

**The yelping, barking, and growling of dogs:
 Architectural Evidence in the Prison of Gjilan, Kosovo**
 Gjiltinë Isufi

As for the solitary cells, I can tell you only this: the space where sentences are served lie two and a half meters underground. The electric lamp stays on all day long, because otherwise one could barely see well enough not to poke one's own eyes out. You have no right to read; you have no right to write, not even letters. And yet, even here you are granted certain rights. For instance, besides food and sleep, you have the right to breathe and to draw in whatever air can be strained through a sieve. You also have the right to think whatever you wish (only to yourself, of course). Babëlok, as you know, one of our folk sayings goes: "A dog does not eat another dog." I, however, say that a human being devours another human being, even fully clothed. When will humans truly become human is unknown, and certainly not anytime soon. To keep myself whole, I will say no more.

Merxhan Avdyli, *Libri i Lirisë* (1991)¹

The Prison of Gjilan, one of the most notorious prisons of former Yugoslavia, today stands abandoned and decaying in the centre of Gjilan in Kosovo. Between 1980 and 1999, a period marked by the violent suppression of Kosovo Albanians by Yugoslav and later Serbian authorities, numerous political prisoners were tortured and tormented in inhumane conditions. Despite its historical significance, the prison remains largely absent from architectural records, with no surviving blueprints or any official documentation. Lacking the hallmarks of a renowned architect or any notable stylistic values, the building has also been dismissed as architecturally insignificant. How, then, can we study a building that resists conventional approaches to architectural history? It is precisely through this question that the prison of Gjilan engages with two ongoing debates in architectural history: the question of architectural evidence and the status of the drawing.

In a letter written to his father in the morning of the 1st of July, 1987, Merxhan Avdyli describes waking up right before the other prisoners who are usually forced to rise at six. In the brief interval before other voices begin to fill the room, Avdyli writes he can loudly hear “the chirping of jackdaws, the cawing of crows, the singing of thrushes, and on the other side, the yelping, barking, and growling of dogs.” Teuta Hadri, imprisoned in Mitrovica in 1981, recalls the four iron doors one had to pass to arrive at the women’s pavilion in Mitrovica, and its corridors mapped mentally by the sound of jingling keys in dreadful silence. “Back then, I said, I will never keep keys in my life,” she says, as she takes out her keys to let us inside her home for the interview to take place.² As we enter inside, Selajdin Abdullahu shuts the steel door with a heavy thud, reenacting the sound the guards used to traumatize the prisoners.

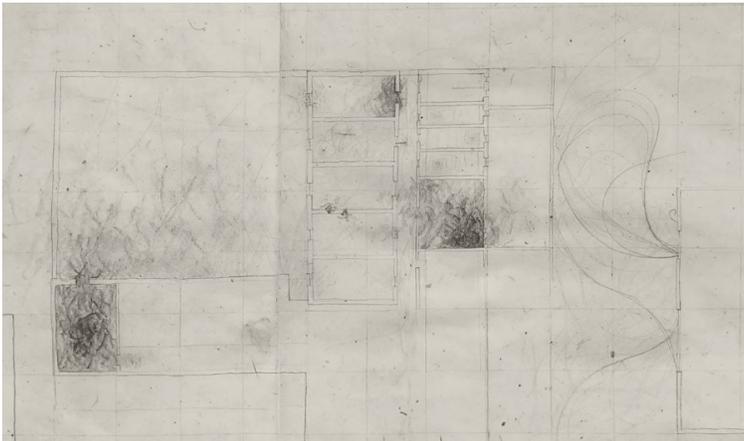


Figure 1. Soundscape drawing of the prison of Gjilan

These sounds, distilled from the prisoners’ poems, letters, and go-along interviews, come together in a speculative soundscape drawing which extends beyond the building’s perimeter to trace a larger constellation of life in prison [fig. 1]. Due to unavailable archival sources on the prison, the act of drawing becomes the first tool with which to approach the building. Rather than serving the purpose of precise documentation, it takes on a different role: as a research tool and a mediator. The drawing begins with the tracing of its inner walls, locating the clang of steel doors, the jingling of keys, and the pounding of rain against tin-covered windows. It then moves slightly outward, capturing shuffled voices from the courtyard and screams traveling from windows of one facade to another. When tracing the perimeter of the surrounding buildings, the drawing faces new questions on the relationship between the prison and its immediate environment. Could faint sounds from the adjacent theatre have drifted into the cells?

The emergence of new questions in the act of drawing immediately activates it as an active research tool. The research process then operates through a feedback loop between the production of architectural documents, literary sources, and oral history, redirecting attention to one another and creating a continuous loop of discovery. At times, interviews reinterpret or challenge insights drawn from literary sources; at other times, unexpected lines of discussion are opened by using the drawings and models during interviews.

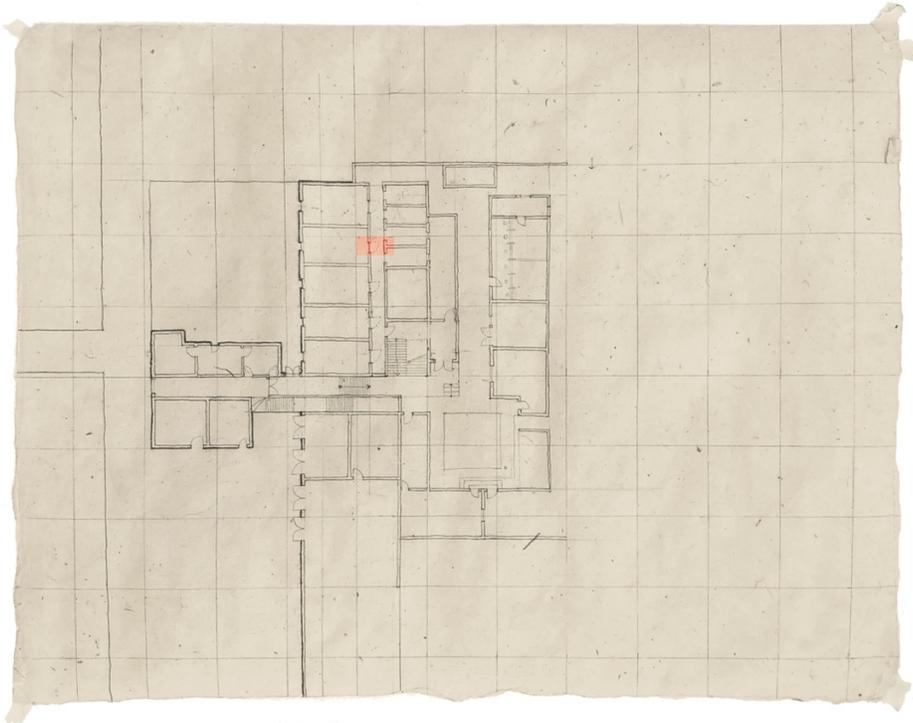


Figure 2. Floor-plan of the prison of Gjilan

Further, the drawing of a floor plan begins to disclose spatial hierarchies in the prison [fig. 2]. Parallel to the cells, the guards' offices are lined up along one side of the building. Much larger in size, they offer far more light and broader views. On the opposite side, the cramped cells face the enclosed wired courtyard. As many as thirteen prisoners were confined in each of these rooms, occupying every available inch of the floor when sleeping. Along the corridor that separates the guards and the prisoners, the doors never align, denying the prisoners any possibility of sight through the peepholes. Now, besides making these spatial relations legible, the drawing starts to raise fundamental questions of architectural representation. How does one draw a prison door? Can one draw a door that is almost more of a wall than the wall itself, in the same way as a conventional door? In architectural representation, dashed

lines generally imply an absence on paper that is present elsewhere, either behind the drawn space or behind the reader. In such cases, the dashed line marks the condition of spatial invisibility. However, like in the drawings of Carlo Rainaldi, the absence in dashed lines can indicate a temporal invisibility.³ Drawn differently from the other doors in the building, these dashed lines in the drawing will accentuate the door's ambiguity. A temporal presence is shown when the ink touches the paper, and a temporal absence is shown when the hand elevation makes the line invisible. The drawing therefore implies that there is a door, and sometimes, there isn't.

In each letter, poem, book or interview, elements of movement, presence, and absence continually construct narratives. In her interview, Teuta Hadri speaks of mapping the guards' movements in the prison of Mitrovica, not by sight, but through traces of light. On sunny days, as the guards would move silently along the corridor, their shadows would slip under her cell door. However, for Ramadan Dermaku in the prison of Gjilan, no shadows appeared, as corridors had no windows facing outside. For him, tracing their movement relied instead on sound: the guards' footsteps and the jingling of keys.⁴ This indirect understanding of space through daily accounts is not only present in practices of surveillance and torture, but also in the prisoners' resistance to confinement. While some speak of secret practices of communication by knocking on walls, others recount how windows were utilized to send secret messages across different floors. Once spatialized, these elements start to construct alternative maps of the prison.

Differently from a floor plan, the section now opens another unseen dimension—the vertical cut [fig. 3]. It reveals relationships that cannot be observed in a site visit, nor in horizontal projections such as floor plans. It first traces the cells' proportions, concrete beams, sight lines, and bunk beds. When perspective is added to the drawing, narratives begin to unfold inside each room. Some show the overcrowded cells with up to thirteen prisoners in one room, while others reveal prisoners reading on their bunk beds or standing in place and facing the window. As pencil shades darken each cell of the section, the structure of the building remains blank, its walls and slabs forming a white grid. Here, then, the boundaries become clear. The thick, heavy walls and concrete slabs separate each narrative as they unfold independently within their small box. Yet, in certain narratives, the pencil traces over the white grid. Abdullahu recalls how coded knocks on the wall allowed prisoners to communicate between cells, a rhythm of taps signalling messages such as the arrival of a new cellmate.⁵



Figure 3. Section drawing of the prison of Gjilan



Figure 4. Cardboard model of cell thirteen of the prison of Gjilan

In this instance, the wall transforms from a rigid border into a conduit of communication. It is here, that the section starts to expose connections between adjacent cells or those across different floors, challenging the idea of a total, isolated prison cell.

Moving from architectural drawing to model-making, the next artifact introduces a section model which brings the prison cell into three-dimensional form [fig. 4]. Unlike drawings, the model engages more directly with proportion, light, texture, and detail. Stripped of its patina of decay in the white cardboard, the cell is abstracted into an unsettling, pure space. But beyond materiality and perception, there is something in the very act of making that is of essence here. As the window is built, the thickness of the wall becomes evident, with an immense depth and covered by bars on both sides. The tilted tin sheet – a detail encountered repeatedly in the prisoners’ accounts – is now fixed in place, enclosing the window completely. As this element takes shape in the model, it begins to resist previous narratives:

how did the prisoners manage to slip pieces of paper beneath the tin sheet covering the window? With the model as a mediator, in a later conversation, a former prisoner explains in detail how the tin sheet was not attached at the bottom, but tilted in an angle and fastened by screws along its sides. Nearly 45 years later, this memory resurfaces with certainty, and a later visit to the site confirms the remaining screw holes on the window sides. The model, therefore, does not merely represent the cell, it questions, clarifies, and reconstructs it.

While architectural history has long relied on apparent evidence such as buildings or their protagonist architects, more recent studies have highlighted the limitations of such monographic narrative forms. As a result, there has been a significant shift towards a broader understanding of evidence, which opened the field to more non-traditional sources: from administrative standards of technical and urban infrastructures, to bodily experience and oral history. For example, in *Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg*, Esra Akcan uses a mode of architectural history which does not turn evidence into a story, but instead turns stories into evidence, in order to distribute agency from designers to inhabitants.⁶ In any case, however, these oral histories are not argued to be fundamental and unambiguous evidence. But by acknowledging subjectivity in experience, these stories offer space for rethinking and dissent. In the case of the prison, in dialogue with architectural drawings, they unlock spatial relationships which would remain invisible through other means.

In the preface of *Letters from Prison: The Censored Book*, Merxhan Avdyli notes that, while the book will in no doubt leave a heavy mark on its reader, this was never the intention of the letters' original authors. What is quite evident here, is that the spatial information we derive from these sources gives an account of the prison so direct that makes them almost incomparable to conventional sources. Smuggled letters, secret poems and whispered messages, which are often overlooked as spatial evidence, begin to map carceral spaces in ways that defy conventional understandings of prisons as total institutions. Each narrative unfolds spatially by speaking of doors, windows, walls, and floors, but also temporally, through structuring events, waiting, and mapping movement and resistance. However, both spatially and temporally, they remain bound to the human scale, written by and for humans. It is only in combination with architectural documents that we reach the non-human scale to discover the prisons' own narrativity in its ability to evoke stories.

Notes

- ¹ Avdyli, Merxhan et al. 1991. *Libri i Lirisë [The Book of Freedom]*. Translated by author.
- ² Interview with Teuta Hadri, conducted by author. Pristina, March 2024.
- ³ Paul Emmons, “The Means and Meanings of Dashed Lines,” in *Paradoxes of Progress: Architecture and Education in a Post-Utopian Era*, 89th ACSA Annual Meeting, (2001), 458-463.
- ⁴ Interview with Ramadan Dermaku, conducted by author. Pristina, March 2024.
- ⁵ Interview with Selajdin Abdullahu, conducted by author. Pristina, March 2024.
- ⁶ Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative, 2021. *Writing Architectural History: Evidence and Narrative in the Twenty-First Century*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press

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BIO:

Gjiltinë Isufi is an architect and PhD researcher at KU Leuven’s Faculty of Architecture in Brussels. She holds a fundamental research fellowship from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) for her project ‘In Space We Read Trauma: Disclosing Microhistories in Kosovo, 1980-1999’. Her PhD aims to develop a methodological framework for spatially investigating traumatic experiences. In doing so, it aims to foster a spatial turn in Trauma Studies—a field largely marked by language-based discourses—and simultaneously disclose undocumented microhistories in Kosovo.