



The Letter

The Letters ABCD is Steiner Architecture's inaugural magazine. Necessarily open-ended, protean, confident, cheeky. It strives to be more than a glorified business card. But can it? Never mind. It showcases the studio's built projects, unbuilt projects, preliminary arguments, not-so-preliminary arguments, inchoate ideas.

This issue is dedicated to some of the things that happen when one travels. **Architecture on the Telephone** looks at the challenge of having to describe a building without the use of images. **Capriccio Elettrico** sketches a future for the Italian Autogrill bridge. **Pit Stop** is an introduction to our latest project, set

along the legendary Grossglockner Hochalpenstrasse. And **Dreamlands** evaluates a recent publication on architectural travel by August Sarnitz.

Sincerely,
The Editor



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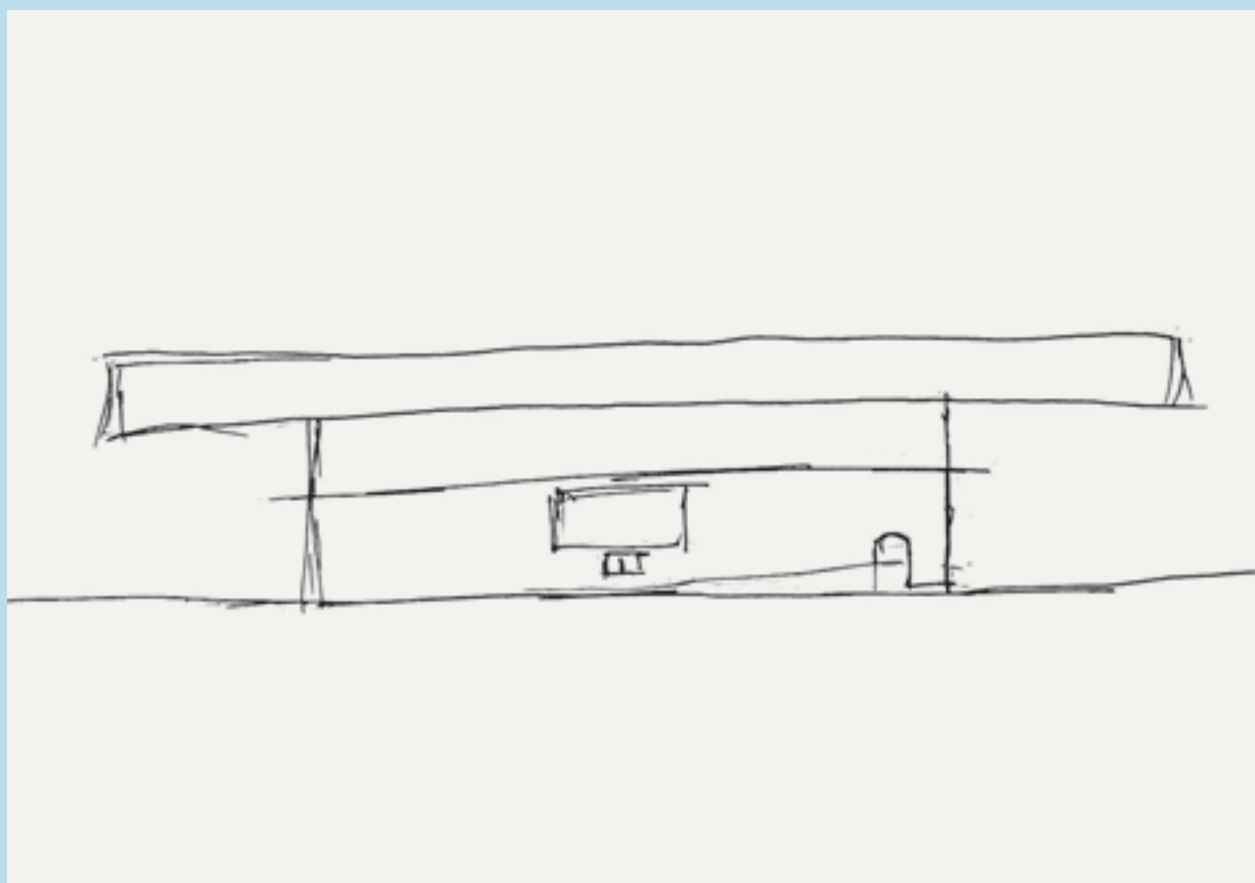
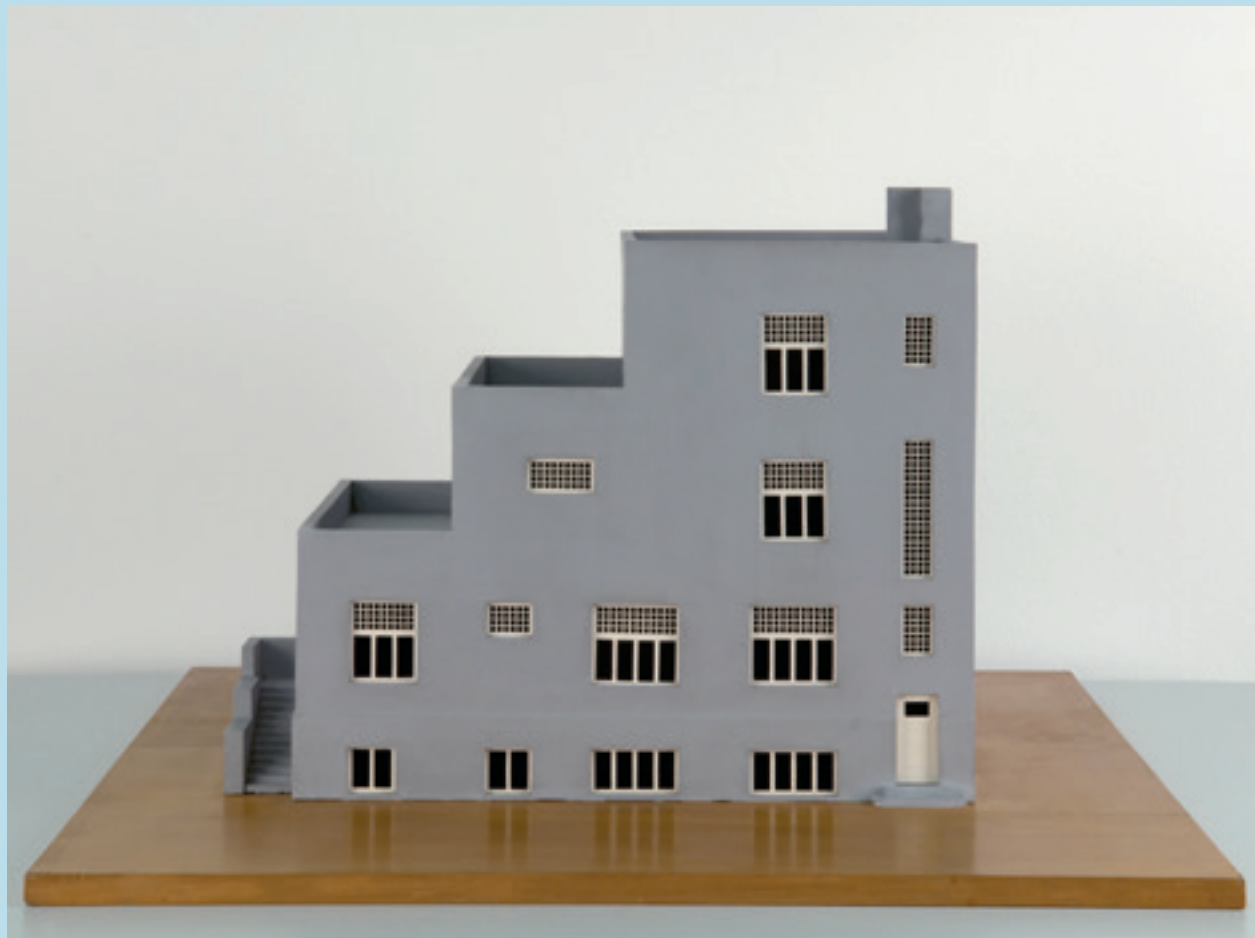
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1. Architecture on the Telephone

F picks up the phone.
It's the blind neighbour
from the construction site
in Salzburg. He wants to
know what the façade on
his side will look like.



F holds the phone away from his face. He's not trained for this. No architect really is.

Secret facilities and the visually destitute aside, not having an image of a building is pretty much an impossibility now. Like polio, the transmission of architecture exclusively through words has been eradicated. It's a quandary we will not find ourselves in again.

The unremembered past was a different story. In the absence of technologies to record and transmit images, relying on our descriptive power to convey the aspect of buildings would have been common, and the standard practice before the invention of the printing press which made images cheap (cheapish).¹ Which meant that if you couldn't travel to see a building, you were probably condemned to imagine it.

But some people liked it that way. Not far from us, the ever-cantankerous architect Adolf Loos believed that a good description of a building was as good as a photograph of it. Not merely as good, but better! One can write the Parthenon, he claimed.

We're not so sure.

To add to this curious discussion, the people of Strozzigasse² decided to play a little game. Educated, elite, but a game nonetheless.

Person A and Person B sit in separate rooms. Person A is presented with a photograph of a building which Person B cannot see. Person A calls Person B and describes the building over the phone. Person B's task is to draw the building based solely on that description. This is architecture by dictation.

And because everything that has to be interpreted can be *misinterpreted*, the results are funky and freakish. Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall, Adolf Loos's Scheu House, Kiyonori Kikutake's Edo-Tokyo Museum, Vincenzo Scamozzi's Villa La Rocca, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's Woodcutter's House... they have all been described over the phone, translated into words, then translated back into drawings.

F, however, refused to play.

ABOVE: Adolf Loos's Scheu House. Wood and acrylic model. Photo @mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien.

BELOW: Adolf Loos's Scheu House dictated and interpreted. Steiner Architecture ff, 2023.

¹ This fascinating topic has been considered by a number of historians. Our esteemed Mario Carpo has surveyed the awkward attempts to convey buildings without images before the invention of the printing press: rhymes, recipes, matrixes,—there's no end to human creativity. The German Richard Krautheimer wrote of the shoddy epigones of Jerusalem's Holy Sepulcher built across Europe from limited travelers' descriptions. See Carpo, Mario. "How do you imitate a building that you have never seen? Printed Images, Ancient Models and Handmade Drawings in Renaissance Architectural Theory". *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, Bnd. 64 (N/A 2001): 223–233; Krautheimer, Richard. "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture'". *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 5 (N/A 1942): 1–33. See also Moya, Max. "Who has Seen Adolf Loos?" *Images of Adolf Loos's architecture 1898–1927*". Dr. Techn. diss., Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 2021.

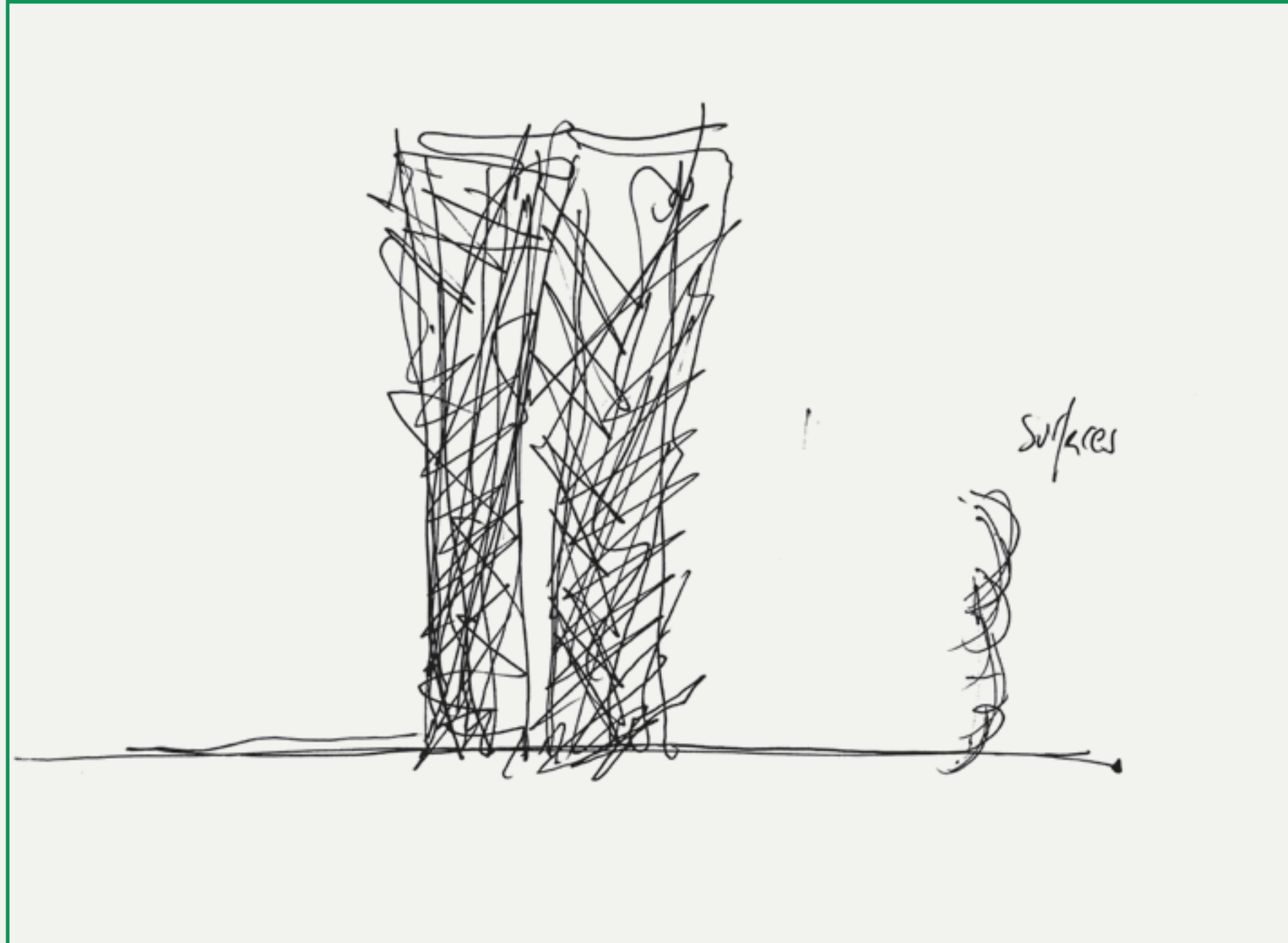
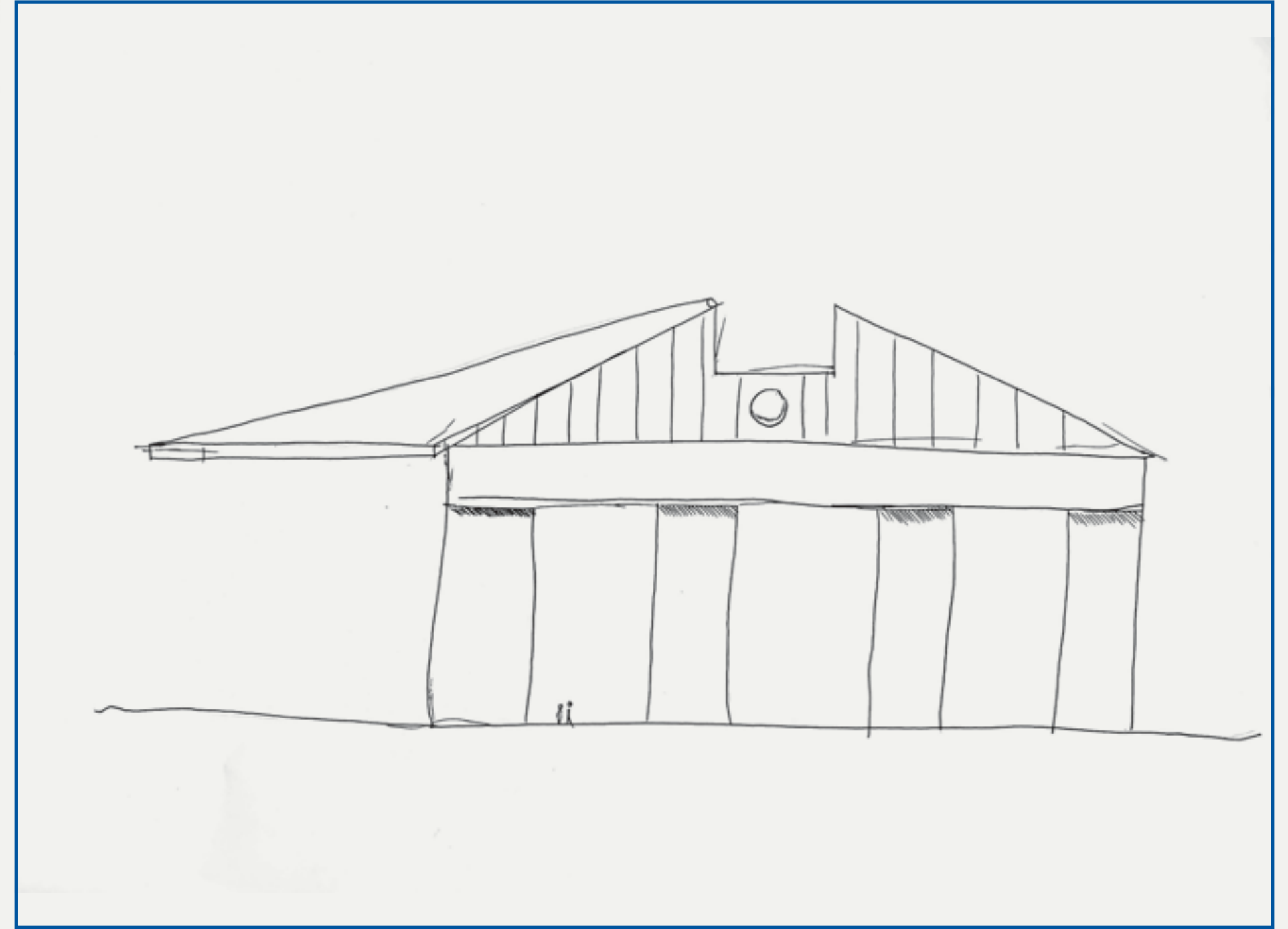
² Strozzigasse 31/1 is the Vienna address of Steiner Architecture ff.

RIGHT: Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. Photo by Henrik Hagerup, 2022.

BELOW: Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles dictated and interpreted. Steiner Architecture ff, 2023.

NEXT PAGE ABOVE: Kiyonori Kikutake's Edo-Tokyo Museum dictated and interpreted. Steiner Architecture ff, 2023.

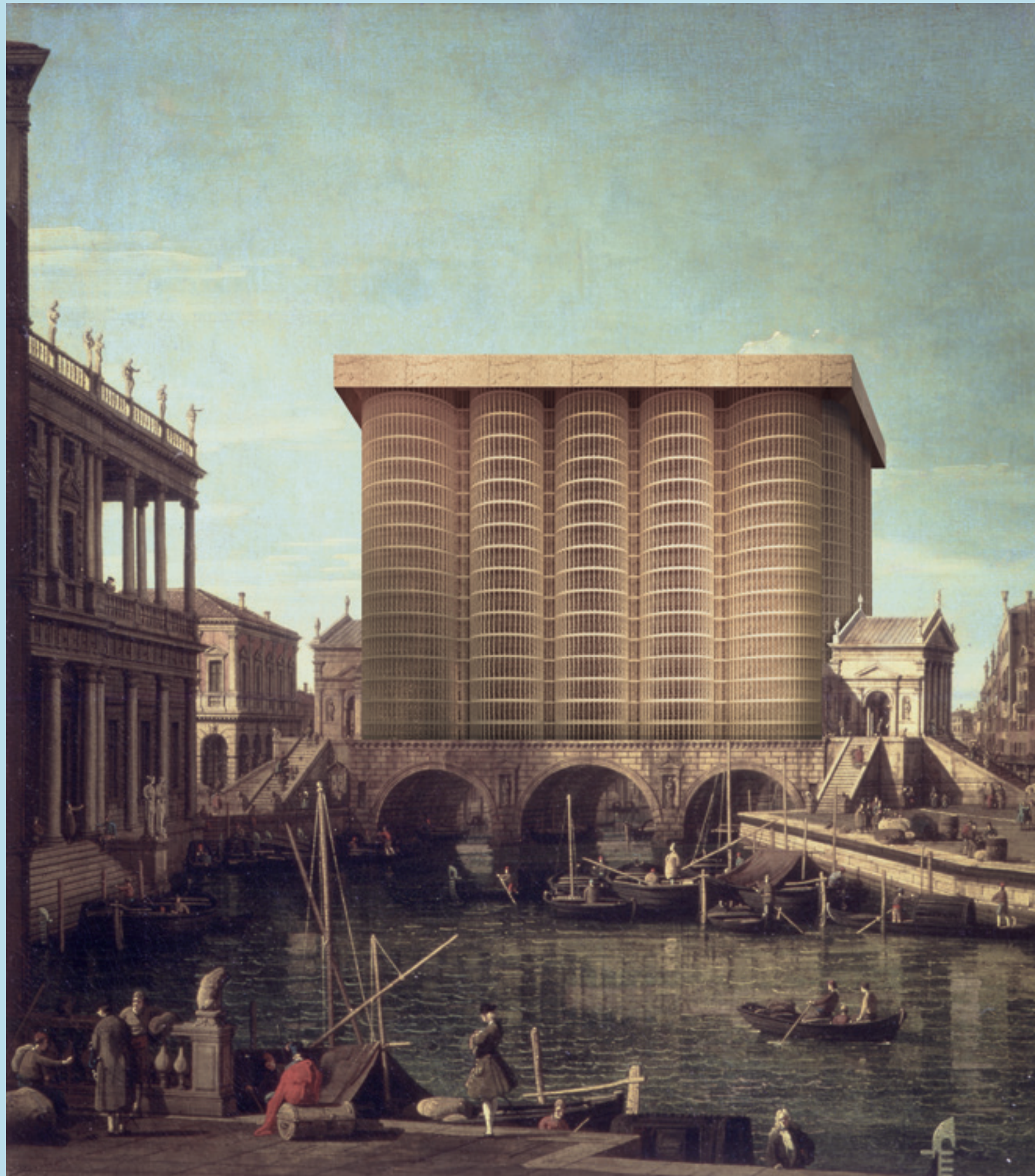
NEXT PAGE BELOW: Kiyonori Kikutake's Edo-Tokyo Museum. Photo by Yu Kurihara, 2023.





2. Capriccio Elettrico

When the
Autogrill bridge
died there were
no mourners.



These paradigmatic pit stops fraught the Italian highways, and for decades their daring leap across the lanes expressed enthusiasm for the car with total candour. No trace in them of the guilt that would later hang over anything redolent of oil. They were true precincts of contemplation and merriment, harmless, like the sites of *fête champêtres*, now unenjoyable in a millennium when staring out a highway bridge feels like contemplating the end of the world.

Tired, the proprietors of these iconic Italian establishments asked themselves where else they might find commuters and other travellers to sell things to. They found them in airports and train stations. They became the barons of Duty Free.

Unreproachable—what was the future of the car then, except growing anxieties over how to fuel it? That is, until the advent of the electric-powered car. Which begs the question: what is different about pit-stopping in the era of the electric engine?

The answer is refuelling time: while a gas tank can be filled in minutes, an electric engine might take between 20 and 50 minutes to charge. In a sense, it's the gas station that changes, the refuelling establishment that devolves into an augmented Autogrill, rather than the Autogrill organically developing a second life.

And before the idea falls into the claws of philistine vulgarity it's the duty of conscientious petrolheads to ask themselves how to shape this transformation.

But will the revenant bridge over the highway look any different in the age of the lithium-ion battery? And what do you really do in 50 minutes?

It's the question of the old bridge-with-a-program: like the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, Pulteney Bridge in Bath, or Palladio's project for the Rialto Bridge in Venice, gloriously illustrated by Canaletto in his *Capriccio con edifici palladiani*.

The rhapsody of the electric car hasn't been written yet.

LEFT: The bridge over the Italian highway in the age of the electric car. Collage over Canaletto's *Capriccio con edifici palladiani* (1756–1759), Steiner Architecture ff, 2023. Reproduced with permission of the Galleria Nazionale Parma.



3. Pit Stop

What is relentlessly curvaceous, potentially deadly, visually stunning, and mighty cold? The Grossglockner Hochalpenstrasse, Austria's most famous road.

The year was 2021 and perched up there in glorious solitude was a wooden inn called Mankei, inoculated against the bitter winter, as if whittled-down by natural selection.

Here was our next commission. The innkeeper came merrily striding down the path. What's that in his arm? Snuggled between his bicep and his chest were a couple of baby marmots, or *Mankei* as the Austrians call them. Aha! That explained the name!

The inside was rustic, as Alpine rest stops are wont to be. With a tinge of folksy and a touch of Spartan. Warmly Spartan. It became clear that however comprehensive the revamp would end up being, the sense of friendly tenacity had to be retained.

Meetings with the client came and went. Mankei would be a meeting place for all the

Euro-motorheads, to whom the road's hairpin curves would be butterflies in the stomach of a young lover. So a pavilion in steel and glass was to be added—a heresy to some government officials who shall remain nameless. But reason prevailed and construction began.

Then winter came and lived up to its reputation, setting in extra early—think snow in September. And in October construction was mandatorily interrupted, only to be resumed in May.

Even in the better months, conditions were strenuous. One day, a portable toilet was being transported by a crane. The crane lost control of it, sending the little green porta-potty sliding down the mountain.

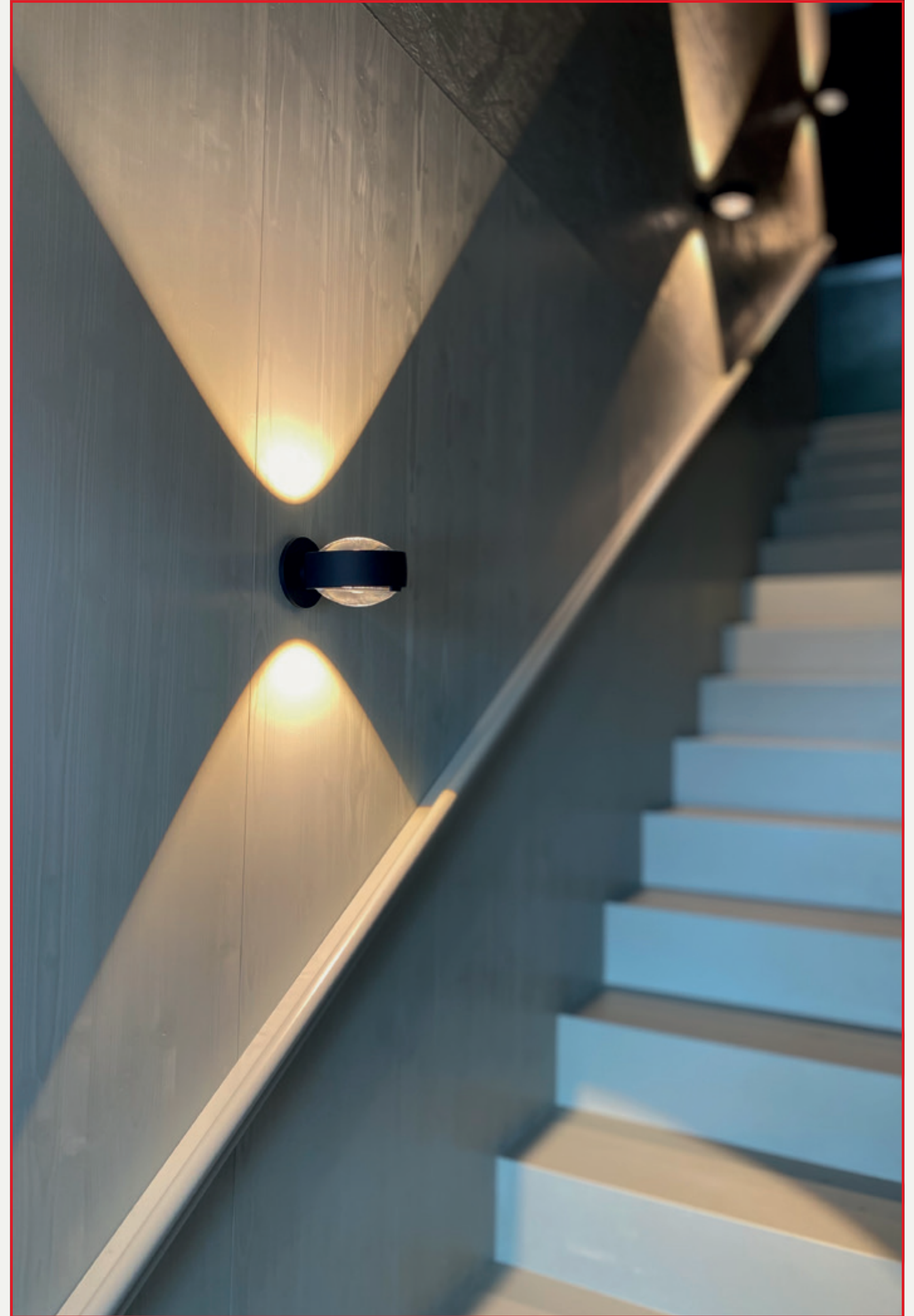
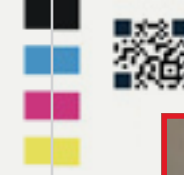
But that's nothing compared to when we had to fly a portable toilet by helicopter to a site in Salzburg. We're getting hooked on adversity.



LEFT: Mankei looking tiny along the Grossglockner High Alpine Road. Photo by Malte Dressel, 2023. Marmot photo by Jimmy Howson, 2023.

NEXT PAGE LEFT: Dauer Porsche 962 in the new Mankei pavilion. Photo by Jimmy Howson, 2023.

NEXT PAGE RIGHT: Interior of the revamped cottage. Photo by Steiner Architecture ff, 2023.





4. DREAMLANDS (A book review)

August Sarnitz, *Dreamlands*.
Löcker Verlag, Vienna, 2023.

Highway 95, close to
New York City. Photo by
August Sarnitz, 1982.

August Sarnitz has been studying the life of Austrian émigrés for the better part of his life. In *Dreamlands* he turns his attention to the travels of someone he's hardly ever spoken of. His own.

The book is made up of 83 lightning-speed chapters, the order carefully considered. Each one is devoted to a photograph Sarnitz has taken, and the city where this happened lends the chapter its name. Then there's a brief text on the left. But that's the only regimentation.

As exegesis of the city in question the texts are deliciously unhelpful. As evidence of the mental activity actuated by travelling, they could hardly be bettered. *Dreamlands* propounds several ideas without the pressure of conciliation: this can be true, it can also not be true. The author is happy to let fragments be fragments. He looks at inconclusiveness with enviable maturity.

We find the myth of Narcissus cropping up in many incarnations. And the fixation with Odysseus (a traveller too!) and the Cyclopes becomes especially relevant in Sarnitz's meditations on

photography—"who am I? I am nobody". This is someone trying to piece himself together from the things that caught his attention. We are what we love(d).

America comes through as the mirror image of Europe, and the photos toy with the degraded rank that the US has forever held in the mind of Europeans. That country is represented more than any other, and among cities the Los Angeles area gets the most chapters, together only with Rome and Vienna. Naturally—the life of Austrian architects in California is Sarnitz's métier.

Memory, on the other hand, is the ligature. Memory and forgetfulness. Is it possible to remember? Is it preferable? How much of memory is invented?—a question asked, fittingly, in the Los Angeles chapter dedicated to Sarnitz's dear *Blade Runner*. And never more beautifully laid out than in his chapter on Florence, and in the brilliant Viennese chapter that closes the book with magisterial mystery.

Above all, this is the work of someone who's been free.

—MM