

The Werks, Hove

The Werks in Hove is lead workhub in a group of four on or near the Sussex coast. It has a high street presence with 60 or so of its 370 members regularly using its three floors of flexible space

The building

The Werks is inside a high street converted shop with normal retail uses either side of its entrance lobby. It has a large open plan co-working space on the ground floor and has recently begun to improve its large basement so that there is a relaxation area and also a large meeting/event room. In total The Werks has 6,500 square feet available to its users.



What's special

The Werks now has four branches along the south coast but each has its own website and identity, with different types of user.

Coachwerks in Brighton, for example, is very much a physical arts-based hub for performers, writers, animators, musicians, photographers, printers and artists etc. It is based in an old car repairs garage. Westwerks in Brighton is aimed more at social enterprises and the voluntary sector, who also have many home-working managers and staff.

The Werks at Hove is a town centre hub with a stronger emphasis on IT-based freelancers and small companies. 'We find that each hub tends to attract local people from its own area,' says director Ian Elwick (above). 'We have tried offering use of all the Werks to members but they rarely use the other sites. Having a hub near to where they live is obviously a key appeal.'

Coachwerks has the happily chaotic feel of a college art room. Set far back from the more expensive water-front neighbourhoods of Brighton the building was once a coach repairs garage, and it clearly benefits from an artistic vision of how it could look. Still far from complete when we visited, it already had a flourishing membership including artists, photographers, environmental groups, dancers and dramatists. Plans were well advanced for a Saturday community café. Unlike any other workhub, its members are actively helping to transform the building – but for now the emphasis is on heavy insulation in preparation for the expected (and delivered) cold winter.



The work, says one, goes in waves. 'One minute it looks a terrible mess, then it looks OK.' Bottles set into internal walls that will form windows are a typical feature. Creative work continues among the chaos, with the scream of a drill competing with a dance rehearsal. The advantage of Coachwerks' approach is its members have a very strong interest in making the place a success. Pitching in with the grubby job of building and decorating has been a great way for members to get to know their future neighbours and collaborators.

Collaboration

'When we started The Werks in 2007 we thought we were pioneers,' says Elwick. 'But a fair few people were having the same idea about creative sector hubs. We are part of a movement to a new world of work – a shift to project-based working and co-working: self-employed people sharing an open plan space.'

'The collaborative way the creative sector works can teach other small businesses a lot. The "larger company counts" growth model just doesn't work in tough times. I'd say it is just not entrepreneurial and is arguably high carbon.'

LewesWerks, based in a former jobcentre at the top end of the historic town of Lewes, is pitching itself at a similar demographic to the Brighton and Hove Werks. 'But the lifestyle in Lewes is very different,' says Rosie Sherry, who runs the facility 'and while the houses cost the same as in Brighton they're a bit smaller and there may be some people who don't yet have broadband at home.' It's Sherry's job to meet and greet and fill the space. She devotes two hours a day to the role and, because it's early days and money is tight, works in her specialist area of social media at other times. 'Filling space is a priority but so too is community building,' she says.



Web developers and Mac specialists Isos get a reduced rent in return for technical support to users. Bookings are growing for the large open plan area, now used for workshops, film viewings etc. This workhub is in its infancy but shows how high street locations can work well for the concept – in the right towns. Even with leaflet drops and a small A-board, most publicity has come through word of mouth.

Instead we find that smaller companies work best when they come together on a project-based approach, sharing contracts or subcontracting to one another. We have had over 20 members here work together on a £90,000 contract recently for example. This can suit the client too – they get real specialists doing each aspect of the work, say on a new website, rather than the staff that one company happens to have at the time.'

Should the collaborative approach be formalised? 'We tried setting up a company out of a collaborative project but disbanded it,' he says. 'We are not here to back one or two large businesses. That's not how our members want to work. They all want to be in charge of their own business.'

Creative businesses don't grow like the innovation centre development model, says Elwick. They grow projects not companies. 'Many workhub users actively choose the flexibility of being small,' he says. 'It doesn't mean they won't contribute large amounts to economic growth. Just read the credits of a Hollywood film for an example of the power of freelancers working together. Many film companies only have a few staff. But they have a large number of individuals and specialist micro companies on their books.'



Dr Vicky Cave (The Werks)

www.oujamaflip.com

Vicky is a freelance designer of interactive educational exhibits for children. It is her third day at The Werks, having moved to Brighton from London just this week. 'I haven't got the internet set up at home yet so I did a Google search for office space and couldn't believe it when this came up just across the road. If it wasn't here I'd probably be doing my nut or working in the library until I'd got everything set up at home.' There's a definite urgency to her work right now, preparing a £1.75m bid to the Wellcome Trust. If the bid is approved, Vicky will secure a long term contract with Eureka!, the national children's museum in Halifax. Though very new to The Werks she's already spotted opportunities here for collaboration. 'I've met really interesting people just sitting across the desk and there's plenty of scope for crossovers. The good thing about this place is it's flexible – a six-month office contract doesn't appeal to me, it would be expensive and you wouldn't have that opportunity to meet people.'

Claire Kirtland (Leweswerks)

www.clairekirtland.co.uk

Claire Kirtland offers a PR and marketing service. Originally from London she moved to Lewes with her son six years ago and until three weeks ago had been working from home. 'I love working from home and I had a little room set up there. But then I had another baby and I can't work around a screaming baby!' she says.

She now works three days a week at Leweswerks alongside others with the same one person, one laptop set up. 'Most of my clients are in Lewes or Brighton, but getting to Brighton by bus or train can mean a round trip of three hours. I wouldn't ask them to come to my home because that's just a bit too personal but I can now meet them here, where it feels professional, it's a great address and people take you more seriously.'



Mandy Taylor (Coachwerks)

illustriousbrighton.co.uk

Mandy Taylor is a fine artist who works on commission, specialising in painting and print. Part-time she teaches English as a second language. Right now she seems to be pursuing a career as a builder, up a ladder elbow-deep in roof insulation rolls and surrounded by buckets of wet plaster. All the CoachWerk's users are helping convert the former coach garage into winter-proof premises.

Mandy became part of the Coachwerks community six months ago, prompted to find studio space to supplement her top floor bedroom where lack of space to overview work in progress was distorting her efforts. 'The mix of people and skills at the Coachwerks, she says, makes it 'amazingly fecund. You're encouraged to try running workshops because everyone assumes you can do it. You're pushed to try things you wouldn't normally. There's also the benefit of a critical second opinion.'

'At college you rely on your tutors to tell you if a work is good. Now you're standing on your own two feet but you value feedback.' The Werks network is also pushing her to learn more economically useful skills. 'I'm planning to learn screen printing at the Printwerks which will generate income and I'll be buying my own relief printing press.'

Management

Werkshop CIC (community interest company) is a private sector venture similar to a social enterprise. It is the parent company which controls all the werks workhubs. There is also Werkshop UK Ltd, a holding company which holds some of the leases and offers the opportunity for spin out projects to get started while they are incubation.

How it started

Ian Elwick and his colleagues researched demand for a hub in Hove. 'We were in touch with home-working freelancers and creatives and asked what they wanted and how they wanted it. 'Traditional work-space demand studies are fatuous when it comes to workhubs, Elwick says. 'It's only when people see, touch and feel a place like this that you can be sure of demand. They don't know they want a hub until they visit one. It's quite unlike traditional companies looking for x square feet of office space.

'At Hove we had an opportunity which was rare in the boom years and we knew generally this was a good area for a service like this. We've been proved right and have even ridden out quite a severe recession.'

Tariffs

The Werks

- Flexible co-working rates ('when you need to escape the home office')
- 'Regular Joe' for £65 per month (use of co-working space and wifi during regular working hours weekdays. Up to three days a week/12 days a month)
- 'Non conformist' for £100 per month (as above with 24 hour access. Up to four days a week/16 days a month)
- Full-time office space at £150/£220/£350 per month depending on space taken. All above plus VAT

The finances

The Werks has the building on a 15-year lease. Running costs including staff are around £150k pa. The cost of initial refurbishment was about £90,000.

The other locations all have similar standalone budgets, but Coachwerks in particular has been an outstanding example of collaborative working. Over 30 people came together there to fix up a very dilapidated motor works adding their own time and money for materials with only the promise of use of the space to motivate them.

Income sources break down as follows: 17% of revenue is from membership (occasional users), 75% from regulars and 8% from one-off fees such as meeting/event hire.

Currently The Werks is trying to finance a revamp of its basement but is struggling to raise the budgets to do it how it wants to. There is no grant funding for The Werks so it is exploring sponsorship as an alternative source. For now its members are offering to help with fundraising in the same way as the finance was raised for Coachwerks.

Staff

At The Werks there are two directors, two members of staff (office manager and accounts) and several volunteers.

Businesses and members

There are 1,500 regular users of all the Werks and a further 300 occasional users, mainly home-based. Businesses range from web designers and programmers to arts and performance at Coachwerks. Individual membership is fluid, with people shifting between full- and part-time use.

'Many of our members are very experienced in business and management. Many have switched to running their own company from a larger employer,' he says. 'We have former BBC executives using our hub. We are not just offering some kind of arts or creative benefit to the local area. The potential impact of the collaboration we enable here is very significant for the local economy.'

The challenges

'This is the way of the future. The new game not the old game,' Elwick says. 'The tide was going this way anyway.' But in the meantime the organisation is struggling to offer either the level of staff or quality of fit out it would like to. The contrast with the amount of public sector support workhubs have in other regions is stark.

'We need to step up a gear,' says Elwick. 'We have a huge asset – our collaborative culture – which sells membership to people. But more resources will be needed if we are to capitalise on this. The answer is not better equipped but sterile space but to try to marry together the people aspects of our workhubs with better facilities. That, frankly, requires support from the public sector and a better understanding of how much of Britain's GDP is developed through small dynamic businesses.'

