Post-Border Futures: Unconstructing Detention Architectures

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Building on both the knowledges of communities engaged in anti-detention activism and of the spatial practices and disciplines of architecture, this paper proposes that critical spatial practices can be utilised to resist and deconstruct carceral border policies, while also being a key tool to produce new forms of engagement with sites of detention.

For the last 30 years Australia has adopted policies of indefinite and mandatory detention of undocumented migrants, which have resulted in a broad range of carceral spaces of immigration detention. Examining a key case study to reveal how spaces of border detention are constructed and maintained, this research uses the practice of architectural drawing and analysis to propose key spatial tools to further reveal the spatial effects of legal, spatial and political systems used to incarcerate racialized bodies at the border. The Park Hotel, which is located in Melbourne and was used as an adhoc immigration detention centre from 2020 to 2022, forms the central focus of this research.

By documenting a series of spatial transformations applied to the windows of the hotel, this research examines a series of architectural modifications which were made to shift the function of the building, from a space of hospitality, to a space of detention. Through doing so, this research questions the potential for spatial analysis to provide new insights into legal and political understandings of the architecture of immigration detention, and provide tools to construct new equitable futures beyond border carcerality.

INTRODUCTION

With increasing levels of forced migration caused by climate change, economic instability, and escalating global conflicts, the overwhelming reactions of the 21st century have been to increase both border militarization and the carceral practices of migration detention.[1] Systems of borders and the architectures of detention can be understood as spatial practices, drawing on tools inherent to architecture[2] in order to limit human movement and retain the structural global inequality put in place by histories of colonial extractivism and racial divisions.[3]

Australia has adopted policies of mandatory indefinite detention since 1992, which has resulted in the production of a variety of carceral spaces used to detain racialized bodies at the border. While these policies and the effects of detention have been researched from such disciplines as humanities and law,[4] there exists further room to understand the specific spaces produced through these policies, especially in the context of periphery sites, such as hotel detention.

Responding to this, this paper explores the potentials for specific methodologies from architectural research and practice to deconstruct and challenge the spatial forms of the border. Processes of spatial analysis have been shown to have the potential to contribute to legal understandings through compiling spatial evidence in order to reveal specific instances of human rights abuses committed through architecture. This is demonstrated in different forms by a range of contemporary spatial practitioners, who work through architectural representation to provide new spatial insights into legal and political understandings, while also using the language of architectural communication to facilitate new processes of public engagement.[5]

In this investigation, a specific case study is used to test possible methods of engagement with sites of detention and revealing the spatial violence these spaces entail. By doing so, this work aims to enhance the understanding of how detention spaces are produced and maintained, and through this proposes speculates of potential processes of unmaking detention spaces to develop new forms of collective resilience.

CASE STUDY: THE PARK HOTEL

This research focuses on the analysis of a recent site of detention to produce a deeper insight into the architecture of immigration detention in Australia. The Park Hotel, a four storey building located in the inner city suburb of Carlton, Melbourne, was transformed into an ad hoc detention centre in December 2020. During this time the Park Hotel operated as a detention facility for over 60 asylum seekers,[6] before it was closed in April

Figure 1. Photograph of the Park Hotel, 2022. Mark Romei

2022. While those detained inside engaged in active protest against their continual incarceration, the architecture of the detention hotel, through specific modifications made to the building, played a role in restricting the visibility of these.

Through conducting a spatial analysis of the Park Hotel, this research proposes to gain a greater insight into the practice of repurposing hotels to become spaces of detention by the Australian government, known as Alternative Places of Detention (APOD).[7]

An APOD is a carceral space of immigration detention which can be created in any everyday architecture. Given that an APOD can potentially be created anywhere, the spatial configurations of these spaces of detention differ vary.[8] Consequently, it is a network of detention spaces which resist visibility and are concealed through both government and corporate secrecy. From 1 January 2018 to 31 January 2021, there were 170 Alternative Places of Detention used in Australia at any time, and of these, 56 APODs were classified as hotel-type APODs.[9] In most of these cases, the locations and specifics of these detention spaces are not known to the public.

The power to transform a civilian architecture into an Alternative Place of Detention is derived from the Migration Act of 1958 - a legislation that was passed to replace the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. The Immigration Restriction act was known colloquially as The White Australia Policy, as it sought to explicitly limit non "white" immigration to Australia. This as a policy was only fully revoked in 1975 with the introduction of the Racial Discrimination Act, which made assessing migration based on race illegal. Although subsequent amendments to the Migration Act have weakened this in practice, most notably the 1992 amendment, which allowed for the detention of non-citizens without a visa to be carried out on an indefinite basis. Additional legislation saw the establishment of off-shore detention centres on both remote Australian islands, and within neighbouring island countries.[10]

The Park Hotel is a direct continuation of the ongoing practices of off-shore detention Australia has employed over the last decade, with all those detained within the hotel people transferred from offshore detention facilities in Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea.

A specific piece of legislation was passed in 2019, which, for a short period of time, allowed for the transfer of asylum seekers from offshore detention centres to the Australian mainland for urgent and neglected medical treatments.[11] These asylum seekers had at this point been detained in offshore detention centres for over 6 years. After being relocated to Australia, most never received the treatments they were transferred here for, and ended up imprisoned within repurposed hotels, such as the Park Hotel.

Within the network of the detention archipelago, hotel detention acts to translate many of the characteristics of off-shore detention back onto the everyday urban architecture of the mainland. The colonial ideas connected to penal islands, such as invisibility and isolation, are reproduced within the architecture of the hotel. Through this process, a site of exceptionality, which is carved out of the everyday laws and operations of the city, is constructed within the city's existing architecture.

Given that public visibility of the events that took place within The Park Hotel are limited, this research proposes that the processes of architectural reconstruction can act as key tools to analyse and reconstruct spatial transformation made to the site, in order to record some of the human rights violations which occurred within it through a process of deconstruction.

SPATIAL ANALYSIS
In order to understand the specific spatial consequences of the mechanisms which allow for a hotel to be transformed into

Figure 2. Floorplan of one of the rooms of the Park Hotel. Mark Romei

a detention centre, the site can be engaged further through methods of architectural analysis. Through doing so, the research hopes to provide new insights into the application and materialisation of specific legal frameworks used to detain bodies of undocumented migrants. The drawing of these transformations focuses on revealing how the room ceases to have the qualities which make a hotel room, and instead amplifies specific qualities which make detainment possible.

Unpacking the process of visual representation Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman theorise on the emerging practices of investigative spatial research. Through reflecting upon the overlapping practice between artists, architects and other aesthetic practitioners engaging in forms of investigation, and journalists and legal professionals using tools such as satellite imagery, and visual reconstruction to undertake visual investigations, they contend that:

> "Abstraction allows us to move from one immediate situation to another and see connections and to predict the occurrence of such patterns beyond immediate observation. To abstract is to interpret an observable or unfolding event, even an event that is purely conceptual. This theoretical or mathematical interpretation beyond immediate sensory evidence is necessary for what we call sense-making."[12]

> — Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth*

Here, it is proposed that the processes of abstraction inherent to drawing allows for the potential to produce new understandings, and for these understandings to be read across different spaces.

In the application of abstraction, this spatial investigation works from the scale of the hotel room, to document how the hotel rooms lose their designed function, and start to operate as a cell. By recording a series of alterations which were made to the windows of the hotel to transform the building from a space of hospitality, into a space of detention, architectural representation provides an insight into how everyday architectures are transformed into a carceral space through the Migration Act.

In December of 2020, when the hotel was first repurposed as a detention centre, the Australian government agency Border Force instructed the windows of the hotel be sealed shut.[13] Many refugees detained in the hotel had medical conditions, such as asthma, depression and heart conditions.[14] The spatial transformation to prevent the window from opening exacerbated these experiences, with no access to fresh air or outdoor space. Additionally, many of the hotel rooms used to detain asylum seekers looked directly onto the concrete walls of the

XX.12.2020
Border Force instructs that the windows of the Park
Hotel be sealed shut

4.01.2021
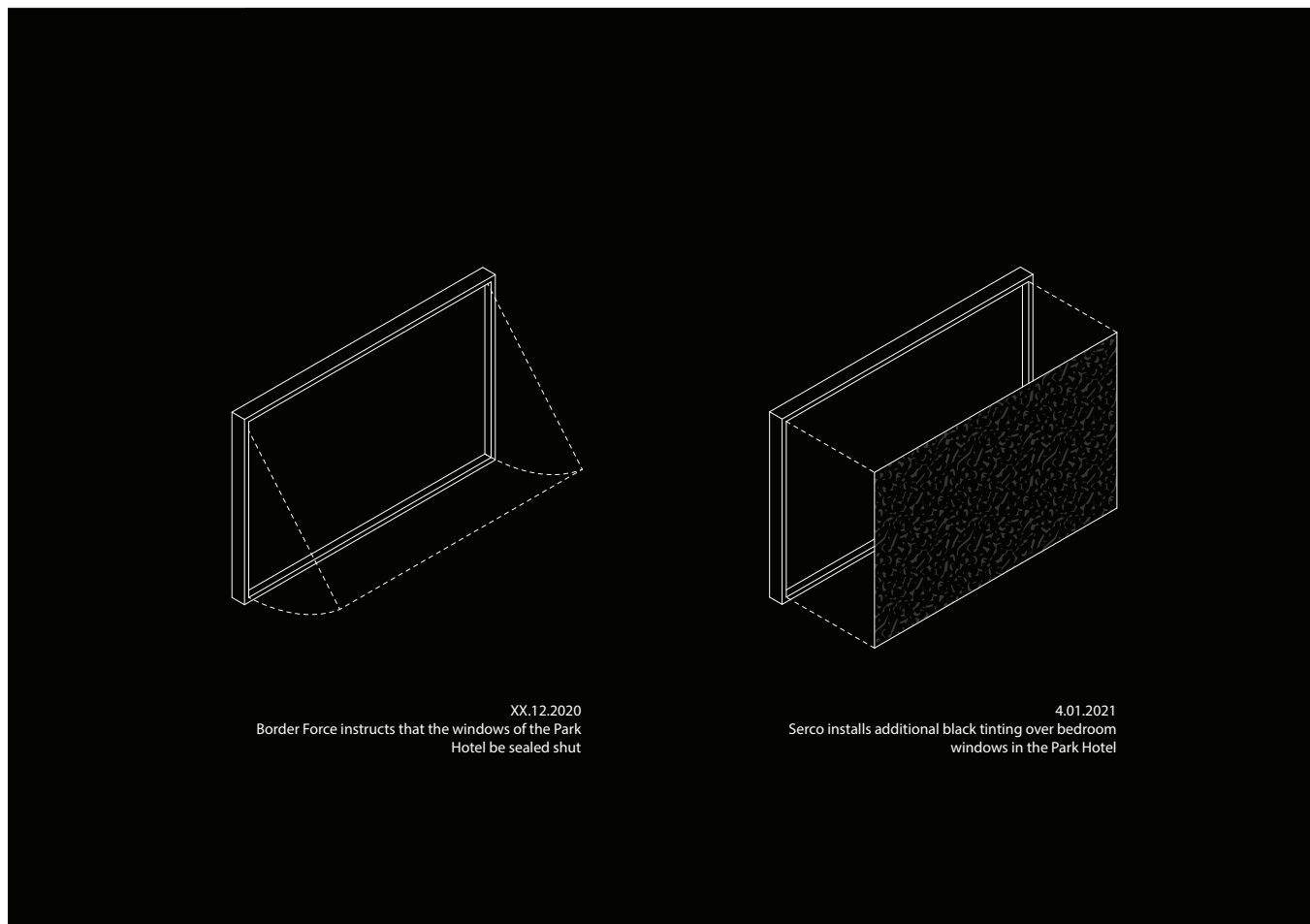Serco installs additional black tinting over bedroom
windows in the Park Hotel

Figure 3. Documentation of the series of spatial transformations applied to the windows of the Park Hotel. Mark Romei.

adjoining buildings, further increasing the sense of claustrophobia of confinement.

For the rooms on the other side of the hotel, those visible to the public, facing onto the street and the adjacent city square, after around one month of operations the windows were heavily tinted with black film. This film, applied to the windows from the inside, increased the condition of invisibility that characterises the offshore detention archipelago, a translation of this condition to this city hotel.

The application of this to the windows of the hotel changed the condition of visibility from those detained within the Park Hotel being able to signal to and be visible to the wider public in the spaces below. To a condition where those detained inside were almost completely hidden from view. The use of a phone light, seen as a white dot in the centre of the window, the only way to be seen from the city below. Here, the room slowly loses key characteristics we understand a hotel room to contain and takes on the spatial characteristics of the detention archipelago.

Beginning to diagram out some of these transformations as they are applied to the hotel, a picture can be built of

how the architecture has been adapted to serve a function of a space of detention. Other spatial alterations include the relocation of the entrance, from blocking off the front entrance on the main street as an access point, to instead using the gated carpark entrance on the site road to act as a secure check point. The hotel sign was also wrapped in black plastic, obscuring the communication of corporate ownership of the site. These signal both a shift in function of the building outside of its usual operations, and also begin to suggest how the spatial conditions of detention differ from those of everyday architecture.

Through creating a detention within the hotel, the architectural typology shifts to somewhere between the hotel and the detention centre. This new typology combines both corporate public architecture, and state based penal carceral architecture. By thinking through this typology it is possible to further understand the interconnected roles public and private entities play in the materialisation of detention spaces. The hotel detention was run by Serco, a multi-national contractor of government services. They have previously received contracts to run Christmas Island Detention centre, and form part of the constellation of private security and logistics companies operating and profiting from Australia's detention networks. This operation was conducted
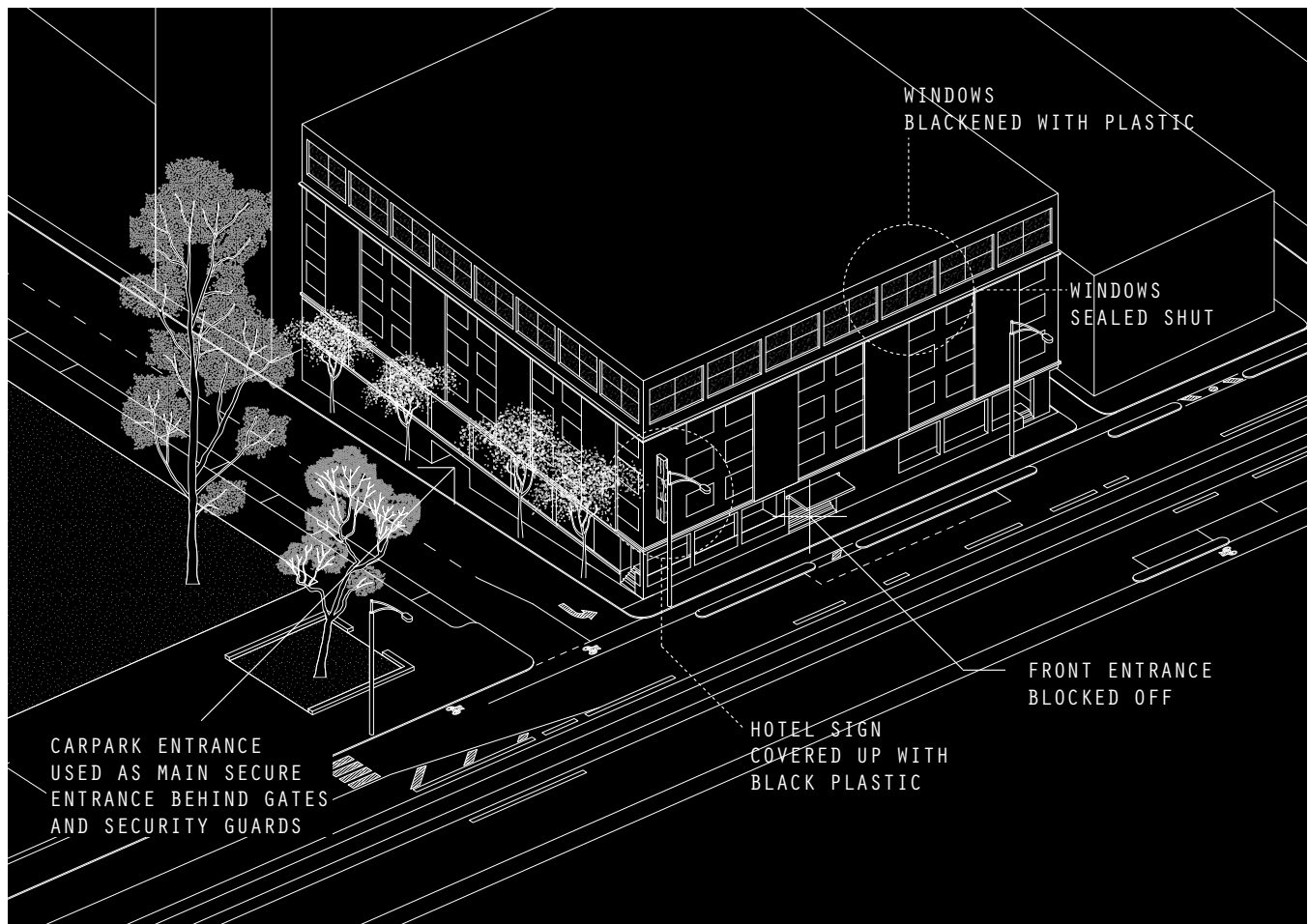
Figure 4. Diagram of a range of transformations made to the Park Hotel to facilitate detention. Mark Romei.

in conjunction with the Australian Border Force, and Serco's involvement constitutes a form of out-sourcing of both labour and responsibility of the operation of detention.

Aiming to understand these organisational relationships as a layer behind the implementation of hotel detention, further compilation of evidence can potentially reveal other intricacies of these laws and regulations. By further making these arrangements visible, and exploring how they also spatially manifest within the site of the detention hotel, larger organisational systems of detention are hoped to be both understood, and challenged.

CONCLUSION

By understanding the conditions which transform a space of hospitality, into a space of detention, architectural analysis has the potential to understand how violence is applied through architecture onto the body. Through understanding the spatialities of detention, it becomes possible to find additional forms of subversions which can challenge the spatial construction of the border.

Through doing so, I argue that through understanding how detention spaces are made, we can find ways to unmake these spaces collectively. As Harsha Walia, an author and activist involved in the No

One Is Illegal movement writes, pre-configurative praxis based on the knowledges of Indigneous traditions, and systems of commons, care and stewardship can inform concrete alternatives to current practices of power and control.[15] These knowledge systems present tangible worlds from which new futures can arise from. Here, the need to unmake detention networks connects to larger challenges of living in a post-climate change world, where new forms of collective resilience will both need to be imagined and enacted.

Through the processes of spatial practice and architectural representation, new tools can be developed in conjunction with such fields as legal practitioners, NGOs and human rights organisations working against detention. Spatial representation and analysis can not only play an important role in building up evidence of specific cases of human rights abuses, but also be used to communicate these to wider publics, combatting their concealed nature. Through communicating with the tools of architecture to reveal specific spatial systems and realities of detention, new forms of critical engagement and collective agency are possible to be produced.

Lastly, it is important that we continue envisioning worlds beyond continued coloniality and the structures of borders. It is here that the practice of spatial knowledge and space-making might both challenge the invisible power structures which we are intertwined within, and also become tools to collectively reveal and dismantle these forms.

ENDNOTES

1. For a comprehensive analysis of the effects of climate change on global borders and detention policies in the 21st century, see: White, Gregory. Climate change and migration: Security and borders in a warming world. OUP USA, 2011.

2. Such as architectural plans and drawings, maps and the application of construction systems and built architectural space.

3. The work of Harsha Walia explores the connections between how racism operates in settler colonial countries with the construction of current detention and border systems. See: Walia, Harsha, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Nick Estes. Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021.

4. Such as the work of Amy Nethery, Suvendrini Perera, Joseph Pugliese, Claire Loughnan, Maria Giannacopoulos and Eleanor Davey, among others.

5. Such practitioners as Forensic Architecture, Susan Schuppli, Jordan H. Carver, Theo Deutinger, Ella den Elzen, and Architects, Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR), among others.

6. Gillespie, Eden. 2021. "Medevac Asylum Seekers Forced to Wait Years for Medical Treatment, Report Finds." SBS News, December 6, 2021. https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/medevac-asylum-seekers-forced-to-wait-years-for-medical-treatment-report-finds/sg6tcf0uz.

7. An Alternative Place of Detention (APOD) can be any place designated by the Minister of Immigration in writing to temporarily act as a place of detention. This practice has led to the use of hotels as detention facilities on an ongoing and indefinite basis. See, Subparagraph (b) (v) of the definition of 'immigration detention' in section 5(1) of the Migration Act 1958 (Migration Act). Note: make sure this is the last text in your paper.

8. APODs have ranged from purpose built immigration detention centres in remote contexts, individual houses used for detention, spaces within other public buildings such as individual hospital beds during access to medical treatment, as well as hotels and motels. They encompass a broad category which can range from spaces indistinguishable from formal, administrative detention centres, to spaces indistinguishable from everyday urban space.

9. This information was revealed in 2021 through a senate standing committee, see: Commonwealth of Australia, AE21-346 - Alternative places of detention (APODs) in Australia since 2018, (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, 22 March 2021). https://www.aph.gov.au/api/qon/downloadestimatesquestions/EstimatesQuestion-CommitteeId6-EstimatesRoundId10-PortfolioId20-QuestionNumber346

10. Off-shore detention began when the Migration Legislation Amendment (Excision from the Migration Zone) (Consequential Provisions) Act 2001, (known commonly as "The Pacific Solution"), was passed to simultaneously exercise remote islands of Australia from the Australian Migration Zone, and allow for non-citizens arriving within Australian territories to be transported to offshore detention centres, either within Australian external territories, and in other neighbouring countries.

11. The Home Affairs Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous Measures) bill, (known commonly as the "Medevac Bill"), allowed for the temporary relocation of critically ill refugees held in offshore detention to Australia for medical or psychiatric treatment. The bill was passed in February 2019, without the support of the government, with the then Prime Minister Scott Morison calling the law a "national security" risk. It was later repealed in November 2019.

12. Fuller, Matthew, and Eyal Weizman. Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth. Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2021, 44.

13. Doherty, Ben. 'Inside Melbourne's Park Hotel, Refugees Sit and Wait for Covid to Find Them'. The Guardian, 25 October 2021, sec. Australia news. Accessed November 5, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/oct/26/inside-melbournes-park-hotel-refugees-sit-and-wait-for-covid-to-find-them.

14. Loughman, Claire. 'Not the Hilton': 'Vernacular Violence' in COVID-19 Quarantine and Detention Hotels, Arena Quarterly No. 3. Accessed May 25, 2022. https://arena.org.au/not-the-hilton-vernacular-violence-in-covid-19-quarantine-and-detention-hotels.

15. Walia, Harsha. Undoing Border Imperialism. Anarchist Interventions 06. Oakland, CA ; Edinburgh: AK Press ; Washington, DCInstitute for Anarchist Studies, 2013, 14.