

CONFRONTING + CARING FOR SPACES OF SERVICE

TIA MILLER



“The goal is to create for the guests an overall impression of vagueness that can be very satisfying, where they get everything they want, but they don’t even know what they want or what day it is or what the fuck is going on. Staff members are meant to barely exist to their guests except as a nondescript blur of impeccable service.”

Armond - White Lotus Season One

CONTENTS

01	THE ABSTRACT
02	INDEXES
03	INTERVIEWS
04	CONFRONTING SPACES OF SERVICE
05	CARING FOR SPACES OF SERVICE
06	APPENDIX
07	BIBLIOGRAPHY

PREFACE

DESIGN [FOR] LABORERS

I approach this thesis as a designer who has influenced the design of service spaces.

As a new boutique hospitality designer who worked through the pandemic, I also came face to face with methods of erasure in labor. With the lull in demand for luxury hotels that came with the pandemic, my workload shifted from working on predominately luxury guest rooms and lounges to renovating back-of-house spaces. The discrepancies between designing for the guest versus the laborer were stark. Where in public hospitality spaces we were given time and fee to interview users and complete visioning sessions, in the back of house, I was handed a binder of standards, told to use the baseline standard and to work as quickly as possible around a small fee. The biggest design questions were deciding how best to conceal the back-of-house program from the guest without hampering laborer productivity.



DESIGN [AS A] LABORER:

I approach this thesis as laborer who has worked in service spaces and has been influenced by the design of service spaces.

I've existed in positions termed "service jobs" or "unskilled labor" at several points in my life. I've faced injury in crowded back of house kitchens which were dangerously designed to free up space for "profit-producing" customers. Like many others can attest to, I've cried in a bleak, empty "break room" after having a demanding customer berate me over forgetting an extra butter packet. I've experienced and seen others face verbal, sexual, and physical harassment that occurred unchecked due to design choices which helped corrupt owners and managers continuously demonstrate their power over laborers. I acknowledge the millions of other laborers who constantly exist in poorly designed labor spaces that harm their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.



DESIGN [IS] LABOR:

I approach this thesis as a designer who is aware of harmful labor standards that exist within architecture and design academically and professionally and how it influences the labor standards of others.

In school we are taught that design should never be "just a job", but a passion. This manifests into the professional world where we are expected to work unpaid overtime, accept little pay, and not question situations of manipulation at the hands of managers or clients all in the name of proving we love our profession. There is a clear connection to how we treat our own labor with how we design for the labor of others. Often, we fail to acknowledge and advocate for the laborers whose job is to maintain the structures we create. Yet, maybe if this perception changed, we would find space to contemplate the terms and situations of our own labor.



01 | THE ABSTRACT

The erasure of labor has existed in many contexts and typologies, now and throughout history. The master or manager stands at the helm, creating standards for a world where the occupant in power doesn't need to directly face the labor that is carried out to maintain a space or standard of luxury. Architecture and design are active agents alongside that master, supporting and perpetuating this erasure, both willingly and passively, in the creation of everything from manor house servant quarters to a restaurant dish washing station. The architect is viewed as an expert who proposes solutions for efficiency, productivity, and profitability without paying mind to the user experience of laborers.

The pandemic and rise of social justice demands brought about many questions surrounding labor and its standards. Interest in labor unions rose, laborers who felt they weren't treated fairly quit in favor of better opportunities, and laborers voiced demands for better workplace conditions. This rhetoric was met with the response "nobody wants to work" as service-based occupations saw a jump in availability. Yet, as wages were upped, it was rare to hear that the "workplace conditions" were addressed in a design sense. Even architects, who hold many layers of influence over a laborer's experience in the built environment, began to question their own accepted standards for overwork, manipulation, and poor wages at the hands of management.

Hotel service spaces have existed as a typology of willful erasure and strategic manipulation for centuries. As criticism around unfair labor practices continues to grow in the post-pandemic world, how can we better confront the necessity of service space while also caring for workers who maintain the buildings we design? Leveraging the common comparison of hotel front of house and back of house spaces to a theater's main stage and backstage, what can be learned when the spaces are reconstructed as open and observable sets? What choreographies exist in these spaces and how do they change when the back and front stages are combined in a way that better considers care and comfort of service workers?

02 | INDEXES

BACK OF HOUSE ELEMENTS OF ERASURE

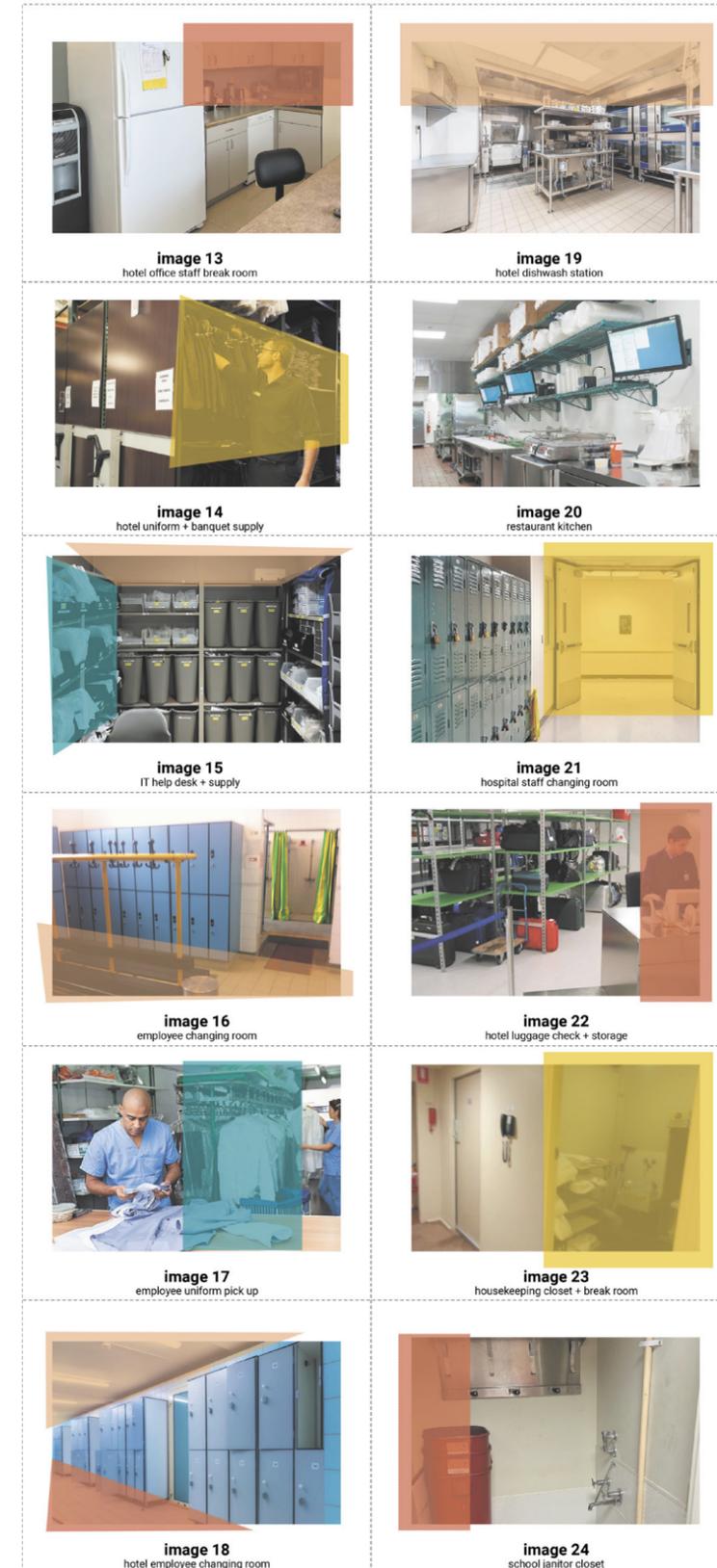
These four elements can also be applied to the modern day hotel back of house spaces. Through conversations with fellow designers, I cataloged their imagery of back of house spaces from site visits and completed projects. In dialogue over these images, we talked through their experiences navigating the status quo of designing service spaces. Unshockingly, we were able to locate at least 1 of the 4 elements in the space of every single image that was provided.

 cramped spatial footprint

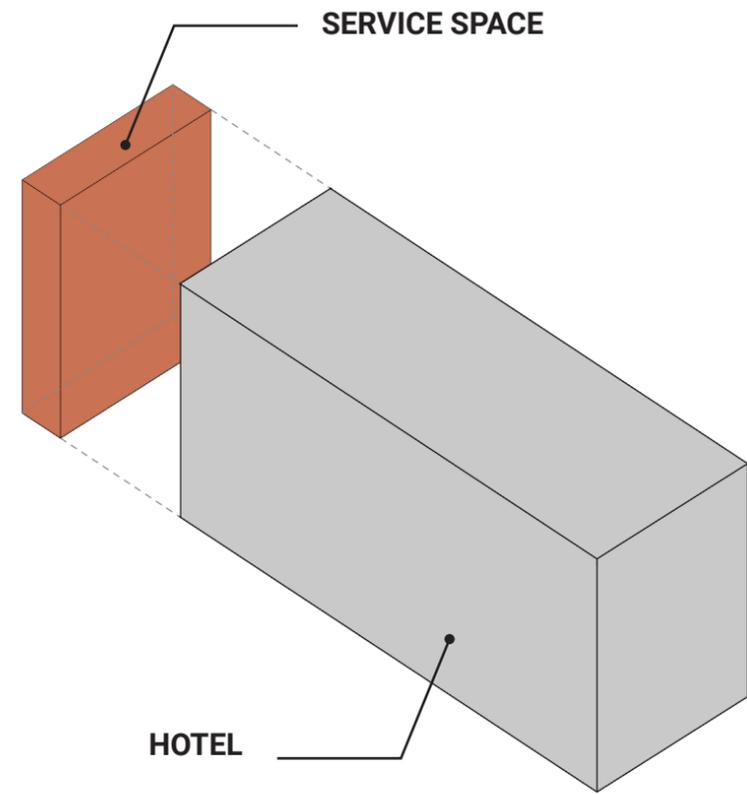
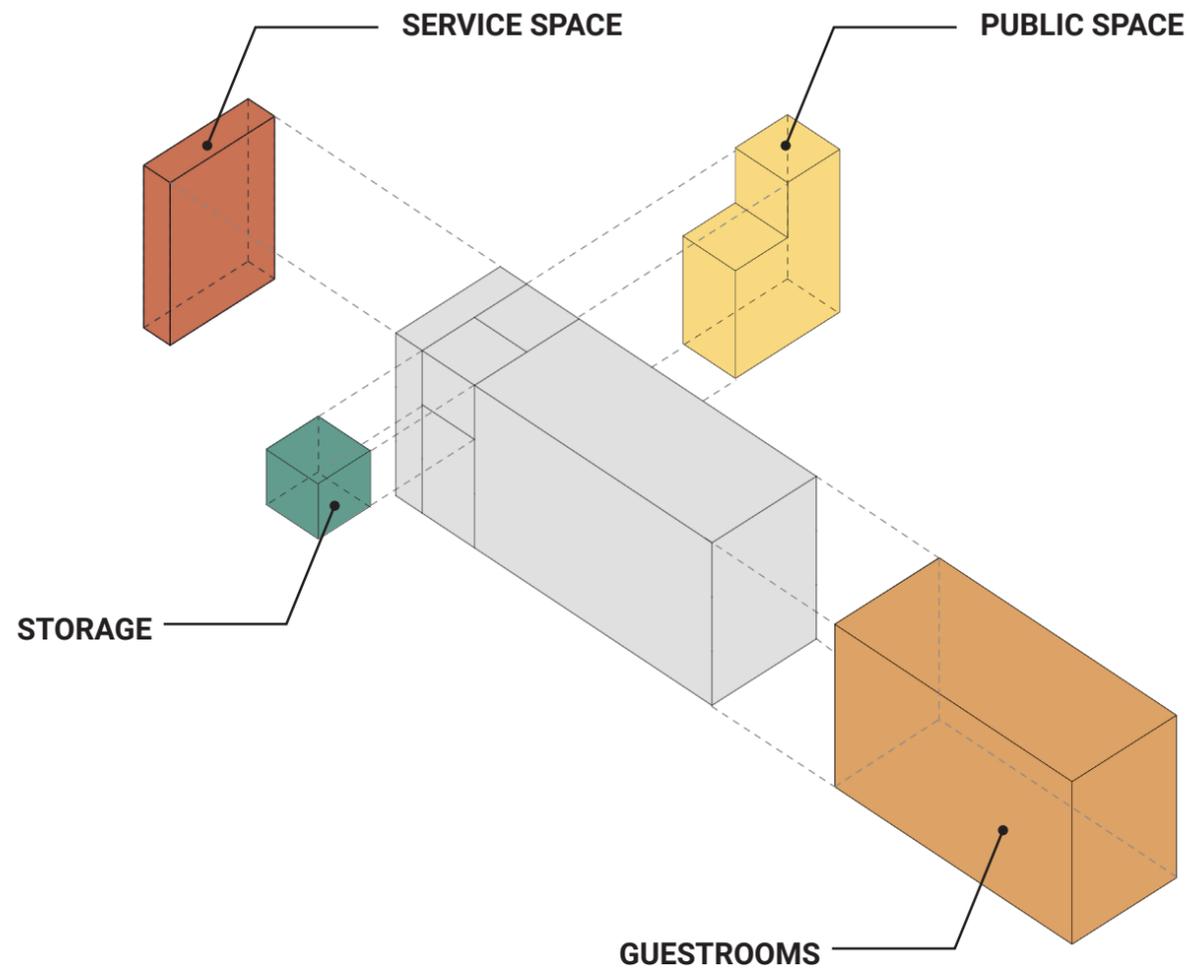
 basic materiality
minimum standard

 secondary circulation /
hidden service

 underground space
no natural light



TYPICAL HOTEL SPACE ALLOCATIONS



SERVICE SPACE

- 800 sf locker room
- 400 sf cafeteria
- 100 sf lounge employee
- 700 sf laundry
- 300 sf linen storage
- 100 sf uniform issue
- 960 sf dining room kitchen
- 960 sf banquet kitchen
- 100 sf room service
- 100 sf receiving office
- 1000 sf admin offices
- 100 sf telephone room
- 100 sf server room

PUBLIC SPACE

- 100 sf sitting space
- 300 sf front desk
- 100 sf washroom
- 2,400 sf Dining Room
- 400 sf gym
- 200 sf locker/shower
- 3,600 sf Meeting Room/
Banquet
- 200 sf Meeting Bathroom
- 1000 sf Prefunction
- 600 sf public space circulation

STORAGE SPACE

- 1,800 sf mechanical, hvac
- 350 sf kitchen storage
- 360 sf meeting storage
- 300 sf general hotel storage
- 100 sf garbage
- 100 sf luggage
- 250 sf receiving platform

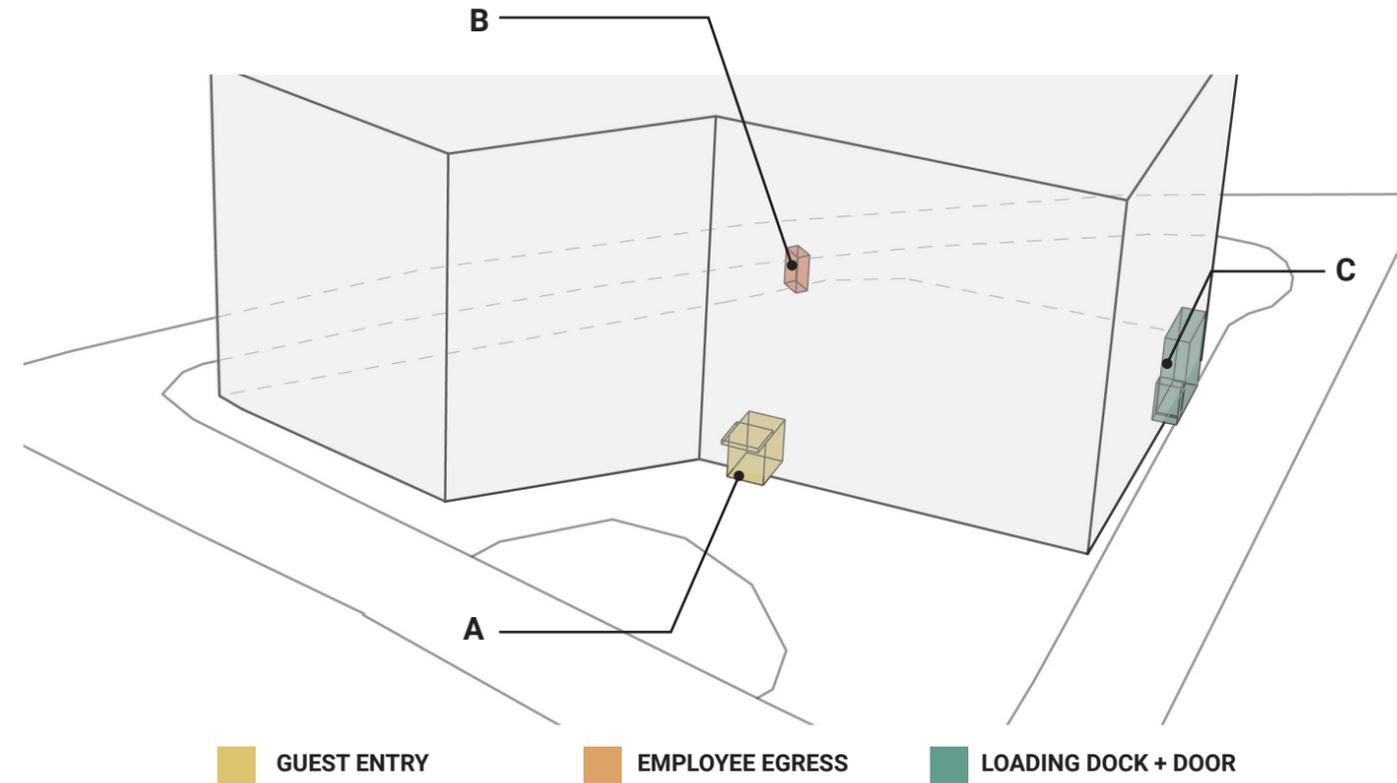
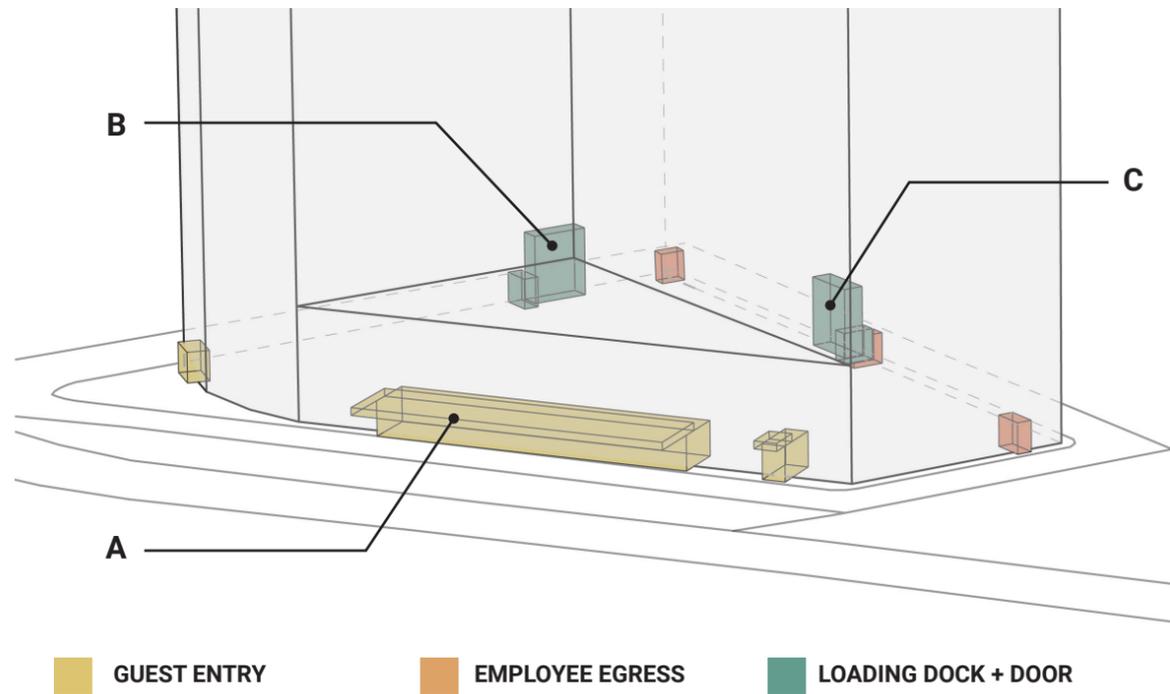
GUEST ROOM

- 50,000 sf guest room space
+ guest circulation

This study assumes a 100 key hotel, 4 star, with a banquet center included in the public space. Counts were found using typical hospitality design standards based on this room count assumption.

These diagrams were meant to better visualize and see the proportions of service space to guest or public space in a hotel. Notoriously, service spaces tend to be quite small and cramped. This helped to visualize whether this felt accurate or if this was more of a conception. It was also helpful to determine the generators of what spaces were sized to. For example, the size of an employee break room is directly related to number of guestrooms a 1 sq ft per guestroom while the locker room is 8 sq ft per guestroom. These assumptions don't come from a standard of efficiency like in guestroom sizing. And it doesn't consider number of employees or the ideal requirements of the program like other public spaces.

POINT OF ENTRY DIAGRAM



THE GRADUATE HOTEL - DOWNTOWN PROVIDENCE

This is a 4 star, 300 key hotel with coffee shop and restaurant included in building footprint.

HOMWOOD SUITES - DOWNTOWN PROVIDENCE

This is a 3 star, 120 key hotel with unoccupied retail space.



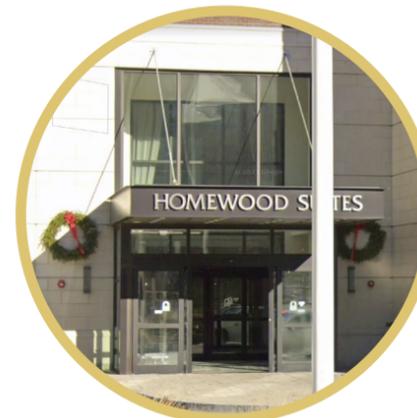
A.
-more extravagant finishes
-borders busy street but has dedicated pull-off area



B.
-simple materials that blend with surroundings
-borders one way alley road facing parking garage



C.
-simple materials that blend with surroundings
-away from main entry
-near restaurant



A.
-more extravagant finishes
-borders busy street but has dedicated pull-off area



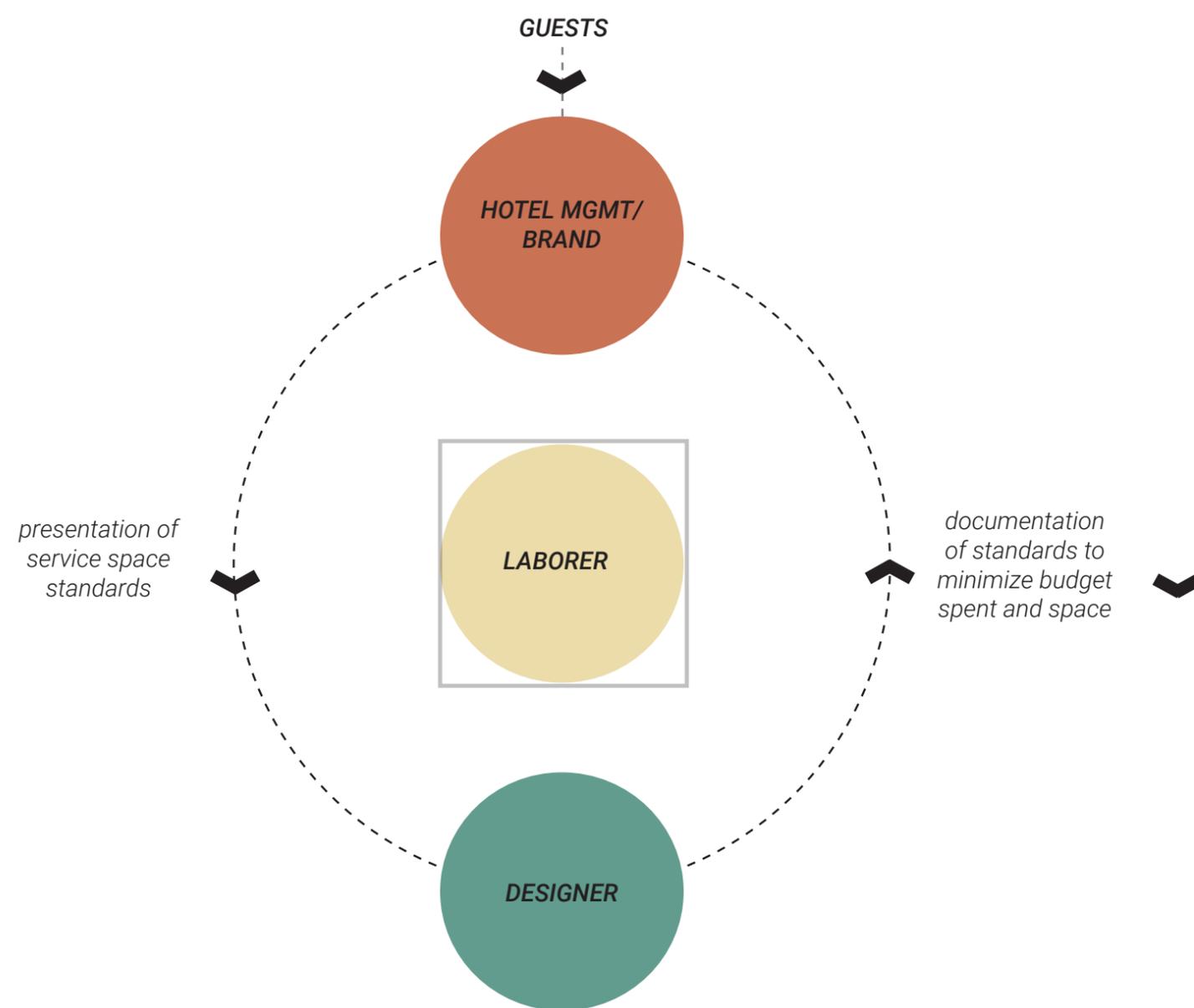
B.
-simple materials that blend with surroundings
-away from main entry
-near restaurant



C.
-simple materials that blend with surroundings
-borders very busy road

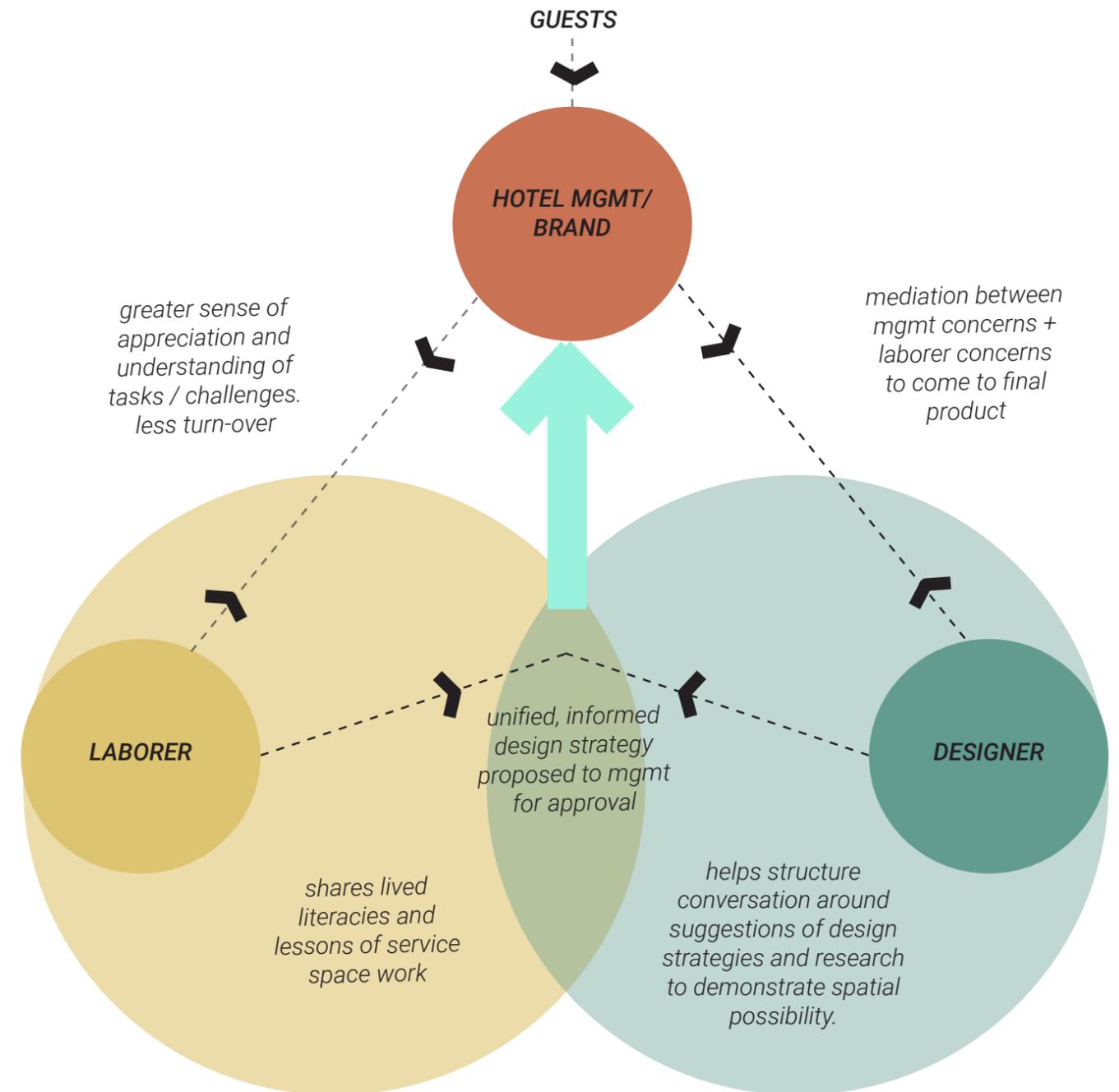
EXISTING DESIGN PROCESS

Typically, the brand works directly with the designer and rarely interacts with workers for their personal insight or user experiences. A narrative of "this is the tried and true method" permeates the process and leaves designers following the binder of standards and only getting feedback from hotel management.



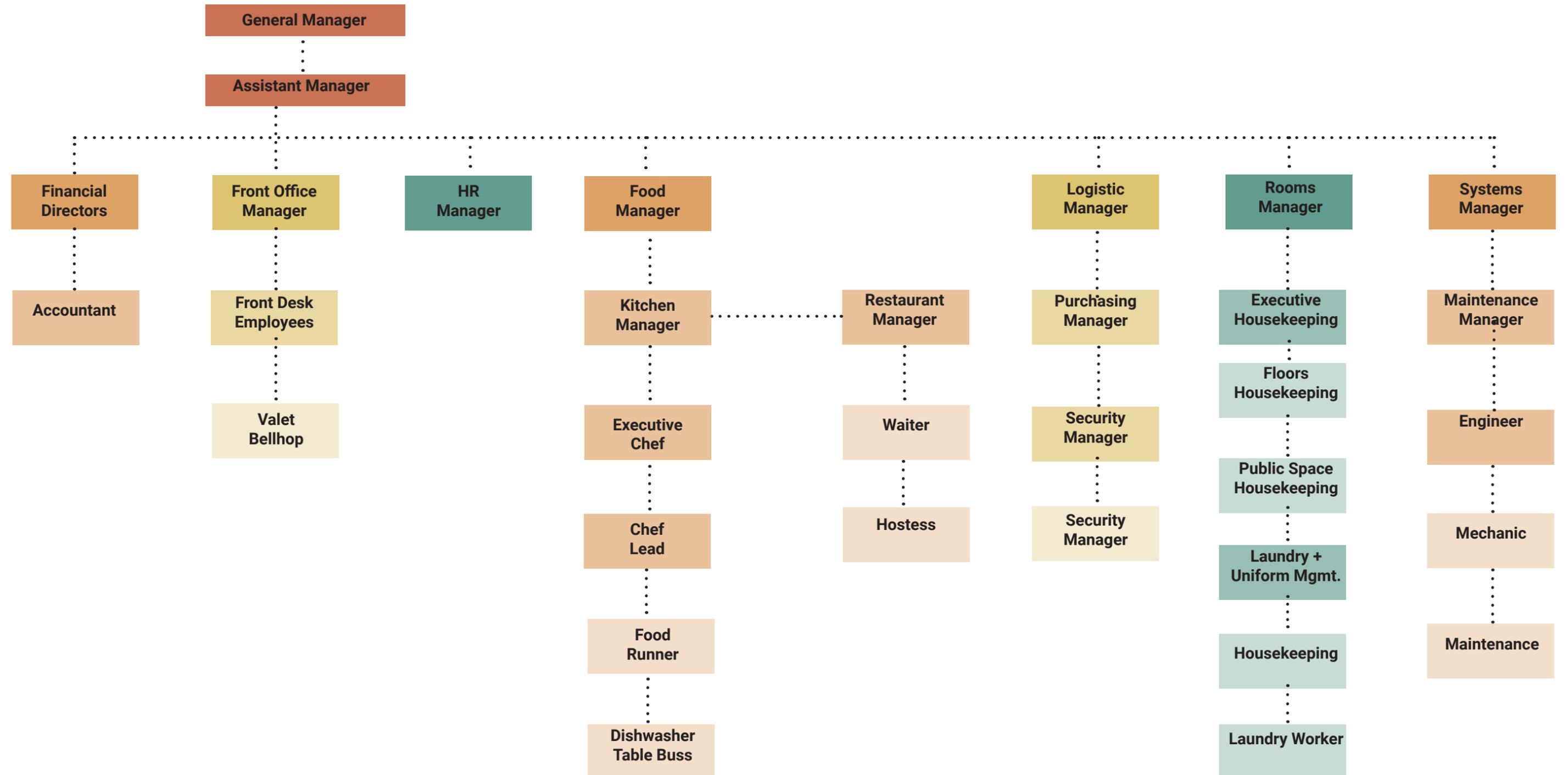
PROPOSED DESIGN PROCESS

However, after many of these conversations I was left questioning how this process could be challenged to look more like the process for the front of house, where the guest or client was very much brought into conversation with management/ the brand and the designer. In other words, how could I leverage conversation with the laborers to help design a back of house space that worked better for the laborers?



HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT HIERARCHIES

A typical hospitality brand follows the ownership and management styles of a typical business within a system of capitalism. There is a brand or owner at the top and a hierarchy of workers underneath whose jobs and power decrease.



CO - OP STYLE OF MANAGEMENT

Co-op styles of management are extremely rare in hospitality design outside of hostel or more informal styles of hospitality design. In this method, all employees are viewed more as equals that each hold one vote.



03 | INTERVIEWS

After completing the initial research, index studies, and conversations with designers, I wondered how this process could be challenged to look more like the process for the front of house. In other words, how could I leverage conversation with the laborers to help design a back of house space that worked better for the laborers?

With this design process in mind, I sought to find ways to connect with service workers in the hospitality industry to ask about their experiences. What worked, what didn't, what made their job better or worse? I completed a series of interviews with works and also found my way into several social media forums for hospitality workers on reddit and facebook and staged questions or gathered information from posts. This is some of the information I gathered from these spaces.

INTERVIEWS- WHAT DOESN'T WORK

"Front desk area should be more enclosed. So over the pod concept and guests coming around. Its not a kiosk where they should just be helping themselves. And employees safety is sacrificed without a designated area to have a physical barrier from guests."



"Our break room is also sad. Its small and gray. Kind of like being in the kitchen, but at least I can talk to people in the kitchen. I'm sure it keeps us busy having it be so sad. Shit is falling apart and no-one wants to fix it or they buy junk."



"A kitchen that fits more than 2 people would be nice. I've gotten some pretty nasty injuries...seen others with them too. And of course there is nowhere good to deal with an injury or sit down a second either."



"Nice large break room for staff to sit in and have meals. Everyone that I have seen has been dismal, dark, and nasty".



"It takes so long to get anywhere efficiently. They spend so much time making sure we don't cross paths with guests, it takes forever to move laundry from one space to another "



"Guests take advantage of the "customer is right" rhetoric and can become violent. Verbally... physically... But in a hotel money talks and we play into it."



"HR was wide open. It felt like I wasn't safe to come there with concerns because everyone could hear."



Laborers in the service industry note many safety concerns regarding the **lack of space** within their programs. Having **easily accessible support systems** and amenities are important but not at the cost of making them difficult to get to. Break rooms are important as a space to relax, rest, and collect oneself in the stressors of hospitality.

INTERVIEWS - ON VISIBILITY

"When I was in the elevator with guests and a full cart, it suddenly became all hands on deck to help me out. Otherwise working in service meant feeling like you were putting on a constant performance."



"What you experience as a guest is very different from what's happening behind the scenes. What happens in the underground stays in the underground."



"Visibility is a big concern. Drug use, sexual harassment, verbal and physical assault are all common in back of house. Its hidden back so far, there its easy to shut off spaces especially as management and get away with shit."



Laborers in the service industry acknowledge that much of their **job feels like a performance** to maintain a level of luxury. In that performance, work is secluded as much as possible to maintain an air of luxury and ease. However, when this boundary between **work and guest experience is crossed**, there are often experiences where **the laborer is humanized** in the eyes of the guest.

INTERVIEWS - WHAT THEY WANT

"Bigger rooms for maintenance to be able to work out of. Dumb waiters that go to linen rooms. Kitchens that are big enough for the tasks that occur there."



"Like why is it so bad to have light in even the break room? Or I've worked at places where all the employee stuff in underground. Even less light there."



"Nice large break room for staff to sit in and have meals. Everyone that I have seen has been dismal, dark, and nasty".



"Getting to work almost took 15 minutes...to go through hallways and doors from the employee parking lot. It took forever. Guests got picked up in a golf cart."



Laborers want more space. More space to do their jobs effectively and not to be an after thought or the result of an equation. More space that is convenient for them to get to versus navigating a labyrinth of hallways to stay away from the guest path. **Laborers also want light.** Better light fixtures and windows and to not be exclusively underground.

04 | CONFRONTING SPACES OF SERVICE

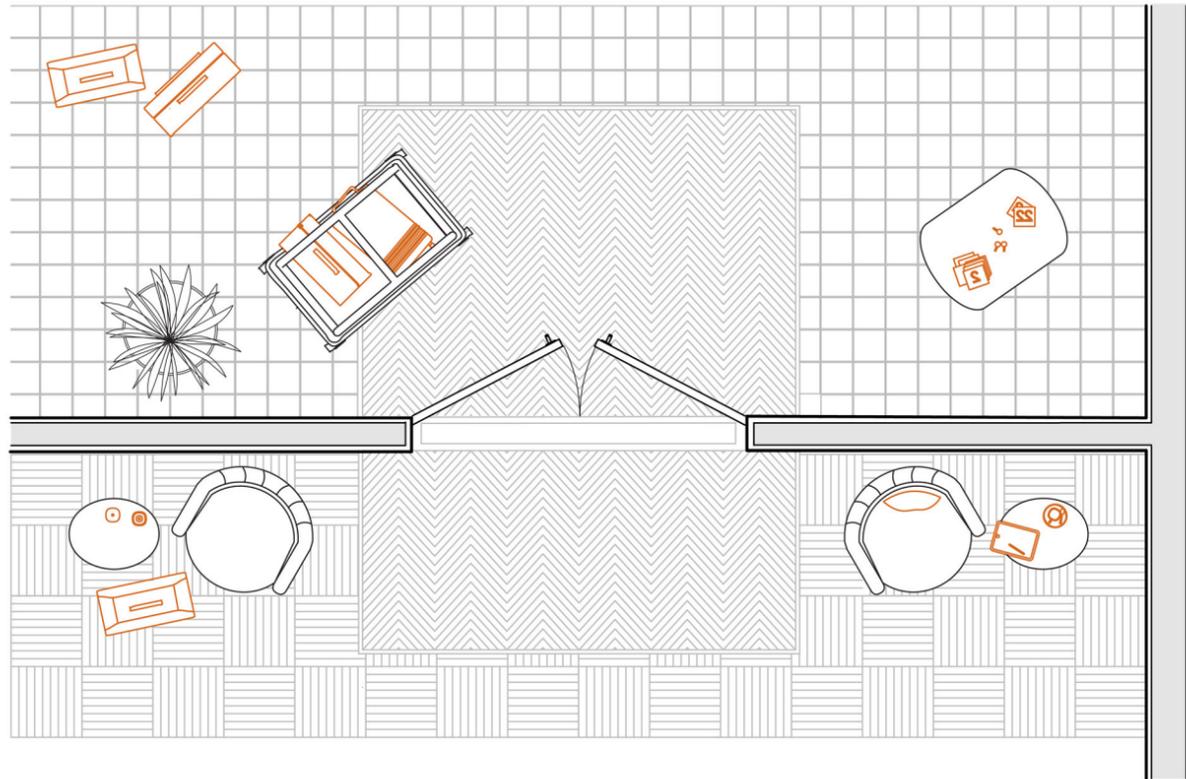
Looking back on this original analogy of back of house spaces and front of house spaces being compared to the theater, there is a relevant opportunity to harness these spaces within this language of theater sets. With this strategy of erasing service spaces in hotel design, its rare we as guests or even designers get to confront them as important spaces that support one another's function fully.

As designers we often develop detailed renderings and drawings of the front of house to demonstrate how the space functions and exists to support the needs of the user. Yet rarely, if ever, do we render or detail out the back of house or the ways in which it ends up being realistically used. Rarely if ever do we devote the care to creating drawings for the back of house that could better force us a designers to consider our place in designing workspaces that benefit all parties, not just those who hold power or money.

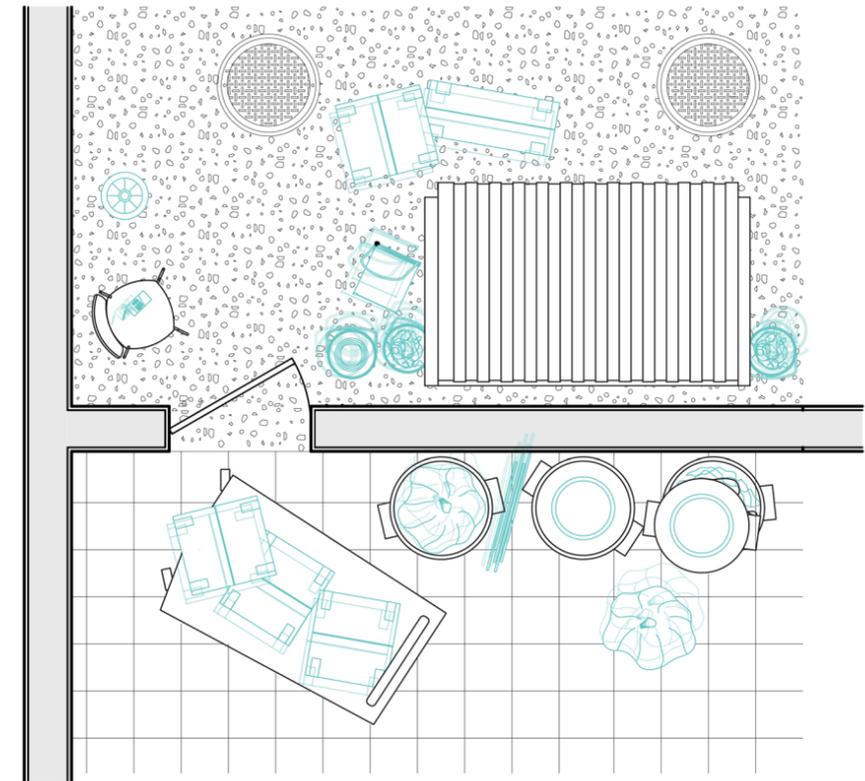
What can be learned or observed if these front stage and back stage spaces are fully revealed next to one another?

What happens when we confront spaces of service alongside the spaces they support?

THE ENTRANCES



GUEST ENTRANCE



EMPLOYEE ENTRANCE

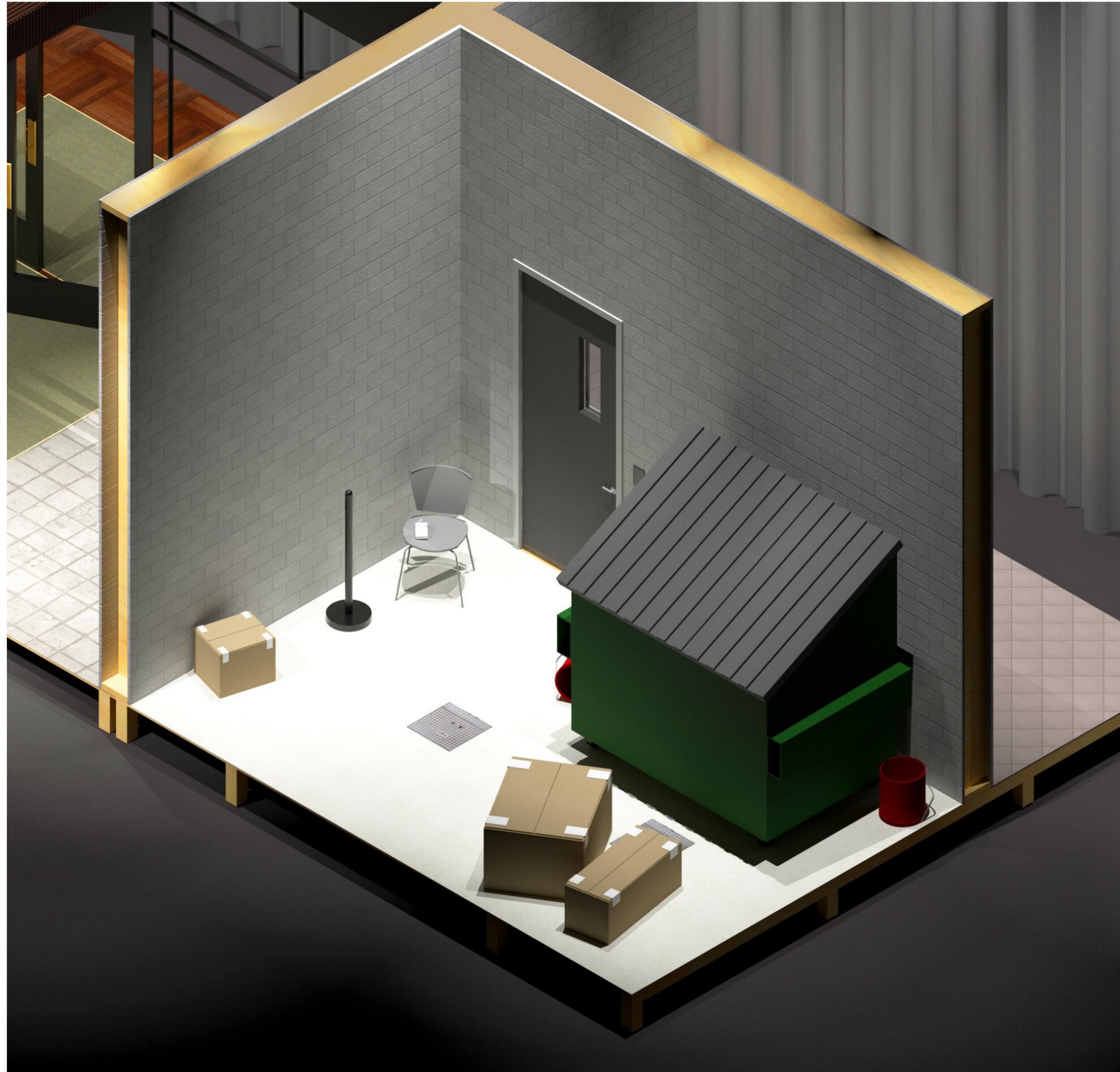
THE ENTRANCES



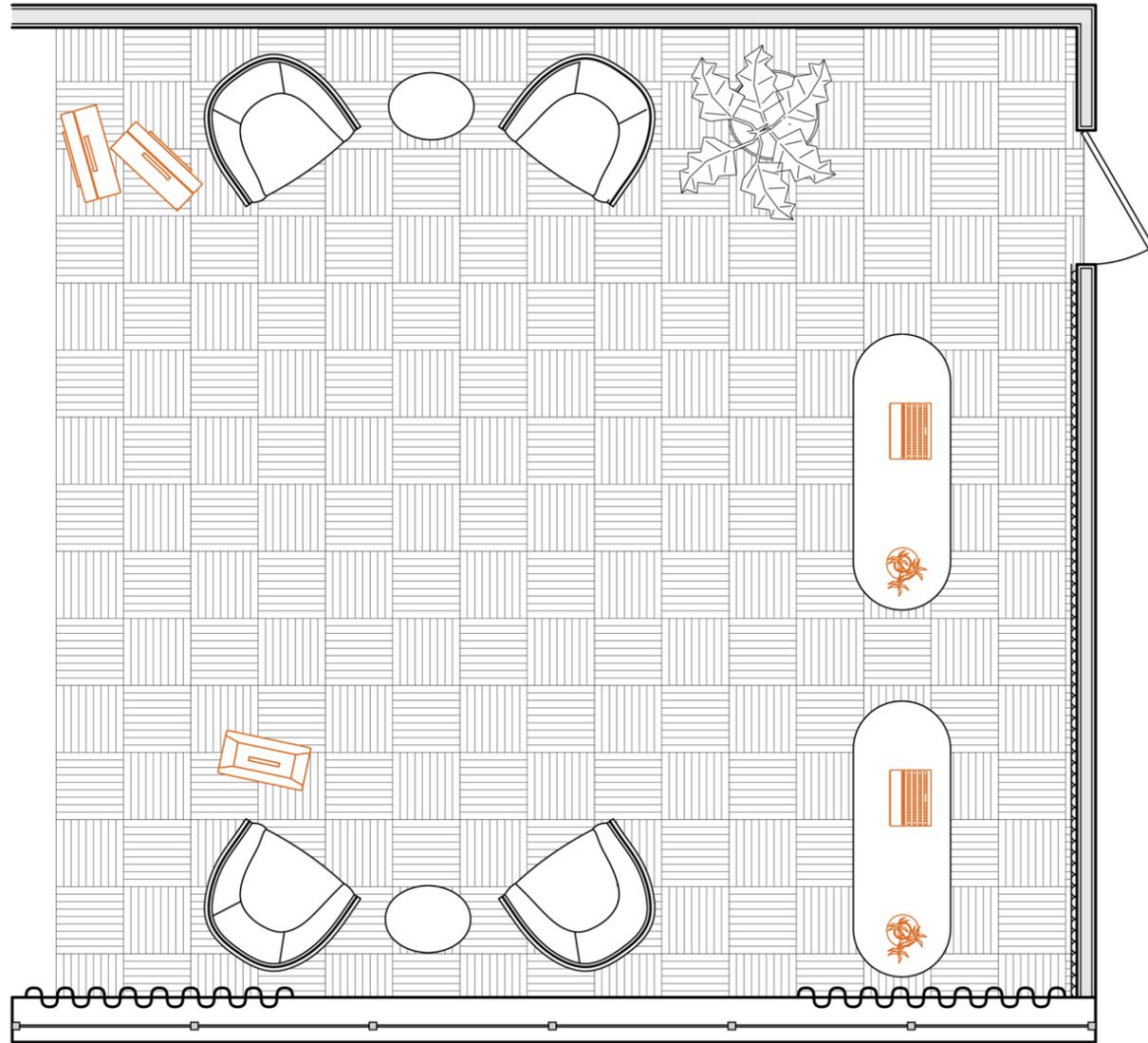
GUEST ENTRANCE



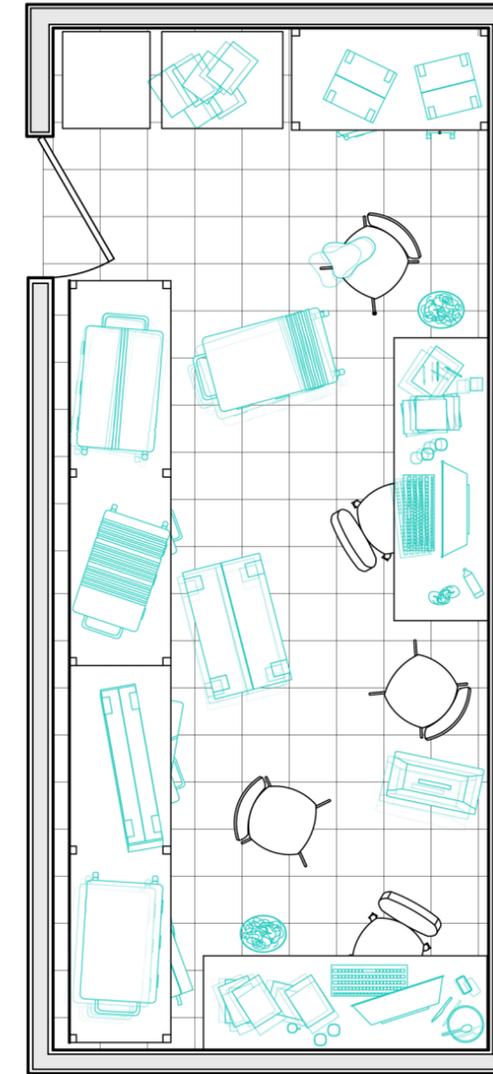
EMPLOYEE ENTRANCE



RECEPTION SPACES



GUEST CHECK - IN



ADMINISTRATION SPACE

RECEPTION SPACES



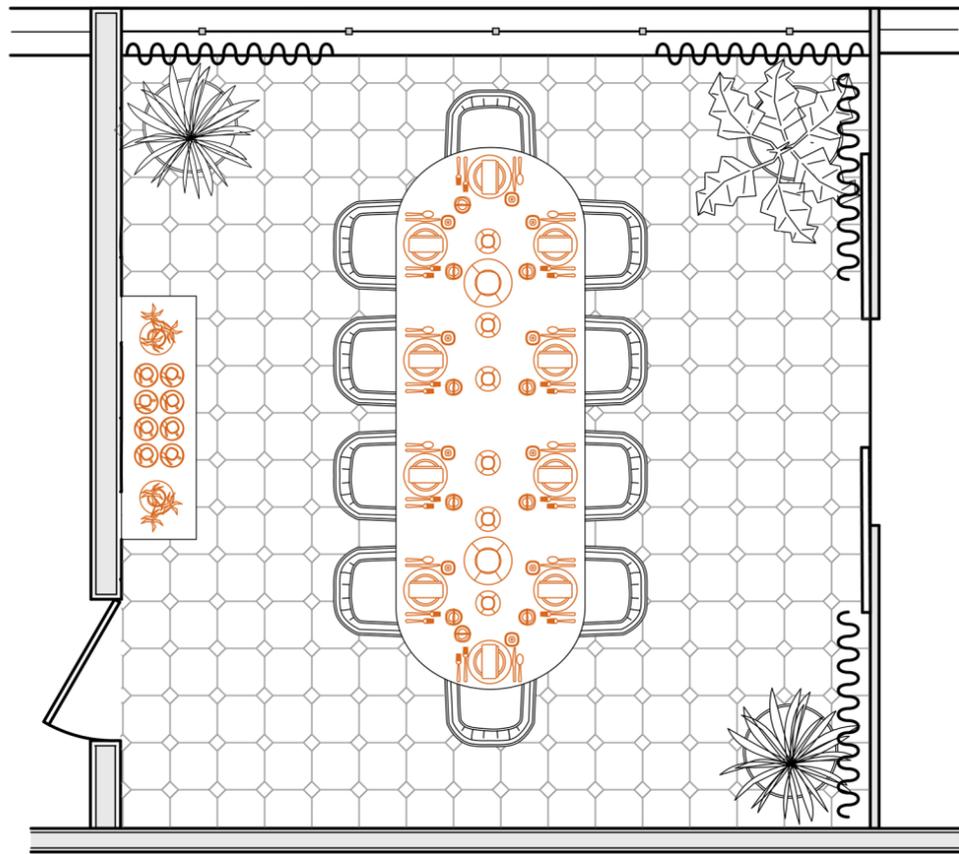
GUEST LOBBY



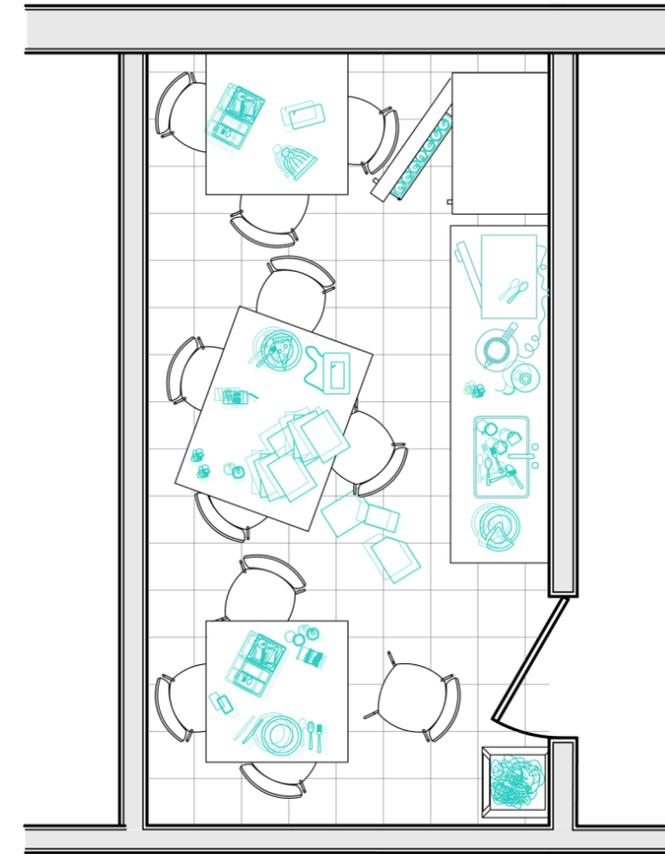
ADMIN SPACE



DINING SPACES



PRIVATE DINING ROOM



EMPLOYEE BREAK ROOM

DINING SPACES



GUEST DINING



BREAK ROOM



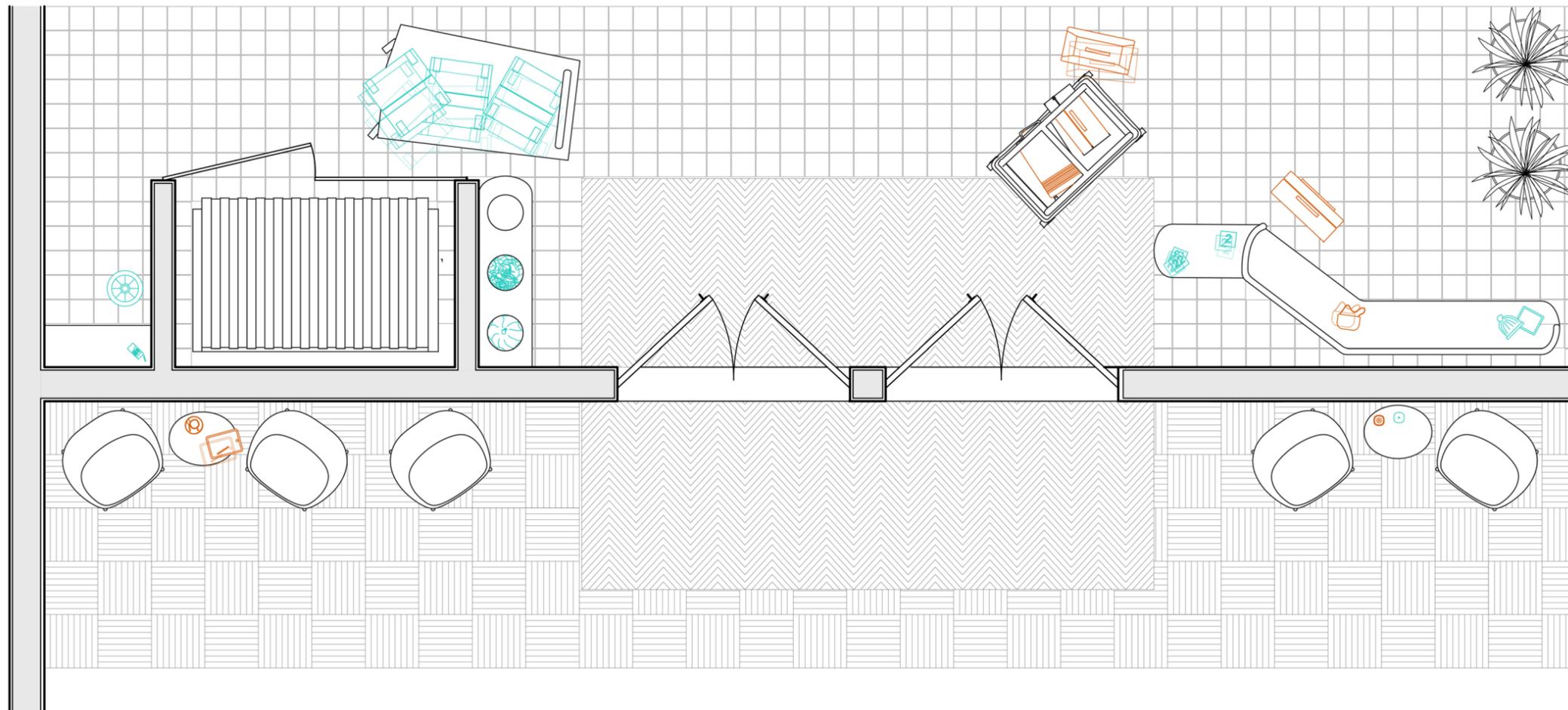
05 | CARING FOR SPACES OF SERVICE

Where this first part requires us to more fully confront service spaces out of their erased context, the second part calls for care within the implementation of the ways in which we as designers create service spaces. How can the conversations from service worker interviews, with designers, and other research be used to design spaces in a manner that demonstrates greater care for those who care for our spaces.

This portion does not necessarily mean to present a final and all encompassing solution. Rather it demonstrates a speculative situation in which the back of house spaces are designed with care and attention not usually afforded to them.

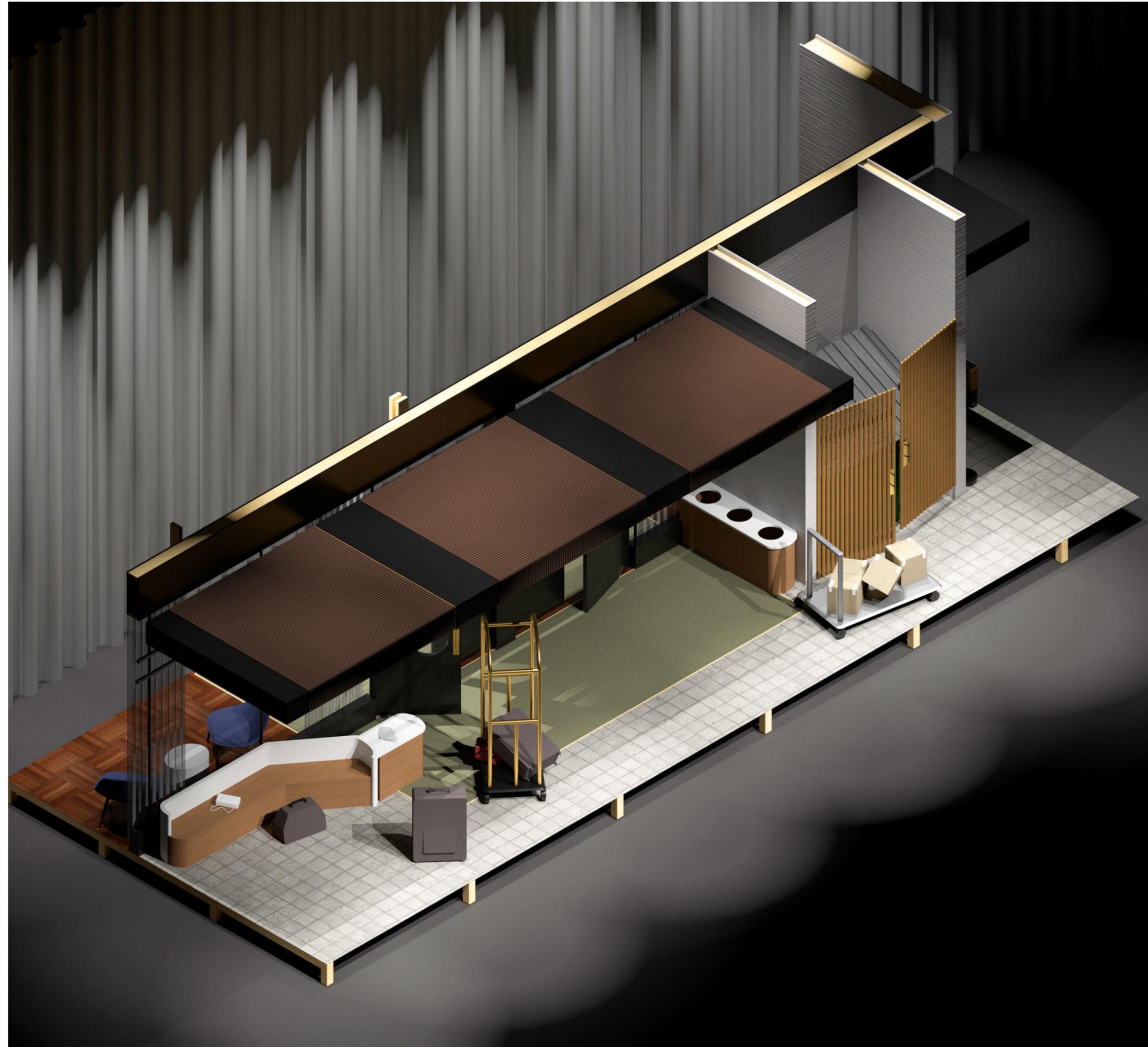
What can be learned from this exercise of care and active listening? What happens when we release the status quo and imagine different scenarios where service workers needs are considered on the same plane as a guest?

ENTRY SPACE

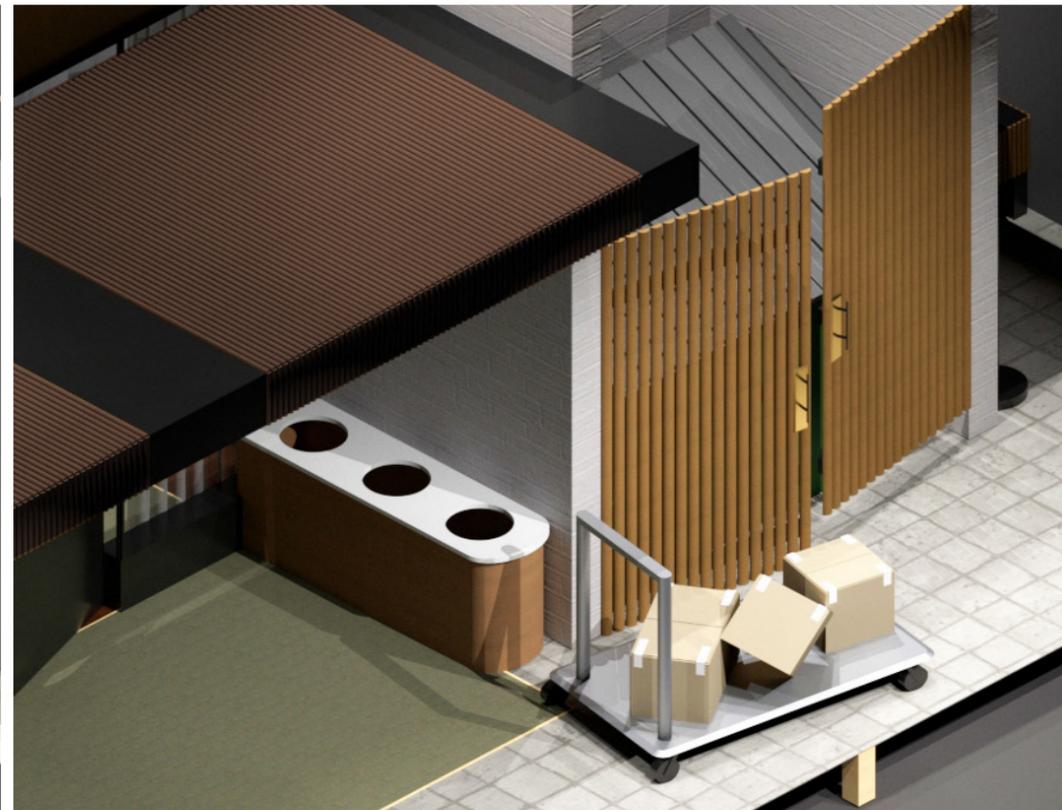


NEW GUEST + EMPLOYEE ENTRANCE

ENTRY SPACE

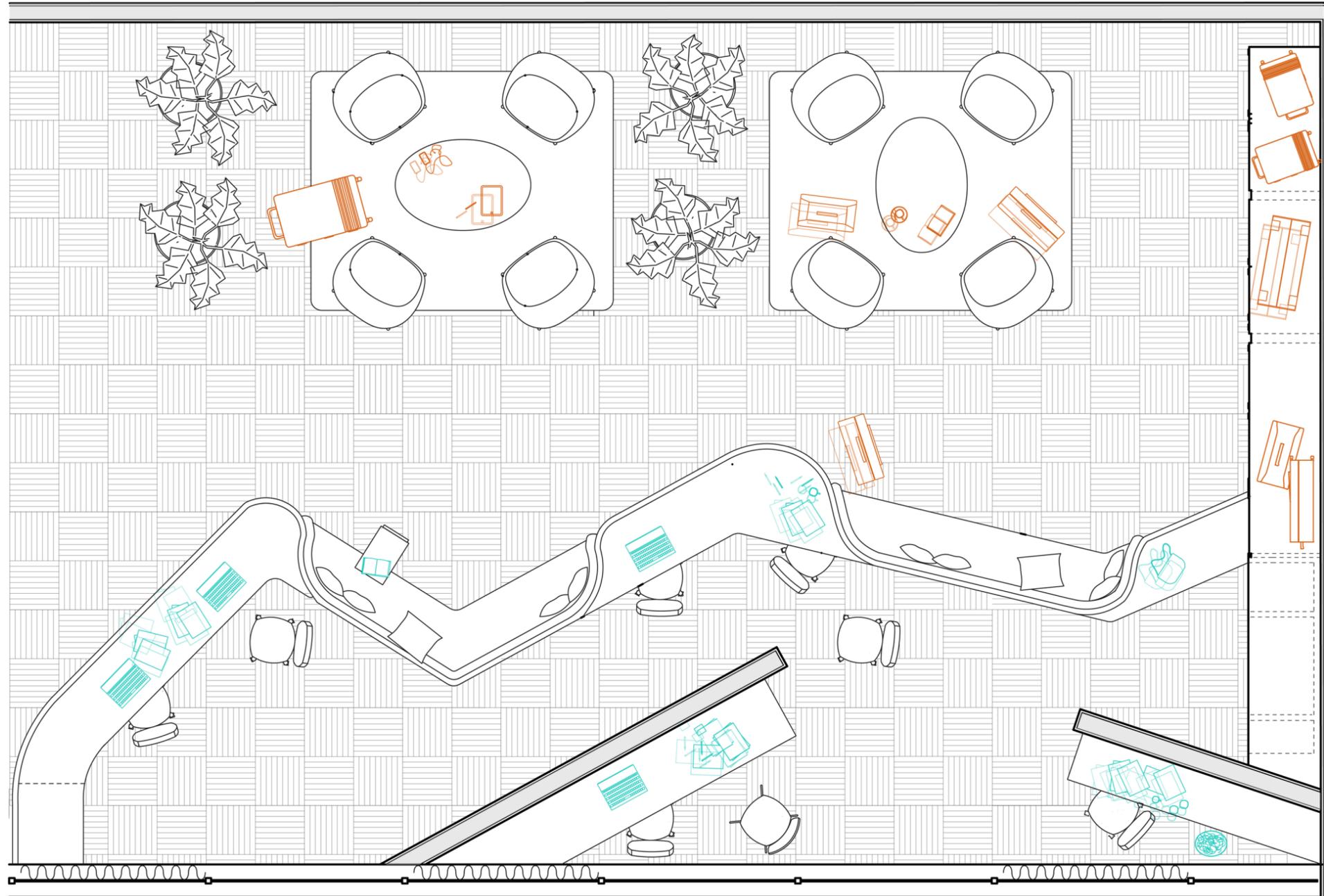


ENTRY SPACE



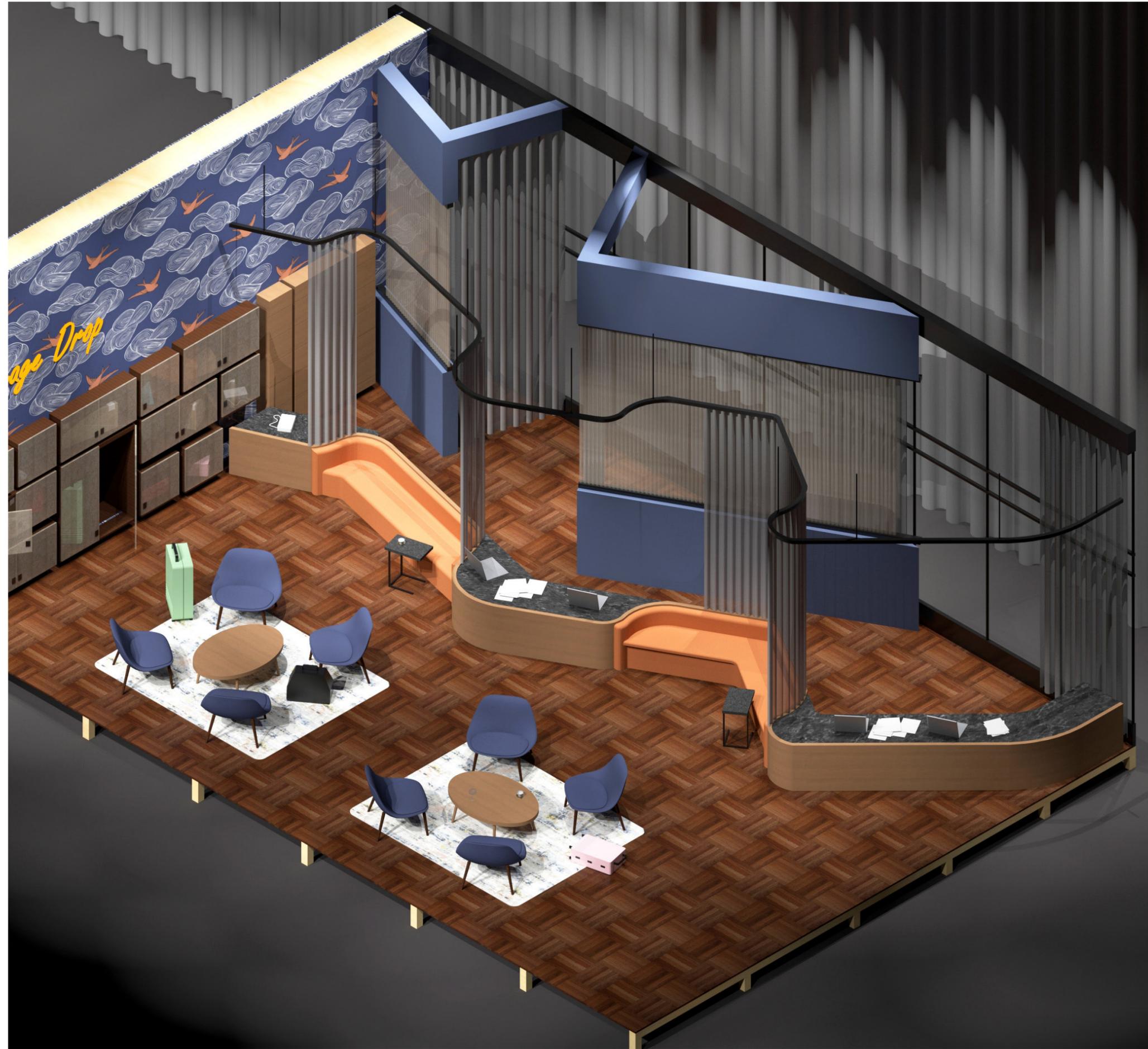
WHAT IF GUESTS AND WORKERS USED THE SAME ENTRANCE?
WHAT IF FUNCTIONS OF THE BACK OF HOUSE WERE MADE MORE VISIBLE?

RECEPTION SPACE

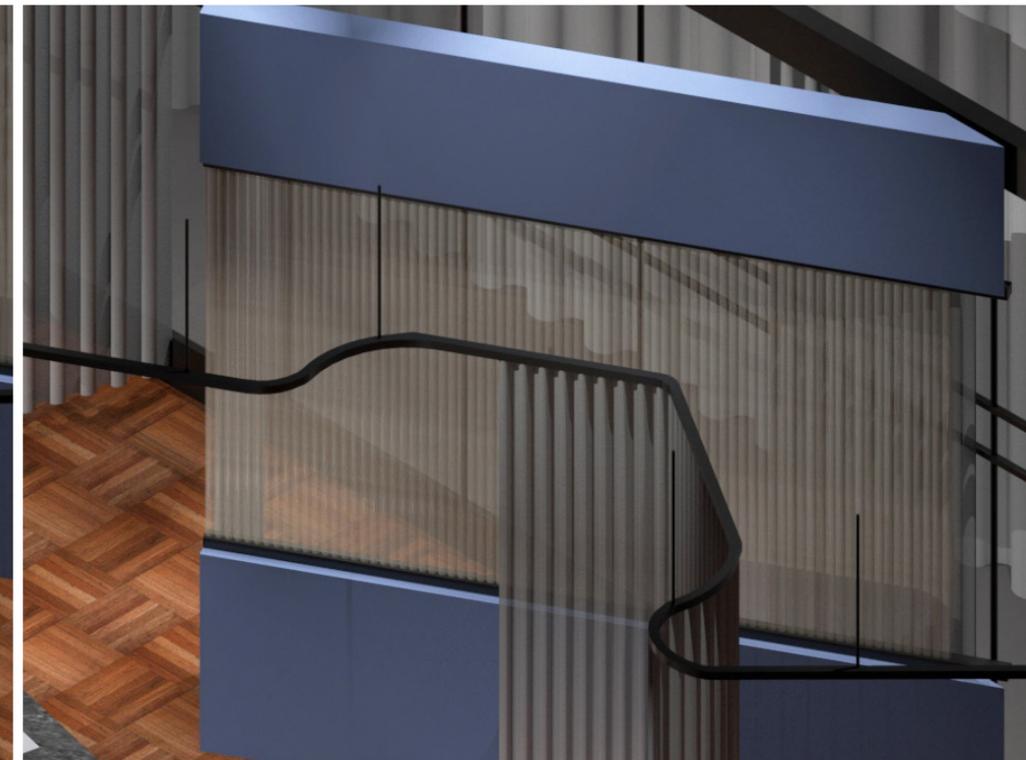


NEW LOBBY + ADMINISTRATION SPACE

RECEPTION SPACE

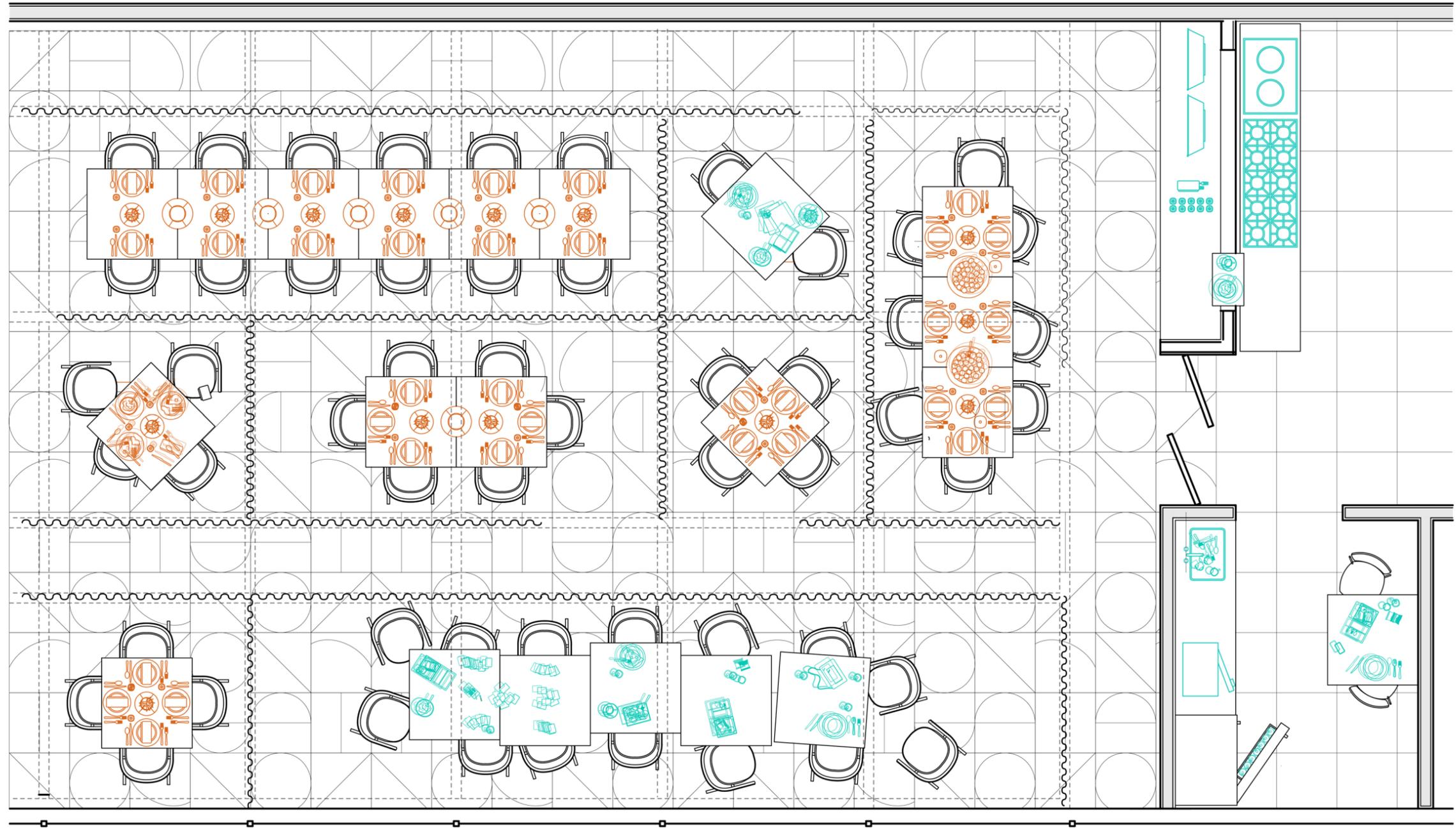


RECEPTION SPACE



WHAT IF GUESTS AND WORKERS WERE PLACED ON THE SAME DESIGNED PLANE?
WHAT IF EMPLOYEES AND GUESTS HAD THE POWER TO CREATE PRIVACY OR TRANSPARENCY AS NEEDED?

DINING SPACE



NEW GUEST + EMPLOYEE DINING AREA

DINING SPACE



DINING SPACE



WHAT IF GUESTS AND WORKERS DINED IN THE SAME SPACE, BUT COULD MAINTAIN PRIVACY AND TRANSPARENCY AS NEEDED?
WHAT IF EMPLOYEES WERE AFFORDED THE SAME FLEXIBILITY AND LUXURY THAT GUESTS WERE?

06 | APPENDIX

The following are a series of initial exercises exploring actions of care and labor through making. In this exercise, I collaged images of several labor spaces using high end interior design finishes. All the finishes were cut one-by-one by hand to make up the final images. These collages brought about a unique series of lessons I had not had the time or space to fully consider as both a design student and architectural worker.

The first was greater inherent knowledge about the finishes, how it cut, how it accepted adhesives, and even how easily it got dirty or stayed clean as I worked. These were not things I'd had the opportunity to really consider as a designer specifying interior finishes, but that laborers would likely face in the day to day requirements of their job. This collage helped remind me that as a designer, I should always carefully consider the acts of installing and maintenance carried out by laborers when specifying finishes and the implications those finishes hold.

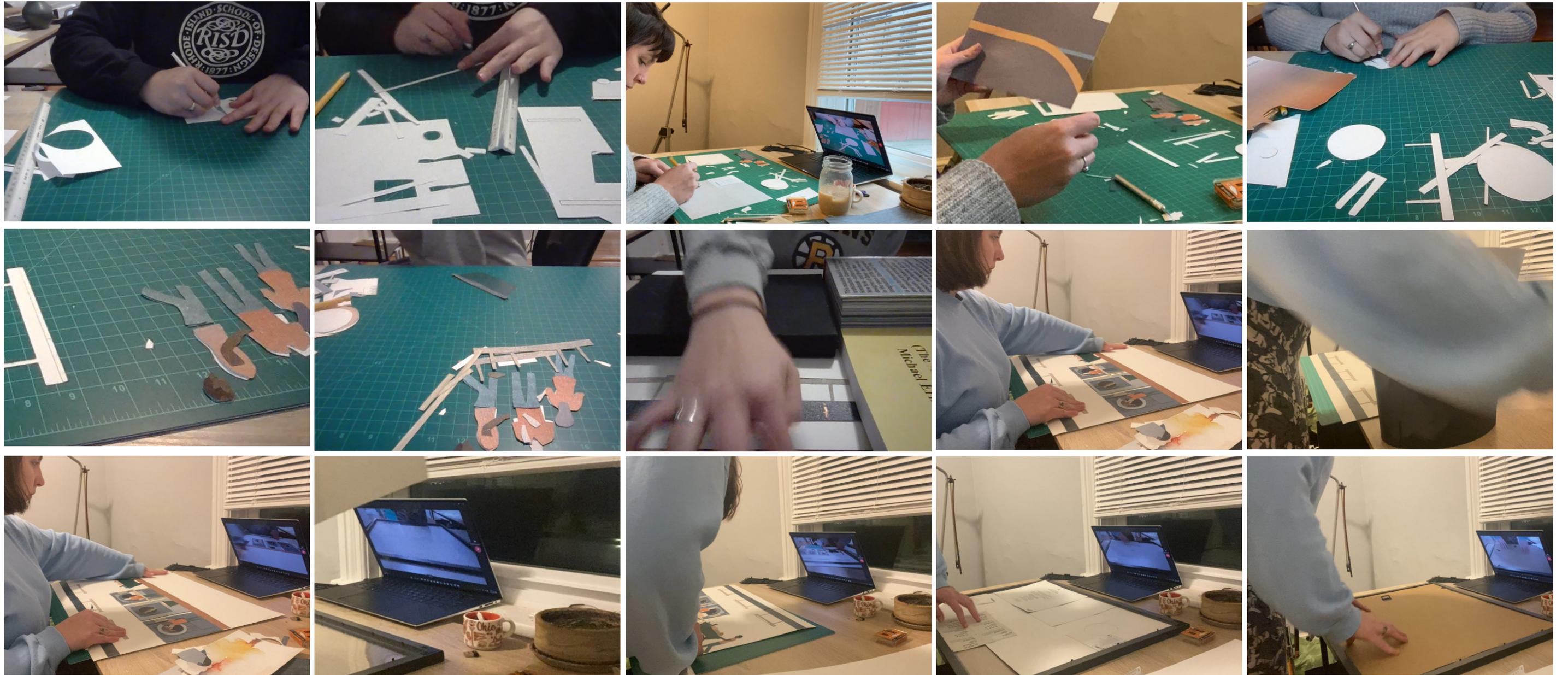
The second was the creation of a task to consider the labor of physically making and "maintaining" these spaces in a much smaller but similar scale. This physical act of labor is not something that often occurs in the design profession and creates further segregation between laborer and designer. This tedious but extremely detailed exercise helped remind me to more fully consider the laborers on the other side of my design work who will be building and caring for the spaces I will one day draw out. This provided a lesson in respecting the inherent knowledges of all types of workers.

Lastly, seeing these spaces of labor which are so often erased or forgotten elevated through this careful collage was a reminder that those who maintain and care for our designed spaces should be celebrated and cared for in their spaces of labor. It was a lesson and reminder of how closely architects and those who maintain the buildings we design are connected. How we treat spaces of labor regardless of power or money is a deep reflection of our understanding of labor within our own practices.

ITERATION 1.0 - CELEBRATING LABOR



ITERATION 2.0-TRACKING LABOR





07 | BIBLIOGRAPHY

Deamer, P., & Bernstein, P. (2012). *Building (in) The future: Recasting labor in architecture*. Princeton Architectural Press.

Deamer, P. (2016). *The architect as worker: Immaterial Labor, the creative class, and the politics of Design*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Dank Llyod Wright [@dank.llyod.wright]. No 9-5 Mentality thread Instagram

Garrett, E. (2022, September). *Designing a Post-Capitalist Practice*. Signs of Collapse. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://static1.squarespace.com/static/614013fc01ca6f6873a9b58f/t/632b3c6c14059d004c74c5d5/1663777906836/EGARRETT_DESIGNING-A-POSTCAPITALIST-PRACTICE.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3ckcglw2P_KQ7JyelbmJXp6j693US7_d14M80XevTaRALVzx1mzymV_I

Madden, D., & Marcuse, P. (2016). *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*. Verso.

Goldfischer, Emily. "Why 'the White Lotus' Is so Haunting for Hoteliers." *Hertelier*, 19 Sept. 2021, www.hertelier.com/post/why-the-white-lotus-is-so-haunting-for-hoteliers.

McCarthy, Amy. "'the White Lotus' Shows What Happens When Service Workers Are Pushed over the Edge." *Eater*, 17 Aug. 2021, www.eater.com/22629182/the-white-lotus-review-hbo-max-service-industry-mike-white.

Many thanks to the following sources:

Facebook Hospitality Workers Family Forum

Reddit Hospitality Forums

Interviews with service workers who asked to remain anonymous

Colleagues who passed on imagery of service spaces from the depths of their project folders and phones

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Throughout this thesis process I've been told countless times that a thesis project is just the beginning of many other projects both tightly and distantly connected. As I was deep in the process of producing and writing for this thesis, I often found myself skeptical that I would want to sink more time into this thing I'd already devoted a year too. However, I'm walking forward from thesis with several reflections and thoughts that I will continue to carry forward with me.

This thesis explored issues of unfair power dynamics in hidden, often dark spaces of service. The process of presenting a thesis in a dark space, similarly separated from the typical oversights of the institution and with the unbalanced power dynamic of student versus 8+ professionals taught me that many of these issues of power in service space hold applicable lessons to issues of architectural pedagogy. If given the opportunity to take on the role of educator or sit on a thesis review, I will try to reflect often and deeply on the circumstances of a thesis and how, these spaces of intense pedagogy and vulnerability can continuously be both questioned and shaped into spaces of care, reflection, and support.

This thesis also taught me that the erasure of service spaces and questioning their typology within very solid structures of power can also cause many circumstances of great discomfort. There was a great deal of discomfort in seeking out ways to gather information from service workers as they are traditionally kept quite segregated. I acknowledge discomfort in knowing my thesis pushed back against many powerful structures and methodologies that have been in place for far longer than I have been alive. Finally, I acknowledge the discomfort that might have resulted in many of design decisions I made throughout this project and that there will always be ground to continue growing and learning. Yet I also am learning to stand firm in the fact that I made decisions that helped me explore spaces I was questioning and that for this part of the thesis, it provided a personal wealth of knowledge and reflection.

Finally, this thesis will always serve as a reminder of the role we as architects and interior designers hold as we design for the world. As a worker, I want to continue to remember who I impact with the work I do and learn to effectively and gracefully push back against decisions that don't always hold the best interests of those not in power at heart. This will be a long learning curve, but one I can point to my thesis as a personal source of beginner knowledge and reflection.

AND THANK YOU'S

To anyone who has worked in a space of service. For those whose daily work is often hidden from the world, but whose work the world would struggle to keep moving without. Especially those who I encountered in my research from the many hospitality forums I read through and those who gave time to speak to me.

To workers with RISD Teamsters Local 251 who fought for their right to a living wage. Your bravery and steadfastness provided lessons for this thesis that I could never get from simply reading a book.

To my advisors Arianna Deane and Carlos Medellin for navigating all the ups and down of thesis with me.

To my former co-workers and mentors who helped support my learning as a designer who could embrace boundaries and push back against the status quo in professional practice. And who taught me to take great pride in the fact that while I'm studying architecture, my roots in interior design are equally important and vital to the practice of design.

To my family for helping me move to Rhode Island in the middle of a pandemic and sent along gifts of coffee and reminded me to always work hard.

To my friends in architecture and outside who also sent words of encouragement and reminded me I was doing something really great and important even when it didn't feel that way.

To my turtle scooter who reminded me to chill out and spend time in the sun.

To my partner Logan who has supported me in every wave of self doubt, who maintained our home when I was up late doing homework or working a shift, and was a constant space of genuine empathy and care throughout my graduate career. Thank you for always keeping me grounded and reminding me to be proud of my growth in all its forms.

