

## Introduction

# Ripples of Loss: On Ephemerality, Obsolescence, and the Archive at the Abbey of Saint-Denis

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This century has seen a flurry of publications on ephemerality in material culture. The related disciplines of art history, architectural history, cultural studies, and urban studies have foregrounded the fleeting objects and sites that have long evaded canons that privileged permanence.<sup>1</sup> This ephemeral turn challenged the founding premises of these material culture disciplines. As Michael Ann Holly writes, “The very materiality of objects with which we deal presents historians of art with an interpretive paradox absent in other historical inquiries, for works of art are at the same time lost and found, past and present.”<sup>2</sup> For Holly, the practice of art history entails ascribing yesterday’s

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<sup>1</sup> See: Dominique Bauer and Camille Murgia, *Ephemeral Spectacles, Exhibition Spaces and Museums, 1750-1918* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Swati Chattopadhyay, “Ephemeral Architecture: Towards a Radical Contingency,” in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White (London: Routledge, 2020); Rahul Mehrota and Felipe Vera, *Ephemeral Urbanism: Cities in Constant Flux* (Santiago: ARQ, 2016); Richard Taws, *The Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013); Sarah Bonnemaïson and Christine Macy, eds, *Festival Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 98.



Figure 1. West façade of the Basilica of Saint-Denis, north of Paris, France. Photo by Taylor Van Doorne, 2024.

objects new meanings today.<sup>3</sup> What about those objects that are not present at all? How do vanished or deteriorated objects challenge disciplinary boundaries? How do they push against common methodologies?

Loss has long concerned artists, architects, makers, and historians. In this volume of *react/review*, articles address the issue of loss through the lenses of ephemerality, impermanence, and obsolescence. Authors in this volume explore the temporal horizons of material culture, articulating how creators or communities grapple with loss and impermanence, or how historians assemble fragments, fill archival lacunae, and contextualize the obsolete. In the capitalist twentieth century, obsolescence and disposability were built into objects and the environment to make way for future accumulation.<sup>4</sup> However,

in this volume, we consider obsolescence beyond the scope of capital. For example, the Abbey of Saint-Denis, a medieval site explored in the introductory case study below, was not made obsolete by economic conditions, but rather political ones that sought to suppress the religious institution it served. Just as the functional monastery of Saint-Denis was made obsolete through the processes of dechristianization and museumification, authors in this issue consider the process of obsolescence of anachronistic social customs, spaces, and building practices.

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<sup>3</sup> Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel M. Abramson, "Obsolescence and its Futures," in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 231-243.



Figure 2. François Debret, *Church of Saint-Denis*, 19th century copy of 17th century engraving. Inscription below by Debret: “Copy of an untitled work that represents all of the dependent churches of the Congregation of Saint Maur. This work was to be part of the *Monasticum gallicanum* by Dom [Michel] Germain [...]” (translation by Taylor Van Doorne). Courtesy of the Archives nationales (France).

### Case Study: Saint-Denis in François Debret’s Archive of Thought

Among architect François Debret’s papers for his 1814-1846 restoration of the Abbey of Saint-Denis (fig. 1) is a fragile graphite drawing on onionskin depicting the medieval monastery as it stood in the seventeenth century (fig. 2). It is a copy of an earlier representation of the grounds and served as Debret’s reference of the abbey’s vanished early modern footprint.<sup>5</sup> It was Debret’s task to restore the crumbling Gothic church, which had been eroded by creative and destructive forces. In the 1790s, revolutionaries stripped the basilica of its valuables, destroyed its royal tombs, and damaged its sculptural detail. When Debret was tasked with restoring the damaged

<sup>5</sup> Debret’s *extrait* is a copy of an engraving from Dom Michel Germain’s *Monasticum gallicanum*, produced in the late seventeenth century.



Figure 3 (above). François Debret, site plan of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, 19th century (undated). Courtesy of the Archives nationales (France).

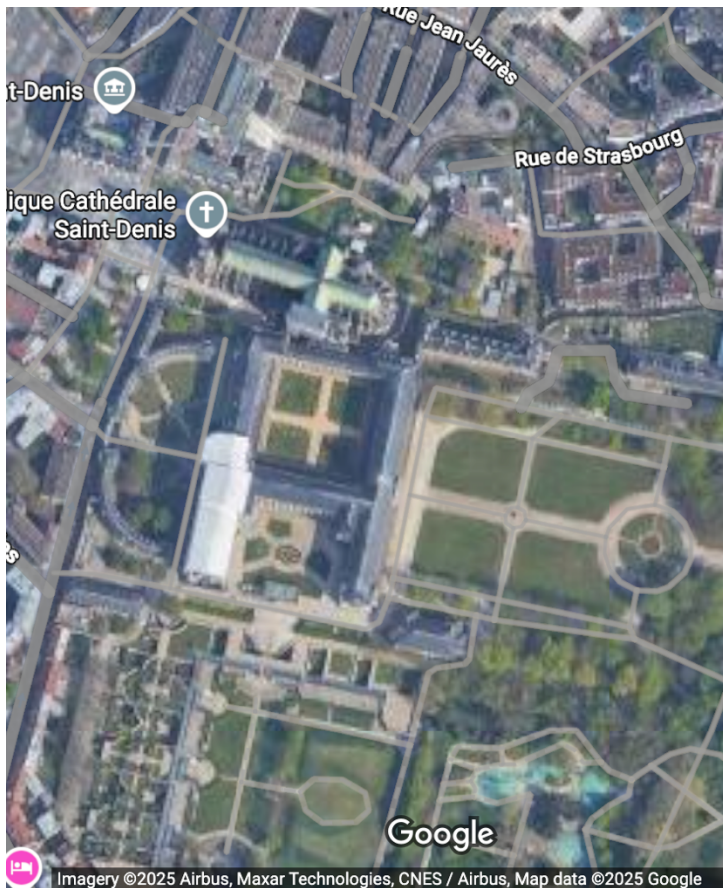


Figure 4 (left). Google Satellite screenshot of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, 2025.

building, he turned to the historical record to recapture the spirit and aesthetics of the medieval past in his restoration. However, little of the medieval site depicted in the drawing remained. Even the ancillary monastic structures flanking the abbey's southern wing were constructed in the eighteenth century (fig. 3-4).<sup>6</sup>

By the nineteenth century, the basilica was in disrepair and the medieval abbey was mostly demolished. We expect such profound changes in an urban landscape over the course of centuries. However, in Debret's postrevolutionary context, this material loss was inflected with more immediacy. Romantic public discourse mourned the ruinous state of Gothic buildings, reflecting a rising nostalgia for an imagined medieval past.<sup>7</sup> Popular figures like Victor Hugo decried the demolition of historical monuments and advocated for the preservation of medieval architecture. For Romantics, the modern age had destabilized institutions and eroded a unified French national identity; a loss symbolized by the image of the crumbling Gothic church.<sup>8</sup> Debret's renovations at Saint-Denis paralleled this discourse, but without romanticizing the aesthetics of the ruin. His interventions sought to disguise the ruination with repair work and Gothic Revival ornamentation (fig. 5-6).

Debret's repairs to the basilica may have sought to reverse the damages of time and revolution, but his onionskin *excerpt* (or copy) imagines the abbey in its pristine medieval form with conventual buildings, cloister, and gardens. The modern copy pines for a vanishing urban fabric. As Andreas Huyssen writes, "Temporality and spatiality are necessarily linked in nostalgic desire."<sup>9</sup> We feel such nostalgia when we behold picturesque architectural ruins where "the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible." The same can be said for this archival document, especially since the urban fabric depicted in the drawing was nearly razed by Debret's time. Yet unlike previous architects who worked on the side, he believed the study of

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<sup>6</sup> Léon Pressouyre, "Did Suger Build the Cloister at Saint-Denis?" in *Abbot Suger And Saint-Denis: a Symposium*, ed. Paula Lieber Gerson (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 229. Marcel Aubert, "Le Portail du Croisillon Sud de l'Église Abbatiale de Saint-Denis," *Revue Archéologique* 29/30 (1948): 18.

<sup>7</sup> Victor Hugo, "A Note on the Destruction of Monuments in France (1825)" and "War on the Demolishers! (1832)" Translated by Danny Smith. *West 86<sup>th</sup>* 25, no. 2 (2018): 224-248; François-René Chateaubriand, "Des Églises Gothiques [troisième partie, livre premier, chap. viii]," in *Génie Du Christianisme Ou Beautés de La Religion Chrétienne: Suivi de Défense Du Génie Du Christianisme* (Paris: Impr. Migneret, 1802), 23-28; Prosper Mérimée, *Rapport au ministre de l'intérieur: monuments historiques* (Paris: Impr. Royale, 1840).

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Halmi, "Romanticism, the Temporalization of History, and the Historicization of Form." *Modern Language Quarterly* 74 (2013): 363-89.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," *Grey Room* 23 (2006): 7.



Figure 5. François Debret, ornamentation “executed in marble in the Florentine style” for Saint-Denis, 1829. Courtesy of the Archives nationales (France).

Saint-Denis’s historic imprint was critical to the project of restoration. In other words, the *extrait* was critical to the architect’s conceptual reconstruction of the site. It evoked the spirit of what had been lost long of the site context before the Revolution stripped the basilica down to its frame. The document expresses the inherent ephemerality of the city in the *longue durée* of history.

The archival *extrait* is a sliver of Debret’s larger historical imagination, and a record of nostalgias past. Stuffed in a folder among predecessors’ and his own plans of Saint-Denis, the document is stored with print representations of the abbey and sketches of archaeological finds. This folder is one of dozens organized in eight boxes that document his plans for Saint-Denis and his studies of the surviving medieval mosaics, sculpture, paintings, and stained glass. The material variety of documents range from the sturdy wove paper to the delicate onionskin of the *extrait*. Some documents are so fragile that they are sealed with striped tape and are unavailable for viewing. Together, these drawings and recreations informed Debret’s resurrection of a medieval syntax. Today, they are the ephemeral material traces of his thought process and practice.



Figure 6. François Debret, ornamental designs for a crossing in the bay of the Winter Choir, 19th century (undated). Courtesy of the Archives nationales (France).

Though Debret had himself reported on the condition and process of restoring Saint-Denis toward the end of his tenure, his papers at the Archives Nationales constitute three decades of his historical imagination and working process.<sup>10</sup> Taken as an ensemble, this collection constitutes an *archive of thought*, an idea we borrow from scholars of Walter Benjamin who have mobilized this concept in their attempts to decipher the fragments of the historian-philosopher's unfinished scholarship.<sup>11</sup> How can researchers reconstitute the arguments of a project like Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* using only citations and research notes? We may pose a similar question about Debret's interventions at Saint-Denis, which were nearly all reversed by his successor Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc for their archaeological inaccuracy. There is thus little trace of Debret's ridiculed restoration left for the historian to study. How can Debret's archive of thought help us understand how the architect approached his historically informed restoration? Can we as historians reconstruct his dismantled reconstruction? In a way, our own historical inquiry toward recovering a lost past using scant material traces and archival documents parallels the architect's work at the basilica.

The archive's hundreds of drawings, plans, and images capture how Debret tackled the issues of loss and recovery. However, the archive is arranged synchronistically, with few documents dated and scant paratext for further clarification. If, as Arlette Farge writes, "The archival document is a tear in the fabric of time, an unplanned glimpse offered into an unexpected event," then how do historians make sense of these hundreds of dated and undated tears shuffled together?<sup>12</sup> Just as scholars of Benjamin must contend with what Farge calls the "fragmented phrases" of the archive to piece together what *Passagen-Werk* (*Arcades Project*) could have been, we must think of this collection of working documents as gestures toward the totality of Debret's short-lived intervention, which was later removed by Viollet-le-Duc.<sup>13</sup> In the

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<sup>10</sup> François Debret, *Notice sur les diverses constructions et restaurations de l'église Saint-Denis, par M. Debret, ... lue dans la séance publique annuelle des cinq académies le lundi 2 mai 1842* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, imprimeurs de l'institut, rue Jacob, 56, 1842).

<sup>11</sup> This concept comes from Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, trans. Esther Leslie, ed. Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, and Erdmut Wizisla (London: Verso, 2015), 2. Other scholars have grappled with similar issues in working with Benjamin's archival fragments. See also, Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press: Belknap Press, 1999). Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller: Tales out of Loneliness*, ed. Sam Dolbear, Ester Leslie, and Sebastian Truskolaski (London: Verso, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 32.

face of a vanished or unfinished object, the historian of material culture scrapes what little coherent information they can from archives that are “forever incomplete.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, we observe incompleteness and ephemerality in Debret’s *extrait* on three registers: as evidence of the impermanence of the urban environment, as a fragile archival document itself, and as a fragment of the architect’s conceptual archive. Historians, material culture scholars, and creators must navigate these contingent layers, and other such ripples of temporal and material loss.

### Contributions to the Volume

Authors in this volume of *react/review* engage with ephemerality, loss, obsolescence, and the role, capabilities, and limitations of archives in preserving the past. Previous volumes drew upon the annual theme of the Art History Graduate Student Association’s Graduate Student Symposium at University of California, Santa Barbara. In the absence of the 2024 symposium, Volume 5’s theme, “From Ephemeral to Obsolete: The Vanishing Historical Object,” was chosen by the co-managing editors. Volume 5 is a special issue comprising research spotlight articles, which are open-ended inquiries that discuss new research findings, speculate on pressing research questions, or address methodological issues encountered in fieldwork, archival work, and design practice.

The first research spotlight, “Scans, Residues, Misrecognitions and Other Materialities of Loss,” is an interview by Evan Pavka of architect and artist Benjamin Busch about his virtual recreations of vanishing Berlin queer spaces for his project *Scanning the Horizon* (2022-2024). They discuss how traditional archives privilege the preservation of certain perspectives and histories, while marginal communities, especially ones that congregate in discreet interiors, are often omitted from the historical record. Using a Leica BLK 360 scanner, Busch attempted to archive the city’s “queer archipelago,” including squats, darkrooms, and clubs with varying clientele and entry protocols. But such spaces evade capture, and archiving their communities and subcultures necessarily involves the loss and transformation of visual information.

In “Spaces of Labor in the Social Clubs of British India: Obsolescence in Denial,” Nisha Shanghavi examines persistent colonial labor practices in the Tollygunge Club in Calcutta. She uses photographs to contextualize her ethnographic fieldwork, childhood memories of Tolly club, and interactions with the attendant *didis*. The term obsolescence, which usually describes the temporal horizons of material culture and buildings under capitalism, functions here to describe how old colonial labor practices persist in the postcolonial present. The piece observes how the hierarchies of server and served are preserved in ordinary spaces and interactions.

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<sup>14</sup> Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 54.

In “Denial and Dissolution: Architecture’s Battle Against Entropy,” landscape architect Eric Futerfas contemplates the architectural profession’s preoccupation with permanence in the era of climate change. He is critical of the current “construction paradigm” and its reliance on CO2 intensive materials like concrete, which are also difficult to reuse or recycle. The piece ponders the deliberate ephemerality of Black Rock City and modularity in the Metabolist movement as ways that builders have wrestled with impermanence. The piece is exploratory, applying a wide range of lenses, from the laws of thermodynamics and Buddhist teachings, to architectural sites like the recently demolished Nakagin Capsule Tower.

Annemarie Kok’s “Living Documents: On the Role of the Audience in the (After)life of Participatory and Ephemeral Art” grapples with the challenges of researching the history of twentieth-century participatory art. Kok details her search for “living documents” or past participants of ephemeral art installations and events like the Evenstructure Research Group’s 1972 *Waterwalk Tube*. While the ephemerality of such pieces lies in their event-like or “airy” nature, prior participants conserve fleeting participatory art in memory. Kok advocates preserving these memories through interviews and discusses the challenges of such work.

Likewise, Laura A. Lucci and Paul Stoesser’s “An Archive within an Archive or, Archive as Repertoire” grapples with the translation of performance to archive. Their article examines the Florentine playwright Baccio Checchi’s 1589 *Descrizione*, a technical document about the staging of the play *The Exaltation of the Cross*. Documenting the complex and multimedia production of renaissance theater, the *Descrizione* is an artifact and a manual, a physical archival record and instructions for embodied, site-bound performance. In articulating how they approach such a document, Lucci and Stoesser parse the tensions between the record and the recorded.

In “Memory, Material Experience, and Consumption: The Printed and Illustrated Ephemera of the Profumo Archive in 20th-Century Buenos Aires,” Sandra Szir and Andrea Gergich explore a collection of commercial ephemera that is not yet fully catalogued or available to the public. Owned by the Buenos Aires Museo, the archive of the 1910-1980s Profumo & Br. printing house contains labels, advertisements, and prints, but also industrial and production documents. The authors provide visual analysis of some of the collection’s labels and interpretations of their production processes, while exploring the implications of the “archival turn” for visual culture studies.

Volume 5 concludes with Jena Marble’s review, “Trending Today, Forgotten Tomorrow: The Ephemerality of AI-Generated Art on Civitai.” In it, she understands AI-generated art on Civitai and other new platforms as constituent of a new era of disposability. Today, these platforms are global sensations, mesmerizing users with a

flood of fungible visual novelty. Drawing from extant online imagery, AI art reaches unselfconsciously across genres and styles, and is wielded to capture public attention above all else. In light of this new form of visual mass production, Marble contemplates the qualities that have given art lasting value as cultural heritage up until now.

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