



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.

Letter D speaks of thickness and material quality. **Thicker than usual** explains the logic of insulating concrete, known in German as Dämmbeton and showcases our latest project. **Mexican thickness** tells the story of a house in Hollywood that helped to vector the textures and colours of Mexican modernist architecture into the USA.

Mimicking thickness argues in favour of Adolf Loos's fake walls and columns, and **Redness** is a paean to that colour written by the architect Boris Podrecca. And as a little ristretto we bring you **Operetta**, a quick guideline for a funny stage design.

Sincerely,
The Editor

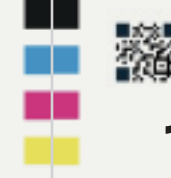


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1. Thicker than usual

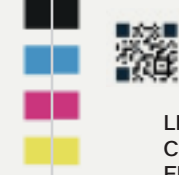
Mr. F sags his shorts in February. He's riding merrily down the frosted Ringstrasse. He's got his headphones on; it's Wu-Tang Clan.

Oh, how he wishes buildings could withstand the cold as well as he can! Oh, the pain of having grown up flipping through glossy pictures of Brazilian concrete buildings from the snowy boondocks of Salzburg! But alas, Austria isn't Rio, and alas! poor old concrete is a useless insulator.

Like a premonition of that *dernier cri* term "the Global South", the carnivals of concrete plasticity of the post-war period, those churches to roughness that followed the mechanistic beauty of canonical modernity, were built in warmer climates: Le Corbusier in Chandigarh (after Le Corbusier in Marseille), Kahn in Bangladesh, Niemeyer in Brasilia, Mendes da Rocha and Vilanova Artigas in Sao Paulo, Lautner in Acapulco. They share temperatures diametrically opposed to those of Austria. And thus the paradigms of concrete building in Europe are bunkers in Dunkirk and tributes to bullies in ex-Yugoslavia: there's no one inside to mind the cold.

If Northern Europeans insist on exposed concrete, they're forced to do two things: cover the outside with insulating material, by which the concrete face is lost on the exterior, or, build two layers of concrete wall, with a space between for insulation like a sandwich. But this sad contraption is fraught with weird detailing, and it defeats the purpose – for the purist! – of having built with what architects call a "monolithic" (built in one-go) system like concrete.

LEFT:
Clinic in Anif. Photo by
Florian Holzher, 2023.



LEFT:
Clinic in Anif. Photos by
Florian Holzherr, 2023.

Mr. F now makes a left on Strozzigasse ringing the cutesie bell on his Bianchi. Wu-Tang's *Gravel Pit* is playing. And all of a sudden he's reminded that someone's solved the problem of concrete already. *Dämmbeton* is a variation of traditional concrete with insulating elements thrown into the mix. The density is brought down, the thermic conductivity reduced. But so is the strength, and one has to compensate with extra thickness. This is why walls made of *Dämmbeton* might need to be as wide as 60cm. Unwillingly, and to Mr. F's satisfaction, it has put back into contemporary architecture the width of the premodern. It restores a dash of primitivity. Hints of raw vigor.

At Steiner Architecture we've used *Dämmbeton* in a couple of projects. We're extra glad to present this building in a quiet neighborhood of Salzburg where we've also explored tinting the concrete red. It's a clinic on the ground floor and rental apartments on the first floor.

Gravel Pit is over. Mr. F stuffs his headphones into his pocket, sweeps a little snow off the front step, and walks into the office. His Peruvian assistant has frozen to death.

He takes a good look at him and jokes with a grin: "Come on! it's nearly spring!"

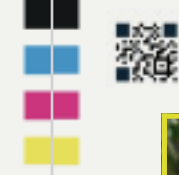
BELOW:
Reception hall. Clinic in Anif.
Photo by Florian Holzherr,
2023.





LEFT AND BELOW:
Staircase to the first floor
apartment. Clinic in Anif.
Photos by Florian Holzherr,
2023.

RIGHT: Strict local building
codes demanded sloped
roofs to harmonize with the
neighborhood. Clinic in Anif.
Photo by Florian Holzherr,
2023.





2. Mexican thickness

Ricardo Montalbán was the biggest Mexican star in Hollywood for the better part of the 20th Century. Settled in Los Angeles as movie stars are wont to do, Montalbán commissioned a house in Bird Streets from his compatriot and brutally talented Luis Barragán in 1982, who had just received the Pritzker Prize for architecture two years prior!

Something must have happened along the way, and the project devolved to a much younger architect. This was Barragán's friend, advocate, and legatee, Ricardo Legorreta, who at the time had built nothing outside Mexico². While Luis Barragán, the giant, would die having built nothing in the US.

Nevertheless, the house that Legorreta built conformed to the style that Barragán had patiently wrought in Mexico, and for which there was already an audience – though not exactly a market – in the US: thick walls, costiveness, invitations to silence that had their source in Morocco as much as in Barragán's Mazamitla³.

Unlike the Mexicans' work in their own country, the Montalbán house was not purple, pink, or fuchsia. That would have been too soon. But with its tans and blues, applied on mute and rough surfaces, it marked the beginning of a flow, a vectoring, of colours and moods from Mexico to the US that would tint California until this day: think of the Desert X exhibition in 2019, or the 2019 installations at Coachella; think of the Instagram success of Paul Smith's flagship store on Melrose Avenue, admittedly a homage to Barragán pink⁴.

From the Montalbán House, Legorreta would go on to build plenty in California and throughout the Southern states, whose geographies seemed to be perfect settings for his Mexican modernism⁵: Pershing Square. The Children's Discovery Museum. Unabashed purples. In mouth-watering private homes, tans dominate the palette. A one-eyed yellow tower looms over IBM's offices in Solana. He then let it all out at the College of Santa Fe's Visual Arts Center in New Mexico, and touched the sky of architectural quality with that ochre house in Reno.

LEFT: Montalbán House by Ricardo Legorreta. Photo by Lourdes Legorreta, 1985.

¹ Luis Barragán was the second architect to win the Pritzker prize (1980). The first laureate was the American Philip Johnson in 1979.

² Legorreta had built plenty in Mexico by then. His Camino Real hotel, constructed to coincide with the 1968 Mexican Olympics, received ample international attention. The '68 Mexican Olympics, whose graphic designing was led by an American (Lance Wyman), contributed to the international appreciation of Mexican saturated colours and modernism and were referenced in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Coincidentally, the Mexico 1968 Olympics were the first summer games to be televised in colour.

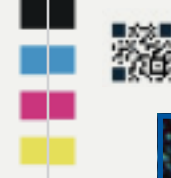
³ Barragán was acquainted with the French gardener Ferdinand Bac's rhapsodies of North African gardens. Mazamitla is a town in Barragán's home state of Jalisco that inspired him deeply.

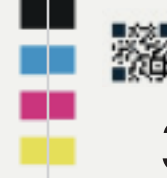
⁴ Since their peak in the pre-pandemic, strong pinks, purples and turquoises have been given less important roles, and have practically disappeared from Desert X's incarnations. The fad seems over. It's obviously merely temporary.

⁵ Broach the broader portfolio of the prodigious Legorreta. Look further. Geographically. You will find his colours and textures throughout the globe: a project in London, and one in Israel. A residence hall in Chicago. Something in Doha. A couple in Brazil. But they seem misplaced – emetic in London. Aptly his house in Japan is white. As is his house in Miami. Despite the size of the Latin community there, which surpasses Los Angeles's in terms of percentage, Miami is more pan-Latin American, more Cuban than anything else. Los Angeles, on the other hand, is principally Mexican.

When thick walls are not thick enough, windows extrude like those on the first floor to give an impression of an even greater thickness from the inside.

Montalban House. Photos by Lourdes Legorreta, 1985.





3. Mimicking thickness



ABOVE: David Roentgen. *Die römischen Frauen ringen mit den Sabinern um den Frieden*, 1799. Reproduced with permission of the MAK – Museum of Applied Arts. Photo © MAK/Georg Mayer.

Adolf Loos lived in a time when buildings were getting progressively thinner. Walls were getting progressively thinner.

But he wasn't a man of thin things. It wasn't in his constitution. So he put back the widths that technology was depriving him of.

How's this for an epiphany: young Loos walks into the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna and sees a panel by David Roentgen (see left). It's a fantastic work of perspective, a *historical picture* executed only with inlaid wood, mimicking depth. He understands modernity at once: depth is in the wall!

1908: His American Bar off Kärntnerstrasse. You go through a tight, snug space as you walk in from the street. Like a cosy threshold. Like walking through a telephone booth – literally; there's a phone hanging there. There's an interest in sheltering. But note this: that the American Bar's entrance, this cosy threshold, was determined by the structure of the Altbau on whose ground floor the bar is located.

It's not his doing – he's merely capitalizing. It's ancient technology that afforded the bar its confidentiality, the smell of entering penetralias.

But when Loos had no old thicknesses to rely on, he mimicked them. See his work in Pilsen, CZ (sorry, "Czechia" – who came up with that?). Visit the Brummel apartment. See the sturdy square columns flanking the dining room. Empty. Hollow. Grab a step-stool and knock on the beam. Hollow as well. Old Michael Brummel will confide in you that he played hide and seek within the "walls"² of his auntie's bedroom.

Take a tour of the Kraus apartment. See those massive columns that flank the dining room mirror – hollow! Walk round the back: he's capitalised them as two ample closets! Now step into the master bedroom. See the deep alcove where the bed is sunken. It's all the quondam

equivalent of drywall and plaster. Open the tiny closet door: you're in a secret, hidden compartment. Continue, and you'll be back in the hall, like an escape route. What is this?

See the living room of his Villa Moller in Vienna: those thick walls, clad in wood, that separate it from the dining room – closets! Check-in at the Payerbach Hotel, the old house of his client Mr. Khuner. See how the beds are all sunken into alcoves. But this isn't a castle: look at the plan and see for yourself that the walls are slender.

And now drink a glass of champagne in his name from his Lobmeyr champagne cooler. What? You gotta be kidding us: it's in the shape of a hollow column.

This isn't cheating. This is someone's world crumbling.

¹ The anecdote is told in *Möbel und Menschen*. Frankfurter Zeitung, August 28, 1929. David Roentgen was a celebrated cabinetmaker born in 1743 in Brno, coincidentally the same city where Loos was born.

² Michael Brummel is the nephew of Jan and Janna Brummel who commissioned Adolf Loos with the design of the apartment in 1927. He was a child before the apartment was requisitioned in World War Two, and inherited it after the Velvet Revolution.



4. Redness

Red is the only true colour – period, end of story.

The reason behind this can lead to an argument. The debate over the correct colour theory usually becomes a battleground slick with fanaticism, where universalists and cultural relativists cross swords.

In my case – as I reflect on works with chromatic themes – I rediscover red time and again, where the fear of excessive homogeneity announces itself, where there is a desire for subtle anarchy and accompanying subversion, where fanfare or even pagan fire seems necessary. Red is radical and undialogical; it does not flirt with the green of the landscape, the blue of the sky, or the yellow of the sacred light. Red remains the spice of every chromatic level.

In my case, red is not just a colour but primarily a carrier of an idea. The effects of its deliberate use can range from disrupting an architectural happy ending to seeking revenge against the client. It is both lover, Samaritan, and nurse. Red resists all secularisation. It is no coincidence that kings, cardinals, and revolutionaries have adorned themselves with it. Even the Karl-Marx-Hof of Red Vienna

shows its colours. Yet its red also becomes more pastel-like and adapted...

Since the architectural theorists of the late *Ottocento*, we know that colour in architecture, following Semper's principle of clothing, also means a kind of *wall* – the inlay on the structural wall. Thus, colour emancipates itself from the generally secondary to the primary. But the dialectical tension remains visible.

A wealth of colour enveloped the head of Athena, with not a single square millimetre of marble left in its natural state from the upper edge of her helmet and eyes to her lips and chin. A Technicolor, so to speak – what a blow to our black-and-white minimalists!

Red is luxury. In Roman impluvium houses, Pompeian red was never just one shade but existed in at least eighty known variations to date.

Colours are as they are; there are neither ugly nor beautiful colours. Chromatics, in general, is a matter of interpretation; harmony theory, an exercise for aesthetes.

Colour thinks, red is red, period, end of story.

LEFT:
Basler Versicherungsgebäude
Vienna, 1993. Photo by
Gerald Zugmann.

Excerpt from *Rouge* –
The Winner by Boris Podrecca
Translated by Alex Turner.

5. Operetta

This is a stage design for an operetta about Adolf Loos. Actors appear and disappear from columns, beams and ceilings. They fling themselves from camouflaged openings. They pop their heads from things that appear to be solid, and leave the stage through inconspicuous hatches. On occasions the whole troop of twenty actors moves from one column to another. The columns and secret compartments are all connected underground so actors can run from one to the other without being seen by the crowd.

Photo by Filipa Miguel Ferreira, 2024.