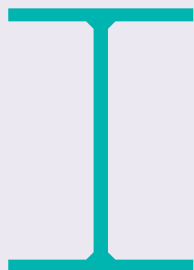


Building Conservation Journal

OPINION

New for old



I recently left my role as Head of Buildings for the National Trust after 15 years. But despite this experience, I still cannot fathom why pretty much all training for built environment professionals relates to new-build.

Nearly a quarter of all buildings in the UK – more than 6m – are traditional, that is, built before 1919, and they account for close to half of all construction work in hand at any time.

The consequences of the current educational emphasis are inevitable – inappropriate understanding of the differences between the performance of new and traditional buildings means that the latter will be treated incorrectly, leading to unnecessary and potentially serious damp issues that in turn will be addressed using inappropriate modern technology, exacerbating the original problems.

This situation will persist while mortgage lenders insist on using so-called specialist remedial damp companies to undertake inappropriate work.

Trailblazer training

The recently introduced apprenticeship levy could help to address training, yet numbers of apprentices have dramatically declined since its announcement.

I am involved in drafting Trailblazer frameworks, but it takes at least a year for the organisations involved to produce documentation, hence the delays in implementation. I hope this can be addressed quickly, so the levy can make the meaningful contribution of which it is capable.

It has also taken several years to deal with the incorrect U-value figures provided for standard assessment procedure ratings for solid walls. This has meant that ratings often bear little resemblance to actual performance, and has led to a general misperception that traditional buildings are inefficient. In turn, inappropriate measures have been taken to address issues hyped up by the sustainability agenda.

As with so many other things, simplicity is often the best approach; traditional buildings are in fact relatively straightforward to understand, and the most cost-effective measures such as roof insulation, draughtproofing, thermally lined curtains and provision of thermostatic

radiator valves and control mechanisms will make the greatest difference, paying for themselves within a short period of time.

Understanding how to balance the need for ventilation and insulation to avoid condensation is key here, but again this is not taught at colleges.

European esteem

In my experience, European professionals hold the UK in the highest esteem in terms of our approach to our heritage. Our traditional building stock is of huge significance to our country and needs to be cherished as such, but proper understanding is vital.

BS 7913, the Guide to the Conservation of Historic Buildings, was revised in 2013 and offers excellent advice for anyone working on or involved with traditional buildings. Yet the vast majority of potential users – which includes some conservation graduates and professionals – won't even know it exists.

We need our colleges to embrace the correct approach to traditional buildings in their curriculum, and to bring BS 7913 into the mainstream. Only then can we stop treating everything as new-build, and secure the future and reputation of the whole construction sector. ●



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