

4. Being in Space – Coping With Space

Being in the world is not about being in space but about coping with space. (Lussault and Stock)

Informed by the geographers Michel Lussault and Mathis Stock and their pragmatist approach, inhabiting is here understood both as a way of concretely residing in a prison cell and more generally as a relation to the world.³⁷ Lussault and Stock argue that actors may encounter space either as a problem or as empowerment. Therefore, the notion of “being in space” becomes less adequate, as the preposition “in” implies an understanding of space as a container that simply holds people. “Coping with space,” by contrast, emphasizes the active process of encountering places: overcoming distances, transgressing boundaries, arranging and rearranging things, and shaping the quality of places through discourse and other forms of action, whether playfully or under constraint. Space is therefore a condition of and a resource for practices. Space and action are co-constructed: practices produce spatial arrangements, shape the qualities of places, and establish distances and boundaries. At the same time, spatial elements – such as location, distance, spatial competence, accessibility, and limits – as well as spatial discourses and imaginaries, are embedded within practice.³⁸

37 Michel Lussault and Mathis Stock, *Doing with Space: Towards a Pragmatics of Space*, *Social Geography* 5, no. 1 (2010): 11–19.

38 Ibid, 11.

Against this backdrop, architectural space can be understood as an active agent in shaping how imprisonment is experienced. The following section deals with two such elements—the window and the prison yard—as sites where these spatial effects become particularly tangible, with an evident impact on lived experience.

4.1 Two Spatial Elements in Depth

The Window

The window is an essential element of the prison cell’s atmosphere and profoundly shapes the spatial and temporal experience of the inmate. Windows play a significant role in inmates’ well-being, particularly when they offer views of the world beyond the prison walls.³⁹ Beyond serving essential functions such as providing daylight, ventilation, and temperature regulation, windows connect inmates to the external environment through multiple senses. In cells located in the upper levels of prison buildings, these views may indeed extend beyond the prison walls, offering glimpses of movement, people, and changing landscapes. This visual access can break the monotony of daily prison life and foster an aware-

39 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.

ness of diurnal time and seasonal changes more generally. While this connection to the outside world may reduce feelings of isolation, it can also evoke a sense of loss or longing, as inmates witness a world that continues to evolve without their participation. [When I don't feel well] I always try to look at the mountains. Then I feel very small. And sometimes, when I have too many problems, I try to focus on someplace distant. So, my eyes have to focus on something very far away. Then I [feel like I] am not stuck here. I have to think about [what's happening] over there. I grew up and lived in the mountains for almost 20 years of my life. (Oliver) I have access to nature, so I can follow the seasons, I can see nature, and for me personally, this is something important, and that's why I think it's a good thing that you at least have a view into the distance. (Damjan).⁴⁰

40 Marti, *Architecture, Atmospheres, and the Pains of Unattainable Affordances*, 11.

Another element of existential importance are windows that inmates can fully open themselves, which is the case in the prison in Cazis Tignež. The exposure to and sensation of fresh air is especially important, since it alleviates the feeling of being trapped.

The importance of the cell's architecture becomes especially clear when comparing environments built in accordance with modern, humane standards with a pre-trial detention facility, where "everything was made of concrete, there was no daylight, hardly any fresh air, the internal ventilation system spread the cigarette smoke of the others. I got skin rashes all over my body, eczema." (Memory of prisoner Marti, 2025, Fieldnotes, 20.9.2022)⁴¹

41 Ibid, 10.

The window runs lengthwise just below the ceiling. You have to tilt your head back to see the light coming in. ST explains that cells used to be built this way so that incarcerated individuals would have to look up to God and pray for their sins to be forgiven. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, PD2)

The higher window reflects an historically embedded moral logic within prison architecture. By forcing the inmate to gaze upwards, the design physically inscribes a posture of submission to a transcendent instance, directing attention away from the external world and toward a symbolic, higher authority. Light becomes less a connection to the outside world and more a controlled, almost sacred element. In contrast, the cells in PD1—a newly built prison—offer a markedly different environment.

The cell is constructed of exposed concrete and feels surprisingly bright. It contains a bed, a chair, and a white, built-in

table positioned beneath the large window, which looks out onto the exercise yard. Unexpectedly spacious, the cell also includes its own shower and toilet. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, PD1)

The Exercise Yard

The exercise yard occupies a central role within both pre-trial detention and correctional facilities, since it constitutes the only accessible outdoor space within the prison environment. It serves multiple functions: as a site of social interaction, physical activity, and provides one of the few opportunities for exposure to space outside the cell. Access to fresh air is therefore not merely recreational but essential, as it temporarily alleviates the experience of confinement and contributes to a minimal sense of spatial and thus bodily relief.

In some facilities, such as CF, the exercise yard is quite large, including green areas, trees, seating, table tennis tables, and exercise equipment.

We are met by the director and led through two more gates into an exercise yard, at the center of which stands a decorated Christmas tree. The extensive area includes several detached buildings that resemble a village. Green spaces, a sports field, and cultivated land are enclosed by fences and barbed wire, beyond which fields and mountains stretch out into the background (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, CF)

Unlike prisons enclosed by solid concrete walls, CF is surrounded by fences, facilitating views into the surrounding landscape and the mountains beyond. On the one hand, this visual openness creates an impression of spatial expansiveness and relative freedom; on the other, the permanent presence of double fences reinforces the boundary between inside and outside. The prison yard thus embodies a spatial paradox: it is the only place that allows access to the outdoors, yet it simultaneously marks the closest and most visible place of separation from it.

In other correctional facilities, such as CF Cazis Tingež, the prison walls are not visible from the exercise yard, contributing to a comparatively more positive spatial atmosphere. However, this is counterbalanced by strict internal regulations: once inmates enter the yard, they are not permitted to move between indoor and outdoor spaces and must remain outside. Under adverse weather conditions, this can become restrictive, since prisoners are forced either to endure the elements or confine themselves to a limited number of sheltered areas.⁴²

42 Ibid, 13.

Construction materials and design further reinforce these constraints. Fixed benches and tables, often made of concrete and exposed to the weather, become cold and uninviting, discouraging their use. In this context, weather operates as a spatial factor,⁴³ interacting with material conditions and rigid temporal regimes to shape both the perception and usability of the exercise yard.⁴⁴

43 Michel Lussault, *When a Virus Takes Place: Some Geographical Reflections on the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic*, translated by Jean Legroux and Claudio Smalley Soares Pereira, *GEOUSP* 25, no. 3 (2021): 1–20.

44 Marti, *Architecture, Atmospheres, and the Pains of Unattainable Affordances*, 14

The pre-trial detention facilities PD1, PD2, and PD3 provide significantly smaller outdoor spaces than the correctional institutions (CFs). In PD1, the two exercise yards are enclosed within the building and constructed entirely of concrete. Inmates in the yard are continuously visible to others, since the surrounding three floors are furnished with glass windows overlooking the space. There is no greenery or grass, and the exercise yards are covered by a glass roof, limiting access to fresh air.

Similarly, PD2 also features two inner exercise yards, enclosed by the building.

We go down to the ground floor into the inner yard. The center is covered, with fitness equipment underneath. As I take a closer look at the space, more and more inmates arrive. They walk together in a circle around the yard, counter-clockwise, talking to each other. There must be around 60 men. M explains that you can infer a lot from the dynamics in the yard—who gets along with whom, who walks alone, who has problems, and who causes them. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, PD2)

The second exercise yard in PD2 is located on the roof and is reserved for individuals classified as particularly difficult.

The fourth floor has its own yard, located on the roof. It is half covered and half open, with barbed wire stretched above it. There is a table tennis table, two plastic armchairs, a punching bag, and several pieces of exercise equipment. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, PD2)

The yard is enclosed by walls, preventing any view beyond the prison, thus reinforcing the restriction that incarcerated individuals in pre-trial detention are not to come into contact with the outside world. PD3 similarly features two inner exercise yards. One includes a table tennis table, some greenery, and space for exercise, with a large, colorful mural painted on one wall. The second yard is smaller and more functional, housing the laundry room and a secured door leading to two isolation cells.

4.2 The Cell as Ambivalent Space

In the previous section, I examined how the design and architecture of prisons shape the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals. However, this relationship is not one-sided: incarcerated individuals' perceptions and uses of space also profoundly shape the environments they inhabit. Through everyday practices—ranging from acts of resistance to the appropriation and personalization of their cells—incarcerated individuals develop ways of “doing freedom”⁴⁵ that challenge and renegotiate their imposed status.⁴⁶ The way inmates arrange and design their cells can thus be read as an expression of either resistance to or acceptance of their conditions.

45 Thomas Ugelvik, *Power and Resistance in Prison: Doing Time, Doing Freedom* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

46 Marti, *Architecture, Atmospheres, and the Pains of Unattainable Affordances*, 2.

The Appropriation of Space

The prison cell is an inherently ambivalent space. On the one hand, it is the only place where inmates can experience a degree of privacy—an environment in which they are unobserved and can temporarily withdraw from the pressures of prison life. On the other hand, it remains a highly controlled setting that ultimately does not belong to them.

In Switzerland, a standard cell measures around 12 m², in PD2 8 m², significantly restricting movement and activity. When the door of a single cell is locked, inmates are compelled to spend extended periods alone, with interpersonal communication tightly regulated and limited. In Switzerland, there are no strictly defined regulations governing the material conditions of prison cells. Instead, they are required to approximate average living standards in terms of lighting, ventilation, sanitary facilities, furnishings, and overall size. In prisons like the CF Lenzburg and the CF Pöschwies, prisoners are allowed to furnish the cell in a homely manner with personal objects and are authorized to hang pictures, but only on defined spaces such as pinboards, not on the wall or door. The regulations prohibit pictures that are considered shocking, defamatory, political or religious, as well as symbols that have a provocative effect on others. Erotic images are permitted, but not pornography. Prisoners can buy additional furniture such as rugs or a reading lamp. They are allowed to re-arrange furniture that is not fixed in place but it must be upright and cannot be close to the wet area, e.g., toilet and wash basin.⁴⁷

47 Irene Marti, “A ‘Home’ or ‘a Place to Be, But Not to Live’: Arranging the Prison Cell, in *The Prison Cell: Embodied and Everyday Spaces of Incarceration*, edited by Jennifer Turner and Victoria Knight (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 125.

Plants from the prison garden are allowed, but not flowers.

Stuffed animals up to 25 cm are acceptable.

The use of a towel as a tablecloth is prohibited.

The personal items can be removed at any time without notice.

The cells must always be tidy and clean. Tidiness is defined as *the state or quality of being arranged neatly and in an orderly fashion*.⁴⁸ The cells are regularly inspected by prison officers, who hold the power over the definition of tidiness. This subjective assessment is shaped by the officer's individual ways of using authority as well as their impressions and stereotypes regarding certain offenders. All these rules show that even if the cell is considered a personal space, it is highly regulated by the prison management. Although cell furnishing is highly constrained, incarcerated individuals use, appropriate and (re)arrange the institutional spatial-temporal order that defines the prison cell through individual practices and thereby create their personal, private space.

48 Ibid.

Coming back to Lussault's and Stocks concept of coping with space mentioned in the introduction, incarcerated individuals (re)arrange their cell by inhabiting it and thus attribute new meanings and values to it. As Marti argues, the prison cell cannot be reduced to space in the sense of a pre-defined container that confines people; rather, it is to be apprehended as an established set of arrangements of space and time that is used and appropriated and constantly rearranged by individuals through their everyday practices.⁴⁹

49 Ibid, 125.

What these everyday practices look like is exemplified in the following section, based on Marti's findings in her field research.⁵⁰ Prisoners either use the practices to make the cell their home or to resist their situation.

50 Ibid, 126.

Reversing the Reversals: Arranging the Cell into a Home

The prison accommodation regime does not prevent inmates from transforming their cells into a home. This transformation occurs through a range of practices, including the use of personal narratives, the arrangement and appropriation of objects, the adoption of domestic routines and patterns of movement, and the engagement of the senses.

One key strategy is narrative framing: prisoners often refer to their cells as a "home," "room," "studio," or even a "one-bedroom apartment," and describe themselves as living there rather than merely occupying the space. This distinction is significant. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan suggests, humans have a fundamental need to anchor their identity in places and objects.⁵¹ According to Yi-Fu Tuan, home is not simply a physical setting but an emotional and intimate space, deeply tied to familiarity. Through routine activities, unfamiliar environments can gradually become familiar, fostering a sense of belonging.

51 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

From this perspective, the (re)arrangement of the prison cell into a home can be understood as a natural response to this human need for familiarity and attachment. This process is further reflected in incarcerated individuals' accounts of their cells as their favorite place within the prison, or even as spaces that genuinely feel like home.⁵²

52 Marti, A 'Home' or 'a Place to Be, But Not to Live', 134.

Leder emphasizes a more active dimension in the transformation of the prison cell into a home, interpreting it as a deliberate act of appropriating space in order to humanize the prison environment.⁵³ As he states: *If spatiality has become constricted, ruptured, disoriented, even reversed, [there are incarcerated individuals who] will do what is possible to reverse the reversals. [They] will make of [their] cell a home.*

53 Drew Leder, *Imprisoned Bodies: The Life-World of the Incarcerated*, *Social Justice* 31, no. 1/2 (95-96) (2004): 51-66.

This process of "reversing" unfolds not only through narrative reframing but also through the material and spatial organization of the cell. By incorporating elements such as rugs, plants, and personal photographs, inmates actively reshape the atmosphere of their surroundings. Thomas Ugelvik describes this transformation as an act of "freedom creation," through which incarcerated individuals challenge their imposed identity and assert alternative ways of being.⁵⁴ Similarly, decorating the cell can be understood as an expression of personal identity — a strategy for orienting oneself in and appropriating a space that ultimately belongs to others.⁵⁵

54 Thomas Ugelvik, *Power and Resistance in Prison: Doing Time, Doing Freedom* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Through these practices, incarcerated individuals not only humanize their immediate environment but also subtly alter their perception of space, influencing feelings of size, openness, and comfort. This transformation is further reinforced through the adoption of domestic routines and social practices — such as eating together, watching films, or engaging in shared activities, which contribute to a sense of coziness. Ultimately, human interaction remains central: encounters with others are a key source of meaning and value, shaping the experience of the cell as a place that can, at least partially, resemble a home.

55 Leonard Baer, *Visual Imprints on the Prison Landscape: A Study on the Decorations in Prison Cells*, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 96, no. 2 (April 2005): 209-217.

The cell is also transformed into a sense of home through the engagement of the senses. Many incarcerated individuals, for instance, consciously avoid perceiving the bars on their windows, while others use familiar smells or music to evoke memories of specific people, places, or moments. These sensory practices contribute to a process of normalization, through which incarceration is reframed as a livable, everyday condition. Transforming the cell into home is about normalizing incarceration and transforming it into a frame of action. To perceive imprisonment as normal life allows an inmate mentally to regain a space of freedom (Marti Fieldnotes, Marco).⁵⁶

56 Marti, A 'Home' or 'a Place to Be, But Not to Live', 134.

For some incarcerated individuals, however, incarceration means giving up hope, letting go of their former, pre-prison self and cutting themselves off from the outside world, since it is too painful to live in two separate worlds.

Never Wanting the Cell to be a Home

For some incarcerated individuals, transforming the cell into a home would mean accepting their incarceration and, with it, relinquishing hope. Instead, they adopt distancing narratives, describing the cell as a place to be, but not to live (Marti Fieldnotes, Lars).⁵⁷ They deliberately avoid calling it a home or personalizing it, preferring to preserve its character as a temporary, imposed space rather than making it their own. The absence of personal objects can also serve as a protective strategy, shielding aspects of their identity and – paradoxically – maintaining a sense of privacy.⁵⁸

However, this form of distancing can come at a cost: it may produce persistent pains of uncertainty and intermediacy,⁵⁹ making it difficult to assign meaning to one's present life. Many incarcerated individuals rarely speak about their former homes, often due to lost connections with people and places, which renders the idea of a future beyond prison increasingly abstract. As a result, their visions of the future tend to take the form of dreams rather than concrete plans. Still, for many, this refusal to adapt fully to their circumstances remains an act of resistance: the continued struggle against their situation, and the hope for release, becomes a vital force that sustains them.

Even when prison inmates seek to distance themselves from the prison through narrative strategies, they may still develop a sense of attachment to – and even belonging within – their cell. I always think: they have been here again. I realize that they have searched the cell and think: they have been here again. Wednesday and Friday I clean the cell, the floor and everything, and then I can see footprints on the floor. That's how I notice that they have been in my cell (Marti Fieldnotes, Jonathan).⁶⁰ Whether or not incarcerated individuals seek to transform the cell into a home, it nonetheless becomes a personal and private territory—one that they strive to defend, in various ways, through a range of strategies and practices.

The prison cell reveals the manifold expressions of the inmate's way of dealing with imprisonment, *“such as focusing on the present, accepting imprisonment and creating a ‘home’ in prison, or, in contrast, maintaining focus on the future, hope for release and continually expressing distance from the prison and all the spaces that it encompasses.”*⁶¹

57 Ibid, 136.

58 Ibid, 138.

59 Ben Crewe, *Depth, Weight, Tightness: Revisiting the Pains of Imprisonment*, *Punishment & Society* 13, no. 5 (2011): 509–529.

60 Marti, *A ‘Home’ or ‘a Place to Be, But Not to Live’*, 138.

61 Ibid, 140.