

GREAT CENTRAL HOTEL

PROJECT: THE GREAT CENTRAL HOTEL
LOCATION: LEICESTER, UK
ORIGINAL STRUCTURE: GREAT CENTRAL RAILWAY (1899), GRADE II LISTED BUILDING
SUBMISSION FOR: SPATIAL EXPERIENCE & INTERIOR RESPONSE AWARD

The Great Central Hotel is a boutique hotel and community cafe located in a former Leicester railway station, currently underutilised. This project allows the building to narrate its own history through design. Mirroring the conceptual depth of a physical archive, each zone implements a distinct stylistic strategy tailored to the building's life stages. The overall user experience is designed as an immersive journey of discovery and sparking human curiosity, allowing visitors to see the space through the eyes of the building itself. The project aims to create a deeper connection between the visitor and the building. Guests don't just occupy a room, they discover...



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Demolition work on Leicester's Talbot Lane

Around 300 houses and several streets were demolished to make way for the construction of Leicester Central Station. Its construction reshaped a portion of the layout of the city.

Roman mosaic discovered beneath the station site

During excavation works, a Roman mosaic was uncovered in the basement of a house at 58 Jerry Wall St. This house was later demolished.

Leicester Central during construction

Construction of Leicester Central Station began in the late 1890s as part of the Great Central Railway's route linking northern industrial cities with London.

Completion of the station

Completed in 1899, Leicester Central became the largest single building in Leicester at the time. The station remained open for just 70 years, and some residents witnessed both opening and closure in 1969.

Demolition of the station

Much of the railway infrastructure was later demolished, and although the main station building survived, several original architectural features were lost during the process.

Building facade in 2000

Building facade in 2020

WITHDRAWAL OF PASSENGER TRAIN SERVICES
 BETWEEN NOTTINGHAM ARKWRIGHT STREET AND RUGBY CENTRAL

LEICESTER MUSEUMS RECEIVED

Official notice informing passengers of the closure of the station, symbolising the beginning of the end.



Great Central Hotel's Façade

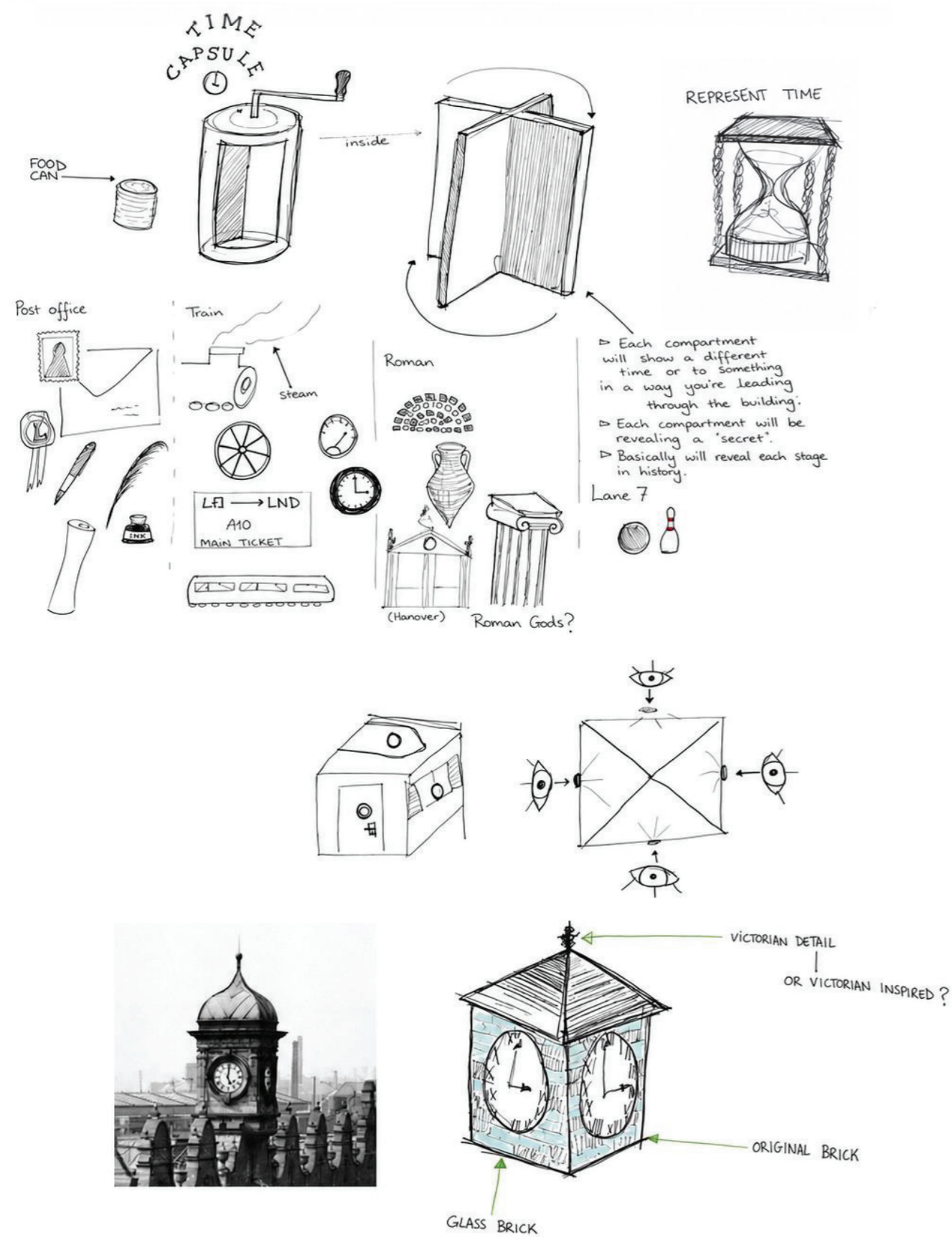


Great Central Hotel - Reception

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Inspired by the history of Leicester Central Station, the concept reimagines the building as a storyteller and silent witness to time. Having observed generations of arrivals, departures and everyday moments, the station is viewed as a keeper of memories, with traces of its past embedded within its walls.

The concept explores the idea of revealing hidden stories and memories through curiosity, discovery and interaction. Rather than presenting history as a fixed record, the proposal encourages visitors to uncover fragments of the station's story, creating a more personal connection between the building and its users.



Compartment A -
Representing the Roman
Past of the area



Compartment B -
Representing the Great
Central Railway



Compartment C -
Representing the Post
Office

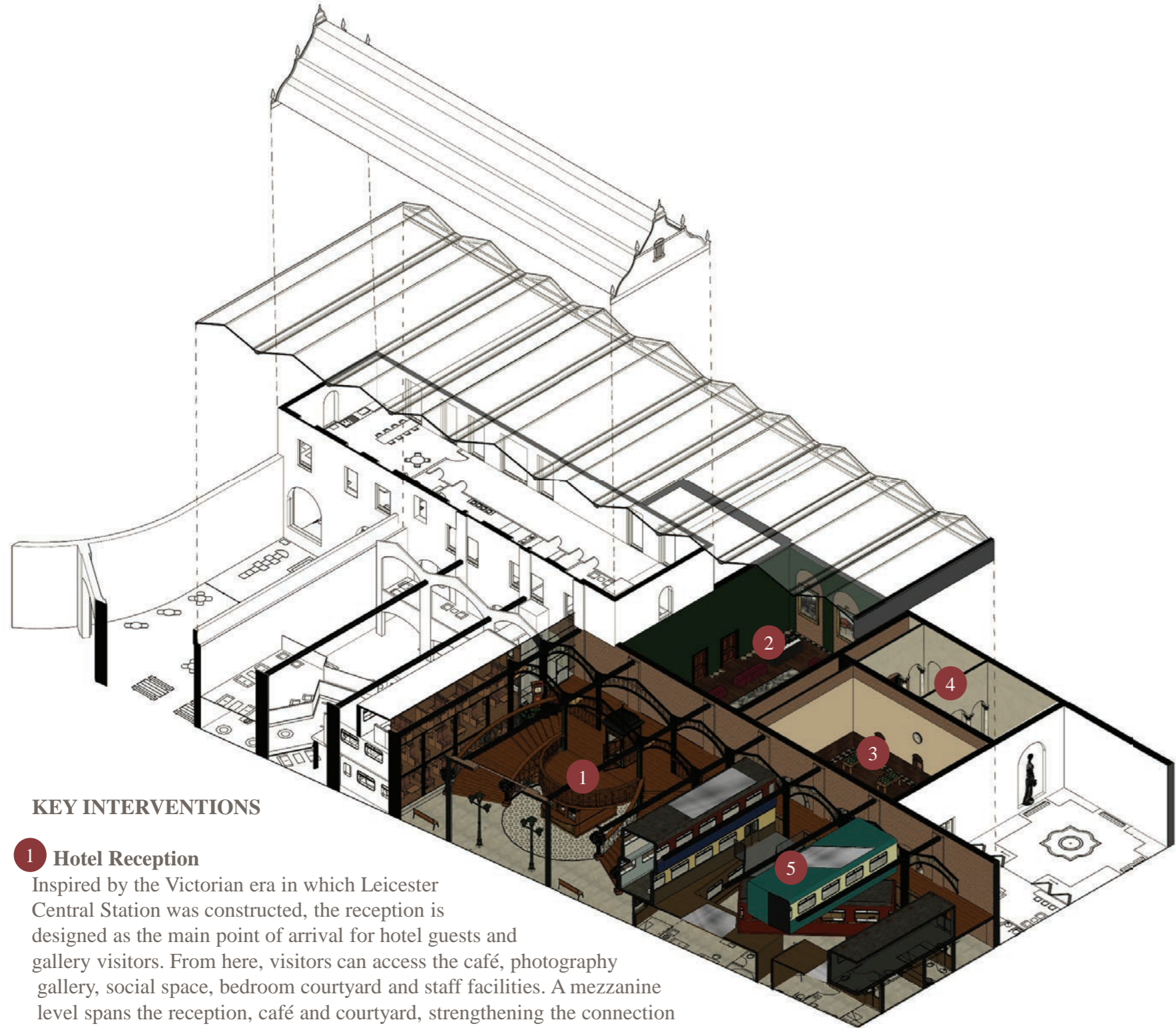


Compartment D -
Representing Lane 7

The concept model translates these ideas into a physical form. The eye symbolises the station as a witness to history, while the clock represents the passage of time and the connection between past, present and future. Hidden compartments reveal significant moments from the site's history, and the leather-bound book represents future stories yet to be written. Together, these elements express the station as a living archive of memories, continuously preserving the past while creating new experiences for future generations.



SPATIAL NARRATIVE



KEY INTERVENTIONS

1 Hotel Reception

Inspired by the Victorian era in which Leicester Central Station was constructed, the reception is designed as the main point of arrival for hotel guests and gallery visitors. From here, visitors can access the café, photography gallery, social space, bedroom courtyard and staff facilities. A mezzanine level spans the reception, café and courtyard, strengthening the connection between these spaces and enhancing the sense of openness throughout the building.

2 Photography Gallery

The gallery celebrates the history of Leicester Central Station through archival photographs, locomotive models and a detailed scale model of Leicester as it appeared when the station was still in operation. Together, these exhibits provide visitors with a deeper understanding of the station's significance within the city and its evolution over time, creating an immersive introduction to the building's heritage.

3 Social Space

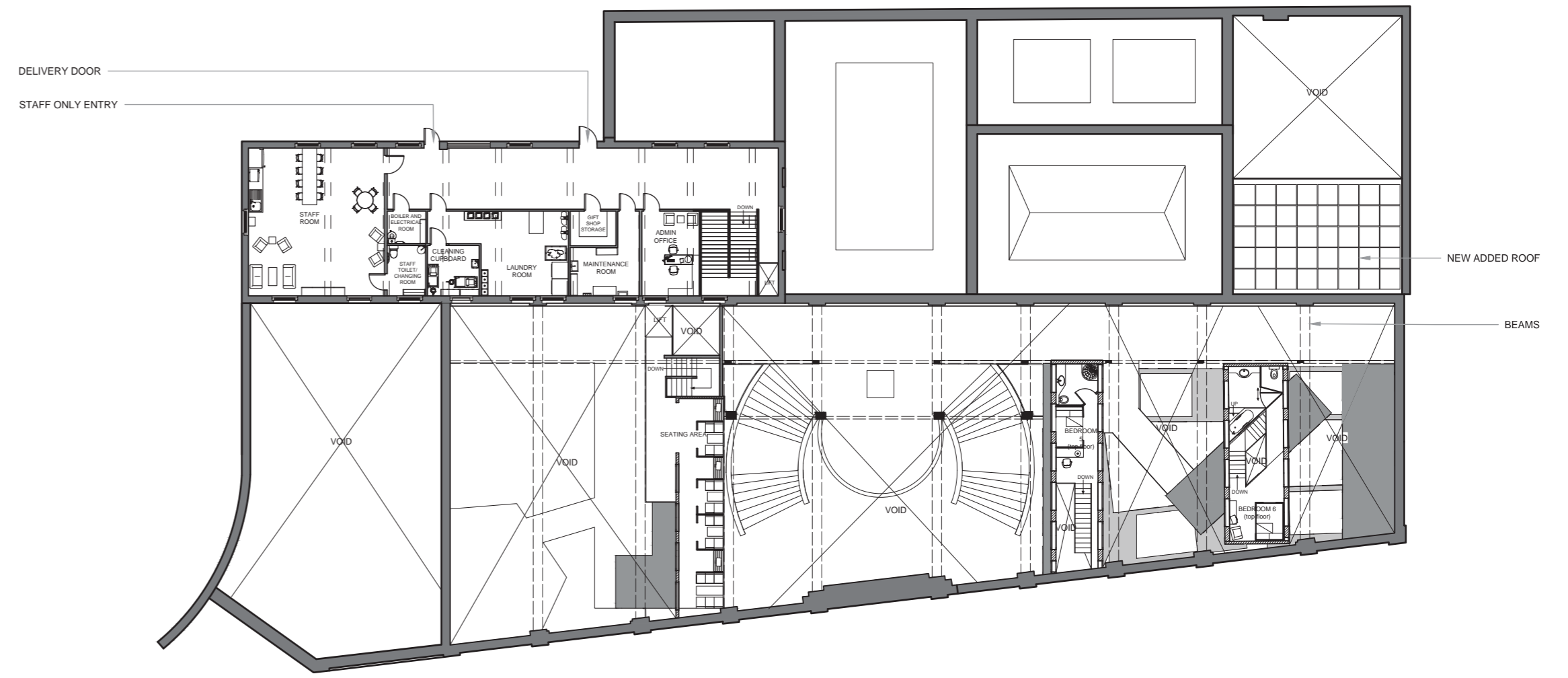
Designed as an evening destination for hotel guests, the social space provides an area for entertainment, relaxation and interaction. The space incorporates repurposed arcade games, alongside a large seating area inspired by the Roman triclinium featured within the secret exhibition. A projector screen allows guests to watch films and gather socially throughout the evening. Inspired by the urban atmosphere of Lane 7, the design combines Victorian elements such as velvet upholstery and gold detailing with bright colours, neon accents, graffiti and wall art. These graphic interventions also provide subtle hints towards the hidden entrance of the Roman exhibition, encouraging curiosity and exploration.

4 Secret Exhibition

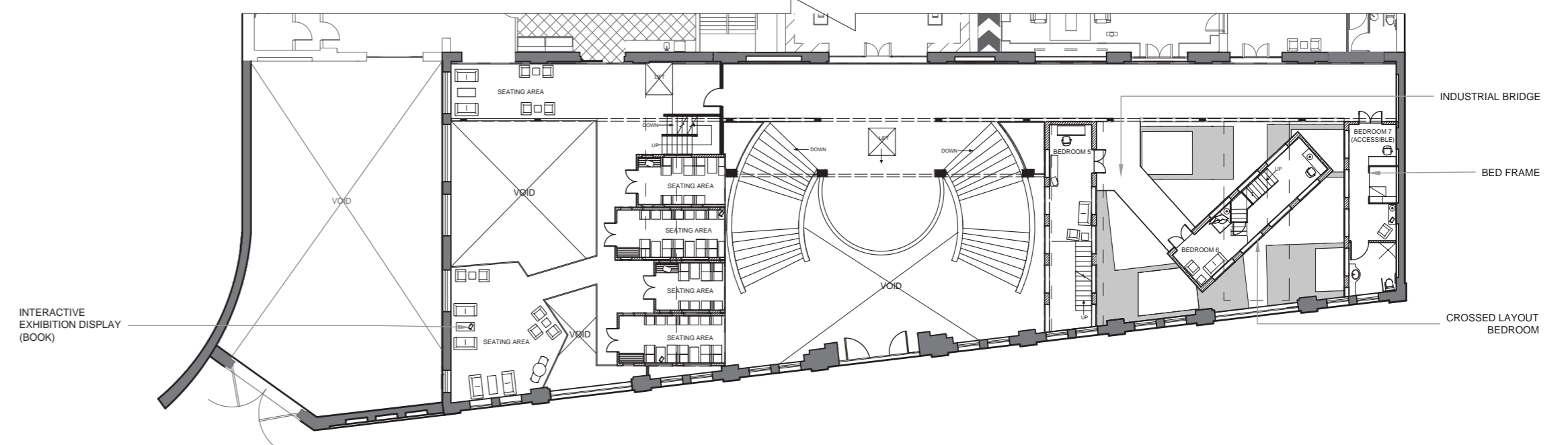
Hidden behind the mirror in the social space, the secret exhibition reveals one of the earliest chapters of Leicester's history. In contrast to the vibrant and energetic atmosphere of the surrounding spaces, this secret and immersive exhibition is designed as a calm environment inspired by the Roman mosaic discovered on the site. The space reinterprets elements of a Roman domus through an accessible triclinium seating area, a display dedicated to Vesta, the home goddess, and an impluvium replica positioned beneath the existing rooflight. Activated by a sensor when visitors enter the room, the impluvium releases water to recreate the sound and atmosphere of a functioning Roman courtyard. Together, these elements create a reflective environment that encourages visitors to slow down and engage with one of the earliest layers of the site's history.

5 Bedroom Courtyard

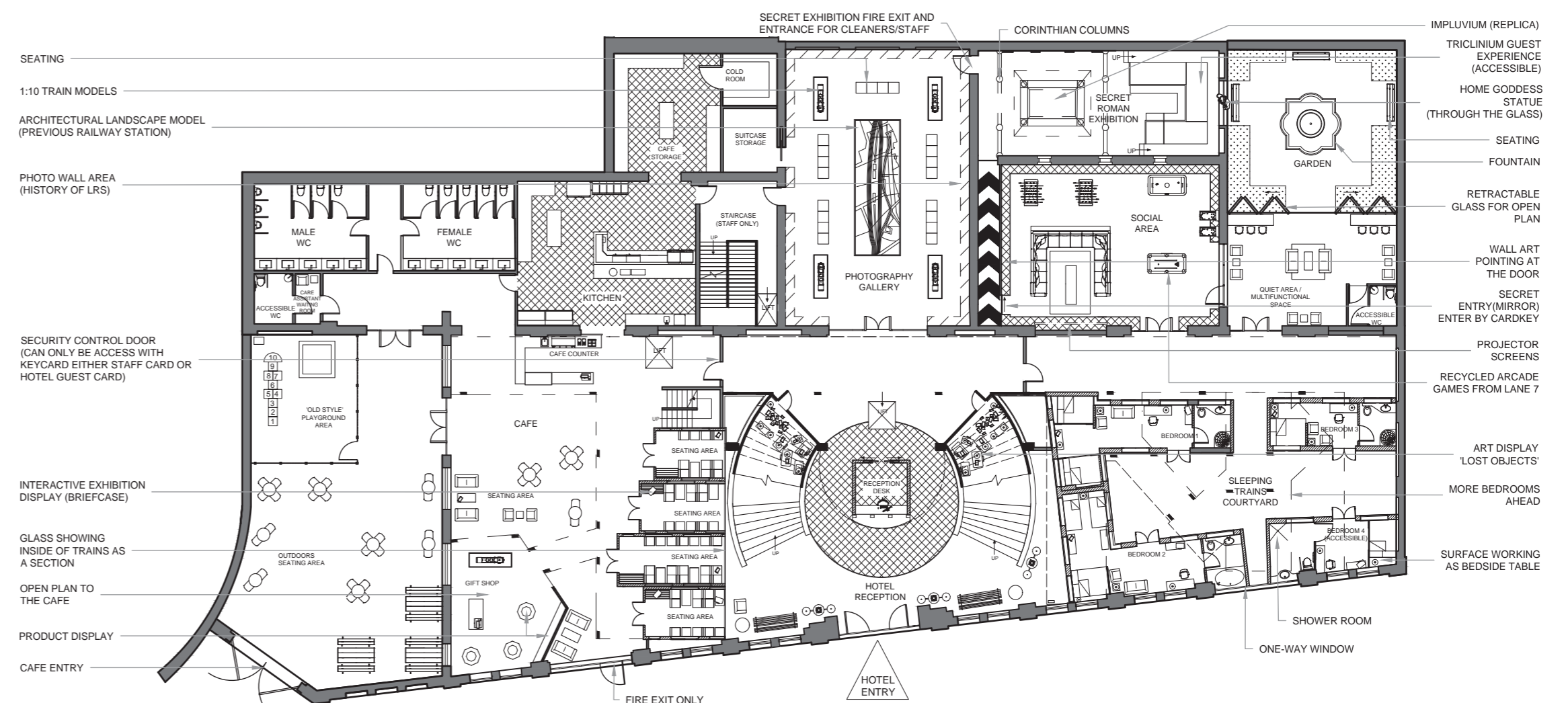
The bedroom courtyard is inspired by the arrangement of disused train carriages that were once stored in scrapyards around Leicester. The courtyard contains seven guest bedrooms, including two accessible rooms and two split-level rooms. While the bedroom interiors are inspired by the Victorian character of Leicester Central Station, the courtyard adopts a more industrial aesthetic influenced by railway infrastructure and the site's engineering heritage. Each room also contains a briefcase display featuring artefacts and information related to different aspects of the station's history, allowing guests to interact with and discover the building's story during their stay.



1st Floor



Mezzanine Level



Ground Floor



Reception desk and café seating area featuring repurposed carriages

1 The bespoke reception desk is inspired by historic railway ticket offices, reinterpreting traditional Victorian detailing within a contemporary hotel setting. Engraved into the front of the desk is a map of Leicester Central Station's former track layout, illuminated from behind to reveal the railway lines. From reception, visitors can see directly into the train carriage café seating and accommodation courtyard, visually connecting different areas of the building. Beneath the staircase, the *Lost and Found* display presents objects from different periods of the station's history, creating the impression of items forgotten and rediscovered over time.



'Lost & Found' art display under the stairs

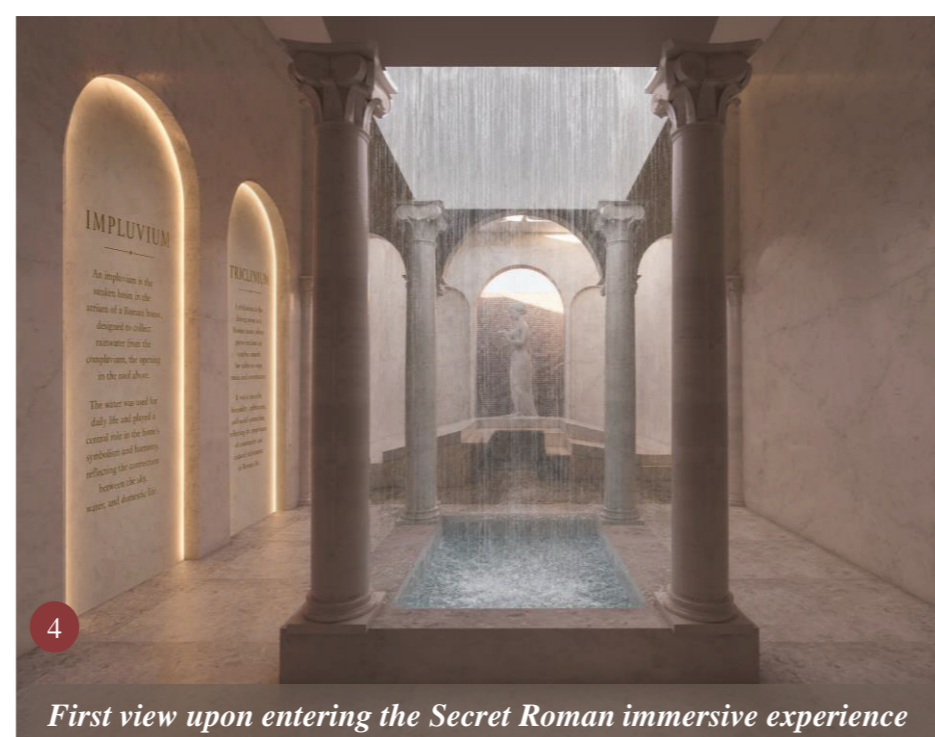


Photography Gallery

2 Inspired by Victorian art galleries and historic railway waiting rooms, the gallery combines dark timber finishes, brick detailing and ornate framing to create an immersive exhibition environment. The deep green walls are inspired by the colour of the locomotives that operated from Leicester Central Station prior to nationalisation, referencing a significant period in the station's history. Archival photographs documenting the development of the station allow visitors to engage with its past and develop a deeper connection to the building's heritage.

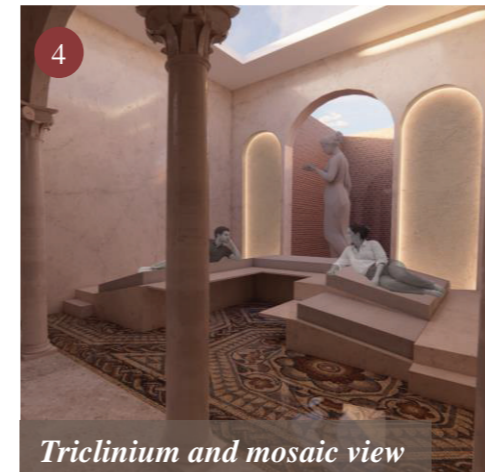


Social Room, looking toward secret mirror door wall



First view upon entering the Secret Roman immersive experience

3 4 The artwork and graffiti throughout the social space contain subtle clues leading visitors towards a concealed entrance hidden behind a mirror in the wall. Activated using a room key card, the secret passage reveals a Roman-inspired exhibition centred around the mosaic discovered on the site. Using water, natural light and replicas of Roman elements, the space offers a calm and immersive contrast to the vibrant atmosphere of the social area.

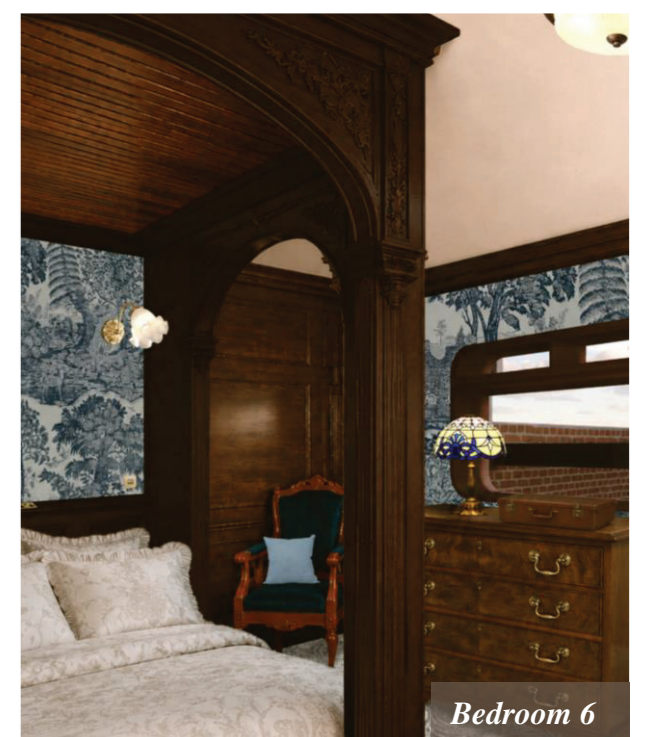


Triclinium and mosaic view



Ground Floor View of Bedroom Courtyard

5 Victorian-inspired interiors combine rich materials, period detailing and bespoke furniture to create a distinctive guest experience. In contrast, the courtyard adopts a more industrial character influenced by railway infrastructure and historic train carriage yards. Each room contains an interactive briefcase display featuring artefacts and stories from different periods of Leicester Central Station's history, allowing guests to continue discovering the building's past throughout their stay.



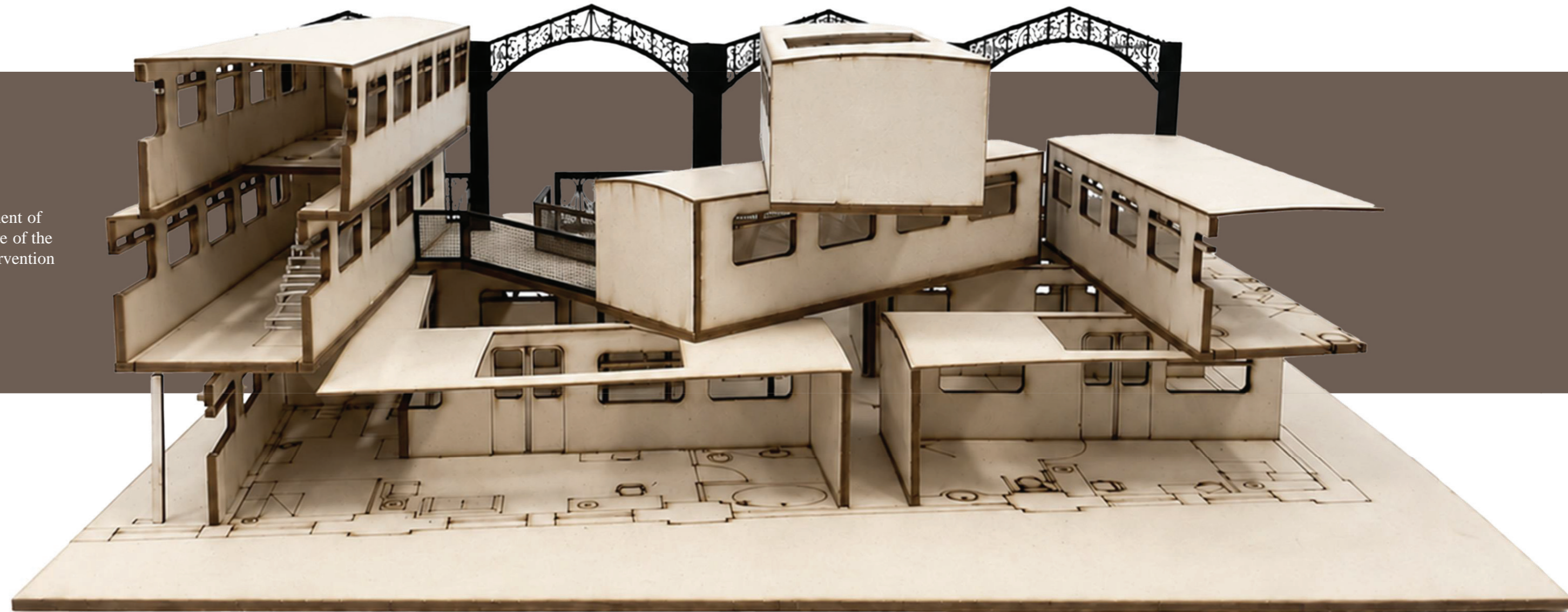
Bedroom 6



Interactive briefcase display

Bedroom Courtyard model @ 1:50

This model was developed to communicate the spatial arrangement of the train carriage accommodation within the existing architecture of the historic railway station. It helps illustrate how the proposed intervention sits within, relates to, and responds to the surrounding structure.



Great Central Hotel : Material Board Specification

1	Brintons	10/50418	Summer Breeze Cloud	Carpet	Bedrooms flooring
2	Sueno	N/A	Amethyst Mystic Velvet	Fabric (Velvet)	Social area Sofa
3	Sanderson	DVLV235272 /C	Bobo Velvet Marine	Fabric (Velvet)	Sofas and cushions
4	AGUA	SKY	Rizada Collection	Fabric (Velvet)	Sofas and Cushions
5	Sanderson	DSOR234348 /C	Sorilla Damask Delft Linen	Fabric	Bedroom cushions
6	Sanderson	217480	Highgrove Toile	Wall Covering	Bedroom wall and details
7	Victorian Plumbing	CHEQL-BLA	Stonehouse studio Chequers Large Black and White	Tile	Social area flooring
8	Direct Wood Flooring	0330818255	Smoked Old French Oak	Engineered Wood Flooring	Rooms, reception and social area flooring
9	Kaza	Gold	Inherited Serendipity	Gold Finish concrete	Reception desk
10	Audacity	LAM-AUTL-12-314	Laminate Tile White Marble	Laminate Tile	Secret exhibition
11	Claybrook	Discotheque	Discotheque Tina	Tile	Reception flooring
12	Victorian Plumbing	HELM2020	Helena Mosaic Effect	Tile	Mosaic in Roman exhibition

Material board

This material board was developed as a communication tool to convey the project's narrative and material strategy. Presented within a re-purposed briefcase, it references the heritage of railway travel that informs the wider design concept while showcasing the materials, finishes, and specifications used throughout the scheme.

The briefcase also serves as a physical prototype of the interactive information cases proposed within the hotel. Elements such as the enclosed specification letter encourage users to physically open and engage with the contents, reinforcing the project's themes of discovery, storytelling, and journey.