



# FELINE SPACE

Yiyi Gao  
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# INTRODUCTION

I was sitting on a couch on a sunny afternoon with a kitten napping on my leg. Not far away there was a five-story cat tree, and a few cats were wandering around. I could not have cat in my new apartment, but as a former cat-owner, I longed for times to spend with cats. Cat cafés became ideal places for me to fulfill my petting needs. Originating in Asia, pet cafés are becoming popular worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Having a pet is not always feasible, and the pet cafés offer people opportunities to enjoy the benefits of interacting with companion animals when they do not personally own one.

Nonetheless, the idea of cat cafés raised ethical concerns regarding commodifying and exploiting cats as attractions for human entertainment. Is this conflict reconcilable? I believe that the cat café as a relatively new concept offers a type of space for researching on human-animal relations outside traditionally home settings or animal centers. Despite varying intention and design aesthetic of cat cafés, a commonly accepted mode of interaction between humans and cats in most cat cafés is by creating an environment that allows people to relax with cats roaming around. Although people bring cats into the cat cafés as facilitators for humans' emotional well-being, cats are the long-term inhabitants of the cat cafés. Humans, on the other hand, are short-time visitors. If people desire a more "ethical" cat café, designers of cat cafés should consider further incorporating the needs of cats as long-term users of the space.

After observing the human-cat relations as well as the spatial designs in existing cat cafés, I ideated alternate ways for human and pet animals to interact. I created experimental spatial design prototypes that deliberately position humans into cats' space for them to experience feline movements and postures. When humans are guided to behave like cats, will the boundary between a human's space and a cat's space become obscured? Through the "primitive" and "animalistic" behavior, will people have different understandings towards human-animal relations? By documenting human and cat behavior inside the experimental prototypes and iterating the design, I seek not a solution to the cat café dilemma but different possibilities of future spatial and furniture design for human and animal users.

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<sup>1</sup> Plourde, Lorraine. "Why Do People Go to Cat Cafes? Loneliness and Relaxation in a Time of Neoliberalism." OpenDemocracy; London, January 5, 2017. Accessed September 2018.

# CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

## Contested Space

### What Is a Cat Café and Why Do People Go There?

The world's first cat café opened in Taiwan in 1998. Although it is not the first café to have cats, the owner commented that “we were the first to be reported on by the media on such a massive scale<sup>2</sup>.” The concept of cat café spread to Japan and gained significant popularity, and the phenomenon started to emerge worldwide<sup>3</sup>.

*Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan* published by anthropology researcher Lorraine Plourde links the popularity of cat cafés with the rise of the healing industry in Japan following its economic downturn, and cat cafés are marketed to have healing effects on people seeking companionship<sup>4</sup>. In urban Japan, cat cafés serve as public spaces offering “leisure (yuttari), relaxation (kutsurogi), slowness (yuruyuru), and the idea of ‘cat time’ (neko no jikan)” outside the stressful daily life<sup>5</sup>. I have visited a few cat cafés in Japan, China, and the U.S in the past few years. Based on my experience and stories heard from other visitors, the “healing” or relaxation part is one main reason for visiting, especially those who have an affection towards cats or previously owned cats. However, there are also other reasons why people walk into a cat café. Some cat cafés are charged for the amount of visit time, sometimes discouraging people who are not willing to spend money on interacting with cats. Some cat cafés have mandatory charges for food and drinks. There are also cat cafés functioning as adoption centers housing previous stray cats or cats surrendered by owners. Tiny Lions is a cat lounge and adoption center affiliated with the Huron Valley Humane Society in Ann Arbor. Staff at Tiny Lions explained that the place was opened up as an extension for adoption experiences outside the Humane Society’s animal shelter. “But many people come here just to relax or study with cats,” said a volunteer at Tiny Lions, “and we want to raise awareness of stray cats and let people learn how to interact with cats<sup>6</sup>.”

### The Design of Cat Cafés

Japan’s cat cafés are often designed as cozy, homely spaces. Wooden furniture, soft edges, and fabrics are common aesthetic choices. As Lorraine Plourde argued, the cat café’s “staged aesthetic of homey, cozy domesticity<sup>7</sup>” is related to its original marketing as places for healing and the consumer culture of healing products. Plourde used the word “patron” for visitors, and cat cafés created environments for patrons to feel that they are at home and

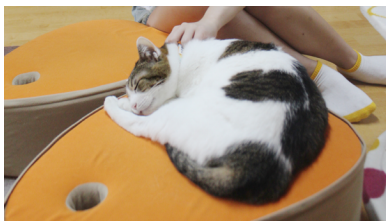


Fig. 1  
A visitor pets a cat napping on a cushion.  
Neko Café TiME, Kyoto, Japan  
Photo taken on May 7th, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Wei, Clarissa. “I Visited the World’s ‘First’ Cat Cafe.” Munchies. March 07, 2016. Accessed November 20, 2018. [https://munchies.vice.com/en\\_us/article/78mejx/i-visited-the-worlds-first-cat-cafe](https://munchies.vice.com/en_us/article/78mejx/i-visited-the-worlds-first-cat-cafe).

<sup>3</sup> Plourde, Lorraine. “Why Do People Go to Cat Cafes? Loneliness and Relaxation in a Time of Neoliberalism.” OpenDemocracy; London, January 5, 2017. Accessed September 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Plourde, Lorraine. “Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan.” *Japanese Studies* 34 (2014)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Interviews at Tiny Lion.” Interview by author. Nov 02, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Plourde, Lorraine. “Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan.” *Japanese Studies* 34 (2014)



Fig. 2  
A cat café with a Japanese home setting.  
Neko no Jikan Cat Café, Osaka, Japan.  
<https://www.theneighborscat.com/neko-no-jikan-kitahonten/>



Fig. 3  
Tiny Lions Cat Lounge and Adoption Center  
Ann Arbor, U.S.  
Photo taken on November 2nd, 2018



Fig. 4  
A cat placed in a basket.  
Miao-le-ge-mi, Beijing, China Photo taken  
on May 20th, 2018



Fig. 5  
Mao Xiao Yuan, Beijing, China  
Photo taken on May 30th, 2018



Fig. 6  
Mao Se, Wuhan, China  
Photo taken on December 27, 2018

playing with their own cats<sup>8</sup>. I visited Neko Café TiME [Fig. 1] in Kyoto, and there were carpets, blankets, and cushions on floors for both humans and cats to use. Neko no Jikan [Fig. 2], another cat café in Osaka, created a traditional Japanese home environment with tatami mats, shoji screens, and other household objects. When the concept of cat cafés spread from Japan to other countries, many cat cafés designs outside Japan borrowed the Japanese aesthetics of domesticity. Staff at Tiny Lions [Fig. 3] in Ann Arbor mentioned that they selected bright colors for the interior to make “a comfortable environment for both people and cats and makes visitors feel like home<sup>9</sup>.” Plourde argued that different from real domestic life, the mode of domesticity at cat cafés is flexible, as “patrons can enter, connect, disconnect, and exit the space freely<sup>10</sup>.” Cats are used as a non-human actor to sell a sense of home and to create a feeling for the visitors that the cats are their own cats. At the three cat cafés I visited in China, Miao Le Ge Mi [Fig. 4], Mao Xiao Yuan [Fig. 5] and Mao Se [Fig. 6], I observed that the furniture types were mainly dining chairs and tables, and three places all charged for mandatory food. People tend to stay at those cat cafés for longer times to socialize with friends, but fewer people have physical interactions with the cats. Owners at Miao Le Ge Mi would pick up cats and deliver them to each table in baskets upon request [Fig. 4].

All different types of cat cafés raise ethical questions about the use of cats. Instead of creating illusions of home environments with cats be potentially seen as companion objects with healing effects projected onto them, or using cats as additional elements that help to create a “different” experience for people to spend money on, can cat cafés be designed differently? Despite different selling points of cat cafés, people are guests paying money for an experience, and they will eventually leave. Cats, on the other hand, are the long-term inhabitants of the cat café space. It leaves a question of whom does space belong to: should cats adapt to the human’s space, or should human visitors adapt to the cat’s space?

<sup>8</sup> Plourde, Lorraine. “Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan.” *Japanese Studies* 34 (2014)

<sup>9</sup> “Interviews at Tiny Lion.” Interview by author. Nov 02, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Plourde, Lorraine. “Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan.” *Japanese Studies* 34 (2014)

## Civilized Space

### Pet-tecture

To design an alternative cat café, I looked into examples of furniture and architecture designed for companion animals. Tom Wainwright in his book *Pet-tecture: Design for Pets* created a catalog of designs for pets<sup>11</sup>. Mentioned in his book, *The Architecture for Dog Exhibition*<sup>12</sup> is a collection of designs by award-winning designers and architects. The exhibition organizer Kenya Hara explained his design [Fig. 7] as a modifier that equalizes human scale and dog scale, “when the dog runs up the stairs, he ends up at just the right height to be face-to-face with a person<sup>13</sup>.” To architect Sou Fujimoto [Fig. 8], “this architecture is a living space for the dog, as well as furniture for the people<sup>14</sup>.” There are other designers created furniture for both human and cat users. Cat Tunnel Sofa [Fig. 9] adds a tunnel to a conventional sofa as spaces for cats to share with the owners. CATable designed by LYCS Architecture [Fig. 10] created organic holes and pathways inside a table to provide an “adventure for the cats<sup>15</sup>” in a piece of furniture originally intended for human use.

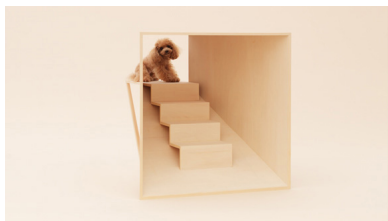


Fig. 7  
D Tunnel designed by Kenya Hara.  
Wainwright, Tom, *Pet-tecture: Design for Pets*. London: Phaidon, 2018



Fig. 8  
No Dog, No Life! designed by Sou Fujimoto.  
Wainwright, Tom, *Pet-tecture: Design for Pets*. London: Phaidon, 2018



Fig. 9  
Cat Tunnel Sofa designed by Seungji Mun.  
Wainwright, Tom, *Pet-tecture: Design for Pets*. London: Phaidon, 2018



Fig. 10  
CATable designed by LYCS Architecture.  
Wainwright, Tom, *Pet-tecture: Design for Pets*. London: Phaidon, 2018

### The Human Space

The above examples provided combinations of human and pet spaces. Most of them are designed for home settings, and many cat cafés aim to mimic the characteristics of private, cozy homes. However, a majority of cat cafés are commercial spaces that people pay to enter. The modes of human-cat interaction at cat cafés are therefore different when the “interactions” are charged or timed. Additionally, the main residents of cat cafés are cats, and humans are visitors paying to see and interact with the cats. The unique human-cat relationship inside cat cafés creates an interesting question of ownership of space. Catherine Ingraham in her book *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition* discusses humanness and the question of life in architecture<sup>16</sup>. She mentioned the contrast between the geometric ideals in architecture development regarding human uprightness and the lack of identifiable concentration represented by the path marked by animals<sup>17</sup>. Spatial practices in architecture often attempt to define objects in a rationally understood environment and create a hierarchy of spaces with different functions. That is how cat cafés are currently designed. In both home-like or restaurant-like cat cafés, chairs, tables, and cat trees immediately make it identifiable what the cat space is and what the human space is. Human-cat activities and interaction are, however, never bound to the spaces defined by the furniture. How can this space be designed differently from our rationally organized, well-defined spaces of homes and cafés?

<sup>11</sup> Wainwright, Tom. *Pet-tecture: Design for Pets*. London: Phaidon, 2018

<sup>12</sup> “Architecture for Dogs.” *Architecture for Dogs*. Accessed January 5th, 2019. <http://architecturefordogs.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Wainwright, Tom. *Pet-tecture: Design for Pets*. London: Phaidon, 2018

<sup>16</sup> Ingraham, Catherine. *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

## Primitive Space



Fig. 11  
Fish Tank designed by Yansong Ma.  
<http://www.i-mad.com/post-art/fish-tank/>



Fig. 12  
Tape Paris designed by Numen/For Use.  
<http://www.numen.eu/installations/tape/paris/>



Fig. 13  
Tape Paris designed by Numen/For Use.  
<http://www.numen.eu/installations/tape/paris/>

### The Animal Space

When I saw the fish tank designed by architect Yansong Ma [Fig. 11], I started to see cat cafés as fish tanks. Ma designed the fish tank by tracking the trajectory of fish in an open space<sup>18</sup>. Different from how a majority of the humans' living spaces are designed, the fish's movements seem to have an ambiguity of directions. Ma later adopted the design strategy of the fish tank in his later architecture project Erdo Museum by maximizing usage of limited space and meanwhile creating a seemingly irrational space with an ambiguity of direction and spatial definition for human users, saying that "we treat people the same way as fish<sup>19</sup>." Both cat cafés and fish tanks are living spaces for pet animals designed for human emotional or entertainment needs. In this way, I envisioned a more direct use of Ma's fish tank design thinking. What if humans actually move and behave as cats in the cat café environment?

### A "Primitive" Human Experience

Yansong Ma used fish trajectory for designing a large scale architectural space with the aesthetics and feel of fish moving freely in fish tanks. Numen/For Use, on the other hand, designed a space in which people can move through like animals. Tape Paris [Fig. 12] is a part of an exhibition titled "Inside," which took place in the Parisian gallery Palais de Tokyo in 2015. Tape Paris, similar to many other works by Numen/For Use, explores the physical space and psychological interiority through the making of organic, interactive architectural installations<sup>20</sup>. Between the ceiling and floor of the gallery Palais de Tokyo, the design group wrapped sticky tape around the concrete columns to form a network of hollows and tunnels in which visitors can climb into [Fig. 13].

I was drawn by the "primitive" quality of the space. Visitors in this space are in some ways similar to animals, and they experience the multi-directional space through bodily contact with the forms and materials intimately. As Numen/For use intended, people's physical interaction within and outside the organic space provokes more in-depth psychological reactions, allowing them to rethink their relations with space as well as their own human bodies<sup>21</sup>. If people are paying to visit a cat café for a different experience, can this experience be something gained from behaving like cats? When people move through a space like a cat and encounter cats inside the space, will they perceive the cats and themselves differently? Can cat cafés, an increasingly popular space where interactions between human and cats take place, become not only a relaxation or leisure space but also an experimental space for further research on human-animal relations?

<sup>18</sup>"MAD Architects Studio Visit : Fish Tank." Designboom. November 23, 2009. Accessed January 5th, 2019. <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/mad-architects-studio-visit-fish-tank/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Numen / For Use. Accessed November 6th, 2018. <http://www.numen.eu/installations/tape/paris/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

# METHODOLOGY

I initially ideated on different types of spaces that can serve the function of a cat café. I conducted research based on the different types of spaces and developed forms and structures accordingly. The iterative process is not a linear approach but a loop and experimentation where I went through stages of research, ideation, development, reflection, and further research. I scaled down my project, but I had the opportunity to develop the design with more depth. Not only did I drastically change the design from the initial ideation but also was able to reflect upon my approach as a designer.

## Ideation

### Form

By painting and abstracting cat bodies, I derived forms with the suggestions of cat postures and movements [Fig.14]. I further developed objects using clay and added silhouettes of human and cats as a reference of scale [Fig. 15]. The clay models allowed me to quickly visualize volumes and spaces.



Fig. 14  
Sketches of forms derived from cat postures



Fig. 15  
Clay models developed from sketches

## Public Space

To challenge the design norm of existing types of cat cafés, I first ideated different open, public spaces where humans can interact with cats [Fig.16]. I designed an urban plaza where stray cats can be brought by animal welfare organizations to interact with anyone who passes by [Fig.17]. After consulting with The Michigan Humane Societies, I abandoned the idea due to potentially huge investments, the social context and weather condition of the chosen site, and the complexity of managing cats outdoor.

## Interior Space

After decided to change from an outdoor space to an interior space, I conducted site research and chose a vacant rental space in downtown Ann Arbor for the cat café. While ideating the spatial design, I considered: how can a spatial design accommodate different levels of interactions between cats and visitors? How can cat cafés intentionally create modes of interaction that are different from the human-cat interactions in traditional home settings and provide more research potentials? Attempting to answer the questions, I designed a range of spaces, both horizontally and vertically, for different levels of human-cat contact and interaction to take place [Fig.18].

The structure I placed in the café [Fig.19] is designed for humans to experience cat postures and movements, and it provides a mode of human-cat interaction hardly explored in other cat cafés and pet furniture designs. To further understand how cats and humans interact, I stepped back from the overall café concept and put my focus on developing this structure.

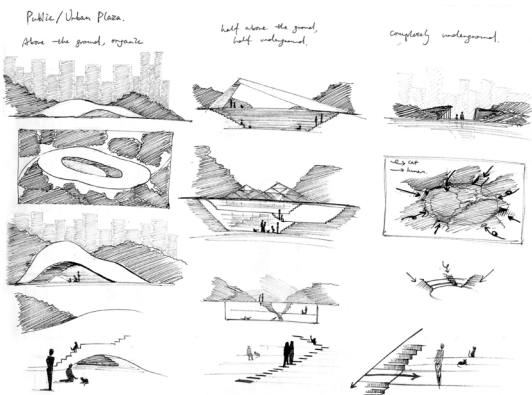


Fig. 16  
Ideation sketches  
of public spaces  
designed for  
human and cats

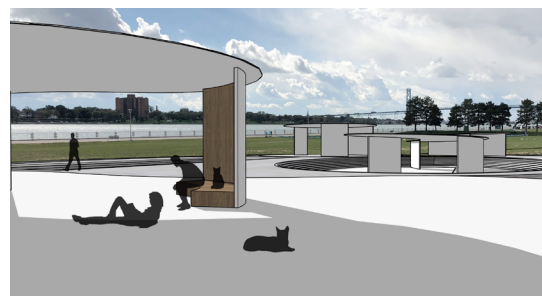


Fig. 17  
Visualization of  
an urban plaza  
designed for  
human and cats



Fig. 18  
Visualization  
of an interior  
space designed  
for human and cats



Fig. 19  
A structure  
designed for  
humans to behave  
like cats



## Prototyping and Design Development

### Experimental Approach

While iterating different spatial structures, I prototyped low-fidelity mockups of the spaces using cardboard and tape, and I took pictures of a human user crawling through the prototype. By annotating on images of the prototypes [Fig. 20], I was able to quickly identify spaces for cats in relation to the scale of the human body.

Through making a more developed, full-scale, modular prototype using cardboard, MDF, and carpets [Fig. 21], I was able to gain better understanding of the structure and make easy modifications through an experimental process. While adding posts as structural supports to the prototype, I discovered other functional use of the posts such as serving as scratching posts for cats and as “barriers” that guide humans to twist their bodies like cats [Fig. 22].

I brought the prototype to Tiny Lions, a cat café in Ann Arbor, as study tools and hoped to document the behavior of cat and human users [Fig. 23]. Three cats at Tiny Lions had physical interaction with the prototype. None of the cats stayed inside the prototype long enough for humans to have closer interaction with them, but I still observed interesting ways the cats explored the spaces inside the prototype. I further developed the spatial design model as modules that can be easily transported and reconfigured for different environments and intentions [Fig.24]. I also visualized the design through a physical scale model [Fig.25] and digital renderings placed in the cat café environment [Fig. 26].

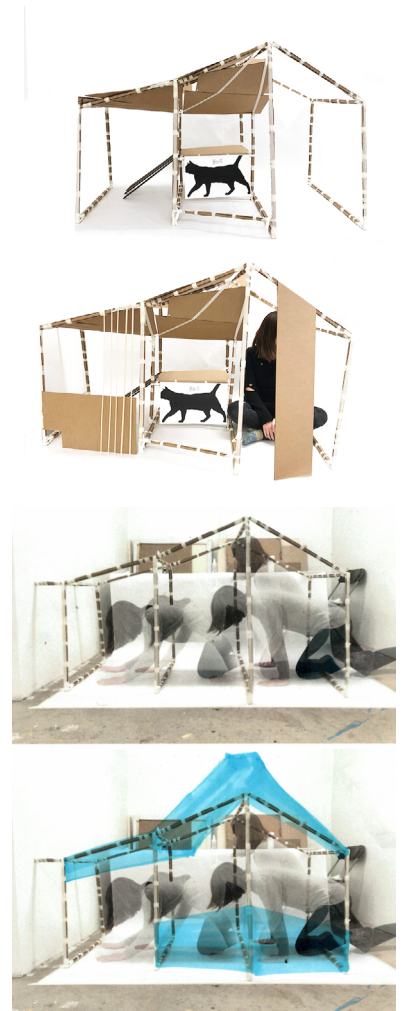


Fig. 20  
Annotated, low-fidelity, full-scale prototype



Fig. 21  
Full-scale prototype



Fig. 22  
Humans are guided to experience the movements and postures of cats



Fig. 23  
Documentation footage of people and cats inside the full-scale prototype.  
Tiny Lions Lounge and Adoption Center, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.  
Mar 17th, 2019

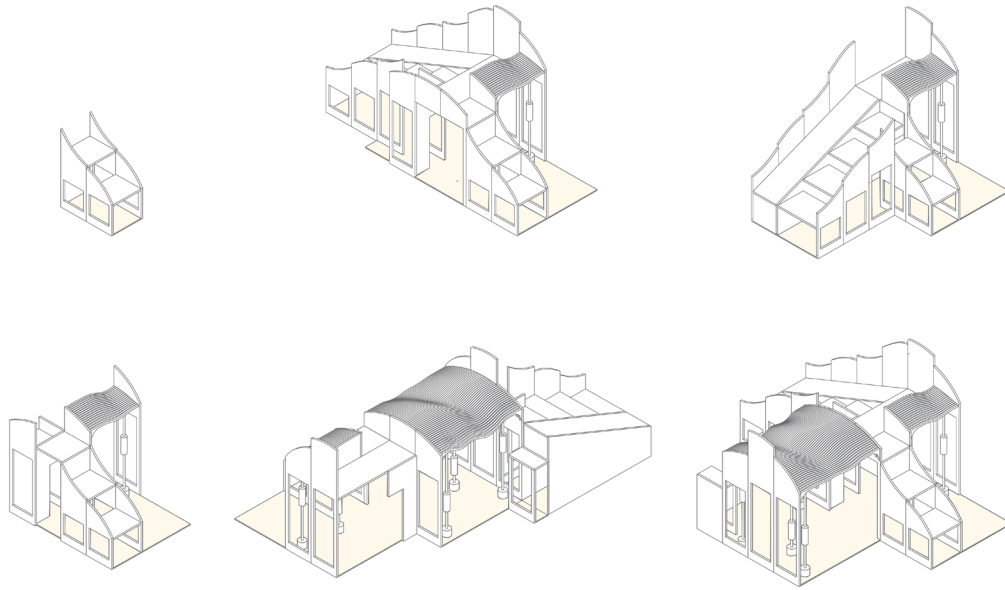


Fig. 24  
Different configurations of the modular design

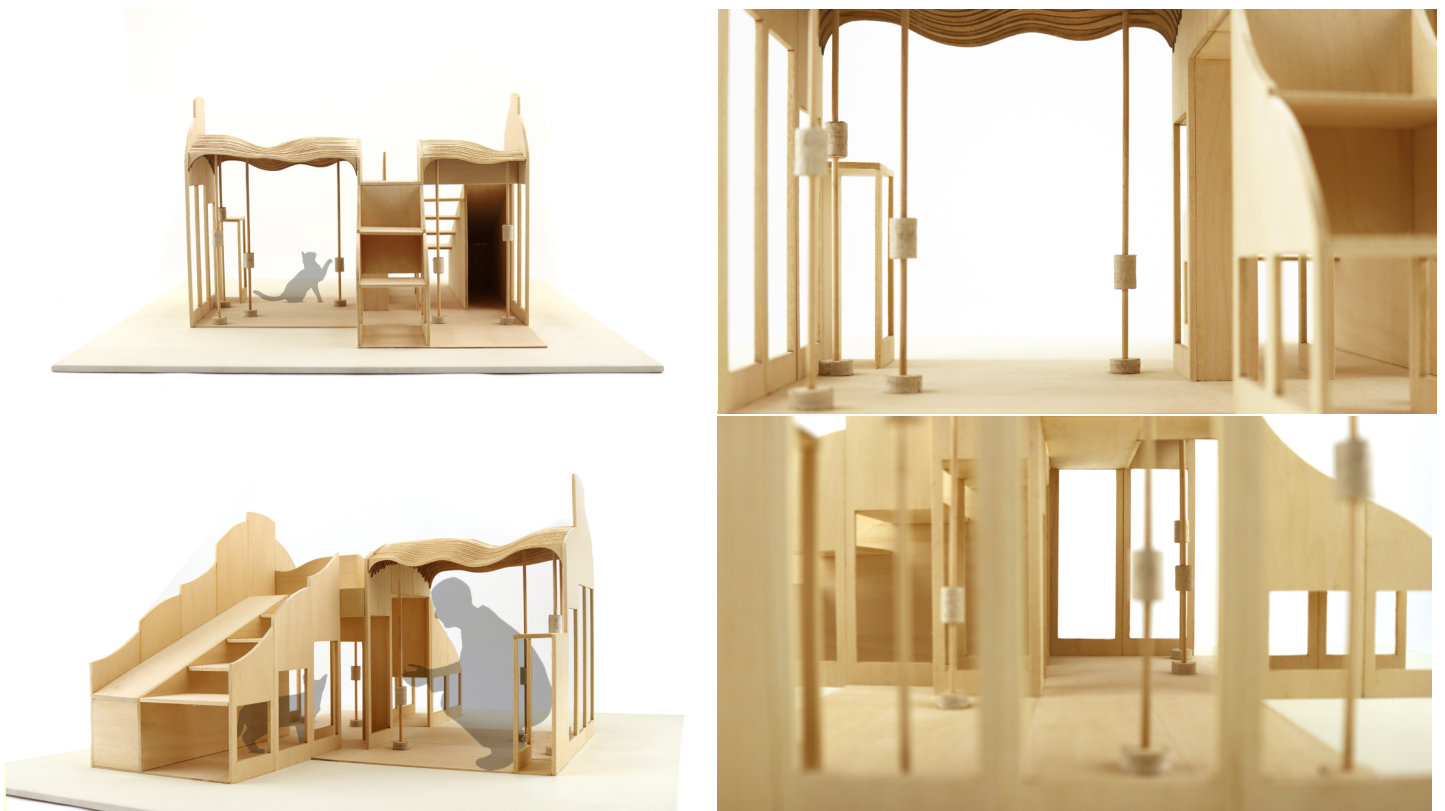


Fig. 25  
A 1:5 physical scale model

## CREATIVE WORK

Placed in a cat café context, *Feline Space* seeks new ways to design commercial spaces for human and animal users. It functions both as a piece of furniture for humans and a built environment for cats. Through its modular design, *Feline Space* can be reconfigured for different cat café environments or to be used in the same cat café for creating a variety of experiences for humans and cats. *Feline Space* attempts to address the ethical concerns raised by cat cafés through an experimental spatial design that invites human visitors to actually inhabit the spaces of cats. In the “cat’s space,” humans are guided to crawl down, twist their bodies, and explore the movements of cats. In the experimental process, I created spatial design mockups in which the behavior of humans and cats are documented and studied. As a study tool, *Feline Space* suggests different ways of seeing, creating, and using spaces in pet cafés.



Fig. 26  
Renderings of the model  
placed in a cat café environment

## CONCLUSION

When I started the project, I was filled with visions of a revolutionary space that could ultimately challenge the existing design notions of cat cafés. During the iterative process of creating different types of spaces for human and cat interaction, my project changed from renderings of a large-scale, utopian public plaza to experimental prototypes. When I shifted my focus from producing a grand architectural space to the process of learning while iterating, *Feline Space* became not merely a design outcome but study tools for myself and other designers working on pet furniture and spatial designs. *Feline Space* does not offer a perfect answer to the cat café dilemma, but I wish my deliverables will become valuable resources for future cat café designs and can invite more designers to incorporate the needs of non-human users into their designs.

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