



SUSTAINABLE VENTURES

London, United Kingdom

CIRCULAR DESIGN AND LOW-CARBON FIT-OUT

Sustainable Ventures has transformed 40,000 sq ft of long-abandoned space in County Hall into Europe's largest low-carbon workspace cluster. Working with Material Works Architecture, the team delivered a highly sustainable workplace operating at 97% capacity through minimal intervention and circular material strategies demonstrating how adaptive reuse can achieve both environmental and economic value at scale.

WORKPLACE STRATEGY

The strategic intent was to create a workspace that embodied its sustainability mission while supporting the rapid growth of climate-tech start-ups. With upfront carbon projected to represent half of construction emissions by 2050, the organisation chose refurbishment over new-build to minimise embodied carbon and demonstrate a practical, scalable alternative to conventional fit-outs.



The project followed three guiding questions: How much do we really need to do? Where does it come from? Where will it go?

County Hall's Grade II* listed structure, unused since 1986, offered both a strong embodied carbon story and a symbolic location. Positioned beside Waterloo Station and facing Whitehall, the workspace acts as a visible statement of the UK's green economy and provides a platform for the climate-tech community.

The design approach prioritised minimal intervention, lifecycle thinking and commercial pragmatism. Rather than pursuing certification schemes that would have been costly or incompatible with the heritage building,

the team focused on decisions that delivered the greatest carbon impact. Material sourcing was guided by circularity, reuse and collaboration with start-ups within Sustainable Ventures' ecosystem.

SPATIAL DESIGN FEATURES

The design emphasises flexibility, reuse and preservation of the building's historic fabric. The team avoided plastering, painting or concealing surfaces, allowing the character of County Hall to remain visible. This approach reduced carbon and cost while creating a distinctive aesthetic aligned with Sustainable Ventures' mission.

Core spatial features include:

- Open work zones supporting changing team sizes and early-stage organisational structures
- Flexible collaboration areas designed for project work, acceleration programmes and investor interactions
- Informal breakout spaces that encourage spontaneous exchange and cross-company learning
- Non-fixed workstations that can be rearranged quickly as start-ups grow or pivot
- Reconfigurable wall systems, many of which were repurposed from interim project spaces, enabling future adaptation
- Reclaimed furniture and architectural elements integrated throughout the space, including reused doors, light fittings and kitchen worktops salvaged from former school laboratories, reducing waste while reinforcing material provenance

The stripped-back material palette creates an environment that feels authentic and functional rather than stylised or premium. For Sustainable Ventures, this visual honesty was intentional. It reinforces the narrative that sustainability is practical and operational, not only decorative.

The layout was also shaped by the organisation's experience managing founder communities.



Early-stage companies often scale rapidly and unpredictably, making flexibility essential. The architecture supports churn, temporary occupancy and fluctuating spatial demands without significant renovation.

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Technology within the County Hall workspace was approached with restraint, reflecting the focus on reducing embodied carbon and creating a flexible environment that can evolve over time.

Rather than installing heavy digital infrastructure or specialist systems, the organisation prioritised reliable, low-impact tools that support the day-to-day needs of early-stage companies. The digital layer remains intentionally lightweight, ensuring that the space can be adapted without significant material waste or complex updates.

Collaboration tools and core operational systems are used where necessary, but technology is not positioned as the defining feature of the workplace. The emphasis is instead on enabling founders and teams to work in ways that suit their pace of growth, with spaces designed to be reconfigured quickly as requirements change. Data collection focuses on operational and environmental performance rather than detailed tracking of individual usage patterns.

SUSTAINABILITY AND MATERIALS

Sustainability was the defining priority of the County Hall refurbishment,

shaping every design and procurement decision from the outset. Rather than adopting a traditional strip-out and rebuild approach, Sustainable Ventures and Material Works Architecture focused on retaining existing elements and introducing new materials only where necessary. This minimal-intervention strategy resulted in significant reductions in embodied carbon, with the project achieving an estimated 1,200-tonne saving compared with a typical London fit-out. The decision not to paint the exposed walls alone avoided 30 tonnes of CO₂ and reduced costs by £30,000.

Much of the material palette was sourced from start-ups within Sustainable Ventures' own ecosystem, allowing the workspace to act as a live demonstration of circular and bio-based innovation. Mycelium was used for insulation and acoustic treatments, recycled wine corks were transformed into cork flooring, and cacao shells were incorporated into marmoleum produced using renewable energy. Waste orange peel, beetroot and coffee grounds were used to create various surfaces and lighting elements, giving physical expression to the organisation's ethos of reuse.

Reclaimed materials were prioritised wherever possible, including reused doors, light fittings and kitchen worktops recovered from decommissioned school laboratories. These elements were integrated directly into the fit-out rather than treated as decorative features, extending their functional lifespan and avoiding unnecessary new production.





Furniture across the workspace is largely leased from a supplier operating a fully circular remanufacturing model. This approach provides flexibility as the community evolves while ensuring that furniture remains in continuous use cycles at end of term, significantly reducing waste and supporting long-term material stewardship.

Wellbeing considerations were embedded through material choice and indoor environmental quality. Natural materials are used throughout, with a focus on low-toxicity and low-VOC finishes. Graphene-based paints and lime-based plasters improve indoor air quality, while all joinery is made from Ecoboard rather than conventional MDF, derived from agricultural waste streams.

Biophilic design is integral to the scheme, with extensive planting integrated into joinery and shared spaces, supporting both wellbeing and environmental performance.

In total, more than 9,600 sq ft of materials were reused or designed for future reuse, alongside water savings of over 40 kilolitres.

The project adopted a pragmatic approach to sustainability, prioritising carbon impact and lifecycle resilience over certification. Certain compromises were necessary, particularly where the supply chain was not yet able to provide viable alternatives. Even so, the design reflects the belief that meaningful carbon reduction comes from working with what already exists, experimenting with emerging materials and involving contractors in new methods.



Standout Innovations

- A minimal-intervention approach that retained the existing Grade II* structure, showcasing that significant embodied-carbon reduction can be achieved without extensive strip-out or reconstruction.
- Use of food-waste and recycled materials, including mycelium insulation, cork flooring, cocoa-shell marmoleum and orange peel and beetroot panels, showing how alternative materials can perform within mainstream commercial settings.
- Reuse and adaptation of flexible wall systems, relocated from temporary project spaces, enabling the workplace to be reconfigured without further carbon-intensive interventions.
- A lifecycle-first decision-making model that prioritised long-term adaptability and embodied carbon over certification frameworks, offering a pragmatic blueprint for heritage refurbishments.
- A commercially viable delivery model, achieving London workspace standards at £95 per sq ft.



The result is a workplace that reduces environmental impact while telling a clear, tangible story about the future of low-carbon workspace delivery.

AMENITIES AND CULTURE

Amenities support collaboration, learning and community building within the climate-tech ecosystem. The environment is intentionally informal, avoiding premium finishes in favour of functional, purposeful spaces.

The location plays a cultural role. Sitting opposite Whitehall, the workspace acts as a visible statement about the potential of green jobs and innovation-led decarbonisation. The proximity to transport hubs enhances accessibility, aligning with both sustainability goals and the needs of early-stage founders.

A large, flexible event space and bar enable the organisation to host open events for between 200 and 300 people, extending the reach of the community beyond resident start-ups. These spaces support talks, investor showcases and public events, reinforcing County Hall's role as a civic-facing hub for climate innovation rather than a closed office environment.

The raw aesthetic fosters a sense of belonging among start-ups. Rather than competing with high-end corporate spaces, it offers simplicity, adaptability and a clear connection to the values of the community it serves.

LESSONS LEARNED

Commercial sustainability requires pragmatism. Choosing not to pursue certification enabled the team to prioritise embodied carbon and long-term adaptability. Most significantly, the project highlights that workplaces expressing their values through material honesty and low-carbon design can support both mission alignment and operational performance.

For organisations considering an office move, County Hall illustrates that refurbishing an existing building can offer the lowest-carbon pathway. Embodied carbon remains a critical yet overlooked factor in workplace strategy, and this project provides a compelling blueprint for future developments.



Key Facts

Industry:	Climate-tech Consulting
Location:	County Hall, London, UK
Office size:	40,000 sq ft
No. of employees in the building:	Over 1000 people; flexible and rotating community of start-ups and founders
Year of completion:	2023
Designer:	Material Works Architecture



Photographs

1. Entrance and Cafe
2. Collaborative space featuring long tables and soft seating for informal collaboration.
3. Exposed and reinforced wall, adaptive design preserving the old buildings infrastructure.
4. Modular partitions designed for easy disassembly and re-use
5. Coffee bar counter made from re-cycled biding rubble. Front cladding formed from waste orange peel
6. Phonebooths providing a private workspace.
7. Biophilic wall in the kitchen dinning area.
8. Coffee bar and casual workspace, encouraging natural interaction.
9. Conference hall, used for large meetins and parties.
10. Kitchen/dinning area with a long table.
11. Small tables for collaboration and private work.

Photography by Fred Howarth and Jim Stephenson

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