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Inside Andrea Zittel’s Experimental Desert Compound in Joshua Tree

At High Desert Test Sites in Joshua Tree, Andrea Zittel’s radical experiment has become a global platform for art, inquiry, and life reimagined.

A–Z West sprawls across 120 acres dotted with cabins, studios, shelters, and these “Planar Pavilions,” informed by Andrea Zittel’s explorations of freedom, limitation, perception, and how architecture and environment recalibrate daily life.
Photo by Lance Gerber

Out past downtown Joshua Tree, beyond the rustic saloon and vintage stores, tourist traffic thins, structures become sparse on the landscape, and the brilliant horizon opens wide in the dusty distance.

The long, sunbaked road cuts through the silence, heat radiating off the surface. Turn down almost any road, and within moments, you'll roll onto dirt, possibly off the grid.

In the periphery, Joshua trees stand frozen in gesture, casting wiry shadows across a sea of sand. Around them, a subtle choreography of cactuses, cat's claw, ocotillo, and, if the season was kind, defiant blooms: bright yellow brittlebush, pinkish-purple verbena.

This is where the desert begins to assert itself. Distances deceive. Sound dissipates. People recalibrate. In her 1903 book The Land of Little Rain, Mary Austin described the Mojave as "the loneliest land that ever came out of God's hands," yet one that "lays such a hold on the affections."

The Wagon Station Encampment rising from the boulder-strewn landscape reduces habitation to essentials and promotes a slower, more attentive way of living
Photo courtesy High Desert Test Sites

Today, this slice of the desert, the Morongo Basin, attracts a spirited mix of artists, prospectors, oddballs, and drifters, each arriving with some version of an escape story and staying for the elemental luxuries of space, light, and a kind of off-leash freedom.

As Austin observed, loneliness lives here, but so does a peculiar form of clarity. Those who come are often searching for something — or shedding it.

It is in this unforgiving terrain that A–Z West unfolds with a tempting invitation: Come here, live differently for a while, and see what that does to your thinking.

Located off Highway 62, along the perimeter of Joshua Tree National Park, the 120-acre A–Z West compound reflects the life and work of artist Andrea Zittel, whose practice — part design lab, part philosophical inquiry — examines how we construct daily life. She

grounds all her furniture, sculpture, textiles, paintings, and drawings in self-imposed systems that explore alternative ways of living.

“What makes us feel liberated is not total freedom,” she says, “but living in a set of limitations that we have created.”

A–Z West is both artwork and infrastructure: cabins, container units, and experimental structures that function as what Zittel calls the “Institute of Investigative Living.” Here, furniture, clothing, food, and shelter become tools for investigation.

At its core is a 1950s homestead cabin, Zittel’s former home, its once-kitschy interior reimagined into a disciplined, highly personal environment. The architecture and interior take shape in geometries that feel deliberate and inevitable.

The shipping container compound explores alternative forms of shelter and domestic space. Photo courtesy High Desert Test Sites

Inside, minimalism prevails. The living room is anchored by “Linear Sequence,” a sculptural installation that replaces conventional seating with a low, horizontal arrangement. Throughout the house, furniture dissolves into architecture: built-ins, integrated storage, and carefully calibrated proportions eliminate excess.

In the kitchen, black, yellow, and white tiles form a rigorous grid, echoed by linear light fixtures overhead. The effect is at once graphic and grounding — a system that organizes daily life into legible patterns.

To stay here is to feel those systems working on you. There is no television, no passive distraction. A record player and a curated library — drawn from Zittel's own collection — slow time. The house creates a perceptual hush where even small routines (cooking, eating) take on unusual clarity.

Photo courtesy High Desert Test Sites

The feeling extends to a courtyard with an open-air bed and shower that reframe rest and bathing as elemental experiences. A sunken patio faces west — a cozy space to watch the slow drama of sunset.

From this nucleus, the property radiates outward into a constellation of structures: a guest cabin, the Wagon Station Encampment of compact shelters gathered around a communal kitchen, and a shipping container compound organized around a courtyard with a chicken coop.

A generous studio anchors the creative output, with dedicated areas for weaving and ceramics. Here, every surface, structure, and routine reflects Zittel's effort to understand how we might live more deliberately, balancing freedom and constraint within the vast, contemplative stillness of the High Desert.

The desert will keep you honest, she says, explaining that it replaces excess with elements: heat and wind, light and shadow, solitude and encounter. The unpredictability

— a stalled car in the sand, a chance interaction with a stranger — becomes what Zittel describes as a kind of “secret artwork” embedded in the experience.

The environment is harsh, yet those conditions sharpen her intention and drive her practice.

The primary bedroom in the main house with integrated furnishings.
Photo courtesy High Desert Test Sites

Geometric tilework and “Aggregated Stacks” reflecting the ordered systems of A–Z West.
Photo courtesy high desert test sites

Zittel's move here in 2000 was a return, of sorts, to a Southern California upbringing shaped by suburban expansion in Escondido and the self-sufficiency of her grandparents' ranch in the Imperial Valley. "I remember how they sort of lived in their own world and did everything for themselves," she says. "They were making a world, literally. A lot of what I remember from my childhood is in my practice today."

She was initially drawn to the desert not for an escape, but for its possibilities as a landscape with the capacity to hold and test new systems. Over decades, she has scaled that impulse to build a life as a form of art by asking what becomes possible when almost everything is removed.

Since 2020, the nonprofit High Desert Test Sites (HDTS) has stewarded A–Z West. Founded in 2002 by Zittel, collector Andy Stillpass, curator and consultant John Connelly, dealer Shaun Regen, and artist Lisa Anne Auerbach, HDTS began as a biennial event where artists installed and performed site-specific works in Joshua Tree, Yucca Valley, Pioneertown, Twentynine Palms, and Wonder Valley. After its final exhibition in 2022, HDTS shifted its focus to fellowships, residencies, and education. In all, it has hosted more than 460 artists.

The living room featuring Zittel's low, horizontal "Linear Sequence" seating installation.
Photo courtesy High Desert Test Sites

Zittel, 60, continues as artistic director but now lives on a smaller property nearby. A formidable board, packed with influential gallerists and collectors, steers HDTS while a small staff tends to operations, programming, and development.

They welcome artists to encounter a landscape that is materially spare but perceptually rich, where wind whips across the sand and temperatures soar and plummet.

“Almost painful, but so good,” Zittel describes. “I don’t want people to be uncomfortable. But I don’t want them to feel comfortable, either.”

For artist Annie Briard, visiting the property was transformational.

“Everything down to the bowls you’re using to eat and the blankets you’re using to sleep are produced here,” she says. “You’re staying in a place that is entirely made of the place itself.”

Already drawn to deserts, to landscapes that destabilize perception, Briard arrived at HDTS for two short residencies — each just 10 days, compressed into a busy international schedule. But the brevity intensified the experience.

Artist and High Desert Test Sites founder Andrea Zittel.
Photo courtesy High Desert Test Sites

Her days took on a different rhythm. Without life’s usual interruptions, her attention shifted to light, space, and subtle changes in atmosphere. “You feel really held,” she says. “It’s an escape from normal time — an alternate little momentary space from normal reality.”

Briard’s practice centers on “moments of affect” — fleeting, subjective experiences that defy easy description. The High Desert, with its optical ambiguity, became both subject and collaborator. Even the Joshua tree presented a perceptual riddle: familiar, yet fundamentally strange. “It’s sort of a bush that, under these magical circumstances, decided it could become a tree,” she says.

Working with handmade lenses and unstable 35mm slide film, Briard leaned into the unpredictability. The resulting images hover between photograph and hallucination — saturated, expansive, disorienting.

“There’s no other place in the world where it would have made sense for me to make that,” she says.

The work Briard developed at HDTS led to an Arctic residency in northern Sweden, where she explored parallels between desert and polar light. The through line was perception: how environments stretch time and reshape the body’s understanding of itself.

She was hardly alone at HDTS. Other artists were on the property, including work-trade participants who contribute labor in exchange for time and space. Encounters occurred in the woodshop, along dirt paths, or in the open desert. “You just chance upon these other artists in the middle of nowhere,” Briard says. “It’s a wonderful place.”

Beyond the house and guest cabin, A–Z West sprawls into distinct yet interconnected spaces. A small library cabin offers a quiet space for reading and reflection. The weaving studio hums with local and visiting artists sharing techniques on looms and tapestry frames.

Living quarters in the shipping container compound.
Photo courtesy High Desert Test Sites

The Wagon Station Encampment is perhaps the most distilled expression of Zittel’s philosophy. Perched above a wash, 12 compact shelters reduce habitation to its essentials: a mattress, a shelf, and a few basic tools. Their curved doors open skyward, evoking both covered wagons and suburban vehicles. Guests — artists, writers,

thinkers, hikers, campers — can access a communal outdoor kitchen, open-air showers, and composting toilets.

To stay in one is to experience a radical recalibration. The smallest details — light shifting across the interior, wind moving through the structure — become omnipresent.

The encampment feels part summer camp, part research station, part artwork.

Below the compound, Zittel's "Planar Pavilions" draw the language into the landscape — 10 black- painted cinder block structures that read as both ruins and frameworks. Artists activate them in different ways, including photographer An-My Lê, whose new work traces celestial movement across the desert sky.

Lê, based in Brooklyn and a professor at Bard College, first came to the desert nearly two decades ago to photograph military exercises at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center for her landmark series 29 Palms. She returned last year as a HDTS fellow and, during her time here, created new images for her Dark Star series. Using a star-tracker to follow the movement of the night sky, she captured celestial arcs with striking precision. Earlier this year, the photographs were installed on the "Planar Pavilions," amid the landscape that informed their creation.

She's one of many established artists who have contributed to the growing influence of HDTS. Recent fellows include Kameelah Janan Rasheed and Eric-Paul Riege, with Lita Albuquerque slated for an upcoming term that will coincide with her early-2027 exhibition at Palm Springs Art Museum.

The annual fellowship brings top-tier artists into a durational dialogue with the desert, while shorter residencies and work-trade programs draw emerging practitioners and interdisciplinary thinkers.

High Desert Test Sites resident Annie Briard's "lenses" distort viewers' perceptions of her landscape photographs.
Photo by Annie Briard and Royale Projects

Zittel is careful, however, to avoid imposing a singular vision. Early on, she studied models like Taliesin West and Arcosanti, seeking a balance between structure and openness. HDTS occupies that middle ground: Its framework supports but does not prescribe. "I always wanted this to ride that line," she says, "a structure that had room for other people's identities."

Meanwhile, off the compound, site-specific HDTS installations — including works by Dineo Seshee Bopape, Kate Lee Short, and Jack Pierson — linger on the landscape, offering something of a scavenger hunt for adventurous art lovers in the High Desert.

HDTS offers public tours — 90-minute immersions in these layered environments. But even within that framework, it is not just about what you see, but how you begin to see differently.

Artists work in the weaving studio.
Photo courtesy High Desert Test Sites

Zittel has spent decades exploring that shift. From a compact living unit in New York to a floating concrete island anchored off the coast of Denmark, her work has consistently returned to the same paradox: that constraint can produce freedom, and limitation can open space for thought.

The idea of reduction as expansion sits at the heart of both Zittel's practice and HDTS. In a culture defined by choice, accumulation, and speed, she favors temporary withdrawal, a reordering of priorities, and a chance to ask, with fresh urgency, what it means to live.

The desert enforces its own terms. Life here can be austere. But in that austerity, something else emerges: a heightened awareness, a recalibration of value.

And in that shift, something opens.

Not necessarily a finished work, but the conditions for one.