



Green Thinking REVIEW

GTR 86

9 Oct 2026



Promoting Innovations and Best Practices
in Sustainable Building for A Flourishing Future.

BUILD LESS. USE MORE.

Do We Always Need Another Building?



Inside: Jaekel House, Lagos

Floreat Vita | Let Life Flourish.

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COVER STORY

The Building We Need May Already Be Standing

Sustainable design usually asks how we should build. Perhaps an earlier question deserves more attention: do we need to build at all?



Jaekel House, Lagos
Photo: Beendy234 / Wikimedia Commons • CC BY-SA 4.0

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Architecture is naturally drawn towards the new. A new brief becomes a new building; an ageing structure becomes a candidate for demolition.

Sometimes that is the right decision. But every existing building represents resources already committed: materials, energy, labour, infrastructure and usable space. Before clearing the site, we should ask how much useful life remains.

Before Circularity Comes Necessity

In GTR 81, *Even Waste Has a Future*, we explored material recovery and reuse. GTR 86 steps upstream: did we need to dismantle the building in the first place?

The World Green Building Council's embodied-carbon hierarchy begins with prevention—considering whether an existing building can meet the need through renovation or reuse.

Even an efficient new building requires materials and generates construction emissions. Sometimes the most consequential design decision is whether to commission it at all.

Look Again

Could an office become housing? Could an underused building accommodate new programmes? Could better services, a revised layout or a modest extension make replacement unnecessary?

These are architectural questions too. They demand imagination, careful assessment and the ability to recognise possibilities within what exists.

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Editor's Note:

WHAT IF WE RENOVATED IT?

Dear Green Thinkers,
Ever since my practice began, I have been an advocate of renovating rather than

demolishing wherever an existing building could still serve a useful purpose. Faced with a proposal to pull one down, my instinct has been to ask: what if we renovated it? That question asks us to pause long enough to recognise what is already there. A building represents materials, labour, knowledge and investment. It may also hold familiarity, memory and meaning for those who use it.

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Editor's Note - continued...

Understanding its remaining potential is part of our responsibility as architects and stewards of human habitation.

Sometimes, investigation will establish that replacement is the sound decision. In other cases, a different arrangement of spaces, improved services, a carefully considered extension or a change of use may open a worthwhile future. Professional judgement gives that possibility a fair hearing.

"Build Less. Use More." brings this longstanding conviction into our sustainability conversation. Nigeria's need for better homes, schools, workplaces and community facilities makes it especially worthwhile to understand how existing buildings can contribute. Every decision to build should begin with a clear account of the need and the resources available to meet it.

Across this edition, we explore the questions, choices and possibilities involved. Jaekel House brings the discussion home, showing how a building can continue to serve through successive changes of purpose.

For me, this is closely connected to Symbiature: shaping relationships among built, natural and know-how systems so that they support human flourishing and planetary well-being across time. An existing building offers an opportunity to put that stewardship into practice.

My invitation is simple: give one familiar building a fresh consideration. Listen to its users, examine its condition and explore its capacity.

What more could it become?

Floreat Vita | Let Life Flourish

– Arc. Denis Uche Akabogu FNIA
Editor-in-Chief

Cover Story - continued...

Reuse is not automatically the sustainable answer. Safety, suitability and whole-life consequences matter. The proposition is simple:

Do not demolish before you have asked what more is possible.

More Life from What We Have

Architectural success can also be measured by how intelligently we retain, repair, retrofit, reconfigure and repurpose buildings.

"Less is more" offers a fresh possibility:

Less new building. More use. More years. More value. More life.

Because sometimes, the next sustainable building may already be standing.

Green Thinking Insights The Value Still Standing

👉 **Old does not necessarily mean obsolete.**

Age alone cannot tell us whether a building remains useful. Its condition, capacity and suitability deserve examination.

👉 **Renovation begins with understanding.**

A measured survey, a clear brief and conversations with users can reveal possibilities that appearance alone may conceal.

👉 **Better use can create capacity.**

Reorganising rooms, sharing facilities or bringing idle spaces into use may meet needs that initially seem to demand additional floor area.

👉 **Retain what matters. Improve what limits.**

Thoughtful adaptation preserves useful qualities while addressing barriers to safety, comfort, accessibility and performance.

👉 **Continuity includes people.**

A renewed building should support the livelihoods, relationships and sense of belonging connected to it.

👉 **Let evidence guide replacement.**

Compare credible options for reuse and rebuilding before deciding which will serve people and place best across time.



Seven Ways To Get More From What We Have

Practical starting points for owners, institutions and design teams.

Making better use of existing buildings begins with understanding how they work –and where their capacity is being overlooked. These seven approaches can help turn that understanding into useful action.

1 | Bring Idle Space Back Into Use

Identify vacant rooms, unused floors and spaces occupied only occasionally. Establish why they remain idle: poor access, discomfort, disrepair or a mismatch with present needs. Addressing the cause may release capacity within the existing building.

2 | Reorganise Before Expanding

Test whether a different arrangement could improve how people work, learn or live. Reconsider partitions, storage, circulation and furniture before adding floor area. Measure the gain through usefulness, comfort and accessibility; avoid creating overcrowded spaces.

3 | Share Space Across Time

A room may serve different groups at different hours. Explore shared meeting rooms, training facilities or community spaces where activities are compatible. Clear booking, security, cleaning and management arrangements help shared use work reliably.

4 | Upgrade What Holds The Building Back

Identify the shortcomings that limit occupation or performance. Targeted improvements to shading, ventilation, lighting, sanitation, accessibility or services may make existing spaces more suitable. Assess these measures together so that one intervention supports the others.

5 | Adapt To A Different Purpose

When the original use has ended, investigate alternatives. A former residence might accommodate offices; an institutional building might support training or community services. Test each proposal against structural capacity, spatial suitability, fire safety, access, services and approval requirements.

Start with the possibilities in an existing building.



START WITH ONE BUILDING

Getting more from a building means helping it serve life better.

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6 | Add Only What Is Needed

Where existing accommodation falls short, explore a carefully sized extension. Retain useful spaces and add the capacity or facilities the brief requires. Examine how the addition affects daylight, ventilation, drainage, outdoor space and the existing structure.

7 | Make The Next Change Easier

Use today's intervention to support tomorrow's adaptation. Where appropriate, introduce movable partitions, accessible service routes, repairable components and rooms suited to more than one activity. Keep drawings and records updated so future teams can understand what they inherit.

START WITH ONE BUILDING

Bring its users and a suitable professional team together. Map what works, what stands idle and what needs improvement. Develop a small set of options, then compare their benefits, costs, disruption and likely service life.



Five Questions Before We Demolish

Give the building a hearing before deciding its future.

Before commissioning another building, ask what the existing one could become. These five questions can help owners, institutions and project teams begin that conversation.

1 | Is the structure still capable of serving?

Commission a condition assessment. What is sound, what requires repair, and what would need strengthening for the proposed use? A tired appearance does not establish structural failure; equally, a fresh coat of paint cannot establish safety. Let evidence guide the decision.

2 | Can adaptation meet the actual need?

Define the need before prescribing the building. Could a different layout, shared facilities, better use of vacant rooms or a modest extension provide the required capacity? Test access, circulation, ventilation, daylight and services against the intended use. The brief should describe what people need to do and experience.

3 | What value would demolition destroy?

Look beyond the replacement price. Consider useful materials, craftsmanship, familiar places, cultural memory and the livelihoods or activities the building supports. Who would be displaced? What would be difficult to recreate? Include occupants and neighbours in understanding what deserves to endure.

4 | What are the carbon and material consequences?

Compare retention and upgrading with demolition and rebuilding over a consistent study period. Include new materials, transport, construction, waste and energy in use. Reuse also requires resources: the task is to establish which option meets the need with the lower whole-life burden.

5 | What could thoughtful renovation make possible?

Explore the positive potential: cooler rooms, inclusive access, improved services, a new use or spaces that can change again. Compare costs, disruption, delivery time and future adaptability. Ask the design team to show a credible reuse option alongside any replacement proposal.

Put it into practice

Before approving demolition, request a short options appraisal: retain and improve; adapt and extend; replace. Compare each against the same brief, including safety, usefulness, whole-life cost, environmental impact and effects on people.

Resources Box

Making the Case for Reuse

👉 **AIA – Today's Buildings for Tomorrow: Guide to Building Reuse for Climate Action.**

Design questions, practical strategies and case studies for renovation and adaptive reuse. (aia.org)

👉 **WorldGBC's embodied-carbon principles begin with prevention.** Its report presents a hierarchy pairing "Build less" with "Maximise use of existing assets"—reinforcing the value of renovation and reuse. (worldgbc.org)

👉 **Nigerian Railway Corporation – The Legacy Railway Museum**

Apply international learning with attention to local climate, construction practices, livelihoods and project requirements.

Green Thinkers' Takeaway

The next sustainable building may already be standing.

Look Again

Top 5 Action Points



Look Again

Case Study Snippet

Jaekel House, Ebute Metta, Lagos Nigeria

A House, Another Life



Jaekel House, Lagos, Nigeria. Credit: [traveladventures.org](https://www.traveladventures.org)

A house built for railway life now helps tell the railway's story.

Built in 1898, Jaekel House served as the railway general manager's residence and later became a staff rest house. In 2010, Professor John Godwin, working with the

Nigerian Railway Corporation, restored the building. It now accommodates a museum of railway artefacts and historical photographs.

Its progression—from residence to rest house to museum—offers a tangible Nigerian example of a building serving successive purposes.



Inside Jaekel House, Lagos: existing spaces given another life. Credit: Eyitayo Harrison Agboola (2023), reproduced from Adegbe (2024) Figure 9. [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The photographs, tools, equipment and other objects displayed within it connect visitors with Nigeria's railway history. The building itself forms part of that story.

What This Example Teaches

For GTR, Jaekel House illustrates how restoration and a change of use can work together. Restoring a building sustains its physical fabric; finding a suitable purpose

gives people a reason to occupy, use and care for it.

When an original function ends, the next brief can begin by examining the building's remaining capacity. Its rooms, structure, location and relationship with its surroundings may offer a starting point for another useful life.

That possibility deserves investigation. Condition, safety, accessibility, services and the requirements of the proposed use must inform the decision. A successful conversion depends on matching what a building can responsibly accommodate with what people actually need.

The Question For Owners

Before treating an older property as an obstacle to development, ask what role it could play in the next chapter of the site.

Nigeria Focus: The Buildings We Already Have

beyond heritage: what useful future might be waiting inside the buildings we already own?

An underused office block, an empty institutional wing or an unfinished structure may hold capacity for a different purpose. A building need not be historically distinguished to deserve an informed assessment of its remaining value.

For owners and institutions, begin by placing existing assets beside present needs. Could vacant rooms accommodate a new programme? Could a revised layout improve utilisation? Could a carefully planned conversion bring an idle property back into service?

Each possibility requires evidence about condition, suitability, conversion costs and effects on people. An unfinished building warrants the same scrutiny; money already spent does not establish its fitness for completion.

Before commissioning more floor area, establish what the floor area already available could do.



OUTSIDE THE BOX

2040: The City We Already Built

An imagined future



Imagine walking through a Nigerian neighbourhood in 2040. You recognise the buildings, but the life within them has changed.

An office block now accommodates homes. An old warehouse houses workshops and classrooms. A tired public building has become a busy community centre. Mature trees shade streets that once seemed destined for clearance.

The transformation began with a different question: **what could these places become?**

Owners examined vacant space before commissioning more. Architects found possibilities within existing structures. Public authorities helped suitable conversions proceed while protecting safety and liveability. New construction filled the gaps that adaptation could not.

It took investment, technical judgement and patient coordination. Some buildings could not be saved. Others proved far more useful than their appearance suggested.

Over time, familiar streets gained renewed purpose. The city grew through both thoughtful additions and better use of what it already possessed.

This future begins with decisions we can make today: investigate before demolishing, repair before abandoning, and design each intervention to make the next change easier.

In 2040, how much of the city we need could be the city already standing?

Look Again

Outside the Box

GTR Closing Reflection

Every existing building invites a judgement about what remains possible. Its original purpose may have ended, yet its capacity to serve life may still be considerable. Sustainable progress asks us to recognise that possibility—and act with care, imagination and sound judgement. Before we build again, let us look again.

Getting more from a building means helping it serve life better.

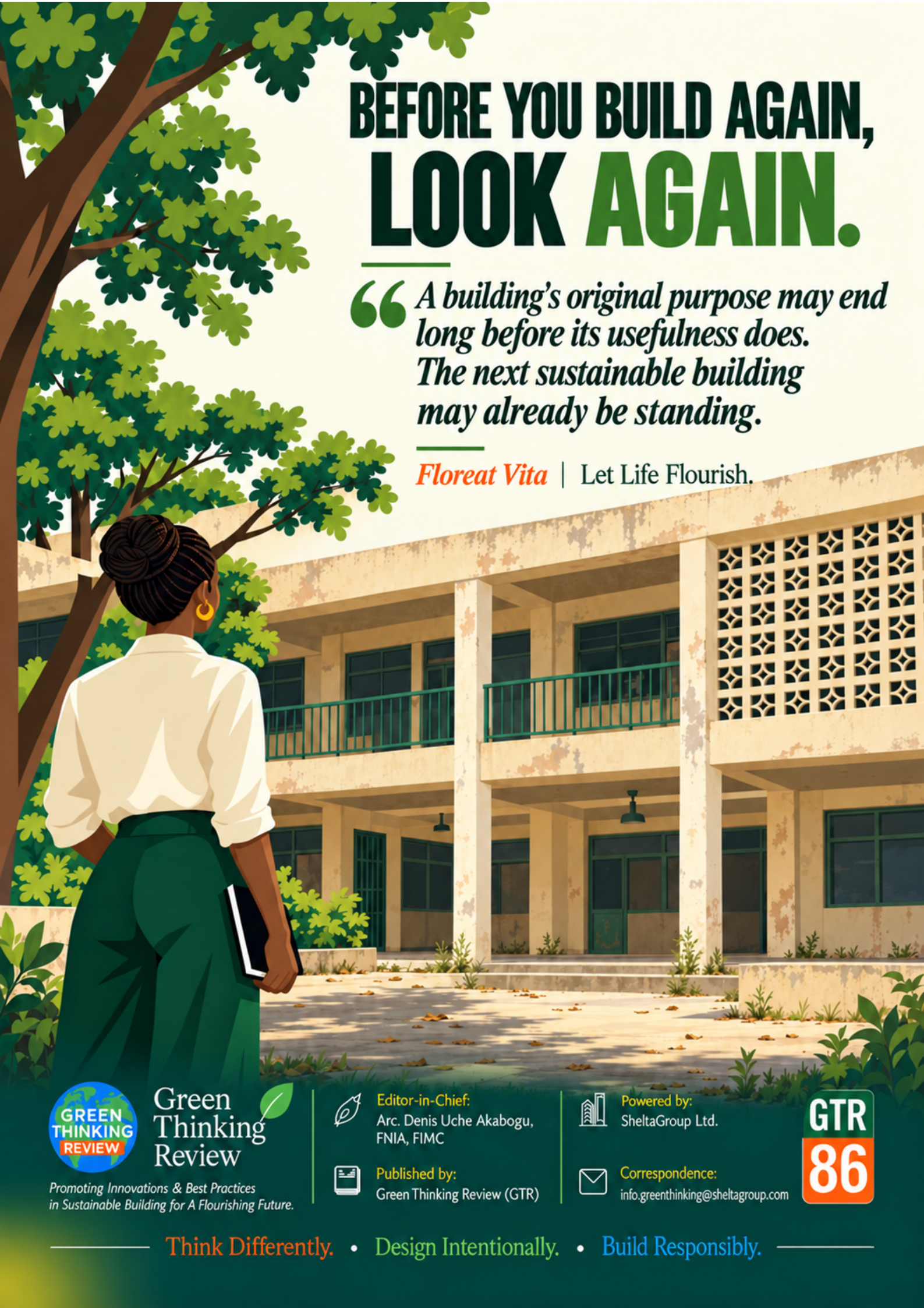
A Question for Today

Which building around you deserves another look—and what could it become?

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BEFORE YOU BUILD AGAIN, LOOK AGAIN.

“A building’s original purpose may end long before its usefulness does. The next sustainable building may already be standing.

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Editor-in-Chief:
Arc. Denis Uche Akabogu,
FNIA, FIMC



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Correspondence:
info.greenthinking@sheltagroup.com

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