

Community, cooperation and co-working, meet Oru Space

As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Vibushan Thirukumar, CEO and cofounder of Oru Space about social impact, high-street regeneration and building a post-covid place that people actively want to go to every day.

Temps de lecture : minute

4 November 2023

What was the catalyst for launching Oru Space?

The dissatisfaction with our careers and the environments we were subjected to were the biggest catalyst to get Oru Space off the ground. Between us we had enough impatience and disgruntlement to take some risks. We wanted to address the big societal and environmental issues we're currently facing; loneliness and disconnection from ourselves and each other, local communities and high streets disintegrating, the climate crisis and rising mental and physical health problems. We built Oru Space on the belief that the way we live and work and the environments in which we exist in desperately need to change.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Imagine a place you want to go to every day, a place with good food and drink that is nurturing to your 'self' and your ambition - that's Oru.

We provide co-working and wellbeing hubs firmly rooted in social impact that combine co-working, hospitality, wellness and events. We consciously support the local community around us through various social initiatives such as donations for food banks, community cook-ups, and free weekly meditation classes. We're also dedicated to operating sustainably across our hubs, with features including solar panels, thermal massing, green rooftops promoting biodiversity, while utilising recycled, repurposed, and second-hand furnishings to minimise waste.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

We're always evolving, and continually looking to improve what we do and how we do it. Every person who joins our team and the companies who join us influence us and shape our growth.

We launched our first site in Dulwich just as the pandemic hit, launching the cafe eight days before lockdown. The restrictions meant we weren't able to open the business as originally planned but we still had lots of people turning up because they had seen what we were building and wanted to be a part of it, which was amazing and validating.

Now, we're in a totally different environment launching our second scaled-up site in Sutton, which is already at over 65% capacity despite not being fully completed. It is part of the largest regeneration of the high street project in the UK and will create 150 new jobs and breathe life back into the local area, regenerating Sutton High Street and reviving a long-abandoned building. It features a 500 desk co-working space, 40 private offices, a 170-seat café-restaurant, nursery and yoga studios with extended wellness offerings.

Tell us about the working culture at Oru Space

The culture is interesting - we're a people-centred business at our core. This means we've created a caring environment where people take the time to look after one another, and the sense of community we've built always amazes me. We spend a lot of time trying to get the balance right amongst staff, doing our best to ensure there's no overtime necessary beyond the company directors and that employee wellbeing guides our decision-making.

How are you funded?

We're mainly funded by myself and Paul, my co-founder, to date. Most of the funds came from a family business - I took over my mum and dad's shop and with Paul's help, converted it into three residential homes and rented them out. I then released equity in those to build more residential property, from which I was able to release enough equity to both pay off my parents' mortgage and start Oru Space. Our landlords have also contributed to some of the construction costs of the project and for Oru Sutton we've received £7M in grants from Sutton Council, the GLA and Big South London.

We're also in the process of raising more funds and are currently inviting the public to become co-owners of Oru Space through [our crowdfund](#) in order to build a 4,000 sqm rooftop extension on our Sutton High Street location.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Our biggest challenge (and our strength!) is our resistance to conforming

to industry conventions. We are always pushing ourselves to think of new and improved ways of doing things, so we have to be crystal clear on our goals and the why behind our decision-making. Doing things differently means we are challenged regularly (rightly so) and we believe this leads to more innovative solutions for achieving our ambitions.

How does Oru Space answer an unmet need?

We believe in the power of community to transform people's lives, regenerate local areas in need and bring a sense of togetherness that is lacking in society today. Oru, meaning 'for one' in Tamil, cultivates this connection. Ask yourself this - do you feel welcome, do you feel supported, do you feel part of something? That is what we want to give people through coworking, wellbeing, food and events across our dynamic spaces.

What's in store for the future?

I'm incredibly optimistic about our future and what lies ahead. The reception to our offerings has been so positive to date, it feels like we're doing valuable work that is genuinely making a difference to people's lives. Our team turns up every day motivated to build on our mission, which is an indicator that we're on the right path. Tangibly for Oru, we next want to go somewhere rural where people can reconnect to nature, taking all of the elements of Oru - community, wellbeing, sustainability - with us for more people to benefit from. I'm heavily inspired by Knepp and everything Isabella Tree and Charlie Knepp have achieved.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

Question everything, work hard to improve things everyday, and take the

time to understand the value of the people you work with and what unique qualities they bring to the table.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

No day is quite the same, however, I usually start by checking every message, email, whatsapp, social media message/comment/post, and then make a mental plan for the day ahead. I make myself a smoothie whilst getting my ankle licked by my dog Wolfie, and we walk to work in Dulwich or catch the train to Sutton, during which Wolfie insists on smelling/marketing every lamppost and saying hello to every dog enroute. If I've got the time, I'm heading into Mysore yoga at Oru Dulwich with one of our great teachers, Tom, to start my day off in the right mental headspace.

As soon as I get in, I check in with the team, find out how everyone's feeling, and make sure we're all clear on the focusses for the day before getting stuck in to whatever is on the agenda.

Vibushan Thirukumar is the CEO and cofounder of [Oru Space](#).