

# A Culture of Control: Introduction

«*The carceral ceases to be a concept if not for the existence and inevitability of the most ‘austere and complete’ form of punishment, captivity, and confinement in contemporary society: a hardscape of manifest material oppressions and dispossession, build of concrete, glass, and steel, its existence facilitated, fueled, and funded by law*».<sup>1</sup>

1 Stefano Bloch, *A Legal Geography of Prison and Other Carceral Spaces*, *Antipode* 56, no. 4 (2024): 1152–1171.

## 1. Context

Every day, individuals are incarcerated. Globally, over 11 million people are in prison today.

Imprisonment is one of the most *austere forms of punishment, captivity, and confinement in contemporary society*.<sup>2</sup> It materializes state power through space, architecture, and institutional control. Prison architecture is therefore not merely a technical or functional matter, but plays a central role in the production of punishment. It encloses people and gives physical form to ideas about order, discipline, morality, danger, and normality. Through walls, corridors, cells, surveillance points, light, sound, and material conditions, it *organizes bodies in space*<sup>3</sup> and shapes how incarcerated individuals experience time, movement, privacy, relation, and constraint. The prison is both a built environment and a social instrument: it spatializes the distinction between those considered law-abiding and those constructed as deviant.

2 Ibid.

3 Léopold Lambert, *Insurgent Architectures: Introduction*, *The Funambulist Magazine*, no. 23, *Insurgent Architectures*, May 1, 2019.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

The effects of spatial and architectural dimensions of imprisonment on the everyday experience of incarcerated individuals remain under-researched<sup>4</sup> and rarely reach a broader public. Knowledge about prisons often remains confined to academic, legal, or institutional contexts, limiting public engagement with the realities of incarceration. This lack of visibility restricts the possibility of a more differentiated debate about criminality, punishment, and the social values that sustain the penal system.

4 Irene Marti, *Architecture, Atmospheres, and the Pains of Unattainable Affordances: Tracing Prisoners’ Lived Experience in a ‘New-Generation’ Prison in Switzerland*, *Punishment & Society*, April 30, 2025: 2.

### 1.2 The unacknowledged connection between prison and society

Despite the common perception of a clear boundary between the prison “inside” and society “outside”, prisons are by no means cut off from the rest of society.<sup>5</sup> The appearance created by high walls and the often remote topographical location of prisons is misleading. The spatiality of prisons interacts with and is embedded in political, economic, social, and cultural contexts.<sup>6</sup> Through the circulation of objects, discourses, money, legal decisions, labor, and, of course,

5 Jennifer Turner, *The Prison Boundary: Between Society and Carceral Space*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

6 Dominique Moran, *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 149.

people, prisons remain in continuous exchange with the society beyond their walls.<sup>7</sup> In human geography, they are therefore not conceptualized as singular places, but as broader spatial processes that connect different sites such as the home, the neighborhood, the court, or the school.<sup>8</sup> (The concept of human geography will be discussed in more depth in the first chapter.)

The common perception that prisons have little to do with those who live outside them is therefore fundamentally erroneous. As members of a society shaped by specific values, norms, and political choices, we are—ultimately—at least implicated in the penal system that this array of forces produces and sustains. This system is both a product of our world and an institution whose effects are deeply interwoven with society. For this reason, incarceration affects us all. Yet we often fail to recognize the underlying connection between the prison system and the values that are upheld by the society of which we are a part.

### 1.3 Criminality, Punishment, and Social Inequality

Prisons give spatial form to punishment and are tied to processes that sort and target specific social groups, determining who is more likely to be controlled through confinement. Punishment is not a neutral or isolated legal instrument. It is shaped by social values, moral boundaries, and existing power relations. It is also shaped by how criminality is perceived within society: crime is often framed as an abnormal deviation from a shared moral order, while those who commit crimes are constructed as an “enemy within”<sup>9</sup> who must be controlled, disciplined, and excluded.

This must be understood within the context of the punitive turn:<sup>10</sup> the sharp increase in state control, criminalization, and incarceration, and the emergence of what the sociologist David Garland describes as a “culture of control,”<sup>11</sup> in which ideals of reintegration and welfare are increasingly giving way to surveillance, discipline, and punishment. This shift is also reflected in Loïc Wacquant’s concept of the “centaur state”: a neoliberal state that is *liberal at the top* and *paternalistic at the bottom*.<sup>13</sup> while it grants freedom and support to corporations and the upper classes, it imposes discipline, surveillance, and punishment on poor and marginalized populations.

This construction is, as mentioned above, never neutral. As the anthropologist and sociologist Didier Fassin argues, the question of what should be punished often conceals the question of who is punished.<sup>14</sup> The figure of the criminal is racialized and classed, and punishment is not distributed equally across society.<sup>15</sup> The presumed tight link between crime and punishment is, in fact, quite

7 Leonard Baer and Bodil Ravneberg, *The Outside and Inside in Norwegian and English Prisons*, Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography 90, no. 2 (2008): 205–216; Nick Gill et al., *Carceral Circuitry: New Directions in Carceral Geography*, Progress in Human Geography 42, no. 2 (2018): 183–204.

8 Melissa L. Mitchell, *Prisons, in Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*, ed. Antipode Editorial Collective (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 221–226.

9 Stephen Duguid, *Can Prisons Work?: The Prisoner as Object and Subject in Modern Corrections* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 147.

10 Helen Fair and Roy Walmsley, *World Prison Population List, 14th ed.* (London: Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, 2024).

11 David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

12 Neoliberalism is an economic and political theory that promotes free-market capitalism, deregulation, privatization, tax reductions, and limited government intervention, while emphasizing competition and individual responsibility. Although it became especially influential in the 1980s, it has been widely criticized for increasing inequality, weakening social welfare, and reducing social and political life to market logic. Alisa Larson, “Neoliberalism,” EBSCO Research Starters: Diplomacy and International Relations, 2025.

weak: many crimes receive no sanction, and many punishments are imposed without a corresponding crime.<sup>16</sup> Offenses associated with economic or elite actors are frequently dealt with administratively, while survival-driven illegalisms, such as theft committed by marginalized groups, are punished more harshly.<sup>17</sup>

For example, money laundering linked to drug trafficking is prosecuted with a high likelihood of conviction, while cases involving economic offenses such as fraud or corruption are less rigorously pursued, despite being more frequent and involving significantly larger sums. Therefore, punishment is determined not only by the illegal act itself, but also by the social position of the person who commits it.

Public discourses on “poverty migration,” and “refusal to integrate” further legitimize these repressive approaches, where safety in society, or rather the lack thereof, is framed as a problem attributable to deviance rather than inequality. Crime can thus be understood as a symptom of broader social inequalities and structural exclusion, while punishment creates an illusion of fairness that obscures and reproduces these injustices.<sup>18</sup> As the widely known abolitionist Angela Davis states, *[prison] relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism.*<sup>19</sup>

#### 1.4 “Swiss Swiss” Citizens

The unequal distribution of punishment described above is not an abstract or distant phenomenon; it is also visible within the Swiss penal system.

In Switzerland, patterns of punishment reveal a clear overrepresentation of non-citizens and socially disadvantaged groups. In 2025, 78% of individuals in pre-trial detention were not Swiss nationals. Among them, 29% held a residence permit, 8.5% were asylum seekers, and for 62% the place of residence was unknown.<sup>20</sup> Individuals without a migration background thus constitute a minority among detainees.

This disproportionality cannot be explained by any alleged higher criminality among foreigners. Rather, it reflects structural mechanisms within the criminal justice system. Two dynamics are particularly relevant: first, direct and indirect discrimination, including racial profiling, the systematic use of pre-trial detention on the grounds of “risk of flight,” and restricted access to alternatives to imprisonment such as community service or electronic monitoring; second, the increasing criminalization of *so-called unskilled, undesirable immigrants from non-Schengen countries.*<sup>21</sup>

13 Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 43.

14 Didier Fassin, *The Will to Punish*, ed. Christopher Kutz, The Berkeley Tanner Lectures (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 91–119.

15 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

16 Fassin, *The Will to Punish*, 91–119.

17 Alex J. Feldman, *Foucault’s Concept of Illegality*, *European Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (June 2020): 421–433.

18 Fassin, *The Will to Punish*, 91–119.

19 Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 16.

20 Bundesamt für Statistik, *Freiheitsentzug, Insassenbestand in Untersuchungs- und Sicherheitshaft, nach Kanton, Geschlecht, Alter und Nationalität – 1988–2026, Daten – Tabelle.*

21 Laurence Rasti, *Wall as Horizon: Photographic Survey Neuchâtel 2024* (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2024).

Within this context, prison architecture becomes part of a wider system of unequal social categorization. The cell, the detention wing, the surveillance corridor, and the institutional routine are not experienced by a random cross-section of society. They are disproportionately imposed on people already marked by migration status, poverty, racialization, and social exclusion. The spatial experience of imprisonment is therefore inseparable from the social inequalities that determine who is confined to prison in the first place.

Penal reforms further intensify these disparities. Since the 2000s, the Swiss penal system has increasingly relied on monetary penalties.<sup>22</sup> Although formally adjusted to income, these fines often exceed the financial capacity of poorer individuals and are subsequently converted to prison sentences.<sup>23</sup> In 2022, approximately half of all incarcerations resulted from such conversions. As a result, economic disadvantage – much like non-citizen status – significantly increases the likelihood of imprisonment.<sup>24</sup>

22 Bundesamt für Statistik, *Revisionen des Schweizerischen Strafgesetzbuchs und ihre Auswirkungen auf die kurzen Freiheitsstrafen* (Neuchâtel: Bundesamt für Statistik, October 2023).

23 In the event that the offender fails to pay the monetary penalty and it is not recoverable through debt collection procedures (Art. 35 para. 3), the offender shall serve a custodial sentence as the alternative to the monetary penalty. A daily penalty unit corresponds to one day in custody. The retrospective payment of the monetary penalty leads to a corresponding reduction in the alternative custodial sentence. Swiss Criminal Code of 21 December 1937, SR 311.0, arts. 36 and 106.

24 Jürg Brandenberger, *Ins Gefängnis wegen Schwarzfahrens*, SRF News, November 11, 2024.

## 2. Research Question

This master's thesis investigates the prison as a spatial and institutional phenomenon through the lens of prison architecture within the Swiss penal system, exploring its relationship to institutional control and the sensory and emotional geographies of imprisonment. The central research question is the following: How can prison architecture be investigated as a spatial, institutional, and sensory phenomenon, and what does it reveal about the lived experience of incarcerated individuals and the penal system which it embodies? Sub-question: How can design research methods generate knowledge about prison architecture beyond the approaches of law, criminology, and sociology, and how can visual communication “translate” this knowledge and convey it to a broader public?

## 3. Methodology

My research process unfolded in five phases, each employing different methodologies.

### Foundation and Gaining Access

The first phase focused on establishing foundational knowledge about the Swiss penal system and prison architecture through a literature and media review. At the same time, I initiated contact with institutions and individuals within the prison system. I also spoke to two photography artists working on prison-related projects to gain insight into visual approaches to carceral spaces.

### Field Research

In December 2025, I conducted field visits to four prisons in the German-speaking part of Switzerland: Pre-Trial Detention 1, Pre-Trial Detention 2 (PD2), Pre-Trial Detention 3 (PD3), and a Correctional Facility (CF). Access to three of the institutions was facilitated through professional networks, while I gained access to the fourth through participation in an academic visit. During these visits, I documented my observations through field reports and engaged in informal conversations with prison staff. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a prison director and the project manager of a pilot project on pre-trial detention.

### Design Research

I used photographs and video recordings to capture and make tangible the visual culture of the research field. Alongside this, I conducted a participatory workshop using a sensory mapping approach with an analog printing technique, to understand which spatial and architectural elements within the prison hold particular significance for incarcerated individuals, how they are perceived, and what meanings are attributed to them.

### Analysis under Institutional Constraints

In the fourth phase, I analyzed the collected material from the literature, the interview and informal conversations, field observations, and the workshop. This phase was shaped by institutional restrictions, including non-disclosure agreements and the requirement to submit the thesis for approval prior to publication. At the time of writing, it remains uncertain whether full publication will be permitted.

### Translation into Visual Formats

The final phase focused on translating the research findings into visual formats to facilitate broader public accessibility, using the medium of a web application.

## 4. Goals and Objectives

The overarching aim of this thesis is to contribute to a more differentiated public discourse on incarceration by contributing to the visibility of the spatial and power dynamics of prison environments and by humanizing those subjected to them.

This thesis assumes that generating an understanding of prison architecture and its social significance can contribute to a greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, the concepts of criminality and punishment. Public awareness must shift from punitive, short-term thinking toward a more rehabilitative, long-term perspective.

The thesis argues that fostering a more nuanced debate about the penal system and the effects of imprisonment on incarcerated individuals can lead to wider societal benefits. These include reduced costs for the state, lower recidivism rates, and the promotion of a more inclusive and less punitive society.

This thesis pursues three primary objectives:

1. To investigate prison architecture as a spatial phenomenon and identify how architectural elements affect the lived experience of incarcerated individuals.
2. To examine what prison architecture and spatial design reveal about the underlying principles and practices of the Swiss penal system.
3. To explore how design research methods and visual communication can be used to make research on such a sensitive field accessible to a larger public.

Visual communication is central to this aim. Visual, material, audio, and video-based formats can make aspects of prison architecture more tangible than text alone by conveying atmosphere, spatial relations, bodily gestures, material traces, and forms of absence or restriction that might otherwise remain abstract. For example, showing the hands or movements of incarcerated individuals, or presenting artefacts produced by them, can create a sense of proximity and contribute to their humanization. Similarly, making institutional censorship visible through blacked-out images, redacted artefacts, or restricted footage can communicate power relations not only through content, but also through the form of the work itself.

By translating research findings into visual and interactive formats, the thesis aims to bridge academic research and public discourse. The practical component, a website, allows users to engage actively with the research material rather than encounter it as passive readers or observers. Through interaction, sound, moving image, artefacts, and spatial navigation, the viewer's presence is acknowledged and drawn into the work. Although the visual material is produced or processed by the researcher, it retains a degree of directness and material specificity that can make the field feel closer, more immediate, and more difficult to dismiss.

In doing so, the project positions itself at the intersection of research, design, and communication. It explores how knowledge about prisons as complex and sensitive systems can be both produced and shared, and how design research and visual communication can contribute to a more differentiated public understanding of incarceration, punishment, and prison architecture.

## 5. Chapter Overview

To achieve these goals, the thesis is divided into six chapters.

The first chapter defines the central terms of the thesis, situating prison architecture and spatiality in the field of carceral geography. Chapter two reflects on the methodological conditions of the research, particularly the challenges of access, institutional restrictions, and power dynamics encountered during fieldwork and the workshop. The third chapter analyzes eight objects and accounts drawn from the interview, examining what the spatiality and materiality of pre-trial detention look like and what they reveal about the penal system. Chapter four examines three spatial elements of prison in greater depth, analyzing how they shape the lived experiences and how the incarcerated individuals relate to the surrounding spatial environment. The fifth chapter introduces the concept, method, and design of the participatory workshop, before analyzing the artefacts produced by participants and their meaning within the context of the penal system. The sixth chapter discusses the website as the visual translation of the research including strategy, structure, and outcome. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the central findings of the thesis and reflects on their implications for understanding prison architecture, punishment, and public communication.