



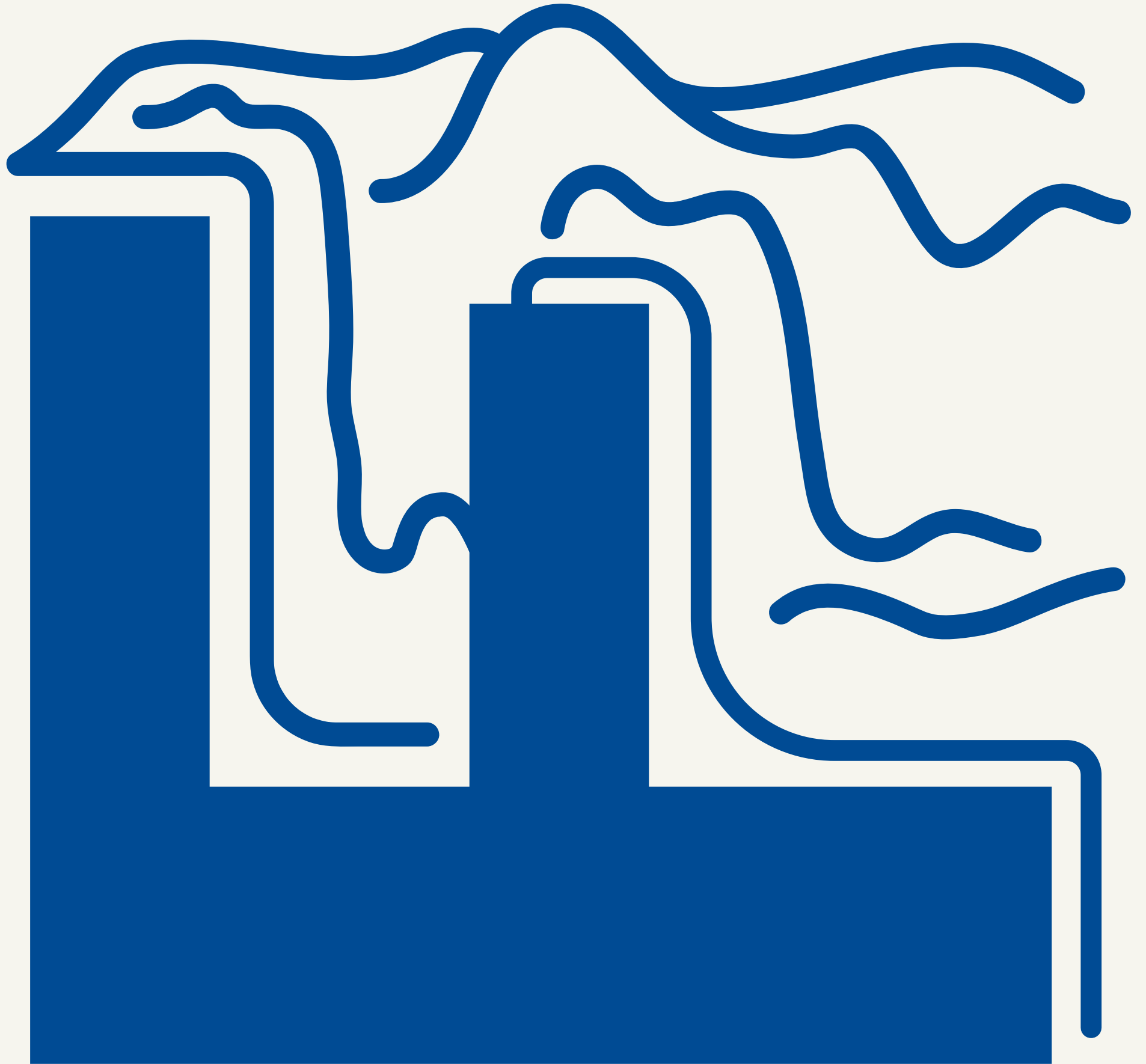
# The Letter

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.

Vienna is an ungenerous patron. But the villages we ran from, crevices and backwoods, have been honorable mecenaes. We devote this issue to the countryside as a token of gratitude. **Only the mountains will be modern** is a prickly declaration of love; **Can the lithium-ion battery be sexy?** probes the near future of highway architecture; **Photographing Villa Stein-de-Monzie**

reveals that modernism needs bucolic landscapes to exist; **The triumph of the void** curtly dissects Oscar Niemeyer's representation of the Brazilian Cerrado in the buildings of Brasilia, and **Reality sucks** introduces artist Mara Novak's latest confrontation with the grotesque misuses of resources.

Sincerely, The Editor



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1. Only the mountains will be modern	<b>3</b>
2. Can the lithium-ion battery be sexy?	<b>7</b>
3. Photographing Villa Stein-de-Monzie	<b>11</b>
4. The triumph of the void	<b>15</b>
5. Reality sucks	<b>16</b>





Theodor Herzl inspects a house by Steiner Architecture in the snowy slopes of Zell am See in Austria's Salzburg region. Herzl was one of the faces of Viennese liberalism at the turn of the century, acting as literature editor of the **Neue Freie Presse**. Background photo by Mara Novak, 2023. Collage by Steiner Architecture, 2024.



# 1. Only the mountains will be modern

## Enough with the city! Everyone can live in an Altbau!<sup>1</sup>

We're tired of the endless discussion about the significance of cities. It's unendurable. It all began with Mr. City and his books. Mr. City's name is Koolhaas. Rem Koolhaas. He was devoted to the proposition that **WORLD = CITY**, and harassed three generations of architects to swallow it. Nothing deserved more attention than the fact that 50% of the world lived in urban areas.

Fortunately Mr. City was touched with the feeling of a new era: he swerved direction and devoted a major exhibition to the countryside at the New York Guggenheim in 2020. Thus the discourse of the city officially sputtered out. Mr. City now purports: if anybody wants to look into the future, they better pay attention to what is going on in the boondocks. On the evening of November 6th, 2024, Mr. City must have congratulated himself. Rightly so. He called out the power of the rural over the urban before any other hot architect did. Do not think it is insubstantial that Koolhaas discussed Tesla's Gigafactory in Nevada in 2020, as an example of the countryside's brutal technologization, and how little the city knows about it. While cities were tearing their clothes apart over the colonization of New England, the boondocks were planning the colonization of Mars. There in the forlorn uncouth plains of America is the future that the city is too unfuturistic to handle.

Today the city is the safe space.  
Only the country will be modern.

Great liberal cities are locked in a path to illiberalism. London is today Britain's most conservative city, as per, ehem, The Guardian. It is tragically Britain's most homophobic city, most resistant to premarital sex and assisted suicide. The riskiest lawn to wear a yarmulka in America is Butler's Lawn in Columbia University, and the only classroom map with a missing state of Israel is in Brooklyn.

These depressing statistics are carpet burns from genuflecting to the myth of complexity; cold sores from submitting to the assumption that cities can only be modern when they behave like dutiful completists of worldviews, even the unmodern ones. Especially the unmodern ones.

A crucial brick in the construction of that fairy tale was the belief that the countryside was congenitally unmodern. The rural was regarded as the territory of the intellectually unfit, low IQ, the boorish, the inbred, the bigots, the patriarchs, the nationalist and other sinners.

The tides have changed.

We predict a near future where the countryside is the territory of the true liberal being, freedom of expression, a setting for unhampered scholarly pursuit, and full enjoyment of political liberty. We predict an exodus of modern-minded individuals from the city to the village.

How will architecture react?





Post data  
 Modernist architecture was not initially built in the city but in the periphery, even if their designers did. Adolf Loos's building in Michaelerplatz was the exception. Only after World War II was canonical modernism invited in. The equation of architecture and politics is a puerile expectation. Modernism merely began with the liberal elite. But Benito Mussolini sponsored modernists as much as Vladimir Lenin. There is no such thing as socialist or fascist architecture. Oscar Niemeyer knew this. The only communist thing about his Communist Party Headquarters in Paris is that he waived his design fees.

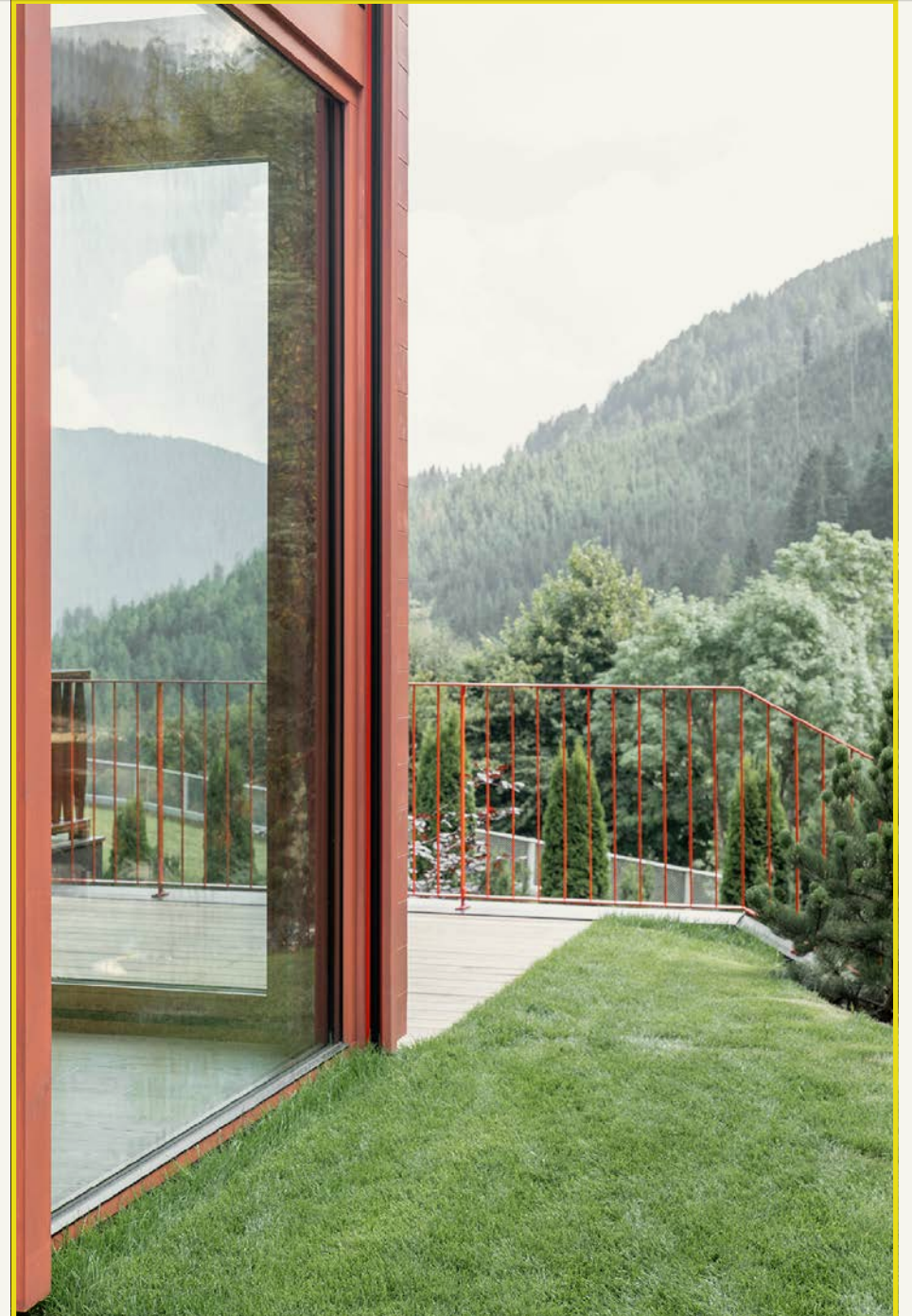
<sup>1</sup> The Altbau is the typical four to five storey masonry apartment building that makes up the majority of Vienna. They are pre-WWII by definition and are frequently stylistically nondescript.

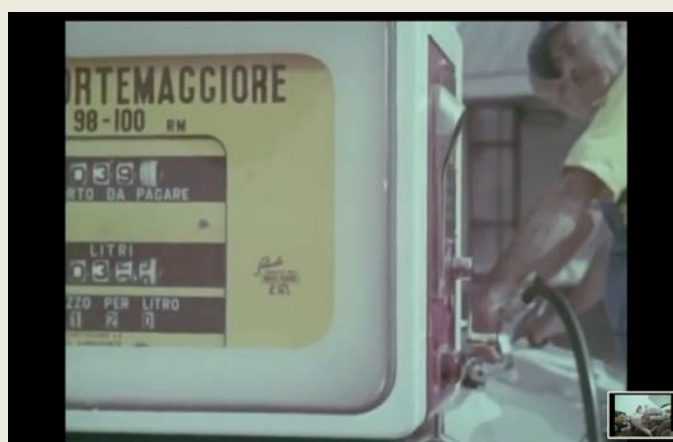
ABOVE LEFT: House on Lake Zell. Photo by Florian Holzherr, 2022.

BELOW LEFT: Proposal for a racing pavilion. Image by Reflexiv Architektur, 2024.

ABOVE RIGHT: Proposal for a glass pavilion with palm trees and Brazilian flowers. Image by Reflexiv Architektur, 2024.

BELOW RIGHT: House Schmitt in Zell am See. Photograph by Florian Holzherr, 2023.





Frames from Hugh Hudson's **The Tortoise and the Hare**. With Liz Allsopp, Lucy Hornak and Gino Zottarelli. The film was produced by Camell Hudson & Brownjohn and financed by Pirelli. Liz Allsopp's wardrobe was provided by the then British fashion icon Kiki Byrne as well as Byrne's London nemesis Mary Quant.



## 2. Can the lithium-ion battery be sexy?

In 1966, the Etonian Hugh Hudson<sup>1</sup> received a BAFTA nomination for a little-known, thirty eight-minute film titled **The Tortoise and the Hare**. A white Jaguar E-class and a double-trailer Pirelli truck begin their journey North from Naples on the newly inaugurated Autostrada del Sole, passing each other to the beat of **Keep on Running** by The Spencer Davis Group. There's chest hair, there's Gucci, there's harmless DUI. There's Enni, Fiat, Motta and more Pirelli: the whole gamut of Autostrada culture.

A few miles from Milan, the Jaguar takes a right exit on a sign that says AUTOGRILL. Now the fashionable Brit at the wheel steps out and climbs into a futuristic concrete building that spans the width of the highway like a bridge. It's a white-dinner-jacket restaurant designed by Angelo Bianchetti, who had trained in the Berlin office of Mies van der Rohe. The groaning board is sumptuous. The waiters are impeccable. The tablecloths shine. Now the Brit looks out the window onto the Autostrada, right at the moment the Pirelli truck passes underneath.

It's a shot that captures the spirit of an era like an inspissation of sociology: the brand new, 1964 Autostrada del Sole was the summation of Italian postwar reconstruction, while the glossy Autogrill restaurants floating above were the ultimate icon of Italian prosperity, like exclusive box seats to watch the blood of Italian industry output flowing through the countryside. Italians know this period as the **Miracolo Economico**. Three decades of brutal growth following WWII, the same three decades known in France as **Les Trente Glorieuses**, **Wirtschaftswunder** in Germany, **Kodo Keisai Seicho** in Japan, and **The Long Summer** in America. And like the Jaguar and the Pirelli truck, the best-selling Fiat 500 and the Italian automotive revolution, these decades ran on oil of which the Arab countries seemed to have inordinate amounts of.

True Hydrocarbon Utopia.

<sup>1</sup> Hudson went on to enjoy a successful career directing TV ads and movies, though decidedly partial towards means of transportation and movement. He directed a gorgeous ad for FIAT ("Handmade by robots") in 1979 and a documentary about the Argentinian racer Juan Manuel Fangio. He also directed two inspiring commercials for British Airways and a deep commercial for intercity British Railway. He's nonetheless more famous for directing the 1982 epic *Chariots of Fire* that won an Academy award.

<sup>2</sup> The Milanese Bianchetti had the right credentials. He had worked in the design of numerous pavilions for the Milan Fiera Campionaria from the 1930s through the 1950s, the façades of which were items of advertising as much as architecture. They were propaganda. All Autogrills (and Mottagrills) were propaganda.

<sup>3</sup> *En France on n'a pas de pétrole, mais on a des idées*. The astute adage is proudly delivered by the French actor Henri Gilibert at the end of a state sponsored ad launched in 1974 to inspire the public in the midst of the **Choc Pétrolier**.

But in 1973 Hydrocarbon Utopia fell from a cliff. **Les Trente Glorieuses** and all the equivalent quips came to an end: a rift in Middle East politics lead the OPEC countries to introduce an oil embargo on the West. The economic repercussions were cataclysmic. No one was. The French cut the hydrocarbon Gordian Knot by implementing nuclear energy. *We don't have oil, but we have ideas!* – said, allegedly, the French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing via proxy in a famous TV-ad. But Italians didn't come up with anything like that<sup>3</sup>. In 1979 Giscard d'Estaing had another great French idea and flew the Ayatollah Khomeini in a First-Class Air France seat to Tehran. It ushered in the Islamic Revolution, which brought about a second oil crisis.

Italy never really recovered.

The 1980s brought the embryo of climate change awareness. It hatched into a censorious martinet. Oil was no longer fashionable. It reeks of Ed Hardy t-shirts. And by association the prestige of the Autogrill died a slow death. As icons of style, they were obsolete. Today the window of the Novara restaurant, which Liz Allsopp looked out onto the Autostrada in **The Tortoise and the Hare**, is clad in depressing metallic brise-soleils. Instead of Liz Allsopp, they got German bus tourists and carabinieri.

Enough of these sad acts. What if Hudson remade **The Tortoise and the Hare** in the current age of the Electric Vehicle? Suppose that Jaguar's November 2024 ad hadn't bombed, and instead of the white E-type in Hudson's movie, it was the new Type 00, pink and laconic, launched last year in Miami, that that took that right exit on the Autogrill sign, somewhere between, say, Naples and Rome. What would the Autogrill that fitted this type of experience look like? What would have Angelo Bianchetti designed?

Here's an idea. Another hypothetical bridge on the Italian landscape. Capitalizing on the charging-time of the lithium-ion batteries in an EV, which may range from twenty minutes to an hour, here the charging stations become the center piece. Capitalizing on the cleanness of clean energy, electric vehicles, roadsters and sedans, are allowed to climb up sculptural ramps. These ramps are rituals. The car is allowed in. It makes its peace with the interior. Interspaced among the charging stations, sharing the bright-coloured, optimistic coloured floors, are spaces for commerce.

Would there be a restaurant? We say Pasticceria Marchesi, Prada's bakery, but with a spin for road-trip snacks! Yes, After all, Autogrill was built by Mario Pavesi, the emperor of the Pavesini biscuits. And the other Duke of the Italian bridge-cum-restaurant was Motta the Panettone manufacturer, which financed sleek designs by the Bolognese Melchiorre Bega who designed Motta's glossy store in the Piazza del Duomo.

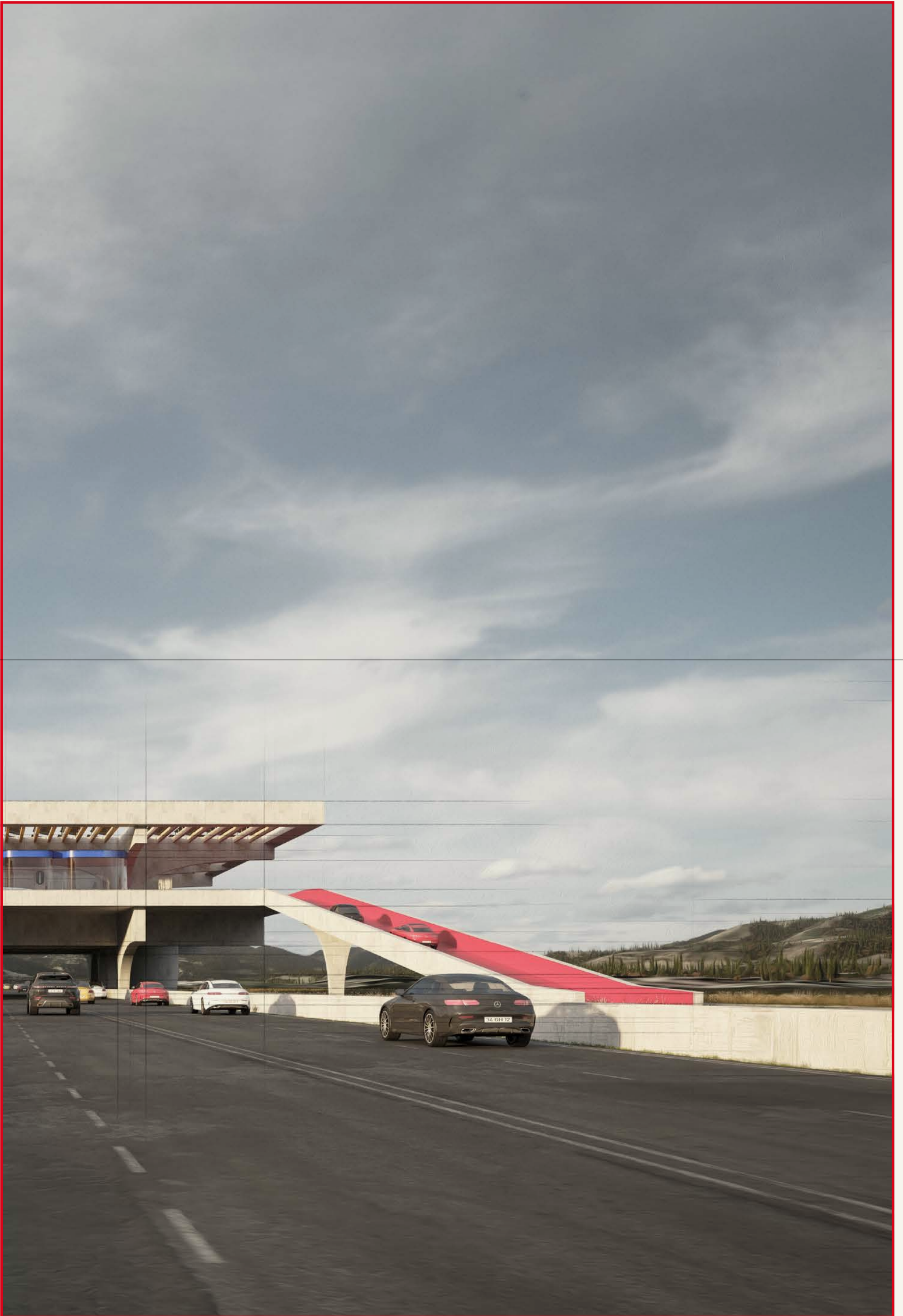
There would be working areas. Free wifi.

What about a fashion brand? Glossier from New York (skin first, makeup second), or, Aime Leon Dore? An edgy fragrance? What fits the bill? Who is the new Kiki Byrne and Mary Quant? And what pays the bill?...for Autogrill restaurants were neither affordable nor cheap to build.

What about pushing the envelope further - a branch of the Cartier Foundation? A custom-made James Turrell space? Or an Art Biotop by Junya Ishigami with views of the Italian hills as a cheeky warm-up while you pause on your way to the Biennale. Push the limits of pit stopping.

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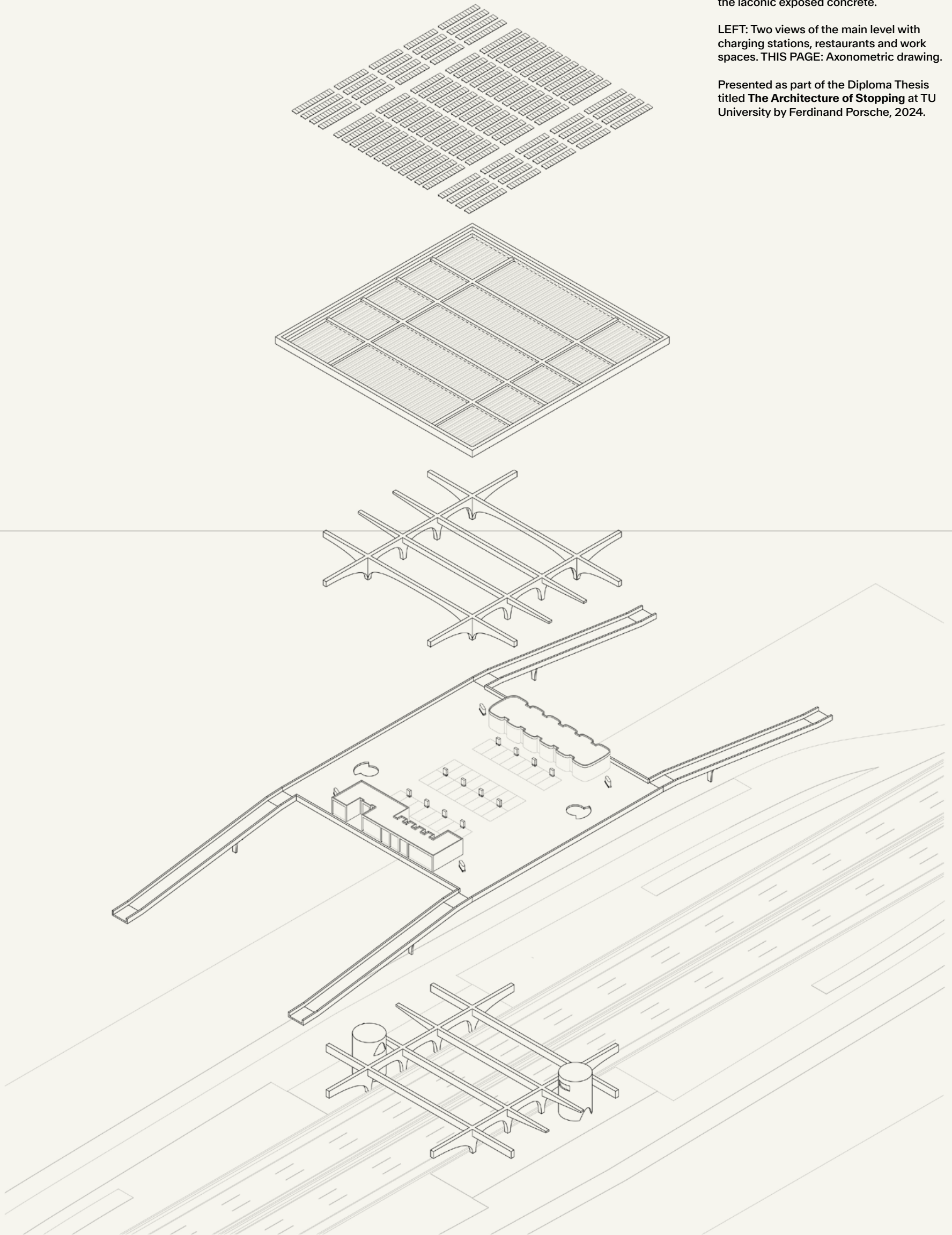




The lower level consists only of structural supports and the beginning of the ramps. Pre-stressed concrete girders (depth = 2.40m) span approximately 32 meters over the standard Italian highway. The main level (first) cantilevers on the concrete girders and contains the electric charging station, boutiques, restaurants, and work spaces. A second set of cantilevering girders support solar panels to offset energy consumption. Concrete conceals dirt well and complies with fire regulations. Bright colours indicate the different zones and contrast with the laconic exposed concrete.

LEFT: Two views of the main level with charging stations, restaurants and work spaces. THIS PAGE: Axonometric drawing.

Presented as part of the Diploma Thesis titled **The Architecture of Stopping** at TU University by Ferdinand Porsche, 2024.







### 3. Photographing Villa Stein-de-Monzie

## Paradox: Le Corbusier's most transparent house is also his most private

I had the good fortune of visiting Le Corbusier's Villa Stein-de-Monzie in 2018. This is crème-de-la-crème Parisian modernism, built in 1928 for a weird trio consisting of American collectors Sarah and Michael Stein and the obscure Gabrielle de Monzie (né Colaco-Osorio) whose role in the household is clear as mud. As advocates of Matisse and Picasso they approached the outrageously countercurrent Le Corbusier<sup>1</sup> and because of the daring project and Le Corbusier's whorish appetite for publicity, the villa became an instant classic.

Photographers have favored the house proper. Images that show the extent of the land are never published. Plans, sections, elevations and axonometries in publications are limited to the composition of the building, with the exception of one sketch in Le Corbusier's **Oeuvre Complete**. That was unimportant to me until that June afternoon under notoriously unreliable Parisian sunlight, when I struggled to find the villa at 17 Rue du Professeur Pauchet.

In fact the land is a gigantic, very elongated rectangle, and the building takes up only a fragment that I estimated to be no more than a seventh part. The house is shy of a hundred meters into the property and from the curb one gets confusing cut-outs of the famous façade through the evergreen. It takes a bit to walk up to it. I remember the sound of gravel. By the time I made it to the door, Rue du Professeur Pauchet was a distant memory.

The interior struggled to impress me. I will not speak of it now. Instead I was interested in the garden at the back, which I had been so incurious about. It looked even larger than the front yard, more wooded, like parkland. Like it takes longer to traverse. It was presented to me through windows as large as curtain walls. A terrace juts out heroically from the first floor. I descended onto the green and began making my way into the garden, moving away from the house, stopping every so many steps to look back at the white mammoth shrinking tinier and tinier between the thicket of trees and shrubs planted at each side of the footpath.

Trendy furniture littered the lawn. There was a makeshift tennis court further back. It's got a whiff of things that are clandestine. I sauntered to the end of the property, patrolling the green for instances of classified modernity. The house was gone.

Coda: I asked to see the master bedroom before I left. Like the living rooms, it faced the glorious backyard with huge wall-to-wall glazing. Yet it felt completely confidential. Privacy was underwritten by the size of the private parkland below and how well it was landscaped, by how successfully it neutralized the neighbours's gaze. You can't peek into it. Corbusierian glass dreams require full control of bucolic utopia to guarantee confidentiality. They always did. And this paradox isn't an isolated case in modernist homesteading, but the norm. Bucolic utopia was the benchmark. And when bucolic utopia wasn't available they didn't open any windows.

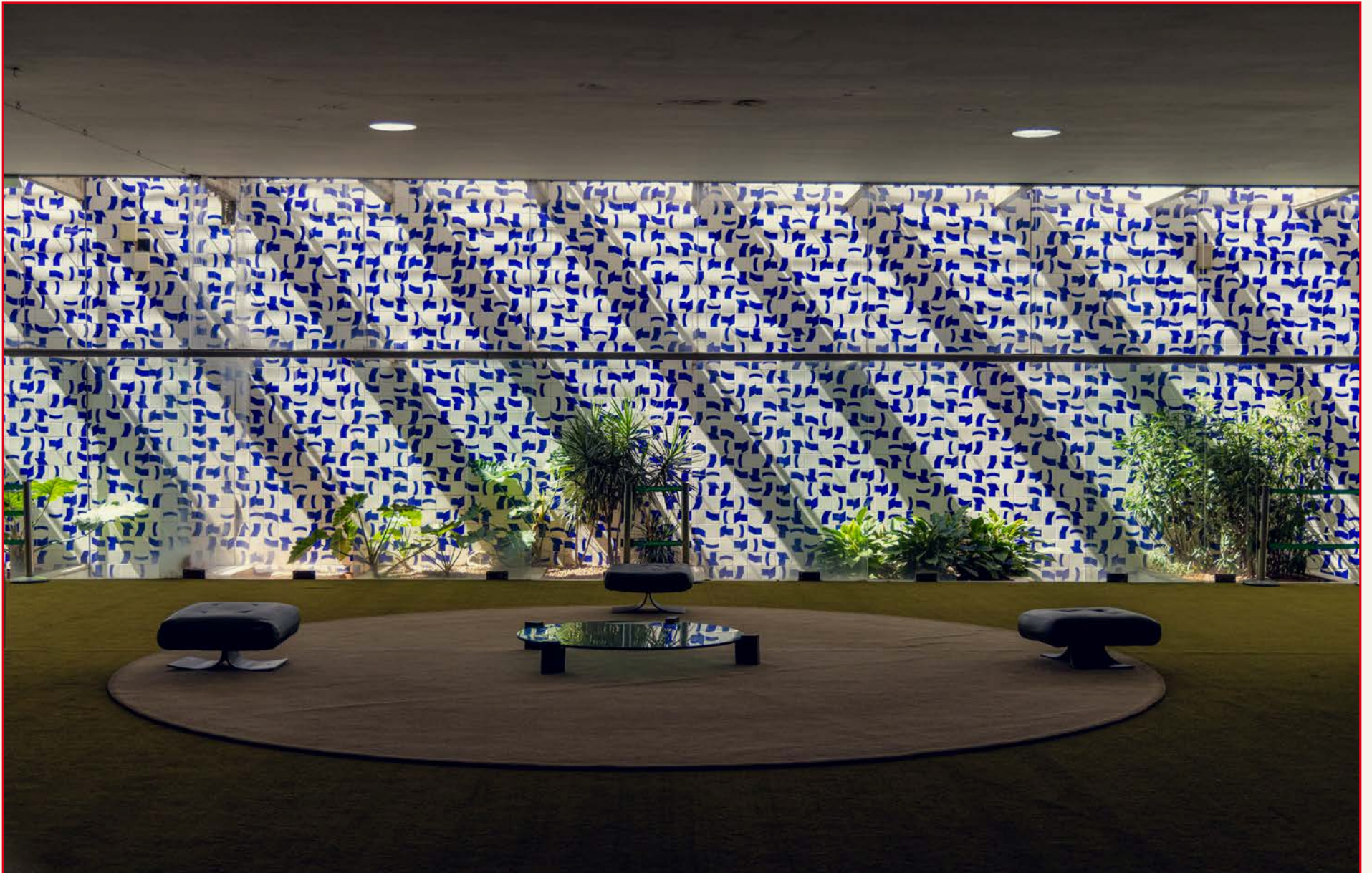
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<sup>1</sup> The early-modern thrupple had seen Le Corbusier's 1925 Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, a building so audacious that authorities bordered it up, and would have remained boarded up if it hadn't been for Gabrielle's one-legged husband and Minister of Finance Anatole de Monzie. The excentric pavilion, built for the 1925 Paris Exhibition of Decorative Arts, was demolished but reconstructed in 1977 in Bologna, tellingly in the middle of a park. A visit today affords the same Arcadian feelings that were typical of Le Corbusier's projects (RIGHT. Photo by Max Moya, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Examples abound: The flabbergasting size of Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat estate or the site of his Farnsworth House, the land of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, Philip Johnson's Glass House. Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre (in frosted glass) is the exception that confirms the rule.

LEFT, TOP: The house as soon as one descends the stairs onto the backyard. MIDDLE: The house seen mid way towards the end of the property. BELOW: The view from the villa's master bedroom. Photos by Max Moya, 2018.





ABOVE: The disturbing distance between the seats and the center table of the Green room in the National Congress of Brasilia is the proof that a single idea has informed the whole project. The building was designed in 1971 by Oscar Niemeyer. The furniture is by Niemeyer as well. The mural in the back was designed by Athos Bulcão, who also worked as an assistant ceramist at Niemeyer's Saint Francis of Assis church in Pampulha (1945). Photo by Pablo García, 2024.



## 4. The Triumph of the Void

In Brasilia Niemeyer behaved like a perfumist. No architect had bottled a landscape like he did.

It was not out of familiarity with the geography. The land that Juscelino Kubitschek earmarked was not the oversexed mountains of Rio where Niemeyer grew up taking in the voluptuousness of the female body by cavorting in hotels. Kubitschek had chosen the Brazilian Cerrado, infinitely planar, botanically spartan, verging on the barren.

Niemeyer was in melancholic shock.

“Desert” is the word that keeps cropping up in his memoirs. A lonely land, land-locked, like the whole Center West province of the humongous country he seemed to be beginning to get to know. It was an unclaimed kingdom of infinite reserves of space, mighty distances and unremitting isolations. It is the home of the horizon, and thus of dawn, so repeatedly brought up in the rhapsodies that poets and musicians composed for the promethean city once it was unveiled in 1960.

In architecture this primeval geography is best represented in infinitely vast floors, scarcity, mute horizontal monumentality, primary shapes. By man-made exaggerations of distances, architecturally-induced isolation.

By singing the triumph of the void.

Niemeyer sang with unmatched talent: in the halls of the Palace of Itamaraty with its million tons of nothingness; the length of the rooms at the Palace of Planalto; the preposterously vast floor of the Plaza of the Three Powers; the discomfiting plane that sustains the saucers of the Parliament.

Through the way everything is placed at a spooky distance from everything else. Surplus of space. Never had handrails been installed so far from the edge they're supposed to protect us from like in the mezzanine of the Palace of Itamaraty; never had conversation been expected to unfold among interlocutors seated so apart as in the Green Room of the National Congress. This is the proof of absolute coherence.

The other condition of the Cerrado that the buildings of Brasilia reproduce is disquieting stasis. Niemeyer's multi-curved structures in Rio or Pampulha wouldn't do. In Brasilia shapes don't swerve, don't dance.

They were born to be still under the guardian eye of the rising sun.

This article appeared in a slightly different form in a report of an architectural peregrination to a number of Brazilian cities between July and August 2024, made possible by the generosity of our esteemed patrons.

## 4. Reality sucks

Landscapes, huh?

Mara Novak discloses the drab truths beneath the glossy overcoat of landscape imagery: the convenient fictions we are happy to swallow; the perennial suspension of disbelief central to vacationing, the visual mendacity of the outdoor-tourism agent. The rural is nothing like we think.

This year Novak's edifying cynicism is directed at the rancid fad of shipping ice blocks from Greenland to the bars of the Persian Gulf for patrons to drink the moribund icecaps. There will be sculptures of cigarette buds in ashtrays. There will be references to Cleopatra's profligacy, and Kelp algae like you've never seen before. You can always depend on Novak for authenticity.

The highly anticipated show opens November 2025 at Kunstraum Lakeside gallery in Klagenfurt.

Serving landscapes noodle river. Part of the Gochujang sunset series, 2023. Novak compares the gross groning-table set-ups of Mukbanging with the landscape photographs of Ansell Adams. Compositions that reminded her of landscapes, not of still-lives. She also noted the challenge of photographing empty landscapes, as the Ansell-Adams canon requires, in the tourist trodden Austria of today. As the Ansell-Adams-genre demanded. Images of snowcapped Salzburg valleys are raped by very irreverent cutouts of seafood. There's tape that looks like stitches. They're hints of hurt.

