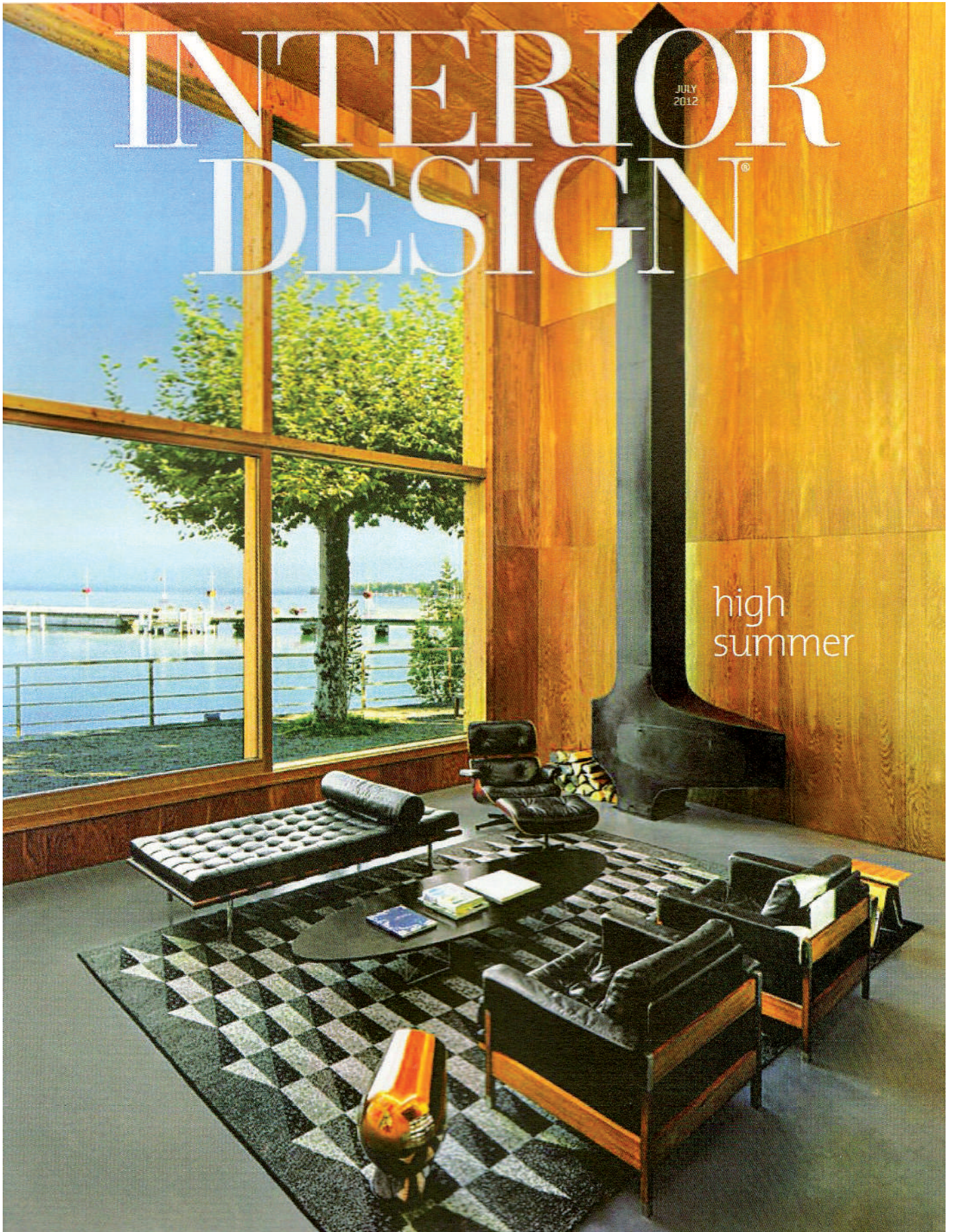


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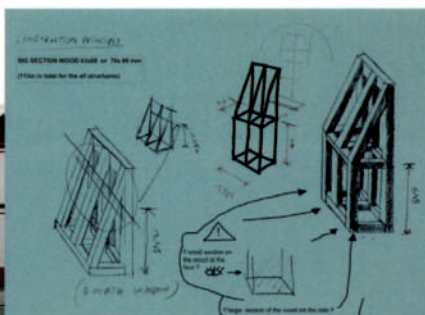


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Aérial took over the 12th-century refectory for one month.

COURTESY OF THE PHILIP C. KRISTING GALLERY



a collision with history

Smashing glass, Baptiste Debombourg inaugurated the gallery at a former abbey in Germany

Clockwise from top left: The facade of the Abtei Brauweiler in Pulheim, Germany, dates to the 18th century. Baptiste Debombourg sketched the frames needed to support Aerial. With a 1:10 scale model in cardboard, he determined how 2 tons of cracked glass would be distributed over the frames. The stability of the spruce frames was tested. They were then painted white. An assistant, Damir Radovic, helped Debombourg layer the glass. It was nailed into place.

“Contextuality” is an artists’ buzzword. When Baptiste Debombourg uses it, however, he means not only specific to a site physically but also infused with its spirit and history. Commissioned for an installation to launch a contemporary-art program called Spiritual Ground at the deconsecrated Abtei Brauweiler in Pulheim, Germany, outside Cologne, he found extraordinary history aplenty. The abbey was established in 1024 by the Count Palatine of Lotharingia, and its church and ancillary buildings later became a charity hospital and a paupers’ workhouse. Before and during World War II, the Gestapo turned them into a prison and concentration camp—this is where Konrad Adenauer was held. A postwar home for displaced persons and a psychiatric hospital specializing in addiction came next.

Coupled with this complex history were the constraints presented to Debombourg by the installation space: a 12th-century refectory of 1,100 square feet, its ceiling vaults supported by six stone columns and its only windows running down one side. As the abbey is a historic monument, nothing could be altered, and no holes could be made in the walls. The installation would have to be freestanding, its weight precisely balanced.

Debombourg prefers ordinary materials, and here the choice of glass “quickly imposed itself,” he says, citing sacred church windows, the way that glass plays with light, and the symbolism of broken glass. “It’s not the violence that interests me,” he says. “It’s the healing that comes later, after the violence.” Once he and eight assistants had smashed 2 tons of laminated glass—using hammers, sledgehammers, ice-breakers, and special gloves—the team layered the crazed glass onto frames constructed from spruce struts, painted white. The final step was to secure the glass in place with almost-invisible white nails. As the fractured surface glittered in the sunlight, *Aerial* looked like the immense wave of history, crashing in through the windows. —Judy Fayard

UNFOLD