While traveling in Germany in 1996, I stayed in a few different youth hostels in Berlin. One was a very small house that had been converted to a hostel, probably able to accommodate no more than fifteen to twenty guests at one time. The other, with rooms that could accommodate twenty, was more institutionally organized, with a cafeteria that ran in two separate shifts of easily over one hundred guests at each seating. Both experiences gave me insight to a project that I did not know I would undertake until at least a year later.

My research for this thesis formally began in September 1997 in London, where I visited four different youth hostels: Earl’s Court, Oxford Street, City of London, and Rotherhithe. Typical of most youth hostels, the first three were renovated buildings originally designed as housing or schools. Only Rotherhithe, located on the outskirts of London, was actually designed to be a group-stay home. For the most part, each hostel provided simple guest rooms, semi-common bath/toilet facilities, laundry, limited meals, and a common room with games or a television. The individual toilet rooms with each guest room at Rotherhithe seemed a good idea, until management realized that without common bathrooms, a room could not be let to guests if the facilities were out of order.

Upon return to Washington, I spent an afternoon in the city’s only existing youth hostel, located in a block of vacant lots, where improvements to the isolated location and dreary, makeshift interior were not difficult to envision.

All of the hostels helped to define the needs and issues to be addressed in a new design, such as: group accommodation, circulation and access, amenities and storage, food and laundry services, and space for recreation and social gathering.