

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Tings Chak**, *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention*, Montreal: The Architecture Observer, 2014. ISBN: 978-94-92058-00-3 (paper)

Compared with many other countries in the Western world, migrant detention in Canada is particular. Canada does not follow recognized international human rights norms for migrant detainees; for example, in addition to the three immigration detention centres that exist in the country currently, Canada uses maximum security prisons to hold detainees despite the fact that these people have not broken any criminal laws. Migrant detainees are mixed with the regular prison population and it is difficult to access information about them. There is no independent monitoring of conditions inside of detention centres (in which Canada actively imprisons children) or over the Canada Border Services Agency. Indeed, migrant detainees do not have much access to the justice system, and there is no comprehensive judicial oversight over decisions to detain migrants. Most importantly, immigration detention in Canada is indefinite, which is what really sets it apart from other Western nations that hold migrant detainees for up to 90 days (Global Detention Project 2012). Some migrants, such as Michael Mvogo, have been in prison for close to a decade because Canada's border officials cannot figure out where to deport him to. Chris Philo's description of carceral geographies, "specifically alighting on the spaces set aside for 'securing'—detaining, locking up/away—problematic populations of one kind or another" (2012: 4), is useful here. Desires of national security are tied up with desires to secure intimate and domestic spaces in that the nation is "our" home and "we" decide who we let in and who we keep out (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Kaplan 2003; Philo 2012). Carceral geographies are used to establish clear boundaries that stretch far beyond the physical space of the prison or detention centre.

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Recently, architectural thought has begun to directly address the problem of violence as a category to be analyzed, and more literature in security studies has considered the role of space and architecture (for example, the work of Eyal Weizman, Bechir Kenzari, Bernard Tschumi, Andrew Herscher, and Nan Ellin). It is a rare occurrence that a thesis in architecture that analyzes violence serves as a theoretical intervention, an analytical tool, and a timely call to action all at once. However, *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention* does exactly that.

The book subtly makes theoretical interventions, taking as its central question “what is the purpose of modern mass incarceration?” It examines the assumptions embedded within architectural thought and practice and unveils a particular kind of ethics. Tings Chak<sup>1</sup> situates the architecture of migrant detention centres within the political economy of the prison-industrial complex, international migration, and the lived realities of undocumented migrants. The book highlights the problem and the solution in one move; it documents the undocumented and locates the hidden spaces and the hidden ways in which violence is inflicted on the bodies of migrants. When we add the presence of working bodies and struggling bodies into those banal, everyday spaces we see that they have precise functions.

Through illustrations, diagrams and architectural plans—the book takes the form of a graphic novel<sup>2</sup>—Chak examines how violence operates within and through migrant detention centres in Canada. These spaces are clandestine, unknown and inaccessible to most people and this is an essential aspect of detention centres. The illustrations reveal so much of what is not seen, including the brutality of constraint and constriction. Chak is able to capture the detention

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1 Tings Chak is a multidisciplinary artist and architect based in Toronto, whose work draws inspiration from anti-colonial, migrant justice, and spatial justice struggles. *Undocumented* grew out of her Master of Architecture research work and collective organizing through No One is Illegal-Toronto and the End Immigration Detention Network. See <http://tingschak.com/>

2 See <http://undocumented.ca/>

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centre from the point of view of the inhabitant. In addition to exerting control over the movements of the incarcerated, the detention centre is designed to control what and how a prisoner can see. In this way, architecture changes identity and consciousness through a particular kind of objectification. Illustrations show the point of view of security cameras inside detention centres that scrutinize the inhabitants from nearly every angle and at all times, leaving the reader feeling claustrophobic. There is no space for privacy or intimacy. There are no sunsets.

Chak guides the reader's gaze towards the structures and machines that directly work on the human body or create conditions for oppression. Understanding architecture, and specifically border architecture, as machine makes it more apparent that space is always actively doing something. Space is actively performing and operating towards a particular goal. An active border machine moves, is complicated and layered, uneven and imposing. The border creates hidden spaces that hold the disappeared—"invisibility is no coincidence" (p.18). What is not directly addressed, but is subtly present in the book, is the terror caused by migrant detention centres on migrant communities who live in Canada's cities, who pick the peaches in fields in southern Ontario, and those in other countries who might be considering migration to Canada or are on their journey here.

*Undocumented* examines invisibility and silences, thus opening up the possibilities of how we can think about architecture, the production of space, and how political power moves unevenly through these. The author begins with the contextual landscape of migrant detention centres in Canada and introduces the problem. The book is divided into chapters that walk the reader to and through the detention centres. Beginning with the nexus of detention centres for migrants across Canada and into the small towns and mundane spaces, such as the outskirts of major cities, everyday roads lead to everyday buildings which serve as warehouses for human bodies. In order to become invisible, these bodies are led through an intake process that not only

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strips them of their humanity, but also disorients them through its particular spatial configurations. The reader moves through the book as though literally walking through the intake process into what the next chapter describes as the “living zone”, the areas that the prisoner occupies. Chak uses various interweaving narratives including the visual representation of research, voices and perspectives of the prisoners, the author’s own voice, and a conversation with a “well known” architect who is never named. Taking on the point of view of the prisoner, the reader feels as though they themselves are being watched.

Foucault (1978), on the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, explains that what is to be gained from a study of the history of sexuality is not just a history of sexuality, but a history of the production of knowledge—knowledge that is produced in a way to exclude and silence some at the expense of others within a given field. Chak interrogates how architectural discourse is produced in a way to create silences which then end up taking material shape. She contributes a dimension of reflexivity on the ethical dilemmas contained within her field by examining what is excluded from traditional inquiry, using a new way of looking at how injustices are reproduced through architectural discourse and form. Additionally, Chak’s methodology seems to overcome a common flaw in academic research. There is a tendency of academics to fetishize the oppressed, to swoop in to gather data on the most marginalized of society and swoop out without accountability to the communities they extract knowledge from, publication in hand. This book is not about the most traumatized and the most dejected; rather, it is about the relationship between architecture and power, and the conditions which purposefully make humans into the traumatized and the dejected. The frames used here implicate architects, designers, planners, public policy makers, and academics who function as part of a system that perpetuates violence on migrant bodies. It is an invitation to reflect meaningfully on the politics of architecture and space and to confront this system.

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The book is about defiance against oppressive structures and it is a call to action. It ends with capturing some of the ways that imprisoned migrants resist and strive to maintain some of their humanity. By the time the book has ended, the reader realizes that what is in their hands is a strategic map. Chak has located the problem and laid out the groundwork with poetic overtones, but she does not offer specific prescriptions. This is an invitation to respond to and to politicize practice, theory, and how we think of carceral geographies embedded in everyday spaces.

Overall, *Undocumented* is a neat introduction to migrant detention in Canada; it is uniquely researched and based on the author's own deep and ongoing commitment to migrant justice organizing. A reservation I have is that because the book is more a piece of art that engages with academic theories rather than an academic resource, the author does not explicitly address all her research methods. The research is cited sufficiently; however, questions remain on how she accumulated enough data to be able to capture the perspective of migrant prisoners, which would make a fascinating read in itself. Given that I am familiar with her activist work, I can safely assume that her ability to capture the perspective of migrants in detention comes from her work with the End Immigration Detention Network.<sup>3</sup> However, a longer discussion of community-based research methods and the ethical dilemmas that arise is needed here. Further, although the book allows the reader to understand how injustices are experienced by certain groups, an in-depth analysis of the social relations that bring people to confront such violent structures, such as the global organization of power, racism, nation-building, and Canadian identity, could have been addressed further. That said, this is a beautiful book for anyone who is interested in architecture, urban studies, geography, planning, and Canadian studies. It is a particularly useful teaching tool for those of us who seek innovative ways to introduce students to complicated theoretical issues and concepts.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://endimmigrationdetention.com/>

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