Obsolescence: An Architectural History

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In our architectural pursuits, we often seem to be in search of something newer, grander, or more efficient—and this phenomenon is not novel. In the spring of 1910 hundreds of workers labored day and night to demolish the Gillender Building in New York, once the loftiest office tower in the world, in order to make way for a taller skyscraper. The *New York Times* puzzled over those who would sacrifice the thirteen-year-old structure, "as ruthlessly as though it were some ancient shack." In New York alone, the Gillender joined the original Grand Central Terminal, the Plaza Hotel, the Western Union Building, and the Tower Building on the list of just one generation's razed metropolitan monuments.

In the innovative and wide-ranging *Obsolescence*, Daniel M. Abramson investigates this notion of architectural expendability and the logic by which buildings lose their value and utility. The idea that the new necessarily outperforms and makes superfluous the old, Abramson argues, helps people come to terms with modernity and capitalism's fast-paced change. Obsolescence, then, gives an unsettling experience purpose and meaning.

Belief in obsolescence, as Abramson shows, also profoundly affects architectural design. In the 1960s, many architects worldwide accepted the inevitability of obsolescence, experimenting with flexible, modular designs, from open-plan schools, offices, labs, and museums to vast megastructural frames and indeterminate building complexes. Some architects went so far as to embrace obsolescence's liberating promise to cast aside convention and habit, envisioning expendable short-life buildings that embodied human choice and freedom. Others, we learn, were horrified by the implications of this ephemerality and waste, and their resistance eventually set the stage for our turn to sustainability—the conservation rather than disposal of resources. Abramson's fascinating tour of our idea of obsolescence culminates in an assessment of recent manifestations of sustainability, from adaptive reuse and historic preservation to postmodernism and green design, which all struggle to comprehend and manage the changes that challenge us on all sides.

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