Learning from the Wreck: Reframing Sentimentality

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Architecture
Harvard University Graduate School of Design, by

Theodore Walter Gadsby

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
[Master of Architecture]

December 2023
(Month and Year Thesis Submitted)

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Theodore Walter Gadsby

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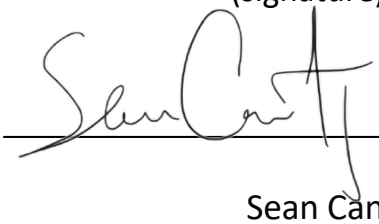


Sean Canty

Theodore Walter Gadsby, advised by Sean Canty

Learning from the Wreck: Reframing Sentimentality

Cape Cod is characterized by a cyclical churning of land. Over timescales of decades, the Atlantic shifts, erodes, and redeposits the sandy sediment from which the Cape is almost entirely composed, rapidly reshaping its coastal profile. Those who have made their homes and livelihoods on it have learned to live with the instability generated by these fluctuations of the dunes. The Cape's outermost stretch of beach is a zone in which the stability of our infrastructure, be it the hulls of our ships or the foundations and walls of our homes, is tenuous. Its shores have been dotted with countless wrecks over the years. Its dunes have seen many beachfront houses crumble down their steep faces. Yet we persist in inhabiting this zone of precarity. As described by authors like Henry David Thoreau, the draw to this liminal space between land and sea is rooted in strong human sentimentality and a fascination with the overwhelming sublimity of the sea's vastness. This sentimentality, our ability to learn from the systemic failures of our infrastructure, and indeed a literal repurposing of cyclically reclaimed building material from housing and shipping results in a new architecture uniquely suited to meeting an important housing need for the region. It relieves pressure from the Cape's broader housing stock by proposing new housing to accommodate researchers from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. This new architecture may itself be ephemeral but acknowledges itself as simply one point in the very cycles of destruction and reuse that generated it.

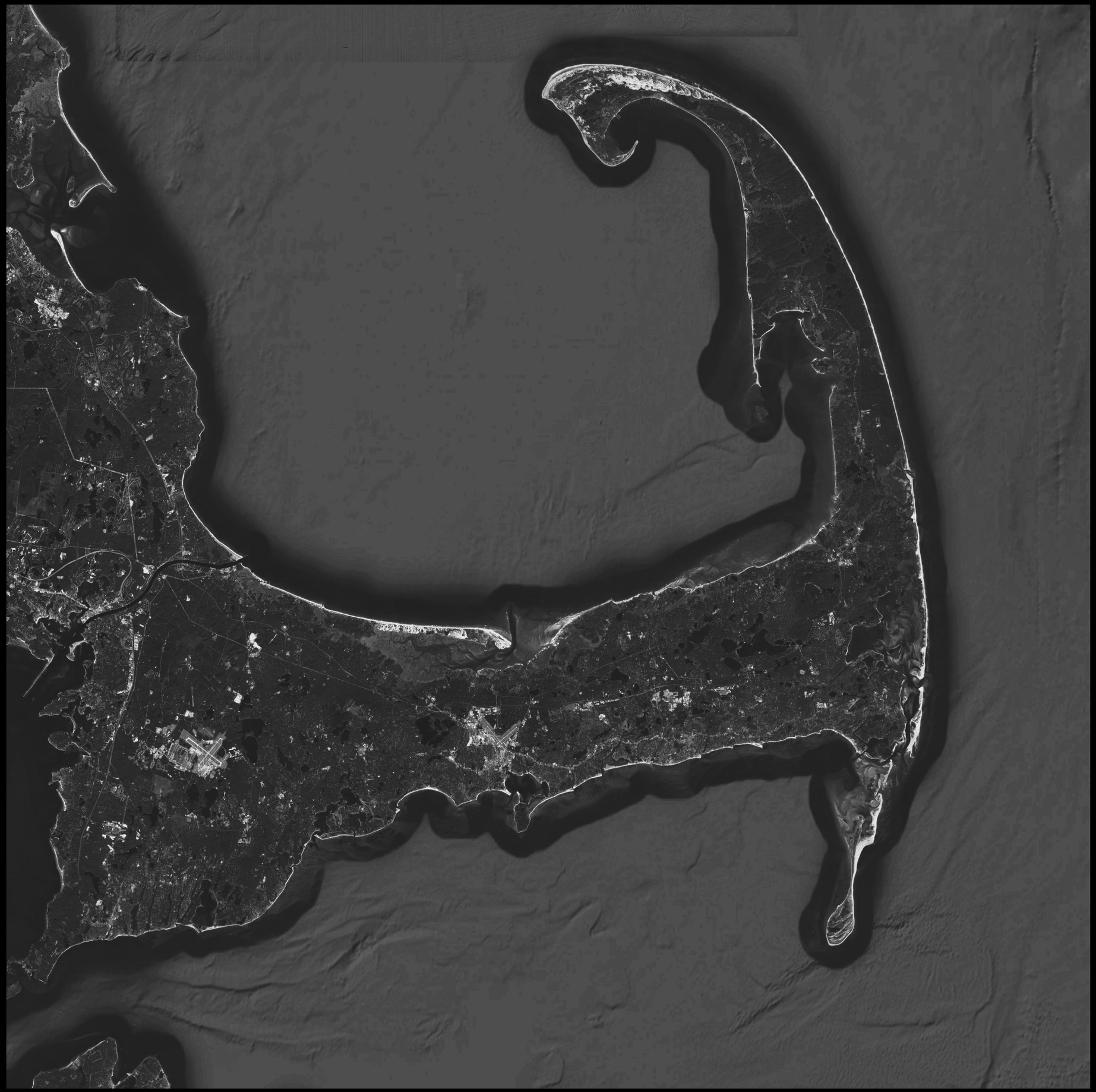
Reviewed By: Frano Violich, Ana Miljacki, Stephanie Lin, Quilian Riano, Jon Lott, Scott Cohen

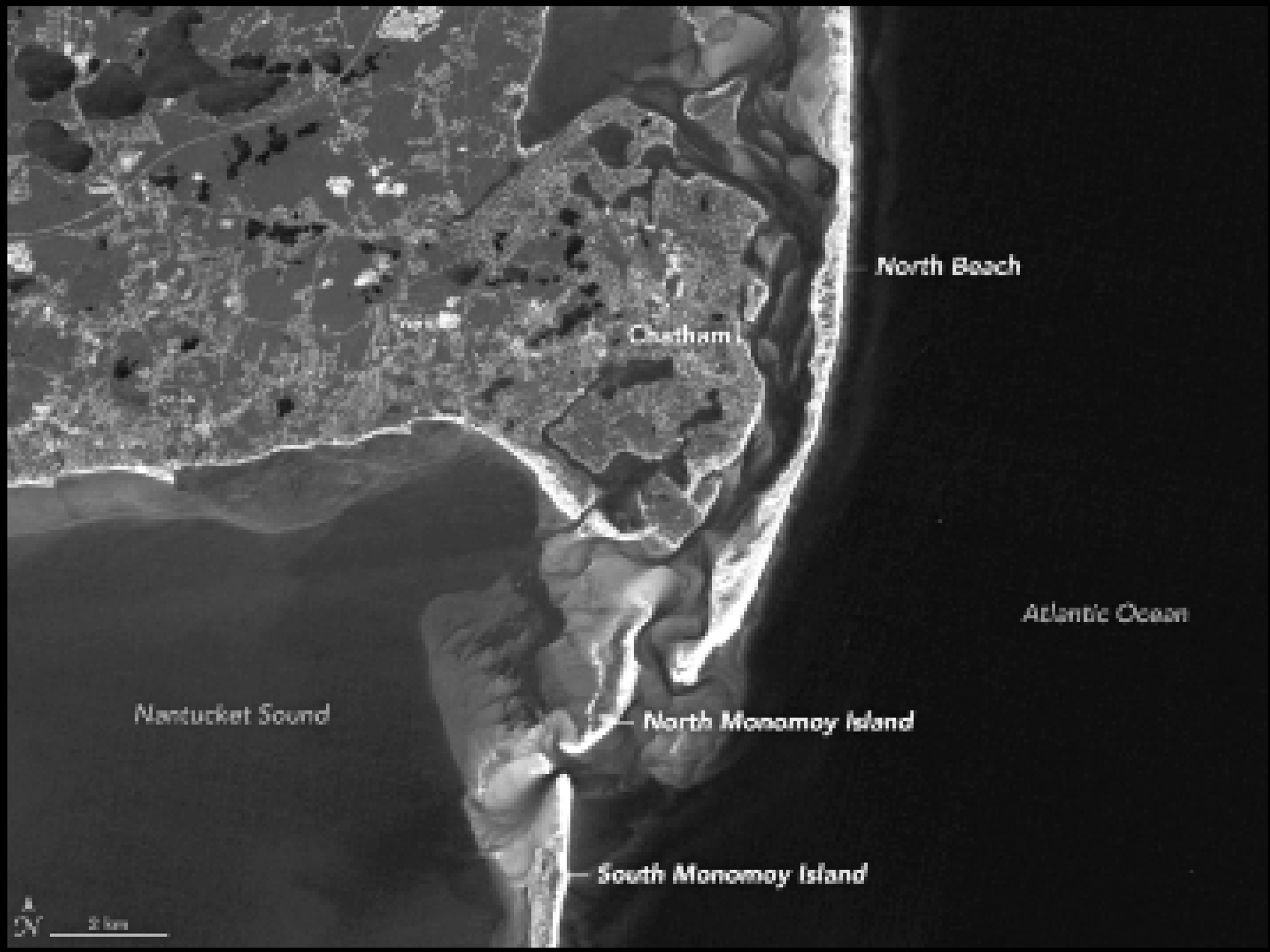
Thesis Final Review
12/19/2023

Walter Gadsby
Advisor: Sean Canty

Learning from the Wreck:

Reframing Sentimentality





“Cape Cod is the scant, cast-up residue of the slow destruction of real land”

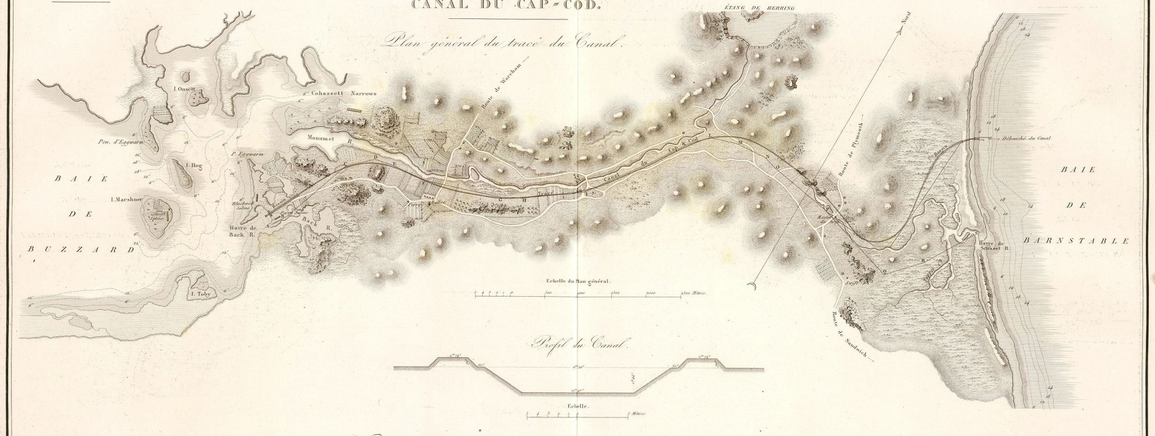
- Mitchell Robert Breitwieser

Today's Wrecks

État de Massachusetts.

CANAL DU CAP-COD.

Plan général du tracé du Canal.



Profil du Canal.

Nivellement général de l'Isthme du Cap Cod suivant les lignes ABCDEFGHIKLMNOPQRS.

Fig. I. 1ère Hypothèse.

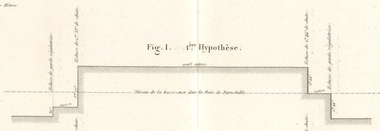


Fig. II. 2e Hypothèse.

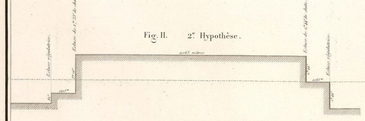
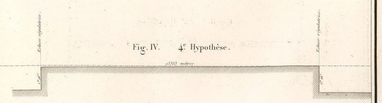


Fig. III. 3e Hypothèse.

Fig. IV. 4e Hypothèse.



Échelle des hauteurs pour les Fig. I, II, III et IV.

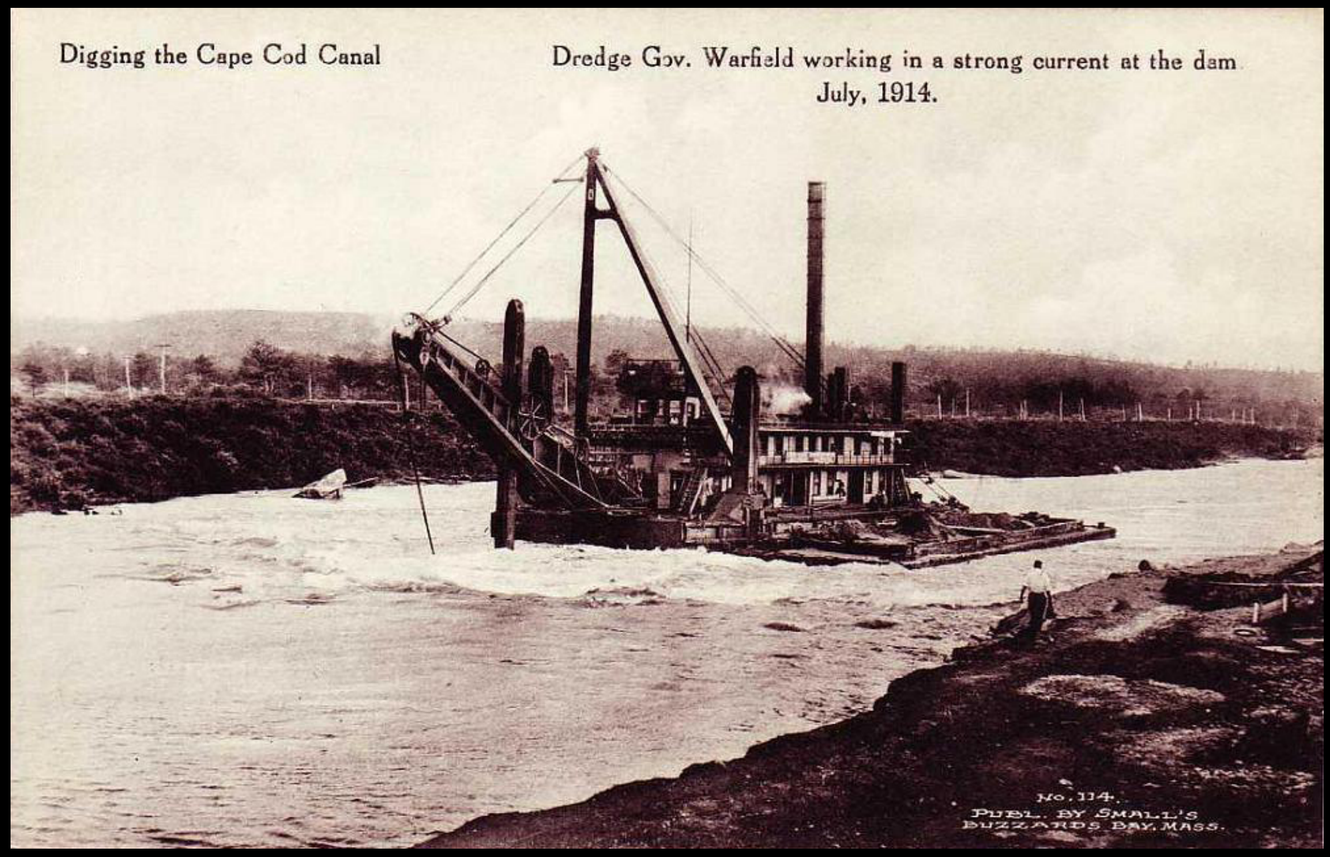
Échelle des Longueurs pour les Fig. I, II, III et IV.

Dressé par le Major Graham.

Gravé par Adam.

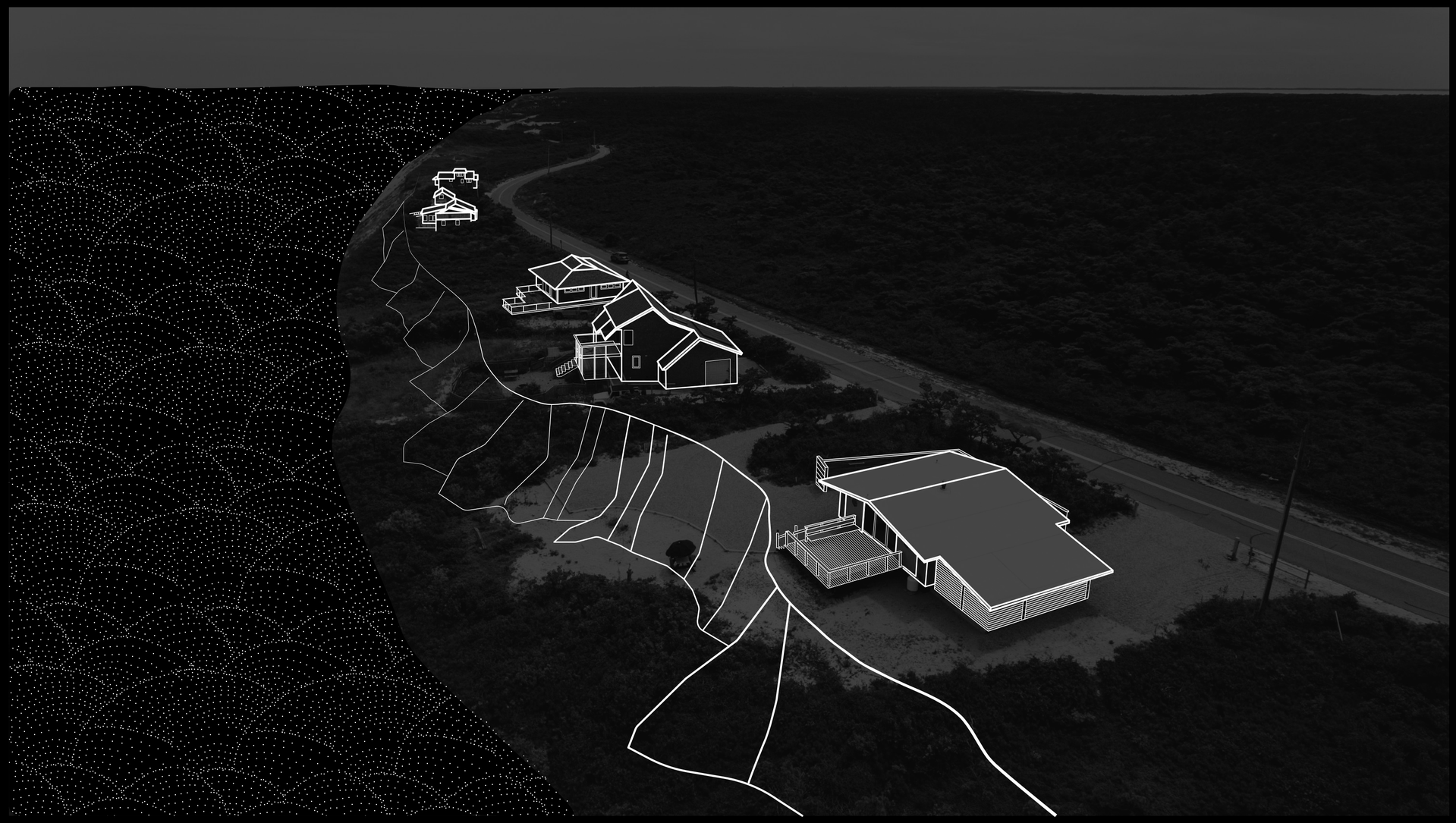
Digging the Cape Cod Canal

Dredge Gov. Warfield working in a strong current at the dam
July, 1914.



Uninhibited access to dunes prior to establishment of National Seashore (1961)

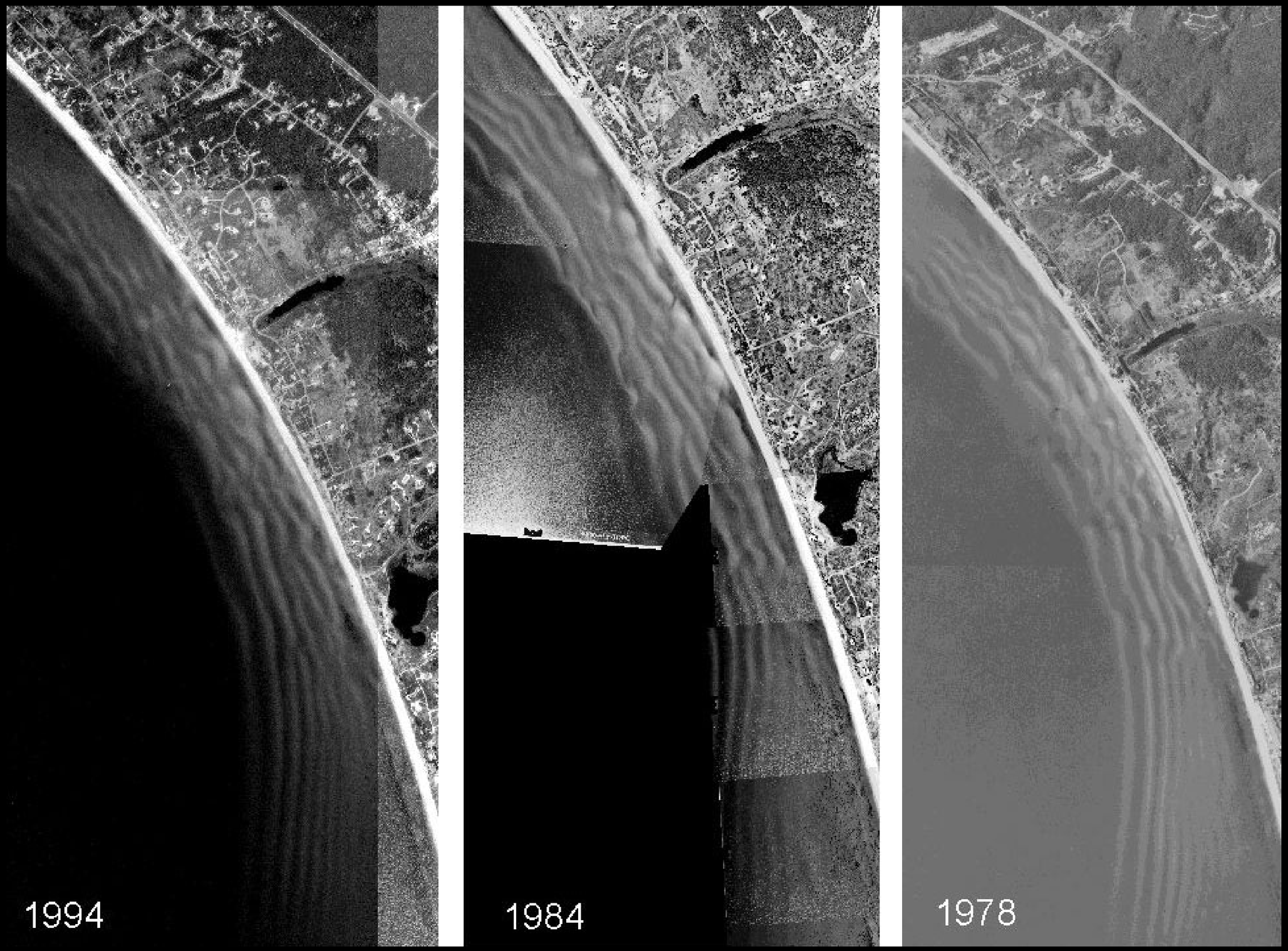
Ocean View Drive, Wellfleet



Lecount Hollow Beach, Wellfleet

Wellfleet

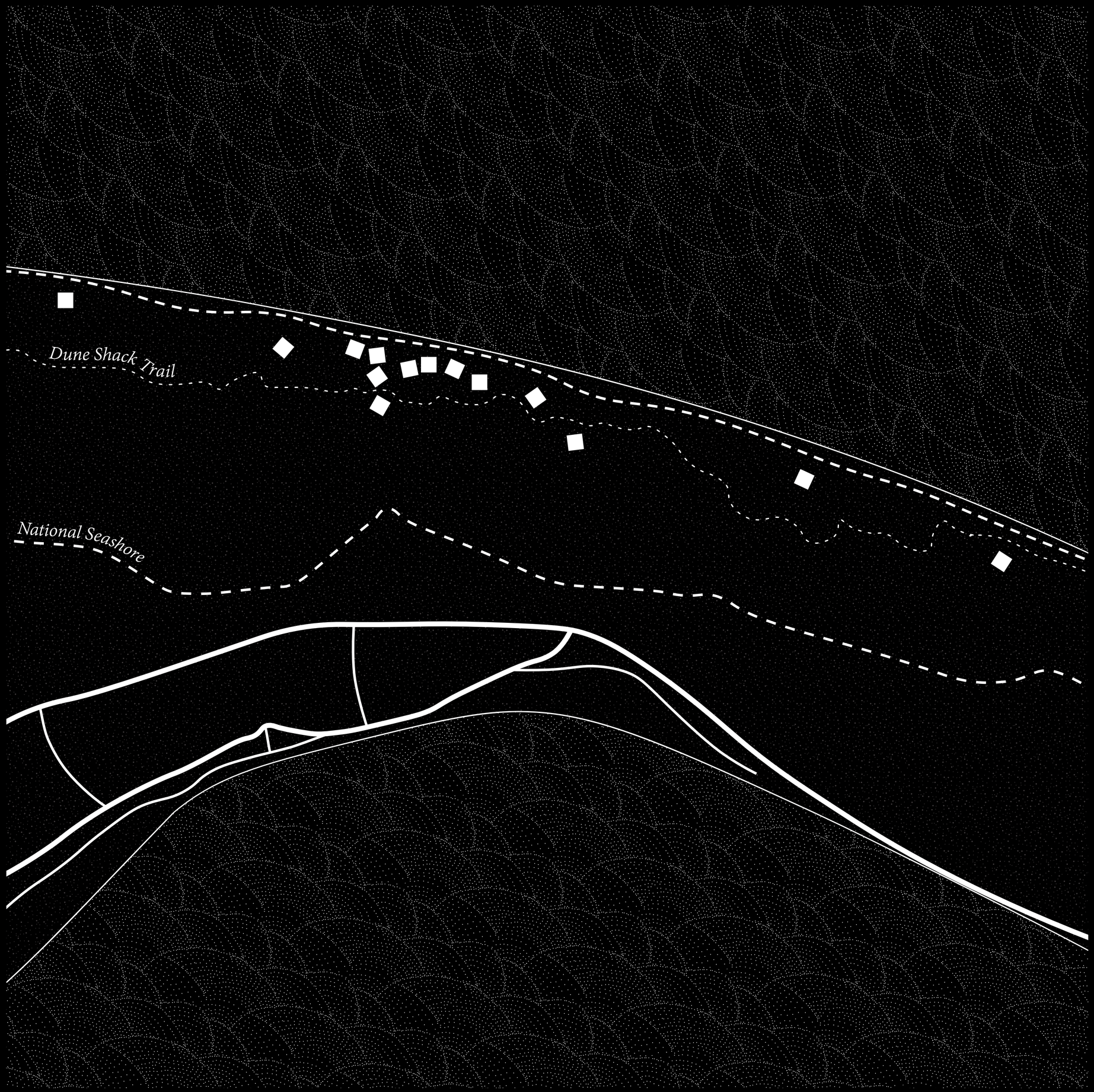
Wellfleet

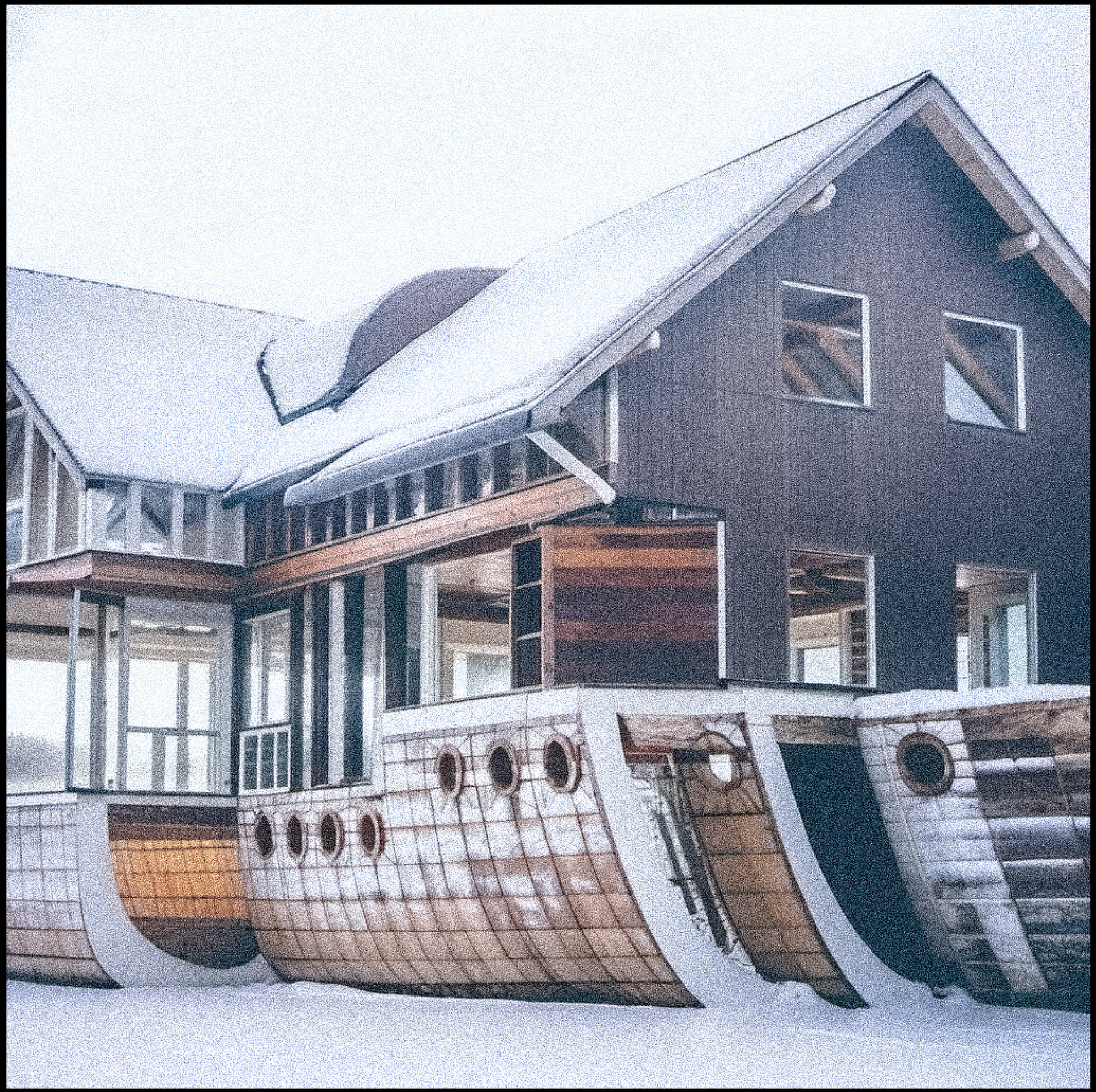


Aerial photos of the shoreline in Cape Cod Bay south of Truro | Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute PV-Lab

Oceanographic Institute, Woods Hole, Cape Cod, Massachusetts | Early 20th Century

Oceanographic Institute, Woods Hole, Cape Cod, Massachusetts | Today


Dune Shack Trail
National Seashore



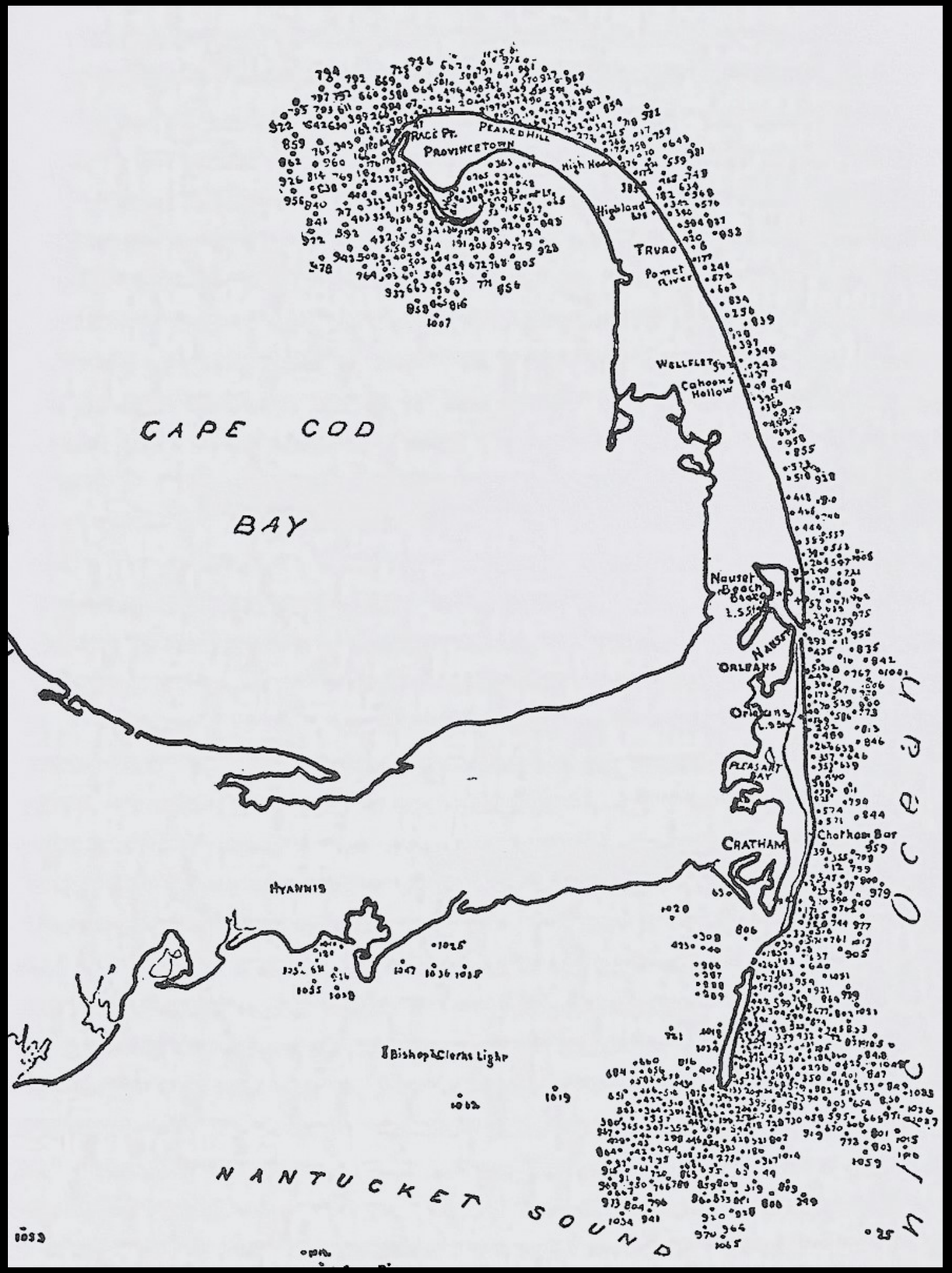
“Cape Cod is not land, really, but a gethering of the wrecks of land”

- Mitchell Robert Breitwieser

Yesterday's Wrecks

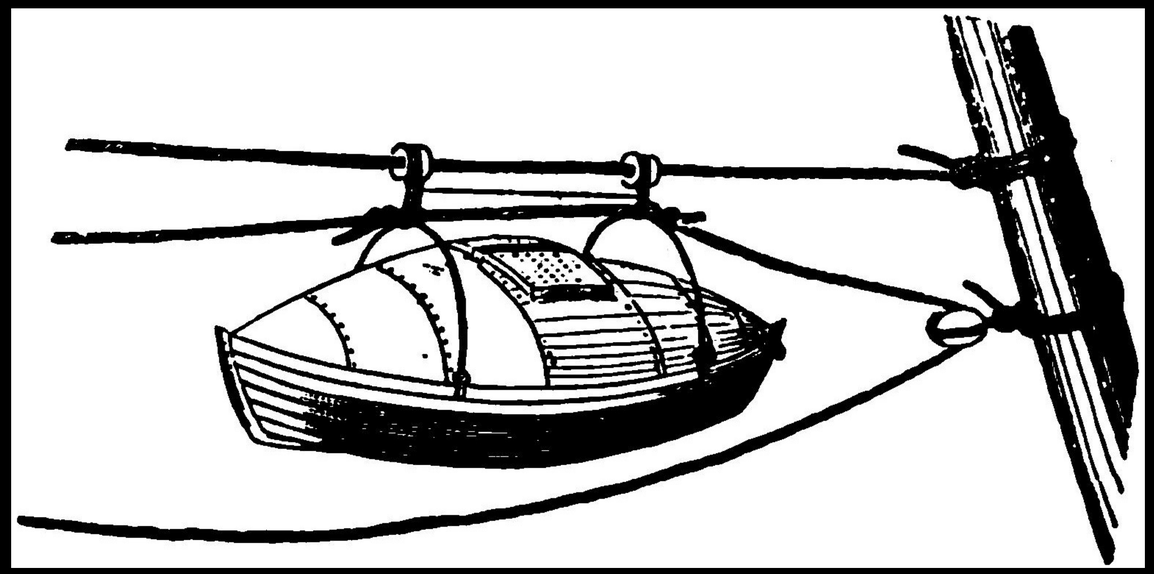
Arizona Sword Wreck | Cape Cod Canal, 1952

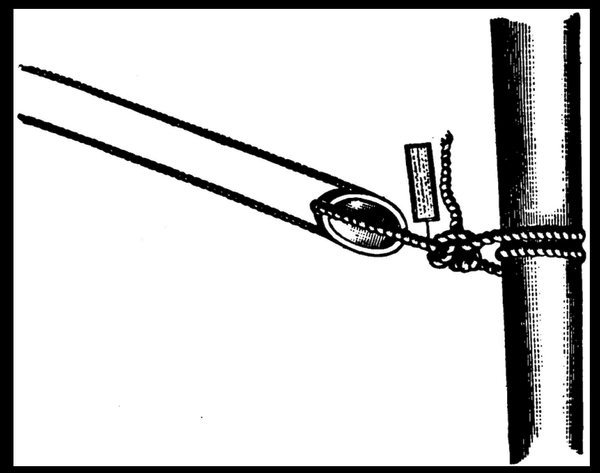
Shipwreck off Truro, 1926

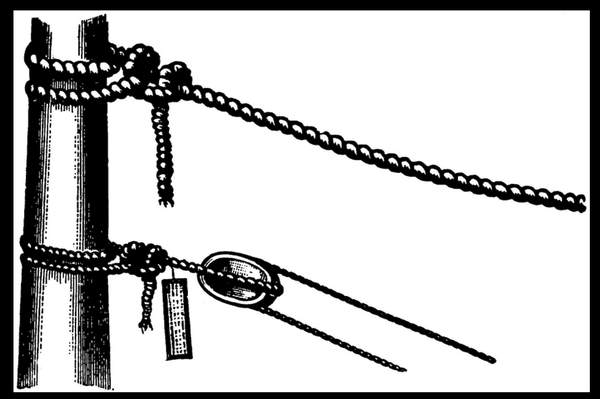


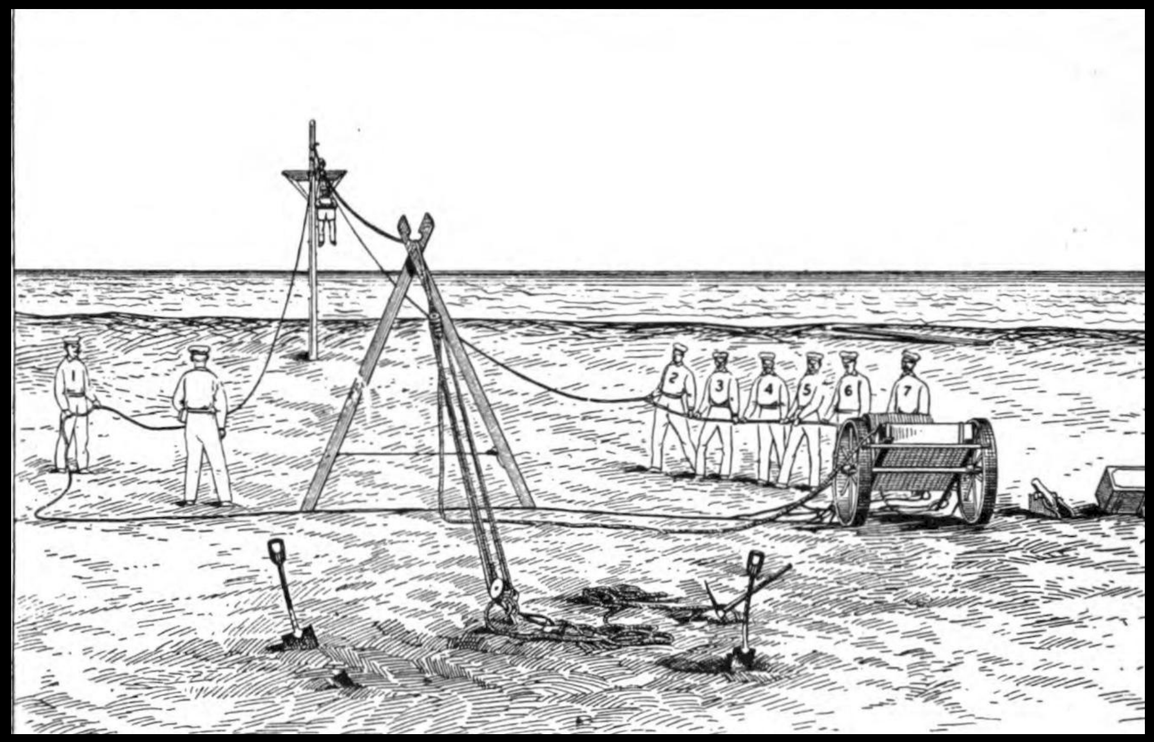
Cape Shipwreck Locations

Coastal Communities Engage with Wreck





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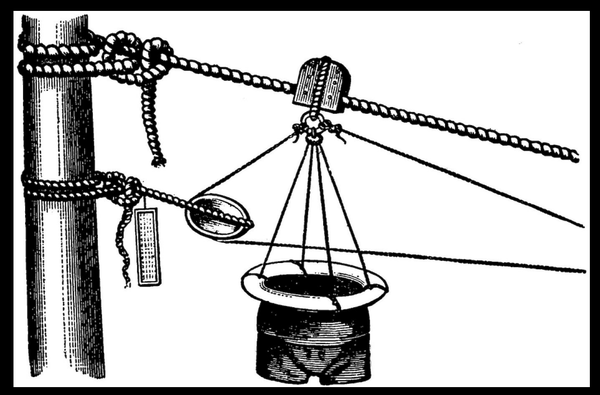
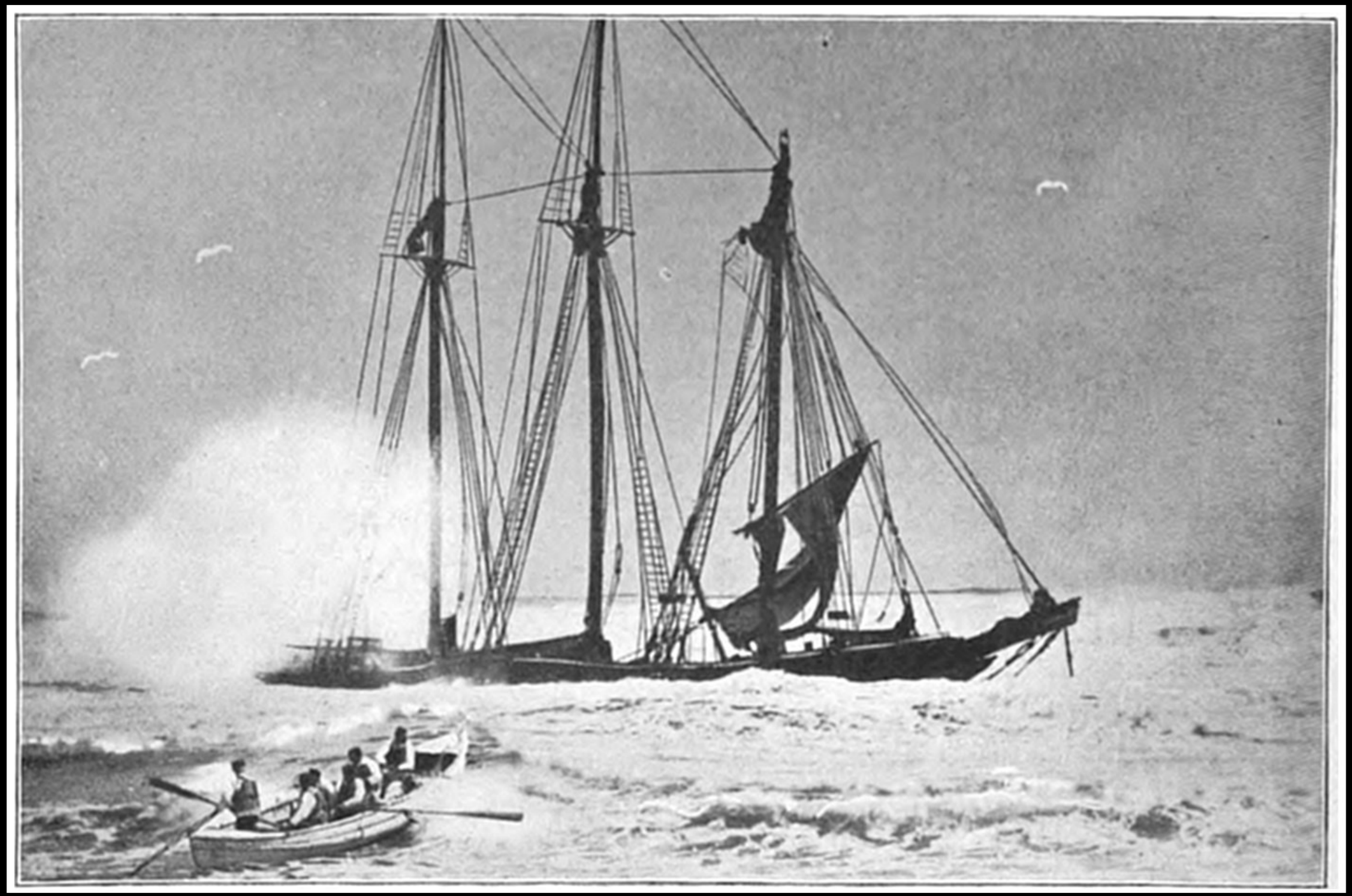
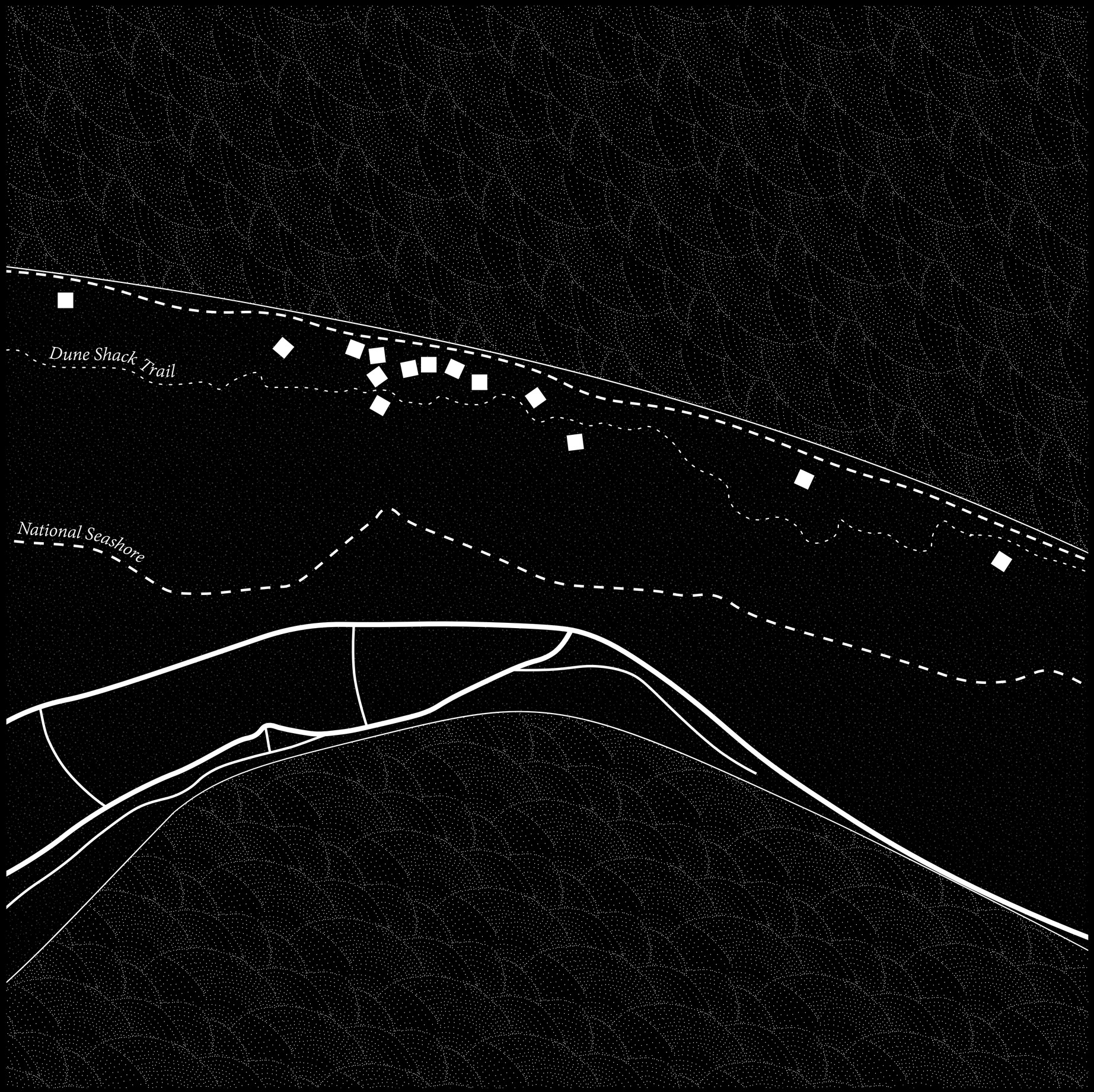




Provincetown-Truro Dunes | National Seashore


Dune Shack Trail
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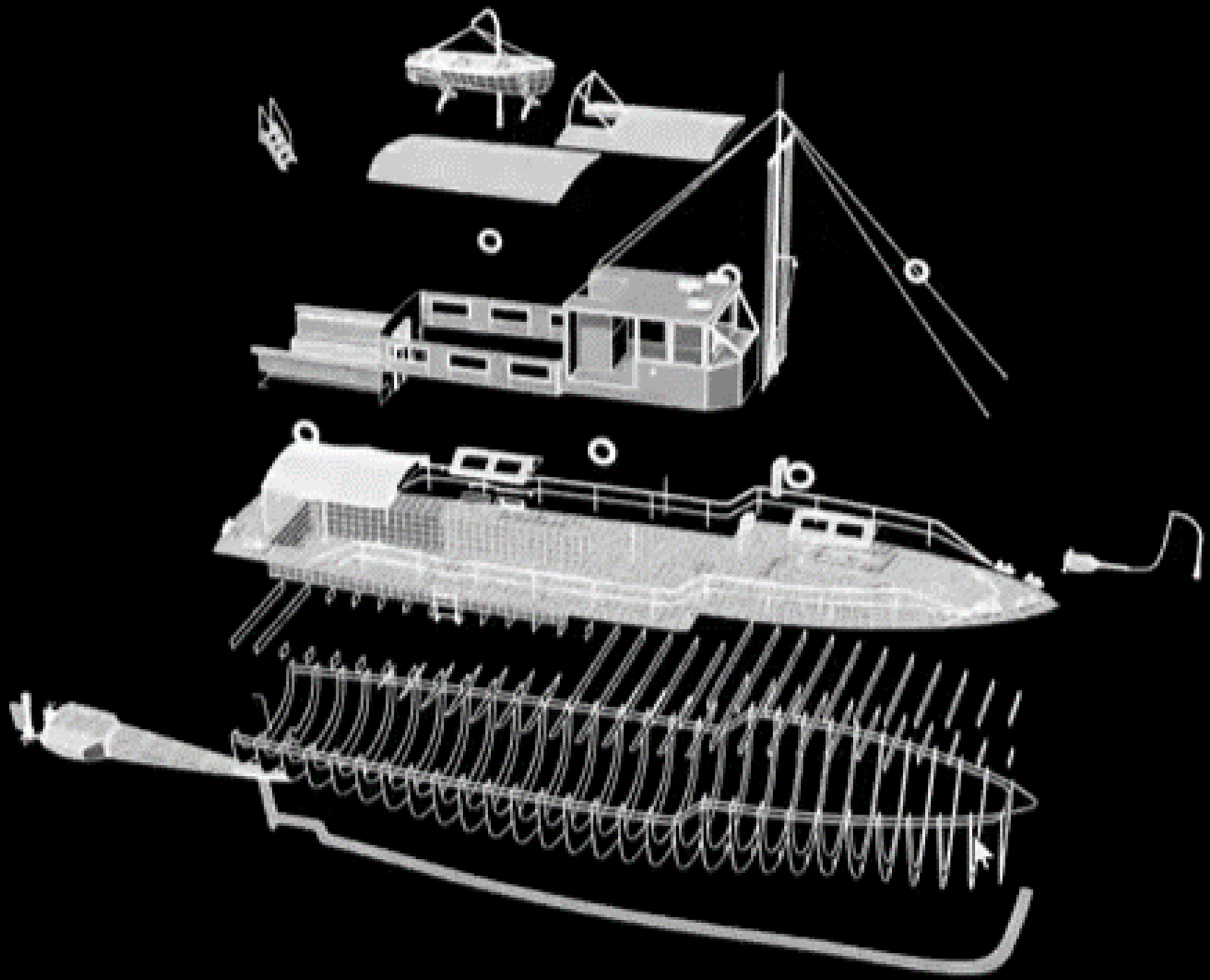
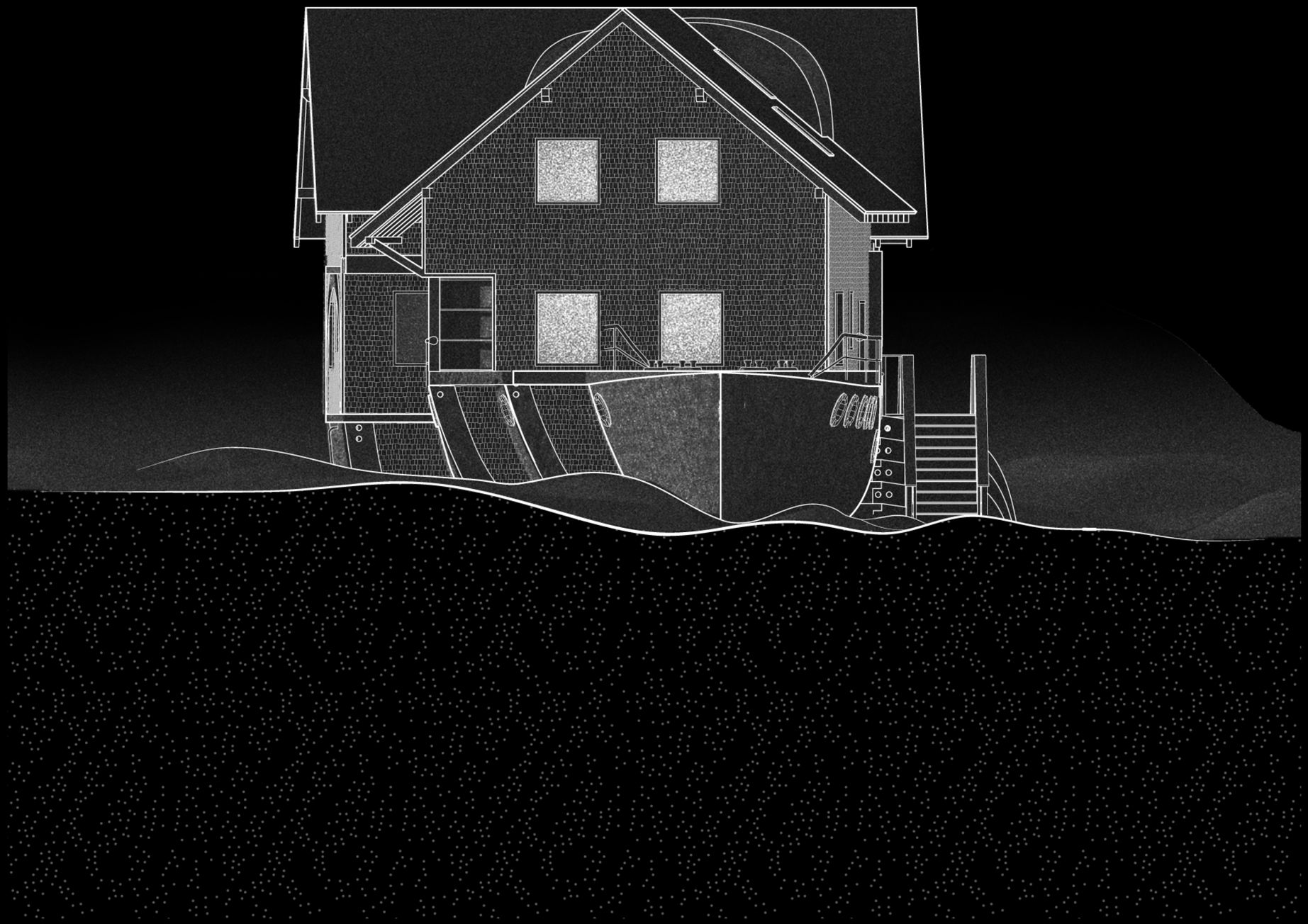
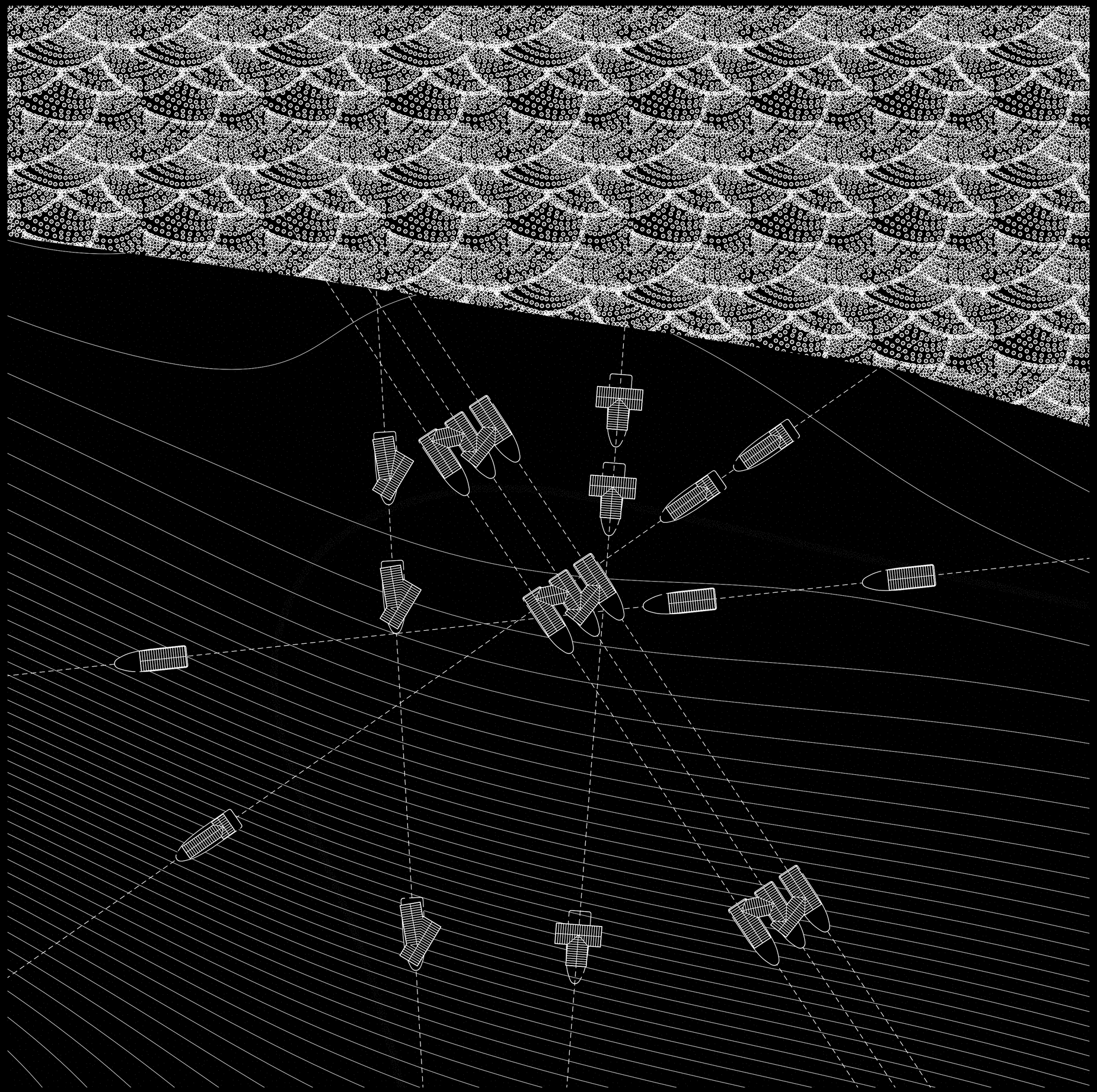
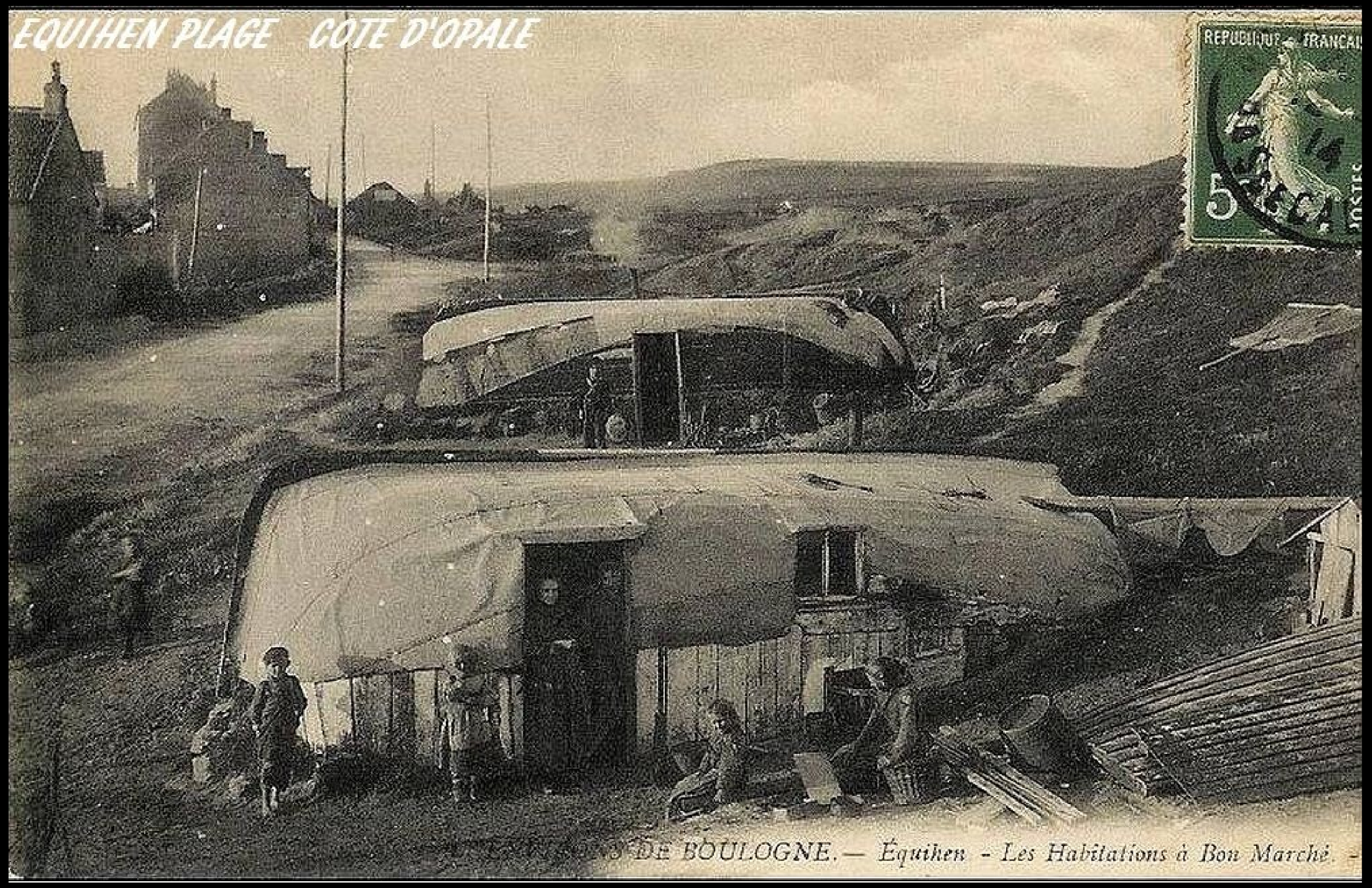


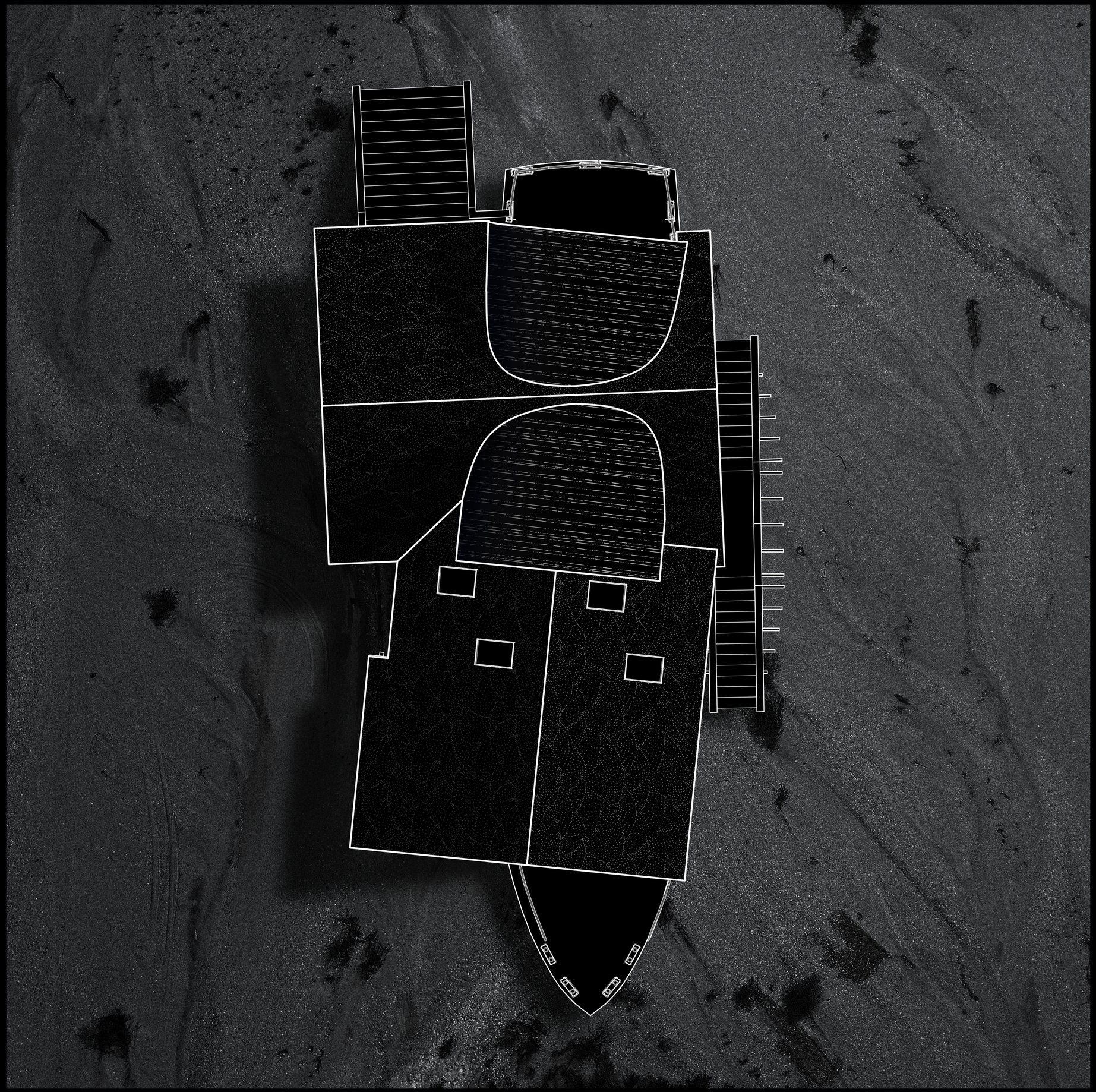


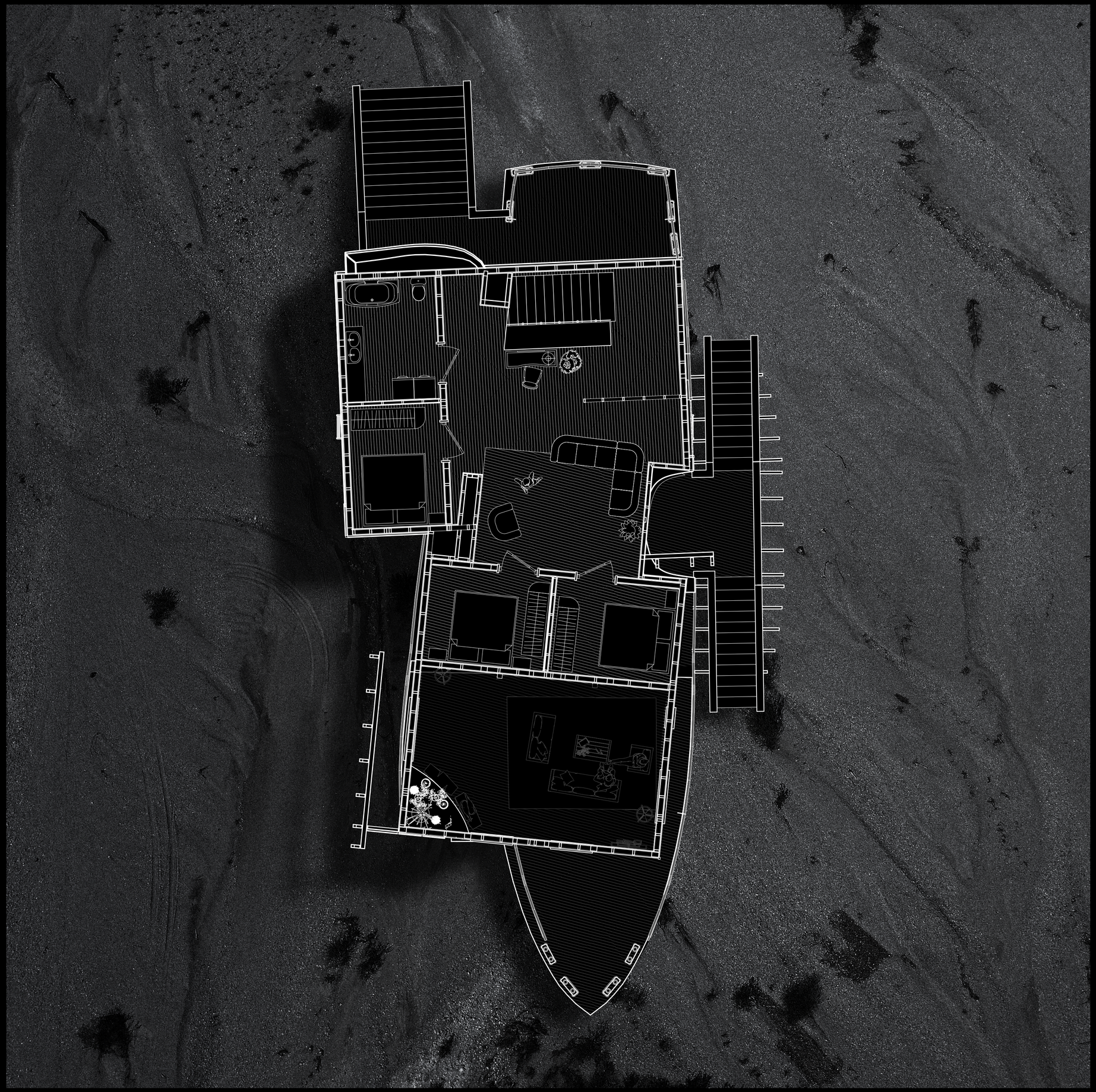
Charles A. Campbell stranded on the beach in Truro, 1895 | National Park Service

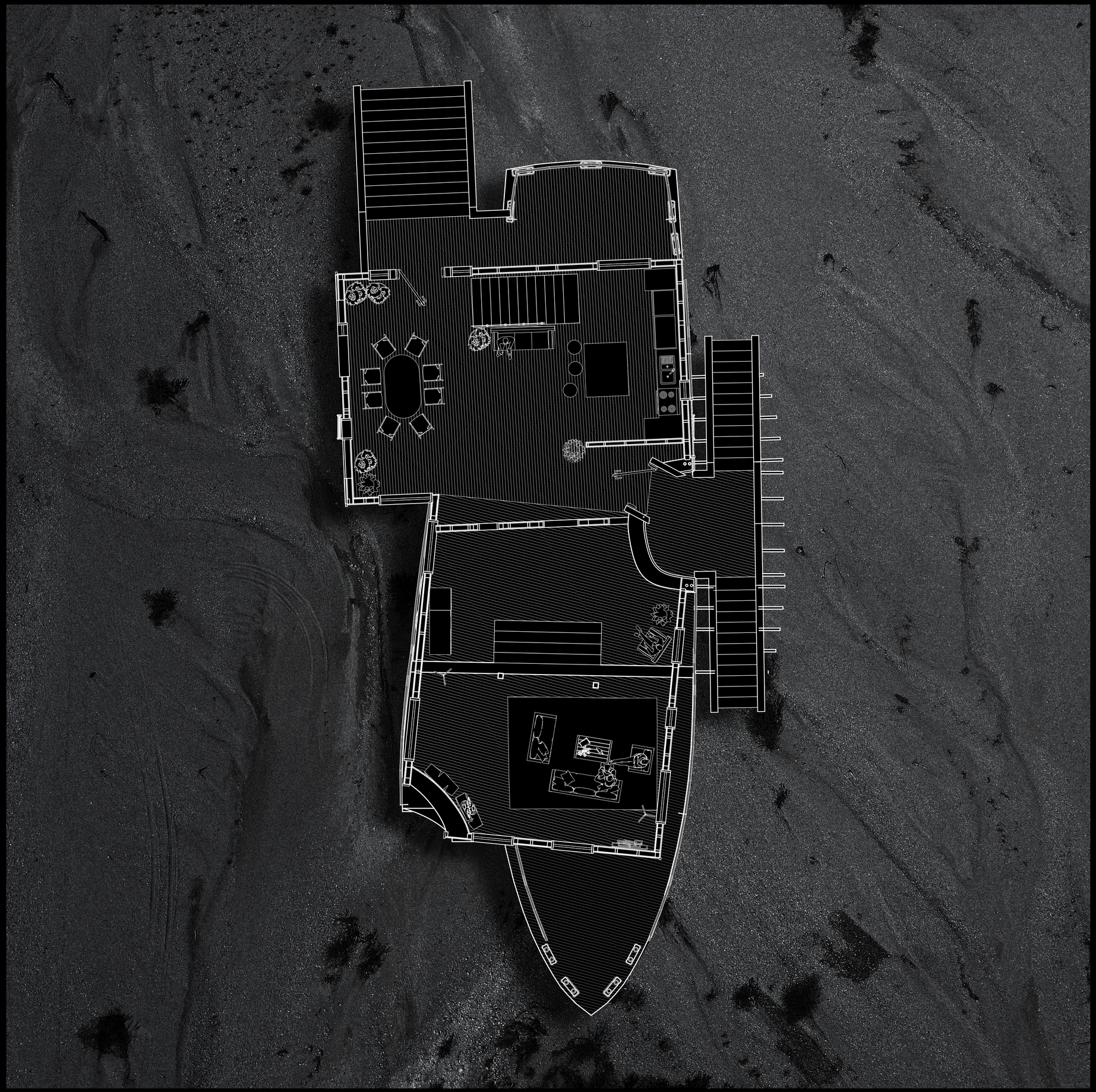


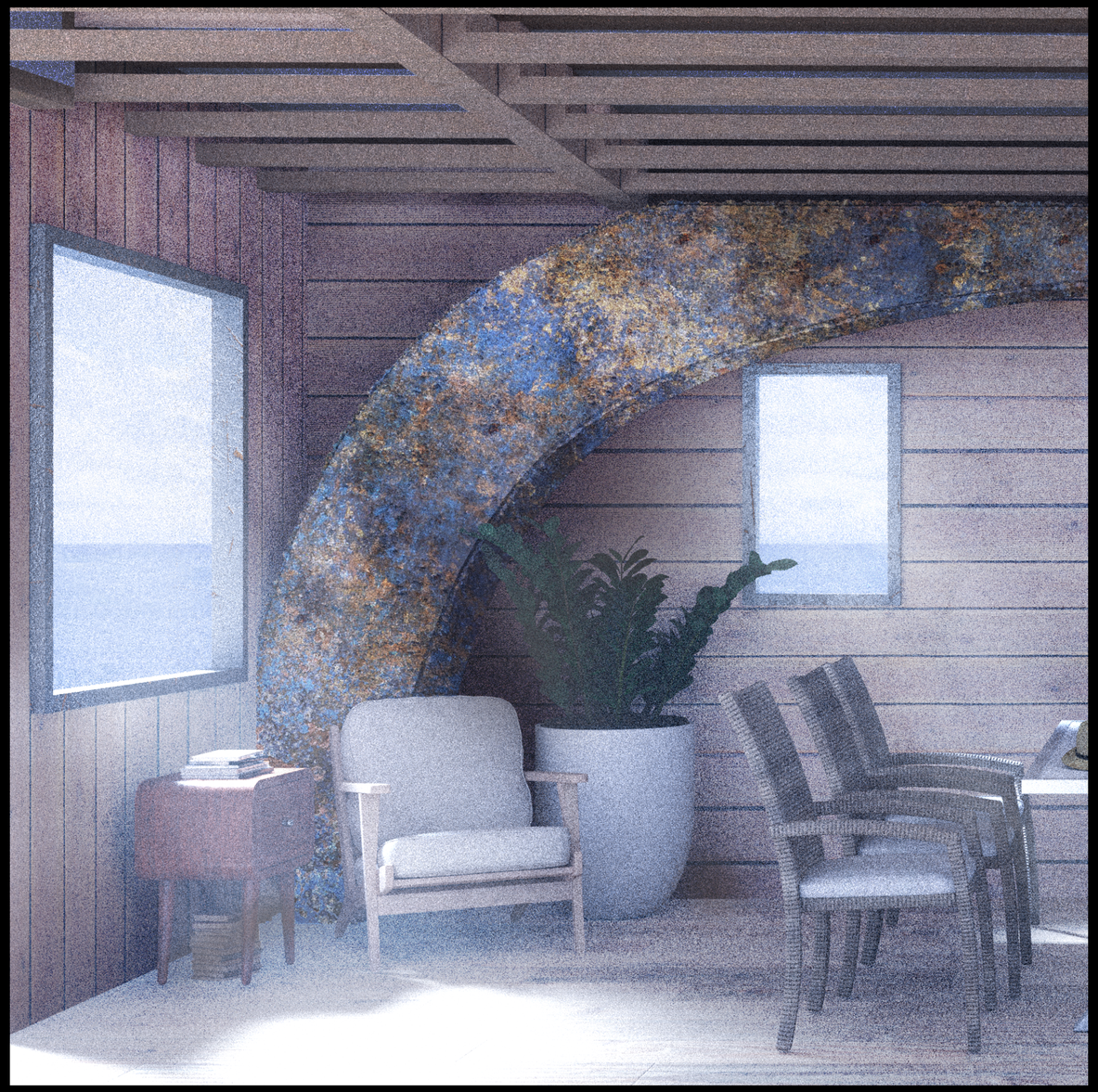


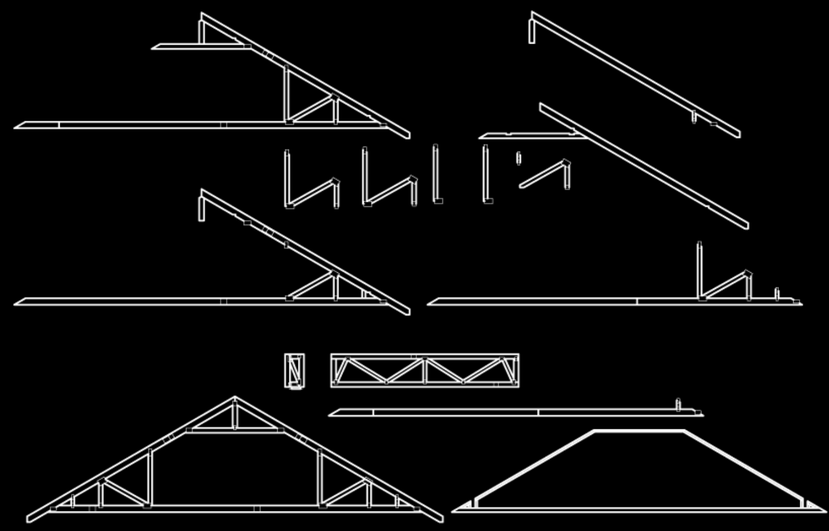
Hulls for Dwelling | Equihen Plage

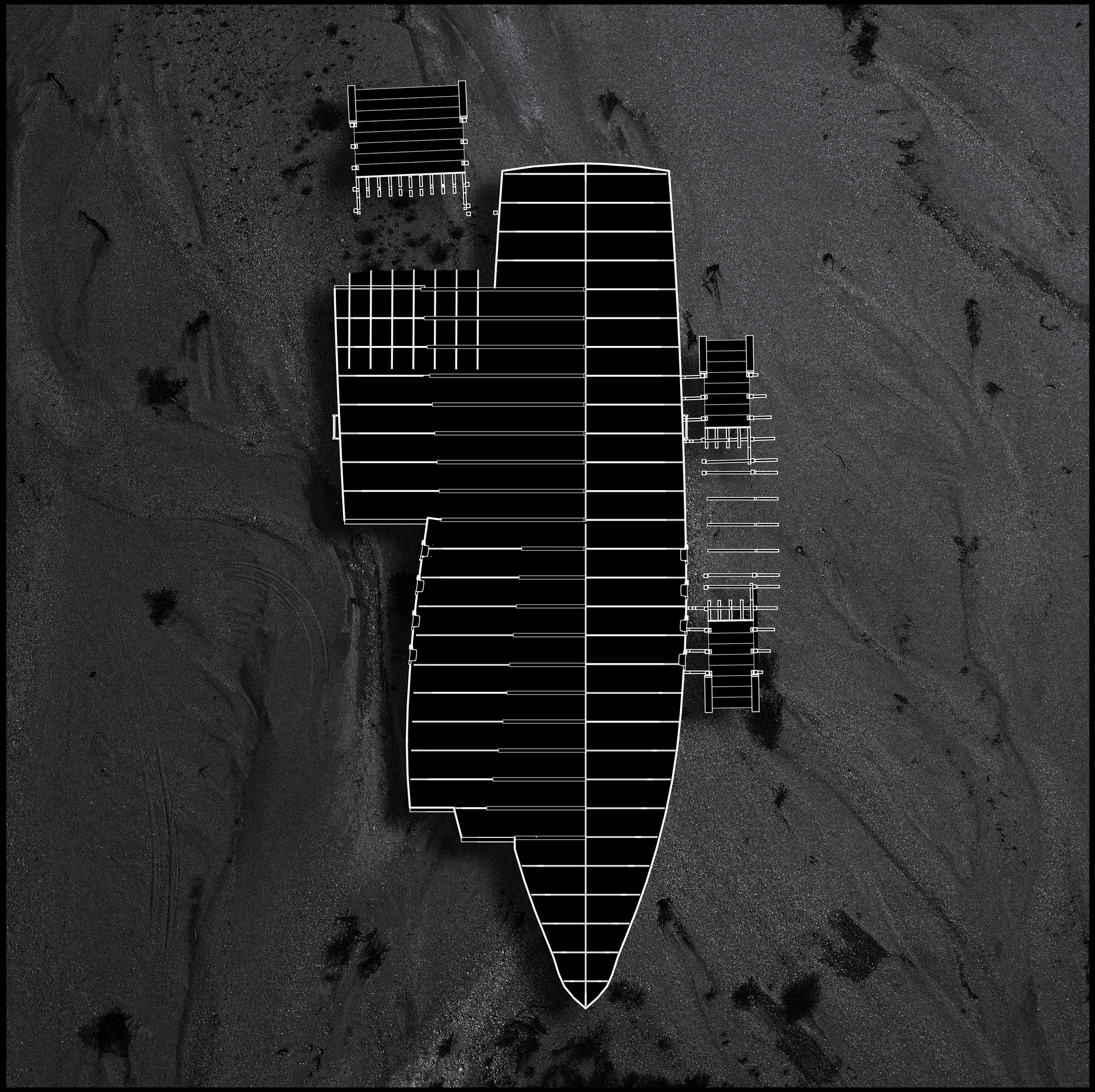


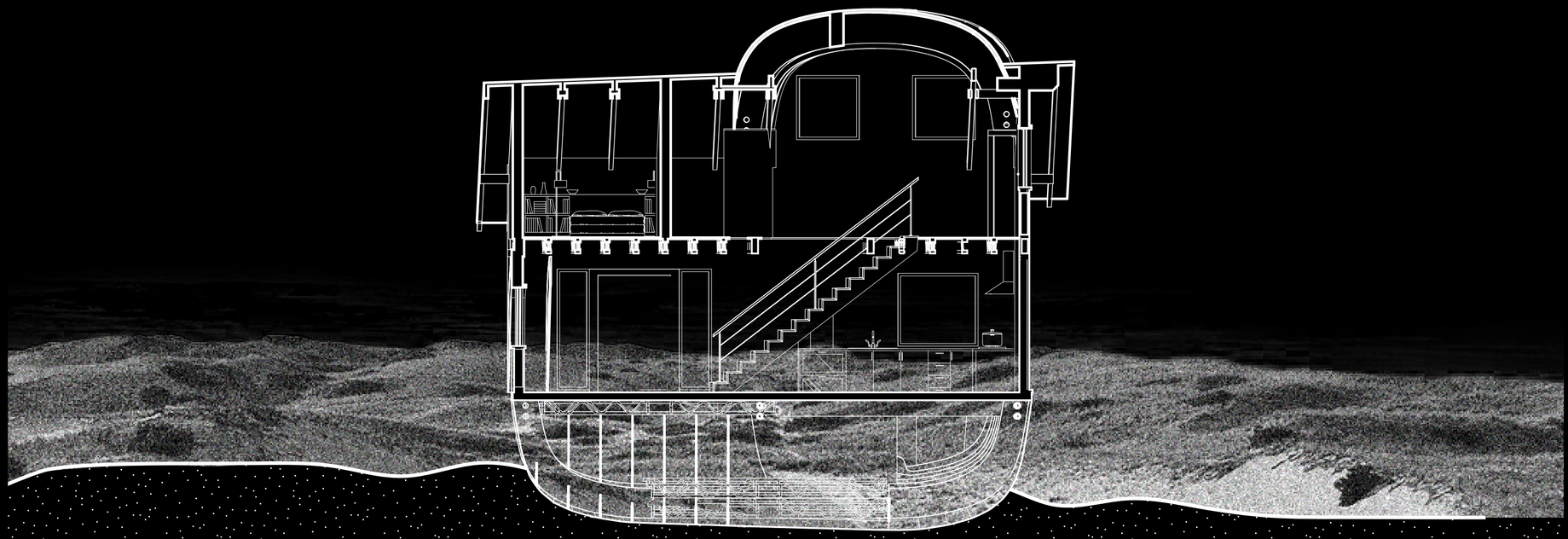


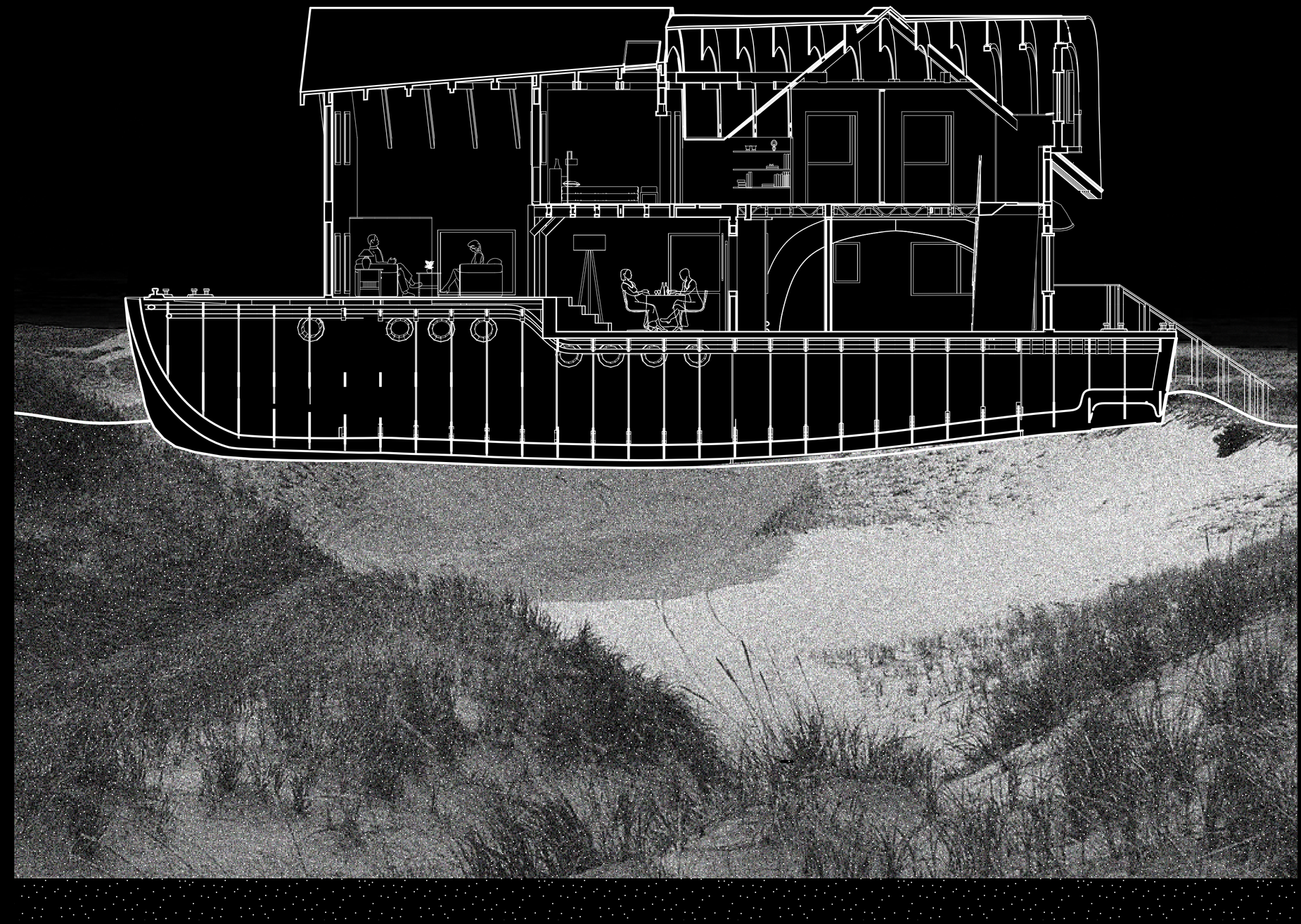


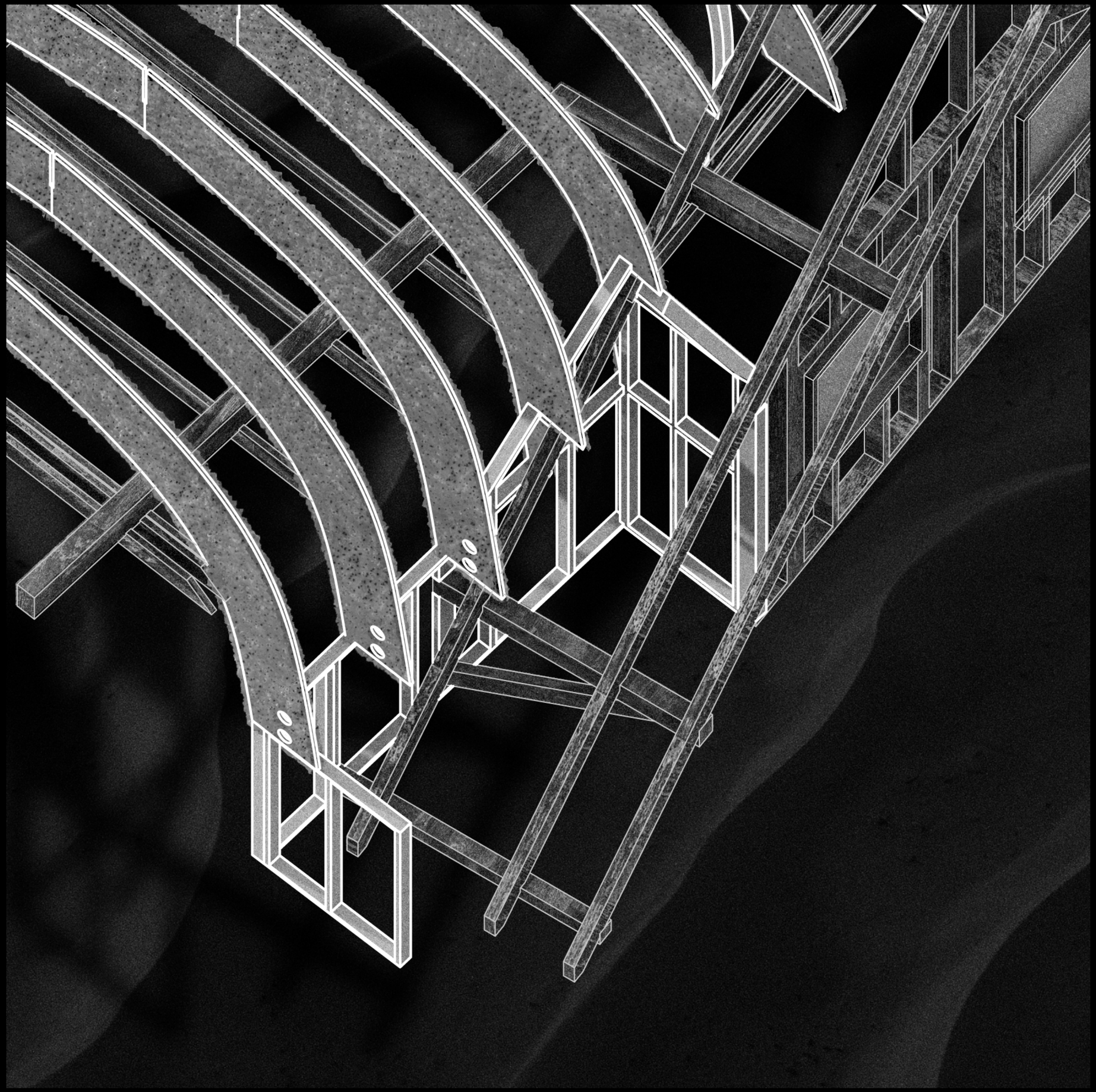


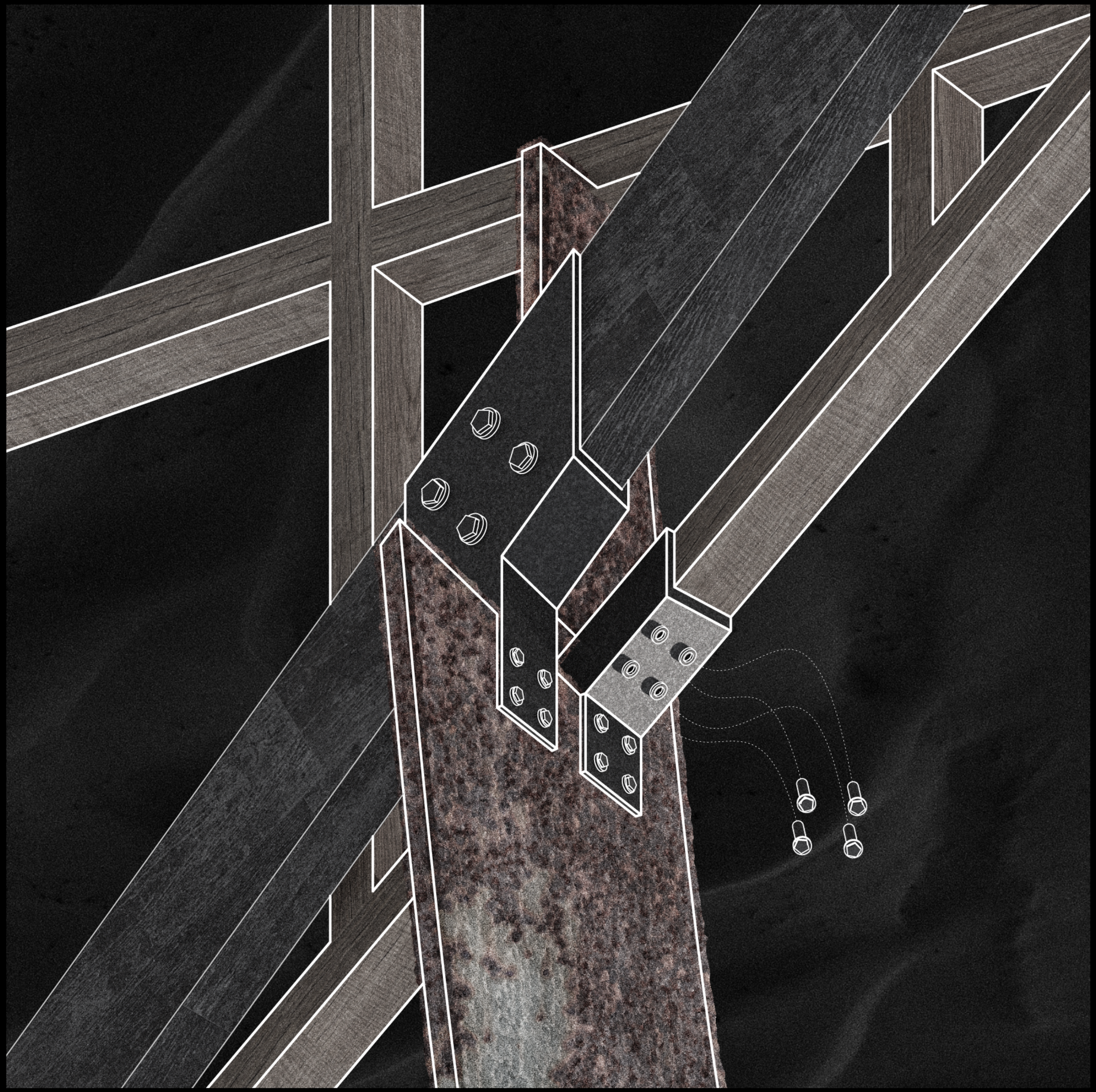


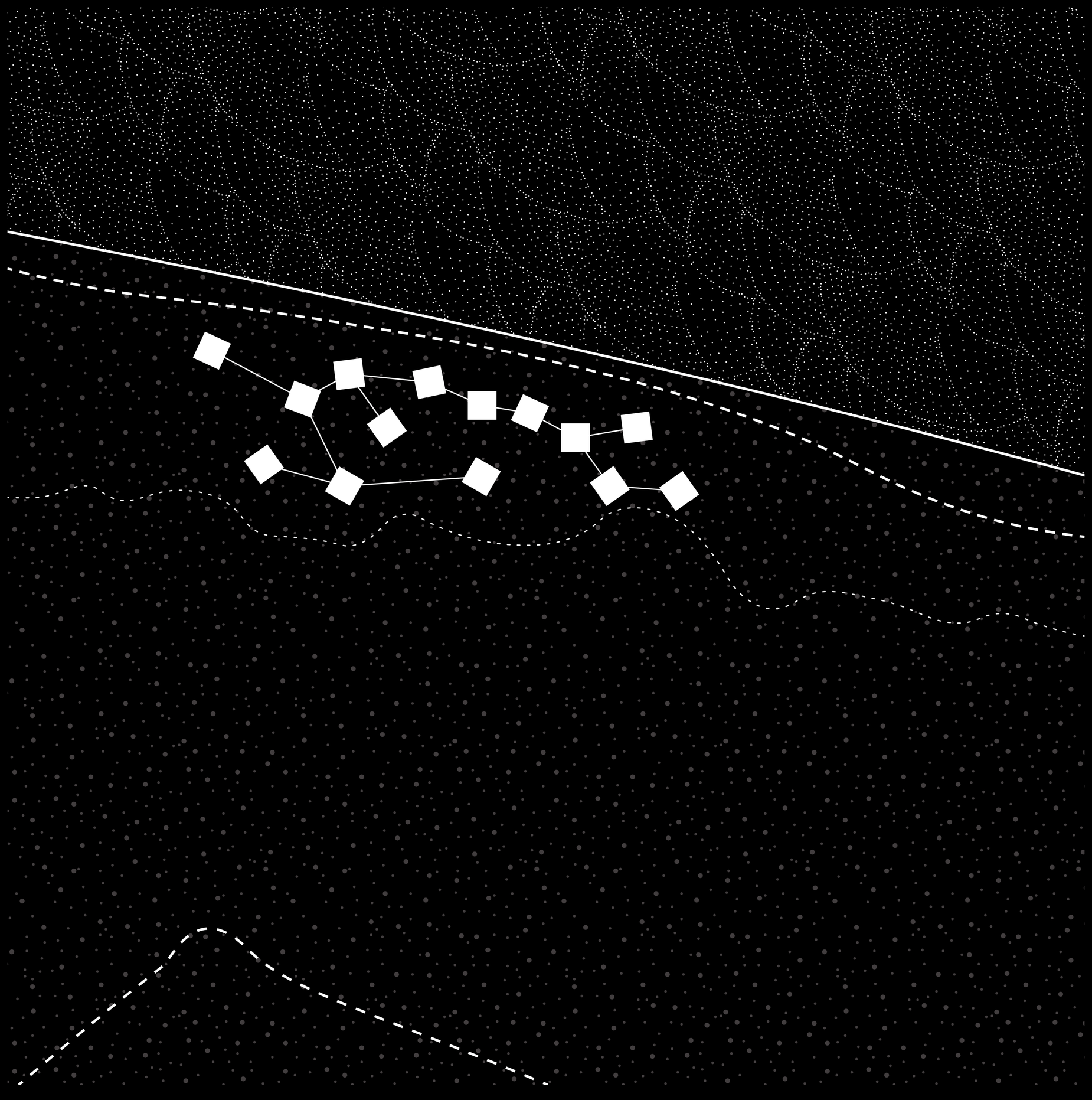


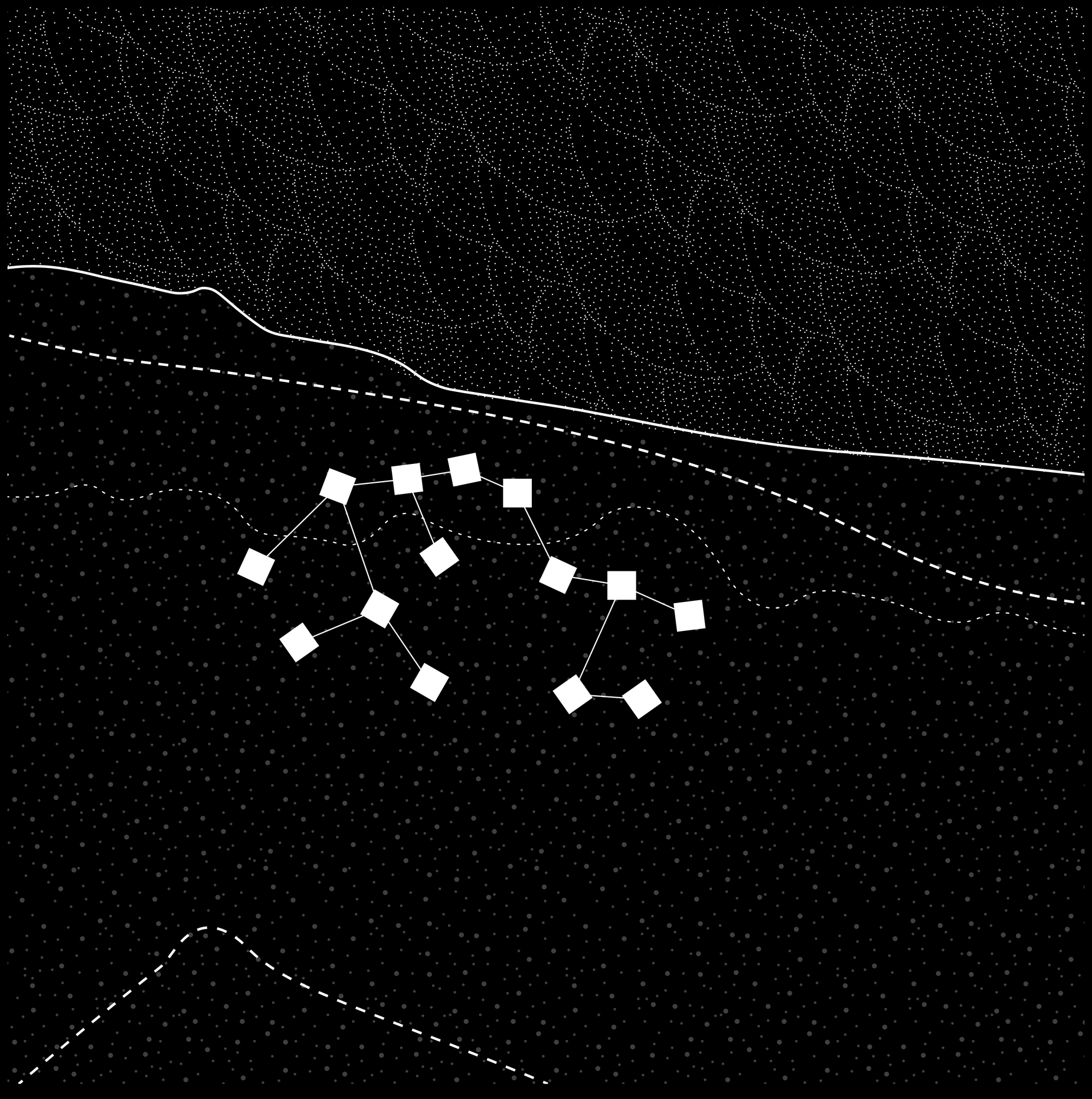


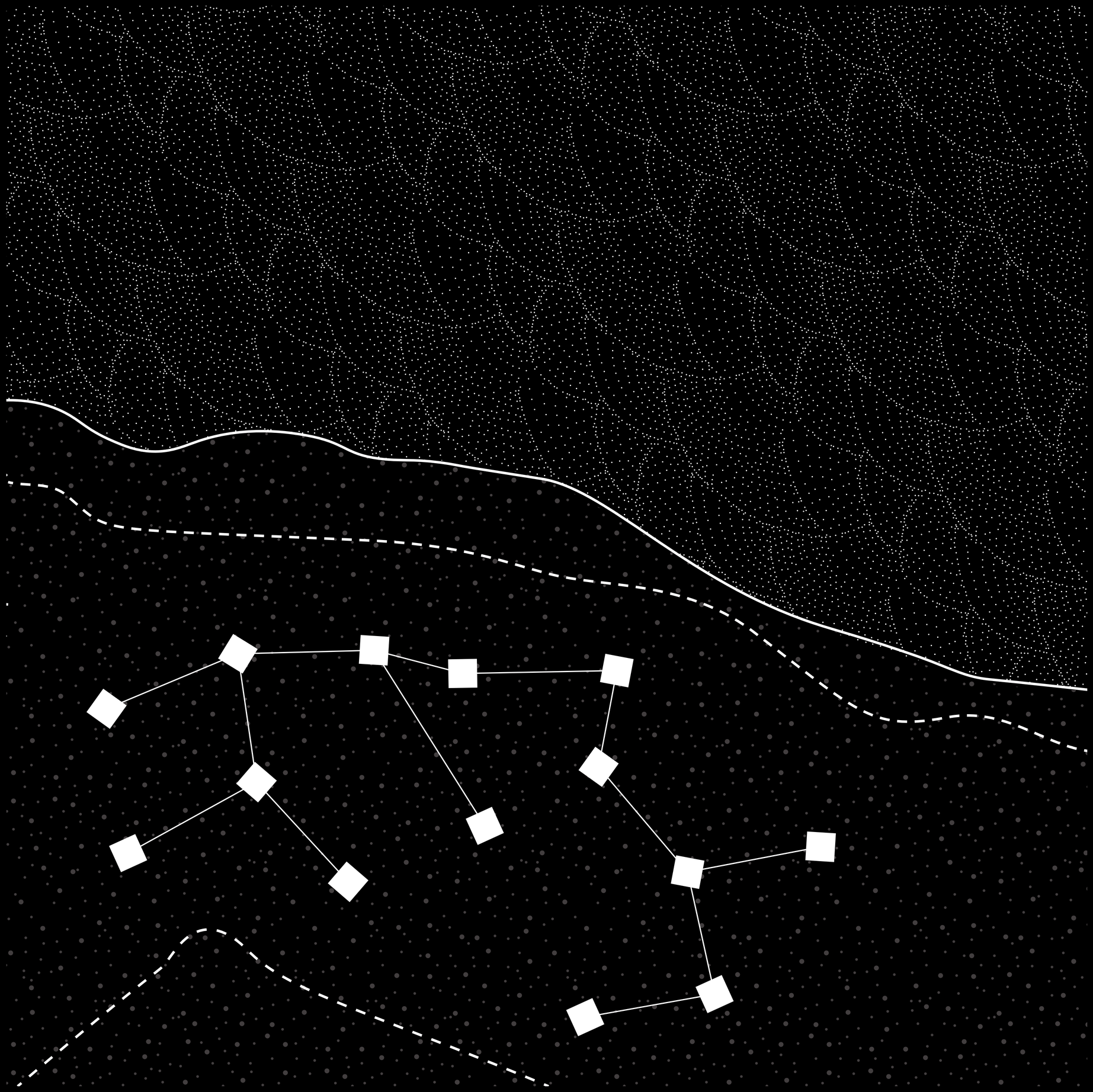












Tomorrow's Wrecks