



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? Nevermind. It showcases the studio's built projects, unbuilt projects, preliminary arguments, not-so-preliminary arguments, inchoate ideas.

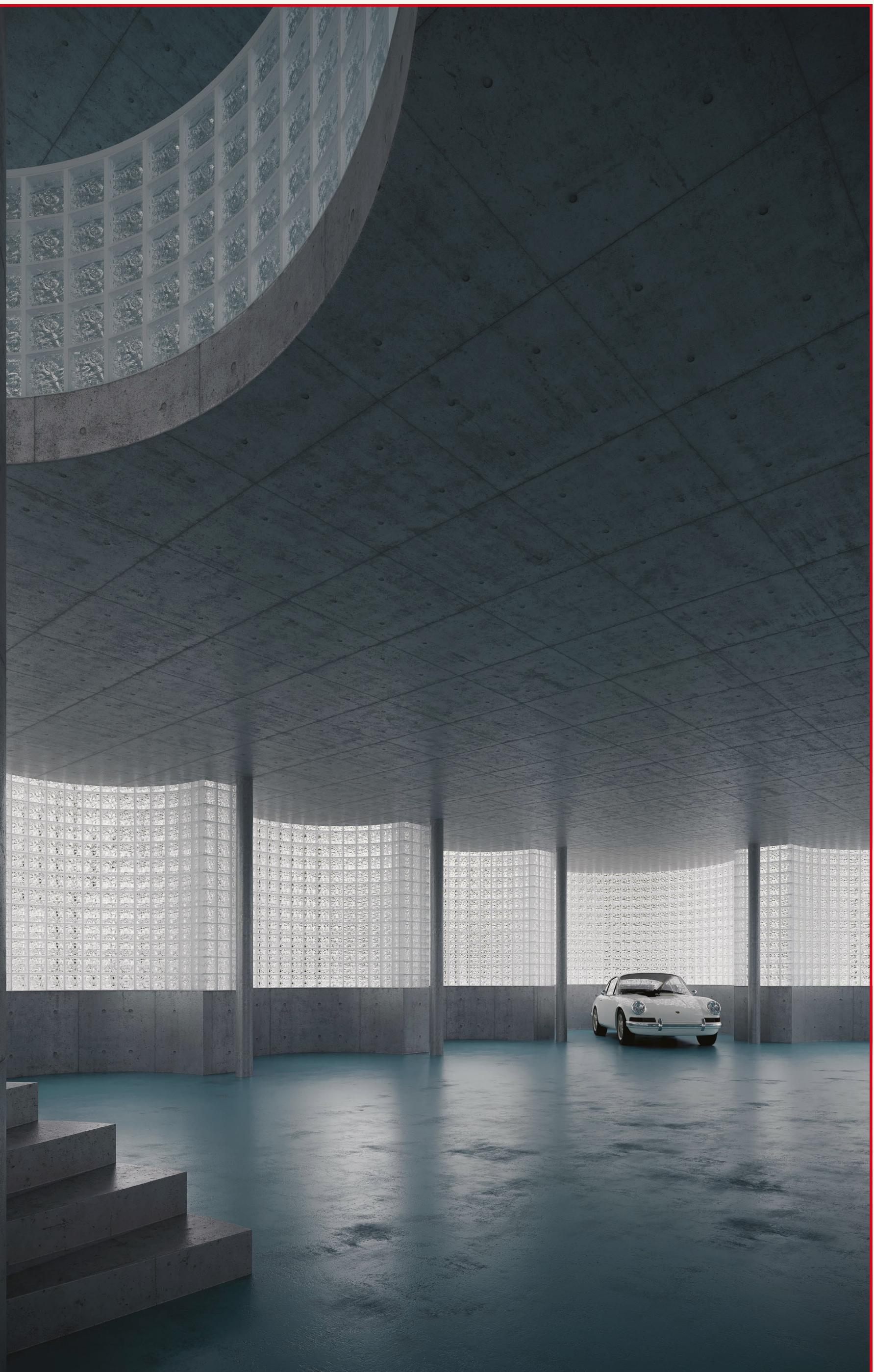
Does reality always look better on a screen? **Definitely maybe** features an unbuilt gallery in Vienna that languishes in electronic files but has become the office archetype. **The rumble in the duplex** is a pitch for an editorial photo session of boxers sparring in an Austrian penthouse. **If it hasn't been photographed, it hasn't been built** by rock-

star photographer Florian Holzherr is an aperçu of contemporary architectural photography. **Telescopes** describes what an exhibition we designed two years ago using optical lenses would have felt like. And **Peeping Tom** introduces Clemens Fantur and his analog photographs of F.A.T's chalet on Austria's most famous scenic road.

Sincerely, The Editor



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1. Definitely maybe

“You loser, you haven’t built anything for me yet”.

He said it with affection.

He’s a brazen client, a self-made man. He claims he finally wants to build the gallery we designed six years ago. Now and then it’s the same cruel trick. Bombastic messages and uncommitted phone calls.

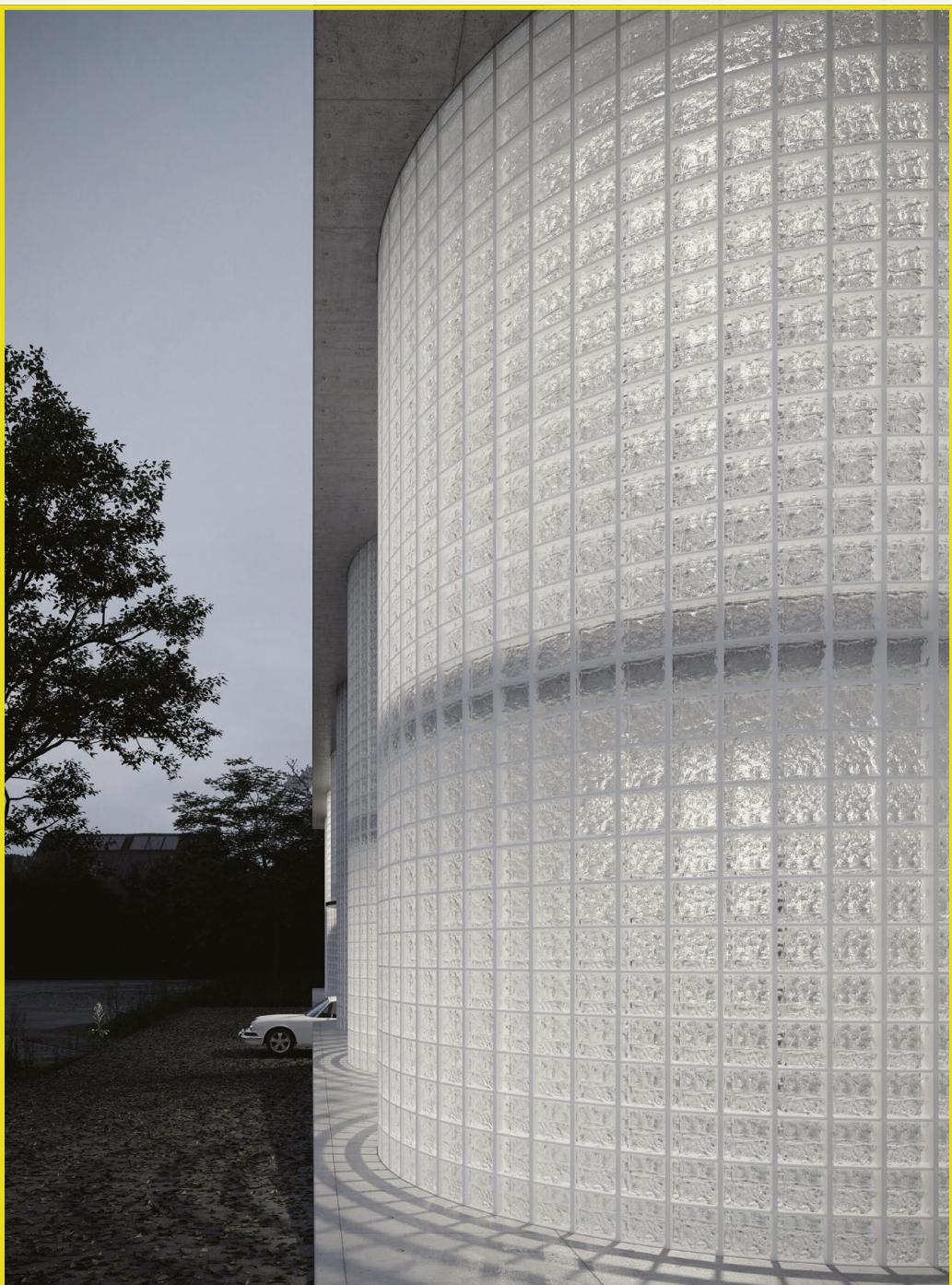
Morsels of hope.

It's a private gallery for his dozens of roadsters and sedans outside Vienna. A private museum. Glass block cylinders would make up the outside like translucent grain silos, topped by a robust concrete frieze that lends the building the air of a Greek temple. The inside is as open as a nineteenth century machine-room, the light is sacrosanct, like an abandoned cathedral. Concrete columns that taper down the middle sustain the ceiling. Yet all the grit of the machine age and the primitive power of exposed concrete was to be tempered by the aquamarine floor and the floor-to-ceiling velvet curtain that opened for the Porsches, like the entrance to a belle époque brothel.

To augment the kinky substory concealed in such details, the museum included a bachelor's studio in the mezzanine level, so one might sleep among the metallic concubines below. Just like these futuristic fantasies, the building would remain unrealized, entombed in PDF and JPEG files.

The private museum became the office cold case, to which all sorts of excuses and words of prevarication attached: we'll call you, maybe next spring, perhaps, if, possibly, definitely, let's talk. Below the wounds every such turn of phrase inflicted, the museum solidified into a paragon of sorts that we began looking back to for inspiration in other commissions, no matter how different the use, size, or location. It reincarnated as a gallery in Southern California. It became an assembly plant in the Middle East, and it became the outside of a shopping center in Vienna. Someone saw it as a bathroom in Salzburg. Corners and details popped up in a house for a collector in Hollywood. As such the private museum does not exist in actuality, but it exerts its power over nearly every single project in our database. We say this with an amount of gratitude to our patron and unwitting enabler: the Private Museum has made us. Our pixel-based archetype.

Left: Main gallery space. Project by Steiner Architecture ff, 2019-2022. All images by Reflexiv Architecture, 2019 – 2022.



Left: Glass blocks turn the building into a Japanese lantern at night.

Below left: The afternoon Viennese light would give the concrete surfaces a warm tan hue.

Right: The staircase leading to the bachelor's studio in the mezzanine. On overcast days the inside would be bathed in blueish light. Like any project that has been protracted over the years, it's seen a number of reincarnations – now one storey, now two stories.

Below right: View of the gallery space from the bachelor's studio in the mezzanine.

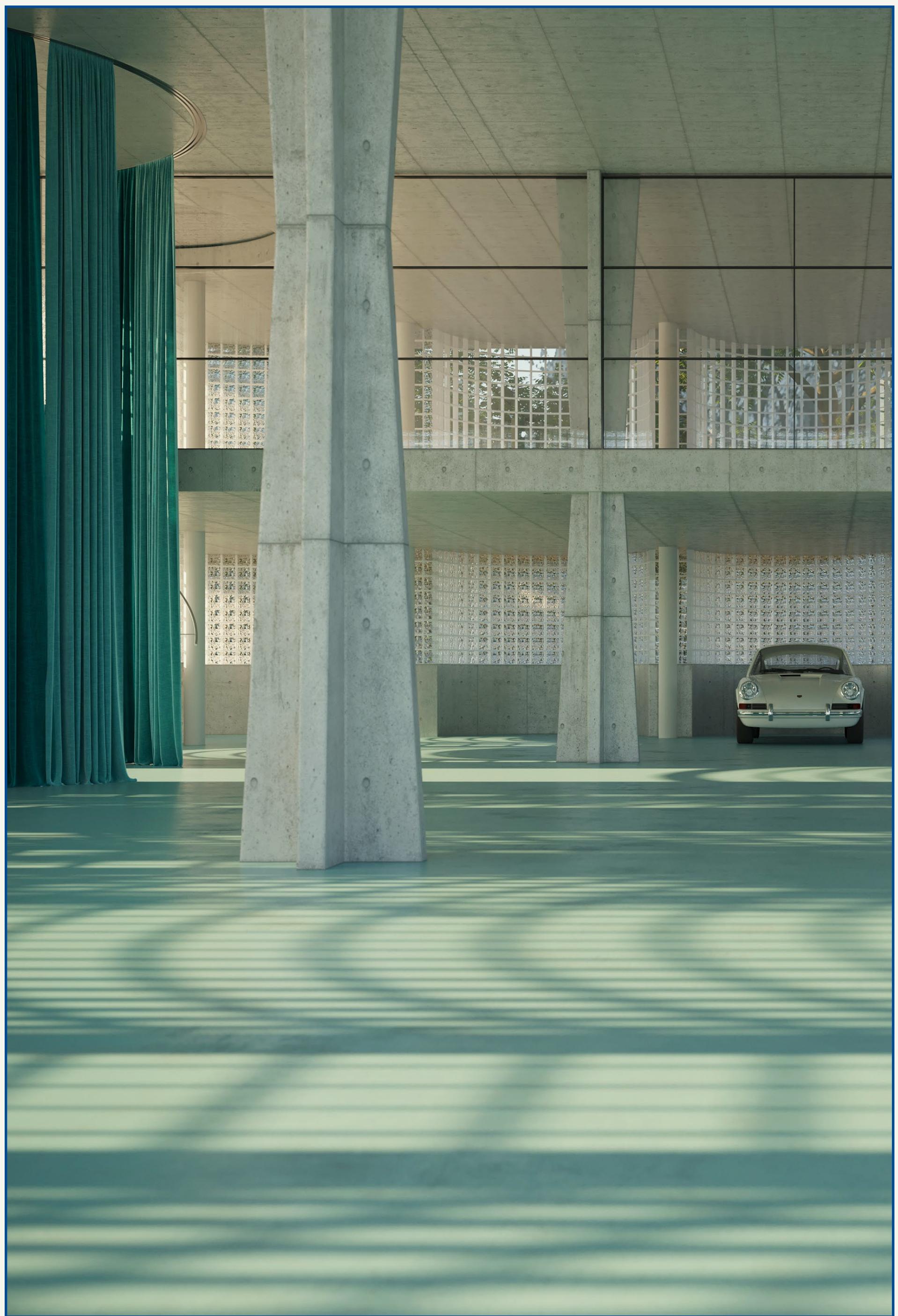
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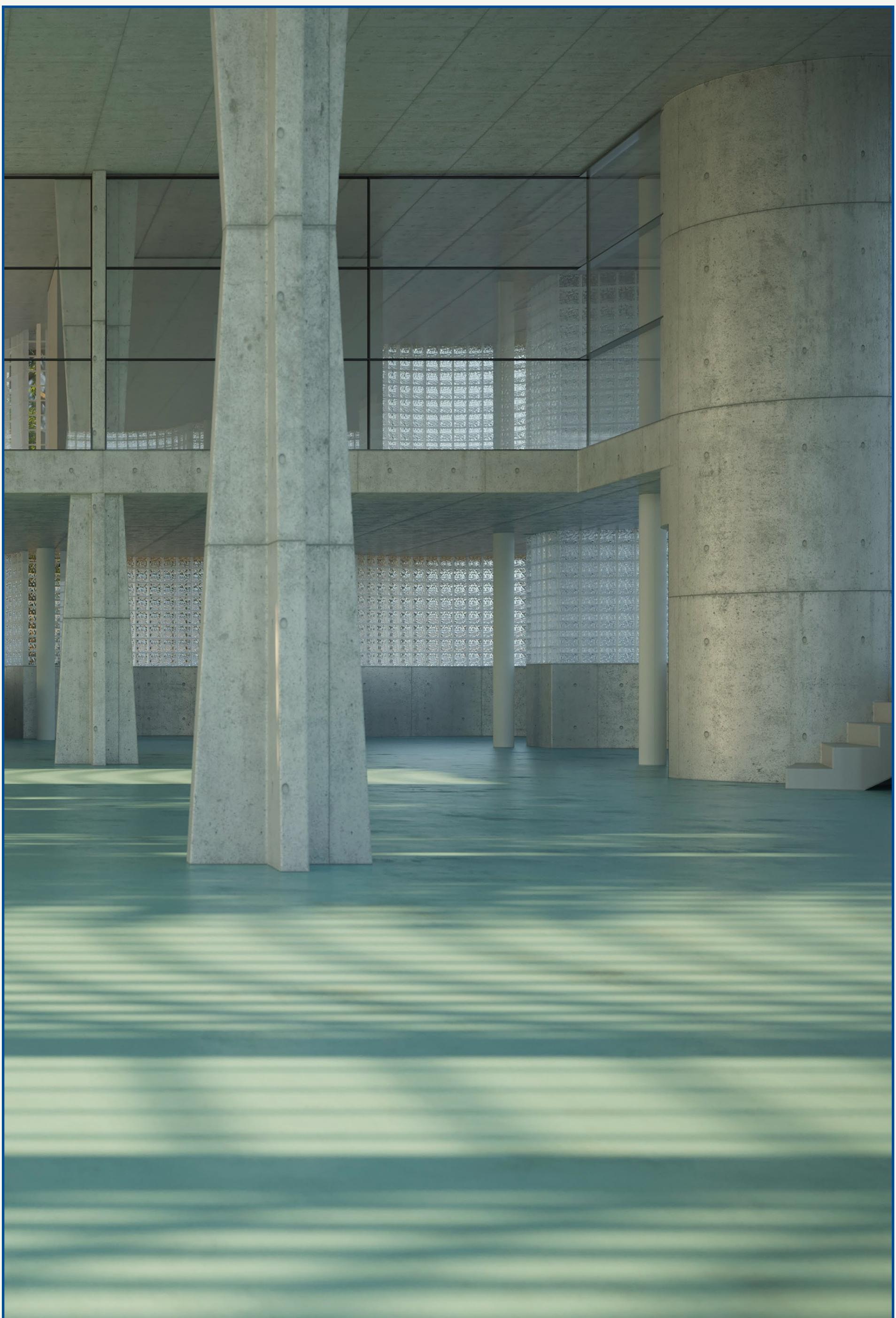
The grid-like pattern of the glass blocks would cast fanciful shadows on the linoleum floor, their curvature shifting as the sun moves through the sky. Notice the green velvet curtain muffling the entrance.

Project by Steiner Architecture ff, 2019-2022. All images by Reflexiv Architecture, 2019 – 2022.













2. Telescopes

Imagine looking at Renaissance tapestries through a telescope.

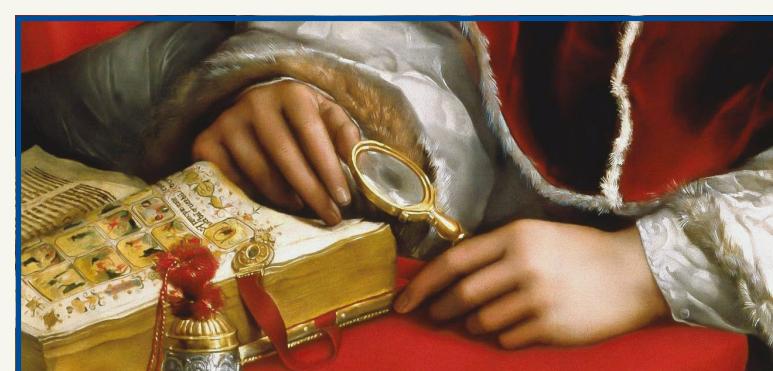
You place your eye on the eyepiece and what do you see? Maybe the sparkle of light on the pupil of a yappy Bichon Frise rendered in silk threads

– or is it a Maltese? The drowsy eyebrow of a Spanish Mastin sticking his head through a wall, the smooth shading obtained through the succession of discreet bands of different coloured threads. Look through the next telescope: it's aimed at the severed head in Pieter Coecke van Aelst's Allegory of Pride. The next telescope is really a fake: it's a microscopic view of the ludicrously laborious work of millimeter-wide threads, with lose fibers like disheveled hair. Over there: it's the dark outline of the treacherous hand of the Gibeonite holding a moldy piece of bread to King Joshua. The human eye revels with the intricacies of threads up close. Procrustean exercise of forcing bands of cotton into images. It wants the microscope. Picture a show built around the yearning to see farther. And deeper.

Picture yourself walking into an exhibition room and being handed binoculars. Or opera glasses. And magnifying glasses. Picture the majesty of a six meter wide Belgian tapestry, four and a half meters tall, seen from the opposite end of a gilded gallery, and then using a telescope to zoom in and enjoy what the naked eye cannot, to feel the warmth of textile that distance has dissolved. The telescope compensates for lost intimacy. Look right! Pope Leo X holds a magnifying glass in his right hand to look at his illustrated manuscript in a painting by Rafael. He too is yearning.

In late 2022 the Kunsthistorisches Museum announced a small competition to design an exhibition. Some of the tapestries that Pope Leo X had commissioned Raphael Sanzio for the Sistine Chapel were going to be displayed in

the museum's gilded galleries, in dialogue with textiles from the museum's collection, plus some bits and pieces thrown in just to put everything in context. In our competition entry, large galleries of the museum were allocated to tapestries only, where they were to glow in their own light, enhanced by the use of telescopes. The curatorial voice, desperate to be heard, was gagged to the baseboard level, sober, lest it interferes with the nobler artwork. Small rooms and hallways were earmarked for smaller items and multimedia explanations. Our presentation took the form of a 2:26 minute movie that followed the structure of Jean Luc Godard's trailer for his 1963 Contempt (Le Mepris). BIENTÔT. DANS. CET. MUSÉE. Ludicrous images glaringly lifted from the internet proposed the following: that everybody likes a microscope.







3. The Rumble in the Duplex

Amateur boxers sparring in a penthouse, like straight out of the Jeff Wall playbook¹. Someone skipping rope. Athleticism and unobstructed movement highlight the jaw dropping amplitude of the space. Gear underscores details: a gym bag over the kitchen counter, a bloody mouthguard next to the French coffee press. A few Easter Eggs to thicken the plot: sparring hinted at the fraternal story behind the commission, a photo of the mythical Japanese architect Tadao Ando in his youth as a boxer was glued to a wall on the back, while a photo of a mirror restaged Neil Leifer's iconic shot of Muhammed Ali. It was too daring.

Who reads architecture magazines anyway? Who reads Domus or Casabella? Who reads Log, El Croquis and San Rocco? Not potential home owners. They don't read Perspecta or AA Files. These golden standards of architectural media serve only to increase an architect's cultural capital, an abstract form of wealth that can be cashed exclusively at cultural state commissions, or tenure-track teacher applications.

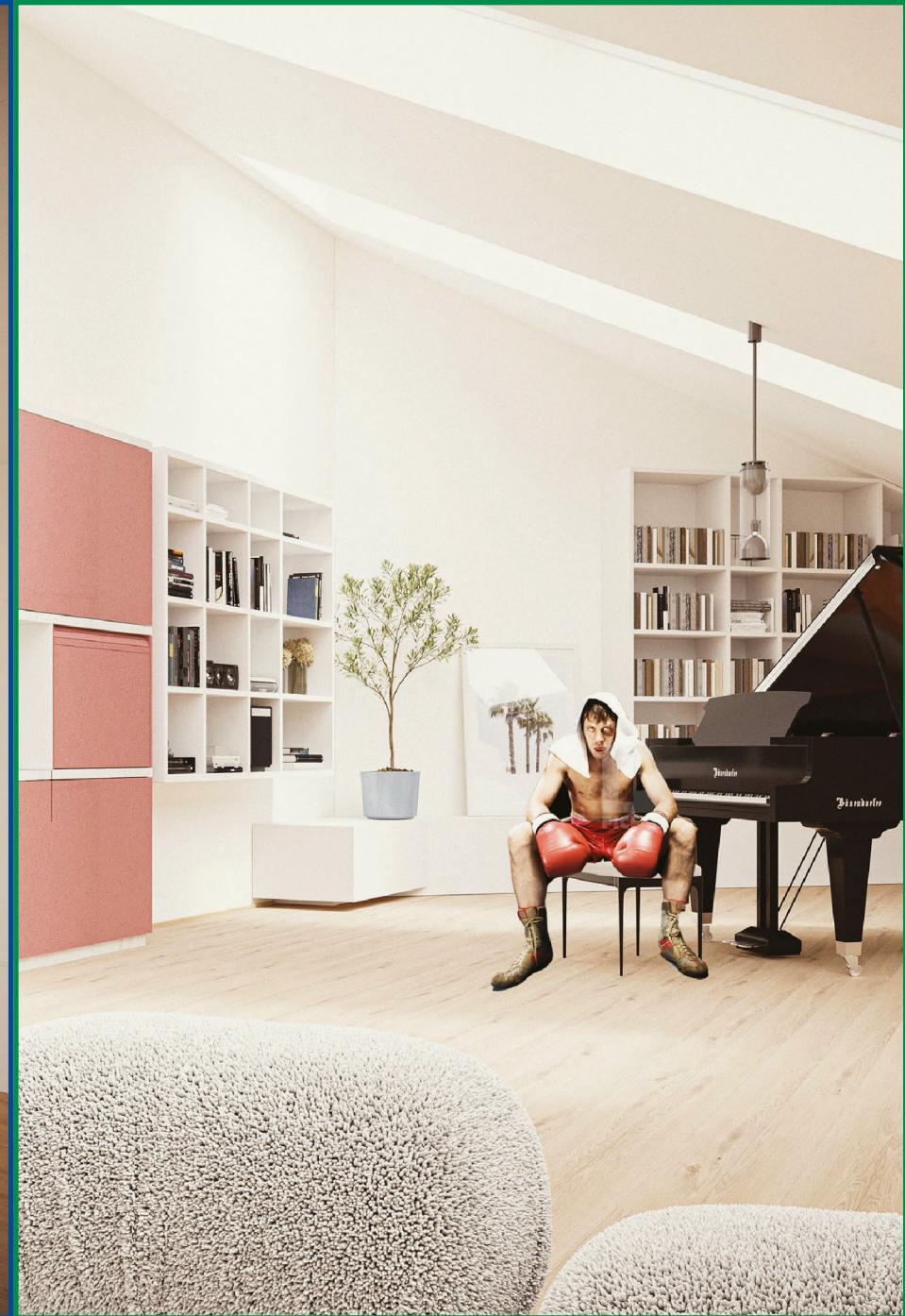
Potential homeowners and regular building patrons chose their architects not based on what's sanctioned by cultural institutions, but by the tried-and-tested, time-honoured, and transparent phenomenon known as word of mouth. Whatever paucity of architectural literature clients consume, they do so through a segment of the media that architects have been taught to loathe: lifestyle magazines, newspaper supplements, Instagram accounts. A different logic governs these publications. When a home is featured in a lifestyle magazine, the client is the story, not the house. Consequently, the photographic logic followed to tell these stories is structurally distinct. They are what the media calls editorial photography. If there's a dining room, the table ought to be set, fresh baguettes in the breadbasket and a bottle of wine; fire crackling in the chimney; a Labrador; barefooted

high-IQ tech innovators looking casual. Glorious sunlight. Cynicism apart, these are images of life. But in their several years of taste indoctrination at school, architects are familiarized with images not brimming with life but touched by the cold finger of death. Empty rooms for emotionally unavailable clients. Baltic austerity. Scandinavian greys. A single chair in the Spartan deck to contemplate the sea of Southern Chile. The Dusseldorf school of photography lives on everywhere and forever in the mind of the architect. Normalized.

It's about time one gets disabused of this notion, if only because it is financially unwise. Architectural photography can be whatever one wants it to be. Nobody's watching. And architectural photography that not only refuses to get on with the program of icy Cartesianism, but that breaks it altogether, can in the long run accrue to an architect's cultural capital as well.

The Rumble in the Duplex was a proposal for an editorial photo session that would have illustrated an article on the Viennese penthouse we had recently built. All collages by Steiner Architecture ff over renderings by Reflexive Architecture, 2022. Photos of boxers and gear are not the property of Steiner Architecture ff.

¹ *Boxers* (2011) by acclaimed Canadian photographer Jeff Wall shows two adolescents boxing in a generic apartment. Scenes of New Zealander musician Lorde's clip for *Royals* (2013) strongly resembles Wall's image.









4. If it hasn't been photographed, it hasn't been built

Jaques Herzog told me that in 1998 when I had the opportunity to take his and Pierre de Meuron's portrait as a young photographer. It was a bold statement. A true statement. Most people know architecture only through pictures. The reasons are many: a building might be too remote, it might not be public, or it might not be there anymore. Seeing architecture with one's own eyes is a rare thing. And that's where the close collaboration between the photographer and the architect kicks in and hopefully pays off in the long run, because that's what the collaboration is about. To quote Julius Schulmann: "I sell architecture better and more directly and more vividly than the architect does (...) the average architect is stupid. He doesn't know how to sell. He's not a salesman. He doesn't know how to express his own building (...) and so I do it". Another very confident statement. Another very true one.

All the famous architects had good photographers with strong imagery that told stories to clients. SOM had Ezra Stoller, Herzog & de Meuron had Margherita Spiluttini, Peter Zumthor had Hélène Binet. The list could be miles-long but the kernel is that architects should choose their photographer wisely. And stick with them! Nothing is more disappointing than an architect's book illustrated with photographs taken by different photographers, all conveying different manners of seeing.

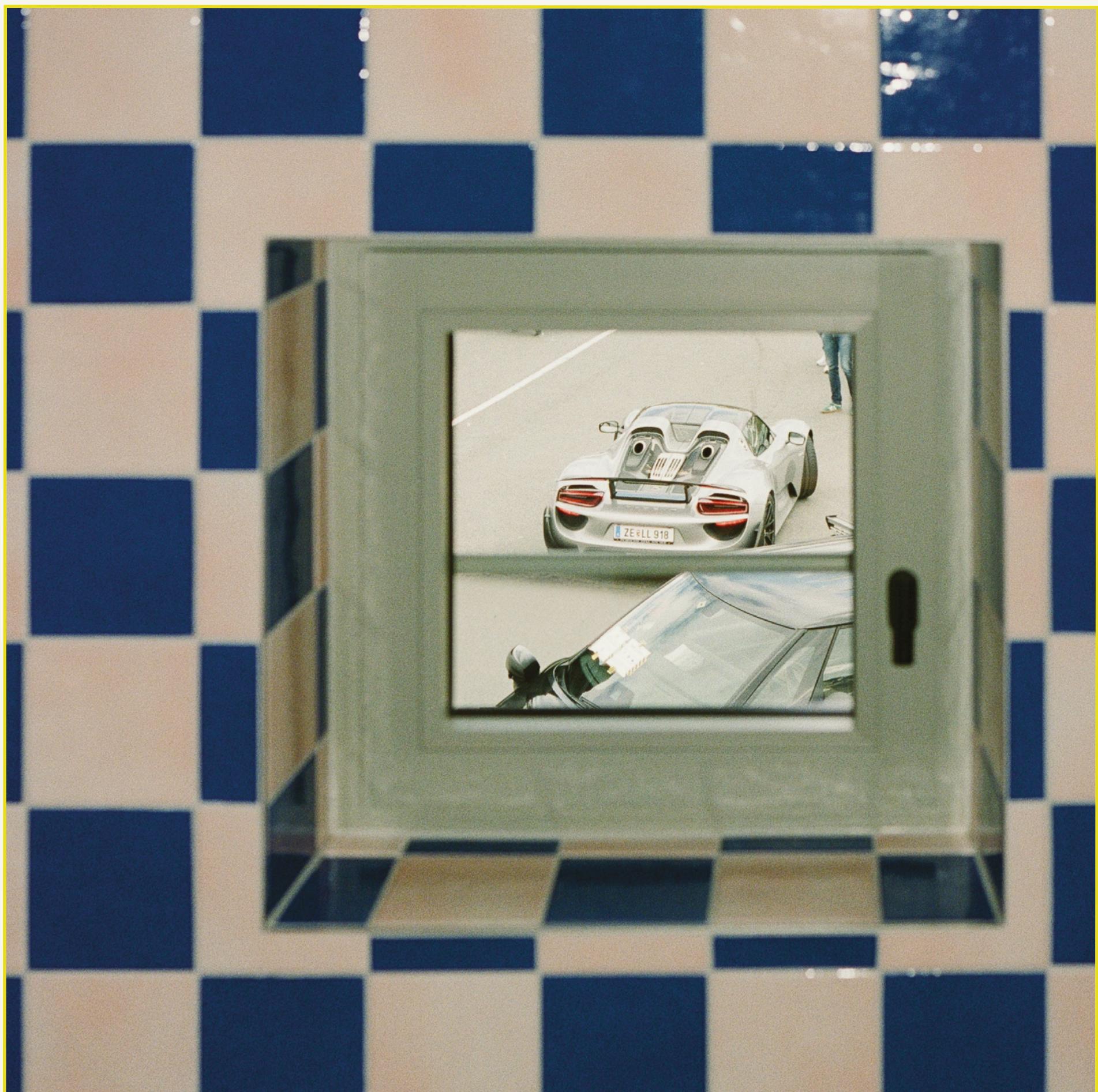
Instagram is a great yet disturbing phenomenon - there lies the beauty of showcasing one's buildings free of charge to millions of (interested) users, but in square format, which had hardly been used since analog Hasselblad cameras disappeared. Hardly anybody pays the photographer's fees anymore.

Architectural photography is there to explain the built environment. The photographs they take are custodians of moments in time that are ideal, that will never repeat themselves. Architectural photography can emphasize the architect's vision, and it can be artful. But it can never be art.

Florian Holzherr, 2025.

Florian Holzherr has photographed the work of James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, Pipilotti Rist, Herzog & de Meuron, SOM Skidmore Owings & Merrill, Peter Zumthor, Louis Vuitton, Prada New York, LACMA, The Serpentine Gallery, to name but a few. He is visiting teacher of Photography for Architects at the Technical University of Vienna. Florian has photographed our Restaurant in Auwirt (2017), Lakehouse in Zell (2021), Mankei Chalet (2023), House Schmitten (2023) and Clinic in Anif (2023).

Left: The garden façade of our newest project in Salzburg, still under construction.
Photo by Florian Holzherr, 2025.



5. Peeping Tom

Viennese photographer Clemens Fantur has taken his analog camera to F.A.T's Mankei Lodge at the Grossglockner High Alpine Road. The photo-shoot highlights not the building but what goes on in the building: the lax, rustic-chic overnight stay, the community, the friendships, human relations. The first-rate car-spotting. A silver Spyder 918 backing up is seen through a tiny window from an indecently tiled toilet in the upper floor guestroom.

You're in the mind of a peeping tom. The room is broke-ass and classy at the same time. Someone puts lipstick on in front of the mirror, then looks out the window, their figure against the light, down at the sportscars assembled on a cloudy day. Snow's began to fall already.

View into the parking lot from one of the F.A.T's Mankei's guestroom bathrooms.
Photo by Clemens Fantur, 2024.