

A E S T H E T I C R U I N ;

B e n j a m i n T K n o e b b e r
2 0 2 1 A r c h i t e c t u r a l T h e s i s ,
V i r g i n i a T e c h U n i v e r s i t y

Thank you to my advisor Josphe Bedford for all your assistance
in helping me plan out my ideas, and to all of the people that
have stood by and supported my pursuits into design.

Throughout history, we have been captivated by the concept of the Ruin and ways of reflecting on the past. Yet the Ruin has a different status for us today as we perceive modern society as currently in a state of Ruin. During periods of our history such as the enlightenment and movements focused on the general museumification of the past, the Ruin was treated in such a way that fetishized its authenticity. Individuals of these periods would often attempt to replicate “grand tour” experiences all for the sake of recreating situations in which authenticity was valued over quality. Today, however, the attitude of Ruin is changing to one that addresses a more direct appreciation of aesthetic and spatial ambiguity. We no longer obsess over the authenticity of our ruins, instead, when facing the reality of Instagram culture in the Anthropocene era, everything is quickly consumed and accepted as truth without question. As long as the experience of the object was memorable there is no need to consider the actors behind the curtain. This, in its purest essence, is the “Ruin” of modern society.

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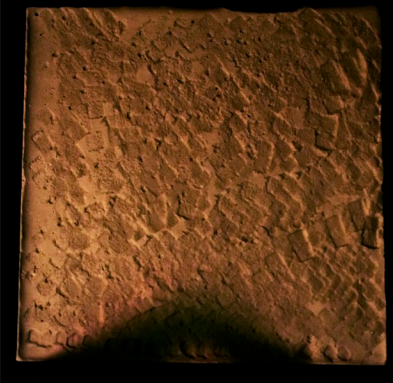
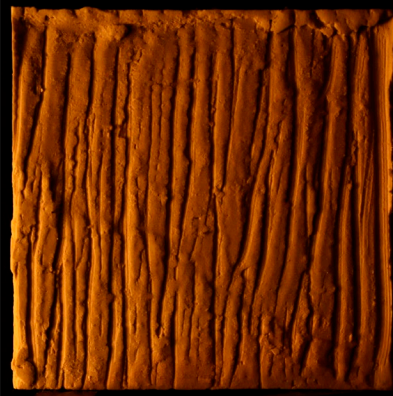
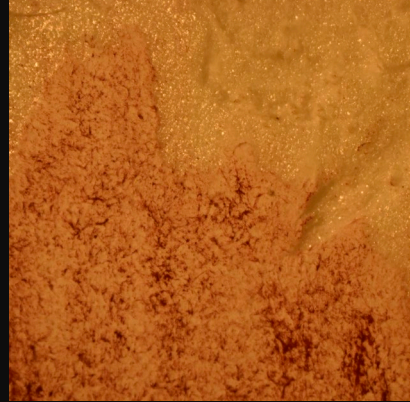
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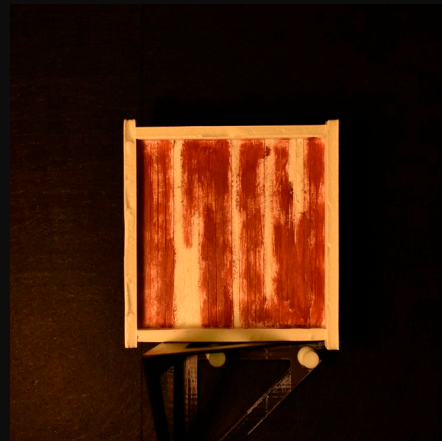
To begin, an emphasis on texture became apparent throughout my studies while trying to identify this phenomenon of ruination. Examples of works have been paired respectively to a given texture(s) in hopes that conclusions can be drawn from the strong relationship between real world elements and entirely fabricated ones. This role of spatial aestheticism completely disregards the histories behind such elements

and rather focuses solely on the involvement of style and atmosphere of the given spaces. This level of blatant disregard for understanding is not often considered comfortable, but it is a common attitude that many take when in discussion of this topic. By acknowledging this fact, I hope to develop an understanding of the topic as a whole and how I can express it in my own way.



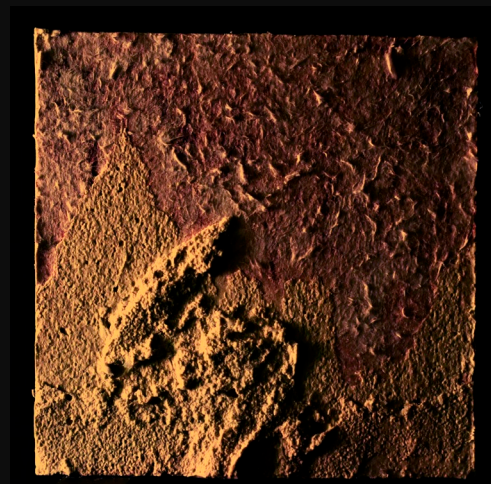
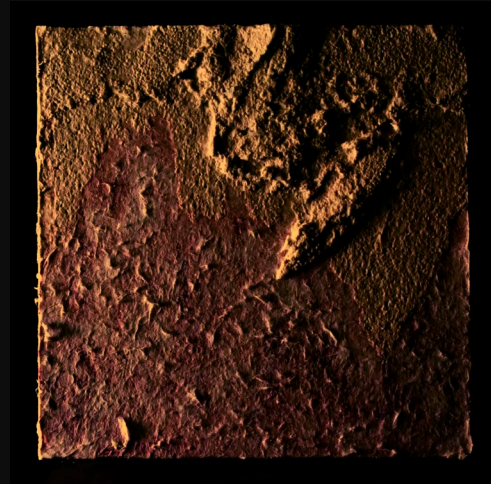
In order to identify this phenomena with ruined aesthetic, it requires the viewer to morally question themselves and the objects that are observed. Inevitably, not everyone is going to be comfortable with accepting this disregard for context, but in contrast to this, we also can't strictly say some people wouldn't enjoy the almost "fetishized" dark-fascination with what's considered uncomfortable. After all, why is it that so many "ruin porn" or "Urban explorer" accounts exist all over social media if not to profit from these very emotions?

Once the phenomena can consciously be acknowledged, I believe that as architects and creative individuals it is then important to create a dialogue around this topic and its place within the discipline. Particularly with this thesis, I hope that through how I aestheticize my own representation of ruin, both in terms of its objective qualities of the elements as objects, and the subjective qualities of their experiences, that some degree of this very dialogue in question can spark the desire for conversation.





Antivilla / Brandlehuber+Emde, Burlon



Mole House / David Adjaye, London



“Abandoned America” / Mathew Christopher



“Destroyed House Leiden”
/Marjan Teeuwen



Chernobyl Exclusion Zone c.2009-2012/
David Mcmillian

As I studied how the atmospheres of these spaces presented themselves, it quickly became apparent that understanding the overall emotion of space could be replicated in the objective qualities of the project. The resulting model photography captures the heightened dramatic qualities of space through various implications of the previous textures, intense lighting, and overall composition of the scene.



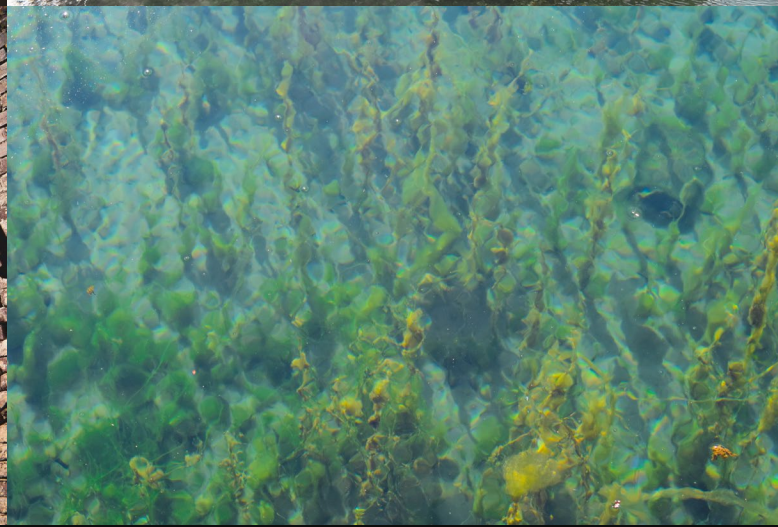


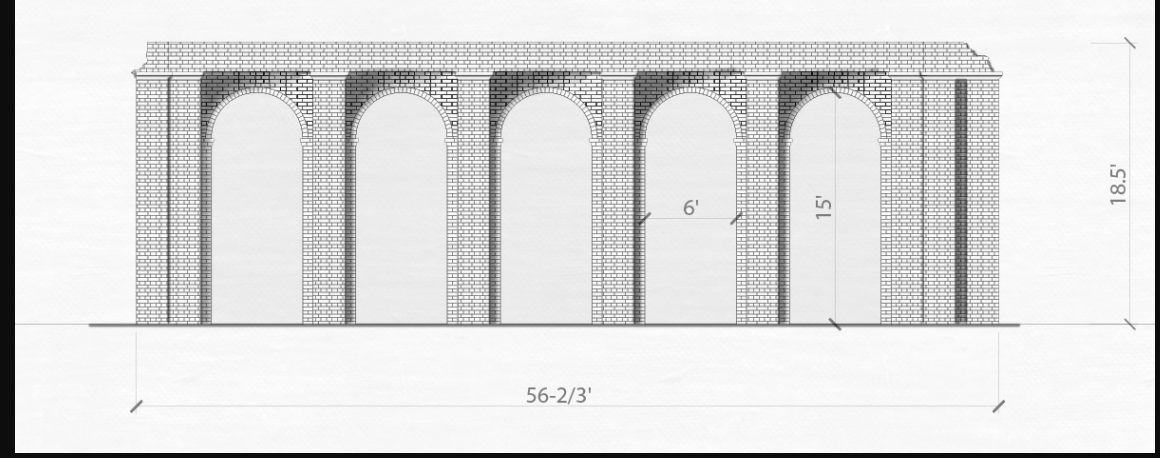
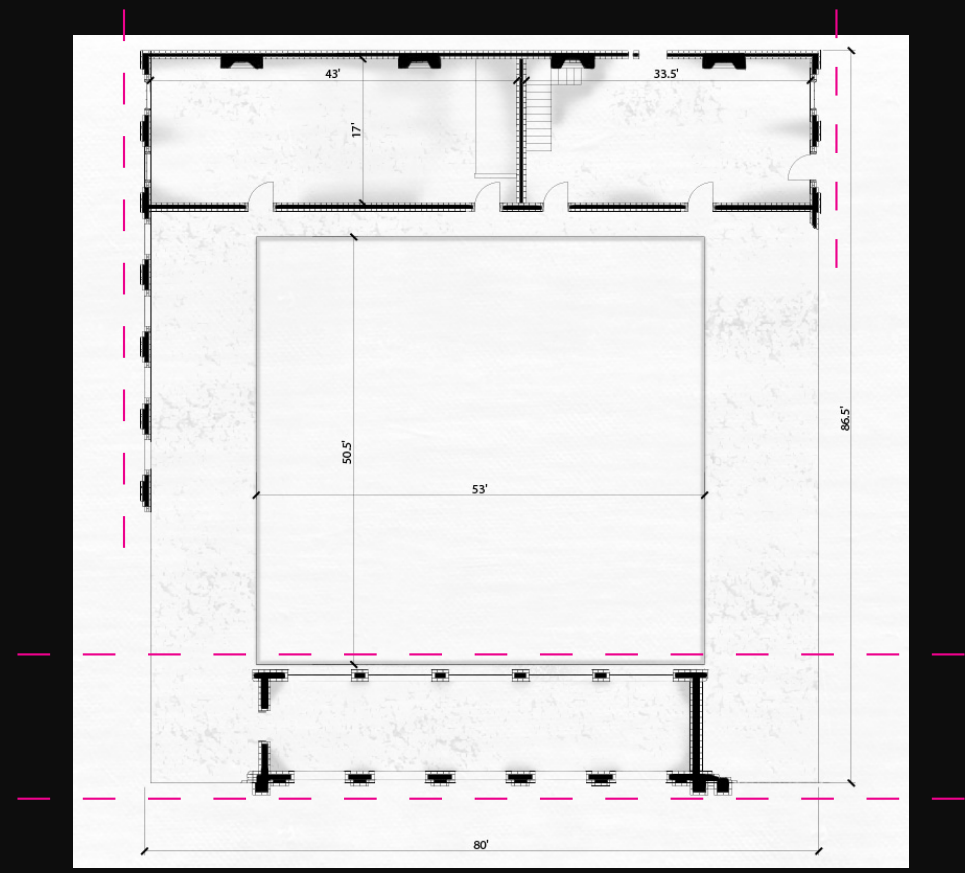




When identifying a location to test the various lessons learned from aestheticizing ruin, I came upon an existing ruin of an old bathhouse in Sweet Springs, West Virginia. Displayed here are photographs of the site that capture the very same attitude of ruination in which this work is attempting to aestheticize. For this work, the context of the actual history of the site becomes irrelevant as the overall narrative arrives from consideration of the material qualities and composition of the site as an aesthetic object and not a piece of history. In this sense, the nature of programming the site also becomes irrelevant as I am only interested in the object's ghostly missing volumes and the matter that results from their decay.





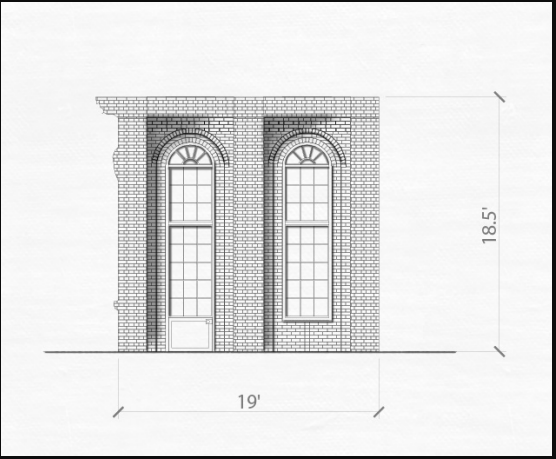


North Elevation

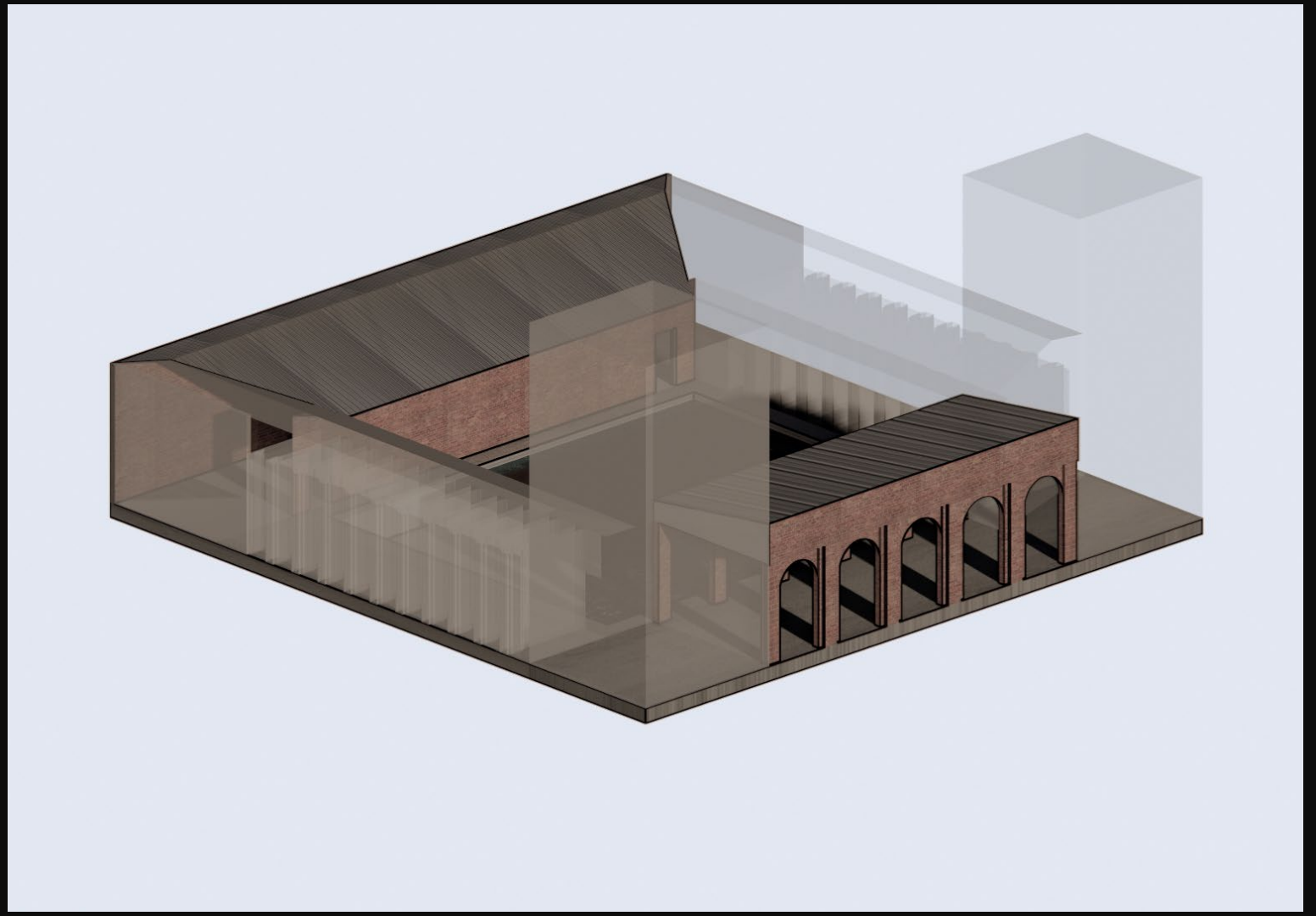


Courtyard North Elevation

North Elevation



Courtyard North Elevation





Reconstructed Rendering of Pool




Reconstructed Rendering of Pool




Having focused on ruination in terms of both the decaying volumes and the physical matter of the decay itself, the project in turn, became interested in the possibilities of gabion-like cages, both to evoke the outline of former volumes and to hold/rehouse the decaying matter. This type of "Maintenance" architecture acts in a multitude of ways as it highlights the human agency towards existing material, particularly on brand for the anthropocene era, as well as creating situations where nature and deterioration become fetshized almost to the point of insincerity.



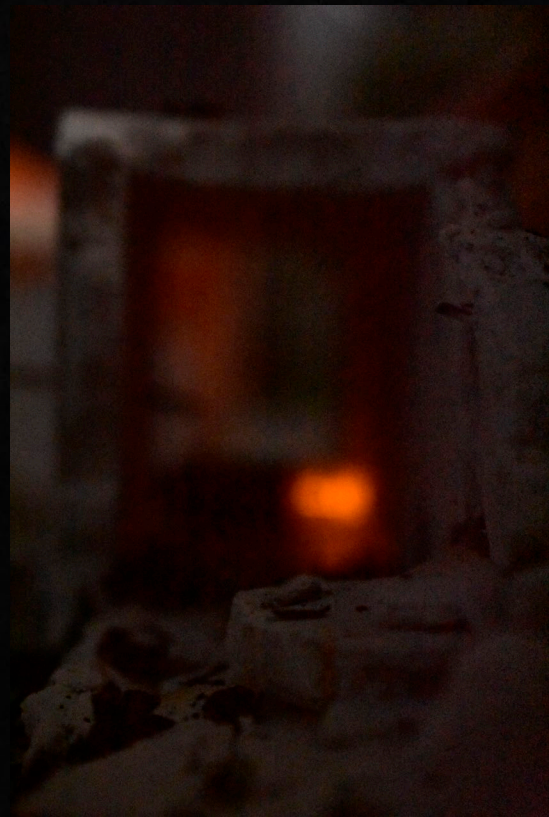


As exploration at different scales of the cage continued, it became a key architectural element that I was able to insert into the site. The mesh of the cage acts as ghostly outlines of volumes, some old, some new, as well as working structurally to give new form to rubble and debris. When volume is then paired with the treatment of material, a relationship between these two displays a clear correlation of the power of human agency and existing condition.

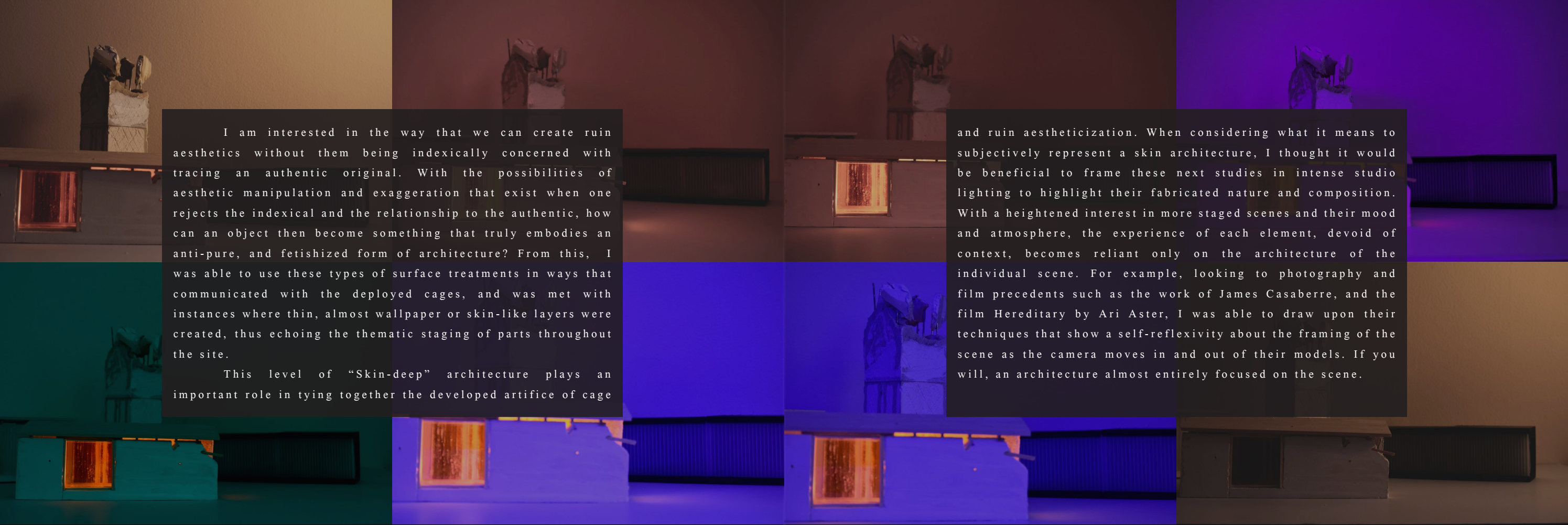










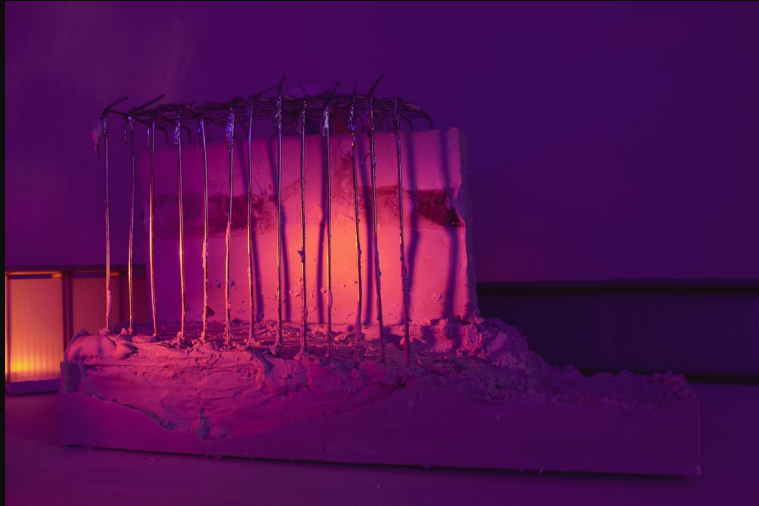


I am interested in the way that we can create ruin aesthetics without them being indexically concerned with tracing an authentic original. With the possibilities of aesthetic manipulation and exaggeration that exist when one rejects the indexical and the relationship to the authentic, how can an object then become something that truly embodies an anti-pure, and fetishized form of architecture? From this, I was able to use these types of surface treatments in ways that communicated with the deployed cages, and was met with instances where thin, almost wallpaper or skin-like layers were created, thus echoing the thematic staging of parts throughout the site.

This level of “Skin-deep” architecture plays an important role in tying together the developed artifice of cage

and ruin aestheticization. When considering what it means to subjectively represent a skin architecture, I thought it would be beneficial to frame these next studies in intense studio lighting to highlight their fabricated nature and composition. With a heightened interest in more staged scenes and their mood and atmosphere, the experience of each element, devoid of context, becomes reliant only on the architecture of the individual scene. For example, looking to photography and film precedents such as the work of James Casaberre, and the film *Hereditary* by Ari Aster, I was able to draw upon their techniques that show a self-reflexivity about the framing of the scene as the camera moves in and out of their models. If you will, an architecture almost entirely focused on the scene.





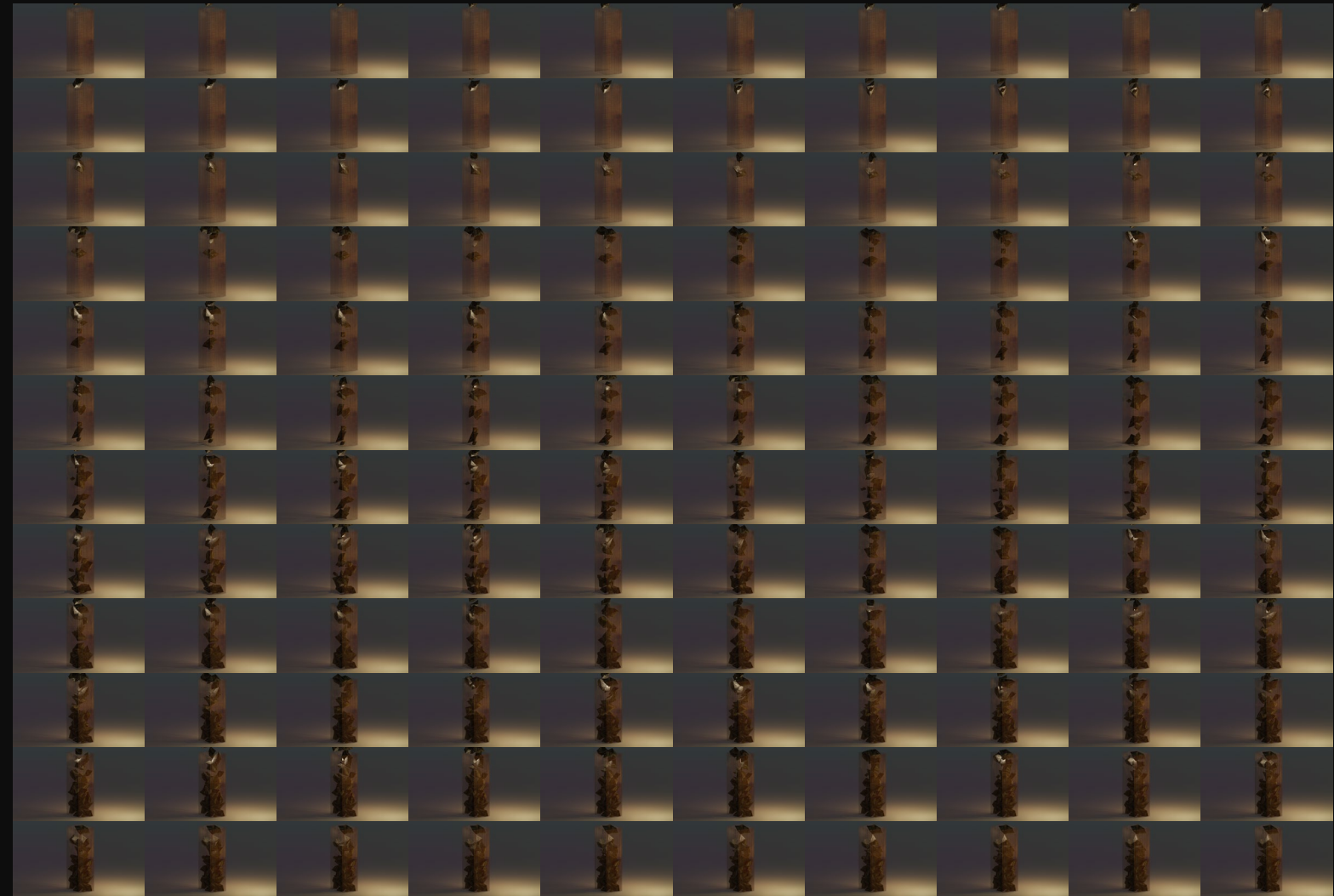
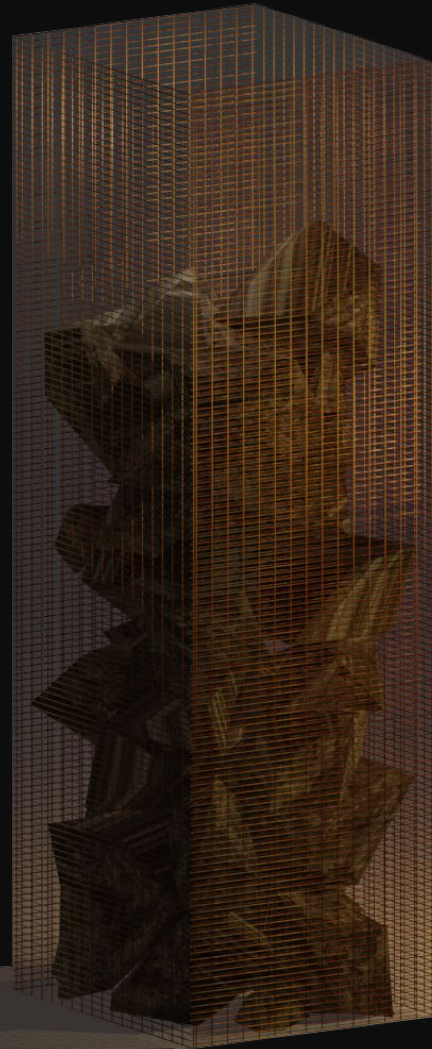




Gathering all of the lessons and definitions learned from the various studies of both subjective and objective dimensions of representing this project, a need for some type of tool or artifice arose. The cage and variations on the skin became key devices used throughout the development of each final narrative element.



Explorations of the cage took many forms as described before with one of those routes being a focus on animation and blender studies. From here, an interest in creating diagrammatic animated representations for some of the stronger narrative elements of the project were developed. Displayed here are some of the stills and a link to a video for the Debris element for you to explore at your own leisure.



<https://youtu.be/l-v5mVfErcl>

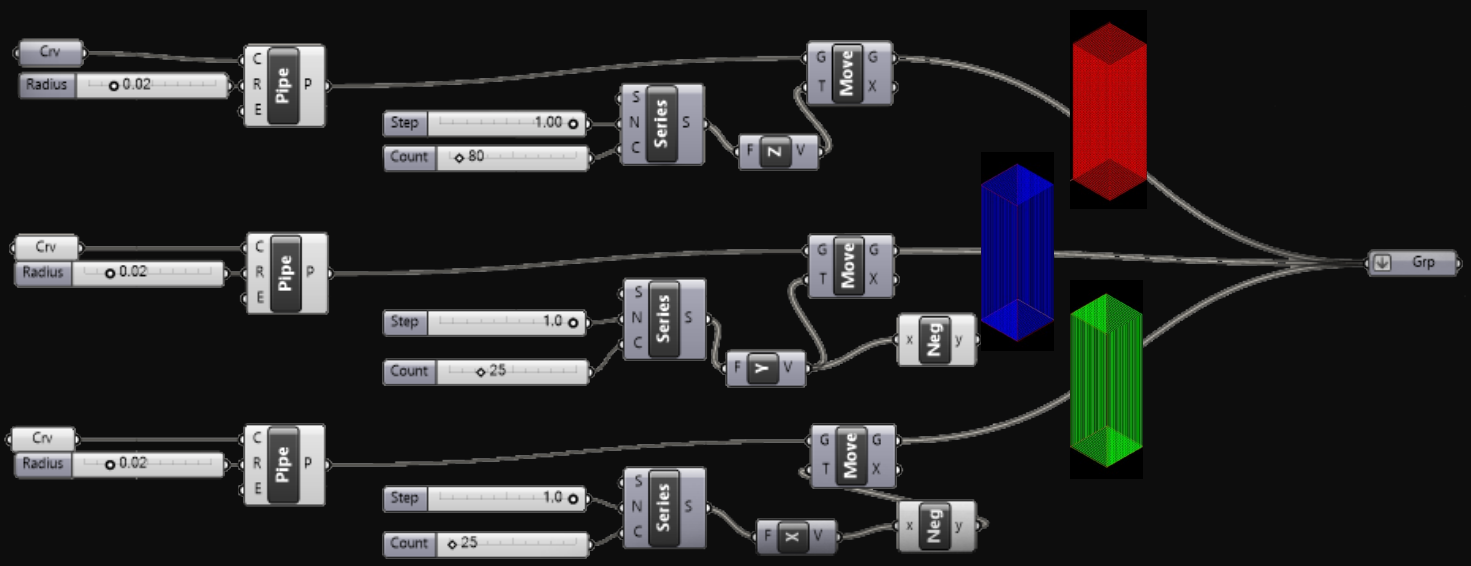
Step = Porosity of mesh

Mesh Metal Pipe Diameter:

.01 = 1/4"

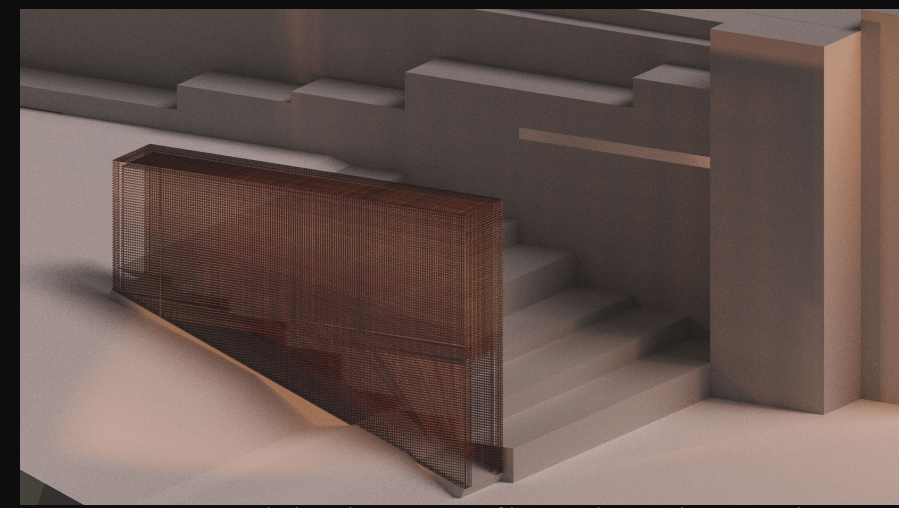
.02 = 1/2"

Size Variables (XYZ Dimensions)

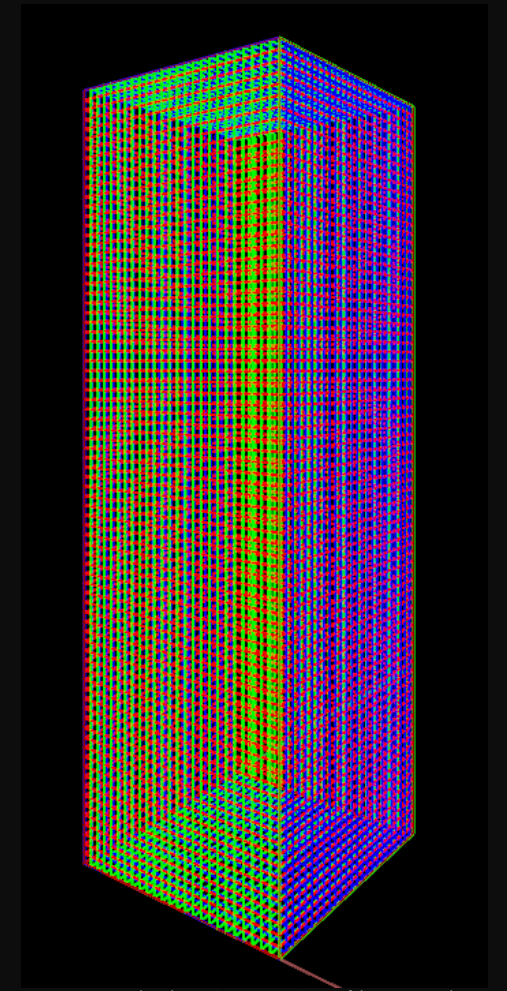


Debris Cage Configuration

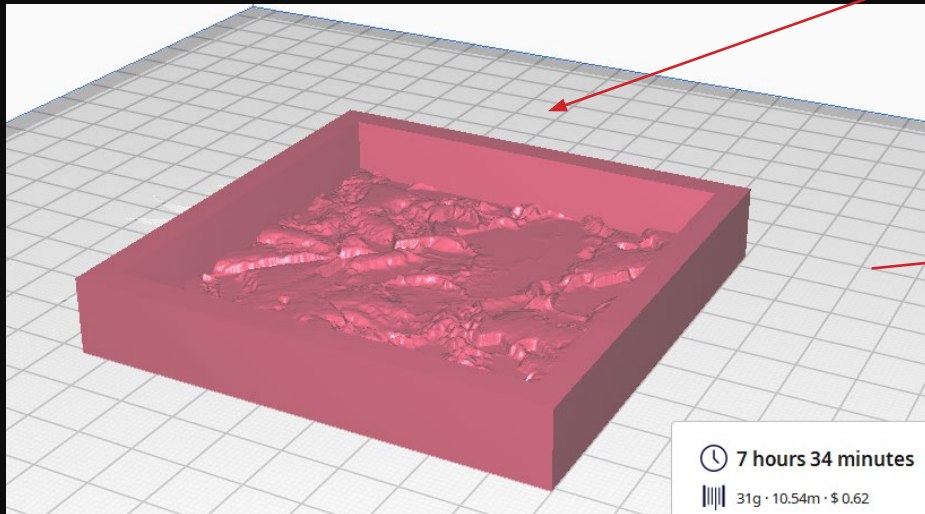
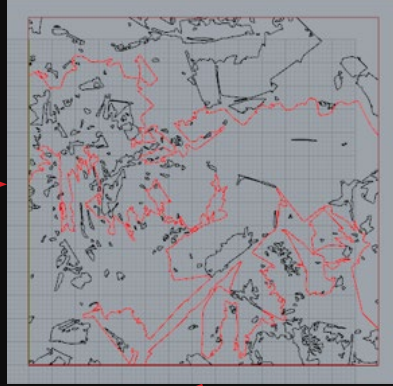
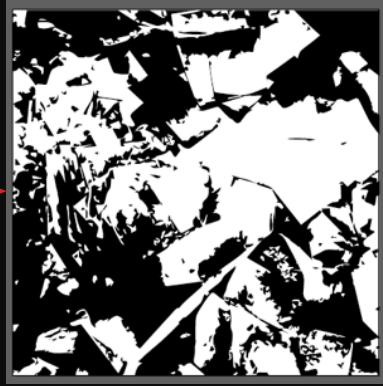
Development of the cage also occurred in the digital space, through the form of a grasshopper script that could be deployed throughout the other elements of the site. By simply focusing on the ability to change the size variables of the cage objects, x y z, it allowed for multiple variations of the cage to be tested from size, location, porosity, and overall composition. Having this flexibility of design allowed the cage to evolve alongside the thought process of the overall project, thus producing an adequate result of what I find to embody architecture of the aestheticized ruin.



Reclaimed Cage Configuration/ Site Development



Debris Cage Configuration

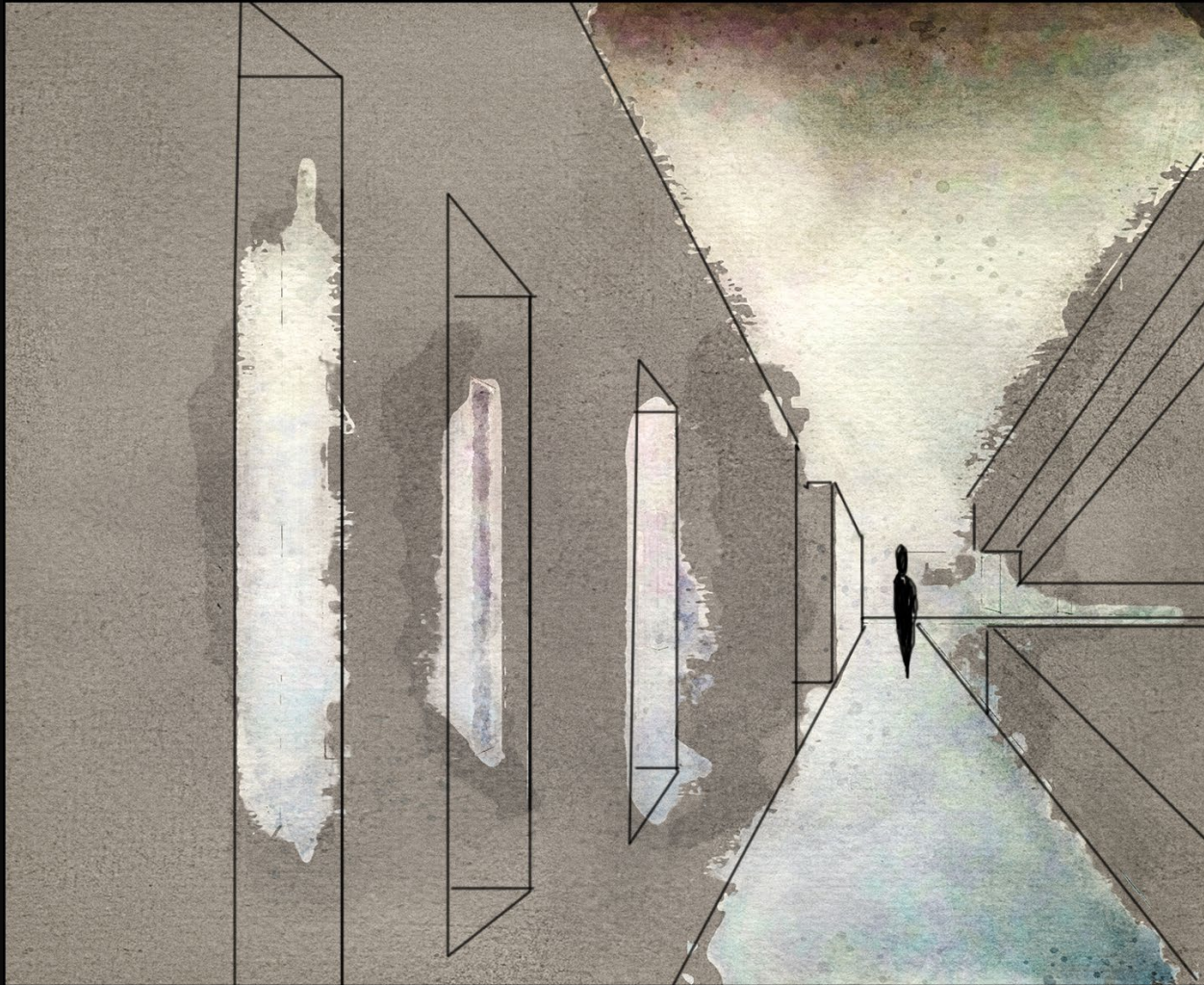


The textured skins of the project were developed throughout, as you have previously seen, with some even making it to the prototyping stage of modeling. By taking any image deemed to be worthy of “ruin” qualities, I was able to create 3d printed interpretations of the given image, and in theory either scale it or use it in mosaic like patterns, therefore quite literally aestheticizing any ruin texture for the benefit of spatial composition. This kind of result gives meaning to the work of this thesis in other broad contexts, as the lessons learned could easily be applied to other formats of design.

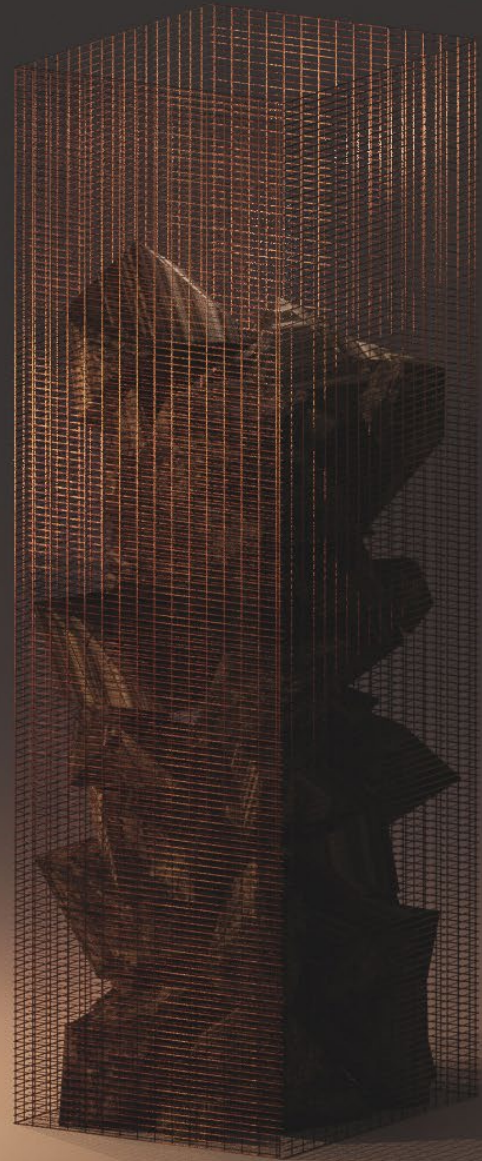


“The Aestheticized Ruin”





The following is the result of applying both facets of subjective and objective representation together through a series of renderings, driven specifically by the architecture and the various characters of each scene. Particularly for these renderings I have applied the traditional film aspect ratio of 4:3, creating moments, or film stills if you will, that each express a differing variety of aesthetic depending on the artifice of the architectural elements and their immediate context. Before each element I have attempted to elaborate on some of the narrative and meaning that has developed from application of the scenographic process to each.



D e b r i s

As you can conclude from the title of this element, Debris focuses on the most traditional gabion role of the cage, but with a twist. As rubble and parts of the existing building are demolished, their remnants are to be placed into the cage volume as if to repurpose their material in spatial significance as opposed to more traditional means. However, the material on site is not the only ruined material to be placed within the cage, as other forms of foreign material, such as plastic and outside trash, have also been thrown into the mix. This highlights human tendencies of polluting the environment and the degree of agency we have around our precious "Ruin" structures that are deemed so important in influencer society.



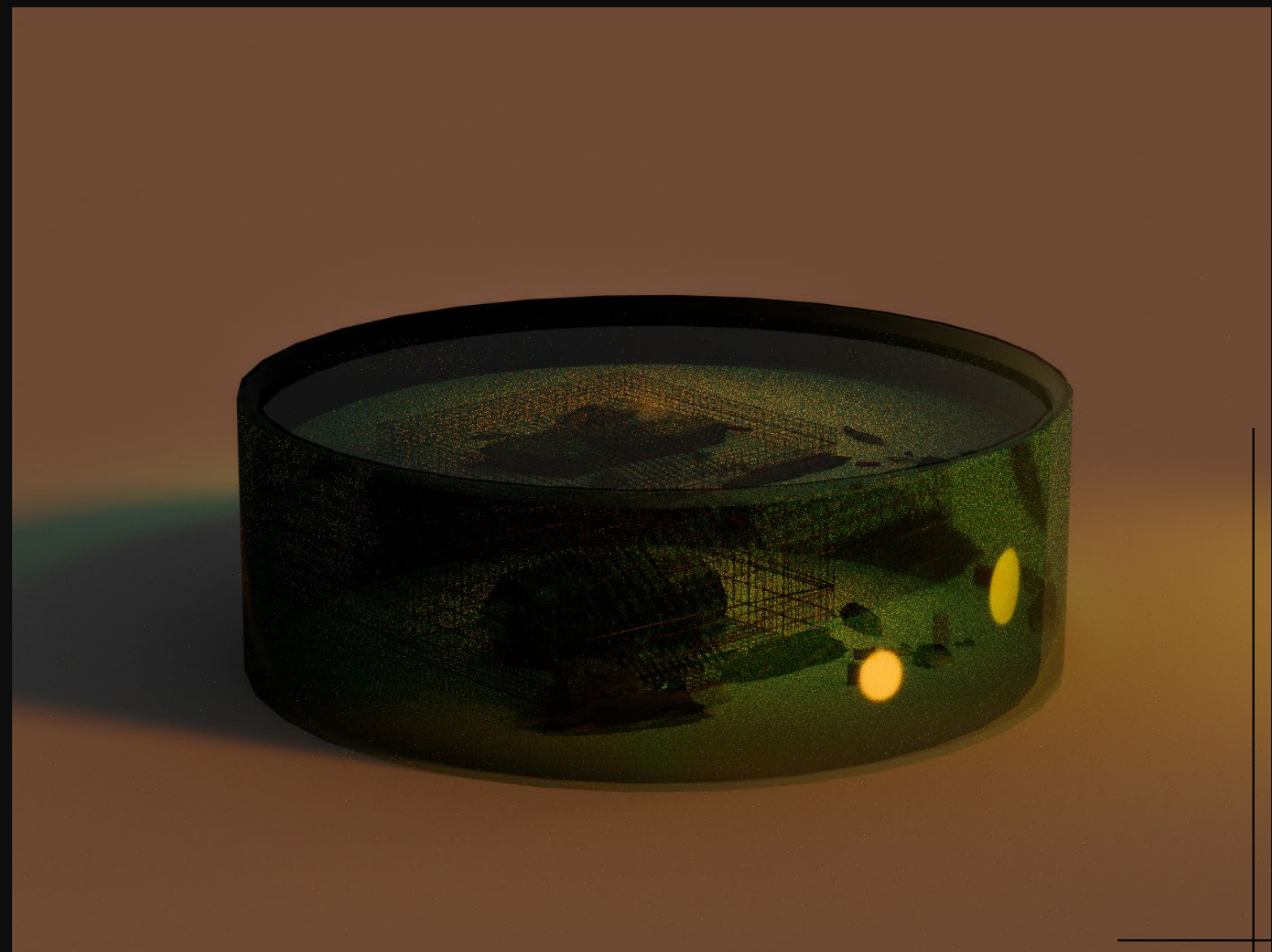


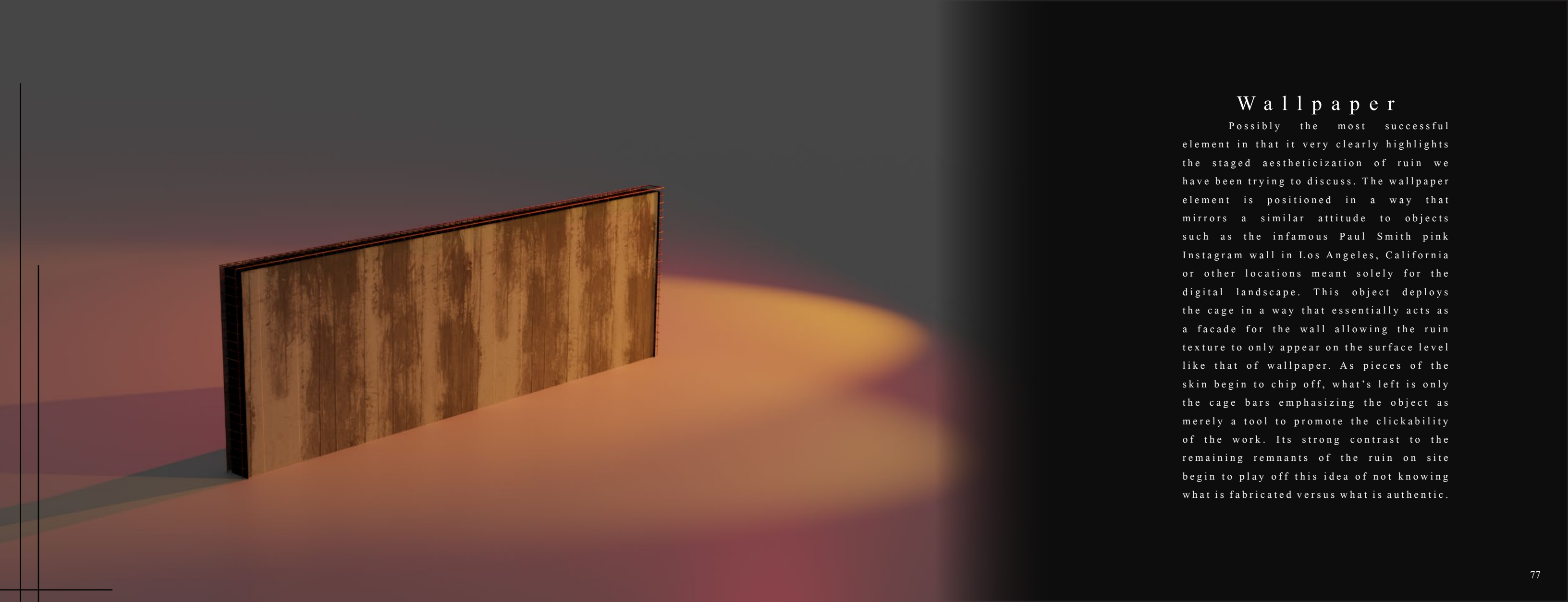
Forgotten

With this element, I wanted to show what it might be like if the once inhabitants/caretakers of this place, willingly chose to not take care of the natural water spring, and in essence end up poisoning the water. By framing one of the fallen gates from the main entrance of the existing building, the cage in this sense acts as a sort of willful negligence in that it essentially places the destruction of the ruin on a pedestal for all to see. As the trash and foreign objects begin to pile up around the cage, you begin to wonder if the inhabitants even know why someone went to all the trouble to frame this piece of the site's history.





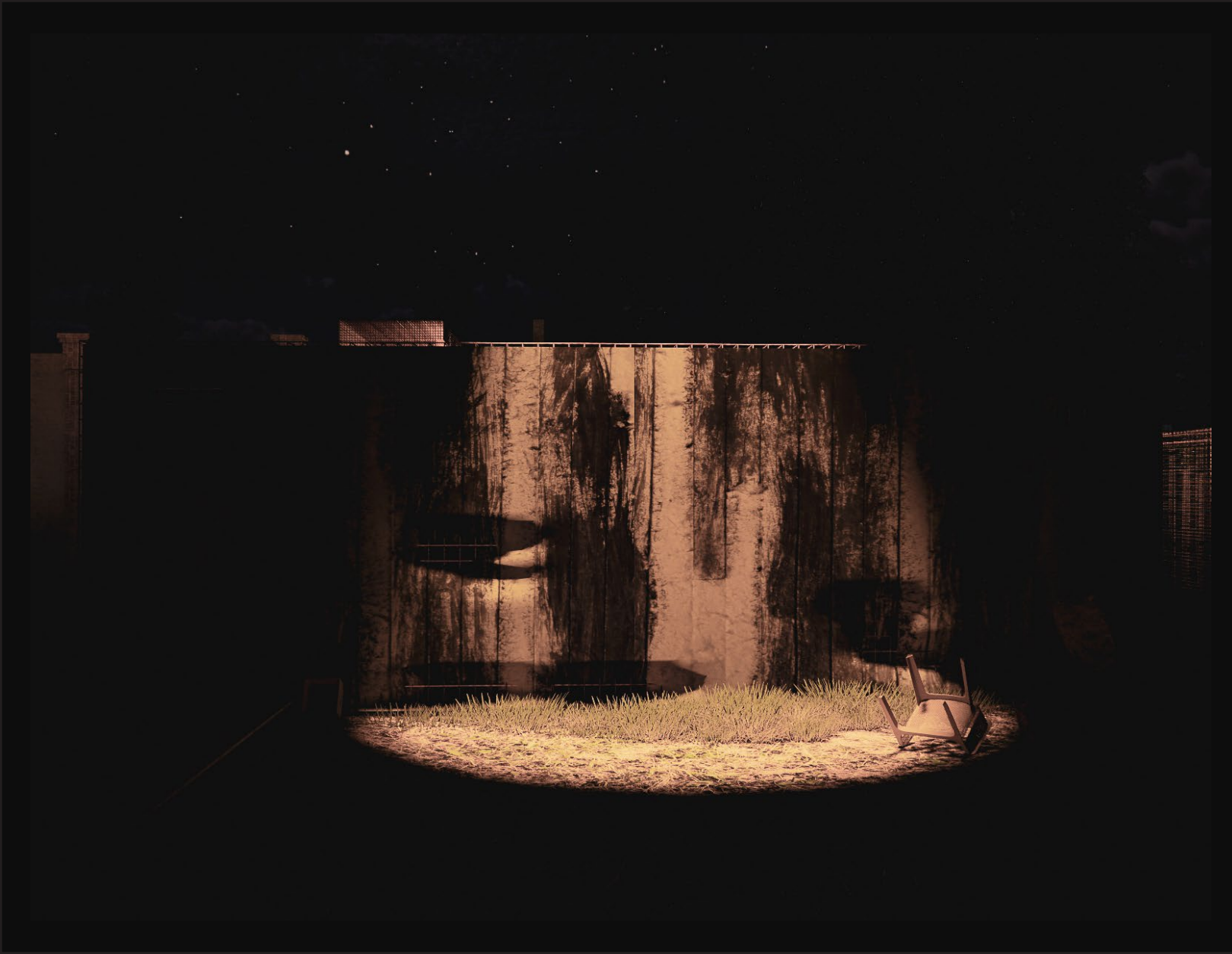




W a l l p a p e r

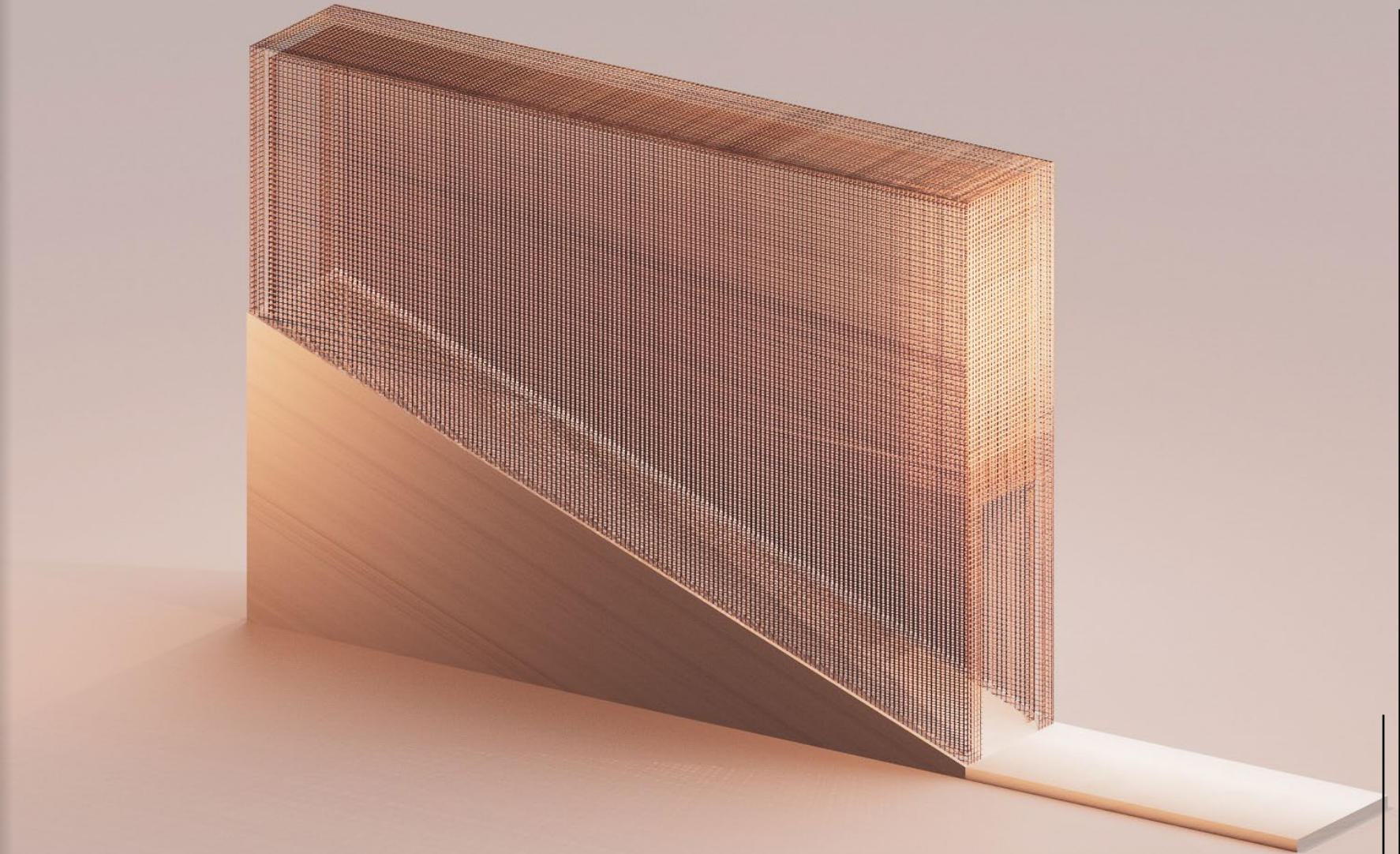
Possibly the most successful element in that it very clearly highlights the staged aestheticization of ruin we have been trying to discuss. The wallpaper element is positioned in a way that mirrors a similar attitude to objects such as the infamous Paul Smith pink Instagram wall in Los Angeles, California or other locations meant solely for the digital landscape. This object deploys the cage in a way that essentially acts as a facade for the wall allowing the ruin texture to only appear on the surface level like that of wallpaper. As pieces of the skin begin to chip off, what's left is only the cage bars emphasizing the object as merely a tool to promote the clickability of the work. Its strong contrast to the remaining remnants of the ruin on site begin to play off this idea of not knowing what is fabricated versus what is authentic.

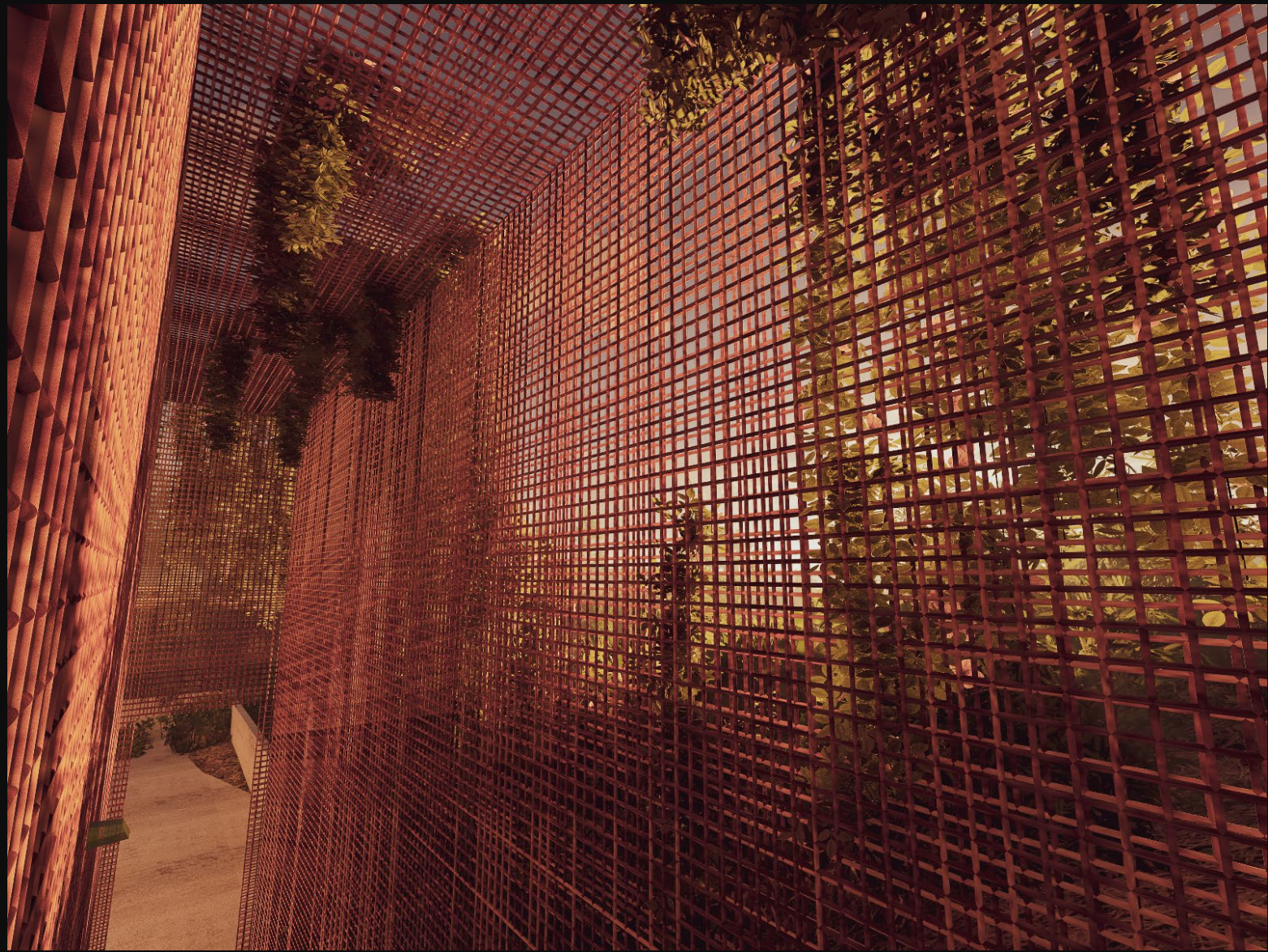


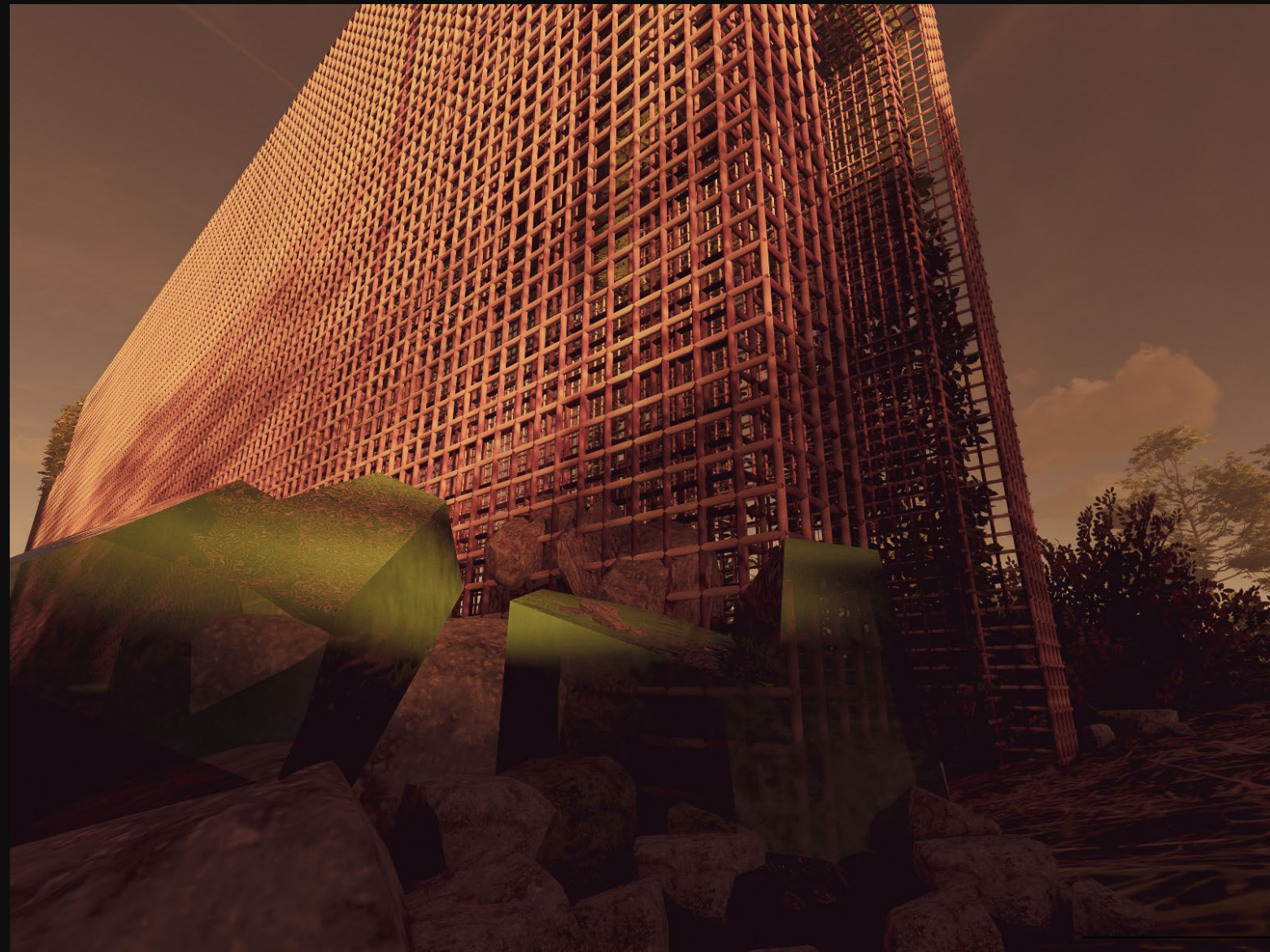
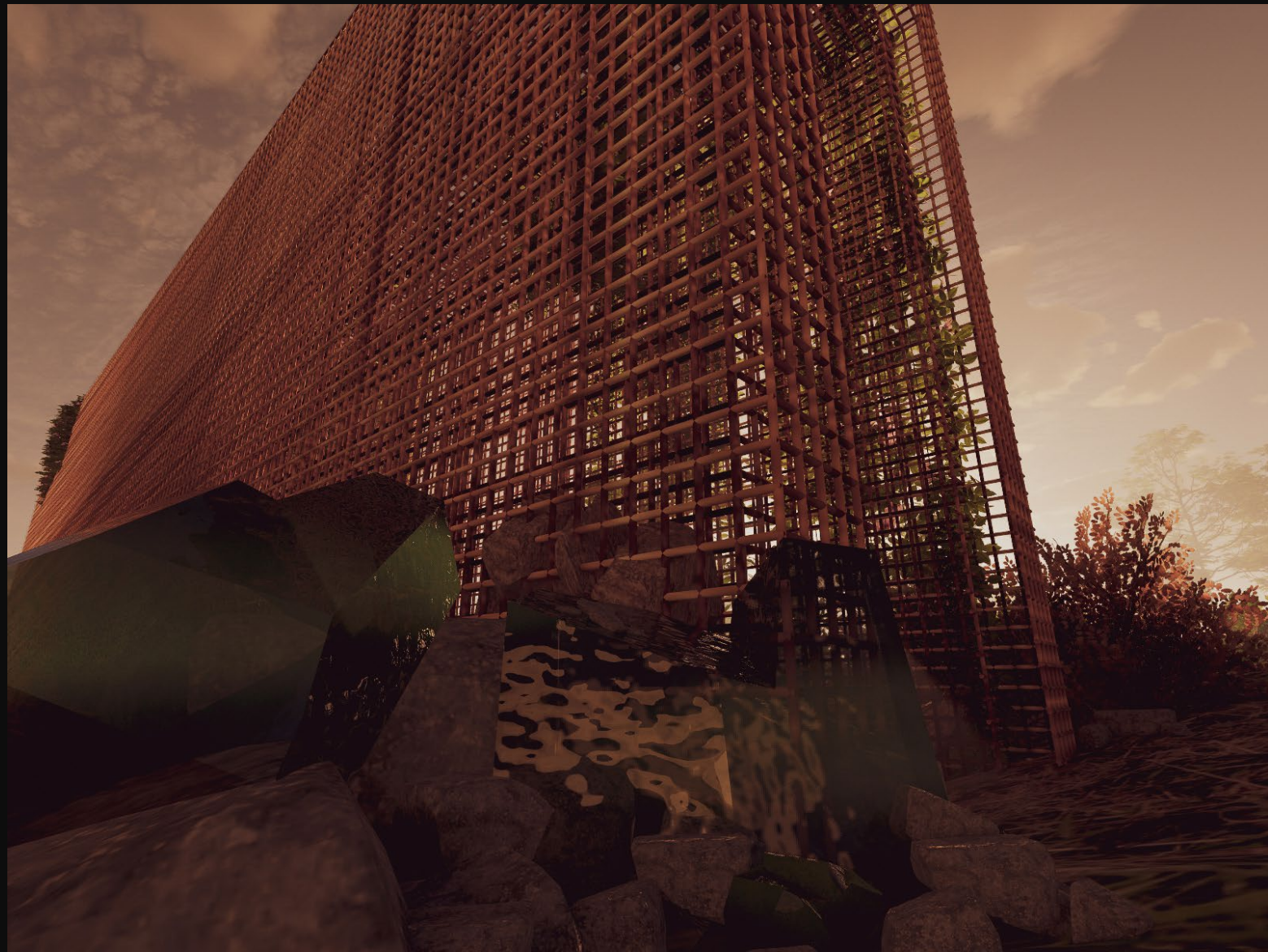


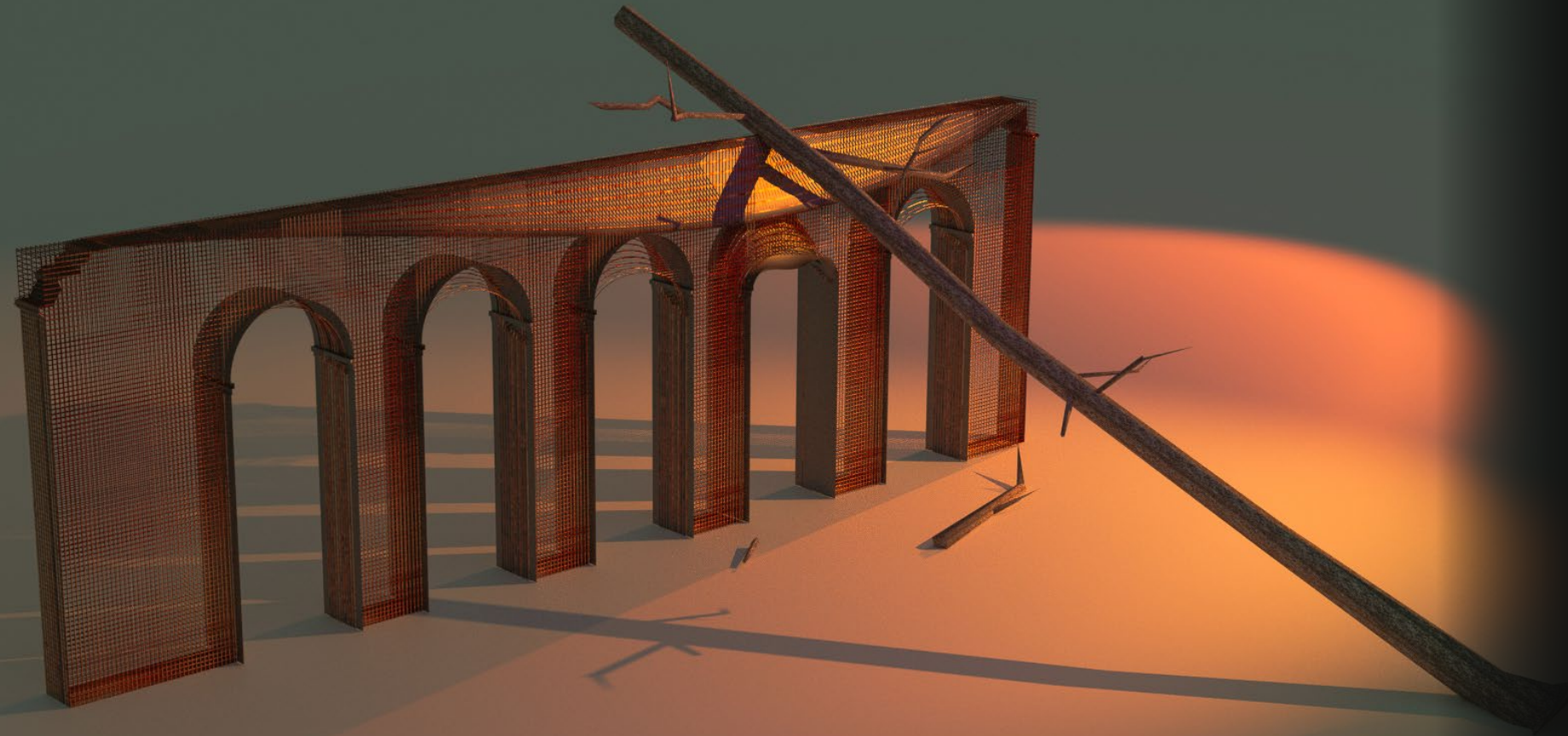
Reclaimed

Similarly to the Debris element, the intent of this cage is to provide a space that naturally incorporates an element of the site, nature, back into the ruin. The difference being, that this object focuses on creating an atmosphere where the local and placed fauna can begin to reclaim the ruin. Rather a more poetic stance of the roles at play between human agency and mother nature, the cage acts as both a catalyst and mediator towards the development of ruination on the site. By making this a point of transition for the individual, the space also acts as a means of embodying a point of transition in time from humanity's reign to what it is we leave behind.









Destruction

With this element, I wanted to take the cage in a way that doesn't directly affect the changing status of the onsite ruin, but rather one that sees the cage itself acting as its own ruin affected by its surroundings. In a mockingly direct sense of the arched structure on the front of the actual ruin, this cage resembles the ruin, but is removed from direct relationship to it. In this separated location we see the cage in a state of deterioration after a tree has fallen, thus indefinitely changing the composition and amplifying its own deterioration.

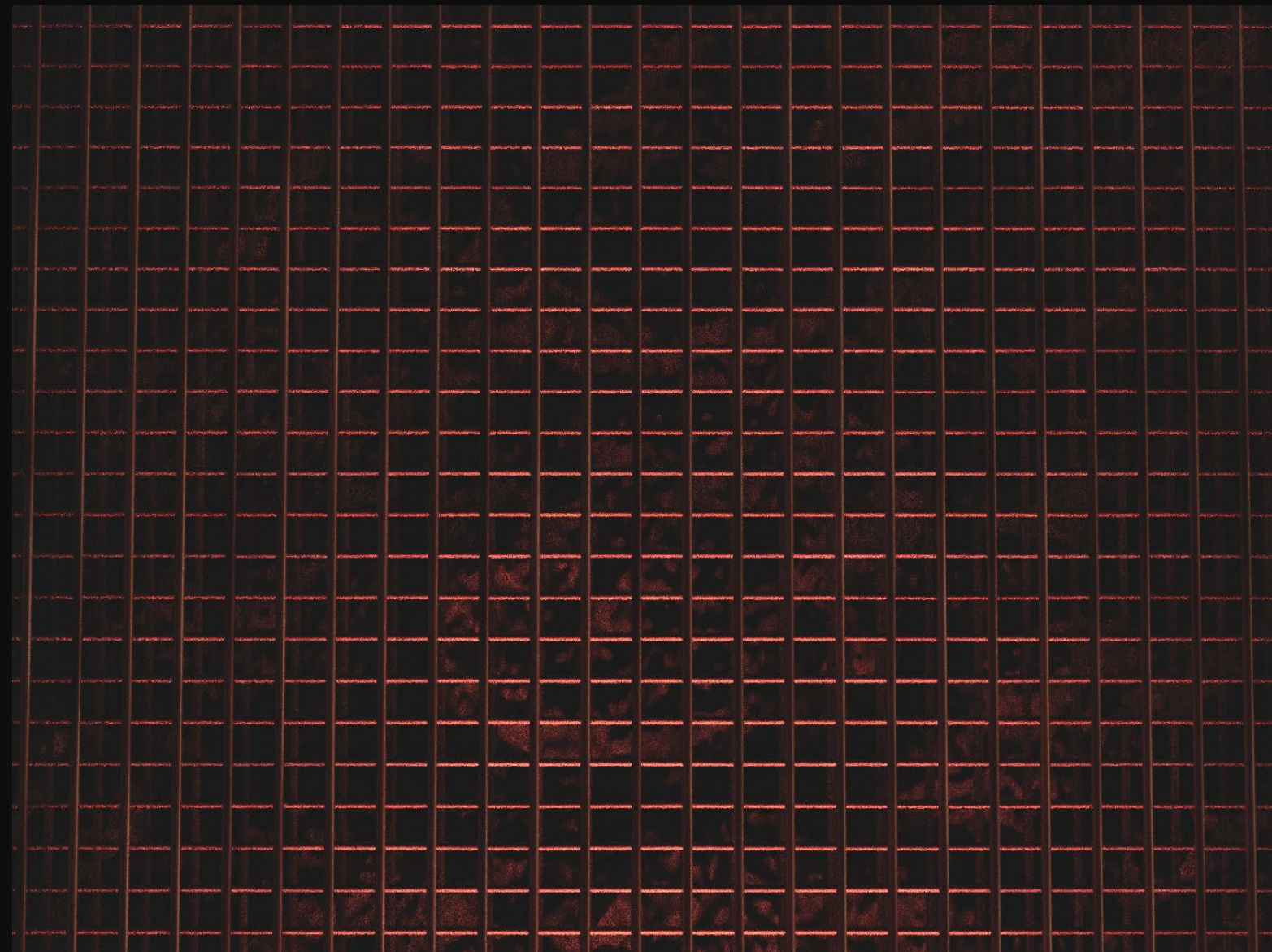
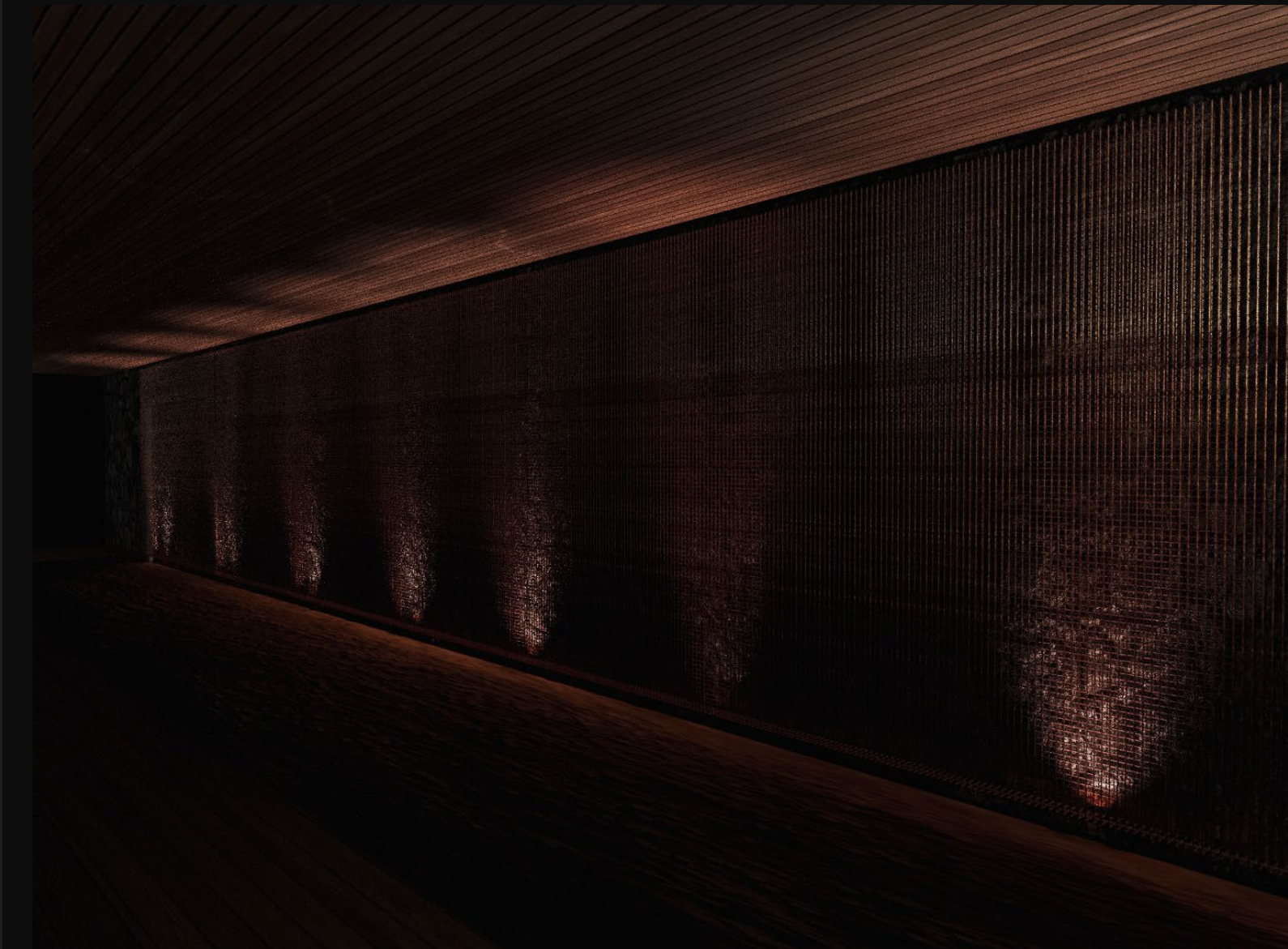


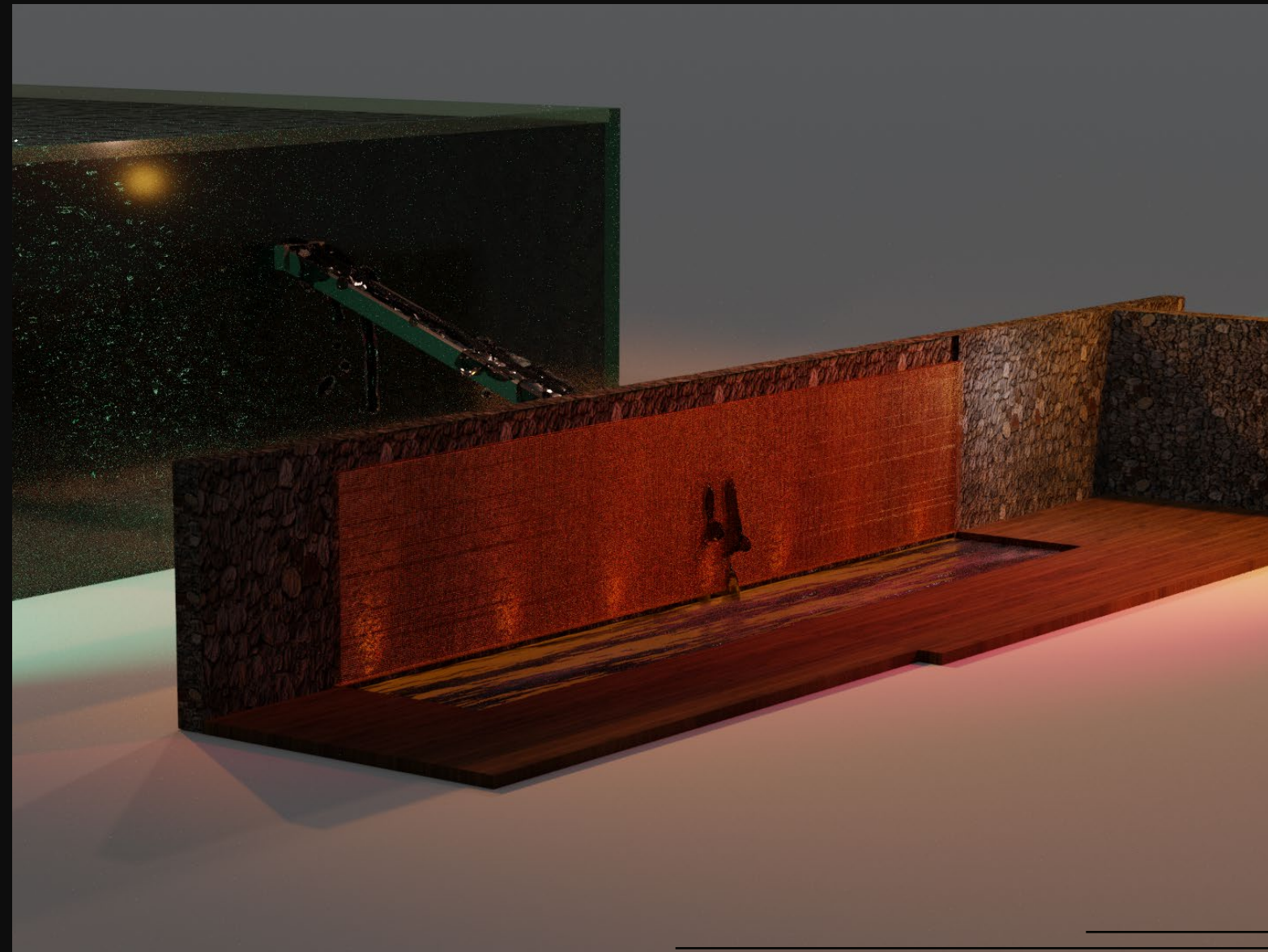
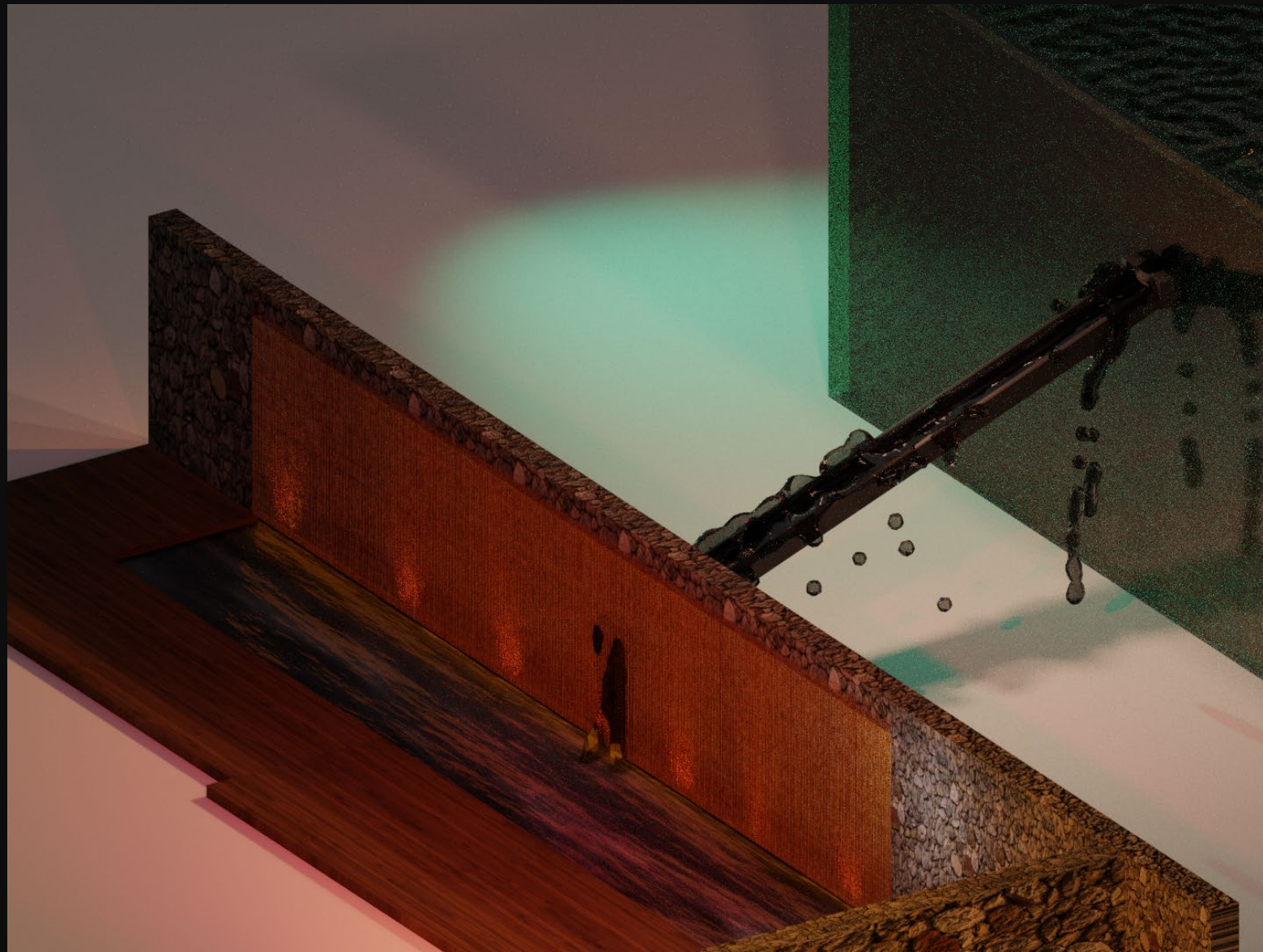


Control

This element positions itself on the strongest side of human agency, as the goal of the concept was to intentionally redirect the element of water from the natural spring to an entirely new manufactured location at a lower elevation. The cage in this sense acts as a texture for the wall where the controlled water is then able to permeate through the cracks of the gabion stoned wall. By emphasizing this notion of control over nature, the element comments on society's history with nature where it was often treated as a rival waiting to be conquered. When comparing this to the Anthropocene era and the heightened sense of dread towards climate change, the cage acts a reminder to this fear by being the literal embodiment of it.





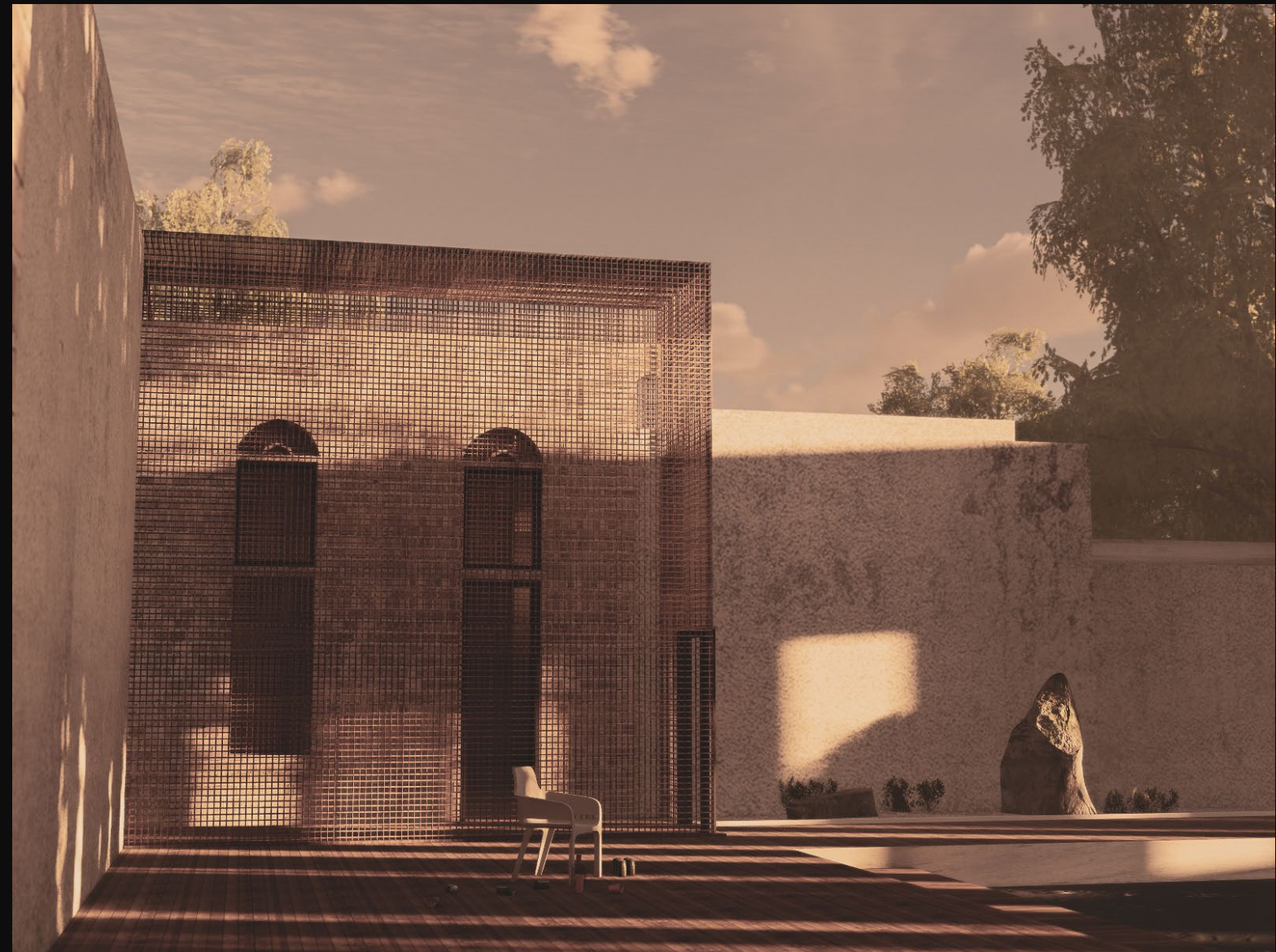




P r o l o n g i n g

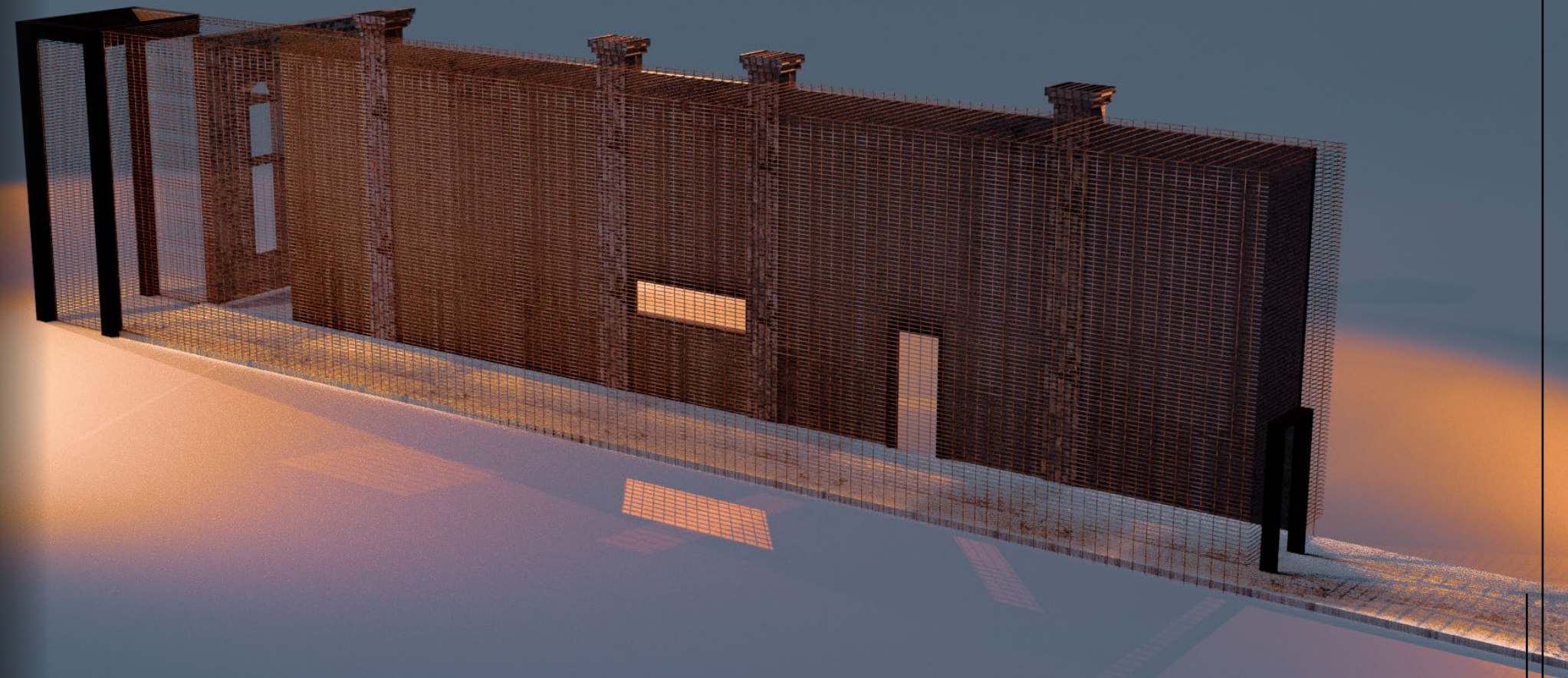
With this element I wanted to show a degree of intervention into part of the existing remnant of the ruin on site. To do this, the cage element acts as almost a lifeline for the wall, theoretically keeping it upright until it too inevitably fails, thus changing the ruins life cycle once again. By making the caged element also a point of transition upon the site, it allows the subject to engage with the literal nature of inhabiting a space that once existed, now in an entirely different, yet somehow familiar way. The highlighting of the joint where the cage meets ruin creates a constant reminder of the service that the cage is providing, and also the ever-ringing notion of human agency refusing to let the ruin die.





Path

With this element the narrative comes from the approach and from the four frozen chimney stacks left from the original building. On approach, views of the other elements are possible adding to the overall impact of the site after arrival. The cage in this sense acts as an enclosure to the remnant wall with framed openings that specifically highlight some of the other objects. The path then ties together each site element as one cohesive attempt at thematically creating some kind of “ruination theme park” for viewers to observe.







In conclusion, I have said there are two parts to my thesis. One of an objective dimension concerned with the ruin, an architectural project to intervene and to focus on the volume and matter of a given location. The other being subjective, concerned with how we experience the object via modes of representation that help develop the overall aesthetic of space. Through exploring these two aspects, I have attempted to highlight a shared common sensibility of embracing ruins because of their aesthetic effects, without being tied to them as sources of authenticity.

As stated before, I see this new aesthetic emerging in the world around us, and I argue that it is connected to how we define the Anthropocene era, and in turn, the overwhelming sense of dread, either for better or for worse, that comes from the realization of our whole world already in a state of ruin. But by trying to understand it, and by working with it, I believe new facets of how we treat the existing condition around us will lead to new and encouraging developments within our discipline and ultimately how we live our lives.

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