

Shapes of Serendipity

Photography Anne Holtrop

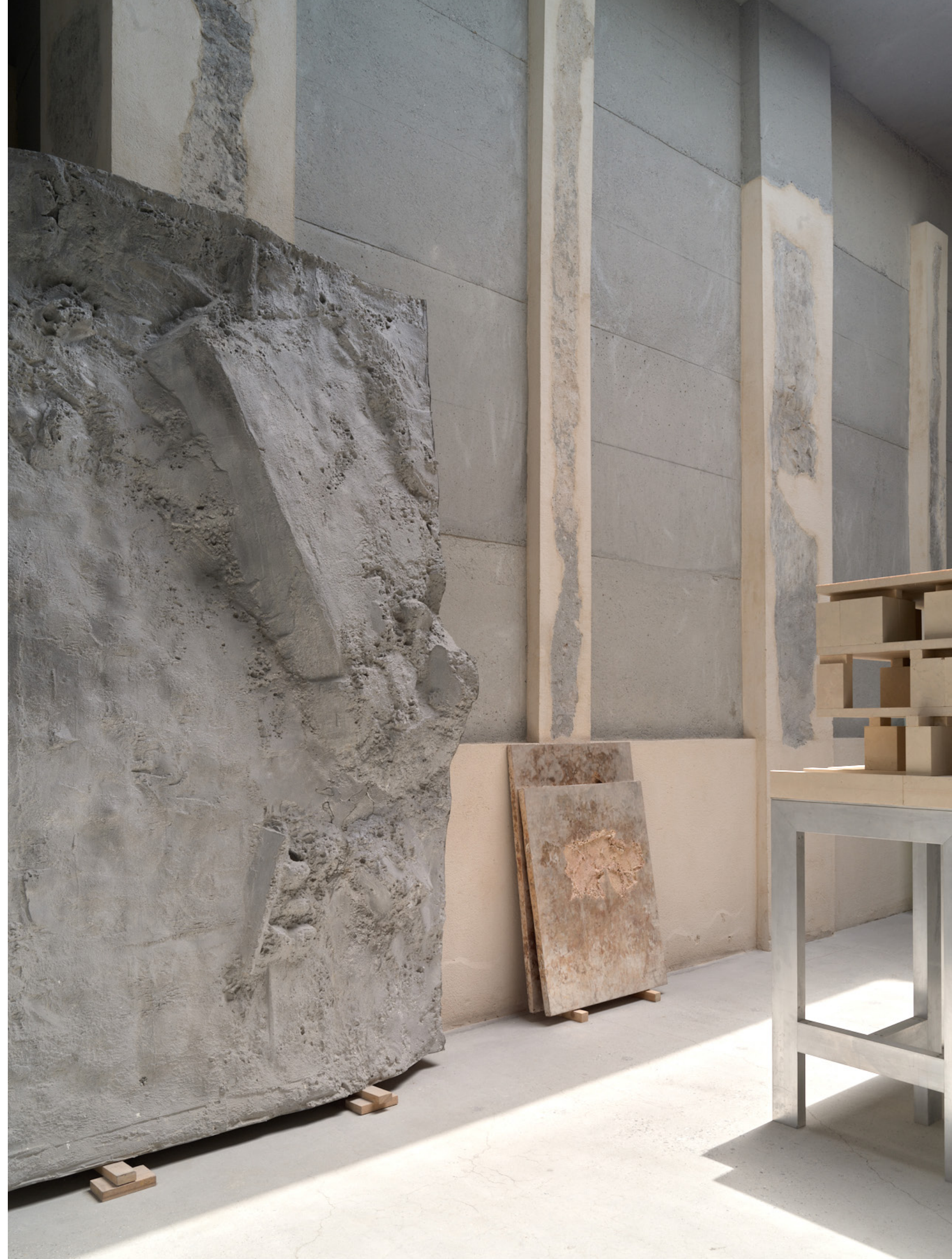
Anne Holtrop is a Dutch architect known for his experimental approach to **materials** and **form**.

He founded Studio Anne Holtrop in 2009 and has gained international recognition for his work that blurs the line between **architecture** and **art**.

His designs often explore **raw materials**, **irregular geometries**, and **process-driven construction methods**.

Notable projects include the Bahrain Pavilion at Expo 2015, the Siyadi Pearl Museum in Bahrain, Maison Margiela store together with John Giallano, and the Green Corner Building in Amsterdam. Holtrop also teaches architecture and has been a professor at the ETH Zurich, he is appointed as Titular Professor at the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio, Switzerland.

His work reflects a deep engagement with materiality and an intuitive design process.





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Furniture Series III
Gallery Maniera, Brussels, 2021

Other Scenes: How did your experience in the arts influence your approach to architecture and working across disciplines?

Anne Holtrop: I wanted to study art when I was younger, but my father encouraged me to pursue architecture instead. At the time, I didn't feel I had the right profile for it, so I started with engineering and then attended architecture school for six years. After graduating, I chose to work with artists rather than in traditional architectural practices, collaborating with Dutch artists like Krijn de Koning and Sarkis Zabunyan from Paris, as I was drawn to the artistic process.

For me, working in an artist's studio allowed me to engage more directly with materials. I learned that the autonomy to create work on my own terms, without relying on external commissions, was incredibly freeing. This independence allowed me to explore architecture in a more artistic and less conventional way, and I still maintain that autonomy today, even when working with clients. It's important for me to create work that responds to my personal vision and body of work, rather than just to the needs of a client.

OS: That freedom sounds crucial for your creative process. Could you expand on how materiality shapes your projects?

AH: Early on, I was fascinated by drawing, but not in the traditional sense. I explored drawing techniques that didn't depict anything specific—drawings created by chance, inspired by artists like Jean Arp and John Cage. I experimented with blind drawings and free-form techniques to free myself from preconceived ideas.

Then I visited Petra, the ancient city carved into the mountains, and that experience changed my perspective. The tombs and structures there were formed by direct engagement with the material, without any drawings. It was purely about the materiality itself. Upon returning, I started working more with materials like sand, casting its imprints into gypsum to explore the relationship between material and form. This process, in which matter itself creates the design, was a revelation. It's something that cannot be replicated by a computer model, as it's an organic, direct interaction that produces complex, unexpected forms.

Working with fluid materials like sand and gypsum allows for a more natural, serendipitous process, where the material's properties shape the final form. It's this relationship between materials and their behaviour—how they flow, harden, and take on new characteristics—that inspires much of my work.

OS: Fascinating... So, do you see this experimentation with materials as a way to redefine their traditional functions?

AH: Yes, exactly. When you purchase a material like glass, its purpose is predefined by the industry—its transparency, its use in windows or facades, etc. But when you approach glass as a fluid material, you can mold it, cast it into shapes, and give it new functions. It's about questioning and experimenting with the material's inherent properties to discover entirely new possibilities.

OS: That's a very interesting approach. Now, you've worked in Muharraq, a region known for its pearling heritage. How does this cultural history influence your design, particularly in projects like the Pearl Museum and mosque renovations?

AH: When I moved to the Middle East 11 years ago, I was immediately struck by the purity of the desert landscape. The lack of vegetation, the open expanse of material, felt fundamental to me as a starting point for design. There's something incredibly raw and direct about the desert that speaks to my approach.

The Pearl Museum, for instance, sits within a rich cultural context. The buildings we renovated were made from coral stone, sourced directly from the sea, and I wanted to honor that materiality while adding a modern touch. For example, the plaster finishes we used retain a sense of imperfection, allowing the material to reveal its layers and history. The weather conditions here also play a role—the intense sun, the salinity in the air—so I finished one of the main exhibition rooms with silver leaf, knowing it would tarnish over time, responding to the natural environment. This kind of dynamic, evolving architecture speaks to the region's history and its ongoing transformation.

OS: It's very poetic how the environment becomes part of the design itself. You also worked on a Maison Margiela store, which blends fashion and architecture. How do you see the relationship between these two fields?

AH: That's a great question. I worked on a concept store for Maison Margiela, as well as a project for Celine before Phoebe Philo left. But it was with Margiela that the true synergy between fashion and architecture became clear. John Galliano and I discussed the idea of defining the "codes" of the Maison, and how to reinterpret these codes in a new context without replicating the past. This is very similar to architecture—it's about pushing the boundaries of what can be done with a material or concept.

For the Maison Margiela store, we cast gypsum in textile formworks to create columns and walls. The result was a textured, unpredictable surface that captured the essence of Margiela's design—imperfect, raw, and full of character. This conceptual link between fashion and architecture was incredibly inspiring.

OS: It's amazing to see how architecture can inform fashion, and vice versa. Finally, how do you balance the unpredictability of working with fluid materials with the precision required in architecture?

AH: Architecture is a discipline that requires a lot of precision, from safety to permits and functionality. But the process is always evolving. When working with materials that are fluid and unpredictable, I approach it as a step-by-step journey rather than a fixed outcome. The initial stages might be uncertain, but as the project progresses, we bring in experts, specialists, and collaborators who help shape the material in the right direction.

For example, with the glass we're casting for the art museum in Riyadh, the material didn't exist in its current form before, so we had to create it from scratch. This required bringing together a diverse team to test, refine, and innovate. It's about creating connections and understanding how the material will evolve at each stage.

OS: So it's a process of discovery and collaboration rather than rigid planning?

AH: Exactly. It's about embracing uncertainty, allowing the process to unfold organically. And when that happens, it leads to new, unexpected possibilities. For me, the process is more important than the final product—it's where the real creativity lies.

OS: That's such an inspiring way to approach design!

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it's where the real creativity lies."

Siyadi Pearl Museum
Muharraq, Bahrain, 2024



Single Hide Furnitures
At.Kollektive, Dongen, 2023

Studio Archive: MM study models
Muharraq, Bahrain, 2024



Green Corner Building
Muharraq, Bahrain, 2020



Studio Amarat Fakhro
Muharraq, Bahrain, 2023



Muharraq, Bahrain, 2020
Aluminium cast for Green Corner Building