PROCESS

for Takeaway, Toilet Breaks and One Very Persistent Cat

Rebecca Chong

00 Abstract

A computer screen is flat, and yet paradoxically spatial. There appears to be a degree of magnification about the computer, holding our attention for a majority of our waking hours, and keeping us sufficiently satisfied without having to leave the 500mm radius of our chair and desk. Workspaces, sources of social stimulation, entertainment, are all instant and accessible, nothing but a reflexive wrist flick of a mouse or a keyboard entry away. A computer UI tells us everything and anything instantly, with constant stimuli signalling the gaps in our information.

Reality pales in comparison as it appears unchanging, or even daunting; there isn't an overworld notification system that tells us when the sun is starting to set, or what's the next task in the main quest of life; and the extent of reality which we are willing to navigate decreases. Conversely, with how easy and straightforward it is to navigate the digital realm, where the "next task" is highlighted in bright red against a dominantly cool toned interface and a wrist flick away from tending to, the world from the computer desk grows smaller and more accessible with each software update or hardware upgrade. With more of our lives being converted to a digital existence, such that we become digital workers, this project seeks to minimally develop a representation of the digital space in order to understand its hold over us, and offer a design interpretation that productively disrupts virtual time and space using natural, nature-bound, or spontaneous occurrences.

Key words: digital space, magnification, simultaneity, interruption, curiosity

Research Questions:
1. How can we represent the spatial qualities, as suggested through the idea of magnification, of the digital space?
2. How can we represent the way of life that has been created by the dominance of digital spaces, where there appears to be a preference for the immediacy and convenience of the digital realm, resulting in a disregard for real spaces, which appear more ambiguous and uninformative?
3. On the convenient spectrum of the clarity provided by the digital realm and the ambiguity or real spaces, curiosity straddles a middle ground. What kind of real space would tell us just enough to pique our interest, and prompt us to engage more with our real spaces, productively drawing us out of our self-contained digital bubbles where work, entertainment and everything but reproductive breaks and toilet breaks take place?
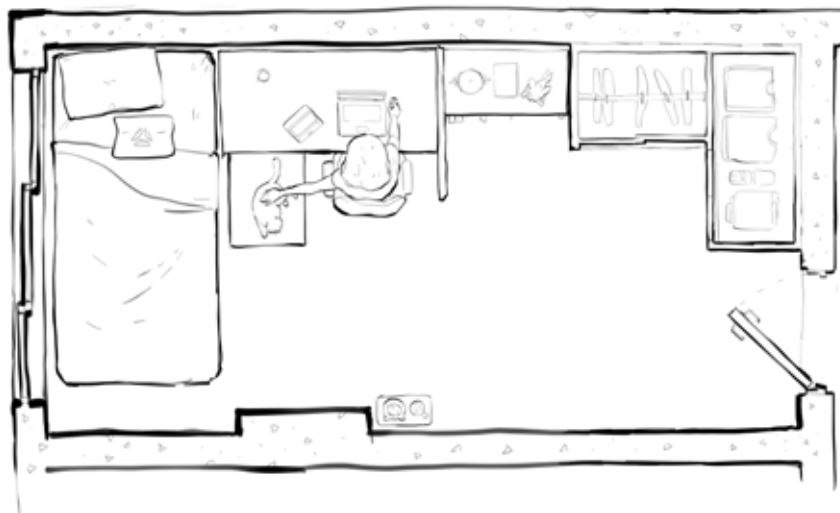
One needs to take their hand off the computer to pet a cat. A notable sacrifice in an era that emphasizes online presenteesim, but a worthy and noble one.
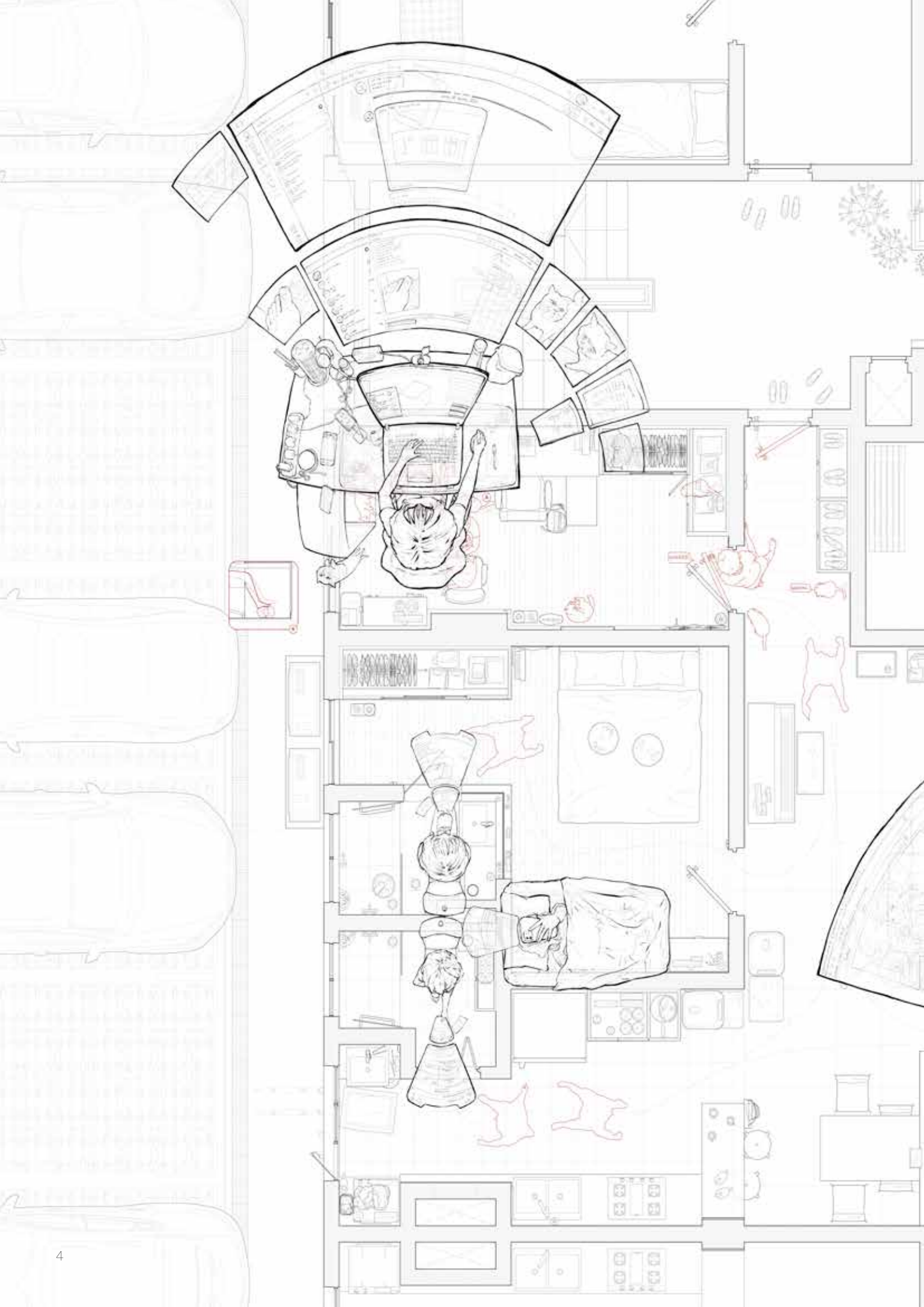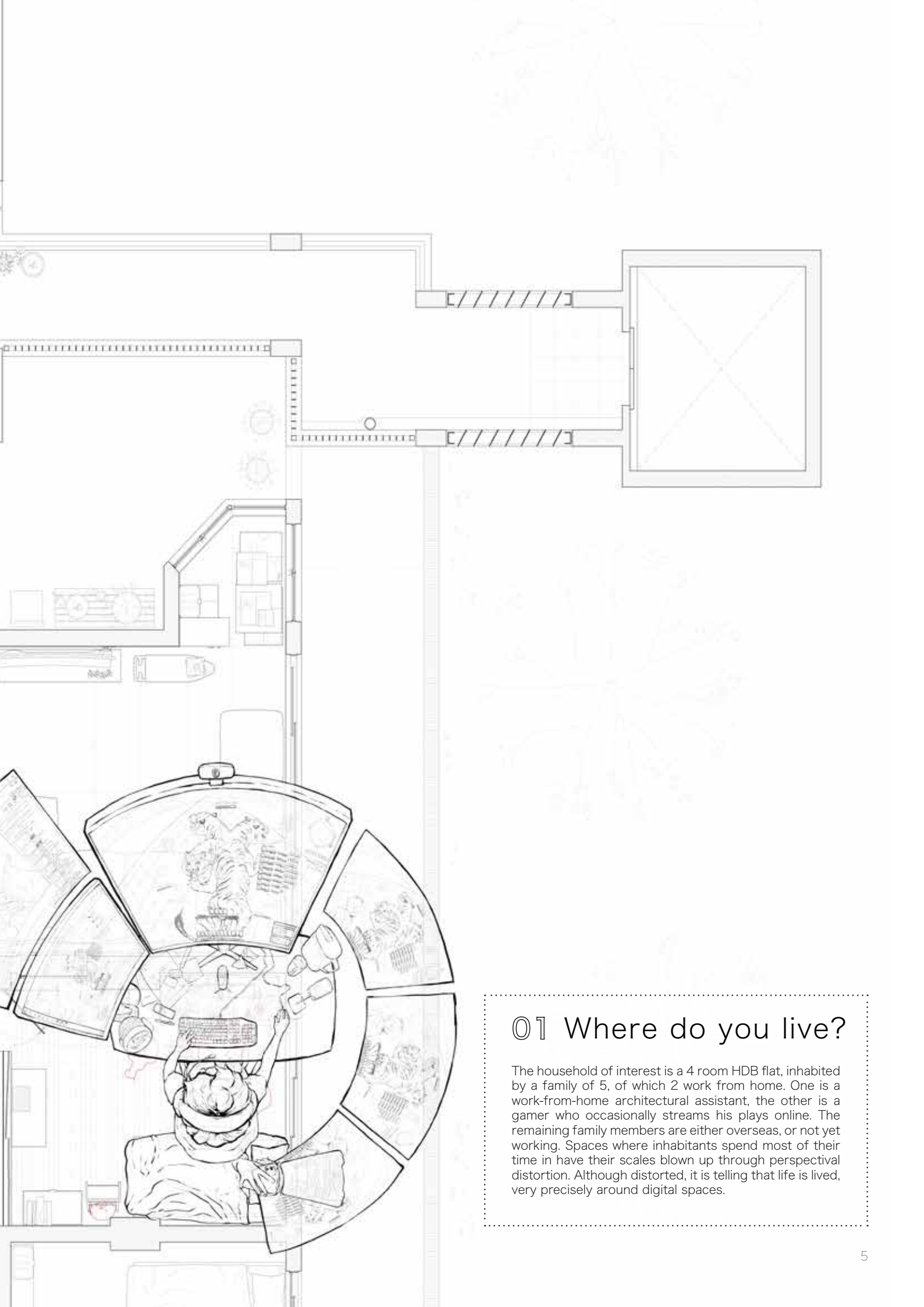
01 Where do you live?

The household of interest is a 4 room HDB flat, inhabited by a family of 5, of which 2 work from home. One is a work-from-home architectural assistant, the other is a gamer who occasionally streams his plays online. The remaining family members are either overseas, or not yet working. Spaces where inhabitants spend most of their time in have their scales blown up through perspectival distortion. Although distorted, it is telling that life is lived, very precisely around digital spaces.
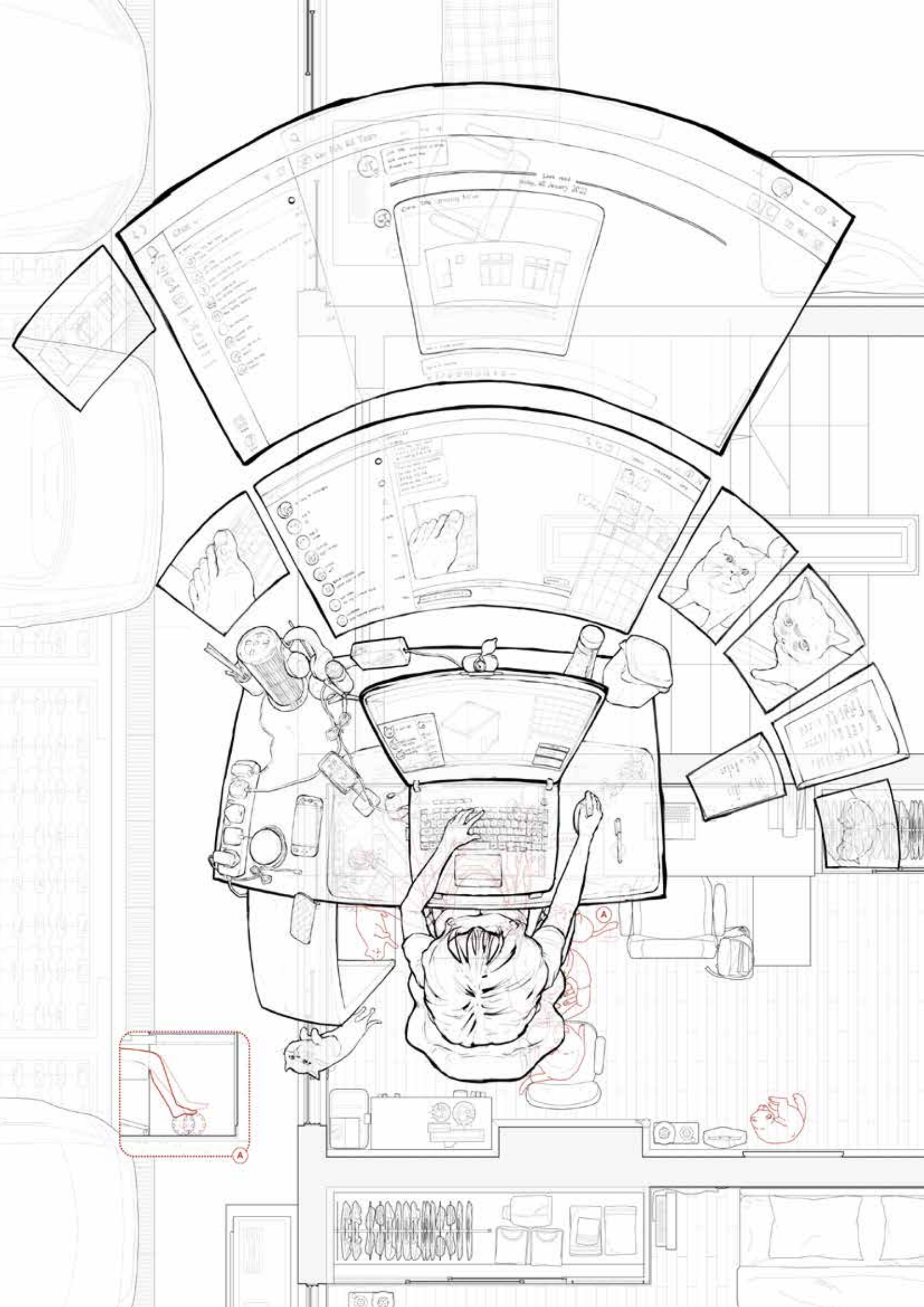
This is the deskscape of the architectural assistant. We see a sketchup interface on which she's working on her task of the day. Overlaid on top of it is a chat screen for Discord, a form of social media. Behind the Sketchup window are other windows for Telegram and Microsoft Teams. Notifications implicitly manage the order of these tasks. A message from a friend comes in via Telegram, followed by a notification from her work group chat. Although she has the choice to tend to whichever notification is more important, the notification systems tells her what has happened, and in precisely which order, while she was working. Paraphernalia to live is concentrated onto the desk, or a miniaturised version is purchased if necessary. For instance, a desk fan to cool the microclimate about her body, or the miniature dustbin to her right. This curation of objects ensures she doesn't have to get up to turn on a switch for a ceiling fan, or to throw rubbish in a trash can which we would normally relegate to the corners of a room. Everything she needs to sustain herself physically is kept within arm's reach. Her phone is even placed on a phone stand to align it closer to the plane of the screen, such that her eyes don't have to stray too far from the screen. Where some of us have to tilt our necks to check our phones laid flat on the table, she just has move her eyes.
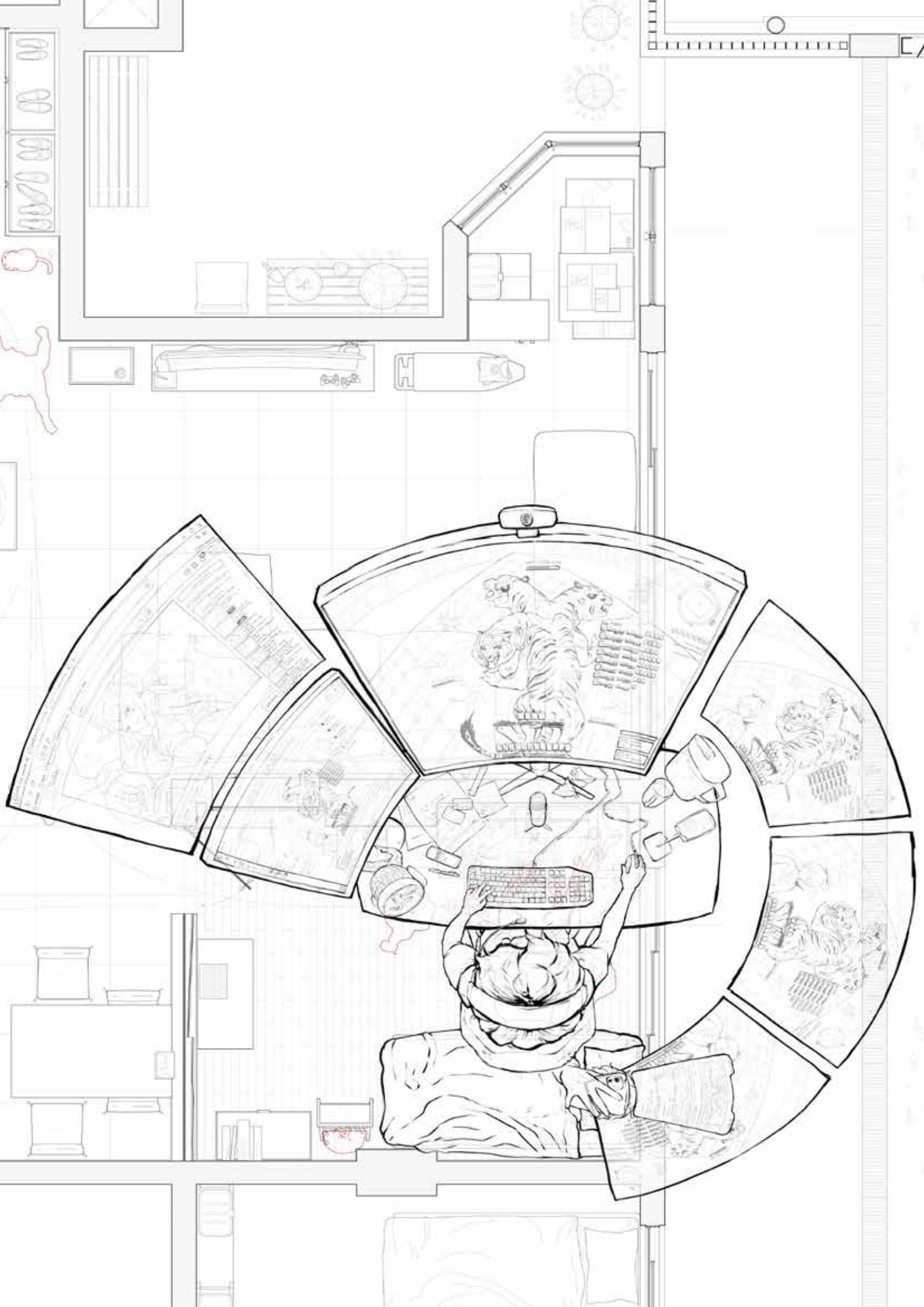
The gamer similarly has multiple windows with multiple tasks running, albeit these are divided across two different monitors. The game which he is playing is on the biggest monitor, with the secondary monitor being used to manage Twitch Studio, the streaming platform, and his other social media platforms being used for communications with teammates, references, or background music. Notifications once again implicitly manage the order of these tasks, suggesting an order of tasks and the preview providing him information on the sender and a gist of the message. A water jug containing all the water he'll need in a day is to his right, rendering the 30 second walk to the adjacent kitchen unnecessary, for this is 30 seconds away from the computer. A desk fan is also positioned to ventilate the space about his gaming chair. A similar foot rest has also been placed under his desk, to ensure the physical body is able to remain sitting for long periods. What these situations both demonstrate, is a magnification of life about the digital space. Functions and items that would have been once spread out throughout the house are now compressed into the orbit of the computer.

A familar analogy might be an airplane seat - everything required to sustain and entertain a human being for 16 hours is compressed into 0.32 m^2 (if you're in economy class) which we grudgingly pay for, and subsequently complain about when elaborating about how terrible the flight was. The difference however, is that while the house is bigger than any first class cabin one could afford, we find ourselves voluntarily keeping to the radius of the computer, wittingly or unwittingly trapping ourselves in a self-imposed orbit about it.

Another space that appears to have been magnified due to the presence of digital spaces is the toilets. In what is probably quite a relatable situation, inhabitants regularly bring their phones with them to the toilet. The phone offers a continuity of activity. The same chats can be accessed from the toilet as seen from how the same image of a friend's toe can be viewed from the toilet, as it can be viewed from the desk for the architectural assistant. Besides entertainment, and perhaps more importantly, the same notification system as what is on the computer allows them to be constantly connected and informed. They are still told just as instantaneously when someone posts on Instagram or sends a message, and are just as able to respond from their perch on the toilet bowl.

This convenience and connectedness allows one to spend extended periods of time in the toilet, not dissimilar to what is being observed at the desk. This experience repeats itself in bed. Where else do we see such patience to lie still, and awake in bed, other than when one is scrolling through TikTok for 3 hours deep into the night (or early morning)?

02 Hardware

Moving a mouse 60mm on the table generates a cursor movement of 388mm on the screen. Half a revolution on the scroll button of a mouse generates a digital movement of up to a meter. In general, miniscule gestures and movements, or if done frequently enough then nothing but a reflexive twitch, map to larger movements on the computer space, implying a certain degree of magnification. Magnification of life about the digital spaces is not only evident on the larger scale, but down to the ways in which these digital spaces are navigated. In contrast, getting up from one's seat and bodily moving one cat in reality only maps to one moved cat (not the most elegant phrasing but it contrasts the immediacy and convenience of control+x and control+v).
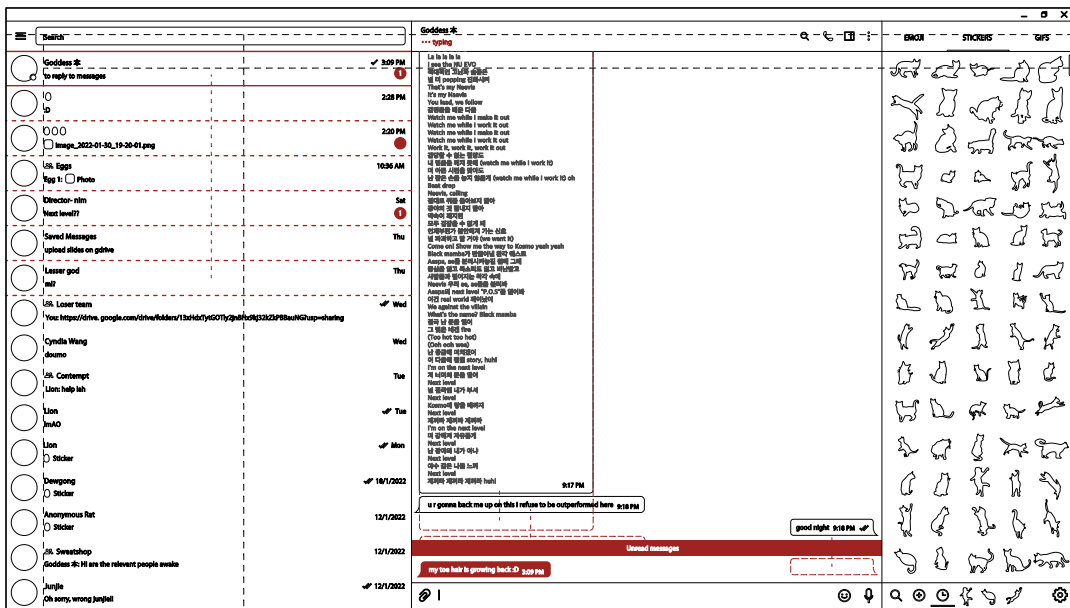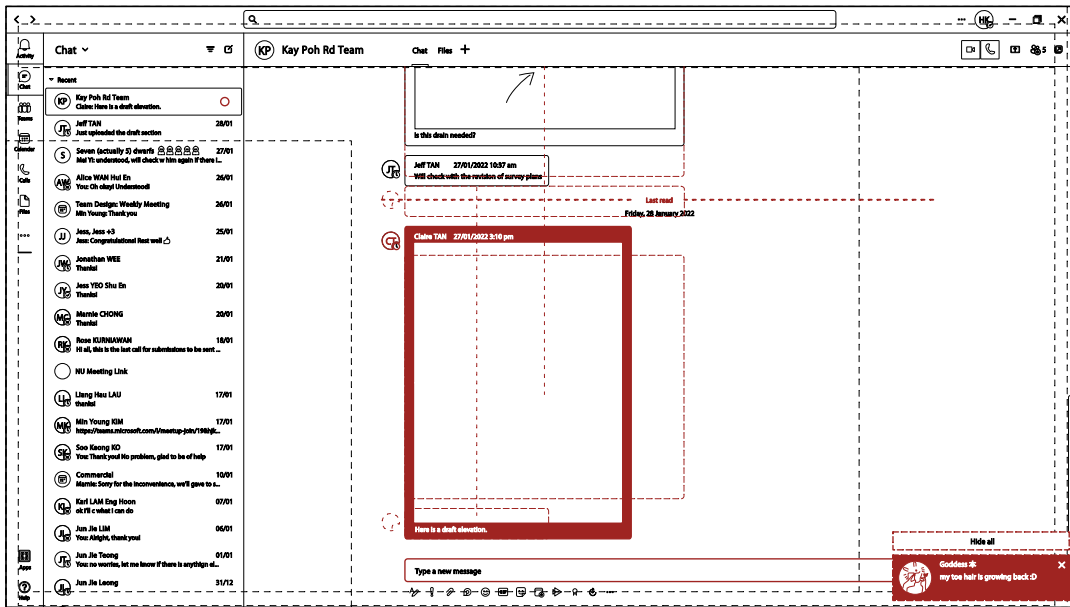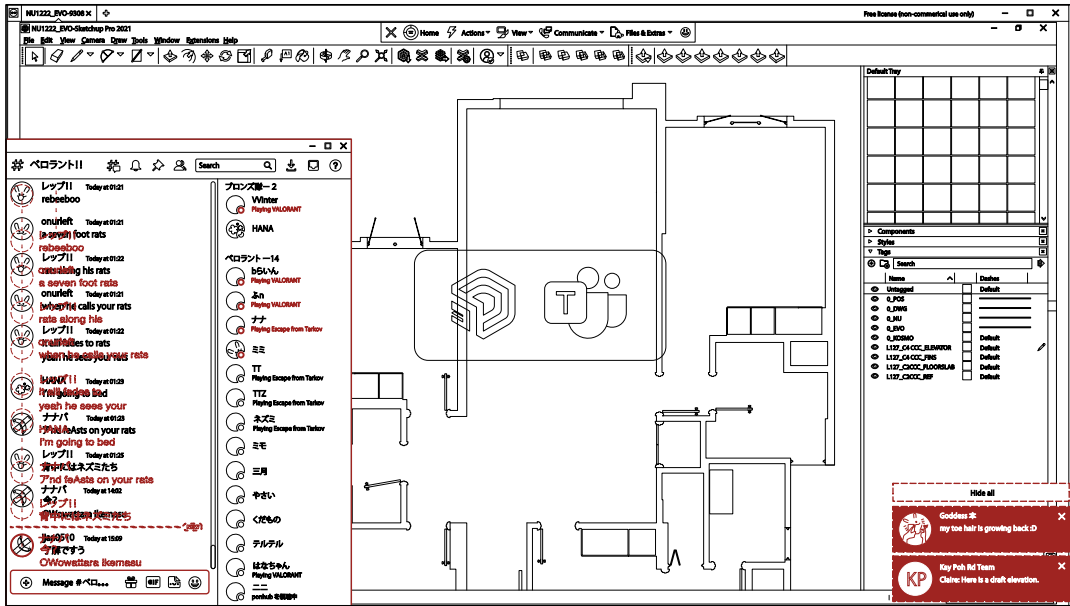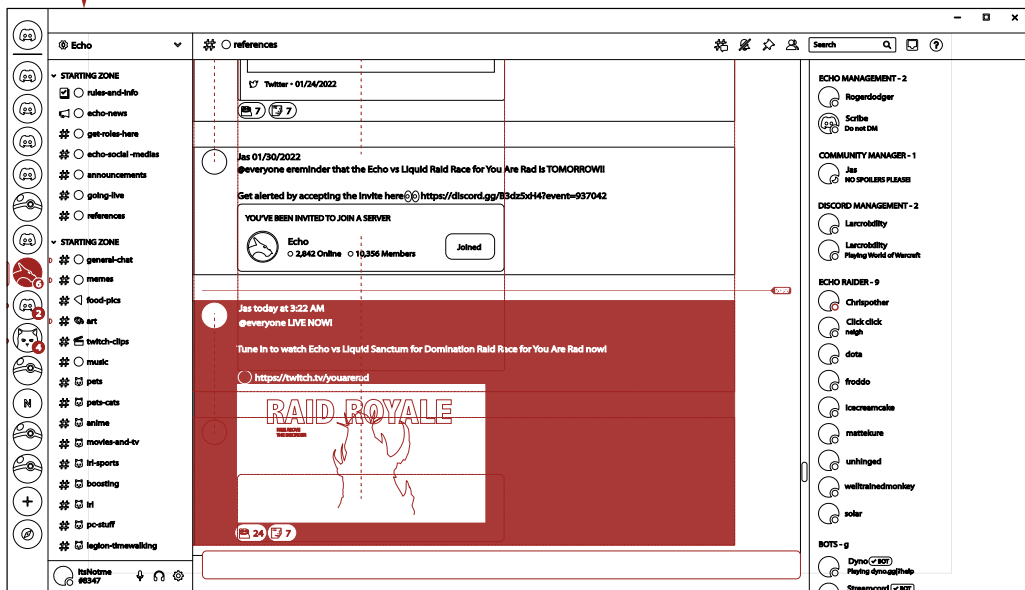
388mm
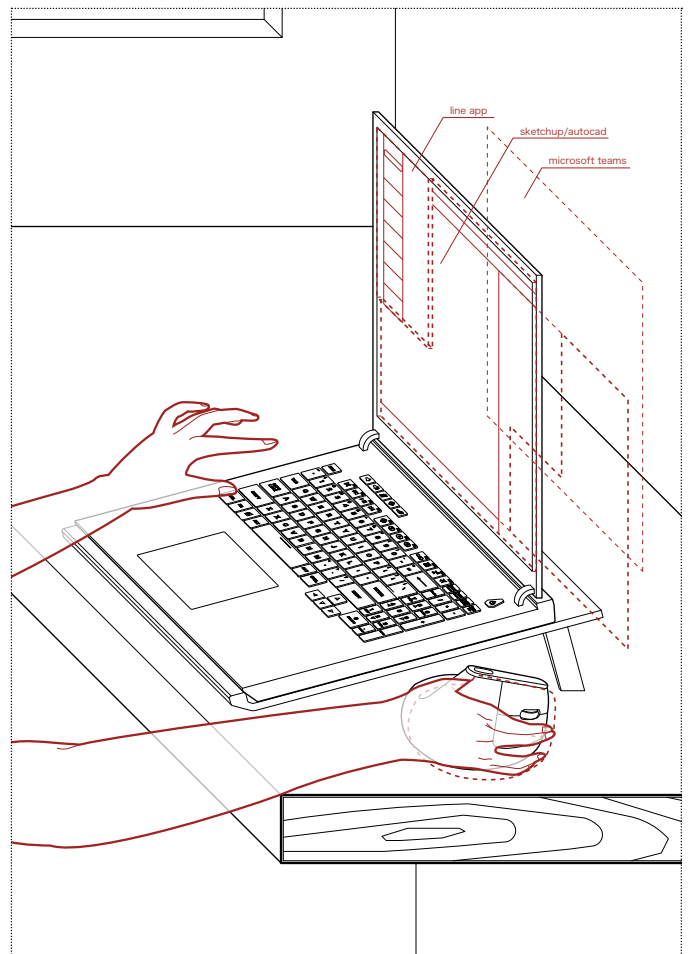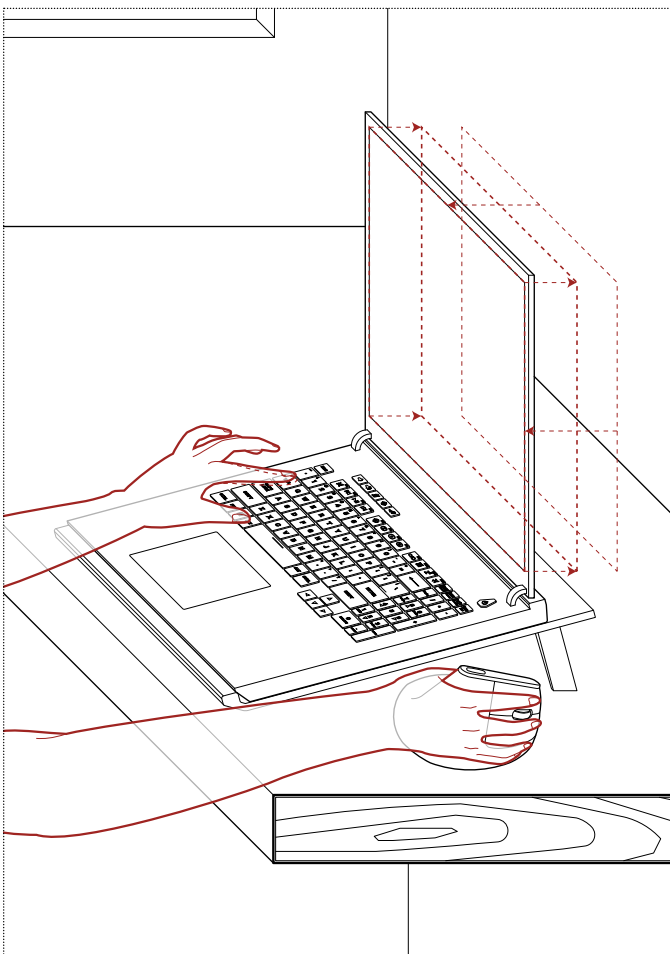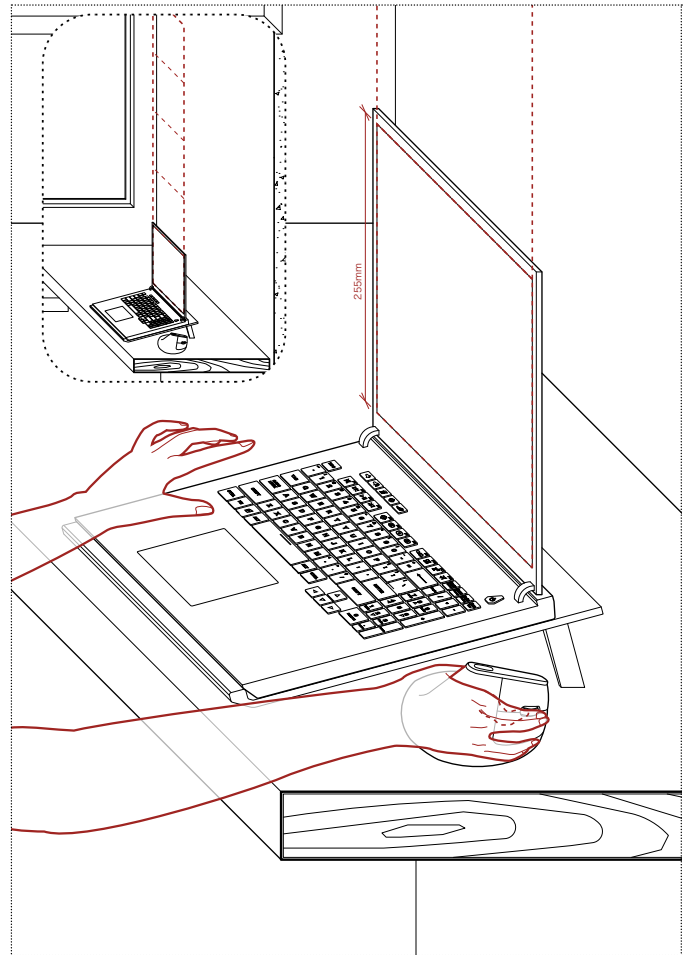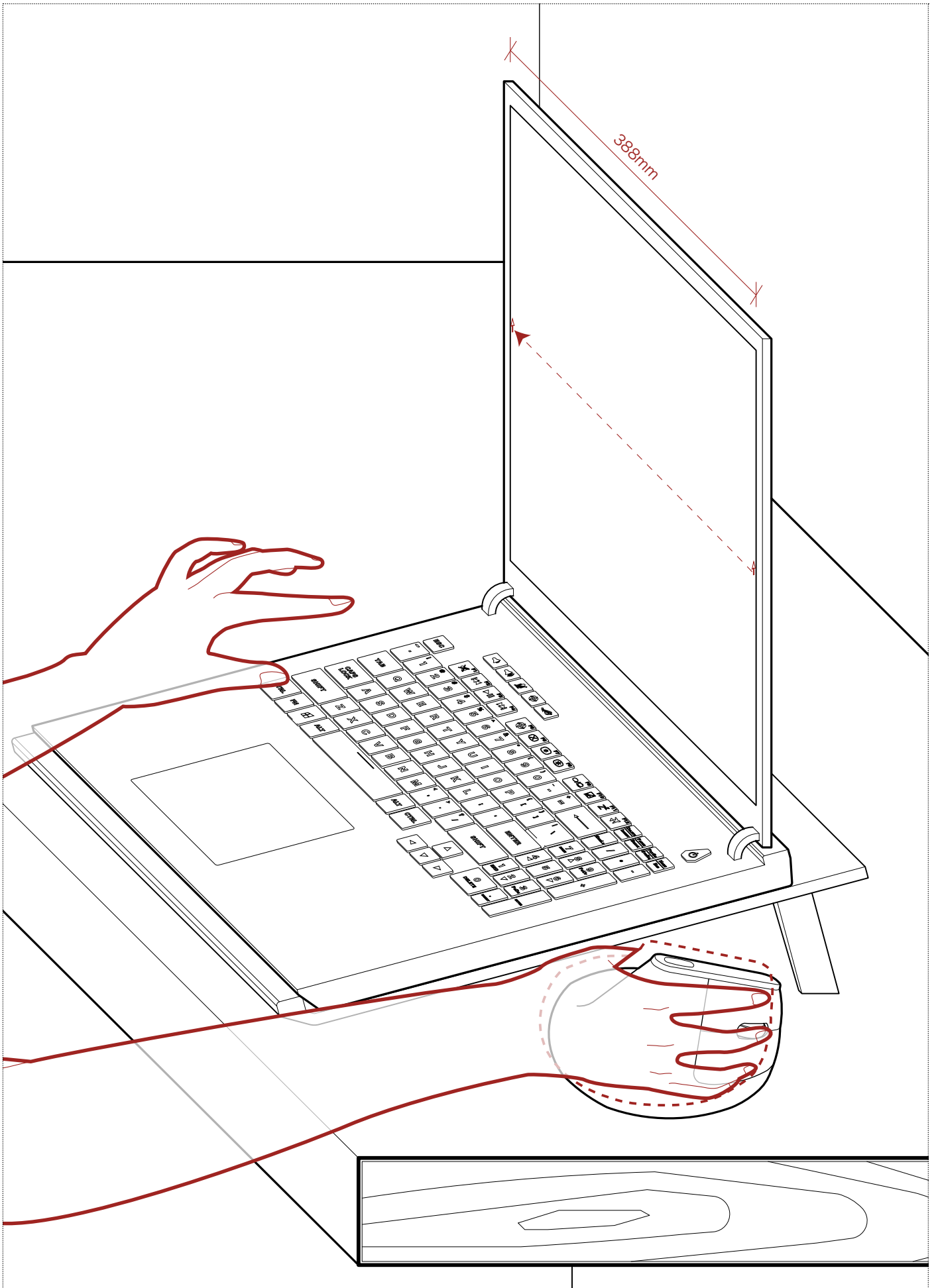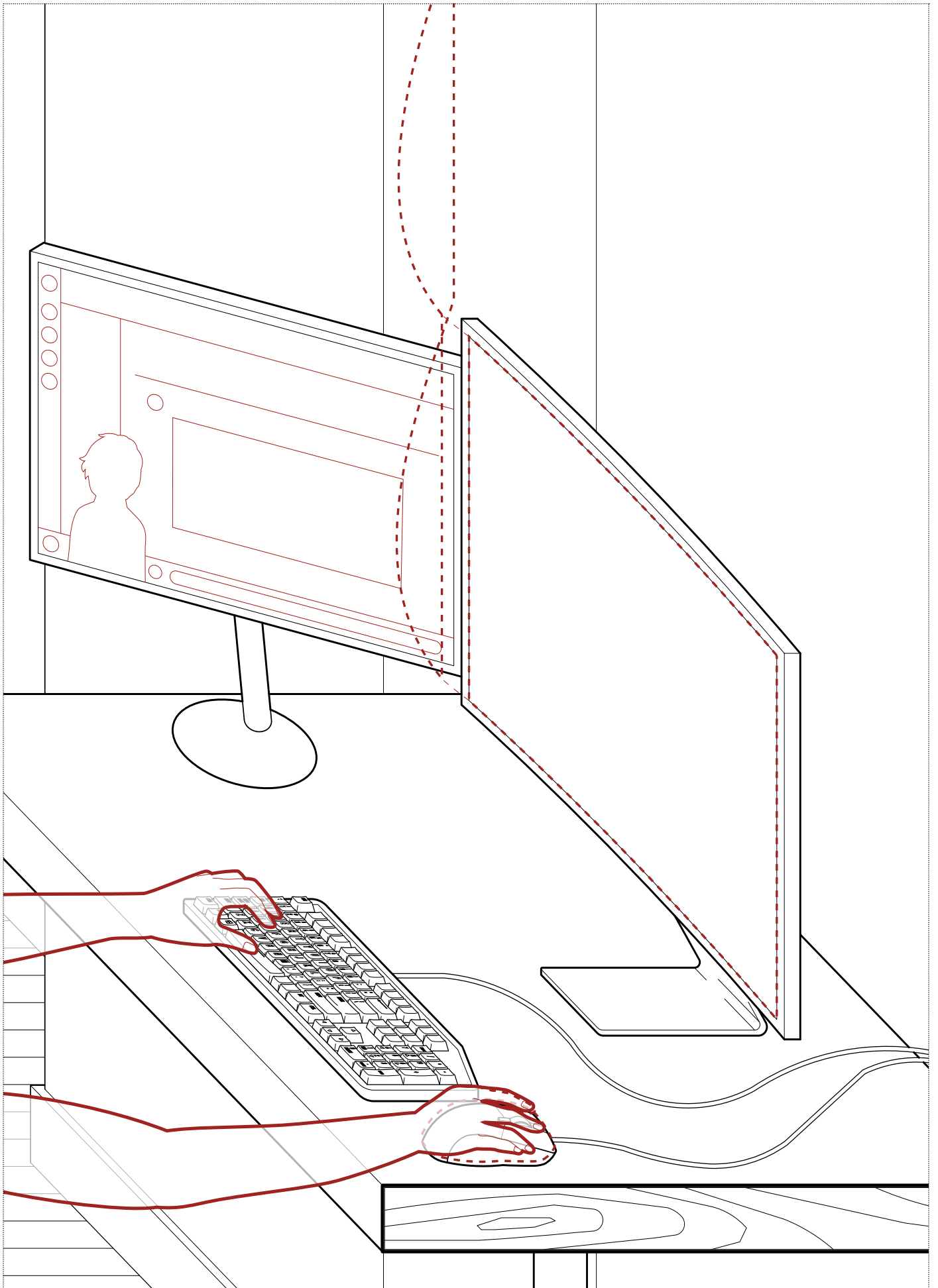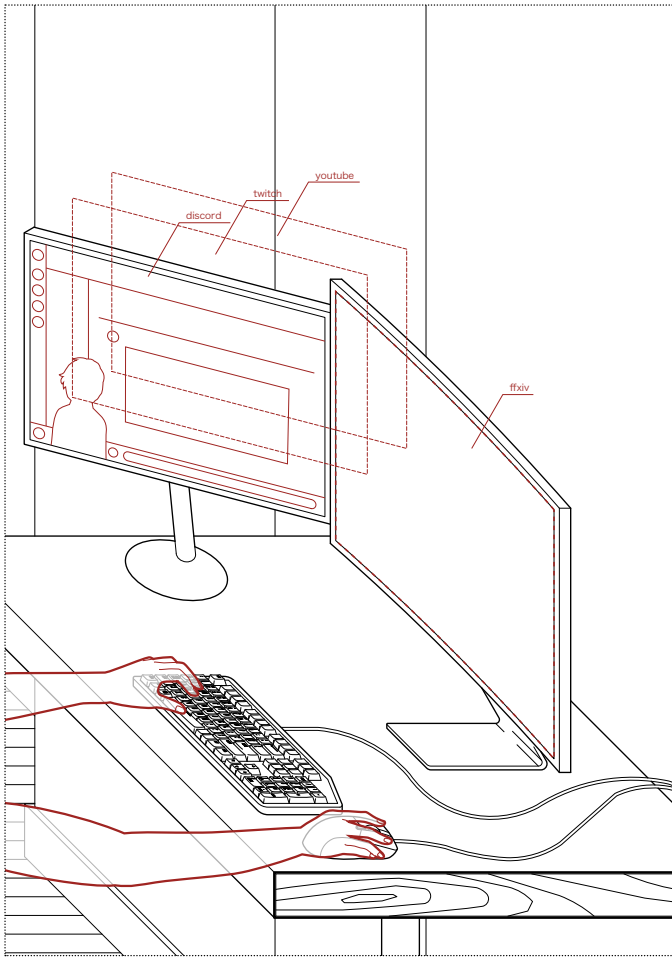
The gamer on the keyboard resembles a pianist playing a Paganini piece (I've read a comment before on a Youtube video of a pianist playing La Campanella, saying that the pianist's hand resembled a laser cutter arm doing engraving). Movement is all instinctive, ingrained through hours of practice, and in that etude, vast distances in the digital space are travelled. The gamer's avatar, the panning of the screen, and the navigation of the numerous windows running on his secondary monitor are all controlled by a keyboard entry or wrist flick of a mouse. The amount of movement and spaces digitally traversed are many times the movement of his hand.

03 Software

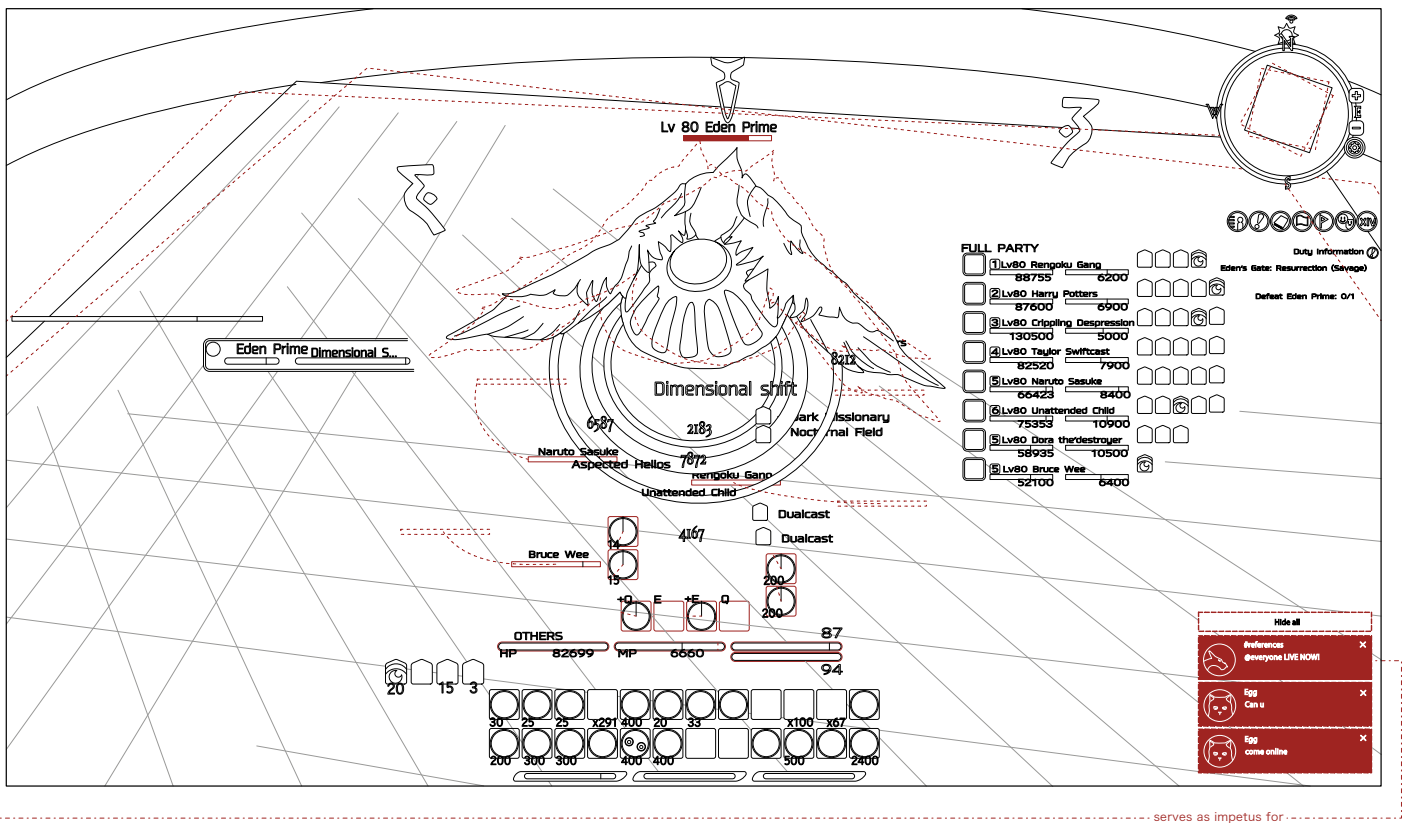It is easy and straightforward to navigate the digital realm, where the "next task" is highlighted in bright red against a dominantly cool toned or muted interface, or at least easier than navigating reality. In reality, there isn't an overworld notification system that tells us when the sun is starting to set, or when is the right time to stop work as our fatigue is approaching a dangerously high level, or what is the next task in the main quest of life.

Conversely, the very point of digital spaces, specifically User Interface and Experience design (UI and UX), is to provide clarity and erase any chance of confusion. Our messaging applications are laid out and coloured such that notifications of any unread messages are always the first to be perceived and read.

Lv 80 Eden Prime

Eden Prime Dimensional S...

Dimensional shift

6587   2183

Naruto Sasuke
Aspected Helios   7872
Rengoku Gang
Unattended Child

Dark Missionary
Nocturnal Field

8212

Bruce Wee

14
15

4167

+9   E   +E   0

260
260

Dualcast
Dualcast

OTHERS
HP   82699   MP   6660

87
94

20   15   3

30   25   25   X291 400 20   33   X100 X67
200 300 300   400 400   500   2400

FULL PARTY
1 Lv80 Rengoku Gang
    88755   6200
2 Lv80 Harry Potters
    87600   6900
3 Lv80 Crippling Despression
    130500   5000
4 Lv80 Taylor Swiftcast
    82520   7900
5 Lv80 Naruto Sasuke
    66423   8400
6 Lv80 Unattended Child
    75353   10900
5 Lv80 Dora thrdestroyer
    58935   10500
5 Lv80 Bruce Wee
    52100   6400

Duty Information
Eden's Gate: Resurrection (Savage)

Defeat Eden Prime: 0/1

Hide all

#references
@everyone LIVE NOW!   ✕

Egg
Can u   ✕

Egg
come online   ✕

serves as impetus for

The only situations in which a digital space might appear ambiguous (because it intends to do so), would be in games, where difficulty is created through ambiguity or unknowns. For instance, the fun of Wordle comes from the thrill of uncovering clues, and the suspense of not knowing the answer. Although Wordle is probably much less cerebral and demanding on the coordination than Final Fantasy XIV, a similar principle applies. Part of the fun of Final Fantasy comes from not knowing what move the final boss might make. However, if it gets too challenging, fret not, one can always tap out by clicking the very useful gear icon at the corner of the screen (it tends to be a gear icon no matter the game genre), and clicking "quit" or "home". We can only wish there was such a convenient function existed in real life (and we might even find it overused).

03 An alternate present

Even though this house offers 105m^2 of space, its inhabitants, a work-from-home architectural assistant and a gamer/streamer, spend most of their waking hours within the 500mm radius of their computers. In this safe space of 0.78m^2, the digital spaces offer more than just convenience, but as well as control, social stimulation, and surety.

Interruptions to this pace of instantaneity and simultaneity are for instance, hunger that drives them to leave the house to get takeaway or their beloved cat asking for attention. The pace moves from the immediacy and replicability of everything at a wrist flick, to the wholly physical nature of having to use one's entire body to cradle a cat, a productive interruption that serendipitously reminds us that it is time for a break. What kind of physical conditions would prompt us to engage more with our physical spaces, productively drawing us out of our self-contained digital bubbles where work, entertainment and everything but reproductive breaks and toilet breaks take place? As immersive as digital spaces are, the physicality of our bodies and its various ailments (such as thrombosis) are something we cannot escape, neither is it something we should endeavour to either.

In the house of study, the beloved cat is an introduction of a wholly physical, wholly "wild" agent in the house that has no regard for the digital space etiquette of presenteeism. She functions on her own rhythm of "fed when needs to be fed", "entertained when need to be entertained" and "rests when needs to rest". Her attentiveness to the changes in her surroundings in turn serves as the timely interruptions for the human inhabitants of the house. What if all interruptions were similarly whimsical and endearing? For instance, the sound of heavier traffic notifies us that the evening rush home has begun, and that it is also time for us to pack up for the day. But instead of being viewed as noise pollution, the noise starts to be framed as a "natural" alarm. Similarly, what if we started to take notice of the timetables of the stray cats in our estate (there'll definitely be some), such that a particular cat meowing for attention signalled to us that perhaps it was time for lunch, or a break? What if we displayed a curiosity towards our environment, such that we learn to read its "notifications"?

The aim is thus to produce a hyper-sensitive and hyper-haptic HDB dwelling to allow for these curiosity-inducing nature-bound occurrences to interrupt virtual space and time. In this alternate present, this creates a way of life where interruptions engender productive breaks. This intervention could intensify, elongate the duration of, or increase the frequency of interruptions to the point they become productive breaks.

Along with the shrinking of spaces based on what is no longer needed (such as a smaller living room as physical space is no longer required for a household to gather), intuitively there should be a reorganization and rethinking of spaces that are "public" and "private". These distinctions are less evident given the insularity of our digital bubbles, such that no matter where we locate the computer in the house, a bubble is created. I also envision a more deliberate dwelling – the act of getting up to close a window to prevent a neighbour's second hand smoke from wafting into one's house is given its own space and becomes an opportunity for one to gaze out the window.

A sketch of a space in which the presence of the cat is magnified. With the table at the "ground level" for the cat, it now becomes even easier for a cat to strut up to us, sit in front of the computer, and demand for our attention.
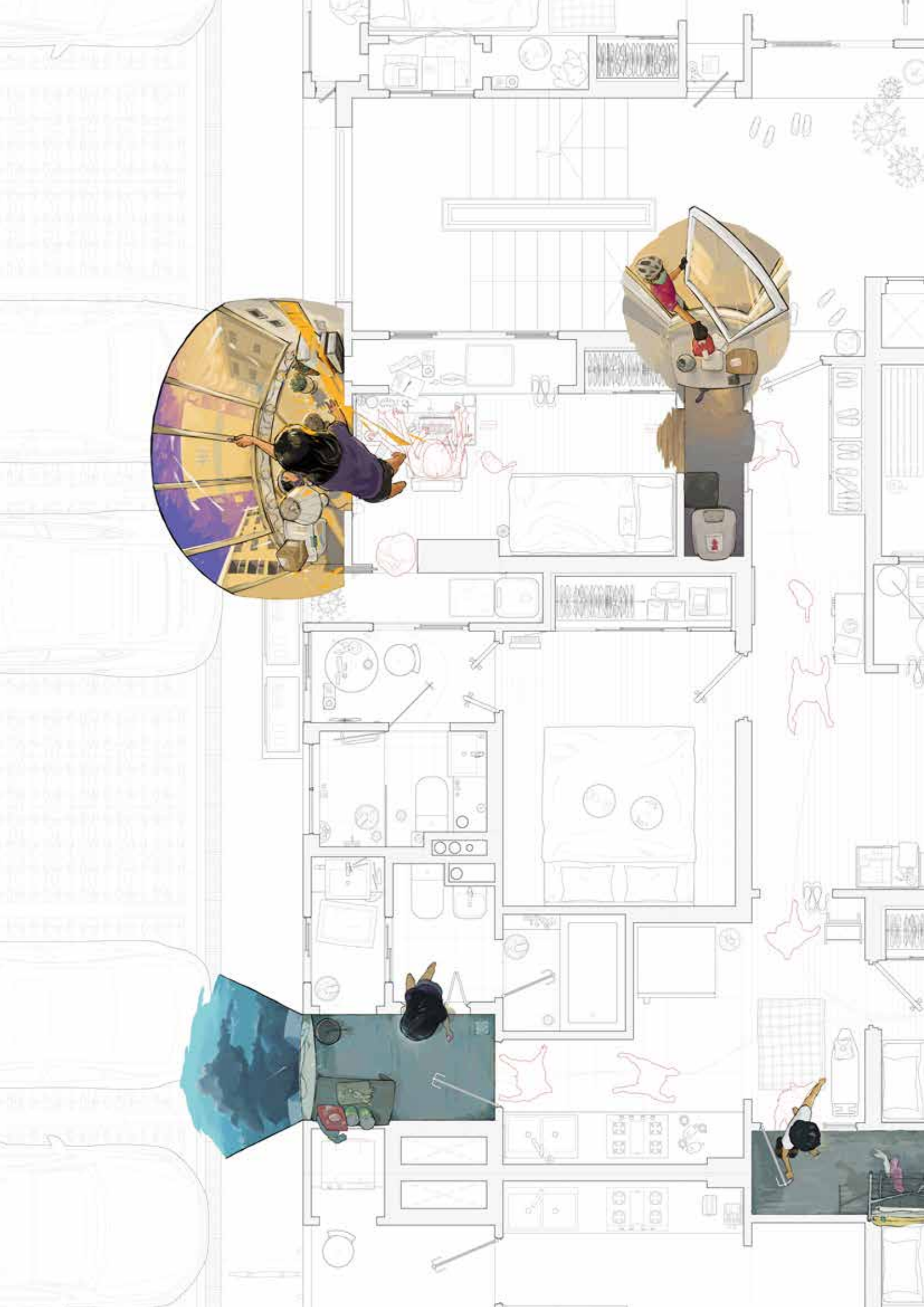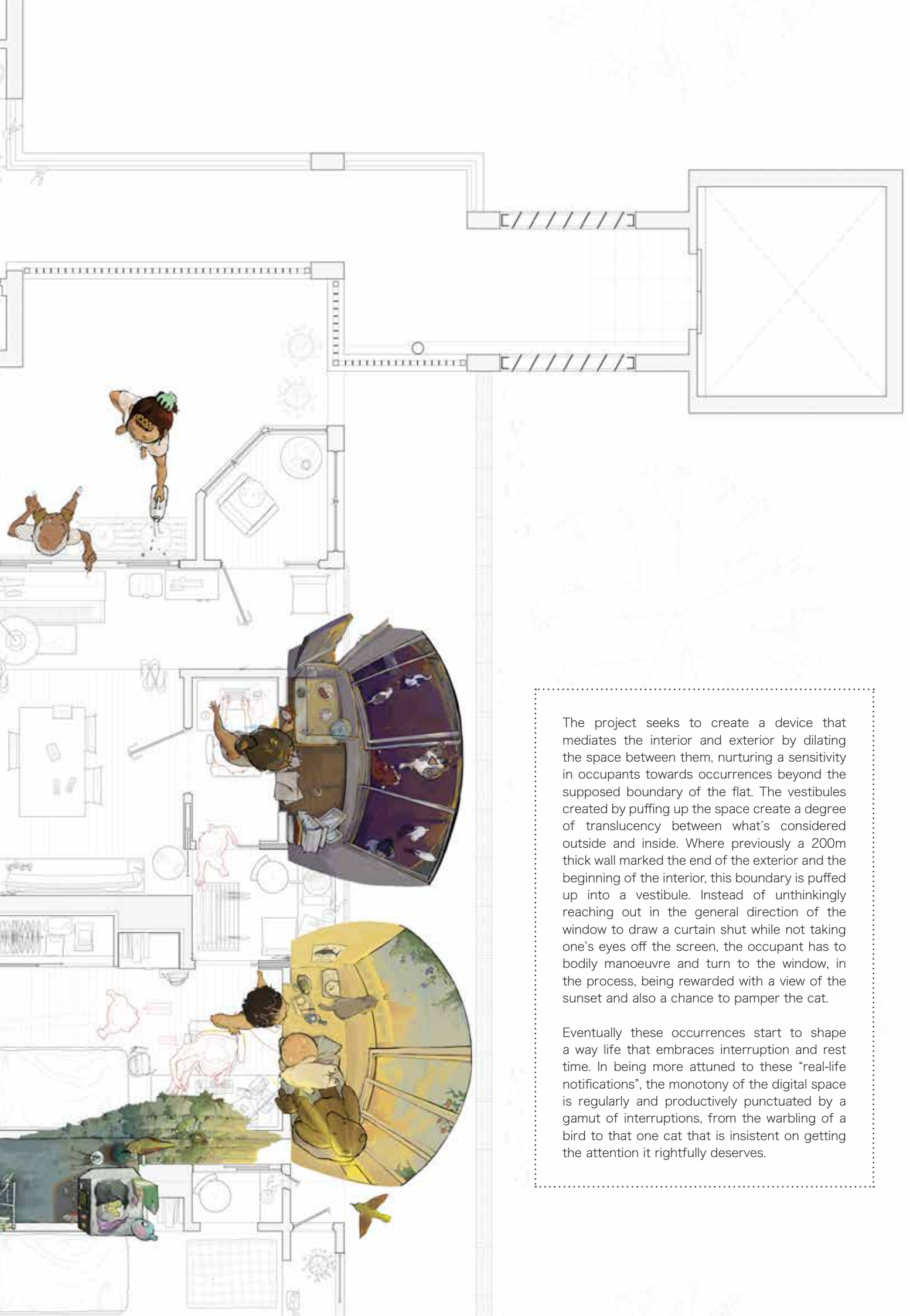
The project seeks to create a device that mediates the interior and exterior by dilating the space between them, nurturing a sensitivity in occupants towards occurrences beyond the supposed boundary of the flat. The vestibules created by puffing up the space create a degree of translucency between what's considered outside and inside. Where previously a 200m thick wall marked the end of the exterior and the beginning of the interior, this boundary is puffed up into a vestibule. Instead of unthinkingly reaching out in the general direction of the window to draw a curtain shut while not taking one's eyes off the screen, the occupant has to bodily manoeuvre and turn to the window, in the process, being rewarded with a view of the sunset and also a chance to pamper the cat.

Eventually these occurrences start to shape a way life that embraces interruption and rest time. In being more attuned to these "real-life notifications", the monotony of the digital space is regularly and productively punctuated by a gamut of interruptions, from the warbling of a bird to that one cat that is insistent on getting the attention it rightfully deserves.
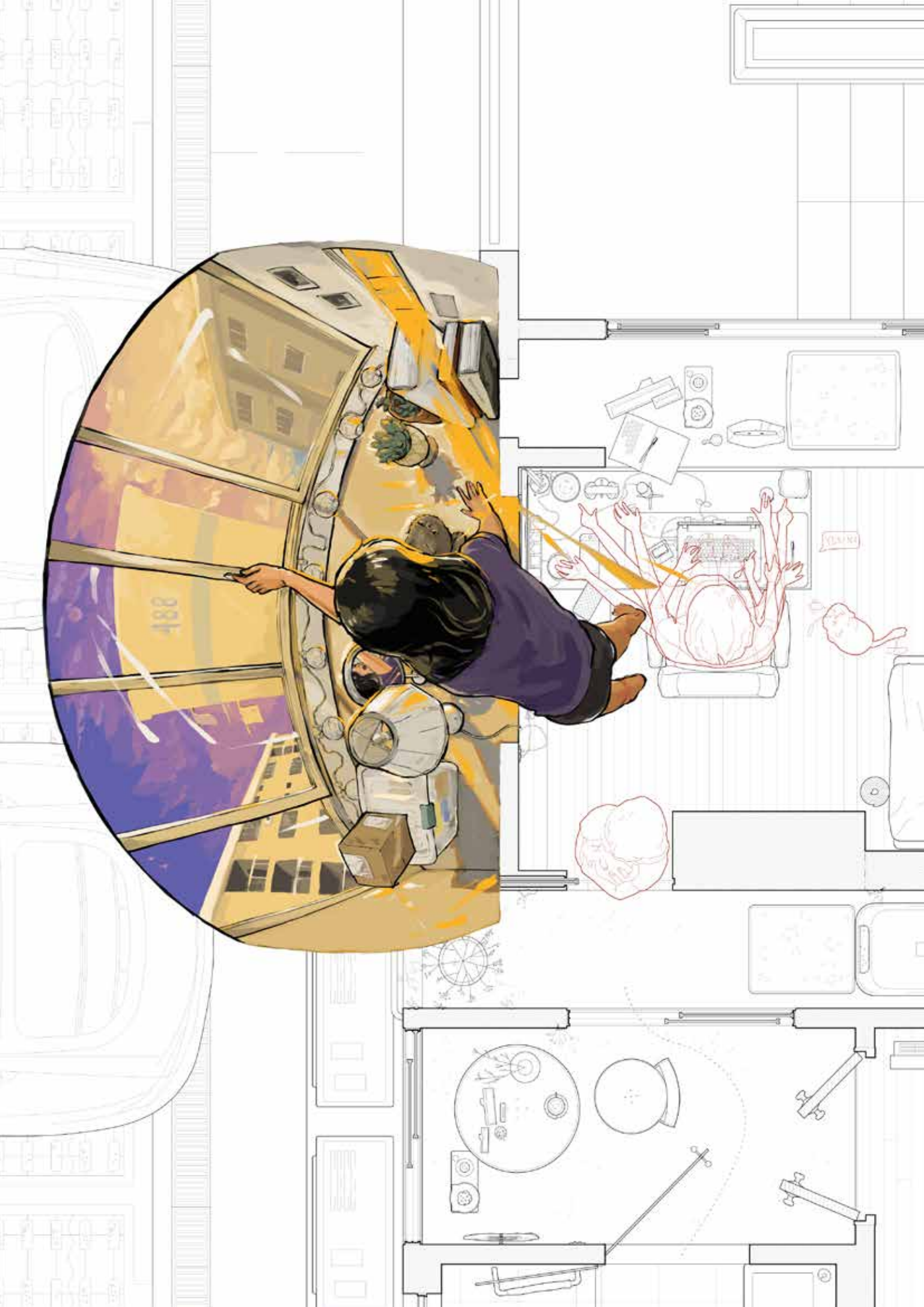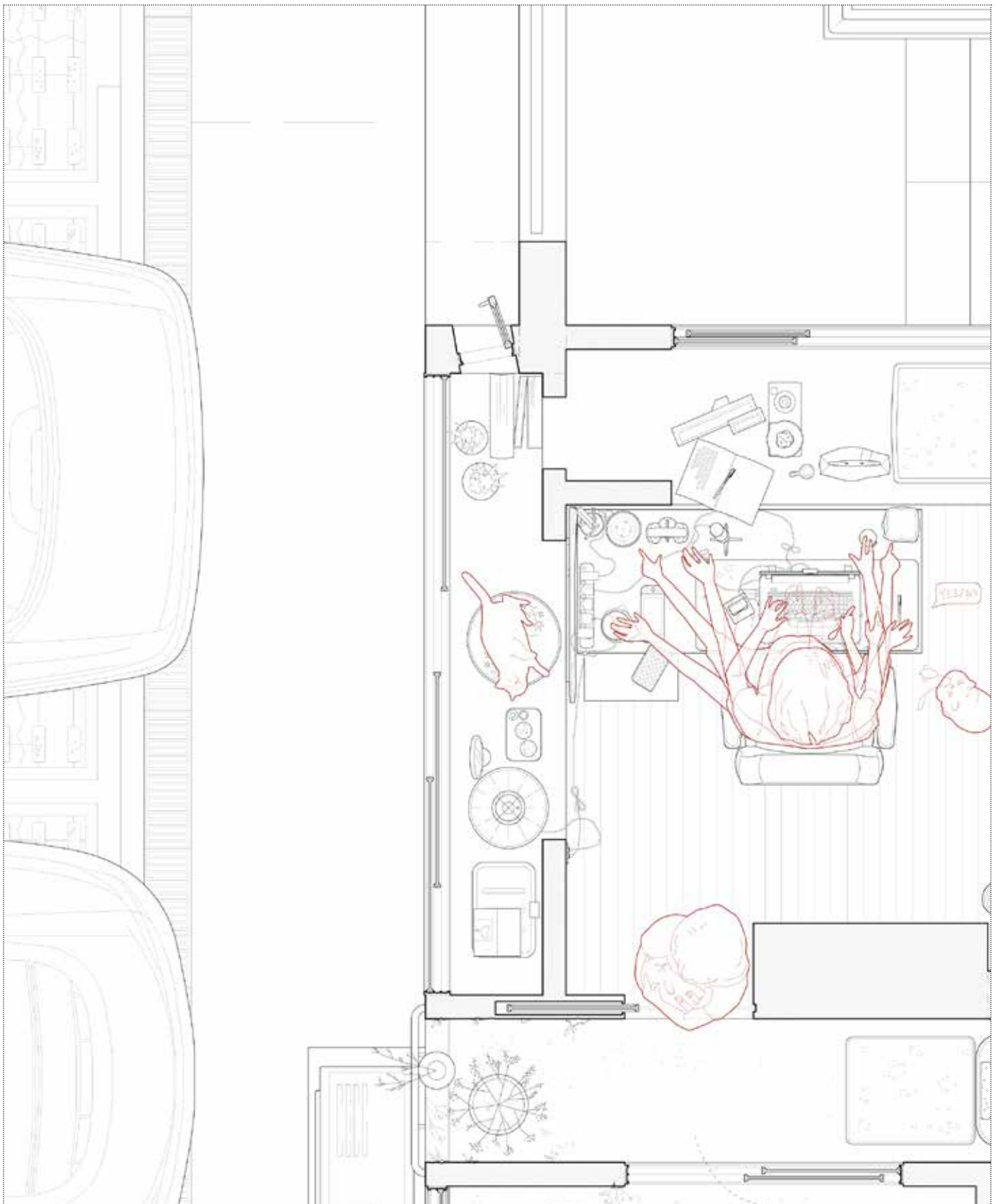
It's no secret that most of us love a pretty sunset. On days when the sunset is particularly attractive, Instagram is flooded with photos of the same sunset taken from different corners of the city. However, perhaps if we were able to peel ourselves away from our computers more often, we would realize that just the falling of evening light is beautiful enough a sight, especially when a whole vestibule is bathed in it. Of course, even better if there is a cat demanding for attention and food as dinner time approaches.
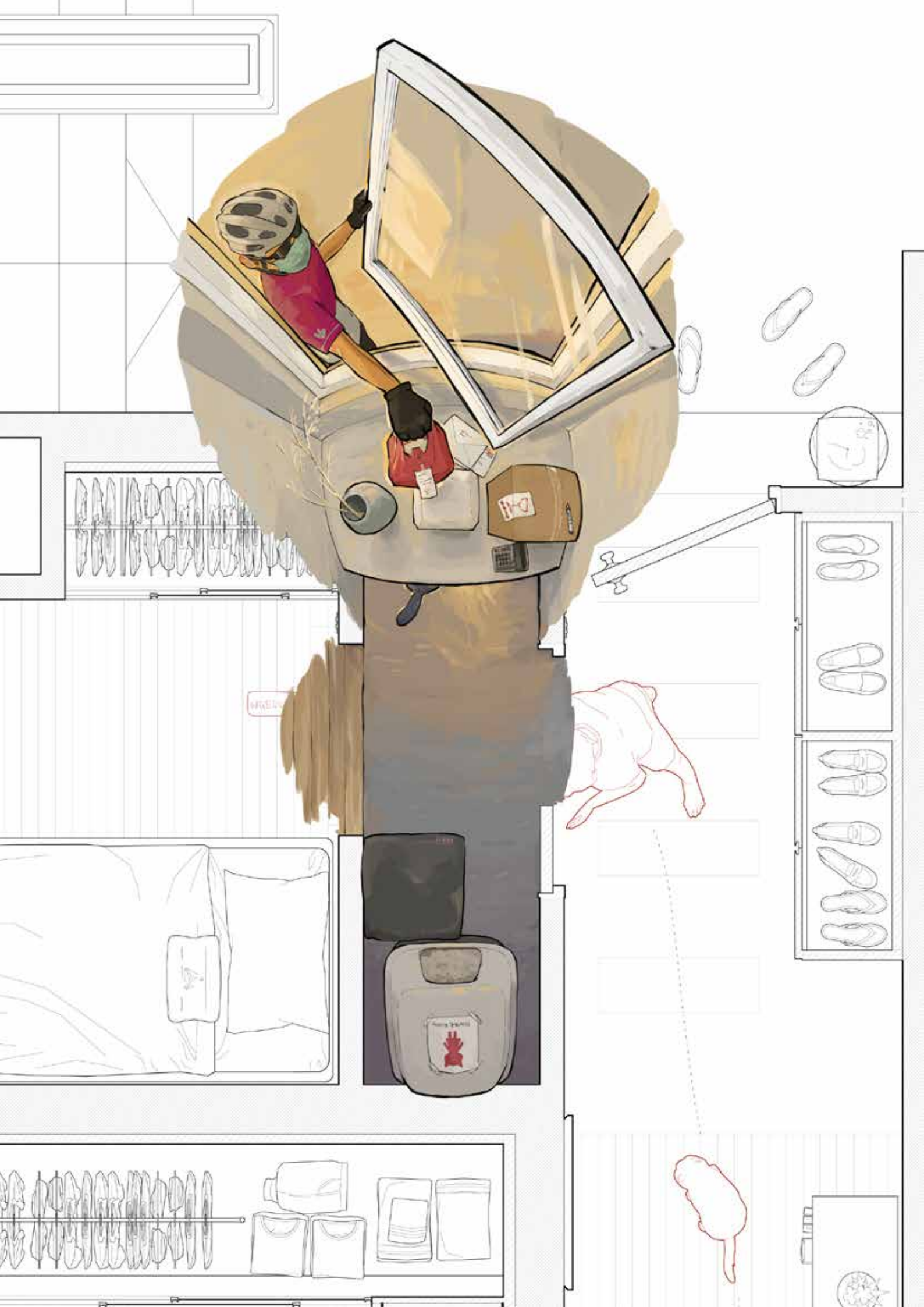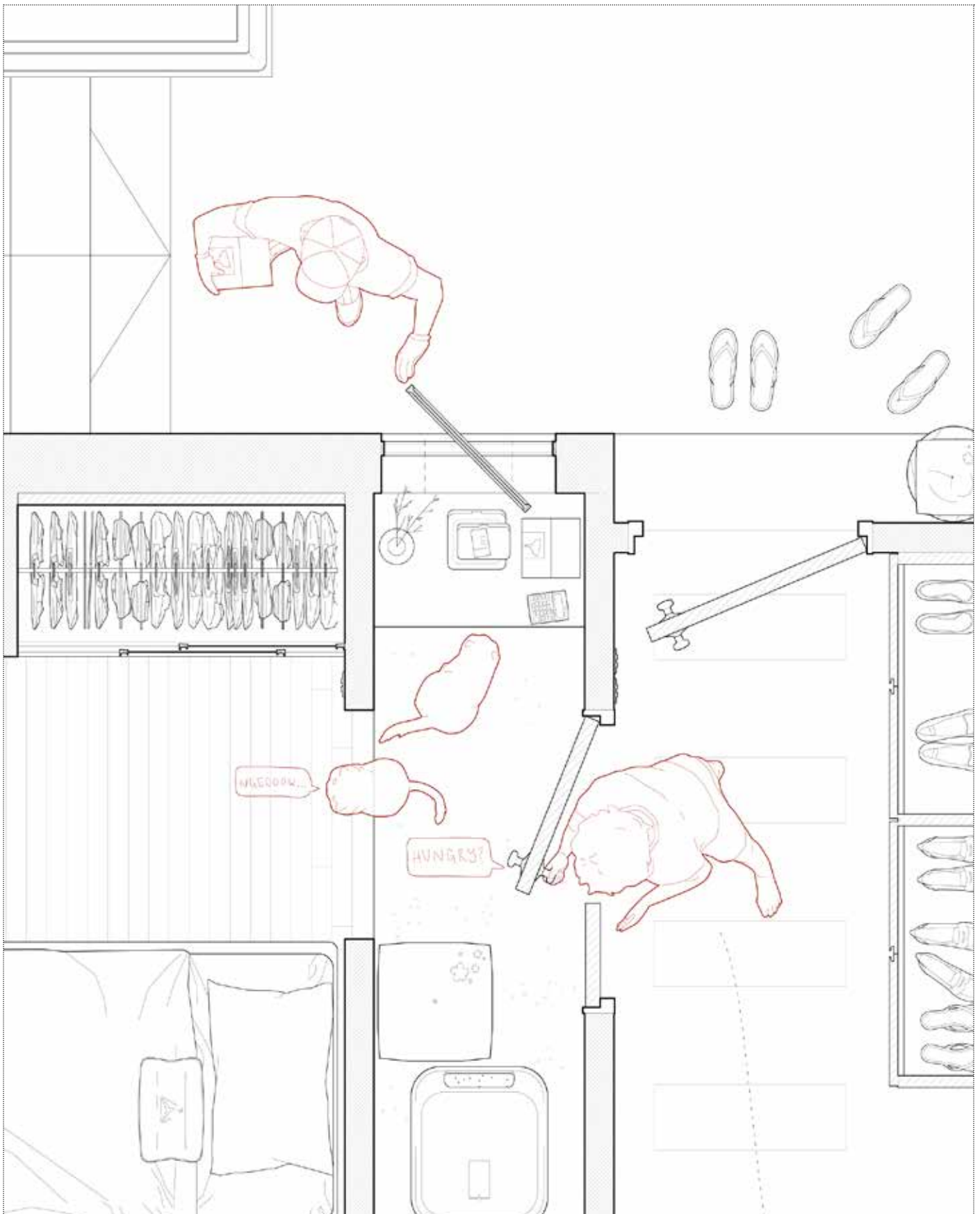
The rustle of a bag of (someone else's) takeaway alerts us to the rumbling of our own stomachs. Other times, it's the mail or morning paper sliding into the house that serves as an indication of which part of the morning we are in. Instead of the mailman discreetly leaving letters on a doorstep that one is unlikely to step out to soon enough, in this glorified entrance vestibule for all things that don't enter the house on two legs, the sounds of traffic in and out of the house are given their own space.
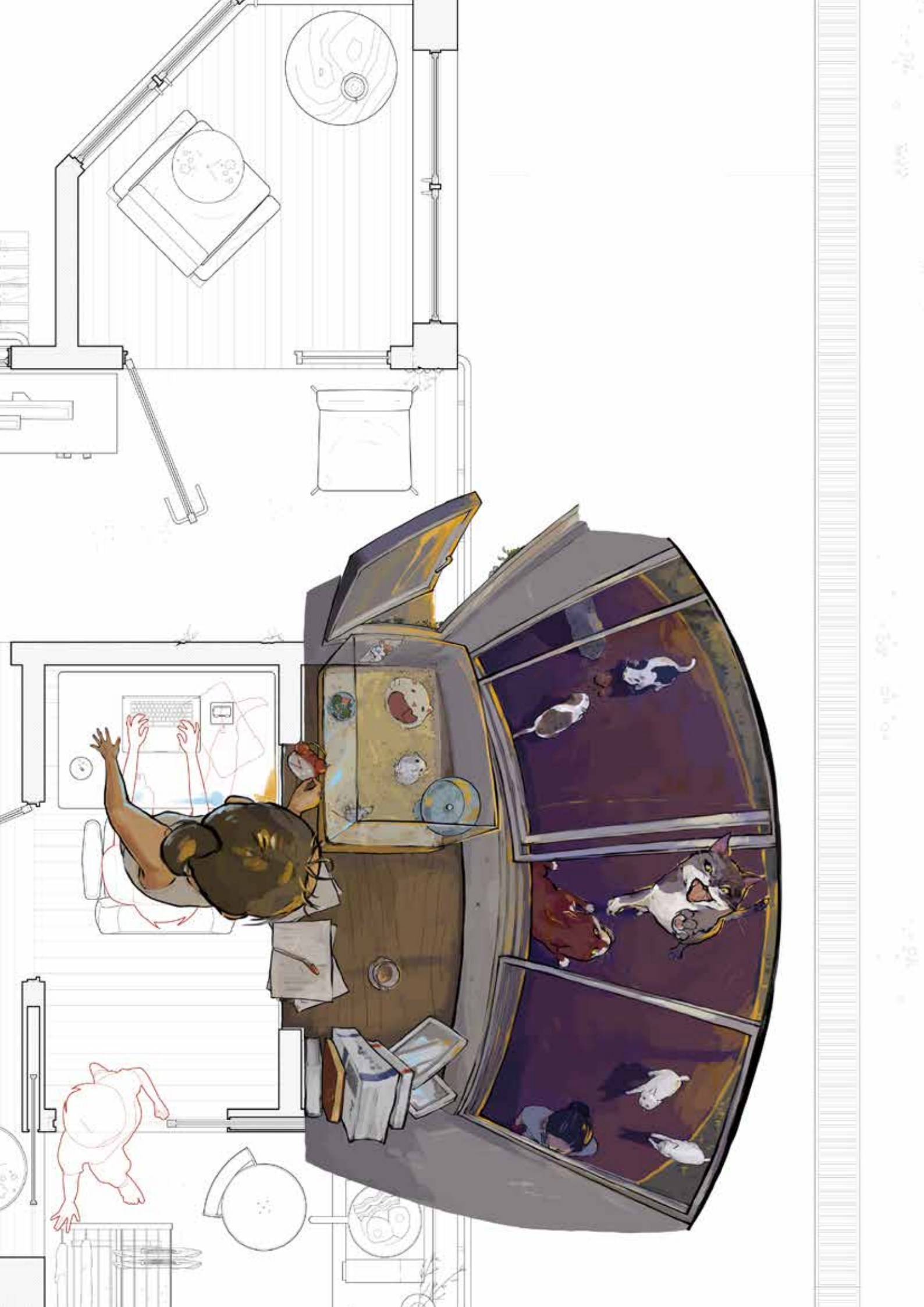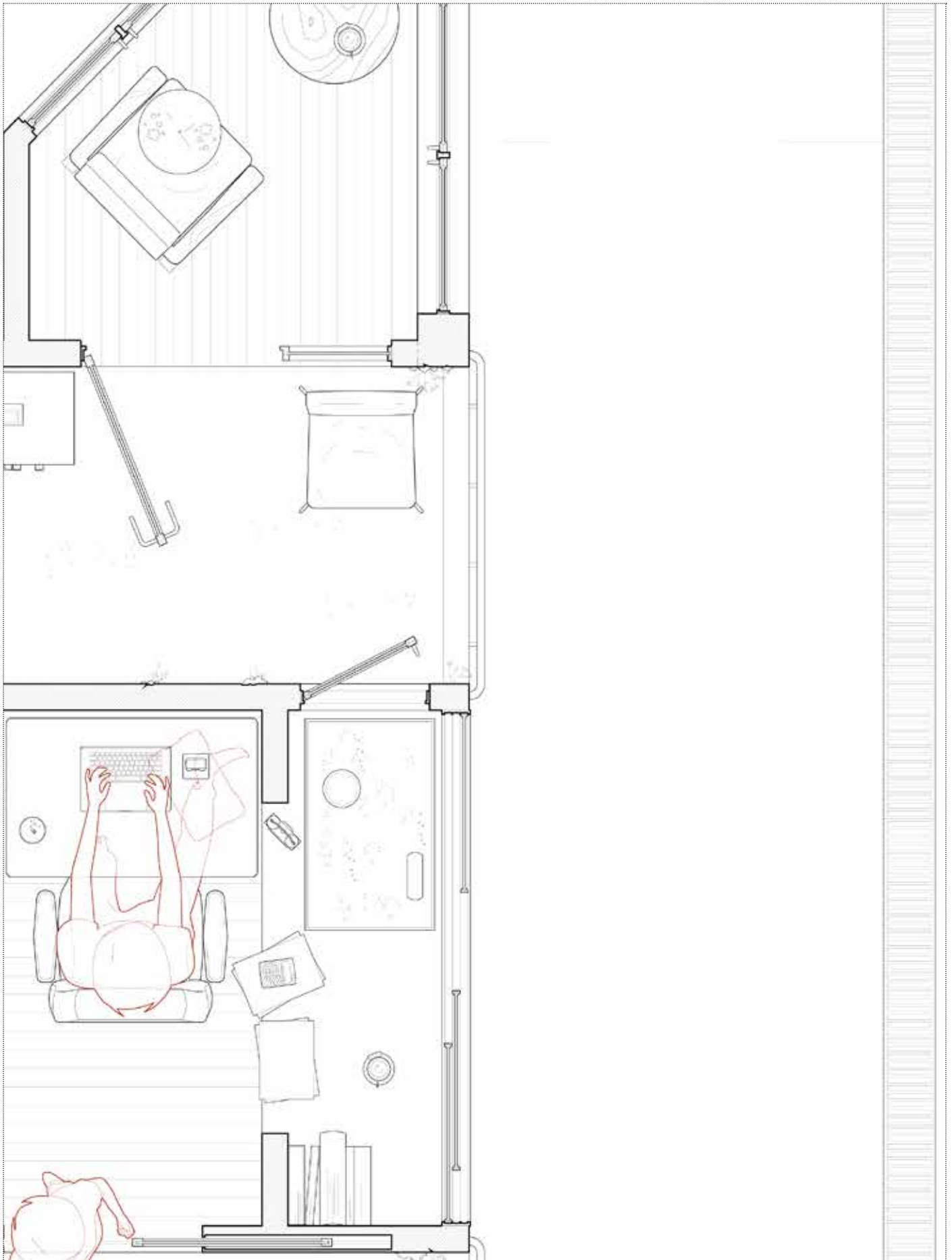
Some call it witching hour, when maybe it's just the HDB block's resident cats caterwauling over food. The quietude, as one sits by the window with a cup of tea, is shattered (quite cutely nonetheless), a sign that the hour is late.

The tenant sunbird, that has taken up residence on the moss and lichen covered
walls of a humid laundry vestibule, misguidedly duets with a supposed mating call, of
what is actually the laundry machine chiming to signal the end of a cycle. In addition
to the robotic chime, every hour of laundry is now punctuated with birdsong, each
one possibly different from the next (not all birds are pitch perfect).
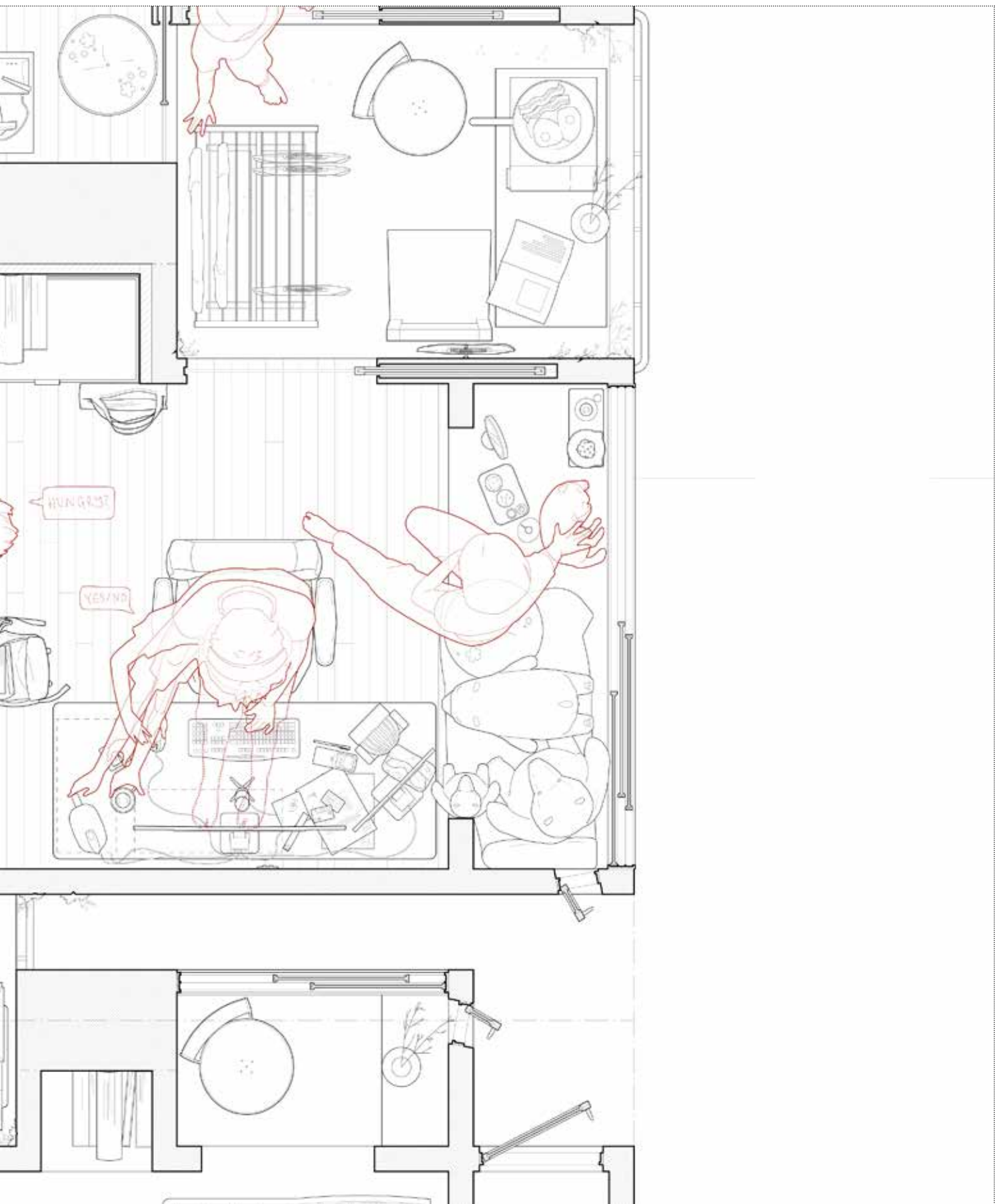
Not too far away, an upstairs neighbour going about their morning ritual of plant watering precipitates a sudden drizzle that might jolt one to get up to close the window, a movement which eventually becomes a much needed eye break.
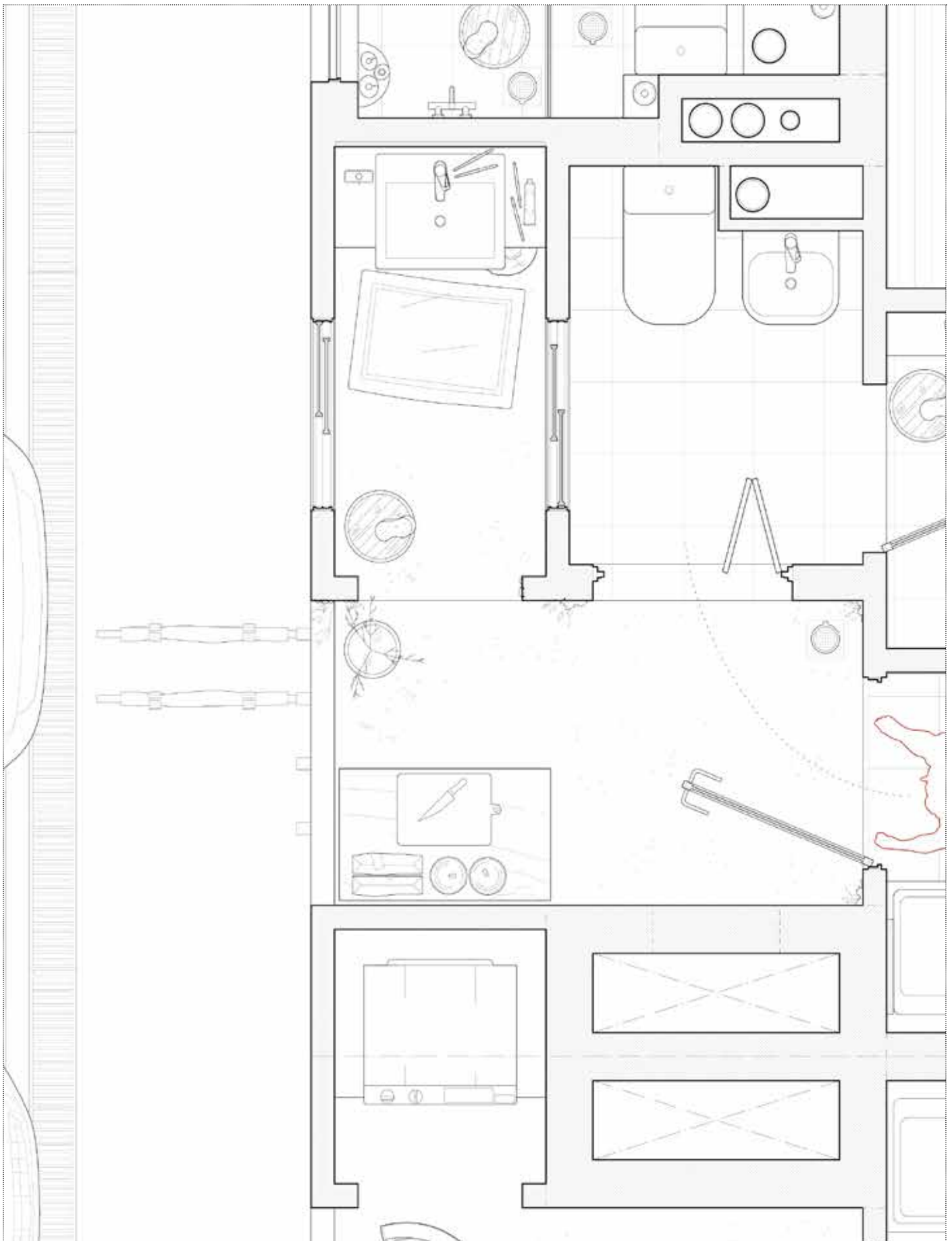
The monsoon months bring a pattern of sunny mornings and rainy afternoons. As the humidity accumulated in the mornings gets unleashed upon the city, the patter of rain in the house serves as an informal midday chime, and perhaps an indicator of too much time spent in the toilet in the case of this particular inhabitant.
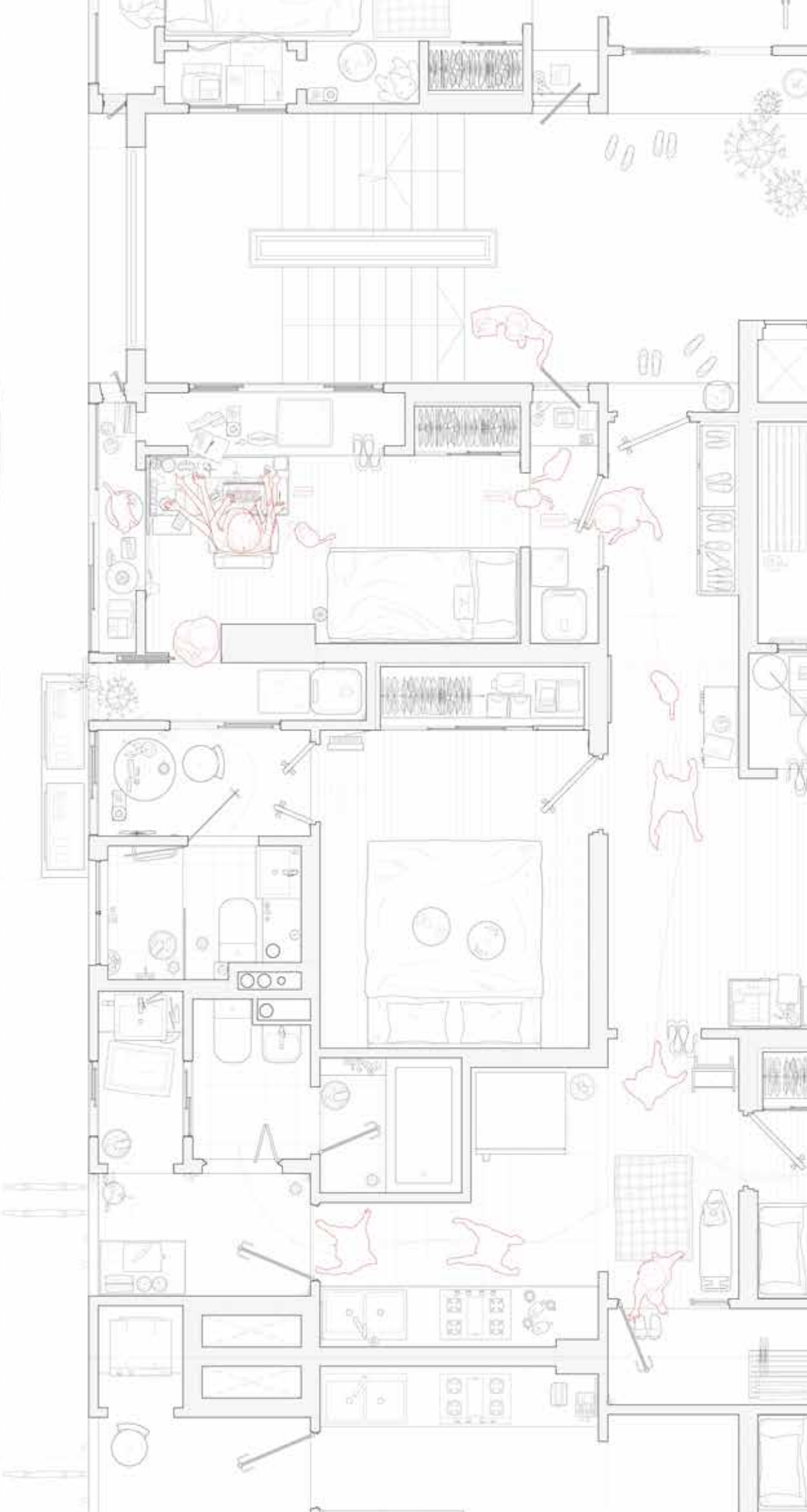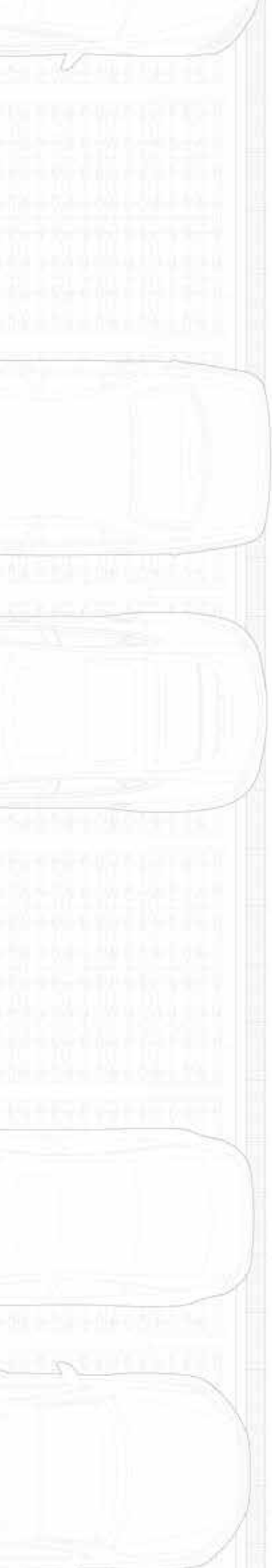
Part model S = 1/20

The room for the work-from-home architectural assistant is surrounded by vestibules mediating between flat and corridor, and interior and exterior. Algae and lichen, attracting a gamut of wildlife, flourish on the walls of the deep vestibule to the side.

Creepers growing on rough, textured walls of the neighbouring vestibule peek into the room through an opening. This opening is not quite wide enough to be a door, but too big to be a window. Terminology aside, this opening allows the sounds of insects, birds and wildlife that might visit to bleed indoors, and for an inhabitant whose curiosity has been piqued to venture out.

Block facade model S = 1/100

The facade of the block deepens as these exterior walls are puffed up. Similar to what has been demonstrated in the 1 to 20 part model, belongings and paraphernelia spill out into these facades, and habits start to form around them. Spillover noise (a neighbour's dog barking, someone's off-key piano practice) combined with a new openness to the exterior (rain coming in through a window which we can afford to leave open) create a quirky cacophonous symphony of interruptions.

03.1 More alternatives

The following are more scenarios of natural or nature-based occurences being reframed as interruptions, or "real life notifications". As a large part of the design is admittedly contingent on coincidence, numerous scenarios were devised to be designed for. Although not all of the following interruptions found their way into the final drawings or models, it is perhaps not too difficult to imagine scenarios in which they could.
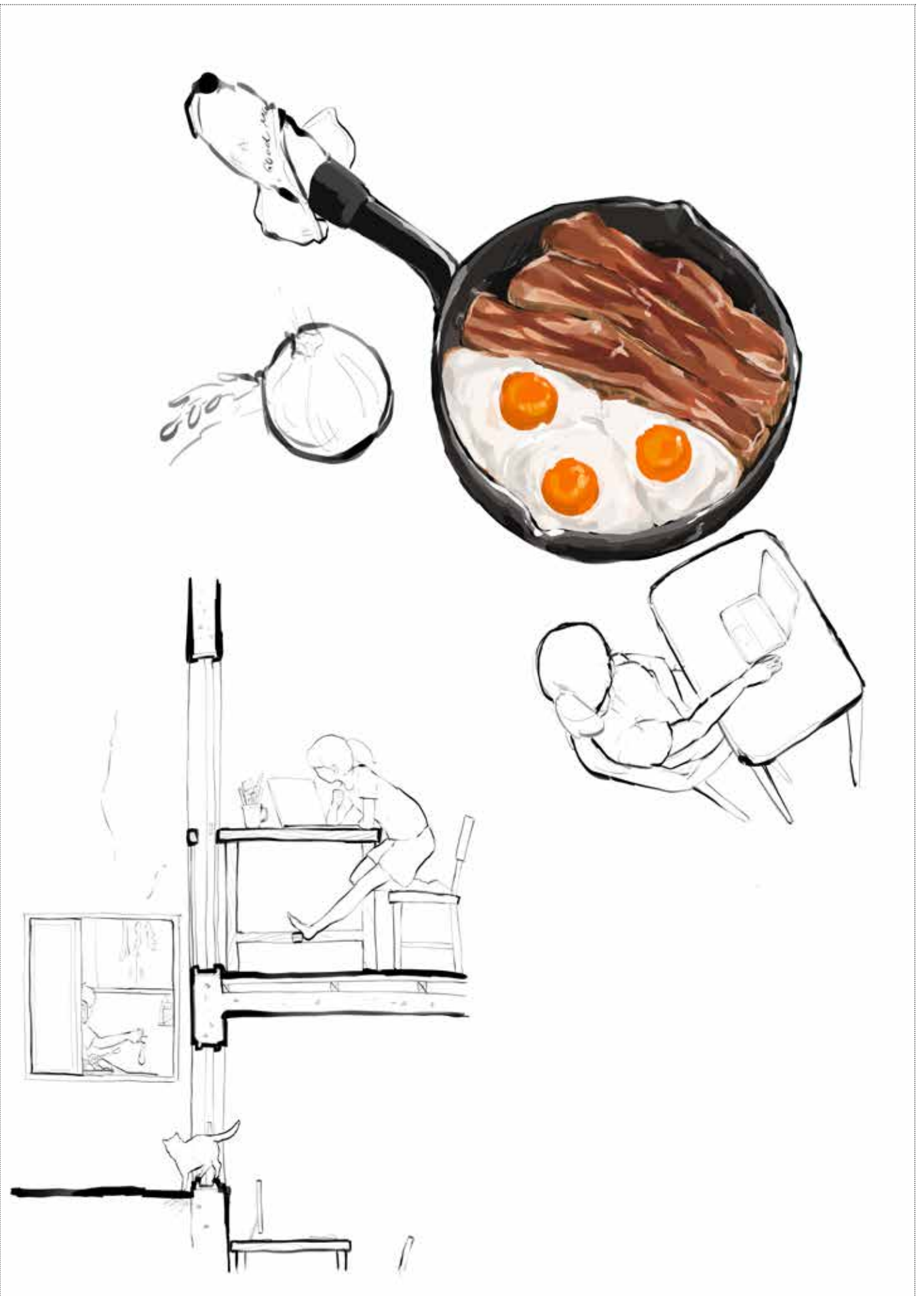
SHIT! (LITERALLY)
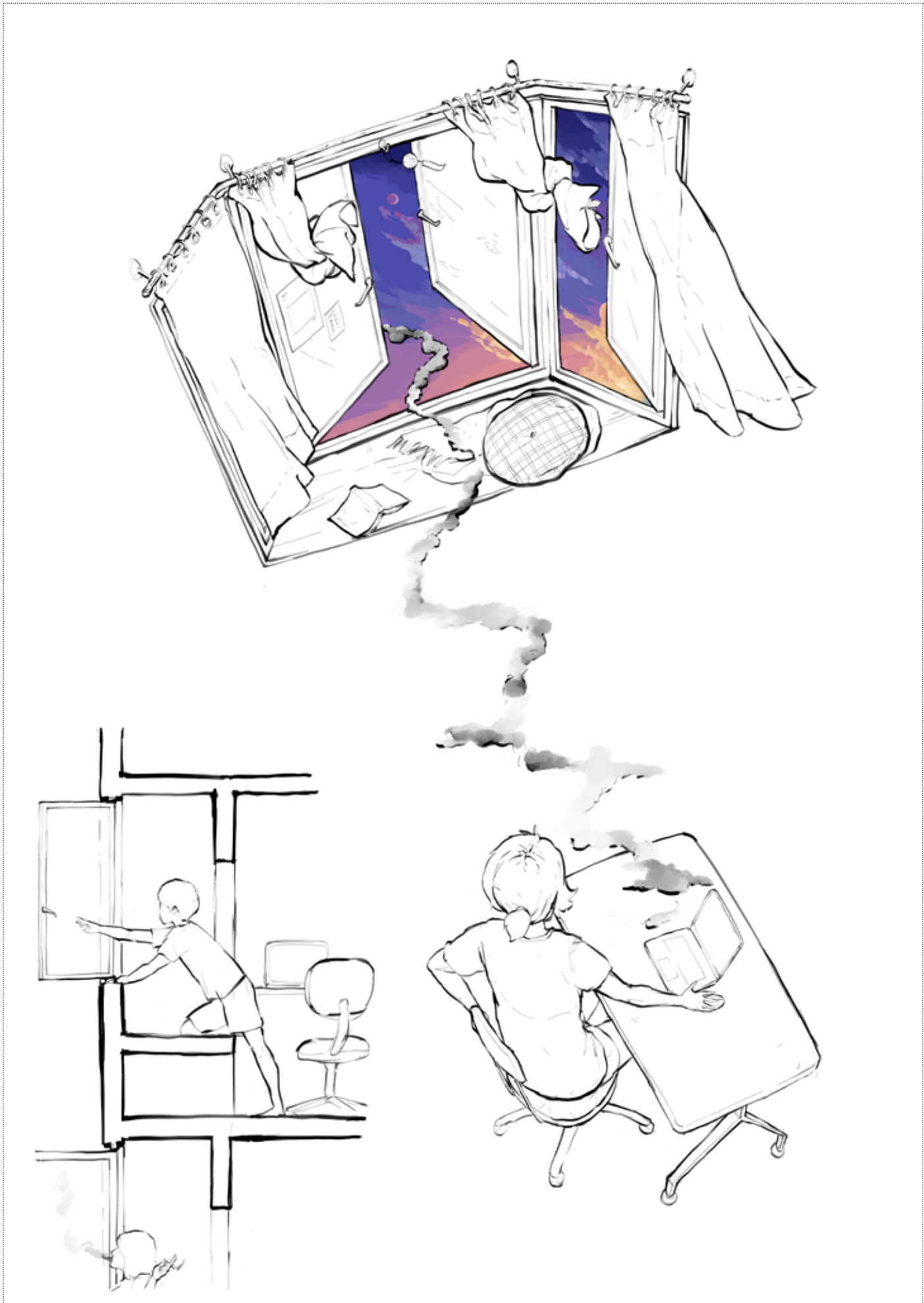
"monsoon afternoon rain"
└ wind blowing
   └ the first drop of rain

WIND DRIVEN RAIN

END OF REPORT