



The Letter

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

Today we invoke the ghost of the preoccupation with "context". **Critical Regionalism** recaps the descent of this famous theory from elite architectural circles in the early 2000s. **Humourless Regionalism** underlines the unlearned lessons of postmodernist architecture and the danger of ignoring its uncomfortable contribution. **Kinky Regionalism** is a declaration of our

office's stance on style, context, and time. It is a manifesto in the third person, past tense. **Playful Regionalism** showcases three projects in the United States that make palpable the constituent elements of their region's identity. And Exit Line brings the issue to an end with a moving eulogy to the Los Angeles sunset.

Sincerely, The Editor

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1. Critical Regionalism

Mr F picks up a Ouija board to speak to dead concepts. "Are there any spirits present?" The candle flickers. "State your name", says the younger F. Now the planchette begins to slide through the alphabet: C-R-I... T-I-C-A-L... R-E-G-I-O... N-A-L-I-S-M.

"Critical Regionalism?!" exclaims Mr F. The planchette concurs.

This well-meaning concept was all the rage during the 80s and 90s. It tried to reconcile modern architecture with the unique characteristics of place, and it favoured buildings that were at the same time universal and particular: Alvar Aalto's brick cottages in Finland and Jørn Utzon's church in Denmark.

Critical Regionalism refused to sit at the table with even the slightest whisper of consumer culture, media, architecture's communicative power, the faintest whiff of supply and demand, or anything that sounded "populist" and by extension anything redolent of "pop". It loathed the postmodern.

In contrast, Critical Regionalism believed in revindicating culture by elevating local construction methods to the level of art, highlighting local natural light, and incorporating folk architecture with modern inflections (or the other way round). It emphasised the sensory experience of buildings, encouraging people to touch them, smell them, and listen to the sounds they made. Eternal meaningful experiences with country houses and tiny town halls.

Expecting this form of slow cooking not to be crushed by the realities of demographics, median income, minimum wage, war and inflation, is a sign of credulity, the mark of that part of the bourgeoisie that refuses to call itself bourgeois. This well-read naivety was to be one of the reasons for its downfall. Like modernism, Critical Regionalism wasn't a stylistic preference but a cause. But unlike modernism, it was a cause with in-built guilt. It was a sort of modernism that kept apologising for being modern. So when Rem Koolhaas yelled "Fuck Context!" (at it), Critical Regionalism cowered and recoiled.

Hypertrophic romanticism was not the only reason it died—though perhaps the only reason that was its own fault. The other executioner was neo-Marxism. It bullied Critical Regionalism with libels about colonialism, whiteness and Western-centricity, for failing to have attached its "Indigenous Land Acknowledgement Statements".

And because of its in-built guilt complex, Critical Regionalism turned the other cheek.

LEFT: "A séance", by William Hope, 1920. Hope was a notorious medium who founded the spiritist Crewe Circle and was one of the first photographers to use his skills for deception through double exposure. Reproduced with permission of the Science & Society Picture Library, United Kingdom.



2. Humorless Regionalism

Detonate a bomb called “nothing new can be invented” and mix up the debris and shrapnel lying on the ground; thus operated architects during the postmodern period.



No other twenty-year period in the history of humankind has produced such aggressively awful, forgettable, straight-to-television freaks as postmodernist architecture did. It is for the most part irredeemable: characterised by sarcasm, an inherent cynicism, jokes, 'visual essays', and buildings that you're supposed to enjoy when you've read the explanation.

With due caution, however, the penitentialia of this stylistic Catomic power plant can be entered; the reactor visited. The tragic AZ-5 button that was metaphorically pressed by Rossi and Venturi can be perused without harm, in search of a lesson or two.

Postmodernism's contribution is to have called out the silliness of modernism's idealism, the infantilism of its militant utopianism, and its hysterical adherence to purity. Postmodernism taught us to cringe at modernism's self-sacrifices, seriousness, and asceticism; its incapacity to laugh at itself.

And, by extemporaneous extrapolation, at Critical Regionalism's incapacity to laugh at itself.

In 2024, nothing knows how to laugh less about itself than minimalistic Alpine architecture: laconic on the outside, painfully undemonstrative on the inside, the built version of “Grumpy Brands” in Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* (2022).

For decades, an esoteric clique of design druids, band-collared shamans and their zealous acolytes have been preaching the religion of concrete, wood, and stones from their verdant valleys. They've succeeded in deluding themselves that they do not entertain any fantasies, possibly a result of their militant atheism; their impulse to suppress the natural human appetite for credulousness has led them to swap communion with Middle Eastern monotheism with the polytheism of lakes and trees and other inanimate objects. They're pathological purists evincing a delirious fear of dumbness, tastelessness, imprecision, the picturesque, and the quaint.

As a result of this neurosis, they've turned every project they can get their hands on into sanctuaries to witness the theophanies of poured concrete and timber. On their side of the Alps, they do not laugh.



3. Kinky Regionalism

Suppose, there had been a circle of architects who called themselves the Kinky Regionalists.

Suppose, they were united in a crusade against dullness, dogmatism, self-sacrifice, and heroism.

Suppose, that they took the tenets of "Critical Regionalism" but inflected them with a dash of folly, lightness, and humour, for the sake of creating healthier architecture.

Suppose, they'd published a Manifesto!

Suppose, in it they'd declared to drop the exigency of total coherence in exchange for what they called the "split personality" of architecture. Under the slogan "Extroverted interiors, Introverted exteriors", they would free interior space from the demand to speak the same idiom as its exterior, a demand that is a bit of a chastity belt, merely another opportunity for ascetic modernism to renounce the prurient flesh!

For the Kinky Regionalists, the exterior would have had responsibilities to the public that the interior did not have. And the interior would have had a responsibility to the individual psyche that the exterior did not.

LEFT: Timber wall partitions, steel staircase and bespoke carpet in a house on Lake Zell. Photo by Florian Holzherr, 2022.

The Kinky Regionalists would nevertheless have been passionately opposed to their evil cousins, the Prankish Regionalists. Prankish Regionalism, a nihilist splinter group, would have taken local forms in whimsical ways: not a dash of humour but a gust of cynicism, which the Kinky Regionalists would have rejected. "Lightness", the Kinky Regionalists said, "not levity".

"Kink", which means dent, would have also been used by the Kinky Regionalists to side with fallibility. Forgiveness could be favoured. Imperfection is not an aim, but it is not castigated. Severity is suspect. Gravitas is suspect. All that would have been in the Manifesto.

Suppose that, in its bombastic but tender tone, the Kinky Manifesto would have declared that all human beings have an appetite for the insubstantial, the superficial, fashion, pop, the fleeting. Garments and consumption articles are temporal, but buildings and cities are not. "In fashion, today is more important than tomorrow", the Manifesto would have said. "But the opposite is true of architecture".

RIGHT, ABOVE AND BELOW:
A private clinic made out of red insulated concrete among traditional houses in the outskirts of Salzburg. Photo by Florian Holzher, 2023.





Thus, getting in bed with fashion, toying with naughty and cheeky garments, pavilions, and product design, allowed the Kinky Regionalists to channel their appetite for the fleeting into products where the fleeting belongs, and away from buildings, where it does not. This enviable maturity, which is not evident on the surface, is in fact strategic and would have permitted the Kinky Regionalists to calibrate the temporal and the permanent.

As such, the cult of the atemporal would have logically been suspect for the Kinky Regionalists. "Protect us also from forever, as it might mean never", the Manifesto could have said.

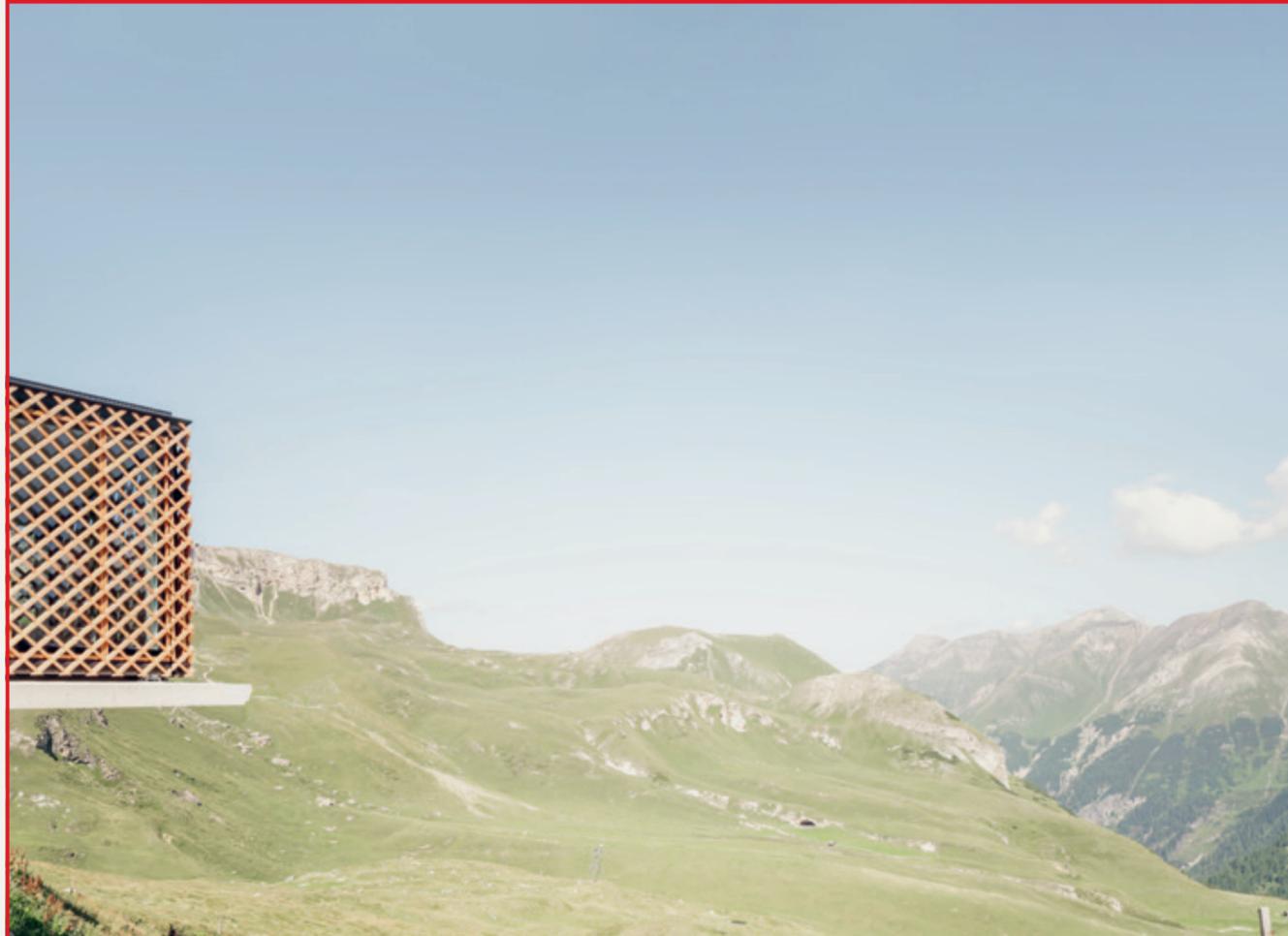
The Kinky Regionalists would have identified that the puritanical shapes and impassive abstraction that were imposed on contemporary Alpine architecture to achieve the "chalice of atemporality" ostracised the individual. Such laconism offers no succour to the uneducated, and architecture must offer succour.

LEFT: Living room of the pavilion for GP's Ice Race in Zell am See, Steiner Architecture, 2021. Photo by Stefan Bogner, 2021.

They believed that rocks, lakes and humanity may endure a thousand years, but not the individual. And the individual deserves succour and satisfaction within their lifetime, they argued.

“We’re not guilty of being temporal.”
“There’s no shame in being mortal.”

If there were a Kinky Manifesto, that’s how it would end.



LEFT: Steel, glass and wood pavilion at the Grossglockner High Alpine Road for Mankei and F.A.T International.

ABOVE: Above: A cheeky interpretation of typical timber cladding in an annex to a hotel in Zell am See.

Photos by Florian Holzherr, 2024.



4. Playful Regionalism

I. A house with a drive-in theater

Shapes, colours, and openings are not the only way architecture can reveal the site's blessings. An architect's power lies in proposing activities as much as designing the hull wherein those activities will take place. It's a form of writing scripts.

A house with a drive-in theatre is a celebration of Los Angeles. It's the perfect mélange of:

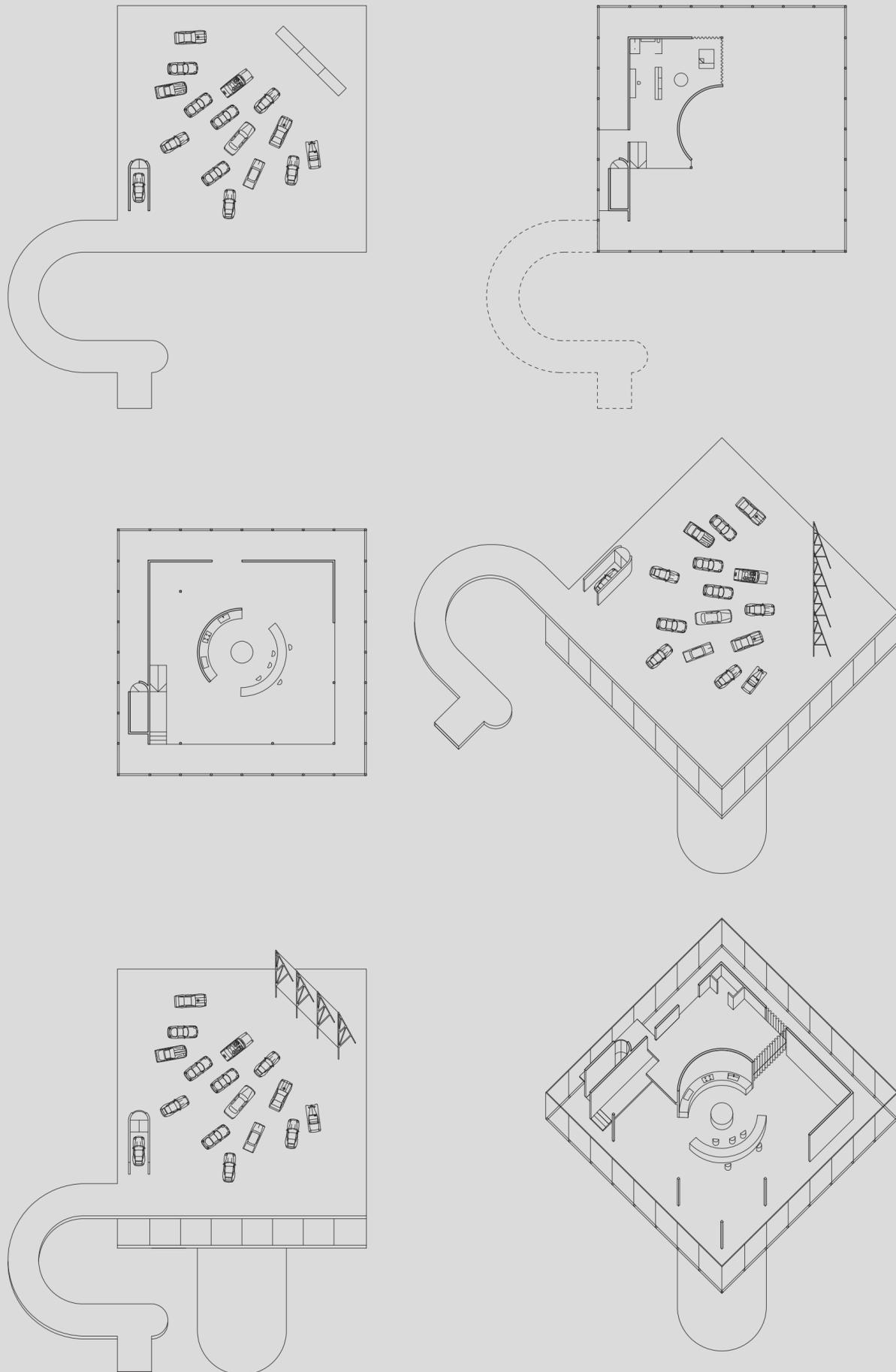
- The single-family home which is the forever typology of this city
- The incline of the hills of Los Angeles: modernism was originally conceived on a flat surface, be it in early 20th-century Vienna, Berlin or Chicago. But Los Angeles may be the first place where modern architecture had to face a slope so systematically. Thus the strategies to adapt modern architecture to steep

gradients are a distinguishing feature of Los Angeles architecture.

- The automobile and the parking lot, without which California is un-understandable. Learning to like the car is a requisite to learning to like Los Angeles.
- Movies, the produce and art form most closely associated with Los Angeles and its number one export.

The square-shaped house sits at the top of a concrete cylinder, wrapped in glass. On the roof, a movie screen is installed against the backdrop of the downtown skyline, providing ample space for twenty cars from which friends and family can watch movies together.

A mock "freeway" connects the street to the roof, honouring *La La Land* through tailored communal enjoyment.



LEFT: Views of the House with a Drive-in theatre. Steiner Architecture, 2024.

RIGHT: Danny (John Travolta) and Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) at the drive-in theatre in *Grease*, 1978. The scene was shot at the now-demolished Pickwick Drive-in theatre in Burbank, California.



II. Car museum with a kart track on top

Here's another exercise in deep recreation: a private sports car museum in Southern California with a racing track on the roof. The rock star architectural historian Reyner Banham learned to drive specifically so that he could study the architecture of Los Angeles, not out of practicality but out of analytical depth. For Los Angeles, he believed, is meant to be experienced from the driver's seat. Banham is commonly held as the man who taught the snobbish world of architectural theory how to love Los Angeles. None of the previous criteria would do, and Los Angeles would be beautiful only if the world of automobiles were beautiful.

Here, an oval kart racing track sits atop a bespoke automobile gallery with a capacity for 20 cars on permanent display and over 90 spaces for storage.

Driving miniature cars (karts) in the company of friends over the roof is a tongue-in-cheek form reenacting the tectonic change that automobiles, freeways, and intersections have had on our lives; it's a toy version of commuting. The miniature-ness of the kart also reminds one of architectural models.

Surreptitiously, this cheeky collective pastime is an avenue (no pun intended) to grasping the elusive Angeleno identity.

ABOVE, RIGHT: Exposed concrete, steel columns and glass work together to build the slick character of the interior of the display level.

BELOW, RIGHT: The museum at dusk with the hills in the background.

BELOW: Display level and ramp leading up to the kart racetrack on top of the museum in Southern California.

Steiner Architecture, 2024.

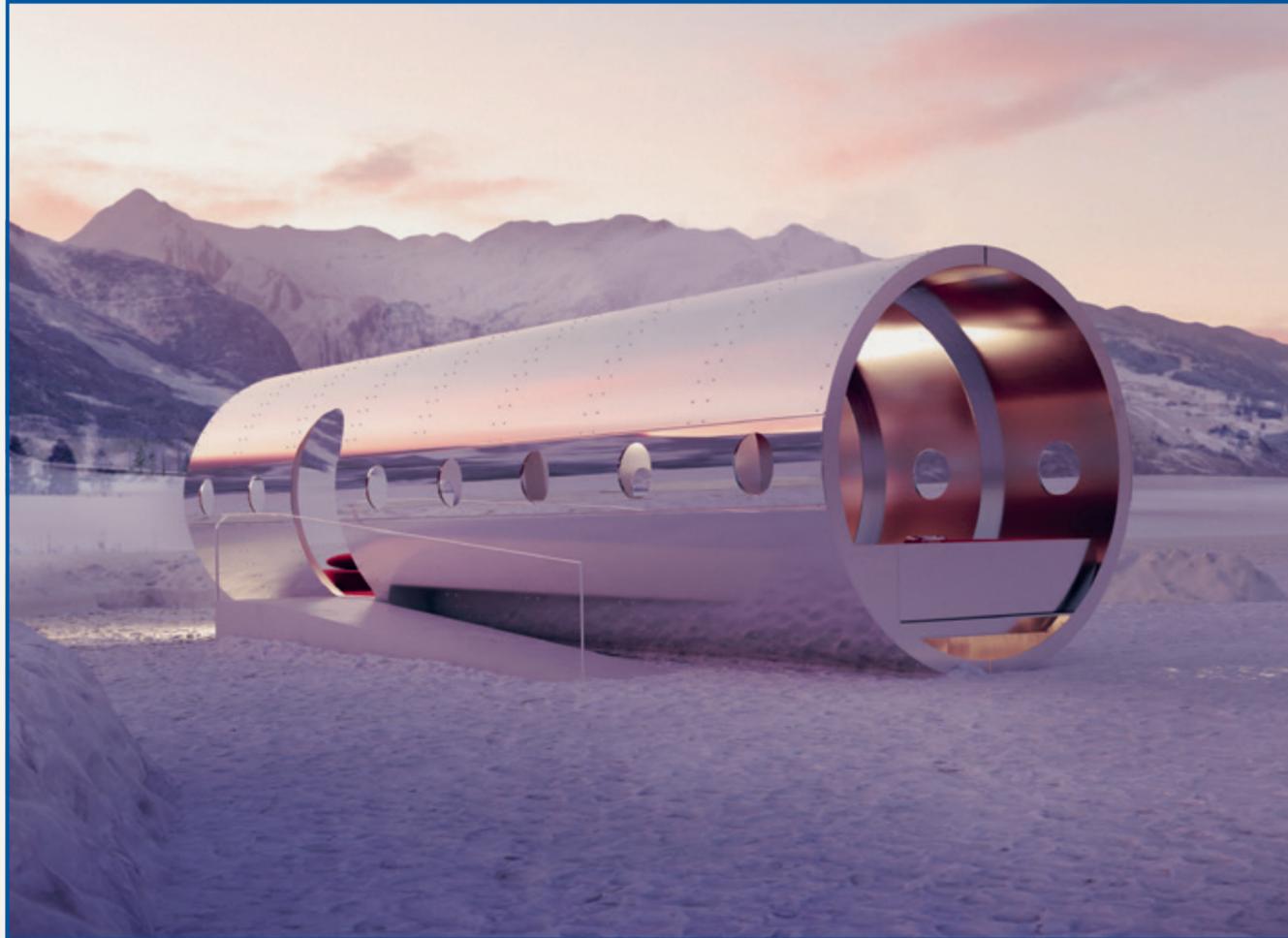


II. Joy Machine

This pavilion for a winter festival in Colorado is an anthem to the wonderful world of aviation. Festival-goers can groove in this hybrid lounge between a vintage American Airlines chrome-painted plane and the eroticised interior of a private jet.

The structure is pared to the minimum but shines gloriously in the winter sun, and contrasts with the red velvet interior that waves back to the decadence of rock stars' aeroplanes and the upper deck of Boeing 747s.

RIGHT AND BELOW:
The lounge is open to the elements and is accessed through a metallic ramp. Inside, metallic tables stand out among the red velvet pieces of furniture including a piano. Steiner Architecture, 2024.





5. Exit Line

ABOVE: The sun sets on the horizon tinting the racetrack above the car gallery structure. Steiner Architecture, 2024.

In 1972, the architecture critic Reyner Banham released a 52-minute film titled “Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles” where he rhapsodised about the previously unrespected and uncouth city of Los Angeles.

This is how it ends, apropos of the sunset falling on the city: That moment when the sun

goes down beneath the Western ocean, because she’s got nowhere else to go, that great moment of plastic fluorescent spectacle, the sun going down in man-made splendour, that really is, to all our lovers of Los Angeles, the greatest exit line any city could ever have.