

McDonald's' net-zero restaurant is a blip in its emissions ocean. But is that the point?

McDonald's UK & Ireland has rolled out a new-build restaurant in Shropshire, which it claims is its first to meet net-zero carbon regulations in its construction and operations. The building was constructed using a range of recycled materials, including cladding made from recycled IT equipment, a drive-thru lane using recycled tyres, internal wall signs made from waste coffee beans, and kerbsides constructed from recycled plastic bottles.

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There is also an onsite solar array, two wind turbines and EV charging points to cut operational emissions. ([Edie](#))

Why does this matter?

In the context of McDonald's' entire and gargantuan global environmental footprint, you could argue it doesn't matter that much. And *many have*, pointing to greenwashing based on one specific site while the firm's *emissions-intensive* (it produces more CO2 than Norway), *land-intensive*, *health-impacting* business model continues largely unabated.

So what if a building McDonald's sells its product through may (or may not – it is being verified by the UK Green Building Council) recoup all the emissions that were created from its construction. It's still part of an operation that sells 75 burgers *a second*. The supply chain to produce these burgers accounts for *80%* of the firm's carbon footprint.

But, from a few other angles, it does matter. That the world's largest fast-food chain is taking this action will go some way to normalise for consumers what changes need to be made to the built environment to help save the planet. It's also worth pointing out this site, along with *other net-zero buildings* in the restaurant's portfolio, forms part of a *wider strategy* for the firm to reach net-zero emissions across its operations by 2050. This includes using this restaurant as a blueprint for future McDonald's sites. The firm's overall strategy has its *weak points*, but it's a step in the right direction.

This is about buildings not food

The built environment ultimately accounts for *40%* of all global carbon emissions. Running buildings uses a substantial amount of energy and creates CO2 emissions, but it's not just about the energy needed to power their operations and keep them warm – there's also that which goes into making and transporting the materials that form the buildings themselves. This is known as embodied carbon. The act of making concrete alone accounts for *8%* of the world's entire CO2 output. The steel industry is responsible for a *similar amount*.

In this regard, efforts to push forward net-zero buildings – from any actor – should be lauded.

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This needs to happen

If we are serious about keeping global warming to 1.5C, net-zero buildings need to become the norm. According to the World Green Building Council, every building in the world needs to become net zero by 2050 if we are to meet our climate targets. This means similar approaches to those utilised at McDonald's' Shropshire site will need to be rolled out, at scale, quickly, when designing new buildings.

Not only that, we will have to tackle our existing building stock too. Around 80% of the buildings that will be standing in 2050 have already been built. They were designed and built in a world that was not focused on reaching carbon neutrality. Adapting this existing and leaky building infrastructure to be more energy efficient will be a significant challenge. Moving to electrify buildings will play a large part, and alongside improving insulation smart technologies will have a key role to play.

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