

An Act in Eight Variations

Instructions for Managing Obsolescence, 2006–2026

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, our professional and academic work has engaged with diverse architectural heritages across multiple temporal, material, and urban conditions. We outline eight variations operating as conceptual frameworks for confronting obsolescence. They are informed by local contexts, environmental urgencies, and collective memory, and offer strategies of intervention grounded in the reuse, adaptation, and reinterpretation of existing structures. (V01) *A Ceramic Landscape*, a former 1970s hospital, previously associated with dystopian imagery, is reprogrammed as a climatic shelter. Constructed with recycled, locally sourced ceramics, the intervention preserves its social memory while activating new environmental functions in Ciudad Real. (V02) *New Layers and Subtraction*, an unfinished corporate structure from the 2008 financial crisis is transformed into housing through spatial subtraction and the insertion of porous thresholds, drawing from Matta-Clark's logic of critical incision, in Seville. (V03) *Connected Landscapes*, a fragmented 14th-century religious complex is reactivated as a civic square and archive for the Ministry of Culture in Galicia, restoring both accessibility and historical traces. (V04) *Diffuse Scale*, a discontinuous new façade, alluding to Antony Gormley's spatial strategies, reconstructs the legibility of a distorted structure through perceptual ambiguity and scale in Madrid. (V05) *Growing Without Visibility*, a 19th-century brick building on Madrid's Paseo de la Castellana is adapted into a judicial facility, integrating geothermal systems and active slabs while maintaining its original presence. (V06) *A Field in the Palace*, a disused cinema is absorbed into the municipal fabric as a luminous civic interior, extending the adjacent public plaza within its historic volume, in Torrelavega. (V07) *buit per ple In Barcelona*, a 1970s corporate building is domesticated through precise material reduction and local ceramic strategies, allowing new social uses. (V08) Instructions for Transition, between the metropolitan scale of Castellana and the domestic grain of El Viso, a spatial and chromatic transition is articulated through glazed, recycled ceramics.

Keywords: Obsolescence, Ceramic, Horizon Line

Introduction

Over the last two decades, our professional and academic work has engaged with diverse architectural heritages across multiple temporal, material, and urban conditions. This activity is explained through eight variations as conceptual frameworks for confronting obsolescence. They are informed by local contexts, environmental urgencies, and collective

memory, and offer strategies of intervention grounded in the reuse, adaptation, and reinterpretation of existing structures.

Throughout the projects examined in this article, a recurring set of tools, actions, and operative logics emerges. These instruments are not understood as isolated technical procedures; rather, they constitute a shared field of architectural agency that becomes visible when analysing how each project engages with pre-existing conditions. Their recurrent appearance—across distinct historical, urban, and built contexts—reveals patterns of intervention that transcend the specificity of place or program. These strategies operate through processes of reuse, reinterpretation, and critical transformation of existing architectural elements accommodating new uses, meanings, and spatial narratives. By working simultaneously with what remains and what is imagined, these interventions articulate a temporal friction: they negotiate between the persistence of memory embedded in the built environment and the speculative dimension of architectural futures. In doing so, they look to construct a methodology in which the past becomes a material for design, the present a space for negotiation, and the future a horizon of possibilities inscribed within the existing. Ultimately, the recurrence of these tools and operations across the case studies suggests that obsolescence can function as a framework for innovation. It becomes a catalyst that not only enables new architectural forms and programs but also challenges dominant narratives of efficiency and novelty in contemporary practice imagining our shared future.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts identified across the case studies are introduced through an initial phase of contextualization and abstract definition, establishing their theoretical and operative foundations. Following this, the article examines how each concept materialized in selected case studies.

«Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è, bisogna che tutto cambi»¹ In certain conditions, heritage regulations or the presence of a building in the collective memory requires that, even when major internal transformations are introduced, the public image of the building should remain unaltered.

Displacement operates through the reconfiguration of access points, circulation paths, and spatial interfaces, often without requiring substantial structural modifications or significant alterations to the building envelope. By strategically relocating or reopening elements such as communication cores or connective thresholds, new spatial relationships emerge, programs gain visibility, latent connections are activated, and the building becomes legible under a renewed logic of use, through an updated spatial narrative.

Subtraction articulates and connects programs that had remained isolated, generating new hierarchies and flows within the building. What disappears in matter reappears in meaning: subtraction enhances clarity, permeability, and spatial depth, opening the path toward a second life of the building. Extracting mass can improve environmental performance—facilitating daylight penetration, promoting cross-ventilation, or enabling pressure differentials across façades—while simultaneously revealing spatial potentials previously concealed.

Accumulation emerges from the need to introduce new—programmatic, spatial, or infrastructural—layers that coexist with the existing architecture rather than replace it. Through the addition of elements, envelopes, or infrastructures, the project constructs

a hybrid condition in which old and new remain simultaneously present, producing an expanded field of meaning and occupation.

Depth in typological terms becomes a valuable design principle for intensifying spatial occupation and programmatic richness. It enables multiple layers of activity to coexist, producing gradients of privacy, permeability, and interaction that cannot be achieved in thin buildings. This logic is particularly relevant in the climatic contexts in which these projects operate: cross-ventilation, the opening of patios, and the strategic manipulation of interior voids reinforce environmental performance while enhancing spatial continuity.

Integration with pre-existences becomes critical when an intervention completes and gives coherence to previously unfinished or fragmented ensembles. By introducing new functions, safety conditions, or accessibility features that were absent in the existing building, the project enables the whole to operate as a unified and legible architectural system. The insertion of a new architectural bodies is in some cases intentionally expressed, generating a kind of architectural cyborg in which the added element is clearly differentiated, establishing a critical dialogue with the preexisting structure.

An horizon line is conventionally established in buildings as a constructive and conceptual division between the above-ground realm—luminous, permeable, and programmatically prioritized—and the subterranean domain, where the lack of natural light and limited visual permeability often restricts its architectural potential. By blurring this boundary, the intervention activates the underground spaces and transforming it into a meaningful part of the project.

Spatial continuity to stitch together and reconnect previously disconnected urban environments. Shared and adaptable interior spaces allow the extension of the public realm into the building. Creating zones that can host collective programs and new patterns of circulation. In this context, architecture operates through the erasure of boundaries, dissolving the conventional separation between interior and exterior, public and private, movement and permanence. Through subtle adjustments in scale, materiality, and spatial depth, we look to constructs an active threshold—a space of transition rather than division—capable of negotiating between different urban intensities.

Taken together, these eight operative principles outline a coherent framework for transforming existing buildings without relying on replacement or erasure. This framework searches to position architecture not as a discipline that intervenes despite the existing, but through it and with it, treating obsolescence as a resource and the built environment as material already charged with meaning and potential.

Case Studies

The following projects seek to demonstrate how these strategies operate when applied to specific contexts, showing that to transform what exists is not to preserve the past, but to activate the future already latent within it. Interpreting these eight variations as a unified creative operation aims to position adaptive reuse not as a technical response, but as a critical attitude, shaped by more than twenty years of research and practice. These opportunities have allowed us to apply these conceptual frameworks.

(V01) A Ceramic Landscape. Former Hospital (1976), new headquarter Ciudad Real, Spain. A former 1970s hospital, previously associated with dystopian imagery, is reprogrammed as a climatic shelter. Constructed with recycled, locally sourced ceramics, the intervention

preserves its social memory while activating new environmental functions.

From an urban, environmental, and economic perspective, the reuse and rehabilitation of abandoned buildings and their adaptation to new functions represent not only a significant urban opportunity but also a commitment to the city and its density.

The project aims to achieve a high level of conservation, preserving 92% of the building's structural elements and over 78% of its façade. The façade conserves existing parapets and lintels, with their thermal inertia, creating an intermediate space that accommodates continuous insulation. The use of ochre ceramics transforms the perception of the building, fostering a closer relationship with local and regional heritage. An aerial view reveals the project's deep material and cultural ties to the region's geography, as the earthy hues of its



Fig. 1. Ciudad Real, Administrative Headquarters, under construction 2024

ceramic façade resonate with the clay-rich landscapes of Castilla-La Mancha. (Fig.1)

(V02) New Layers and Subtraction. Unfinished office building (2008) new housing, Seville. An unfinished corporate structure from the 2008 financial crisis is transformed into housing through spatial subtraction and the insertion of porous thresholds, drawing from Matta-Clark's logic of critical incision. Reusing an existing deep office structure and transforming it into housing introduces a set of challenges and opportunities. The building presents several characteristics typical of office construction—generous floor-to-ceiling heights, large spans, deep floor plates, and cantilevered elements. A key operation is the introduction of new patios, enabling natural light and cross-ventilation while remaining compatible with the structural logic of the existing building. Each unit thus operates as an elevated single-family home with its own patio, and privileged relationship to the exterior.

(V03) Connected Landscapes. Former Monastery (s14), Historical Archive, San Francisco, Pontevedra. A fragmented 14th-century religious complex is activated as a civic square and Archive for the Ministry of Culture in Galicia, restoring both accessibility and historical traces. The transformation of a listed historical building (BIC) -altered over time through multiple, often incoherent interventions- into a Historical Archive demands a precise balance between preservation and renewal.

Recovering the central role of the courtyard allows it to function as both environmental

regulator and spatial organizer, bringing natural light, ventilation, and legibility to the interior. Historical modifications to the surrounding topography gradually detached the structure from its urban context, isolating it on a raised platform. Instead of privileging a single historical moment, the intervention filters and hierarchizes what remains, recognizing the authenticity of each stratum and allowing new layers to enter into dialogue with them. The archive becomes therefore not an object frozen in time, but a built reflection of the evolving and connected nature of the consolidated city. (Fig.2)

(V04) *Diffuse Scale c44*. DGS Headquarters (1978) Paseo de la Castellana 44. Madrid. A discontinuous new façade, referencing Antony Gormley’s spatial strategies, reconstructs the legibility of a distorted structure through perceptual ambiguity and composite scale. The project addresses the rehabilitation of an 20th century existing building in a highly exposed



Fig. 2. Interior space, Historical Archive, Pontevedra, Spain (digital image 2023)

urban setting, not by asserting it as a new landmark, but by reinforcing its ability to belong. A new, porous façade subtly distorts reading of the building’s true height: vertical glass planes of varying proportions, suspended from the roof structure, create a blurred edge condition that distorts the perception of elevation while maintaining transparency from floor to ceiling. In doing so, the building regains its original ambition—an abstract, floating prism whose mass does not rest on the ground but hovers above it. Obsolescence—whether spatial, technical, or energetic—is reframed as an instrument of transformation.

(V05) *Growing Without Visibility: Housing building (1890) transformed into Audiencia Nacional. Castellana 14, Madrid*. A 19th-century brick building on Madrid’s Paseo de la Castellana is adapted into a judicial facility, integrating geothermal systems and active slabs while maintaining its original fabric. The intervention preserves the original intentions of the project while updating them through contemporary strategies, ensuring that the transformation remains concealed behind the listed façades. By considering the building’s thermal inertia and upgrading airtightness and envelope performance, the intervention combines the environmental advantages of the original masonry with contemporary

passive-energy standards. Instead of reserving basement levels for residual uses, the project introduces natural light, ventilation, and independent access, allowing these spaces to serve high-value programs such as court rooms. As a result, the visual mass of the building remains unchanged, even though its usable area increases substantially.

(V06) *A Field in the Palace*. Town hall (1875), Torrelavega, Cantabria. A disused cinema is absorbed into the municipal fabric as a luminous civic interior, extending the adjacent public plaza within its historic volume. The intervention at Municipal Palace seeks to restore the building's institutional presence while redefining the role of public architecture within the contemporary city. Rather than acting as a self-contained object, the project reinforces the building's civic condition, allowing it to function again as an urban reference and a place for collective life. The former cinema volume is preserved and used as a spatial reservoir for the town hall's extension. By respecting its structural logic of large spans, the space becomes an interior continuation of the public square—a luminous, covered landscape. The result is a deliberate illusion: a building that maintains a nineteenth-century civic presence while housing a highly efficient twenty-first-century administrative infrastructure.

(V07) *buit per ple*. Former La Seda building (1977), New AEAT headquarters Barcelona. In Barcelona, a 1970s corporate building is domesticated through precise material reduction and local ceramic strategies, allowing new social uses. The project is situated in a heterogeneous stretch of Vía Augusta, where domestic buildings and ceramic façades define the urban character. Rather than imposing a new object, the intervention works with the existing structure, using the façade as a device of scalar camouflage. The exterior envelope becomes an instrument to negotiate between public institutional presence and residential context. A variable pattern of solids and voids—ceramic surfaces combined with vertical glass elements—produces a porous, ambiguous reading of scale, dissolving the perception of floor levels and avoiding the monolithic effect of a continuous curtain wall.

(V08) *Instructions for Transition*. CCS Paseo de la Castellana 106/108 Madrid. Between the metropolitan scale of Castellana in Madrid and the domestic grain of El Viso, a spatial and chromatic transition is articulated through glazed, recycled ceramics. The proposal seeks to construct an architectural element capable of reflecting the fragmented and heterogeneous condition of the consolidated city. Rather than producing a singular independent object, the project operates as a connective tissue between adjacent urban fabrics—mediating between the metropolitan scale of Paseo de la Castellana and the domestic character of Altos del Hipódromo.

Located within the UNESCO *Landscape of Light* buffer zone and flanked by historically protected contexts, the project must achieve presence without imposition. The city around the site reveals a rich stratification of scales and materials—from Oiza's BBVA headquarters and Zuazo's Nuevos Ministerios to Sota's nearby Maravillas gymnasium—where ochre ceramics façades are recurrent. Following this lineage, the intervention introduces a new envelope that acts like a unifying backdrop, much like Alberti's completion of Santa Maria Novella, capable of giving coherence to preexisting bodies through a contemporary formal logic. The façade adapts subtly through geometric modulation and chromatic shifts, recalling the perceptual effects explored by Carlos Cruz-Diez: from Castellana, the building reads as metropolitan and large-scale; toward the residential areas, it reduces its vertical presence, lightens its tonality, and decreases the apparent size of the openings.

In a context defined by sunlight, heat, and heritage sensitivity, the project rejects the

contemporary obsession with reflective transparency—what Andrés Jaque calls our addiction to shine²—in favour of a more civic, material, and durable presence. The façade employs recycled ceramic elements combined with vertical glass strips to modulate light, depth, and perception. The building thus becomes a transitional device that guides the shift from metropolitan intensity to residential calm, from infrastructural to domestic scale.

Conclusions

Across these experiences, obsolescence ceases to be a diagnosis of failure and becomes a weapon of transformation. The existing buildings—too big, too obsolete, too inconvenient—are not demolished but re-read. Tools are not mere tactics: they are acts of resistance against the cult of the new. By embracing the imperfect and the inherited, architecture positions itself as mediator between time periods, between memory and desire, between what still resists and what urgently needs to change.

But beyond method, this is a cultural stance. If the city is already built, why do we insist on acting as if every project were a blank page? What if obsolescence is not a problem, but the most radical material we have? The future of architecture may lie not in conquering the city, but in negotiating with it, accepting that every intervention is a dialogue and, provocatively, that sometimes the most radical act is not to build— but to project what already exists into the future.

Notes

1. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa ne *Il Gattopardo*.
2. Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation, XHOLOBENI YARDS. Titanium and the Planetary Making of SHININESS / DUSTINESS, installation presented at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2023.

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