

Challenges and Prospects of Building Thermal Insulation Coatings in the Low-Carbon Transition

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Abstract. Global building energy consumption accounts for approximately 35% of total energy use, with its full-life-cycle carbon emissions emerging as a critical factor in achieving carbon peaking and neutrality goals. In China, for instance, operational building carbon emissions exceed 50% of the national total, while thermal losses through building envelopes in extreme climate zones like Xinjiang contribute over 50% of total energy consumption, underscoring the pivotal role of thermal insulation coatings in energy conservation. This review systematically examines conventional thermal insulation coating systems—including barrier-, reflective-, and radiative-type technologies—based on their porous structural optimization, high-refractive-index filler composites, and atmospheric window spectral regulation mechanisms. It further introduces emerging functional coatings: phase-change types utilizing microencapsulation to address leakage constraints, bioinspired coatings mimicking biological thermal management through hierarchical micro-nano structures, eco-friendly variants employing bio-based materials to reduce environmental impact, and transparent coatings balancing optical transparency with thermal insulation via nanocomposite engineering. However, current systems face persistent challenges including multi-scale interfacial instability, process cost-effectiveness limitations, and insufficient cross-climate service performance databases. Future research must prioritize breakthroughs in dynamic thermal-responsive smart materials, high-throughput directional assembly processes, and innovative full-life-cycle carbon accounting methodologies. These advancements will promote the evolution of building energy efficiency toward adaptive regulation and ecological sustainability, offering systematic solutions to support global carbon neutrality objectives.

Keywords: Building Energy Efficiency; Barrier-Type Coatings; Reflective Coatings; Radiative Coatings; Phase Change Coatings; Bio-Inspired Coatings; Transparent Coatings.

The global construction sector accounts for 34%-36% of total energy consumption and serves as a key contributor to carbon emissions, particularly due to air conditioning and heating systems[1][2]. In China, buildings' lifecycle carbon emissions represent 50.9% of the national total, with operational energy use constituting 21.8%. Notably, public buildings in Xinjiang of China exhibit 2.5-3.2 times higher energy consumption intensity per unit area than residential buildings[3][4]. Intense summer solar radiation causes significant heat gain through building envelopes, contributing over 50% of total energy consumption in extreme climate zones[5]. Enhancing the thermal insulation of building envelopes and accelerating their low-carbon transition are urgently required to achieve carbon neutrality goals.

Traditional building envelope insulation materials face limitations such as complex installation, thermal bridging at joints, performance degradation from moisture-induced pulverization, and flammability risks of aging organic materials. In contrast, emerging thermal insulation coatings achieve efficient heat resistance through submillimeter-thin layers with low thermal conductivity, high infrared reflectivity, and emissivity. Their lightweight nature, easy application, and adaptability to complex facades make them particularly suitable for existing building retrofits. Despite challenges like high costs and inadequate weather resistance in humid-heat/salt-mist environments, these coatings demonstrate significant potential for energy conservation under carbon neutrality goals. This paper systematically reviews research progress in traditional insulation coatings, summarizes advances in novel solutions, and outlines future directions to advance their application in building energy efficiency.

1. Principles and Classification of Traditional Thermal Insulation Coatings

According to the different thermal insulation mechanism and mode of thermal insulation coating, the traditional thermal insulation coating can be divided into three types: barrier type, reflective type and radiation type.

1.1 Barrier type thermal insulation coating

Since its development in the 1980s, barrier coatings represented by composite silicate systems have formed a typical formula system. During construction, a continuous insulation layer is formed on the surface of the substrate using a 5-20mm thick coating process. Its performance mainly depends on the synergistic effect of the thermal conductivity of the filler and the pore structure of the coating. The insulation effect is positively correlated with the increase of thickness, and is particularly suitable for high-temperature protection of building exterior walls in summer[9][10].

1.1.1 Thermal insulation principle

Barrier type thermal insulation coating is a functional material that achieves passive temperature control by reducing heat conduction. Its core mechanism is to use low thermal conductivity components and porous structures to form significant heat transfer impedance. This kind of coating is usually composed of lightweight thermal insulation aggregate (such as aerogel, hollow glass beads, expanded perlite), low-density inorganic mineral filler (diatomite, vermiculite, sepiolite powder) and weather resistant binder (organic resin or silicate cementitious materials). The thermal conductivity of the coating is reduced by introducing non convection air with low thermal conductivity to build a loose structure with high porosity^{[6],[12][13]}.

In order to reduce the thermal conductivity of the thermal insulation coating, different people at home and abroad have done a lot of research on improving the performance of the coating through different methods, such as sol-gel method, solid phase reaction method, micro phase structure control, in-situ crosslinking, filler modification, physical blending method, in-situ polymerization, layer by layer deposition, air pressure spraying process and phase inversion method[18-28].

Silica aerogel shows good thermal insulation and sound insulation performance, mechanical strength and optical transparency, and has been used in the preparation of thermal insulation coatings in recent years[17]. Xu et al[18]The SiC coating prepared on the surface of mullite fiber was compounded with sol, and then aged and supercritical dried to prepare a shielding Al₂O₃-SiO₂ aerogel thermal insulation composite with a thermal conductivity of 0.049W/(m · K) at 1000 °C. Lu et al[19]A lightweight nanocomposite with density of 0.13g/cm³ and thermal conductivity of 0.024W/(m · K) was prepared by adjusting the density of microstructure and the in-situ crosslinking between silica aerogel and boroaluminosilicate fiber during thermal compression. Ding et al[20]TiO₂ aerogels were prepared by sol-gel method, and then blended with SiO₂ sol. SiO₂/TiO₂ composite aerogels with room temperature thermal conductivity as low as 0.0251W/(m · K) were prepared by electrospinning and freeze casting technology. Luo et al^[21]By using physical blending method, gas-phase silica, Al₂O₃ and MnO₂ are efficiently combined, and their synergistic effect is utilized to achieve a thermal conductivity of 0.0843W/(m · K) at 500 °C and a temperature resistance limit of 1200 °C for the thermal insulation coating. Zheng et al^[22]The silica dry gel is integrated into the acrylic lotion through in-situ polymerization technology, and the thermal conductivity of the coating is reduced to 0.07 W/(m · K). This direct synthesis of silica dry gel in the acrylic lotion effectively simplifies the preparation process of the dry gel thermal insulation coating.

In addition to silica aerogels, rare earth oxides, hollow glass beads and nanomaterials have also been extensively studied due to their excellent thermal insulation properties and their synergistic effects. Li et al[23]A high entropy pyrochlore type structural material based on rare earth zirconate was successfully prepared by mixing six rare earth oxides in equimolar ratios with ZrO₂ using traditional solid-phase reaction method, with a thermal conductivity continuously below 1W/(m·K) in the temperature range of 300-1200°C. Yan[24]A low thermal conductivity and weather resistance

coating with a thermal conductivity of $0.0712\text{W}/(\text{m}\cdot\text{K})$ and an adhesion of 1.57MPa was prepared with modified acrylic lotion and inorganic zinc silicate resin as the matrix, in cooperation with vitrified beads, glass fiber and titanium powder. Zhang et al[25] By combining layer by layer deposition technology with pressure spraying process, a highly ordered $\text{Ca}_2\text{Nb}_3\text{O}_{10}$ nanosheet based thermal insulation coating with corrosion and oxidation resistance was successfully prepared, which exhibited a minimum ultra-low thermal conductivity of $0.03\text{W}/(\text{m}\cdot\text{K})$ after annealing at different temperatures. Zhang et al[28] Phenolic epoxy lotion was prepared by phase inversion method, and hollow glass microspheres (HGMs) were added to it as thermal insulation filler to prepare water-borne thermal insulation coating with thermal conductivity as low as $0.093\text{W}/(\text{m}\cdot\text{K})$.

1.2 Reflective thermal insulation coating

Reflective thermal insulation coatings originated from aluminum based reflective insulation systems, which achieve high visible light reflectivity by introducing metals and oxides (such as Al_2O_3) as functional fillers[13]. However, metal fillers are prone to oxidation reactions in aqueous media, leading to optical performance degradation, and are therefore limited outside of building insulation systems[14]. This type of coating combines the advantages of high substrate adhesion, environmental weather resistance, and surface self-cleaning, and can be directly applied to the surfaces of crude oil storage tanks, refrigeration equipment, and building envelope structures without the need for auxiliary protective layers[13].

1.2.1 Thermal insulation principle

Reflective thermal insulation coatings achieve cooling by reflecting over 95% of solar radiation in the visible and near-infrared spectrum. Their core composition combines a high-transparency resin binder with high-refractive-index fillers and hollow microspheres: Metal oxides induce surface reflection through refractive-index mismatch with the resin matrix, while hollow materials trigger secondary scattering via low-thermal-conductivity porous structures, synergistically blocking heat transfer. The coating's reflectivity is directly governed by the refractive-index difference between binder and fillers, particle size distribution, and filler concentration, with greater refractive-index gaps amplifying interfacial reflection efficacy[6],[15],[16].

1.2.2 Research progress

To reduce the absorption of solar radiation by buildings and focus on mitigating the urban heat island effect. Usually, solar reflective pigments such as TiO_2 and ZnO particles are embedded in polymer matrices[26][27]. Among them, titanium dioxide, due to its high reflectivity, has been extensively studied by scholars at home and abroad in recent years for its synergistic effects with different types of substances such as SiO_2 , graft copolymers, Fe, etc[29-37]. For example, Hong [33] A new type of potassium silicate based solar thermal reflective coating with a thermal reflectance exceeding 90% was successfully prepared using mechanical activation and polyester (PET) fiber toughening technology, with potassium silicate as the base material, TiO_2 as the pigment, and AlPO_4 as the curing agent. Liu et al[34] SiO_2 shell was prepared by template method, and TiO_2 nanoparticles were deposited on the surface of SiO_2 by hydrothermal method to form a porous shell. Finally, the dispersion was coated on a glass substrate using drop casting method to make a coating. After testing, the infrared reflectivity was 89.61%. Yu et al[37] Using bisphenol A diglycidyl ether as the film-forming substrate, TiO_2 as the main reflective material, and adding 9 wt% bismuth vanadate/iron oxide yellow composite pigment, an environmentally friendly reflective coating with visible light reflectivity of 53.26%, near-infrared reflectivity of 76.85%, and brightness value of 81.55 was prepared, which combines cooling and driving safety.

At the same time, in order to meet the aesthetic needs of diverse colors, the development of colored coatings is also quite important. Different scholars have conducted extensive research on reflective coatings in coatings and their production into reflective coatings[38-40]. Chen et al[41] In this study, yttrium aluminum garnet was modified by cerium doping by sol-gel method, and a new type of thermal insulation ceramic pigment with high near-infrared reflectance, ultra-low thermal

conductivity and bright yellow color was developed. Luo et al^[42] Using traditional solid-state reaction method, a new type of inorganic pigment with adjustable color and a reflectivity of 87-98% at a wavelength of 1100 nm was prepared by mixing and grinding lithium, aluminum, molybdenum oxides, and doped metals (Fe, Pr, etc.) as raw materials, and calcining them at a high temperature of 650 °C. Yu et al^[43] By environmentally friendly hydrophobic modification, hollow glass microspheres, TiO₂, and inorganic composite pigments with high near-infrared reflectivity were mixed and sprayed to prepare superhydrophobic insulation coatings with near-infrared reflectivity of 0.833, 0.797, and 0.646 for yellow, brown, and black, respectively.

For the problems of poor weather resistance and insufficient high-temperature stability in traditional organic based reflective coatings, research has turned to inorganic substances such as potassium titanate, kaolin, and mullite to innovate the traditional system. For example, Lu^[44] Potassium titanate whiskers (PTW) were prepared by KDC method, and TiO₂ was modified by allyl bromide. At the same time, a core-shell TiO₂ @ PA hybrid lotion was designed by fine lotion polymerization, and PTW with a solar reflectance of 0.86 was prepared by compounding PTW and TiO₂@ PA/ TiO₂@PA Reflective thermal insulation coating. Gomez et al^[45] A reflective coating based on mullite reverse photonic glass (PhG) was developed by combining sol gel with atomic layer deposition (ALD) technology. The coating still maintains high near-infrared reflectance and structural stability at 1500 °C. Ragi, etc^[46] In response to the insufficient solar thermal shielding performance of polyurethane (PU) protective coatings, kaolin functional fillers were prepared by surface modification of alumina/zirconia combined with colloidal oxides, effectively improving their infrared reflection ability.

Table 1 Performance Comparison of Commonly Used Reflective Fillers

Material	Refractive Index	References
Titanium Dioxide rutile TiO ₂	2.74	[47][48][49]
Anatase TiO ₂	2.57	[47][48][49]
SiO ₂	1.54	
	1.7 (blue)	
	2.05 (red)	
Iron Oxide Pigment	1.80 (green)	[50]
	2.41 (yellow)	
	1.60 (orange)	
	1.44 (borrow)	
ZnO	1.6	[51]

1.3 Radiation type thermal insulation coating

Unlike passive thermal reflection in barrier or reflective coatings, this material enables bidirectional thermal management: absorbing 45%-60% of visible light via lattice vibrations during solar exposure, then releasing over 70% of stored heat through radiative emission post-thermal equilibrium, achieving simultaneous internal and external cooling.

1.3.1 Thermal insulation principle

Radiation type thermal insulation coating is an active cooling material based on thermal radiation effect. Its core mechanism is to convert the absorbed solar energy (mainly concentrated in the 0.4-2.5 μm band) into electromagnetic waves of specific wavelengths through the energy state transition of material molecules, especially in the atmospheric infrared window band of 8-13.5 μm, to dissipate heat or thermal radiation into the cold universe (≈ 3K)^[6]. Due to the low absorption rate of water vapor and carbon dioxide, this band can achieve 70% -95% of thermal energy penetrating the atmosphere and dissipating into outer space, forming a unique "escape channel" for thermal energy^[16]. Passive radiative cooling technology does not require energy input and cools surfaces by reflecting sunlight and radiant heat, which has a significant impact on the global energy landscape^[7].

1.3.2 Research progress

In the early days, in order to achieve high solar reflectivity and passive radiative cooling, multi-layer mirror structures were often constructed using thin layers of metals such as silver and aluminum. However, these coatings have limitations such as narrow optical reflection bands, poor mechanical durability, and a mirror like appearance that may not be visually appealing[53-55]. In recent years, researchers have gradually shifted from traditional metal based multilayer structures to materials such as polymers, inorganic/ceramic substrates, and dielectrics[56-63]. For example, Shao et al[56] A WSi₂-Si-glass hybrid coating with good thermal durability was prepared on a fiber ZrO₂ ceramic substrate using an impregnation rapid sintering process with WSi₂ as the emitter, borosilicate glass as the binder, and Si and SiB₆ as sintering aids. Chen et al[57] A precursor solution was prepared by physical blending using H₃PO₄, Al(OH)₃, and deionized water. Zirconia balls were used as a medium to ball mill the metakaolin powder and precursor solution. Finally, the slurry was sprayed onto an aluminum plate to prepare a 0.95 high emissivity and excellent durability all inorganic radiation cooling coating based on phosphate based geopolymer (PGEO). Guo et al^[63] The silicone resin/boron nitride dielectric radiation cooling material designed through biomimetic dynamic hydrogen bonding network has a synergistic mechanism of crack self repair and fracture energy enhancement, significantly improving its outdoor durability while maintaining high radiation cooling performance.

In recent years, polymer materials represented by polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS), polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF), and their copolymers (such as [P(VdF HFP)_{HP}]) have attracted much attention in the field of building insulation due to their unique photothermal control properties[58-62].

Mishra, BR, etc[58] A disordered TiO₂/PDMS metamaterial coating with 0.94 solar reflectance and 0.96 atmospheric window emissivity was developed by randomly embedding monodisperse TiO₂ microspheres into a polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) matrix. Xiang et al^[60] SiO₂ microspheres were embedded into a three-dimensional porous cellulose acetate (3DPCA) matrix using phase change technology and automatic deposition method to prepare thermal insulation coatings with an average emissivity of 0.96-0.97, which can be applied in various fields such as building energy conservation. Das, P[62] A radiation insulation coating based on MgO polyvinylidene fluoride (MgO-PVDF) with an emissivity of up to 0.985 has been developed. However, the production cost of PVDF is relatively high. Based on this, Tian et al^[61] Polyethylene terephthalate (PET) and a small amount of polyolefin were prepared into PET/polyolefin prefabricated films through ultra large scale and high-throughput film stretching methods. A layer of polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA) micro hemisphere was coated on top of it to develop a low-cost and 0.901 emissivity PMMA hemispherical coating.

2. New type of thermal insulation coating

2.1 Phase change materials

Phase change materials (PCMs) regulate temperature through solid-liquid phase transitions to absorb/release heat, and are applied to building envelopes and roofs to enhance thermal inertia [64]. Despite their high latent heat density and temperature regulation capabilities, liquid-phase leakage-induced poor cyclic stability severely hinders practical applications. In recent years, scholars have combined microencapsulation technology with porous matrix adsorption strategies to optimize thermal performance while suppressing leakage. For example, Wang Qinghua and others[65] Using high-density polyethylene (HDPE) to encapsulate paraffin and utilizing the rigid shell of HDPE to restrict liquid phase flow; Wu [66] Then the double encapsulation method of vitrified beads vacuum adsorption and styrene acrylic lotion is proposed to improve the sealing performance through physical adsorption and polymer coating. Zhang et al[67] Coating and encapsulating PCMs using the high crosslinking properties of epoxy resin. Mohammadreza et al^[68] Phase change materials (PCMs) were encapsulated in a urea formaldehyde (UF) shell and dispersed in a polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) matrix using in-situ polymerization technology.

2.2 Biomimetic coatings

In recent years, biomimetic thermal regulation research has made significant progress in areas such as radiation cooling, hydrophobic insulation, and extreme environmental protection by drawing on the structural and functional characteristics of natural organisms. Norman and others [69] Based on the biomimetic research of the Sahara silver ant triangle hair array, it is revealed that it suppresses solar radiation heat absorption through high reflectivity in the visible near infrared band, while enhancing black emissivity in the mid infrared atmospheric window, and utilizing passive radiation cooling effect to dissipate heat to space and other dual thermal regulation mechanisms. However, the synergistic regulation of broadband reflection narrowband emission and large-scale controllable preparation technology of micro nano structures have not yet been solved. Kulp et al [70] Research has found that the multi-level micro nano structure formed by β - keratin nanofibers in penguin feathers achieves synergistic optimization of thermal insulation and superhydrophobicity on the basis of lightweight design, providing a natural paradigm for the design of biomimetic lightweight thermal insulation hydrophobic integrated materials. Metwally et al [71] By systematically analyzing the microstructure of penguin feathers and polar bear hair, quantitative analysis based on scanning electron microscopy (SEM) revealed that both have typical layered porous structures that can significantly improve the thermal resistance of hair. Their effective thermal conductivity is as low as $0.023 \text{ W/m} \cdot \text{K}$, which is 40% lower than traditional insulation materials. Zhan et al [72] Inspired by the hollow, lightweight and hydrophobic characteristics of polar bear hair, which can withstand extremely cold environments, a carbon tube aerogel with advantages of lightweight, waterproof and thermal insulation was developed, and its performance is better. Li et al [73] By mimicking the layered structure of pearl shells and using a radio frequency magnetron sputtering system to control the shutter time of dual sputtering guns, excellent high-temperature and wear-resistant CrMoN/SiNx multilayer coatings were prepared. Miguel and others [74] Based on the high reflectivity characteristics of the Sahara silver ant and the spatial distribution pattern of zebra stripes, a biomimetic segmented reflective coating strategy is proposed, and its building thermal performance is evaluated in a certain urban area of Panama City. Research has shown that sloping roofs designed with reflectivity contrast stripes exhibit better thermal regulation performance than total reflection roofs. The heterogeneous reflective coating enhances local radiative heat dissipation and promotes natural convection, synergistically optimizing the thermal regulation capability of building envelope structures. Guo et al [75] Inspired by the superhydrophobic surface of lotus leaves, a biomimetic multi-level structure thermal barrier coating was developed using plasma spray physical vapor deposition with multi-level micro nano structures. Mugdha et al [76] Several studies on the construction of superhydrophobic coatings using biomass materials such as lignin, cellulose, chitosan, and starch were introduced, as well as the techniques used to construct superhydrophobic coatings.

2.3 Transparent coating

Due to the drawbacks of high solar transmittance, poor thermal insulation, and low thermal inertia of transparent building envelope structures, and the fact that the heat transfer coefficient of traditional glass is often higher than that of walls with insulation layers, it is easy to form a "cold bridge" inside the building, resulting in energy loss of transparent building envelope structures accounting for about 60% of the total energy loss [83][84]. This means that the transparent enclosure structure is the weakest link in building insulation. In recent years, academia has developed transparent thermal insulation coatings with more energy-saving potential by using sol gel method, hydrothermal method and filler modification. Virtudazo et al [85] NHSPs nano hollow silicate particles were prepared by soft template sol gel method. The internal air layer was used to prevent heat insulation and conduction, and nano particles stacked to inhibit convective heat transfer. After coating, the thermal conductivity of the glass substrate was reduced by 29.9% and remained transparent. Bao et al [86] The size adjustable double-layer hollow was successfully prepared by sol-gel method $\text{TiO}_2@ \text{SiO}_2$ Microspheres were combined with waterborne polyurethane to prepare a new transparent insulating glass coating that maintains 85% visible light transmittance while increasing UV shielding to 98.7%. Zhang et al [87] The

water-borne polyurethane (FWPU) base material with excellent water resistance was prepared by cross linking modification of multiple sealants, and further mixed with modified silica aerogel (SSA) to prepare a high water resistant transparent thermal insulation coating with a thermal conductivity of $0.1288\text{W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$, which significantly reduced the energy consumption of glass. Zhang et al^[88] Silicon dioxide/antimony doped tin oxide was prepared by hydrothermal method ($\text{SiO}_2@\text{ATO}$) A transparent thermal insulation coating with a visible light transmittance of 83% was prepared by composite preparation of submicron hollow microspheres and acrylic resin.

3. Summarize

Traditional thermal insulation coatings—barrier-type (via sol-gel, in-situ polymerization, and solid-phase reactions to reduce thermal conductivity while enhancing high-temperature stability and sintering resistance), reflective-type (achieving high reflectivity and chromatic tunability through material modification), and radiative-type (improving emissivity via microsphere embedding and phase-change integration) — alongside emerging coatings, such as phase-change types (microencapsulation mitigating leakage yet suffering from thermal conductivity hysteresis and thermomechanical mismatch-induced microcracks), bioinspired types (lightweight, thermal-insulating, and hydrophobic synergies via hierarchical micro-nano bionic structures but limited by mechanical degradation of biomass-based materials and scalability bottlenecks), and transparent types (balanced optical-thermal performance via nano-hollow/aerogel composites yet constrained by cost-effectiveness of sol-gel synthesis and interfacial adhesion on flexible substrates), exhibit functional advancements.

However, both categories confront shared challenges: 1) Insufficient universality validation regarding substrate compatibility, weathering resistance, and environmental durability; 2) Economic and environmental constraints of critical processes, including import-dependent atomic layer deposition and energy-intensive processes (e.g., mechanical exfoliation, microsphere fabrication); 3) Scalability defects from non-uniform gravitational self-deposition and poor scalability of sintering processes; 4) Inadequate long-term service evaluation frameworks, necessitating multi-scenario accelerated aging and dynamic load fatigue testing protocols. Addressing these requires integrated optimization of material-process-service lifecycles to bridge laboratory innovations and industrial applications.

4. Prospect

Future research needs to continue to focus on breakthroughs in dynamic adaptive control technology, multi mechanism collaborative optimization, and low-carbon preparation processes, with a focus on developing intelligent responsive coatings and biomimetic composite systems to simultaneously address cost, durability, and extreme environmental adaptability issues, and promote the transformation of high-performance coatings from laboratory to engineering applications. At the same time, it is necessary to establish a full lifecycle carbon assessment system, promote green material substitution and process innovation, accelerate large-scale production and intelligent integration, and help achieve the goal of building carbon neutrality.

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