



# 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.

Letter H is devoted to the spell of deserts. **What Planet is This?** narrates an epiphany in Western Sahara while inspecting the site of a commission. **The Desert Strikes Again** editorializes on deserts in the American media. **You've got Mail** unveils the ambitious overhaul of a modernist building in the Saudi port city of Jeddah. **J'accuse Banham** shines light on the

role that architectural critic Reyner Banham played in the modern appreciation of deserts. **Dubai Object Trouvé** features a project for a dune bashing arena in Dubai. **And My Drink Tastes Like Apocalypse** reports on Mara Novak's newest show where she confronts the unholy practice of shipping Antediluvian ice to the UAE.

What is it,  
Major Lawrence,  
that attracts you  
personally to the  
desert?

It is clean.

From Lawrence of Arabia,  
directed by David Lean, 1962

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# 1. What Planet is This?

We wade the windward side of the hallowed dune, shielding our face with our shirts, but dust attaches to the eyebrows like iron filings to a magnet.  
At last, we reach the summit.  
The storm subsides and the curtain rises on the lion-coloured earth and the deep azure of the Atlantic.

We think of Mount Sinai.  
We scan the dry Earth relieved of its mask.  
The revelation begins.

“What is life?” asks the voice that speaks from the burning bush.  
“A crust. An exception”, one of us replies.  
“Sand is fertile soil for myth and moonshine. The special soil where dreams of ferrous certainty grow.” Says another convert.

The desert revealed the underlying shape of the Earth: Here was the true skeleton of the world. All vegetation was big botanical disguise. A verdant carpet covering a desiccated rock. No roots ever ran deeper than the dermis of the land. Nothing flowers underneath. To pierce the ground is to follow a slow process towards the burning core of the Earth.

These revelations fell on us like ten commandments.  
We shattered the Golden Calf of false Architecture.

LEFT: Detail of an installation in Mara Novak's My Drink Tastes Like Apocalypse, Kunstraum Lakeside, Klagenfurt, 2025. Photo by Mara Novak, 2025



ABOVE: George Lucas's *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* was released on May 25, 1977, and soon became the highest grossing film in history and remained so until Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* was released five years later. With its awe inspiring two suns, sublime arid landscapes and Luke Skywalker's will to freedom, the planet Tatooine captured the fascination of two generations.



## 2. The Desert Strikes Again

From staging blockbuster fights to financing preposterously futuristic cities, the Persian Gulf is making sure the West's conception of the future remains inseparable from deserts.

With world-power status comes the right to export images of the geography one is accustomed to, the same way French gardens were exported at the height of French economic dominion.

As such the Persian Gulf might be this epoch's custodian of the sacred association between deserts and contemporaneity.

But it is in no way the first.

In a sense the globalization of deserts in Western media was the consequence of the rise of another, earlier, arid superpower. Californication – the export of California's soft power – carried with itself a particular geographical and horticultural paradigm.

Western movies, the lores of Californian mythology, amalgamated mass culture with a particular landscape. Images of the American Southwest, Utah, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico became inseparable from stories of epic valor and emancipation, broadcast with an intensity never seen before.

At around the same time that California became a global power on its own, Land Art took the lead in artistic investigation. Artists like Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, James Turrell and Richard Long, all worked under the desert's spell. Modernism and modern art, both European products, with their preference for ascetism and elementality, were destined to wed the desert.

Advanced Air and Space also contributed to gluing the desert to notions of the future, with such oddities as the Manhattan Project in New Mexico, top secret air bases in Nevada, the first images of the barren surface of the moon and the unbelievably familiar photos of the desert crevices of Mars. Deserts, secrecy and the future go together.

In 1990 the Gulf Wars became the first war to be broadcast live by satellite, leading to the media concept known as the CNN Effect. The Gulf War's revolutionary coverage replaced the Vietnamese rainforest as pop culture's paradigmatic theater of war. Its ubiquitousness fused the concept of perpetual anxiety with the image of the desert into the American psyche.

In fact most American Wars since 1990 have been fought in desertic territories. Their names oddly reminiscent of Hollywood Blockbusters (Operation Desert Storm/Shield, Operation Odyssey Dawn, Operation Restore Hope), these conflicts have ensured that being deployed to combat today means being deployed to some desert somewhere. They have tattooed onto the American psyche the impression that freedom is won by beating somebody at something in a desert, whether you're Luke or Anakin Skywalker, Clint Eastwood, Mad Max, Paul Atreides or a Navy SEAL.





### 3. You've Got Mail

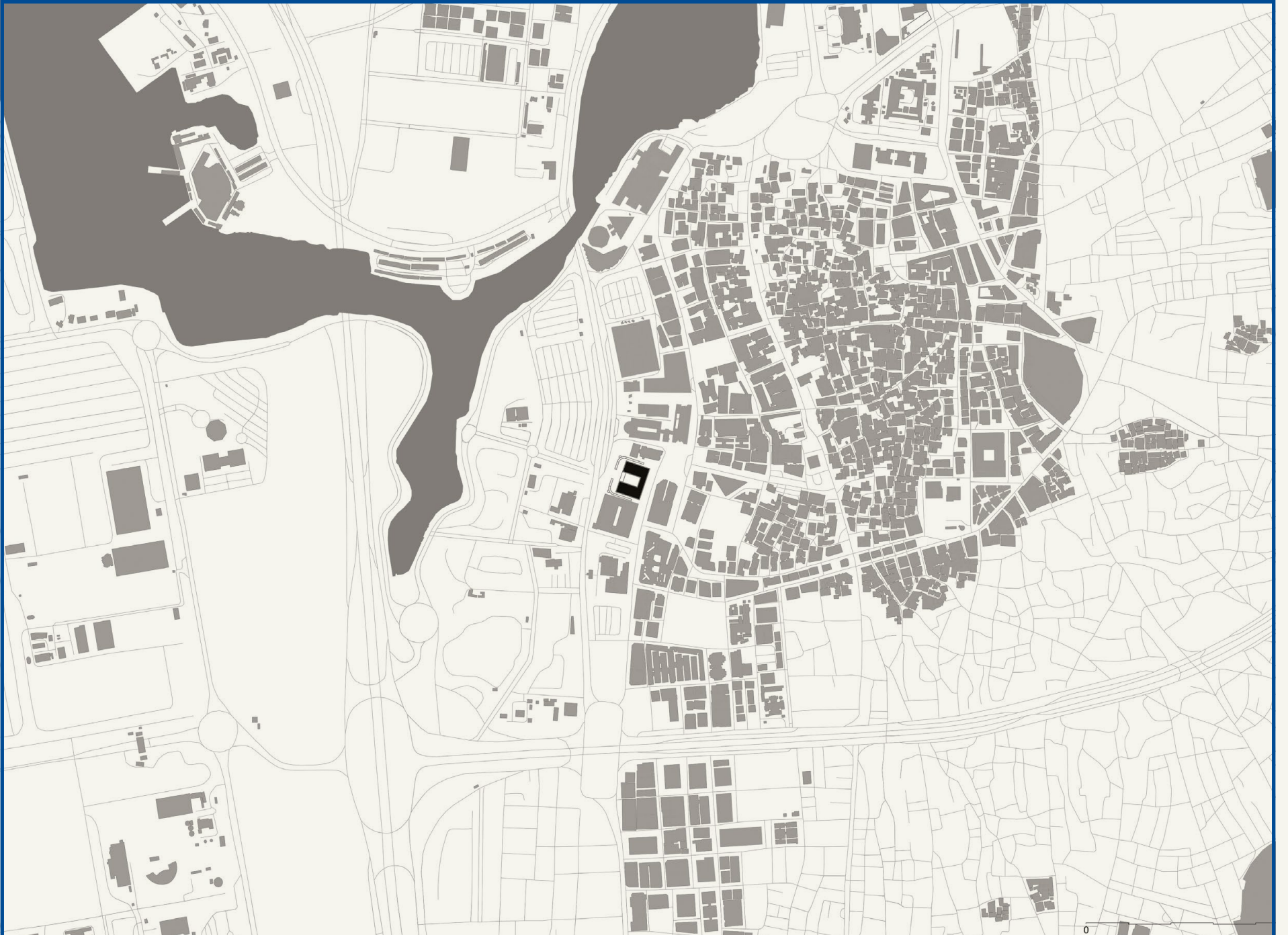
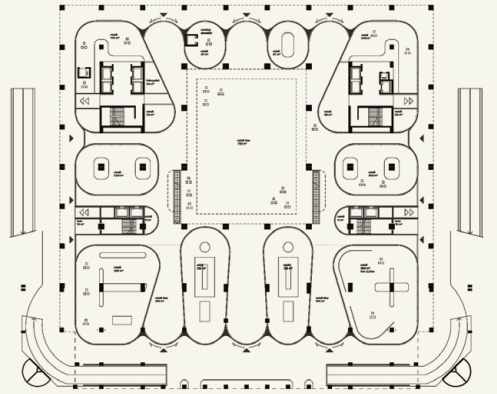
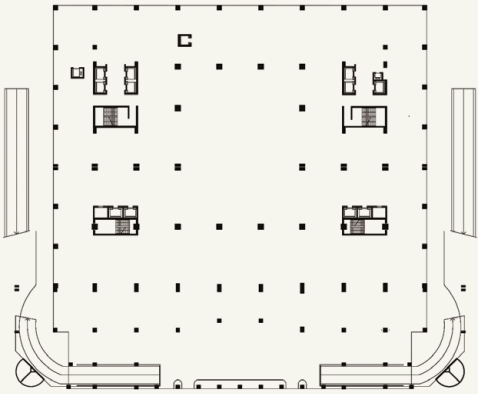
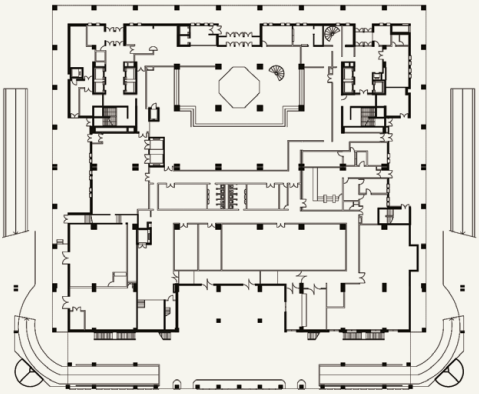
In an article titled *The Long Leap Forward* published in 1986 by the Arab American Oil Company, Richard Hobson and Arthur Clark wrote: “As late as the early '70's, the volume of mail in Saudi Arabia was still under 100 million pieces of mail a year – perhaps no more than about 10 pieces a year for every man, woman and child resident in the kingdom. But in 1980 the postal services handled more than 400 million pieces and in 1985, 713 million, an average of nearly two million pieces a day”.

Such tidal change rested on a network of new roads, rail, airplanes, and of course, post offices, of which by 1985 there were 580. Three post offices soar above all else: those in Riyadh, Dammam, and Jeddah, all developed by a subsidiary of the French La Poste during the 1980s. Distinctively modern, bordering on brutalist, and uttering coarse references to vernacular components, the three headquarters follow the same design pattern, like variations on a theme. Full of conveyors, sensors and sorting devices, the buildings were as much industrial infrastructure as pieces of context-sensitive architecture.

The building in Jeddah, however, stood out from the triumvirate owing to its peculiar location. Located on Baishin Street facing a body of water, the building was at the same time a resident of the picturesque Al-Balad district with its masonry walls counterpointed by delicate wooden latticed balconies, part fortresses and part filigree jewelry, and the next-door neighbor of the Islamic Port of Jeddah – none else than the busiest port in Saudi Arabia. Yet with the oil boom the Jeddawi migrated North to what is now the new city with its luxury, AC, waterfront developments. The Al-Balad neighborhood waned. With it, the old post office.

Not for long. The Al-Balad neighborhood was listed as UNESCO World Heritage in 2014, and in 2019 the Kingdom's Public Investment Fund decided to include Jeddah's old Al-Balad district in its multi-million Saudi Vision 2030 initiative. And for its iconicity, location, size, the Jeddah post office was earmarked for a resurrection.

LEFT: Intruder stainless-steel curved wall/ceiling in the shopping mall atrium of the overhauled Post Office.





The ambitious Jeddah Post Office overhaul aims to make a cultural hub out of the old headquarters. It is a complex building, a multi-purpose structure: a hotel with a members rooftop bar, a top-notch spa, coworking space, an auditorium and a mall all at the same time. While the quaint historic alleyways and houses of the Al-Balad district are going through their own restoration process as part of the Saudi Vision 2030, the Post Office overhaul has the added challenge of working with modernist heritage: with a concrete structure, beams and coy cantilevers, a whole different set of architectural aspirations that were particular to the age when the post office was built. It's Arab modernism, vintage "critical-brutalism".

Depuration is the guiding principle: the overhaul prioritizes the main structural elements, leaving them bare. Stripping the paint off columns and beams to expose the raw brawny concrete. Around this matrix of load-bearing elements, curved walls made of lighter, disruptive materials, form different spaces. The whole sculptural power of the curve is best appreciated in the shopping mall atrium: a dazzling huge stainless-steel fold, like an intruder.

Unlike the three/four storey, straight-to-Instagram historic structures of the Al-Balad district, the Post Office is tall enough to form a strong rapport with the Port of Jeddah across the water. The unphotogenic brutalism of the Post Office sort of makes sense when seen next to the Port. When it looks at the Port. It was once too, an industrial facility.

ABOVE LEFT: Three stages of the Post Office overhaul. From left to right: Existent plan with structural elements and partition walls; structural elements only; new curved partition walls. Steiner Architecture, 2025.

BELOW LEFT: Plan view of the Old city of Jeddah and the Al-Balad neighborhood. The Post Office is U-Shaped and shaded in black. To the west is the Port of Jeddah. Steiner Architecture, 2025.

BELOW: View of the Post Office at night from across the future New Historic Waterfront of Jeddah. Image by Reflexiv Architecture, 2025.







## 4. J'accuse Reyner Banham

Averaging 800mm of rainfall per year, Norwich England is hardly a prophetic cradle for men romantically attached to deserts. But it is, nevertheless, England's "driest" county, and the town where Reyner Banham, the critic that taught Western architects to love the desert, was born in 1922.

At twenty-seven Banham enrolled in the prestigious London Courtauld Institute to study architecture history with the leading figures of the day, and wrote his doctorate degree on modernism's hysterical relationship to technology. Titled *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, the book became one of the all-time must-reads of twentieth century architecture.

In the 60s Banham moved to Los Angeles, where he wrote his famous *The Architecture of the Four Ecologies* before starring in the gorgeously titled documentary *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles* in 1972.

But it was his 1978 book *Scenes in America Deserta* that consolidated his innovative vision. Banham had seen the desert for the first time in 1968 driving down the road to Las Vegas. And as such it was the automobile the conceptual prerequisite to understanding the association between deserts and postwar culture. Reyner Banham managed convince British and East Coast architects that in the emptiness of the desert lay a set of transformative experiences that rendered everything else ancient regime. The true zeitgeist of postwar culture resided in places chillingly named the Death Valley, Shoshone or the Mojave Desert.

Reyner Banham taught at SUNY Buffalo and UC Santa Cruz, as well as the Bartlett School of Architecture in London and passed away in London in 1988.

LEFT: Architectural historian and critic Reyner Banham riding his Bikerton bicycle on the Silurian Dry Lake in the Death Valley National Park. Photo by Tim Street-Porter, 1981.



skyline terrace

pitstop lane

tribune north

race track

platform south

visitor area

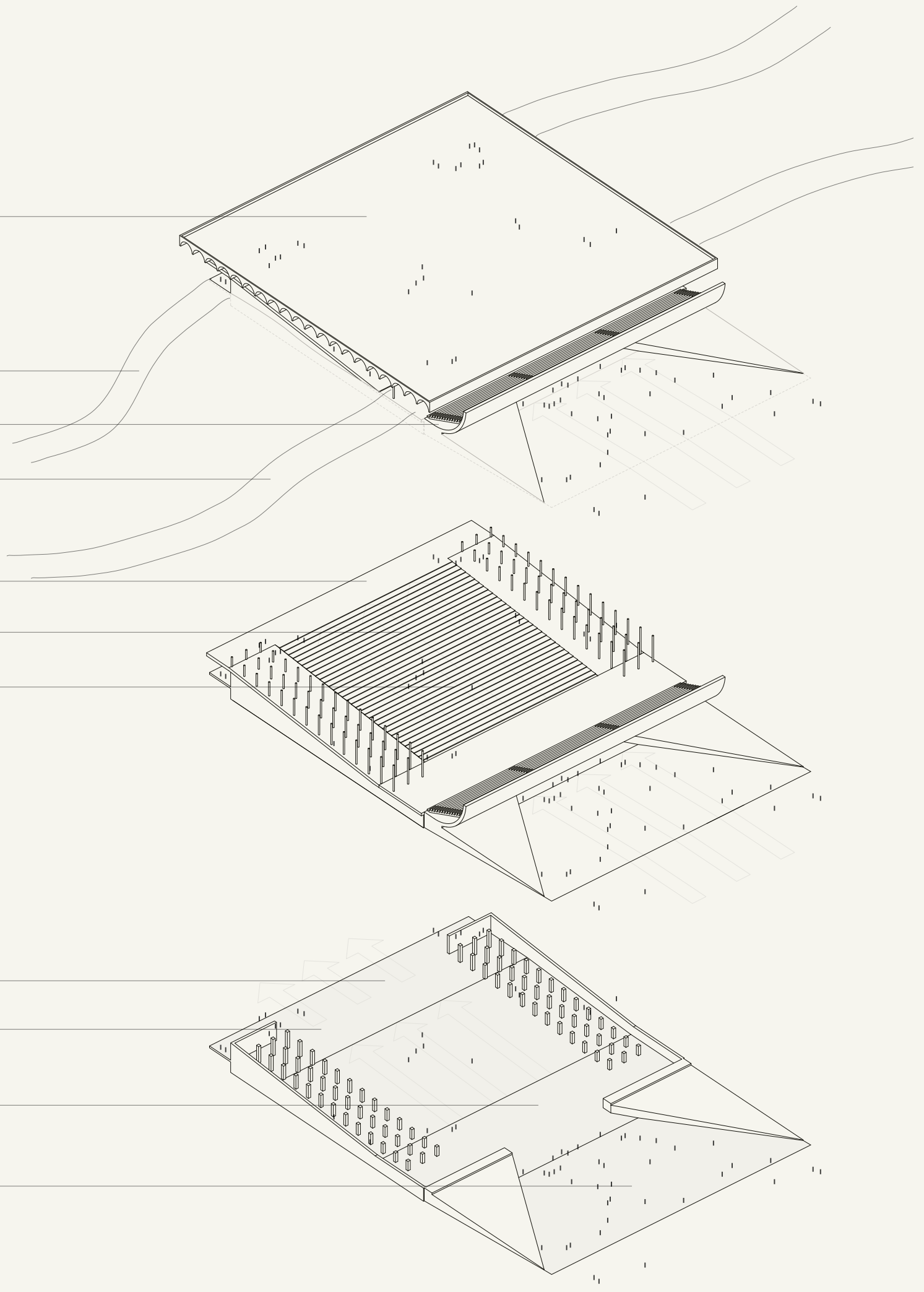
tribune south

pitstop outdoor

racer garage

visitor area

visitor entrance





## 5. Dubai Object Trouvé

**The Dune Bashing Arena outside Dubai is a half-buried remainder from another epoch, like an elephant tusk sticking out of hot sand, and as if it were a second act, a modern interpretation of a Bedouin canopy protects the building like a carapace. One is always an archaeologist approaching a dig when walking up to the building.**

But this is fundamentally an earthwork taken over by loosely guided, undogmatic action. Appropriated rather than carefully programmed to function as something.

Often, petrol-drunk Land Cruisers sail through the seas of sand around it with the same heartbreaking gentleness of Russell Crowe's hand caressing cereal spike at the end of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. Ten thousand spectators shrouded in silks and subterfuges would survey the scribbles in the sand from their seat below a carapace battling against the baking sun. Jeeps, pick-up trucks and boogeys pound the arena's red carpet like cheetahs doted on by the electrifying noise of the mad crowd - Who are you wearing? The shadow of the roof maximizes the drama of the anti-lag valves blasting small craters into the ground.

Incidentally, it would all have something of the casual butchery of the Roman arena: the roistering fandom, feral engine noises. The brilliant muscularity of the vehicles and the oil stains in the dirt like swathes of swordsmen's blood.

Some Land Cruiser looks up the crowd and roars: "ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED?????!!!" A lecherous modern-day Commodus smirks approvingly. Thumbs up. A falcon snatches its pray in mid-air.

On other days the building houses fashion shows, art fairs, concerts. On others it houses nothing but an observatory of vastness and a growing city in the distance. Multipurpose Facilities, a Falconry Studio and Hospital, air-conditioned rooms, auto repair and tire shops and gallery space are in the basement, to which the ground merely slopes down to give access.

The core intention of the design, however, fully condenses in the building's roof: a huge public square, deliberately redundant in the empty desert, like a pun on space. It's a huge and fully carpeted inclined plane that offers the best views of the dunes and the Dubai skyline that lies miles away. Especially at night. Whatever activities it may set in motion, they are equally unscripted. Equally public - and true public means unscripted, unpredictable and free.

LEFT: Isometric explanation of the several layers of the Dune Bashing Arena in Dubai. Image: Steiner Architecture ff, 2024.

NEXT PAGE: The stadium sticks out of the sand like the half-buried ruin of another time, here graced by the speed of a tuned muscled car. Image by Reflexiv Studio, 2024.







## 6. My Drink tastes like Apocalypse

Mara Novak's new solo exhibition has opened in Klagenfurt's Kunstraum Lakeside. Aptly titled My Drink Tastes like Apocalypse, the show confronts the hospitality industry's newest moral low: the wretched retail of prehistoric Arctic ice in Emirati nightspots, that it may cool the parched tongue of the rich under the fake gloss of gastronomic respectability.

But Novak approaches the stench of ethical rot ever so obliquely. This examination of the grotesque aspect of the roof top bar feels muffled underneath layers of artistic inquiries. As good art should.

Novak, a photographer by trade, has made ice versions of different glasses and goblets with tap water. Good quality, drinkable, Viennese tap water. Then she's photographed them against blue and turquoise backgrounds. But one sees the same vase in two slightly different sizes, much like one sees an object bigger when it's submerged in

water - optical distortions painfully concocted in the dark room. These intimations of icebergs are bravely displayed in signally unorthodox frames, brightly coloured, weird-shaped, the edges rounded. Toyish. Taste and authenticity have always been problems that Novak wants us to wrestle with.

Another storyline is cooked below the gallery eye level: Directly on the floor swathes of dirt reference the artificial islands of luxury developments in the Gulf coast, like dehydrated icebergs on the gallery's linoleum floor (in German a mountain is called a Berg and so for an Austrian an iceberg is an ice mountain). In a corner of the gallery the earth is pushed against the glass-wall. Bits of rock and debris litter the topography of fake peninsulas. A piece of rusted wire and a foot of wrecked PVC tube, speak of the decrepit construction industry.

Armageddon, gently suggested.