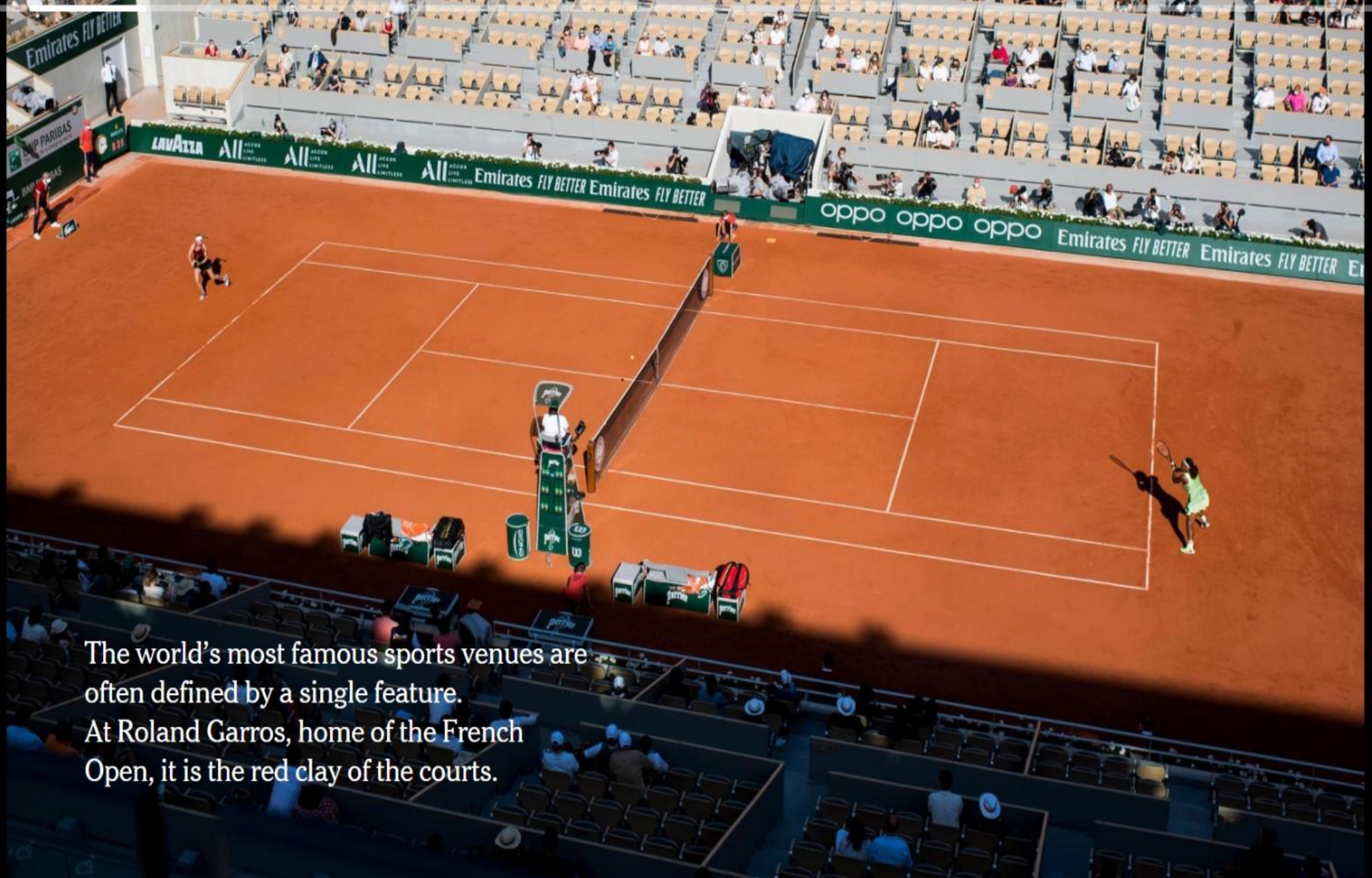
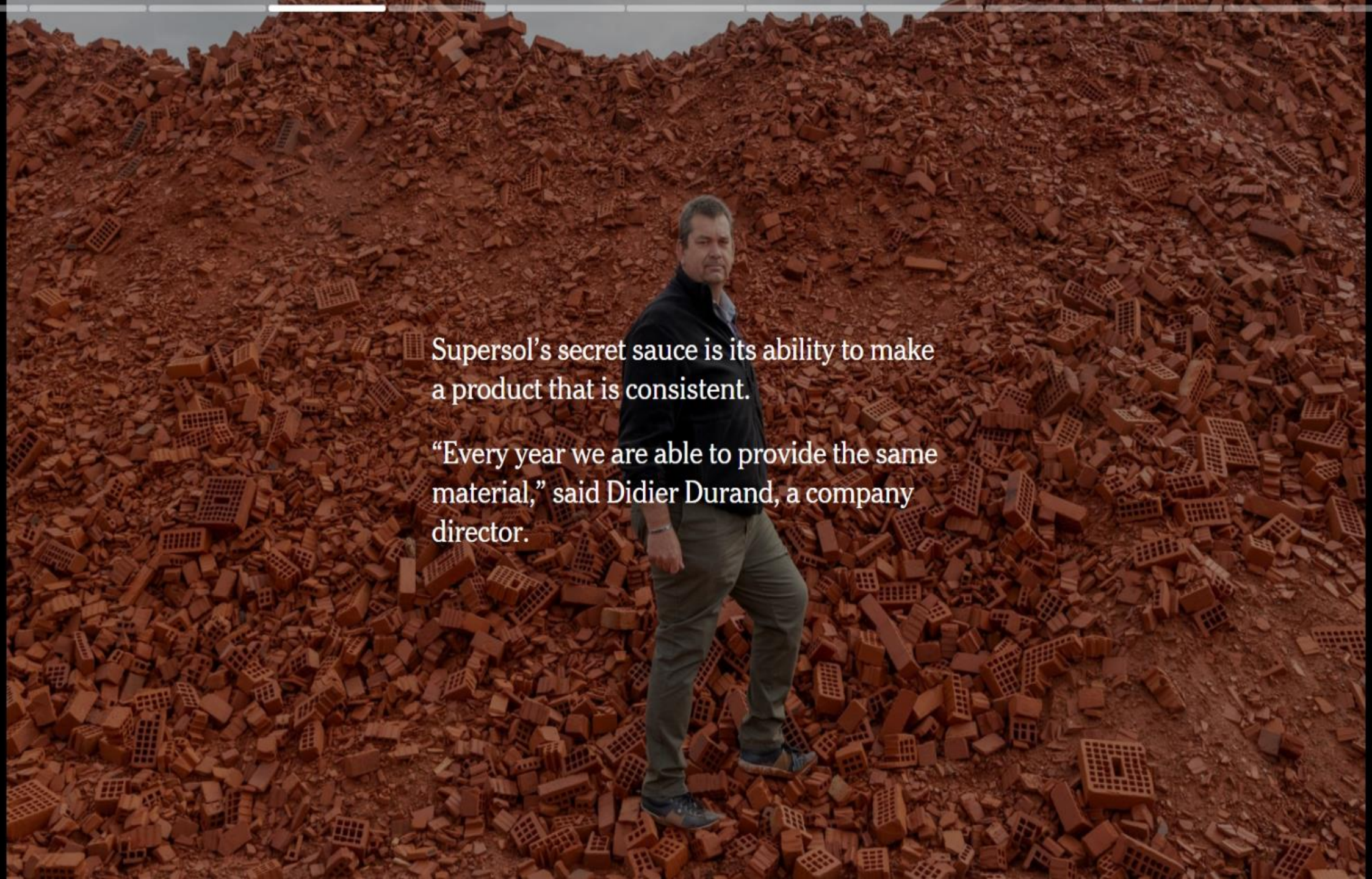
The Silent Star of the French Open

By James Hill and Matthew Futterman Photographs by James Hill and Pete Kiehart June 10, 2021



The world's most famous sports venues are often defined by a single feature. At Roland Garros, home of the French Open, it is the red clay of the courts.

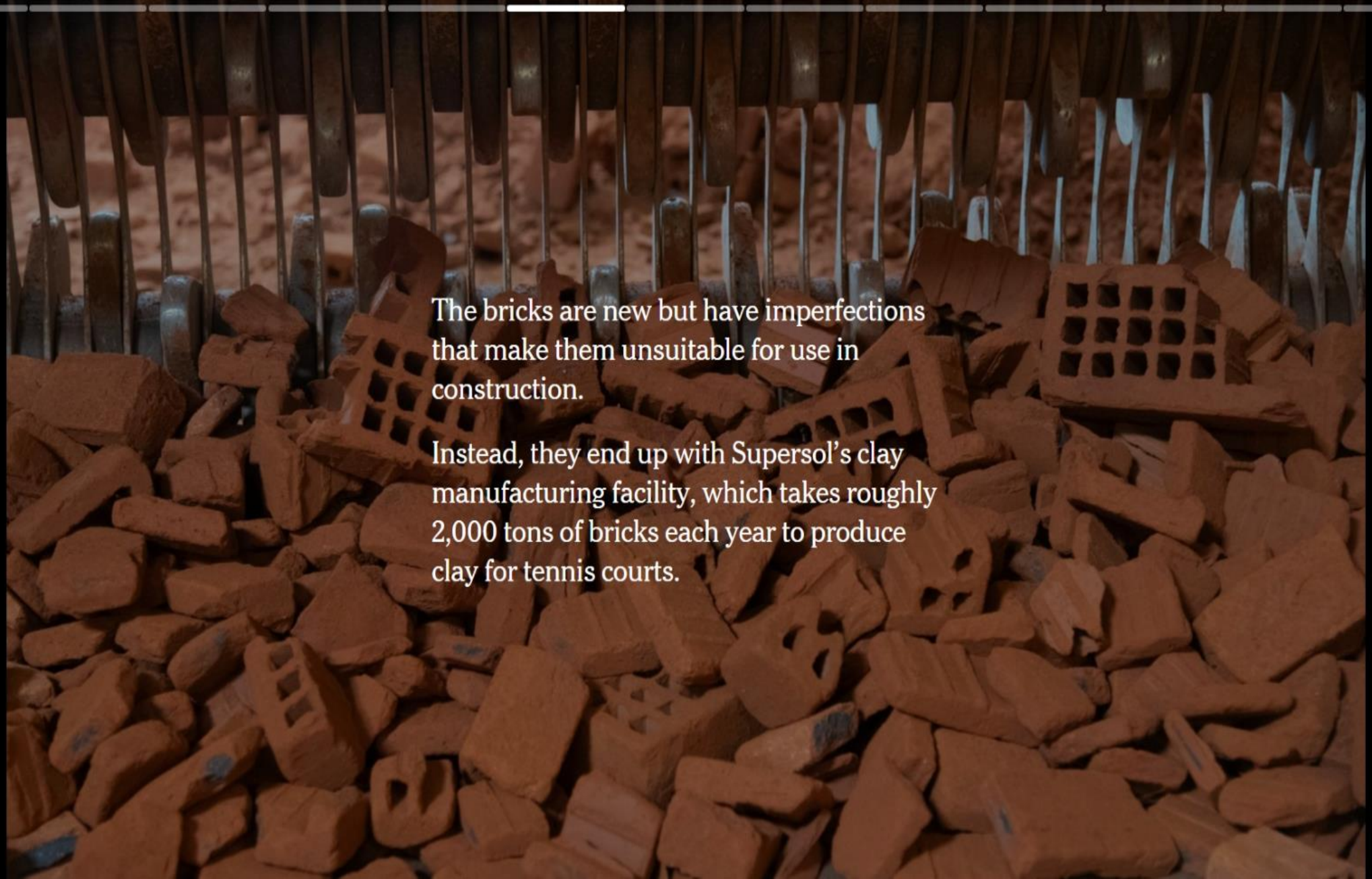
For more than 50 years the clay has come from a single factory in Oise, north of Paris, run by a company named Supersol.



Supersol's secret sauce is its ability to make a product that is consistent.

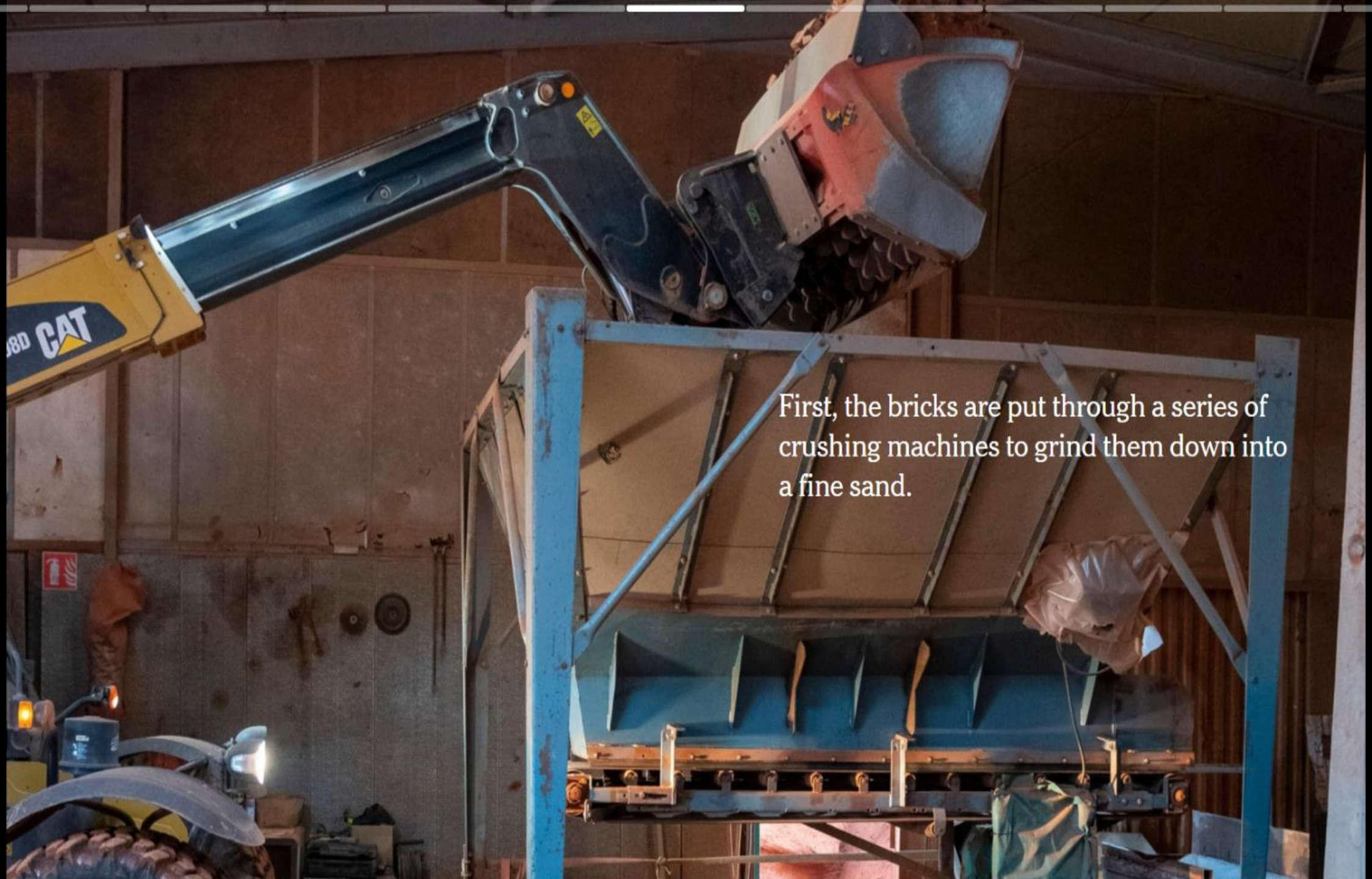
"Every year we are able to provide the same material," said Didier Durand, a company director.

The clay begins its life as bricks, a specific type that is only made in France.



The bricks are new but have imperfections that make them unsuitable for use in construction.

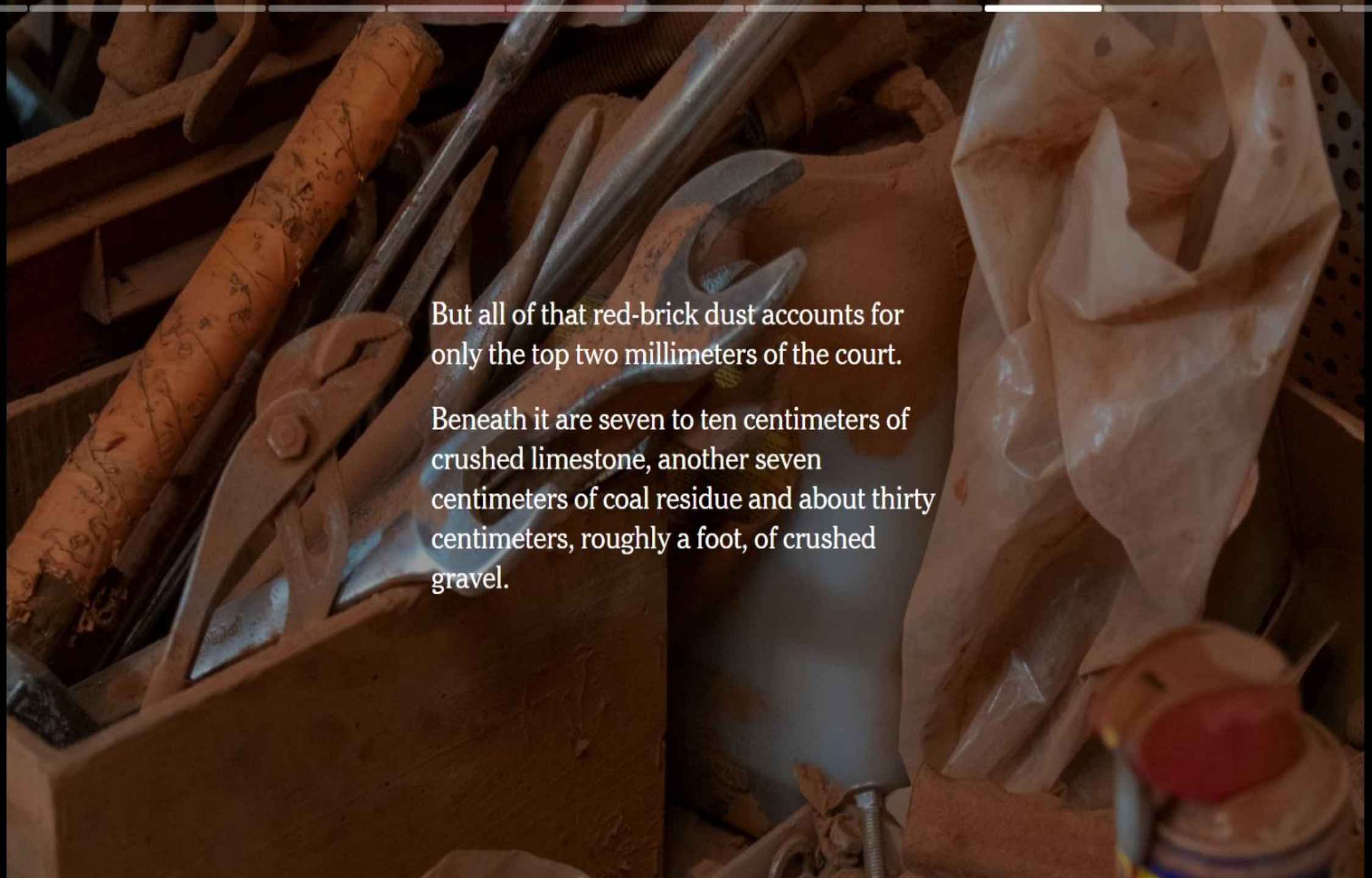
Instead, they end up with Supersol's clay manufacturing facility, which takes roughly 2,000 tons of bricks each year to produce clay for tennis courts.



First, the bricks are put through a series of crushing machines to grind them down into a fine sand.

The grains are smaller than one-tenth of a millimeter, the company says, making them fine and smooth enough to allow players to slide with ease.

Roland Garros orders roughly 80 tons of the clay for the French Open each year.



But all of that red-brick dust accounts for only the top two millimeters of the court.

Beneath it are seven to ten centimeters of crushed limestone, another seven centimeters of coal residue and about thirty centimeters, roughly a foot, of crushed gravel.


Those velvet-smooth two millimeters,
though, make all the difference.