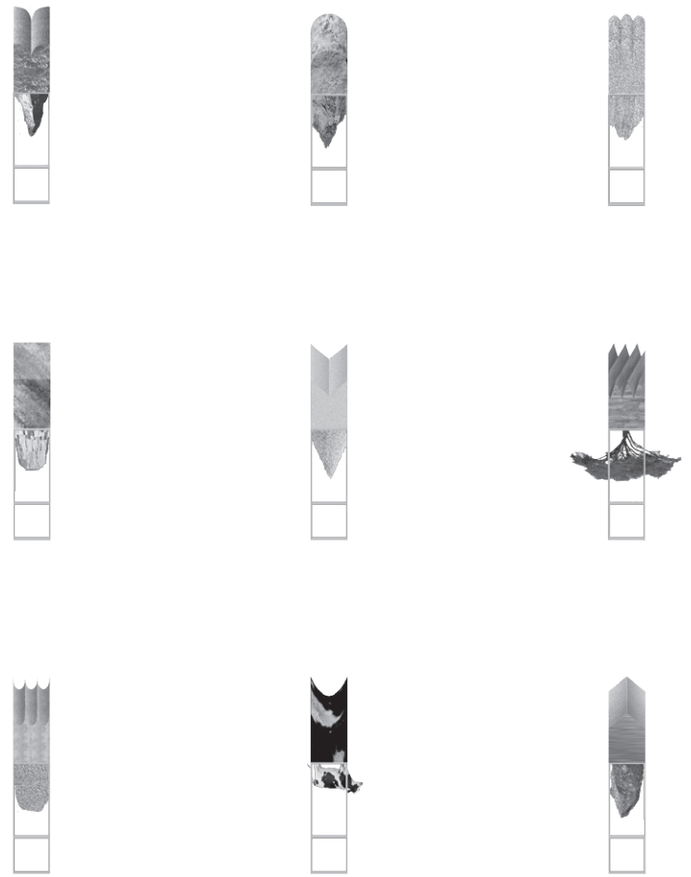
Nine Islands:
Matters Around Architecture



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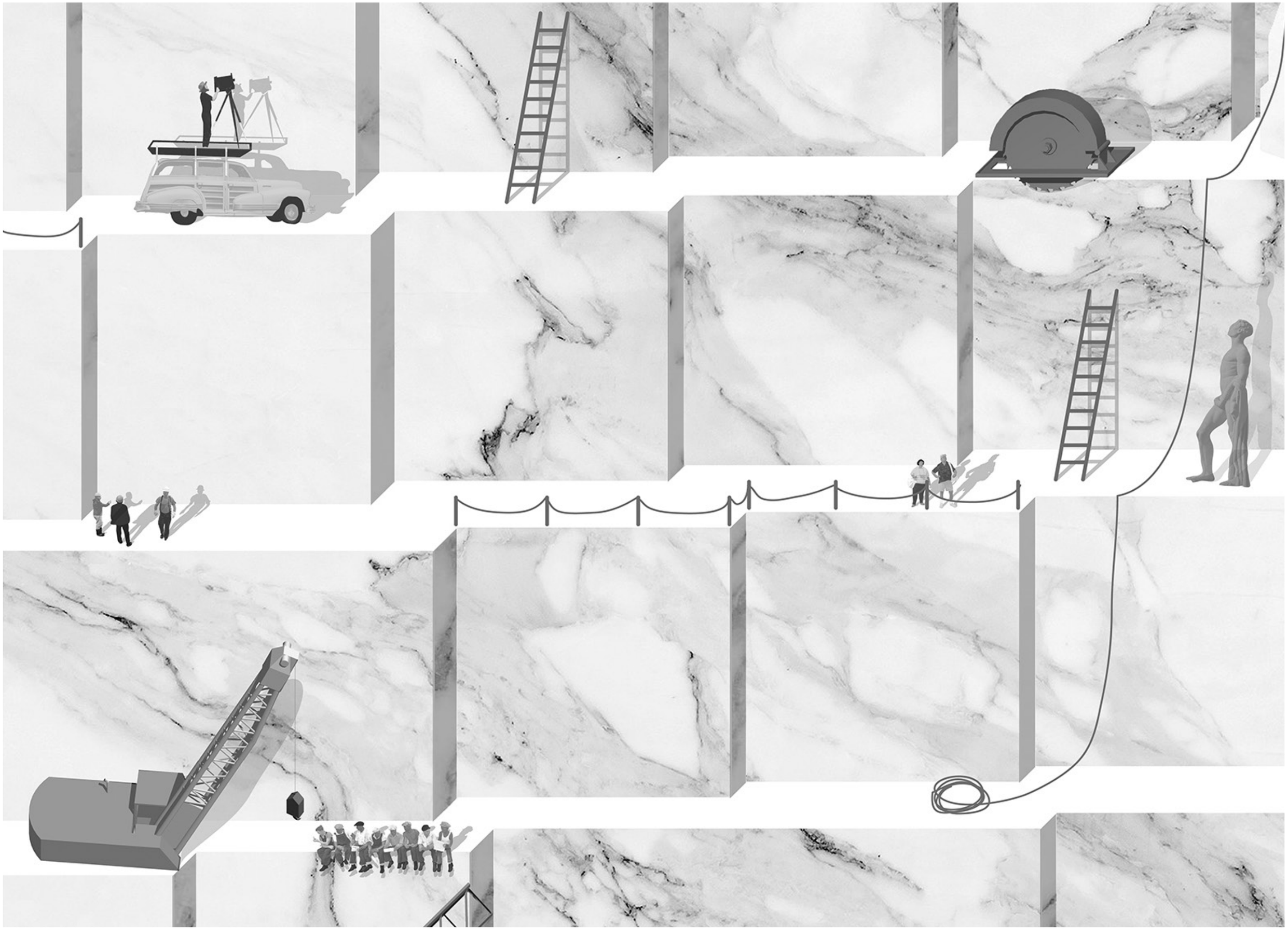

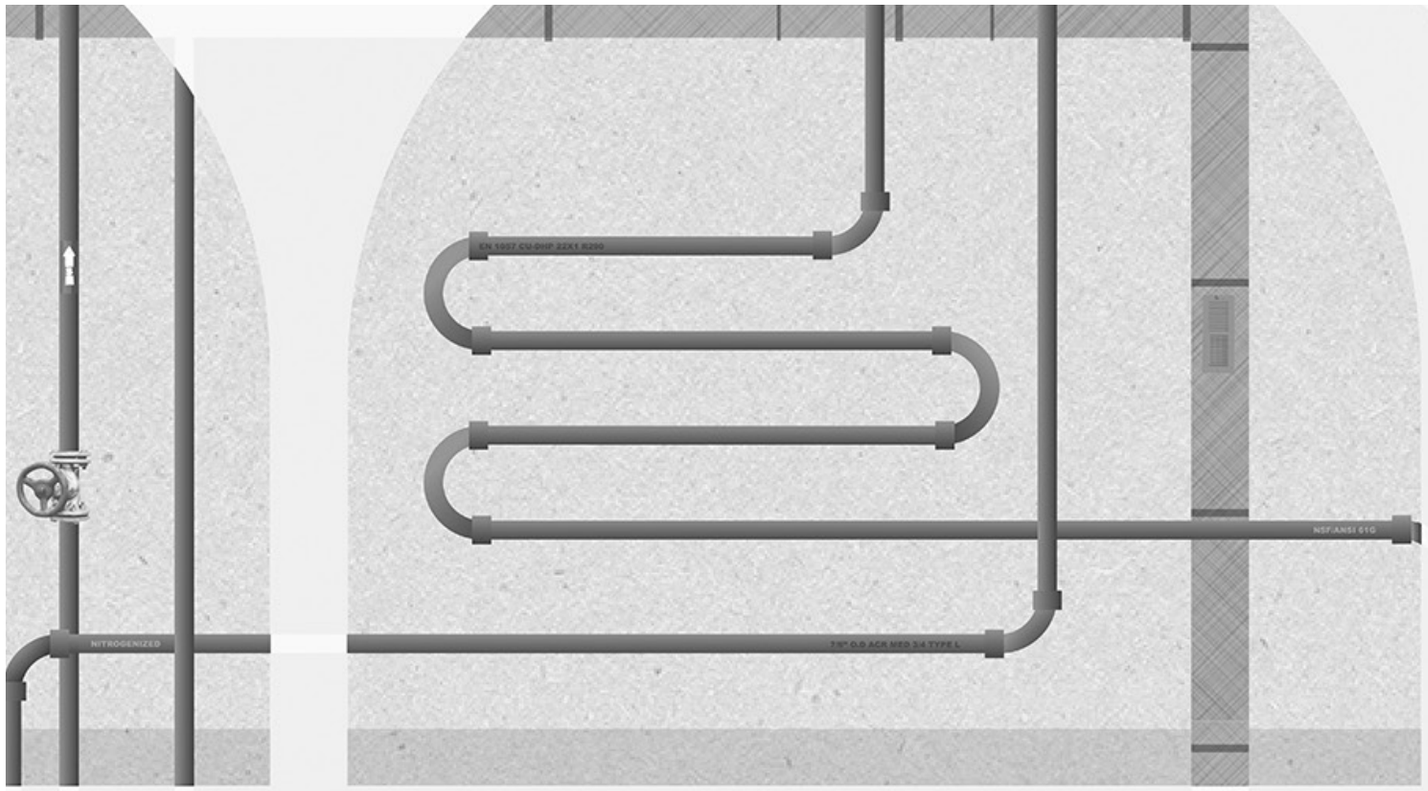
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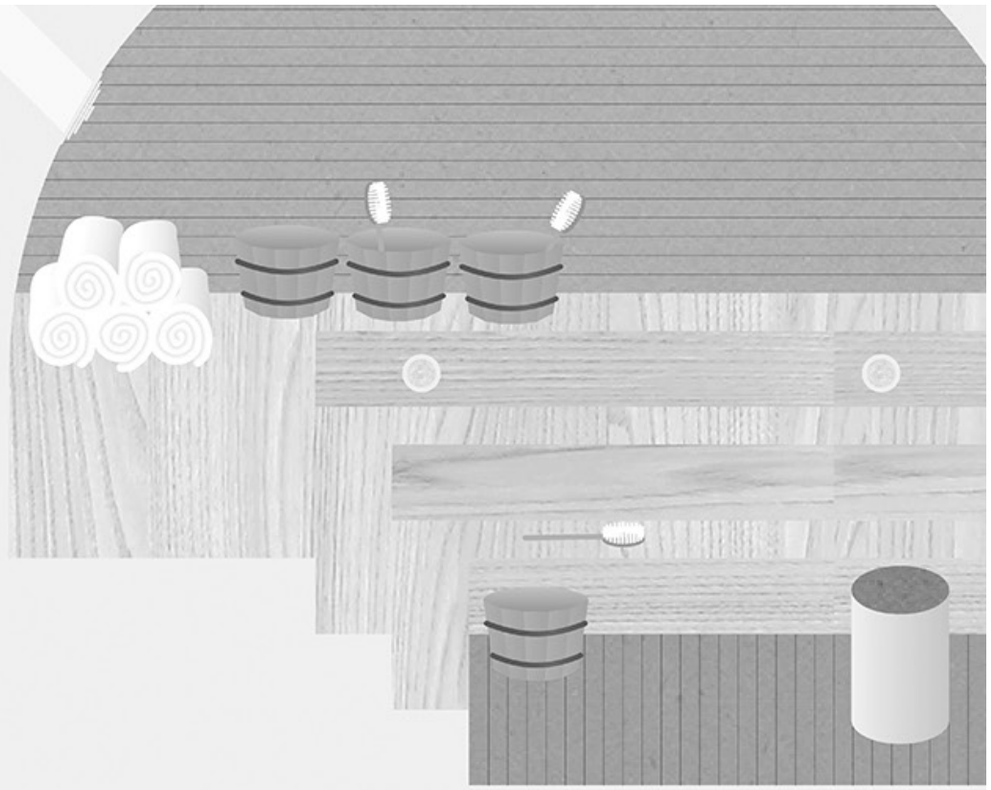

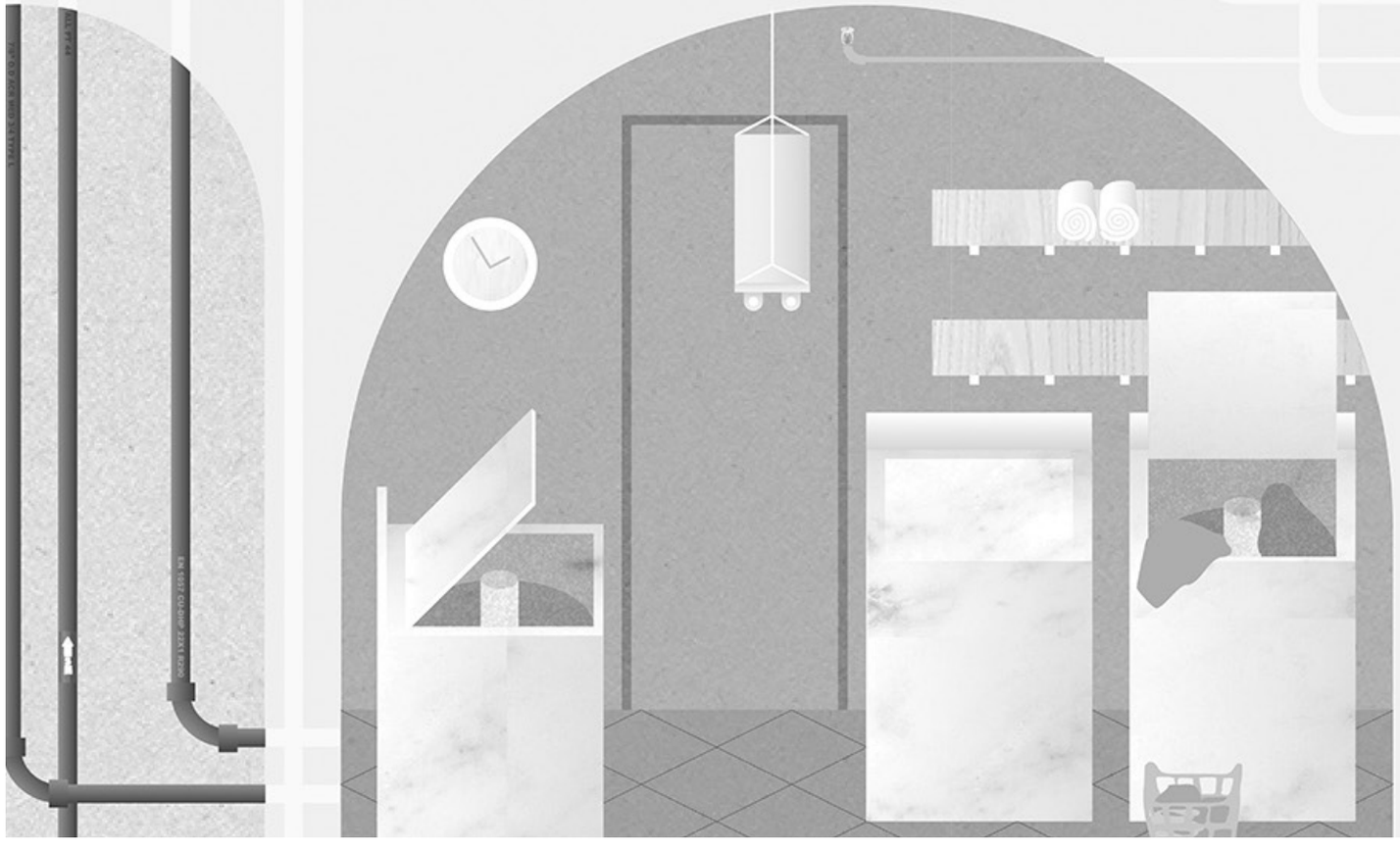
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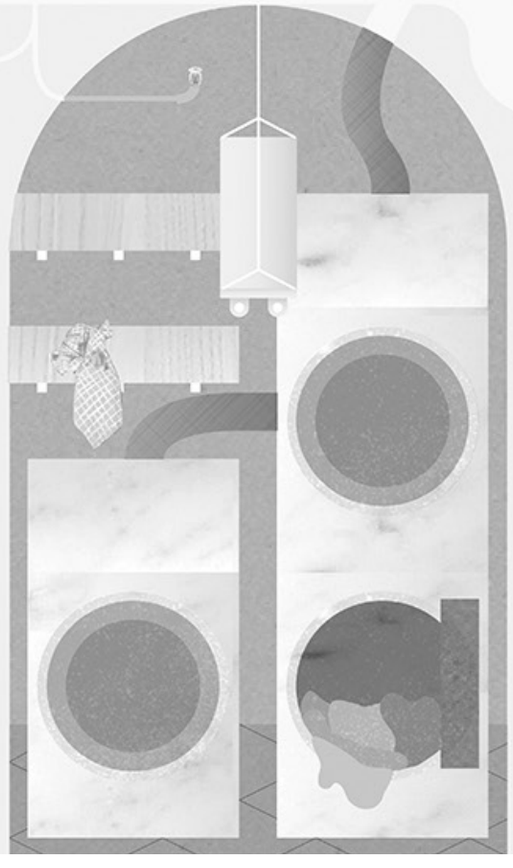

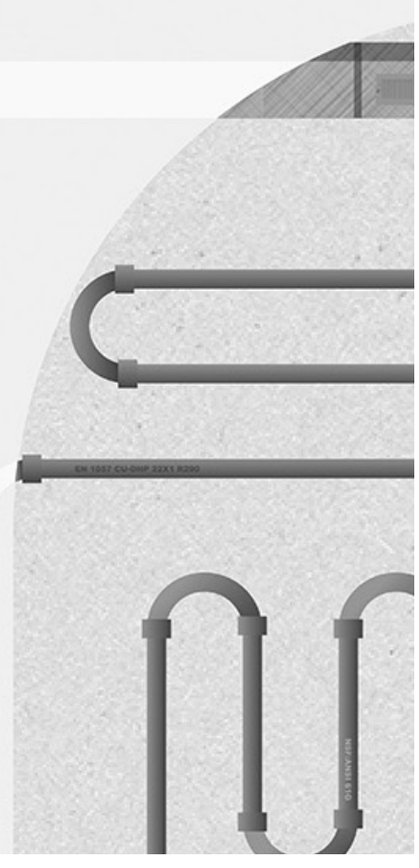
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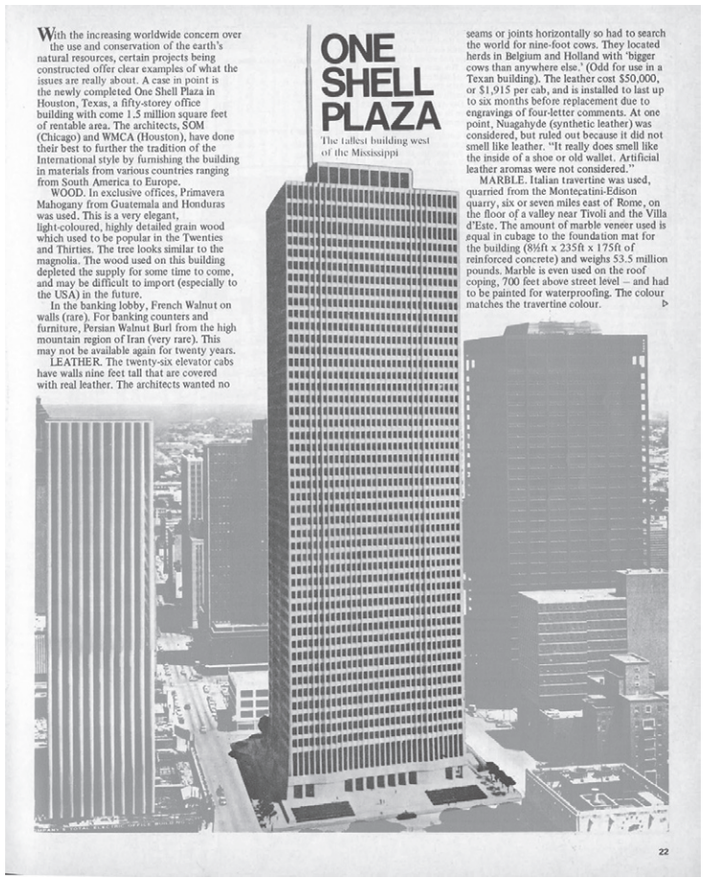

ONE SHELL PLAZA

The tallest building west of the Mississippi

With the increasing worldwide concern over the use and conservation of the earth's natural resources, certain projects being constructed offer clear examples of what the issues are really about. A case in point is the newly completed One Shell Plaza in Houston, Texas, a fifty-storey office building with come 1.5 million square feet of rentable area. The architects, SOM (Chicago) and WMCA (Houston), have done their best to further the tradition of the International style by furnishing the building in materials from various countries ranging from South America to Europe.

WOOD. In exclusive offices, Primavera Mahogany from Guatemala and Honduras was used. This is a very elegant, light-coloured, highly detailed grain wood which used to be popular in the Twenties and Thirties. The tree looks similar to the magnolia. The wood used on this building depleted the supply for some time to come, and may be difficult to import (especially to the USA) in the future.

In the banking lobby, French Walnut on walls (rare). For banking counters and furniture, Persian Walnut Burl from the high mountain region of Iran (very rare). This may not be available again for twenty years.

LEATHER. The twenty-six elevator cabs have walls nine feet tall that are covered with real leather. The architects wanted no seams or joints horizontally so had to search the world for nine-foot cows. They located herds in Belgium and Holland with 'bigger cows than anywhere else.' (Odd for use in a Texan building). The leather cost $50,000, or $1,915 per cab, and is installed to last up to six months before replacement due to engravings of four-letter comments. At one point, Niagahyde (synthetic leather) was considered, but ruled out because it did not smell like leather. "It really does smell like the inside of a shoe or old wallet. Artificial leather aromas were not considered."

MARBLE. Italian travertine was used, quarried from the Montecatini-Edison quarry, six or seven miles east of Rome, on the floor of a valley near Tivoli and the Villa d'Este. The amount of marble veneer used is equal in cubage to the foundation mat for the building (8½ft x 235ft x 175ft of reinforced concrete) and weighs 53.5 million pounds. Marble is even used on the roof coping, 700 feet above street level – and had to be painted for waterproofing. The colour matches the travertine colour. ▷

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"One Shell Plaza: Tallest Building West of the Mississippi,"
Architectural Design 1972

Nine Islands:
Matters Around Architecture

NEYRAN TURAN

Strata of the world is a jumbled museum.[1]

Buildings are the very reverse of rocks. They are absolutely in or power, both the species and the situation; and hence arises the excess in which they often abound. [2]

In 1972, *Architectural Design* published an article on the recently built, 50-story One Shell Plaza in Houston, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The editors described in detail the lavish materials incorporated in the building, which came from every part of the planet and included primavera mahogany from Guatemala, Italian travertine quarried near Rome, and Persian walnut from Iran. They criticized the building's use of such rare and expensive materials as irresponsible in light of the "increasing worldwide concern over the use and conservation of the earth's natural resources." One material drew particular scrutiny: real leather, used to sheathe the nine-foot-tall walls of the building's 26 elevator cabs. "The architects," the article reported, "wanted no seams or joints horizontally so had to search the world for nine-foot cows"—the largest raised at the time.[3]

In the context of the widespread critique of late modernism and the emerging environmentalism of the 1970s, the tone of this article is not surprising. More striking are the specific connections the article portrays between architectural materiality and resource geographies. How do we understand the materials of architecture in relation to resources today? For some, resources are natural and thus need to be preserved and protected. For others, resources are systemic and thus need to be managed and maintained. In the context of the new geological epoch posited by the Anthropocene, can we conceptualize resource––in this case, materials around architecture––not as merely natural or systemic but geological and geographic?[4] If discussions around materiality in architecture and urbanism usually focus on performance in relation to the material conditions of the building or the city with an instrumental or managerial tone, might a conceptualization of the material as raw matter—both with its (wider) geographic and (deeper) geologic dimensions—bring a new conception of materiality for architecture?

1. Robert Smithson, Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968)

2. Thomas Whately, Observations on Modern Gardening (1770)

3. "One Shell Plaza: Tallest Building West of the Mississippi," Architectural Design 42, no. 1 (January, 1972): 22.

Geologic and Aesthetic

When considering material as matter and resource, the evident historical relationship between the geological and the aesthetic provides important clues. In his book *Romantic Rocks*, literary theorist Noah Heringman shows how the development of the discipline of geology in the Romantic era created a very specific "aesthetic geology," a material and aesthetic appreciation of rocks. To the Romantics, the formlessness of rock compositions dramatized the recalcitrance of raw matter and triggered associations between the Picturesque and geology.[5] Similarly, in his book *Romantic Landscapes: Geology and Its Cultural Influence in Britain, 1765–1835*, Dennis R. Dean points to the unseparated condition of the arts and sciences in the 18th century and demonstrates how the geological developments of the era closely related to that of the Picturesque. More specifically, contrary to seeing the Picturesque as a direct consequence of the enclosure movement in England (the prevailing interpretation), Dean reveals that the "Picturesque was itself a kind of enclosure movement since it endeavored to reduce problems caused by an awareness of geological forces to pictorial dimension."[6] While proposing the Sublime, the Picturesque, and the Geological as three major classifications of the Romantic landscape, Dean sees geological theories as aesthetic constructs in themselves:

4. For further elaborations on these questions in the context of climate change, see Neyran Turan, "Measure for the Anthropocene," in Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary, ed. James Graham et al. (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, and Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), 120-128. See also Neyran Turan, "How Do Geographic Objects Perform?,"ARPA, vol. 3, Performance (2015), http://www.arpajournal.net/how-do-geographic-objects-perform.

5. Noah Heringman, Romantic Rocks: Aesthetic Geology (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

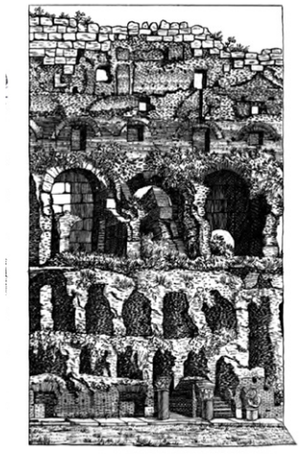
6. Dennis R. Dean, Romantic Landscapes: Geology and Its Cultural Influence in Britain, 1765–1835 (Ann Arbor: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 2007), 62.

7. Ibid., 66.

8. Marcia Pointon, "Geology and Landscape Painting in Nineteenth-century England," in Images of the Earth: Essays in the History of Environmental Sciences, ed. Ludmilla Jordanova and Roy Porter (Oxford: Alden Press), 95–96. For a similar discussion in the American context, see Rebecca Bedell, The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting, 1825–1875 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

> By reducing space to manageable "views," the Picturesque bounds, frames, and subdues its potential energy [...]. In general, the Sublime recognizes and delights in present (or latent) force; the Picturesque seeks to deny or contain it; and the Geological stresses the roles of natural forces through time [...]. Romantic geological theories are rational attempts to discover origins and processes of the inanimate world—scientific endeavor as it was then understood—but they are also, [...] aesthetic constructs designed to affirm a particular version of the geocosm. [7]

What is particularly striking about both Heringman's and Dean's affirmations in relation to the relationship between the geological and the aesthetic is the fact that it was not only that late-18th- and 19th-century landscape painting was affected by the developments in geology but that geology itself was also affected by art and aesthetics. Art historian Marcia Pointon sheds light on this point by exposing the conceptual alliance between geologists and landscape painters, especially during the 19th century. She argues that, while both groups shared a strong interest in developing a new visual language for registering geological features, each also favored imagination over the empiricism and accuracy of topographers:



> Since the accurate recording of features of the landscape without improvement of embroidery was essential to the geologist [...] one might reasonably expect the empirical tradition of the topographer to have had the greatest influence on the development of landscape painting in the nineteenth century, the period when geology becomes a science of major importance [...]. But the topographical artists, whose main tasks had been antiquarian or military (the recording of ancient buildings, harbors and coastlines) used an outline technique which was not well suited to the needs of the geologists [...]. Thus, on one level, the growing interest in geology in the nineteenth century was readily absorbed into an existing tradition remote from topography; and the ground was prepared for an alliance between landscape painting and geology which would operate as much through the imagination as through empiricism. [8]

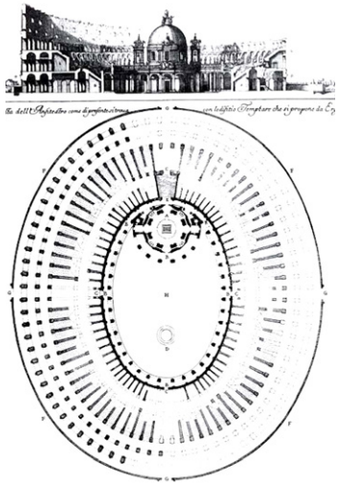
[Left] Engraving of the Colosseum from Richard Deacon's Flora of the Colosseum [1855].

[Below] Ground plan and elevation drawing of Carlo Fontana's Colosseum church in the ruin of the amphitheater [1725].

Pointon's analysis is even more noteworthy when one considers the much-preferred emphasis on empirical research and "evidence" within the design disciplines today, in discussions of environment, landscape, and territory. How can we talk about similar kinds of interactions between aesthetic imagination and the new geological age of the Anthropocene when it comes to understanding material both as resource and recalcitrance of raw matter? Rather than limiting the role of the Anthropocene for design merely to a visualization problem (empirical research of data) or to an issue of mastering or solving problems (righteous scenario planning or environmental engineering of data and performance), might we see it as an opportunity to prompt renewed relationships between the material and the representational?

The Long Span

Consider two depictions of the Colosseum in Rome that were produced a little more than a century apart. First is the plan drawing of Carlo Fontana's 1725 project for the erection of a church on the arena of the Colosseum amphitheater, which turns the oval organization of the existing plan into a centralized building arranged around circular passages. Second is English botanist Richard Deacon's *Flora of the Colosseum* from 1855,



which records 420 species of plants growing in the ruin state of the Colosseum, some of which were rare species whose seeds were primarily transported to the site by the animals and slaves brought from Asia and Africa for the city's numerous spectacles. When positioned next to one another, these two depictions of the Colosseum put forward an important coupling of two different dimensions of architectural longevity. First, as illustrated by the Fontana plan, is the expanded life-span of a particular building after its original use and its inherent capacity for flexibility despite programmatic obsolescence. Second is the idea of material long-span, which complicates the delicate relationship between natural and man-made systems within an elongated temporality as presented by Deacon's plant inventory.

Given our contemporary environmental, political and economic instabilities, a discussion on the architectural long-span might seem to point towards already exhausted undertakings in our field: foregoing the architectural object altogether for the sake of ultimate flexibility and ephemerality, foregrounding the idea of performance for a "realist" mission, or declaring the sole permanence of the architectural object with a relative suspension from questions of temporality. If we have already come to realize the dead-end quality of these discussions and their derivatives, then another question follows: What if our objects, geographies, and geologies cannot be neatly categorized as flexible or ephemeral but instead are in dire need to be reimagined in their expanded temporal and spatial long-span, i.e. in their unfamiliar permanence?

As an alternative to relying on prescriptive efficiency measures, one could instead see an emerging body of speculation in the field of eco-criticism that understands environment in its temporal and spatial "long-view"—that is, within a longer span of time and larger span of earth, offering an important, expanded interpretation of our relationship to the earth as humans. "To call human beings geological agents," as historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, "is to scale up our imagination of the human." [9] As the "the distinction between human and natural histories—much of which

9. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," Critical Enquiry 35 (2009), 206.

had been preserved even in environmental histories that saw the two entities in interaction—has begun to collapse," Chakrabarty writes, "it is no longer a question of simply of man having an interactive relation with nature," but instead, as humans operating as a "force of nature in the geological sense." [10] From Timothy Morton's "hyperobjects," which depict environment as a compilation of immense objects—such as the polystyrene cups that will still be around after 500 years—vastly distributed in time and space relative to humans, to historians Jo Guldi and David Armitage's critique of short-termism and call for a new conception of longue-durée in their book History Manifesto, an intellectual shift of elongation is evident in the fields of history and eco-criticism. One unifying thread within this shift is the return to and reinterpretation of permanence. [11] Morton writes:

> Capitalism is a boiling whirlwind of impermanence. It reveals how things are always shifting and changing. But, it isn't the ultimate horizon of meaning [...]. Materials from humble Styrofoam to terrifying plutonium will far outlast current social and biological forms. We are talking about hundreds and thousands of years. Five hundred years from now, polystyrene objects such as cups and takeout boxes will still exist. Humans have manufactured materials that are already beyond the normal scope of our comprehension [...]. Plutonium will be around for far longer than all of recorded human "history" so far. If you want a monument, look around you. [12]

Another example would be media theorist Jussi Parikka's geological studies of media, which provide us an alternative theoretical lineage for materials, metals, chemistry, and waste. The raw materials of the earth, Parikka writes, "articulate the high-technical and low-paid culture of digitality. They also provide an alternative materialism for the geophysical media age." [13] In parallel, can we consider a similar intellectual shift in our understanding of architectural materiality within a longer span of time, and a larger span of earth?

10. Ibid, 207.

11. Timothy Morton, Ecological Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010). Jo Guldi and David Armitage, History Manifesto (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

12. Timothy Morton, Ecological Thought, 130–31.

13. Jussi Parikka, The Anthrobscene (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 98.

The *Nine Islands: Matters around Architecture* project aims to start such alternative conversations by examining the under-conceptualized spatial and temporal long-span of architectural materiality. From the recalcitrance and the extraction of a particular raw matter from a specific geographic location, to its processing, transportation, and construction into a desired finished effect in a building and to its demolition, waste, and decomposition, the project aims to open future dialogues in relation to the spatial and temporal long span of architectural materiality. The project showcases this long-span through nine case studies (nine islands) by looking at particularly lavish or widely used nine building materials: certain types of marble, wood, glass, travertine, copper, aluminum, concrete, leather, and plastic. [12] By emphasizing the contrast between the raw and the finished, the project renders architecture's direct relationship with resource geographies visible.

The project is comprised of nine 180X135cm drawings and nine 40X40X140cm models. For models, the upper part of each model consists of a "Monument," an archetypical building mass that is finished with a specific material. As an opposition to the upper part, the lower part of each model consists of a "Rock," a formless landmass from which the raw matter is extracted (quarry for the marble, tree for the wood, cows for the leather, etc.).

Accordingly, by juxtaposing the finished surfaces and archaic extrusions of typologically simplified monuments at the top with the vulgar formlessness of the naked landmasses below, each island dramatizes particular building material as an object. This juxtaposition of monument and landmass works through two registers: first, the collapse of the finished and the raw aims to call attention to the under-conceptualized space in between; second, by suspending the archetypical slow time of architecture (the extended timespan of a given typology) and the slow time of geology in the space of an architectural model, the project presents the "reverse obsolescence" of each island as a resource ruin. [15]

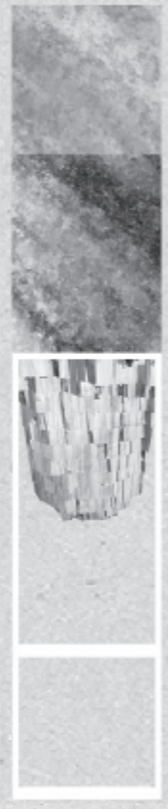
Here, the word "matters" used in the title of this project operates on two registers relative to these questions. First, "matters" depicts an expanded understanding of materialism, which does not reduce architectural materiality to a finished state but to an elongated temporality from extraction of raw matter to waste. Second, "matters" points to the kinds of "ordinary" activities that take place around the material practice of architecture.

This double signification is evidenced in the drawings of the project. Similar to the contrast in the models between archetypical object on the top and the associated raw matter below, the drawings of the project use a similar double register. Consisted of two parts, each drawing of the project depicts two different snapshots from the long-span of one of the nine materials. While the upper part of each drawing positions one building material through a particular architectural lens (elevation, section, plan, specification, detail), the lower part depicts a daily life scene from the wider life span of the same material (extraction at the quarry, shipping at the container port, demolition of the building ruin, roofing at the construction site, etc.). As the upper drawings depict architectural spaces or specifications as *still-lifes* with human traces without their actual presence, the lower drawings showcase over-populated human activity and presence in the extraction, production, transportation, construction, demolition or waste site. Aiming to couple an inquiry of matter in architecture with its seeming opposite inquiries of representation, and abstraction, *Nine Islands* poses an alternative conception of materialism within the architecture discipline. In an era when humans are described as "geological agents," [16] architecture is both a background and a measure against which the world might be read. Like architecture then, Nine Islands represents the world back to itself.

14. The luxury or economy embedded in any particular material is more complex than simply calculating a unit cost especially of one factors in the ideas of embodied energy and embodied carbon in relation to the lifecycle of construction materials. Consider concrete, for example. As the most widely used building material, concrete might not make the list of most expensive building materials, on first inspection. However, concrete is a mixture of the constituent materials such as cement, sand, aggregate, and other additives such as plasticizers. The processing and transportation of some of these materials (cement and aggregates, for instance) contribute substantially to the cost of concrete, as well as its energy and carbon impacts. See: G. P. Hammond and C. I. Jones, "Embodied Energy and Carbon in Construction Materials," Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers, vol. 161 no. 2, Energy (2008): 87–98.

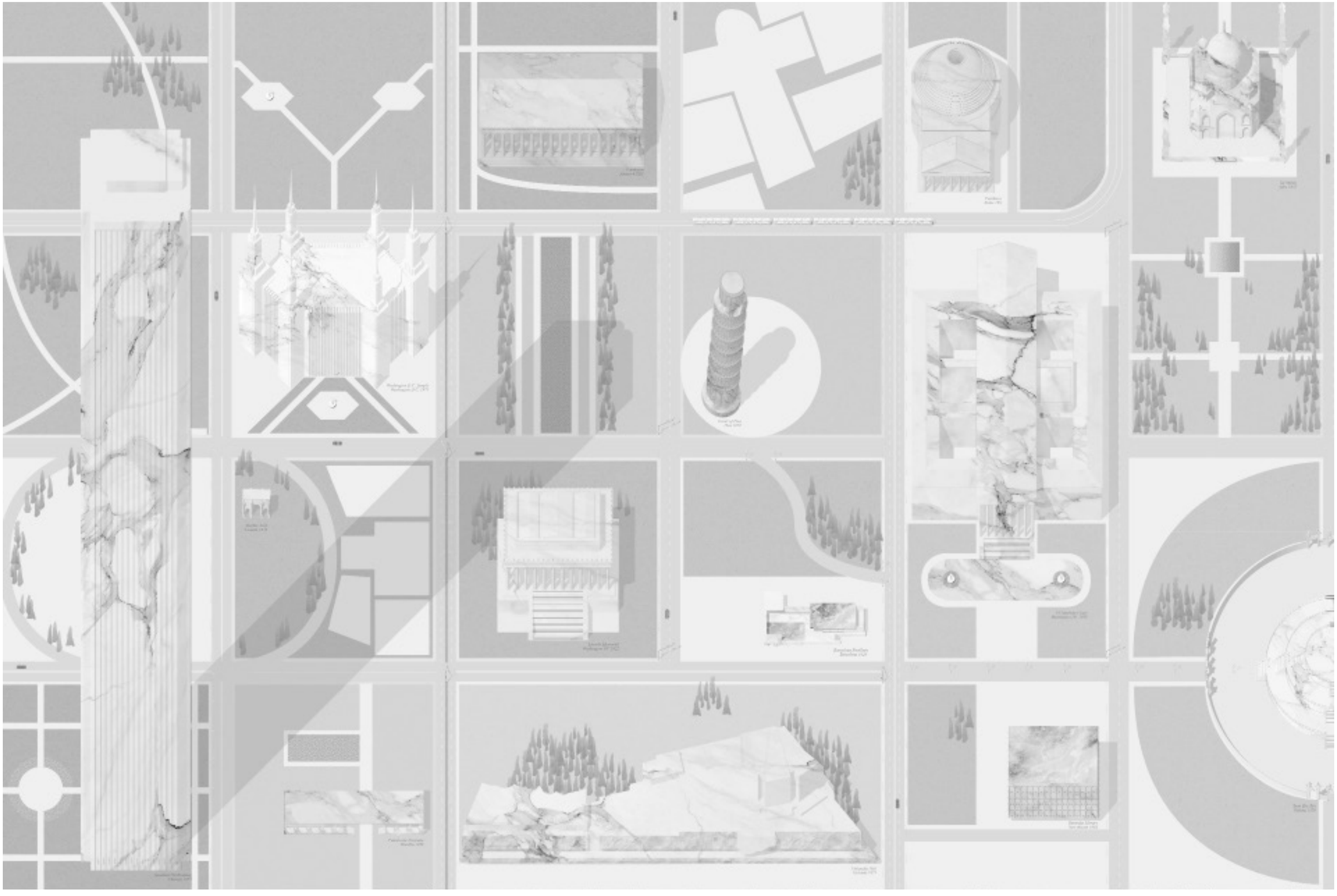
15. Borrowing from Vladimir Nabokov's observation that, "the future is but the obsolete in reverse," in his article "The Monuments of Passaic" from 1967, Robert Smithson used the phrase "ruins in reverse" to refer to the construction sites of the suburban developments in Passaic, which were going to be eventually built. He wrote: "This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built." Emphases in original. Robert Smithson, "The Monuments of Passaic" Artforum (December 1967), 54. For Smithson's referencing of Nabokov, see Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments" Artforum (June 1966).

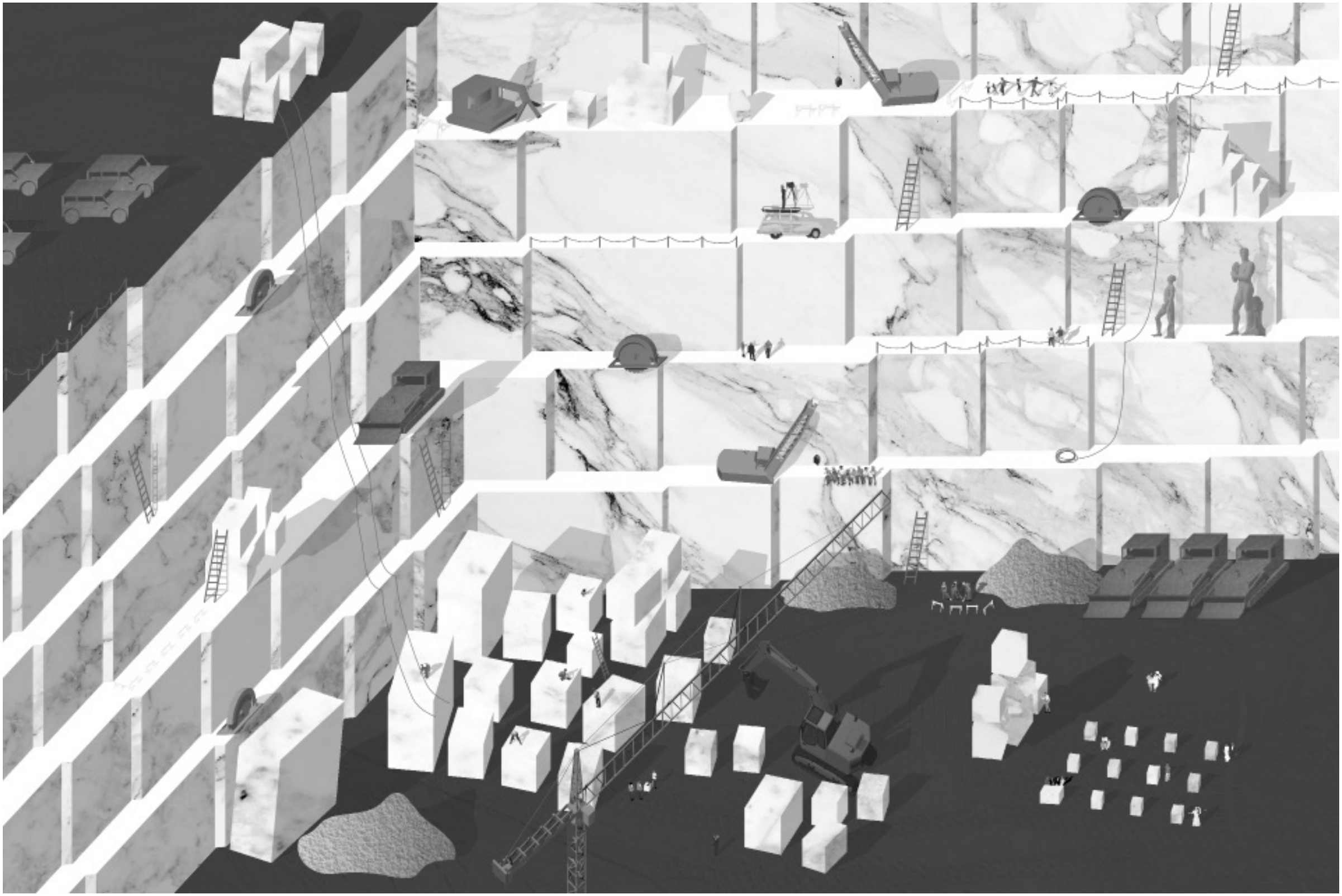
16. B. Wilkinson, "Humans as Geologic Agents: A Deep-Time Perspective," Geology 33, no. 3 (2005): 161–64. Also see Peter Baccini and Paul H. Brunner, Metabolism of the Anthroposphere: Analysis, Evaluation, Design (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012)

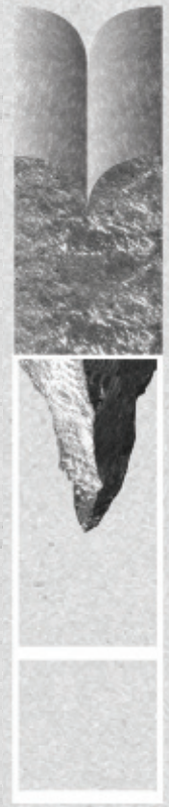


Marble

Architectural Still Life –
What would an open air architectural museum with all the important marble buildings look like?

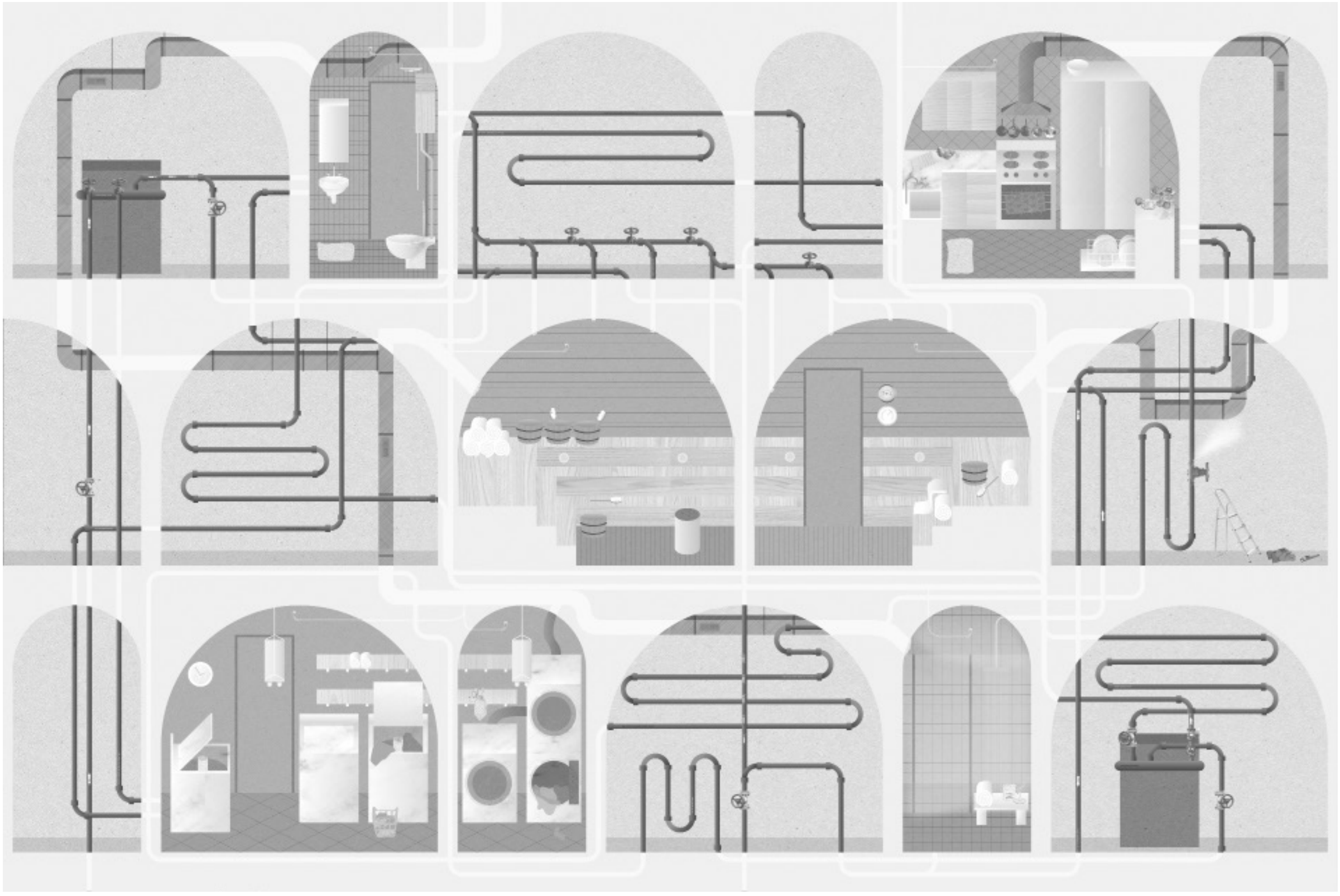




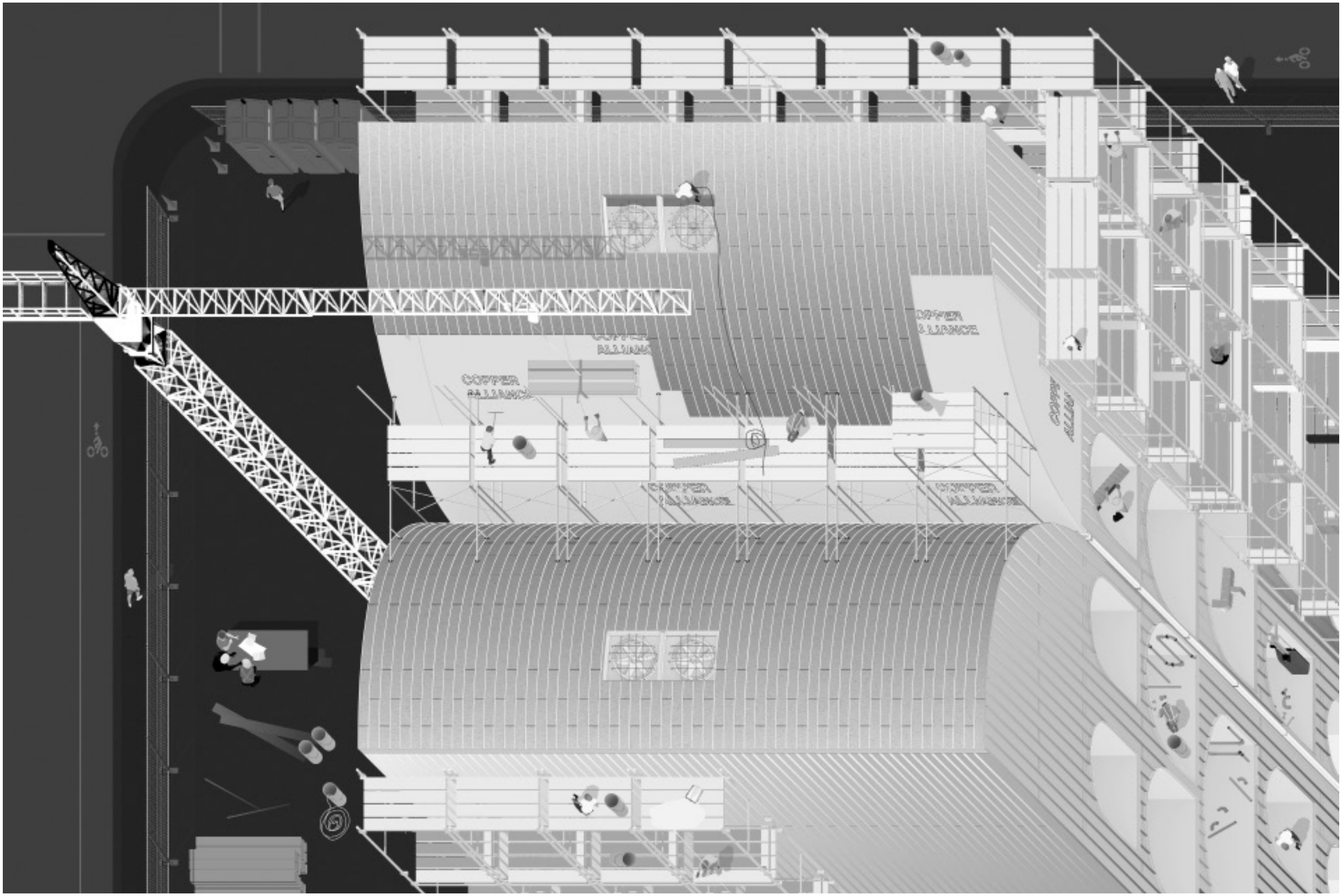


Copper

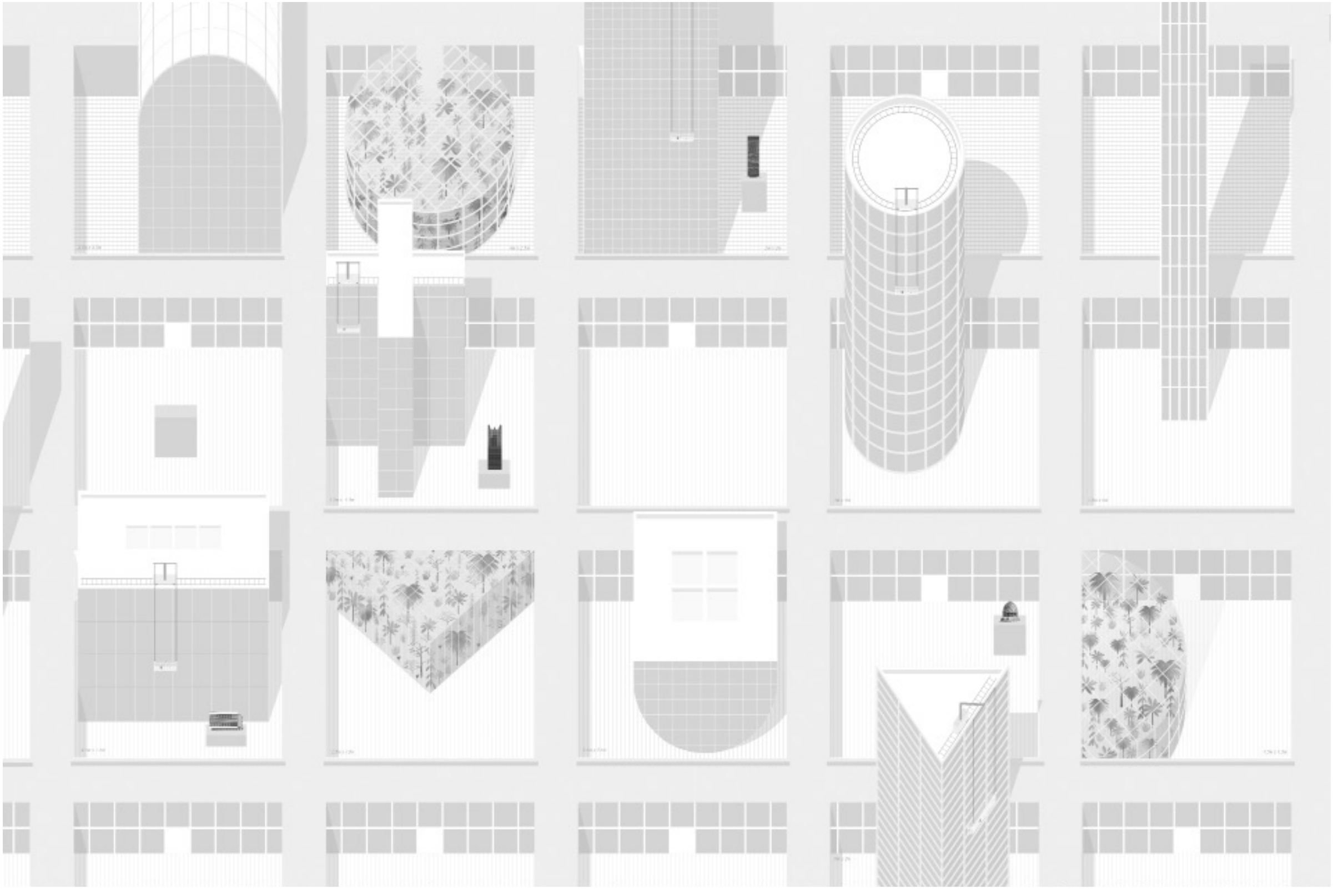
Architectural Still Life – Our saunas, kitchens and restrooms, all heated, air-conditioned and fire-proofed by copper pipes and HVAC systems, waiting to be pampered by maintenance and repair.

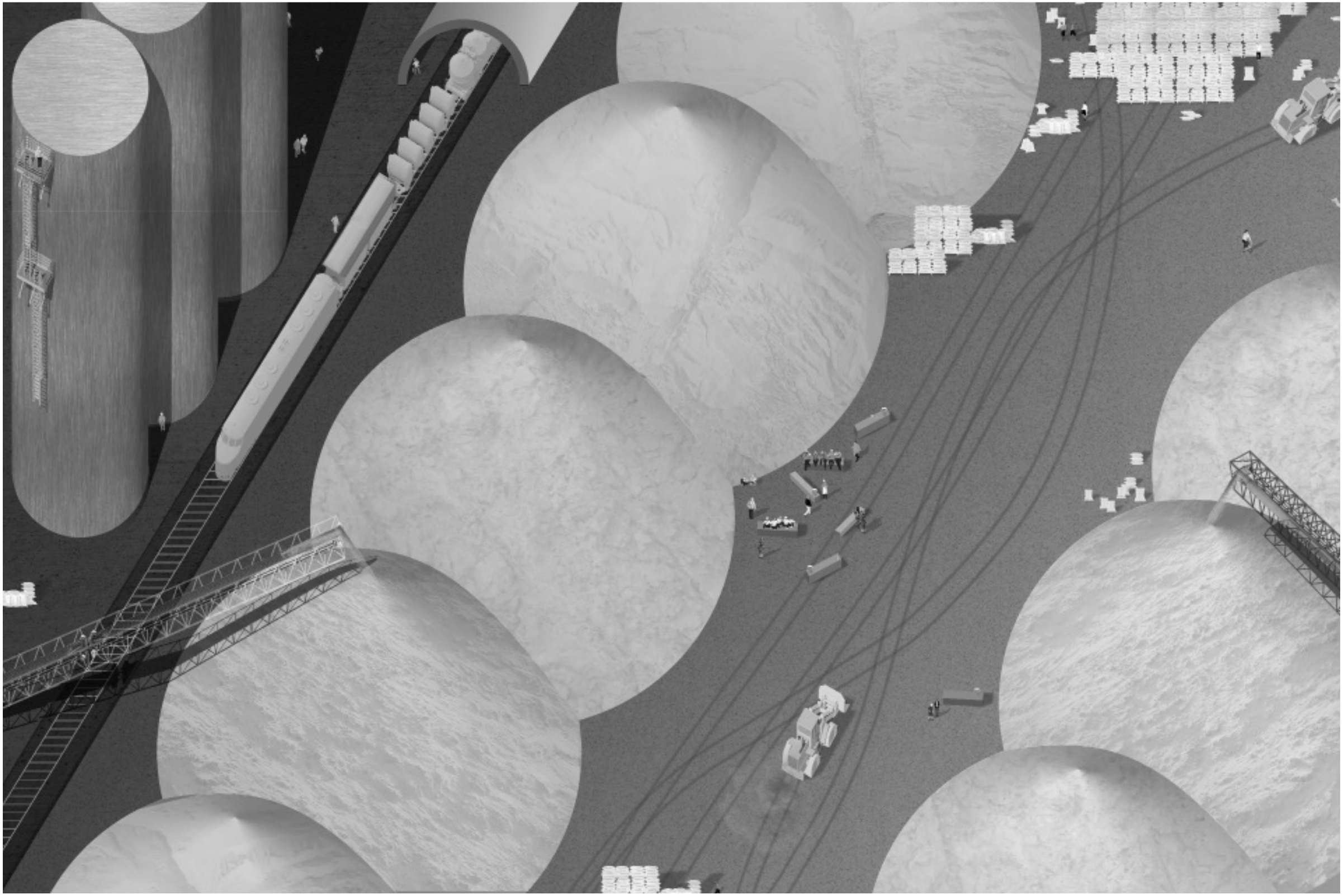


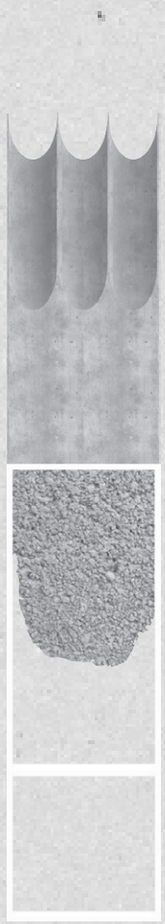
The same building has copper cladding and is continually in construction.
There is anxiety that the building will be in this state forever.



Glass

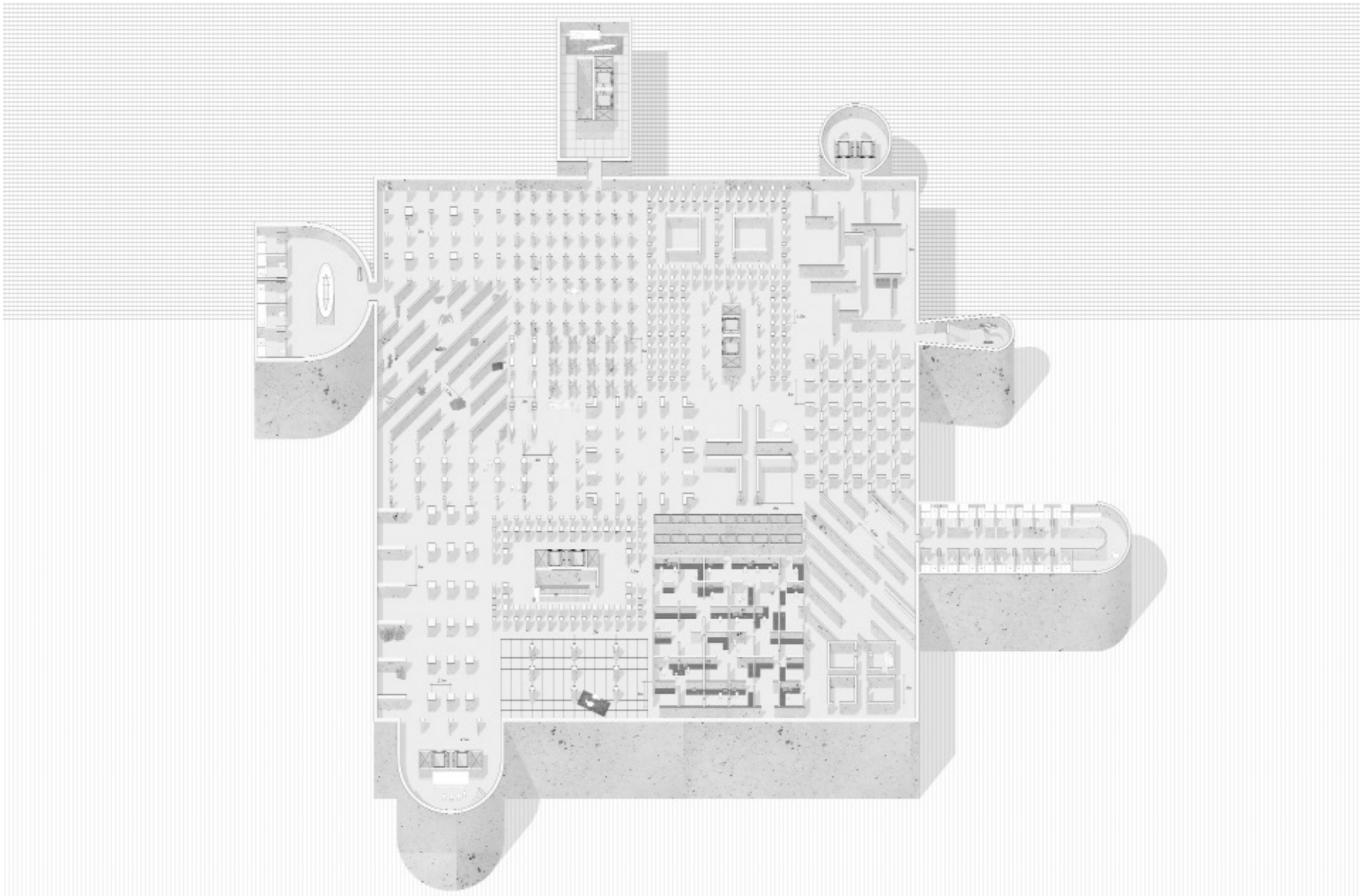


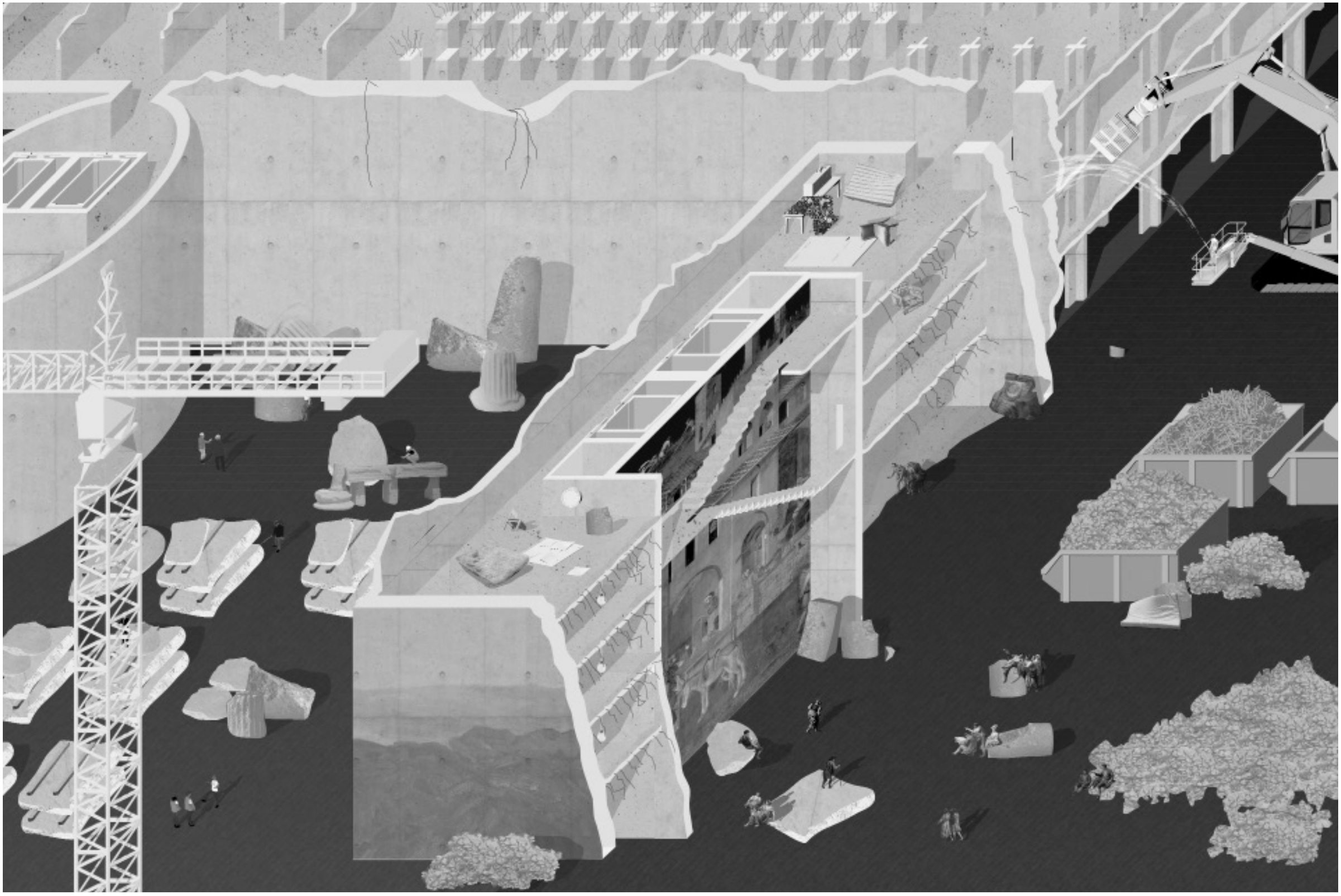




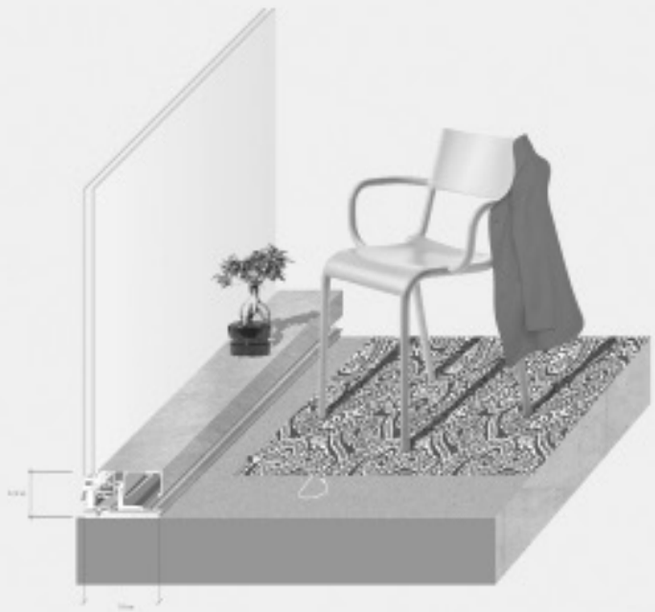
Concrete

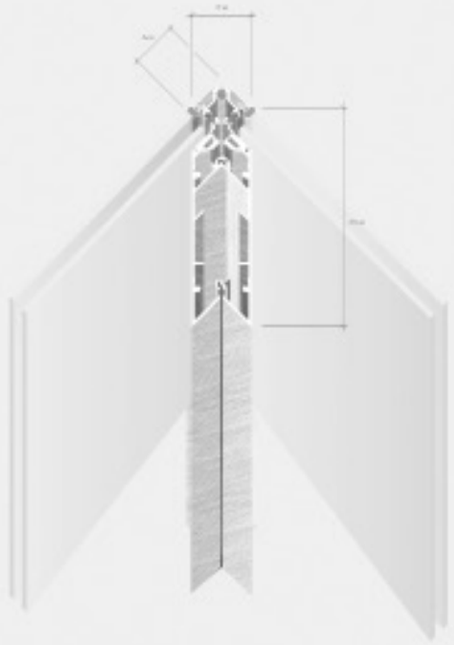
Architectural Still Life –
Our buildings are the field condition of concrete cores, walls, columns. Nothing more, nothing less.

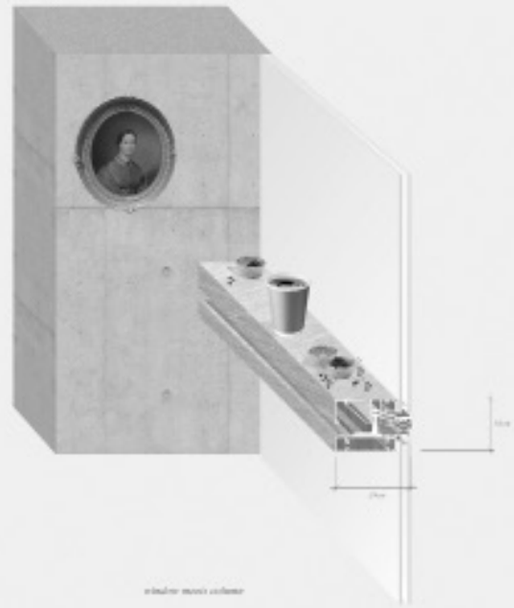


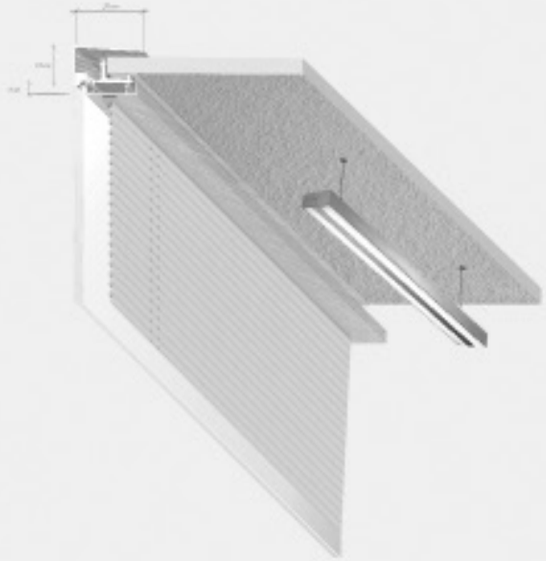


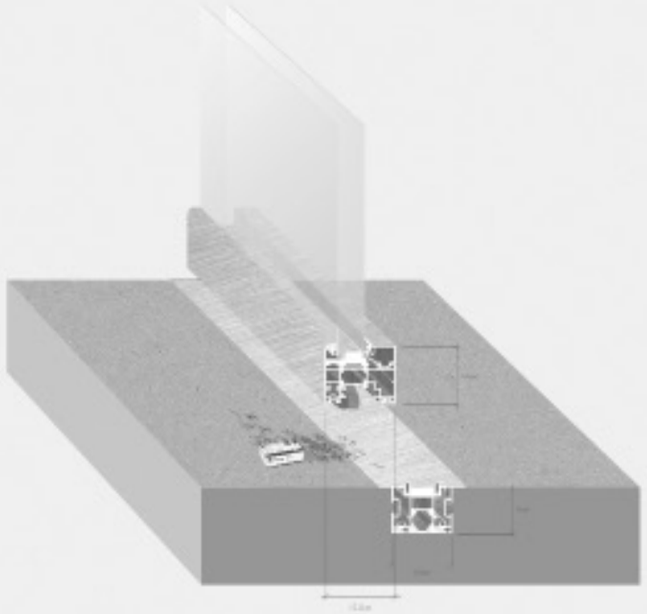
Aluminum

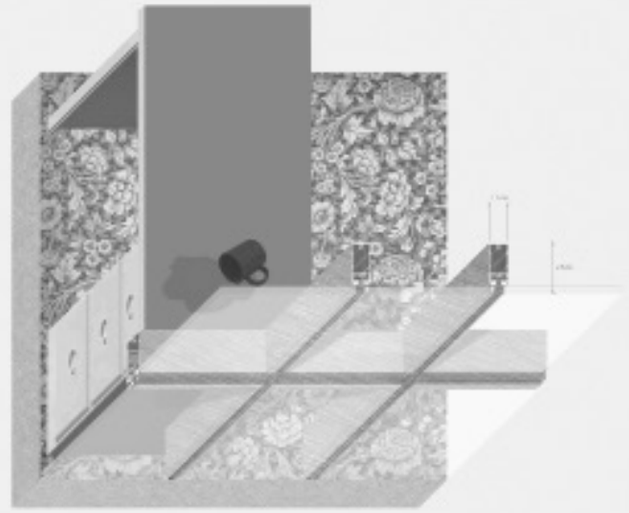










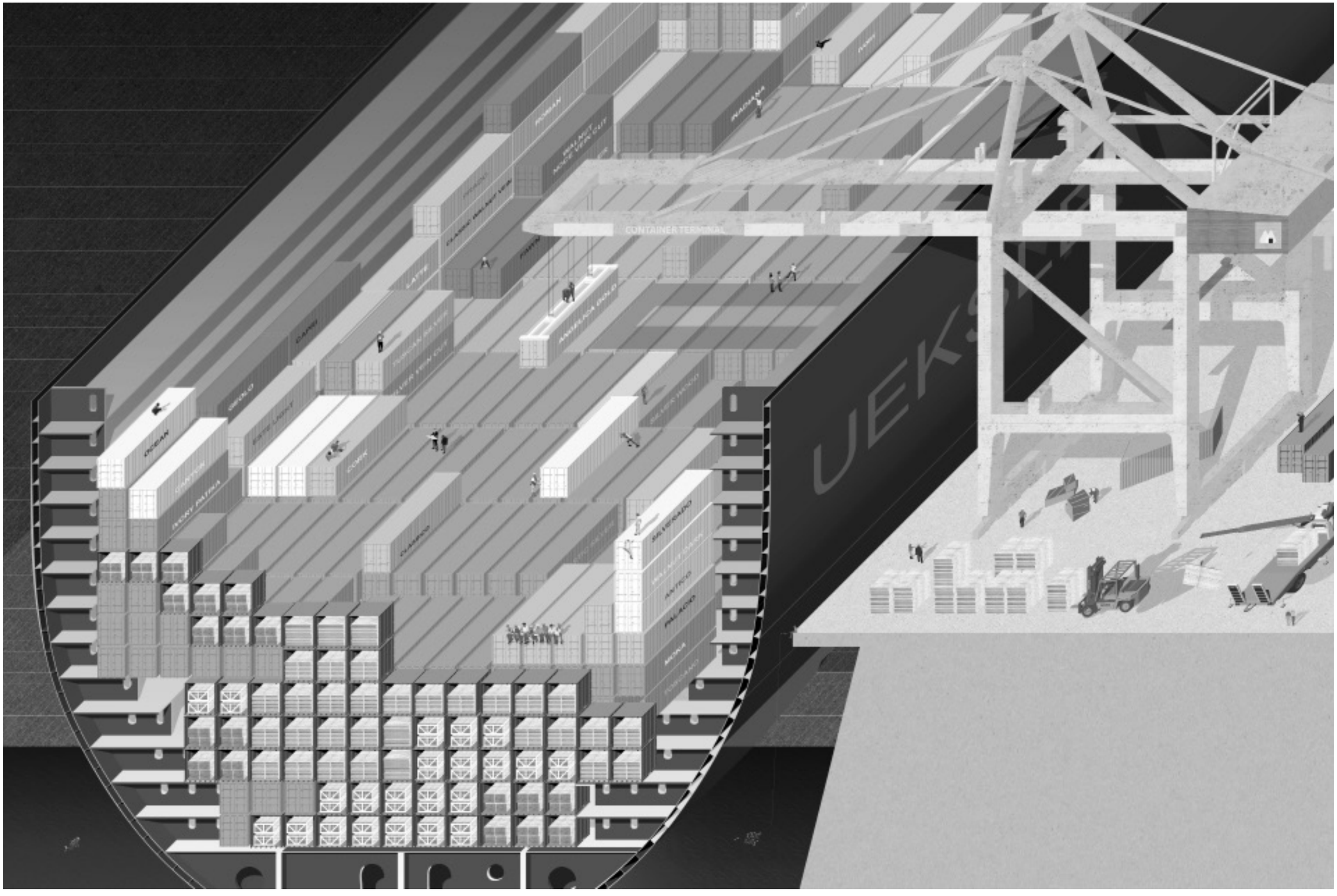


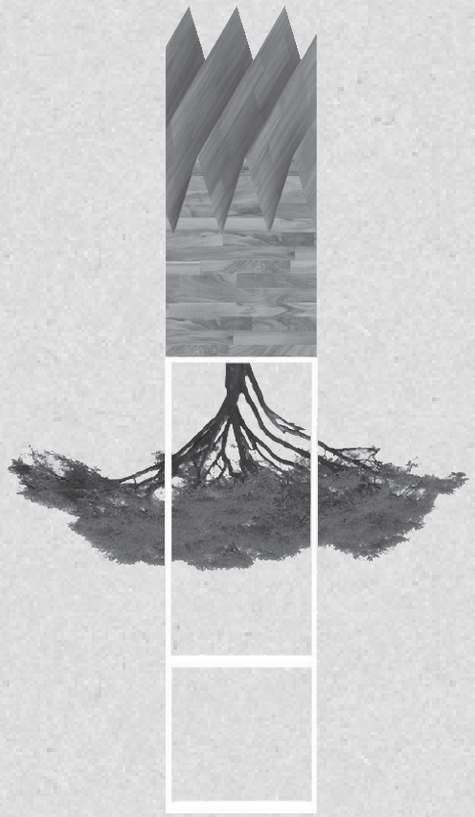
Any aluminum smelter is an image of a contrast between a technological interior environment and a wilderness landscape.

Travertine

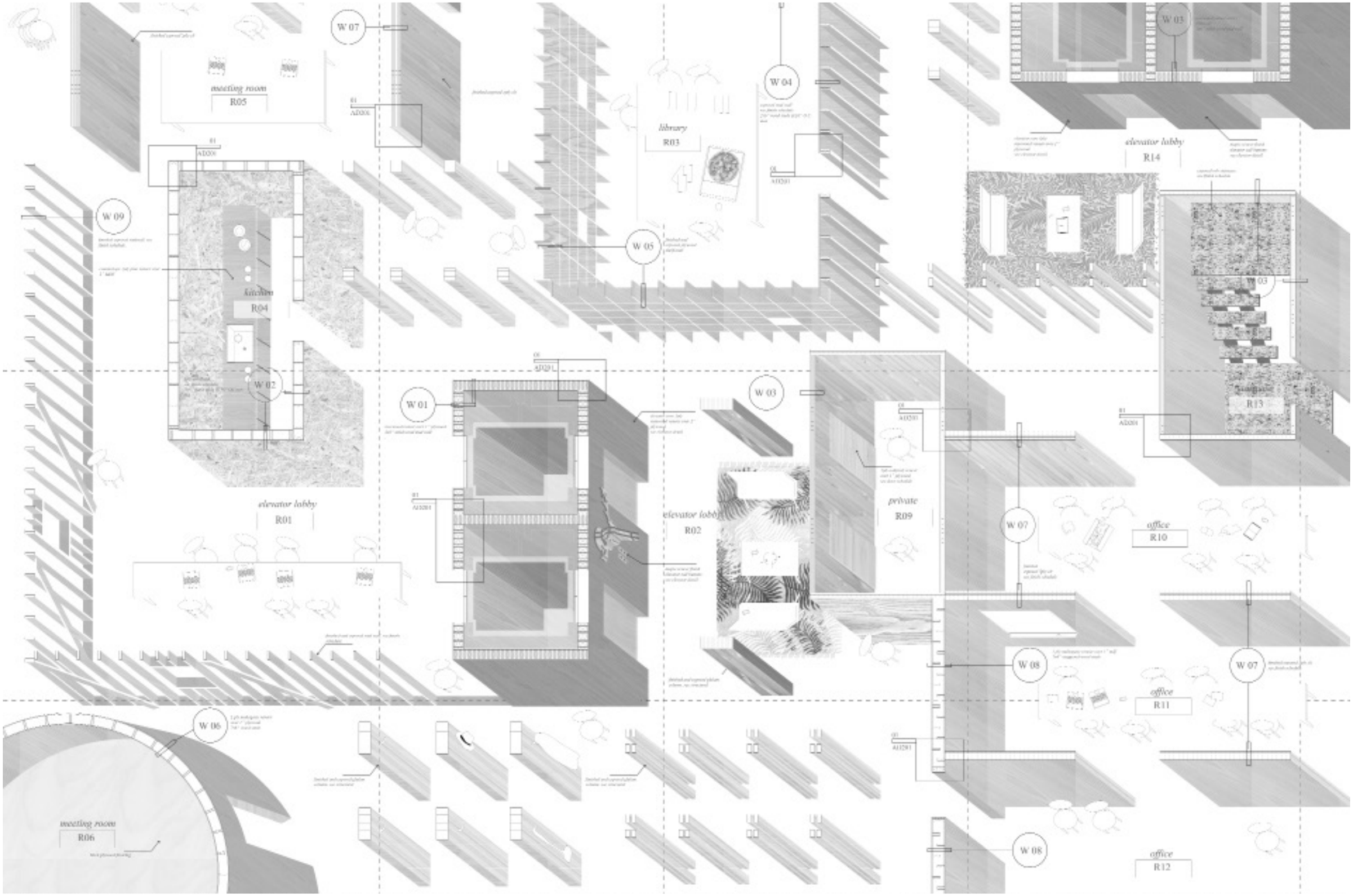
Architectural Still Life - Lives around our offices with travertine curtain walls; on the outside in dire need to be maintained, in the inside to be accommodated.

Travertine to be transported is waiting at the port. Users enjoy the prolonged process.

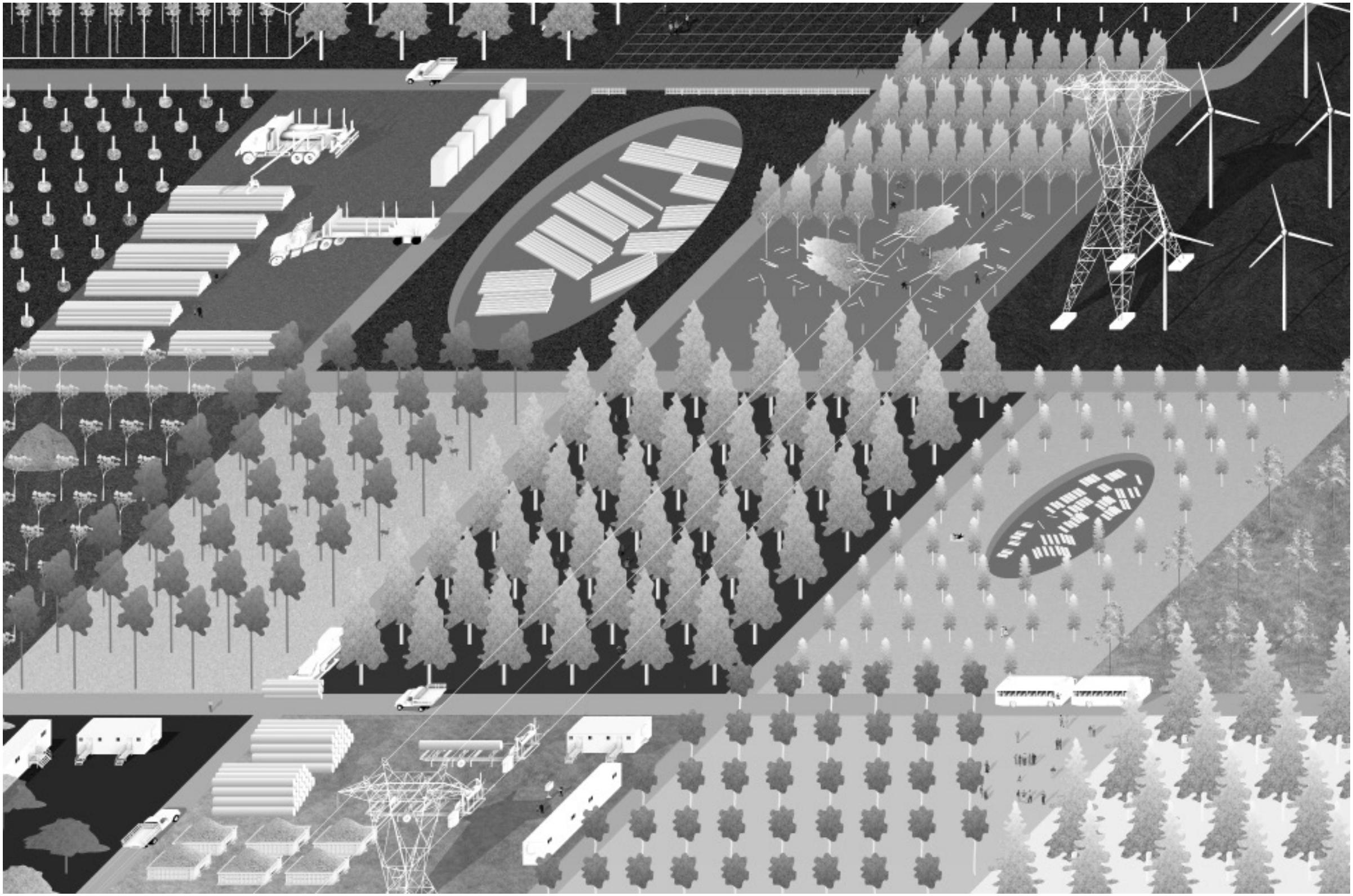


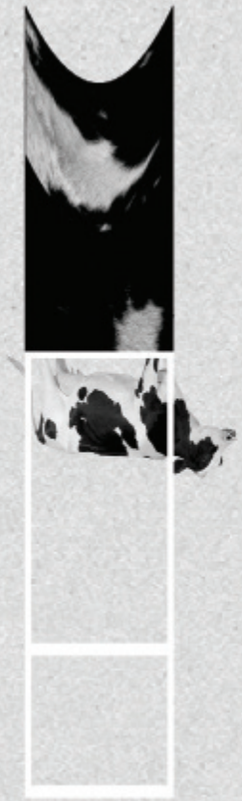


Wood


W 07
meeting room
R05
01
AD201
W 04
library
R03
01
AD201
W 05
W 03
elevator lobby
R14
W 09
kitchen
R04
W 02
W 03
R13
01
AD201
W 01
01
AD201
W 03
elevator lobby
R02
private
R09
01
AD201
W 07
office
R10
elevator lobby
R01
W 08
W 07
office
R11
W 06
meeting room
R06
W 08
office
R12

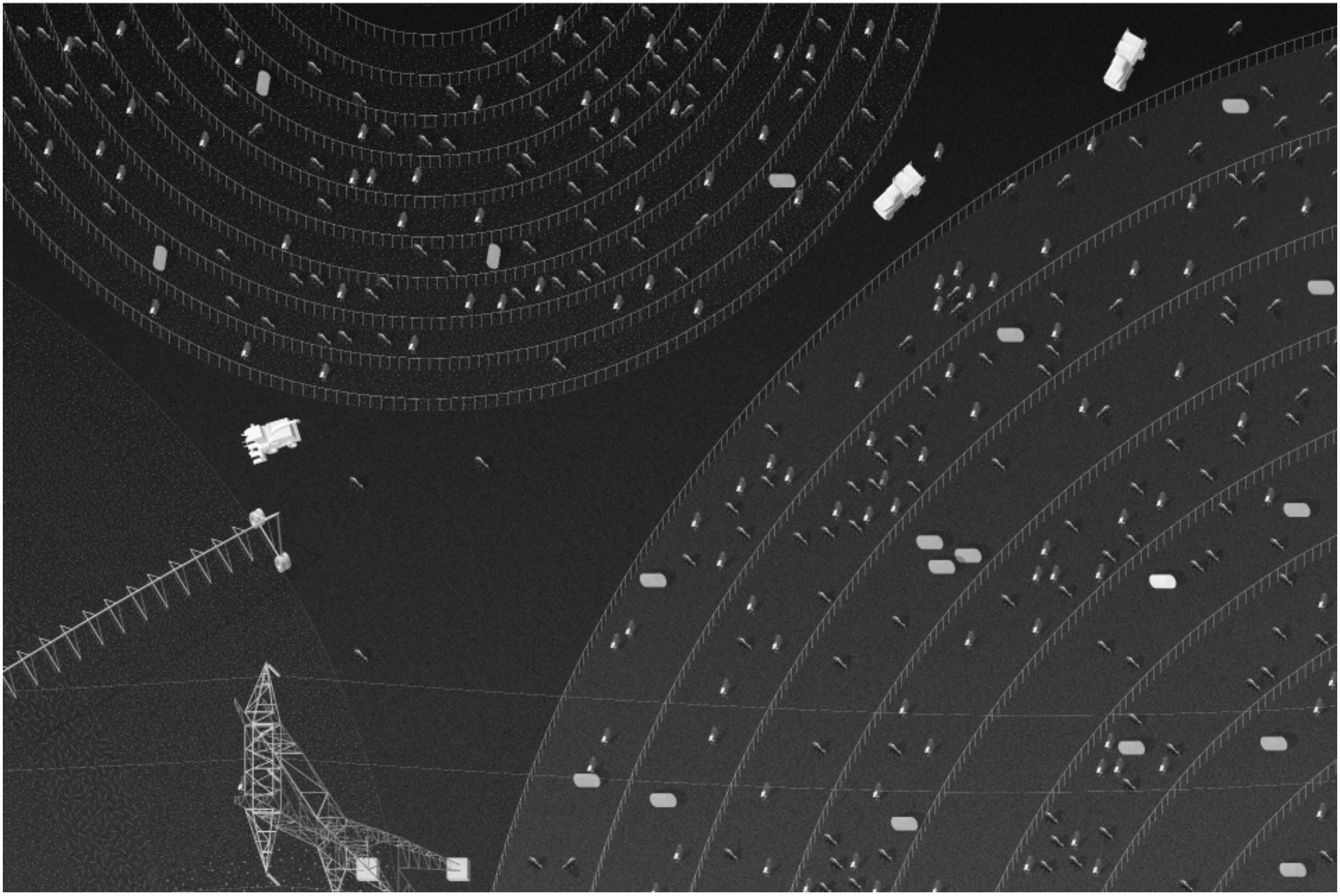
Industrial tree farms are our new gardens.





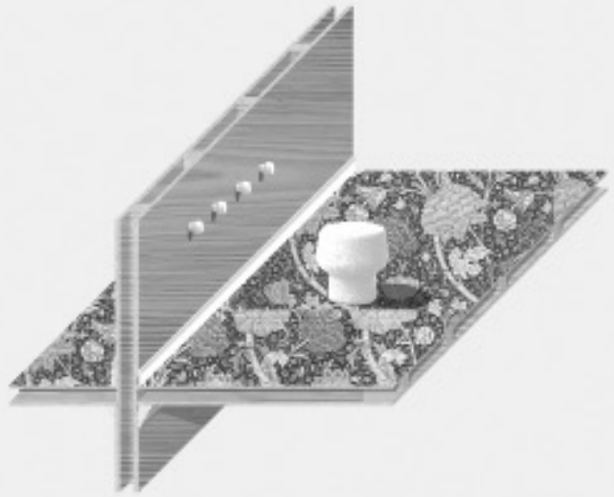
Leather

Architectural Still Life – A skyscraper roof garden covered with lush leather and false rococo fireplace is a mischievous Corbusian paradox. Background is not Parisian monuments but the roof top chillers.

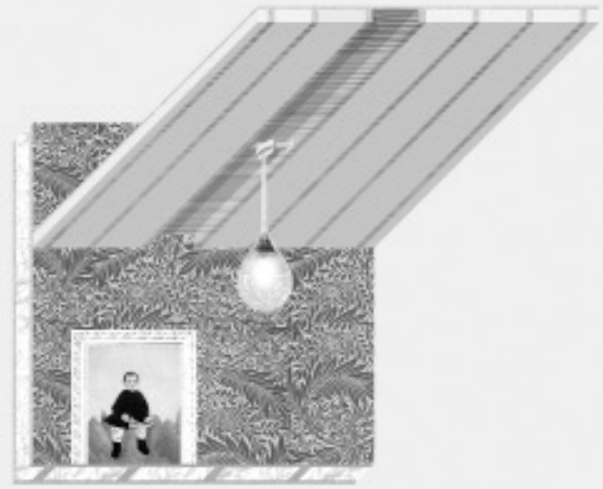


Styrofoam

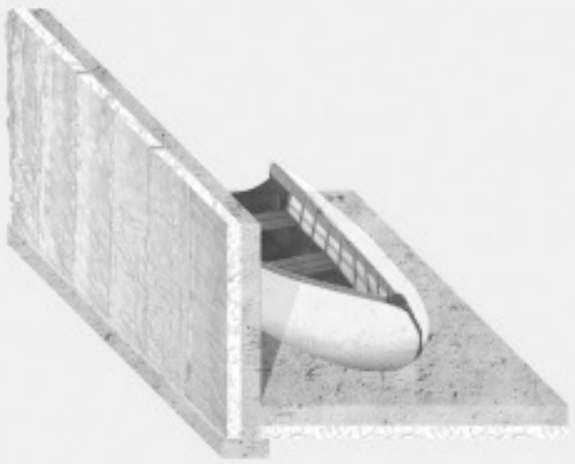
exterior walls



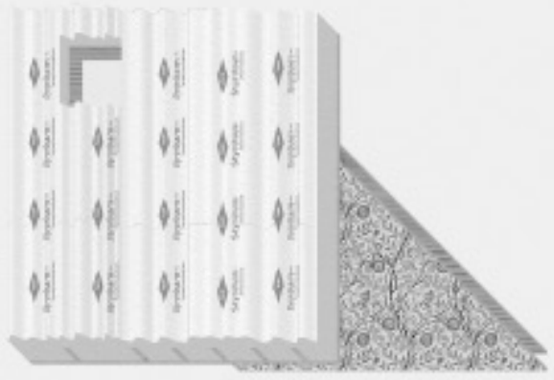
crown and base moldings



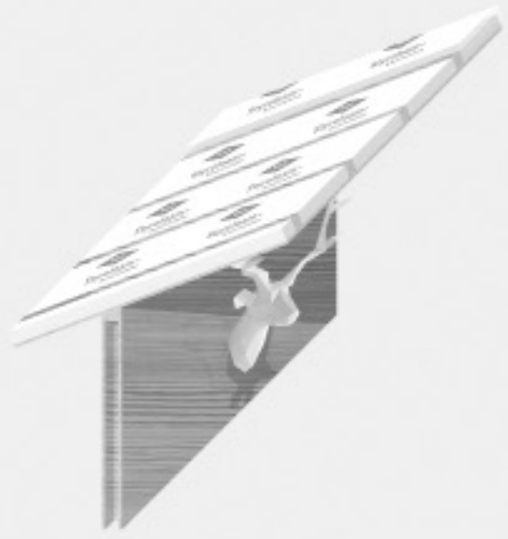
between the studs



foundation walls in heated basements

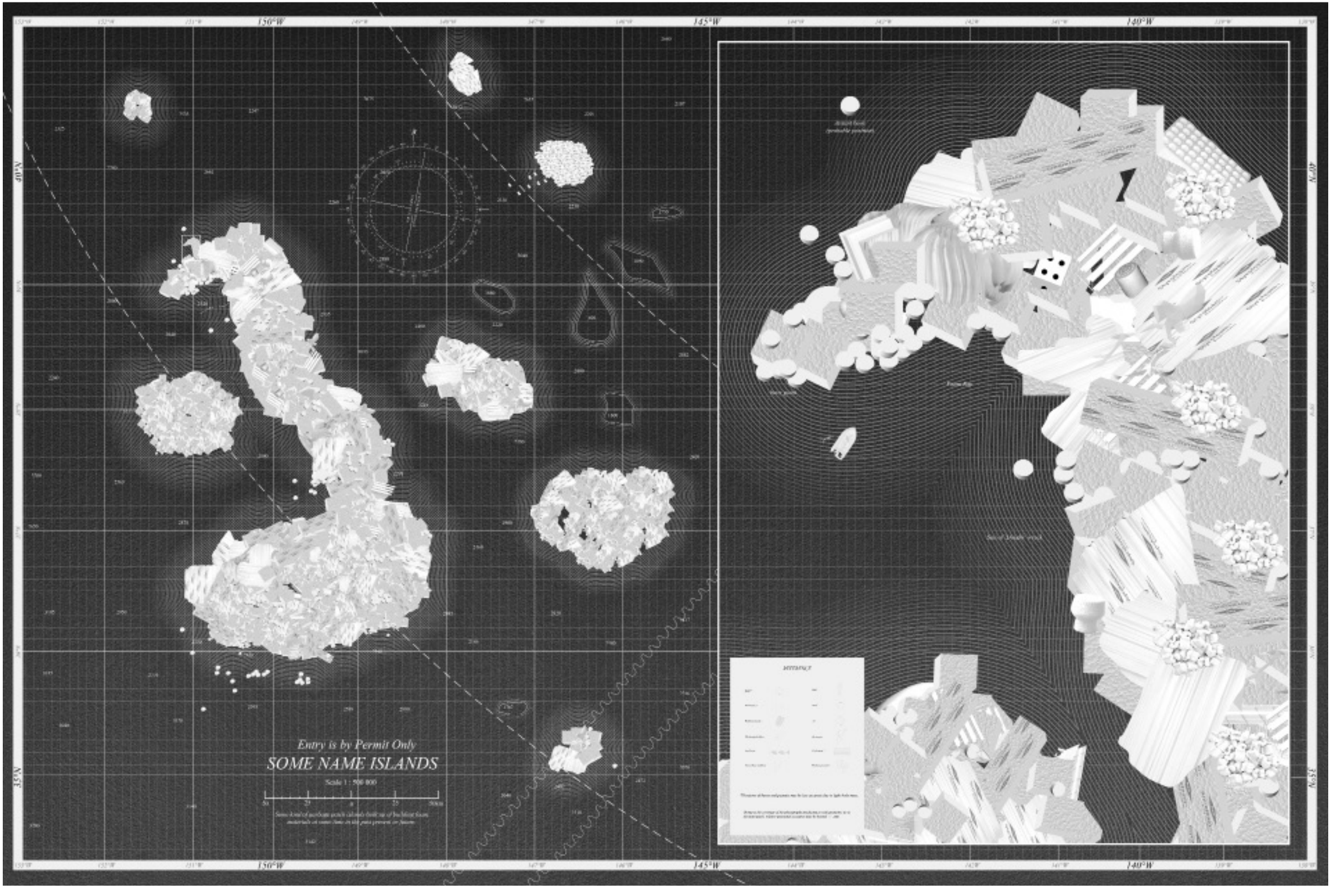


exterior cladding and interior finishes

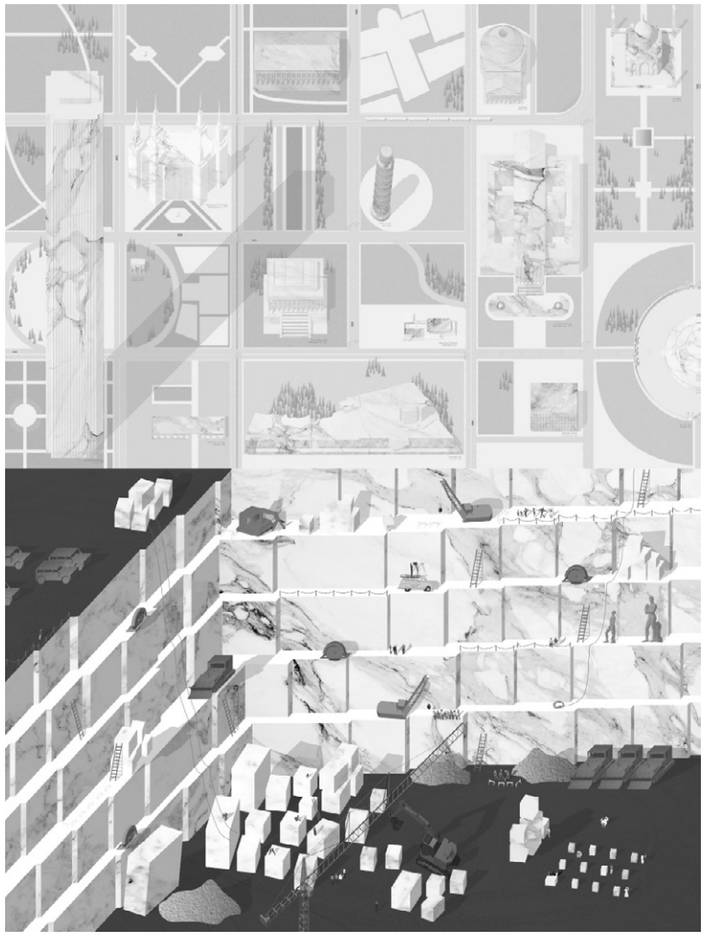


between rafters at roof

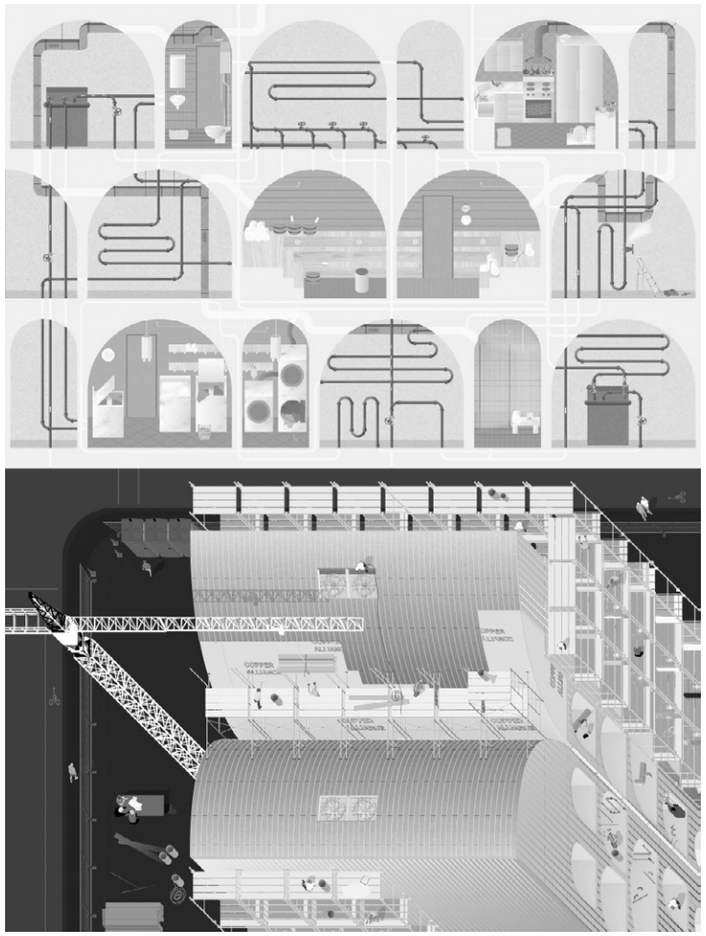
All that Sytrofoam building material is now on a waste mount at the Pacific Ocean Garbage Patch.



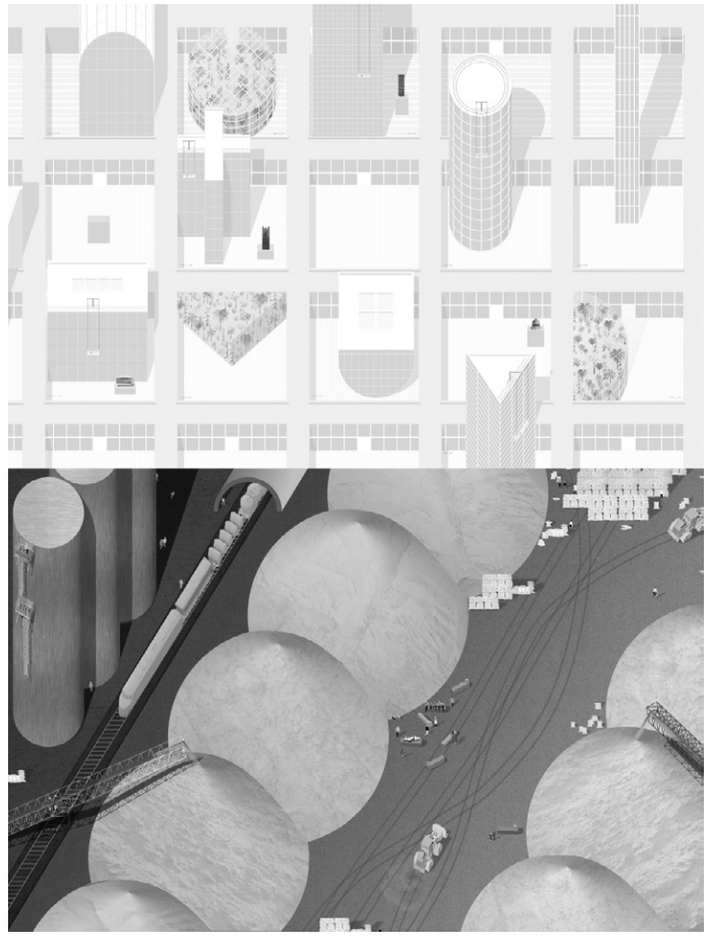
Marble



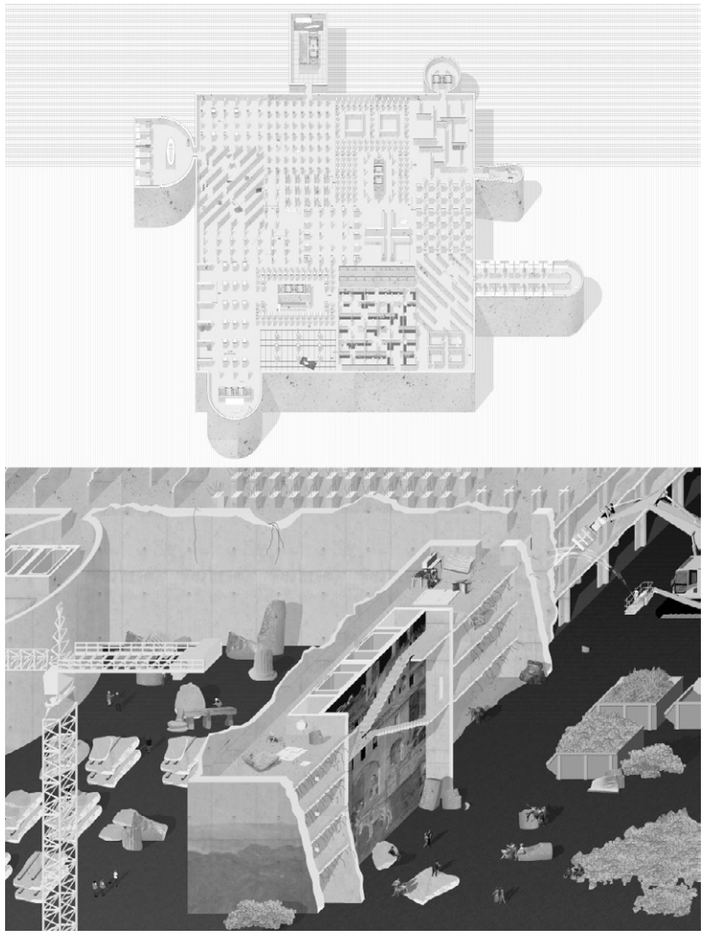
Copper



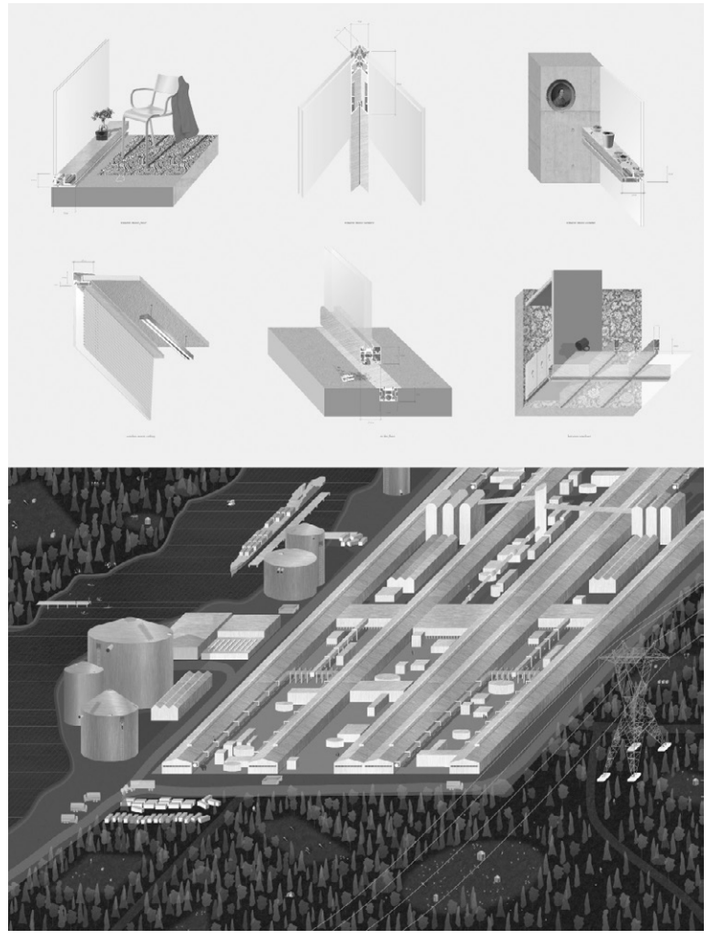
Glass



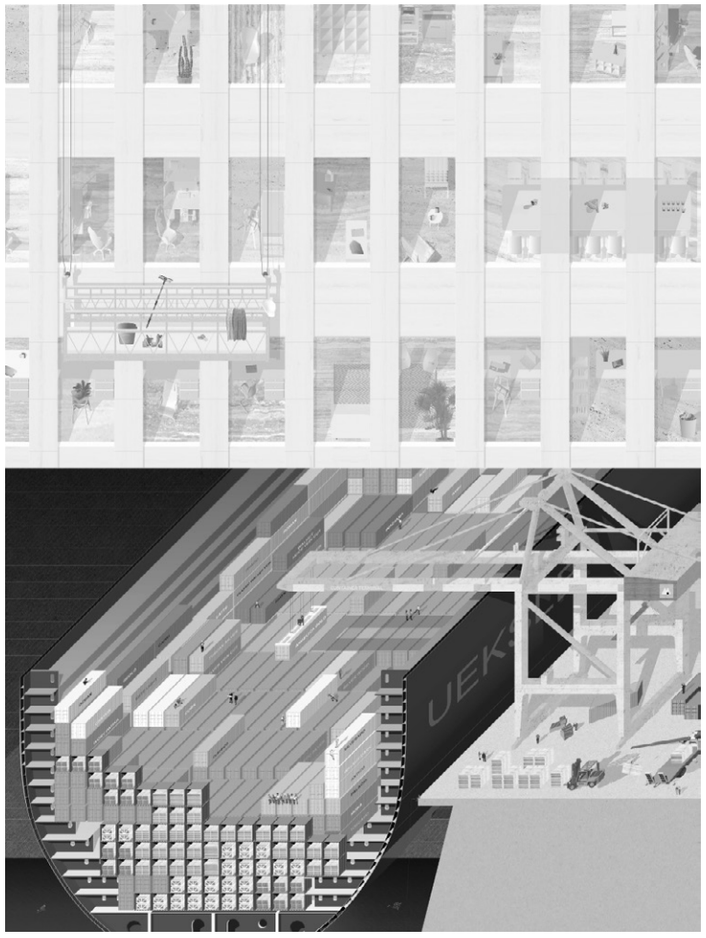
Concrete



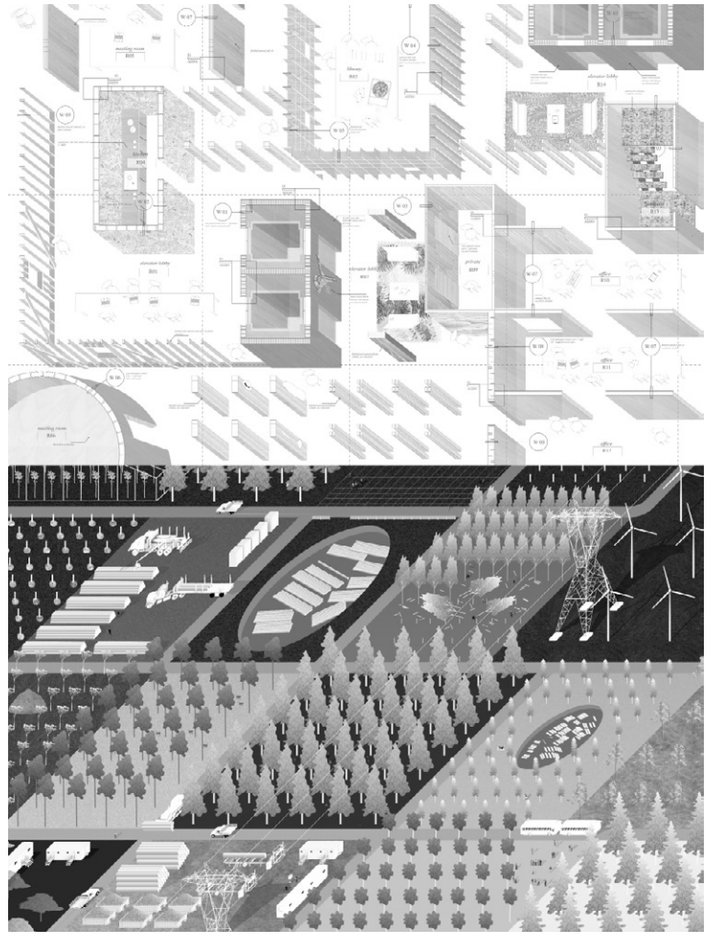
Aluminum



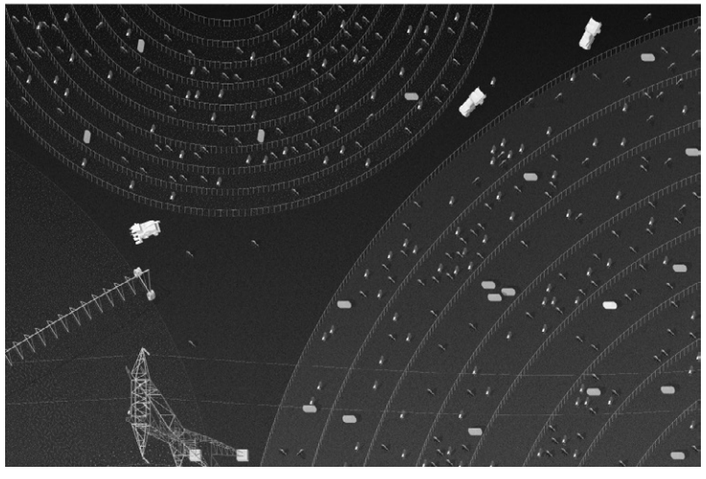
Travertine



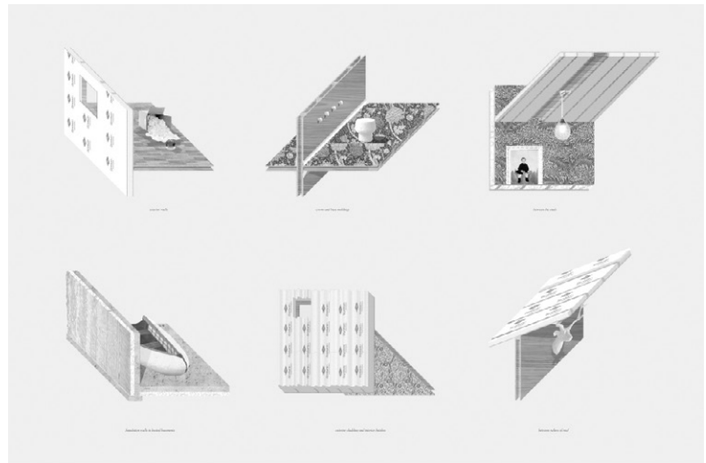
Wood

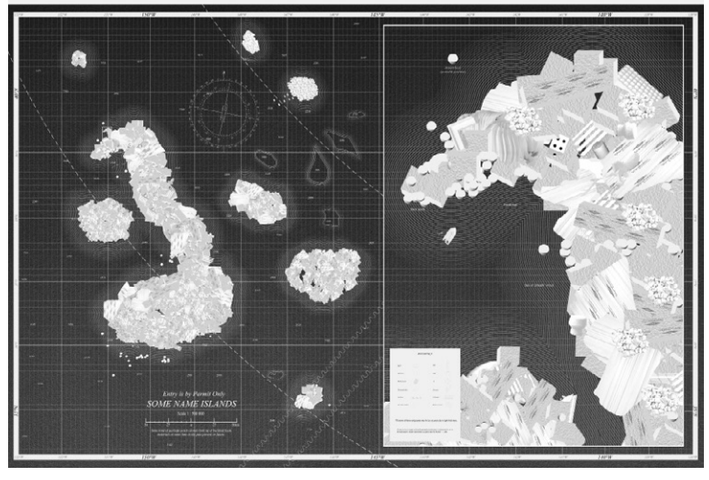


Leather



Styrofoam





Nine Islands: Matters Around Architecture is a project by NEMESTUDIO for the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial "Are We Human?" Galata Greek School, Istanbul. Curated by Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, with Evangelos Kotsioris

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