

Materials

Mesoporous Optically Clear Heat Insulators for Sustainable Building Envelopes

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Funding: No funding source declared.

COI: The author declares no competing interest.

AI Declaration: The author affirms that artificial intelligence did not contribute to the process of preparing the work.

Sustainable building design increasingly emphasizes energy efficiency, occupant comfort, and environmental responsibility. Mesoporous optically clear heat insulators (MOCHIs) represent a promising technology for building envelopes, combining transparency with thermal insulation to reduce energy consumption while maintaining natural lighting. These materials leverage nanoscale porosity to impede heat transfer through conduction and convection while allowing visible light transmission, potentially replacing traditional glazing or insulating layers. MOCHIs offer unique advantages for daylighting, passive solar management, and thermal comfort, supporting green building certifications and reducing operational carbon footprints. However, challenges remain in scalability, mechanical robustness, and integration with conventional construction materials. This article evaluates the potential of MOCHIs in sustainable building envelopes, highlighting design considerations, performance metrics, and future research directions. By merging optical clarity with thermal insulation, these advanced materials exemplify innovative pathways toward net-zero energy buildings, promoting environmental sustainability and occupant well-being.

Keywords: Mesoporous Materials; Thermal Insulation; Sustainable Building; Energy Efficiency; Optical Clarity

Science Insights, May 31, 2026; Vol. 48, No. 5, pp.2211-2214.

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THE built environment accounts for a substantial portion of global energy consumption, with heating, ventilation, and cooling (HVAC) systems representing the largest

share (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2022). As climate change intensifies, the construction industry faces mounting pressure to reduce operational carbon footprints and enhance

building efficiency (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2021). Traditional insulation materials, while effective at thermal management, often compromise natural light transmission or architectural aesthetics. Conversely, glazing and transparent materials provide daylighting but typically exhibit poor thermal insulation (Baetens et al., 2010). Mesoporous optically clear heat insulators (MOCHIs) represent an innovative solution, combining transparency with exceptional thermal resistance to create building envelopes that are both energy-efficient and visually appealing. By integrating these advanced materials into walls, windows, and facades, architects and engineers can design structures that optimize daylighting while minimizing energy losses, contributing to sustainable building practices.

MOCHIs exploit the principles of nanoscale porosity to hinder heat transfer. At the mesoporous scale—pore sizes between 2 and 50 nanometers—air trapped within the material reduces thermal conductivity, inhibiting heat flow through conduction and convection (Fricke & Emmerling, 1992). Unlike conventional aerogels or opaque insulators, MOCHIs maintain optical transparency, allowing visible light to pass through while limiting infrared heat transmission. This dual functionality enables buildings to benefit from daylighting for occupant comfort and productivity while simultaneously reducing HVAC loads. In essence, MOCHIs reconcile the traditional trade-off between transparency and insulation, offering a compelling pathway for net-zero energy building envelopes.

The optical clarity of MOCHIs is a key feature for architectural applications. Daylighting has well-documented benefits, including enhanced visual comfort, reduced reliance on artificial lighting, and positive effects on occupant well-being and productivity (Edwards & Torcellini, 2002). Conventional insulating materials often block light or create haze, limiting design flexibility. MOCHIs, with controlled pore size distribution and refractive index matching, maintain high transparency while delivering significant thermal insulation (Baetens et al., 2010). This combination supports modern architectural trends favoring open, light-filled spaces without sacrificing energy performance, aligning aesthetic considerations with sustainability goals.

Thermal performance is another critical aspect of MOCHIs. Buildings experience heat gain and loss through conduction, convection, and radiation, particularly across windows and opaque envelope elements (ASHRAE, 2021). MOCHIs address these challenges by reducing conductive heat transfer via trapped air in mesoporous networks and minimizing radiative heat transfer through scattering and selective reflectivity (Jelle et al., 2012). Experimental studies indicate that transparent aerogel-based materials—closely related to MOCHIs—can achieve thermal conductivities as low as 0.03–0.04 W/m·K while maintaining high visible light transmittance. Such performance metrics position MOCHIs as competitive alternatives to conventional low-emissivity glass, double glazing, or opaque insulation, with the added benefit of transparency.

Integrating MOCHIs into building envelopes requires careful consideration of material properties, fabrication methods, and structural requirements. Sol-gel processes, supercritical drying, and templating techniques have been employed to produce high-quality mesoporous materials with tunable pore sizes

and optical clarity (Pierre & Pajonk, 2002). However, scalability remains a challenge, as large-area uniform films must maintain transparency, mechanical robustness, and thermal performance. Strategies to enhance mechanical durability include hybrid composites, polymer reinforcement, or multilayer laminates (Koebel et al., 2012). Addressing these engineering challenges is crucial for widespread adoption in real-world building projects.

Environmental sustainability is a driving factor for MOCHI development. Reduced energy consumption in buildings directly lowers carbon emissions, contributing to climate change mitigation (IEA, 2022). Additionally, MOCHIs can enable passive solar design strategies, where controlled daylighting and thermal insulation work synergistically to minimize artificial heating or cooling (Jelle et al., 2012). Their low material density and potential for incorporation into recyclable or hybrid matrices further enhance environmental credentials. By reducing both operational and embodied energy impacts, MOCHIs support holistic sustainability objectives in the built environment.

MOCHIs also offer opportunities for advanced design innovation. Architects can exploit transparency and optical properties to create dynamic facades, light wells, or atria that maximize daylight penetration while minimizing glare and thermal discomfort (Baetens et al., 2010). Selective control of infrared transmission can enhance passive solar heating in winter while limiting unwanted solar gain in summer. Additionally, integration with smart building technologies, such as electrochromic coatings or thermochromic layers, could enable adaptive building envelopes that respond to external climate conditions in real-time (Granqvist, 2014). These synergies demonstrate the transformative potential of MOCHIs in next-generation sustainable architecture.

Comparative analysis of MOCHIs with conventional materials highlights their advantages. While traditional insulating materials such as fiberglass, mineral wool, or polystyrene provide effective thermal resistance, they are opaque and limited in applications requiring transparency. Conventional glass or acrylic glazing offers visual clarity but is thermally inefficient (ASHRAE, 2021). MOCHIs bridge this gap, delivering both transparency and insulation, thereby enabling energy-efficient design without compromising aesthetic quality. The combination of low thermal conductivity, high light transmittance, and structural adaptability makes MOCHIs particularly suitable for high-performance buildings targeting LEED or net-zero energy certifications (Jelle et al., 2012).

Despite these advantages, challenges remain for large-scale implementation. Cost remains a significant barrier, as mesoporous fabrication processes are often resource-intensive (Koebel et al., 2012). Long-term durability, resistance to moisture, UV stability, and abrasion are critical considerations for building applications exposed to environmental stressors. Research is ongoing to develop hybrid materials, polymer composites, and protective coatings to extend service life while maintaining optical and thermal performance. Addressing these limitations is essential to enable MOCHIs to move from laboratory-scale innovation to mainstream building material solutions.

Economic considerations are also central to adoption. While initial costs may be higher than conventional glazing or insulation, lifecycle energy savings can offset upfront invest-

ment (IEA, 2022). Energy-efficient building envelopes reduce operational costs, HVAC demand, and maintenance, providing long-term financial benefits. In regions with high heating or cooling loads, MOCHIs could deliver rapid return on investment, particularly when combined with other energy-saving strategies such as solar shading, natural ventilation, and smart controls (UNEP, 2021). Evaluating cost-benefit ratios in context-specific scenarios is crucial for convincing stakeholders of MOCHI viability.

Future research directions include optimization of pore size distribution, refractive index tuning, and hybridization with functional coatings to further enhance thermal and optical performance (Pierre & Pajonk, 2002). Integration with building-integrated photovoltaics, smart windows, and responsive facades could create multifunctional building envelopes that generate energy, manage light, and provide insulation simultaneously (Granqvist, 2014). Advances in scalable manufacturing, including roll-to-roll deposition or additive fabrication, could reduce costs and improve material uniformity. Interdisciplinary collaboration among materials scientists, architects, and engineers will accelerate translation from experimental prototypes to market-ready building solutions.

Additionally, climate-specific design strategies may optimize MOCHI performance. In cold climates, maximizing insulation while permitting daylight penetration supports passive

solar heating and reduces heating demand. In hot climates, selective infrared reflection can limit cooling loads while maintaining natural illumination (Jelle et al., 2012). Adaptive and localized design approaches, informed by climate modeling and building energy simulations, can leverage MOCHIs to achieve optimal energy performance under diverse environmental conditions. This flexibility underscores the material's potential for global applicability in sustainable architecture.

In sum, mesoporous optically clear heat insulators represent a transformative approach for sustainable building envelopes, merging transparency with thermal performance to meet the dual demands of energy efficiency and occupant comfort. Their nanoscale porosity enables low thermal conductivity while permitting visible light transmission, offering new design possibilities for daylighting, passive solar management, and architectural aesthetics. Although challenges remain in scalability, durability, and cost, ongoing research and technological innovation are paving the way for broader adoption. By integrating MOCHIs into contemporary building design, architects and engineers can reduce energy consumption, enhance occupant well-being, and contribute to climate-resilient, net-zero energy structures. These materials exemplify the convergence of materials science, architecture, and sustainability, highlighting a path toward environmentally responsible and visually appealing building solutions. ■

Received: December 10, 2025 | Revised: February 12, 2026 | Accepted: March 12, 2026

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