



DON'T WASTE BUILD- INGS



**THE GREAT BRITISH REPAIR PLAN
FOR BUILDINGS UNDER THREAT**

INTRODUCTION

When we think about resources, it's understood that things like fast fashion, single-use plastic, and food waste are an environmental disaster, damaging nature and fuelling global warming. But what about the consequences of routinely throwing away much bigger objects – buildings? Did you know that almost two-thirds of all waste produced in the UK (66 million tonnes) is construction and demolition waste¹? Demolished buildings are typically replaced with new ones, but this creates the demand for new fossil-fuel based materials such as steel, aluminium, concrete, and brick. The emissions caused by their production, known as 'embodied carbon', are released into the atmosphere immediately and amount to more than 64 million tonnes of CO₂ every year in Britain². According to the Commons Environmental Audit Committee, this is more than UK emissions from aviation and shipping combined³.

Don't Waste Buildings is calling on the next government to tackle this by *introducing regulation and financial incentives* that will make the reuse of existing buildings simpler and more profitable.

WHO ARE WE?

Don't Waste Buildings is the campaign to put a spotlight on this embodied carbon and make the case for the productive use of empty and underperforming buildings. These buildings, all over the country, are untapped economic and social assets, not structures to be casually discarded. The campaign is non-party political and is run by a collection of individuals made up of leading architects, engineers, property developers, financiers, heritage experts, and others.



1. Defra statistics, March 2020
2. UK Green Building Council (UKGBC) [UKGBC Whole Life Carbon Roadmap Progress Report](#) launched at COP28,
3. EAC, Building to Net Zero, September 2022

WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Across the UK, we urgently need buildings of all shapes and sizes to serve many needs – providing space for uses such as retail, office, health, community, education, and especially housing. Yet, for decades, our regeneration approach has been to demolish and replace shops, offices, and housing blocks which are viewed as past their sell-by date. While some buildings should be demolished or partially demolished, we now know this approach doesn't only cause noise and disruption for communities but is fuelling the climate crisis because of the sizable upfront carbon emissions caused by demolition and replacement (new build) construction. This embodied carbon is one of two types of emissions associated with buildings, the other being operational carbon which results from the energy used to operate the building or its infrastructure such as heating, hot water, cooling, ventilation, and lighting.

Reaching Net Zero is a major challenge that is unachievable without bearing down on both these parts of our built environment's environmental footprint. Yet progress, especially on embodied carbon, has been far too slow. As the UK Green Building Council has reported, for buildings and infrastructure to hit its delivery pathway or 'roadmap' to Net Zero, embodied carbon emissions needed to fall 17% between 2018 and 2022 yet fell by just 4%, less than one-quarter of the amount that was needed.⁴



4. UKGBC's Whole Life Carbon Roadmap Progress Report

WHAT'S THE ANSWER?

The greenest building is the one that already exists.⁵ Every empty or under-utilised building presents an opportunity to tackle the climate crisis and help communities. And there are a lot of these, especially in challenged sectors such as office and retail. The national office vacancy rate throughout the UK now stands at 7.6% (the highest in nine years)⁶ while more than 10,000 shops closed in 2023 alone⁷, yet we have a national shortage of housing. What if we viewed these numbers not just as a problem but as a potential opportunity for regeneration and possible change to better use that would attract considerable support from the general public?

In most cases, threatened buildings can be restored, repurposed, revitalised. They can be adapted for new uses and, where they are unpopular or viewed as ugly, they can be made attractive, helping to restore vitality to our High Streets and local neighbourhoods.



- 5. Quote by Carl Elefante, former president, American Institute of Architects
- 6. Commercial real estate information company CoStar
- 7. Centre for Retail Research

WHAT'S THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT?

In some respects, the UK industry is at the forefront of the retrofit revolution and boasts some of the finest international examples of building reuse. However, such innovation remains atypical. At a bigger scale, it tends to be led by property developers with long-term outlooks and expert staff such as British Land, Landsec, and Grosvenor. At present, many others in the built environment including SMEs do not reuse and retrofit buildings as standard as it is typically less profitable in the short term than building a larger replacement building. Embodied carbon emissions remain unregulated, and measurement and mitigation is typically voluntary. Meanwhile, the VAT framework actively favours new builds and discourages reuse. The status quo is holding back the UK from reskilling and training hundreds of thousands of people for the green economy. The government should remove such barriers so the whole industry can participate in this vital economic transition.



SIX WAYS DON'T WASTE BUILDINGS WILL HELP ACHIEVE THIS:

- ➔ We will explore and recommend a range of potential policies and financial incentives that will drive the reuse of existing buildings and reduce embodied carbon. These should promote clarity and avoid adding to the planning burden.
- ➔ We will share information, collate reports, and record evidence and case studies from across the built environment sector to demonstrate best practice.
- ➔ We will meet with politicians and policymakers to urge them to support policy change which should be included in their first term of government.
- ➔ We will demonstrate the case for re-purposing existing commercial buildings and empty housing as high-quality homes. We face a housing crisis as well as a climate crisis yet, due to the environmental impact of newbuild, current government housebuilding targets would see England use up the entirety of its 1.5C carbon budget on housing alone.
- ➔ We will work with other organisations in this area, demonstrating how our aims are linked and complementary. There is a groundswell of support **across the entire property and built environment sector** for this type of action.
- ➔ We will engage with communities at a grassroots level to help them amplify the Don't Waste Buildings message locally.





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For further information,
please go to the Don't
Waste Buildings LinkedIn
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found here:

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