

Merciless Geometry*

Luise Vormittag, 2018

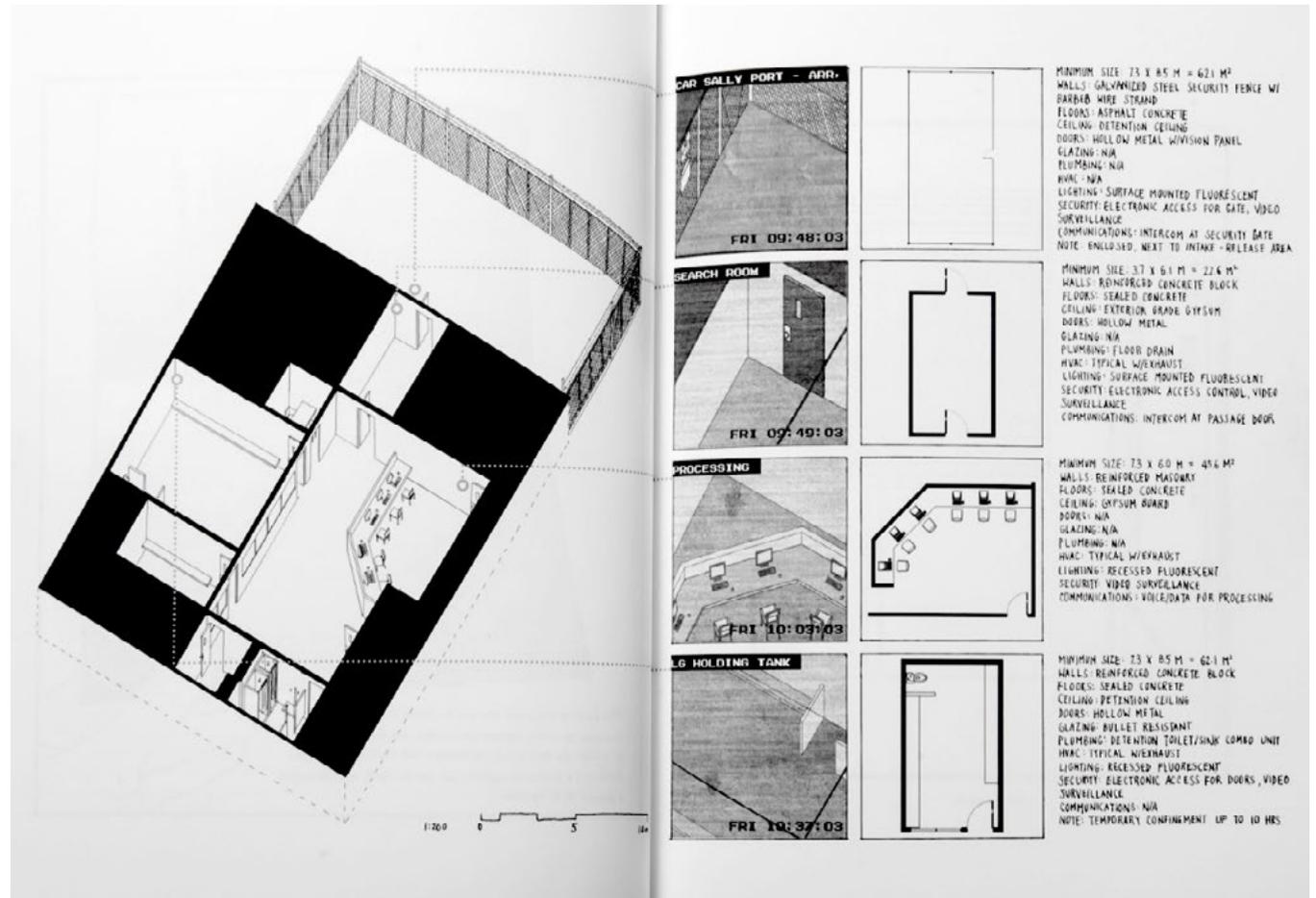
I am walking through a labyrinth of basement corridors keeping an eye out for the posters guiding me to [Tings Chak's](#) presentation. On the posters are images of cubes rendered in parallel projection; cubes representing cold, sparse rooms. One is filled with bunk beds, another has a few tables, yet another a screen. The rest are empty. Doors opened and closed. Hard concrete floors. No people.

Chak is this year's artist in residence at Birkbeck's School of Law, and I have come to hear her speak about her graphic novel *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention*,

recently published by Ad Astra Comix. 'No, not really a graphic novel,' Chak corrects herself during the first few minutes of her talk, 'more like a 'graphic documentary'.'

I am leafing through a copy of the book. It focuses on the Canadian detention system for undocumented migrants. Canada, like the UK, can hold migrants in detention indefinitely without charge. Because detention centres in Canada are already filled to capacity, about a third of migrants are held in 'rented beds' in provincial prisons.

A spread from Tings Chak's 'Undocument' depicting generic, imaginary detention spaces. 'The banality of geometry in itself is crushing.'



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'It is not just the people who are undocumented,' Chak continues, 'the buildings are too.' There are barely any photographs of these places, and they are inaccessible to the general public. They are hidden in the landscape, innocuously tucked away. And the architects who design these buildings don't generally talk about this aspect of their work. It barely registers as architecture. 'It is more of a by-product of the built environment,' Chak suggests, 'a spatial solution to a political problem.' So how do you represent something designed to be invisible? How do you bring the architecture of concealment into public view?

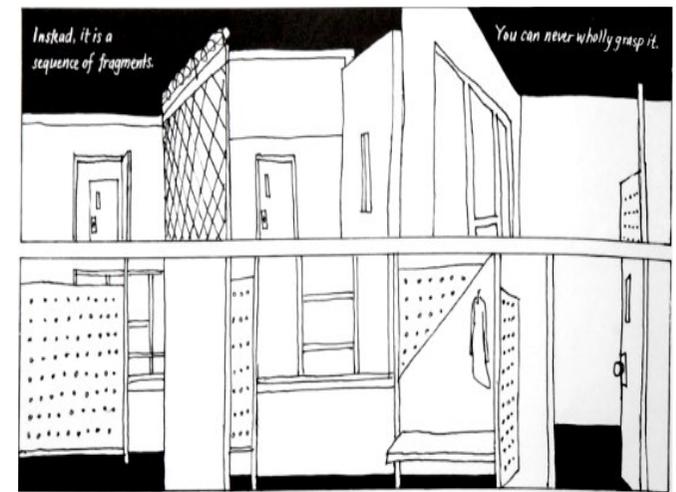
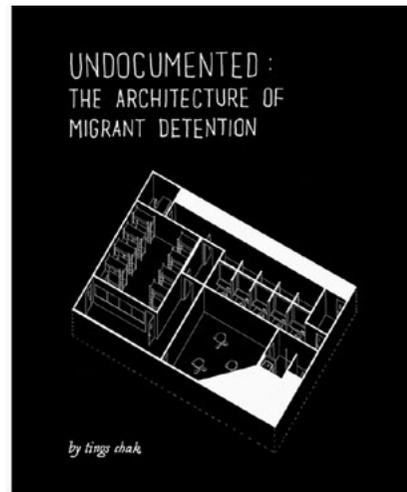
Chak uses a number of different methods: She 'visits' the Canadian provincial prisons holding migrants on Google Streetview, she draws on recorded conversations with detainees carried out by support organisations, and she uses design manuals and guidelines; those containing security recommendations as well as those by organisations such as the Red Cross, that suggest minimum humanitarian standards. Her architectural training enables her to then reverse-engineer a set of generic, fictional detention spaces based on this information. When I speak to her after her presentation she reflects on this process: 'I took on the role of the prison architect, and soon I found myself lost in detail: Which doorknob, what quality of glass do I use? I can see how one might quickly lose sight of the bigger picture, of the political systems one is perhaps unwittingly supporting.'

Floorplans, interior elevations, parallel projections, the 3D walk-through video – the architectural conventions employed by Chak have their own set of associations. Although many art historians today agree that the geometric imagining of space is culturally and historically specific, a general sense of its supposed neutrality pervades contemporary societies. In his highly influential book *The Production of Space* (1974) Henri Lefebvre equates this mathematically ordered conception of space, exemplified by linear perspective but most fully realised in architectural and urban plans and maps, as the spatial equivalent of the clock, that mechanises our time and working life, and contributes to the individual's alienation in the capitalist social order. Through the creation of their plans, models and designs,

he argues, architects and urbanists create a repressive technocracy that is able to conceal its coercive nature due to the supposed neutrality of geometry.

Chak is of course aware of these associations. 'There was no need to depict any extreme scenarios,' she explains. 'The banality of geometry in itself is crushing.' She keeps the voices of the detainees separate from her architectural renderings, focusing instead on spatial standardisation, efficiency, the minimum requirements. When she does turn to individual voices, intermittently in *Undocumented*, and with greater focus and depth in a separate piece for *The Funambulist Magazine*, the detainees' attempts at resisting the crushing banality of their environment becomes evident. Chak highlights the creativity required to establish a personalised space with minimal resources in order to maintain a sense of self.

In addition to the conventions of architectural drawing practices, Chak also borrows techniques from the comic book. But where comics use the frame and the gutter to suggest the sequential passing of time, Chak's work locks us in a loop. Nothing happens. Moving through a door will only reveal another door, an empty corridor, an empty wall. While most undocumented migrants are held for about a



Left: Cover of 'Undocumented'

Right: 'It's a sequence of fragments. You can never wholly grasp it.'

month in Canada, some people have been in detention for five, seven, or even ten years without charge or trial.

I think about the name of this column: Public Realm [*This is the name of the column this article appeared under in Varoom magazine.*]. This is its exact inversion. The laws governing immigration and their architectural manifestations in the form of detention centres and prisons shape our public spaces by controlling who has access to them. Who can mingle? Who is seen? In Jenny Erpenbeck's most recent novel *Go Went Gone* African migrants stage a protest on Berlin's Alexanderplatz with signs declaring: 'We become visible.' The main protagonist, a German retiree, overlooks them nevertheless. The novel charts how the faceless machinations of law mercilessly grind towards their dispersal and erasure. Chak's focus on the architectural expression of this obliteration contributes to the migrants' struggle towards visibility. Once *Undocumented* has entered your field of vision it becomes difficult to overlook.

tingschak.com
undocumented.ca
adastracomix.com