

UNFINISHED RUINS

Re-imagining potentials of
obsolete architectures.

Markus Köhler

Jorge Mejía Hernández
Elise van Dooren

Research plan
Explore Lab 39
TU Delft, 2024

„Unfinished buildings have the beauty of this which could have been. Of this which is not yet there. Of this which might be one day.“ - M. Augé

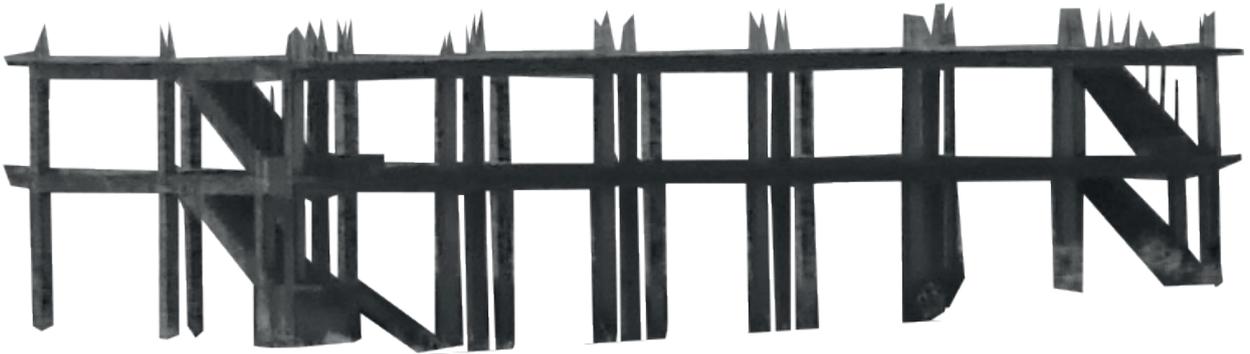




Fig. 01: Unfinished row houses in Craco Peschiera



Fig. 02: Unfinished and under decay in Avigliano Lucania

Keywords

unfinished, temporality, openness, reuse, ruins

Besides dry and hilly landscapes, small rural villages and an ever blue sky, the south of Italy is characterized by a great amount of vacant concrete structures that disfigure the idyllic scene.

Unfinished yet under decay, their uncertain state gives the impression of a construction site that has just been left abandoned from one day to the other, with loads of bricks waiting to be filled in the empty skeletons but no one around to continue work. Ruins of a projected dream rather than a building, these structures are situated on the edge of small, rural agglomerations or sprawled around greater cities, formulating a transition zone towards the open landscape.

Their material and structural appearance is always the same and based on the archetype of any modernist structure: Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-Ino, an open skeleton structure consistent of only platforms, pillars and a staircase, casted in reinforced concrete. Depending on the state of completion this concrete framework is complemented with fillings of brick or tuff stone.

Unfinished ruins vary in scale, from whole infrastructural projects to public buildings or private residences. Their bare concrete shells take on all kind of different shapes: Gigantic pillars, once thought to carry the load of thousands of cars passing over them, expressive forms of public buildings whose intended use is hardly apparent, or simple concrete skeletons that draw the three dimensional outlines of a house.



Fig. 03: Unfinished skeleton in Atena Lucana

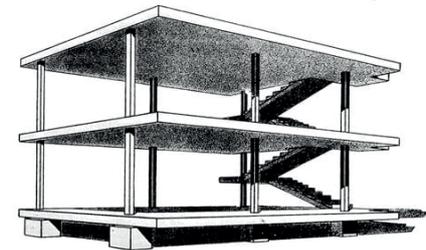


Fig. 04: Maison Dom-Ino, Le Corbusier



Fig. 05: Cemento Amato, Angelo Maggio



Fig. 06: Cut-Out of unfinished ruin in Atena Lucana

All of these cases are united by their obsolescence. They have never served any formal use and there is no demand or interest in completing them. Their existence and decay marks a waste of resources and violates within the landscape.¹ As monuments of failure and scars on the environment they have a negative impact on their context and the people confronted with them. Due to a lack of external pressure, unfinished buildings often remain in a static condition and continuously decay towards an uncertain future.

¹ M. Turchiarulo, 2023.

Research question:

How can unfinished ruins be re-imagined to narrate the past, serve the present and stay open to the future?

Unfinished ruins have a magic attraction to me. Disrupting yet stimulating they mediate between past, present and future, inviting their emptiness to be filled by imagination. If we accept them as a condition to work with, rather than a problem to solve², unfinished ruins become a valuable spatial resource. Observing the unfinished as extraordinary expression of architecture can alter our understanding of these structures and give meaning and function to their otherwise superficial existence. Temporarily abstracted from their context and explored without prejudices, their inherent spatial qualities and potentials can be unveiled.

² G. Licata, 2014.

However, their existence cannot simply be perceived from an romanticized abstract and aesthetic position but must be considered within the context of how they came to be and their reciprocal impact on the local condition. Only when transformed in their environment, the change of perspective, as emphasized in this research, can contribute to break their static condition and transfer unfinished ruins into an active mode of becoming.



Fig. 07: Burj al Babas, Valmarc



Fig. 08: Unfinished public infrastructures, Alterazioni Video

The phenomenon of unfinished buildings is not limited to the South of Italy but apparent in modern civilization around the world. Their occurrence is mostly the result of unregulated modern building practices, discarded extension plans and speculations by private investors. The latter became most evident through the burst of the 2008 real estate bubble in Europe that resulted in huge amounts of vacant constructions unlikely to ever be inhabited, as in the example of these failed vacation residencies in Turkey.

While unfinished buildings are relatively new to some places, their emergence in Italy dates back to the post-war period and is concentrated in the southern Regions, namely the *Mezzogiorno*. To understand their existence in this context requires a distinction between public and private commissions.

From the 1960s on the construction of public buildings in Italy was actively fostered by the government to stimulate economic growth in the historically underdeveloped South. Due to poor planning, corruption and misprojections many buildings remained unfinished.³

With “incompiuto siciliano” the artist collective Alterazione Video raised international awareness of this condition with a complete documentation of unfinished public structures all over Italy. Their work attempts a change of perception, elevating the phenomenon to an architectural Style and by that establishing a foundation for open, unbiased engagement with unfinished ruins in practice and theory. In result to the huge attention evoked by their publications, the subject of public unfinished structures has been discussed in media and politics extensively and projected for re-evaluation by the Italian government.

The prevalence of private unfinished buildings, in contrast, is less discussed in architectural as well as public discourse and more complex to outline. It expresses a conflict in cultural desires of home ownership, economic limits and an informal self-building practice, facilitated by modern construction systems and suspended over time. The state is powerless to restrict the continuous occurrence of these little planned and often unauthorized projects.⁴ As long as underlying, structural problems remain and installed top-down regulations, only challenge the legal state of already existing structures the occurrence of new ruins will continue, transforming the South Italian landscape with patterns of unfinished skeletons.



Fig. 09: Il Mezzogiorno

³ P. Arboleda,

⁴ G. Licata, 2014.

methodology	data analysis	storytelling	imaginary experiments
	evaluation	observation	interpretation
subject/ scope	all cases	selected cases, actual	selected cases, potential
tools	data collection, comparison and interpretation	photographic documentation, model, descriptive writing	sketches, associative writing, application of concepts and theory
expected outcome	understand condition, outline possibilities for intervention	make visible the invisible, open space for interpretation	explore qualities and potentials

Fig.10: Research Methodologies

The phenomenon of unfinished ruins has been increasingly described and theorized. However, there are still few examples that concentrate on its actual condition in form of ordinary, small scale structures scattered all over the country. This research aims to untangle the complex condition of unfinished ruins and to offer alternative perspectives that deepen our understanding of their present state and reveal possibilities for future transformations.

To do so, unfinished ruins are subjected to a multi-layered investigation that analyses their condition on a territorial and architectural scale and probes alternative readings through archetypal projections. By that, I hope to give value to what is often overseen, forgotten or under-represented and make visible what may previously have been invisible to others.

1 // Data Analysis/ Quantitative Study

The scope of this study is outlined by an initial field study in August 2024 in which around 80 unfinished ruins in the regions of Calabria, Campania and Basilicata were documented. During a second tour in November 2024 the found examples will be revisited, complemented and evaluated based on a set of parameters like size, state of construction and decay, accessibility and centrality.

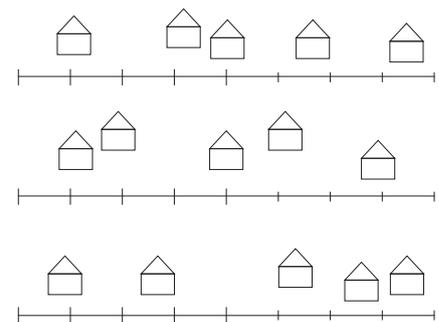


Fig.11: Data evaluation

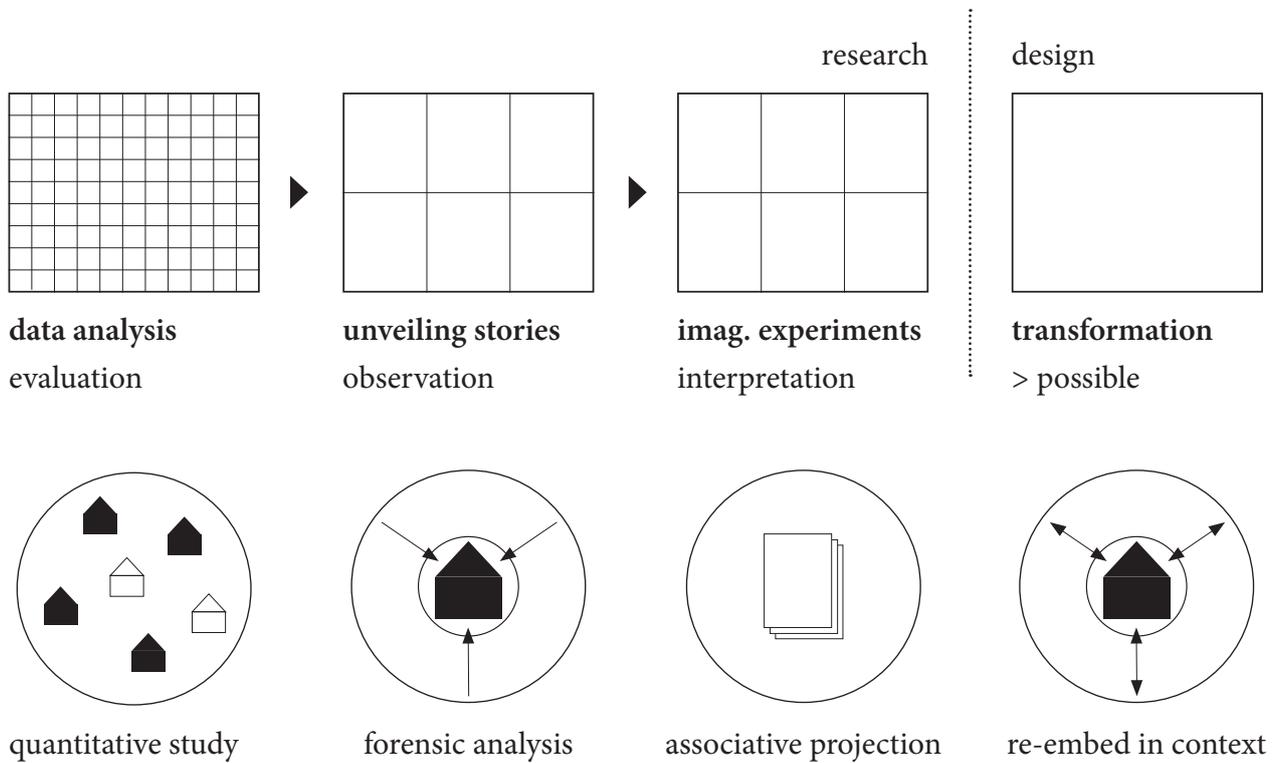


Fig.12 Research and Design

2 // Unveiling stories/ Descriptive Analysis

In the following, a change of scope is attempted focusing more closely on 5 to 6 selected case studies. After a preliminary documentation of the buildings and their dimensions, a more subjective observation is pursued to carefully investigate its current state. Through a forensic examination of spatial situations, objects and details, in a multi-sensory inventory, the present state can be interpreted to speculate on the buildings past.

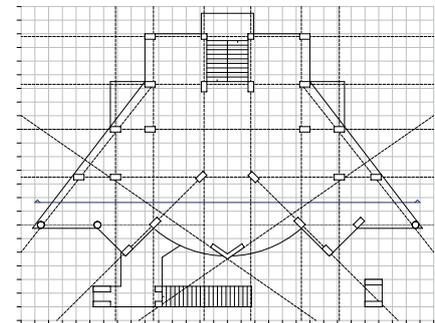


Fig. 13: Case Study Analysis

3 // Imaginative experiments/ Associative projection

The third phase explores the potential of unfinished ruins and draws on the same body of case studies that was previously examined. In this experiment, functions, like Garden, Temple, Palace or Platform are projected on the existing structures. This association with archetypal themes is intended as a research by design experiment to re-imagine alternative uses in the existing situation and not to be confused with the proposal of a concrete intervention.

On the following page the methodologies will be scheduled in a time frame, relating the research to the following design project.

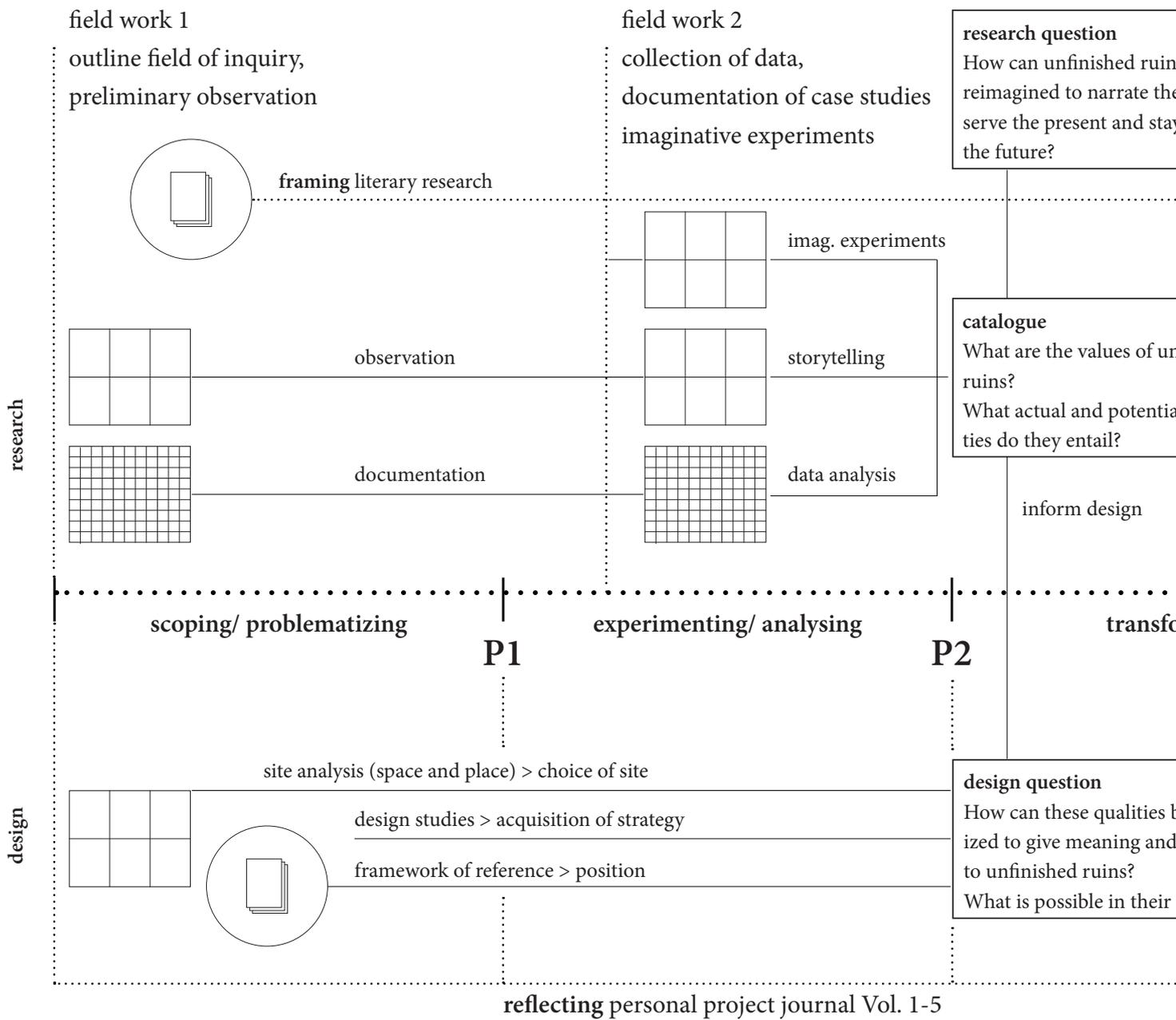
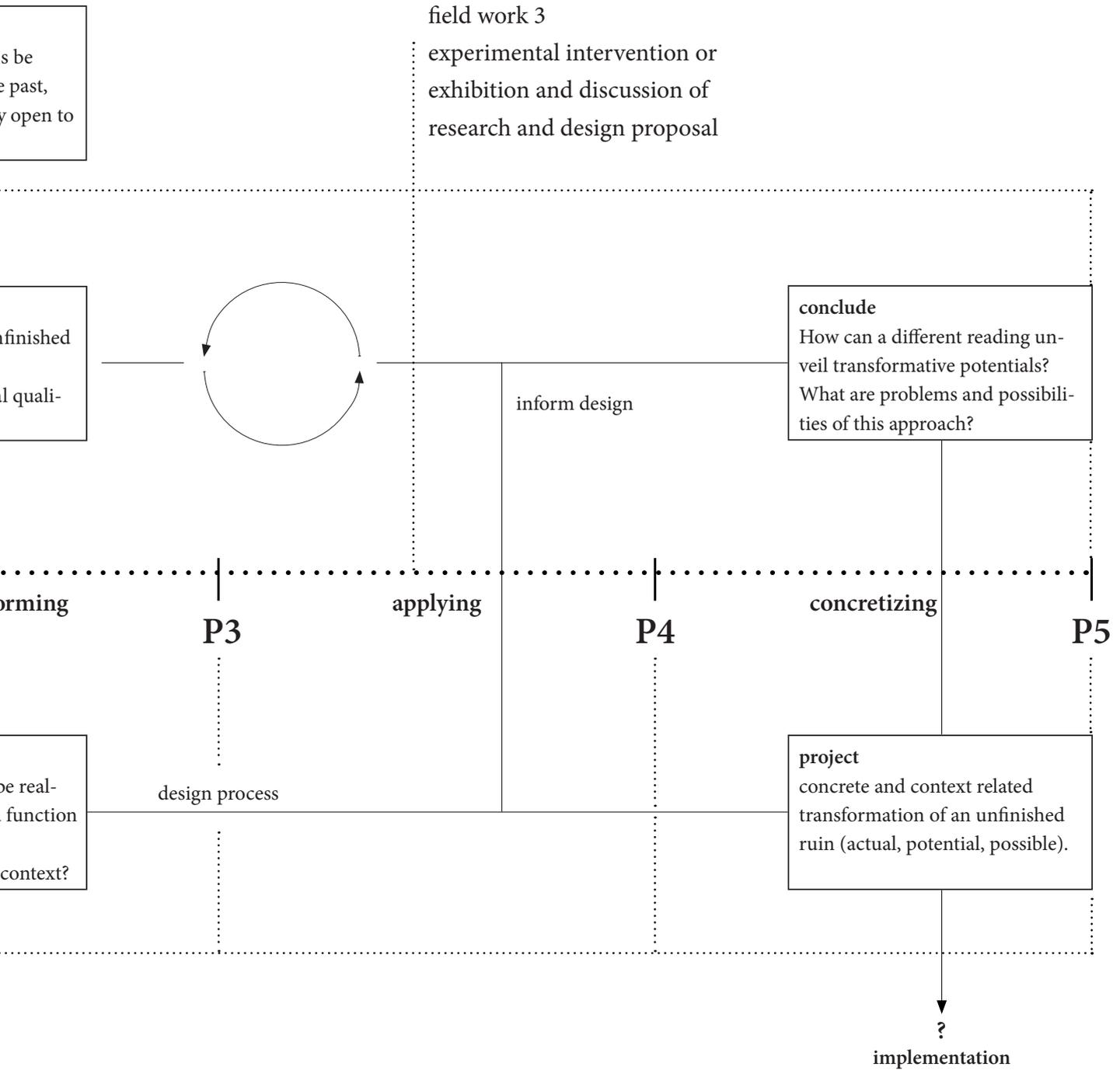


Fig. 14: Graduation Process



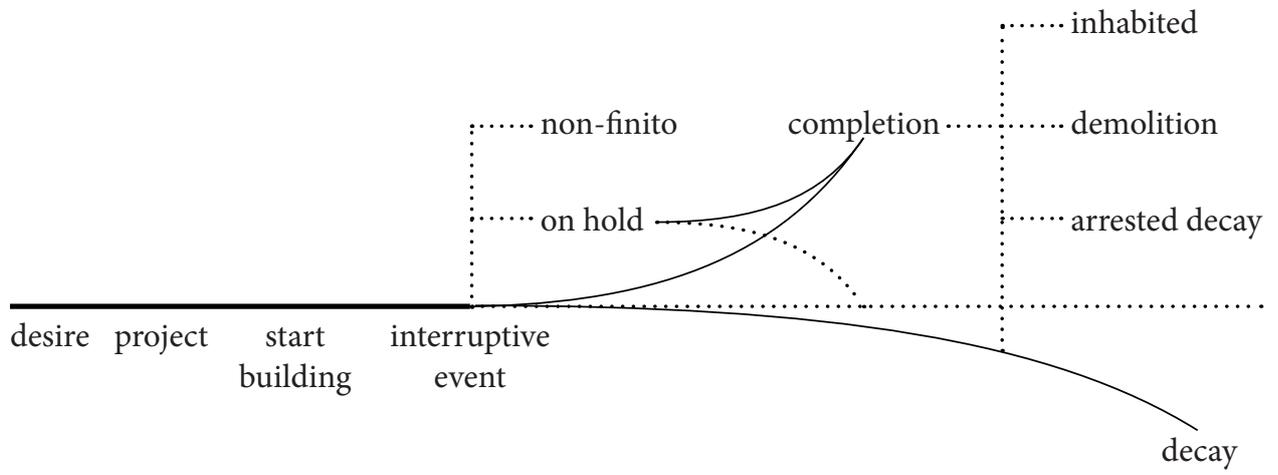


Fig. 15: Possibilities of unfinished ruins



Fig. 16: Love Affair, LanWei 30

How is the unfinished reflected on a territorial scale?

The quantitative study of unfinished ruins can help to understand patterns, differences and similarities of the phenomenon as a whole and to indicate relevance for a more detailed examination of specific cases.

Referring to the work of Alterazione Video P. Arboleda outlines the possibilities for an architectural approach to unfinished ruins. Besides finishing, demolishing or leaving them as found he lists active arrested decay as an alternative perspective which aims to halt the decay of a structure, make it safe and accessible and transfer it into a new use.⁵ By evaluating the condition of individual structures, this method attempts to identify cases that have an active negative effect on their environment and demand an architectural intervention, opening up the questions of what to do with these structures.

What is the actual condition of unfinished ruins?

The method of storytelling aims to interpret unfinished ruins as extraordinary architectures revealing details that might remain hidden in a superficial observation. Does the site show signs of formal or informal uses?

If there are no indications for human activity, what kind of plants and animals frequent the place? How do nature and decay shape the design and add patina?

Robert Smithson's investigation of the Hotel Palenque gives a good example of how an observation, outside categories of aesthetic judgement, can give meaning to ordinary and often overlooked spaces and thereby open up room for interpretation.

What actual and potential qualities do they entail?

Building on these observations, it becomes possible to imagine other scenarios to take place in the present structure. How do these functions facilitate the space? What needs or challenges might such alternative uses introduce?

How can these values be made accessible to give meaning and function to unfinished ruins?

With the findings of this research I aim to lay the foundation for my design project, applying the identified abstract potentials to a concrete transformation. The extensive analysis and interpretation, will help to derive on a specific site for intervention, one that relates to the themes of my research while still allowing a concrete, practical and realistic proposal for an architectural intervention throughout my Master's Thesis.

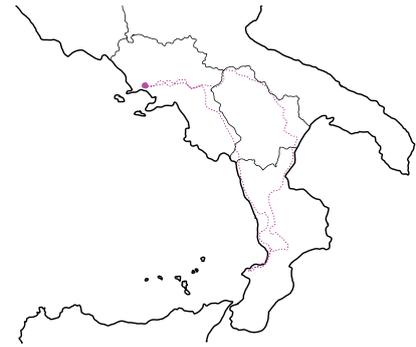


Fig. 17: Field of inquiry

⁵ P. Arboleda, 2019.



Fig. 18: Observation



Fig. 19: Hotel Palenque,
Robert Smithson



Fig. 20: Guardia di Finanza
Brandlhuber+

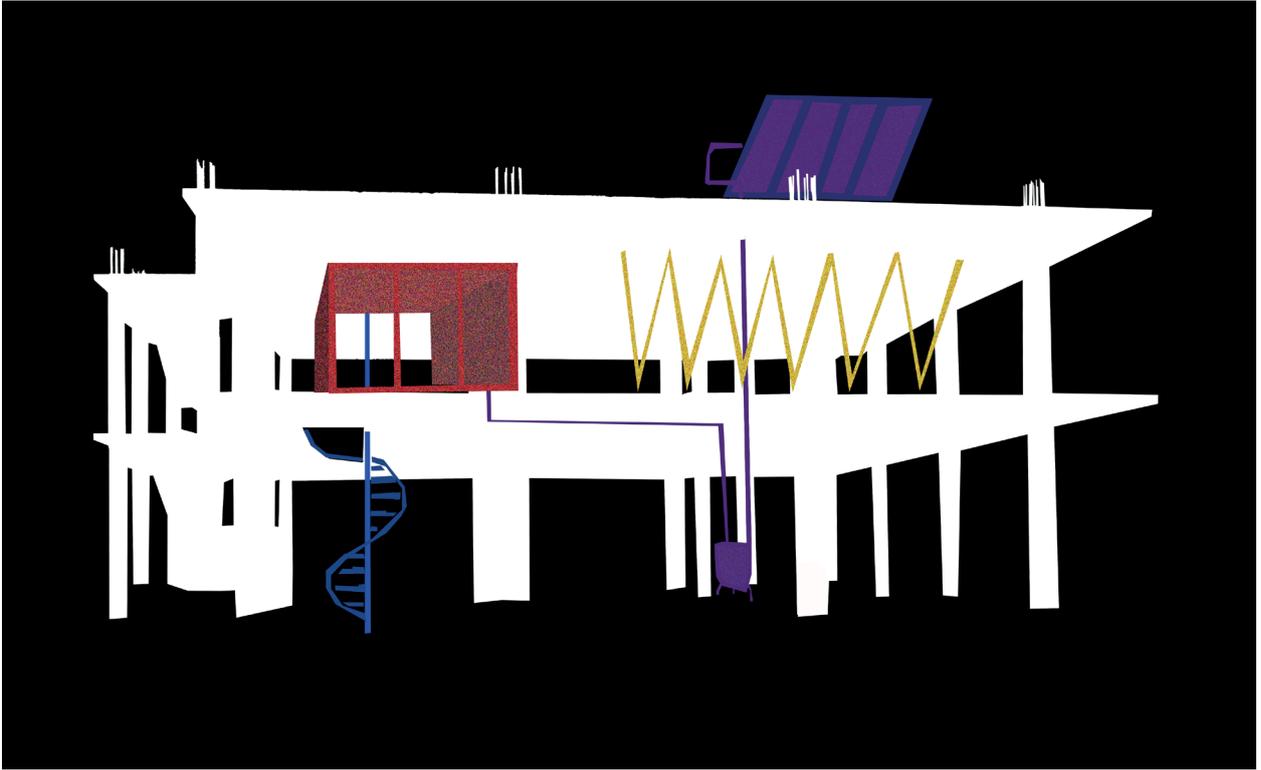


Fig. 21: Transforming unfinished ruins.

In-text citations:

1. Turchiarulo, Mariangela. The Athrophied Gaze. In: Mauron, Gabriel. Homes on hold. traces of unfulfilled dreams. Benteli, 2023.
2. Licata, Gaetano. Maifinito, p. 130. Quodlibet Studio, 2014.
3. Arboleda, Pablo. Reimagining unfinished architectures: ruin perspectives between art and heritage. Cultural geographies, p. 227. Vol. 26(2), 2019.
4. Licata, Gaetano. Maifinito, p. 128. Quodlibet Studio, 2014.
5. Arboleda, Pablo. Ruins of modernity, The Critical Implications of Unfinished Public Works in Italy. International journal of urban and regional research, p. 806. Vol. 41, 2018.

Figures:

Fig. 01: Unfinished row house in Craco Peschiera. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 02: Unfinished and under decay in Avigliano Lucania. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 03: Unfinished skeleton in Atena Lucena. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 04: Maison Dom-Ino, Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier & Pierre Jeanneret, Oeuvre Complète Volume 1, 1910–1929, Les Editions d'Architecture Artemis, Zürich, 1964.

Fig. 05: Cemento Amato, Angelo Maggio. Angelo Maggio. In WU Magazine, 2020. Accessed 18 Oct 2024. <https://wumagazine.com/2020/03/16/angelo-maggio-non-finito-calabrese/>.

Fig. 06: Cut-Out of unfinished ruin in Atena Lucana. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 07: Burj al Babas, Valmarc. Valmarc, 2022. Accessed 21 Oct 2024. <https://lumieresdelaville.net/portfolio-view/burj-al-babas-ou-le-village-fantome-aux-cents-chateaux>.

Fig. 08: Unfinished public infrastructures, Alterazioni Video. Basilico, Gabriele. Incompiuto. La Nascita Di Uno Stile-The Birth of a Style. Ediz. Bilingue, p. 119. Humboldt Books, 2018.

Fig. 09: Il Mezzogiorno. Mnemoc, 2007. Accessed 21 Oct 2024. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mezzogiorno.svg>.

Fig. 10: Research Methodologies. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 11: Data evaluation. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 12: Research and Design. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 13: Case Study Analysis. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 14: Graduation Process. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 15: Possibilities of unfinished ruins. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 16: Love Affair, Lan Wei 30. Another mountainman, 2006. Accessed 30 Oct 2024. <https://www.domusweb.it/en/photo-essays/2012/11/27/lanwei-architecture-interrupted.html>.

Fig. 17: Field of Inquiry. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 18: Observation. Markus Köhler, 2024.

Fig. 19: Hotel Palenque, Robert Smithson. Robert Smithson, 1973. Accessed 25 Oct 2024. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5321>.

Fig. 20: Guardia di Finanza, Brandlhuber+. Erica Overmeer, Pin-Up 25, 2019. Accessed 30 Oct 2024. <https://archive.pinupmagazine.org/articles/article-arno-brandlhuber-concrete-villa-finanza-sicily#28>.

Fig. 21: Transforming unfinished ruins. Markus Köhler, 2024.

research methodology:

Smithson, Robert. Hotel Palenque, monuments of Passaic New Jersey. PARKETT Books and Editions on Contemporary Art. Vol. 43, 1995. Accessed 30 Oct. <https://www.parkettart.com/books/p/43>.

Dooren, Elise van, et all. Making explicit in design education: generic elements in the design process. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 2014.

Unfinished buildings:

Brandlhuber, Arno; Hönig, Tobias; Kuehnert, Nikolaus; Ngo, Anh-Linh. Legislating Architecture - Gesetze gestalten! p.196-203. *ARCH+*, Vol. 225, p. 2016.

- Licata, Gaetano. Maifinito. Quodlibet Studio, 2014.

- Basilico, Gabriele. Incompiuto. La Nascita Di Uno Stile-The Birth of a Style. Ediz. Bilingue. Humboldt Books, 2018.

- Mauron, Gabriel. Homes on hold. traces of unfulfilled dreams. Benteli, 2023.

- Ippolito, Farbizia. Terra Sospesa. Lo Squaderno, Vol. 34, 2014.

- Arboleda, Pablo. Reimagining unfinished architectures: ruin perspectives between art and heritage. *Cultural geographies*, p. 227–244. Vol. 26(2), 2019.

- Arboleda, Pablo. Ruins of modernity, The Critical Implications of Unfinished Public Works in Italy. *International journal of urban and regional research*, p. 804-820. Vol. 41, 2018.

- Tornatora, Marina. Multiple City and Smart City. OPEN-DOMINO in the marginal and interrupted areas of the far south. *Festival dell'Architettura Magazine*, Vol. 6 (33), p.61-68, 2015.

Ruins:

- Hill, Jonathan. *The Architecture of Ruins: Designs on the Past, Present and Future*. Routledge, 2019.

- Pimlott, Mark. *The Public Interior as Idea and Project*. p.96 - 147. Jap Sam Books, 2016.

- Arboleda, Pablo. Book review: Paul Dobraszczyk, *The Dead City: Urban Ruins and the Spectacle of Decay*, London and New York. *Urban Studies*, Vol. 55 (13), p.3048-3053, 2018.

- Kathpalia, Rajeev. Celebrating the power of ruins. *Vastu-Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design*, 2018.

- Barasch, Dan. *Ruin and Redemption*. Phaidon, 2019.

Theoretical Framework:

This section represents my ongoing literature research and is sorted by concepts and themes on which I am working.

Use and Meaning:

- Kubler, George. *Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things*. Yale University Press, 1962.
- Abramson, Daniel M. *Obsolescence: An Architectural History*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Openness/ Determination

- Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. Penguin Books, 1972.
- Hernández, Jorge M.; Daglioglu, Esin K. *Open Architecture and its Discontents*. In *Footprint* 31, Vol. 16, p.3-8. Accessed 30 Oct 2024. <https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.16.2.6076>.
- Rabaça, Armando. *Spolia and the open work*. 2022. In *Footprint* 31, Vol. 16, p41-66. Accessed 30 Oct 2024. <https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.16.2.6076>.

Unfinished:

- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Harvard University Press, 1989.

Paradise:

- Fardin, Igor. *Here and not: The Project for an Incompiuto Eden*. Kaiak. *A Philosophical Journey*, Vol. 10, 2023.
- Rykwert, Joseph. *On Adam's House in Paradise: the Idea of the primitive Hut in Architectural History*. The Museum of Modern Art, 1972.

Platforms:

- Aureli, Pier Vittorio; Tattara, Martino. *Platforms: Architecture and the Use of the Ground*. E-Flux Architecture, 2019. Accessed 30 Oct 2024. <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/conditions/287876/platforms-architecture-and-the-use-of-the-ground/>.
- Utzon, Jørn. *Platforms and Plateaus. Ideas of a Danish Architect*. TRANSFER Global Architecture Platform, 2016. Accessed 30 Oct 2024. <http://www.transfer-arch.com/monograph/platforms-and-plateaus/>.

Time:

- Hill, Jonathan; Dow, Elizabeth. *Design on the past, present and future*. In *Bartlett Design Anthology | PG12*, 2017. Accessed 30 Oct 2024. https://issuu.com/bartlettarchucl/docs/design_anthology_unit12.

