Syracuse University

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playingGround: Towards a Seriously Playful Architecture

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Syracuse University

playingGround

towards a seriously playful architecture

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THESIS CONTENTION

playingGround is a study of the fundamental rules and organizational logics seen in popular board games and an exploration of their potential applications towards manifestation of utopian ideals of the built.

This thesis is interested in the restoration of user freedom in the built environment by reintroducing the concept of "play" as the fundamental principle of design and giving equal agency to all users in utilizing and modifying transitional and extended use circulation space.

Play in this thesis acts as the antithesis to the normative systems of orders and regulation from which contemporary architecture is derived.
playingGround posits that every ground condition holds inherent potential for play and delight in its use and these qualities, when achieved, lead to a reorganization of social dynamics. The games studied are seen as tools of projection of architectural possibilities in the built environment. Gaming logics, rules and framework are used to create a design system in which play, fun, delight and entertainment are prioritized as paramount to formal and spatial development.

The product of *playingGround* is the development of a new method of designing space that involves the composition of elements of play from board games that are then appropriated to the built environment alongside select inherent opportunities for play presented by site conditions.

PLAYING HUMAN

Based on an analysis by historian Johan Huzinga, the human species can and should be qualified under 3 developmental stages: homo sapien, homo faber, and homo luden.

Architecture today designs for *homo sapiens*, man the knower, as it caters to intellect and efficiency in design, and also caters to *homo faber*, man the maker, as it caters to craft, artistic expression and creativity. However the discourse neglects the third and most complex category *homo ludos*, man the player.

A failure to prioritize play in design is a failure to cater to a fundamental aspect of human nature. This leaves users of the built environment with no outlet for their playful nature and thus takes away their freedom of full human expression.

In order to design an environment in which users have the ability to fully engage all their faculties of expression and senses, play must be the a core focus of design.

Homo - ~~sapien~~ ~~faber~~ luden

In searching for an area for this thesis to test ideas of play in the built environment, a singular building project became less interesting than designing to space between existing projects on a site.

The ownership and control of the development of built space is heavy laden with political, social and monetary restrictions that make many facets of architectural products difficult to emancipate from existing systems. An opportunity however for change appears not in what is generally focused on and known as" buildings" but the seams in the urban fabric and circulation that connects them.

Circulation is often a neglected part of designed spaces. The space that connects is treated as space in which nothing exists besides flat ground. The idea of a blank and flat slate for circulation has left the spaces that we spend most of our lives in, in transit, as the most unexciting ordinary places. Rather than being a design exploration in and of itself, circulation is what exists in leftover space. It is an avenue to something else and nothing in and of itself.

Apart from situations of incomplete circulation, material flaws or climatic elements, the paths we spend our lives transitioning through have little to no variation of in their design or organization sequencing.

This "no man's land" presents a space in which new ideas, hierarchies and systems can be implemented, not to fix results of its use but to set up parameters in which users can bring richness to use.
It is the testing ground for play.
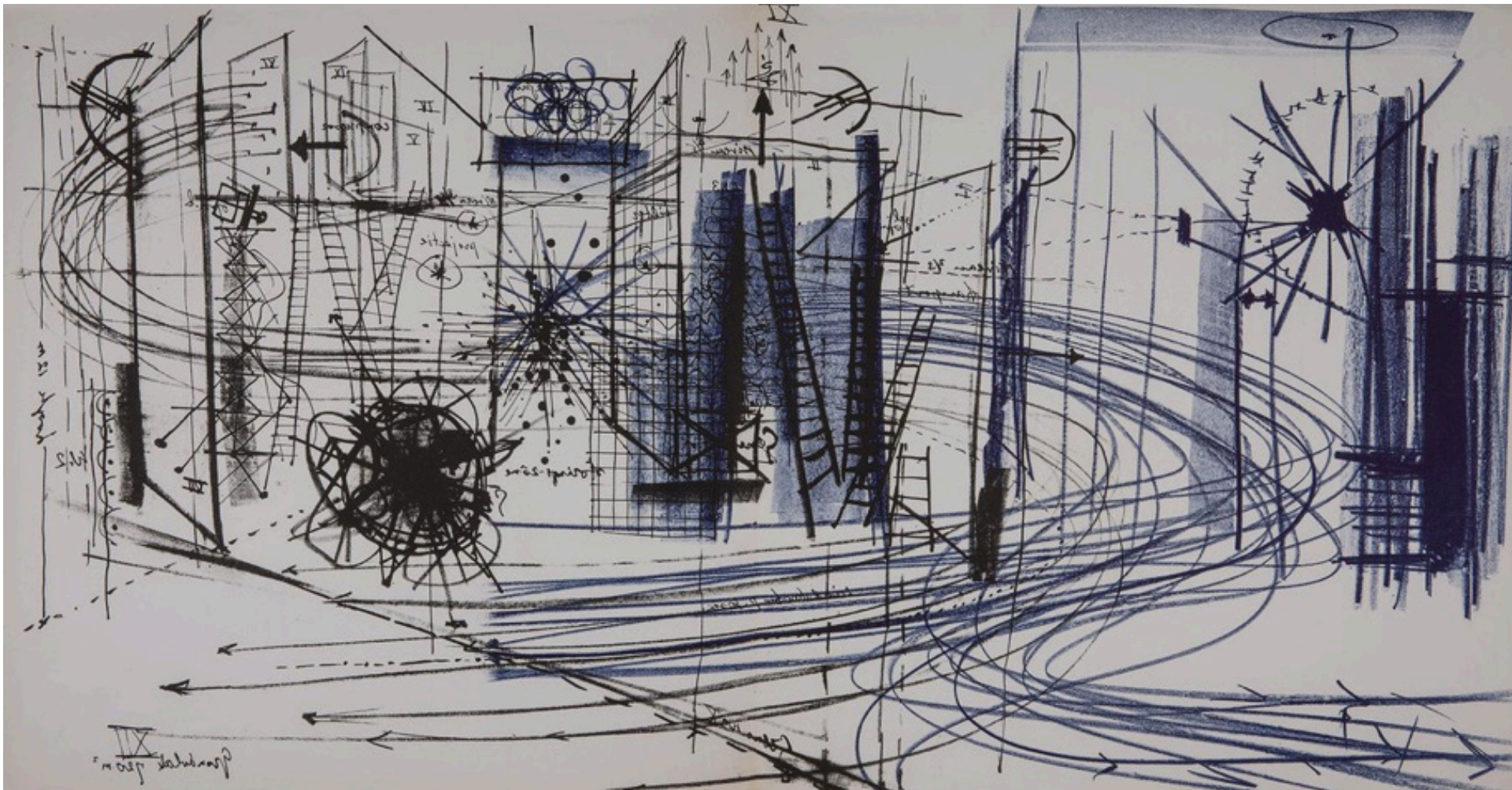
Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys (1920–2005), New Babylon, 1963. Lithograph, 400 × 760 mm

"Inside the playground an absolute and peculiar order reigns" - Johan Huzinga

The image and quote duo from Constant Nieuwenhuys' New Babylon and Johan Huzinga's Homo Ludens embody the aim of PlayingGround to explore the territory of play and its potential for expression in the built environment based on a series of gaming rules and logics that are unique to the design itself and at times foreign and inexplicable from outside of the system. The definition of play in this thesis is borrowed from Huzinga and this definition because the aspiration for the study of systems and logics within game play.

The Las Vegas Strip, Tini31, Thinkstock

"Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.
It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner."

- Johan Huzinga
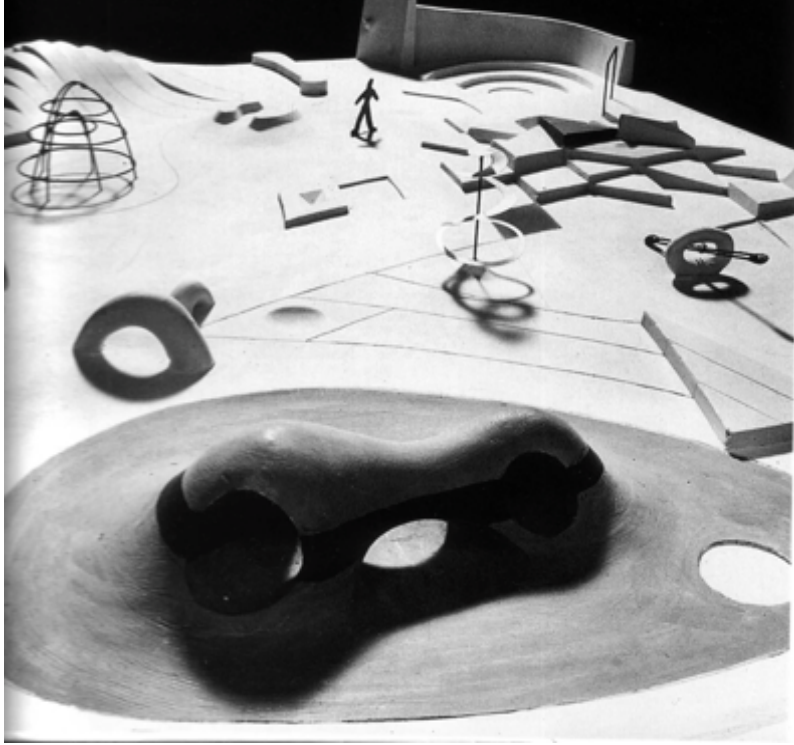
PLAYGROUNDS

Playgrounds are interesting as an architectural typology of study as they serve as a microcosm for the investigation of the relationship between the built environment and the social interaction generated by it; as well as a snapshot of the role of recreation, delight and play in society.

Play is commonly correlated to programs and spaces related to the demographic of children but the desire to play is inherent to all.

Play in the contemporary adult programmatic discourse has been manifested through pop up events and installations that mimic familiar play items seen on children playgrounds in an attempt to satisfy the desire in adults.

However these fleeting and exclusive experiences do not fully cater to the need for play in the daily routine.

Isamu Noguchi, model for United Nations Playground, 1952
Paul Friedberg, P.S. 166 West 89th Street Playground, New York, 1968
Aldo Van Eyke, Nieuwmarkt Playground, Amsterdam, 1947

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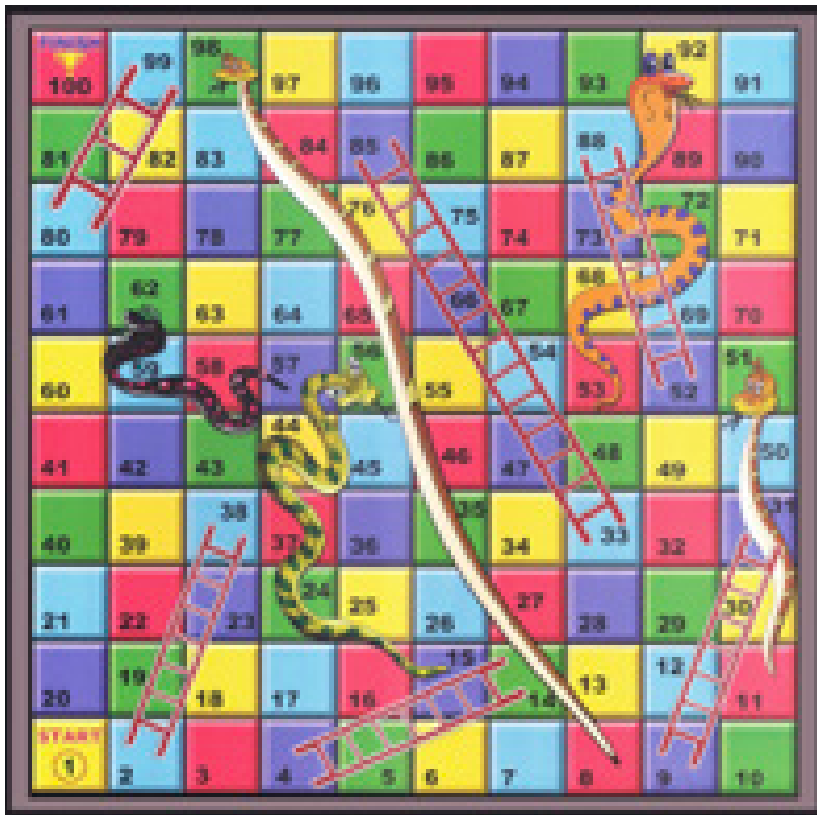
GAME PLAY

Board games hold inherent qualities that promote user generated entertainment, and ever changing array of experiential possibilities in their universes and principles that allow for orderly play and interaction whilst also facilitating avenues to subvert rules and mod environments based on user preferences.

These games are re-imagines apart from their flattened physical representation and designed into their own universes in which participants are entirely submerged in the atmosphere, context and culture of play. Each game possesses elements that achieve a level of 'gaminess' that can be applied to the built.

CANDYLAND
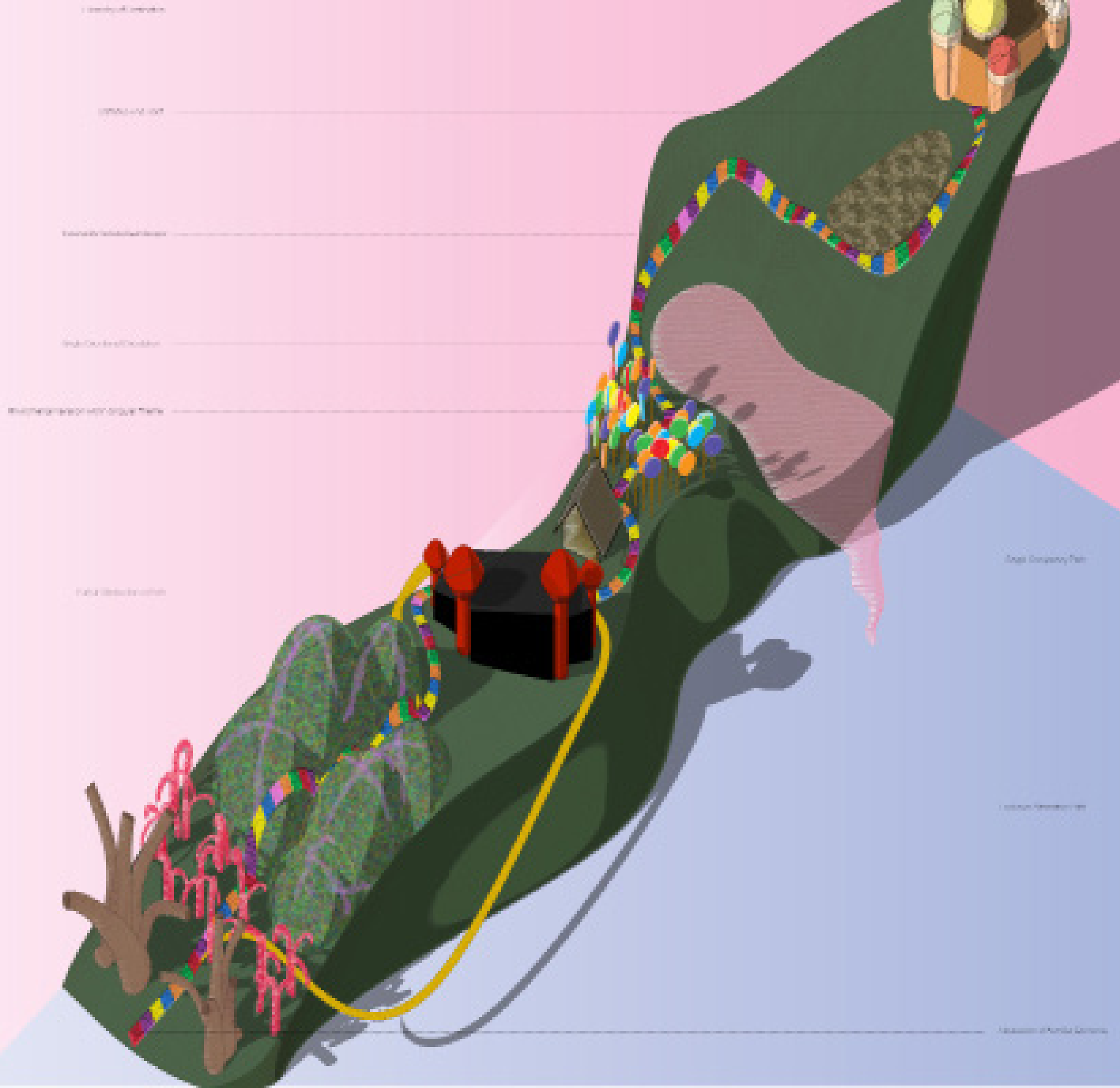
CANDY LAND

Candyland embodies the base idea of a singular circulation, through a fantastical landscape, towards a fixed goal. It is low stakes and does not necessitate path planning before commencing engagement with the site. The universe creates a hierarchy of spaces within it through the estrangement, re-appropriation and scalar manipulation of familiar elements. Candyland prioritizes solo experience of atmosphere as a driver for delight.
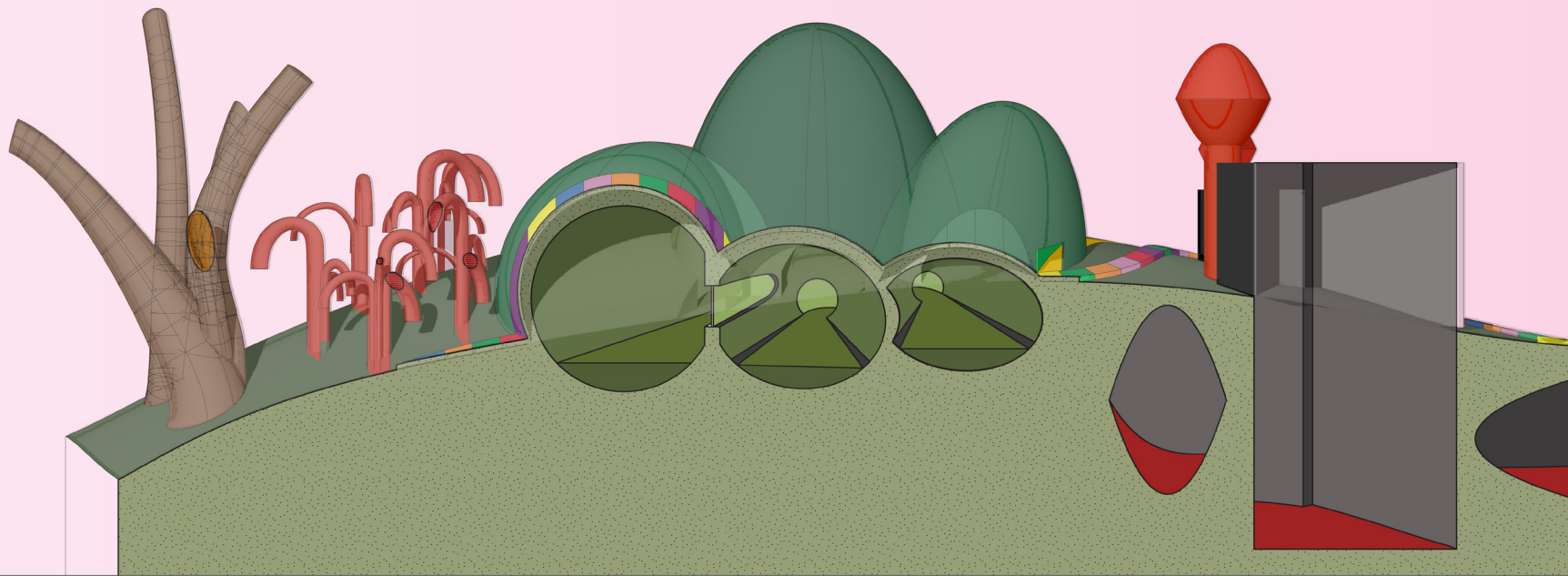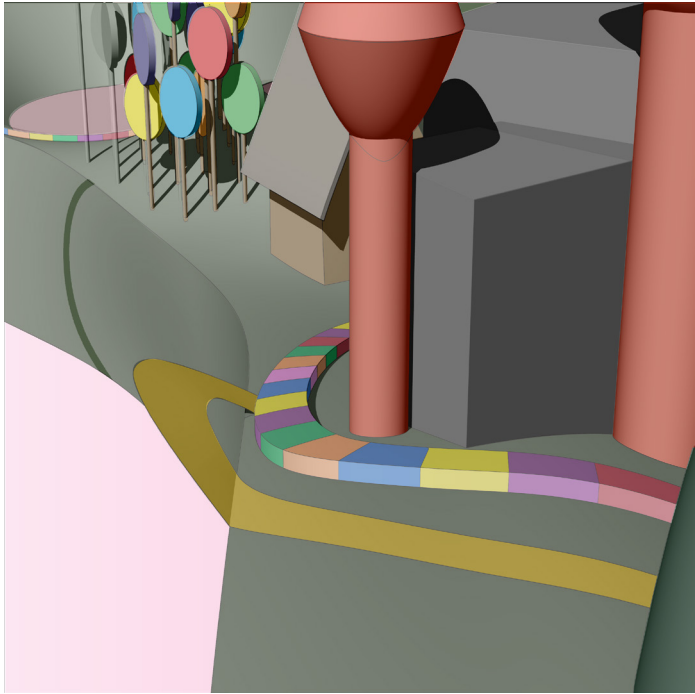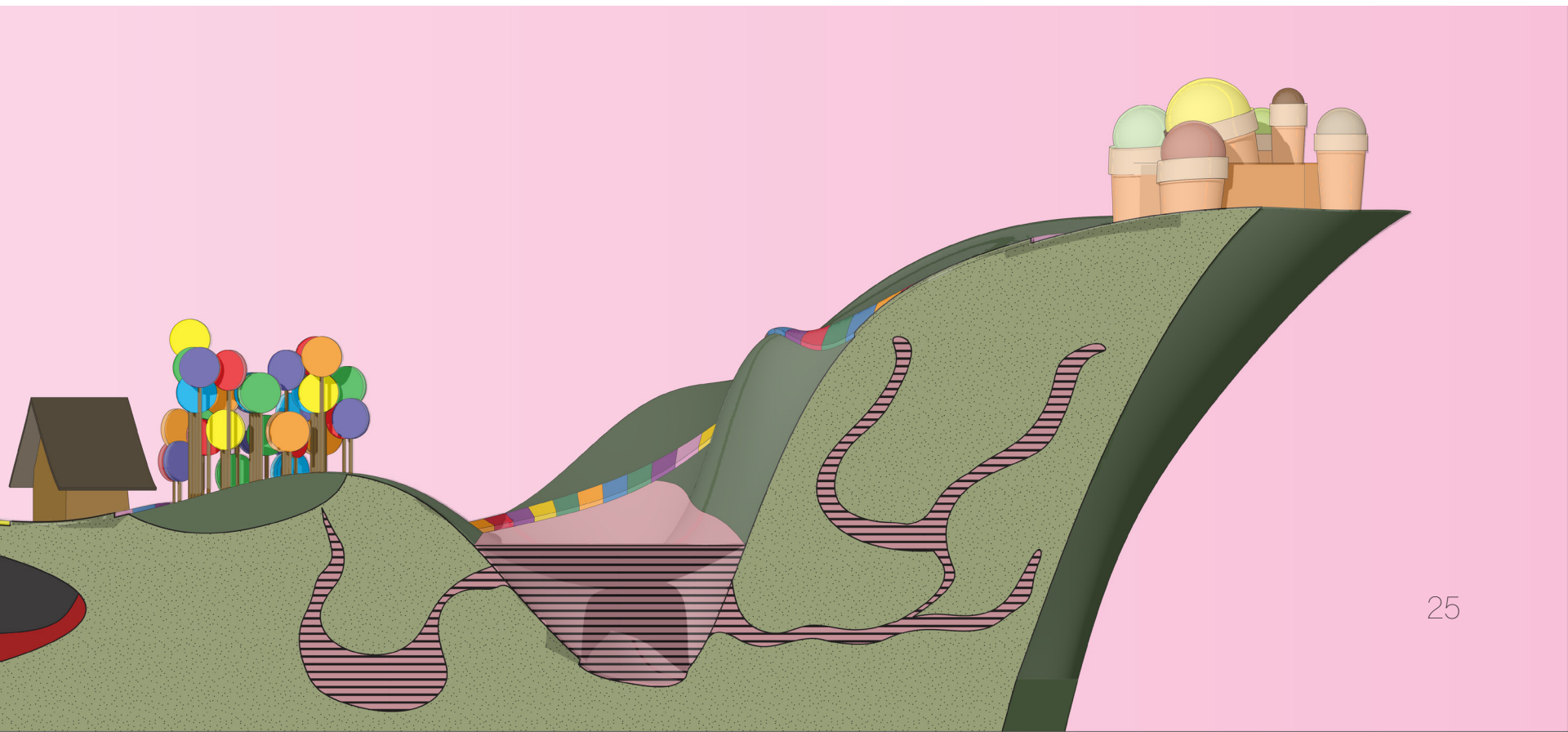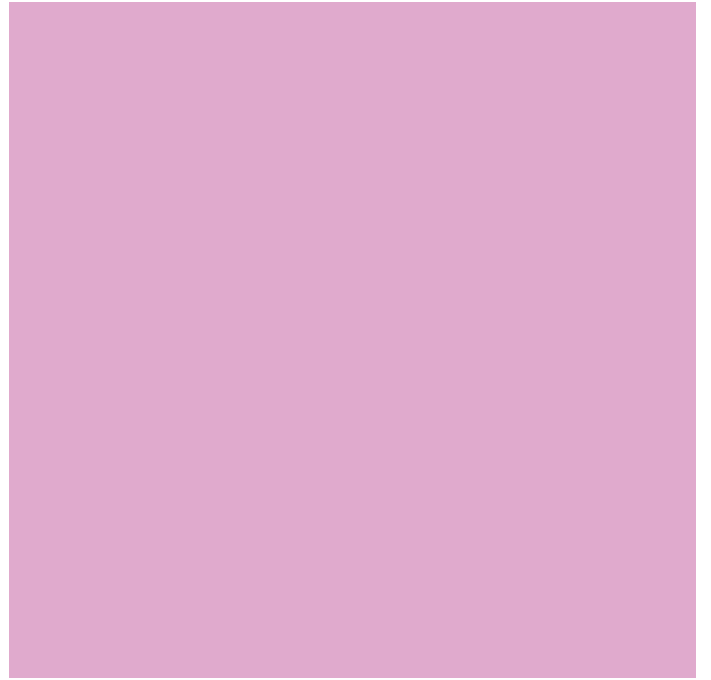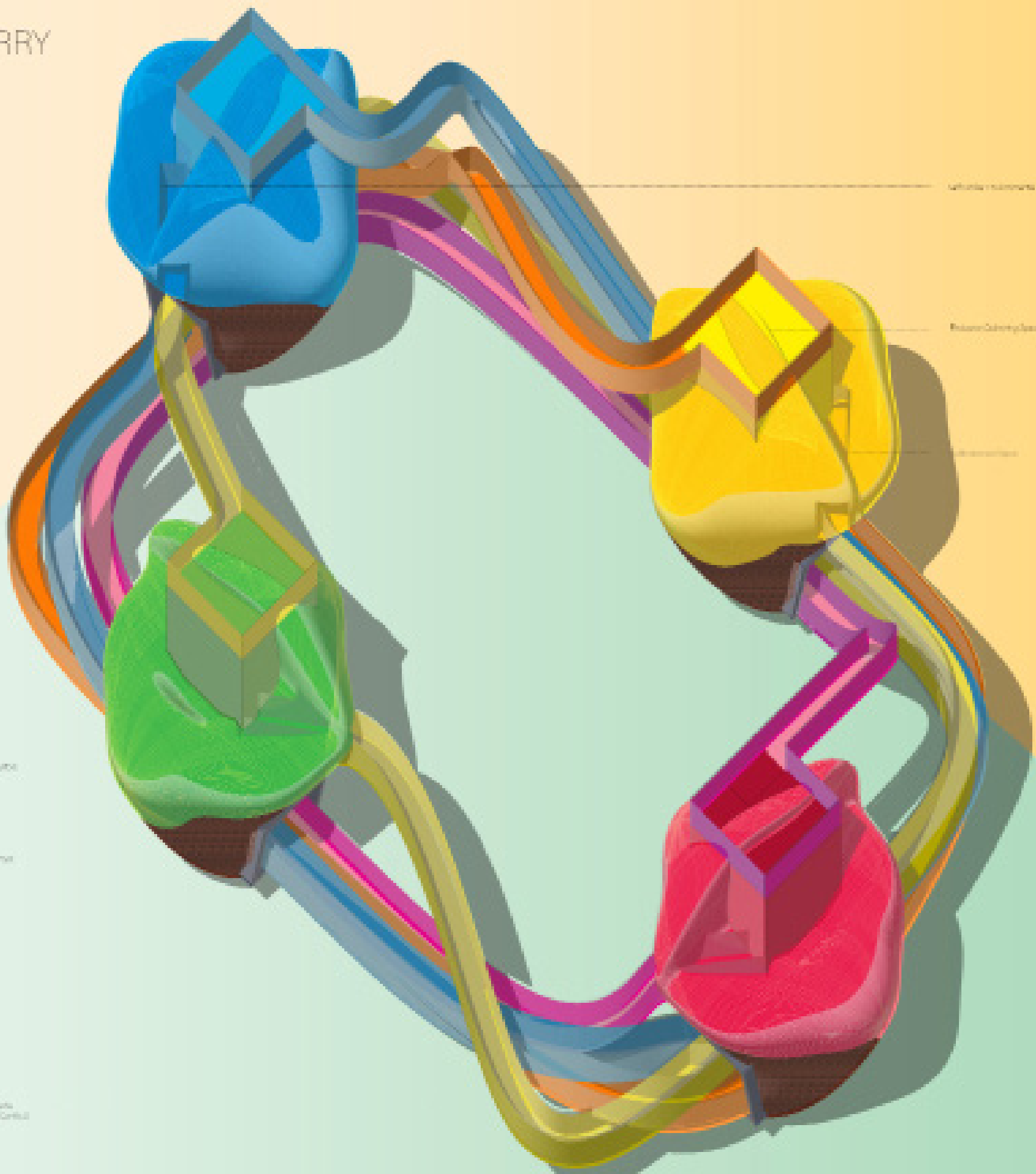
Sorry is a game that is most successful in continuing entertainment through its orchestration of player interaction and conflict. The aim of the game is to transition from self similar interior places through a relatively basic circuit of path. Delight in use comes through social interaction, strategic moments of orchestrated conflict and ultimately luck.
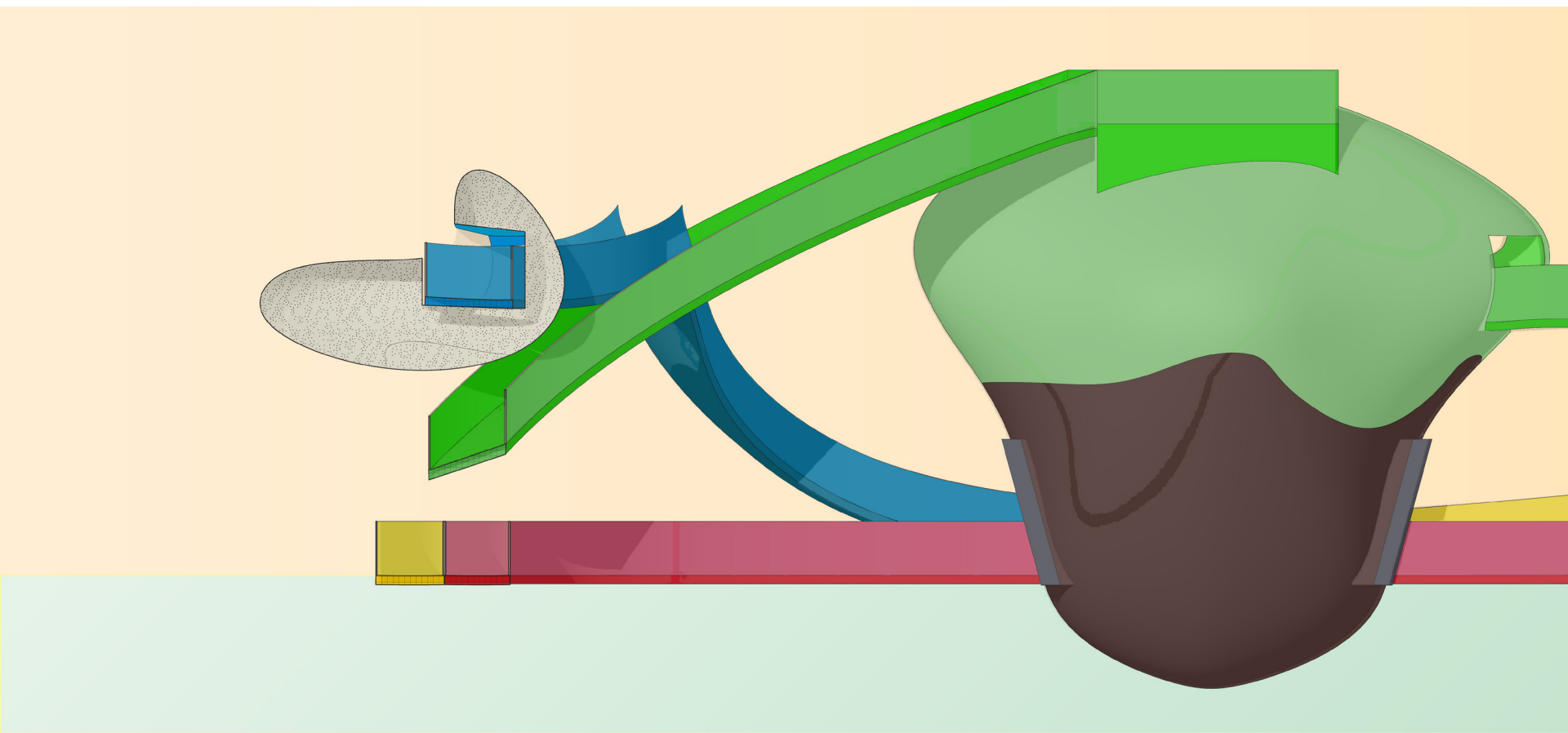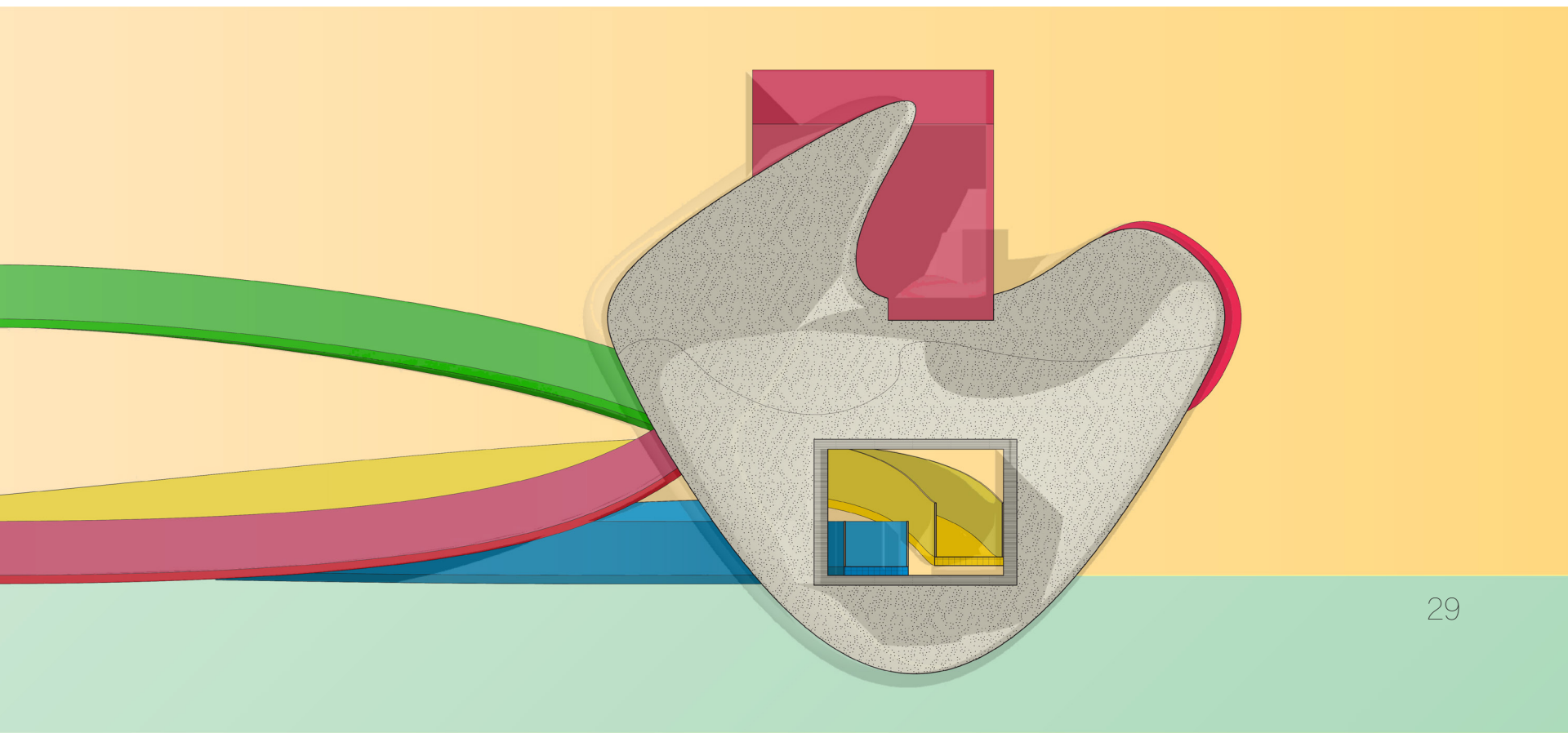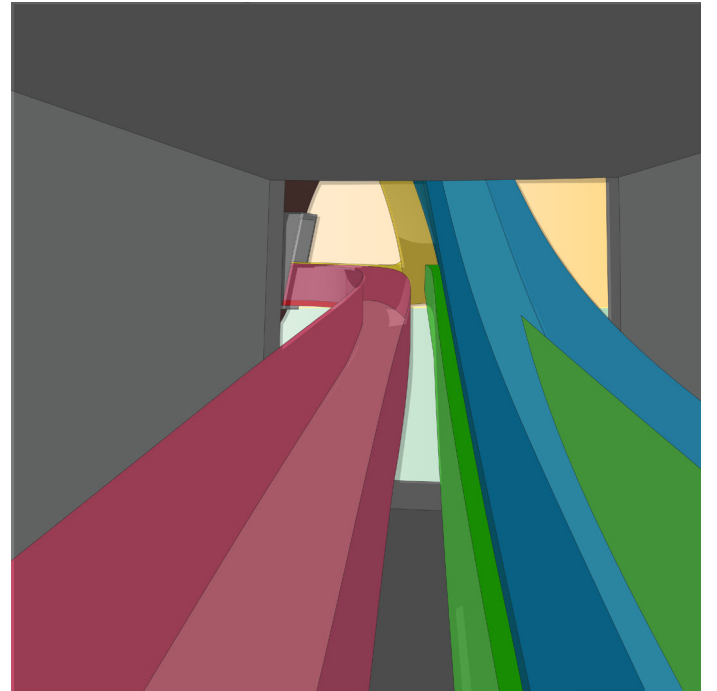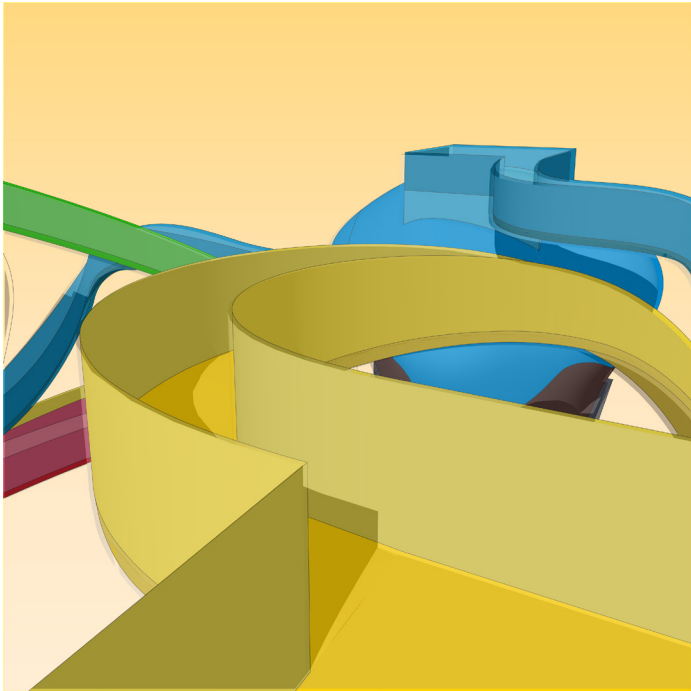
CLUE
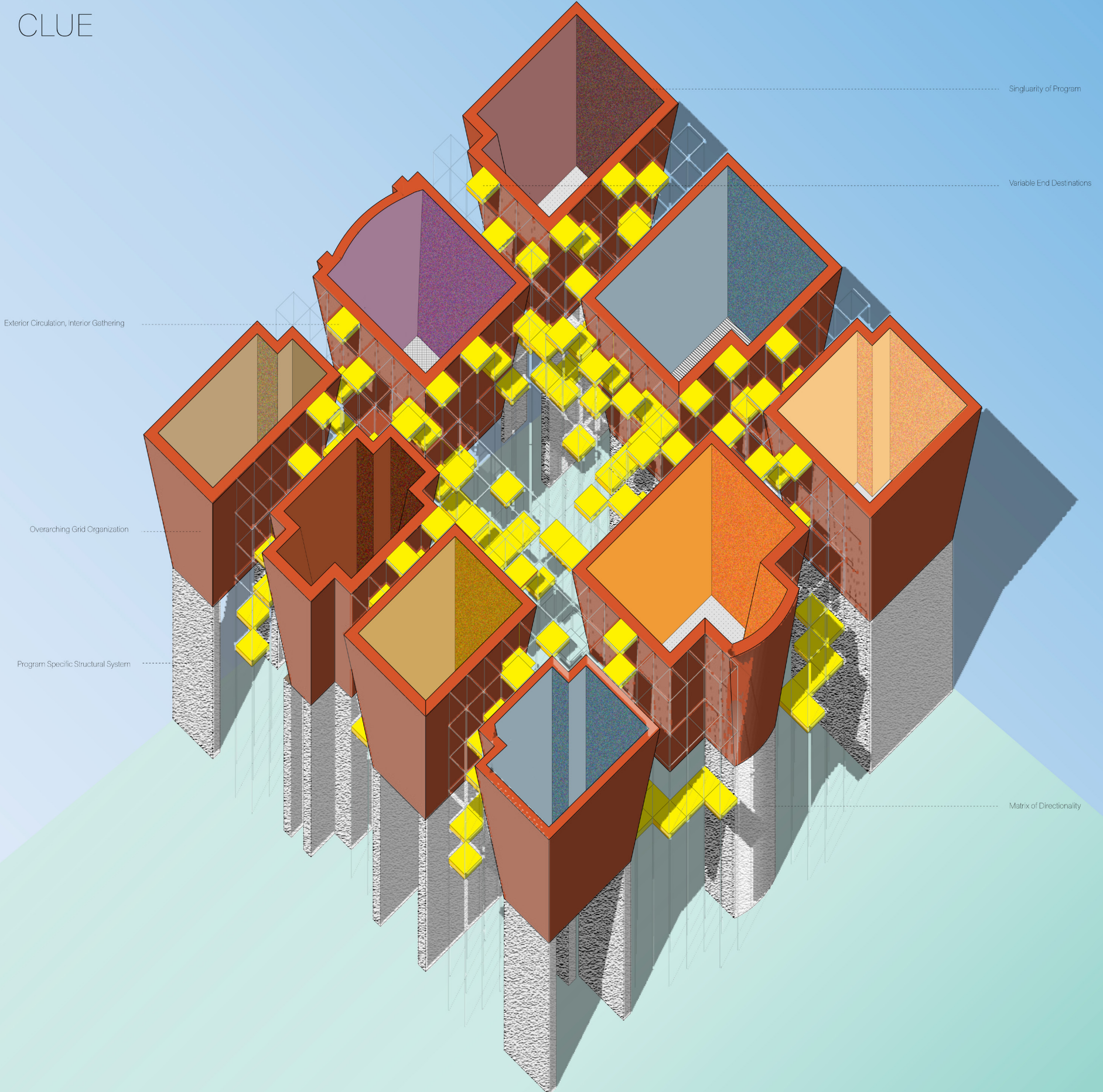
Singluarity of Program

Variable End Destinations

Exterior Circulation, Interior Gathering

Overarching Grid Organization

Program Specific Structural System

Matrix of Directionality

Clue

Clue relies on a non hierarchical circulation path through a closed system to generate entertainment. In Clue, users circulate randomly to accumulate knowledge and familiarity with the landscape. Circulation is overlapping, cyclical and unpredictable at the start of game play.
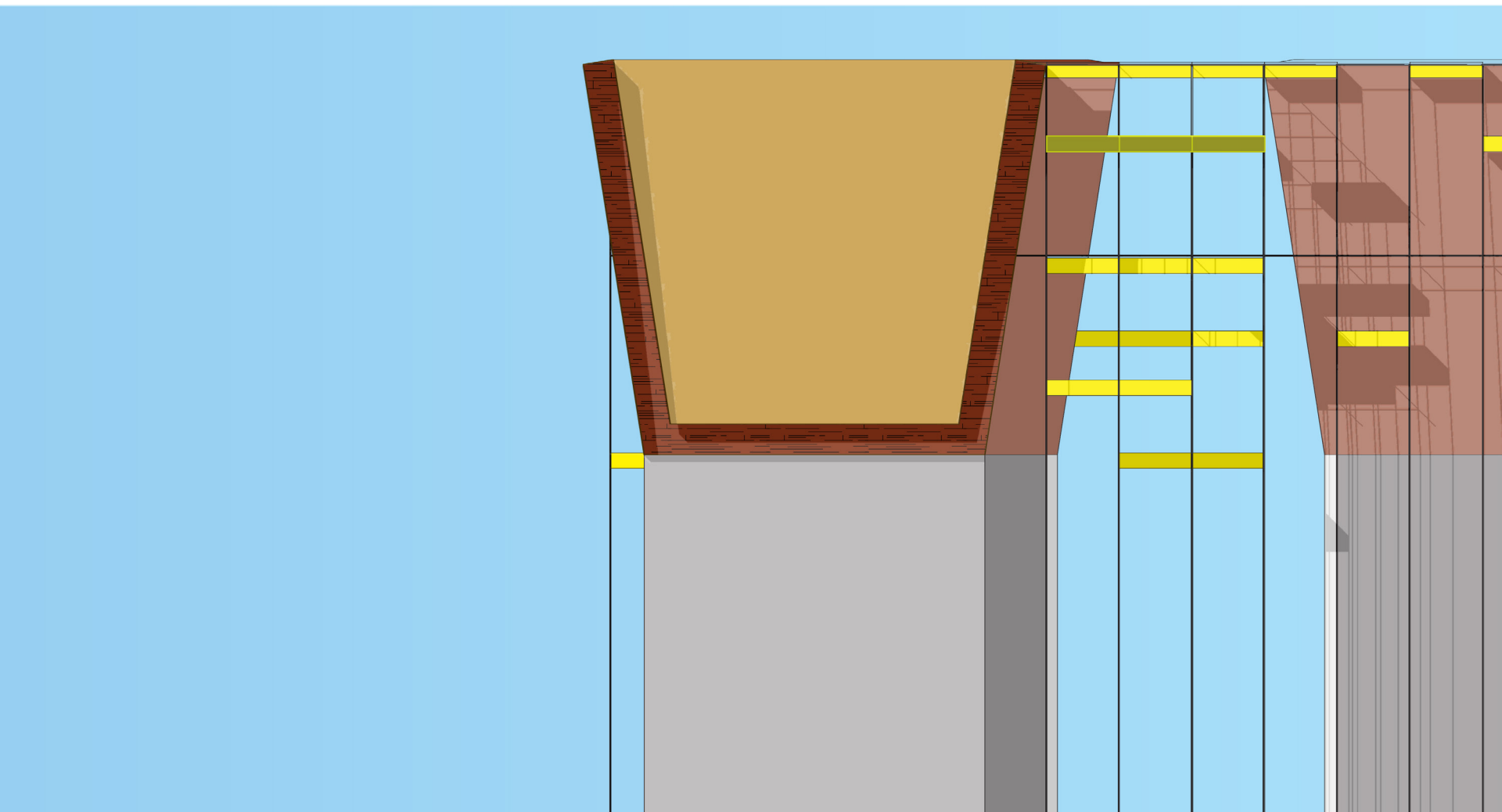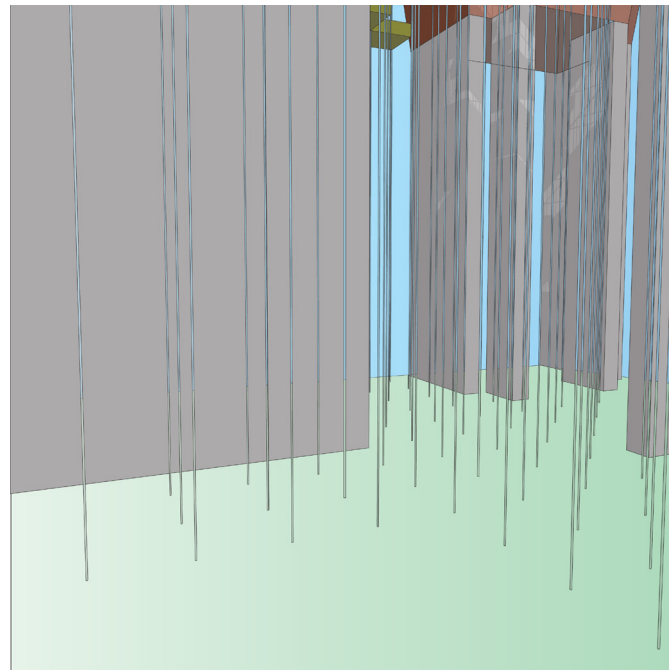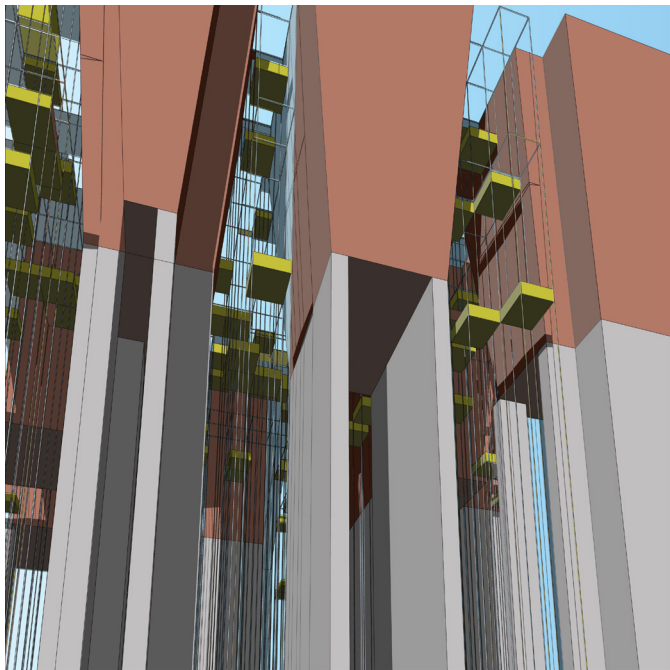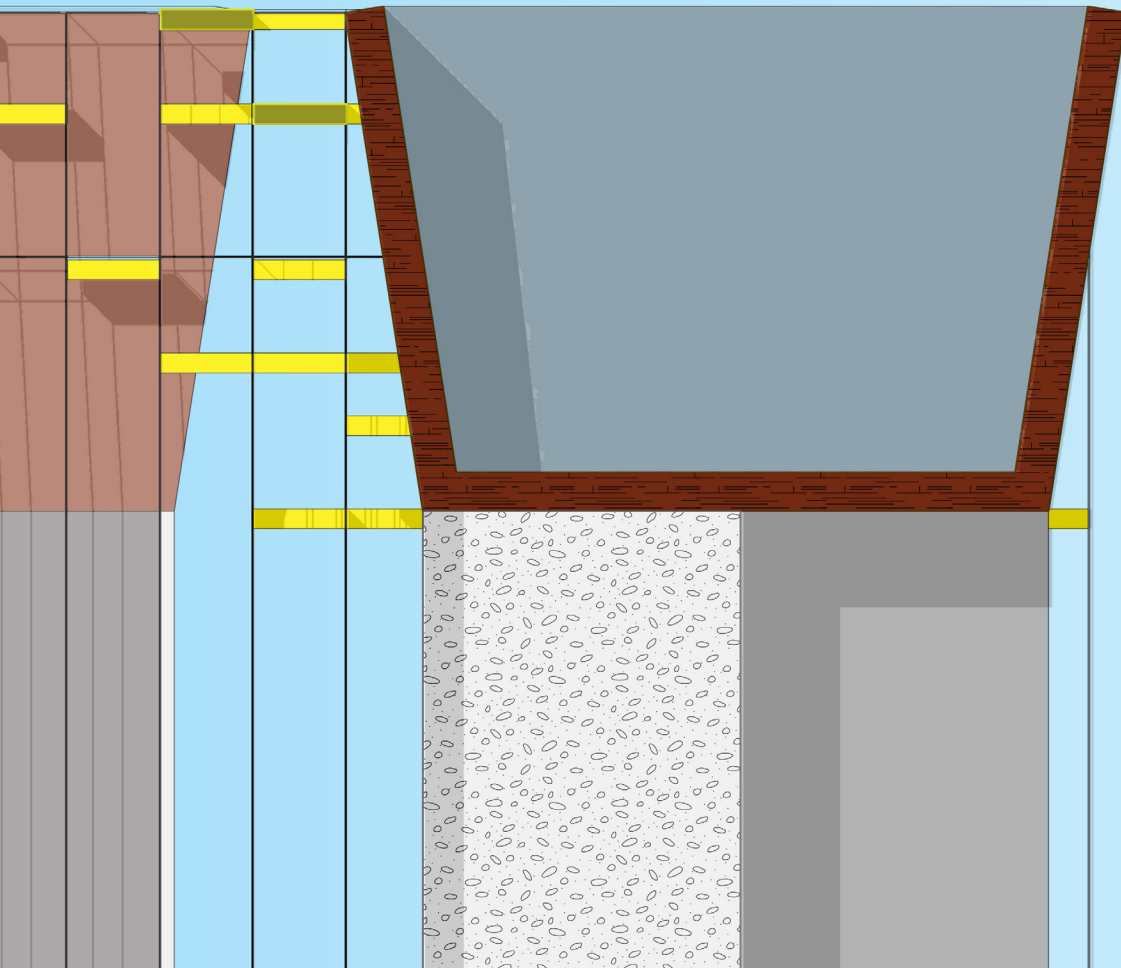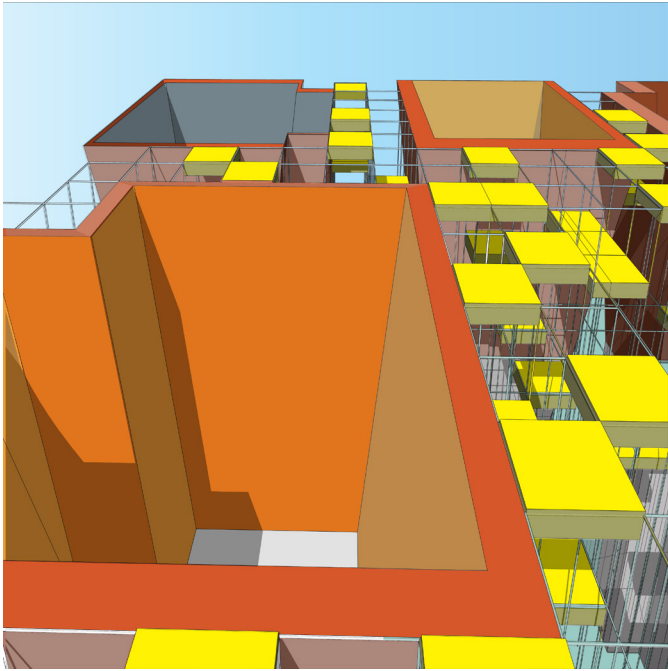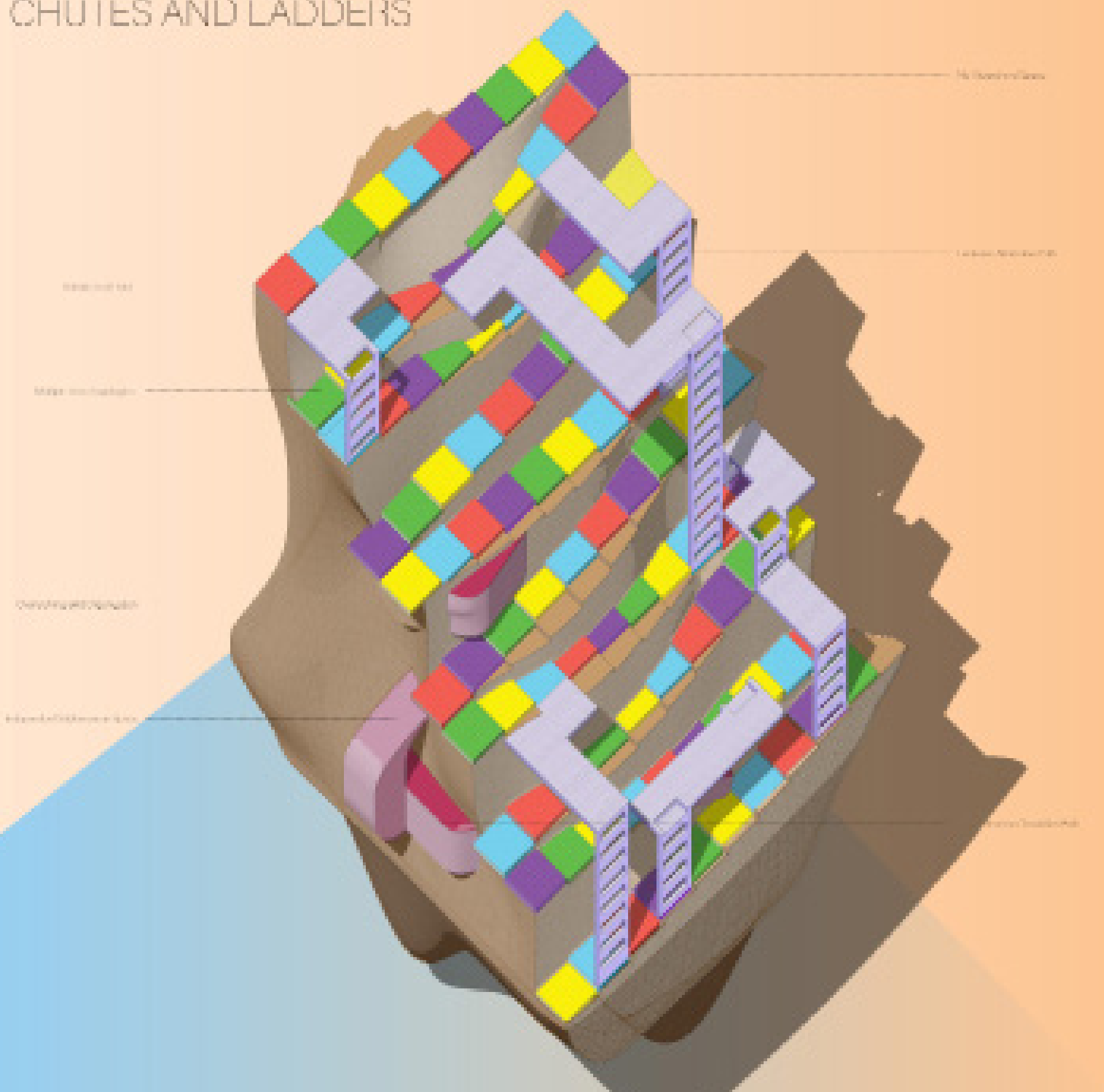
CHUTES AND LADDERS

Chutes and ladders sets up a landscape of obstacles and accelerators along a topographically sleep landform. A seemingly linear progression along the path has the possibility for non linear diversions through the infrastructure. What is seen on the surface of the game is equally as important and integral to game play as what is below the ground.
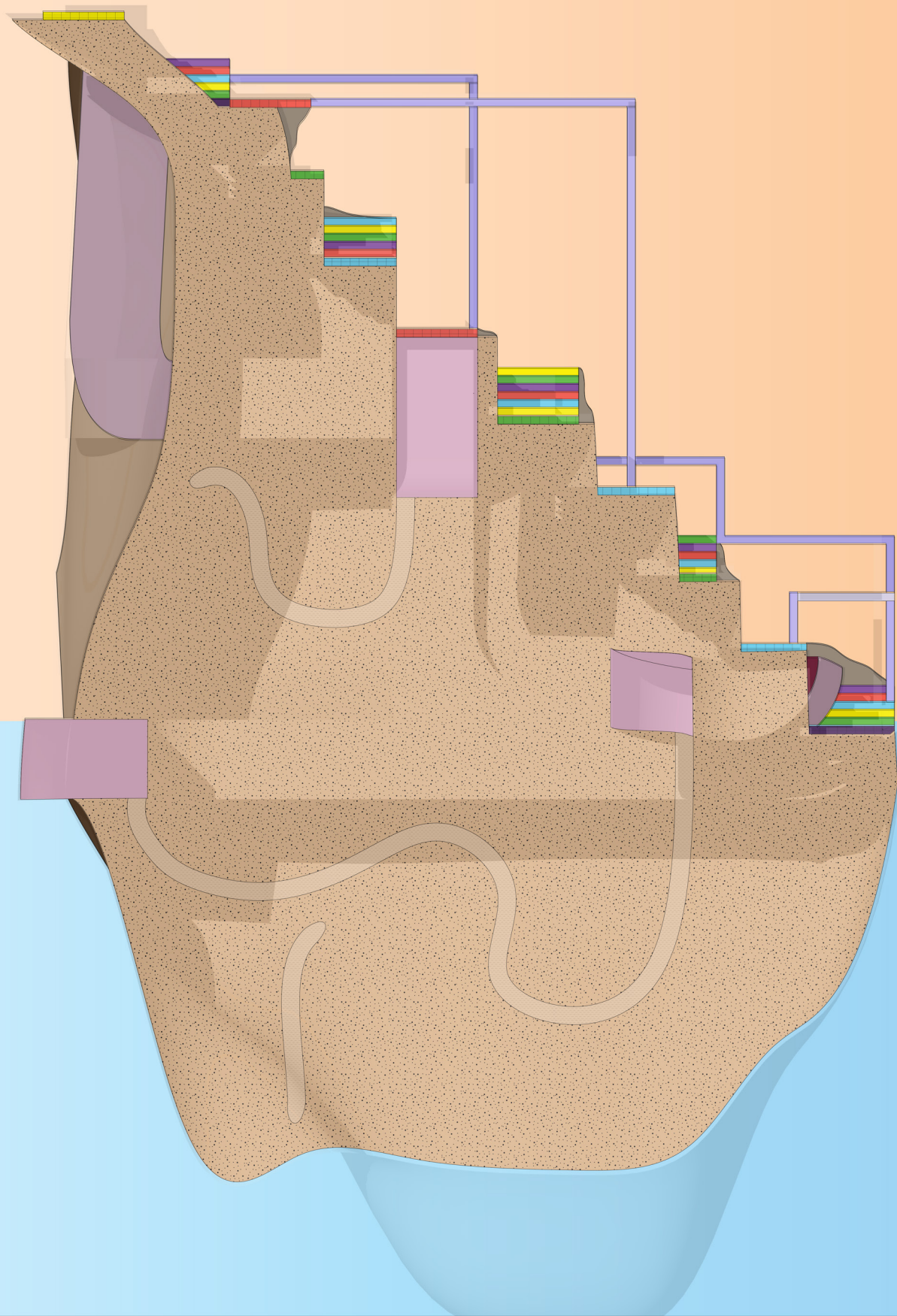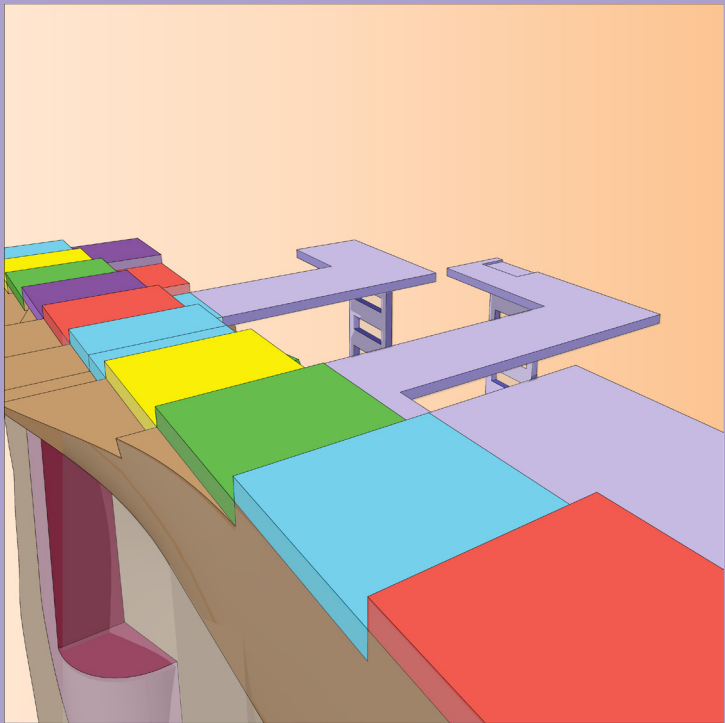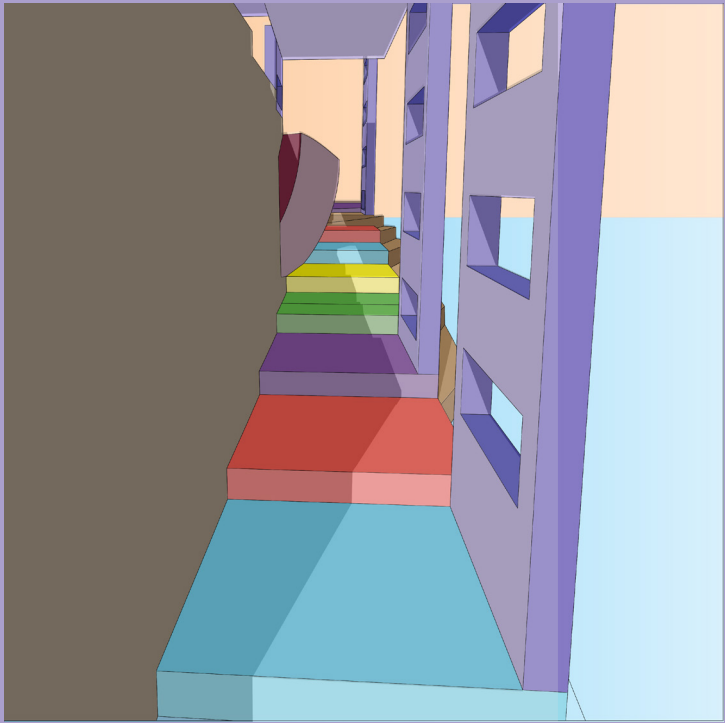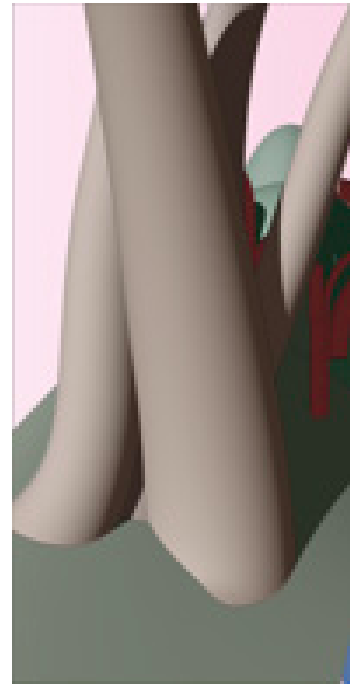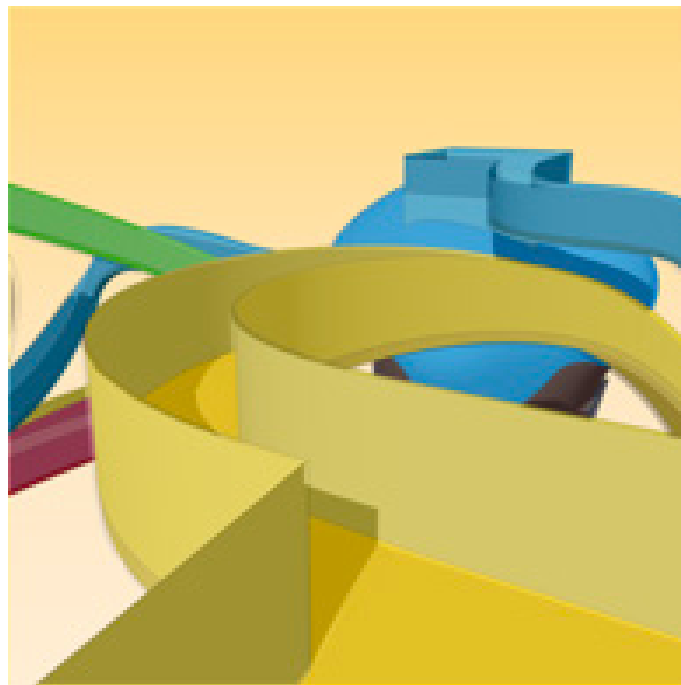
Estrangement of Elements
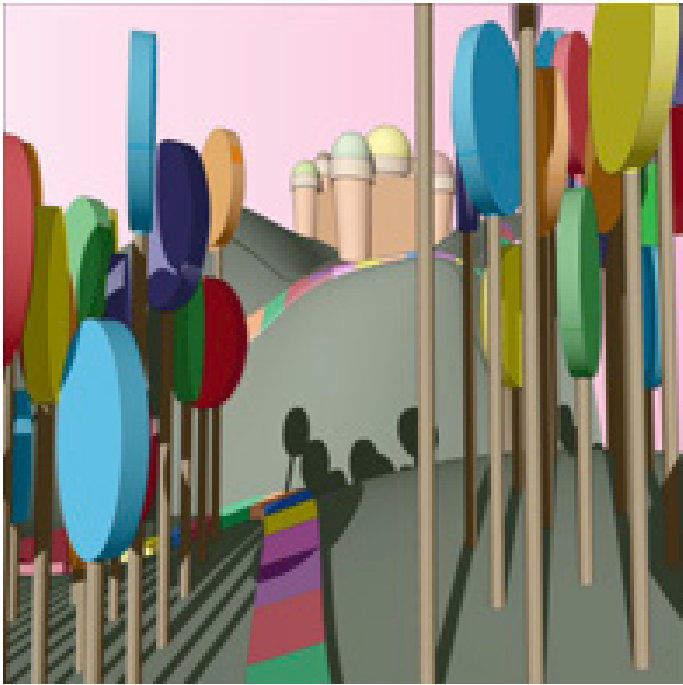
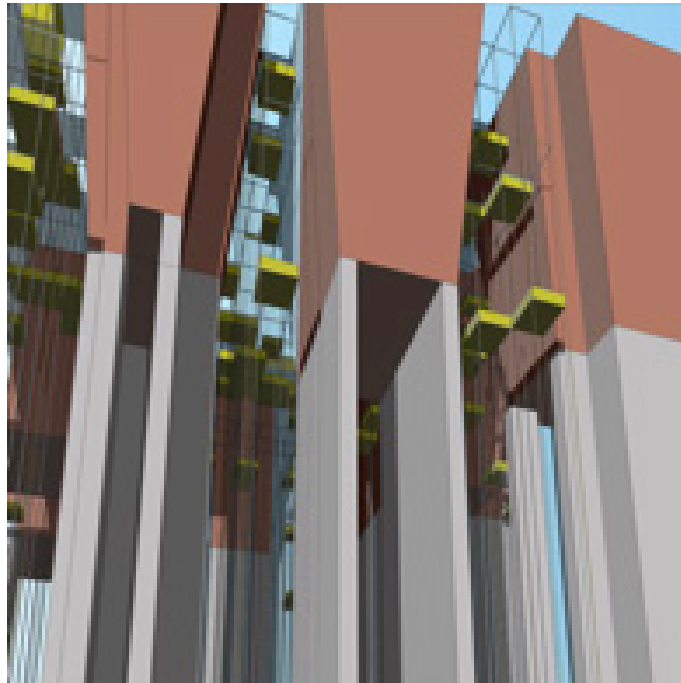Non Linear path
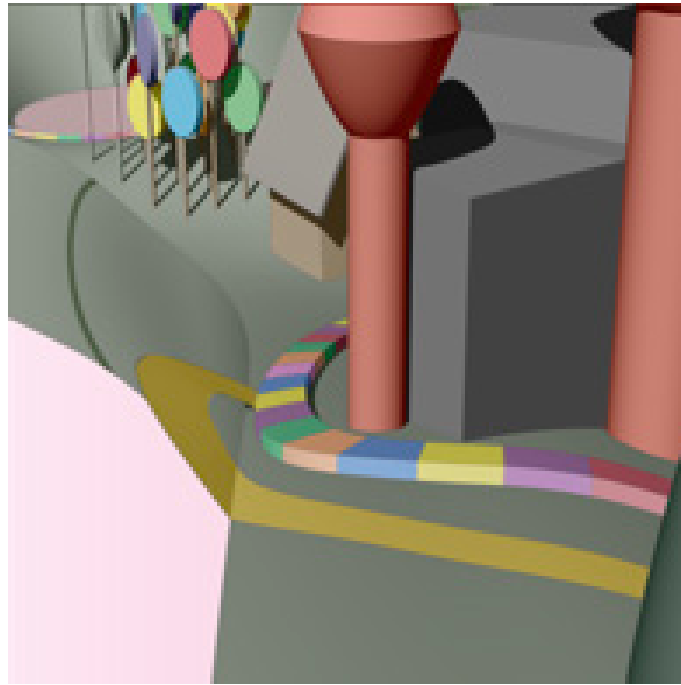
Landscape G
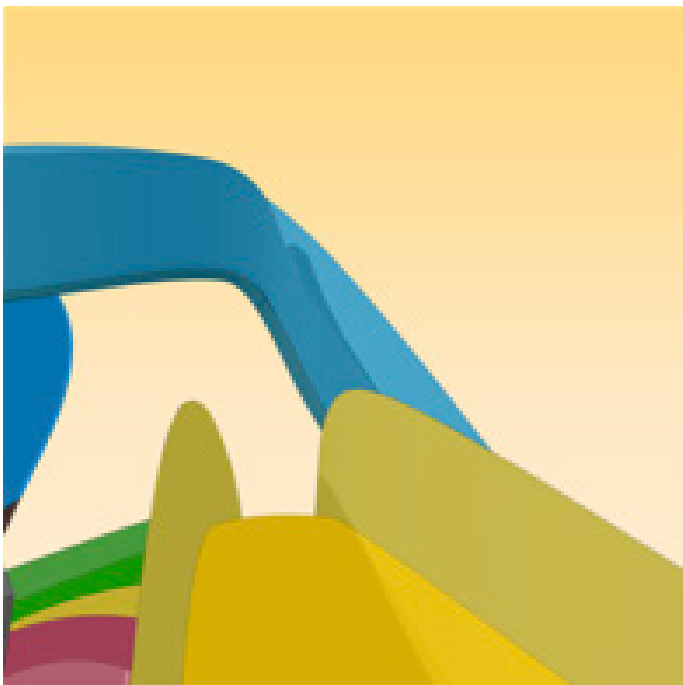
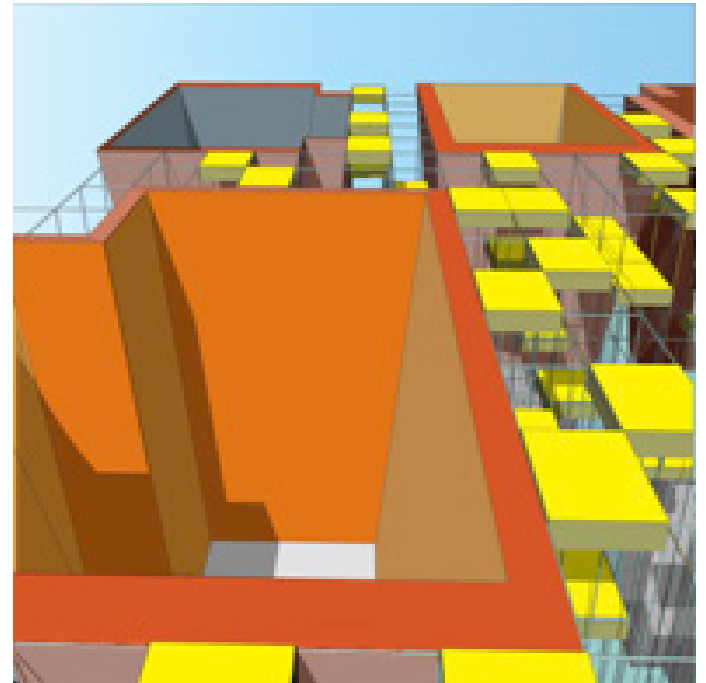Orchestrated Conflict
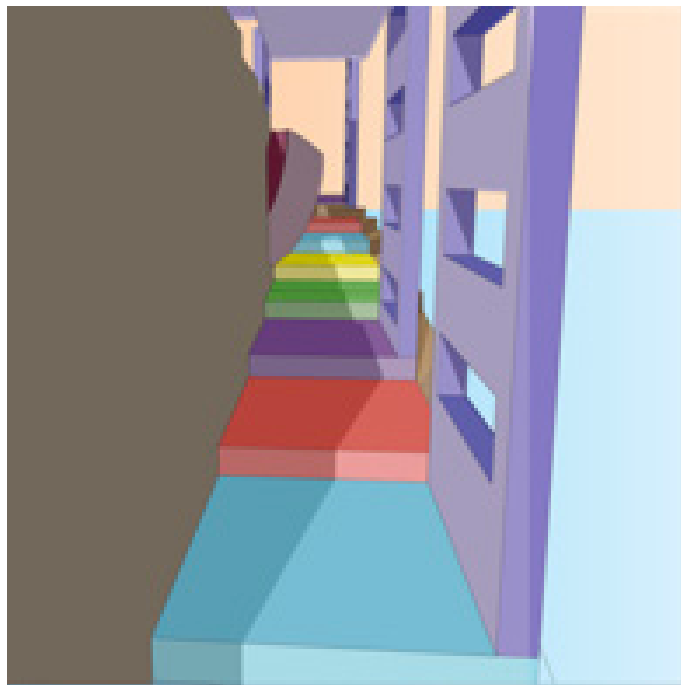
Disorienting Circulation
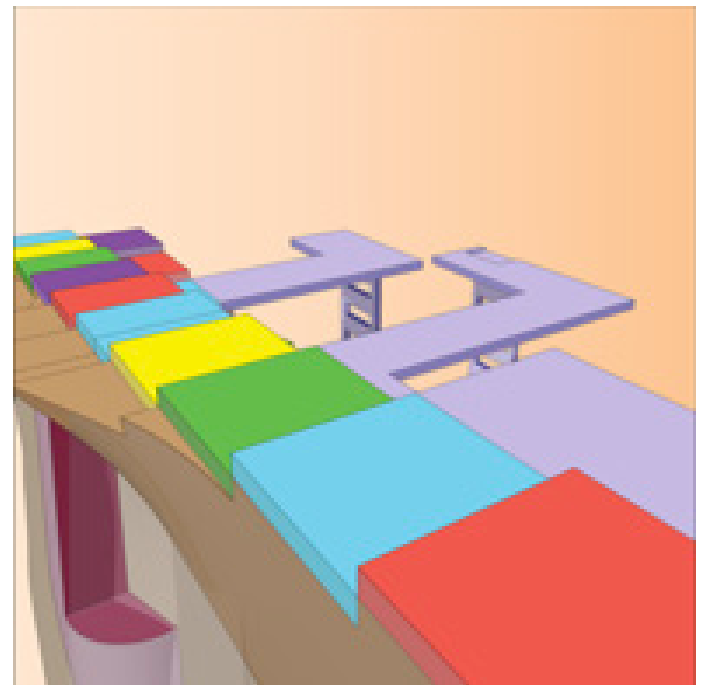
Standard In

enerated Path

9 Square Pixelation

Closed System

terior Space

Steep Topography

Subterranean Space

- GRID
- NON LINEAR PATH
- SUBTERRANEAN SPACE
- SCALAR MANIPULATION
- ESTRANGEMENT OF THE FAMILIAR
- ORCHESTRATED CONFLICT

HOW TO PLAY

Removing the concepts and logics from their direct expression in the games allowed for the development of a series of transformational commands to aid in applying the concepts in a regulated way to the site.

6 main transformational commands were used to manipulate physical and conceptual elements on the site. These altered elements were then disassembled, re-appropriated and misplaced in order to create the *playingGround.*

The transformation commands allowed regulated iterations the familiar to be generated whilst opening up new opportunities to break the ground plane and create new spaces to inhabit.
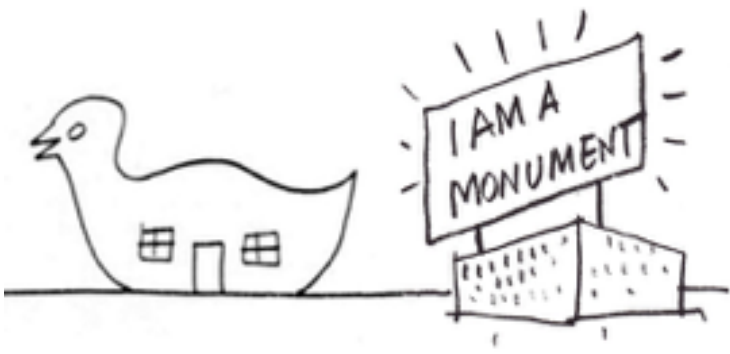
LAS VEGAS
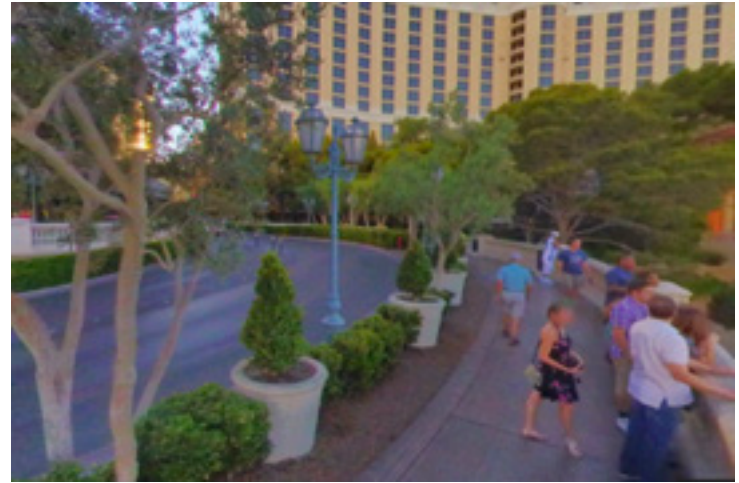
The site of playingGround is the Las Vegas Strip in Nevada. as the strip historically has a vested interest in idea of fantasy, entertainment and play in its architectural development over time.
The site as it already has fragments of the fantastic, varied connected program and a high value on visual and representational projections.

The destinations located along the strip range from casinos and hotels to restaurants and spas and everything in between. The common thread is their unique commitment to specific atmospheric identities.

However the paths between the destinations on the strip fail to continue to manifest the ambition of the strip to be a playful escape from the mundane. This exploration found these spaces to be most appropriate for play as it juxtaposes itself to the normative ways of the strip.
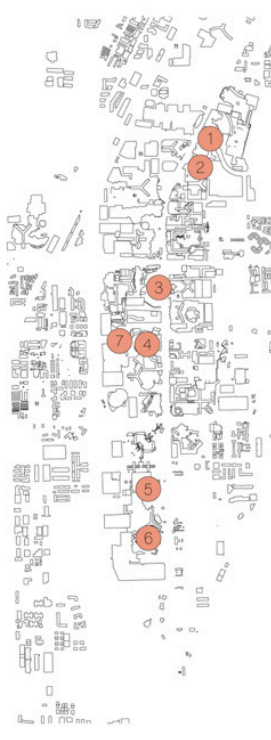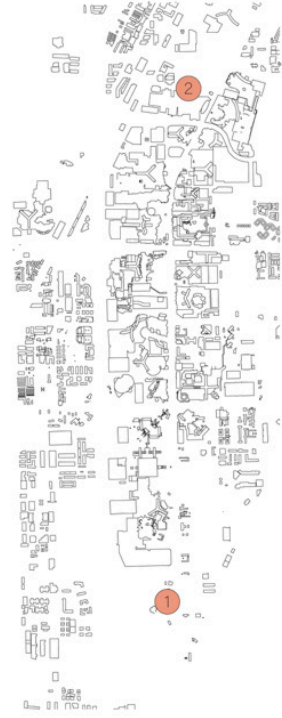playingGround aims to re-characterize existing routes that in isolation could be located in any urban setting.
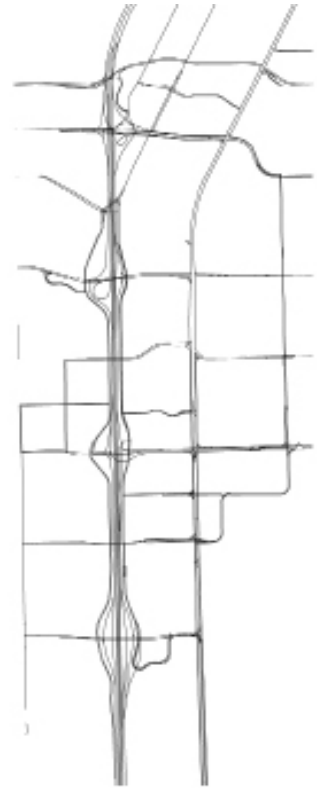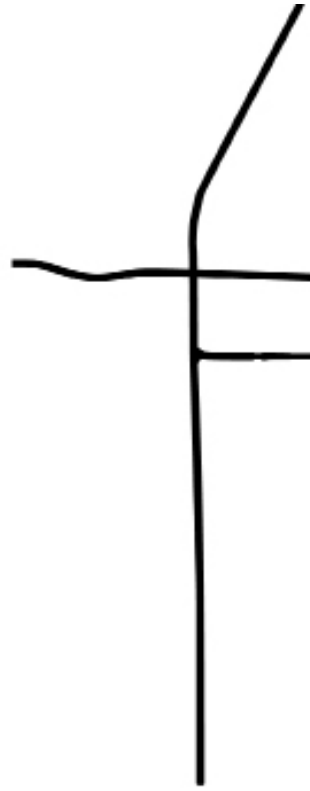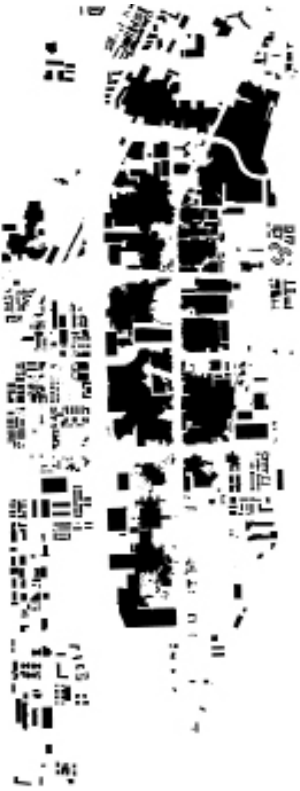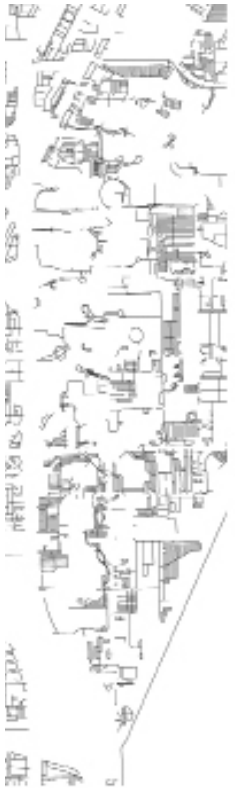
Fictional
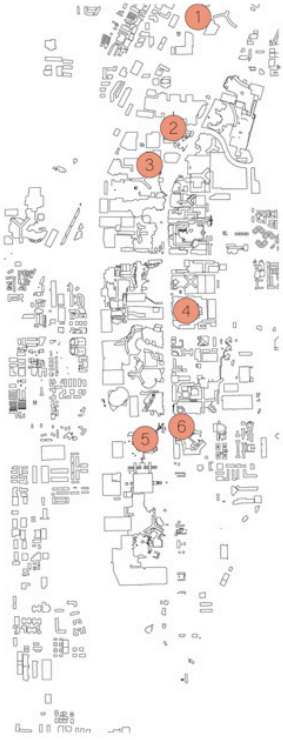
1: El Rancho / Last Frontier
(Demolished)
2. Treasure Island
3. The Mirage
4. Planet Hollywood
5. Excalibur
6. Tropicana

Appropriated

1. Palazzo
2. Venetian
3. Paris Las Vegas
4. New York, NY
5. Luxor
6. Mandalay Bay
7. Caesar's Palace

Other Landmarks

1. Welcome to Las Vegas Sign
2. Fashion Show

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playingGround: LAS VEGAS

The 3 sites chosen as the testing ground for playingground held unique moments of theme, juxtaposition, implied context and potential for overlap of commands.

The seam and junctions between the elements became the main area of interest as they presented cases of abrupt discontinuity as well as shared qualities created by different logics.

The playingGrounds span the space between 3 distinct pairs of existing destinations.
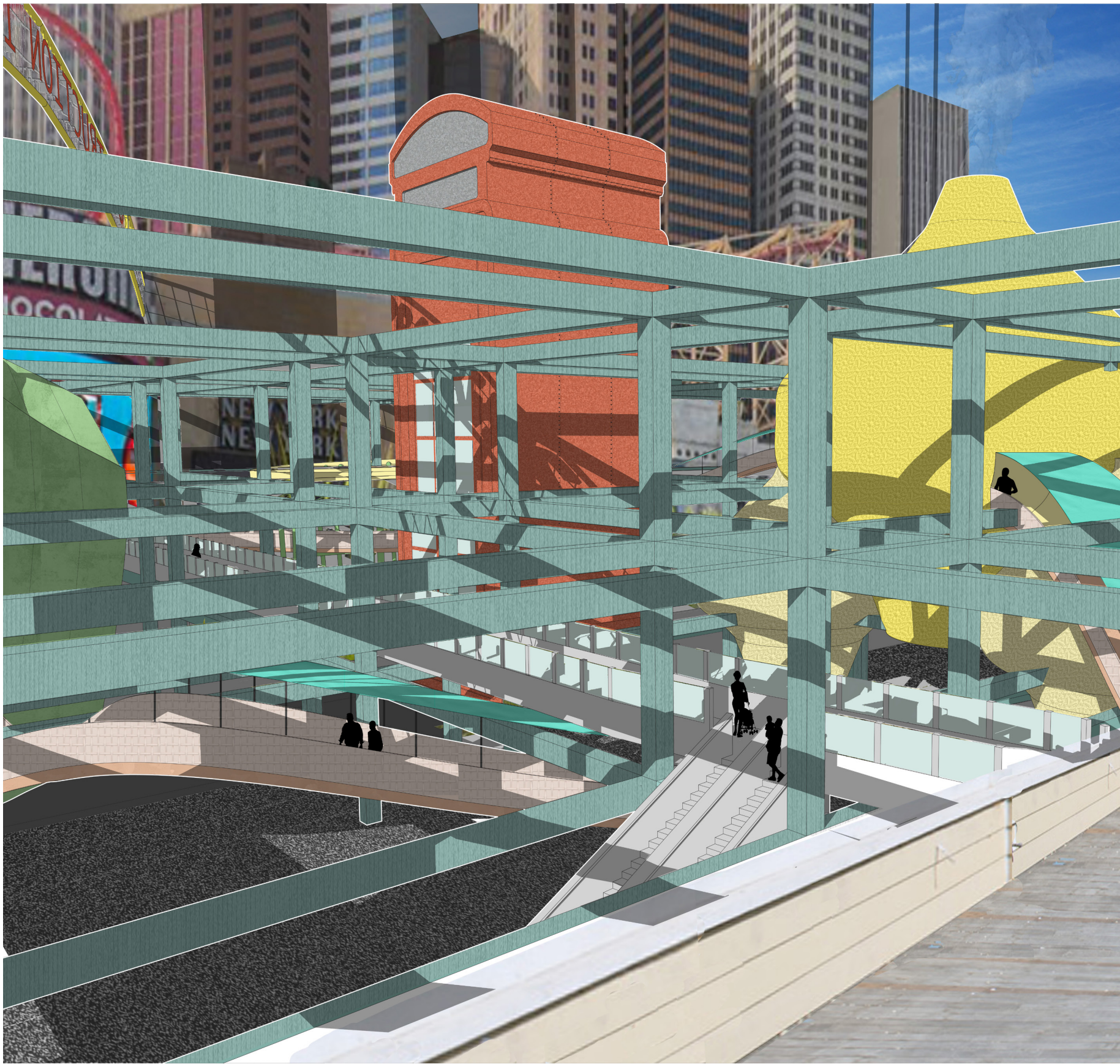
playingGround 01

This is sited between NY, NY, Las Vegas and the MGM Grand Hotel. The idealized reproduction of NYC and the Hollywood themed hotel present opportunity for the continuation of city like density and iconic geographic re-appropriation.

The site has an existing bridge between the two locations which began to play with the normative pedestrian circulation paths that flank the road. Two main single direction paths are added perpendicular to the bridge for the beginning of the development of this playingground.

The framework mimics the ever present scaffolding seen in NYC while also providing a structure for familiar objects to exist and float within. The juxtaposition between the rigid structured space created by the framework and irregular objects creates an interior landscape that is ever changing as one transitions across the road.
A collection of borrowed icons have been further iconicised through scale but played with through defamiliarizing them by low fidelity reproduction.

BUY ONE GET ONE FREE
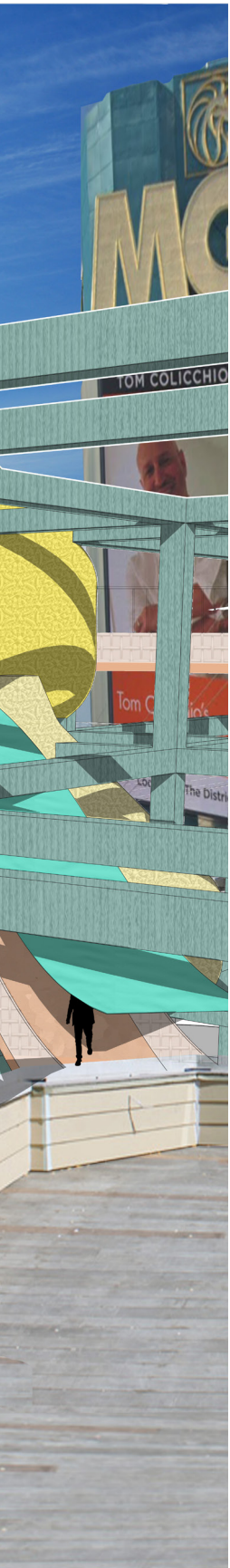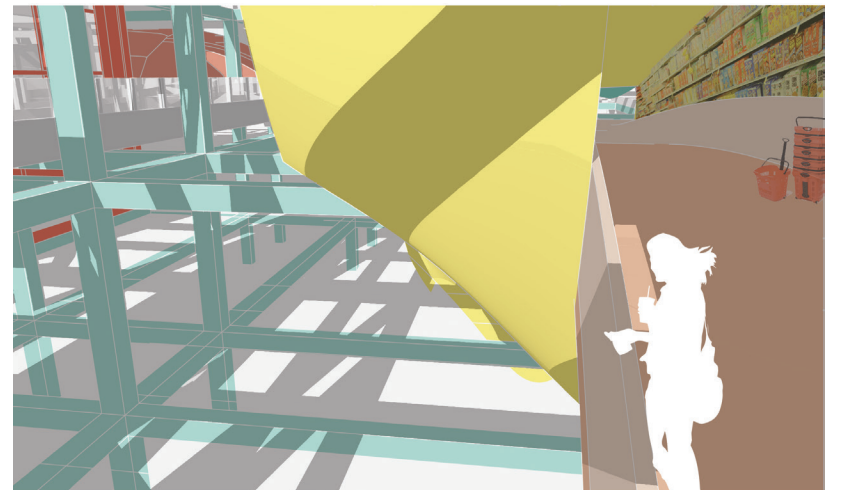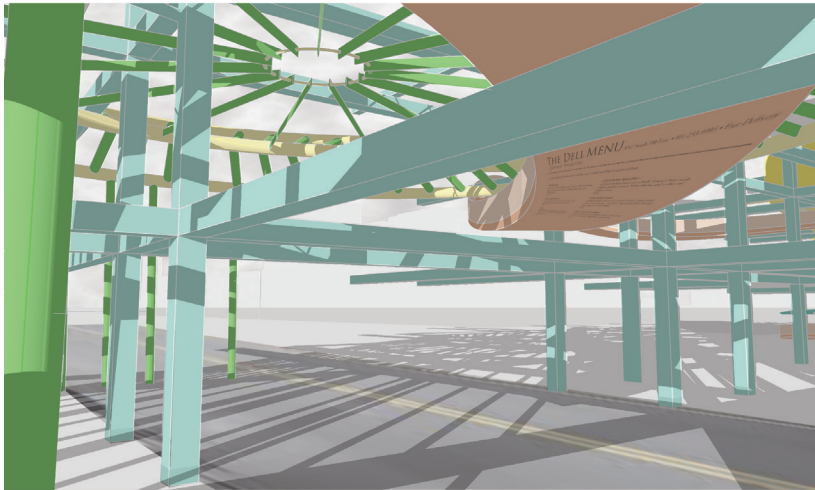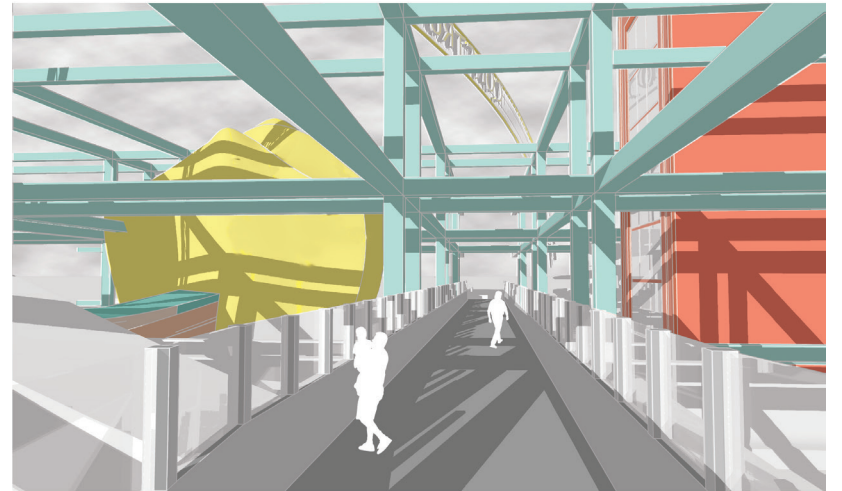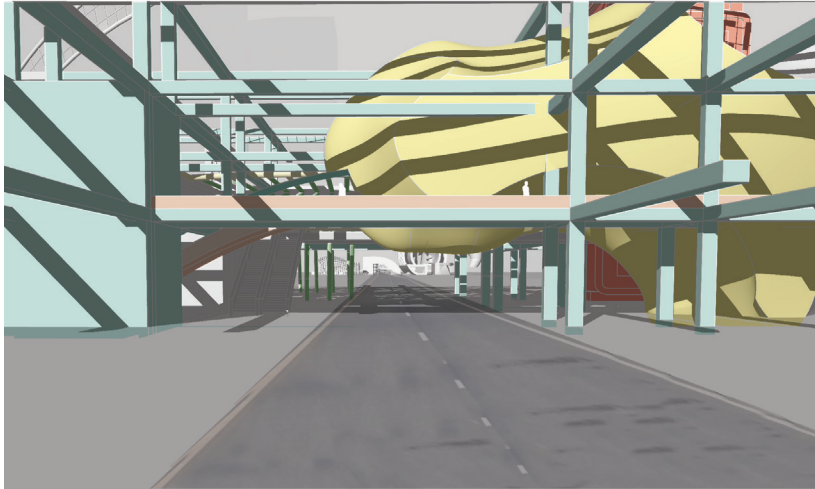
playingGround 02

Playingground 2 is located at the t junction flanked by the Dolce and Gabana store and Chili's restaurant.
This location is inspired by the strong iconography of the brands and an interest in a translation between the duck an the decorated shed. Gathering spaces in this transition space provide public areas of relief for visitors while framing new views of the strip.

This site had no direct connection between the shops and the restaurant but the diagonal outlet road offered a opportunity to extend the line of circulation into the site and accentuate the corner it rounds.
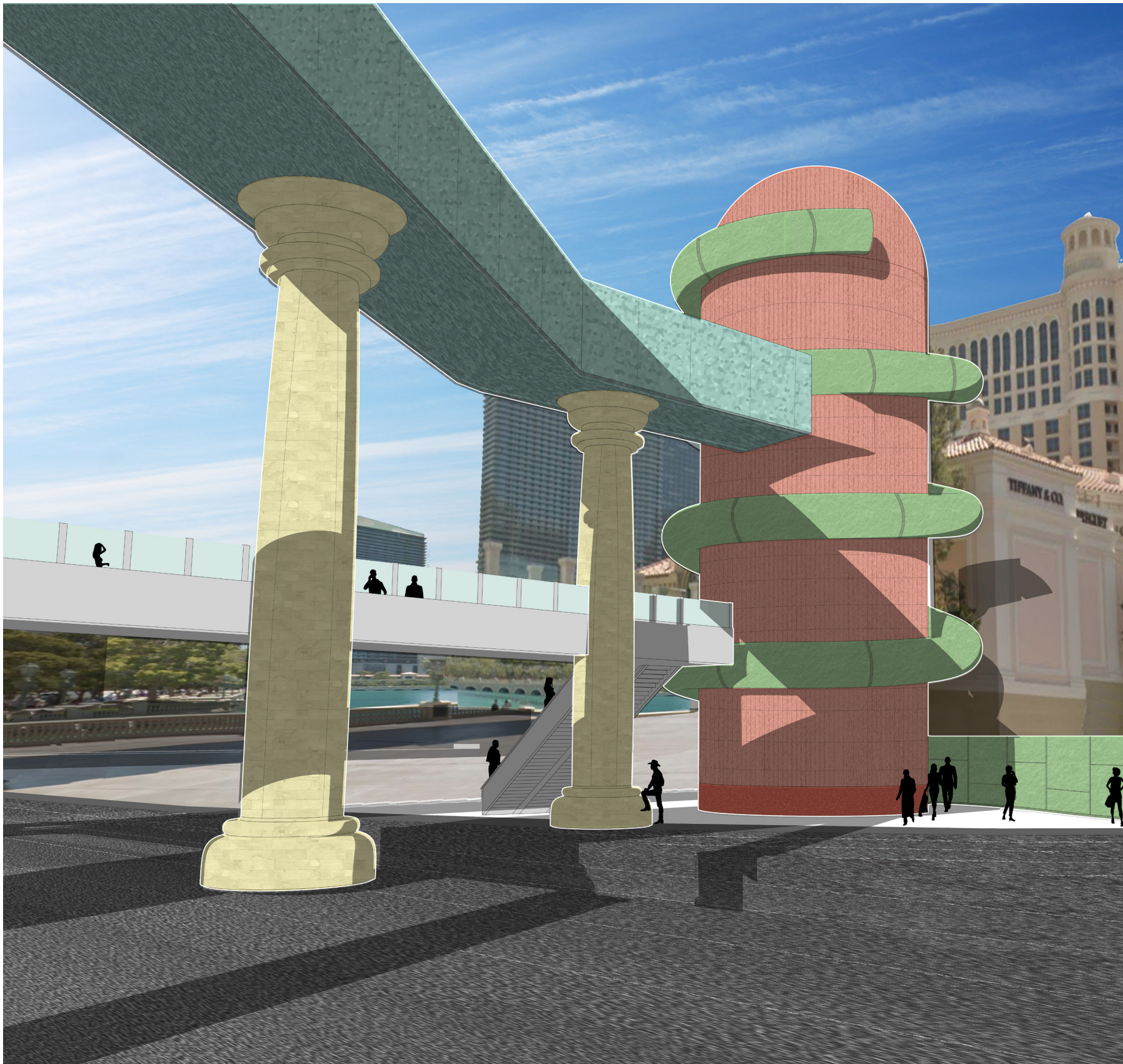
Here the form of the playing ground is created through the spatialization of the icons and creates an inhabitable tension between the high class and the cheap elements of the site.

The larger main spaces are connected through a maze of interlocking tunnels that allow for choices and mistakes to be made in circulation to generate a playful experience.
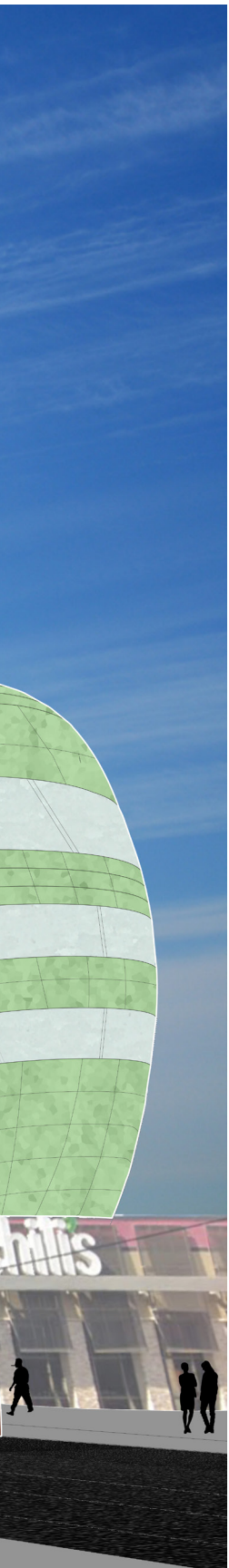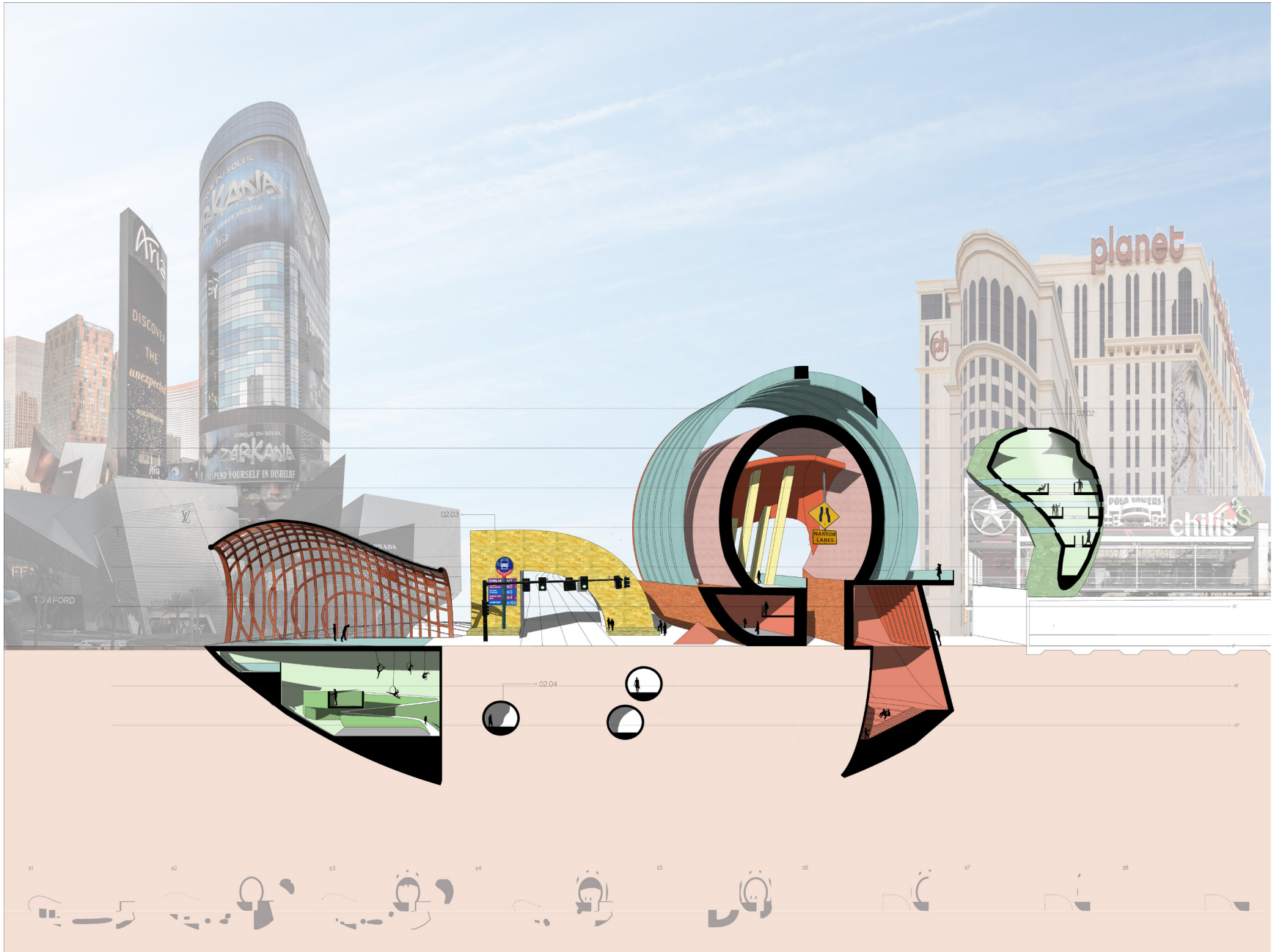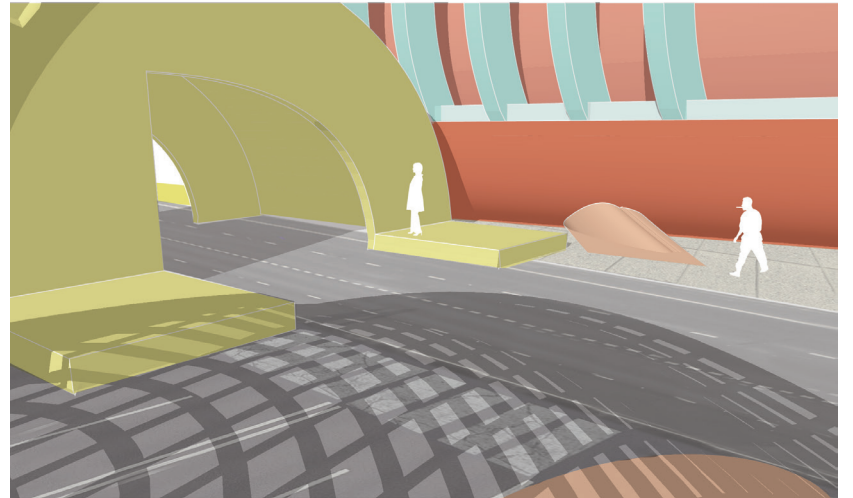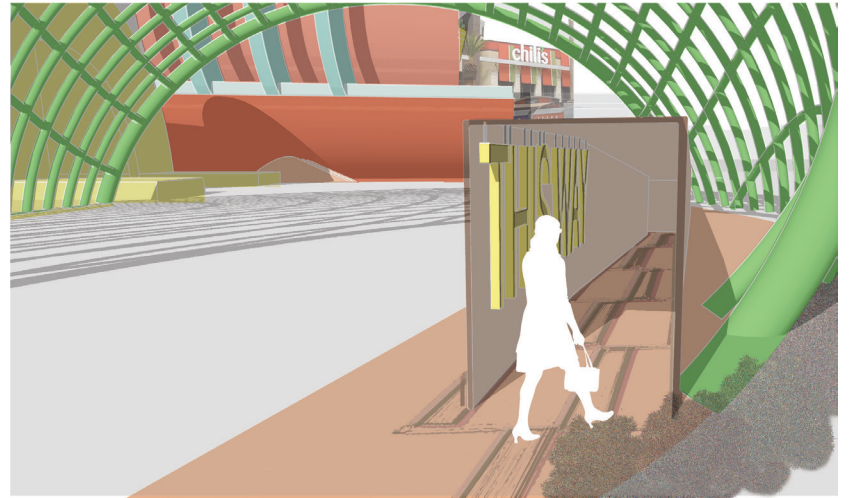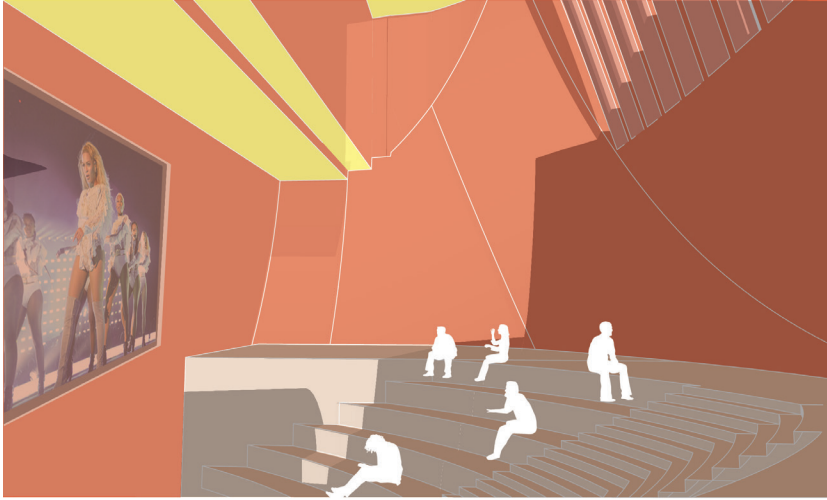
playingGround 03

The third site located at the intersection between Caesar's palace and Ballys hotel and Casino has distinct periodic language, repetitive forms and geometric facade paneling which were all borrowed for the design.

This site has 4 existing bridges that connect the themed hotels and clubs. This playing ground chose to focus on the bridges and proliferating them across the site to generate play.

Working with the ideas of interlock and juxtaposition between the new and the old, scalar distortions allow for the creation of new monuments while the low fidelity translation of elements produce new icons that are familiar but all together out of place. Repetition of these elements aims to create a condition in which visual delight is not a singular event but a constant atmosphere.
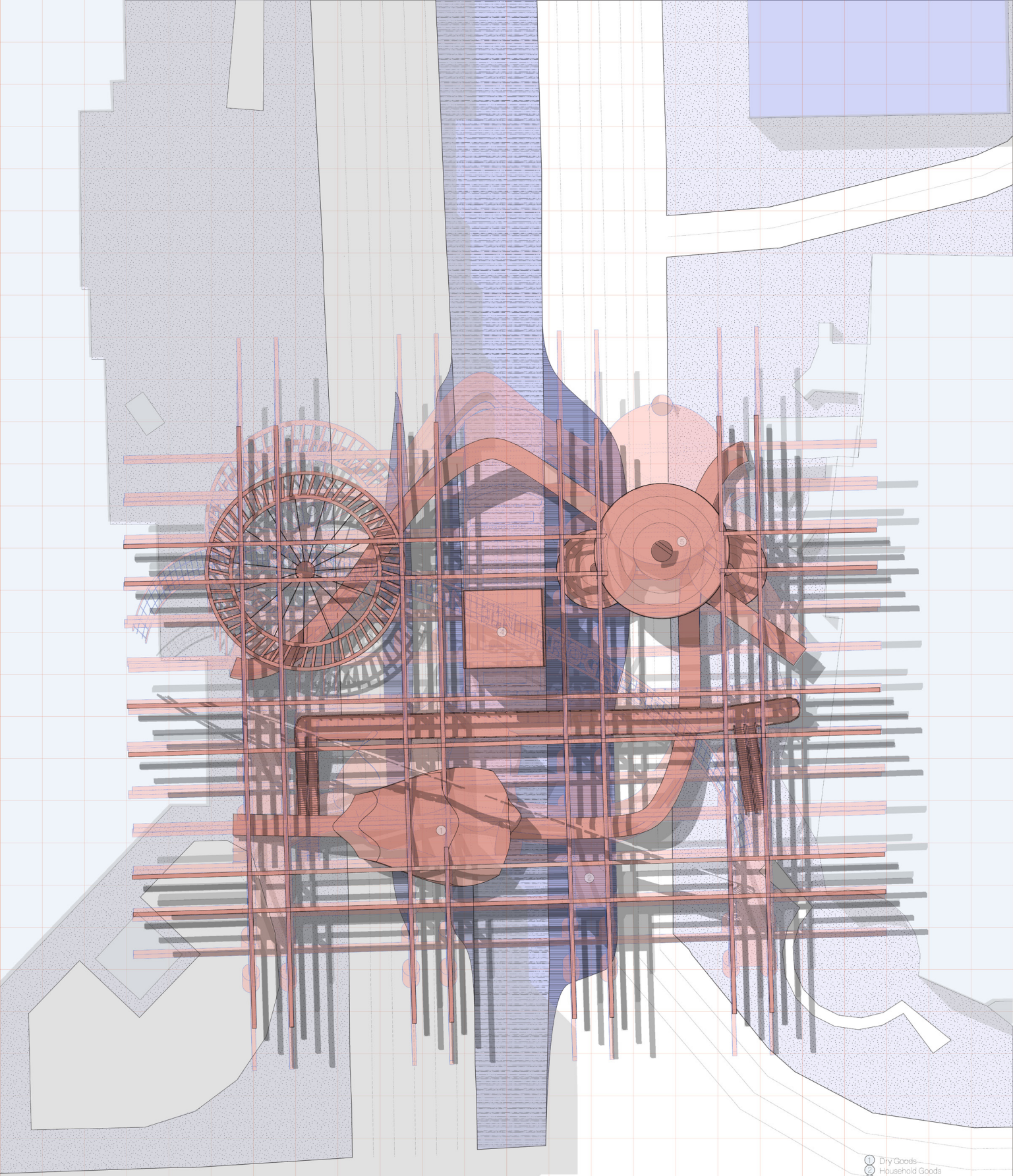
A series of above and below ground paths subvert the existing squared circulation path around the intersection and produce opportunities to travel through, across and below to generate play at various pedestrian and vehicular scales.
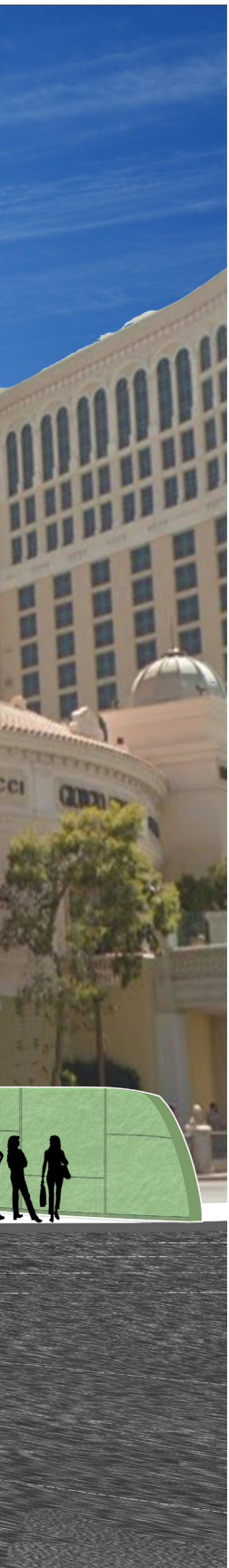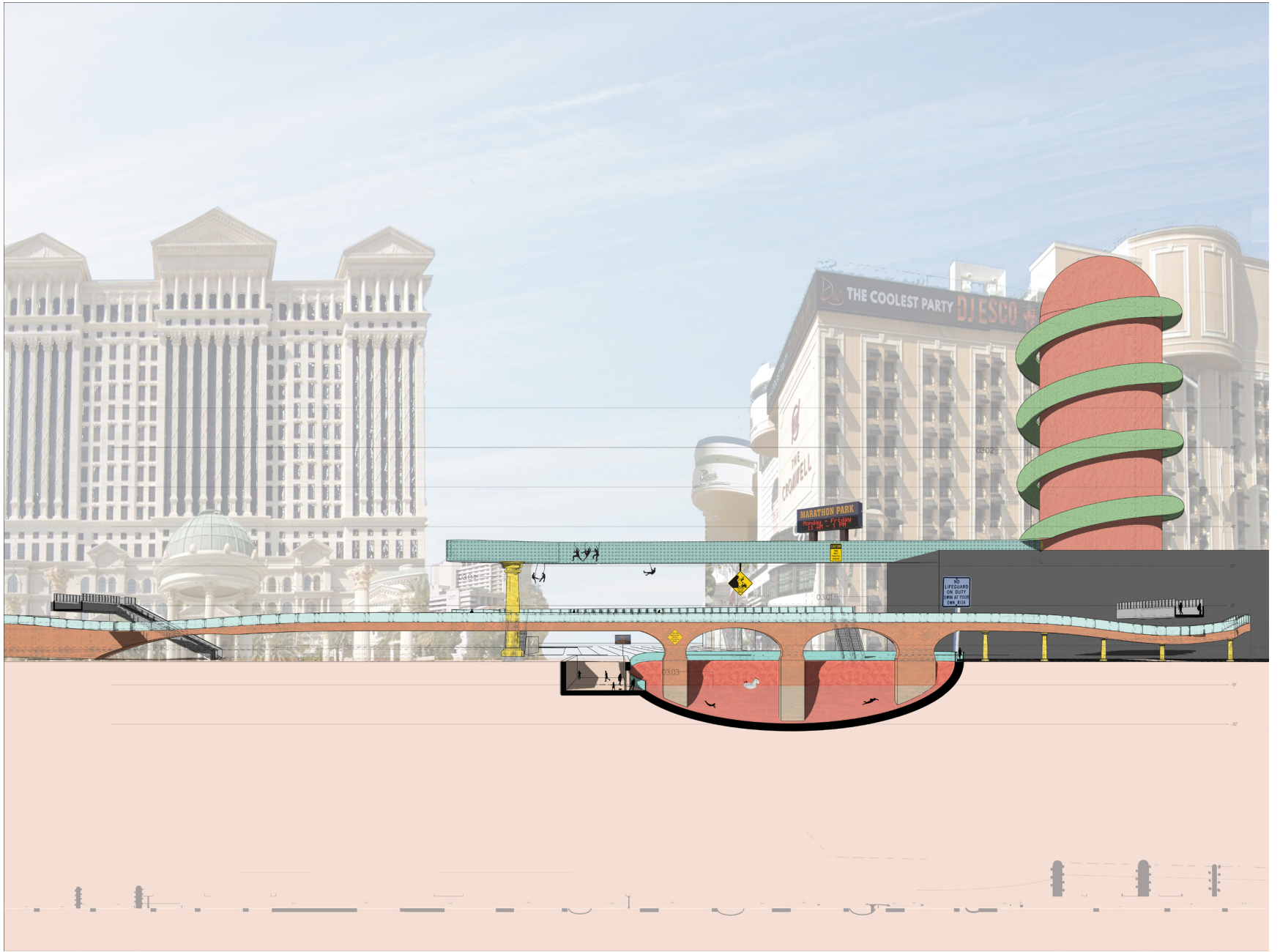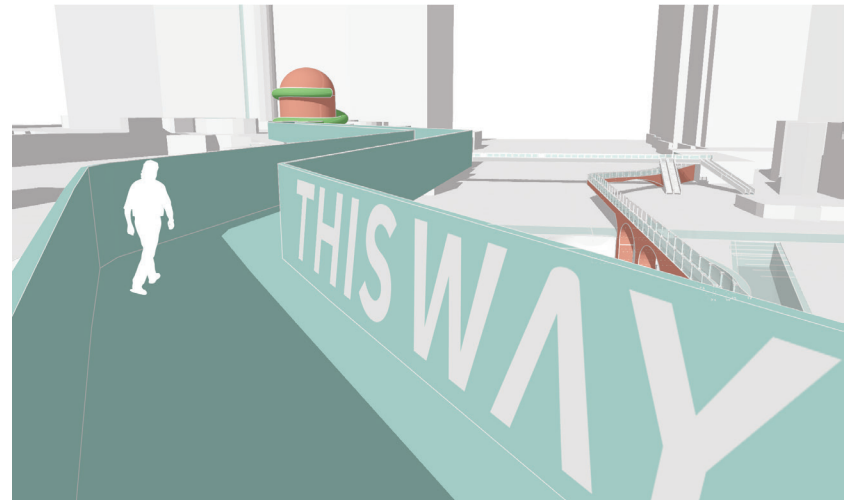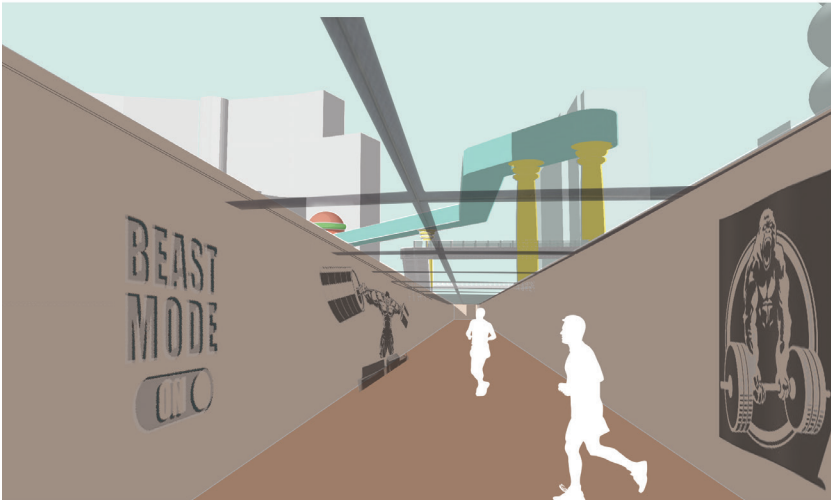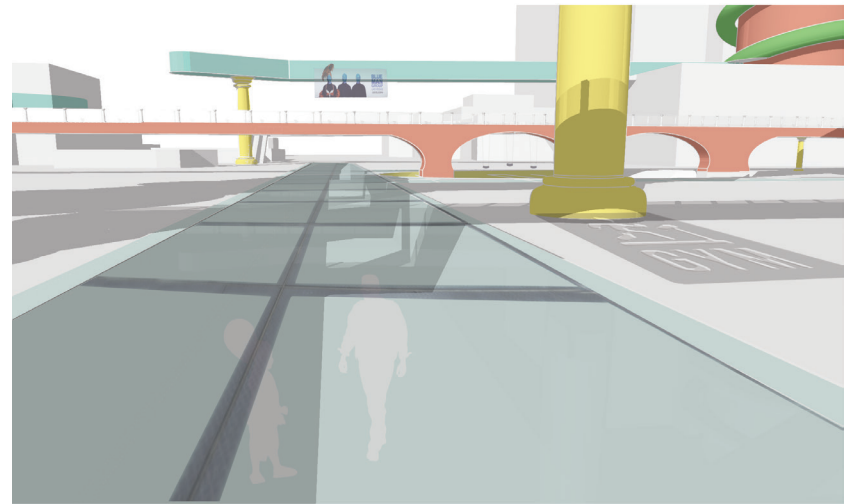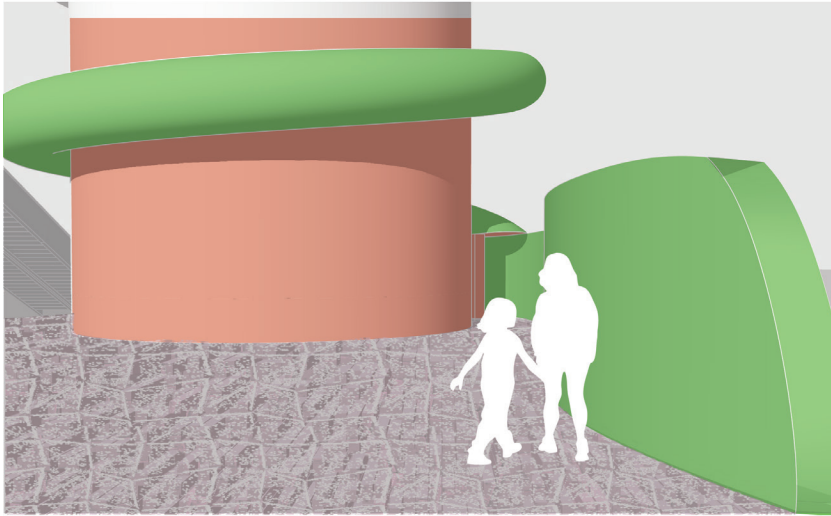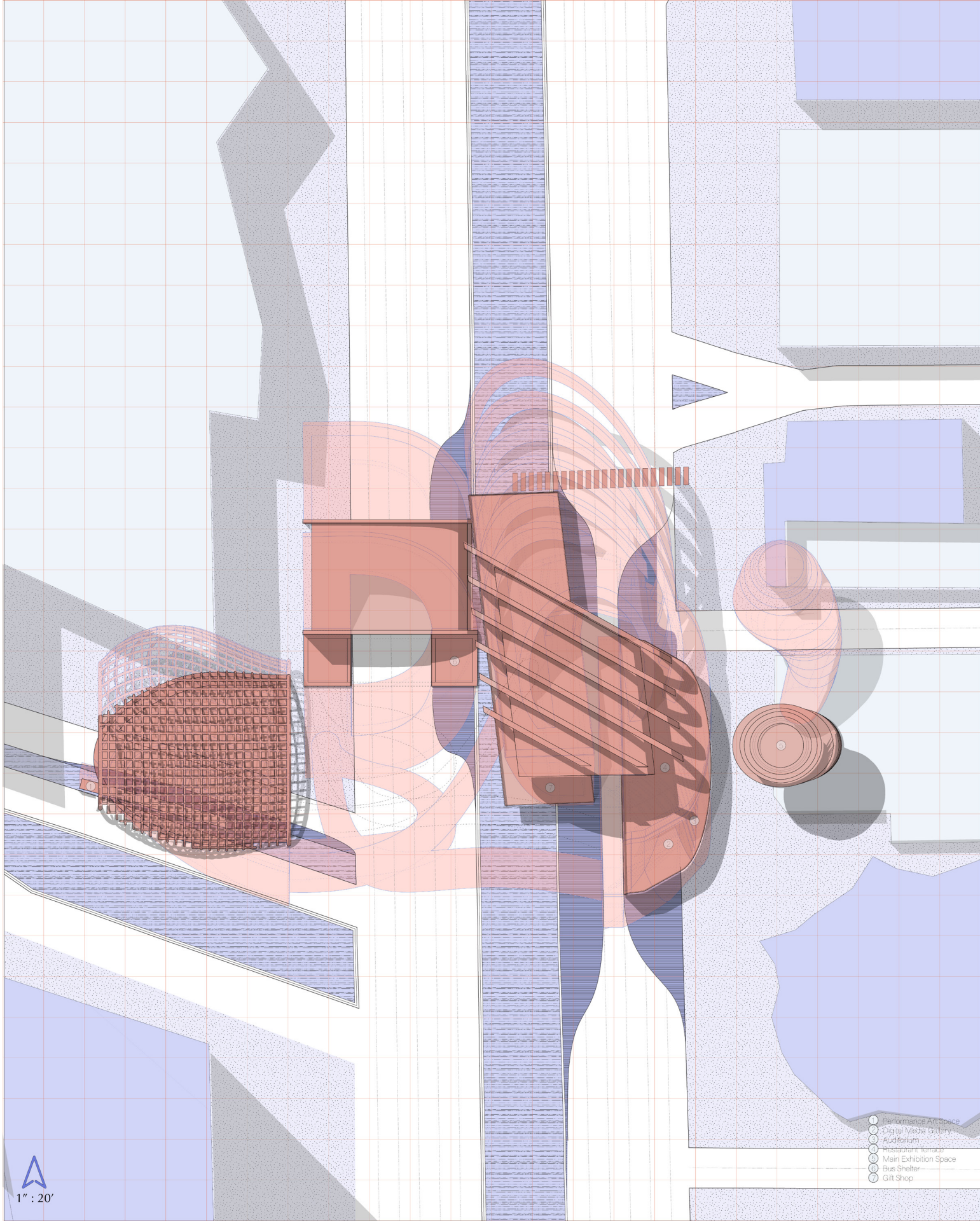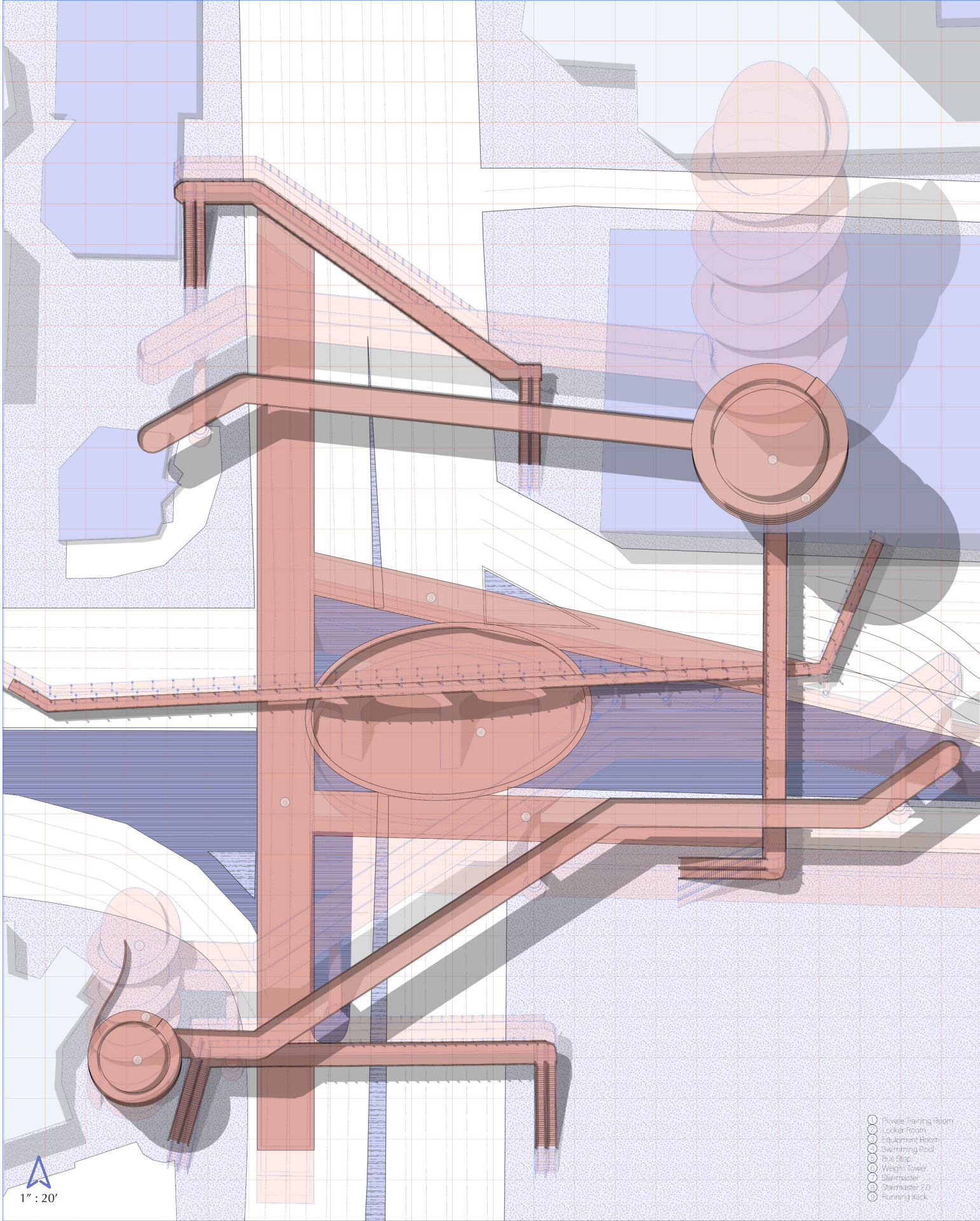
PLAYING WITH PROGRAM

① Dry Goods
② Household Goods
③ Fresh Produce
④ Cold Store
⑤ Bakery and Ready Made Products
⑥ Bus Stop

1" : 20'

1″ : 20′

1" : 20'

Though the playinggrounds can attributed ordinary programs that allow for agency and incentive to circulate them, The three playingGrounds stand alone as they are programmed for fun through circulation and aim to be elaborate paths between destinations as opposed to simply destinations in and of themselves.

Play occurs with the limits of time and space, has an internal visible order and operates outside the boundaries of necessity and utility.

PlayingGround posits itself as a manifestation of the essence of play in the built environment in which new fantasies can be created, delight is activated and the existing is framed and experienced in new ways.

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