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URBAN AND ARCHITECTURAL MODELS OF UNBUILDING IN TRANSFORMING THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

URBANISTIČKO-ARHITEKTONSKI MODELI RAZGRADNJE U PREOBRAZBI SUVREMENOGA GRADA



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Date of public defense: December 05, 2025

The dissertation examines unbuilding as the planned subtraction of urban fabric. Contrary to building as the primary, addition-based constructive activity, unbuilding operates through the selective removal of buildings, generating urban voids that are further reconfigured as open public spaces. The research is grounded in the growing presence of derelict, obsolete and/or abandoned structures in European cities, often resulting from deindustrialization, demographic flux, and unregulated development. Conventional planning tools have proven insufficient for addressing these spaces, which frequently remain in prolonged stagnation, while cities continue to expand territorially despite the negative spatial, social, and ecological consequences of overbuilding. Although adaptive reuse offers partial solutions to these issues, many sites fall outside its scope. Unbuilding thus emerges as a complementary strategy capable of rebalancing built and open space and enabling alternative forms of urban regeneration.

The research therefore aims to define and articulate unbuilding as a legitimate and creative urban and architectural operation.

The methodological framework of the dissertation combines theoretical and empirical approaches, enabling both conceptualization and practical examination of unbuilding. The research draws on diverse sources, including literature, planning documentation, cartographic and photographic records, and analytical drawings. Theoretical analysis identifies and systematizes detected unbuilding patterns into conceptual models, which are then tested through 30 selected European case studies. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, each case is examined across spatial, social, economic, and ecological dimensions. Architectural drawings played a central methodological role in this process, not merely as a means of representation of the selected case studies, but as a critical tool for their analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the key findings.

The visual atlases accompanying each model form a complementary interpretive framework

together with the textual analysis, revealing spatial logics, transformations, and contextual effects through drawing-based inquiry. The findings are synthesized into a set of unbuilding models and a process diagram, forming a comprehensive framework for future research and application.

The dissertation is structured into nine chapters, progressing from the examination of unbuilding's boundary conditions to the development and verification of its models in transforming the contemporary city. Following the introductory chapter, which defines the conceptual and methodological framework, the research first addresses two key spatial layers that frame unbuilding: disrupted urban spaces, which represent the layer preceding unbuilding, and urban voids, which constitute the spatial outcome of subtractive interventions. Chapters 2 to 4 analyze these layers through their historical, theoretical, and typological dimensions. Building on these foundations, Chapter 5 develops nine theoretical models of unbuilding, which are then tested on 30 selected European case studies in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 synthesizes the findings, refining the nine unbuilding models and outlining the broader process of unbuilding. The dissertation concludes with a discussion in Chapter 8, which contextualizes the findings within a local and professional framework, as well as a final conclusion in Chapter 9, which reflects on the main contributions and outlines future research directions.

Key results and contributions of the research confirm the relevance, applicability, and transformative potential of unbuilding as an urban and architectural operation, tactic or strategy. The first major contribution lies in a clearer understanding of the conditions under which unbuilding becomes a meaningful urban transformation tool. Through the typological analysis of disrupted spaces and the examination of their possible transformation trajectories, the research identifies specific spatial, social, economic, and ecological contexts in which unbuilding is more appropriate than adaptive reuse or replacement construction. A related contribution is the re-

framing of urban voids – not as passive residual spaces, but as active spatial resources capable of releasing urban density pressure, enabling social and economic activation, and improving ecological balance of sites. The second contribution lies in the theoretical elaboration and empirical verification of unbuilding as a creative and transformative spatial act. The study demonstrates that subtractive interventions can act as instruments of spatial innovation, social correction, economic development, and ecological remediation, challenging the conventional opposition between building and demolition. The third major contribution is the development and verification of nine urban and architectural models of unbuilding, established through theoretical research and tested on selected European case studies. These models encompass a broad spectrum of subtractive strategies: bold urban breakthroughs (M1), pointwise urban pruning (M2), generation of the tabula rasa condition (M3), correction of spatial mistakes (M4), subtractive adaptive reuse (M5), urban degrowth (M6), unbuilding into nature and ecological remediation (M7), unbuilding for material reuse (M8), and unbuilding as an ideological act (M9). These nine models not only establish a shared conceptual lens for understanding unbuilding but also offer a set of flexible instruments that can inform future planning and design processes, particularly in contexts where overbuilding, demographic decline, and ecological pressures demand more adaptive and regenerative approaches.

In conclusion, the dissertation positions unbuilding as a necessary, creative complement to conventional, growth-oriented planning and design approaches. It demonstrates that subtractive interventions can operate as purposeful and strategic instruments for reshaping and rebalancing urban fabric, as well as generating new spatial, social, economic, and ecological values. Rather than treating construction as the sole driver of urban development and demolition as its negative counterpart, the research demonstrates the creative and transformative capacity of planned subtraction.