

CREATING A SPACE FOR SUCCESS FOR ENTREPRENEURS IN THE CBD

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“I freak out when people tell me I’m in real estate. Technically I am, but it’s deeper than that.”

A man of overwhelming sophistication and a style as pronounced as his multi-textured, wood-finish office decor, **Jonathan O’Byrne**, CEO of the co-working space Collective Works, is a gent with exquisite taste and even more impressive vision.

Since officially opening in 2013, Collective Works has rocketed to full-occupancy success, expanding within months of the launch. Designed with an obvious eye for detail, Collective Works brings the comfort of home with all the practicality, productivity and first class professionalism you’d expect from an office in the CBD. But other than the ergonomic chairs and quirky meeting rooms paired with cheap beer, it’s the flexible hourly rental in the prime location of Cecil Street, and the greater vision of creating a co-working business community, which is the secret to its success.

Jonathan founded Collective Works to prevent entrepreneurs from going through the isolation and disassociation that so often comes with working in the SME environment. “Traditional serviced offices don’t solve this problem because they are designed to isolate people.” They cater to “the old world of working, not businesses and people who seek to collaborate.” In his opinion a huge portion of the SME market has been neglected; “they don’t understand businesses under 50 people in size, and the way they work,” he explains.

Despite enjoying six-figure success running a PR agency, Jonathan took the leap to start Collective Works, the space he envisioned as the ideal working environment for small collaborative companies. He spent months working out the business model and months further searching the length and breadth of Singapore for the perfect location. He finally settled on a property that was central and suitable for multiple businesses, then came the challenge to design, source and build his dream into a reality.

“It was a huge risk. You don’t take the decision to shut down a profitable business lightly” in mid-2012, he disbanded his agency and reinvested its capital along with his personal assets into the new business. He was very aware of how little time he had to make a success of the business “I had a ticking clock.” Having put “everything” into the business there was no safety net if it failed.

Recounting a story during the early stages when his office cleaner asked why he needed such a big office for just himself. “Don’t ask me that! [laughs] I’m writing huge cheques for empty space!” he joked. Perhaps not so funny at the time, Jonathan can now afford to see the humour as plans for next year include expanding to multiple locations.

Collective Works saw its first client in January 2013, by June was full and by September had opened two additional new floors. “The only space we haven’t sold is the one we’re using for storage!” he adds.

“Five years ago, If you told somebody you could get an office space in the CBD by the hour, they would say you were nuts. But now we’ve made that a reality. If you told somebody today you can work flexibly from four or five offices across the CBD by the hour, they would say you were nuts. But we’re gonna make that a reality.”

But more than the physical space, Jonathan insists Collective Works is about the network. “It’s my way of looking after business. The older members know that, but the newer members may not, because we’ve got so wrapped up in rapid expansion and logistics, the vision is getting buried.” He says it is important to get back to your “roots” and ask yourself: “Why did I take that crazy step?”

And for Jonathan, that crazy step was to create a dynamic working environment that brings people together. “You can do a lot with digital, but there’s a lot you can’t replace and that’s tangible,” he says.

His parting words? “Prolific beats Perfect.” But ironically, Jonathan seems to achieve both.