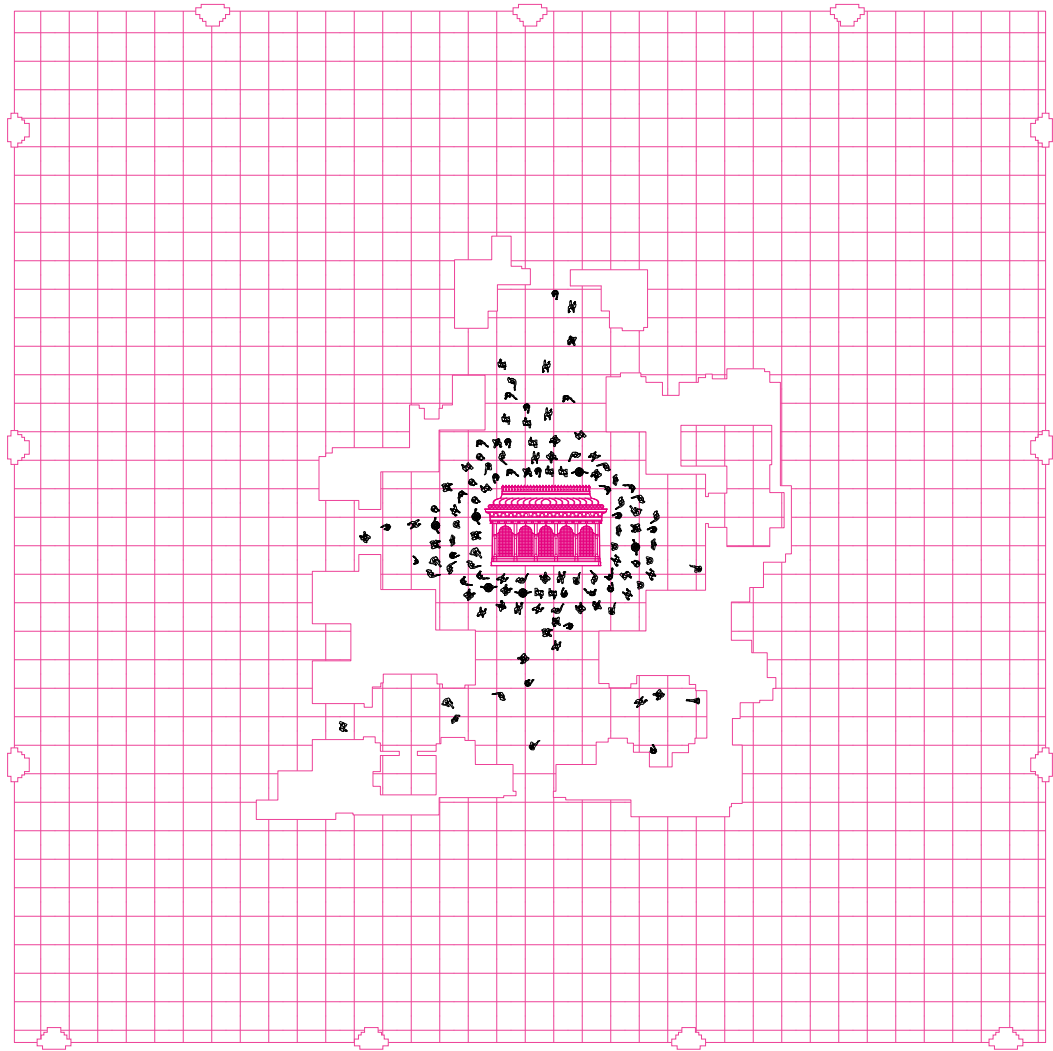# The Rooms of
Hotel City

A spatialised understanding of the systems that
allow tourists to extent themselves inside cities.

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Date: 10 January 2021
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You are in the hotel lobby and you check in; what do you check in?
- Yourself?

No. You leave yourself behind.
- Where?

Rooms 1-10
Enter

What happens when tourists reign a city? When endless flows of imported beings form ever-growing mountains of bodies, that roll and spread through the city like tidal waves, covering everything and everywhere. What happens when houses are one-by-one razed to the ground and rebuild as hotels, when precise local craftmanship is replaced by mass-produced knockoffs? What happens when local culture is overthrown in favour of market trends, when traditional rituals have become a trained show that's put on. In other words: what happens when the city itself is commodified into a liveable experience, when the city itself is the apotheosis of tourism?

It would be a Hotel City.

The conceptualisation of Hotel City tries to answer the question how a scaffolding of tourist attractions, can affect, disrupt, and transform the city around it in such a way that the perception, purpose and methods of the city itself change entirely.

What does the Hotel have to do with it?

The Hotel is the interface through which tourists interact with the city; a territorial device that allows its visitors to extent their beings within the city. In Hotel City, it acts as a metaphor for describing and understanding the effects that tourism has on the city. Each Hotel City functions as a machinery that presents itself through a specific reading of isolated parts of the city, as in the notion of the Oligopticon by Bruno Latour: "Far from being that in which we all reside, Society is produced, on a tiny scale, within these numerous laboratories that coexist" (Latour & Hermant, 1998, plan 30).

What do we learn from this conceptualisation?

Hotel City questions the ambivalent nature of cities shaped by tourism, by specifically looking at the systems that enable tourists (unknowingly or not) to take a hold of the city, as if it's a condition. Comprehending the ways in which the tourist dwells, experiences, and orientates him or herself, reveals the prerequisites of this condition, allowing us to understand it, and possibly intervene in it. In this essay, these systems have been compartmentalised into different rooms, numbered 1 to 10. Each room is briefly introduced in italics and represents a discussion that generates a space in which certain notions circumscribing Hotel City can be nurtured and pruned. It is through this framework of thought sequences that one is able to grasp the conditions that enable Hotel Cities to come into existence.
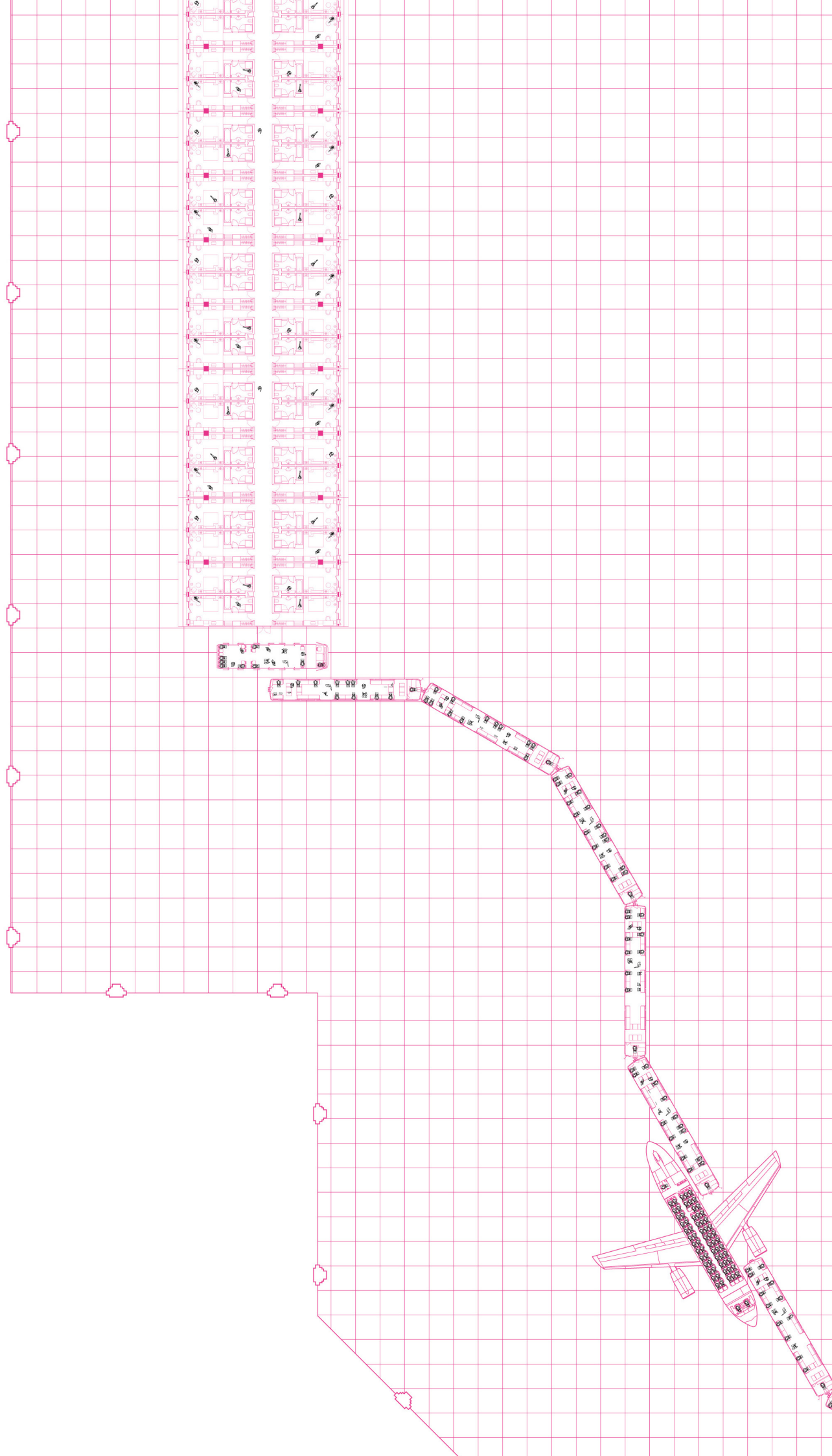
Room 1
Lure

Hotel City is you waking up in the morning, standing in the bathroom, and facing your mirror. In your reflection you find a smile, accelerated by excitement. Hotel City vitalised you with its luring promise: today, finally, you will go to visit the place that you've been dreaming of. A shiny, new, moving, and transformative experience awaits you. What are you waiting for? Hotel City attracts you; it has something you seek, something you desire. With your trolley packed, Hotel City makes you leave your apartment.

Unsuspectingly, we are all affected by the tourist condition. Through a circulation of images, anticipation is incubated within us, as we're audio-visually bombarded with last-minute getaway advertisements, holiday pictures of friends, and catchy bits of tropical music. We are incepted with what Rob Shields (1990) calls 'imaginative geographies'; mindscapes of desired distant places that seduce us to embark on journeys and leave our everyday lives behind for what they are. But this is not new.

For centuries people have been displacing themselves, in search of something outside their daily realities (Feifer, 1985). The early pilgrim journeys towards holy places such as Jerusalem, Medina, and Mashhad display a determination to find something 'beyond'. The Grand Tour, with young adults trying to culturally enrich themselves by touring through Europe and soaking up experiences in every country, displays this same determination. When local folk discovered they could exploit these passing visitors, hotels and restaurants emerged. Subsequently, place-bound rarities started being advertised as 'attractions' and their visitors started being called 'tourists' (Crick, 1989). Hotels themselves also went through a series of evolutions, each signifying a similar development in the characteristics of the tourists visiting them. The ancient typology of the inn or caravanserai, situated along a trading route, provided food and shelter for weary travellers. When living standards rose, and the seeking of pleasurable experiences became the main reason for visiting other places, hotels started to pop up inside city centres, providing visitors with a comfortable base from out of which the city could be explored (Thompson in Urry & Larsen, 2011). Interestingly, in the beginning of the 20th century, hotels started to brand *themselves* as the experience, an example of which is the full-fledged historical recreation of Venice that can be lived and enacted in the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas. If hotels can become an experience in itself, couldn't the whole city become a hotel?

This is exactly where Hotel City enters the stage. It is the lure of the whole city, with its myriad of attractions, promoted through its shiny advertising, that seduces tourists towards it. Dean MacCannel sharply describes this tourist condition as "you have got to see this", "taste this" or "feel this" (MacCannel, 1999, p. 203).
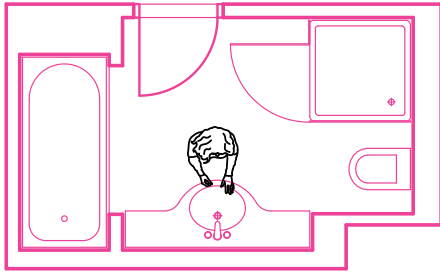
Room 2
Exchange

Hotel City is an infrastructure that seamlessly connects people and places. In a multitude of transport carriages, you are teleported through the landscape, as if its boundaries didn't exist anymore. You swoosh through air, screech over rails, plough underground, and scrape over asphalt. Practically any carriage that holds more than six people can be found in Hotel City and transfers people like packages on a conveyer belt. In this streamlined experience you find yourself in a timespan shorter than boredom arriving in the place you desire. Hotel City is an exhibition on efficiency, a theme park filled with amusement rides that move you around perpetually, again and again delivering you where you want to be.

The time that the landscape dictated our movements has long been lost. Infrastructures that empower methods of displacement now reign and define our territory on planet earth. Movements over the globe are facilitated through flight-price comparison websites, whilst concrete is being poured in every corner, on every island, through every desert. The result is an infrastructure of hubs and spokes, ports and stations, airlines and waterways, freeways and underground tunnels, that all intersect with each other, enabling the privileged soul to circumscribe the entire world in less than 48 hours.

Take the airport: a typology materialising in every global city. Within an airport, one finds itself in a perfectly regulated environment in which all kinds of actors intertwine with each other. Inside this place, there's a rhythm to be found; a carefully orchestrated choreography of departures, arrivals, announcements, taxi drivers calling for your attention. This dance of carriages is conducted by invisible systems. Packed like sardines in a crushed tin box, airplane passengers carefully align themselves inside rows of narrow seats, constituting a cabin crowded with over 50 nationalities, every one of them staring blankly at televisual screens that play the latest trends in entertainment. Marc Augé (1995) baptizes these globalised infrastructural hotspots as 'Non-Places': they all resemble each other, constructed in a both functional and clinic kind of architecture, cleansed by rooftops adorned with air-conditioning units of its outside meteorological realities. Interestingly, it is these very 'non-places', with their globalised, or rather standardised, network of signs, that enable the erasure of frontiers over the world, resulting in a seamless exchange of people from all places. Keller Easterling (2014) coins the term 'Extrastatecraft' to describe the influences that certain infrastructures have in rewriting how societies live, work, and coexist with each other, of which the airport is the perfect example.

It is in within these infrastructures that Hotel City thrives. Through the multiplication of these non-places across the globe, tourists are enabled to spread their wings, leave their flock, and fly towards their desired destination.

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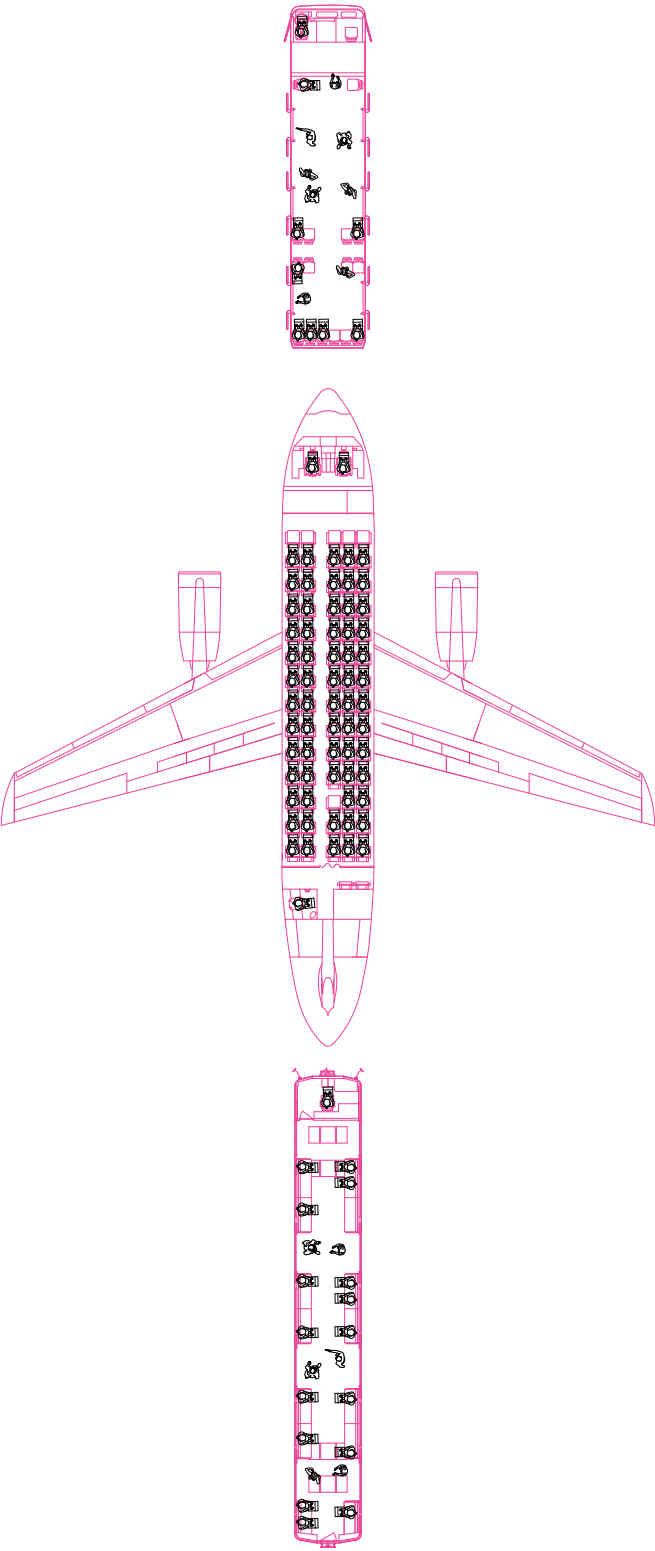
Room 3
Gaze

Hotel City is a dome of air surrounding you, like a personal bubble. When traversing the sidewalk after exiting your carriage, you breathe the bubble's air, heavily polluted though it is with sounds, smells, and everything you're actually not supposed to be breathing. As your lungs expand, your eyes open wide; you see your prize, exactly as Hotel City wants you to see it. Behind barriers of traffic lights, crosswalks and wide, grey, dead asphalt lies Hotel City's core, its main attraction. You are gravitated towards it, drifting along endless corridors full of identical numbered doors, buildings, and floors.

Once you step out of the non-place, displaced from wherever you came, you'll find yourself in a new world. Each new environment you arrive in consists of collections of scraps of localities, and you are moving right through it. What do you see?

"The outside, the general framework, is not what dominates me; it is what I dominate with my gaze. But what I dominate I don't see unless I refrain from looking outside, otherwise I'm immediately limited to my own point of view" (Latour & Hermant, 1998, plan 8). This quote from Latour's description of the 'Invisible Paris' captures how each individual is effectively confined within her or his own personal gaze upon the world, an understanding that Edmund Husserl beautifully resonates when he writes "each Ego has its own domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives the things in a certain orientation." (Husserl, 1983, p.165). This bubble, in which one finds itself, is what John Urry and Jonas Larsen (2011) refer to as the 'tourist gaze'; the condition to which tourists are subjected, defining what they actually can and cannot perceive. Louis Turner and John Ash, in acknowledging this gaze, place the tourist at the centre of a 'strictly circumscribed world' that is defined by the entrepreneurs of touristic places, and thus becomes "a small monotonous world that everywhere shows us our own image; … the pursuit of the exotic and diverse ends in uniformity" (Turner & Ash, 1975, p. 292).

This suggests that the touristic sphere, in light of how it's created, operates independently and regardless of the city, and in a way, would not respond to the city's forces that be, rather it would be a kind of counterpoint to it, as it's in the tourist's perception that things would appear as 'exotic'. It is within this veil of perceptions, appearing if one adds up all tourists' gazes, that Hotel City slowly subjugates its host city.
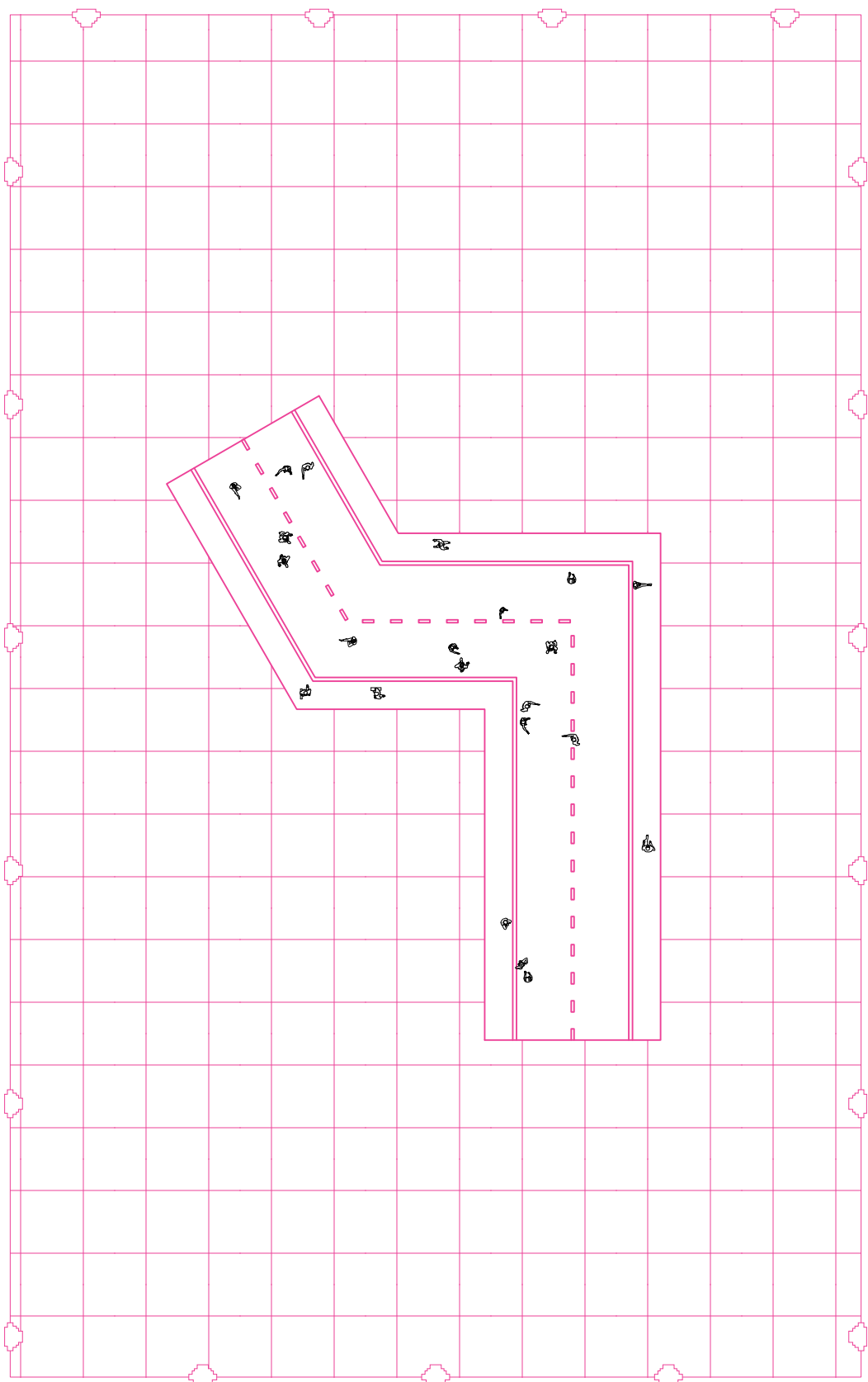
Room 4
Secure

Hotel City is heavily supervised by a rainbow of rays of protection. Hotel City's core organs are fortified with security gates, camera's and x-rays, that monitor everyone who enters and leaves, govern every square meter, and fill up hard drive after hard drive, all 24 hours a day. As you step into one of Hotel City's entrances and raise your arms for an electromagnetic full body scan, the guard topples his coffee, as he accidentally interprets your belt for something actually dangerous. Of course it's a false alarm, as it always is.

On a rather concerned tone, Paul Virilio (2002) describes how the frontiers of the state have passed into the interiors of cities, as every place deemed important now has become a well-defended fort on its own. He further elaborates on how this implies that the notion of the city's border is shifting. Because what is the true façade of the city, when you are time after time frisked and searched when passing places within the city? It might indeed be that the city has lost its outside borders, as Fuller and Harley state that "cities are full of visitors; people from elsewhere who may or may not be 'just tourists' and need to be surveilled" (Fuller & Harley in Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 222). Thus, slowly, cities are transformed into panopticons, as every oddly looking or behaving individual starts to look like a potential terrorist. Latour, just like the tourists that have no choice but to cooperate with this security frenzy, seems to have little problem with it: "I'm neither in control nor without control: I'm formatted. I'm afforded possibilities for my existence, based on teeming devices scattered throughout the city. I go from one offer to the next" (Latour & Hermant, 1998, plan 33).

As a tourist, having passed one of the checkpoints, you enter the controlled unknown that is Hotel City. As your freedom of movement inside this place is completely controlled, it is the systems of checks and allowances, parenting this control, that govern and decide your every behaviour.
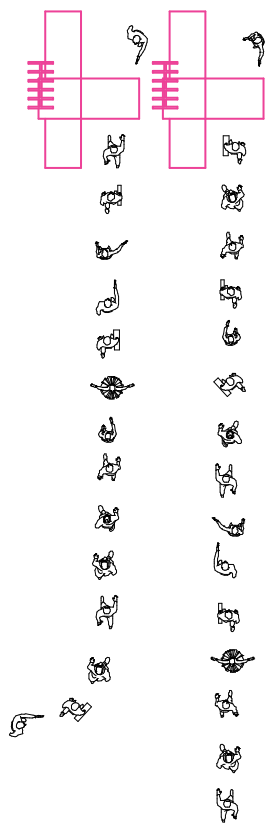
Room 5
Build

Hotel City stretches as far your eyes can reach. Now standing on the biggest and most prominent pedestrian-only square, you are dwarfed by walls of buildings that demarcate the square. Hotel City is thoroughly cleaned day in and day out, and you are amazed by its cleanliness. No specks of dust are to be found here, on its shining marble floors that are beautifully ornamented. Overlooking the square are slender towers, minaret-like structures, equipped with speakers that shout instructions you don't understand. Luckily, Hotel City is fully equipped with an army of signposts in precisely your language, which you silently read and obediently follow.

Like a museum's collection that's grown over centuries, the artifacts and landmarks that are found within the city give scale and prominence to it. Whilst minute and extravagant structures were sculpted by kings and kin, life was allowed a place within and around; continuously redefining its buildings and their respective contexts. Architecture, as Marc Augé mentions, "transmits the illusions of the current dominant ideology, … the aesthetics of which support those illusions and expresses the triumph of the system" (Augé, 1995, p. xvi). If the physicality of the environment is a representation of the invisible systems that govern the environment itself, what does this tell us about the ones who visit these places? In the case of ancient places, surely, these places don't serve their original function anymore, since most of them were not built for the delight of tourists. Does this imply that tourism is in these cases some form of archaeological sight-seeing, or even time travelling – as one walks amidst the remains of former realities? And in the case of 'modern' structures, what is the ideology that they reflect, having been built specifically for the usage of tourists?

In Hotel City, previously prevailing artifacts have become pawns in a game of worship and ownership, as they in many cases still prevail under their new contemporary ideology. In places where heritage remains unprotected, however, greedy development is replacing ancient fabric with buildings catered especially to the ideals of Hotel City, as is the case in the context of Mashhad, Iran, where in the periphery of its most influential tourist attraction a "great amount of luxurious shopping centres and high-rise buildings … have violated the reconstruction and renewal rules in significant ways" (Jalali, Davoudpour & Tabibianc, 2018, p. 10).
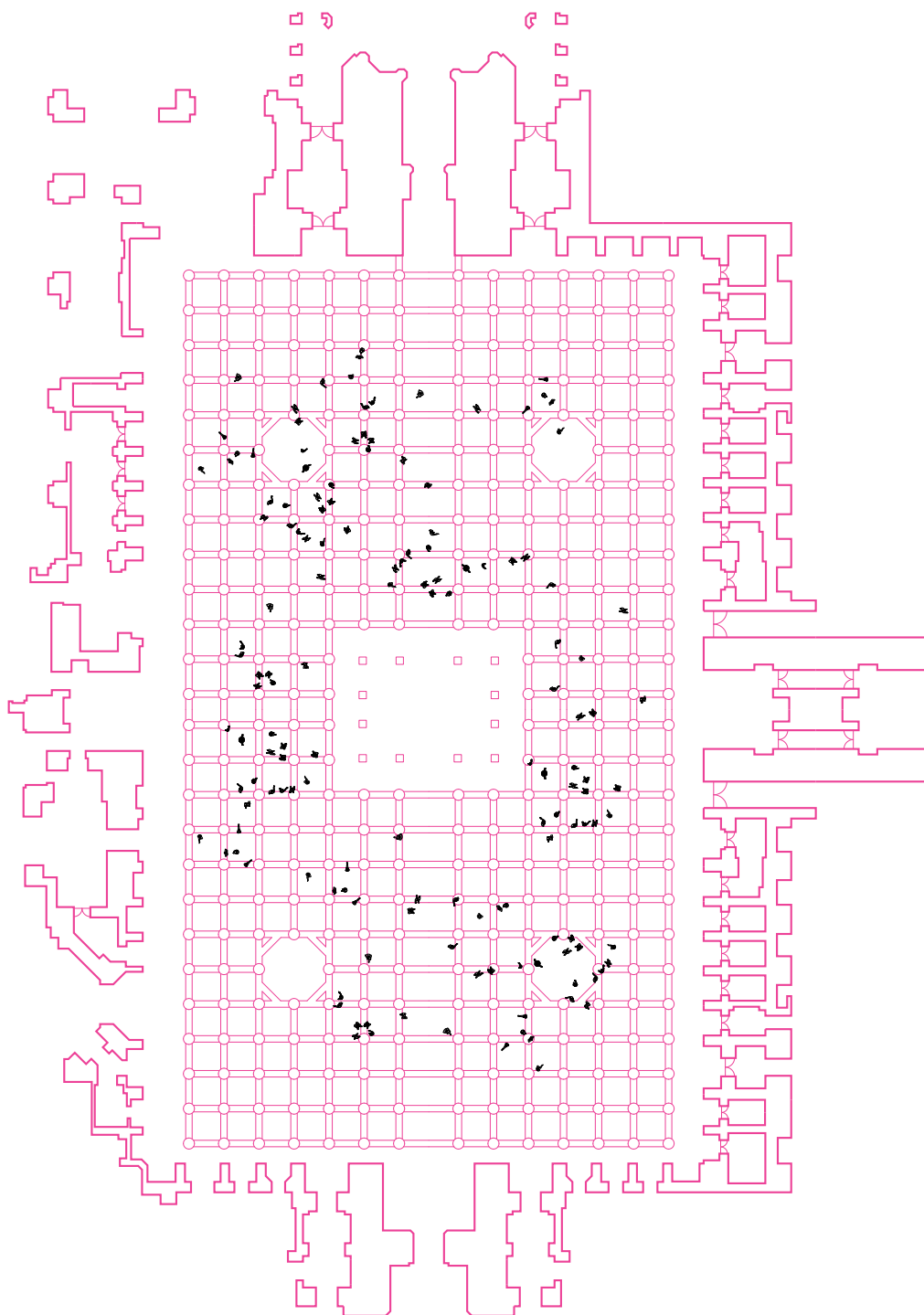
Room 6
Convulse

Hotel City is full of corridors that guide you towards its attractions. The closer you get to one of them, the more crowded it appears to be. As you enter one of the corridors, your find yourself in a traffic jam of people queuing for the same thing for which you came. In Hotel City, space is swarmed by people you don't know and most certainly will never see again. Yet, those people are somehow familiar, as you can identify with them, their place in the world being the same as yours.

The built environment is flooded with waves of bodies, rolling over its streets and crashing into its spaces. Tourists inhabit cities through occupying its hotels, attractions, gift shops, streets, transport carriages, and every other corner deemed worthy of their gaze. This inhabitation deals with what Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen describe as the 'corporeality' of travel: "the body breaks with established routines and practices. … Here [on holiday], we know it in our conscious bodies that are temporarily united in an utterly physical ritual" (Veijola & Jokinen, 1994, p. 133). It's precisely in these corporeal aspects of tourism that matters of phenomenology also kick in, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that "spatial forms or distance are not so much relations between different points in objective space as they are relations between these points and a central perspective: our body. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.5). We start understanding that it is actually through our corporeal experiences, that we perceive, structure, and order the world that surrounds us. Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain how "our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It implies itself to space like a hand to an instrument" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.5). To say our bodies are similar to instruments, is to say they're similar to tools; capable of '(re)sculpting' the very spaces we inhabit. Sara Ahmed (2006) acknowledges this notion when she illustrates how bodies extent themselves into space. She explains the '(re)sculpting' as a necessary outcome of the act of dwelling, which is what tourists are doing as well with their corporeal inhabiting of cities.

Thus, the question arises whether this bodily extension of tourists within Hotel City leads to any form of '(re)sculpting', and whether this is confined, regulated, or problematic in any way. If erosion becomes a product of alien inhabitation of the spaces within Hotel City, would it matter, or would it simply be the sign of a successful enterprise?

Room 7
Attract

As you enter Hotel City's core facility, its main attraction, its dragon's lair, you find yourself amidst a crowded room, full of people that all share the same desire. As one body everyone gravitates and rotates around it, swarms it, touches it, kisses it. How can a single place affect so many? Even you wanted to see it, believe it, and live it. Now you are here, experiencing the very thing Hotel City promises and promotes. Do you feel it? Does it move, transform, or affect you? Hotel City originates from and revolves around a centrepiece: the main attraction of the city, which in most cases is destined to become an island within the city, slowly converting its existing surrounding fabric into a temporal periphery. That which was long-lasting becomes short-lived: an experience becoming a fleeting memory.

Now the lure of Hotel City has successfully affected you, and you finally find yourself amidst the experience that you desired, the question arises: what is actually happening here?

The main attraction of each Hotel City could be seen as nearing the status of being something 'absolute' if we're to take all the attention it receives seriously. 'Absolute', in the reasoning of Giorgio Agamben (1999), refers to how something is a thing in itself; in solitude, separated, but acquiring a position towards the whole from which it has been separated. The main attraction, along this line, reads like an island floating in the belly of the city, completely isolated, a perfect alternate reality found within the city. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, contrary to Agamben, regards the 'absolute' as the result of "everything becoming one" (Hegel, 2018, p. 11). This would translate in an understanding of the main attraction as being the natural outcome of all preceding processes; the main attraction as neither the heart nor the fingertip of the body of the city, it not being distinguishable from its context. This line of thinking resonates with the case of pilgrimage tourism, as here it is the whole journey that could be considered as the main attraction, and thus something 'absolute'. Through a succession of rituals, the pilgrim becomes one with his spiritual goal. This realisation takes places in what Arnold van Gennep describes as 'rites de passage' (Van Gennep in Turner, 1974). Victor Turner goes on to divide this ritual sequence into three phases; (1) separation: the pilgrim leaves his "earlier fixed point inside of a social structure", (2) liminality: the pilgrim "passes through a cultural realm that bears no resemblance" to where he came from, (3) reincorporation: "the passage is completed, the pilgrim possesses new rights and obligations vis-à-vis others", as he returns to where he came from (Turner, 1974,
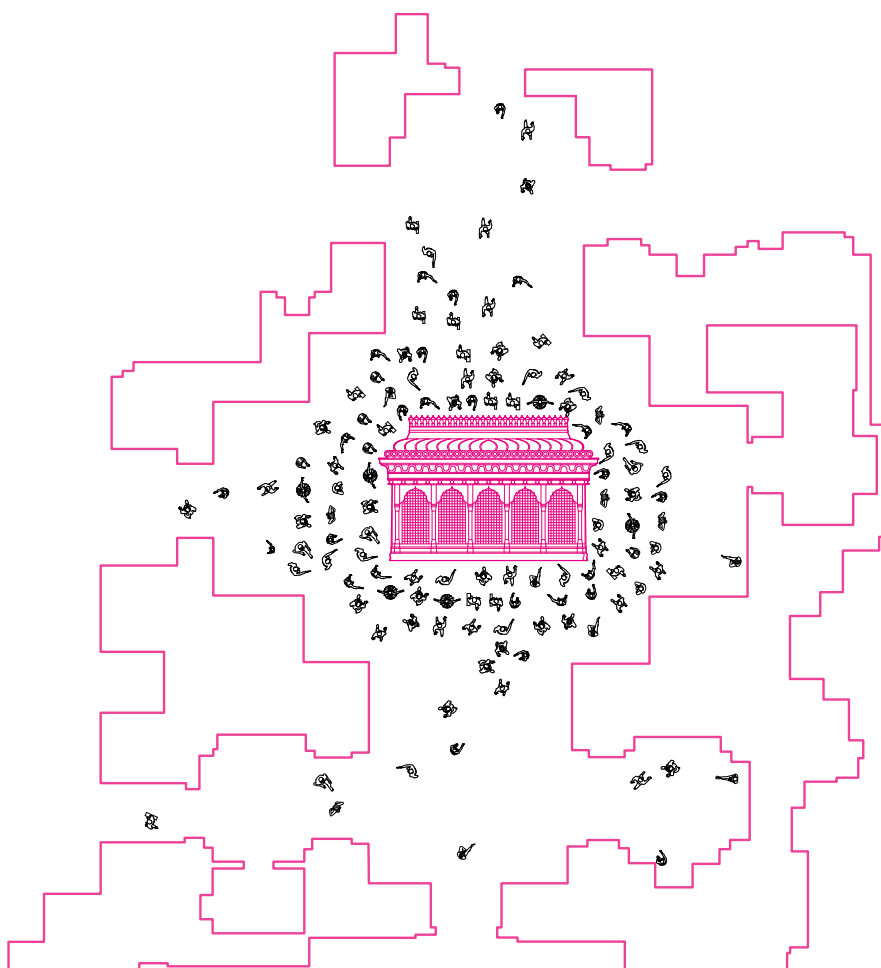
p. 94). It is in these 'liminal spaces outside space or time' of phase 2, that everyday re-lations, obligations, and structures are reversed, and one finds itself on the thresholds of the 'absolute'. And actually, don't these three stages of the 'rites de passage' awfully resemble the stages a regular tourist also goes through during his travels to, in, and from Hotel City? Therefore, I deem that the main attraction of Hotel City possesses exactly these liminal qualities that Turner describes.

Another quality that can be attributed to this other reality found within main attrac-tions, is that it is 'hyper-real'; a term that Jean Baudrillard (1983) coined to describe things created to trick our consciousness in believing that they are more real than the real thing, and thus more worthy of our time; capable of delivering us the virtue we so desperately seek. Hyper-reality is characterised by its surface qualities: it is with care-fully designed, detailed, and ornamented facades that hyper-real places convince us of their own realities. Umberto Eco gives the example of how wax statue museums market themselves as "one of the most thrilling experiences of your life", and how "their con-cern with authenticity reaches the point of reconstructive neurosis" (Eco, 1986, p. 23); revealing hyper-reality's quest to become reality itself. Other examples are the 'skyscape' installations of James Turrell, in which Turrell through a framing of surfaces, captivatingly focuses all our bodily senses intensively on an ordinary piece of sky: ele-vating its reality into a hyper-reality. Daniel Boorstin regards these "synthetic novelties that flood our experiences" as 'pseudo-events' (Boorstin, 1964, p. 9), referring to those pre-staged happenings that are found within tourist experiences; a 'flash mob' parade on the main street of Disney Land, a 'sudden' procession of herded goats through the Alpine village of Zermatt, or the elaborate dusting of a Holy Shrine.

If Hotel City delivers us one thing, it's an unforgettable memory, derived from its own marketing of itself being the 'absolute' experience in a lifetime, which consequently is made real by layers of hyper-reality that are clad onto it.

Room 8
Commodify

Hotel City profits from its visitors through the gift shop. It materialises in a myriad of unsexy ways and sells millions of wares that awfully resemble each other, though are separable in terms of price and quality. Hotel City emerges with the growing economic benefits of tourism for the city. In Hotel City, values are subjected to the desires of economy; culture is commodified and sold to the highest bidder; tradition is thrown over in favour of standardised processes. The organically grown Bazar became an artificial shopping mall. The independent vendors became employees. The authentic wares became imported products.

'Exit through the gift shop', a line made famous by Banksy, holds true for most experiences that are easily within reach. Whether it's a themed rollercoaster in your local theme park, the St. Peter's Church in the Vatican, or the MoMa in New York; exiting a place means having to wade through displays of wares that can possibly become physical memories of what you just have experienced, that is, if you buy them. The experience itself has been commodified; its appearance materialised inside a miniature keychain, fridge magnet, or stuffed animal. But merchandise is not all, as Guy Debord (1967) explains how also cultural happenings are being commodified, resulting into what he calls the 'society of the spectacle'. According to Debord, as cultural rituals are being subjugated to the economy and turn into (pseudo-)events with a price tag, our societies become dominated by a fetishism of the commodity. This results both in people's estrangement from each other, as now their interactions are founded on production and making profit, and a loss of quality, as quantity becomes the deciding factor in the development of all things. Malcolm Crick (1989) seems to not have any problems with this apparent loss of quality, as he points out how cultural behaviour is anyway continuously being invented and reinvented, resulting in an absence of authenticity. And if there is no such thing as authenticity, who is to judge what holds quality and what not?

Thus, even though commodification paired with masses of visiting tourists might have the power to alter or even overthrow local cultures, the question remains whether this is favourable or not, because this commodification in many places does become a dependable source of income for the local communities. However, this dependency also comes at its costs, cause if the stream of tourists suddenly halts, so does the flow of income (Crick, 1989).
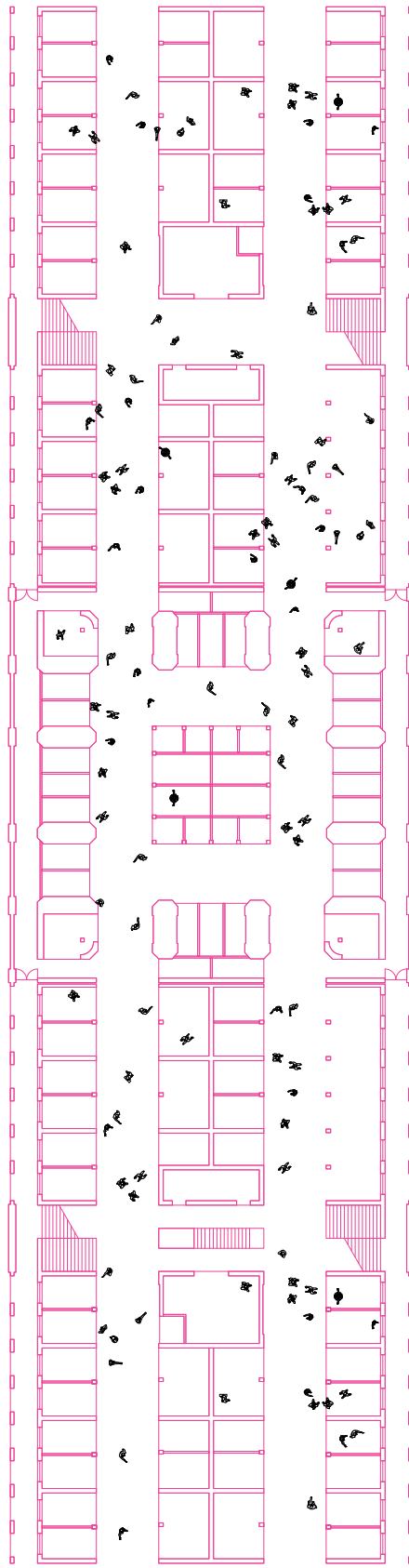
Room 9
Rotate

Hotel City gladly includes everyone, and it makes no exceptions. As long as you check-in in its lobby, you are welcome, yes thank you very much. You are serviced by a local; one of the many faces that represent Hotel City's interface. As you turn around after check-in, you notice the vacant expressions of the other guests waiting behind you; they too had their once-in-a-lifetime experience today. Hotel City rotates a constellation of people, interactions, events and places, of which the backstage is invisible for its visitors; carefully worked out of sight. In Hotel City, everything amounts to nothing, as every week is a repetition of the previous week, and a rehearsal for the coming week.

Every operation has its backdoors, ranging from invisible alleys filled with heaps of garbage bags, to obscured structures of tax evasive labouring. As a visiting tourist, you're mostly unaware of the hidden worlds that are found behind those shiny shopfronts surrounding you. Much of these parts remain in the shadows, though there's one curtain that's easily lifted, which is found in the interactions that tourists have with the staff of each place they visit. Mark Gottdiener (2001) describes those who serve the mobilised tourists as the 'immobilised bodies', who effectively enable the functioning of the tourism industry. Urry and Larsen refer to these interactions between serving and served as what they call "strange encounters" that involve "exceptional levels of 'non-interaction'" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 29). This is resonated by Jacques Bugnicourt who puts forward that most tourist related jobs are unskilled, which results in a lot of "flunkey training" (Bugnicourt in Crick, 1989, p. 316). And even though these unschooled workers might be looked down upon, these immobilised bodies on the front line do perform what former SAS airline president Jan Carlzon calls 'moments of truth' (Carlzon, 1987). These are the 15 seconds on average that an interaction takes, that completely define the way the customer sees the place he's interacting with. Carlzon, in recognising these 'moments of truth', acknowledges the significance of these immobilised bodies, as to the point that he deems that they are the most important part of any customer experience. This relationship of giving and receiving between the mobilised and immobilised thus appears to be mutual, as it is both parties who could potentially benefit from it.

To think of Hotel City as a chain of interactions between alternating visitors, a fixed front line of foot soldiers, and an invisible backstage, seems to acknowledge this still undiscovered hidden world that is found behind any enterprise. To to be a tourist, thus, could be seen as being one cell in a greater network; each interaction creating a series of relays through an interface that interacts with the city.
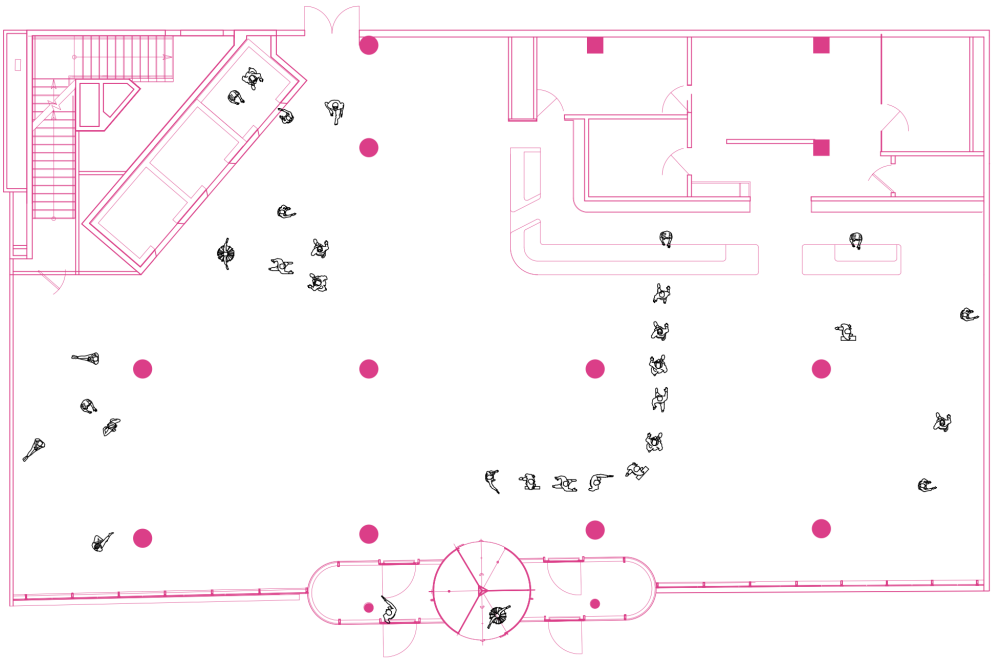
Rooms 10-1
Coming Home?

Hotel City's rooms are comfortable. They cater to your needs, muffle your bad habits and refine your peculiar thoughts. The room you just entered eerily resembles your own room, the one you left this morning. When you lie down, the bed smells the same as your own bed, a fresh and empty kind of clean. In Hotel City, even though all are guests, everything is familiar, everyone finds their way, and everyone feels at home.

What happens when you (temporarily) live in Hotel City? Could you ever call this place a home? If we're to believe the phenomenologists of Room 6, every space in which the act of dwelling is exercised, sooner or later ends up as an extended part of oneself. The entrepreneurs of Room 5 would gladly make us believe that we actually are at home, though the philosophers in Room 7 would argue how we in the end should need to return to our original habitats, as to complete our ritual transition, otherwise we'd be stuck forever in liminality, although; what would be wrong with that? And more importantly, could we actually feel at home in a place that is as fortified as Room 4, or as serviced as Room 9? Would we feel confined by living a premediated experience, as the sociologists point out in Room 3? And even if we did, we could easily escape this confinement through one of the infrastructures found in Room 2. It could also be some other place that's being broadcasted from Room 1, luring us away from what we, at least now, call home.

Can you give me a conclusion of Hotel City?

Hotel City is a sum of its city's spaces, structures, smells, and sounds; capable of delivering you an unforgettable experience, that, paradoxically, in some ways is as generic as a hotel room, if it weren't for its fantastic cladding. Hotel City is capable of transforming its visitors into absolute believers of whatever reality it has to offer. And even though this all might be true, the real answer to Hotel City lies in the question that still remains:

"And what is the secret?" "What the revealed religions have been unable to reveal. The secret lies beyond." (Eco, 1989, p. 208)
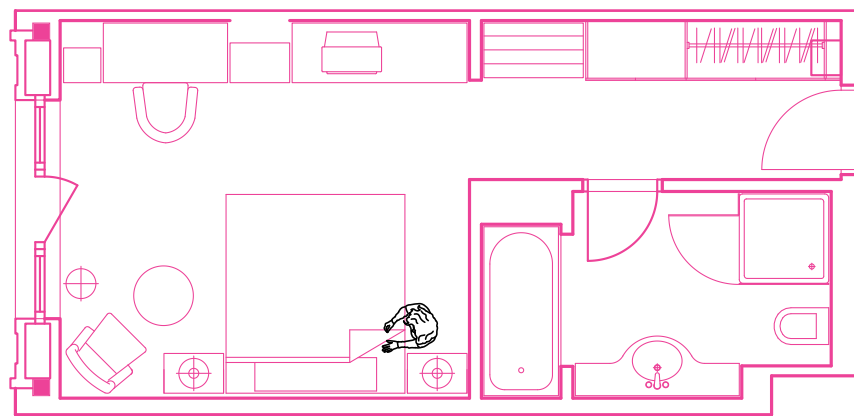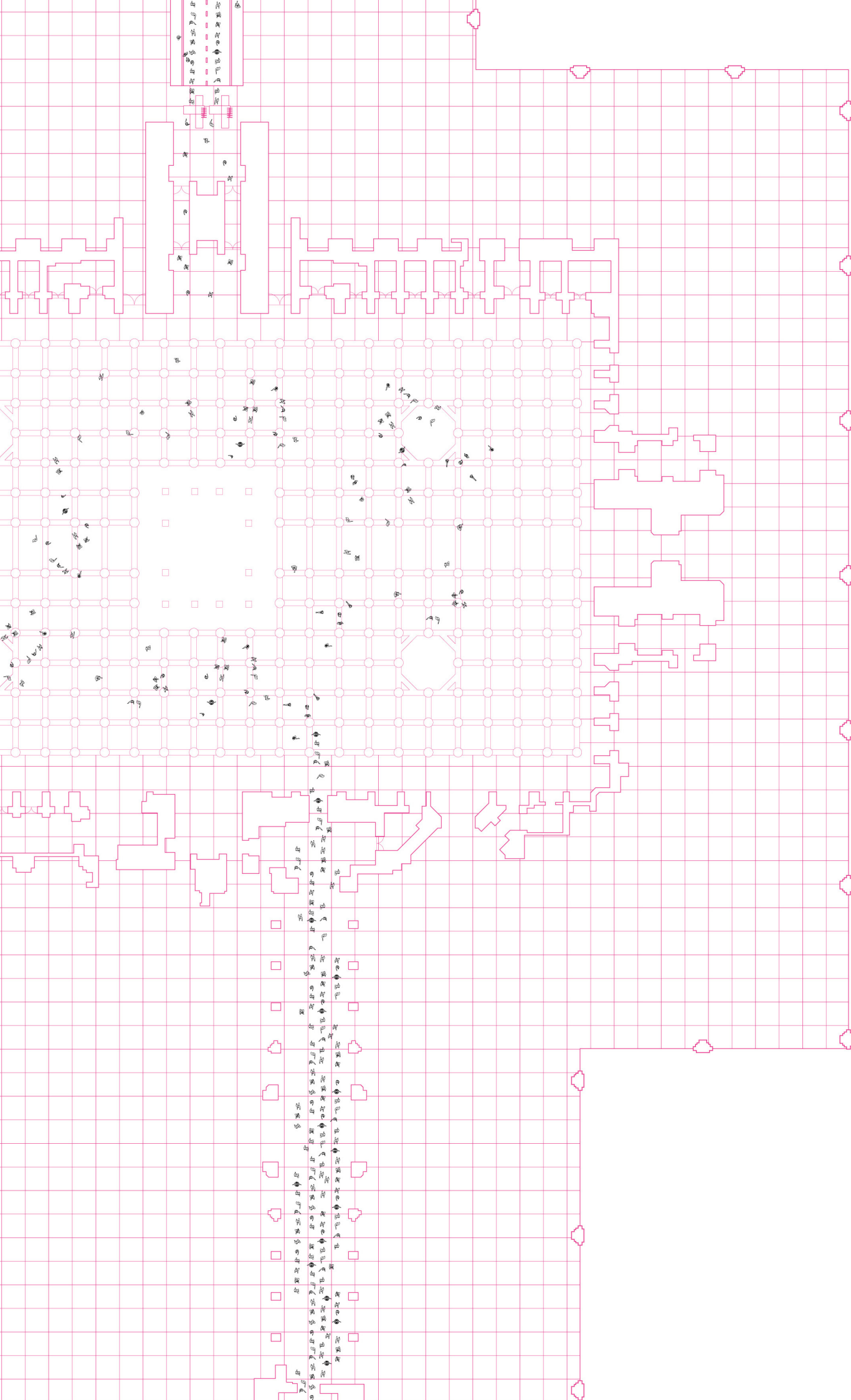
You are in the hotel lobby and you check in; what do you check in?
- Yourself?

No. You leave yourself behind.
- Where?

In Hotel City.

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