

# Installation Art and Live Performance as a Means of Exploring Place History

Class of 2023



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Graduate Thesis Book

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## Introduction

Historic places unfold visual narratives adorned with innate scenic allure. Art plays an integral role in highlighting such places that define cultural and social values. This applies to installation art, a genre born from the fusion of space-making and storytelling, designed to evoke curiosity, fascination, and communal involvement. My thesis project focuses on methods of developing an immersive experience where inhabitants become utterly involved with a constructed cosmology of visual stories.

The site selected for this endeavor is the historic city of Al-'Ula in Saudi Arabia – renowned for its intricate tapestry of archaeological heritage. The city's landscape mirrors the interplay of ancient rock formations, expansive desert vistas, and remnants of historical architecture echoing long past civilizations. This unique setting holds immense potential for accommodating an inhabitable art installation that seamlessly merges with its surroundings, transcending the boundaries of conventional architecture.

*Keywords: Storytelling, Immersion, Performance*





PROPOSED SITE:  
AL-U'LA, SAUDI ARABIA



"AlUla is a place of extraordinary human and natural heritage, a living museum of preserved tombs, sandstone outcrops, historic developments and monuments. This truly unique destination is transforming as a global tourist experience under the direction of the Royal Commission for AlUla." <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Architecture at a Loss, Installation Art Emerges

At its core, storytelling in architecture is about emphasizing human connection, but "Architecture has spent the past 75 years searching to regain the public's interest, to reconnect buildings to culture, to rediscover its social purpose. It is still looking".<sup>1</sup> Recent critiques have suggested meaningful architecture be equated with experience through the idea of narrative.<sup>2</sup> Installation art has emerged as a response to this critique by integrating the arts of space-making and story-constructing, to spark curiosity, intrigue, and immersive engagement.<sup>3</sup> Just as film did for photography, installation art activates architecture by bringing life and movement to stillness.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike architecture, which has a static, fixed form, 'installation' works are completed by the participation of the human character, emphasizing a more holistic design.<sup>5</sup> While traditional artworks situate an independent object in a surrounding, installation works draw from the qualities of space and thrive on audience participation.<sup>6</sup> Kabakov, a pioneer in the installation genre, defines the 'totality' of installation as the inclusion of surrounding space in a way that abolishes the division between artist and viewers.<sup>7</sup> The audience is allowed inside it, so it is no longer something they gaze at. Instead, they live in the artwork and become engulfed in the sensory and experimental elements of the space. As soon as the eyes land on the art, the atmosphere takes over and every individual becomes a character only to come out completely astonished. The effect is very intimate, immersive, and universal.<sup>8</sup>

Installations also hint at alternative ways of comprehending the past in association with the hosting site.<sup>9</sup> In other words, installations are rejuvenating artworks that transform the perception of space by reviving its values, such as visual effects, spatial forms, sounds, and rhythms.<sup>10</sup> Within the frame of this idea, and by allowing a subtle invasion of the place's history through a modern lens, experiential art serves as a canvas where imagination meets reality changing our perception of the simple act of inhabitation. <sup>11</sup>

This literature review examines the major concepts embedded in the development of an inhabitable art installation and considers how it might influence social engagement and historic revitalization. One site in particular, the historic city of Al-'Ula in Saudi Arabia, known for its complex tapestry of archaeological formation, has hosted a variety of intriguing installation works. I have a profound personal connection to Al-'Ula and will begin by discussing the possibilities this place offers.

### Understanding Al-'Ula

The largest archaeological city in the northwest of Saudi Arabia, Al-'Ula is a unique landscape of natural and built forms and an unseen wonder of the world.<sup>13</sup> The city was founded in the 6th century BC and has a long and complex history of human habitation, with the first settlers reportedly arriving in the Neolithic period. Throughout the years, the city has served as a crossroad for weary travelers looking for a place to rest, as well as for the inhabitants for trading silk, spices, and other items through other countries.<sup>14</sup> In the 1980s, the residents left for more modern locales and the city remained uninhabited for over four decades.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Bouday, Common Edge, "Let's Put Narrative Back into Architecture," <https://commonedge.org/lets-put-narrative-back-into-architecture/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Landi, "Telling Stories in Three Dimensions: Installation Art Today." ARTnews.com, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/installation-art-today-3429/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> "Architecture and Art: Not so Very Different." PDH Academy, 27 Jan. 2016, <https://pdhacademy.com/2015/08/05/architecture-and-art-not-so-very-different/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Installation art." Tate

<sup>7</sup> Podoroga, Notes on Ilya Kabakov's «on the total installation,» 345–352.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Notes on Ilya Kabakov's «on the total installation,» 345–352.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> World Economic Forum, "How Saudi Arabia's ancient AlUla region is building for the future," <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/saudi-arabia-alula-sustainable-development/>

<sup>14</sup> French Agency for AlUla, "AlUla, Wonder of Arabia the Oasis with 7000 Years of History,"



The Saudi Arabian Royal Commission for Al-'Ula (RCU) reopened the city for tourism in October 2020, with improved streets, restored buildings, and unparalleled attractions. The city features ancient tombs, exquisite natural rock formations, and cutting-edge art installations.<sup>15</sup> Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, its wide-swept expanse is a living museum, providing a one-of-a-kind global destination for year-round travel.<sup>16</sup>

Al-'Ula is being built with an eye to the future, diversifying the economy in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program, and the RCU is keen to advance new cultural dialogue in the region through art. Emphasizing respect for the town's landscape, culture, and heritage, the development principles focus on improving the quality of life for residents and boosting the tourist economy.<sup>17</sup> Some international art exhibitions that have taken place in Al-'Ula and organized by Desert X<sup>18</sup>, explored themes of mirage, and an oasis, all intrinsic to the desert's ancient culture.<sup>19</sup> Artists evoke a public conversation through artworks that communicate ideas of survival, "Dreams, camouflage, fiction, dis/appearance, extraction, illusion, and myth, while also examining the dichotomy between the natural and man-made worlds," DX Al-'Ula stated.<sup>20</sup>

Understanding this context, it is clear that the historic city offers an extraordinary opportunity of hosting an art establishment. In the following sections, I briefly outline views brought about by existing artists/theorists, followed by exploring the performative expression in such practices.

#### Examples of installation artworks organized by Desert X Al-'Ula



Shezad Dawood, Coral Alchemy. 23



Jim Denevan, Angle of Repose.22



Rashed AlShashai, A Concise Passage. 21



Manal Aldowayan, Now You See Me, Now You Don't.24

<https://www.afalula.com/en/alula-wonder-of-arabia-the-oasis-with-7000-years-of-history/>

<sup>15</sup> The National News, "Al Ula Old Town: Ancient village in Saudi Arabia reopens to visitors for first time in three years," <https://www.thenationalnews.com/lifestyle/travel/al-ula-old-town-ancient-village-in-saudi-arabia-reopens-to-visitors-for-first-time-in-three-years-1.1180318>

<sup>16</sup> French Agency for AlUla, "AlUla, Wonder of Arabia the Oasis with 7000 Years of History,"

<https://www.afalula.com/en/alula-wonder-of-arabia-the-oasis-with-7000-years-of-history/>

<sup>17</sup> World Economic Forum, "How Saudi Arabia's ancient AlUla region is building for the future,"

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/saudi-arabia-alula-sustainable-development/>

<sup>18</sup> "Desert X is produced by The Desert Biennial, a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) charitable organisation founded in California, conceived to produce recurring international contemporary art exhibitions that activate desert locations through site-specific installations by acclaimed international artists." As described on DX's official website.

<sup>19</sup> Desert X, <https://desertx.org/>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Desert X, <https://desertx.org/dx/desert-x-alula-2020>

<sup>22</sup> Desert X, <sup>22</sup> <https://desertx.org/dx/desert-x-alula-2022>

<sup>23</sup> Desert X, <sup>23</sup> <https://desertx.org/dx/desert-x-alula-2022>

<sup>24</sup> Desert X, <https://desertx.org/dx/archive/now-you-see-me-now-you-dont>

#### Understanding Installation Art

What distinguishes installation art from other traditional artworks, according to the philosopher Juliane Rebentisch, is its viewers being subjected to the experience.<sup>25</sup> Elisa Caldarola further explains that the power of installations, "Seems to lie not so much in their relational character, but rather in the fact that they thematize the relationality of art by exemplifying it at its strongest, through the creation of physically immersive environments".<sup>26</sup>

In her book, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Claire Bishop categorizes 'themed' structures offered by installation art: [1] 'Dream Scene'<sup>27</sup>, which allows meaning to arise through psychological connection, personal memories or cultural associations, or the conscious perception of sensorial encounters, as exemplified in the Kabakov's total installation *The Palace of Projects*;<sup>28</sup> [2] 'Heightened Perception', which reframes viewers' perception of the world, such as in the minimal artwork *L-Beam Collection* by Robert Morris that establishes a public mode of interaction through scale manipulation; <sup>29</sup> [3] 'Mimetic Engulfment', found in artworks that instead of "heightening awareness of our perceiving body and its physical boundaries .. seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self,"<sup>30</sup> similar to James Turrell's light installations *Wedge Work IV*, and *Trace Elements*<sup>31</sup>; [4] 'Activated Spectatorship', which generates social discourse, emphasizing the community as the subject of the installation<sup>32</sup>, for instance, Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oak Trees and Bureau for Direct Democracy*.<sup>33</sup>

#### Designing An Experience: An Attitude Toward Space

The process of constructing a new reality immersive for the viewer starts with altering the hosting space of the installation.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the space displaying the artwork is ultimately reprocessed. Dominant spatial features, despite their ordinality, take different meanings, 'roles' in the intended plot.<sup>35</sup> As such, while walls are often considered to be the background of a certain performance, they constitute the borders of the installation 'world,' as well as isolation from the external universe, the gallery, or the museum.<sup>36</sup> In a similar manner, a ceiling, if inadequately constructed, represents a 'gloomy' sky, and vice-versa, 'clear', or 'bright'. If the earth, the floor, is 'dirty' or littered, in the installation, it can allude otherwise; an active, dynamic life of the earth, or simply the process of manufacturing.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, some interior elements such as doors and preliminary spaces, represent meanings of authorization as they pave the way and set the mood of the viewer, representing thresholds of anticipation.<sup>38</sup> The spatial proportion and its components denote the emergence of a carefully put-together experience; without this, the installation fails.<sup>39</sup>

As an interesting example, Kabakov holds a precise perspective on the ideal size for an installation: 'the model of the world' is determined to be rectangular shaped, two-story, and a maximum space of 300 sq. ft. The calculation came about from studying the emotional understanding of viewers' behavioral patterns, examining surrounding objects, and appreciating this model's closed artificiality.<sup>40</sup> Such space provides comfort and intimacy while allowing free maneuvering through the environment, but does not necessarily reject enumerating 'optimum structures.' In fact, duplicating these 'structures can produce a series of creative cosmologies.<sup>41</sup>

#### Objects in Installations

A space is silent, blunt, and dead, but can revive when it contains objects of social associations recognizable to the viewer. <sup>42</sup> The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff explains that objects hold their history of making and their symbolic, economic, or societal value.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Caldarola, 2021

<sup>26</sup> Elisa Caldarola, "Improvisation and Installation Art". In Alessandro Bertinotto & Marcello Ruta (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in The Arts*. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (Italy: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), 47.

<sup>28</sup> "The Palace of Project". <https://www.kabakov.net/installations/2019/9/14/the-palace-of-projects>. In this project a two-story spiral pavilion houses 61 subjective retelling of projects for the free interpretation of the viewer.

<sup>29</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (Italy: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), 48-52.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 85-86

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 102

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 104; These projects aimed at political activism intend the physical and aesthetic side of the installation as a means of stimulating discussion.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 102

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 104; These projects aimed at political activism intend the physical and aesthetic side of the installation as a means of stimulating discussion.

<sup>36</sup> Ilya Kabakov, 'On The Total Installation', (Cantz Verlag, 1995), 256.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 256- 269

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 256- 269

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 256- 269

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 256- 269

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 256- 269.

Biographies of materials unfold what is otherwise considered unknown. Their ability to form or shift meanings is activated by juxtaposition or transition from one cultural venue to another.<sup>44</sup> In the context of an installation, the topology of objects is showcased for the viewer as they move or pause in the space. The relationship of some objects to others, one category to another, and the hierarchy of significance operate powerfully to create its own imagery, its own story.<sup>45</sup>

Kabakov suggests that the practice of locating objects within an installation is based on circumstance; placement relies on rationales that may impose either grouping similar or contrasting objects with each other, and with the surrounding environment.<sup>46</sup> The optimal rule here is that whenever one or a group of objects is contrasted with another, similar to theatre, viewers' attention addresses what is dominating and marginalizes the remaining objects into a 'continuous unified background'. The secondary static characters here can play roles that are dividing or complimenting, while the main role can be performed as a kind of exaggeration of their message.<sup>47</sup> Light and spectator axis of movement can be manipulated in relation to the roles of objects.<sup>48</sup>

Dislocation also creates an opportunity for eliciting a strong sense of discomfort that can initiate communication.<sup>49</sup> A shift in objects is disruptive to ordinality, and can include flipping objects inside out, upside down, or compiling them.<sup>50</sup> From this perspective, processing the wave of associations fused in materiality is fundamentally dependent on spatial layout and procession. When the audience is captive to the orchestrated journey, the result is pure enchantment and enduring success of the entire system.<sup>51</sup>

In this context, the anthropologist Shirley Ardener identifies the variability of objects' perception mediated through spatial terms.<sup>52</sup> In other words, there is a set of taxonomic rules that surface from social perimeters and manipulate our behavioral patterns.<sup>53</sup> Ardener explains that objects' locations and methods of categorizing naturally project a political interpretation often interrelated to gender, society classification, spheres of interest, or biases.<sup>54</sup> As such, these logical relations enforce boundaries that translate social reality into physical territories, levels, and realms.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, a space with a certain materialistic context speaks its social meanings, thus, imposing certain behavioral restraints.<sup>56</sup> An example in that reference is illustrated by Mark Kingwell to address the expression of furniture placement.<sup>57</sup> A table when placed in a dining room imposes a certain arrangement of other objects, chairs, around it.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, people, not only, embrace this circulation but also, are prompted to follow a body posture; people sitting on chairs, and a collective performance of dining.<sup>59</sup> In this manner, as objects inform their surrounding environment through their qualities—shadow, color, temperature, or dimensions— and the situating of other objects, simultaneously, their meanings are determined by the presence of individuals in space; representing a 'social map'.<sup>60</sup>

### The Potentiality of Participation and Live Performance

Viewers, who generally feel free when looking at a painting or sculpture, find themselves controlled by the installation and become immersed.<sup>61</sup> As active characters in the art they behold, they feel compelled to follow the emotions or recollections that arise within. As described by Kabakov, a pioneer of installation art, "The main center toward which everything is addressed, for which everything is intended, is the viewer."<sup>62</sup>

Within this frame of reference, Caldarola discusses the 'rules of participation' put forward by philosopher Sherril Irvin.<sup>63</sup> Curators, who can participate as actors in the display, also control the kind of actions performed by the public for the artwork to be properly experienced. For instance, Tania Brugheria's Endgame places spectators at the perimeter of a cylindrical scaffolding covered with white fabric—the installation

envelops the performance. The audience can view the performance by inserting their heads into the holes included in the white fabric and even changing their position by circling around the hollow cylinder. <sup>64</sup> Thus, the crowd is choreographed to serve the artist's intention of cultivating multiple perspectives of the attended play. In that sense, boundaries between theater, artwork, and performance have extended and a novel intermedial condition of production takes place.<sup>65</sup>

The rules of engagement might allow a range from limited to full freedom in their expressive performance. This is where the concept of improvisation emerges, harnessing the creativity of the collectives to set up the narrative.<sup>66</sup> The power of improvisation perfectly corresponds with the future of storytelling, as seen in Sleep No More, an immersive theatre production deprived of all spoken dialogue.<sup>67</sup> It is performed primarily in a dimly lit environment, where darkness allows for control over the audience. This show is intended for the audience to interact with their environment. According to Maxine Doyle, the co-creator of the show, the immersive theater experience was about indulging the senses and pushing the audience to imagine on a bigger canvas.<sup>68</sup> From the viewer's perspective, not only do they get to explore a multitude of fragmented plays scattered in the host site, but also they are able to engage in a private experience where a rehearsed character invites a member of the audience and provokes them to freely disrupt and improvise in the environment. <sup>69</sup>

### Future Direction: Total Installation and Performance at AI-'Ula

When people engage with a place, they seek continuity with their past.<sup>70</sup> While historic preservation can help consolidate a sense of place rooted in the past, installation works can enable a forward-looking sense of discovery and engagement with a site. The type of integration that is possible through installation art offers a comprehensive experience, and live performance lingers in our memory. For my thesis, I propose to utilize concepts from the literature, in particular the 'dream scene' approach, with careful consideration of how objects are situated to create an interior atmosphere. I intend to activate the site of AI-'Ula using these ideas of total installation and live performance. installations.<sup>1</sup>5 Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, its wide-swept expanse is a living museum, providing a one-of-a-kind global destination for year-round travel.<sup>1</sup>6

AI-'Ula is being built with an eye to the future, diversifying the economy in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program, and the RCU is keen to advance new cultural dialogue in the region through art. Emphasizing respect for the town's landscape, culture, and heritage, the development principles focus on improving the quality of life for residents and boosting the tourist economy.<sup>1</sup>7 Some international art exhibitions that have taken place in AI-'Ula and organized by Desert X18, explored themes of mirage, and an oasis, all intrinsic to the desert's ancient culture.<sup>1</sup>9 Artists evoke a public conversation through artworks that communicate ideas of survival, "Dreams, camouflage, fiction, dis/appearance, extraction, illusion, and myth, while also examining the dichotomy between the natural and man-made worlds," DX AI-'Ula stated.<sup>2</sup>0

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44 Ibid.  
45 Ilya Kabakov, 'On The Total Installation', (Cantz Verlag, 1995), 294.  
46 Ibid., 290  
47 Ilya Kabakov, 'On The Total Installation', (Cantz Verlag, 1995), 292.  
48 Ibid., 291.  
49 Ibid., 292.  
50 Ibid., 292.  
51 Ibid., 292.  
52 Ardner, 1993. "The Partition of Space." Excerpted in Intimus. pp. 15-21  
53 Ibid  
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57 Kingwell, 2002. "Tables, Chairs, and Other Machines for Thinking." Excerpted in Intimus. Pp. 173-79  
58 Ibid.  
59 Ibid.  
60 Ardner, 1993. "The Partition of Space." Excerpted in Intimus. pp. 15-21  
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63 Elisa Caldarola, "Improvisation and Installation Art". In Alessandro Bertinetto & Marcello Ruta (eds.), The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in The Arts. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3.

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67 Penn, "9 Things to Know before You See Sleep No More." NYCgo.com, 23 Nov. 2016, <https://www.nycgo.com/articles/things-to-know-before-you-see-sleep-no-more/>.  
68 Soloski, The New York Times, "Sleep No More" Awakens After a Long Hibernation," <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/theater/sleep-no-more-reopens.html>  
69 Penn, "9 Things to Know before You See Sleep No More." NYCgo.com, 23 Nov. 2016, <https://www.nycgo.com/articles/things-to-know-before-you-see-sleep-no-more/>.  
70 Clare Cooper Marcus

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- 3 Desert X, <https://desertx.org/dx/desert-x-alula-2022>
- 4 Desert X, <https://desertx.org/dx/archive/now-you-see-me-now-you-dont>







Nabatean Tombs, Al-Ula

## Historic Context



Al-ʾUla (Arabic: **أَلُؤْلَا**), Located in the northwest of Saudi Arabia, and 200km from the Red Sea, AlUla is located on the old 'Incense Road'. This was a trade route that linked Arabia with the Mediterranean region. For centuries it was a geographical and cultural crossroads, a place of meetings and exchange. It attracted travelers from all over the world, and since 2020 has been doing so again.

An ambitious regeneration plan aims to attract two million visitors by 2035 and make this the world's largest living museum – a unique and global destination for arts, culture, heritage and nature tourism.

"Everything You Need to Know to Plan a Trip to Alula in Saudi Arabia." euronews, April 8, 2021. <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2021/04/08/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-historic-and-beautiful-area-of-alula-in-saudi-arabia>.

"Agency for Alula Development Press Kit," accessed February 21, 2023, [https://www.afalula.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/AFALULA\\_DOSSIER\\_DE\\_PRESSE\\_EN\\_09\\_2019.pdf](https://www.afalula.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/AFALULA_DOSSIER_DE_PRESSE_EN_09_2019.pdf).

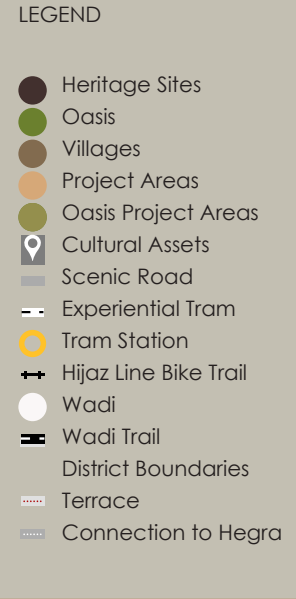




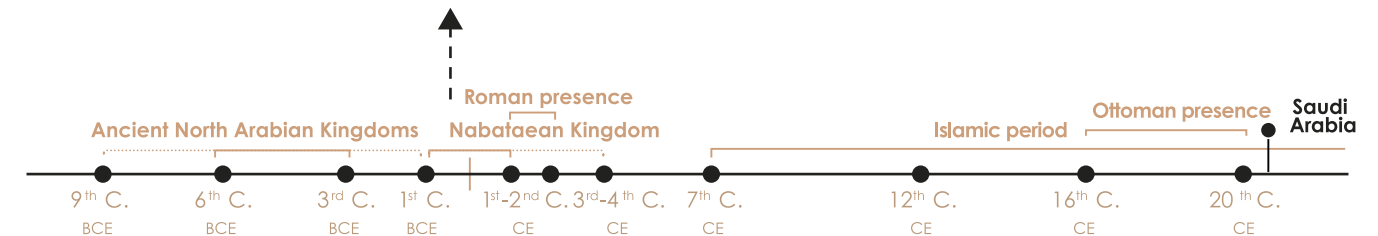
## “A Journey Through Time” Map

Five distinct districts within one region: Each district shows a different element of Alula's 200,000 year history.

- Hegra City - UNESCO site
- Nabataean Horizon
- Jabal Ikma
- Dadan district
- Alula Old Town



Thierry Pigot, “The Journey Through Time Masterplan Marks a Major Step in Protecting and Sharing the Alula Cultural and Heritage Site with the World,” AFALULA, April 8, 2021, <https://www.afalula.com/en/journey-through-time-masterplan/>.



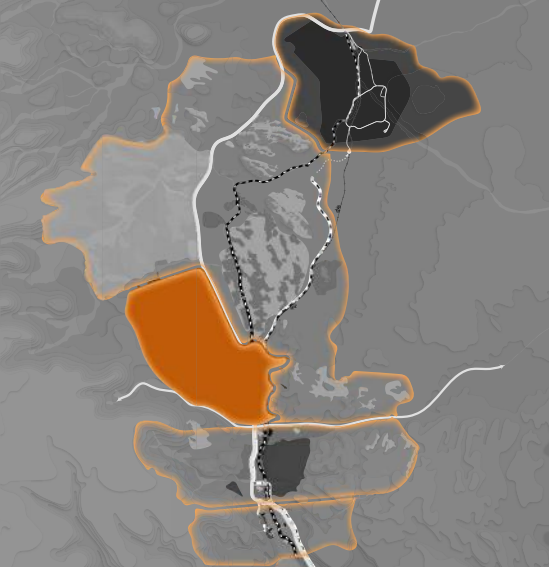
## 1- Hegra

UNESCO site since 2008.

The First district is the 'Silent City' of Hegra, Functioned as the southern capital of the Nabataean Kingdom, with Nabataean culture continuing for centuries after the kingdom's fall. Spectacular carved tomb facades. Water management and development of agriculture in the Hegra Plain. Prosperity from incense trade to the Mediterranean.

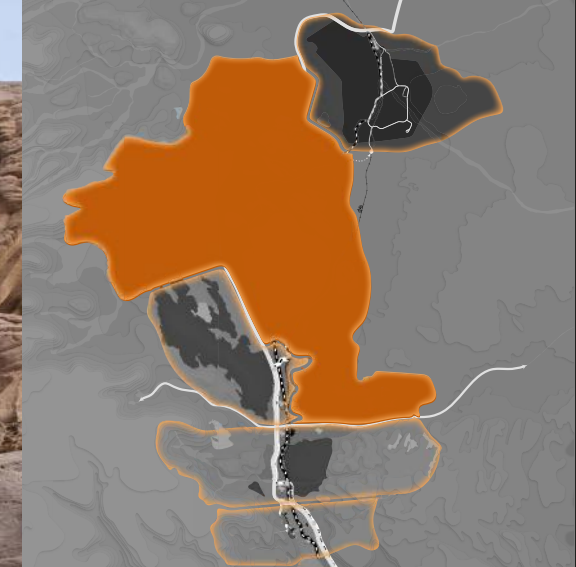
<https://www.experiencealula.com/en/discover-alula/about-alula>





## 2. Jabal Ikamh

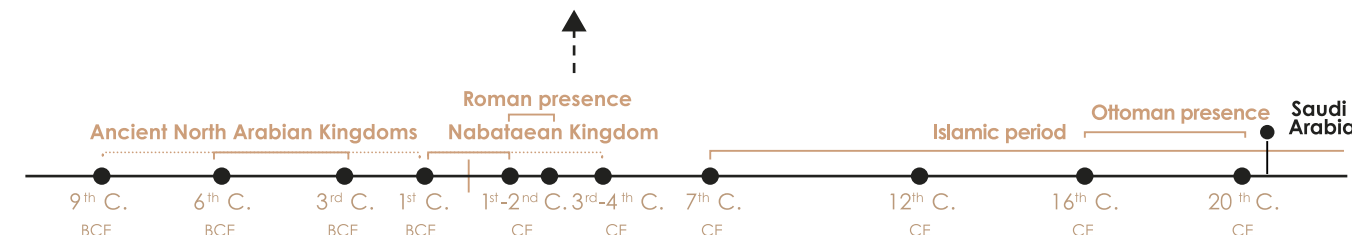
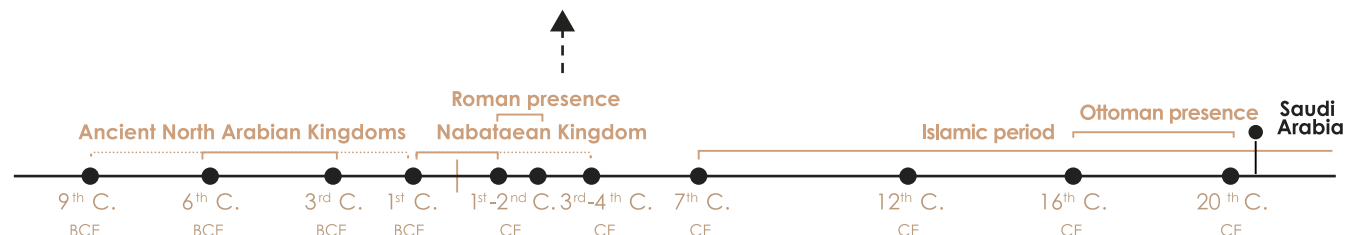
Jabal Ikamh, a mountain that has been described as a huge open-air library. The writings found in the Aramaic, Nabataean, Thamudic, Greek, Latin and Hebrew languages – are a clear indication of who lived at the ancient and historic sites of AlUla, or who passed through the area. The inscriptions reflect the openness of the people of the region.



## 3. Nabatean District

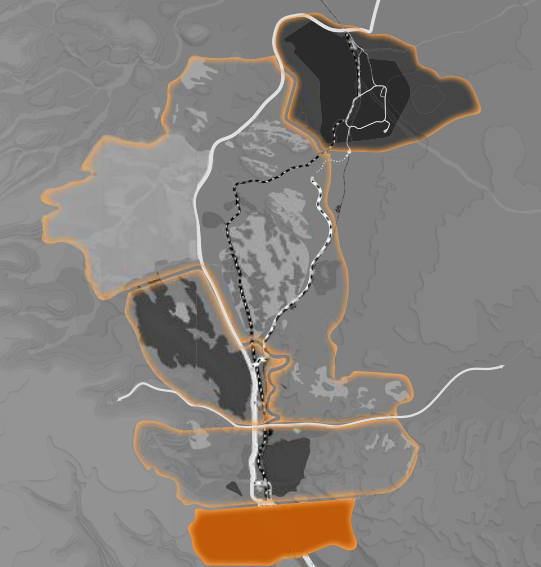
A striking vista of magnificent rock formations, a prelude to those in Hegra. An immersive journey through the lifestyle of these nomadic people, this district includes a village carved from the rock, and a Nabataean-style open-air theatre. It is also home to the stunning Maraya concert hall, the largest mirrored building in the world.

<https://www.experiencealula.com/en/discover-alula/about-alula>



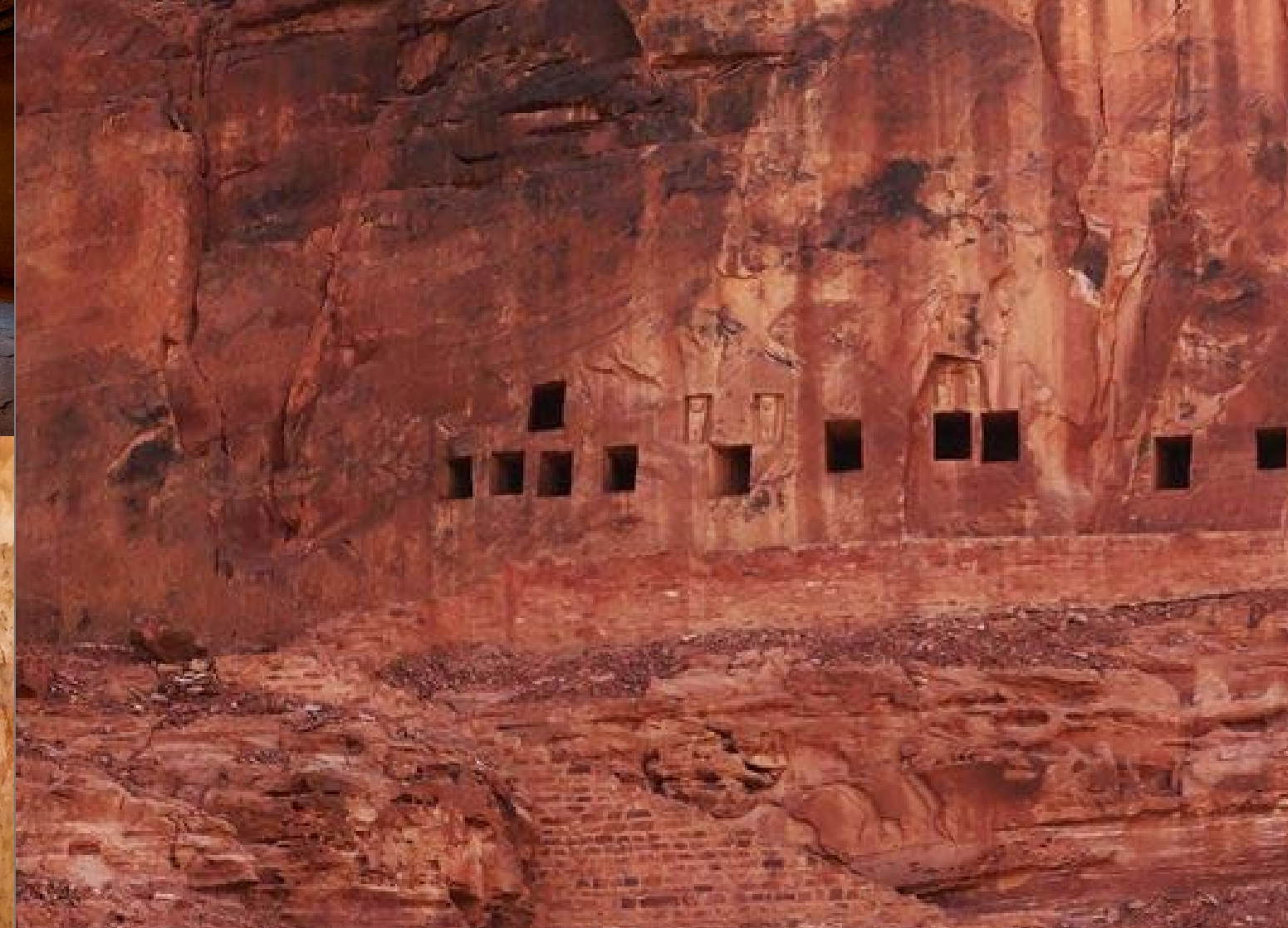
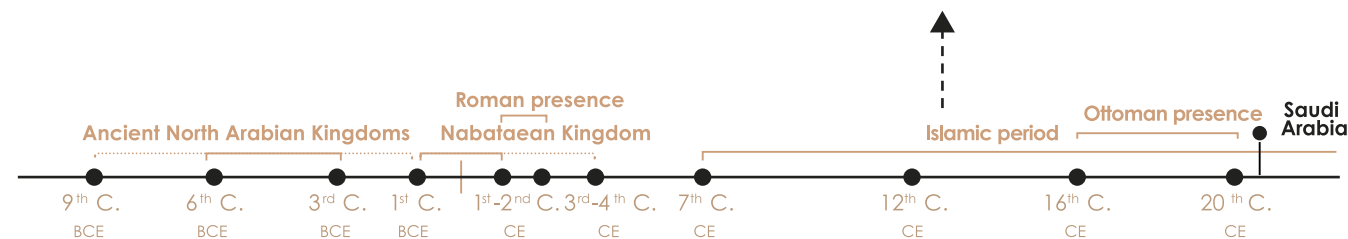
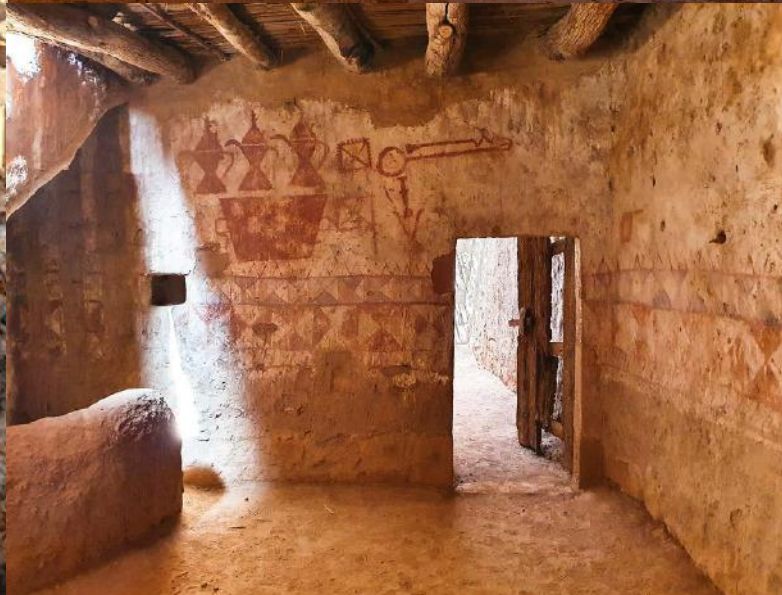
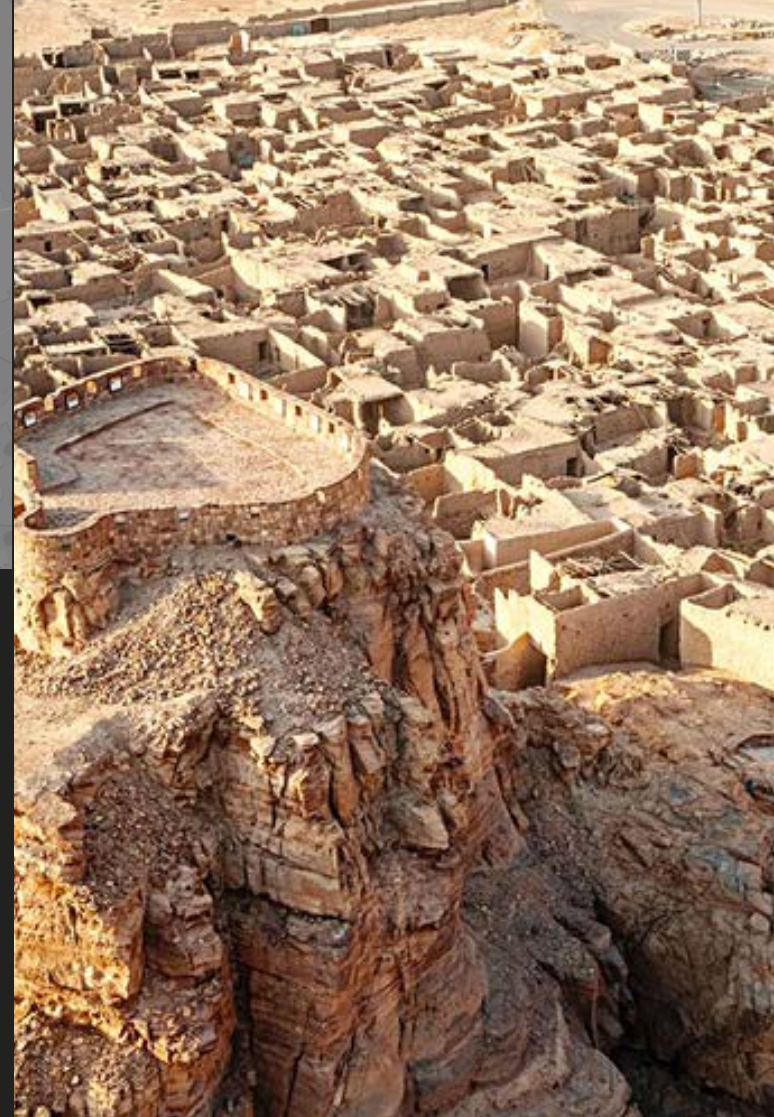
"Agency for Alula Development Press Kit," accessed February 21, 2023. [https://www.afalula.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/AFALULA\\_DOSSIER\\_DE\\_PRESSE\\_EN\\_09\\_2019.pdf](https://www.afalula.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/AFALULA_DOSSIER_DE_PRESSE_EN_09_2019.pdf).





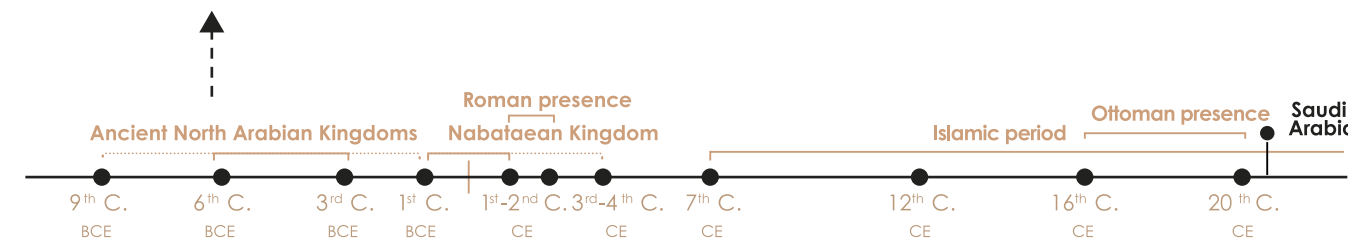
## 4. Old Town

Old Town Houses: The Old Ala had about 14 gates and 5 squares. The old town houses consist of two floors. The basement consists of a small roofed courtyard called (Asfal). It is for the reception of foreign guests and a room or two also to store luggage, dates and grains. also those two rooms may be used for sleeping in winter. There is also a staircase leading upstairs that contains a small square called (Merbad) along with a kitchen and toilet as there are two rooms, one of which is called (Alsahan).



## 5. Dadan and Lihyan

The most prominent features known to us today are the impressive architecture of the temple at Dadan, the carved rock cut tombs that overlook the city, including the famous Lion Tombs, and the evidence of craftsmanship in the form of larger-than-life statues, smaller votive statues, pottery, incense burners and columns.

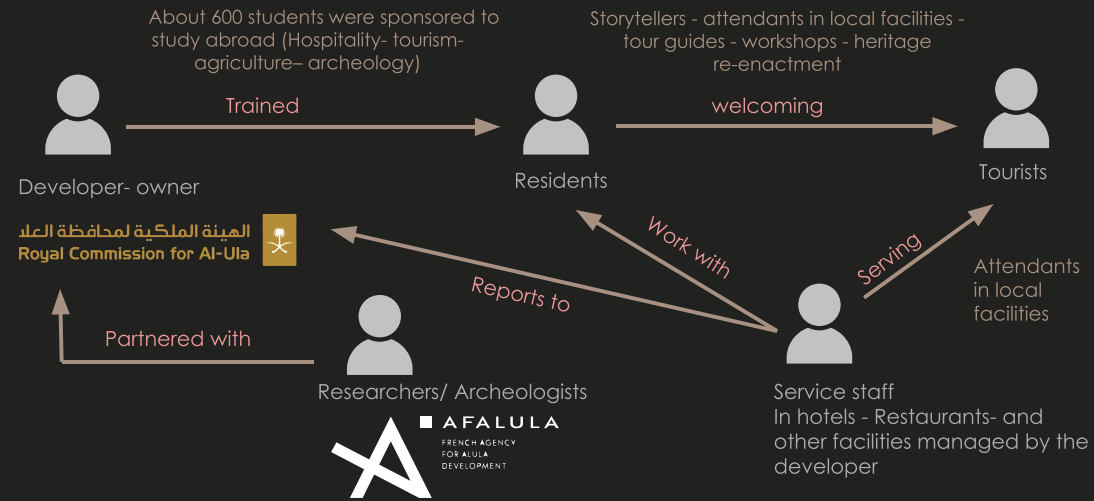




# Al-'Ula's User Profiles and Key Stakeholders

The Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) was established to protect and safeguard AlUla, a region of outstanding natural and cultural significance in North-West Saudi Arabia. The following diagram showcases the dynamic between Al-U'la's stakeholders with the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) being the primary user.

## Main user profiles



<https://www.rcu.gov.sa/en/fact-sheets/>

## RCU's Vision

- Tourism**  
Developing a tourist destination successful and responsible cosmopolitan.
- Art & Culture**  
Discovering, activating and preserving heritage. Develop artistic and cultural shows and societies.
- Nature & Wildlife**  
Preserving the ecosystems for nature and wildlife.
- Social & economic development**  
Developing participating community  
Build sustainable economy

# The Regenerative Plan By The Royal Commission For Al-Ula



→ The Old Town

## Sustainability has been at the heart of the restoration of AlUla

"Sustainability and a commitment to the circular economy are at the heart of the AlUla project. The Wadi of Hospitality, running through the ancient oasis, is the focus of re-wilding and biodiversity plans. A 46km low-carbon tram line will connect AlUla International Airport to the five districts. This scenic roadway, like the wadi, will mostly follow the route used centuries ago by pilgrims on the Hijaz railway.

At the moment, 60 per cent of the oasis has been abandoned due to the lack of water and years of unsustainable farming practices. But a strategy to rehabilitate the land and reverse the course of desertification with improved water management is under way, under the umbrella of the Saudi Green Initiative. Eighty per cent of the region's land has been earmarked as nature reserves and many species of flora and fauna have been reintroduced.

As well as agricultural and water management programmes, community-driven services and amenities have been very important in the planning of AlUla's transformation."

"Everything You Need to Know to Plan a Trip to Alula in Saudi Arabia." euronews, April 8, 2021. <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2021/04/08/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-historic-and-beautiful-area-of-alula-in-saudi-arabia>.







Jim Denevan's Installation Artwork, Angle of Repose, Al-Ula

## The Intersection of Art and Al-'Ula Designer's Rationale

### Why Designing an Art Gallery in AlUla?

**Cultural Exchange:** Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia is suitable for an art gallery to realize its potential as a thriving cultural destination. The region is already brimming with historical treasures and natural wonders, making it an ideal setting to nurture artistic endeavors. By establishing an art gallery, Al-Ula can showcase and preserve its rich heritage while embracing contemporary expressions of art.

**Artists' Destination:** Al-Ula's historical significance as a prominent stop along the Incense Road, an ancient trade route, adds a layer of cultural depth to the art installations. This historical context allows artists to explore themes of cultural exchange, trade, and the region's ancient past, creating a meaningful dialogue between contemporary art and history. The project aligns with the officials' vision, offering a platform for local and international artists to showcase their works through historic lens.

**Contribution to Tourism Development:** An art exhibition establishment aligns with the Saudi government's efforts to promote tourism and cultural initiatives through Vision 2030. By hosting international art events, Al-Ula demonstrates its commitment to becoming a vibrant and diverse cultural destination, attracting global attention and reinforcing its position as a place where art and culture thrive.

**Seeking Novelty in Design:** Visitors to the valley can immerse themselves in a captivating artistic journey, experiencing the beauty of the desert landscape while engaging with art installations and exhibitions. The gallery's architectural design can harmoniously blend with the surrounding environment, emphasizing the sustainable and sensitive development approach that characterizes the Art Valley.







Existed Examples of Experiential Art Scattered in The Desert of Al-U'la  
<https://desertx.org/dx/desert-x-alula-2022>

## FALK'S Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience



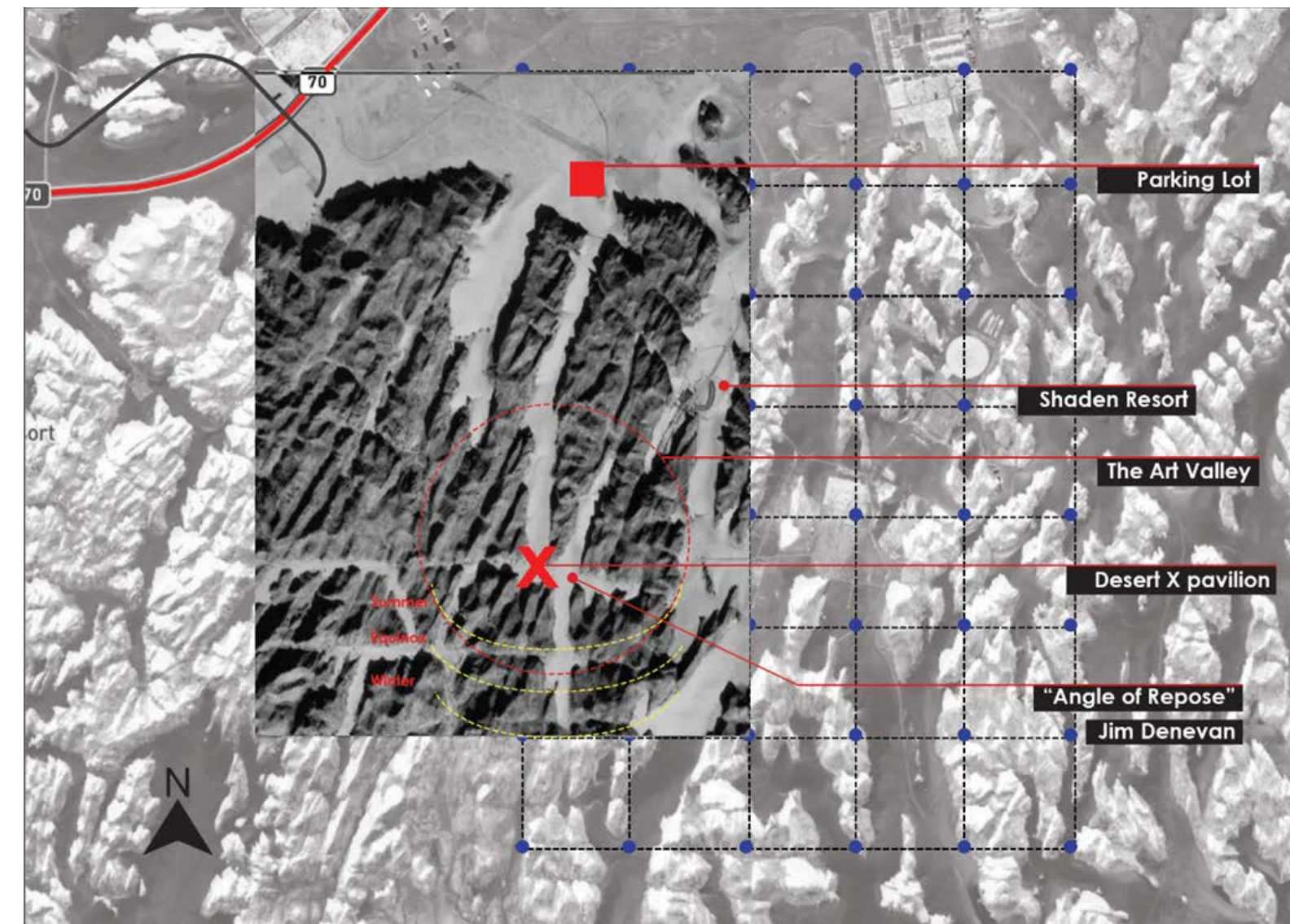








Site Analysis  
Desert X, Art Valley







<https://architizer.com/projects/desert-x-alula-visitor-centre/>

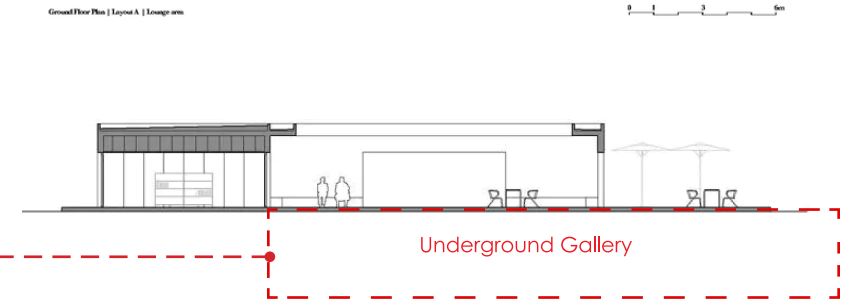
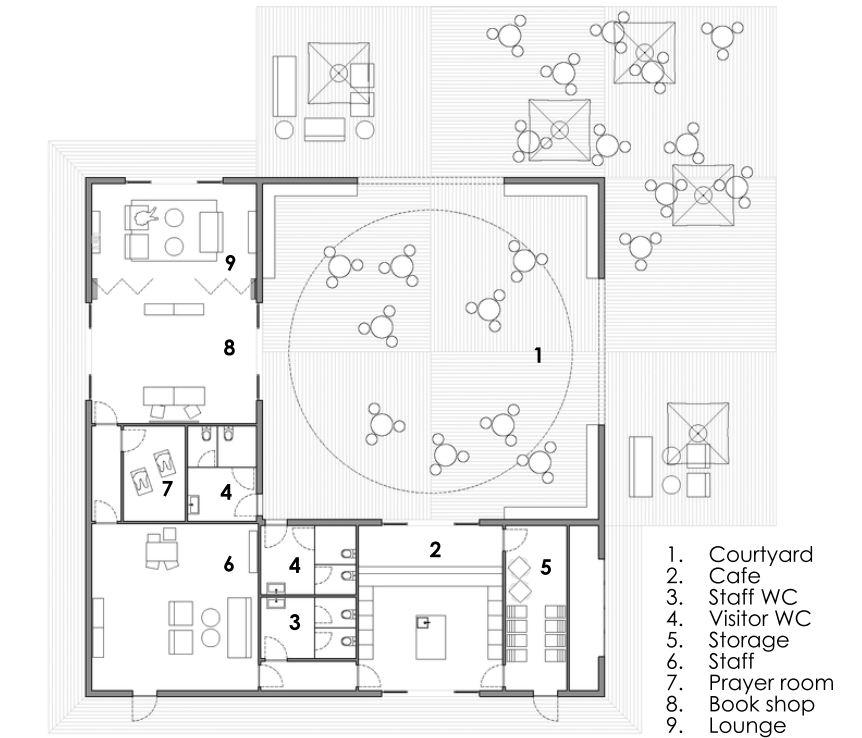
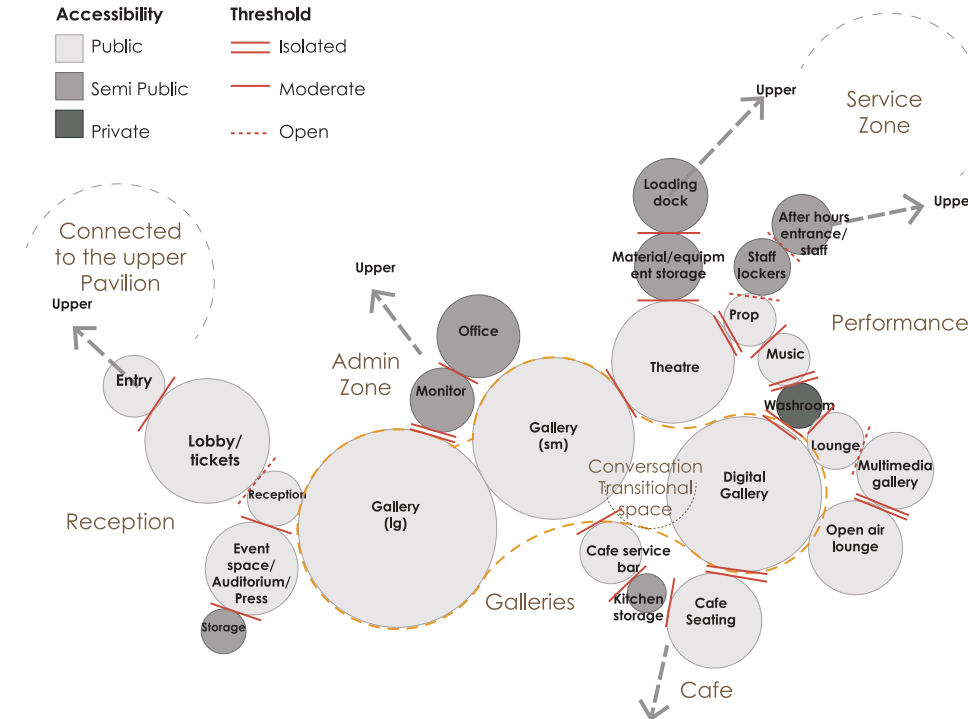
## Site Analysis Expansion Proposal, Desert X

**Architects:** KWY.studio  
**Project:** Desert X Al Ula Visitor Centre  
**Client:** Royal Commission for Al Ula  
**Proximity to an attraction:** Elephant rock  
**Views:** 360 degrees  
**Area:** 2626 sqft

**Design Objective:**  
 Designing an underground gallery as an expansion to the pavilion, the gallery should mirror the city's captivating landscape, cultural significance, and its potential to foster artistic expression and cultural exchange. The collaboration serves as a catalyst for the development of Al-Ula's artistic scene and reinforces its position as an emerging cultural hub in Saudi Arabia.

### Suggested Programming For The Underground Establishment:

Accessibility	Threshold
Public	Isolated
Semi Public	Moderate
Private	Open



<https://architizer.com/projects/desert-x-alula-visitor-centre/>





**Observation Notes**

- Two Exits one as staircase/ the other for ADA (ramp Office places need more space to accommodate for every one Office area has some standing benches for interns
- Conference room is small to accommodate for all staff
- The facility is currently closed to prepare for an upcoming installation
- Future plans involved including hubs that are open all year for the public However food and beverages was a concern and how that would affect artworks presented in the gallery.
- Freight elevator on the 2nd floor opens to the kitchenette which is inconvenient, ADA wise

# Case Study For The Gallery's Program: Institute of Contemporary Art- UPENN

**Overview:** The museum is associated with the University of Pennsylvania, and is located on its campus. The Institute is one of the country's leading museums dedicated to exhibiting the innovative art of our time.

**Location:** 118 S 36th St, Philadelphia, PA 19104

**Designer:** Adèle Naudé Santos, 1963

**Owner:** University of Pennsylvania

**Public transit access:** SEPTA.svg 36th Street: Subway-surface trolley lines

**User:** Art lovers- University students - Philadelphia residents

**Size:** 13699.37 SF

**Elevator Information:**

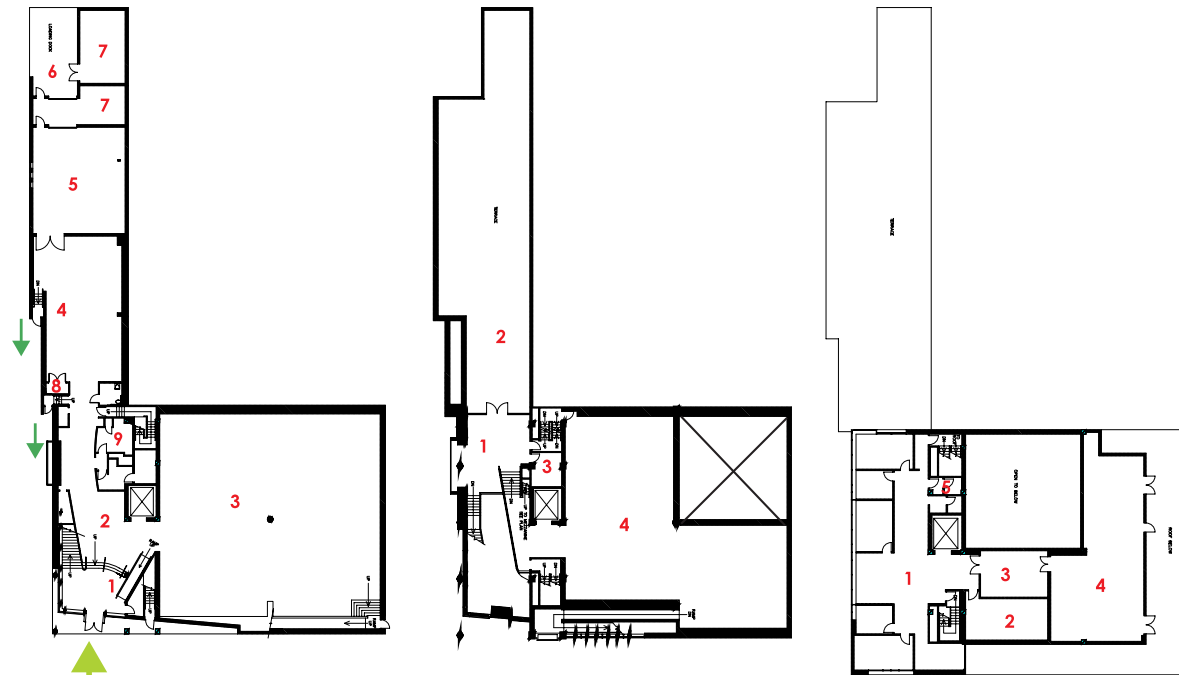
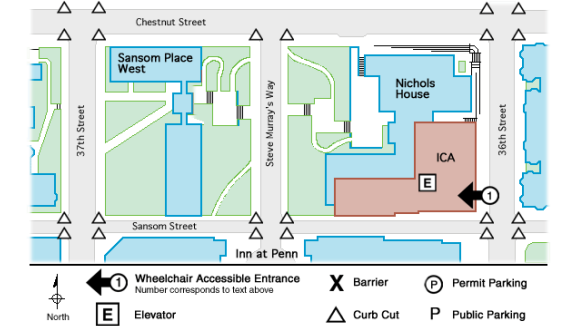
- There is one elevator on the southwest side of the building which accesses all levels.

**Accessible Restrooms:**

- First floor - male's, female's, and family's

**Building Information:**

- There is an outdoor terrace on the 2nd floor, open to the public during warm weather .
- There is a steep ramp between the first and second floors which is used only for emergency egress.



**First Floor programming:**

1. Admission/ tickets
  2. Lobby
  3. Gallery
  4. Reading spaces/ Hub
  5. Auditorium
  6. Loading dock
  7. Storage
  8. Cloak room
  9. Restroom
- ➡ Main entrance  
➡ Exit

**Second Floor programming:**

1. Reading spaces/ Hub
2. Open area/ public

**Mezzanine programming:**

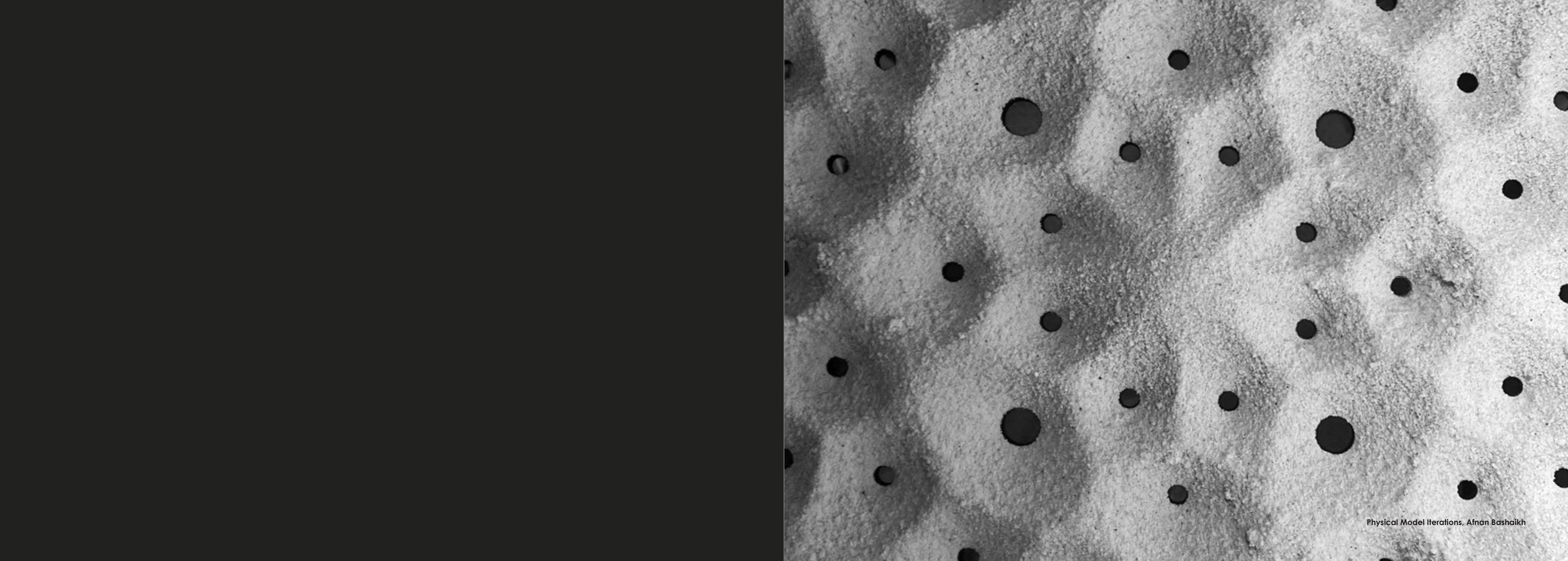
1. Kitchenette
2. Gallery

**Third Floor programming:**

1. Office area (22 people)
2. Archive
3. Conference room
4. Service area
5. Staff restroom

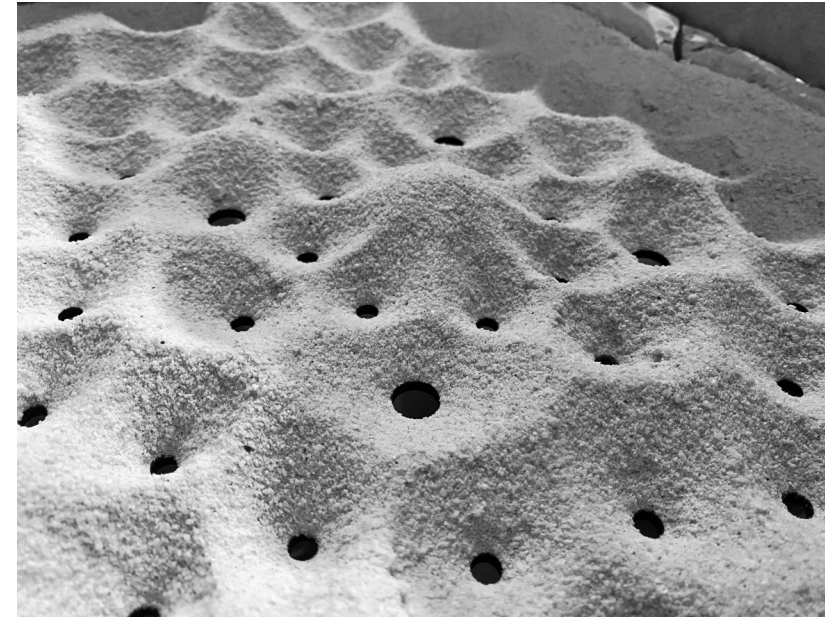








# Conceptualization Through Form Investigation



Drawing from the sandbox experiment, inspiration has led to utilizing the resulted shape to create a horizontal porous facade, 'The porosity of Losses'.

## Porosity of losses

### Mortality of life

- Enclosure
- Confinement
- Circular shapes
- Underground
- Concealment

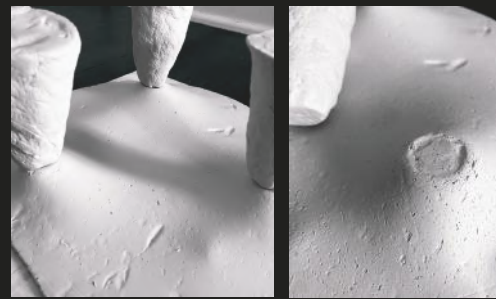
### Erosion

- Decay
- Cavernous shapes
- Overgrown vegetation
- Minimalism
- Morphed structure (Terrain)

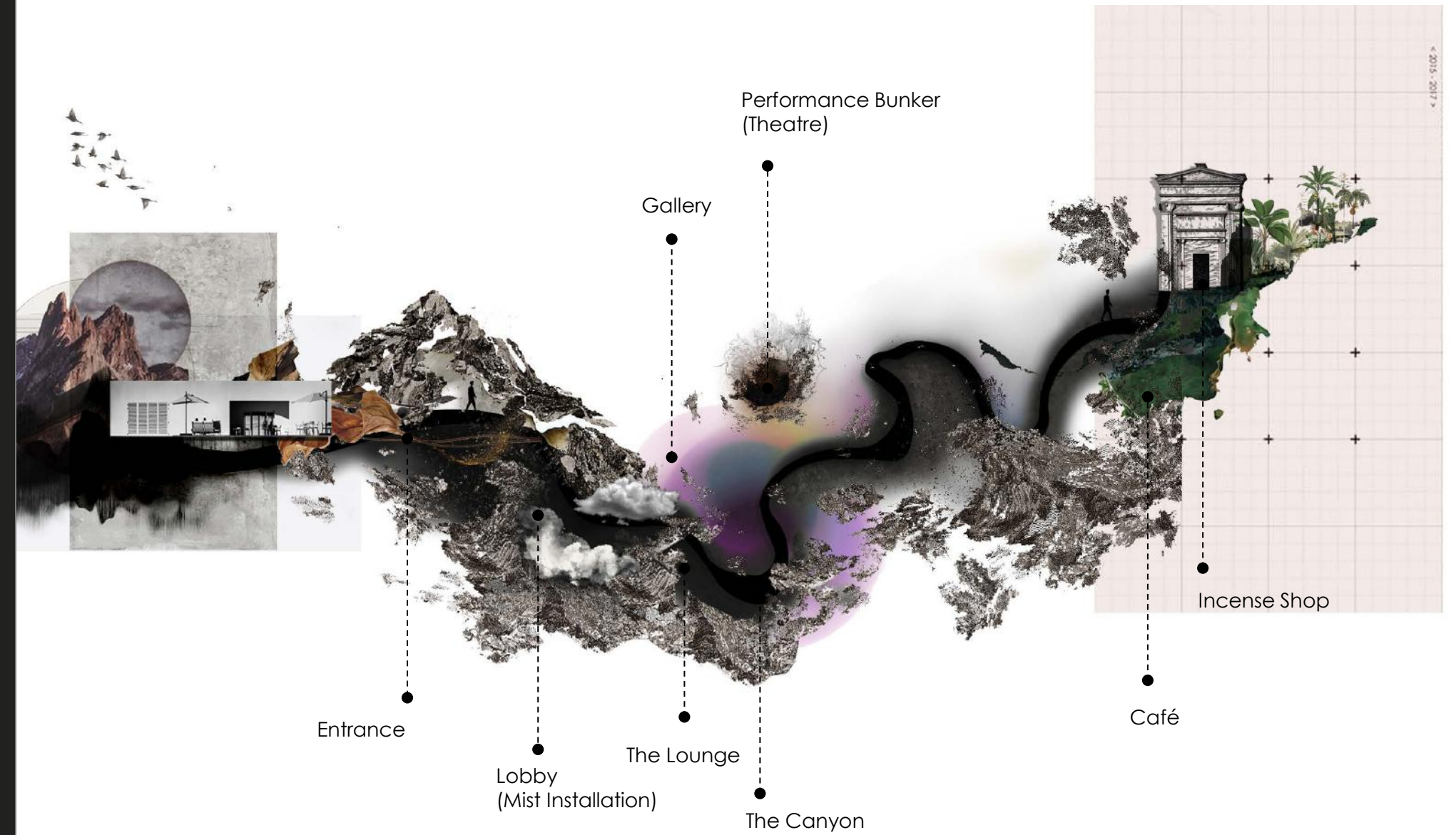




Physical Model to Section,  
Illustrating the concept:  
«Porosity of Losses».



## The Experience Map









Porosity of Losses in Facade Design, Night View



## A Reversed Practice

### Initiating the Experience:

- Concealed Architecture
- Horizontal Porous Facade
- Sand dunes-like skin creating kinetic performance
- Initiates the experience of entering a cavernous underground space that represents a container of art





# Exploring Underground



### Tour Stops

- 1. Entrance
- 2. Tunnel
- 3. Lobby (Mist Installation)
- 4. Lounge
- 5. The Canyon
- 6. Theatre (Performance Bunker)
- 7. Cafe
- 8. Gift Shop
- 9. Exit is the same way as entry.
- ▲ Emergency Exits
- ▲ Main Entrance/Exit

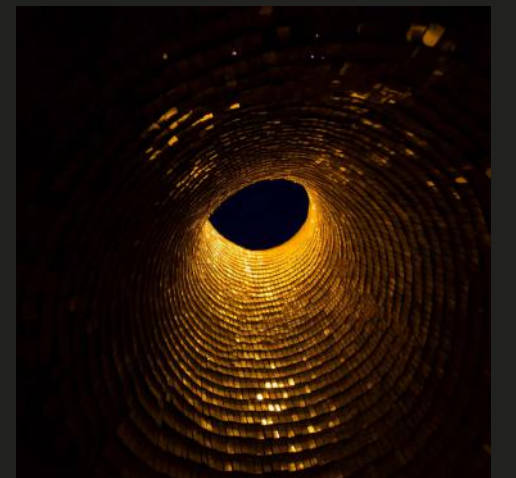


### Underground Tunnel

- Ramp connecting visitors from the surface to underground gallery.
- Inscription drawn from Ikamh Mountain with multiple languages lighting up upon visitors motion.

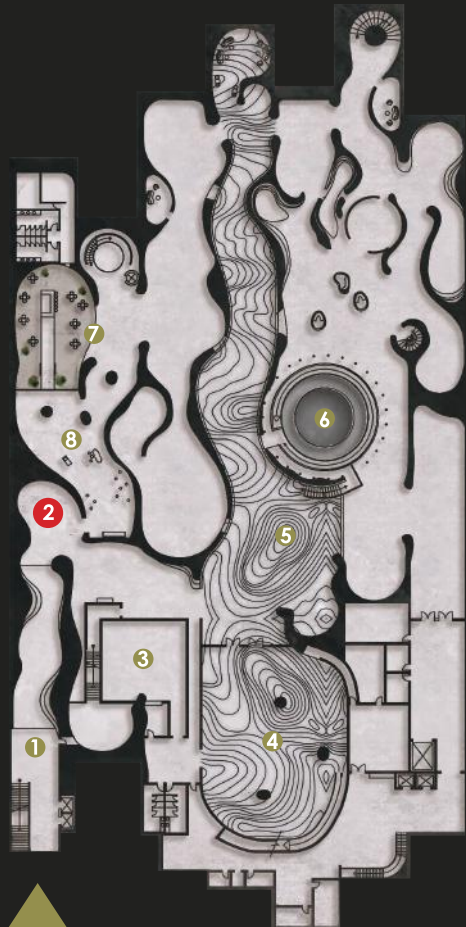


Day Vs. Night



Cone-shaped Skylight



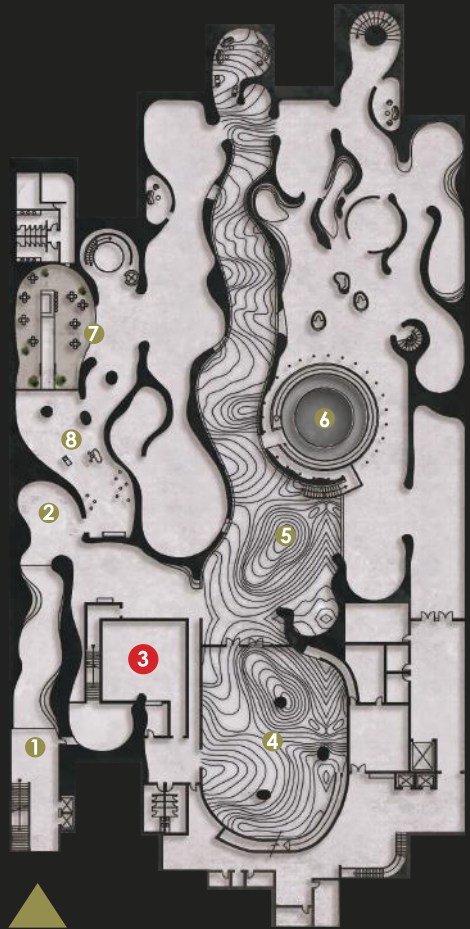


**Tour Stops**

1. Entry
  2. End of the tunnel, cone-shaped skylight
  3. Lobby (Mist Installation)
  4. Lounge
  5. The Canyon
  6. Theatre (Performance Bunker)
  7. Cafe
  8. Gift Shop
- Exit is the same way as entry.







**Tour Stops**

- 1. Entry
  - 2. End of the tunnel, cone-shaped skylight
  - 3. Lobby (Mist Installation)
  - 4. Lounge
  - 5. The Canyon
  - 6. Theatre (Performance Bunker)
  - 7. Cafe
  - 8. Gift Shop
- Exit is the same way as entry.



**Inspiration**

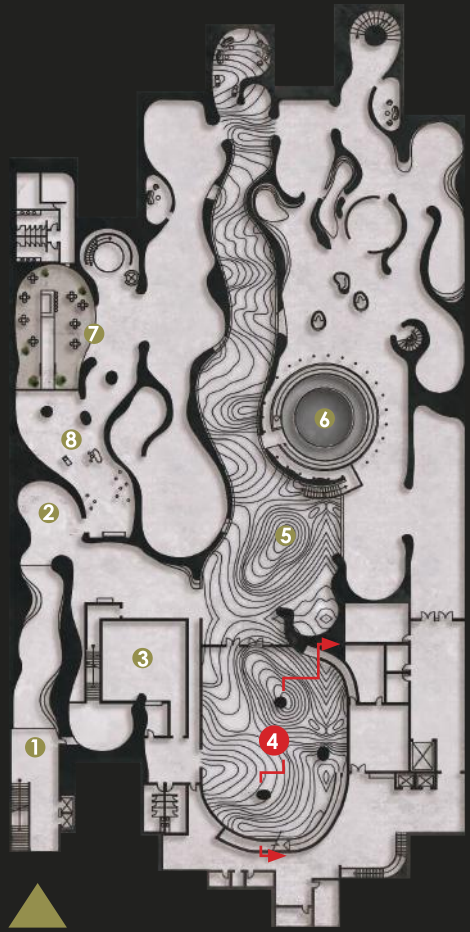
Preservation of Tradition: oud dispenser in the Arab world serves as a convenient and modern way to experience the traditional fragrance of oud, which holds deep cultural and religious significance. It is often used to welcome guests.



Scented Mist Dispenser designed by the architect Francesca Gotti







**Tour Stops**

1. Entry
2. End of the tunnel, cone-shaped skylight
3. Lobby (Mist Installation)
4. Lounge
5. The Canyon
6. Theatre (Performance Bunker)
7. Cafe
8. Gift Shop

Exit is the same way as entry.

**Lounge**

- Swaying floor interpreting the idea of terrain
- Suggest relax and re-charge







#### Tour Stops

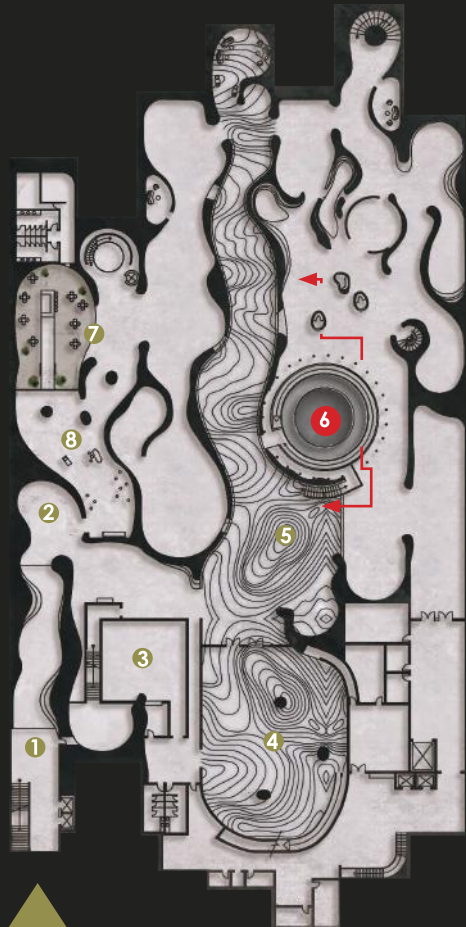
1. Entry
  2. End of the tunnel, cone-shaped skylight
  3. Lobby (Mist Installation)
  4. Lounge
  5. **The Canyon**
  6. Theatre (Performance Bunker)
  7. Cafe
  8. Gift Shop
- Exit is the same way as entry.

#### The Canyon

- A purely perceptive physical experience.
- Free-form concrete walls, which form an artificial canyon with Architectural opening that reference the Nabatean Architecture.
- Twirled and twisted path/ Undulating floor, Sensitive to Extreme users.





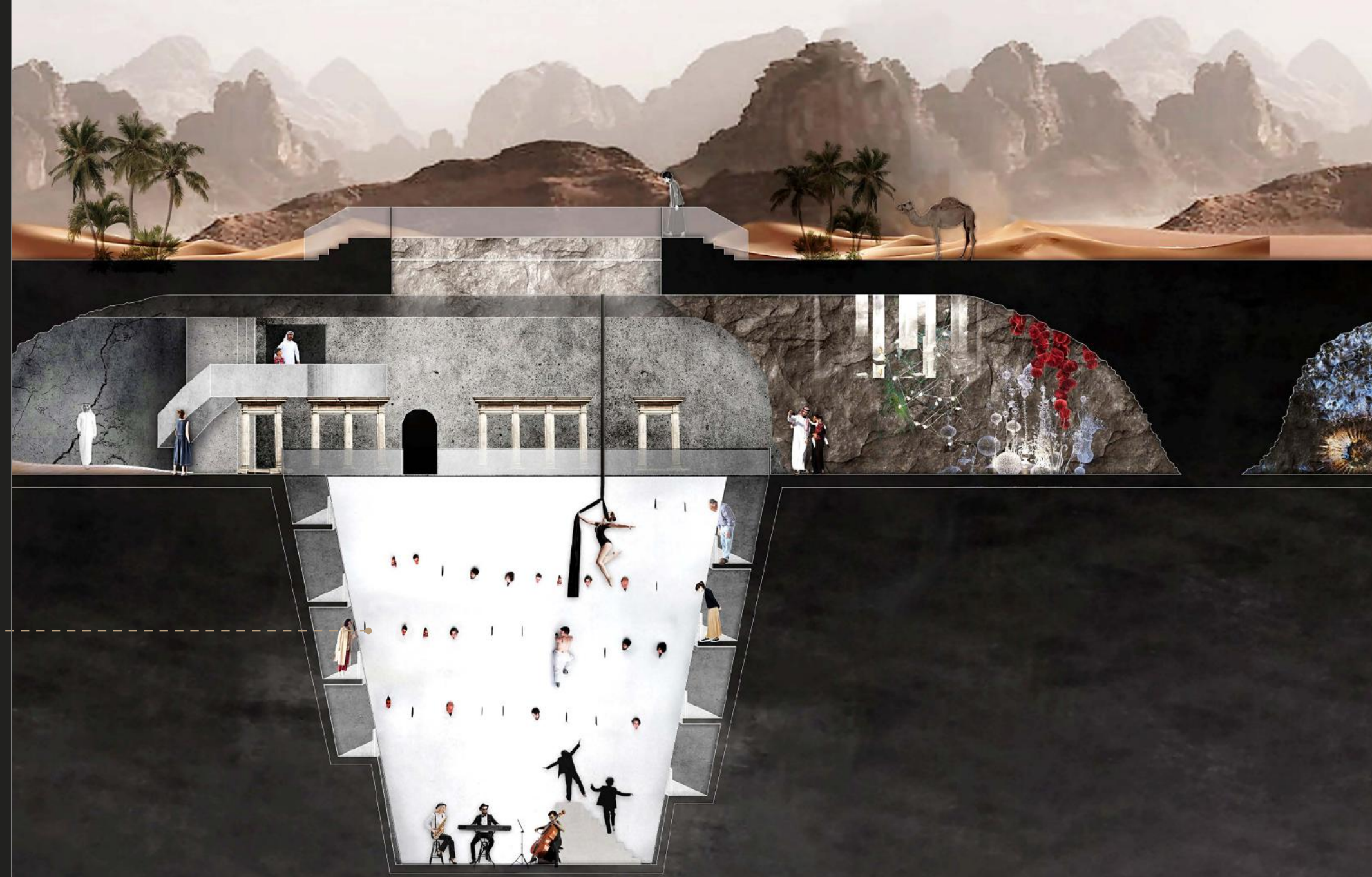


**Tour Stops**

- 1. Entry
  - 2. End of the tunnel, cone-shaped skylight
  - 3. Lobby (Mist Installation)
  - 4. Lounge
  - 5. The Canyon
  - 6. Theatre (Performance Bunker)
  - 7. Cafe
  - 8. Gift Shop
- Exit is the same way as entry.

**Theatre**

- A spiral underground structure
- The white fabric features openings for audience members to peer through representing blurred boundaries between spectator-ship and performers.







**Tour Stops**

1. Entry
2. End of the tunnel, cone-shaped skylight
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4. Lounge
5. The Canyon
6. Theatre (Performance Bunker)
7. Cafe
8. Gift Shop

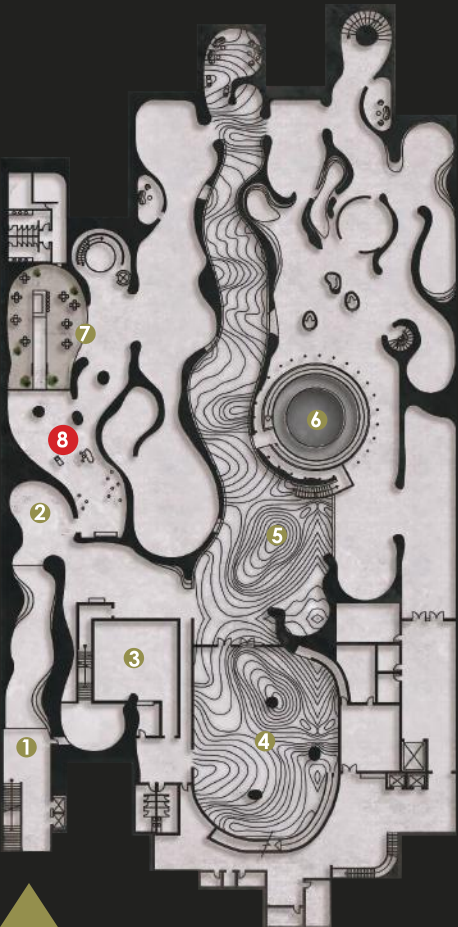
Exit is the same way as entry.

**Cafe**

- Sand flooring mirroring aboveground with wider opening allowing more light and framing surrounding mountains.
- Emphasizing nature



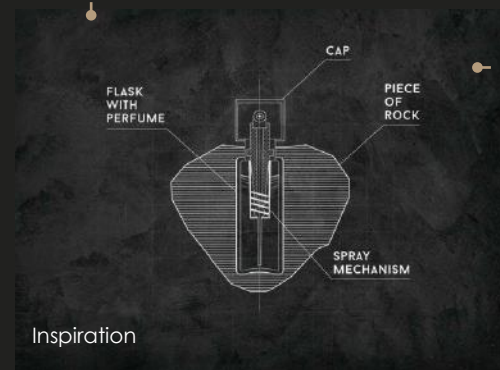




**Tour Stops**

1. Entry
  2. End of the tunnel, cone-shaped skylight
  3. Lobby (Mist Installation)
  4. Lounge
  5. The Canyon
  6. Theatre (Performance Bunker)
  7. Cafe
  8. Gift Shop
- Exit is the same way as entry.

Example of Custom inscription on rocks, made by Al-Ula sculptors. (Sculptors workshops demonstrated in perspective).

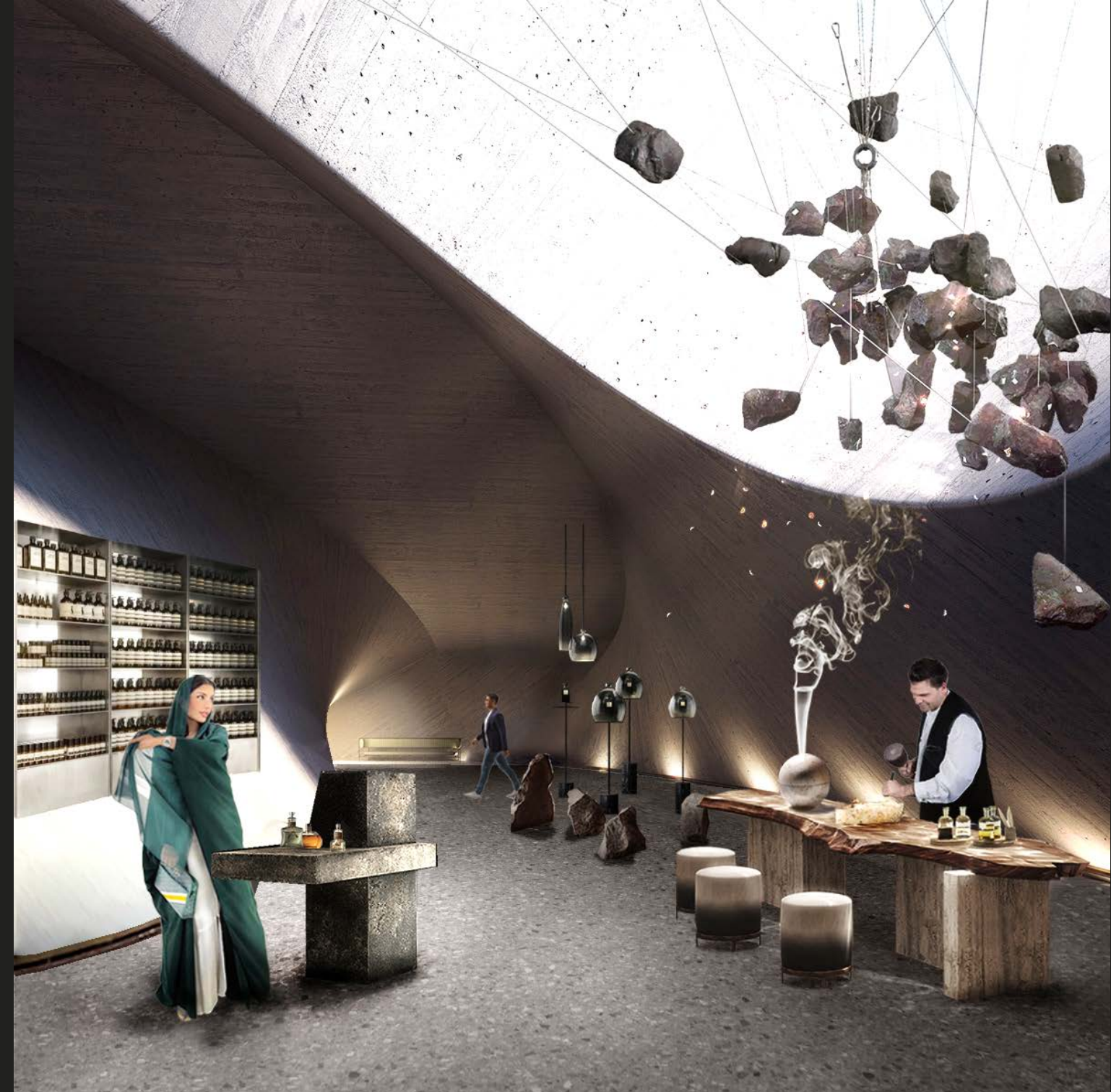


**Gift Shop**

- Custom made perfumes embedded in an sculpted rocks from the local environment.
- Visitors can get help from sculptors available at the shop.
- The Exit from the gallery is through the gift shop to the tunnel, and to aboveground.

**Products**

Integrating the aromatic scent of (OUD) with Al-Ula stones, illustrating both traditional, social, and historical values in one product.





# Plan



## Legend

- 1. Entrance
- 2. Lobby
- 3. Office
- 4. Event space
- 5. Canyon
- 6. Performance Bunker
- 7. Gallery (Zone A)
- 8. Gallery (Zone B)
- 9. Gallery (Zone C)
- 10. Multimedia
- 11. Prayer males/females
- 12. Toilet males/females
- 13. Cafe
- 14. Gift shop
- 15. Gallery Storage
- 16. Monitor Room
- 17. Janitor
- 18. Utility
- 19. Equipment
- 20. Staff area
- 21. Event Space Storage
- 22. Electricity
- 23. Toilet males/females
- 24. Visitors Locker
- 25. Workshop
- 26. Concealed Spaces of Pause
- ▲ Emergency Exits
- ▲ Main Entrance/Exit

## Redefining Art Display and Exhibition: Realizing the Design Impact

**Reversing Typical Practice (Seeking Novelty in Design):** reversing the typical interior design practice by beginning with form investigation through 3D modeling, followed by conceptualization, 3D design and rendering, and concluding with space planning, facilitates a dynamic and iterative design journey. This approach encourages a more intuitive and hands-on exploration of spatial relationships, volumes, and proportions, fostering a deeper understanding of the design's physical presence. The outcomes are spaces that not only function effectively but also possess a captivating spatial quality born from this alternative creative sequence.

**A Unique Architectural Marvel:** Attracting art enthusiasts, tourists, and design enthusiasts from around the world. The design can become a signature attraction that adds to Al-Ula's allure as a cultural destination.

**Preserving the Historical Landscape:** An underground art gallery would offer a unique opportunity to showcase art while preserving the Al-U'la's historical and natural beauty above ground, ensuring minimal visual impact on the surroundings.

**Integration with Nature:** The underground design would allow the art gallery to seamlessly blend with the desert landscape, creating an immersive experience where art and nature harmoniously coexist. This integration aligns with Al-Ula's commitment to sustainable development and cultural preservation.

**Climate Control:** Al-Ula experiences extreme temperatures, making an underground gallery an ideal solution for climate control. Maintaining a stable and comfortable environment ensures the preservation of artworks and enhances the overall visitor experience.

**Preserving Al-Ula's Authenticity:** As an emerging cultural destination, Al-Ula seeks to maintain its authenticity and distinct identity. An underground gallery aligns with this vision, allowing the city to evolve while preserving its unique character.





# Tourists Experience

**Thinks:**

"Beautiful mountains and fossils in the rocks, the setting makes it look like a movie set."

"Al-U'la is a difficult place to find decent affordable accommodation so when I booked this resort through booking.com months before my trip my mind was at ease."

"Perched far in the interior surrounded by big boulder size rocks, it gives the impression of being in the Grand Canyon of the US."

**Does:**

1/day excursion/ trip starts at 6:30 am  
 Rely on hotel restaurant for main meals  
 Stayed in average 2 to 4 nights «seemed adequate»  
 Relied on hotel for transportation

**Feels:**

Evenings/After sunset times are better due to light arrangement/ atmospheric/romantic  
 Large and spacious rooms/luxury  
 Staff service/treatment is excellent  
 Farwa/umbrella availability is helpful

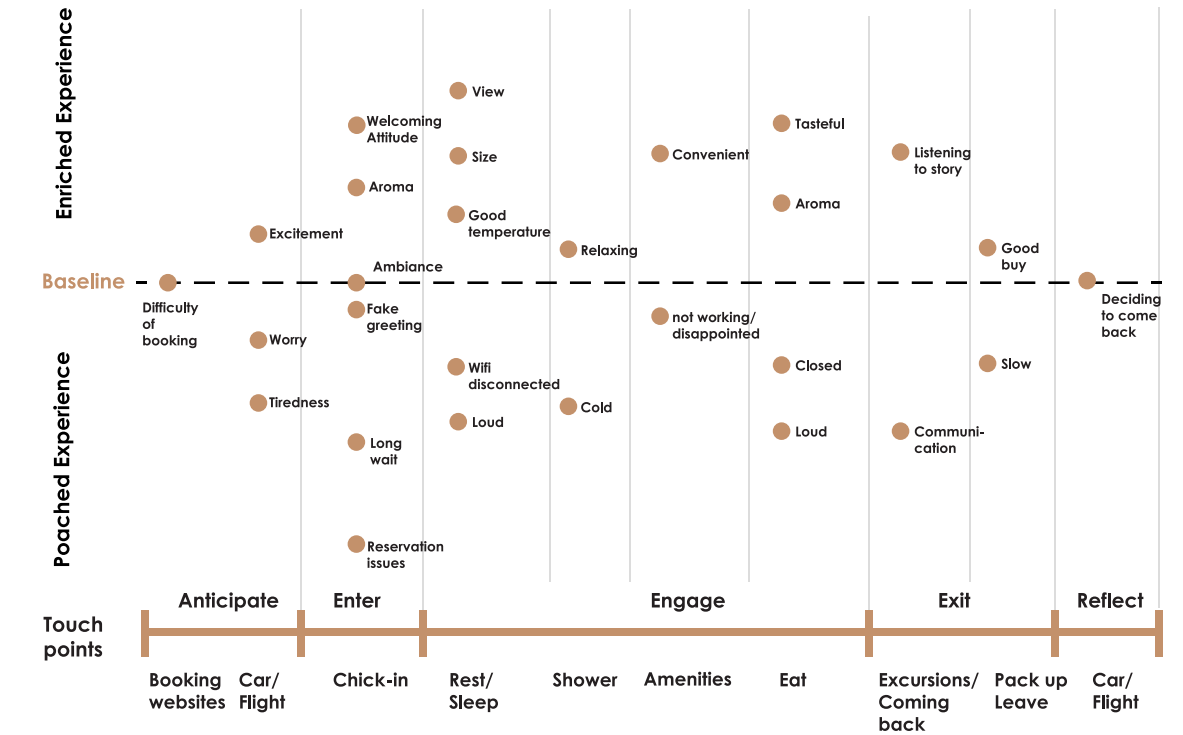
**Pain:**

Long chick-in time  
 Expensive  
 Construction noise  
 Poor Wifi connection  
 Litter around the desert  
 Restaurants operating hours are limited, makes an issue with other out-of-premises restaurants being more than 20 min. away

Reviews were collected from: Booking.com/ TripAdvisor.com



# Al-Ula Resorts Customer Journey Map





## Artists Experience

The RCU has established an artist residency program in AlUla. A twelve-week production and research-based residency focused on the oasis. Six artists collaborate with a range of experts in research to develop insights into the heritage, nature and cultural meaning of the oasis. "Throughout this process, the local community had a vital role in sharing the knowledge and skills of their land. In parallel, the artists, the experts, and the local community participated in a dynamic and regular public programme."

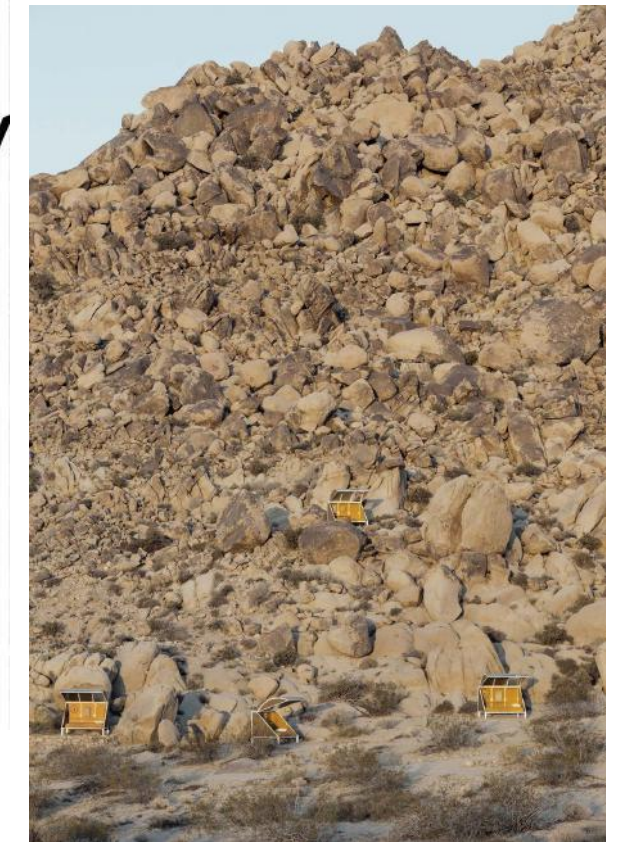
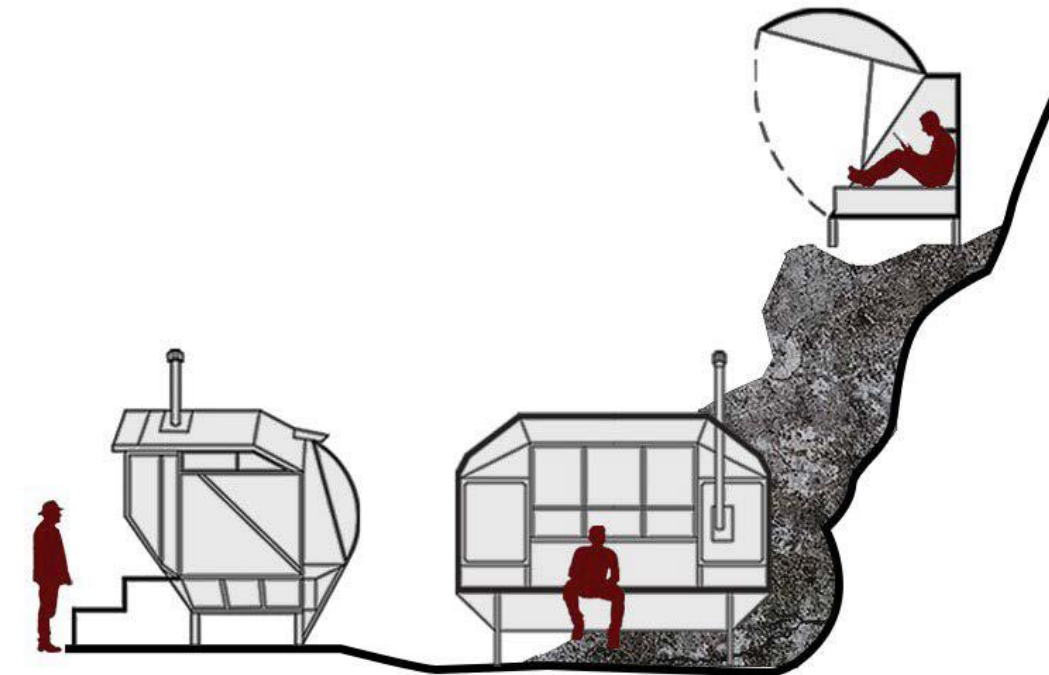
**Mabiti AlUla**  
(Current site designated for artists stay)



[https://www.experiencealula.com/en/discover-alula/arts-culture/alula-art-residency-first-edition#:~:text=The%20Royal%20Commission%20for%20AlUla,2022\)%20focused%20on%20the%20oasis.](https://www.experiencealula.com/en/discover-alula/arts-culture/alula-art-residency-first-edition#:~:text=The%20Royal%20Commission%20for%20AlUla,2022)%20focused%20on%20the%20oasis.)

## Case Study For The Artists Residency Program: THE WAGON STATION

The wagon station by Andrea Zittel offers a series of sleeping pods amid the desert in California. Zittel, invites artists, hikers, and researchers to stay in these stations that blend both communal and private endeavors. Not only that they speak to a shared sense of community that exists among guests cooking together or going on hikes, but also to the solitude, exploration, and immersion offered by nature. Efficiency is the key to this design's success, being easy to transport, collapse, and reassemble.

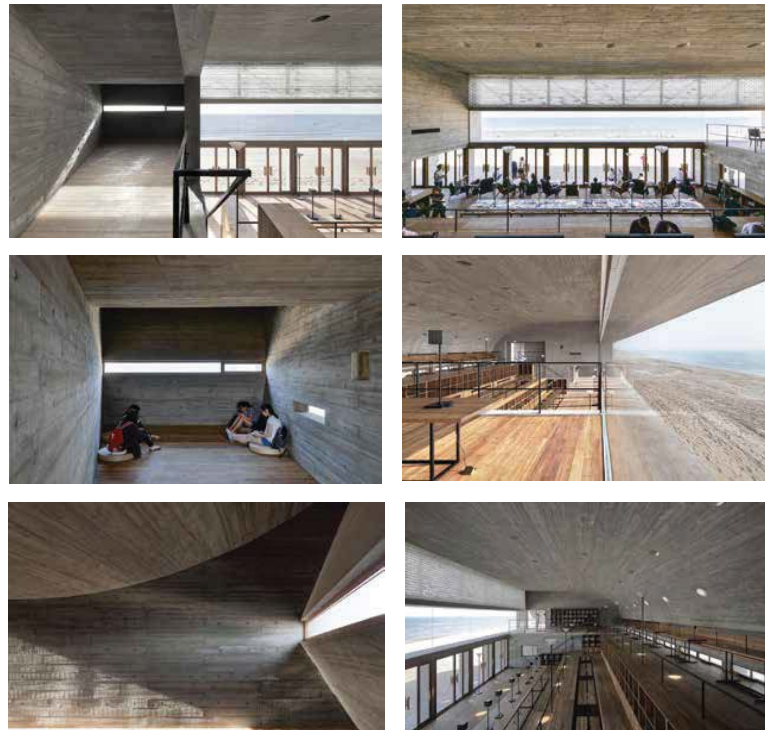
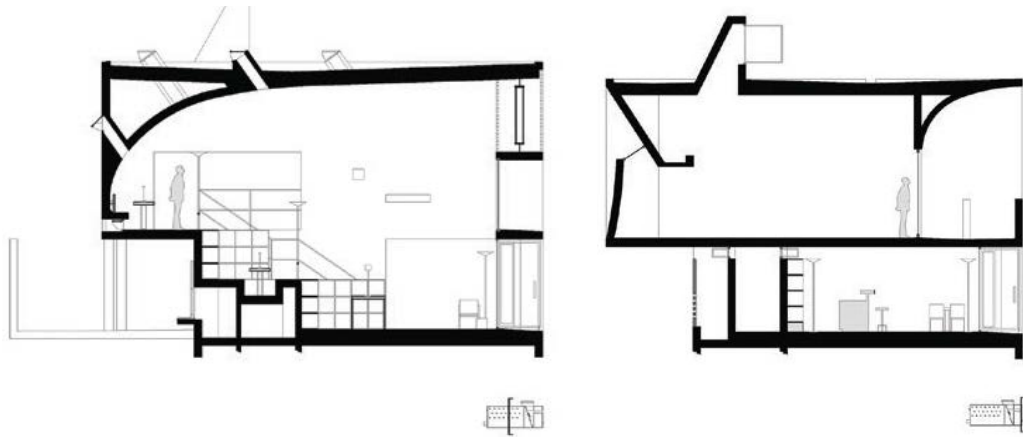
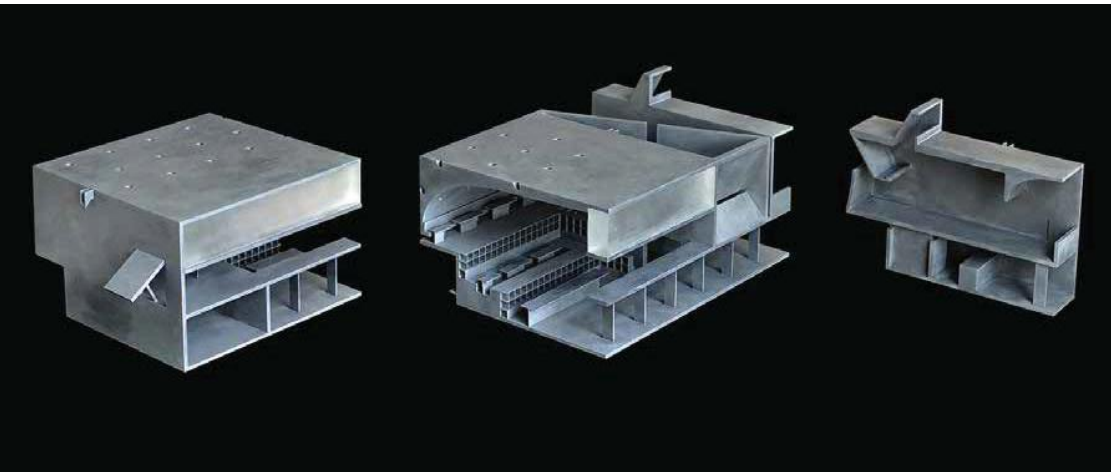




## Case Study: Seashore Library

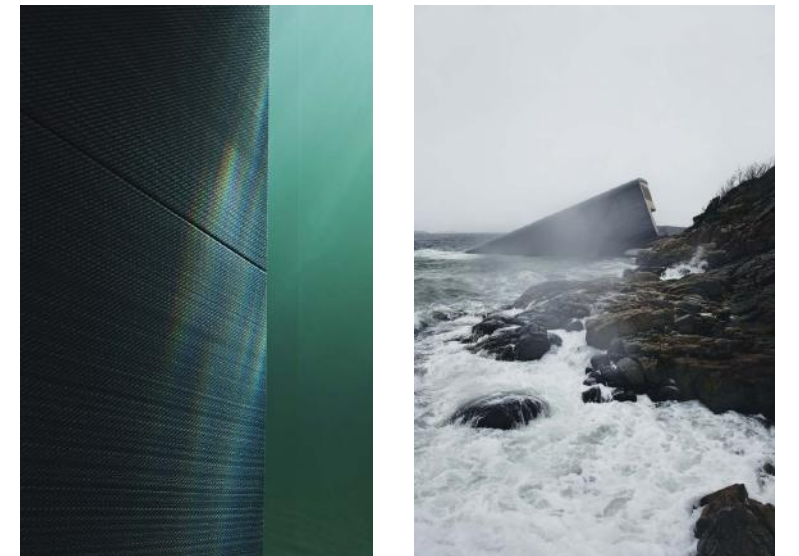
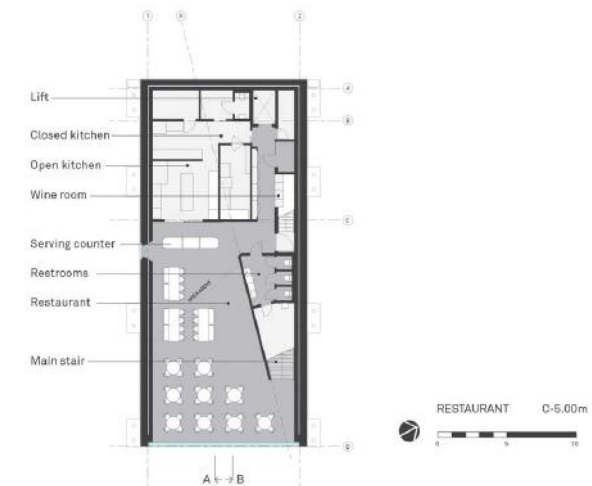
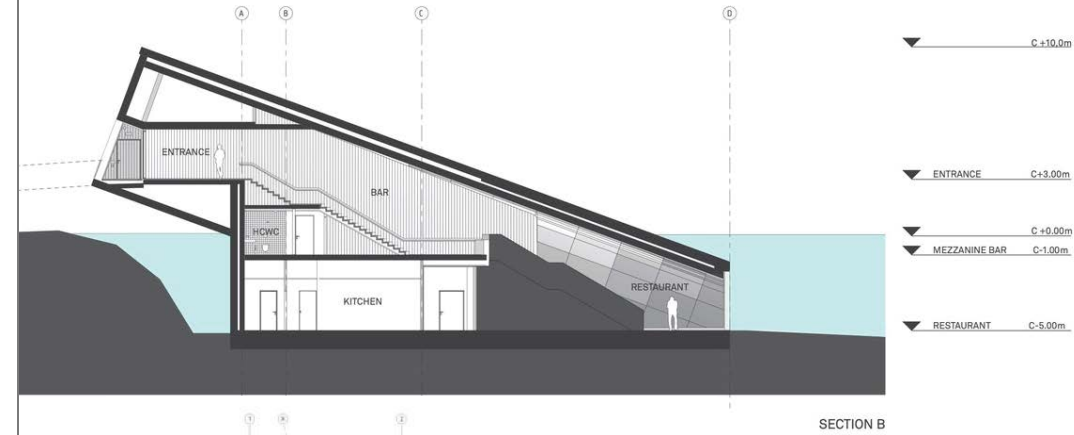
QINHUANGDAO SHI, CHINA. 2015

When walking into the space, one starts to feel the light, breezes, and sound of the ocean. What comes after the perception is the unique spiritual linkage between each individual and the sea. In here, everyone can slow down the usual pace, and unfold the feeling of distant and loneliness different from the city life.



## Case Study: Under

Under is a restaurant in Norway designed by Snohetta. The restaurant also functions as a research center as it provides a tribute to the wild fauna of the sea. A vertical window is cut into the side of the building, extending from above sea level down to seabed. The view evolves gradually throughout the day and season. With the color of the water shifting from sapphire blue during winter, to emerald green in the summer, the resulting atmosphere instills a sense of awe and mystery.





## Design Probes: Material

### Atlas of Views

A set of 3 installations that break down the complexity of the natural tapestry into fragmented scenes. Each structure emphasizes a particular vista of the landscape with a proper shape of frame. And with inside speakers playing sounds found in nature, The visitor become captivated by the details.



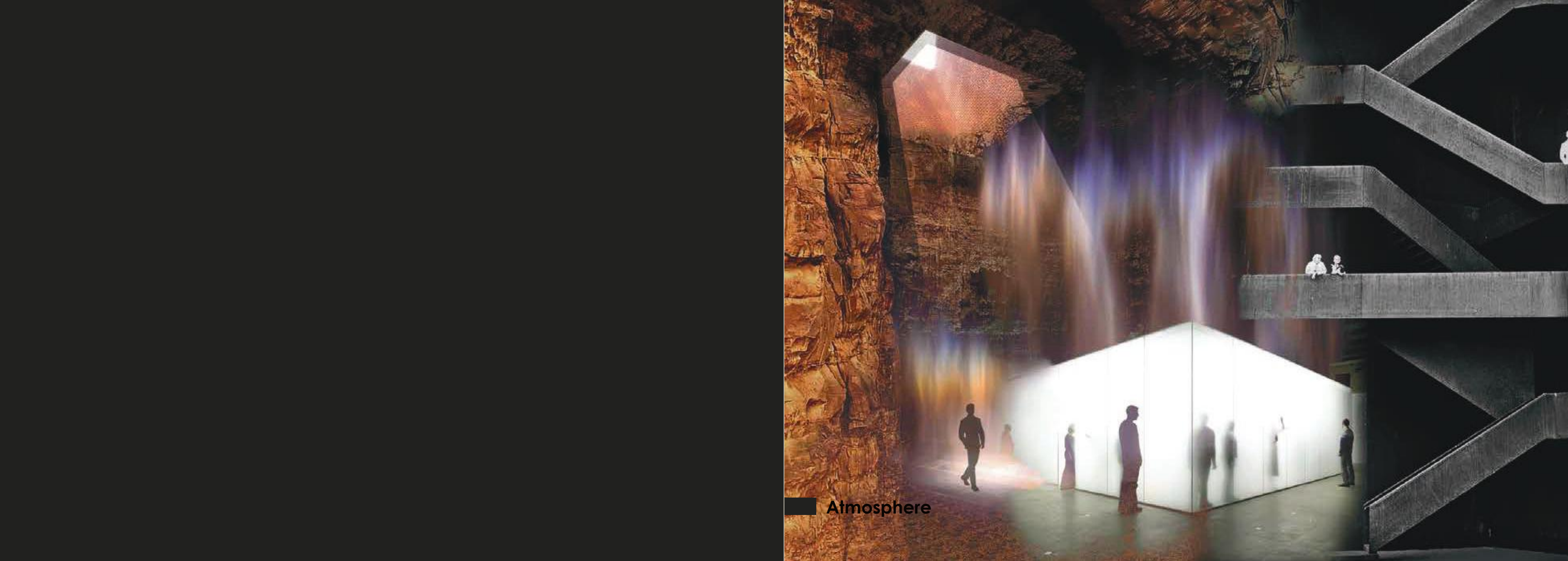
## Design Probes: Scale

### Observation Tower

- Emergence of actors.
- At night, and due to transparency of the structure's material, the tower turns into a glowing lantern.
- Also, as visitors maneuver vertically, they activate performance showcasing theatricality.







■ Atmosphere





**Afnan Bashaikh**

**Grad Thesis Book**

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