

Pre-Trial Detention 1

November 26, 2025

Glaring emptiness

Anonymity

Everything is grey, no colors, unnatural materials—like another world, where you are no longer yourself

Sharp edges and lines, grids

Barriers, hatches, doors

*All life is divided into minutes, hours, days, routines, structures, grids—and there is no breaking free Rooms full of onions and garlic
The smell of onions and garlic in the concrete building*

After the interview with KR, the prison director, and ST, who manages the pilot program, KR offers to show me the building.

We start on the 3rd floor. There are several cells here, two workrooms, and a communal shower. By chance, we run into the manager in charge of work operations—a calm, pleasant man. He shakes my hand, introduces himself, and offers to show me the workrooms. An inmate is mopping the corridor. KR, the prison director, greets him and asks how he is doing. There are several types of work: the woodwork shop, metalwork shop, working in the laundry, peeling onions, peeling garlic, processing wooden scrubbing brushes, working in the kitchen. We walk through the building—work is going on everywhere. The manager unlocks a door; we—KR, ST, and—greet everyone. Most return the greeting; some shake our hands. There is a loudspeaker in every room and the inmates listen to Arabic music while working; many are chatting. The atmosphere feels relaxed, and the men talk about what they are working on. Some look worn-down. Who knows how long they have been here. In the laundry room, one of the men reports that he has been working there for a long time—about one and a half years—and that it is the only form of work that is also done on Saturdays. In the other areas, work is only done Monday through Friday, a few hours each morning.

Huge quantities of garlic and onions are peeled. In the onion room, there are containers filled with large white onions; the floor is covered with onion skins. Six to eight men work here, wearing masks. You can already smell the onions when the elevator opens onto the corridor; the work supervisor's eyes are watering. We say

goodbye and he locks the room again. We visit the other work-rooms, the library, communal rooms, the open-air exercise yards, the infirmary (external doctors visit twice a week or are called in emergencies), and the intake cells, in which inmates are placed immediately upon arrival.

A maximum stay of 96 hours is permitted in these cells. These inmates are locked in for 23 hours and allowed one hour per day outside, alone, in a small, open-air yard. Eight to ten such cells are located along one corridor. I let myself be locked in for a few minutes. Through the cell door you can hear everything—conversations and footsteps. Each cell has a hatch that can be opened from the outside. Before unlocking a room, KR glances through the hatch—for safety reasons and out of habit, she says, even though an orange light above the door on the outside indicates that the cell is unoccupied. Anyone can look in at any time from the outside; the occupant has no control over this. The cell is made of exposed concrete and contains a bed, a chair, and a built-in desk consisting of a simple white panel, mounted beneath the window. The window looks out onto the exercise yard. The cell is unexpectedly large and has its own shower and toilet.

Next, we visit the cell for inmates at risk of suicide and those who may pose a danger to others. According to ST, the cells are deliberately constructed so that one cannot injure oneself or destroy the cell. Nevertheless, inmates still manage to damage them—one had taken an entire cell apart. I can easily imagine how rage and despair could intensify to immeasurable levels here. One inmate was experiencing psychosis, KR reports. He was hearing multiple voices and was very difficult to manage, but he still had to be granted his hour of outdoor time in the yard. „When inmates are not doing well, solitary confinement is the worst thing, because the feelings become even more unbearable and the inner voices even louder than usual,“ says ST. PD1 is repeatedly assigned inmates who should really be housed in a clinical facility, but because there are not enough places available, people also end up here, even when this setting is only partly suitable for them. We then visit the two rooms reserved for consultations with lawyers—one with and one without a glass partition—as well as the visitation room.

The architecture has a far greater effect than I had expected. The exposed concrete creates a brutal atmosphere. The material feels cold, unyielding, and forbidding. Inside, I get the impression that

the building is designed to repress, strip away, and even “erase” the person. The omnipresent grey of the floors, walls, and ceiling produces an overwhelming sense of power and, at the same time, of emptiness. You cannot look outside—only into the inner yards. There is no decoration whatsoever; everything looks impersonal and identical, as though all color had been drained from life.

There should really be no prisons. The pervasive powerlessness, the dependency, the near-absence of autonomy, the almost non-existent space for agency—one feels all of this immediately. Even though I am only being guided through the building for an hour and a half, I feel completely crushed, overwhelmed by the architecture. It takes away your personality; it takes away your life as you know it. People speak of normalization, of everything being done to make the stay as normal as possible, but the architecture screams. It roars. It signals unmistakably that nothing here is normal. The walls are bare; there are no plants, no green spaces, no wood, no natural materials. The cells are made of concrete, the furniture of plastic. The shower and toilet are metal. Everything feels cold, forbidding, unnatural. It is simply impossible to feel normal here. The daily routine is always the same, any sense of autonomy is truly minimal—in fact, it barely exists.

At the same time, considerable effort is being made to maintain the principle of normalization. Each inmate has his own shelf in the communal refrigerator; inmates can purchase or order items and store them there. Each shelf is opened with a separate key and is marked with the corresponding cell number—so that, like anyone else, one can simply go to the fridge and take something out. Inmates spend ten hours a day outside their cells—except those in the intake cells.

What surprised and impressed me was the relationship between inmates and staff. Everyone greets each other, strikes up conversations—almost like colleagues. The difference is that some move around freely, while doors close again behind others. The atmosphere is unusually relaxed. The atmosphere here bears no resemblance to the image conveyed by the media, politicians, or films; those portrayals feel worlds away from reality.

Yet the architecture drains you, makes you feel small, takes everything away. In another context, one might describe it as modern, sleek, or simply industrial. But here in the prison, it weighs on you and makes the power relations unmistakable. There is no disorder, no darkness, nothing is broken—and yet everything is

impersonal, sterile, overwhelmingly empty. I can well imagine that some people go mad here. The architecture truly weighed me down; I had the feeling of losing myself. Nothing looks or feels like a space one knows from ordinary life. It is a world unto itself, completely cut off from everything familiar. No matter how hard one tries to make pre-trial detention as normal as possible—the surroundings undo those efforts immediately. Photographs of the architecture cannot begin to capture this.