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Should Old Buildings be Sacrificed to Construct Green Buildings for Energy Efficiency?

Posted on 21. Mar, 2011 by [Maryruth Belsey Priebe](#) in [Articles](#)

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Old Buildings-Can They be Green



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Concrete Forms (ICF)

Is tearing down an historic building in favour of building a brand new, more efficient one ever justified? There have been several [articles](#) and [blog posts](#) recently on the hotly debated topic, with opinions across the spectrum, and plenty of intensely emotional responses to go around.

The basic arguments supporting the destruction of old buildings are as follows:

- Some buildings are structurally incompatible with energy efficiency – floor to floor heights are too low to install modern systems, for instance.
- A building's embodied energy (or embodied carbon) – representing the energy used to create the materials and construct the building in the first place – has a far smaller impact on climate change than the energy expended over the life of an inefficient building.
- Many of the materials salvaged (carefully) from an old building (bricks, fixtures, tiles, steel, and the like) can be repurposed in new buildings or

recycled into new products, thereby preserving the embodied energy and lessening the impact on landfills.

- Achieving healthy indoor air quality and thermal comfort in old structures is often extremely challenging, if not impossible.

By contrast, those who oppose the tearing down of old buildings have this to say:

- The intrinsic architectural and historic value of existing buildings is significant and worth preserving.
 - Simple measures such as replacing windows and HVAC systems, adding insulation, and so on can significantly improve the energy efficiency of an old structure.
 - The embodied energy of a building is too valuable to waste by tearing it all apart.
 - Taking a building apart responsibly (a process known as deconstruction) is too time-consuming to be worthwhile; a better expenditure of energy would be retrofitting an old building.
 - Proponents of [green building designs](#) often use systems such as [LEED](#) to tear down perfectly functional buildings in order to install new, modern ones. Donald Rypkema, someone passionate on the subject, says LEED stands for “Lunatic Environmentalists Enthusiastically Demolishing” and not “Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.”
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Image Via Flickr: Steve & Jemma Copley

As a result of such conflicting views, a serious and often negative debate is brewing between preservationists and those who support programs like LEED. Disagreements between serious building lovers (preservationists) and green building advocates certainly doesn't benefit the direction of the sustainable building industry.

What are your thoughts? Should old buildings be sacrificed for energy efficiency? Or does the historicity of aged structures require preservation at all costs?



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We blog about green building practices to help you create energy efficient homes.

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