

## 5. Mapping Carceral Environments: A Participatory Workshop

### 5.1 Concept

In the context of the penal system, the voices of people affected by incarceration are often mediated, restricted, or silenced. It was therefore important for this research project to create a space in which these voices could be heard and their perspectives on prison architecture could become tangible.

For these reasons, I designed a workshop that allows for visual forms of expression and knowledge production. Through a visual exploration of prison architecture, the workshop seeks to reflect the sensory, spatial, and emotional dimensions of incarceration from the perspective of those who experience it directly.

### 5.2 Workshop Design

The workshop is conceived as an open, low-threshold, and materially-grounded research tool. Participants are provided with a set consisting of modeling clay, paper, a pen, and an ink pad. Over a period of three hours, they are invited to engage with their immediate environment by taking impressions of surfaces and objects using the clay and transferring these impressions onto the paper using the ink pad. These material traces may be supplemented by any forms of annotation.

I was permitted to document the workshop through photographs and video recordings, taken by Massimo Bordogna under my direction.

### 5.3 Method

I chose an approach for the workshop that draws on traditions of participatory research, which challenge hierarchical knowledge structures and seek to redistribute interpretive authority. Within this framework, knowledge is understood as embodied, situated, and shaped by lived experience. Participants actively contribute to the production of knowledge by shaping the workshop outcomes through their choices of objects, surfaces, annotations, titles, and gestures.

Design research methods can generate forms of knowledge that go beyond verbal description. Through the prints they made, participants were able to express dimensions of carceral experience that remain difficult to capture through conventional

interview-based approaches. Unlike an interview, which is limited to what a participant can or chooses to verbalize, the prints allowed participants to engage with their environment directly. In this sense, the prints constitute a form of embodied knowledge: produced through bodily movement and touch, they capture how the body experienced and related to the space.

The prints not only document surfaces and objects, they also serve to inscribe the participants themselves. Each participant developed different printing techniques and left distinct traces, like fingerprints, handling marks, names, cell numbers or titles. This makes the method especially valuable in comparison to an interview, as the outcomes include bodily, material, and personal traces of the participants' engagement with their environment.

As a relational and situated form of inquiry, the workshop acknowledges the plurality of ways in which knowledge about punishment and incarceration can be produced. It made visible how participants perceive, inhabit, and emotionally relate to the carceral environment. The epistemic value of these outcomes emerges precisely from their individuality, layeredness, and material specificity.

## 5.4 Positioning

Throughout my research, it has become clear that life in prison is made distressing by a variety of factors, including the endless repetition of daily routines and the near-complete loss of autonomy—both of which are reinforced by the architecture. For this reason, moments of novelty, unfamiliarity, and contemplation take on particular significance. The workshop responded to this condition by introducing a small deviation from everyday life and offering a playful, experimental form of engagement that is rarely possible within such a highly regulated environment.

At the same time, the workshop took place within a field of conflicting intentions and purposes. The aims of my thesis—to foreground the perspectives of incarcerated individuals and to emphasize that they are, first and foremost, human—stood in contrast to the restrictions of the institution. These constraints were especially palpable in the context of pre-trial detention, where legal proceedings are still ongoing and anonymity is therefore particularly important.

This tension became particularly visible in the documentation of the workshop. I was not permitted to show participants' faces or reveal their names, even though some participants explicitly allowed me to use their names and wrote them on their prints. I was also instructed to censor identifying features, such as tattoos visible

on participants' hands, and to remove all voices from the recordings. In addition, elements that had already been erased by staff on the original print sheets—such as names and cell numbers—remained visible in the high-resolution scans I had made. These traces were subsequently redacted as well, resulting in multiple layers of censorship. As I am not allowed to use participants' real names, I assigned them pseudonyms based on the languages they spoke and the nationalities I inferred from them.

For more extensive insight into positionality and the challenges of being granted access, see Chapter 2.

For the full workshop report, see page 18.

## 5.5 Analysis

In the following, the outcomes of the workshop are analyzed, to gain insight into the materiality and spatiality of incarceration.

### Tomáš

Tomáš focuses on details of his own cell, primarily foregrounding its defects. The prints *Loch in der Wand* (Hole in the Wall), *Spiegel Rand* (Mirror Edge) and *Decke Oberfläche* (Ceiling Surface), point to neglect and a materially degraded living environment. At the same time, elements such as plants as decorations mark small counter-spaces within this structure. However, the fact that these are not real but artificial plants highlights that even “natural” elements, which could otherwise bring a sense of vitality into the prison space, remain artificial and lifeless. His careful, almost technical working method, as well as his use of specialized terminology (“Positive,” “Negative”), suggest a reflective relationship to his environment and situation.

He labeled his prints with his cell number.

Tomáš showed interest in my work and specifically asked about the topic of my thesis.

### Lorenzo

Lorenzo selects personal, everyday objects and symbolic motifs for his prints. Central among them are the *Knast-Adiletten* (prison “sliders”), which—as he explained to me in conversation—he perceives as inferior compared to the Birkenstocks he used to wear. He describes the plastic material as unpleasant because it makes him sweat more quickly and does not feel as comfortable as the natural material of



Figure 15: Print by Tomáš, reproduced with consent. See all prints on pages 96–97.



Figure 16: Workshop documentation.

his Birkenstocks. He would like to replace them, but cannot afford to do so. At the same time, he titles his prints *Die Blüte der Hoffnung* (The Blossom of Hope) and *Das Gefangene Pferd* (The Captured Horse), which he assigns to prints of plastic plants and the “knight” chess piece. These titles suggest an imaginative engagement with his situation what could be read as expressing longing, restriction, and a desire for escape. His conscious decision, in his own words, to become “poetic” can be understood as an attempt to introduce an additional layer of meaning into an otherwise limited space.



Figure 17: Print by Lorenzo, reproduced with consent. See all prints on pages 98–99.

He also makes an imprint of the structure of a handle of a piece of equipment from the fitness room. He then places a fingerprint on the center of the print. He layered the impersonal with the personal. The imprint of the fitness equipment handle captures a repetitive, institutional object – something standardized, shared, and tied to routine bodily discipline. By adding his fingerprint onto this structured surface, he inscribes his own identity onto an otherwise anonymous and regulated environment.

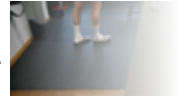


Figure 18: Workshop documentation.

Lorenzo labeled his prints with his cell number.

### Pablo

Pablo focuses on a range of functional and everyday elements of prison life, including a toaster, stairwell, as well as recreational and training equipment.

Notably, he does not label his prints himself but asks others to do so on his behalf. At the same time, he marks the prints with his first name, making a form of authorship and presence visible.

*The Spanish-speaking man asks another participant to write the object descriptions on his sheets for him. He then adds his name himself. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, PD3)*



Figure 19: Print by Pablo, reproduced with consent. See all prints on pages 100–101.

Particularly striking is his attempt to take an imprint of a door lock which is subsequently destroyed by a supervisor. His complaint about this suggests a tension between his desire for expression and institutional restrictions.



Figure 20: Workshop documentation.

*We walk together with a man and a supervisor. The man climbs a few stairs to the second floor and takes an imprint of a door lock. The door separates the corridor behind it from the stairwell. “The lock is forbidden,” the supervisor says. “Es prohibido,” he repeats several times in Spanish.*

*The man laughs and places his imprint on a windowsill. The supervisor then crushes the imprint with a forceful fist-punch and repeats, “Es prohibido!” The man asks why. “Punto!” the supervisor replies, repeating it several times on the way back to the library. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Field-notes, PD3)*

This tension is also evident in his work with the modeling clay itself: with the imprint titled *Meine Stimmung* (My Mood), he initially forms a smiley with upward-curving lips, which he then alters and passes on to another participant, which reads like a collective gesture.

Pablo labeled his prints with his name.

### Matteo

Matteo focuses on a set of everyday objects and surfaces, including the telephone, a chess piece, and the grated floor. Three additional prints – likely taken from different surfaces – remain unnamed, suggesting either a more intuitive approach or a reduced emphasis on categorization. The imprint *Türe besetzt/frei* (door occupied/free) highlights a binary system of access and control that structures daily routines, pointing to regulated use of shared spaces.

### Aleksandr

Aleksandr focused primarily on everyday functional objects within the prison environment, such as the shower, telephone, heating, and fitness equipment. This selection suggests an attention to routine, infrastructure, and the material conditions that structure daily life. The inclusion of recreational items like a chess game and a ping-pong paddle points to moments of social interaction and leisure within confinement. Notably, the imprint of another participant’s ear – taken in a moment of laughter and joking – introduces a playful, human dimension, reflecting shared moments of enjoyment and social connection within an otherwise object-centered selection.

### Michal

Michal produced a large number of imprints in the laundry room, suggesting that this space holds particular significance for him. This is likely because he spends a considerable amount of time there as part of his assigned work, washing other inmates’ clothes and preparing fresh sets of bed linens, towels, and washcloths. He en-



Figure 21: Print by Matteo, reproduced with consent. See all prints on pages 102–103.



Figure 22: Workshop documentation.



Figure 23: Print by Aleksandr, reproduced with consent. See all prints on pages 104–105.



Figure 24: Workshop documentation.

gaged with the task in an expansive and exploratory manner, going beyond the initial instructions. For instance, he used his fingers to apply ink directly from the stamp pad, modifying and extending the prints. Toward the end of the workshop, he asked for more time and referred to himself as an artist.

Michal made his prints on one side of the paper and added written labels on the reverse.

### Jakub

Jakub selected a mix of security-related and everyday objects, including the door lock, window bars, prison slippers, telephone keypad, and a 20 kg weight plate. His successful imprint of a door lock—despite it being prohibited—highlights the omnipresence of architectural boundaries and control mechanisms. Alongside these, he also documented the workshop itself by making an imprint of the lid of the modeling clay container itself (*Knete für Projekt*).

He labeled his prints with his cell number.

### Conclusion

The analysis of the prints reveals recurring patterns. Out of the five to seven prints produced by each participant (48 prints in total), six elements consistently reappear. This repetition reflects both the limited spatial environment and the significance of these elements, leading participants to engage with similar features. Notably, five of these six recurring elements are located outside the cell, suggesting that the primary focus of daily life extends beyond the individual cell space.

The prints reveal not only the conditions of the environment but also the ways in which participants actively relate to and negotiate it. Through marking practices—such as labeling with names or cell numbers, adding fingerprints, or introducing poetic titles—participants inscribe aspects of the self within a constrained setting. These acts, alongside moments of subtle resistance, point to forms of agency that persist despite restriction. However, such expressions remain shaped and limited by institutional regulations, which ultimately determine what can be shown, recorded, and preserved.



Figure 25: Print by Michal, reproduced with consent. See all prints on pages 106–107.



Figure 26: Workshop documentation.



Figure 27: Print by Jakub, reproduced with consent. See all prints on pages 108–109.



Figure 28: Workshop documentation.