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Sarah Lopez

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States of Incarceration: an architectural perspective on immigrant detention in Texas

Sarah Lopez

University of Texas, Austin, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Buildings and landscapes are crystallizations of dominant societal beliefs and practices. Architecture also shapes peoples' experiences of places and institutions, and provides a unique source of evidence of historical change. This article describes how students from the School of Architecture and the Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin researched the spaces of migrant detention in Texas, which is a critical part of America's larger story of mass incarceration. Students mapped the physical locations, architectural forms, and building histories of Texas' detention centers, and worked with migrants who had been detained to create visual stories of their migration journeys and experiences in detention. These methods support the argument that the spaces of immigrant detention – the material forms, geographic locations, institutional structures, and nested experiences – are critical to understanding a disjuncture between detention policy and detention practice. The US government asserts that immigrant detention is civil in nature, yet detention centers owned by private prison corporations and located in unpopulated rural localities with limited public access replicate US prisons, and are experienced by migrants as punitive environments. These methods also contribute to a more robust and expansive public "spatial imagination" regarding the relationship between immigrant detention and the environment, which is necessary to envisioning alternative systems of (and to) immigrant detention.

KEYWORDS

Immigrant detention;
immigration policy;
detention centers; service
processing centers;
incarceration; criminalization;
Texas

As a built environment historian, I teach about how buildings and landscapes are crystallizations of dominant societal beliefs and practices. In addition to reflecting social norms, architecture also shapes peoples' experiences of places and institutions, and provides a unique source of evidence of historical change. Our class topic and panel for *States of Incarceration* entitled "How does architecture shape punishment? Spatial stories of migration and detention" brings a spatial and architectural lens to political, social, and legal scholarship on immigrant detention in Texas – a state known for detaining and incarcerating more individuals than any other in the Union (Carson & Diaz, 2015).¹

Graduate students from the School of Architecture and the Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin who have not experienced detention or international migration first-hand researched these issues using two main strategies. First, they mapped the physical

locations, architectural forms, and building history of detention centers. Second, students worked with migrants who had been detained to create visual stories of their migration journeys and experiences in detention. Our project sought to define detention space, reveal how it is produced, describe the experience of detention through migrants' own words, and render these spaces and experiences visible to a broader audience. Thus, the goal was two-fold: on the one hand, students developed a methodological toolkit for researching places and practices that are hidden from view; on the other, they designed mapping and representational strategies aimed at communicating pressing social issues to a broader public.

Both the scope of detention infrastructure and the veil of secrecy that shrouds its development and maintenance presented unique challenges in our effort to understand and visualize detention environments. So-called "immigrant detention" is, by law, an "administrative detention," whereby the US government detains migrants pre-trial as it evaluates whether or not they are granted asylum, residency, found guilty of an immigration-related crime such as illegal entry, or deported. In addition to immigrant detention facilities, there are criminal alien requirement (CAR) facilities or immigrant prisons where noncitizens who are found guilty of immigration-related crimes are incarcerated for up to several years. In Texas, many different agencies and companies manage the facilities that detain migrants. The federal agency responsible for executing national immigration policy, ICE, creates contracts for "detention beds" with six private prison companies, and scores of county officials across the state.² Taxpayer funded, ICE is required to share information with the public whereas the private corporations that manage and own the majority of Texas' detention centers are not. Despite pledges of transparency and accessibility, ICE denied my requests through the Freedom of Information Act for architectural plans and information about the building processes. They have deferred (since the fall of 2015) my requests for interviews with the Office of Detention Policy and Planning, tours of key facilities, and copies of facility contracts. The private corporation GEO Group has denied access to their buildings, as well as an interview with their construction management team. My students were creative with available resources: primary ICE contracts already secured by the Freedom of Information Act and government documents available online, the physical landscape itself, personal testimonies, and primary and secondary sources from *Grassroots Leadership*, *Detention Watch Network* and academics and activists in the field (American Civil Liberties Union, 2014; Chak, 2014; Conlon & Hiemstra, 2017; De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Dowling & Inda, 2013; Gilman, 2013; *Trac Immigration Reports*).³

My students' first task was to get a sense of how many facilities detained and incarcerated migrants in Texas, and whom they detained. Including immigrant detention centers, city and county jails that house migrants, and CAR facilities, Texas has a total of some 33 facilities that have the capacity to detain and incarcerate over 30,000 migrants. An estimated 50% of Texas' detention facilities are filled with asylum seekers from over 200 countries. Some individuals seek out US border patrol after arduous journeys through the Americas; others come to the US on a tourist or student visa and then apply for asylum. While the majority of Texas' asylum seekers are from Central America, we met people from Cameroon, Sudan, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, and Mexico. Individuals detained also include migrants who have been apprehended within the US due to an irregularity in their residency status, but not yet charged with any crime. The first time a migrant is apprehended at the US-Mexico border for illegal entry, he or she receives a

misdemeanor; the second time, it is a felony. Barring unusual circumstances, these individuals are generally incarcerated in CAR facilities or processed through the courts and granted “voluntary deportation.”

After grasping the scope of detention in Texas, students developed mapping techniques to document the historic development of detention facilities. Placing these facilities on a timeline based on when they were built and/or used as a detention facility reveals patterns and connections between facility construction and immigration policy and politics. The majority of Texas’ detention infrastructure was built between 2000 and 2010, when at least 19 large-scale facilities were erected. Several political and economic factors account for this spike. The 1996 legislation, known as the Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act, greatly expanded the categories of immigrants who were deportable and subject to mandatory detention, thus shifting the balance of who and how many individuals were detained, and setting the stage for increased detention in the 2000s. Post-9/11 legislation led to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), charged with combating terrorism and immigration, and then given more funding to do so. Increased funding also opened opportunities; the nation’s two largest private prison corporations, GEO Group and Corrections Corporation of America, heavily lobbied Congress in the early 2000s, specifically regarding immigration issues (Justice Policy Institute, 2011; Carson & Diaz, 2015). In 2004, Congress appropriated funds for what they call “immigrant beds.” An immigrant bed is a synecdoche for a migrant him or herself, an abstract way to apportion sleeping space for individuals. By 2010, they enacted the first “bed quota” requiring DHS and ICE to maintain 33,400 immigrant detention beds daily (Detention Watch Network, 2015).

These legislative and congressional mandates resulted in the construction of several new detention centers and prisons that, once built, possess an inertia of their own. Private corporations assume risk and debt to invest in permanent buildings. And, since ICE pays these companies per bed per day, there is a perverse incentive to detain more individuals for longer periods of time (Carson & Diaz, 2015, p. 11).

Questions like “what should the buildings look like?” and “how should migrants should be treated?” reveal the institutional complexity of how facilities are owned and managed. In Texas, ICE owns and manages two detention centers, known as “service processing centers.” Otherwise they have “intra-governmental service agreements” with private companies and counties. CAR facilities filled with migrants who have been charged with immigration-related crimes (as well as other “alien” offenders) are not technically detention centers and are overseen by the Bureau of Prisons. While ICE has standards for how migrants should be treated known as performance based national detention standards (modeled on standards for civil incarceration), day-to-day decisions about the management of detention facilities, as well as the design and construction of them, are at the discretion of private companies motivated by shareholders and profit margins, rather than human rights or civic responsibilities.

To better understand the material and geographic dimensions of detention, students used Google Maps to analyze each building “footprint” (its shape and mass) and geographic siting. The basic layout of facilities – rooms strung together along a linear “telephone pole,” campus plans, singular massive warehouses, or rows of semi-permanent tents or barracks – follow the patterns of mid- and late-twentieth century prison design (Johnston, 2006). Mapping the centers’ geographic locations in relation to cities that provide pro-bono legal services shows that seven out of over 30 centers are located

within 60 miles of cities that have these services.⁴ Since almost 90% of those represented by a lawyer win their asylum cases, being located far away from access to lawyers in cities actually hurts one's chances of winning asylum.⁵

On a field trip to the US-Mexico border students experienced the geographic isolation of four centers; the euphemistically named “South Texas Family Residential Center” (one of Texas’ two family detention centers) is not only on a lonely road adjacent to a civilian prison and agricultural fields, but also set back far enough that it is not visible to passing drivers. Upon touring the La Salle County Regional Detention Center facility, we learned about the important role of sound (the echoes of heavy metal doors, the clanking of footsteps and wheels on concrete floors, the beeping of entry and exit codes) in the creation of an atmosphere of fear and control (Figure 1).

The architecture of immigrant detention in Texas can be described as a rural warehouse-prison vernacular. The facilities are privately-owned but government-financed; design/build groups in prison corporations like Geo Group and CCA innovate with low-cost industrial and corporate building techniques such as modular construction to realize super-scale facilities. Sited adjacent to agricultural fields, the large dirt lots with massive shed roofs, hollow core plank ceilings and single-story tilt-wall structures are hard to distinguish from light-industrial warehouses or mega-storage facilities. Upon closer inspection, they can be identified by two entrances (one for visitors and employees and the other for transportation companies ferrying noncitizens to their new “home”), a high-security sally port, rectangular caged outdoor spaces, and a double perimeter road lined with a 12-foot security fence topped with concertina wire. Three flags mark the entrance – the US flag, the Texas State flag, and a flag for the corporation that owns and manages the center.

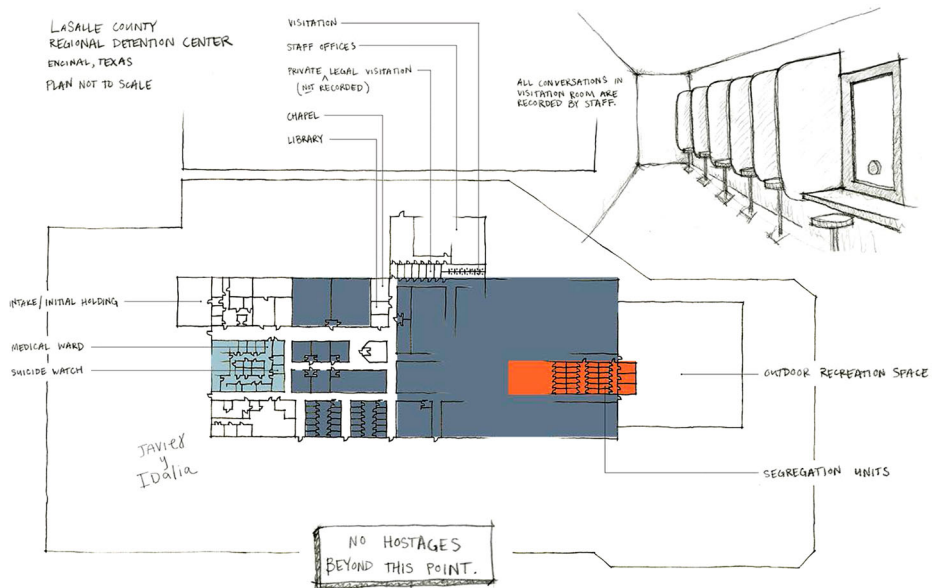


Figure 1. During a tour, a student documented the basic layout and visitation room of the La Salle County Regional Detention Center. Encinal, Texas, 2015 (Drawing by Katie Slusher).

Beyond these material conditions, our understanding of why and how the architecture of detention matters as a social and psychological experience came from those who have been detained. We developed a technique for conducting “cognitive maps,” semi-structured drawing exercises where those detained created mental representations of their physical environments. Primarily men were contacted through an immigrant shelter in Austin, Casa Marianella, which temporarily houses migrants released from detention as well as migrants who are homeless. Orchestrating eight cognitive maps with men mostly detained at the South Texas Detention Center – known as “Pearsall” – is a very small sample. Yet, eight descriptions of one specific room-type pointed us toward future trajectories for research and nascent patterns regarding the relationship between the physical environment, its daily management, and how it is experienced (Figure 2).

Miguel, an asylum seeker from Columbia, was detained for four months at Pearsall.⁶ He described his room as a rectangle with two long windowless walls lined with metal bunkbeds and two communal tables running down the center. A small, enclosed recreational space is on one end, and bathrooms and showers partially open to view are on the other. Thus, other men and female guards witnessed detainees defecate. His description coheres with the “hardened environments” of standard prisons (Justice Facilities Review, 1998). Designed to house 100 men “from all over the world” 24/7, these environments produce what several interviewees described as the claustrophobia of everyday life.⁷

Another asylum seeker, Ahmed from Ethiopia, drew a series of interconnected rooms along a central spine, as he described surprise, confusion, and anger regarding his time in

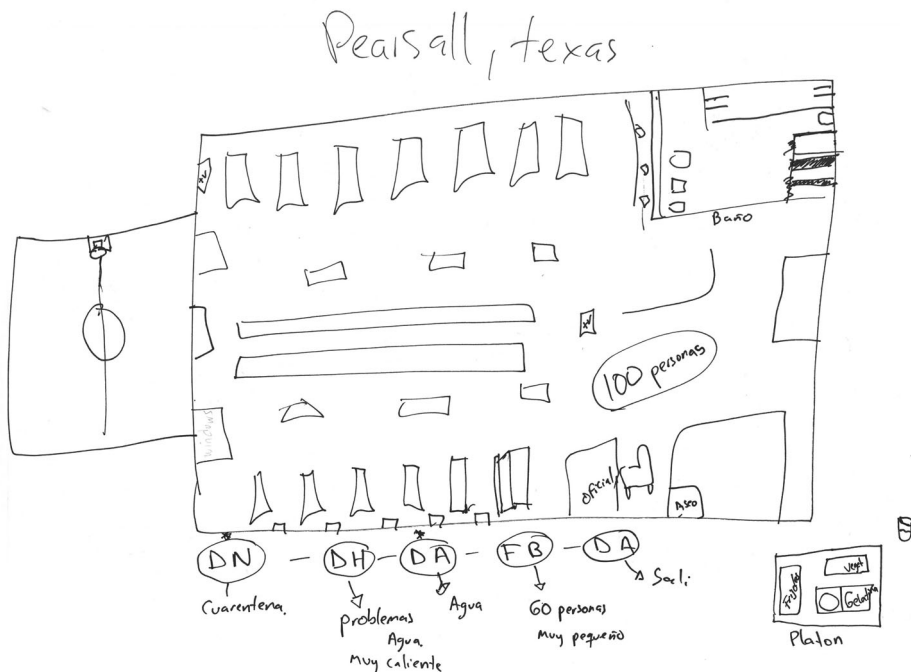


Figure 2. Asylum seeker Miguel’s drawing shows that “100 personas” (100 people) live in a room lined with bunks and picnic tables, shedding light on spaces that the public cannot access. Austin, Texas, 2015 (Drawing by Miguel).

solitary confinement. Writing down various dates and room numbers, corroborating his story with a “pink slip” he was given upon release, Ahmed explained that he was thrown into a solitary cell – usually reserved as punishment for the most dangerous criminals – for over a month for reasons he still cannot understand. During this time, he received meals through a metal slot and was forced to shower while handcuffed. Watch dog reports and local exposés, such as the American Civil Liberties Union’s investigation into Texas CAR facilities, report about the arbitrary and harmful use of solitary confinement (also known as segregation units) in CAR facilities and immigrant detention. Sometimes migrants are egregiously placed in segregation because the facility simply needs more “beds.”

Detainees also repeatedly spoke of the lack of outdoor time (they were taken to an outdoor soccer field for one hour once a month) as creating a sense of disorientation. At Pearsall, the daily recreation space is a walled room at the end of the dormitory that has small clerestory windows covered by barbed wire. Naz, detained for 10 months, recalled: “you really don’t get to see the outside ... There’s a very small drain hole for the water to flow out of the rec area. If you look through that you were able to see the grass on the other side.”⁸ Men were also “reshuffled,” from one pod to another. This meant that they were separated from new but important friendships; Miguel described feelings of isolation and fear upon relocation.

This course was aimed at exposing students to new methods for using architecture and landscapes to reveal the stakes of our current immigration system, and to engage with pressing social issues. A multidisciplinary approach including historical research, analysis of architecture and geography, and the stories of immigrant detainees expose the micro experiences of detention in the macro processes that shape the immigration system. The building of more so-called detention centers as institutional environments managed by private corporations with little oversight and in the architectural language of civilian prisons not only increases our capacity to detain men, women, and children in prison-like conditions despite the fact that they have not committed a crime, it also predisposes migrants to punitive environments and experiences for years to come.

In addition to exploring methods for studying the built environment, creating a visual story of immigrant detention in Texas is, I hope, a first step toward broadening what Dell Upton refers to as our “spatial imagination,” or a sense of the relationships among people and their environments, regarding migrant detention (Upton, 2008). By rendering the infrastructure of detention visible – showing where the centers are located, what they look like, how they are managed and how they are experienced by detainees – the public can begin to formulate critical questions about how America’s newest arrivals should be treated, as well as perceive the gap between our government’s immigration policies and actual immigration practices. As noted earlier, immigrant detention is, by law, “civil” meaning migrants should not experience detention as punishment, and yet, they do. Furthermore, detaining the physical liberty of any individual is exclusively a governmental authority. Yet, private prison corporations who are experts in cost-saving technologies, not civil or international rights, are at the helm of not only managing, but also envisioning our detention system. They are deciding where new facilities are located, what they look like, and how they are run. And, they are doing so with little public accountability and transparency. Engaging the existing infrastructure of detention is an important way for students and the broader public to begin reimagining our immigration system as one that relies on a different kind of architecture, as well as different institutional organizations (such as

community advocates and religious groups), to welcome new-Americans and migrants to the US, rather than imprison them upon arrival.

Notes

1. Email correspondence with Bob Libal, executive director of Grassroots Leadership, in the author's possession, April 12, 2017.
2. Six companies that build and manage detention centers in Texas are Corrections Corporation of America, GEO Group Inc., Management and Training Corporation, Emerald Corrections, Community Education Centers, and LCS Correction Services.
3. Government contracts can be found on the Freedom of Information Act library available at: www.ice.gov/foia/library.
4. In 2015, El Paso, Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Houston and Brownsville offered these services.
5. Immigration lawyer, Dr Denise Gilman, class lecture at the University of Texas at Austin, September 24, 2015.
6. Miguel is identified by first name only.
7. Miguel, interview by Jessica Carey-Webb and author, November 2015.
8. Naz, interview by author, October 2015.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Sarah Lopez, a built environment historian and migration scholar, is an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and a Mellon-Fellow in Architecture, Urbanism and the Humanities at Princeton University. Lopez' research focuses on the impact of migrant remittances – dollars earned in the US and sent to families and communities in Mexico – on the architecture and landscape of rural Mexico and urban USA. Her book entitled *The Remittance Landscape: The Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2015. Her research on immigrant detention, inspired by her engagement with the Humanities Action Lab's *States of Incarceration* exhibit, continues. She is also examining the relationship between 30 years of continuous migration between Mexico and the US and the development of an informal binational construction industry on both sides of the border.

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