TELL THE TRUTH

A campaign for honesty
in the built environment

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Introduction

How it started

In late 2019 as the school strike for climate movement was gathering momentum, and after a summer of Extinction Rebellion protests, Bennetts Associates took part in the Global Climate Strike along with other Architects Declare signatories. Part of this day was about joining the protests, but for half of the day we closed our doors and worked together to outline ideas for how we as architects could go beyond what we already do. We structured the day around Extinction Rebellion's key messages, the first of which was to simply TELL THE TRUTH.

What is it?

Our response was to reflect on how we talk about our buildings and "sustainability" generally, and to cut out anything which we thought was unhelpful to general discourse in the built environment, emphasising the right way to make sustainability claims. The result is a short list of dos and don'ts that are easy to monitor, and can be easily used to hold us to account, both internally and externally.

Lets do this, together

In the wider context of climate emergency strategies that cost money, need resource and training or require clients to change briefs, we hope that this will be seen as something that is easily implementable and free. It works for architectural practices wanting to align their claims with the climate emergency, but is also aimed at journalists to form a best practice guide to cut greenwash and unfounded claims from the wider architectural discourse. It is not intended as a final document, rather to be a work in progress, to be updated both by Bennetts Associates through suggestions from others.

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The Charter

Energy

	What will we do	Why
ENERGY	Energy targets should only be referred to if they are based on predictive analysis (ideally PHPP/Design for Performance/TM54) and should state in the text or a footnote what methodology was used to reach these numbers. This would also apply to statements such as “x% reduction”. If no predictive assessment was undertaken, we will state this. Where in-use data exists and we have permission to publish, this will be used in place of, or in addition to predicted data.	Most energy claims are based on building regulations compliance calculations (Part L or Section 6) which dramatically underestimate energy consumption, and for many typologies these have almost no correlation with the final energy usage. Whilst planning/building regulations/BREEAM are based on this, referring to these calculations just perpetuates the mistake. Although we are obviously not in control of how our buildings are used, this is one of the best indicators of the design’s alignment with in-use targets.
OPERATIONAL CARBON	Similarly to Energy, Operational Carbon assumptions should be based on predictive assessment. Any operational carbon claims will clear what carbon factors are being used, however we will primarily use energy use in any sustainability claims.	As per “Energy” for the requirement to use predictive assessments. Conversion from energy to carbon is not always clear and ignores the fact that there is a limited amount of low-carbon energy that can be used.

Embodied Carbon & Materials

	What will we do	Why
UPFRONT & EMBODIED CARBON	Any embodied or upfront carbon claims for a full building should be accompanied by a LETI declaration for the full scope of the project. Any claims in relation to individual building elements or systems should include explanatory text (even as a footnote) and include specific carbon figures alongside any reduction claims.	Many claims in the media are often based on studies of only parts of a building (leading to misleading comparisons). It is also hard for others to assess the veracity of the claims without at least some breakdown of the numbers to check scope, methodology and omissions. Claims can often be hard to check. For example, when stating “the project is X% better than typical” it is important to define both what the project is achieving, and what we are using as a “typical” value.
MATERIALS & SPECIFICATION	When talking about materials and specifications we will avoid referring to anything that is an industry standard, for example concrete with average amounts of cement replacement or LED light fittings. Similarly, when noting exceptional specifications we will note why they go beyond industry norms.	As technologies progress and once unusual specifications become industry standard these specifications can still often be found padding out sustainability descriptions of projects. Doing so risks slowing the ratchetting up of ambition within the industry and can take the focus away from delivery of overall project targets.

Using the words

	What will we do	Why
'SUSTAINABLE'	Avoid using this word generically, e.g. “a new highly sustainable workplace”, instead focus on specific aspects with clear outcomes or processes.	It is impossible to define “sustainable” so using it could allow us to imply a level of performance that is not present. Using more specific aspects also improves the wider discourse and hopefully pushes others to use and evidence their claims.
'LOW CARBON'	Similarly to “Sustainable” this is not well defined. We will therefore only use it when referencing projects that have met LETI/RIBA targets for upfront or embodied carbon, and only when those claims are outlined properly.	See 'Sustainable'.
'NET ZERO'	Only use the term net-zero when its usage aligns with the UKGBC’s framework definition, and, once released, the Net Zero Carbon Buildings standard. This requires meeting of key requirements prior to any use of renewables and offsets.	Many projects claim net-zero or carbon neutral status based on the project using renewable energy, or just being electric-only, but a net-zero project only uses its fair share of renewable energy or offsets and so is defined by its energy usage and upfront carbon.

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