

Building a Sustainable Future: Automobil-Club Verkehr's Office Transformation

How the Automobil-Club Verkehr invested in their new space to minimize environmental impact and create community for employees

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It's a pivotal moment for businesses. With the climate crisis and the rapid evolution of working habits, organizations realize they need to make changes to be ready for the future. Founded in 1962, the Automobil-Club Verkehr (ACV) in Cologne, Germany, offers roadside assistance, travel protection, and insurance services. Recognizing the importance of sustainability in the automobile industry, ACV has committed to leading by example. They took action to transform a historic building into a modern, sustainable workspace that deeply considers the needs of both the environment and employees.

ACV rose to this challenge in partnership with Steelcase and THinkForward architecture. The beautiful new office space stands as a testament to what can be achieved when environmental considerations and employee needs are placed at the forefront of design and decision-making.

“Sustainability was the centerpiece of this project. We wanted to create a truly sustainable business - ecologically, economically, and socially - that's primed for the future.”

HOLGER KÜSTER | Managing Director at ACV

A COMMUNITY HUB WITH SUSTAINABILITY AT ITS CORE

Bringing the idea to life required extensive collaboration and problem-solving. Refurbishing an old building is more sustainable than constructing a new one; but it's more complex. However, dynamic partnerships allowed the teams to successfully navigate challenges and complete the project in just 16 months.

The journey began with employee workshops, where individuals voiced their preferences and needs. These workshops were crucial in shaping the office layout and features, ensuring they supported employee wellbeing and productivity. Key considerations included room sizes, open social spaces, meeting rooms, large kitchenettes on every level, and department placement. This collaborative approach resulted in a workspace design that supports daily activities and facilitates workflow and communication. “Steelcase helped us design a space specifically tailored to ACV's needs that supports collaboration and community at work,” says Küster.

Sustainability was central to every decision in ACV's refurbishment. The original building frame was kept in place, minimizing materials used. It features a photovoltaic system that supports operations, making it nearly 70% self-sufficient. And the sustainable materials used in the building remove CO₂ from the atmosphere. "Our focus is turning old buildings into sustainable ones. ACV is designed to reduce CO₂. We estimate that the wooden façade of the building has permanently bound at least 20 tons of CO₂. And the photovoltaic system reduces carbon emissions by 13 tons each year," says Thorsten Franz, Architect at THinkForward architecture.

"To bring our vision to life and achieve our long-term goals, we partnered with sustainability-focused experts like Steelcase and THinkForward," says Küster. "They supported us at every step to reduce ACV's carbon footprint." ACV's ambitions align with Steelcase's goal of reaching a net zero future by transforming operations and helping clients redesign their spaces. Steelcase provided comprehensive support by focusing on sustainability and community-based design and using carbon-neutral products and local supply chains. "These partnerships were crucial in implementing ACV's goal. Everyone had the same understanding of what we wanted to achieve," Franz adds.

"The ACV refurbished space is designed for resilience, ensuring both the space and the community can stand the test of time and adapt to changes quickly. It anchors people to the company, their work, and each other."

RALF FRETER | Workplace Consultant at Steelcase

THE NEW SPACE IS A WIN

The new office space is accomplishing what ACV intended, and the response from employees has been overwhelmingly positive. "We have been here for nearly a year now, and we continue to have a very high level of employee satisfaction – 97% think the workplace is great," says Küster.

The new office space at ACV is designed to enhance employee well-being, foster community, and support new ways of working. With amenities like showers and a large kitchen for communal meals, the environment promotes wellbeing and engagement. A variety of spaces allows employees to choose the type of space that works best for their needs. A clean desk policy, with personal lockers to store belongings, supports efficiency and agility. The design facilitates opportunities for socializing, such as events in the large kitchen, barbecues on the outdoor terrace, and having lunch together. "People share experiences and establish a bond. That same camaraderie drives engagement, innovation, and progress in all areas of work," Küster explains, highlighting the importance of community in the workplace.

A BLUEPRINT FOR THE FUTURE

ACV's investment in the needs of people and the planet is paying off. "People are excited to come to work because the space is flexible and supports connection. At the same time, the building and products minimize the impact on the environment," says Küster. "It's a win-win situation."

The success of ACV's new office space demonstrates that it is possible to create a workplace that is both environmentally sustainable and supportive of employees. This project serves as a model for other organizations looking to make a similar impact. The combination of innovative design, sustainable practices, and a focus on employee wellbeing has resulted in a thriving workplace that is ready to face the challenges of the future.