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America

Deserta



“That was not why we took that shot; the intention was to photograph “Phone Booth Mesa” on the way up from Shiprock to Cortez. Neither of us remembers seeing any building in the foreground of that view; but there it is, a standard, off-the-peg, industrially produced Butler building with an air conditioner unit on its flatly pitched roof. It is finished in an inoffensive tan colour, but that doesn’t make it any less outstandingly visible against the background of sagebrush. Why then does the eye of memory not see it? It must be that it is such a usual building in a landscape where only the exotic or the outrageous in architecture tends to look at home and be remembered.“

“In a landscape where nothing officially exists (otherwise it would not be “desert”), absolutely anything becomes thinkable, and may consequently happen.”

In 1982 Reyner Banham publishes *Scenes in America Deserta*. Appearing ten years after *LA: city of 4 ecologies*, it could be read as a unveiled criticism of the uncompromising urbanism he so much celebrated ten years earlier. As Banham himself clarified (in 1972 already, in *4 Ecologies*), truth is somewhere in the middle. The city cannot be understood without the desert, and ultimately one only experiences the desert whilst leaving the city, its counterpoint.

What then makes this complex and mythified bond between the built and the nothing, central to the perpetual melancholia of going West?

This difficult duo seems to be the key constituency of the ur-idea of the settlement, driver of the perpetual negotiation between space and technology, liberty and control; engine of every project somewhere comfortably placed between pragmatism and Utopia. In 2014, driven by an unconsumed

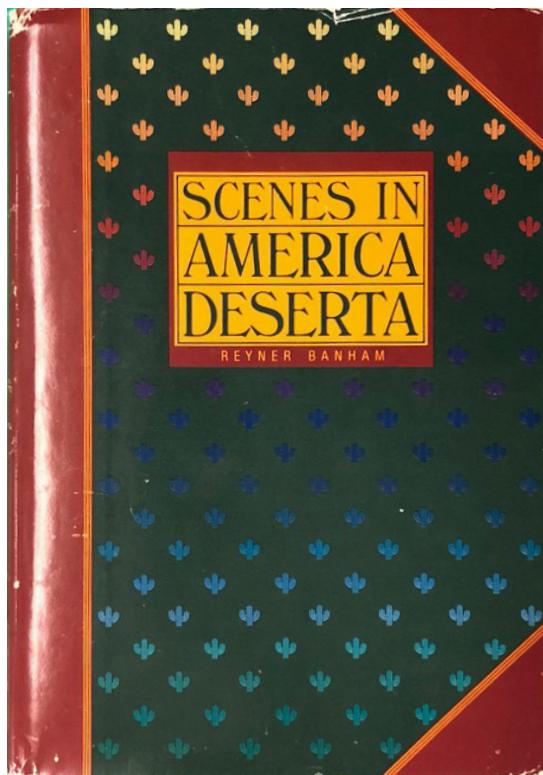
fascination for both the desert and the horizontal city, we made a small show called ‘Small Museum for the American Metaphor’. The show collected 42 items all more or less related to spatial associations with ‘the West’, the desert and ‘Technicolor sky’. Each of the objects had a somewhat weak relationship with the metaphor so to speak, but the totality of associations made a potent plea for an architecture of scale and abstraction, strangely located between the sculpture and the perspective.

In Banham’s Deserta, the desert is unaccommodating. In the shortest time Wright’s elegant tent like structures all but disappeared. Zzyzx, a spatial hoax in the desert developed by a cunning crook remained exactly that.

The clay structures of indigenous tribes, the carved rocks and the Spanish colonial tropes seemed surprisingly more resistant to the relentless powers of nature. Perhaps the most successful seem to be buildings that disappear in

plain sight. In a fascinating ‘revelation’ starting one of the chapters of the book, Banham writes about an ordinary building carrying a ventilation box which he only finally discovers on a photograph of the very space he visited before. Then, on the spot, he remained unaware of the structure’s presence. The building revealed itself after the fact, in the parallel life at the project. Perhaps the right strategy in this epoch full of bombast, is an architecture that performs without much consideration. A conscious ignorance of everything that counts might be the key to its success. The desert wins anyhow.

Reyner Banham, Scenes in America Deserta, 1982



Pieter Vermeersch, Untitled, 2014, Print on wallpaper, site specific intervention. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery, New York



# Timing

- 1 23 January  
Lottery day – start  
Kersten Geers
- 2 28—31 January  
—12 February  
Workshop  
Andrea Zanderigo  
Jelena Pancevac
- 3 11—12 February  
Kersten Geers
- 4 21—22 February  
Andrea Zanderigo
- 5 25 February  
Midterm  
Kersten Geers Andrea Zanderigo
- 6 10—16 March  
Trip  
Los Angeles – Mesa  
Verde – Spring mountains  
Arcosanti – Taliesin West  
Kersten Geers Andrea Zanderigo
- 7 28 March—1 April  
—15 April  
Workshop  
Kersten Geers  
Jelena Pancevac
- 8 11—15 April  
Andrea Zanderigo
- 9 30 April—1 May  
Final review  
Kersten Geers Andrea Zanderigo

# Presentation

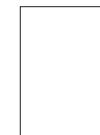
A4

1 First



A3

2 Then



A2

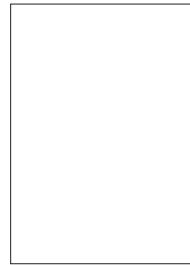
3 Midterm



+model

A1

4 Final



+model

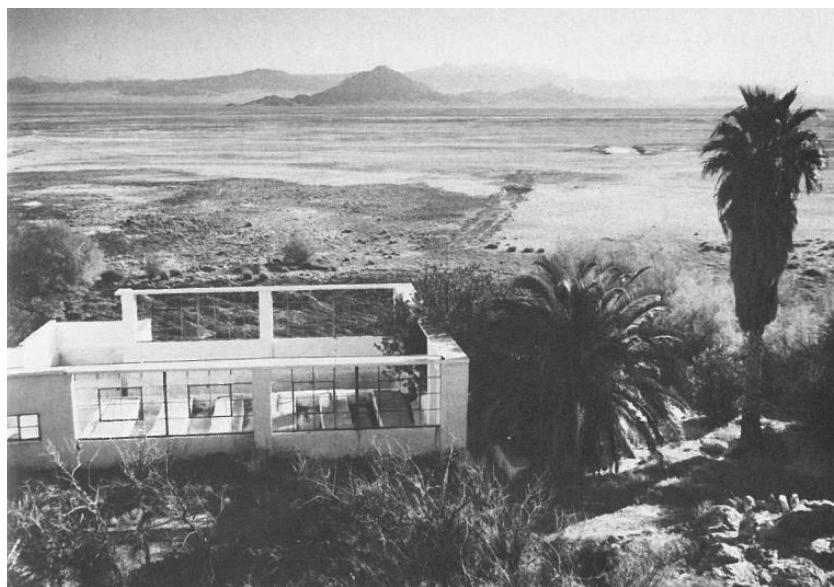
# Ancestors



Koenraad Dedobbeleer, It's Anachronistic to Attempt to Solve the Problems of the Present, 2013, 178x60x60 cm



P.R. Banham at Silurian Lake, California



Curtis Howe Springer's  
ZZyx Resort, near Baker,  
California



Frank Lloyd Wright's  
Taliesin West, Scottsdale,  
Arizona

2019

Architecture  
without  
Content