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Preserve and Reuse or Destroy and Rebuild? Losing the UK's Twentieth-Century Building Legacy and Sustainable Ways to Save and Repurpose It

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Abstract

Useful, reusable buildings that embody communities' history, identity and aspirations are currently being lost, and their embodied carbon wasted by demolition. Key twentieth-century buildings that could be reused are being destroyed by a combination of factors that need reform if their potential for adaptive reuse as contributions to sustainability and progress towards carbon neutrality is to be acknowledged. It is hoped that this paper, based on UK experience, has a wider relevance since the reuse of buildings is a worldwide contribution to achieving net carbon zero. It is time to take demolition off the table, but currently, there are UK legislative hurdles unfavourable to this change of direction. Historic buildings are lost as a result of the narrowness of Historic England's preservation criteria for Listing. The widening of Permitted Development Rights facilitates demolition without consultation or planning permission. There is weakness in the underfunded local authority planning system, while tax inequity charges 20% VAT on restoration but not on new building. We need to change our throw-away culture and remove these obstacles to reusing our historic building stock - to the benefit of both the climate and the sustainable future of our communities.

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Keywords

Embodied energy, Twentieth-century historic buildings; Adaptive reuse; Taxation; Sustainability

1. Introduction

New build versus Reuse

Nearly 40% of global carbon emissions come from the built environment, with new construction responsible for about a quarter of that. Emissions from construction and the use of buildings are now a "bigger existential threat than nuclear war, just a lot less obvious or immediate." (Sturgis, 2024) Every year, 50,000 buildings in the UK are demolished, and in 2022, 222m tonnes of waste were produced, of which 138m tonnes, or 62%, was construction, demolition and excavation waste. (Hurst, 2024) There is widespread agreement that this disposable culture needs to be swiftly addressed. The president of the Royal Institute of British Architects says, "Experts predict that 80% of our current building stock will still be in use in 2050, the year we want to be net zero. We need to make a concerted effort to realise the full potential of these buildings and take retrofit seriously. Reducing the built environment's impact is one of the most effective ways of helping the UK reach its legal commitment to be a net-zero community by 2050. It's a case of thinking about yesterday's building, putting in today's technology so we can use it tomorrow." (Muyiwa 2024) The RIBA's 2023 Built for the Environment report with the slogan 'System Change not Climate Change'

makes the case that the built environment must drastically reduce its carbon emissions to work towards net zero, sharing best practices, with social justice at the heart of action. Existing buildings are an untapped economic and social opportunity.

In response to the climate emergency, the UK is the only major economy to have set a target of 77% for 2035 and 100% from 1990 levels to Net Zero by 2050. (UK Government, 2023) This graph describes the UK’s legally binding trajectory to Net Zero, showing the requirement for 2025.

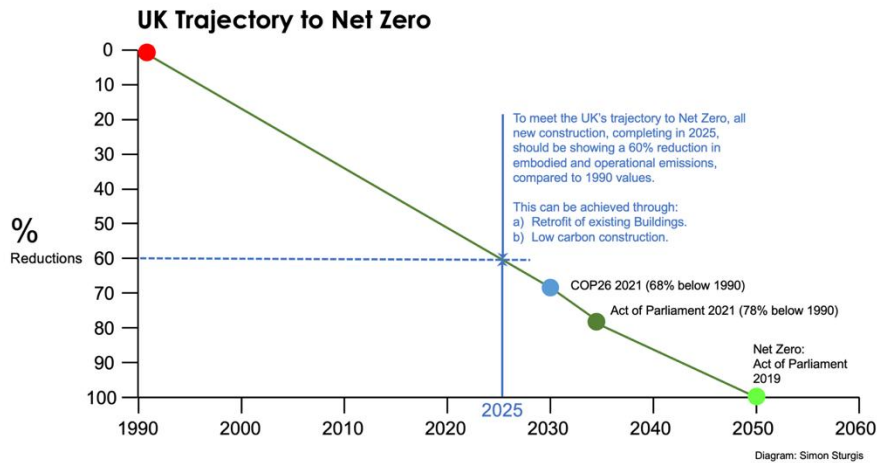


Figure 1: UK trajectory to net zero. (Source: Don’t Waste Buildings National Policy Planning Framework consultation response, September 2024)

As Carl Elefante said, “The greenest building is the one that is already built.”(Elefante, 2025) Buildings represent enormous investments in energy, material, and financial resources. They contribute to global warming - from the manufacture of their materials, their transport to the site and their construction (embodied emissions) as well as consuming non-renewable energy for heating, cooling, lighting, and equipment (operational emissions). For many buildings, embodied emissions are equivalent to two decades or more of operational emissions. “Thousands of viable buildings are destroyed every year in the name of progress. The scale of such wastefulness is even more troubling as the world confronts climate change and the need for rapid reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Retrofitting existing buildings to improve their performance can achieve energy efficiencies equivalent to new buildings, substantially reducing operational emissions while avoiding the immense embodied emissions from constructing a new building. Occupying, maintaining, renewing, and adapting existing buildings is the greenest approach and is especially crucial for renewing and adapting existing buildings is the greenest approach and is especially crucial for meeting emissions reduction targets in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.”

As the climate emergency deepens, changes in the planning framework and in our behaviour to reduce our carbon imprint become ever more urgent. Relevant UK regulations need updating to reflect this. In Conservation and Sustainability in Historic Cities, Dennis Rodwell sets out the theoretical and practical background to architectural conservation and how its perceived relevance and level of attainment can be extended when harnessed to wider agendas of sustainability and cultural identity. (Rodwell, 2017) This paper examines the legislative barriers preventing implementation of this urgent task – in particular, the reuse of twentieth-century buildings - in the context of Rodwell’s definition of UNESCO’s term ‘cultural landscapes’ in the creation of sustainable futures. To him, it signifies an inclusive approach to “inheritance” which does not create “the many separations and divisions that hamper, impede, if not prevent, rational, common-sense approaches to safeguarding what we have inherited, use, and take forward.” (de Olivera, 2025) As I examine below, these barriers include regulations which allow demolition without planning permission, the narrowness of the UK’s Listing criteria which exclude twentieth-century buildings adapted over time and the unequal tax regime between reuse and newbuild.

If this important and vital change is to be implemented, the local authority planning system also needs strengthening As the Town and Country Planning Association says, “the result of the intense reform of the planning system driven by the tension between the ideological and the practical is a planning system which is now highly complex but also desperately ineffective. Underfunded, demoralised, and lacking public trust, the system is clearly on its knees. And

that matters enormously because the planning system is central to any government who has ambitions for an efficient and democratic system producing healthy and climate-resilient communities.”- (Town and Country Planning Association, 2024)

The government’s zero carbon targets acknowledge the importance of responding to the climate emergency, but several current regulations outlined in this paper facilitate demolition and prevent reuse. Indications that this dichotomy might be addressed are beginning to appear. In September 2024, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport acknowledged that standing buildings, including those identified as ‘heritage’, can be reused and repurposed. “Heritage-led regeneration can return buildings to commercial, community, and residential use. It attracts businesses, visitors and investment to a place, increasing employment, providing opportunities for the local community, supporting the visitor economy and creating locally generated income. It can also reduce carbon emissions through the protection of embodied carbon, supporting the Net Zero mission.”(DCMS, 2024) A survey examining “how national planning policy and guidance might be updated around the demolition and redevelopment or retrofit of buildings” invited public responses in autumn 2024.

Building conservation groups, including the Twentieth Century Society, Don’t Waste Buildings, the Heritage Alliance, SAVE Britain’s Heritage and Civic Voice as well as the architects’ professional body, the Royal Institute of British Architects are making the case for saving and reusing existing buildings as a vital element in reducing carbon emissions. The 2022/23 public inquiry into the proposed demolition and redevelopment of the Marks and Spencer building in Oxford Street London opposed by SAVE Britain’s Heritage marked a watershed moment for the planning and construction industry because it was the first time a planning inquiry had sustainability and heritage as its joint focus. “However efficient this proposed new building would have been, retrofitting the existing buildings to contemporary standards would have a much smaller carbon cost – as well as being cheaper, quicker and less damaging for Oxford Street. It challenged our laissez faire attitude to demolition and loss as simply being necessary for economic growth, and invites us to consider the townscape and environmental consequences.” (SAVE, 2023) ‘When the Minister blocked the demolition plan in 2023, he said he wanted to use the National Planning Policy Framework to highlight the need for repurposing and reusing buildings, introducing a presumption in favour of this change. “This case has focused widespread public attention on the wasteful knock it down and build again process that has dominated our construction sector for the last 100 years.” Demolition would “fail to support the transition to a low-carbon future, and would overall fail to encourage the reuse of existing resources, including the conversion of existing buildings.”- (Ellis, 2024)

2. Legislative obstacles to reuse and retrofit; proposals for change

In the UK, there are legislative hurdles unfavourable to this change of direction. As well as ‘disposable culture’, two current regulations result in the loss of reusable buildings: the narrowness of Historic England’s listing criteria, which are confined to ‘architectural or historic interest’ as well as excluding buildings which have been altered over time. This particularly applies to commercial and industrial structures. The widening of Permitted Development Rights also allows property owners to demolish buildings on their sites without planning permission. Two other factors are the weakness of the local authority planning system and the inequity of the UK’s buildings taxation, which work actively against the conversion of existing structures by charging 20% VAT on refurbishment works – while new builds are VAT-free. (Rodwell, 2017)

Useful, reusable buildings that embody communities’ history and aspirations, including those constructed in the twentieth century, are currently being lost, and their embodied carbon wasted by demolition as a consequence of these narrow rules. Much of the government’s current consultations such as that on revisions to the National Policy Planning Framework is driven by the need to address the severe national shortage of housing, which appears to exclude any other building types apart from ‘housing stock’ – leading to the loss of commercial, industrial and mixed-use structures which are likely to have been upgraded as their function changed, particularly those from the mid-twentieth century. This paper makes the case for widening the definition of listing protection by adding considerations of sustainability and prevention of losses of embodied energy; also by introducing a presumption against demolition for otherwise unlisted buildings by identifying those of local significance in upgraded Local Lists which are maintained

and updated by local planning authorities with knowledgeable input from local communities – perhaps as a revived Grade III listing.

Examples cited here are Important twentieth-century buildings: useful, reusable buildings that embody communities' history and aspirations, providing character, historic value and amenity to their local areas. These are currently being lost and their embodied carbon wasted by demolition as a consequence of these narrow rules. If the UK is to meet its zero carbon targets, they should instead be protected from demolition - and repaired, retrofitted and reused.

There's also a gap in legislation in Scotland which leaves even listed buildings vulnerable to demolition by local councils under emergency public safety powers in section 29 of the Building (Scotland) Act 2003, without local planning authorities being required to provide evidence to justify their actions, including making public reports or surveys or evidence that alternatives to total demolition have been explored. While recognising the paramount importance of making dangerous buildings safe, in June 2024 SAVE Britain's Heritage called for enhanced guidance to address before demolition on public safety grounds, including consultation of the national heritage advisor Historic Environment Scotland to ensure that only the minimum demolition necessary takes place to make the building safe, avoiding excessive or total demolition. Their petition to the Scottish Parliament called for enhanced policy guidance setting out the minimum evidence and processes required by local planning authorities before making decisions on the demolition of listed buildings under emergency powers and a mandatory requirement for them to engage conservation-accredited engineers in all cases involving listed buildings. The petition was supported by the chair of the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland and the Scottish Civic Trust.- (Private Eye, 2024)

3. What's being lost or is vulnerable to demolition?

In London, several well-loved pioneering London County Council social housing developments where listing has been refused have either been demolished or are under threat. Historic England's twentieth-century expert, Elaine Harwood, recommended the listing of Portsmouth's Civic Offices designed in 1974-6 by Teggin and Taylor. They enclose two sides of the Guildhall Square, but the bronze glass curtain wall needs replacing, as well as renewal of the building's internal services. Harwood identified the wider risk to postwar town halls and civic centres, many of which have been poorly maintained or haphazardly altered to keep pace with the changing needs of local councils. The hexagonal Sunderland Civic Centre by Sir Basil Spence in 1965 was demolished because it was said to be too big and expensive to maintain. In 2023, Harrow Council decided to demolish its large concrete civic centre of 1970 by Eric Broughton Associates. (Jenkins, 2023) Historic England refused to list Portsmouth's Civic Offices, and they might be demolished.

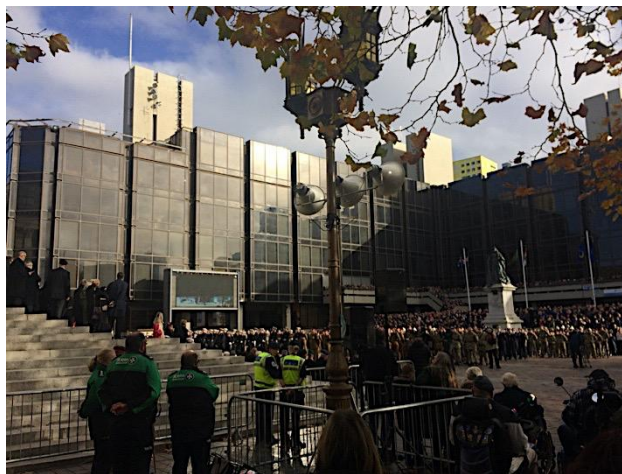


Figure 2: Portsmouth Civic Offices, Guildhall Square (by authors)

4. Closing the loophole in Permitted Development Rights

In 2021 to remove the need to apply for planning permission for minor developments or changes within an existing development and to facilitate the thousands of much needed new homes, the UK government deregulated Permitted Development Rights to boost housing provision via the demolition of vacant shops, offices and other commercial

building on high streets and brownfields or already used land. Owners were given the right to demolish unlisted buildings which are not on lists of local significance or within a conservation area within 28 days of posting an intention to do so. (UKGovernment, 2024) This measure had unintended consequences, leading to the unforeseen loss of reusable buildings - including key historic ones. “As with all property owners in similar circumstances, the site owners enjoy 'Permitted Development' (PD) rights, effectively granting approval for the demolition of the building. As such, the principle of its removal was not a matter for the consideration or determination of the Planning Authority.” (Cracknell, 2023)



Figure 3: News Centre Portsmouth. Editorial offices, lake and landscaping. (Celia Clark 2022)

This paper includes examples of buildings demolished as the result of PDR and Historic England’s refusal to list them. The News Centre at the entrance to Portsmouth was designed by Edward Cogswell of local firm AE Cogswell & Sons in 1966-7 for the local newspaper: “an iconic landmark at the entrance to the city. (Private Eye, 2023) AE Cogswell & Sons designed many locally notable landmark buildings, monumental pubs, schools, churches, cinemas, blocks of flats, hospitals and the prison, some of which are already listed. The dramatic curved frontage building housed the newspaper’s editorial offices in a three-storey crescent set in its original landscaped lawn, lake, trees and railings. The exposed concrete frame was decorated with blue mosaic and a large gold central panel proclaiming its function. Behind were the distribution centre and print hall with crinkly roofed canopies which incorporated decorative cast concrete abstract panels by well-known sculptor William Mitchell (1925-2020). In the RIBA Library, the Twentieth Century Society researched the innovative concrete Dyform used to create the spacious interiors. The News Centre remained in the same use: editorial, printing and distribution of local and national newspapers for fifty years. In 2023, advised by the university Estates team and local estate agent Vail Williams, the building’s owners First Hampshire & Dorset Bus applied on 6 July to demolish the whole building under Permitted Development in order to construct a single-storey storage shed for their electric buses. (Portsmouth City Council, 2023) They justified these applications on the grounds that the building was deteriorating, being damaged by vandals, the heavy cost of security and that it was in “poor condition”. Local people and the Twentieth Century Society said there was no evidence that it was in a dangerous state or beyond repair.

The Sustainable Conservation Trust (SCT) began to prepare reuse plans and applied to Historic England to list it, which is especially appropriate since saving postwar landscapes is one of HE’s stated objectives. SCT made the case that its thousands of tons of embodied carbon would be thrown away by demolition and that the building could be repurposed to accommodate this new use. Despite support from the Twentieth Century Society, from Dr. Dawn Pereira, an expert on William Mitchell and from the Hampshire Buildings Preservation and Sculpture Trusts, Historic England refused to list it - because the building had been altered. (Historic England, 2023) Demolition began in a few short weeks, even before the Sustainable Conservation Trust’s application to Historic England to list the building was being considered. The SCT subsequently asked the Department of Culture, Media and Sport for a review of the refusal to save it by listing it. (UKGovernment, 2013) It was demolished between October 2023 and March 2024 - while the DCMS took several months to review Historic England’s refusal to list it, which they eventually confirmed. The site is now a heap of rubble – and for sale, since only a small area is needed for the bus garage.

The Heritage Alliance, England's largest coalition of independent heritage interests which includes more than 200 organisations with over 7 million members, volunteers, trustees and staff who own, manage and care for the vast majority of England's historic environment set out PDR's impact on the historic environment in detail in their Consultation Response to the Changes to Various Permitted Development Rights in April 2024. (Heritage Alliance, 2023) "Facilitating the demolition and rebuild of structures without considering environmental impact clearly goes against the Government's sustainability and net-zero goals. This is not just an issue of heritage protection, it's also about the adaptation and reuse of all buildings. Allowing very modern buildings to be demolished in the same breath as protecting old ones is not a 'win' in sustainability terms. This PDR ignores circular economy principles and the wealth of evidence which demonstrates that retrofitting or renovating existing buildings is almost always less carbon-intensive than rebuilding them. In some cases, demolition is justified, but the planning system and Local Planning Authorities exist to carry out those assessments." Their Heritage Manifesto (June 2024) says, "It is also vital that the Permitted Development Right (PDR) for demolition is abolished to encourage reuse over unnecessary waste and that the use of PDR in the planning system is taken under review. Retrofitting just half of all historic buildings over a 25-year period will reduce carbon by 39 million tons of CO₂, and result in savings of £3.4 billion."

5. Updating the C20th UK listing system in the 21st century

The traditional 20th-century approach to architectural heritage focused on attributed cultural values. The current Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Act) 1990 requires the Secretary of State to compile "a list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest for preservation for future generations. bringing it under the consideration of the planning system, so that it can be protected for future generations," (Historic England 2025) "Even if the architect is not known, it may be possible to show that a building is a good example of a particular style; this may be particularly relevant if the style is characteristic of a town or district. Architectural importance includes technology and both materials and the method of construction may contribute very much to a building's interest and special character." (Burton 2019) In 2024, there were 379,176 listed buildings on the National Heritage List for England. However, this number does not differentiate between single buildings and groups of buildings, so this total is by no means comprehensive. Only 'selected' buildings after 1914 were normally listed, but in 1987, the Department of the Environment Circular 8/87 adopted a '30-year rule,' which brought post-war buildings within the ambit of listing designation. The protection of more recent buildings has moved forward ever since, "though controversially in many cases and with uneven result" (Allen 2022) excluding 'unpopular' works of Brutalism. An example was the pioneering multi-use Tricorn Centre Portsmouth. Owen Luder's Tricorn Centre Portsmouth was refused listing and demolished in 2004. The site has remained empty for twenty years.



Figure 4: Tricorn Centre Portsmouth Original perspective Owen Luder CBE Past President RIBA

Department of Culture, Media and Sport's Principles of Selection for Listed Buildings were subsequently enlarged: instead of the "relatively simple criteria, namely age, the more elusive criterion of 'significance' became paramount."

(Historic England 2020) Once added to the list, which has three grades: I, II* and III, a listed building is protected by law, and its demolition or alteration without consent is a criminal offence. Change, alteration or even demolition of a listed building must be applied for to the local planning authority - which is why their professional capacity is so critical. The National Planning Policy Framework (2012 and subsequently updated) “introduced the explicit presumption in favour of ‘sustainable development’, which as far as the historic environment is concerned requires planning authorities to weigh up the public benefits that such development would deliver in compensation for potential harm to heritage assets. (Historic England, 2020) The resulting, somewhat elastic, concept of ‘less than substantial harm’ whereby on occasion considerable intervention is authorised, is one on which many conservationists have their misgivings.” (Rodwell 2024) The case studies in this paper did not make it onto the List, so they did not even have this protection – or the lesser status of protection as ‘non-designated heritage assets’. This narrow selection of buildings to be preserved conflicts with today’s agendas of sustainable development and climate change, which embrace wider societal, cultural and environmental issues and recognise additional, complementary values, including community, resource and usefulness.

Historic England emphasises the link between restoring historic buildings and the green interest in reducing carbon emissions and protecting diminishing resources – and also that preservation gives people hope, purpose, identity, community spirit, optimism and courage to take control of their future.” (Historic England, 2020) They acknowledge that a response is needed to the climate emergency - and that as buildings account for approximately 40% of the U.K.’s carbon footprint, there cannot be a way to carbon neutrality without sustainable built environment strategies. Stressing the importance of embodied carbon, their 2020 Heritage Counts report states that “We cannot new-build our way out of climate change. The repair and re-use of historic buildings is materially less carbon intensive than either demolition and rebuild.” “The manufacturing of building materials, their transportation and the construction process are all responsible for creating significant carbon emissions. Retaining buildings places value on the carbon spent during their construction, further avoiding the additional emissions associated with demolish and rebuild. This, therefore, sees conservation align with the principles of sustainability: that preserving and sustaining the historic environment has social, economic and environmental benefits.”

“As we fast approach the second quarter of the 21st century, HE *et al.* largely remain in the third quarter of the 20th. HE is indeed historic!” (Rodwell, 2024) While Historic England increasingly makes the link between reusing buildings and saving carbon, this acknowledgement has not been translated into actual policy on listing - which might prevent well-loved and significant reusable buildings from being demolished, instead giving them renewed sustainable life. Listing solely on architectural or historic merit no longer makes sense in the face of the climate emergency - at the Historic England level - or indeed at the relevant government department, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, which establishes the listing criteria. In the face of the climate emergency, the continuing loss of reusable but unlisted buildings has led national conservation organisations to campaign for legislative acknowledgement that reusing existing buildings should be the norm.

Emphasising the value of standing buildings is now acknowledged by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport: “The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is committed to working with other government departments, including the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) as well as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), to ensure that future energy strategies are sympathetic to our historic housing stock”. (DCMS, 2024) In autumn 2024, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government conducted a national survey asking for opinions and experience about demolition, redevelopment and retrofit of buildings as part of the updating of the National Planning Policy Framework. (Civic Voice, 2024) Civic Voice, to which local civic societies and community groups belong, urged their members to respond and share their experiences to ensure that national planning policies support both environmental sustainability and heritage conservation. (Civic Voice, 2024)

The proposal to revive the Grade III listing linked to local authorities’ Lists of Buildings of Local Significance with a presumption against demolition is gaining traction. In 2018, Civic Voice, local societies’ central body published a guide for communities on how to develop a Local Heritage List with help from Historic England, to inform developers, owners, council officers and councillors about buildings within the local authority boundary that are

desirable to retain and protect, to offer specialist advice to owners to protect the buildings' character and setting and to help the council in its decision making. (Civic Voice, 2024) In 2020, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government encouraged communities to nominate locally important historic buildings which they value most for inclusion in their local authority's list, helping to protect them through the planning system; offering ten councils funding to develop new or updated local lists to engage civic/heritage groups and local historic building societies. (MHCLG, 2020). In 2024, New Forest National Park invited residents to nominate heritage assets to the Local List, offering specific criteria: examples of national or local trends/practices/ways of life representative of a historic period that changes over time, intrinsic design and aesthetic value relating to local/national styles, materials, construction or craft techniques, group value, archaeological or historic interest, landmark status or community/social value. (NFNP, n.d.) These criteria are reflected in nine of the thirteen local authorities in the county of Hampshire who have local lists, although not all of them invite new nominations from their communities. Several lists have not been revised for many years. Local authorities' resources have been severely depleted long-term, so keeping these vital local lists up to date to protect valued buildings capable of reuse and repurposing from demolition would beneficially be a shared task between the council and its community.

6. VAT

The imbalance of our buildings' taxation system actively works against the adaptation and reuse of standing buildings. Charging VAT on restoration and repair while newbuild is not charged if buildings are demolished and entirely new constructions are built also needs to be urgently addressed – as voluntary conservation organisations have been stressing to government for many years. The Heritage Alliance's Election Manifesto (June 2024) says, "We need a simpler tax regime which promotes repair and reuse over demolition and waste. Reforming the VAT regime on repair and maintenance will promote the long-term sustainability of our nation's irreplaceable heritage assets and tackle carbon emissions. Repairs are currently subject to 20% VAT, yet no VAT at all is charged on demolition or new builds. This creates a perverse incentive to demolish old buildings rather than repair or reuse them. We ultimately support a 0% equalisation of VAT for repair and maintenance, demonstrated initially through a targeted, time-limited intervention to demonstrate impact. Even temporary five-year VAT equalisation would generate an economic stimulus of £51 billion (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors). This would release investment, boost skilled jobs, reduce the carbon effects of demolition and rebuild, and help the next Government meet net zero targets." (Heritage Alliance, 2024) Lobby groups, including the Green Register, are challenging the inequality between new build and renovation with representations to the UK tax authority HMRC, also identifying which elements of a retrofit can be zero-rated in projects that include both zero-rated installations of energy-saving materials and renovation. (The Green Register, 2024).

7. Repurposed twentieth-century buildings

Some 'iconic' mid-twentieth-century buildings have survived, creatively repurposed via a radical overhaul by visionary developers and specific grant aid. An unlisted Brutalist example is the 1967 Camden Town Hall annexe in Euston Road London designed by Borough Architect Sydney Cook with a reinforced frame, pre-cast concrete panels and bronze windows: six floors of offices, a reception and basement carpark and a restaurant and recreation space on the top. In 2014, when repairs were estimated at £15m, staff were moved to a purpose-built office in the nearby Kings Cross development. There were fears that it would be replaced by an intrusive tower block, but instead, in 2019, it opened as 'London's hippest Hotel', the Standard. The interiors of the 266 hotel rooms and the public spaces retain a seventies-style aesthetic. Three new floors were added on the top with floor-to-ceiling windows and private terraces with epic views. The architect Ian Chalk's design, supported by the Twentieth Century Society, added an external red tubular lift in homage to London's Routemaster buses to the front façade, offering direct access to a restaurant, bar and roof terrace as part of the building's ambitious regeneration. (The Standard, 2019)

After standing empty for more than 25 years and falling into a state of decay, the Brutalist High Point building in Bradford, West Yorkshire, has been rehabilitated by a residential conversion scheme. Built in 1972 to designs by John Brunton Partnership as headquarters for the Huddersfield and Bradford Building Society, High Point was considered to be a 'beacon of modernity' in the mostly Victorian city centre and remains one of the tallest buildings

on the city skyline. Locally based developer Radian and architects Beckwith Design Associates Ltd accommodated 87 rental flats within the 8 storeys of former office space, supported by the award of a £2.9m Bradford Heritage Buildings grant by West Yorkshire Combined Authority, towards the total project cost of £11 million. The fluted concrete facade has mostly been retained and cleaned, with the horizontal and vertical bands of ribbon windows re-glazed throughout. The podium building has had its concrete facade panels replaced with curtain glazing, representing the biggest visual change to the building. Negotiations are currently ongoing with a potential cultural tenant to occupy this prominent space. Bradford will be UK City of Culture in 2025. (The Twentieth Century Society, 2024)

8. Conclusion

In the current process of updating the National Planning Policy Framework, the UK government needs to acknowledge the imperatives of the climate crisis. SAVE Britain's Heritage says, "we need a fresh positive approach to re-using historic buildings and saving precious resources. We also urgently need a robust national planning policy on retrofit that aligns with the UK government's law on net zero targets." (SAVE, 2024) It is clear that Historic England's policy in the space between conservation theory and practice is evolving in response to the climate emergency, but a link between their advocacy of building reuse and retrofit and their listing criteria now needs to be made explicit if the country's building stock including twentieth century buildings is to make a greater contribution to saving embodied energy. Local people's knowledge of and attachment to valued local buildings should be acknowledged and added to the planning system by working with hard pressed planning authorities to keep up to date lists of buildings of Local Importance. The loophole in permitted development which leads to premature demolition needs to be closed, and VAT charges on development should be equalised.

This paper adopts Dennis Rodwell's approach to the historic urban landscape: that cities are places where people live and work; they "were not built for 21st-century people to decide that they were cultural heritage – they were built to function" (de Oliveira, 2025) Urban settlements are dynamic, and their built fabric is constantly changing. The adaption and reuse of the existing stock of standing buildings is a key factor in the building industry's response to the increasingly urgent need to reduce carbon. The presumption against demolition and towards reuse needs to be explicit in legislation and actual practice. Citing an admittedly small selection of examples from the UK, this paper illustrates how declarations of intent to work towards sustainability need to align with revised governance mechanisms, which are currently obstacles to the achievement of this vital task. This paper is a contribution to the discussion of legislative change which enables rather than obstructs the reuse of the embodied energy of twentieth-century buildings, contributing to urban settlements' sustainable futures across the world.

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Ethics Approval

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no competing interest.

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