



Balcony view at Solomons' redevelopment of the Council's Papcastle Depot in Cockermouth

# Liberation of the 'office' – Papcastle Depot, Cumbria

by Victoria Clements\*

**T**he future of workspaces and the drawbacks of the traditional office model has for some time been a hot topic for discussion. With the rise of the mobile 'coffee shop' start-ups simply requiring a laptop and Wi-Fi, coupled with the demise of large, commercial, uneconomical office lets and outsourcing, resulting in swathes of empty office blocks across the country, the demand for flexible workspaces which cater for a wide variety of workers, is ever increasing.

Not only are start-ups and SME's requiring a more flexible and economical option to traditional office models and a less formal approach to

where they work; but so, too, are staff employees of organizations, large and small. The modern surveyor for instance, is required to be technically proficient and also an innovator with creative solutions to solve issues, implementing agile-working approaches.

Ben Waber, Magnolfi, & Lindsay, surmised in their 2014, *Harvard Business Review* report, titled 'Workspaces that move people', that creating opportunities for interactions or 'collisions' is incredibly important in a workspace and will increase creativity and, in turn, productivity. 'The type of interaction that's most valuable changes according to goals; what doesn't change is that interaction in

itself is far more valuable than we realize. Sometimes circulating, exploring, engaging, and increasing the number of people's collisions is more important than individual productivity or creativity.'

To increase the frequency of 'collisions' and interactions the office areas need to be organized in such a way that ensure people are talking face to face and collaborating, breaking away from formulaic layouts where movement is hampered by the volume of desks on tightly packed floors.

## Putting the 'office' to work

If you consider the national skills shortage, surveying in particular, the

work environment shifts from simply being a building in which to work, to an ally in the attraction and retention of employees, providing employers with a competitive edge in the war for talent. Offering an inspiring work area, as well as flexibility of work, is an important factor when considering attraction strategies for multiple site workers. Traditionally surveyors may have been expected to be based five days per week on sites, often working away from home on weekdays; candidates now look for flexibility may be three days on site and two days based locally, allowing for a better work-life balance, with occasional home working and hot desking options thrown in to the mix. Work-life balance can be more important than overall package to candidates in today's labour market and needs to be fully considered by employers when considering office redesign and workplace planning.

Perhaps the questions employers need to ask are how can we make the physical 'office' work harder for us? How can workspaces facilitate more 'collisions' and what if those 'collisions' could include external businesses and cross-discipline organization? Finally, how can the 'office' play a pivotal role in talent attraction, development and retention strategies?

Mark Wilding, in the November 2017 edition of RICS *Modus* magazine titled 'The Future of Work' quoted Gemma Kendal, Director of EMEA office capital markets, who stated: 'We have seen a reduction in desk space per employee in offices ... [and] an increased appetite for innovative spaces such as community space, incubators and creative space – which are increasingly important to employees.'

### Case study – Solomons Europe, Papcastle Depot

RICS Chartered Quantity Surveying Practice Solomons Europe, based in the North of England, recently opened their new office facility in Cumbria, near Cockermouth, which puts many workspace design theories into practice. After scouring a map of Cumbria for a location that could service its clients in North and West Cumbria, whilst also



bringing together its North East, North West and Cumbrian teams to encourage greater internal collaboration and interaction, they settled on a disused Council Depot with fantastic transport links (A66, M6 and A69). The ambition was to repurpose the building, through permitted development rights, into a hub from which it would be able to nurture its regional teams of 'intrapreneurs'.

Solomons wanted to take 'connectivity' one step further by creating a space where greater collaboration is possible, not just internally but with external businesses also, by gifting and renting out workspace pods to start-up and SME organizations from the local community – creating a melting pot of ideas, interactions and creativity.

Managing Director, Dominic Doig, FRICS, MACostE, reflects: 'We took a disused depot, with good connection links to North and West Cumbria and created a collaborative space which embodied our ethos of both nurturing and growing our talented teams, as well as giving back to our local communities and supporting local businesses. This for us is "business done well".'

The 400 square-metre depot was in a state of dilapidation when purchased, but its portal frame construction meant that it was otherwise a blank canvas. Dominic and partner Kerry Doig (co-owner and Strategic Director of Solomons Europe), considered the layout that would work best for them and their growing business and sketched out many designs before settling on a solution, with spaces for reflective

thinking, collaborative discussions and information-sharing across businesses and disciplines; creating energy and dynamism to propel regional growth.

Domini Doig continued: 'Having looked at other office space available in Cumbria, on the established business sites, we couldn't find anywhere that would provide the liberated space we were looking for. We don't want people chained to their desks, we want them to be interacting with each other, sparking debate and ideas and looking for innovative ways to help our clients. That kind of innovation doesn't come from a box, you need space and an environment that will help you to see the bigger picture.'

### Clear desk policy

Solomons' redevelopment, known as Papcastle Depot, took 22 months from design to completion, costing circa £500,000. With high-quality furnishings and fittings guaranteed to last, it opened its doors in July 2019. With only 29% of the 400 square-metre floor space allocated to desk space, Solomons Europe has taken the bold decision to deliver an office which provides employees and SME tenants room to move and to think freely; a liberation from the cramped, tightly packed offices which can stifle modern approaches to working.

42% of the floor space has been dedicated to the communal kitchen and break-out area, providing a generously proportioned zone which can be used to host events and networking sessions, as

well as a great social space for lunch. Landing areas are decked out with comfortable seating and bistro-style tables to facilitate break-away conversations, and a covered outdoor space creates an 'inside/outside garden' which promotes wellbeing and encourages working in the fresh Cumbrian air, literally giving people room to breathe and to think. The quality finish adds a unique feel to the commercial property, paying homage to its industrial character and history; steelwork is exposed and walls are adorned with reclaimed barn cladding, natural grains and hues on show. Splashes of orange and yellow bring a vibrancy and energy to the contemporary space. Thanks to a local supply chain, pouring their craftsmanship and energy into the site, the Depot seems to radiate with positivity and warm glow (not just because of the choice of paint colours).

Graham Keen, Senior Quantity Surveyor at Solomons Europe and a member of the staff that regularly works from Papcastle commented: 'The different zones and ability to move away from desk and find quiet space is fantastic. Having other companies on site facilitates networking and idea sharing. Definitely, my preferred working style, in a fluid working space, no restrictions. With nicely fitted out workstations which are well appointed, I can spread out and use different workspaces as I need to. I feel more productive as a result.'

In addition, there is also ample space made available for local SMEs to enjoy all the Depot has to offer with three, four and five-person pods available for rent with competitive rates. Social enterprise All Together Cumbria have been gifted space at the depot to create a hub for interaction with the regional supply chain employers and businesses, to support local impact on recruitment and apprenticeships. The team have recently moved in and are enjoying the vibrant, modern surroundings. Tracy Todd, All Together Cumbria Recruitment Desk Manager, said that being a tenant at Papcastle Depot 'is a phenomenal opportunity'.

In addition, Solomons Europe are continuing a 'Pay It Forward' philo-

sophy which the business introduced in its 20th anniversary year, by launching a competition to offer a local start-up or SME the opportunity to win six months' free rent in one of the exclusive three-person pods, with the aim of further supporting creation of an SME business community hub of its own.

### Future proof

A space that inspires employees and gives back to the community, with a vibrancy and energy all of its own – is this the future of the modern workspace? Early signs suggest the Depot will deliver on the owner's intentions, with greater innovation and creativity of employees already observed by the leadership team.

The Depot will form a central core for the company's 'Conversion to Quantity Surveying' initiatives already under way to tackle the regional skills shortage, and set to increase head count by 10%. In addition, the facility already hosts a number of clients and their teams on an *ad hoc* basis, supporting further multiple cross-business opportunities. Solomons also encourage local and regional micro-businesses to pop in and chat between meetings and appointments, to use the communal areas and meet friendly faces to chat and share ideas, proving the intended collaborative workspace model, which seems to hold its own.

Kerry Doig, Strategic Director, said: 'We really want to see micro and small businesses develop and grow from this space, taking with them a network of connections and a feeling of inclusivity in the business as well as local community. We know how hard it can be to take a business to the next level, and the ability to get out of the bedroom office or garage workspace can bring immeasurable benefits in boosting confidence and the opportunity to make beneficial connections. Successful business is a long-term commitment, but making good, supportive links at the outset can pay huge and unexpected dividends. We hope to support this further at Papcastle and to encourage other, bigger businesses to do the same.'

Granted, in today's economic climate, not all companies will be looking

### Papcastle Depot project overview

**Area:** Cumbria, Great Broughton near Cockermouth

**Development type:** Change of use from warehouse to office facility under permitted development rights

**Size:** 400 square feet.

**Supply chain:** Chris White Cumbrian Craftsmanship (Building, Joinery and Site Management), Structural Engineer – Crux Associates, Walmsley Associates – M&E Consultant, Fenetek – Glazing, Steadmans – Roofing, DRG Limited – Electrical and Plumbing, Steel Vintage – Desks and meeting tables, RHS Ulverston – specialist industrial meeting table, DMA Safety Management – CDM Advisor. Majority of materials were sourced

**Architect:** John Coward Architects  
**Build time:** 10 months August 2018 – June 2019

**Land cost:** £130,000

**Build cost:** £499,000

**Total cost:** £629,000

to spend in excess of half a million pounds creating a unique work hub, but it is a model that can be scaled to size, depending on budgets, required use and employee numbers. It's the layout, bespoke furnishings, multi-use spaces and zoned approach that give the building its unique energy, which appeals to employees and SMEs alike. Modern employers need the vision, tenacity and creativity of Dominic and Kerry Doig and the belief that business can and will prosper with the help of well designed and planned working areas.

### Bibliography

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