

## ARCHITECTURE AS RESOURCE Kaiwan Mehta

On two recent occasions, one, an architecture conference at an architecture college in Mumbai and the other, a jury session for national awards in interior design, one was thrown right in the midst of discussing what role theory and criticism play in the way architecture is practiced and produced. In the former context, one was surprised to realise how journalism and criticism were imagined, or treated, as peripheral or a luxury, with a clear resistance to even an attempt at understanding its processes and role; including a self-claimed architectural journalist refusing to understand research, criticism and journalism as 'engagements with practice'. The latter was a more pleasant experience where the process of judging design became the occasion for practitioners to ruminate over issues that one otherwise took for granted – such as the role of craft in contemporary design, and in what ways can 'integration' happen, and what are the protocols of this 'integration' – and realise the short-comings within normative practice to deal with such issues, and the fact that often issues need a discussion outside the everyday processes of design and build. Both these experiences simply reinforced the journey this magazine has adopted for itself – to draw out, reference, indicate, and emphasise, the multi-valence in architecture, and hence the many experiments in trying to grasp aspects of this subject-object called architecture. Architecture is the study of a field as much as it holds at its centre an object called 'building' – and this constantly shifts the manners and methods by which we try and engage with architecture, attempting to understand it, as well as its existence and behaviour.

Architecture, in many ways, becomes the playground for culture, life and society to play itself out. Its existence is much, and far beyond that of the architect, and so, in many ways, the architect is playing his role within the architecture as a field of living, rather than being the super-creator of that field. The architect is oscillating between the roles of a creator and a sustainer – creating the material shell and context, by actively engaging with the ocean of life as matter as well as context, and hence sustaining it. The architect essentially engages with what he is given by culture and society, but in his practice s/he also holds the key to turn the rules of the game at some time under certain conditions. Often the questions architects ask, or are pressured to answer, need to be thought through outside the direct production of architecture, but yet within the biography of buildings and material landscapes. The life of things and objects are journeys within histories and cultural atmospheres, and hence their existence is embedded in context, often even sustained by that – in which case the study of objects is incomplete without understanding the

atmospheres that house them, and through which objects journey. But this also brings us to essentially realise that the study of architecture may not reside within the practice of architecture, nor are the tools of architecture adequate for the knowledge we need to produce about the life of architecture. In which case borrowings from experiences and researches in other fields may be necessary to study and understand, but having said this, the problem is how do we assimilate knowledge produced in different fields and formats into one conversation or a conversation purely on architecture?

This issue begins with the question of practice and theory and then journeys through artistic projects that explore questions regarding the mediums of our thinking, cultural forms such as theatre or a public speech and redrawing these formats in different, but specific, spatial and architectural locations. Jitish Kallat spatialises Swami Vivekananda's speech, draws text not into being an image but being a bodily experience, using the form and sense of a winding stairway through a large space; the stairway and the grand space now not only perform a new role, but also alter our imaginations of reading space typologies through the politics of a speech-content now entering it. The medium of LED lights itself conjures up material histories, and the role colours play in human social templates, now adjusted as image and word, text and landscape, diagram and space, in forms of simultaneous readings, and mappings. As we talk of readings and mappings, the work of Seher Shah redraws architectural drawings, in the way she converts these capsules of message and information into landscapes of spectral conversations. The aerial photograph and the architect's drawing both assume a power of telling, a sensibility of control – and then Shah, literally flattens them out with a breaking of the scale and geometry of the image, or knitting lines and diagrams through the drawing as if it is a carpet of memories – in this flattening, she literally narrativises the image, taking it beyond the conventions of depth or dimension.

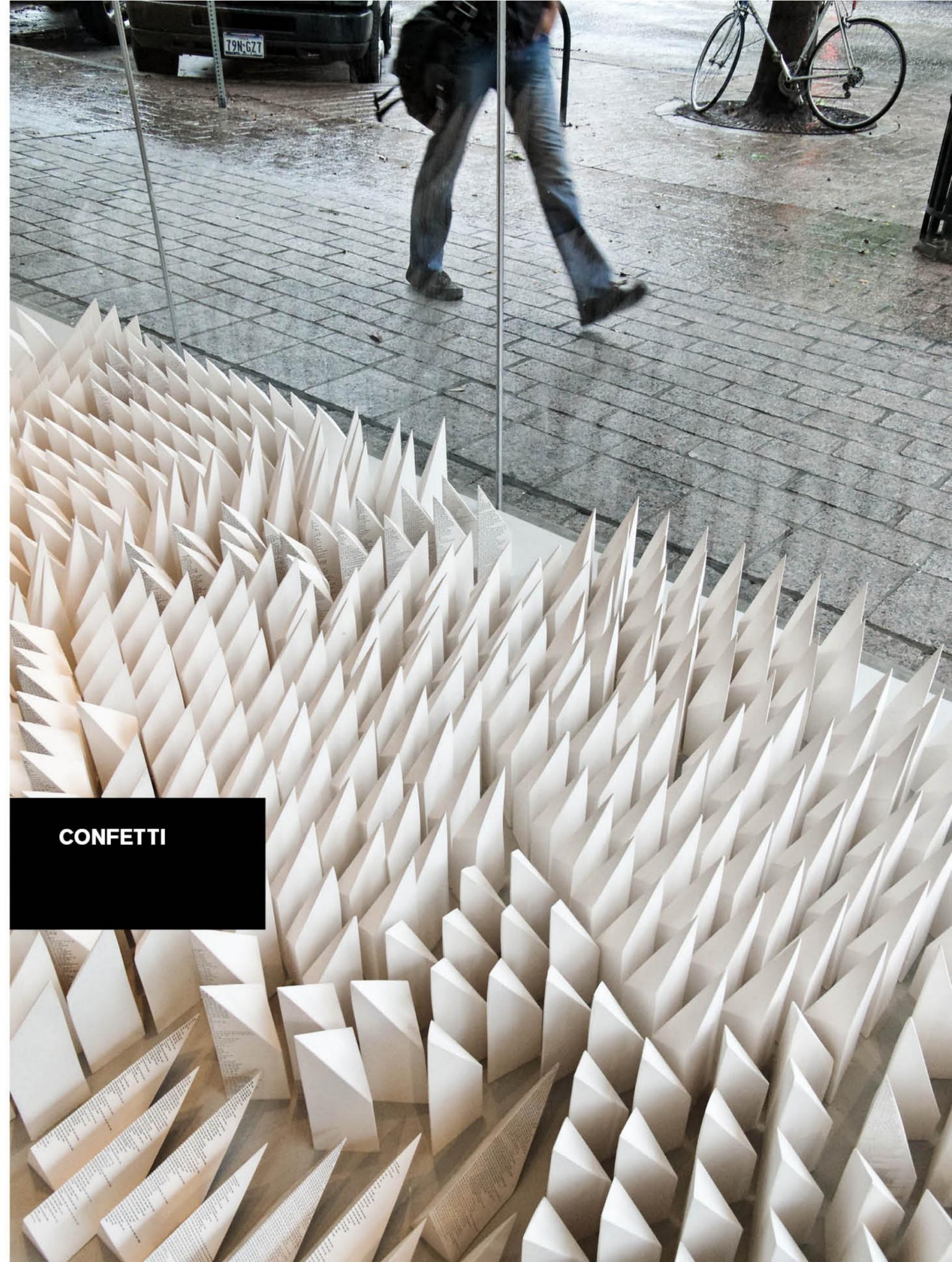
Two architects have been touring India, lecturing on their work and thoughts - Juhani Pallasmaa from Finland and Rafiq Azam from Bangladesh. As we revisit the way Pallasmaa understands architecture, and urges us to travel this path with him, we, in a detailed way, engage with the scope of Azam's work. It is not just about the work that Azam produces as an architect, and the very fine and sensual quality it expresses, but it is more about the discourse his work generates in Bangladesh and also the Global South or South Asia. Both these architects produce a discourse on the sensibilities of a material culture like architecture, and literally speak of the 'eyes of the skin' but

at no moment is this sensibility only about emotion and sensuousness, it is very cultural and historical. In the emotions that one finds in Azam's architecture, it is actually possible to ask questions of South Asia's tryst with multiple modernisms, resistance to universal typographies in architecture, as well as the intellectual life of a city and its inhabitants.

Architecture can systematically be explored and expanded to understand the intellectual life of a city and the histories of its inhabitants – but one will have to leave behind the methods that Francis D K Ching's *Form, Space and Order* proposes, and work towards other methodologies and tool-boxes of understanding and exploring. On one hand we look at the conservation of old and dying-out cinema houses, while on the other we look at informal 'slum cinemas' which produce an architecture of urban tongues, and they are spatial typologies for which the normative structures of study are incapable of producing much knowledge, and hence the demand for newer ways of approaching spatial and material studies in cultural contexts such as Mumbai in this case.

And talking of typologies in changing cultural formations, as well as bringing the discussion on South Asian contexts, we review, through an interview, the KMC building in Hyderabad designed by Mumbai-based RMA Architects. We discussed the apartment typology in the context of a Delhi neighbourhood with Mehrotra earlier, and now it's the corporate office building we look into. Mehrotra, having only recently completed a survey of architecture in India over the last 20 years, is interestingly placed as an architect as well as a researcher to comment on the broader issues of architectural development while negotiating the details of design in one of his own contributions to the contemporary architectural landscape. In his design for the KMC building, he negates the curtain-glazing formula otherwise seen as unavoidable for corporate towers, but still explores the facade as the most contemporary architectural device. He converts the facade to a vertical garden of sorts, not only raising questions of surface and sustainability in a more sensible manner, but as a simultaneous effect, also achieves a blurring of social and class boundaries across the different cadres of employees in the building. This building also localises the production of itself, phasing it out over a time period, completely changing the rhetoric on urban constructions. This building indeed creates much ground for thinking and conversation.

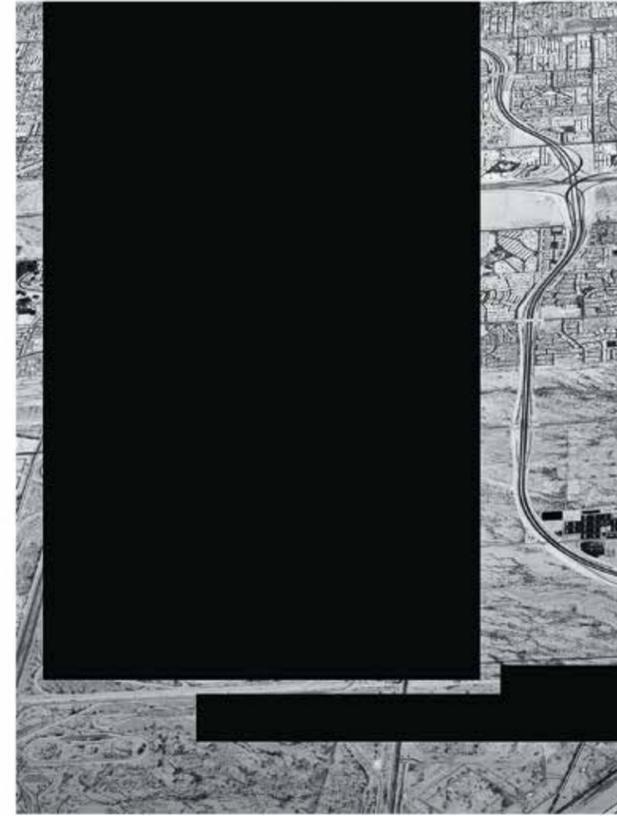
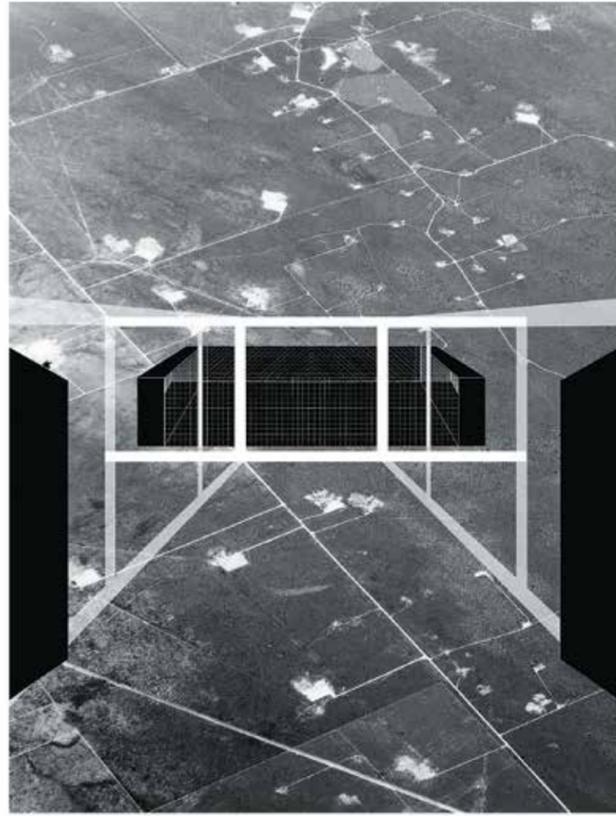
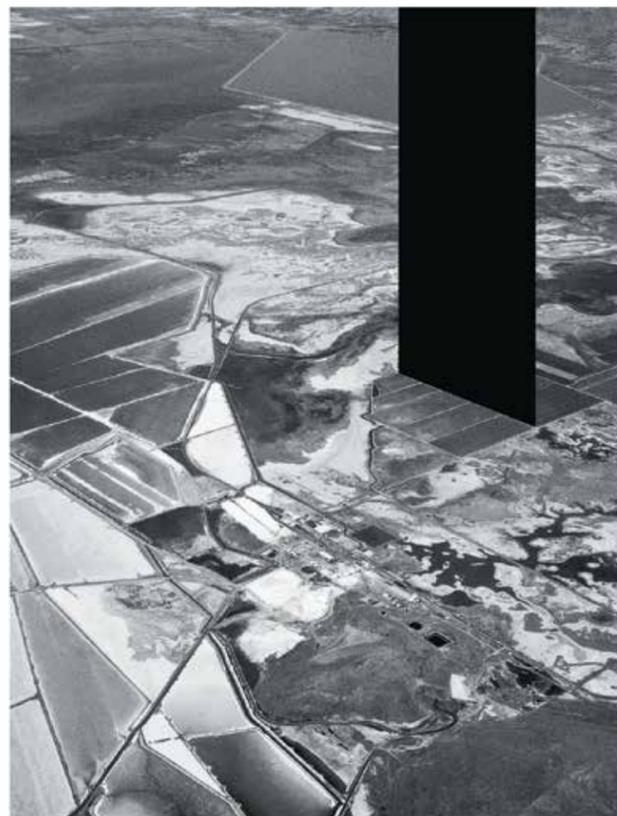
In this way, this issue, like all others, journeys through projects and thoughts, in an ever-on-going attempt to deepen and expand the definition of architecture. **km**



## DRAWING ALLEGORIES

Performing a narrative that plays on the 'here and now' rather than a distant, preferred future that architectural drawings by nature project, Seher Shah's architectural drawings convert geographies of representation to landscapes of conversation

Kaiwan Mehta



**This spread: selected images from the series, Mammoth: Aerial landscape proposals 2012**  
21 archival digital prints  
17.5 X 13 inches each  
Images courtesy of Jhaveri Contemporary  
Photographs by Randhir Singh

Drawings are the mainstay of architectural practice, as much as they do have a historical existence, and do not exist as long as architecture does, within human civilisation. They operate on rules and protocols, and allow the systems of design and construction to proceed within certain logics, producing buildings and other such objects and landscapes. In this sense, a drawing projects into the future – indicating towards a reality yet to come; however, we, as architects, think so much through the drawing that we start projecting onto a drawing an immediate and material existence of its own; the drawing then becomes a super-existent entity of its own accord.

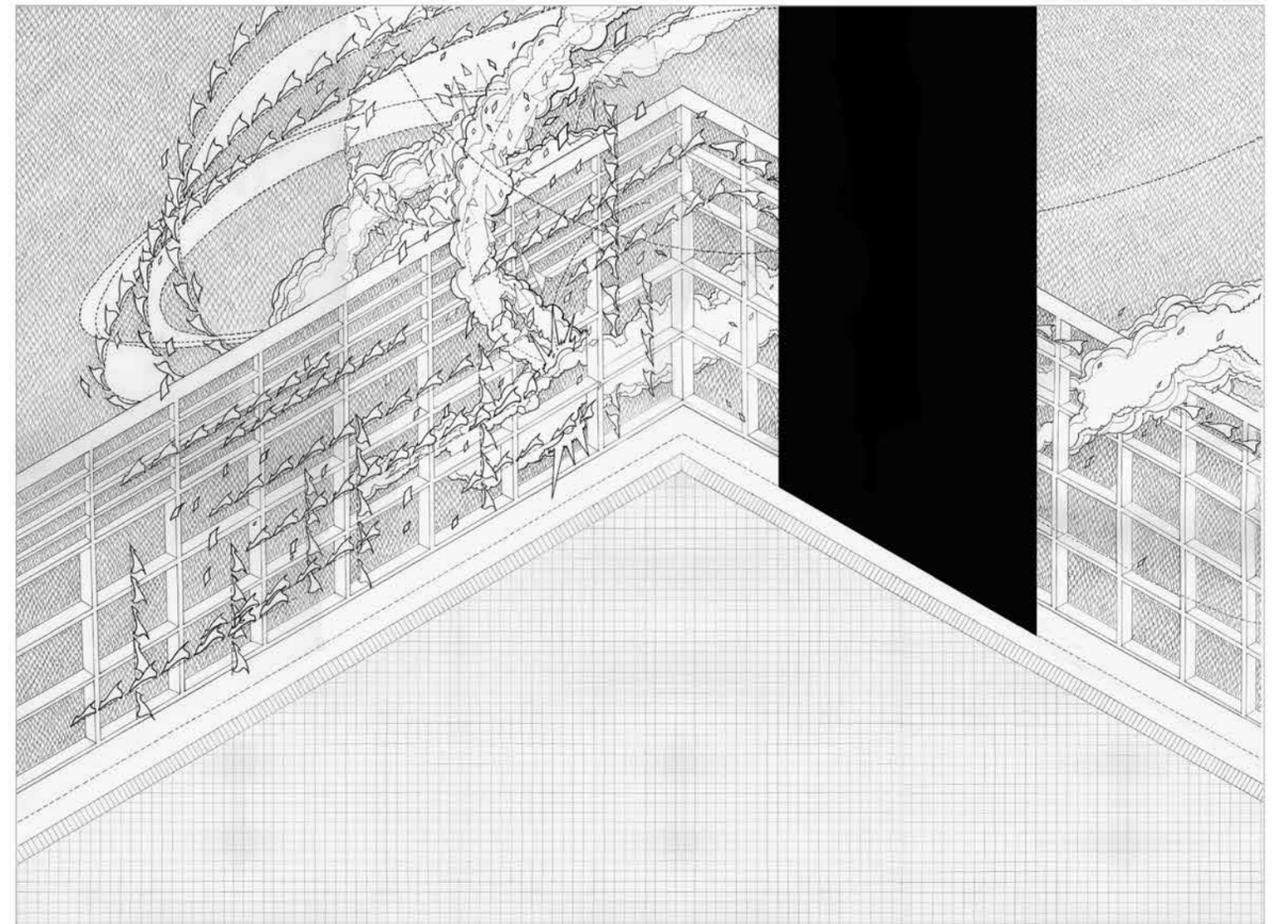
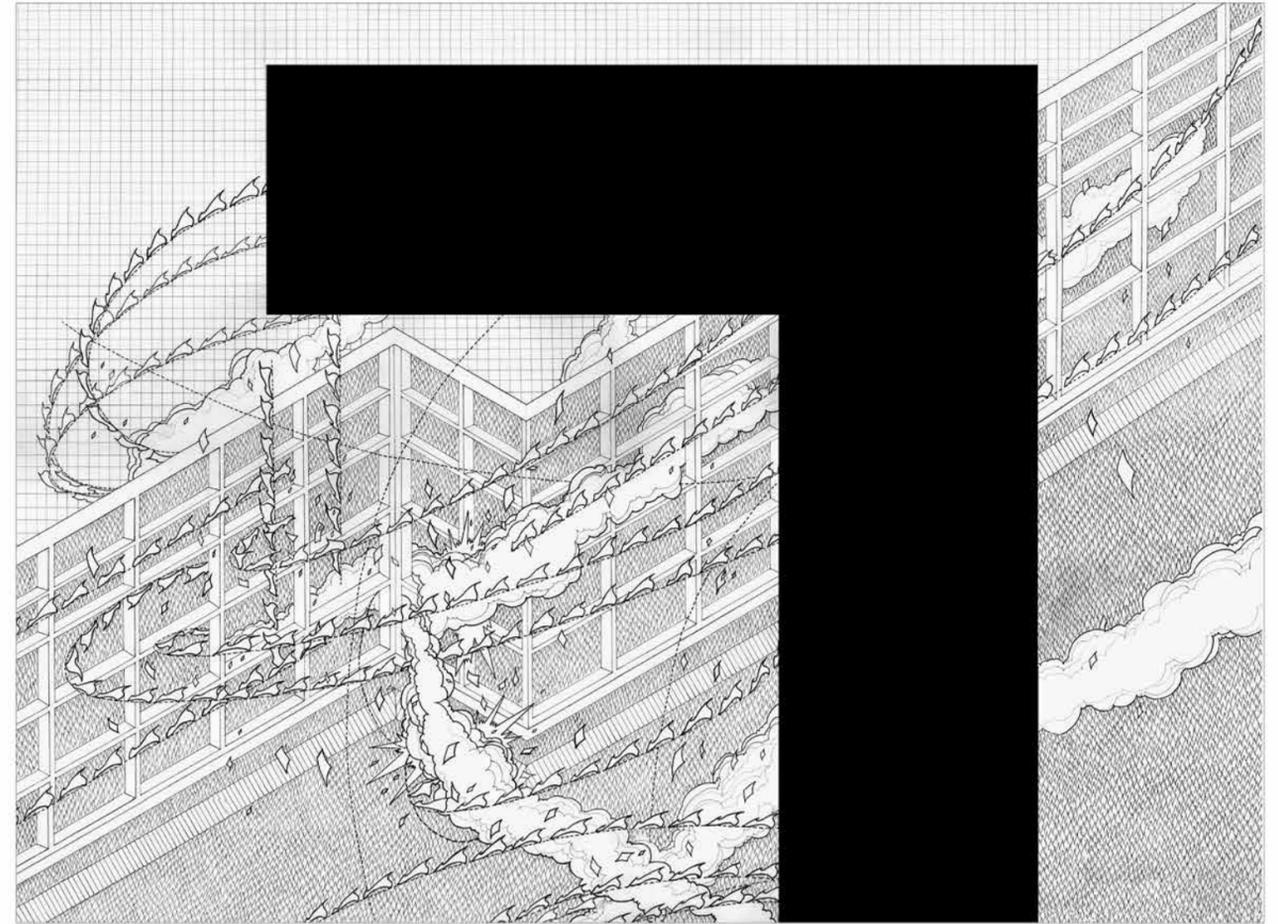
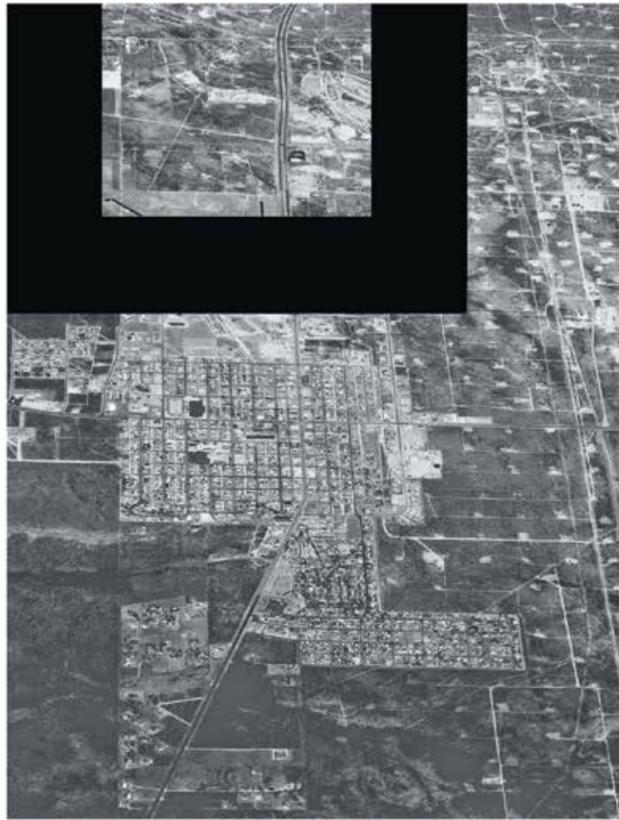
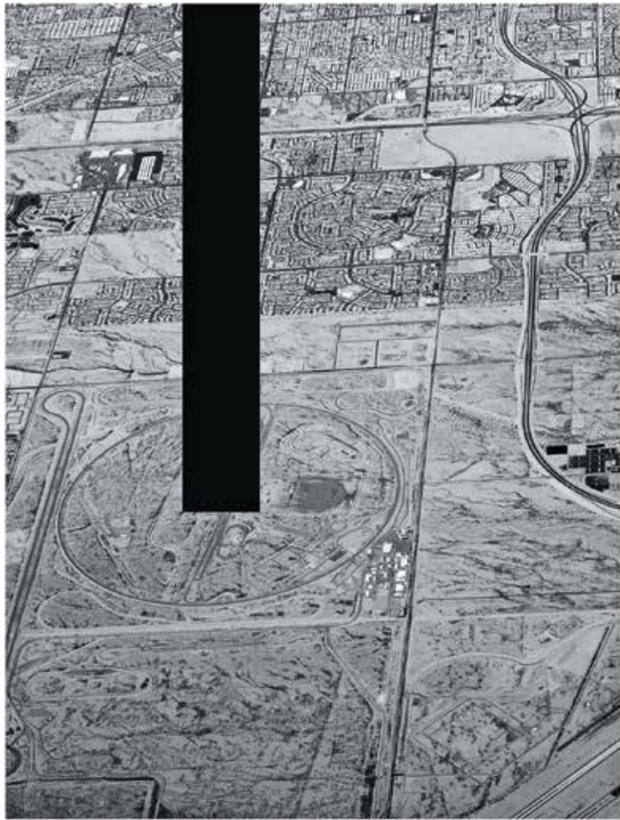
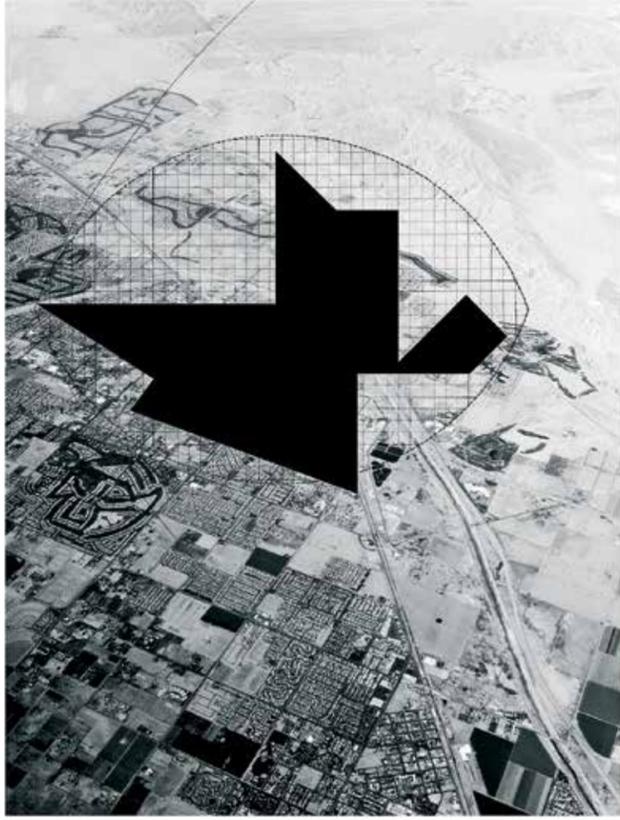
The work of architect Seher Shah disturbs the stability and material confidence of a drawing on its own ground, and in its own game. The abstract construction of a predictable future that a drawing proposes is indeed

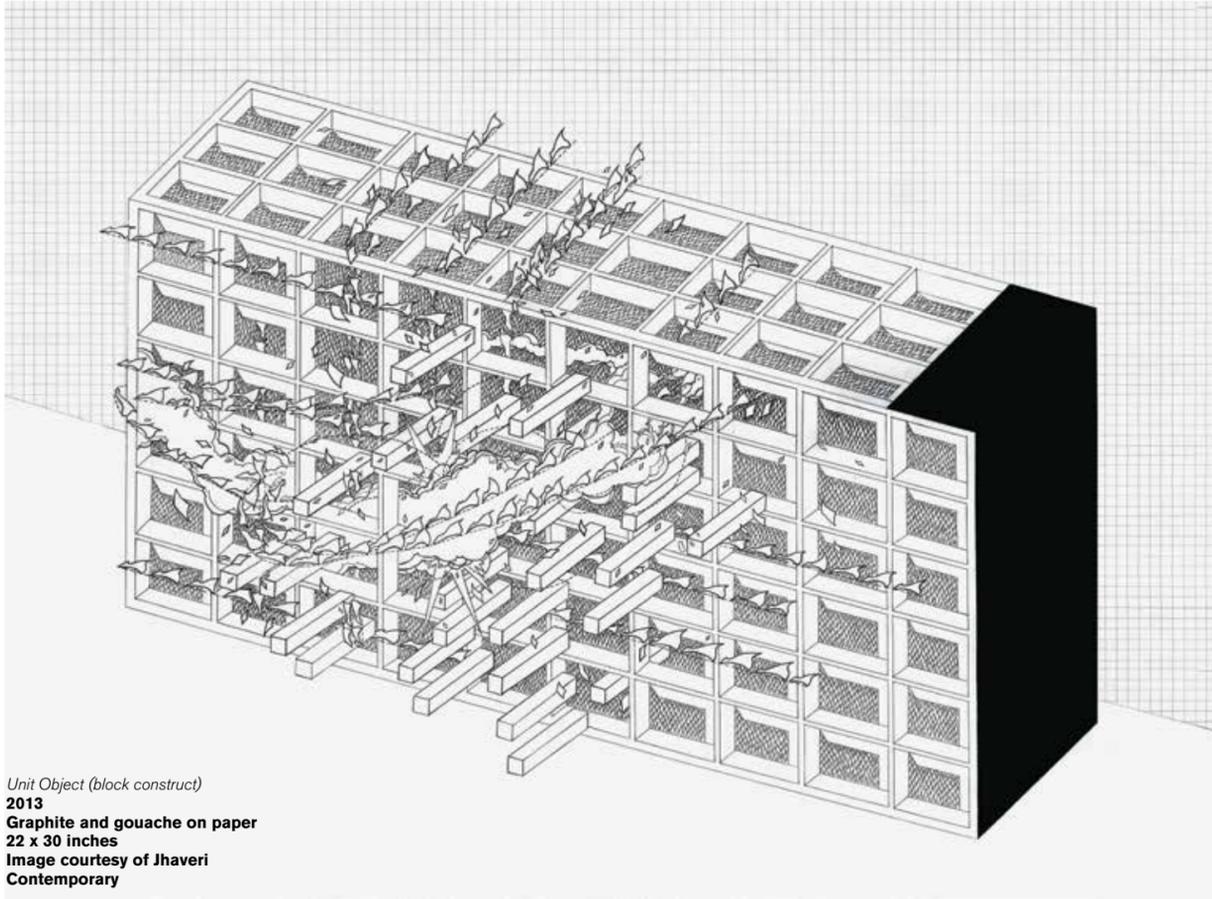
converted into a reality of its own existence and narrative. The drawings of Seher Shah perform a narrative that is 'here and now' rather than for a preferred future; it is no more a representation of something, but has a self and being of itself.

As much as these creations with architectural drawings play with the sensitivity and emotional attachments that architects have with architectural drawings, it also uses those affects and qualities to make a political point – making the drawing now a discursive object, one that ruminates through its own lines, marks and incisions. On repeated looking, one will realise how all these drawings are not just growths of kinds on architectural drawings, but are images in themselves, and Shah explores the image-making process in her tectonic diagrams and maps. The drawings are maps, the landscape is a diagram – one wonders with these shifts at the different

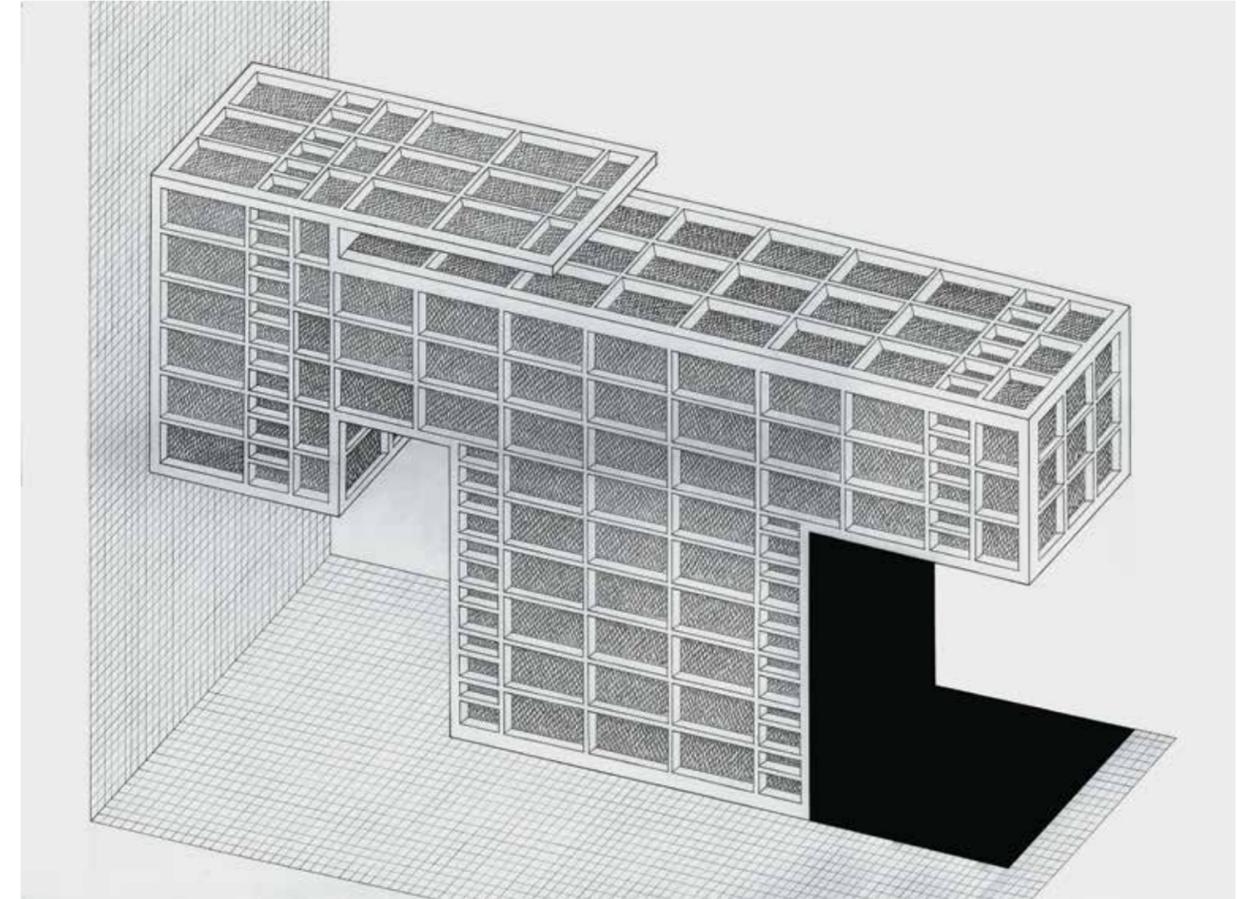
**Right: Seher Shah's works at The Radiant Lines exhibition at Nature Morte, Berlin, 2012.**  
Image courtesy Randhir Singh and Jhaveri Contemporary.  
**Next spread: left: selected images from the series, Mammoth: Aerial landscape proposals 2012**  
21 archival digital prints  
17.5 X 13 inches each  
Images courtesy of Jhaveri Contemporary  
Photographs by Randhir Singh  
**Right: Study for a totem (double wall) 2013**  
Graphite and gouache on paper  
Double panel drawing: 44 x 30 inches  
full dimensions



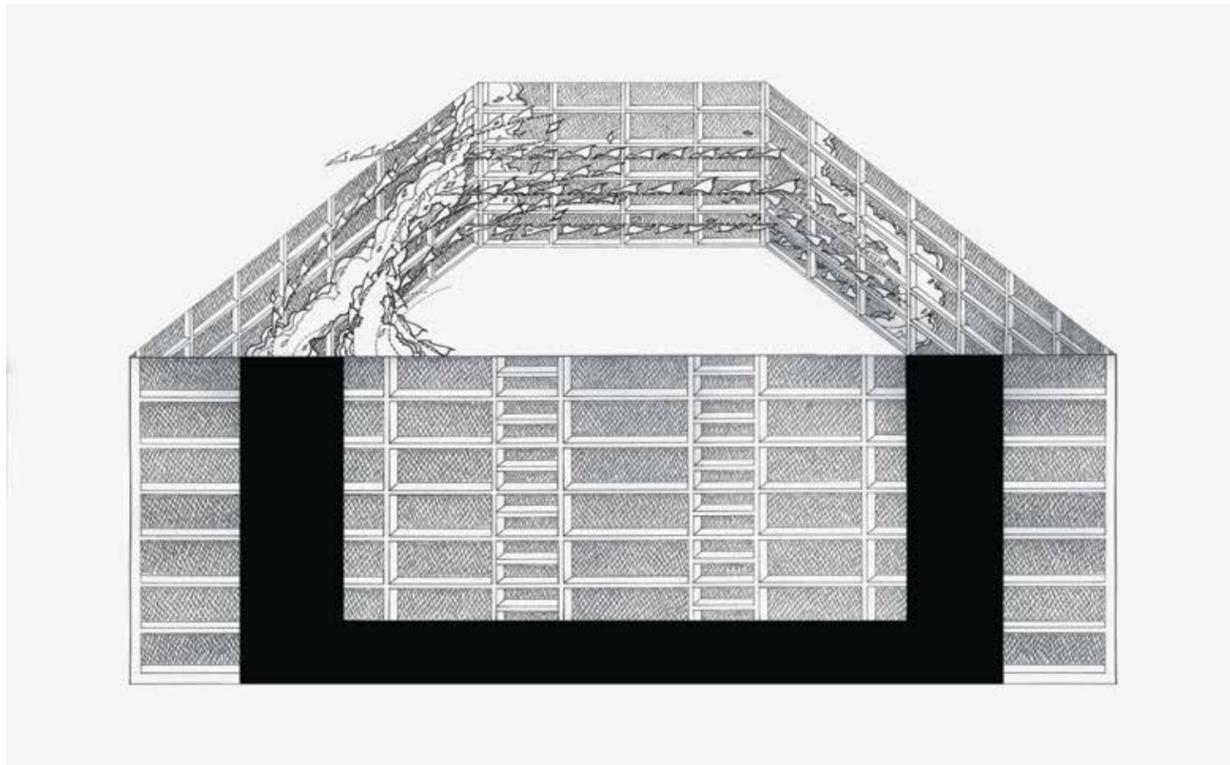




*Unit Object (block construct)*  
 2013  
 Graphite and gouache on paper  
 22 x 30 inches  
 Image courtesy of Jhaveri Contemporary



*Unit Object (cantilever)*  
 2013  
 Graphite and gouache on paper  
 22 x 30 inches  
 Image courtesy of Jhaveri Contemporary

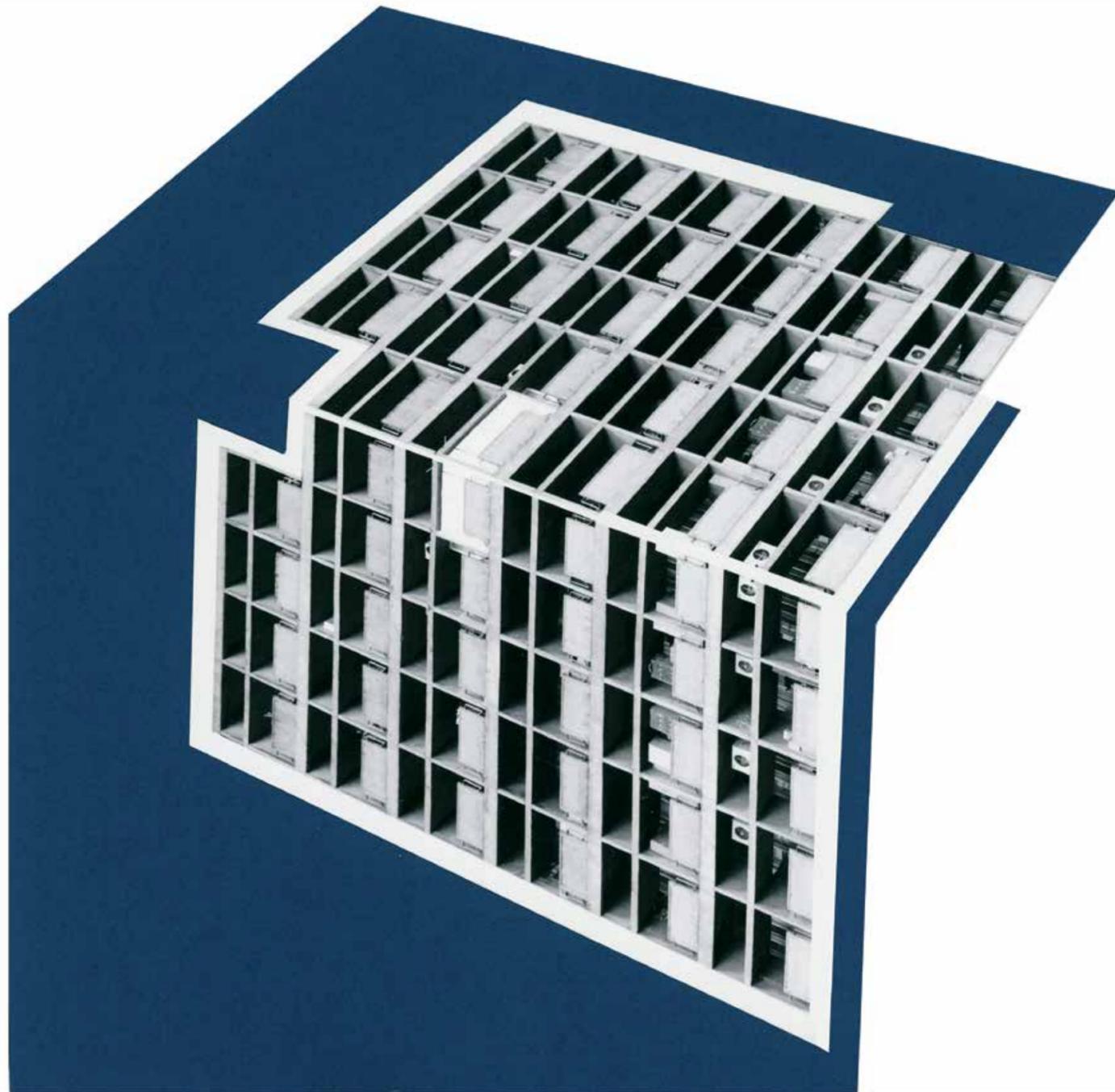


*Unit Object (courtyard)*  
 2013  
 Graphite and gouache on paper  
 22 x 30 inches  
 Image courtesy of Jhaveri Contemporary



*Landscape object\_Vista I*  
 2013  
 Painted wood, Plexi and acetate  
 Height: 14 inches, Length: 8 inches, Depth max: 3 inches  
 Image courtesy of Jhaveri Contemporary





Radiant Lines - Blue Object

typologies of drawings, representing and seeing. It is the reference frame and scale that Shah allocates to these drawing-objects that produces the dialogue across typologies of thinking, knowing and representing, or re-narrating a representation. All images – the scaled diagram that projects a future reality and materiality (simply put, the architectural drawing), or the aerial photograph or rendering of earthly geographies – take vision to a realm that is not the experience of an everyday reality or an everyday practice. In fact, the mind and eye is trained (and made to practice) knowing the world as, and through, projections and representations, rather than the everyday experience of it, and being in it. In architectural drawings and aerial images

there is a distancing of reality as much as they claim to reproduce the real (or the real in future); and in their claim they allow for a sense of control – a control that is intellectual and visual – such that spectral landscapes are squared to horizontal or vertical experiences of distance and depth. Shah converts line in to texture, and landscape, and break the mould of the architectural drawings. The lines from structures of working and representation, become structures of thinking, and these interventions in some sense produce new, rather pseudo-landscapes of their own, denying the architectural drawing or image any further a projective claim.

*Kaiwan Mehta*

*The following extract is from the essay Utopian Shards by Alan Gilbert features in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Brute Ornament.*

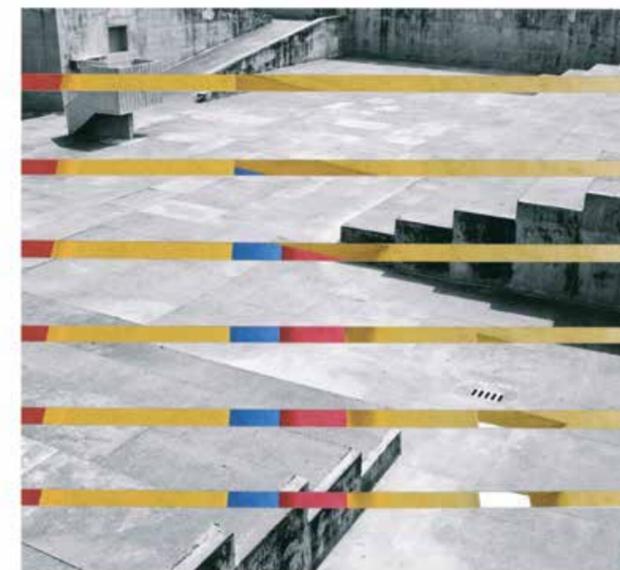


Radiant Lines - X Block

### Utopian Shards

It has almost become a cliché to say that modern architecture, and perhaps modernism itself, died in 1972 with the demolition of two massive apartment buildings in the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in St. Louis, Missouri. But even before this dramatic demise was proposed in Charles Jencks's 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, large-scale urban public housing complexes in the United States had already been labelled a disaster. Built during the post-war peak of Modernism and partially inspired by the urban planning designs of French architect Le Corbusier, these housing projects generally consisted of enormous apartment buildings clustered together in ways that frequently isolated them from the surrounding urban (and growing suburban) environment. Intended as a form of slum-clearing as well as an attempt to provide decent and affordable housing for the working-class poor, whether white or black, many of these urban interventions became associated with squalor and violence within a decade or so of their construction.

The reasons for this are complex, but it is easy to blame the cold and inhuman quality of the architecture itself — a style known as Brutalist. Nevertheless, cultural forms, architectural or otherwise, do not change (or die) on their own; rather, their underlying



Radiant Lines - Yellow Courtyard Plan



social and historical conditions shift. Despite the destruction of Pruitt-Igoe, Modernism still exists to the degree that the material conditions giving rise to it continue. In other words, Pruitt-Igoe and related urban projects such as the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago did not fail simply because of their severe architectural form; they failed partly as a result of social and architectural policies that created racially segregated oases from which social services and economic opportunities were withdrawn. They also failed partly because of budget constraints that disallowed some of the architectural amenities, and niceties that characterised Le Corbusier's series of European housing projects known as Unité d'Habitation.

Another much-noted aspect of Modern architecture is its lack of ornamentation. Modern design arose in response to the flourishes of late Victorian culture (as in, the florid aspects of Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, etc). The collapse of Europe in the wake of World War I and the rise of a hyper-masculinist fascist culture (the two are obviously not unrelated) came to view these tendencies as decadent and effeminate. Meanwhile, Modern design and manufacturing saw them as superfluous to the dictate that form follows function. Seher Shah's work in *Brute Ornament* beautifully and impressively captures this history of Modernist architecture and design, hope and disappointment. Say what one will about the sordid end to Modernist projects such as Pruitt-Igoe or Robin Hood Gardens in East London, the

**Above: Seher Shah's works featured at The Radiant Lines exhibition at Nature Morte, Berlin, 2012. Images courtesy Randhir Singh and Jhaveri Contemporary.**  
**Below: *Object Repetition (line to distance)* 2013**

**1000 cast hydrocal objects with ink, dimensions variable, Image courtesy the James Gallery and Etienne Frossard**



motivations behind them were frequently progressive, and, in the case of someone like Le Corbusier, even grandly utopian. Moreover, not every instance of Modernist urban planning resulted in its inhabitants' disenfranchisement. The 23 de Enero district in Caracas, Venezuela, one of the largest public housing projects in the world, has for decades served as a seedbed for vibrant radical politics. Shah's work gestures toward this big utopian vision, its adaptation, and in many cases its destruction. The absence of subsequent encompassing utopias — the postmodern vanquishing of metanarratives, as Jean-François Lyotard famously declared — perhaps makes their Modernist iteration worth investigating again now that postmodernism is being rendered obsolete. Shah's *Object Relic* (Unité d'Habitation) (2011) imagines a version of this revisiting. Modelled on, and inspired by, Le Corbusier's Unité in Marseille, France (completed in 1952, a few years before Pruitt-Igoe), Shah's graphite and gouache on paper endeavours to capture in both its large scale and meticulousness the serial quality of Le Corbusier's architectural technique. The modular units that formed the heart of his approach appear at the bottom of the drawing as empty, flattened out, and perspectively distorted. Grey fields alternate with white bands as the overall composition finds its foundation before quickly expanding upward. Lines of what look to be flags, or flames, or leaves begin to form a haphazard grid. @

Alan Gilbert