

Unbuilding Obstructed Futures

On the Temporality and Materiality of Dismantling Infrastructure

Call for Papers for a Three-Day Workshop at the University of Augsburg, Germany

17 – 19 March 2027

Modernity has thrived on the idea that we can “build the future”. Advancing technologies, infrastructures, and institutions were believed to open a growing realm of possibilities. Ideas of progress, growth, innovation, and production still hold that promise. However, the promise has become increasingly doubtful. Nuclear reactors, coal-fired power plants, open-pit mines, dams, canalized rivers, data centers, asphalted streets – the continued presence of these infrastructures threatens environmental stability in different ways. They block migratory routes of animals as well as the material flow through ecosystems; they continue to emit toxic residues and waste; or they facilitate resource-intensive production and consumption patterns. The continued presence of these infrastructures and their long-term effects no longer seem to create an open future full of possibilities, but an obstructed future full of liabilities (Folkers 2021).

Rather than building an open future, the environmental humanities as well as sociologists and philosophers of time have variously discussed whether the dominant collective relation to the future will not rather be one of living in the ruins (Tsing 2015), repairing what is broken (Jackson 2014) and grieving for what is lost (Cunsolo and Landman 2017). Beyond perspectives on a world of rubble, we want to ask how an obstructed future can be unbuilt. Understood in a wide sense, “un-building” evokes not only the technical act of controlled demolition, but more importantly the deliberate and socio-material character of phasing out, decommissioning, dismantling of destructive infrastructures as well as the following processes of restoring, revitalizing, reimagining what remains.

The workshop thereby taps into a growing field of scholars investigating practices of unmaking, undoing, and unbuilding in the context of infrastructure studies (Shove 2012; Feola et al. 2021; van Veelen and Kuchler 2026) and its interdisciplinary anchoring ranging from anthropology, geography, architectural theory and sociology to history and philosophy. We aim to raise and discuss questions on how unbuilding processes are politically effected, socially contested, and materially organized. How do unbuilding processes stabilize or unsettle the linear temporality of modernity? How is unbuilding structured on a socio-material level? How are the technological and political-economic means as well as the knowledge necessary for unbuilding distributed? What can historical cases tell us about unbuilding processes? And how can we think about unbuilding in relation to more established concepts such as (re)production, repair, care, or abandonment? We are interested in empirical case studies, historical as well as theoretical approaches that help us to understand the material and temporal characteristics of infrastructural unbuilding in light of global environmental crises.

The three-day workshop (starting on Wednesday at noon; ending on Friday at noon) will bring together scholars from across the humanities and social sciences. Through presentations, interactive discussion formats, and a collective site visit to a local river restoration project, we will discuss unbuilding as an emerging theme in infrastructure

studies, connect a diverse field of disciplines to each other, share the insights, challenges and open questions of our research, and learn about unbuilding in the field.

The workshop is an in-person event and will take place in Augsburg, Germany. As an outcome of the workshop, we intend to publish revised versions of the submitted papers in an edited volume with a university press by summer 2028. Limited funding is available to cover travel and accommodation costs of participants who lack institutional funding.

Please submit an abstract of max. 500 words together with a short biography of the author(s) by 31 October 2026 to Maximilian Mai Pieper (maximilian.pieper@uni-a.de). Please indicate in your submission email whether you would require funding support. Successful applicants will be notified by the end of November 2026.

References

- Cunsolo, Ashlee, and Karen Landman. 2017. *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
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- Folkers, Andreas. 2021. "Fossil Modernity: The Materiality of Acceleration, Slow Violence, and Ecological Futures." *Time & Society* 30 (2): 223–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X20987965>.
- Jackson, Steven J. 2014. "Rethinking Repair." In *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, edited by Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot. MIT Press.
- Shove, Elizabeth. 2012. "The Shadowy Side of Innovation: Unmaking and Sustainability." *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management* 24 (4): 363–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09537325.2012.663961>.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- Veelen, Bregje van, and Magdalena Kuchler. 2026. "Beyond Linear Progress: Towards a Material-Temporal Understanding of Infrastructural Unmaking." *Futures* 175 (January): 103730. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2025.103730>.