

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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1. 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.

This lecture examines why local ones have been lost – and how they could have been saved.

As Carl Elefante said: “The greenest building is the one that is already built.” 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).

As 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.

Existing buildings are an untapped economic and social opportunity.

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.”This talk is an expansion of the lecture I gave at the international Conference on Architectural Heritage in Calgiari Sardinia last September and to the Portsmouth Society in April this year. The Society’s aims are: caring, conserving, and improving Portsmouth. Specifically, we are interested in preserving the best of Portsmouth’s environment; buildings, streets, open spaces, and waterfront, and in encouraging well designed new buildings and sympathetic re-use and restorations. They are members of Civic Voice, the national group for civic societies round the country.

I end my lecture end with local and national examples of positive reuse.

2. 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

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.

Before we can restore, retrofit and adapt standing buildings to sustainable new life, we need to keep them standing. In this lecture I explore why so many twentieth century buildings in the UK are demolished – and how they can instead be reused and brought to new life.

3. Every year 50,000 buildings in the UK are demolished, yet the Government is committed to Target Net Zero: to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 68% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, by 77% by 2035 and 100% - Net Zero – by 2050. The UK Green Building Council aims to 'radically transform' the way that the [built environment](#) in the UK is planned, designed, constructed, maintained and operate, estimates that 25% of the UK’s emissions are directly attributable to the vast energy required to produce new construction materials. Cement production alone accounts for 8% of the world’s carbon emissions, and the construction industry consumes 50% of global steel production and 25% of all plastics and produces 60% of UK waste.

Clearly these two objectives – demolition and net zero - are at loggerheads, incompatible. As the climate emergency deepens, changes in regulations and in our behaviour to reduce our carbon imprint become ever more urgent. Relevant UK regulations need updating to reflect this.

4. These are three current UK government obstacles to Reuse and Retrofit:

1. Permitted Development Rights allow demolition without planning permission

2. Historic England’s too narrow criteria for Listing Buildings: solely on

grounds of historic or architectural interest lead to the loss of reusable buildings, some of them valued features of local communities.

Listing is refused if a building has been altered over time.

This excludes many commercial and industrial buildings.

3. VAT at 20% is charged for Restoration or Retrofit of buildings,

But it's zero on New Build ...

Here are examples of buildings Lost – as well as of those under threat of Demolition

5. Here's the first obstacle: the widening of Permitted Development Right to demolish buildings without the need to apply for planning permission. This was intended to build more homes – which are urgently needed. **But it had unintended consequences: loss of buildings that could have been reused.** The News Centre at Hilsea is the most prominent local example of a reusable building lost to Permitted Development Rights.

It was the former office headquarters and printing hall of the Portsmouth Evening News built in 1966-67 to designs by well-regarded local architects A. E. Cogswell & Sons. The Twentieth Century Society pointed out that it featured in architectural publications: the building's innovative use of concrete to create interesting architectural forms and achieve large (50-55ft wide) spans producing spacious and open interiors which could be easily adapted to allow for maximum flexibility. It was also innovative in its pre-stressing technique: using British Ropes's newly-developed 'Dyform' seven-wire strand "for what was thought to be the first time in this country" to give the concrete maximum strength.

6. The curved office block sits in its original landscaping – a curving pond and lawn, flanked by groups of trees at either end and enclosed by the original v-shaped railings, with three concrete monoliths proclaiming THE NEWS grouped at the northwest corner of the site. Post-war landscapes are one of Historic England's listing priorities.

The C20th Society said that if it was listed, **"the new owners would be compelled to adapt the structure for reuse, thereby preventing it from becoming another casualty of hurried demolition permissions and another irreplaceable 20th-century heritage asset vanishing forever, as did the Tricorn Building. We do not wish to repeat the story of the Tricorn, nor do we want to see the News Building survive merely in the yellowing pages of architectural history books."**

7. The News Centre was actually three buildings: the curved Editorial building with its gold mosaic, and its special lake and typical 60s landscaping and railings, and reuse of granite blocks from fortifications in the Military Road edge of the site.

8. What made the News building extra special were the decorative abstract concrete panels by artist William Mitchell, who trained at Portsmouth College of Art. He was a leading post-war British sculptor, represented by an impressive 16 artworks on the National Heritage List for England (NHLE).

As far as we know only one survived the demolition, but we don't know where it is. William Mitchell also designed this ornamental stained glass window and mural in Portsmouth Water company's hq in Havant. This building is also under threat of demolition for a housing development. However, in Blackheath London this red mural has been saved and relocated...

First Bus, who owned the site – in use to print the Daily Mail and other papers only three years ago... pulled it down in 2023-4 under Permitted Development Rights.... with only six days' notice because 'vandals were said to be getting in'.

The Sustainable Conservation Trust, which is based in the former dockyard Pay Office applied to Historic England to List the News Building, strongly supported by the Twentieth Century Society, which did a lot of research about the building in the RIBA library. We said that "Not only does the building have architectural and artistic significance, it also had historic interest locally as the former centre of operations and production of an important regional newspaper." The C20 Society advised that the council could use an Article 4 Direction to prevent demolition as well as questioning of the validity of the permitted development application while its future was decided, But Ben Cracknell, Portsmouth City Council's Conservation officer advised the council that they had no option but to grant 'Prior Approval' for the method of proposed demolition within 28 days.

9. First Bus, who owned the site – in use to print the Daily Mail and other papers only three years before... pulled it down in 2023-4.... with only six days' notice because 'vandals were said to be getting in'. The local councillor and people in Hilsea also objected strongly – but to no avail...

The Sustainable Conservation Trust began to develop reuse plans – but demolition began so quickly there was no time to add detailed plans... Historic England refused to list it: They said: "the architectural integrity of the building as a whole has been undermined by significant loss and heavy remodelling; while the office wing survives well externally, it does not demonstrate special architectural interest in its own right. Although a level of alteration and adaptation is expected for buildings of this type, in this instance the later additions, particularly the section rebuilt in 2005, are substantial and have unbalanced the composition of the original building... it does not have the architectural and historic interest to merit listing in a national context." (Historic England Reject at Initial Assessment Report 11 August 2023). Richard Peats, Historic England Team Leader said criteria for "post-war listing is very high, and as "this particular building is not by a particularly well-known architect nor clearly innovative in design or construction this is not a stand out candidate for listing...

10. Private Eye reported on the 25th August 2023 that 'Although not listed, the building is an iconic modern landmark at the entrance to the city. Locals have called for its curved front façade with a duck pond in front, to be saved at the very least. Experts in 20th century art have also flagged up the potential loss of large abstracts sculptural panels by artist William Mitchell on the exterior of the production building... While

First Bus argues that the News Centre “is in poor condition”, according to the Twentieth Century Society there is no evidence it is in a dangerous state or beyond repair... This column has previously raised the issue of the rapid loss of artworks by Mitchell and a number of other mid-20th century artists, whose major works include murals and sculptures attached to now-unfashionable buildings. ...It ought to be possible to safely extract the panels from the News Centre but Mitchell’s artworks have a worrying history of going missing when they get in the way of large developments...”

It’s now a heap of rubble... and First Bus has put the enormous site up for sale. They only need a small portion of the site for the garage for their electric buses...

11. Here’s the second legislative obstacle to reuse: Historic England’s too narrow criteria to List a building... As Dennis Rodwell, eminent conservationist said: they are stuck in the 20th century – when the criteria were developed... and they need to join the 21st century with its increasing need to respond to the climate emergency...

In 2024 there are 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

Historic England says” “The traditional 20th century approach to architectural heritage focused on attributed cultural values: solely architectural or historic interest. Only selected examples of our built heritage survive the drive to adapt and modernise our homes, towns and cities. At present their criteria for twentieth century listing remains both narrow and very high This assumption 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.”

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...”. But the listing criteria remain obstinately narrow...

The narrow criteria for listing – which protects buildings from demolition or damaging change leaves most of our building stock unprotected. Unlisted but important and reusable useful buildings are vulnerable to demolition.

12. Now I turn to other c.20 buildings which could either have been reused – or are under threat of demolition because they are not listed. Pitt Street Baths designed by GE Smith in 1910-2. These Art Nouveau baths and Gymnasium built for the Ministry of Defence as the Royal

Naval School of Physical Training. Generations of Portsmouth children learnt to swim there. After the navy built a new swimming pool and gym at HMS Temeraire the swimming pool was filled in with foam blocks and used as another gym. In its latter days it was used as the Southern base for national trampoline training because of the unusual height of the main gym. In about 2000 there were plans to redevelop the Tricorn and this site. The Portsmouth Society applied to English Heritage to list the building but this was refused; a certificate of indemnity was issued against listing for five years - and it was demolished in 2008. The site has been empty ever since...

13. The huge triangular Tricorn site has been empty even longer... Designed by Owen Luder president of the RIBA and Rodney Gordon, the Tricorn was a national innovator in piling different uses one on top of the other: shopping, a garage and pubs on the ground floor, flats, a wholesale vegetable market and storage spaces on the first, with

14, seven storeys of carparking above – particularly appropriate for an island city short of land. It was a giant Brutalist sculpture – much loved by artists and film and video makers, who enjoyed its complexity and innovation. Its design inspire the Barbican in the city of London.

15. Two architects: Kate Mackintosh and Mick Morris - joined the Portsmouth Society's campaign to save and repurpose it – by drawing up reuse plans – for housing, a roof top café, and the transformation of its parking trays with greenery and colour... – as my book about it explores...

16. As Hellman's cartoon shows there were many enemies stacked up against it: the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Portsmouth City Council, English Heritage – which refused to list it despite our reuse plans, and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. Ironically, its job was to influence and inspire the people making decisions about the built environment. It championed well-designed buildings, spaces and places, ran public campaigns and provided expert, practical advice.... Chris Smith, secretary of State for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport refused to list the Tricorn – on English Heritage's advice that 'whilst the Tricorn is "startling to behold" and "possess some passage of real architectural power..." the spiral ramps were too small, the flats were condemned as unfit for human occupation, "the building has acquired a reputation for anti-social behaviour", the commercial units were hard to let, and "the incomplete street frontage to Charlotte Street is dispiriting..."'. Years of neglect by its owners and complicity by a city officer in this – were ignored. Beethoven's 1812 Overture was played as demolition began, while our trombonist played the Last Post... It's about time the site was built on...especially to fulfill Portsmouth's housing quota.

17. The Nuffield Centre designed by the architect of Southampton Civic Centre which had a fine interior with a special balcony looking over the Hampshire cricket ground was demolished by the

university in 2004. They are building a laboratory block on the site. Could it have been reused? Was it listable?

18. The university's Anglesea Building which housed the Department of Technology, with its integral sculptures is due to be demolished in the university's Masterplan.

19. University House, the former Building Society building by Hedley Greentree is also due for demolition, to be replaced by a large research building.

20. Historic England, as English Heritage is now called, refused Jane Smith's and my application in 2023 to list the former NatWest Bank, built in 1957 at 68 Palmerston Road Southsea PO5 by Sherren & James, architects to National Provincial Bank. The bank is unoccupied, as some of flats above appear to be empty too. It's vulnerable to demolition/change of use - which may destroy the fine banking hall, with its ceramic mermaid, bronze window frames and marble columns. "The NatWest Bank is a key part of Southsea's post-war townscape. It has group value with the contemporary former Knight & Lee department store (1955-59) on the corner of Palmerston and Clarendon Road, Grade II listed in November 2021, and with the monumental Debenhams department store in Osborne Road opposite the bank." The bronze doors in NatWest Commercial Road Portsmouth branch were removed some years ago. Portsmouth City Museum has already taken the bronze city map into their collection. the bronze door details are disappearing, the roof is showing signs of damp...

21. In contrast, across the road Knight and Lee built 1956 after severe war damage to Southsea shopping centre by architects Cotton, Ballard and Blow was Listed Grade II in 2021 – at the second attempt. After my first attempt for the Portsmouth Society was refused, Professor Deborah Sugg Ryan's case linking it to the history of department stores succeeded. However, unlike Debenhams across Palmerston Road which is not listed It has a notable surviving original interior features include spiral staircases with terrazzo flooring in the northwestern and southwestern corner customer entrance vestibules; a central staircase; escalator; lifts; doors, light switches and electrical boxes; and radiators. Entrance vestibules on the western elevation are decorated with 1950s mosaics and terrazzo tiles. Deborah Sugg Ryan, Professor of Design History and Theory at the University of Portsmouth, has said of the building: "This is an important example of postwar reconstruction of commercial premises following Portsmouth's Blitz that shaped the Southsea shopping precinct." The department store closed in 2019.

The new owners THAT Group were granted planning permission in 2022 to convert it into a cinema, hotel, gym, office and retail space, but apart from renewal of some services, the building remains empty and unused. That Group has not gone ahead with its planning permissions for mixed use: retail, cinema, flats...Their record on converting buildings they own is not good...

22. You may be surprised to hear that Hilse Lido is not listed either. Jane Smith published an impressive history of it; but again the DCMS refused to list it. In the current lottery funded

refurbishment one of the integral fountains has been demolished, which wouldn't have happened had it been listed.

23. Langstone Harbour's prominent landmark, the Barnard Tower is also not listed. It's not clear what the university intend to do with it when the Langstone campus is redeveloped.

24. There's a good case for listing Portsmouth Central Library designed by Deputy City Architect Ken Norrish, "In bold contrast to the adjacent international-style Civic Offices and neo-classical Guildhall, its striking sculptural form in incised concrete, clad in Japanese glazed tiles, its curved form and continuous bands of windows recessed in dark brown frames were influenced by the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Renamed The Norrish Library in 1995, it houses the Central Library, café, offices, workrooms and storerooms. Underused, post Covid and internet information access, the building is in need of refurbishment, particularly of obsolete facilities such as the projection room – which still has 1970s film projectors, repairs to leaks in the top floor balcony and toilets. It's underused because it's only on pedestrian routes, which lowers its footfall. Can someone help me to apply to list it?

25. Clarence Pier isn't listed, despite the Portsmouth Society applying to list it, as a rare example of the California Google Style. The seafront Masterplans proposes its demolition, and because it's privately owned it's excluded from the seafront sea defence defences currently under construction.

26. Another candidate for listing is the Solaglass Factory in Limberline Spur Hilsea which has a distinctive staircase showing off the factory's glass products. Laura Fox applied to list it, but I don't know the outcome...

27. The City Council propose to pull down a huge chunk of the northern end of Commercial Road in connection with the redevelopment of the Tricorn. When I asked Cllr. Hugh Mason why, he said "it was before my time." Why is this waste of standing buildings necessary? Isn't the Tricorn site big enough?

28. The Society considers the Portsmouth Civic Offices, the City's main office building to have national heritage significance and called on Historic England to list the building at Grade II.

Historic England have refused to list the Civic Offices Portsmouth City Council's main office building! The centre of the city was remodelled in the 1970s. A new central square was created, framed by the Civic Offices built in 1974-6 by architects Teggin and Taylor. Curtain walled in bronze glass with a statue of Queen Victoria in the centre, it's been the focus of civic life, including military parades, demonstrations and university graduations for 40 years.

Private Eye reported that a Full Council meeting on 19 July 2022, councillors passed a motion compelling the administration to bring a report that considers the future of the civic offices including running costs, costed proposals for alternative working solutions for

the civic offices functions, including working from home overheads, possible alternative income generation from other users, financial analysis its current market value ...Portsmouth City Council leader Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson was quoted in news reports saying that the council should vacate the civic offices for smaller premises. Other councillors have made known their dislike of the building and low energy performance and raised concerns that it could cause the council to miss its net zero targets.

July BBC News report for more information:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-62241344>.

It's at risk and is reportedly suffering from lack of maintenance. It's outside the Guildhall and Victoria Park Conservation Area. The decision was taken to exclude the offices in 2004, when boundary changes were made, due to "the buildings being less than thirty years old". However, the contemporary Central (Norrish) Library (1972-76) is included within the CA.

Surely it can be reused –

29. maybe by stripping the bronze glass curtain wall back? Holding an architectural competition with the help of the RIBA which would generate ideas on new uses as well as how to adapt it. What's their plan?

30. Here are five more Twentieth Century buildings which have found new life. The Portsmouth Society successfully campaigned to save the Palace Cinema, AE Cogswell's first cinema built in 1922 after he came back from serving in the Artists' Rifles in the Khyber Pass, which it's why it's in Islamic style. It's now a night club. Mercantile House. Owen Luder's other Portsmouth building_ is used for university teaching.

The Pearl Insurance building, later Charterhouse offices is now flats and shops. Commercial Chambers designed by E Evans Palmer in 1937 was once an office block is now used as a Language School.

31. Boathouse 4 in Portsmouth Dockyard's Heritage Area was under threat of demolition in the 1980s. Designed by four dockyard engineers in 1939-40 as a small boat maintenance and repair shop in the buildup to WWII, it was to be replaced by a commercial building symbolising the area's change of use from part of the working naval base. the Portsmouth Society persuaded SAVE Britain's Heritage to campaign to save it, apply for listing and develop reuse plans. Listing was refused, but fortunately the Naval Base Property Trust had a change of heart, and lottery funded restoration by architect Michal Cohen as an international centre for timber boat restoration and repair – and an added harbourside restaurant at high level – won design awards – and makes it a popular – and free visitor attraction in the heritage area.

32. What else can be done in national policy to save unlisted buildings from wasteful demolition? One way to value unlisted buildings at national level would be to revive the Grade III listing, linking it to each local authority's List of Buildings of Local Significance. 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 – including Hampshire. I found that the best practice involving the local community in keeping the Local List up to date was in Southampton. Its planning department has an online form which any group – or individual - can use requesting a cherished local building be added to the list.

Portsmouth's is severely out of date, but attempts to correct and update continue to be refused by the planning department....

33. The third obstacle to reuse in current regulations is that VAT – Value Added Tax - is charged on restoration and repair, while newbuild is not. Voluntary conservation organisations have been asking for this imbalance to be corrected to government for many years. The Heritage Alliance 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. 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.” **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. Restoration and repair of the Elizabethan Wymering Manor in Portsmouth was estimated at £5.9m in 2020. Adding VAT to the fundraising target is unaffordable...**

34. The National Case for Reuse. Marks and Spencer’s in Oxford Street London was the catalyst. As SAVE Britain’s Heritage said at the public inquiry into the proposed demolition:

“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.” Minister Michael Gove blocked the demolition plan, saying he wanted to use the National Planning Policy Framework to highlight the need for repurposing and re-using buildings. “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”

35. Unlisted buildings can be saved and reused by imaginative developers, Here are two examples: Camden Town Hall extension in Euston Road London by the Borough Architect in 1970 needed updating, with an estimated £15m of repairs. Camden invited bids for the site. The hotel company, André Balazs

Properties and Crosstree Real Estate Partners – developers of New York's The Mercer – planned to convert it; the Twentieth Century Society supported their architect Ian Chalk's conversion. Three new storeys were added and a scarlet external lift. The hotel opened in 2019.

<https://c20society.org.uk/40-buildings-saved/28-camden-town-hall-extension-london>

36. Here's another Brutalist example: High Point Bradford. Designed by John Brunton in 1972 as the headquarters of Huddersfield and Bradford Building Society it stood empty for more than 25 years until local developer RADII and architects Beckwith Design Associates converted it into 87 flats with £2.9m Bradford Heritage Buildings grant by West Yorkshire Combined Authority, towards the total project cost of £11 million.

Bradford will be the UK City of Culture in 2025

So – it can be done!

36. How do we go about Retrofit and upgrading of standing buildings so they can be given new sustainable life? There are many courses run for and by building professionals – and for building owners. Here's an example – a course for how to upgrade homes.

37. Dame Caroline Dinenage MP for Gosport, and chair of the DCMS Heritage Select Committee launched this public inquiry on December 29th.

So, perhaps the government is at last seeking to reconcile its net carbon targets with the reuse of the country's standing buildings – including its historic ones....

38. Finally, a plea! We are in a state of climate and ecological emergency! With the built environment contributing to 42% of national emissions, we urgently need to implement ambitious and radical changes if we hope to address and reverse our current trajectory towards catastrophe.

This interactive Demolition Map is part of an international movement to identify buildings Lost, Under Threat and Saved/Reused supported by the UK Green Building Council. Trying to find statistics on threatened or unfairly demolished buildings can be difficult. 'It is equally difficult to find positive case studies of campaigns that saved buildings from demolition.

The Demolition Map aims to gather information on threatened, demolished, or saved buildings, building on the campaign to stop demolition, as a critical step towards Net Zero! It's interactive: you can add buildings in your area to it, uploading images.

