

Miek Zwamborn AN EYE OF WATER

About Jeroen van Westen's photographs

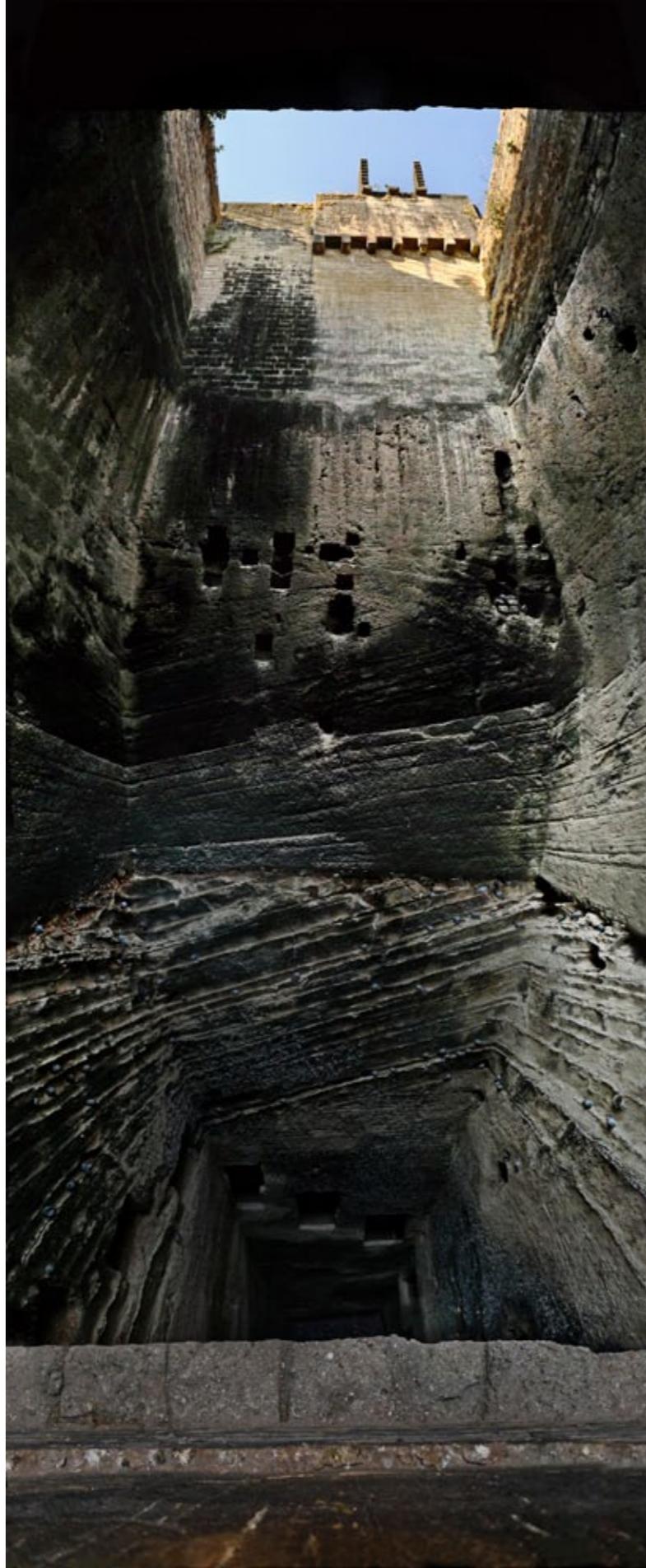
During a night in 2010, a Guatemala City sewing machine factory disappeared. Without anyone noticing, a broken pipe over months, or maybe years had caused the soil to wash away leaving a hollow space beneath the factory that eventually gobbled up the building. Nobody was in the factory that night. I do not know what happened to the hole: whether they pulled up the building or filled the hole with waste material. Possibly the hole is still a hole, surrounded by a fence, in the middle of the city.

I had practically forgotten all about the hole until I was remembered of it when viewing Jeroen van Westen's work. The gobbled-up building, its architecture unknown to me, appeared to have crawled up clinging to the hole's walls. During the climb, floors had been constructed and support beams had been placed. Stairs led from the edge of the hole to the bottom and in the curving walls niches were spared out and ornaments were added.

Van Westen had shot photographs of stepwells in India's Gujarat province and had brought these photos together in a magnificent two-volume book titled 'Inverse'. In Gujarat alone, there are three-hundred water wells. Long ago, they were the portals to potable water. Connecting with groundwater flows, these wells were built from the 6th to the 18th century. During droughts in between unreliable monsoons these wells provided fresh water to men and animals and crops. The groundwater level has sunk since the coming of mechanical pumps and drill holes; most of the wells have dried up and were deserted.

Van Westen combined several photos of each of the stepwells to form single images. His vertical panoramas show each floor but also the beginning (the sky) and the end of the well (the bottom); this way a dizzying depth is created. The images Van Westen constructed swallow up the viewer, draw his or her eye all the way to the bottom, yet contrary to the Guatemala City hole also bounce it back straight up to the opening reflected in the well's bottom.

Because of each photo's many perspectives, which seem to put the viewer's eye on different well levels, looking at the photos becomes a physical experience. Each image helps the viewer understand with almost mathematical precision the well's architecture and at the same moment exposes its emotional and tactile proximity. As viewer one feels the coolness, smells the stones, hears the wind rustle. Light enters the hole. Dark stones continue to turn lighter. Pillars appear to be full of ornaments, patterns carved out

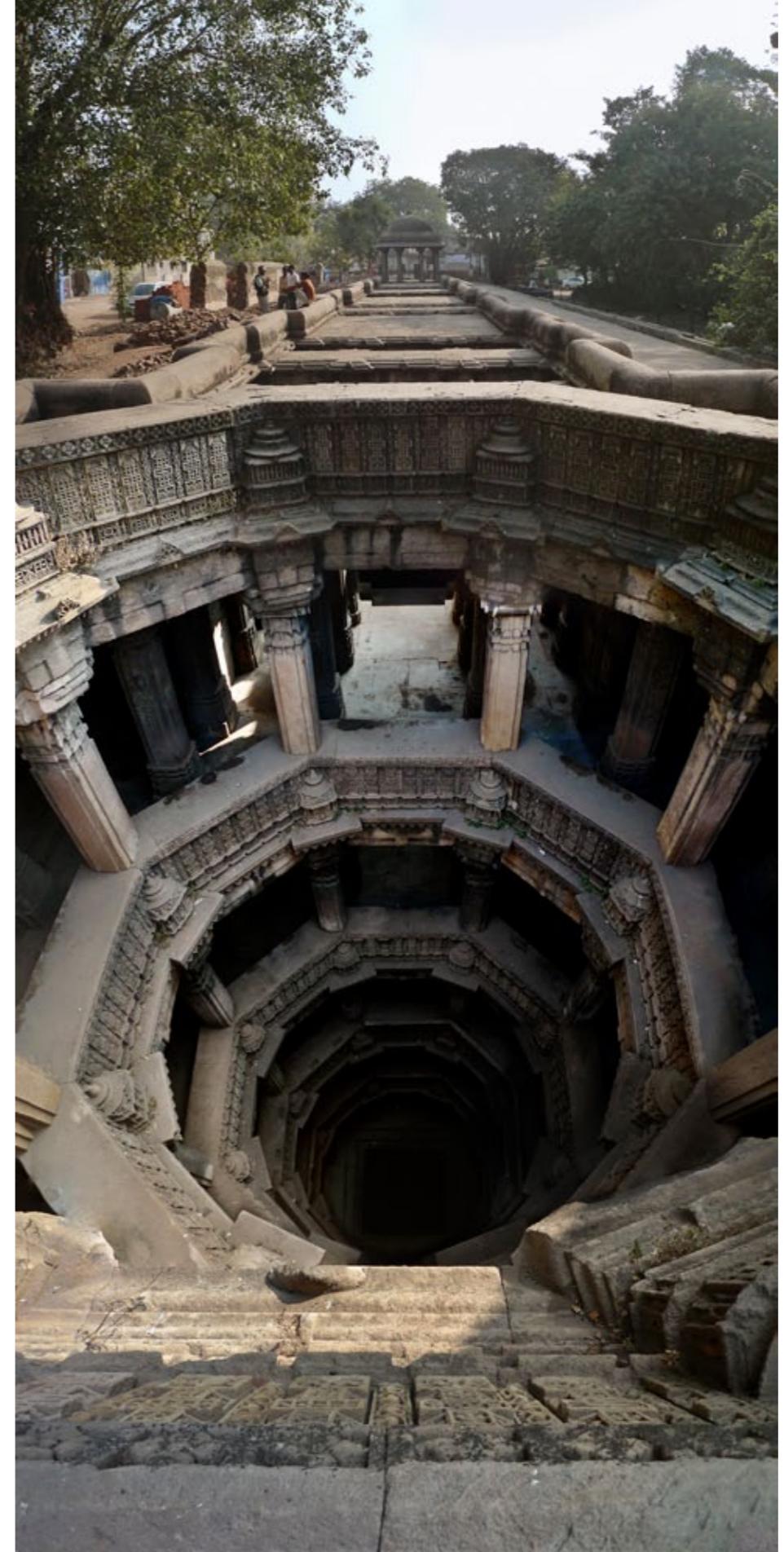


in the stone become visible. Once in a while a pilgrim sprinkles milk on the ledges for the deities, the gods. Seeds and leaves have descended on the stairs. Feathers are drifting on the water, as do the clouds.

Jeroen van Westen's water wells are spaces filled with history as well as air. The walls, formed from rock or stacked stones, appear to be solid. They keep the earth away from the hole, they push the edges free. Each well is a courtyard in the earth, a spot to be respected; while viewing the photos one experiences this mystic force.

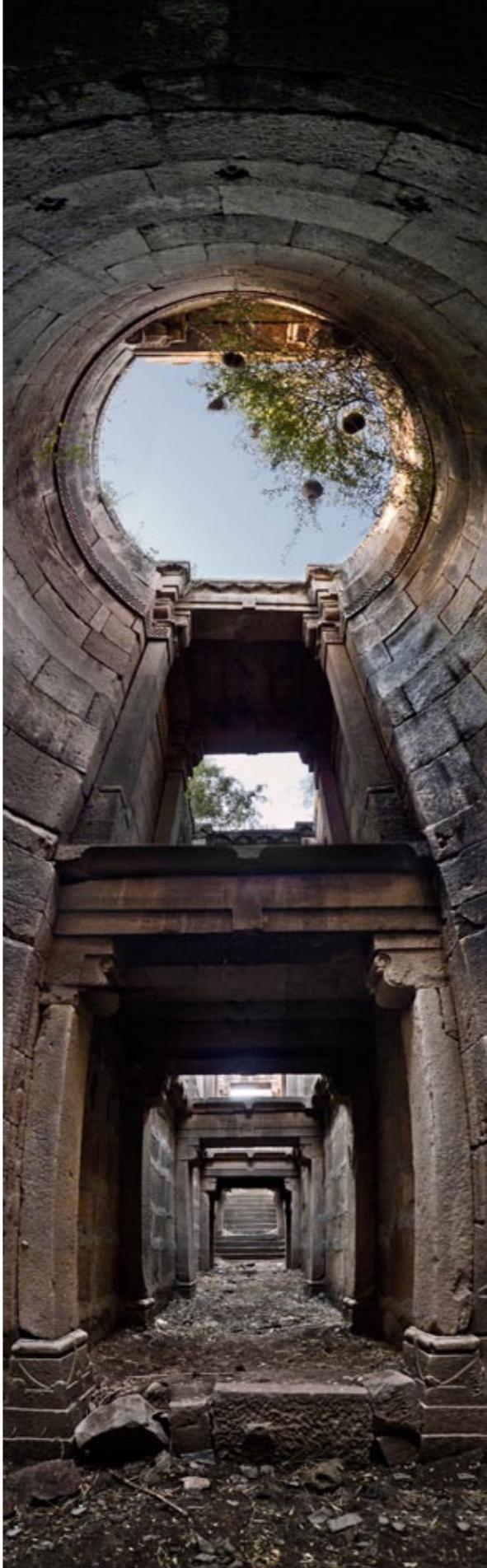
How did they construct these inverse temples? Some wells look as if simply hacked out: the rock walls form the mine shaft and here and there supported by stacked stones. Other wells look like baskets braided from stone, nests as if made by weaver birds. Again other stepwells look like buildings that have landed upside down and settled themselves deep in the earth.

One of the images shows a broken bottom strewn with pieces of stones and branches. The well has two floors and looks large. Just out of center, against the image's lower frame, a bird's nest has fallen down. If one looks at the photo for some time one notices more nests, high in the air, floating above the well's opening in a tree. There are still five nests, but they will succumb and just like the first nest end on the bottom. It is not often that time is so visible, so breakable on a branch, so empty and infinitely evaporated as in this image.



Dada Hari, Ahmedabad

between Halvad and Kankavati



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