

THE ETHNOGRAPHY PROJECT

BEL FORNO CAFÉ

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ABOUT THE SITE

Bel Forno is a privately-owned café in North Berkeley, resting at the fork in Shattuck Avenue. The café primarily serves neighboring residents and is busiest on weekday mornings and on weekends. This café serves coffee, pastries, pizza, pasta, and more. Bel Forno has a rugged, wooden interior with a hometown feel.



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INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

ABOUT THE CUSTOMERS

Bel Forno attracts middle- to upper-class guests — predominantly caucasian — due to the rather high price of their food and their location in North Berkeley. A few students are there, though. The insides of the café is conducive to people who seek either a quiet place or a social meeting place. Those who belong in the former generally sit and study by themselves, while those in the latter category bring along a guest or two, generally their spouses or significant others, and chat over a cup of mocha or a gourmet sandwich. The small round tables are ideal for both the introvert and the social guests: the former use the entire table while the latter get in close together. The chairs are arranged in such a way to allow pairs to face each other. A single counter with a view of the sidewalk is also available for people who simply wish to eat alone, which customers don't mind using while looking at the feet of passers-by.

The customers seem to come to Bel Forno more for its atmosphere than for its food. They did not seem too concerned about eating, but rather wanted to simply spend the time there in the company of another or in the company of a book.

ABOUT THE SPACE

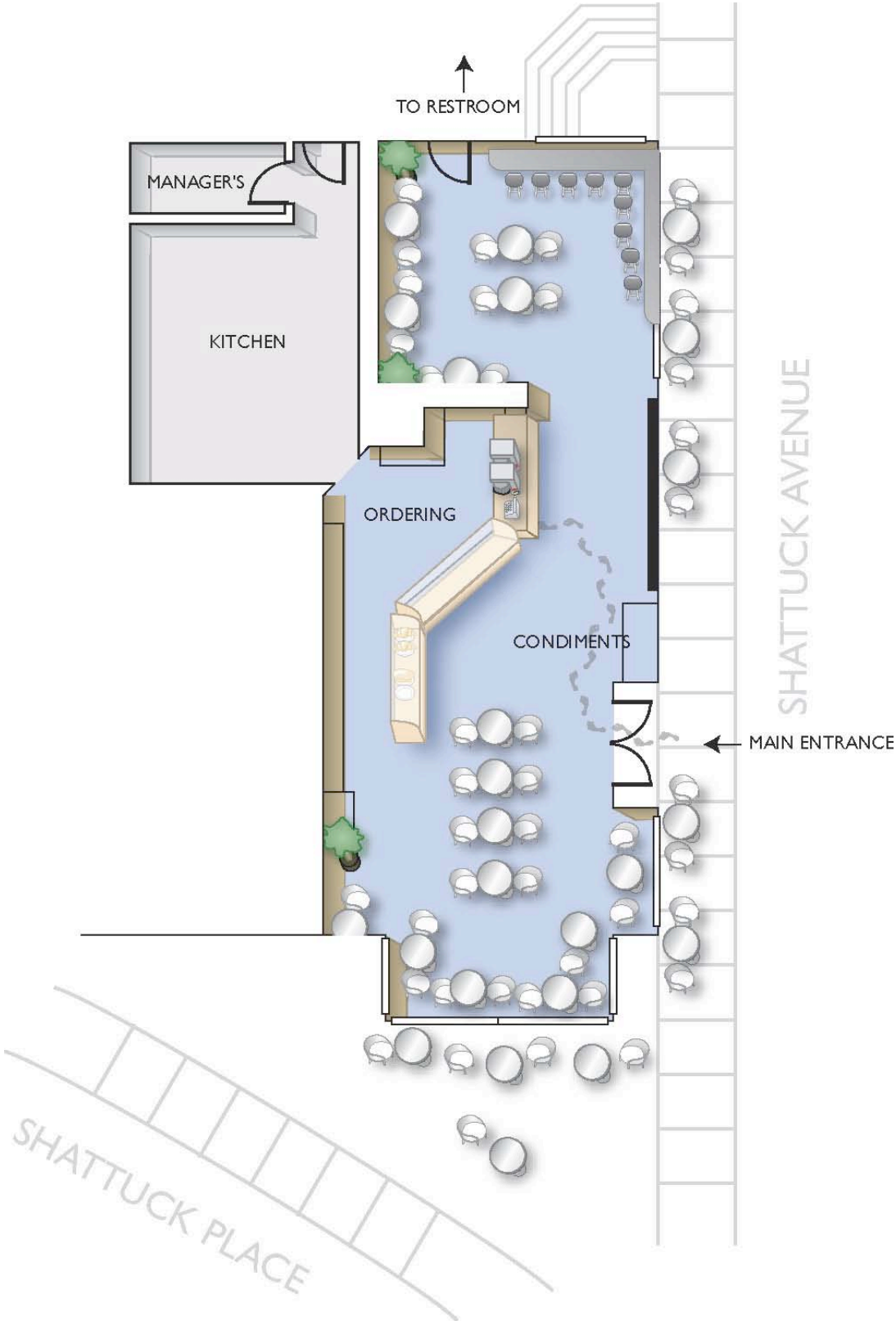
Three areas make up the Bel Forno: a dominant inside room filled with round tables, an outside eating area, and a separate space for the dining counter. The variety of eating spaces help the café cater to customers with different preferences.

Inside, the café's space is small, with a somewhat low ceiling and narrow space in between tables, to allow for a close, intimate setting. The windows and mirrors reach from the ceiling to below desk level, offering a generous, unobstructed view of the frantic world with the traffic of Shattuck Avenue; altogether, they manage to block the outside noise. Unused ceiling fans hang still from the ceiling, contributing to the overall slow pace of things within.

ABOUT THE ARCHITECTURE

The incandescent and warm-yellow lights, quaint wooden walls, and tiled floors give Bel Forno a warm, homely feel. Though the spacing of the tables is small, the room hardly feels cramped. The café feels open due to the large windows and the mirrors on the wall, creating the illusion of more space. Leafy-green plants and potted trees inside the room make the room feel more natural, and contrast well to the sterile modern environment of, say, a Starbucks Coffee store. The northernmost room is less cozier because it receives less sunlight and less visible attention from the staff; consequently, its rear entrance seems hardly used.

ORIGINAL DESIGN



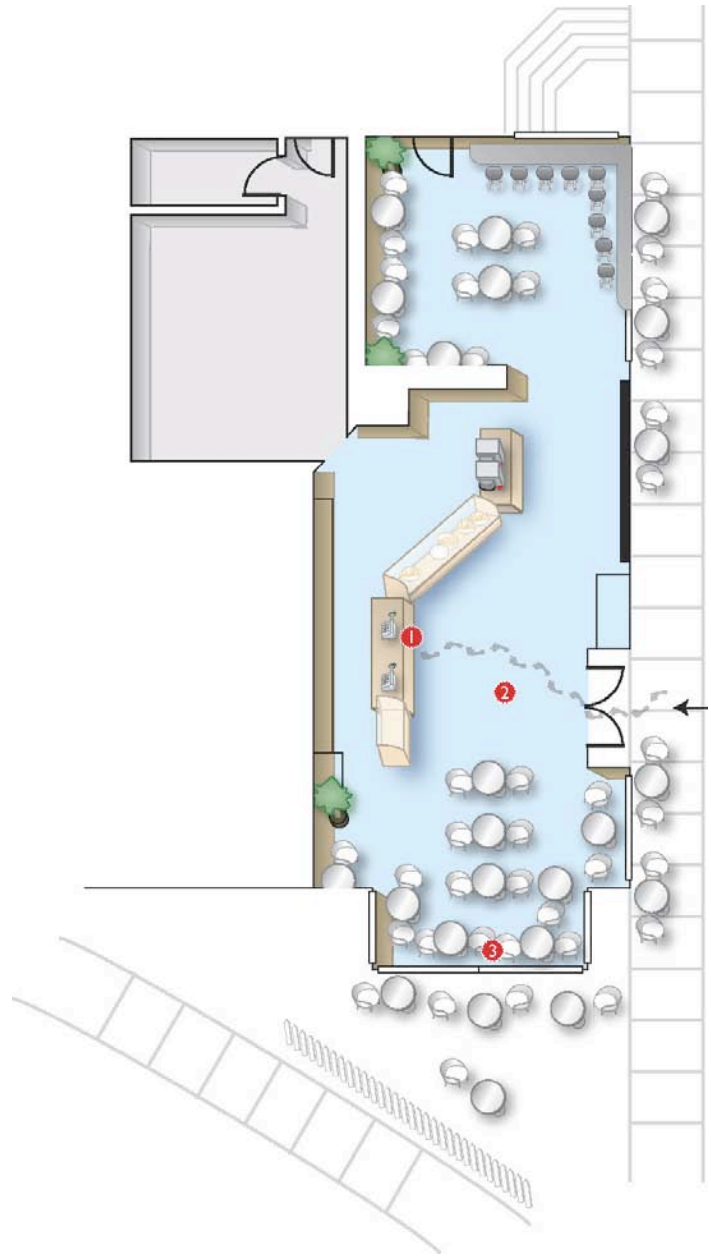
INITIAL REDESIGN

Bel Forno needs only minor redesigning. Customers who walk in are immediately confronted with a row of tables, and must turn right to see the cashier. For the seated guests on the southern end of the building, the cashier's current place is ideal since it is out of the way; however, a sufficiently long queue formed that prevented customers from being able to reach the condiment counter or otherwise pass through the hallway. The cashier should either relocate to a different spot, perhaps at the ① mark on the diagram, or immediately in front of the entrance, so that customers can form the queue out the door and onto the sidewalk.

The spacing (mark ②) between the point-of-purchase and the tables should be sufficiently distanced and further spread out so that those waiting in the queue would not disturb the seated customers. Spreading out some of the tables on the southern end of the restaurant would give customers some breathing room. Had Bel Forno been

operating at full capacity during peak dining hours, the place would have undoubtedly been crowded. (At 1:00 pm on a lazy Sunday, almost half of the tables were occupied, which did not make the place initially feel crowded and cramped.)

The dining counter (mark ③) could be relocated from its northeastern location to the southern windows. Breakfast diners would not appreciate staring the eastern sun in the morning at its current location; and, since Bel Forno is on a hill that slopes upward, diners at the counter are treated to a view of people's shoes and the floor. Changing to the southernmost end is more ideal because it is slightly elevated above the ground outside and the sun does not shine through the windows until noon.



INTERVIEW RESULTS

WITH THE MANAGER

Fred Shokouh is the manager and owner of Bel Forno. He generously gave his time on the morning of February 11th for an interview about his café.

The most frequently occurring, relevant words from the raw interview notes were “people”, “know”, “years”, and “service.” Some other relevant words include “neighborhood,” “close,” “relationship,” “customers,” “family,” and “children”. Fred — and his diction — emphasized the importance of knowing the customers personally and of delivering good service. Years of history and neighborhood presence have helped keep customers.

Interestingly enough, he did not mention the café’s appearance, aesthetic appeal, and visual and aural ambiance as factors in attracting return customers. We did not consider good old-fashioned service to be a major contributor, partly because we ourselves felt like the unfamiliar outsiders: as undergraduate students, we were considerably younger among their middle-aged and senior clientele. This certainly does not diminish the importance of the café’s environment; the polished, boarded walls, along with tall windows and classical music, make for a very open, inviting, and warm place to spend some time.

Bel Forno on a weekday morning is worlds apart from the people-filled sunny warm Sunday afternoon when we last visited the café. This time, the place is eerily quiet. People seem to come by themselves, alone, often taking one of the complimentary reading materials — magazines or newspapers — and ordering a warm beverage: coffee, hot chocolate, mocha. Customers huddle over their newspapers, sitting close to the walls, implicitly signaling their desire for privacy. The café feels much more empty and spacious than it was during the weekend; it feels much more warmer inside than the dark, bleak cloudy outdoors, but the lack of people certainly made one aware of the solitude.

WITH A CUSTOMER

Reflections on the interview and its content:

- Bel Forno is a place for the neighborhood. The neighborhood is composed of mainly the elderly and those who have lived around that area for an extended length of time. Students are rarely seen in Bel Forno.
- The informant likes the place because of the sitting areas provided to the customers. Its popularity might be due to the fact that the elderly people often cannot stand up for too long.
- The environment inside the café gives a protected feeling, since soundproof windows block out all outdoor sounds. I agreed with the informant in my first impressions of the place.
- The informant did not find the difference in mood in the front and back areas of the café to be a bad thing. On the contrary, my redesign of the café eliminated the solitary and quiet mood that existed in the back portion of the café. This illustrates the point that architects and residents do not think alike all the time, highlighting the importance of an informed design.
- Continuing with my previous point, the informant also did not mind the height of the lunch counter or the position of the ordering counter. From these differences I conclude that my redesign would have to tailor more to what the customers think are the positive and negative aspects of Bel Forno.

Process of Interview:

I showed up at Bel Forno one early morning. There were only around 10~12 people in the place, and they were either elderly male-male or female-female pairs, or middle-aged to elderly individuals. The racial makeup was predominantly white. I observed for about 30 minutes before I decided to initiate a conversation. I finally picked a lady who was eating breakfast and reading a magazine by herself. She might have sounded a bit reluctant when she agreed for the interview, but I proceeded. I started asking questions, and the conversation became more lively and relaxed. I recorded the interview on a tape-recorder with her permission. The interview lasted about 15 minutes, and no one else seemed to notice that there was an interview going on. Each table kept to themselves with their respective conversations. Bel Forno is a place to be with people while keeping to yourself, if you wanted to.

TAXONOMIES

The words and phrases from each interview were analyzed and categorized into diagrams.



LOCATION The physical setting of Bel Forno, in relation to its surroundings

MENU The food and beverages being served at Bel Forno

PEOPLE The people who visit Bel Forno on a regular basis

DISLIKES Things not completely satisfactory about Bel Forno

LIKES Things that shouldn't be changed at Bel Forno

TIME When and how often time is spent at Bel Forno

ATMOSPHERE The mood of the place and the amount of comfort it brings

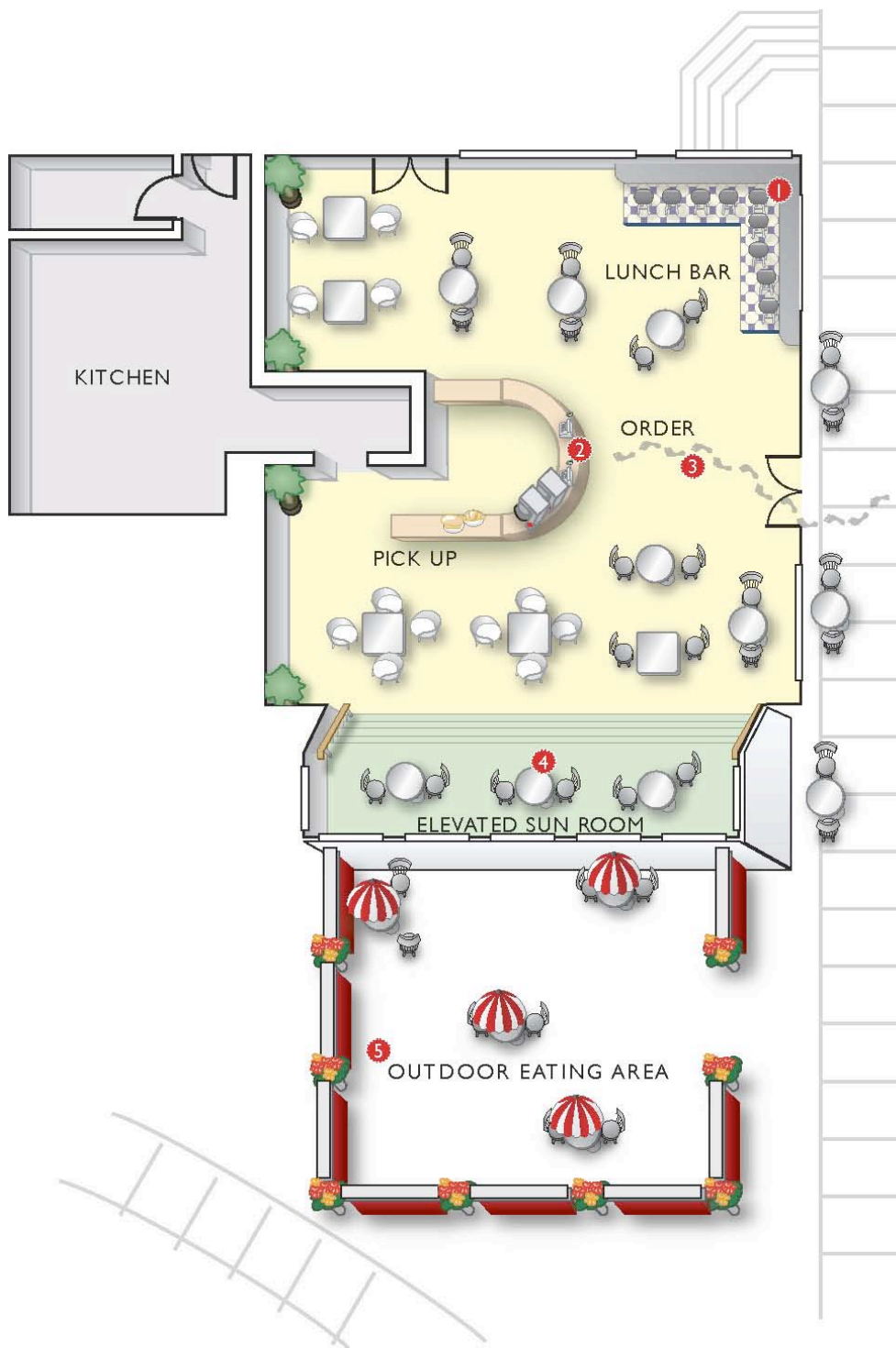


HISTORY The origins of the café and its building

CHANGE Things that could be modified at Bel Forno

INTIMACY How much the customers and the staff know each other

FINAL REDESIGN



- 1 • Elevated lunchbar
- 2 • Circular showcase counter with two cashiers for improved response time, and a lower counter to encourage open discussion between employees and customers.
- 3 • More open lobby space to accommodate crowding on weekends, with a greater variety of table and chair designs.
- 4 • Elevated southern dining area to allow more sunlight
- 5 • Outdoor eating area, protected by a low fence and lots of flowers.
- Drain outside northern door

DISCUSSION

INTERPRETATION OF INTERVIEW INTO REDESIGN

The following proposed items add to or modify the current state of Bel Forno:

- **Flowers:** Based on the manager's comment that the outdoor space looks worn, the flowers will make Bel Forno more aesthetically pleasing.
- **Outside fence:** to extend the protected feeling preferred by the customer from the indoor space to the outdoor space.
- **Adjustable umbrella shaded tables:** to give customers choice of sun exposure, and also to prolong the life of exterior tables.
- **Elevated southern seating area:** To create an additional level of elevation for the customer's changing mood.
- **Table and chair variety in height and shape:** To accommodate different moods and elevations, in addition to providing comfort through diverse seating options.
- **Circular counter:** to alleviate front door traffic.
- **Lowered pickup counter:** to make orders easily reached by customers both young and old.
- **Raised lunch bar:** to avoid eating at sidewalk eye-level, and also to provide additional elevation.
- **Drain outside northern door:** to prevent flooding, and to provide a safer route into the café on rainy days. (Easy access)
- **Two working cashiers:** to provide faster service, thereby decreasing congestion and crowding. The café is cozy, not crowded.

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE INITIAL AND FINAL REDESIGN

There was no complaint about overexposure in the outside eating areas; so adjustable umbrellas are installed over the tables to provide choice, not absolute change. An additional benefit of the umbrellas is to protect the outside tables from wear and tear.

Neither the manager nor the customer informant commented on the mirrors in the café. The mirrors expand the interior space visually. But since the customer likes Bel Forno for its warm and protected feeling, removal of the mirrors will likely enhance that feeling. The accuracy of this prediction will have to be confirmed in a POE.

The customer informant confirms the problem of crowding at the ordering counter. Therefore the counter will be made circular to provide a more fluid pathway.

To further improve customer service, there will be two working cashiers at the circular counter. This will speed up the service.

The customer informant does not consider the height of the lunch bar to be an issue. But to adhere to the customer's preference for diverse elevation and atmosphere, the lunch bar is raised. In addition, the change will raise the eye-level of the user above the sidewalk level, so s/he does not eat at people's feet.

Contrary to the initial assumption that the northern area should be assimilated into the rest of the café in terms of its mood and atmosphere, the customer informant prefers the separate seating area. Therefore in the redesign, the northern area will keep its original plan. However, the circular counter might change the usage of that area. This aspect will have to be revisited in a POE.

ORIGINAL INTERVIEWS

WITH FRED SHOKOUH, MANAGER

How long has this building been around?

For about 20 years. The Il Fornaio bakery was its first tenant. It was identical to the same Il Fornaio bakery chain in Italy, and had the whole design of the counter, material, bread, and goods. The guy who established the chain here, William Sonoma, also founded a line of housewares. They used to have Il Fornaio stores in Walnut Creek; the first one was in San Francisco. This [the Berkeley branch] was their second store. They have also opened up stores in Southern California. Now they've converted over as a restaurant, selling small coffee and pastries. There's one at the Broadway Center; now it's a beautiful restaurant there. They still have Il Fornaio chains at major cities, like San Francisco... [mentions that Bel Forno is about 18 years old now]

What is this place about? What makes Bel Forno unique?

The fact that it's been here so many years. At the time when Il Fornaio was here, even though it was an *Italian* bakery, their croissants used to win Bay Area Best Croissant awards, which was interesting because croissants are French! They had good name recognition and service behind it. When we took over, we had to change some of the stuff because we weren't Il Fornaio anymore. We started baking our own goods... good service. We've had this food for so many years.

Who are you?

I run the place. I manage the store with the help of others. I'm the owner. We've had this place since July 1990.

What kind of people come here?

All sorts of neighborhoods...mostly neighborhoods. The thing about it is that on all north, west, and east sides [relative to our café], it's residential; and south side has more businesses. We get a mixture of all the people surrounding here... some people passing through... but 90% of them are returning customers.

What attracts people to Bel Forno?

We've been here a number of years, the people who have been working here have worked here for eight years... little bit less...so people like to see that. See the same people, see the same thing, try to have good service, know the customers. And they come here... they get used to it... sometimes they even forget what they order, and rely on us to remember for them! One man — that guy who came in earlier — wanted his in a particular way... double sleeved cup, certain amount of foam and milk. That brings people back. You go to a place where they know each other. You know their family and you know their kids. It's a close relationship with the customer.

What do you like most about Bel Forno?

Customers, because I've known them for many years. I've seen their children grow, I see them every day, so you always have something in common. I look at them as a person, not as a customer. The people that I work with, they've been here so long, they sometimes know more than I do. They know how certain things should be. That helps. Customers, definitely.

What would you change about Bel Forno?

I would give more variety or change the menu, but that's very hard to do. Try to have some variety for pastries, for lunch, or salad; we're changing the salads in the next month. Well, we want to have Internet connection... some people might like it... they don't want to be home, or they're travelling, or they're coming through. Service is good. Food, I'm happy with it, so there's not a whole lot to change. Flower bed outside looks a little worn... tables outside might not look that good... but nothing to change in a major way.

When is Bel Forno the most crowded?

Saturdays and Sundays are usually the busiest. Morning gets busy, lunch is okay, afternoon gets quiet down. We've been closing at 6:00 for the longest time, so people are not used to being here in late afternoon and early evening.



WITH RENÉE, CUSTOMER

8:40 am
Monday, February 10, 2003

Jack (J): What do you feel when you come in to this place? And just get something to drink and sit down?

Renee (R): Um...What do I think of it. The mood here is um...I am going to say sunny...But that's not really a mood.

J: Yeah but it does describe the place, the windows,

R: yeah, the mood of it is, um...open, and sunny, and, um...it is, uh, busy, but not too busy. So it means that I can sit and read, and it doesn't overwhelm me with the noise. So I guess the mood is uh, I don't know, just a morning mood.

J: Do you usually come here in the morning, or...?

R: Uh, yeah. I don't come here every morning. But when I do come here, it is in the morning.

J: And how often would you say that is?

R: Oh gosh...maybe once a month.

J: Ok, uh...If you had to choose one word to describe Bel Forno to somebody else, who's never been here before, what word would you choose?

R: Let's see...what word...Comfortable?

J: Comfortable.

R: But it could be more comfortable though.

J: Why do you say that?

R: Because I don't think it has the most comfortable chairs.

J: Well, actually, I am reading a book on chairs.

R: Oh yeah? I think if they had different chairs it would probably be...you now I have actually met her [Galen Cranz].

J: Really?

R: Yeah, um...it is a long story, but I mean...

J: Ok,

R: It's a book about chairs? Oh that's right she did that big exhibit.

J: It's about how chairs are really uncomfortable. How designing the perfect chair is really really difficult.

R: Oh that must be really interesting. Anyway, if this place had more comfortable chairs I would probably come here more often.

J: that's great. Ok, and...

R: Uh, do you want, can I tell you more about what I think about this place?

J: Oh sure, no problem, go ahead.

R: um...In Berkeley, there's a lot of coffee places that are great, but you can't sit down

inside. And so, I especially come here because I like to be able to sit down inside, so, even though I like Peet's, I come here because you can't sit down at Peet's.

J: Right.

R: And that's...even in the...there's only...I can probably only name two or three places in the North Berkeley area that you can go inside and sit down, and have coffee. So, um...that are comfortable like this. And also because it has southern exposure, even on a cold day it is sunny in here

J: yeah. It is. And it is really quiet in here, I remember the first time I came in here I couldn't really hear any cars from the outside.

R: right. You don't hear the traffic.

J: It's really quiet in here.

R: It feels open but protected...So that's not a one-word description is it?

J: But it's good, yeah, it's a more detailed description, that great.

R: uh huh.

J: And what kind of people would you say, like to come to this place?

R: Well,...[mumbled on tape] I'd say older.

J: That's what I kinda noticed:

R: And I think it's because actually they are people who live very close by come here. Um, I think it's definitely...I mean I live within walking distance here, and I often see people I know from the neighborhood where I live in here. So when I say older, it's not a college...it's not a student place. It's a more... parent place.

J: Actually I live right in that place for a year, and I realized it's a little far

R: Oh no, this neighborhood is just more of a residential area, it's not a campus feeling.

J: um hum...

R: Not that that's bad, but...

J: Yeah I know, the coffee places...like Café Strada down on south side is really crowded, and really noisy, because of the students there.

R: right. Well there are times that I go there just because I like the atmosphere there, you know.

J: [mumbled on tape] place, where do you want to go?

R: I want to be able to go to some place where I can just sit down and read, and have my coffee...And if it is a warm day, I probably would not come here, because I want to be outside.

J: Have you ever sat outside here?

R: I have, but it's...

J: Noisy?

R: But it's nice, and there are times when I want to sit out there.

J: Ok so...while we are on the noise issue, what do you think about the location of this coffee shop? In terms of...major roads, um...

R: I think it's great. Uh, you know, that's very convenient, because the backside of it is the opposite of the front side of it. So, there's plenty of parking, it's easy access. And it's walkable.

J: Is there anything else you want to add about this place? Just in general?

R: I could comment on the food...

J: Anything would be fine.

R: uh, what do I tell you about the food? This place does not serve strong coffee compared to other places in Berkeley. So if you are a wimp, like me, you can have a cup of coffee without having to water it down. It is definitely not the Peet's kind of brew, it's lighter.

J: And what about, this interesting question. Uh, what would you do, if you are an architect, and you want to redesign this place?

R: hum, I think mentioned it needs more comfortable chairs, but that wouldn't really be redesigning the place. And they did redesign the place a while ago. I think, for me, the biggest thing about, I am not going to say [mumbled on tape], but is not to my taste, the furnishings for sure. I don't care for the fans. You know, um, the flooring. Window wise, it's fine, you know, um...I think it functions well, I think the fact that there's two separated seating areas, is a good thing, not a negative.

J: You ever sat at the lunch bar over there?

R: Yeah.

J: So what do you think about the bar and its height, in relation to the street?

R: Um...It doesn't bother me. I think that one of the things about this place is that it's diverse, in the physical environment. Sitting in here, you can kind of be in whichever elevation you want. It's quite...has a lot more diversity than a lot of other places. Um... On wet days, that side [the backdoor] is kind of a problem, I find.

J: Why's that?

R: Because the patio area which leads down to the bank, it seems puddlely, you know, it's a really minor thing. [mumbled on tape]

J: But this year is really dry.

R: I like, I mean, I really like the fact that they have decent reading material here...I wish they have bacon instead of ham. It's one of the few places where you can get eggs in the morning, easily. In fact, that's rare. I am still thinking that around here, of all the places that you...you could go to Saul's across the way, but that's a whole major, sit-down-and-order-from-a-menu experience, and it's more expensive.

J: yeah.

R: This is the only place in this area you can get eggs. So if you want protein in the morning. This is the only place you can come.

J: Well that's all I have for the questions.

R: Oh good!

J: Is there anything else you want to add?

R: no...

...

R: couldn't think of anything architecturally if there anything else I would like to change.

J; Well there's one thing I noticed. Uh, it's about the ordering counter, if it's too crowded when there's lots of people waiting in line.

R: You know, I think for the people waiting in line it might be cumbersome, but it generally doesn't enclose on the people who are sitting. So, um...I don't think I've been in here when the line is so long that it's a problem...if it has a long line, like other places have, I could see why it might be. But, you know, I've seen ten or twelve people standing there, and they just wrap around the counter, so...it's narrow in there, but it functions. I don't think I would find it to be so not functional that I would go to the expense to change it.

J: Thank you so much for your time.

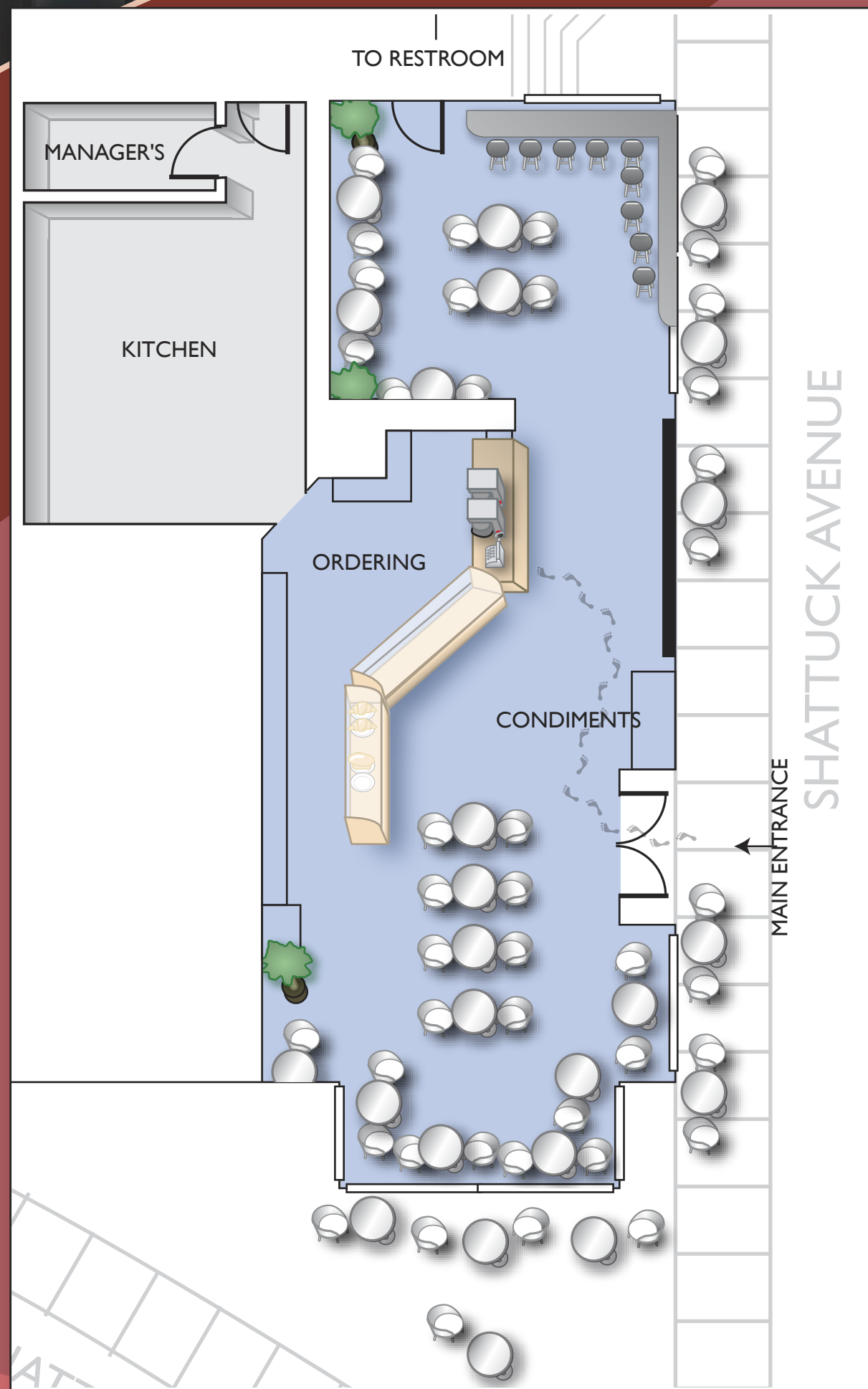
R: Ok. No problem.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY PROJECT

BEL FORNO CAFÉ

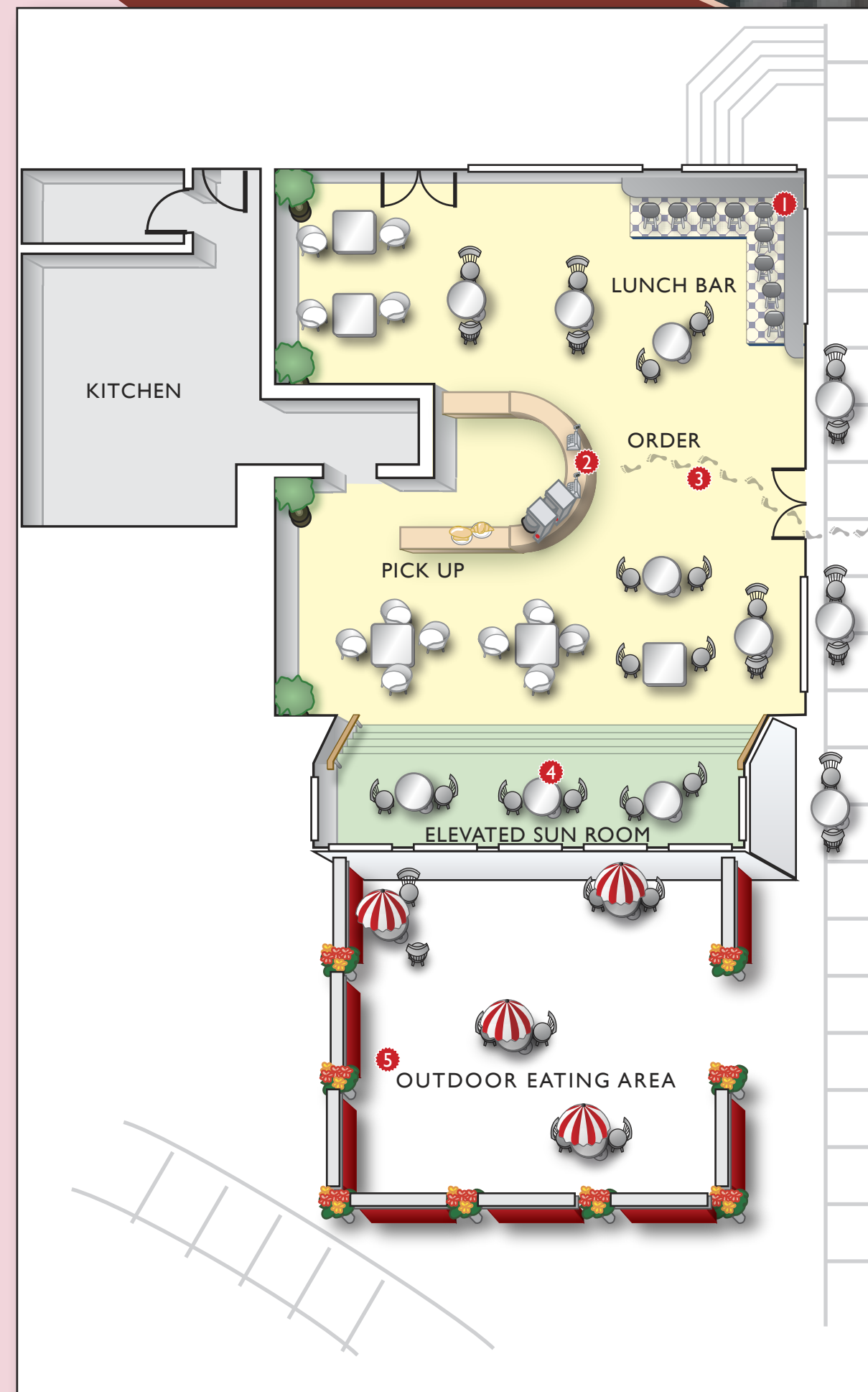
A SMALL CAFÉ WITH PASTRIES, PIZZA, PASTA AND MORE, BEL FORNO HAS A RUGGED, WOODEN INTERIOR WITH A HOMETOWN FEEL. NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES ARE AVAILABLE FOR CUSTOMERS. THE ATMOSPHERE IS COZY AND WARM, ESPECIALLY SUITABLE ON A COLD WINTER DAY. GRAB A CHAIR, AND ENJOY YOUR BOOK WITH A MOCHA.

INITIAL



- Some of our initial thoughts of its current design:
- Customers overexposed to sun outside
 - Mirrors are unnecessary
 - Ordering counter overcrowded
 - Lunch bar too low
 - Northern room's atmosphere too different
 - Cashier should be relocated. There's only one.

FINAL



- 1 • Elevated lunchbar
- 2 • Circular showcase counter with two cashiers for improved response time, and a lower counter to encourage open discussion between employees and customers.
- 3 • More open lobby space to accommodate crowding on weekends, with a greater variety of table and chair designs.
- 4 • Elevated southern dining area to allow more sunlight
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 - Drain outside northern door

"You know their family and you know their kids."

— FRED SHOKOUH, MANAGER

"It [Bel Forno] feels open but protected."

— RENÉE, CUSTOMER

"Sometimes they even forget what they order, and rely on us to remember for them!"

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"Sitting in here, you can...be in whichever elevation you want."

— RENÉE, CUSTOMER

"I don't think it [Bel Forno] has the most comfortable chairs."

— RENÉE, CUSTOMER

The customer informant agrees with the **crowding** of the counter; therefore, the counter will be made **circular** to provide a more **open** pathway. To further improve and speed up **customer service**, there will be two working cashiers at the circular counter. The **openness** of the counters allow the employees and the customers to further their relationships, something that the manager prizes.

The customer prefers **variety in elevation**, so a change in the lunchbar is implemented to add elevation — previously, customers were only able to see the feet of those who walked by.

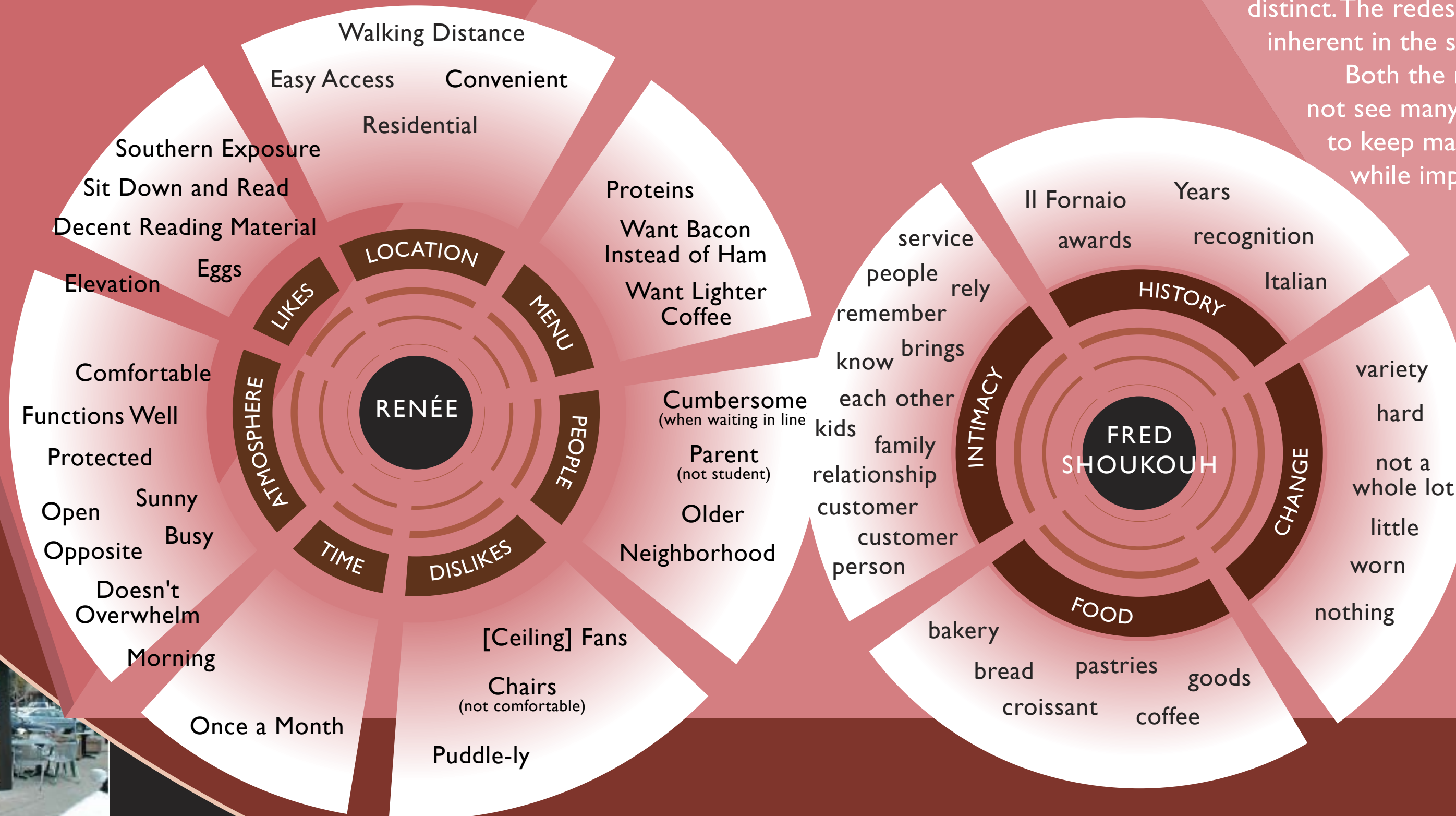
The mirrors expand the interior space visually; by removing the mirrors, we promote the **warm and protective** feeling that customers enjoy at Bel Forno. This untested assumption can be examined in future studies.

Contrary to the initial assumption that the northern area should be assimilated to the rest of the café's atmosphere, the customer informant preferred to keep the two areas distinct. The redesign preserves the **solitude** inherent in the separate northern room.

Both the manager and the customer did not see many problems. The redesign attempts to keep many of its successful features while improving on others.

INTERVIEW QUOTES

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS



TAXONOMY

