

# Beyond Confinement

## Bodies, Spaces and the Challenge of Social Reintegration

carcere  
ricerca-azione  
prototipi  
sovraffollamento  
reinserimento  
**prison  
action research  
prototypes  
overcrowding  
reintegration**

Il sovraffollamento delle carceri in Italia mette in luce una tensione critica tra la fisicità della reclusione e gli obiettivi riabilitativi del tempo della detenzione. Oltre a rappresentare una questione quantitativa, il sovraffollamento riflette sfide più profonde legate alla necessità di modificare gli spazi e le modalità di gestione degli stessi, con implicazioni dirette sul benessere di detenuti e operatori. L'articolo ripercorre l'esperienza del gruppo di ricerca *Laboratorio Carcere* del Politecnico di Milano, esplorando come il progetto di architettura possa contribuire a trasformare le carceri da strutture di contenimento a luoghi che promuovano la dignità umana e la reintegrazione sociale.

Attraverso l'impiego di "prototipi di transizione", il gruppo di ricerca sperimenta interventi concreti che pongono al centro l'interazione tra gli individui e gli spazi in cui vivono, creando occasioni di relazione sia all'interno degli istituti sia tra il carcere e la società esterna. Tali interventi, concepiti non come risposte ma come inneschi per nuove domande di progetto, permettono ai ricercatori di rilevare direttamente le caratteristiche degli spazi di reclusione. L'apertura di *Off Campus San Vittore*, uno spazio di ricerca e didattica del Politecnico di Milano all'interno del carcere storico della città ha rappresentato un punto di svolta nel condurre la ricerca-azione. La frequentazione settimanale di tali luoghi consente ai ricercatori di osservare, misurare e comprendere le condizioni di comfort abitativo in diverse stagioni dell'anno, offrendo una prospettiva più complessa e articolata sugli spazi detentivi. Le riflessioni qui presentate, radicate nel contesto milanese, intendono stimolare un confronto più ampio con altri contesti europei sul tema urgente della qualità abitativa negli spazi di reclusione.

The issue of prison overcrowding in Italy highlights a critical tension between confinement and the rehabilitative goals of detention. Beyond the quantitative issue, overcrowding reflects more profound challenges related to modifying spaces and their management methods, directly impacting the well-being of both inmates and staff. This article retraces the decade-long experience of the *Laboratorio Carcere* research group at Politecnico di Milano, exploring how architectural design can transform prisons from containment structures into places promoting dignity and social reintegration.

The group's approach involves "transition prototypes", experimental interventions focused on interactions between individuals and their spaces. These interventions aim to create opportunities for relationships both within institutions and between prisons and external society. These interventions conceptualised not as solutions but as catalysts for novel design inquiries, enable researchers to directly observe the characteristics of spaces hidden behind prison walls. A significant development in this regard was the establishment of *Off-Campus San Vittore*, a research and teaching space of the Politecnico di Milano located in the historic prison of Milan. Weekly visits to these spaces allow researchers to observe, measure, and understand the comfort conditions in various prison places throughout different periods of the year. This offers a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on detention spaces. The reflections, rooted in the Milanese context, aim to stimulate a broader dialogue with European contexts, addressing the urgent issue of living quality in detention spaces.

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On 16 December 2024, 62,153 people were detained in Italian prisons, compared to a regulatory capacity 51,320. However, due to various reasons, 4,462 beds were temporarily unavailable, reducing the effective capacity to approximately 47,000 places and resulting in an actual overcrowding rate of 132.6%<sup>1</sup>. These numbers highlight the persistent issue affecting the 189 Italian prisons.

Prison overcrowding is more than a logistical or numerical problem; it reveals the complex tension between physical space and the individuals confined within it. This issue compromises not only the material and structural conditions of detention but also profoundly impacts the psychological and social well-being of inmates, as well as the staff working within these institutions (Møller and others, 2007; WHO, 2023).

Prison is, by definition, a place where freedom of movement is restricted. While this limitation aims to ensure community safety and punish criminal behaviour, it must also be accompanied by a rehabilitative objective: to prepare confined individuals for social reintegration, enabling them to reclaim an active role in society.

The dynamics of detention, therefore, turn around the positive tension between bodies and the spaces of confinement. However, the prison's ideological role as a site of discipline and punishment (Foucault, 1977) has historically overshadowed the bodily and subjective experiences of individuals. Yet these experiences are placed at the centre of penal execution by current legislation. As stated in the European Prison Rules under its basic principles: "(5) Life in prison shall approximate as closely as possible the positive aspects of life in the community; (6) All detention shall be managed so as to facilitate the reintegration into free society of persons who have been deprived of their liberty" (Council of Europe, 2006).

Drawing on experiments conducted by the multidisciplinary research group *Laboratorio Carcere* at

Politecnico di Milano, this paper explores the relationship between bodies and prison spaces through an 'operational' design vision. This approach supports and tries to materialise the transition of prison architecture from being merely a space of detention to becoming a place of relationship – inside and beyond the prison walls<sup>2</sup>.

## BODIES AND SPACES: BEYOND THE QUANTITATIVE DIMENSION

The bodies in question are the confined ones, individuals convicted of crimes or being held awaiting trial when deemed necessary by authorities to ensure public safety or the proper conduct of judicial proceedings. However, they are also the bodies of those who work in prisons: prison officers, educational, healthcare, and administrative staff, as well as cooperative workers and volunteers who cross the gates daily to contribute to the functioning of the "prison machine". The spaces embrace the complex system of buildings and open areas enclosed within the prison walls. The barrier enforces the removal of those who have committed crimes from society and keeps them out of sight, an action that contradicts the purpose of rehabilitation, which requires visibility, connection and reintegration.

When individuals are deprived of personal freedom, they lose the ability to move freely and make autonomous societal choices. This deprivation entails numerous restrictions on daily life, including limitations on movement, separation from family and community, and the loss of certain civil rights. However, fundamental rights such as health, humanity and dignified treatment must be upheld. Prisons should, therefore, provide a "life space" and function as institutions that "ensure hygiene, education, and culture while also safeguarding the right to affection" (Colombo 2022, X). However, this mandate is often not fulfilled, not only in Italy<sup>3</sup>.

In Italy, the introduction of Law No. 354 of 1975, "Rules on the Penitentiary System and the Penal Execution of Measures Depriving or Limiting Freedom", marked a significant shift in the detention system. Prisons were redefined as spaces for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of convicts. The law established key principles: the rehabilitative purpose of punishment, respect for human dignity, the centrality of work, and the participation of detainees in institutional life. This evolution in the concept of punishment is reflected today in many legal frameworks and is widely embraced across Europe and beyond.

However, in everyday practice, prisons are still predominantly viewed as spaces for containment and exclusion of those who have committed crimes, particularly in instances involving specific types of offences or sensationalised cases. This perspective is likely influenced by the enduring idea of the "modern prison" as a tool to "discipline the bodies and minds of detainees" (Foucault, 1977). In his investigation of "other spaces", the French philosopher identifies prisons as heterotopias of deviation: physical places and symbolic spaces representing punishment, justice, and social control. Understanding prisons as heterotopia provides a valuable framework for analysing their role in modern society, evaluating their evolution, and recognising how they increasingly embody complexity and contradictions. This demands a constant "design thought" (Di Franco, 2012) capable of negotiating the tensions between the spaces and the bodies that inhabit them.

However, the implementation of rehabilitation and social reintegration principles is limited by the inadequacy and condition of the spaces intended to host the treatment activities envisaged by law<sup>4</sup>. Prisons persist as a "real place outside all places" (Foucault, 1967).

When Law No. 354 of 1975 came into force in Italy, new facilities were built, often replacing existing ones, alongside maintenance and

expansion efforts for current ones. However, these interventions failed to translate the reform's intentions in a spatial manner (Bozzuto 2020). The organisation of prison facilities remains primarily focused on containment and restricting inmates' movement. Several factors have reinforced this custodial and neutralising view of confinement, including the security emergencies brought on by political terrorism and the escalation of organised crime during that period. This perspective inevitably influenced how sentences were carried out and the design of detention facilities. In building new prisons or renovating existing ones, the first task of ministerial technical offices was to ensure security, with a paramount focus on preventing escapes and maintaining strict discipline (Marcetti 2011).

Such choices have led the Italian system to persist in a state of "ordinary emergency," characterised by chronic overcrowding and harsh living conditions for confined individuals and those working within the system. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has repeatedly criticised these conditions. The widely cited *Torreggiani and Others vs. Italy*<sup>5</sup> ruling established that overcrowding constituted inhuman and degrading treatment, violating Article 3 of the European Convention<sup>6</sup>.

Over time, the Court's rulings have helped to redefine the operational understanding of detention spaces. As Alessandro Albano notes, "[through its judgments, not only about Italy] the Court begins with a problem perceived solely as spatial and contributes to redesigning a broader model of detention" (Albano 2020, 36). Starting from the issue of overcrowding, the ECHR's decisions have progressively shifted the focus from incarceration as "empty time" to constructing conditions in which space becomes a "co-creator of life time, an intrinsic quality of a designed place" (Palma 2020, 20). The emphasis has moved beyond merely satisfying the quantitative requirement of 3 square metres per inmate, prioritising the creation of a system

of spaces that support inmates' daily practices. There is a growing recognition of the need to intervene in prison structures, promoting environments designed "to allow individuals to find some measure of well-being, even amid the difficult circumstances they face" (Palma 2020, 11).

## MAKING SPACE FOR BODIES: OPENING TO DESIGN

Addressing the issue of prisons, it is essential to recentre the focus on "space as a problem", acknowledging its intricate and twisted nature (Tschumi 1996, 31). Tackling complexity requires an approach that oscillates between treating space as an autonomous entity – the pure space – and understanding its intended and unintended uses, enabling its experience and meaning.

In the project that is necessary to reform Italian detention facilities and put concrete actions in place<sup>7</sup>, it seems unavoidable to move beyond an exclusively regulatory vision that has, over time, led to the neutralisation of individuals (Bianchetti 2020, 65). This perspective reduces inmates to "those who are guarded" and staff – police officers and other employees – to "those who guard".

In *Asylums*, sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) introduces the concept of the "degradation ceremony" to describe the loss of subjectivity experienced by the confined, depriving them of the ability to feel and exist within their bodies. This loss results from standardising daily routines, control over their environment, and submission to authoritarian rules, which are not always transparent. By contrast, regulations and laws use the term 'custody' to highlight the need to move beyond a purely segregative approach in sentencing. As mentioned earlier, the shared vision is to place the individual at the centre of the prison organisation, moving beyond efficiency-focused and purely retributive theories of punishment.

In introducing the rehabilitative purpose of detention, legislators highlight how all observation and treatment actions carried out by prison staff must enable the creation of an individualised plan tailored to the specific needs of each detainee.

However, how is it possible to adopt a diversity-sensitive approach to the execution of punishment? Such an approach requires a variety of spaces to support daily life and clashes with the anonymity often seen in detention facilities. The anonymity of prison spaces results from decades of design practices focused exclusively on containment and security, whether in building new facilities or adapting existing ones. These spaces were often designed based on outdated conceptions of the role of punishment. In Italy, inmates spend their days moving between cells, shared with others, corridors that, over time, have increasingly taken on the character of shared spaces, and outdoor courtyards accessible at set times. However, these courtyards are often unused due to their inadequate size or lack of facilities for meaningful activities. For specific needs, inmates may access spaces outside their wing, such as meeting rooms with family and lawyers, healthcare facilities, or work areas for those who qualify for access.

Anonymity is also rooted in the fact that prison facilities rarely distinguish between pre-trial detainees and those serving short or long sentences, between young and elderly inmates, or between Italian speakers and non-speakers. It often neglects the presence of officers, staff, volunteers, and inmates' families as well. The anonymity and trivialisation of these spaces result from several factors: a general abandonment of thoughtful design – summed up by the all-too-common refrain, "but this is a prison" –; the overwhelming of technical offices with daily emergencies; and the accumulation of small-scale routine maintenance interventions that eventually become the norm. These works are carried out urgently and with

minimal resources – often by in-house maintenance teams (officers and inmates) that lack sufficiently qualified personnel – and focus exclusively on resolving immediate functional issues using available materials. Little attention is given to the overall spatial impact. The result is a mismatch of materials and colours and a prevailing sense of impermanence. Often, the distinction between spaces relies solely on wall colours.

In the increasingly urgent need to reconfigure detention spaces, it is essential to envision interventions that go beyond their "false neutrality" (Palma 2020). It is necessary to abandon an approach that predefines spaces (almost exclusively) based on their dimensions and security requirements – often overestimated – and instead embrace a design vision capable of fostering relationships between the physical attributes of space, its potential uses, and its meanings. A spatial design that is capable of "establishing that field of action where the capacity to inhabit the world by caring for it is exercised" (Leveratto 2018, 113) and, in turn, caring for oneself.

To pursue the goal of "making space for action", it seems necessary to move away from a purely planimetric dimension, where predefined functions are distributed according to minimal pathways designed to ensure maximum security. Overcoming this zenithal perspective means "making space for the bodies" that inhabit the prison, paying attention to "the ways and places of their being in space, their actions, vulnerabilities, and desires" (Bianchetti 2023, IX) while avoiding their neutralisation by reducing them to stylised figures or statistical entities. This approach outlines a project that is aware of the fact that, in prefiguring space, we shape how different bodies exist and often resist within it, making design "first and foremost, a practical, political, and ethical exercise" (Bianchetti 2023, 58). Designers are called upon to imagine various spatial conditions where time, conflict, and the

unpredictability of uses are valued, accepting that not everything can be anticipated. This challenge presents additional difficulties for prison administration, which must embrace uncertainty and adjustment as structural aspects of its daily operations. However, only through the ability of all those involved to accept the challenge of an "open project" – which may also be characterised by disorder and exceptions – can we envision a transition from detention as "empty time" to imprisonment as "project time", sensitive to individualities and capable of proactively including fragments of external society.

## LABORATORIO CARCERE: DESIGNING PRESENCE

Over the years, *Laboratorio Carcere* has undertaken a series of targeted interventions aimed at opening the lived dimension of space<sup>8</sup>. These small localised actions, nominated as 'transition prototypes', are attempts to create conditions for staging diverse ways of fostering relationships between individuals. One example is the *Casetta Rossa* (Fig.1), a small red wooden pavilion designed as a space where children and parents can meet through play. It is a contained yet open environment<sup>9</sup>. Providing comfortable and safe spaces for physical activity was the goal behind creating Action Track, which involved opening two gaps in the wall separating two courtyards, an action with strong symbolic value (Fig.2) to build a red, shock-absorbing running track (Fig.3). Encouraging self-care as a daily practice led to the Free Acting project, which experimented with small-scale interventions within the common spaces of the women's block.

Walls and floors in social areas and laundry rooms were equipped with fixed tools (often everyday objects such as handrails and hooks) and informative graphics about exercise routines (Fig.4 and 5). These transformed the spaces into informal and accessible areas for daily physical activity<sup>10</sup>.



Fig.1 - *Casetta Rossa*, a meeting day. Credits I. Balena.



Fig.2 - *Action track*, the passage opening in the division wall.



Fig.3 - *Action Track*, a training session with a team came from outside.

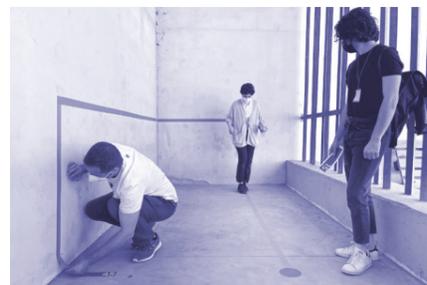


Fig.4 - *Free Acting*, the researchers mock up a possible intervention in the female block for a test day.



Fig.5 - *Free Acting*, a woman tests the equipped wall in a communal space in the wing. Credits A. Donelli.

Even simple actions, such as ringing an intercom to open the entrance gate or waiting for your turn for an appointment, have become opportunities to reimagine spaces as welcoming and attuned to individual needs. This principle was applied at the Juvenile Social Service Offices in Milan, where the design encourages users to choose where and how they want to sit, fostering a sense of individuality.

It is important to remember that convicts are brought to prison; they do not arrive voluntarily seeking help, as is often the case with other social services. For this reason, actions that can facilitate establishing a "good helping relationship" with operators from the very first encounter are essential, enabling different modes of engagement.

By promoting realized modifications, the research seeks to overturn a well-established vision that regards construction as the outcome of a design process, whether autonomous or participatory. By experimentation with "tentative forms" (Barbieri, 2017), the research aims to engage with the context actively. The interventions are intended to provoke the situations they address, challenging the practices through which collective spaces are produced and experienced. One of the main goals is to "make space for practices" involving individuals, groups, and communities. The experiments act as "spatial agents (...). They are negotiators of existing conditions in order to reform them partially. Spatial agency implies that the action to engage transformatively with [societal] structure is possible but will only be effective if one is alert to the constraints and opportunities that the structure presents" (Awan, Schneider, Till 2011 p. 31). With its prototypes, the research becomes an exercise in "testing the possible" (Hirschman, 1988), triggering targeted changes to build the conditions for a broader transition. This transformation is achievable both by activating new imaginaries for reshaping prison spaces, incorporating the

designs of their inhabitants, and by dismantling intervention practices that, in complex institutions, tend toward inertia and resignation. In the first case, we deal with pointed modifications, such as removing or relocating selected elements and using new materials to enhance sensory comfort. One example is the intervention in San Vittore prison's CAR section (High-Risk Cells). This small area houses individuals in a state of severe psychological fragility. Despite this, the environment was previously indistinguishable from parts of the facility. The project, developed in collaboration with the administration, aimed to address some critical issues, such as the lack of a permanent "healthcare-psychiatric" position, an adequate monitoring room for officers and poor living conditions. It became an opportunity to experiment with alternatives. Wood, often judged unsuitable material for detention facilities, was introduced – but appropriately treated – to create spatial and perceptual discontinuity from other areas of the prison. A timber-framed partition wall with glass panes replaced the usual polycarbonate sheets to improve the quality of light. A suspended ceiling made of wooden fibre panels was also installed to enhance the section's acoustic comfort. Finally, a dedicated air conditioning system was added in the corridor and common areas to improve the habitability of a space that demands special attention (Fig.6).



Fig.6 - The ongoing works within the CAR section.

The *ReverseLab* project, *A Space for Contemporary Art Between Prison and City*<sup>11</sup>, aimed to challenge the prison institution's natural introversion. Through the lens of contemporary art, both as a medium for production and consumption, the project initiated the refurbishment and reactivation of an uninhabitable space that had been closed since the mid-1980s (Fig.7).

This space was transformed into a site dedicated to artistic and cultural production. Thanks to the project, this abandoned area was converted into a permanent workshop for training activities aimed at inmates. It also became – and will continue to be – an exhibition space open to the public, fostering dialogue and comparison between the prison and the city.

Hosting a public exhibition with site-specific contemporary artwork inside a detention area offered two key perspectives. From within, it revealed the potential of specific prison spaces from a fresh angle. From the outside, it allowed the



Fig.7 - *ReverseLab*, the first ray basement before the renovation work.



Fig.8 - ReverseLab, the exhibition opening: *Gli artisti sono quelli che fanno casino.*

public to access and firsthand experience parts of San Vittore's detention spaces. The spaces that hosted the first exhibition, *Gli artisti sono quelli che fanno casino (The Artists Are the Troublemakers)*<sup>12</sup>, open to the public from September 28 to November 16, 2024, replicated the dimensions and layout of everyday detention spaces found on the upper floors and in other wings of San Vittore. The event was possible through collaboration with public and private institutions, support from third-sector associations, and strong public attendance during the days exhibition was open (Fig.8).

## LABORATORIO CARCERE: RESEARCHING THROUGH PRESENCE

Using "transition prototypes," *Laboratorio Carcere* is engaged in redefining the design needs of detention spaces and identifying possible approaches to address them. This effort focuses on both inmates and operators. A challenging task involves designing spaces that must balance containment and control with humanisation and socialisation. This research pathway targets overcoming the false dichotomy between security and rehabilitation, demonstrating that both are essential for the effective carrying

out of punishment. Only through active collaboration among all stakeholders is it possible to create prison environments that combine safety with opportunities for participation. For instance, a secure environment encourages inmates to engage in treatment programmes and leisure activities outside their rooms, while spaces offering diverse living conditions – for both socialisation and privacy – help reduce tension, prevent incidents, and promote psychological well-being.

Such a design effort cannot solely rely on applying regulations and technical expertise, although both are indispensable. It requires collaboration among treatment professionals, designers, and prison administrations, who are daily tasked with 'creatively managing' these spaces. This is crucial because the perception of space differs significantly between those who inhabit and endure it and those who conceptualise and design it, theoretically and practically.

Being outside, redefining the design of detention spaces is no easy task because these environments are hidden behind walls and difficult to access. This lack of familiarity often leads to abstract and generalised principles being proposed. In 1949, Piero Calamandrei, an Italian jurist and politician, wrote in the journal *Il Ponte* that "one must

see" in order to emphasise the importance of firsthand observing the living conditions of incarcerated individuals to make fair and forward-thinking decisions.

By promoting the fabrication of 'transition prototypes', the research group embraces Calamandrei's exhortation. Through noticeable action, researchers gain the opportunity to immerse themselves in prison contexts and directly experience the characteristics of these spaces, capturing aspects that only firsthand observation can reveal. As Mallgrave notes, "perceiving or inhabiting a built environment, we simulate the forms and materials with our bodies; in a sense, we empathise with them physiologically and emotionally, and only later do we form a complete awareness of whether we find pleasure in the experience or not" (Mallgrave 2015, 177). This bodily and sensory experience is essential for gaining deeper insights into the limitations and potential of existing spaces and for engaging in more direct dialogue with those who inhabit them. Researchers can develop a multidimensional understanding of prison environments thanks to the prolonged immersion required by implementing these projects. This knowledge, accumulated through repeated visits and observations, serves as the foundation for proposing interventions and developing new design solutions while also collecting fresh field data.

This approach to conceiving and conducting research directly within the prison environment underwent a significant evolution with the opening of *Off-Campus San Vittore* in October 2022. It is one of four research spaces established by the Politecnico di Milano as part of the *Off-Campus: il cantiere per le periferie* programme, which aims to address issues of marginality in various contexts across the city of Milan. This initiative, promoted by Polisocial, seeks to strengthen the presence of the Politecnico in its city and foster the idea of a more socially responsible university: attentive to social challenges, open, and closely connected to



Fig.9 - *Off Campus San Vittore*, the two rooms open on the corridor. Credits Laboratorio Immagine PoliMi

its surrounding territories and communities.

Establishing a research space within the detention area at the *Casa Circondariale di Milano - San Vittore* has shaped new opportunities to experience and observe prison daily life, broadening the scope for conducting field research. The innovative aspect lies in the ability to access the prison weekly without planning specific activities in advance. This means, for instance, being able to repeatedly measure and assess, using one's senses, the thermal, acoustic, and lighting comfort conditions in various spaces of San Vittore at different times of the day and the year. These spaces include the detention areas, common areas, and facilities used by staff and prison officers, such as the canteen, cafeteria, and open spaces. The two rooms that house *Off-Campus* are located within the detention area, resembling the 'overnight rooms' of the wings, and overlook the corridor of the *First Ray* (Fig.9). This corridor connects the entrance to the Rotonda (the central

core of the institution, physically and symbolically): an obligatory passage for anyone entering or leaving the detention area.

On the upper floors is the young-adults wing, which primarily houses inmates aged 18 to 25, and the research group is involved in

developing various projects.

The *Off-Campus* serves as a privileged vantage point, providing opportunities for "fortunate encounters" with those who frequent San Vittore, whether officers, inmates, or volunteers (Fig.10).



Fig.10 - A co-design activity in an underused courtyard in San Vittore prison.

During these encounters, first-hand observations are enriched by feedback gathered through informal conversations with inmates and staff, allowing for the recording of different perceptions regarding the same spaces and/or issues. These discussions, often repeated and ongoing, evolve into opportunities for continuous dialogue and frequent exchanges of opinions. Repeated collaboration builds trust and familiarity, which are essential for conducting in-depth and accurate analyses of environmental conditions. Over time, certain routines develop with some individuals, which may take the form of advice or serve as the basis for new collaborations and projects. A significant example of this interaction is the partnership with the team MOF (Ordinary Maintenance of Buildings).

The MOF is composed of officers and inmates responsible for the routine maintenance of prison spaces. The MOF officers are indispensable partners during the prototype implementation phases. With them, discussions take place on how to carry out interventions, starting from the usual methods of operation within San Vittore, and evaluating to what extent one can or should deviate to achieve the objectives set for each intervention. In time, one learns to design and develop projects within the actual possibilities of the context.

At the same time, the prototypes aim to convince the MOF and the administration that, under certain conditions, it is possible to pursue alternative approaches to the inertia of routine practices, which are often dictated by contingencies and emergencies, as in the case of the CAR project described above.

The opportunity to remain inside the prison without necessarily responding to an immediate emergency allows one to slow down and, as the anthropologist James Clifford (1997) suggests, to notice what else is happening daily. This approach makes it possible to grasp subtle, often unnoticed aspects, enabling a deeper and more prolonged reflection over

time. The concept of slowing down becomes crucial here, not only for understanding the spaces but also for grasping the social dynamics that develop within the prison.

In this context, *Off-Campus* transforms into a "timed place" (Lefebvre, Régulier, 1986), where it is possible to observe the rhythms of prison life as a relationship between time and space. The detention time is often considered linear, marked by the repetitive nature of days and activities occurring at more or less regular intervals. However, by complementing the observation of these "linear repetitions" with "cyclical repetitions", one can note that "there is always something unexpected, something new entering the repetition: a difference" (Lefebvre, 2019, 77).

These "rhythms of renewal" primarily emerge during moments of interaction and socialisation. Each detention space has its own rhythms: those of custody and control, but also those of daily life and human relationships. This dualism between rigid time and flexible time becomes central to understanding how both inmates and staff experience the prison space. Recognising a multiplicity of linear and cyclical rhythms creates an opportunity to design spaces that support, respect, and innovate these temporal and procedural dynamics.

This involves considering not only the physical organisation of spaces but also how they can respond to the different moments of daily life, aiming to balance areas for socialisation and privacy, spaces for activities, and places for rest. This aligns with the research group's ambition to propose actions capable of transforming detention time from 'empty time' to 'lived time'.

## DISCUSSION

Through the realisation of prototypes, researchers remain anchored to facts rather than the ideas they have constructed around them. This direct immersion in the prison environment allows for operating within its timelines

and constraints while opening up possibilities for experimenting with new solutions. Working with the available resources, procedures, and individuals involved in a real and constrained context enables the adoption of an "attitude to possibilism", as Hirschman (1988) describes it.

It is an openness toward what does not yet exist but can be imagined and realised starting from what is already present. Being physically within the prison and acting through prototypes is a way to familiarise oneself with the issues, starting from the spaces themselves. Pier Luigi Crosta reminds us that innovation begins once familiarity with a context is achieved: "if you are familiar, you invent" (Crosta 2021, 16).

The daily and prolonged proximity to things (even within the limitations imposed by managing such a complex institution) makes it possible to notice unusual and unexpected opportunities for use. It is not so much about confirming or disproving preexisting ideas but about building new ideas by observing what people do, what we might add and what spaces do (Awan, Schneider, Till 2011).

This process of familiarisation allows the research process and the 'prison project' to move away from rigid and codified procedural paths, making opportunities for more fluid and spontaneous dynamics. The urgency is not so much about imposing a pre-established plan but rather about implementing actions that respond to the context. The goal, therefore, becomes to "identify the favourable factors operating within their configuration; [...] allowing oneself to be guided by their inclination; in short, instead of imposing one's plan on the world, to leverage the potential of the situation" (Jullien, 1998, 20).

## CONCLUSION

This research method also requires an informal engagement with the contexts, experimenting with the fertility of everyday situations and relationships. By cooperating

to overcome operational and conceptual obstacles, the research gains a multi-perspective understanding of the prison, capturing its structural complexity and the thoughts and perceptions of those who inhabit and experience it daily. Familiarising oneself with these spaces not only paves the way for innovation but also enables the development of solutions that arise from the context itself and are truly applicable, addressing the specific needs of those who live in prison day after day.

The direct experience within prisons has allowed the researchers of the Laboratorio Carcere to acquire a richer, more complex, and detailed understanding of the spatial and social dynamics that characterise the prison context, though limited to the Milanese institutions.

The pressing issue now is how to decode this knowledge and make it broadly accessible and communicable, both to professionals working within the prison system and those tasked with designing and managing these spaces.

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## NOTES

1. Source "Final Report 2024" edited by Antigone Association.

2. The contribution attempts to deal with the topic of the relationship between spaces and restricted bodies from the architectural design perspective, starting from the Italian context and opening to a comparison with others, both detention contexts and ways of doing research, particularly European ones.

3. For insights into the current state of Italian prisons, see the annual reports by the Antigone Association at [www.rapportoantigone.it](http://www.rapportoantigone.it)

4. See, for instance, the annual reports to the Italian parliament and the recommendations of the National Guarantor for the rights of persons deprived of liberty at [garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it](http://garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it)

5. See <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-116248%22%5D%7D>

6. In reply to the judgment, the Italian government adopted urgent measures to reduce prison overcrowding (dl 146/13 'svuota carceri' and Lg. 47/15 on pre-trial detention), improve detention conditions and reform criminal justice, introducing alternative detention regimes and a programme to refurbish prison facilities. Alongside these was the organisation of The States General of Criminal Execution (2015), which involved experts, practitioners, academics and representatives of civil society in a series of working tables to discuss and propose solutions to the problems of the penal system, with a particular focus on alternative measures to detention, the social reintegration of prisoners and the improvement of prison conditions.

7. This consideration focuses on the possibility of intervening in existing facilities; addressing the construction of new detention centers would inevitably raise other issues beyond the scope of our current investigation.

8. The investigation path has been nourished by different research that, over the years, has seen the construction of increasingly multi-disciplinary teams moving in a broader horizon than the realisation of the prototype itself.

9. The design and the realization of the pavilion started and involved students attending the Design Studio at School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering at Politecnico di Milano, a.a 2017-2018 prof. A. Di Franco, M. Moreno and C. Merlini.

10. Both prototypes are the outcome of the research ACTS – A chance Through Sport (2019-2021) financed by Polisocial Award 2019. [www.acts.polimi.it/](http://www.acts.polimi.it/)

11. [@reverselab.polimi.it](http://reverselab.polimi.it)

12. The exhibition featured the work that artist Maurice Pefura created with the collaboration of around 40 prison inmates with the support of Laboratorio Carcere, Forme Tentative ETS and Philo APS. It was curated by Diego Sileo of the PAC Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea di Milano.