuchschnid. Designed to respond to a series of existing copper cupolas in the local area, the glass elements feature an emerald layer to create a green hue, set within a complex geometric frame. A row of responsive LED lights at the base of the dome emit a subtle glow at night time, providing a visual marker for The Department Store.

Within the tower are two connected floors for meeting and dining, which enjoy natural light and sky views.