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A Commentary on Alternate Officing Options in the UK

By Brian Sherwood Jones

Brian Sherwood Jones is the founder and CEO of [ProcessforUsability](http://ProcessforUsability.com), a UK-based consultancy firm focused on providing assurance that systems and services meet user needs. He can be reached at brian@processforusability.co.uk. We would welcome similar submissions offering perspectives on office costs and alternative work arrangements in other countries.

UK costs and constraints on future work

I am not an economist, architect or builder, so this is not my area of expertise, but it is an attempt to “follow the money” and understand the working conditions for future British knowledge workers.

Office space is expensive

I live in one of the cheapest parts of Britain. The rent on an office of about 1000 square feet in my area would be about £10k p.a. (multiply by two for dollars), with hefty local taxes on top of that.

Office space in Britain is the most expensive in the world. Even in a struggling, medium-sized city, like Birmingham, costs are more than 40 percent higher than in Manhattan although construction costs half as much.

Office space in London, according to commercial data (KingSturge, 2003 to 2005) is not just more expensive than anywhere else in the world; it is some three times as expensive as the next most expensive city in Europe, Paris, and more than three times as expensive as in Manhattan.

Even more telling, perhaps, are the costs of office space in British provincial cities. Birmingham was the next most expensive European city after Paris, and Glasgow, Edinburgh and Manchester were all more expensive than Manhattan; office space costs almost twice as much in any of those smaller and not very prosperous British cities as it does in San Francisco – a city which not only is highly prosperous and has some of the tightest regulatory constraints on housing in the US but also has topographical constraints on land supply. Office space in Birmingham cost 124 percent more than in fast growing, twice as big, and land-strapped Singapore.”

“Office Space Supply Restrictions in Britain: The Political Economy of Market Revenge,” by Paul Cheshire and Christian Hilber, January 2007)

The “[Square feet oh, how square](#)” article from *Business Week* (July 3, 2006) ought to apply to the UK in spades. It is my impression that the penny seems to be dropping at last, and that companies and corporate organisations are now welcoming flexible working, telecommuting etc., but that this is very recent (the last few months really). The

[shedworking website](#) has links to the various surveys. Personally, I would expect things to move fast now.

Homes are small (and expensive)

The shortage of housing combined with low interest rates has led to high prices – the market has not started to move down (yet?), unlike in the US.

The UK has the smallest space standards in Europe (developed as minimum standards in 1961 and adopted as maximum). Modern homes are seen as too small (“[Space Race](#),” *Building* magazine, Issue 11, 2007). Houses are say 750 – 850 square feet. The introduction of additional bathrooms into much the same volume has shrunk the size of bedrooms (“The changing face of housing in Britain” by Beverley West, UNMIST, RICS Research Foundation ISBN 0-85406-968-2, 1999: Download from www.rics.org). Potential working space is small; typically the third bedroom; 80 square feet would be about par.

Recognition of home working is patchy at best

Some people (notably Josephine Smit of *Building* magazine) have been pointing out for the last decade that home working should be recognised, but Beverley West did not find support for this in 1999, and the 2005 CABA survey (“What home buyers want: Attitudes and decision making among consumers,” CABA Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment, 2005. Download from www.cabe.org.uk) did not even ask about it. Personally, this seems an astonishing omission.

Garden Offices and sheds seem to be the answer for many. The [shedworking blog](#) has some impressive figures on the scale of uptake. For less than a year’s rent, I could buy a garden office and add value to my house) The site <http://www.smartgardenoffices.co.uk/start-up-businesses/funding.htm> has figures.

The “third place” may be the pub

The coffee house culture is long established in Britain (for example, Lloyd’s coffee house in London started a number of famous enterprises named after it). However, pubs are getting wi-fi and need the business; there are some enterprising landlords on all scales who may well provide the major “third place.”

Not much sign of mobile offices (yet)

The extreme top end of the mobile office caught some press interest (“[Firm builds internet motor home](#)”), but there seems to be little activity here. For a small multiple of the cost of a garden office, a vehicle conversion to an office would seem to offer considerable flexibility (and leave the shed free for more important things, like time-wasting). To some extent, I may be unduly influenced by a neighbour; I do not covet his ox, but his Stonefield 4x4. . .

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