3. Material Traces of State Power

Prison architecture materializes state power and gives form to ideas about order, discipline, and morality. This chapter turns to objects, architectural elements, and carceral spaces encountered during my field research, examining them as material traces through which the penal system becomes visible. In doing so, it shows how abstract penal logics are embedded in, and reproduced through, the built environment.

The chapter also draws on insights from an interview conducted in PD1 with ST, Project Manager of the Pilot Project Pre-trial Detention Zurich/Bern, and KR, Prison Director in Pre-trial Detention, which is also part of the pilot project. The project aims to preserve the resources of detained persons and prevent the harmful effects of detention, continuing the efforts of the cantons of Zurich and Bern to reform pre-trial detention.[35] ST and KR provide valuable insights into the workings of pre-trial detention, the challenges involved, the efforts being made to reform the system, and the values that guide their work with incarcerated individuals. (For a more detailed discussion of the pilot project and the pre-trial detention system, see the full interview on page 22.)

35 Kanton Zürich, *Modellversuch Untersuchungshaft – ein Projekt für die Schweiz*, media release, June 25, 2024.

3.1 Spatiality and External Control

Spatiality in correctional facilities and pre-trial detention is shaped by extensive regimes of control. The prison environment actively organizes, restricts, and sequences movement through a dense network of architectural and technical barriers, including doors, locks, fences and coded access systems. These spatial arrangements make external control tangible in everyday life, as movement becomes dependent on institutional permission rather than individual decision-making. The resulting loss of autonomy can be experienced as deeply debilitating; as KR notes, *Many fall into crisis as a result of the strong external control within the prison, because they can no longer decide for themselves what to do.*

> *We are guided through the regular detention unit in small groups. Every door in the building has multiple locks. Next to each lock, there is a white or orange circular sticker. I ask the staff member what it means, but he avoids the question and doesn't give an answer. Presumably, the colors are technical markings related to the locking system.* (Meyer-Clason, Field Report CF)

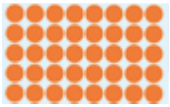

Figure 6: Orange stickers documented during field research at CF.

The orange and white dots next to each lock indicate the underlying complexity of the prison's locking system. The unusually high number of doors—and thus locks—requires an additional visual code to guide staff, indicating how profoundly movement through the building is structured and controlled. This layered system of barriers not only regulates access but also governs the pace and rhythm of the body, slowing it down and fragmenting movement into controlled sequences.

This spatial organization extends beyond movement and shapes social relations and everyday experience. Living in proximity over extended periods intensifies interpersonal tensions, as reflected in frequent requests for cell changes. When individuals are confined together for weeks or months, the lack of choice in social interaction can become a source of friction, even as shared cells may simultaneously offer moments of connection and conversation.

Spatiality clearly has a direct influence on the emotional state and social behavior of prison inmates. As KR recalls, the former 23-to-1 system in which individuals were locked in their cells for 23 hours a day and had one hour of outdoor exercise, exemplified an extreme form of confinement: *People were locked up, their energy had nowhere to go—so when they were brought to me for a conversation, I first had to spend ten minutes de-escalating before I could even begin.*

Such conditions highlight how architectural and temporal restrictions intersect, producing environments where everyday conflicts emerge from spatial proximity: *"For example, yesterday two separate incidents, both revolved around garlic: at dinner there was garlic bread, and in the kitchen the distribution was apparently uneven—that already caused trouble. The second dispute took place in the work unit. When peeling garlic, the peeled weight is precisely measured by the weighmaster, as payment is based on this. Yesterday, someone apparently accidentally recorded too few kilograms for another person, resulting in lower pay. That led to disagreements. Conflicts happen here as everywhere—only in a very confined space, which makes them even more likely. People don't necessarily always get along, and some have elevated aggression levels."*

Spatial experience is shaped not only by control and proximity, but also by additional dimensions, such as sensory conditions, as the following example illustrates.

Rooms filled with onions. The smell of onions against the exposed concrete. In the onion room, there are containers filled with large white onions, and the floor is covered with onion skins. Six to eight men work here, wearing masks. You can already smell the onions when you arrive on the corridor by elevator, and the work manager's eyes are watering. (Meyer-Clason, Field Report PD1)

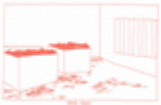

Figure 7: Sketch of the onion room observed during field research at PD1, reconstructed from memory.

The onion room introduces an intense sensory layer into an otherwise controlled and sterile architectural environment. The pungent smell of onions and garlic penetrates corridors and lingers in the exposed concrete, marking space through odor rather than visual design. This creates a contrast to the sterile environment of this prison's architecture. It is, however, a familiar smell—one that immediately evokes memories.

3.2 Psychological Vulnerability

A significant proportion of individuals in pre-trial detention are already psychologically vulnerable, with estimates ranging from 50 to 70 percent—far higher than in the general population. Many suffer from conditions such as schizophrenia, psychoses, delusions, or personality disorders, which can be further exacerbated by the conditions of incarceration. *This means that many overreact very quickly: 'I need a cigarette—right now!' This can trigger enormous stress, and a conflict arises just like that. Or someone says: 'The other person took my cigarette!' A world can collapse over something trivial,* notes ST.

This heightened sensitivity is compounded by the prison environment itself: *We also pay close attention to who is housed in a single or shared cell. We cannot put two people from nationalities that do not get along in the same cell. And even something as minor as the television program can lead to arguments. That is why we always need to coordinate placements very carefully,* explains ST. Many detainees have limited conflict-resolution skills or exhibit antisocial behavior, contributing to a situation in which the threshold for conflict is low and escalation is frequent.

An additional factor is individual resilience, which varies significantly. While some individuals are "prison-experienced", (KR) others experience detention as "sheer hell," (KR) repeatedly lapsing into crisis. *"Nobody is here voluntarily, and people are thrown together here—there are people from all over the world in this place. It is a context of compulsion, even if we allow certain relaxations,"* explains

KR. The combination of psychological vulnerability and structural constraints creates an environment in which *"the fuse is often short, and the potential for conflict is correspondingly high."*

The confrontation with psychological vulnerability becomes manifest in material traces such as the following:

> *He presses the torn blanket into my hands, along with a pair of underwear wrapped in plastic. He rips open the packaging and tears the underwear as well. "The fabric is so thin that it tears immediately, so that inmates cannot use it to hang themselves."* (Meyer-Clason, Field Report PD2)

Figure 8: Suicide-preventive underwear documented during field research at PD2.

The existence of suicide-preventive underwear in a pre-trial detention facility points to a structural tension between care and coercion within the system. Individuals who are newly detained, potentially experiencing acute distress or Haftschock, are nonetheless placed in confined spaces and are left alone. This raises questions about the adequacy of initial assessment procedures and whether vulnerable individuals are adequately identified and directed to appropriate care structures.

This observation is reinforced by accounts from KR and ST, who highlight the limitations of the current system:

PMC How is it assessed whether someone is stable enough to be held in detention?

KR That is assessed by doctors. There is a so-called Hafterstehungsverfahren (assessment of fitness for detention), which is already carried out during provisional detention. The term is Hafterstehungsfähigkeit—that is, whether someone is medically able to endure detention or whether they would need to be placed in a clinic. In practice, however, this concept is interpreted very broadly. There are simply not enough places in psychiatric facilities. Many people come to us even though detention is far from ideal for their recovery and often exacerbates mental health conditions. Many would actually belong in a clinic, but places there are also scarce. This is a challenge affecting all prisons—not only in Switzerland. We are seeing an increasing number of mentally conspicuous detainees. This has changed significantly compared to ten years ago. Many detained persons are psychotic, schizophrenic, or exhibit strong conspiratorial thinking. The number of such cases is steadily increasing.

These insights point to a systemic gap between the identification of vulnerability and the availability of appropriate care. Preventive measures such as providing suicide-preventive underwear function as compensatory measures within a system that lacks sufficient places in institutions offering therapeutic alternatives.

This logic extends to individuals who exhibit aggressive behavior or pose a risk to others, where control is likewise expressed through materiality and objects:

> *Next, we visit the cell for suicidal inmates and those who may pose a danger to others. According to ST, the cells are deliberately designed so that one cannot harm oneself or destroy the cell. Nevertheless, inmates still manage to do so—one of them reportedly dismantled the entire cell. I can easily imagine how anger and despair escalate to extreme levels here. One of the inmates had a psychosis, KR reports. He heard many voices and was very difficult to control. He still had to be granted his one hour of exercise in the yard. "When inmates are not doing well, solitary confinement is the worst, because feelings [become stronger] and inner voices become much louder and even more unbearable than usual," says ST. Inmates are repeatedly admitted to prison PD1 who would actually need to be placed in a clinical facility. However, due to a lack of available places, individuals end up here, for whom this form of detention is only partially suitable.* (Meyer-Clason, Field Report PD1)
> *Next, we look at a cell reserved for particularly aggressive inmates. In the small anteroom, protective equipment for the staff is stored. M shows me a device used to cut clothing* off the body. (Meyer-Clason, Field Report PD2)

Figure 9: Reference image of a S-CUT XC-E similar to the one observed during field research at PD2.

The S-cut tool exemplifies a highly invasive form of intervention, in which cutting clothing from the body entails a loss of autonomy and dignity.

> *On the floor lies a torn mattress inside a sack, and the blanket on the chair is also ripped. The items in this cell must be extremely durable and almost indestructible, as inmates take out their aggression on them, M explains. Although the cell is specifically designed for such cases, there are still individuals who manage to tear everything apart.* (Meyer-Clason, Field Report PD2)

Figure 10: Reference image of a tear-resistant blanket similar to the one observed during field research at PD2, where photography was not permitted. The blanket measures 140 × 200 cm and is boil-proof, flame-retardant, and washable for institutional use in hospitals, prisons, and police facilities.

The safety blanket, intended as a durable and harm-preventive object, reveals the limits of design-based control within the penal system. Although these materials are engineered to withstand extreme use, their destruction exposes the mismatch between institutional expectations and the intensity of human behavior under conditions of confinement. The torn blanket is evidence that aggression cannot be fully contained through architecture or material alone.

Figure 11: Children's cutlery from IKEA's Kalas line, documented during field research at PD2.

This logic is also reflected in other material interventions that aim to manage risk:

> *M unlocks an isolation cell. It is very sparsely furnished: a "bed" with a blanket and a stainless-steel unit that combines a toilet and a sink. There is also a set of plastic tableware—a cup, a bowl, a plate, a knife, a fork, and a spoon—each in a different color; children's cutlery from IKEA.* (Meyer-Clason, Field Report PD2)

Pastel-colored children's cutlery in an otherwise grey and minimalist isolation cell creates a striking visual and symbolic contrast. Its use serves as a risk mitigation measure—plastic, child-safe objects are obviously intended to prevent harm to oneself, others, or the cell itself—yet they also convey a paternalistic undertone. The infantilizing aesthetics position the individual as a subject in need of both control and protection, highlighting how care and coercion become intertwined within the penal system.

3.3 Fragmented Communication

Communication in pre-trial detention is highly structured, mediated, and significantly delayed. The central means of interaction within the institution is the Hausbrief, a standardized and *"old-school"* (KR) communication tool through which detainees submit requests for medical care, psychological support, social work, or simply to buy stamps. This system formalizes the communication of personal needs by imposing bureaucratic procedures on them, limited to a single request per form and requiring justification. As a result, even basic needs must be articulated within predefined categories, filtering urgency through administrative logic.

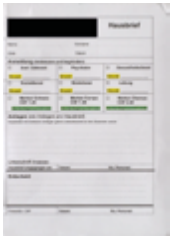

Figure 12: Hausbrief documented in field research at PD1.

External communication is similarly restricted and controlled. Written correspondence is subject to censorship, while visits and phone calls must be approved by procedural authorities and are often monitored. In many cases, detainees are limited to a single authorized

contact, and communication may be denied due to concerns such as the risk of collusion. Institutional authorities define all conditions of contact, reinforcing a system in which communication is not only mediated but also tightly regulated.

Communication within the prison is also highly bureaucratic and tends to be slow. As noted by ST, *"a great deal can fall apart within just a few months if administrative processes are not handled quickly and efficiently."* Timely intervention is therefore crucial to prevent harm caused by detention.

3.4 Who is Being Punished?

"As for the composition of those detained: around 40 percent are foreign nationals who are registered as residents of a foreign country. The remaining 60 percent live in Switzerland. Of these, roughly half are foreign nationals with residence in Switzerland; the other half are Swiss citizens—though a not insignificant proportion of these are dual nationals with a migration background." (ST)

In the introduction, I discussed the overrepresentation of minorities and migrants within the prison system.

This structural imbalance also becomes visible in the spatial and material organization of prison architecture, as the following examples illustrate.

> *In the office, there is a whiteboard with magnets labeled with the staff members' last names. Under the magnets, slips of paper are attached indicating a language. M explains that they had to hire someone specifically who speaks Arabic.* (Meyer-Clason, Field Report PD2)

Figure 13: Sketch of language board observed during field research at PD2, reconstructed from memory.

The language board reveals the linguistic diversity within the prison while simultaneously pointing to the overrepresentation of foreign nationals. With approximately twenty different languages indicated, communication becomes a managed resource that must be organized and distributed through staff.

The presence of a Qibla compass sticker in cells similarly reflects an institutional response to the needs of a diverse inmate population. By providing orientation for Muslim prayer, the prison acknowledges religious practices and signals a degree of cultural inclusion. At the same time, however, the necessity for such a device points to the significant number of Muslim inmates in pre-trial detention. This

Figure 14: Sketch of qibla compass sticker observed during field research at PD1, reconstructed from memory.

overrepresentation aligns with statistics and indicates underlying structural inequalities within the Swiss penal system.

This structural imbalance is further complicated by an observation made by a guard at PD2, who noted that, for some inmates, detention represents a form of relative security: they earn more per month through prison work than they would in their countries of origin, and have guaranteed access to shelter, food, and basic care. Rather than diminishing the punitive nature of incarceration, this observation underscores how the conditions that make prison appear viable for some are themselves products of global inequality. When imprisonment can seem preferable to life outside, the question of who is being punished extends beyond the individual, implicating the broader social and economic structures that shape who ends up inside.

The objects, architectural elements, and spatial arrangements discussed in this chapter show how the penal system becomes visible in material form. At the same time, these material traces expose the tensions and limits of the system. Objects designed to protect can also infantilize, objects intended to prevent harm can point to the absence of adequate therapeutic care, and systems meant to organize communication can further reduce autonomy. The chapter therefore shows that material objects in prisons do more than support institutional routines: they make visible the contradictions of pre-trial detention, where care and coercion, protection and control, reform and punishment are continuously intertwined.