



BEN GARCIA

Selected Works

Columbia University GSAPP

01

Informal Economies:
Housing in Little Senegal

Core III Studio
Fall 2024
Instructor: Nina Cooke John
Partner work with Elizabeth Owen

04

Submerged Commons:
Reservoir Playground

Advance IV Studio
Spring 2025
Instructor: Alessandro Orsini
Individual Work

02

Harlem Ball:
Re-Situating the Cotton Club

Core I Studio
Fall 2023
Instructor: Virginia Black
Individual Work

05

Petco Paranoia:
Hamster-Human Playland

Core II Studio
Spring 2024
Instructor: Grace Ali
Individual Work

03

Set Between Acts:
Archive and Performing Arts Center

Advance V Studio
Fall 2025
Instructor: Amale Andraos
Individual Work

06

Common (Hell's) Kitchen:
Community Food Rituals

Advance VI Studio
Spring 2026
Instructor: Jayden Ali, Chloe Munkenbeck
Individual Work

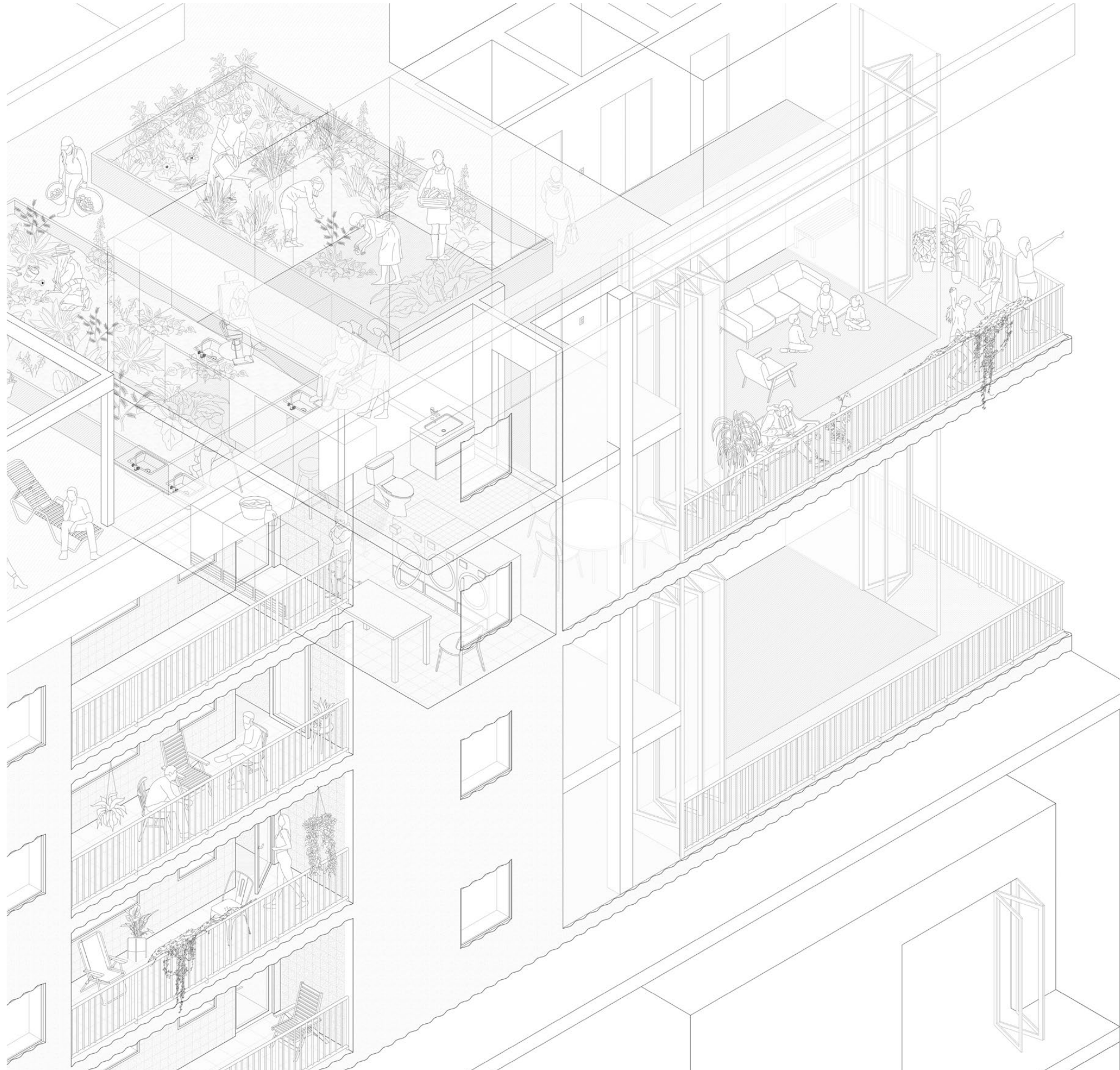
01 Informal Economies:
Public Housing in Little Senegal



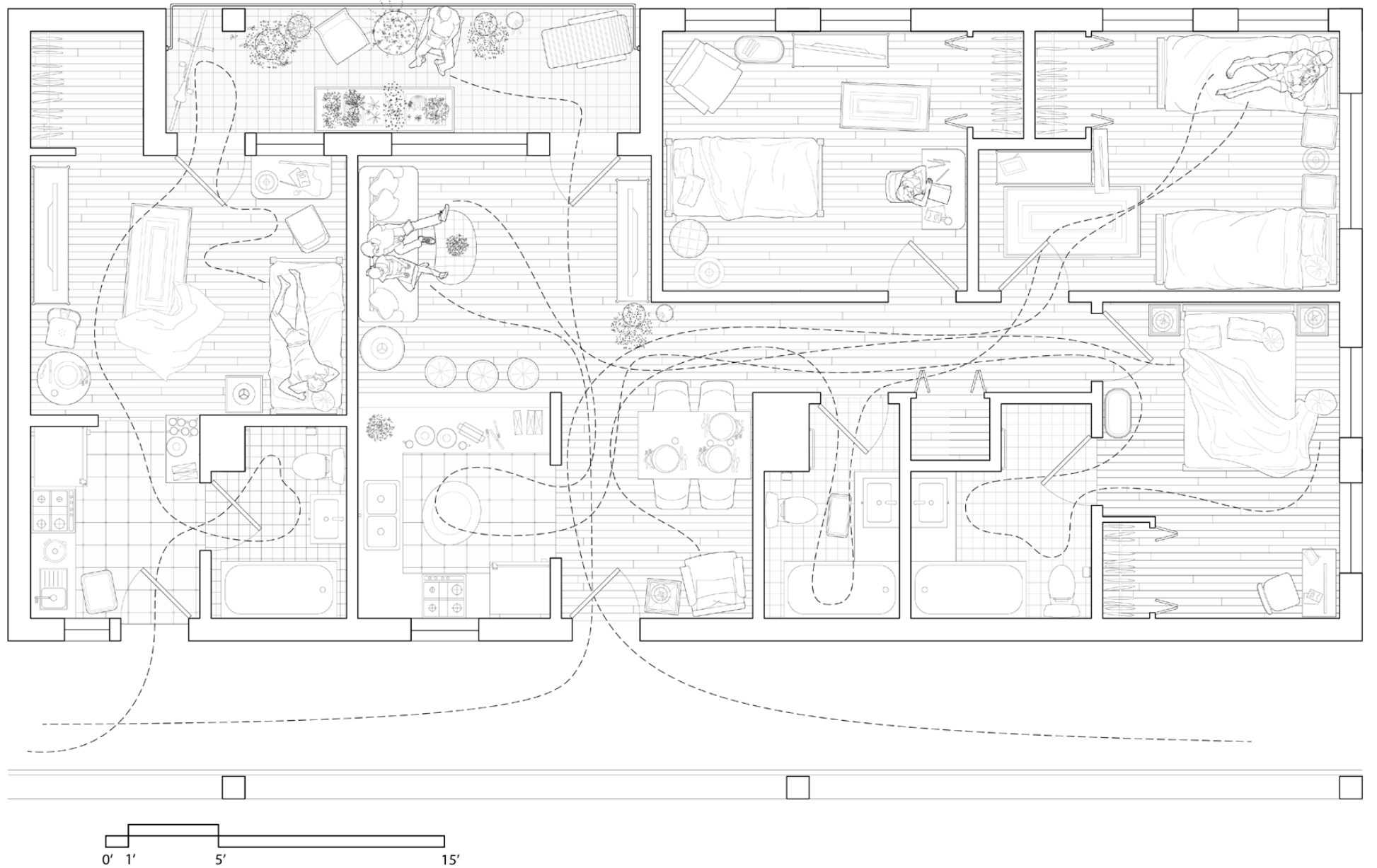


This project articulates a relationship between housing and informal economies of labor present within Harlem's West African immigrant community. It aims to connect residents of the site with the broader community through facilitating spatial moments of cultural-exchange, economic autonomy, and community-building. This design incorporates housing units for Harlem's West African immigrant population; ranging from multi-generational families to the more recent influx of single, young adults.





The corner lounges provide spaces for leisure and production. This includes shared kitchens, laundry rooms, hair braiding spaces, and sewing rooms. These communal portions also consist of unprogrammed shared space that is meant to adapt to the needs and habits of the residents. This can facilitate spaces of cultural performance such as story telling, birthday parties, or pop up shops for residents that want to sell their goods in a smaller, more intimate setting than the ground-level market.



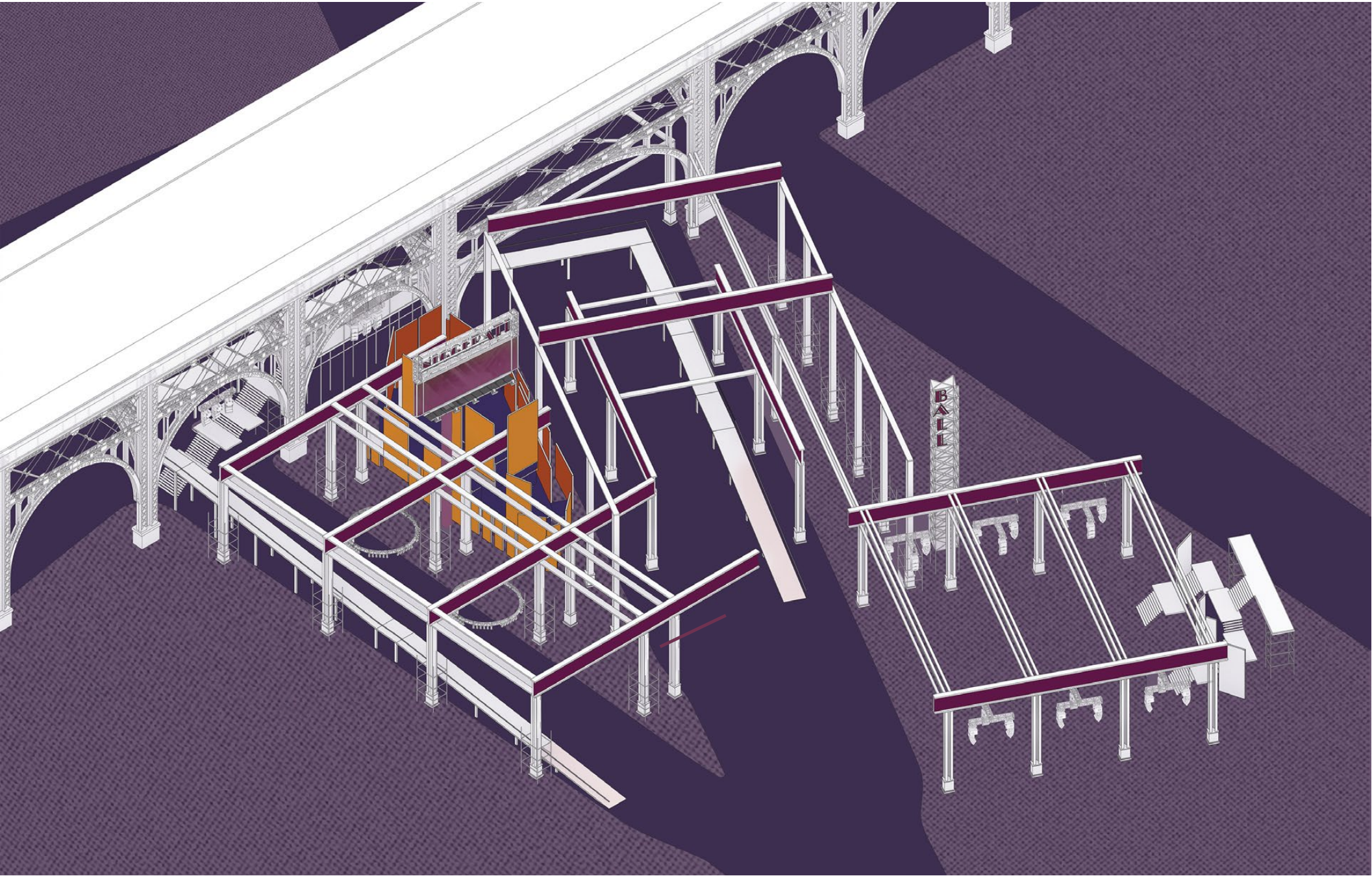
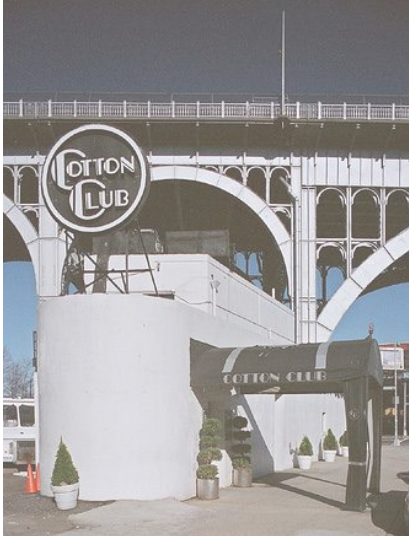
Pairing single-occupant studios with multi-room family units accommodates the Senegalese tradition of multi-generational co-living while also aiding the cultural transition as young adults adapt to single dwelling in the United States. Organizationally, our design structures vary degrees of separation and connection among residents and families.



02 Harlem Ball: Re-Situating the Cotton Club



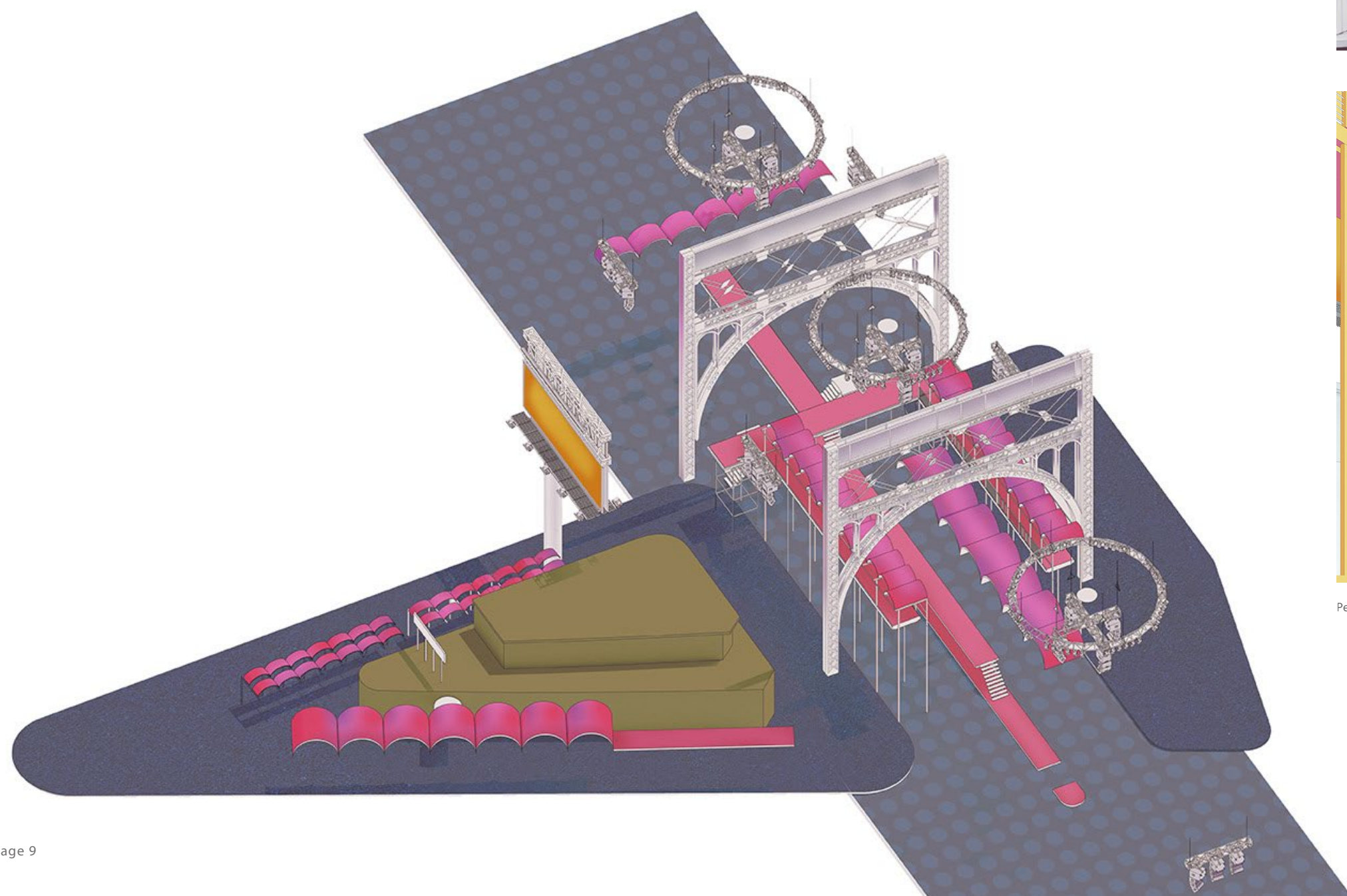
The Cotton Club is a formerly segregated nightclub historically associated with prominent Black cultural figures of the Harlem Renaissance like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Fats Waller, Ethel Waters, and Big Mama Thornton. Light-skinned Black artists performed for exclusively white audiences, against a backdrop of racially-charged antebellum motifs and imagery of the “exotic.” Through its naming, operation, and material aesthetics, the Cotton Club spatially reinforced racial stereotypes that dehumanized the Black body in its subjugation to the white urban gaze.



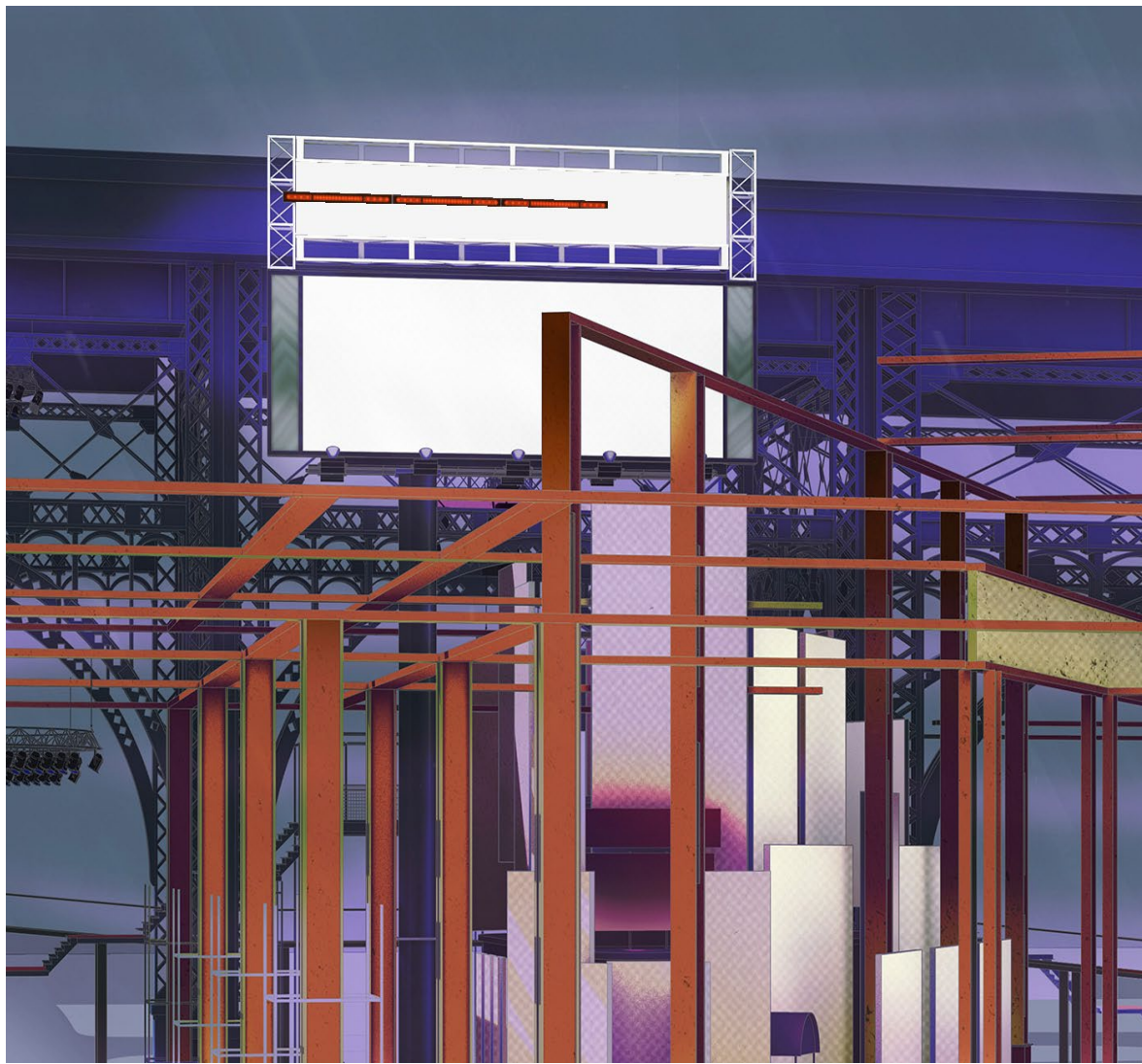
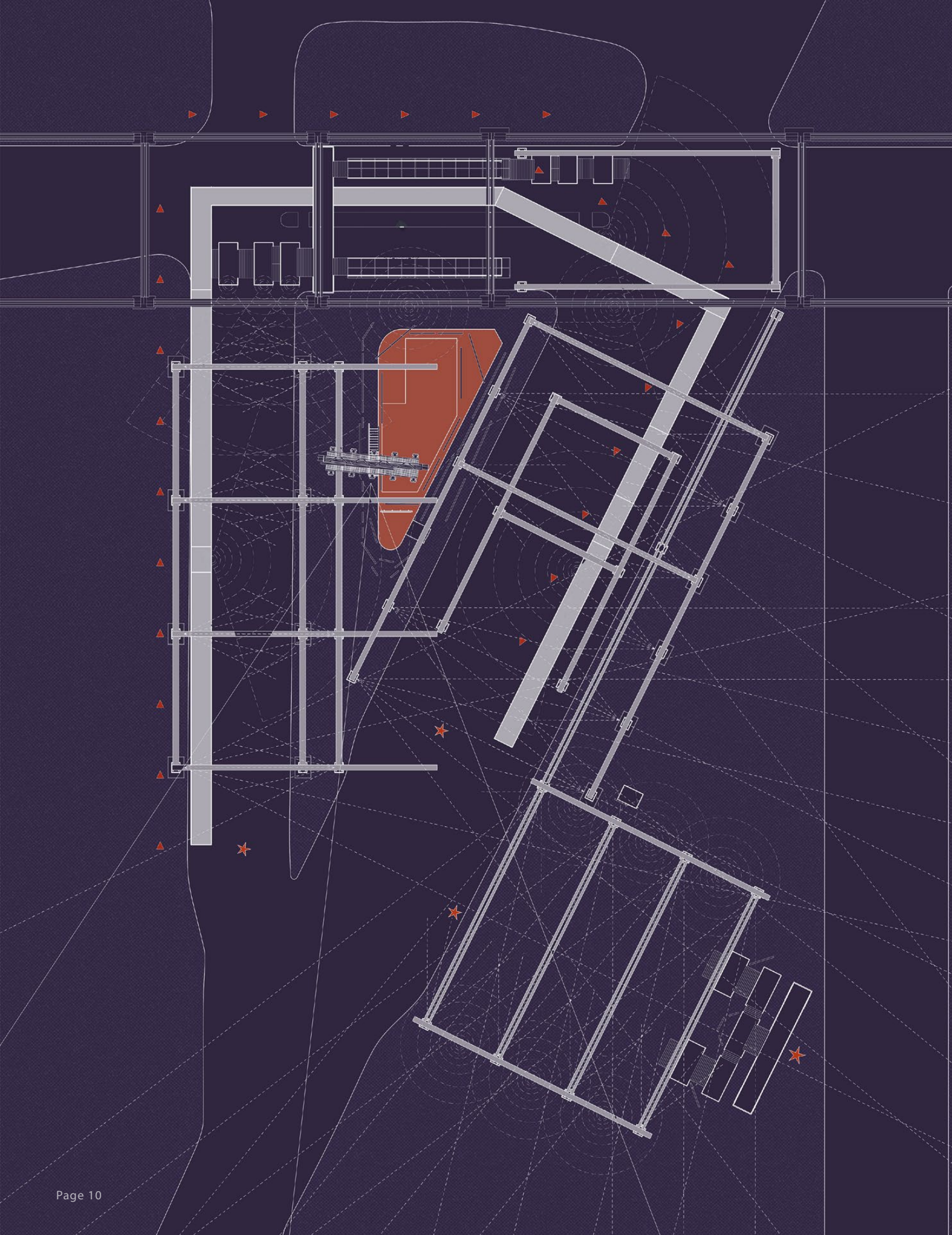
Harlem Ball deploys an adaptive re-use of the historic Cotton Club performance venue and its surrounding context within Harlem, New York, transforming the site into an urban-scaled stage for underground Ballroom culture. The design of this project relies on audio-visual projection, the manipulation of architectural surfaces for visual performance, and extensive research into the body of visual artwork from the Harlem Renaissance—helping to contextualize the racialized histories of the Cotton Club and reconcile its historical subjugation and exclusion of the Black body.

Spectators and artists activate the site through a network of free-standing stages, exterior panels, frames, and projected images. This project stages a series of spatial encounters through art, performance, and local history among the Cotton Club's urban context.

With the existing nightclub's interior left intact, this project activates the surrounding streetscape, the nightclub's facade, and the nearby 125th Street Viaduct as architectural surfaces for visual projection and cultural performance.



Performance perspective



The existing nightclub has been enveloped in an exoskeleton of layered panels for various images to be projected onto throughout these new performances. A network of steel frames extend the site in each direction from the centrally-located Cotton Club, defining the boundaries of the outdoor performance space while structuring new spatial thresholds for a variety of immersive experiences.

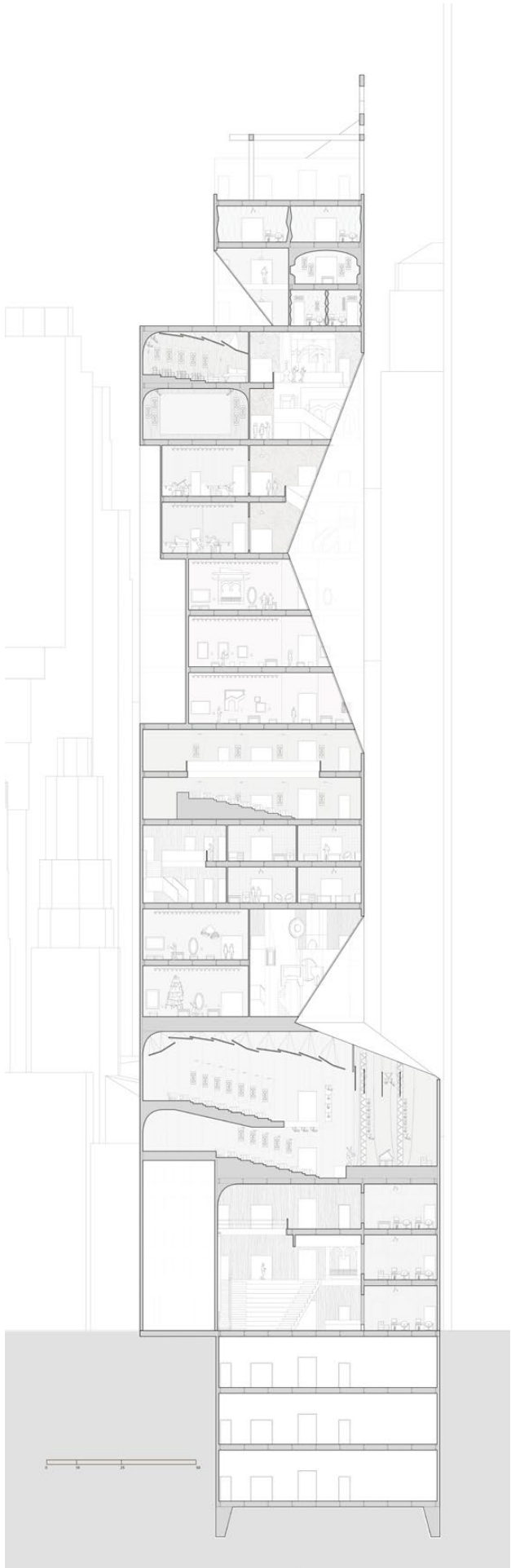
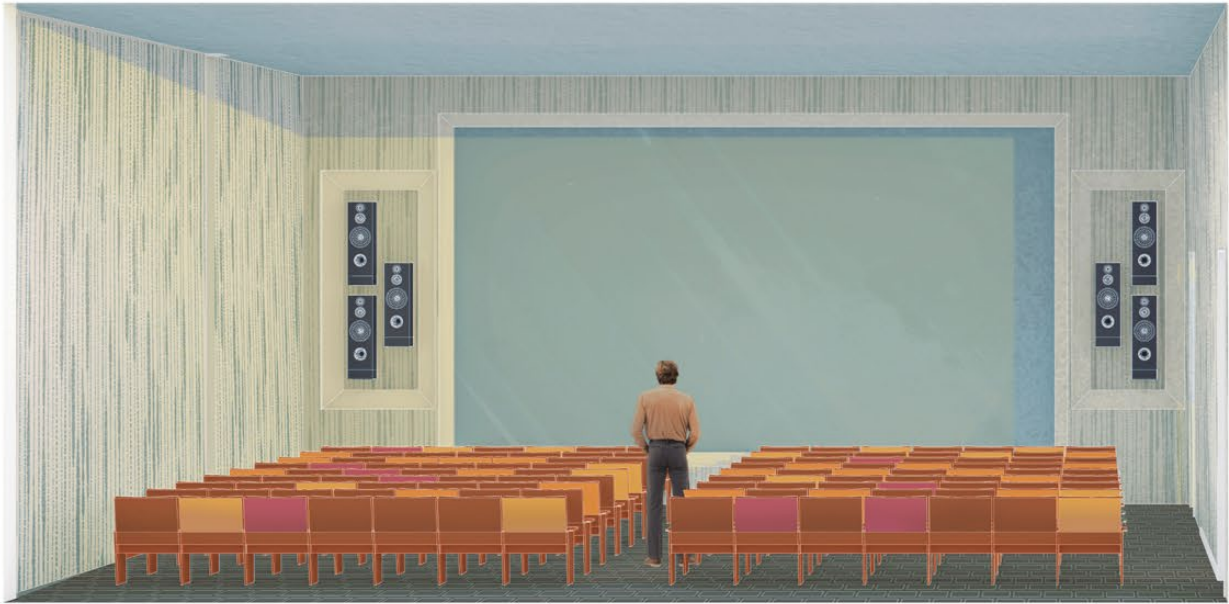


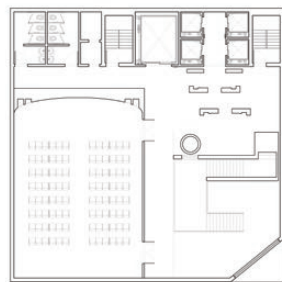
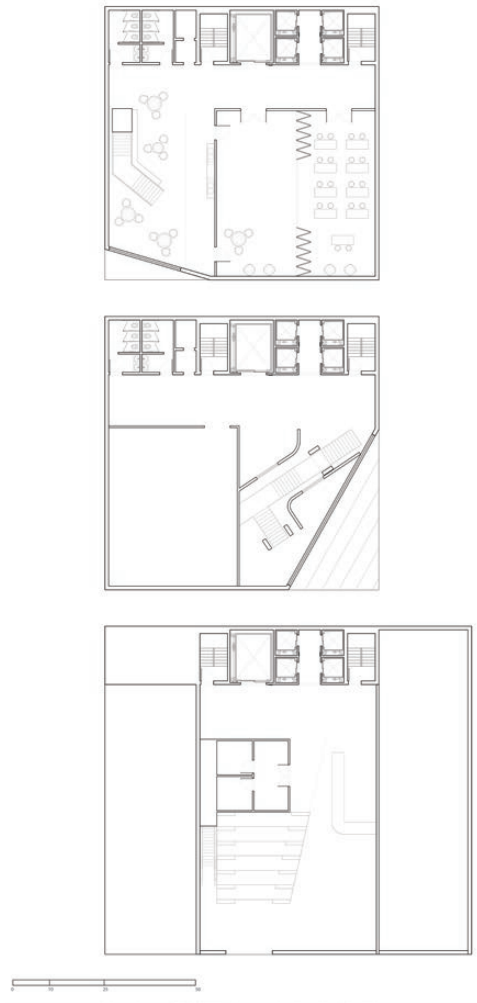
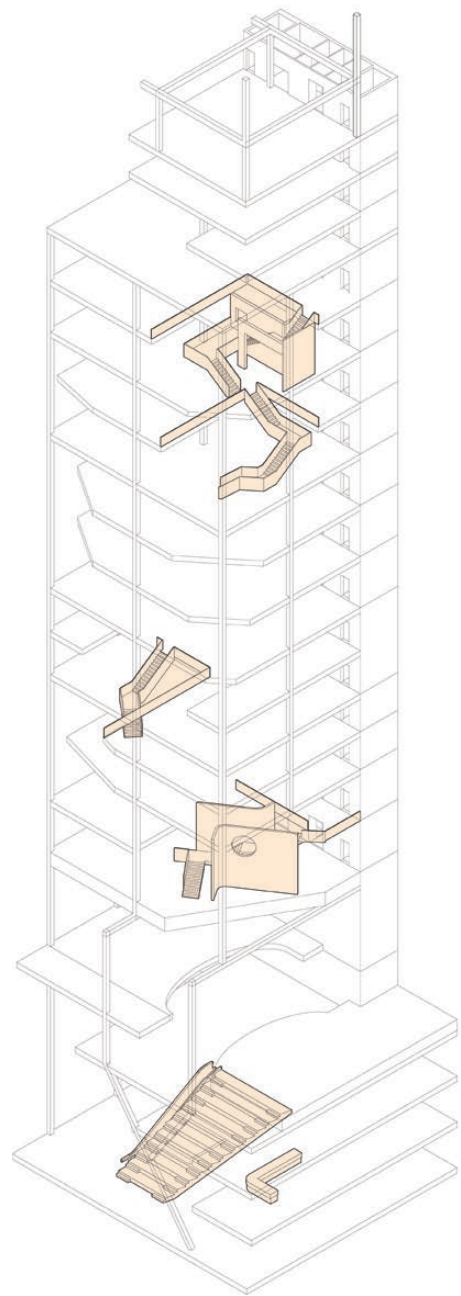
03 Set Between Acts: An Archive and Performing Arts Center

The Museum of Arab American Performance illuminates histories and ongoing cultural expressions within the Arab American diaspora through a specific focus on the performing arts. The project proposes a vertical museum and performing arts center situated on the former site of the Little Syria colony in Lower Manhattan. The building, itself, performs through layered transparencies, suspended fragments, and framed views that recall stagecraft and scenography, while crafting a kinetic sense of cultural memory for both visitors and artists.



Double-height museum galleries form adjacencies to contemporary modes of performance like dance, song, film, theatre, and oral storytelling. Sculptural circulation paths, salvaged building marquees, and decorative fragments from 20th-century works of Arab American theatre are all recontextualized as 'set piece' boundaries; selectively framing moments of visual continuity between spaces of archive and performance. Each level is experienced as a narrative threshold between different modes of visibility: rehearsal, exhibition, storytelling, and making.

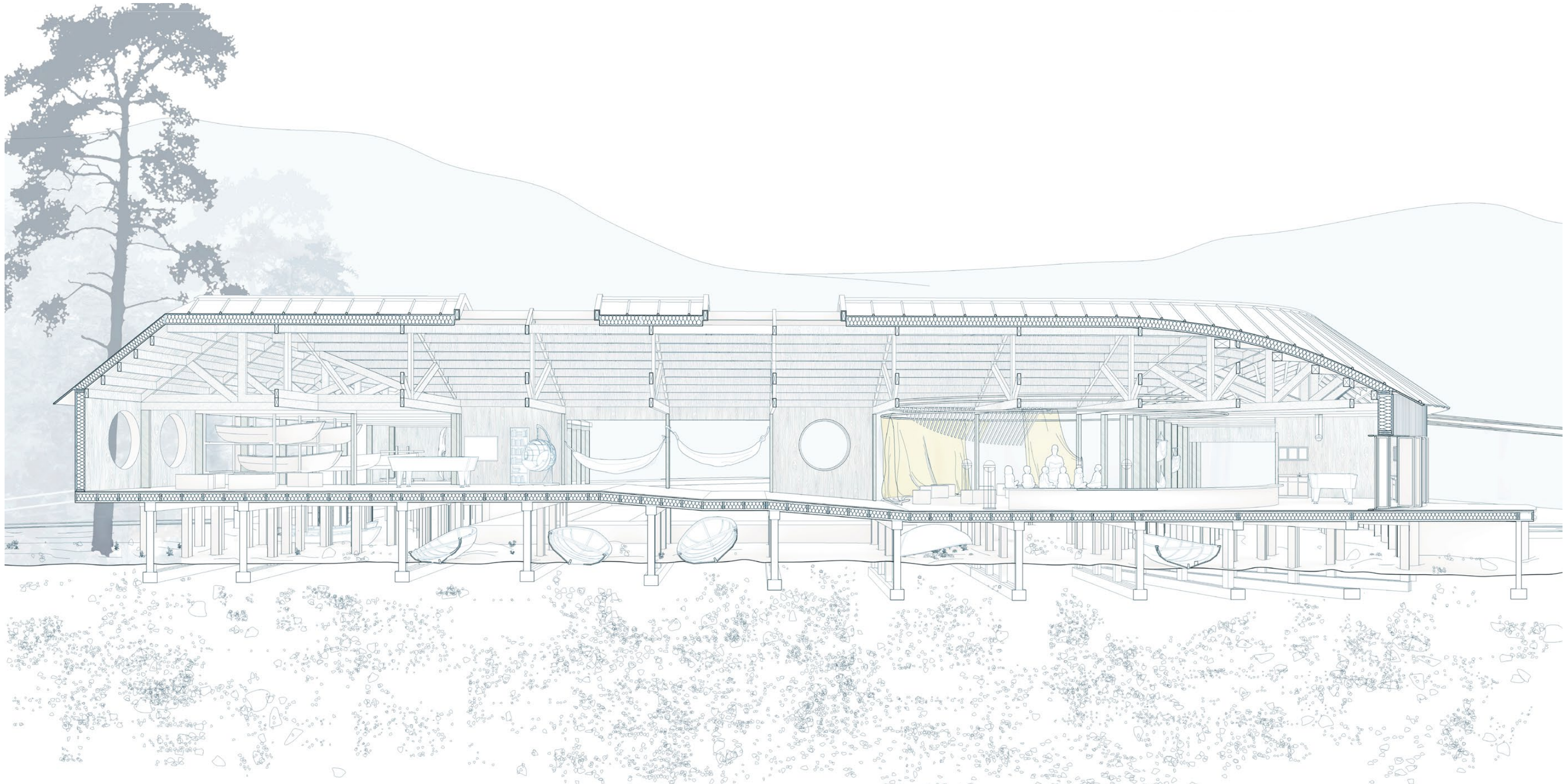


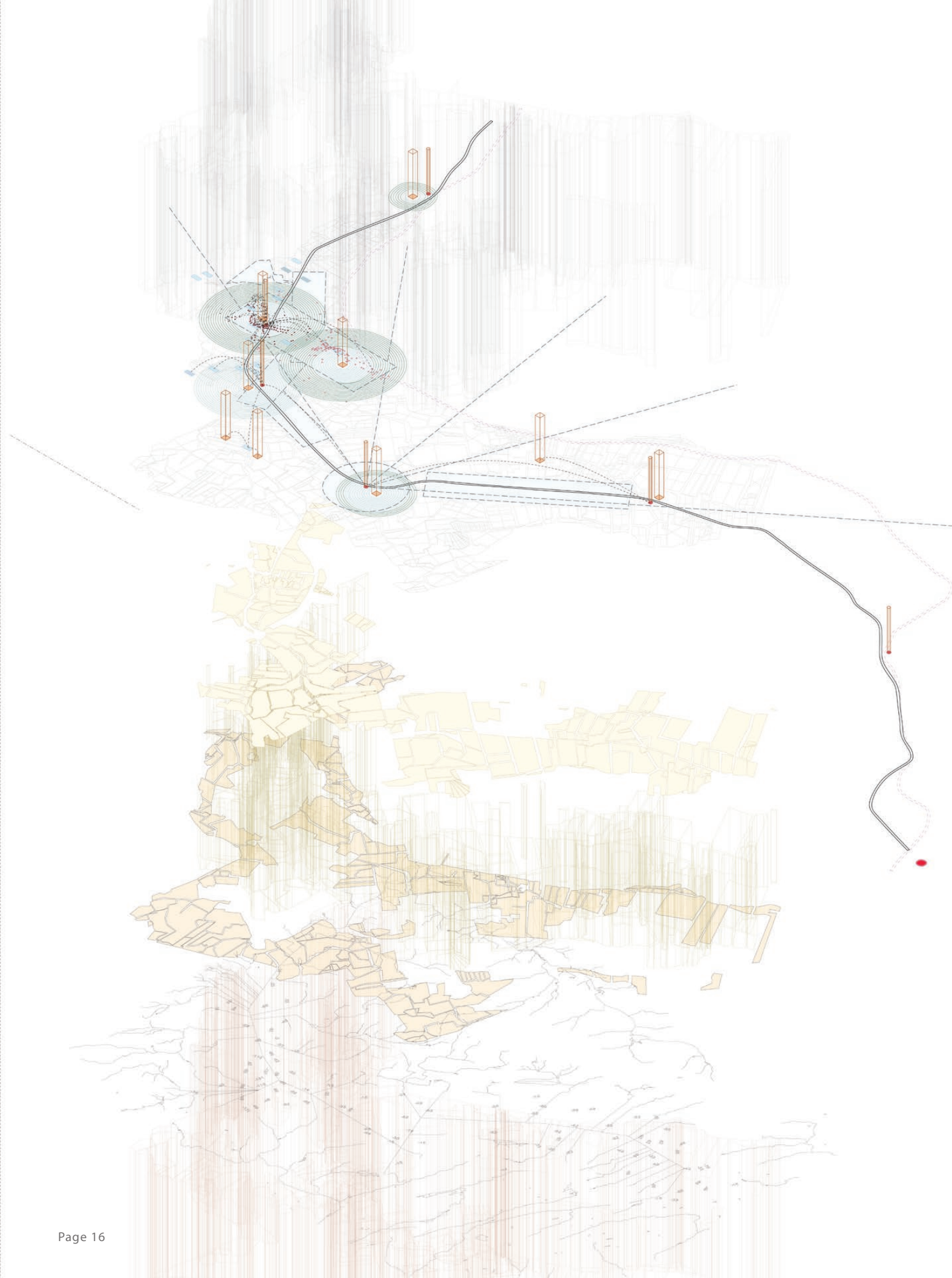




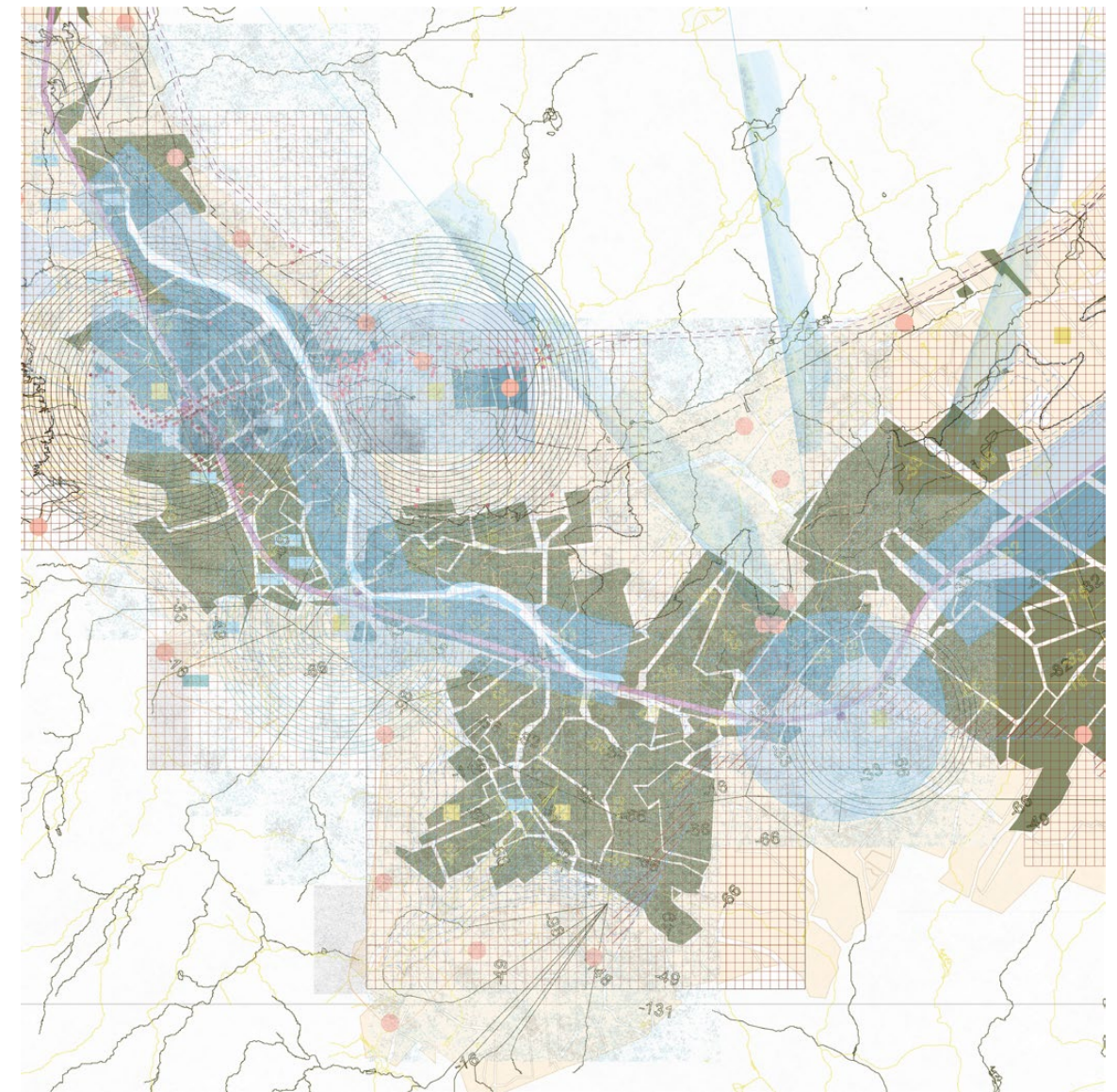
Through an archive of historical architectural fragments, imagery, and performance-related artifacts, the museum program highlights the ingenuity and artistry of Arab American diasporic communities, situating these contributions within the nation's broader cultural landscape.

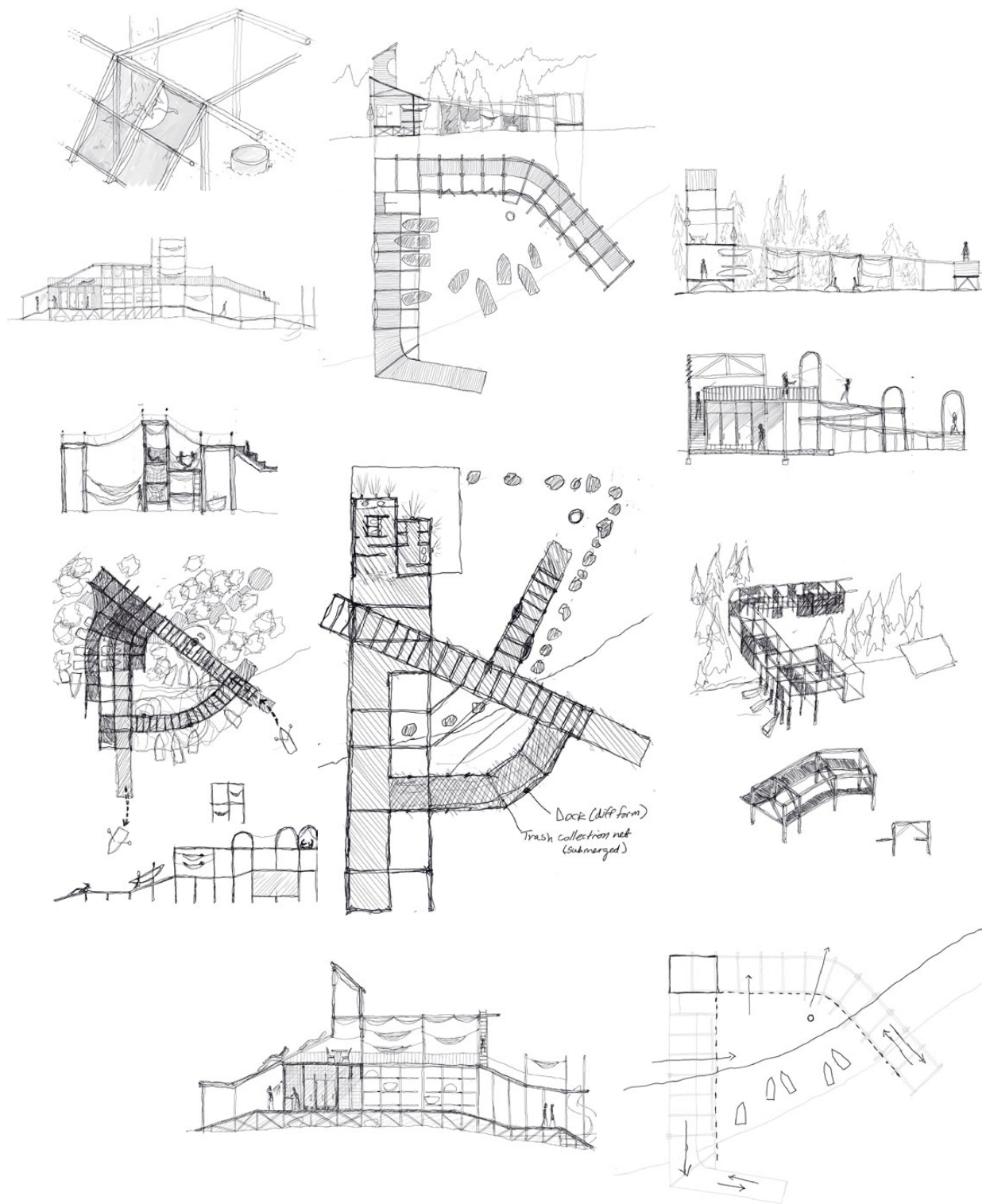
04 Submerged Commons:
Reservoir Playground



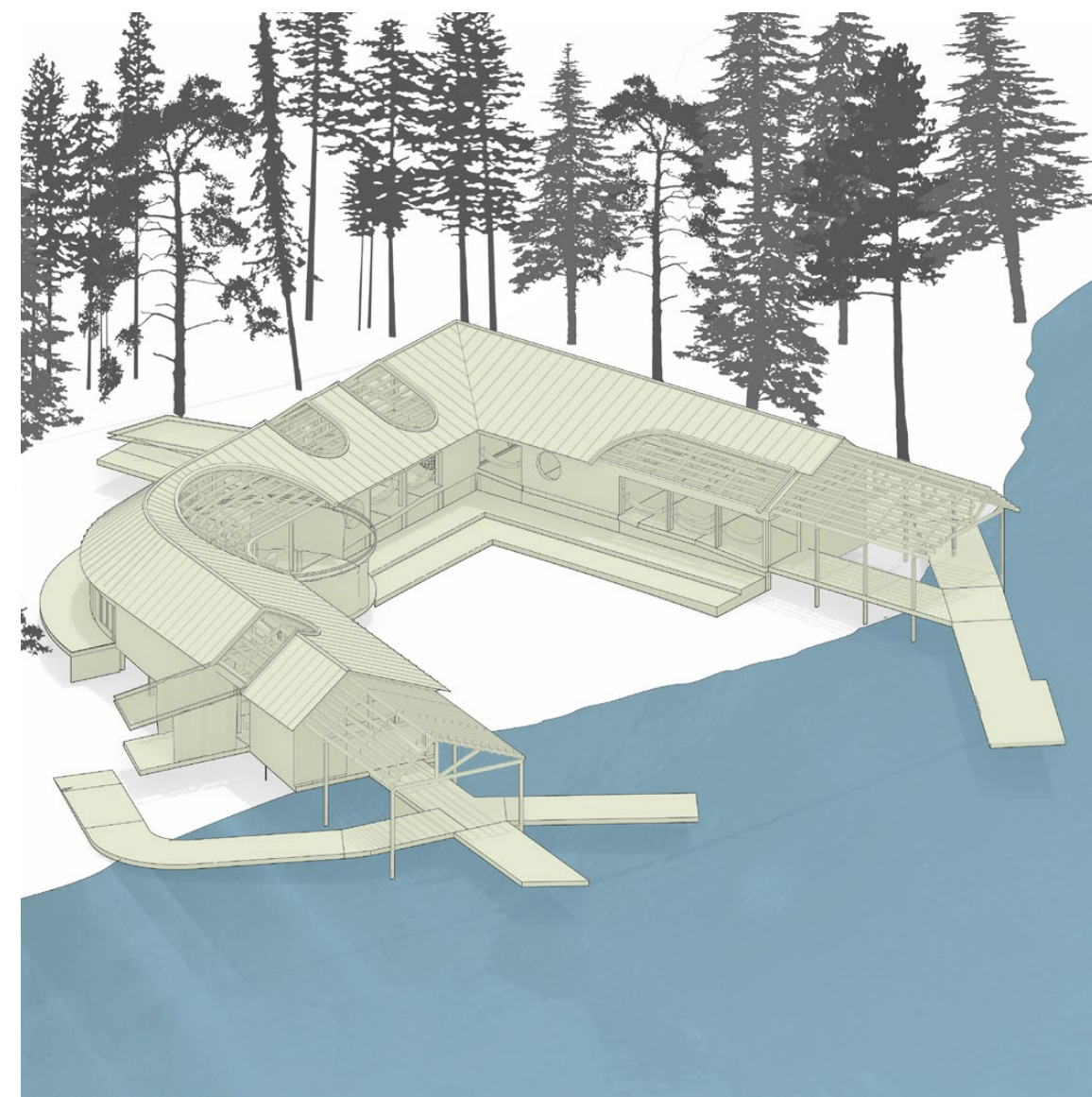


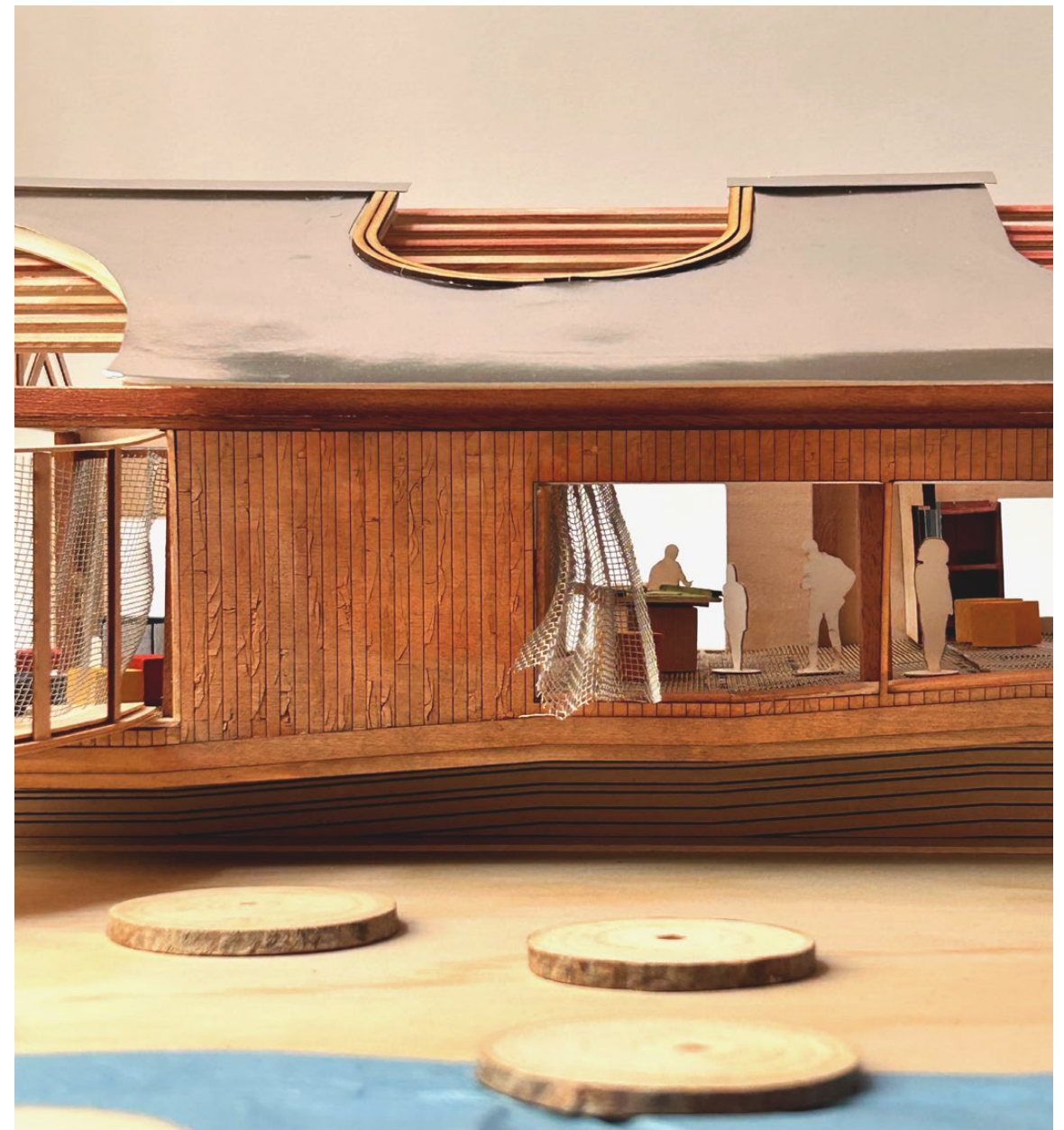
Constructed in the early 20th century to supply drinking water to New York City's growing population, the creation of the Ashokan Reservoir led to the demolition of twelve hamlets in Ulster County and the displacement of approximately 2,000 people; severing local economic and cultural ties to the Esopus Creek and the vibrant boarding, fishing, and leisure industries that were situated along its banks. Prior to the reservoir's construction, numerous hamlets were situated along a once-robust Delaware & Ulster Railroad line that enabled the economic vitality and spatial mobility between the Town of Olive, New York City and broader Hudson Valley populations. Against this backdrop, my project proposes a boat storage facility, fishing dock, and leisure pavilion—collectively a “playground”—on the shoreline of the Ashokan Reservoir. This architectural intervention reclaims local community access and presence for the Ashokan Reservoir's water, foregrounding leisure as a practice of both resistance and cultural production.





My design deploys both permanent structure and adaptive surfaces; staging spatial moments of play, rest, and informal gathering...while reinforcing an expanded communal access point to the cultural and economic benefits of the Ashokan Reservoir's water. The project's design invites a renewed communing of the site, reactivating the reservoir's edges as a space of communal agency that resists institutional demands for isolation, extraction, and production. The primary, fixed programs include a boat storage facility, a publicly-accessible restroom, a boat washing station, and an open-air fishing dock.

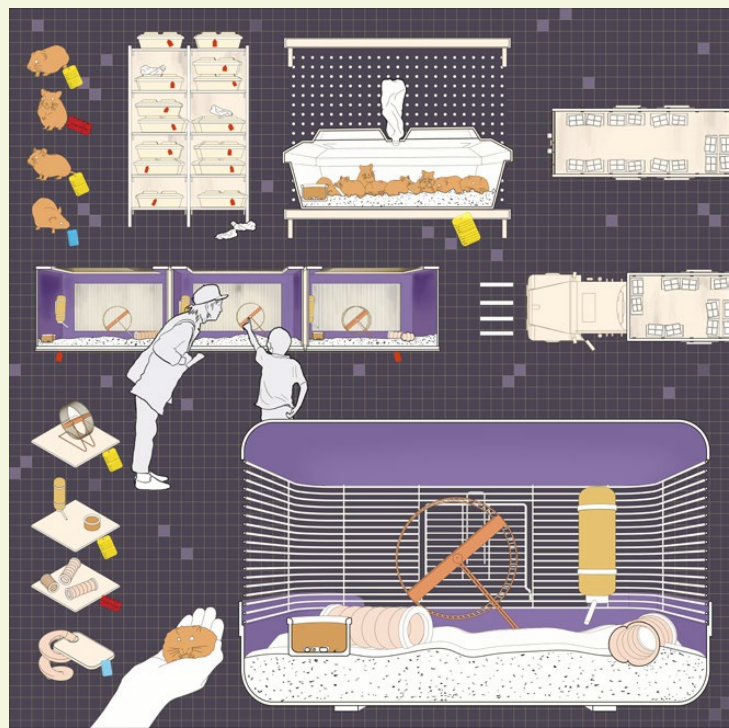




The building's structure and footprint remain sensitive to both the DEP shoreline and the reservoir's water edge. Its curved shape in plan facilitates a user-activated enclosed shoreline that adapts its program to the reservoir's fluctuating water levels. As water levels rise a larger portion of the site becomes suspended over the water, allowing the architecture to function as an anchorpoint for floating boat storage. As the water recedes during periods of low-tide, the ground can emerge as a make-shift beach for community access.



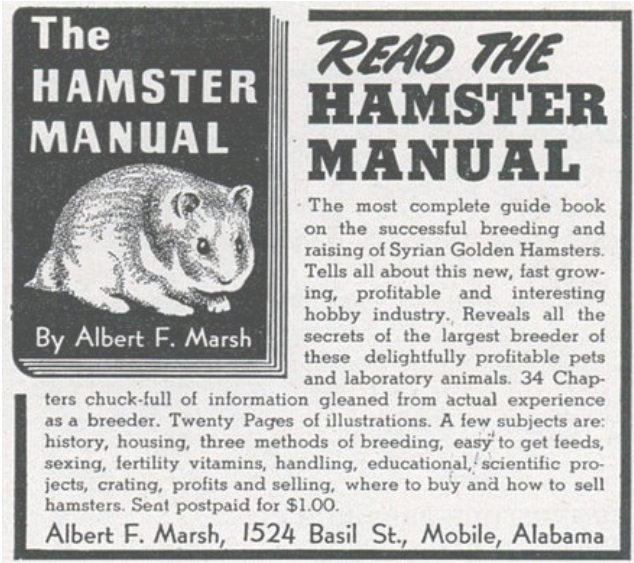
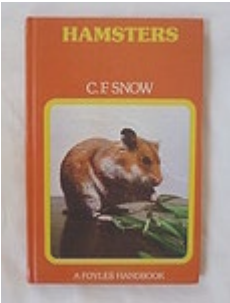
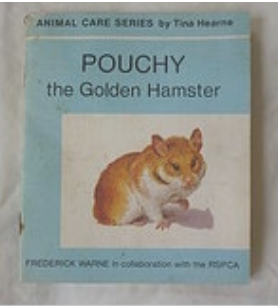
In both plan and section, the architecture stages a spatial gradient of intimacy with moments of visual connectivity between programs, varying degrees of opacity on the building's skin, and the user-activated manipulation of surfaces to expand or shrink spaces for a variety of gatherings.



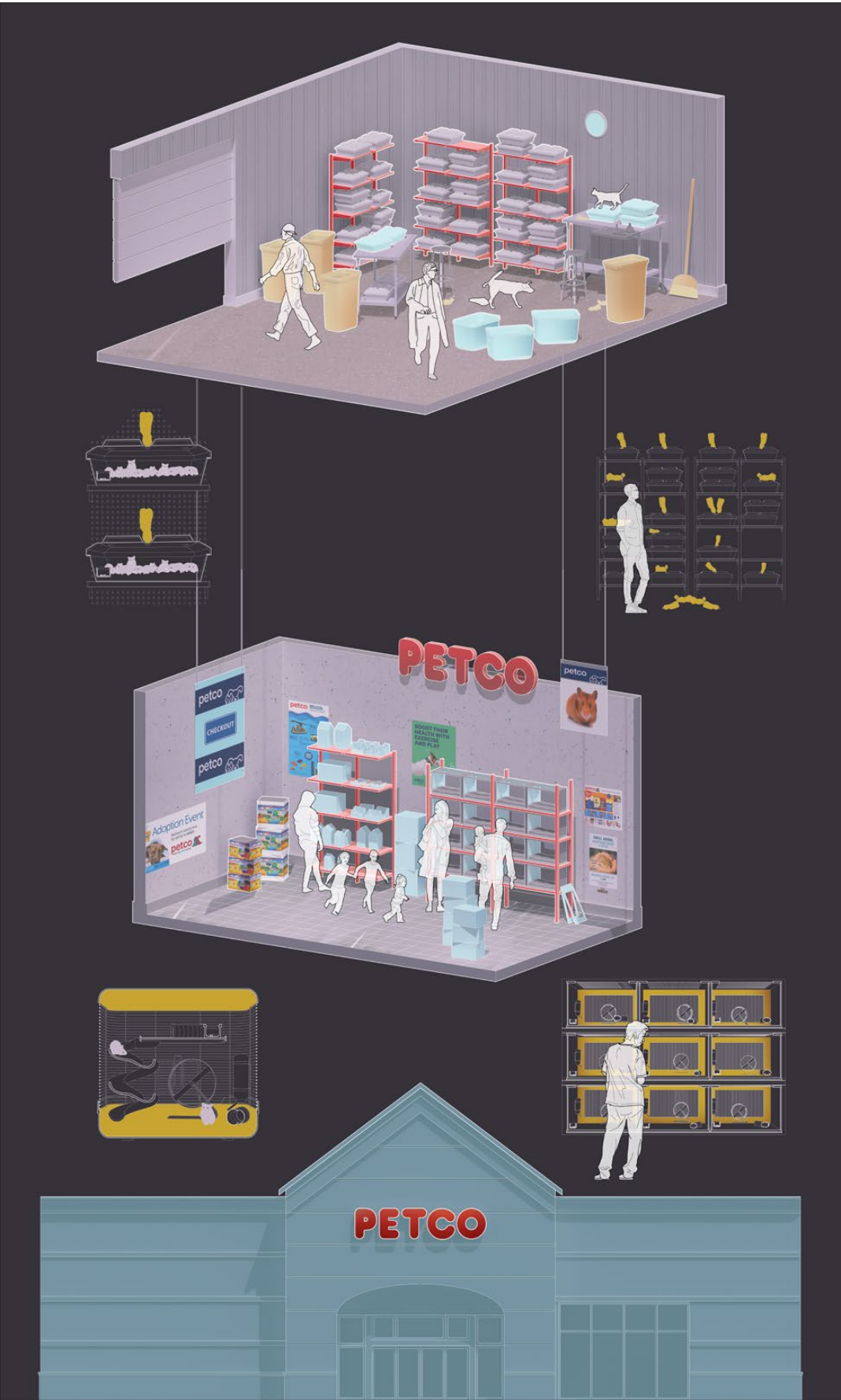
05 Petco Paranoia: Hamster-Human Playland

This project situates an amusement park and simulated ecosystem for both humans and hamsters within the footprint of a big box retail store. This design renders the amusement park typology as an opportunity to uncover, re-think, and hyperbolize the absurdity of spatial conditions embedded within the architectures of captivity, while staging a sequence of “attractions” that disrupt the language of subjugation between these two species.



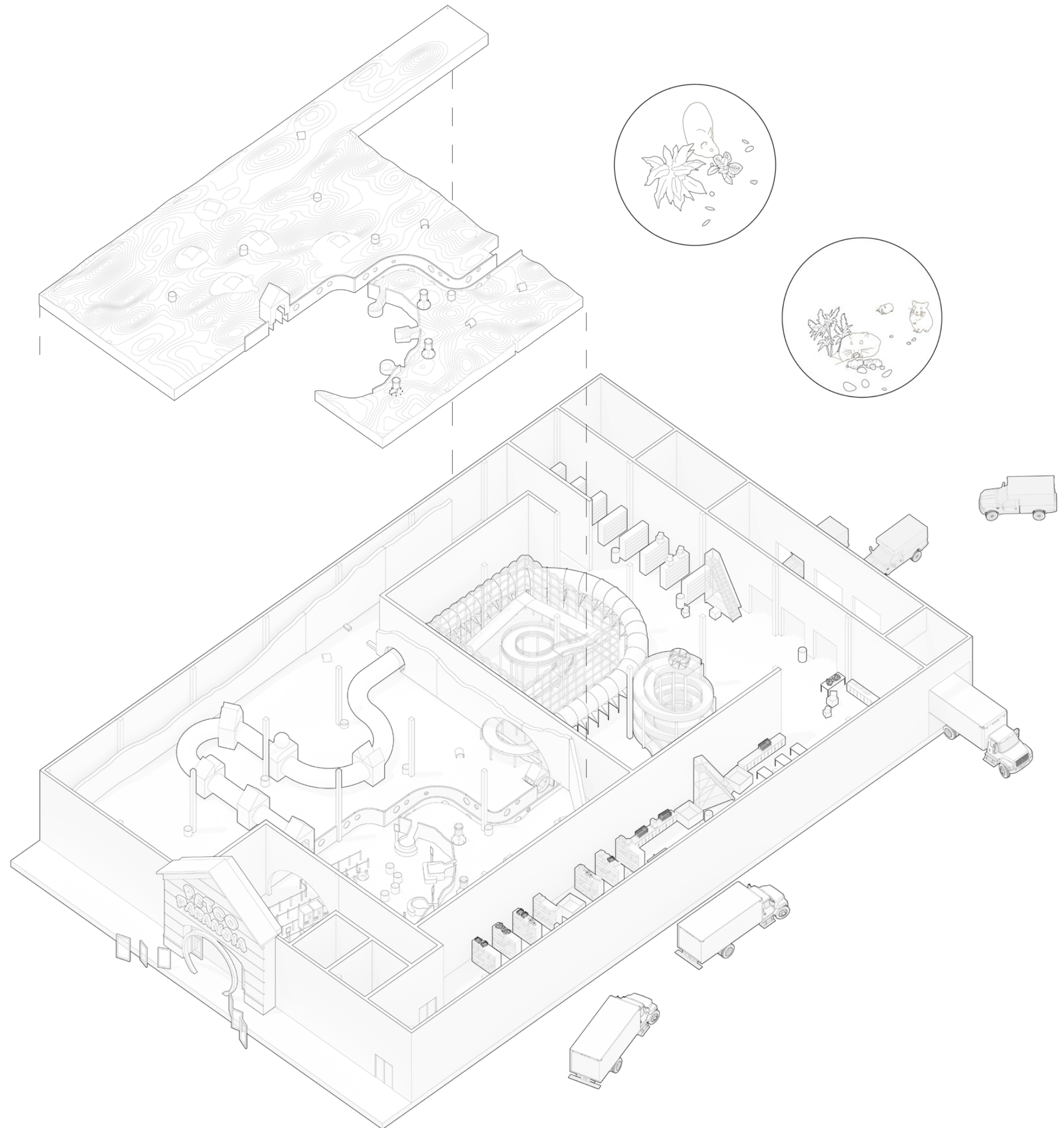


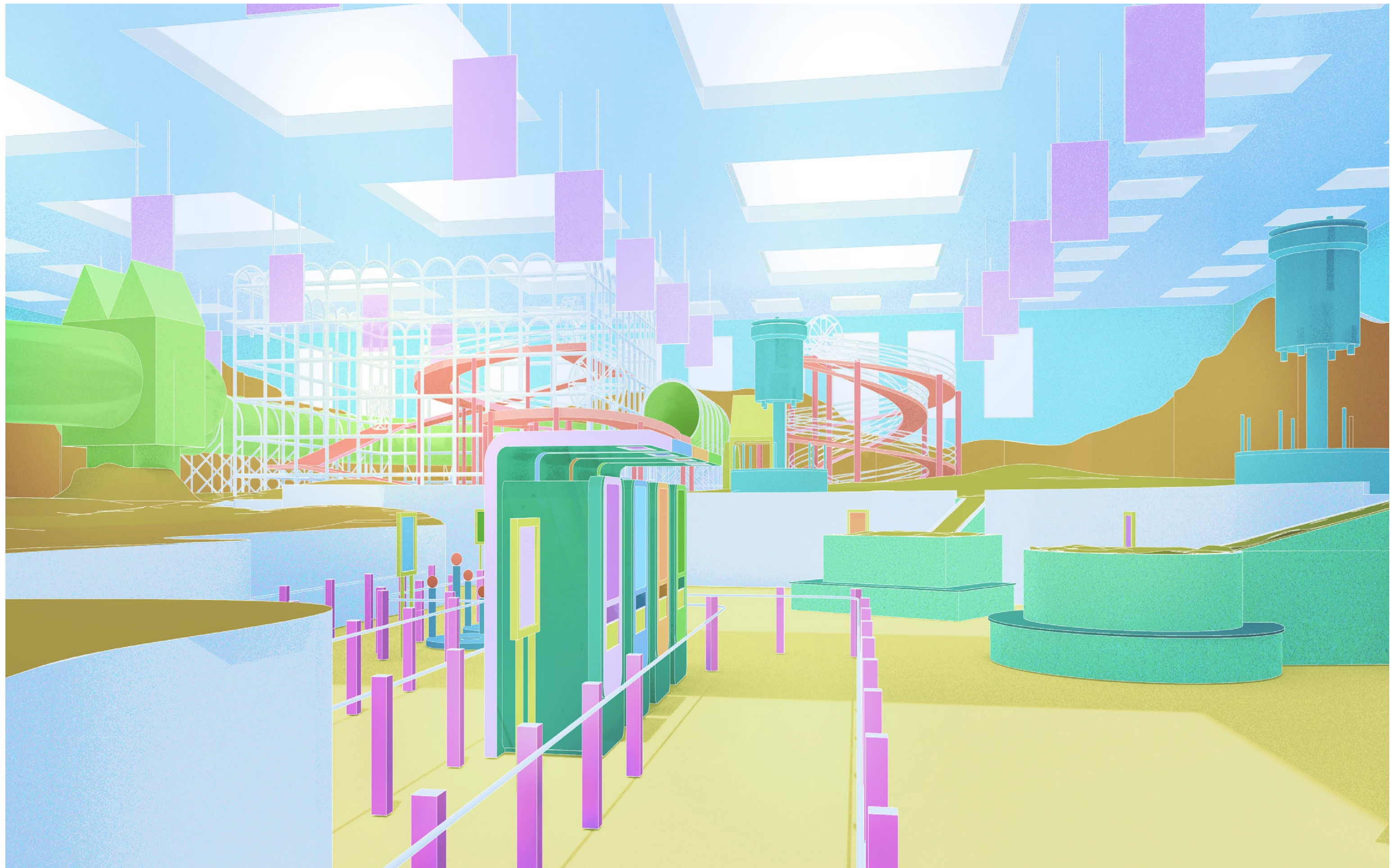
Serving as a layered architectural system of play, education, and ecological sensitivity, this project is conceived along a speculative timeline for dismantling current animal retail chains, re-assimilating Syrian hamsters into their natural environmental conditions, and re-shaping the general public's imagined relationship to domesticated pets.

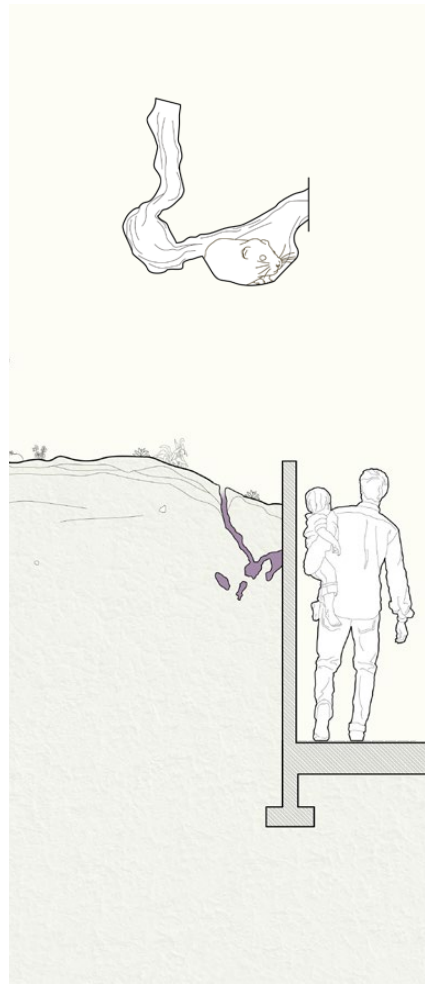
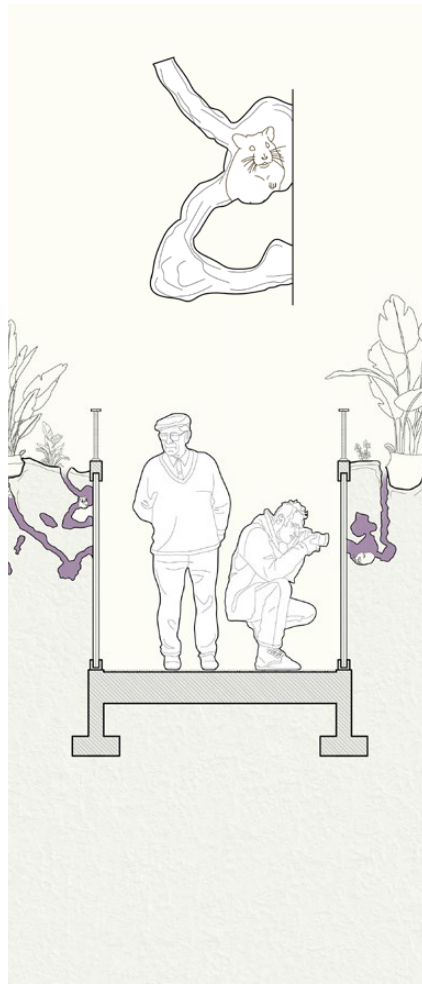
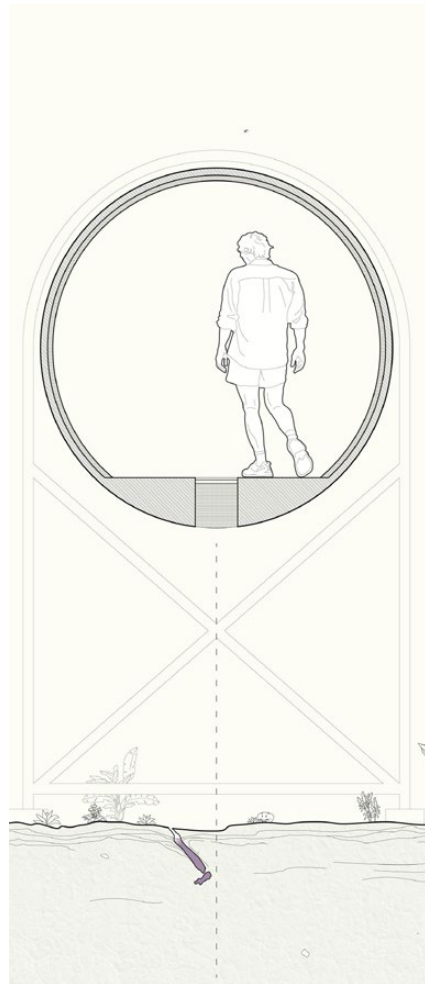


Human circulation through the site is constricted to a sequence of attractions themed around burrowing, physical activity, and feeding. The amusement park's attractions re-tool the architectural logics of the mass-produced hamster habitat, crafting human-scaled spatial conditions for visitors to deepen their understanding of Syrian hamster behaviors and embody the hamster's daily rituals that would occur in typical caged environments.

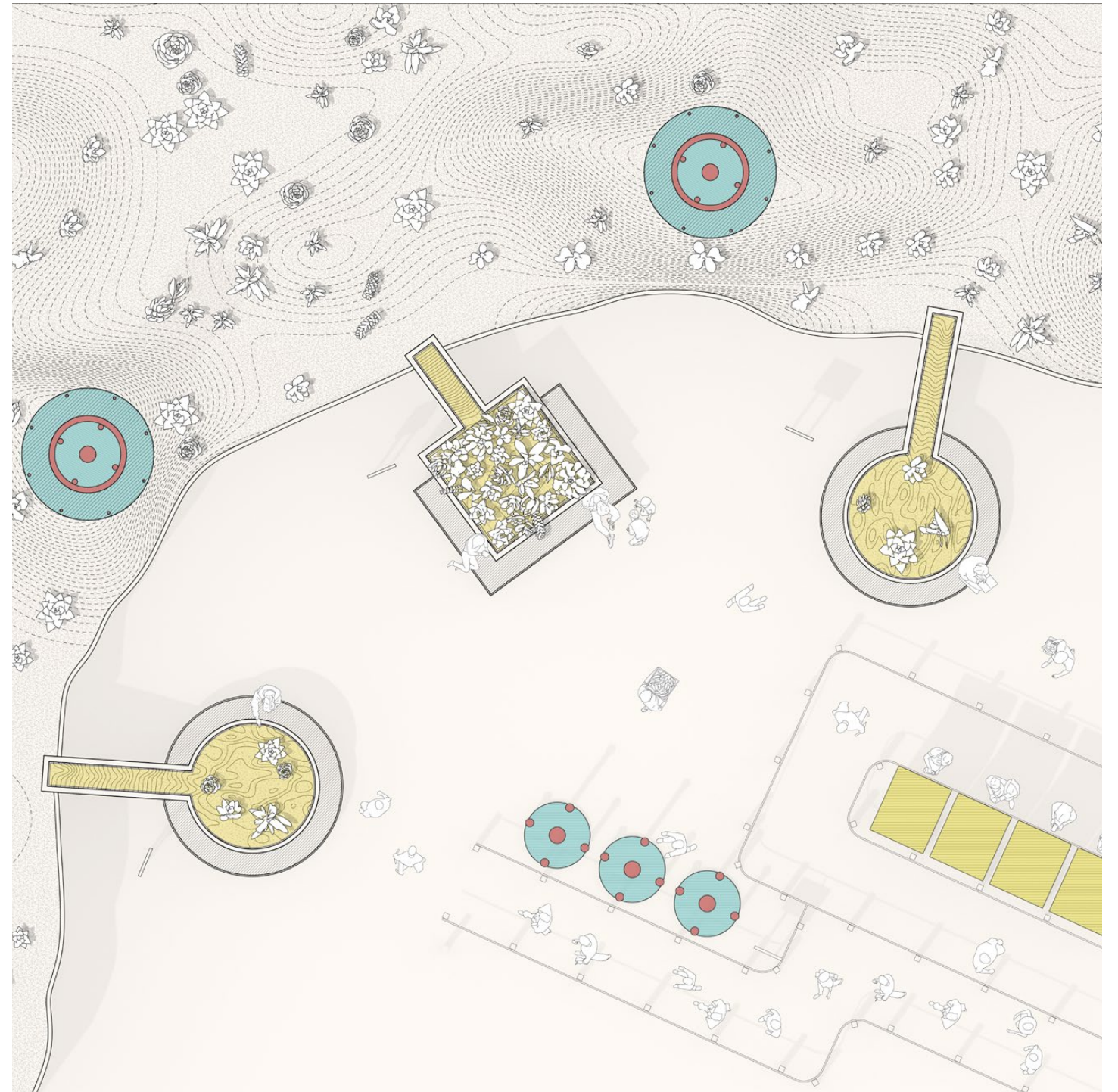
Most of the site's square footage is built as a sloping bed of desert, grasslands, and vegetation for hamsters to freely roam, engage, and burrow beneath to their natural capacity; approaching human visitors at their own discretion.



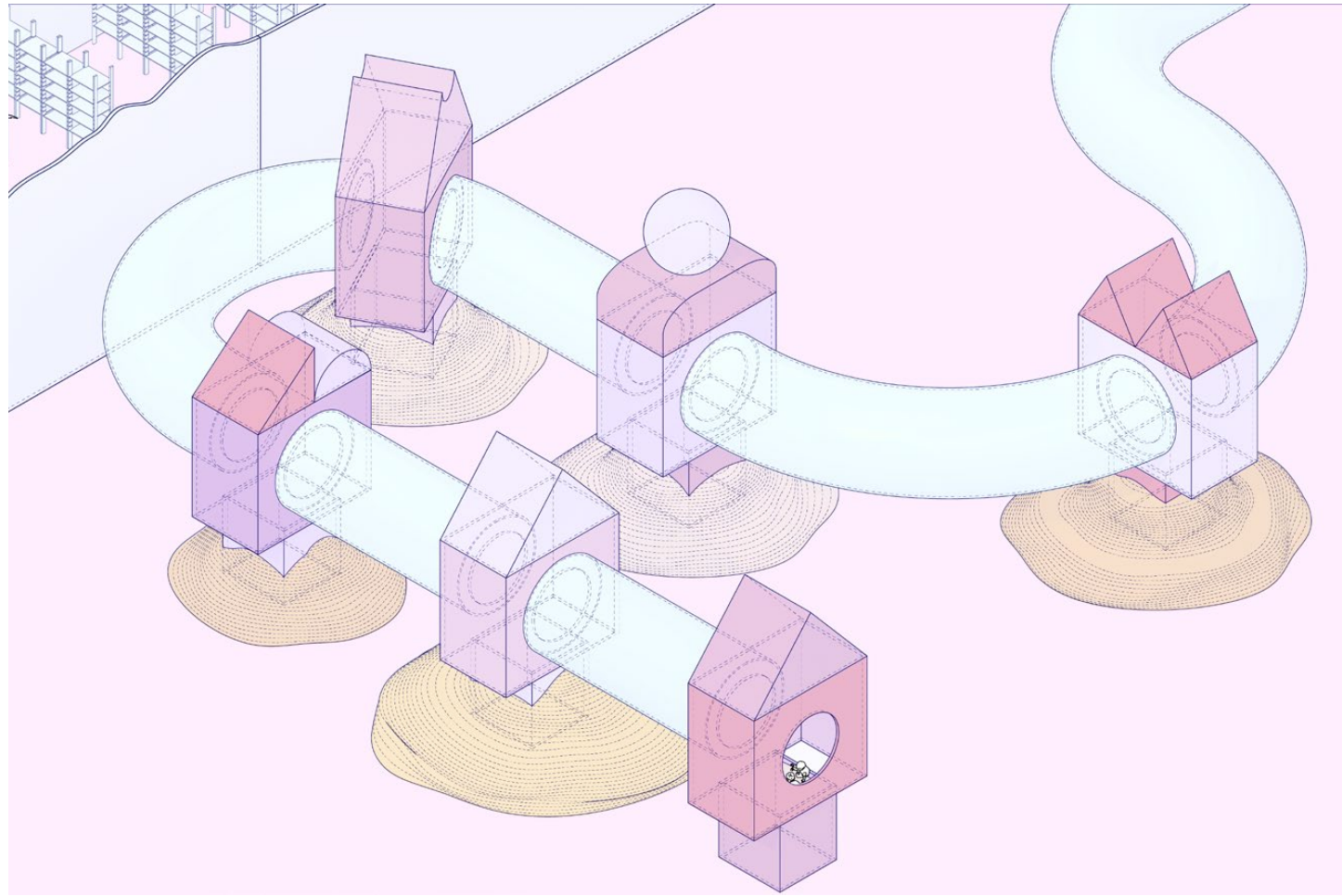




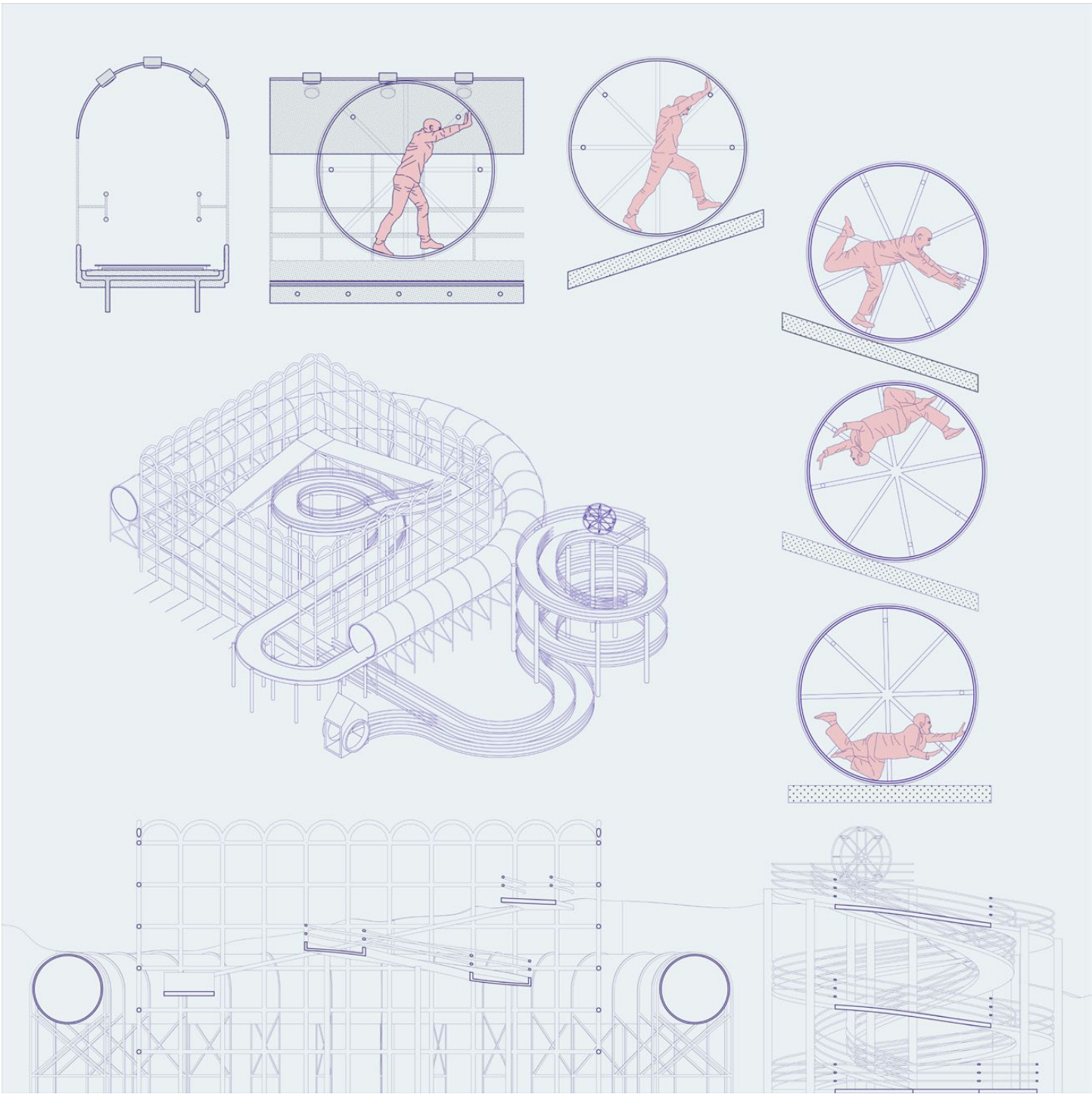
All of the terrain surrounding these attractions is designed in service of the hamster, constructing the ideal natural conditions for burrowing, feeding, breeding, and social enrichment through architectural considerations of things like temperature, soil depth, vegetation, visual stimulation, and daylight cycles.



The feeding station is embedded within a network of garden surfaces, allowing humans to indirectly feed the park's hamsters through depositing seeds, grains, fruits and vegetables. In captivity, Syrian hamsters respond best to routine daily feedings and learn to associate their owners with this activity. In nature, hamsters repeatedly gather food from specific locations to then store in their natural burrows. The amusement park's daily operational schedule helps this feeding zone to become a scheduled, "mechanized" process for the hamsters to collect food, return to their burrows, and know when they can expect to encounter humans.

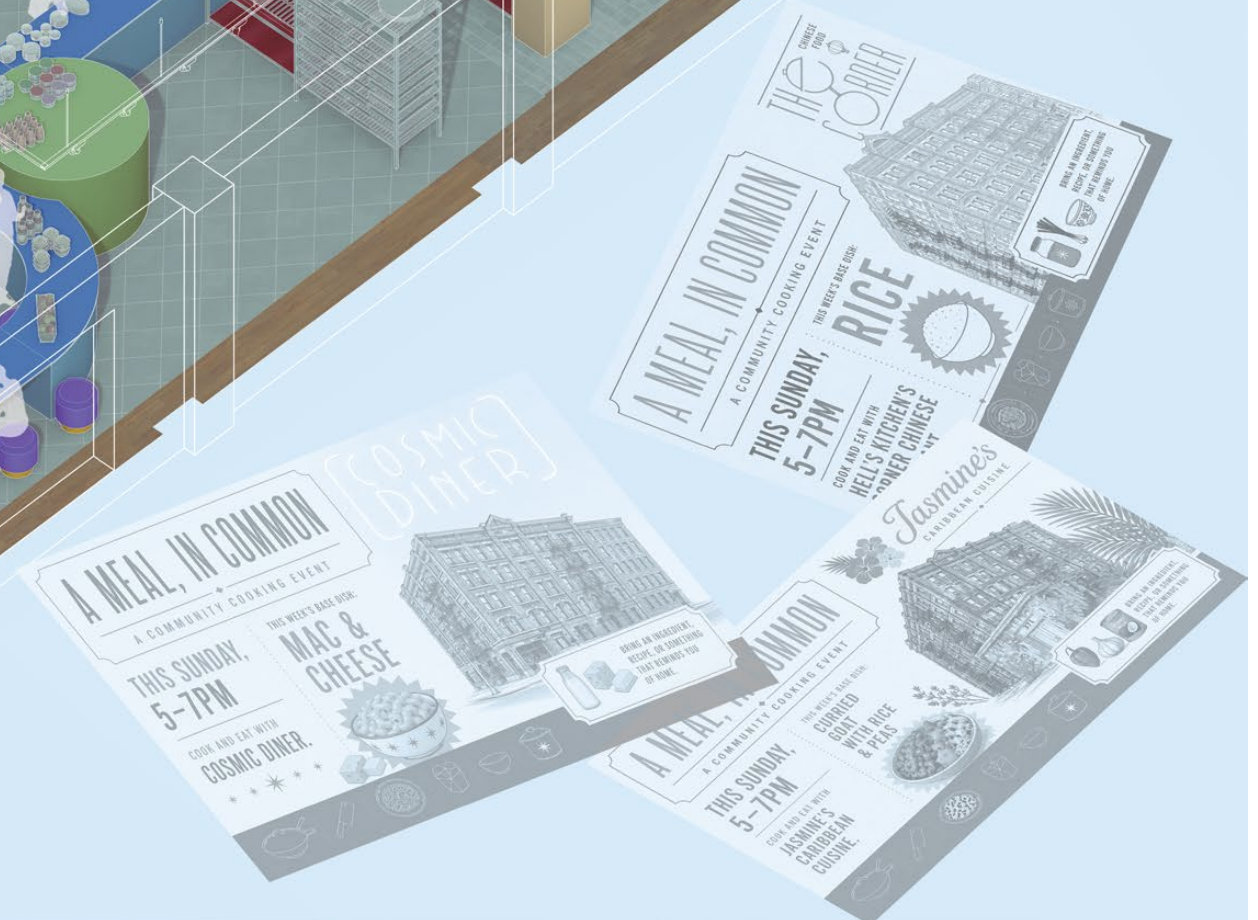


Each of these zones become architectural touchpoints to subvert or question the spatial dynamics between species; allowing the human to 'embody' the hamster as it would typically engage these architectures in its cage. Nesting construction serves as an educational attraction for the visitor and vital bedding source for hamsters. Utilizing discarded excess bedding materials previously sold at petco, the visitor engages in the process of constructing a resource to the hamster.



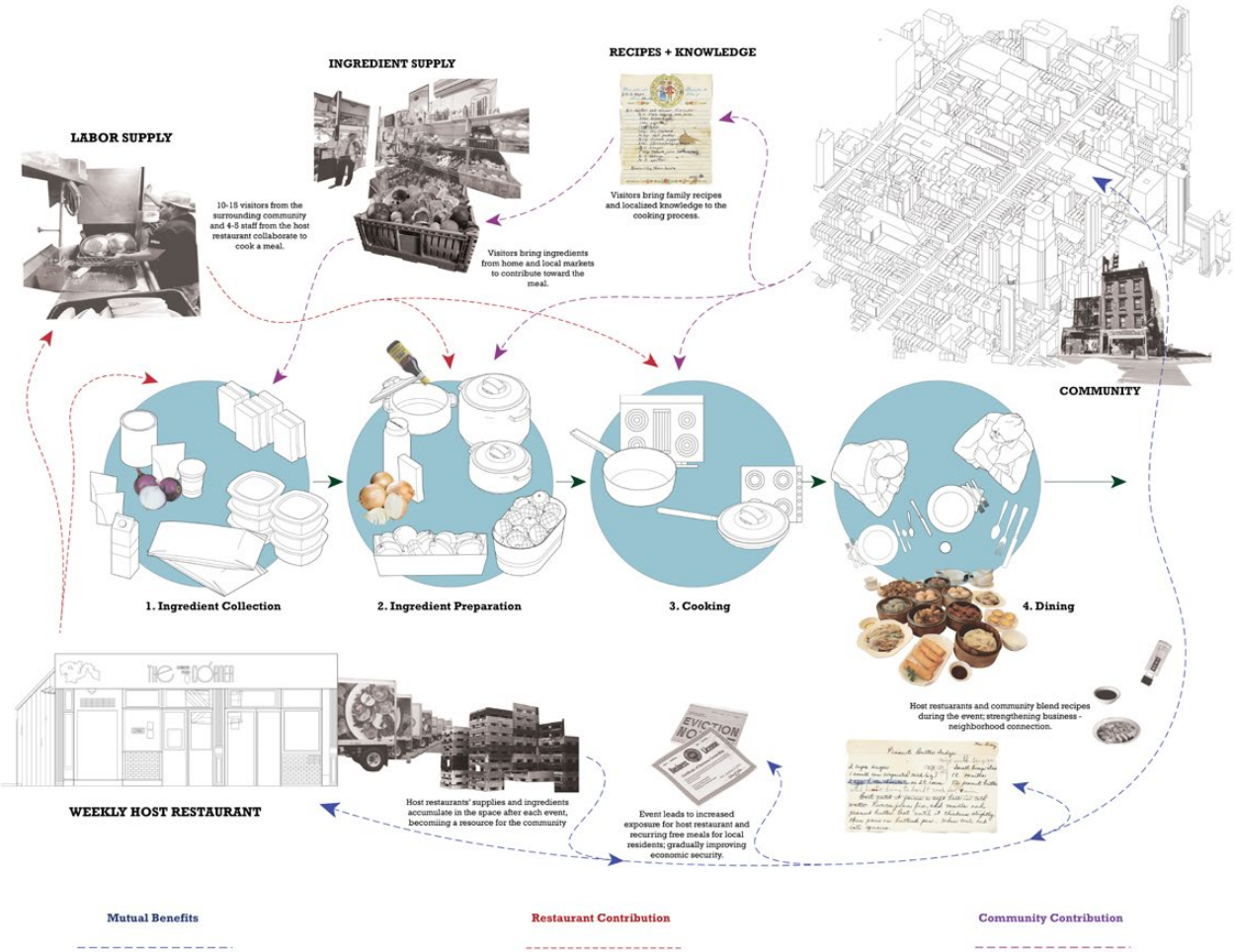
The amusement park features a caged obstacle course for the visitor to navigate in a human-scaled wheel, enduring a simulation of typically-stressful conditions for a domesticated hamster, such as vibrations from children running, blinding lights from a lamp placed too close to the cage, overstimulating noises from a television, and foul smells from soiled cage materials in a poorly circulated room.

06 Common (Hell's) Kitchen: Neighborhood Food Ritual

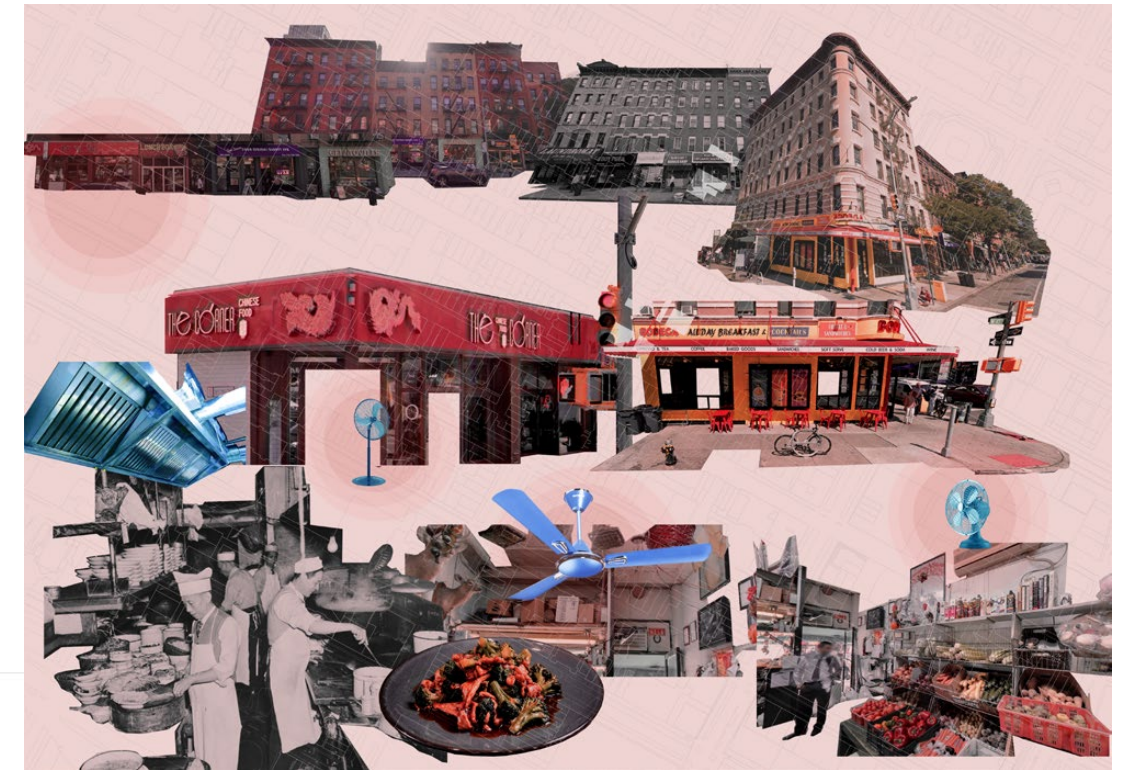


Narrative of Ritual

I saw the flyer taped to the inside of a 9th Avenue deli window, half-covered by other announcements—roommates wanted, guitar lessons, someone’s cat is missing. The glass was slightly fogged, so I had to lean in closer than I meant to. It read: This Sunday, 5–7pm. Cook and eat with Hell’s Kitchen’s Corner Chinese Restaurant. This week’s base: RICE. Bring an ingredient, recipe, or something that reminds you of home. Free of charge. I stood there a second longer than usual. Rice felt almost too basic—which made it harder to ignore. It’s the one thing I eat all the time without thinking about it. I thought about the way my neighbor cooks it; looser, almost like porridge. She once wrote her method down for me on a scrap of paper. I still had it somewhere. The next day I brought a small bag of jasmine rice, some scallions, and that note—rewritten more neatly, though I wasn’t sure I’d use it. When I arrived at The Windermere, the first thing I encountered wasn’t a dining room, but a narrow pantry stretched along a continuous counter. People were already gathered, placing things down—different kinds of rice, sauces, spices, things I couldn’t fully identify. There was no clear system, but things began to group themselves. Someone reached past me to grab the rice I brought—“Is this okay to use?”—and I nodded without thinking. Nearby, people debated how rice should be rinsed, or not rinsed. You start to realize that even something as simple as rice carries habits you didn’t know you had. As the counter curves, it becomes a prep space. We begin working side by side—washing, chopping, passing things back and forth. A cook demonstrates a technique, then steps away to let someone else try. Someone asks how I cook rice, and halfway through explaining, I realize I don’t really know—I just repeat what I’ve always done. Further along, the space thickens into cooking. A sea of pots, pans, sound, and smell. Ingredients move constantly—what you brought disappears into other dishes, and other people’s things end up in yours. At some point, I stopped trying to keep track of what was mine. By the time the counter opens into dining, the meal is no longer singular. It’s a collection of versions, all orbiting the same idea. Someone points out a dish that used the scallions I brought, but it tastes nothing like how I would have made it. Another dish reminds me of something I ate years ago, though I can’t place where. You realize the meal was never meant to be fixed—it’s something assembled through exchange. On the way out, there’s another flyer—next week, a different restaurant, a different base. It feels less like attending an event and more like stepping into something already in motion. I still have the note in my pocket. I never used it, but it somehow still feels like it ended up on the table.



Below: An analytical elevation for the corner of West 49th Street and 9th Avenue in Hell's Kitchen. This sequence of locally-owned restaurants and commercial businesses serves as a microcosm to understand the role of food, smell, and airflow as architectural mechanism in establishing neighborhood identity; both at the personal and urban scale.



Above: A collaged drawing detailing material aesthetics and conditions of labor within Hell's Kitchen's historic food system.



This project proposes a recurring, free neighborhood food ritual staged within the ground floor of the Windermere building in Hell's Kitchen. It is organized around a continuous counter that supports the full cycle of a meal: ingredient collection, preparation, cooking, and collective dining. Each session is hosted by a different locally-owned restaurant and structured around a simple base dish—like rice, broth, or noodles. Rather than a fixed menu, the system invites variation. Community members bring ingredients, fragments of recipes, or cooking habits tied to their own experiences, which are pooled into a shared pantry embedded within the counter. From there, cooks and participants work side by side, exchanging techniques and adapting one another's contributions. The resulting meal is not authored by any one individual, but produced through a series of small negotiations—between memory, material, and method.

