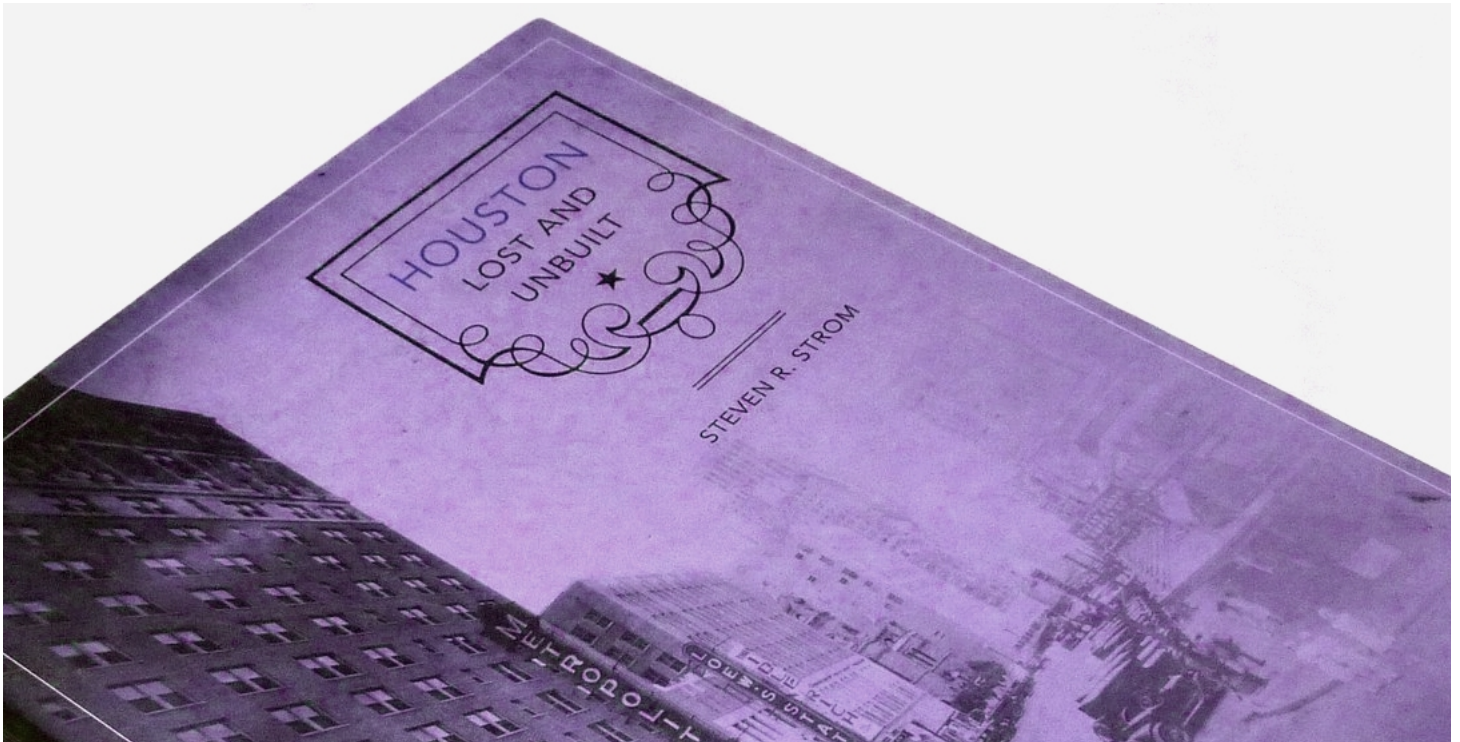


# Stakes of the Unbuilt

AUTHOR

Daniel M. Abramson



Steven R. Strom, *Houston Lost and Unbuilt* (University of Texas Press, 2010).

[View full image +](#)

Within recent architectural history exists a minor genre of publication: *Unbuilt America* (1976), *Unbuilt Oxford* (1983), *Unbuilt Netherlands* (1985), *Unbuilt Chicago* (2004), *Unbuilt Toronto* (2008), *Houston Lost and Unbuilt* (2010).<sup>1</sup> Rediscovered drawings and models celebrate futuristic cities and theoretical alternatives, unlucky competition entries and the simply forgotten. Here the unbuilt represents what-if urbanism, counterfactual place: “A History of the City That Might Have Been,” reads the Toronto subtitle. This work is peripheral to the practice of academic architectural history. It is populist in tone, even antiquarian in its fascination with lost worlds. Certainly it lies at a distance

**What are the characteristics and history of the “unbuilt”? How does it relate to architectural practice and the built? And, for architectural history, what are the stakes of the unbuilt? Why does it matter? What might it do?**

from the discipline's seemingly more serious theoretical and historiographical concerns.

DOWNLOAD PDF



Mark Osbaldeston, *Unbuilt Toronto: The City That Might Have Been* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008).

More generally though the unbuilt undergirds architectural history's master narratives. For several generations now, historians have filled their accounts of modern architecture with the unbuilt of Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Étienne-Louis Boullée, Tony Garnier and Antonio Sant'Elia, the Ecole des Beaux Arts and the Russian Constructivists, Le Corbusier and Archigram. Here the unbuilt drives the story of twentieth-century design. "Blueprints of the Modern Imagination" subtitles *Visionary Architecture* by Neil Spiller.<sup>2</sup>

## § 1

In this essay I want to examine more critically this category of the unbuilt. What are its characteristics and history? How does it relate to architectural practice and the built? And, for architectural history, what are the stakes of the unbuilt? Why does it matter? What might it do?

Writing on the unbuilt typically asserts an eternal human interest in the theme, harking back to the Tower of Babel. But it is demonstrably *not* true that architectural historians have always valued the unbuilt. Before the mid-twentieth-century, histories of architecture were accounts of the built, not the unbuilt, save for rarities like Donato Bramante's early sixteenth-century St. Peter's project or Gian Lorenzo Bernini's seventeenth-century Louvre scheme. From Russell Sturgis and A. L. Frothingham's *A History of Architecture* (1906-1915) to Henry Millon's *Key Monuments of the History of Architecture* (1964) today's famous unbuilt were all but invisible.<sup>3</sup>

After the Second World War some architectural historians, beginning with Emil Kaufmann and followed by Vincent Scully and Manfredo Tafuri, sought modern architecture's roots in the eighteenth-century unbuilt of Piranesi, Boullée, and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux.<sup>4</sup> The eccentric, often utopian schemes' spatiality, abstractions, and aspirations, seemingly so unlike what was erected in their time, provided a genealogy for historians' twentieth-century modernisms. The unbuilt helped modernism appear as a subterranean, oppositional movement bubbling to the surface.

The unbuilt as a distinct genre, worthy of separate attention in its own right, appeared still later, not until the 1970s. Architectural historian George Collins observed in the 1976 introduction to the seminal *Unbuilt America*, "Little study seems to have been made of the history of the unbuilt as such ... neither the history of worldwide Unbuilt nor of Unbuilt America has really ever been written."<sup>5</sup> The unbuilt has its own historiography.

The authors of *Unbuilt America*, Alison Sky, an art historian and artist, and Michelle Stone, a photographer and sociologist, had been founders in 1969, along with architect James Wines, of Sculpture in the Environment (SITE). SITE's interdisciplinary project engendered Sky and Stone's research into *Unbuilt America*, and was funded by NEA, Kress, Graham, and Rockefeller foundation grants. The 300-page book, with nearly 500 images, gathered together scores of unbuilt projects, historical and contemporary, by designers famous and obscure organized from A to Z; Raimund Abraham to Robert Zion.

Sky and Stone historicized the context for their recuperation of "forgotten dreams."<sup>6</sup> "The emphasis in the U.S. is shifting by necessity, from construction to reconsideration, reclamation, recycling and redevelopment ... this [is a] whole new wave of introspection."<sup>7</sup> By 1976 America was halfway through a decade of economic distress, diminished expectations, and in recovery from political trauma and social division. For those concerned with the built environment, recession, ecologism, and preservationism had put the brakes on modernist schemes and hubris, for worse and for better. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, published in English in 1974, became a touchstone for the power of the lyrical imaginary, "a zodiac of the mind's phantasms."<sup>8</sup> The invention of the unbuilt, as its own genre within architectural history, coincides with this cultural moment: chastened yet hopeful, celebrating the marginal the alternate, the poetic, and the experimental.

Many of the projects in the seminal *Unbuilt America* are self-conscious, utopian provocations meant to redirect architecture and society. These visionary unbuilt often represent the poetry of architecture to the prose of the built: allusive and abstract, opaque and ungrammatical, fragmentary and free. Abraham writes of his fantastical drawn theory as, “a mechanism to search for the universal quality ... the idea.”<sup>9</sup> Here the unbuilt underwrites the architect-philosopher ideal, the ambition for architecture to be pure creation of the singular mind, which the built, always collaborative, can never achieve. The visionary unbuilt represents architecture’s uncompromised creative ideal.

But other projects in *Unbuilt America* are more mundane, like an unrealized Thomas Jefferson observation tower, which came to naught due to contingency. These unbuilt embody history’s vicissitudes, not its grand trajectories: “unbuilt due to lack of funds” or “to death of a client”, “unsuccessful competition entries,” a “study,” or “pending.” They are accidental, not deliberate unbuilt, victims of chance, timing, and different directions taken.

We have, then, two sub-categories of the unbuilt, what we might call the visionary unbuilt, and the contingent. The distinction, Lucia Allais suggests, relates to the dimension of time.<sup>10</sup> Visionary schemes invite a forward glance, down one true, vanguard path to a reformed society and discipline. The contingent unbuilt, conversely, invite a backward glance, along multiple routes history might have gone, each with its own likelihood and validity; no privileged truths.

Most of the unbuilt in *Unbuilt America*, and in the master narratives of modern architecture, are of the visionary variety. Belief in the authority and autonomy of the architect has long underwritten architectural mythology, belying the complexity of actual architectural production, which is traversed by multiple agents from patrons to contractors, and contingencies that elude the architect’s grasp. In the twentieth century, vanguardism joined this ideology that regarded the architect as prophet, critic of the present, seer to the future. The visionary unbuilt secures architecture’s place within forward-looking modernity. The built/unbuilt dichotomy undergirds modernist historiography’s tradition/avant-garde dichotomy. More recently, the visionary unbuilt promotes architecture’s status as a form of dematerialized media, tuned to contemporary culture (the digital), architectural theory (e.g., Peter Eisenman), and historiography (e.g., Beatriz Colomina). Promoted by

architectural history, the unbuilt feeds the profession's evolving ideology.

The category serves other constituencies, too. At the time of its publication, *Unbuilt America* benefited from emerging interest in the conservation of architectural drawings, Sky and Stone noted, a subset of the strengthened preservation movement, which helped make available the book's trove of images. Indeed as a graphic medium, the unbuilt, especially its visionary variety, functions within the economy of fine art collecting by patrons and museums. Expanding markets seek commodities for sale. Exhibitions often accompany publications. Industrialist Howard Gilman's collection of visionary schemes, assembled in the late 1970s, now resides at MOMA, substantiating the dominant vanguard narrative of twentieth-century architecture.<sup>11</sup> The stakes of the unbuilt, since the genre's inception, have come to include dealers' profits and collectors' assets, curators' agendas and institutions' fortunes, along with architects' illusions.

## § 2

Now we may ask, what are the stakes of the unbuilt for architectural historians? Some of this may be illuminated in an essay by Harvard architectural historian Neil Levine, "Building the Unbuilt: Authenticity and the Archive," for the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.<sup>12</sup> In a special section on preservation, Levine argues against the posthumous erection in Buffalo, New York, of two Frank Lloyd Wright designs, for a funerary memorial and a boathouse. Boosters seeking an enhanced civic profile desired the Wright buildings. The boathouse was not even intended for the city.



Blue Sky Mausoleum, Buffalo NY, built in 2004 based on a design executed in 1925-1928 by Frank Lloyd Wright. Image after Ayres Photo.





Fontana Boathouse, Buffalo NY, built in 2007 based on designs executed in 1905 and 1930 by Frank Lloyd Wright. Image after David Oltra.

To Levine, however, dead men's drawings cannot verily be realized.

“In betraying the archive, the building of the unbuilt replaces its authentic record of the past with something that for many people will create not only a false impression of history but also ultimately debase the very legacy of the architect the building was meant to enhance.”<sup>13</sup>

Truth remains in the unbuilt, Levine asserts. Upon death, the architect's drawings are no longer anticipatory. They are mummified, life interrupted by death. Necessary changes in construction will stray without consent from the archived original. What was once preparatory becomes unbuilt, and to Levine unbuildable.

Here in a nutshell are some of the the stakes of the unbuilt for architectural history: authenticity and the archive, autonomy and creativity. And Levine claims, not unusual in the genre though no less surprising for it, that the unbuilt exceeds the built in truth value, and “can prove to be more authentic [than the built record] since it is usually immune” to restoration and reconstruction, neglect and reuse.<sup>14</sup> Another champion of the unbuilt, quoted by Collins, writes that the built represents but “a weak echo” of the unbuilt.<sup>15</sup>

That the unbuilt surpasses the built is a remarkable assertion. First, it draws a sharp line between the unbuilt and the built, and defines starkly the unbuilt in opposition to the built. Second, it reveals an unexamined presumption of much architectural history: that what is authentic in architecture is not the built thing and its vicissitudes but the expressed idea in its coherent purity, uninhabited by use, unchanged by time or contingency. Unbuilt is uncorrupted. To center evaluation upon architects' agency is one of

architectural history's core metaphysics and limiting horizons, which dichotomizing and valorizing the unbuilt as distinct from the built merely reinforces.

The architectural historian's own agency and identity is also served by this formulation of the unbuilt. The solely-authored text is architectural history's ideal and archetype, notwithstanding others' considerable influences, from colleagues to editors (howsoever acknowledged parenthetically). Architectural historians' implicitly undergird their own illusions of singular creativity when valorizing architects' idealized unbuilt.

The unbuilt as usually deployed in architectural history is dematerialized and essentially esoteric. An image or text in an archive drawer or library book, it is not there, big in brick and mortar, to be encountered by a multitude. "The evidence of the visionary is hidden from view in libraries and muniment rooms," writes architectural historian Howard Colvin introducing *Unbuilt Oxford*.<sup>16</sup> The unbuilt hides within the built. Esotericism supports architectural history's ideology. It is unavailable to the many. Its study depends upon specialized access and knowledge: admittance to collections, interpreting graphic marks upon a page. This is Levine's implicit argument, that "many people" will be deceived by building the unbuilt in Buffalo, "betraying the archive."<sup>17</sup>

In privileging the archive and the visual, the genre of the unbuilt thus cements architectural history's identity with its elder-cousin disciplines of art history and history. Studying buildings themselves might be the purview of the engineer or the amateur. Interpreting drawings and texts is the scholar's elite realm.

### § 3

The stakes of the unbuilt are high indeed. The unbuilt can embody mythical ideals of singular, autonomous, elite creativity, to profit the architectural profession, the academic architectural historian, and players of the art economy. From this perspective, the genre of the unbuilt is not marginal to architectural history. It may be, in its visionary strain, architectural history's ideal practice: esoteric and exclusive, text and image, pure conception of the singular mind serving a deterministic narrative, tracking one true path through history. But as high as the stakes of the unbuilt are, the genre has yet to be taken fully seriously by the discipline of architectural history.

By this I mean architectural historians have yet to pursue one of the central questions of the unbuilt. What if it had actually been built? I do not mean what the unbuilt would *look like*. Plenty of visual fantasies exist, now in digital form, to excite architects' imaginations. I mean the historian's question, what would be the conditions and consequences for building the unbuilt, to engage the contingencies of history, to transcend the divide between the two categories?

Historians sometimes entertain counterfactuals in this manner, to elevate contingency over determinism. The point of counterfactual history is not full-scale elaborations of alternate scenarios (i.e., parlor games of visualization), but a more fundamental theoretical objective, "to abolish inevitability," argues a collection of essays entitled *Virtual History*.<sup>18</sup> From this viewpoint, taking seriously the probabilities and consequences of alternatives undermines history's certainties: that the present is the past's only possible outcome; that history proceeds by master narratives towards enlightenment or chaos, salvation or freedom. The purpose of counterfactual history, building the unbuilt, is to open up the past, present, and future to alternative visions and narratives, contingency and agency. "Virtual history is a necessary antidote to determinism," declares Niall Ferguson, editor of *Virtual History*.<sup>19</sup>

Taking the architectural unbuilt seriously then should test architectural history, not reify it. The unbuilt should not just be a blueprint of the avant-garde, a deterministic temporal glance forward, but rather a critique of the discipline's epistemology and a serious, historical, interdisciplinary look backwards. What, for example, would have been history if Cedric Price's famed unbuilt Potteries Thinkbelt (1964-66) had actually been realized as a dispersed academic network in a deindustrialized English county?<sup>20</sup> How might local society have developed, internally and in relation to the nation and the state? What might have been the impact on higher education and the British welfare state of this scale of investment in human capital? What would have happened to an actualized Potteries Thinkbelt in the recessionary 1970s and thereafter, if the land and infrastructure had been utilized then and not left empty for later? And, if Price's grandest vision had been realized, what would happen to the architect's canonical identity as lonely visionary?

For architectural history to pursue such questions about the *consequences* of the unbuilt — and not just to visualize its forms — would be to open architectural history more fully to history. It has long been axiomatic to architectural history that form matters. It still should, I think, to distinguish the



field from other historical disciplines insensitive to the built environment's formal nuances, languages, and traditions. Yet we have little sense, outside the internal circuits of architectural history and theory itself, of how architecture might matter to lived, historical experience. What would it mean to take seriously the contingent unbuilt, not just visualize it, but actualize it, to play out in history the unbuilt, the architectural what-if? Building out the unbuilt in this manner, engaging it with contingency not just hagiography, would not serve the architecture profession's design agenda, but architectural history's more general disciplinary identity. How might architecture not just embody but effect human action? How does the built environment mediate human struggle and consciousness? Architectural history at present seems to possess neither the methodological means nor the theoretical inclination to engage fully with these transdisciplinary questions. Architectural history remains largely irrelevant to other historical fields.

These then are the ultimate stakes of the unbuilt: to test the capacities of architectural history, not ignore its limits. To critique its metanarratives, not reinforce its certainties. To interrogate its ideological services. To inquire what architectural history does and doesn't do, can and can't do, and why. To ask where might assistance be sought from and rendered to other disciplines.

To ask these questions, to engage seriously the stakes of the unbuilt, is to aid the maturation of architectural history. Engaging the genre of the unbuilt as a historiographical, theoretical, and methodological construct helps the discipline see limits, blind spots, and ideologies. Engaging the unbuilt in this manner may help the discipline achieve the same degree of self-reflection engaged in by its humanities kin. The stakes of the unbuilt then are precisely the stakes for architectural history: to reflect critically upon method and to develop interdisciplinarity. The unbuilt represents opportunities for architectural history barely glimpsed in the genre so far.

*Thank you especially to Lucia Allais and Alison Isenberg for commentary on drafts of this essay.*

✓ Transparent Peer Reviewed

Daniel M. Abramson, "Stakes of the Unbuilt," *Aggregate 2* (February 2014), <https://doi.org/10.53965/LIWX7784>.

\*Transparent peer-reviewed

- 1 George Collins, "Introduction" to *Unbuilt America: Forgotten Architecture in the United States from Thomas Jefferson to the Space Age*, ed. by Alison Sky and Michele Stone (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); Howard Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983); Cees Nooteboom, *Unbuilt Netherlands* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985); Martha Thorne, *Unbuilt Chicago* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2004); Mark Osbaldeston, *Unbuilt Toronto: A History of the City That Might Have Been* (Toronto: Dundas, 2008); Steven R. Strom, *Houston Lost and Unbuilt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). [↑](#)
- 2 Neil Spiller, *Visionary Architecture: Blueprints of the Modern Imagination* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2006). [↑](#)
- 3 Russell Sturgis and A. L. Frothingham, *A History of Architecture* 4 vols. (New York: Baker & Taylor/Doubleday, 1906-15); Henry Millon, ed., *Key Monuments of the History of Architecture* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964). [↑](#)
- 4 Vincent Scully, *Modern Architecture: The Architecture of Democracy* (New York: Braziller, 1961); Emil Kaufman, *Architecture in the Age of Reason: Baroque and Postbaroque in England, Italy, and France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955); Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976). [↑](#)
- 5 Collins, 7. [↑](#)
- 6 Alison Sky and Michelle Stone, ed., *Unbuilt America: Forgotten Architecture in the United States from Thomas Jefferson to the Space Age* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), vii. [↑](#)
- 7 Sky and Stone, vii. [↑](#)
- 8 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 22. [↑](#)
- 9 Raimund Abraham et al., *[Un]Built* (Vienna and New York: Springer, 1996), 113. [↑](#)
- 10 Aggregate, *Governing By Design: Architecture, Economy, and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012). [↑](#)
- 11 Terence Riley et al., *The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002). [↑](#)
- 12 Neil Levine, "Building the Unbuilt: Authenticity and the Archive," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67/1 (March 2008): 14-17. [↑](#)
- 13 Levine, 17. [↑](#)
- 14 Levine, 14 [↑](#)
- 15 Collins, 1. [↑](#)
- 16 Colvin, vii. [↑](#)
- 17 Levine, 7. [↑](#)
- 18 Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 190. [↑](#)
- 19 Ferguson, 89. [↑](#)
- 20 J. Stanley Mathews, *From Agit-Prop to Free Space: The Architecture of Cedric Price* (London: Black Dog, 2007). [↑](#)