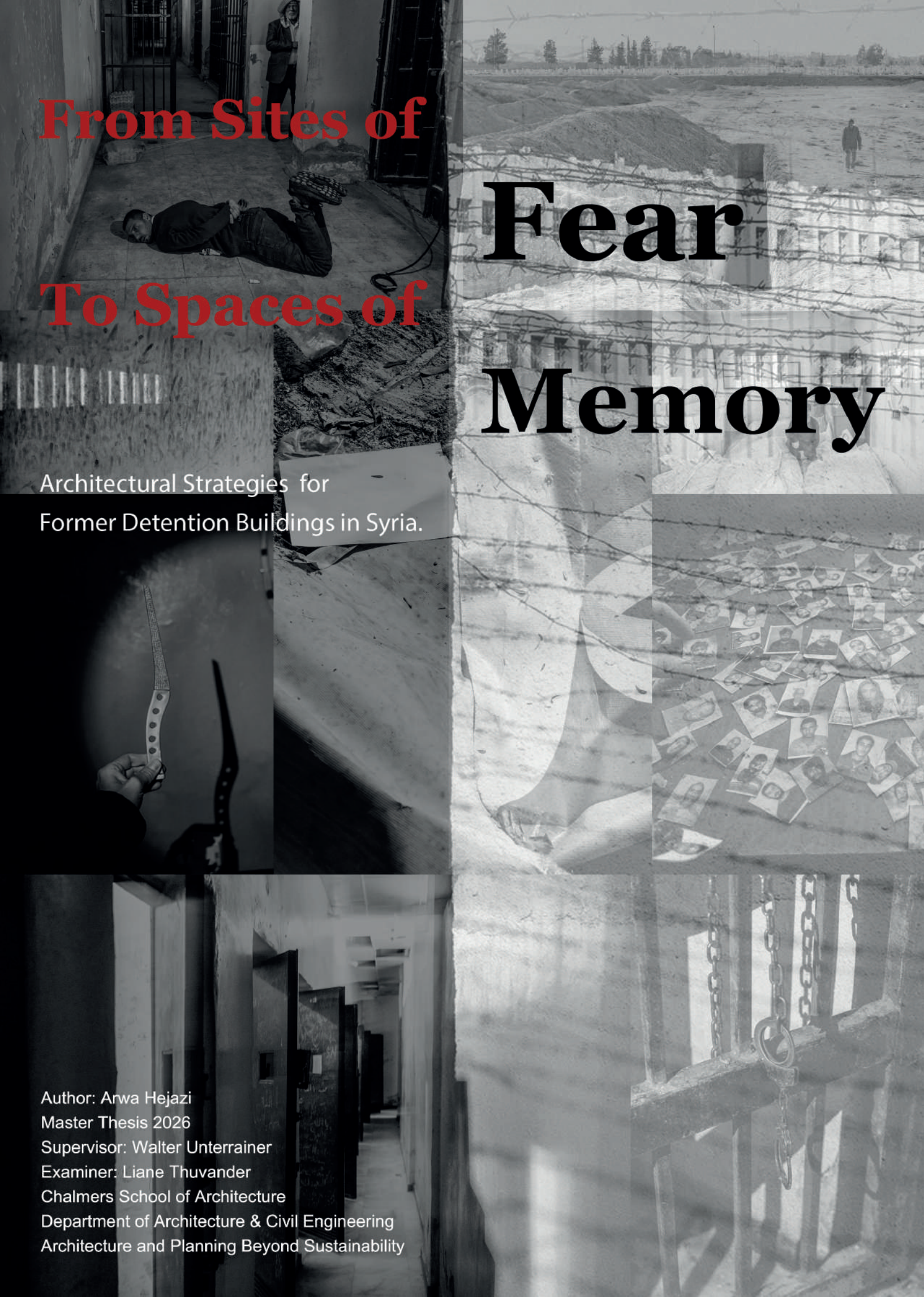




From Sites of To Spaces of

Fear Memory

Architectural Strategies for
Former Detention Buildings in Syria.

Author: Arwa Hejazi
Master Thesis 2026
Supervisor: Walter Unterrainer
Examiner: Liane Thuvander
Chalmers School of Architecture
Department of Architecture & Civil Engineering
Architecture and Planning Beyond Sustainability



CHALMERS
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

From Sites of Fear to Spaces of Memory

Architectural Strategies for Former Detention Buildings in Syria

Arwa Hejazi
MASTER'S THESIS 2026



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Building Design & Transformation for Sustainability

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Spring 2026

ABSTRACT:

Arbitrary detention in Syria under the Assad regime functioned as a political tool to suppress opponents, leaving behind buildings burdened with trauma and loss. Today, former detention centers stand as material witnesses to violence empty yet saturated with untold stories. This research approaches these sites as architectural and civic resources rather than structures to be erased. It asks: how can former detention sites in Syria be transformed into spaces of memory, justice, and collective healing while preserving the integrity of their painful histories?

The study is grounded in theories of collective memory, architectural memory, transitional justice, and collective psychological healing. It explores how architecture can operate as a mediating framework between documentation, remembrance, and future-oriented transformation. Methodologically, the research employs qualitative approaches, including interviews with survivors, families of the missing, and human rights organizations, alongside a survey that ensures the participation of affected communities in decision-making processes. International case studies of sites memorialized after periods of violence are analyzed comparatively to extract spatial strategies of preservation, intervention, and reinterpretation. A field-based investigation of Sednaya Prison in Syria forms the basis for the design exploration.

The design research tests varying degrees of architectural intervention, from minimal preservation to adaptive reuse, in order to evaluate how spatial strategies can acknowledge trauma without aestheticizing or neutralizing it. The expected outcome consists of design proposals and strategic guidelines for the sustainable reuse of former detention sites, contributing to the formulation of a context-sensitive architectural framework in a post-conflict Syrian setting. By articulating spatial tools for engaging with difficult heritage, the research seeks to position architecture as an active participant in processes of justice, remembrance, and societal reconstruction.

Keywords: Sites of Detention; Adaptive Reuse; Architectural Memory; Transitional Justice; Collective Healing.

STUDENT BACJGROUND:



Self-description:

I hold a Bachelor's degree in Architecture from Syria, where my academic and professional interests developed around the relationship between architecture, identity, and social context. My work explores how design can respond to questions of sustainability, social justice, and community participation. Growing up in a society deeply affected by detention and political violence shaped my awareness of the spatial dimensions of power and exclusion. These experiences led me to engage in humanitarian initiatives supporting survivors and their families, and ultimately inspired my research interest in the role of architecture in processes of memory, healing, and justice in post-conflict contexts.

List of studios:

- Prototypes and Assemblages (ACE530).
- Building Climatology (ACE350).
- Emergency Architecture and Resilient Design (ACE450).
- Sustainable Development and the Design Professions (ACE380).
- Beyond Sustainability (ACE440).
- Integrated Sustainable Building Design for Architects (ACE560).
- Key Projects for Sustainable Development in the Local Community (ACE555).

DEDICATION

To the souls of those who perished under torture, and to those who remain missing between absence and hope.

These pages are not only about you, but for you.

May your names endure, and your stories be carried forward, so that they are never lost to silence or oblivion, and so that truth is revealed and justice is one day served.

To my family members, my father, Mohammad Hejazi, my sister, Thuraya Hejazi, and her husband, Younes Al-Karim, who carry the scars of detention across the eras of both Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

01 INTRODUCTION

Background and Problem Description	01 - 03
Aim	04
Research Question	04
Research Methodology	05
Delimitations	06
Relevance for Sustainable Development	06

02 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical foundations	07 - 08
Reference Projects	08 - 14

03 STAKEHOLDER And COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Survey	15 - 20
Interviews	21 - 22

04 DESIGN PROPOSAL

Site and Building Analysis	23 - 35
Field Visit Observations	36 - 38
Design Concept	39 - 58

05 DISCUSSION And CONCLUSION

59 - 62

06 REFERENCES

63 - 66

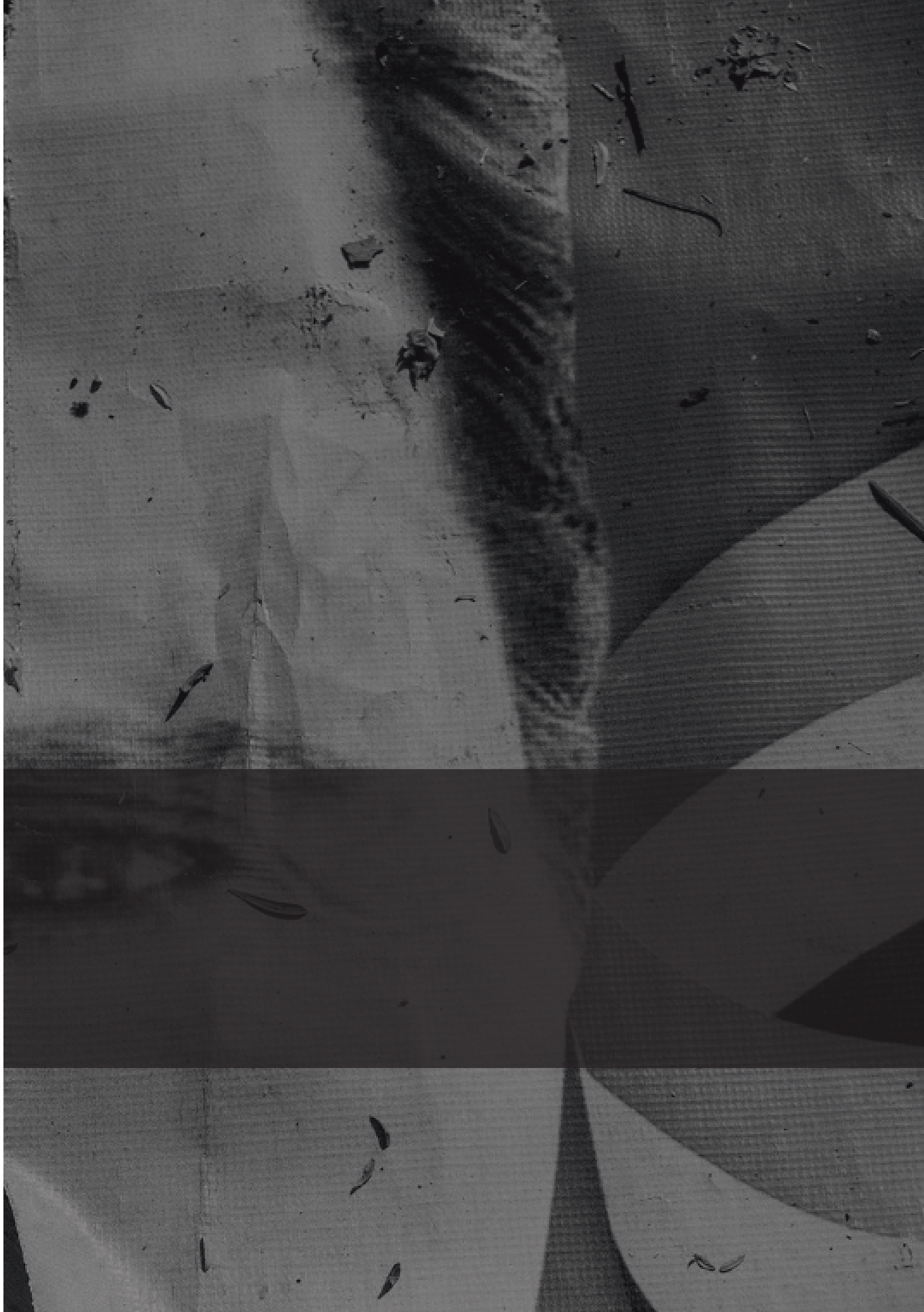
07 APPENDICES

67 -



INTRODUCTION

01



Background and Problem Description

Arbitrary detention in Syria has long been used as a political tool since the rule of Hafez al-Assad, systematically employed to silence dissent and suppress freedoms. Tadmor Prison became a symbol of fear, torture, and death (Taleghani, 2015). When ISIS destroyed Tadmor Prison in 2015, Syrians strongly rejected the act, perceiving it as an attempt to erase history and conceal crimes (Haaretz, 2015).

Since 2011, the scale of detention has expanded dramatically. According to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM, 2024), there are between 100 and 111 detention facilities in Syria, with at least 181,312 detained, 177,057 forcibly disappeared, including 4,536 children and 8,984 women, and 45,342 killed under torture between March 2011 and August 2025 (Syrian Network for Human Rights [SNHR], 2025). These numbers are considered conservative estimates, as the actual figures are believed to be significantly higher. After the fall of the regime and the opening of prisons, thousands of families remain without knowledge of their loved ones' fate, while survivors continue to suffer from severe psychological trauma caused by extreme conditions of detention (Fakih, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Today, these buildings stand physically empty, yet they remain heavily charged with memories, pain, and untold stories. The central societal question is: how should these sites be addressed? Should they be left as silent ruins, demolished, or reused?

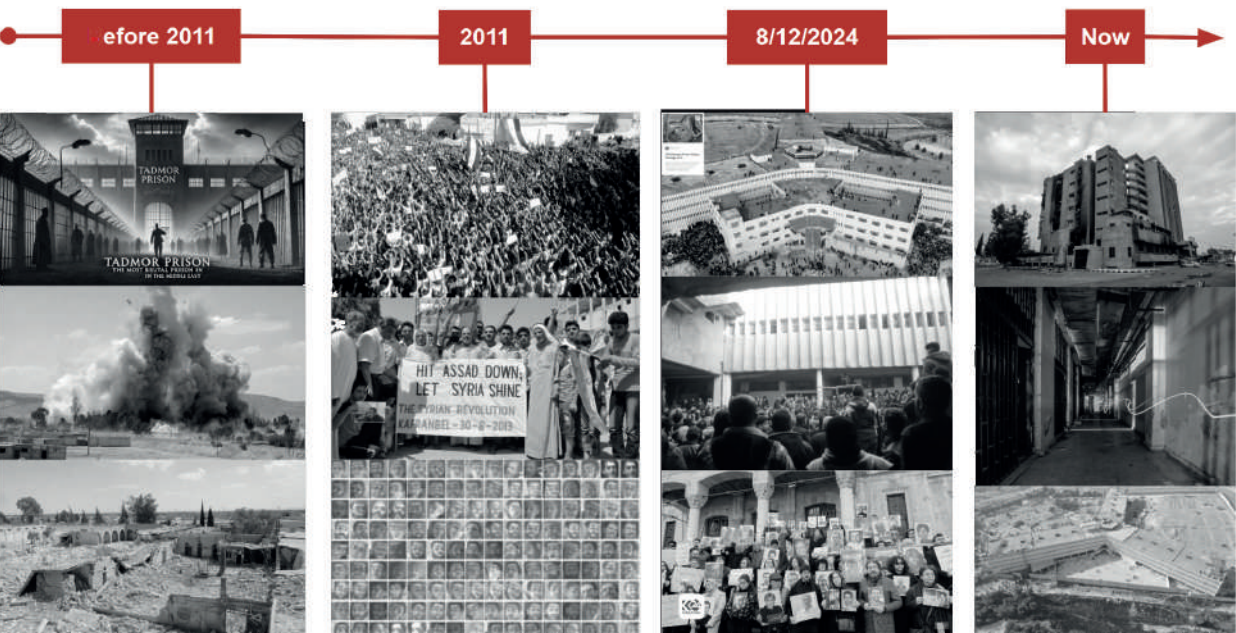


Figure 1. Timeline illustrating the transformation of detention sites in Syria. Timeline composition by author.

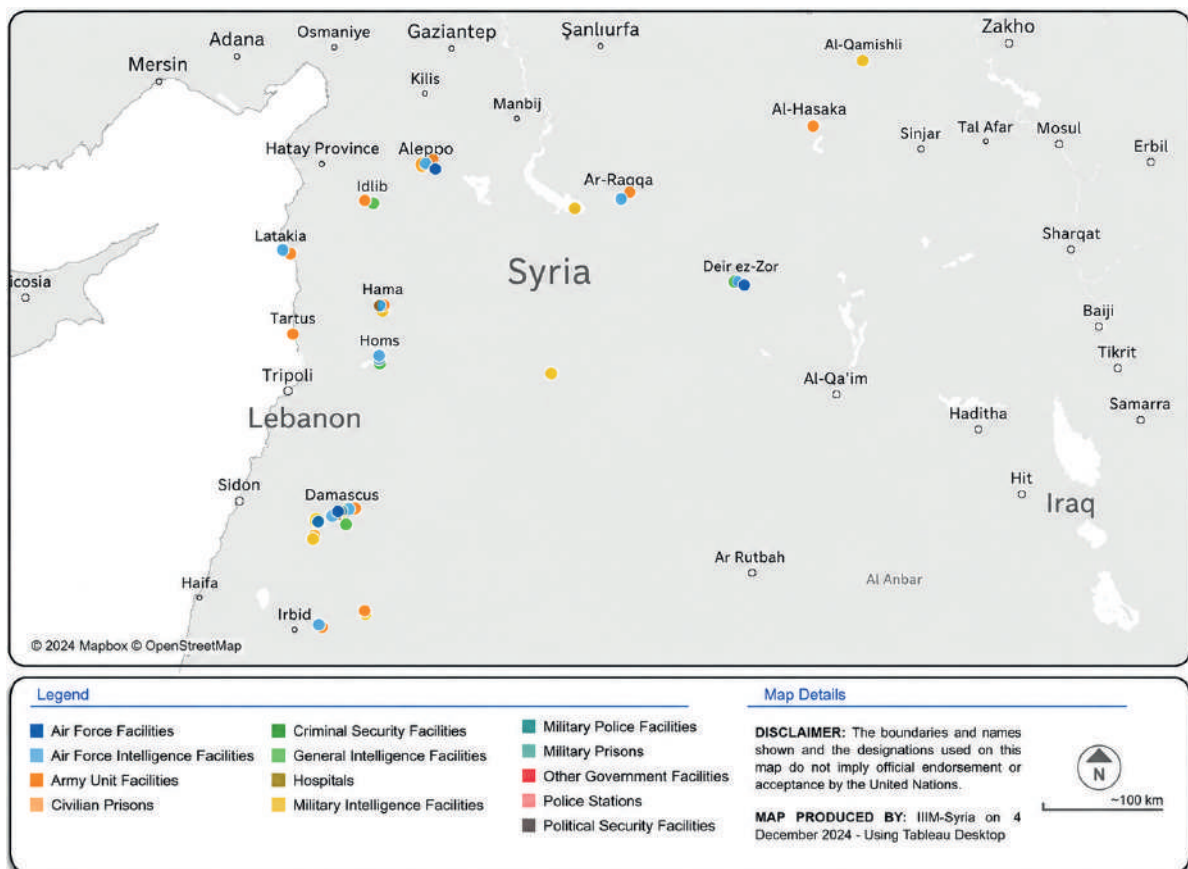


Figure 2. Map of documented detention and intelligence facilities across Syria.

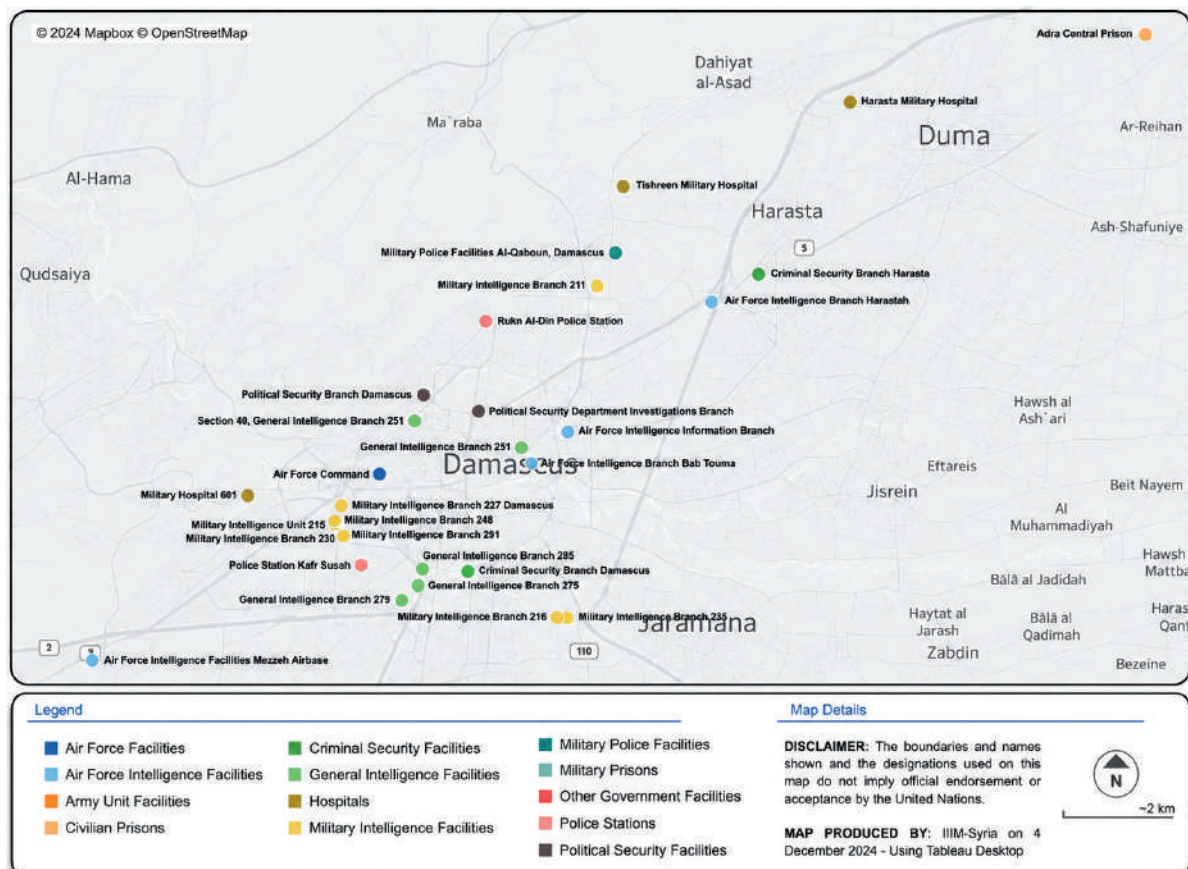


Figure 3. Map of documented detention and intelligence facilities in Damascus.



Figure 4. Statistics on arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearance in Syria (2011–2025). Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), August 2025.

From a professional perspective, this project aims to provide a dual contribution:

- Theoretically, it explores the intersection of architecture with collective memory, transitional justice, and psychological healing.
- Practically, it proposes sustainable architectural strategies for reusing former detention buildings as sites of remembrance and recovery, rather than erasing them through demolition or abandonment.

It addresses one of the most painful issues in Syrian society, the case of detention and enforced disappearance and seeks to transform sites associated with violence into spaces for dialogue, justice, and healing, contributing to rebuilding social trust after the conflict. Documenting and preserving these buildings also prevents the erasure of evidence and helps ensure that such atrocities are not repeated.

A clear knowledge gap exists. Transitional justice in Syria is often discussed in legal or political terms, while the architectural and spatial dimension has received little attention. The question of how physical spaces themselves can preserve memory and support healing without reproducing trauma or whitewashing the past remains largely unexamined.

Finally, this topic holds personal significance for me. Having a direct connection to the issue of detention, along with continuous engagement with survivors and families of the missing, I am acutely aware of the profound weight these buildings carry in people's lives. This motivates me to pursue a thesis that is not only academically rigorous but also socially relevant one that amplifies the voices of those directly affected and places them at the center of envisioning the future of these spaces.

Aim

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how architectural memory can be mobilized in former detention buildings in Syria to contribute to transitional justice and collective psychological healing. The research seeks to explore architectural strategies that preserve the painful history embedded in these sites while transforming them into spaces of justice, remembrance, and recovery.

Research Questions

Main Question:

How can architectural strategies of preservation and transformation in Sednaya Prison mediate between processes of memory, transitional justice, and collective psychological healing?

Sub-questions:

- 1** - In what ways can former detention centres be reused as tools for reconciliation and justice?
- 2** - How can architectural interventions influence and shape the collective memory of traumatic events?
- 3** - What design strategies can balance between documenting trauma and creating spaces for healing?
- 4** - Can a building transform from a symbol of fear into a resource that supports victims, their families, and society in achieving psychological recovery?

Research Methodology

Data Sources:

- Primary data (first-hand): Primary data was collected through field visits, site observations, semi-structured interviews, and an online survey.
- Secondary data (second-hand): Existing documentation of Syrian detention sites, including maps, archival materials, reports, and visual references (films and museum-based materials).

Methods:

- Context and site analysis: Interpreting the Syrian context through collected primary and secondary data, including spatial and historical analysis.
- Theoretical framework: Establishing the theoretical foundation through the study of collective memory, architectural memory, transitional justice, and psychological healing, alongside the analysis of comparable international case studies.
- Stakeholder and community engagement: Conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including survivors and professionals working with affected groups, alongside incorporating documented testimonies. An online survey was also conducted to engage affected communities in shaping the project's direction.
- Design concept development: Translating research findings into conceptual design strategies that reimagine Sednaya Prison as a space for memory, justice, and healing.

Tools:

Spatial documentation and analysis: Sketching, mapping, photographic and video documentation of spatial conditions, material traces, and sensory qualities.

- Architectural drawing and reconstruction: Redrawing existing architectural drawings based on available secondary sources due to the absence of official drawings, and developing drawings for the proposed design using AutoCAD.
- 3D modeling and visualization: Developing 3D models in 3ds Max and producing visualizations using Lumion and Photoshop.
- Diagrammatic representation: Creating conceptual diagrams to explain spatial relationships and design strategies.
- Use of Artificial Intelligence tools: Supporting early-stage visualization, writing assistance, and language refinement.

Delimitations

This thesis focuses on the architectural and social transformation of former detention buildings in Syria, exploring how they can be reused as spaces of memory, justice, and healing. The study does not aim to provide a comprehensive historical, political, or legal analysis of the Syrian conflict or detention practices; rather, it approaches the topic from a purely architectural and spatial perspective.

The research primarily relies on qualitative methods, including interviews, surveys, and secondary sources. Due to accessibility challenges, it is not possible to conduct extensive field studies for all former detention sites; therefore, one representative building will be selected as a case study. The project focuses on developing conceptual and design strategies rather than carrying out an actual restoration or construction project. Although the thesis does not include the physical implementation of the proposed design, it aims to develop architectural ideas and strategies that could be realistically applied in the future, once political and social conditions allow. While the research engages with psychological and social aspects, it does not include therapeutic or legal interventions. Its contribution lies in providing architectural insights and design strategies that support memory, justice, and healing complementing, rather than replacing, legal, political, and medical efforts in this field.

Relevance for Sustainable Development:

This research approaches sustainability through an integrated environmental, social, and cultural lens. By reusing former detention buildings instead of demolishing them, the project reduces waste and preserves resources, aligning with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Socially, it supports SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by transforming spaces of trauma into places for dialogue, justice, and healing, while involving affected communities in decision-making. Culturally, it preserves these sites as part of Syria's collective memory and social heritage, promoting education and awareness in line with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and Target 11.4, which focuses on protecting cultural and natural heritage. Finally, the research emphasizes collaboration with local and humanitarian actors, embodying SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) through partnerships that advance sustainable and inclusive development.

The project is evaluated using the SDG Impact Assessment Tool (University of Gothenburg, n.d.) within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015).



THEORETICAL FR

02



FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Foundations

Transitional Justice:

Transitional justice refers to the set of mechanisms societies employ to address large-scale human rights violations following periods of conflict or authoritarian rule. These mechanisms often include truth commissions, legal accountability, reparations, and institutional reform. According to Teitel (2000), transitional justice operates at the intersection of law, politics, and moral reconstruction, aiming to confront past abuses while enabling democratic transformation. Similarly, Minow (1998) emphasizes that societies emerging from violence must balance between demands for justice and the need for reconciliation. Within this framework, physical sites associated with violence such as prisons and detention centers can play a crucial role as spaces where the past is acknowledged, documented, and publicly confronted.

Collective Memory Theory:

Collective memory describes the ways in which societies remember and interpret shared past events. Halbwachs (1992) argues that memory is not only individual but socially constructed through institutions, narratives, and spaces. Building on this idea, Nora (1989) introduces the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), referring to physical locations where memory crystallizes and is preserved when living memory begins to fade. Former detention centers and prisons often function as such sites, where survivors, families, and affected communities remember, share, and transmit experiences connected to the place. Architecture therefore becomes a medium through which these shared memories can be preserved and communicated across generations.

Architectural Memory:

Architectural memory focuses on the role of the built environment in embodying historical narratives and shaping collective identity. According to Till (2005), architecture can act as a political and cultural medium that frames how societies interpret their past. Huyssen (2003) further highlights that contemporary cities increasingly engage with “memory landscapes,” where historical traces coexist with new spatial interventions. In this context, preserving sites of trauma does not merely protect physical structures but maintains material evidence that anchors memory in space. Bădescu (2022) argues that architects can function as “memory actors,” mediating between preservation, interpretation, and transformation when dealing with difficult heritage.

Collective Psychological Healing:

Spaces associated with violence can also contribute to processes of psychological and social healing. Edkins (2003) explores how trauma reshapes political and collective memory, emphasizing the need for spaces where traumatic histories can be acknowledged without being erased. Environmental psychology suggests that carefully designed spaces can support processes of recovery and reflection for survivors and affected communities. In this regard, adaptive reuse of former detention sites can create environments that balance remembrance with care. As Canepa (2023) notes in studies of former prisons, transformation strategies must address both the historical burden of the site and its potential to serve contemporary social needs.

Conclusion:

These theoretical perspectives collectively inform the architectural approach of this project by framing former detention sites not only as physical structures but as spaces of memory, justice, and healing. They guide a design strategy that balances preservation and transformation, where certain parts of the site are maintained as material evidence of the past, while others are carefully reinterpreted to accommodate new functions. Through this approach, architecture becomes a mediating tool that acknowledges past violence, supports collective memory, and creates conditions for reflection and psychological healing.

Reference Projects:

These reference projects are studied as examples of how former sites of violence can be transformed into spaces of memory, documentation, and reflection. Each case demonstrates a different approach to preservation, intervention, and visitor experience. The analysis focuses on key aspects such as the level of architectural intervention, the relationship between old and new elements, the role of narrative and exhibition, and the emotional journey of the visitor. These observations inform the development of the design proposal and help define strategies for dealing with sensitive historical spaces.

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Poland

Project Description:

Auschwitz-Birkenau is one of the most significant memory sites in the world. It was established by the Nazi regime in Poland during World War II as a detention and extermination camp. Initially used in 1940 to imprison political detainees, it later expanded into one of the largest sites of mass killing, where more than one million people, most of them Jews, were murdered within a systematic process of transportation, detention, and extermination.

After the liberation of the camp in 1945, the site was preserved and officially transformed into a museum and memorial in 1947, with the aim of documenting the crimes and maintaining physical evidence of the past. The project is based on preserving the buildings and spaces in their original condition, including visible traces of use and deterioration, allowing the site to communicate its history directly.

The approach relies on minimal intervention. Destroyed elements are not reconstructed, and no cosmetic restoration is applied. Only structural stabilization is carried out where necessary. Interior spaces are left unchanged, enabling visitors to confront the site in its raw and authentic state without heavy design mediation.

Key Takeaways:

- Preserving the building in its current state can be more powerful than reconstruction.
- Signs of decay and damage act as important carriers of memory.
- Minimal and non-intrusive interventions help maintain the authenticity of the space.
- The absence of heavy design allows the emotional impact of the site to remain strong.



Figure 5. Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, Poland. Source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

Robben Island (South Africa)

Project Description:

Robben Island is a former place of exile, detention, and imprisonment, used from the seventeenth century and later transformed into a high-security prison during the apartheid era. It held political prisoners and leaders of the anti-apartheid movement, including Nelson Mandela. The island's isolation from the mainland reinforced its role as a tool of control and separation.

After the end of apartheid, the site was transformed into a national and global memory site, officially becoming a museum in 1997. The approach focuses on preserving the prison environment in its original condition, maintaining the spatial and material reality of detention. Cells, courtyards, and circulation paths remain largely unchanged, allowing the site itself to convey its history.

Rather than relying on heavy architectural or exhibition interventions, the visitor experience is based on direct engagement with the space. Former prisoners often guide tours, turning the visit into a lived narrative grounded in personal testimony. Interpretative elements are present but minimal, ensuring that the authenticity of the site remains central.

Key Takeaways:

- Preserving spaces in their original condition reinforces authenticity.
- The spatial experience itself can act as the main narrative tool.
- Human testimony adds a powerful layer beyond architecture.
- Minimal intervention allows the memory to remain direct and personal.



Figure 6. Robben Island Museum, South Africa. Source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, Argentina

Project Description:

The ESMA site was originally a naval school that was used as a clandestine detention and torture center during the Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983). Thousands of people were illegally detained, tortured, and disappeared within this complex. After the end of the dictatorship, the site was transformed into a memory space dedicated to documenting human rights violations and preserving collective memory.

The intervention is based on preserving the original building while introducing new elements to support its transformation into a museum. The existing spaces are maintained as evidence of past events, while exhibitions and interpretative layers are carefully inserted to explain what happened. The project creates a dialogue between the old and the new, where contemporary additions remain clearly distinguishable from the original structure.

Rather than leaving the site completely untouched, the project adopts a balanced approach that combines preservation with adaptive reuse. This allows the building to function as an active educational and cultural space, while still maintaining its historical significance.

Key Takeaways:

- Combining preservation with new program can activate the building.
- Clear distinction between old and new interventions is essential.
- Interpretation and narrative can support understanding of complex histories.
- The site can function as both a memorial and a public, educational space.



Figure 7 . ESMA Memory Site Museum, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Source: Government of Argentina, 2023. Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA.

Topography of Terror Documentation Center, Germany

Project Description:

The Topography of Terror site is located on the former headquarters of the Gestapo and SS in Berlin, where many crimes of the Nazi regime were planned and directed. After World War II, most of the original buildings were destroyed, leaving behind only ruins and archaeological traces of the past. The project transforms the site into an open documentation center, where these remains are preserved and presented as historical evidence, rather than reconstructing what was lost. The design keeps the ruins exposed and integrates them into the visitor experience, while introducing a new, minimal and neutral building to host exhibitions, clearly separated from the historic ground.

The intervention is based on minimal design and clarity. The new building does not attempt to recreate the past, but instead allows the historical elements' foundations and fragments to remain visible and legible. The open nature of the site enables visitors to move between indoor and outdoor spaces, creating a direct connection with history.

Key Takeaways:

- Preserving ruins as evidence can be more powerful than reconstruction.
- Clear separation between new and old is essential.
- Minimal and neutral design helps highlight historical elements.
- Open spaces can function as powerful memory landscapes.
- Combining indoor documentation with outdoor experience strengthens understanding.
- An overly neutral approach may reduce emotional impact.
- Heavy reliance on text can weaken the spatial experience.
- A balance is needed between clarity and emotional engagement in design.



Figure 8 . Topography of Terror Documentation Center, Berlin, Germany. Source: Stiftung Topographie des Terrors.

Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Cambodia

Project Description:

Tuol Sleng was originally a school that was transformed into a detention and torture center during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979). Thousands of people were imprisoned, interrogated, and executed within the building. After the fall of the regime, the site was converted into a museum documenting the crimes and presenting victims' testimonies.

The project relies on almost complete preservation of the building with minimal architectural intervention. Classrooms were converted into cells, and walls, floors, and harsh modifications were left as they are. Photographs, documents, and a few interpretative elements were added to explain what happened, without redesigning or beautifying the spaces. The site remains in its raw condition, confronting visitors directly with its reality without strong design mediation.

Key Takeaways:

- Full preservation of spaces intensifies realism and emotional impact.
- Absence of architectural intervention allows the site to speak for itself.
- Direct experience can be more powerful than designed exhibitions.
- Documents and photographs support understanding without altering the space.
- Lack of design intervention may limit the diversity of the experience.
- Fully raw exposure can be overwhelming without a gradual narrative.
- Some level of guidance may be needed without losing authenticity.



Figure 9 .Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Source: Wikipedia.



STAKEHOLDER A COMMUNITY ENG



AND GAGEMENT

Introduction:

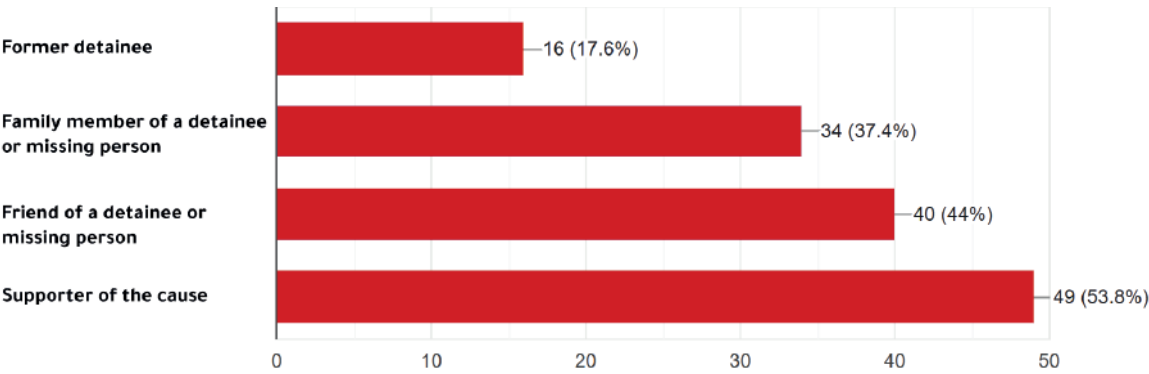
This survey was conducted to understand people’s views on how former detention buildings in Syria should be treated in the future. The questionnaire was distributed online using Google Forms and targeted families of detainees and missing persons, former detainees, as well as individuals in solidarity with this issue. A total of 90 responses were collected. The survey aims to support the development of the design proposal based on the views of the local community, and to support research on the role of these places in memory, justice, and healing.

Detailed survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

Analysis of the survey results:

Describe yourself - You may select more than one option

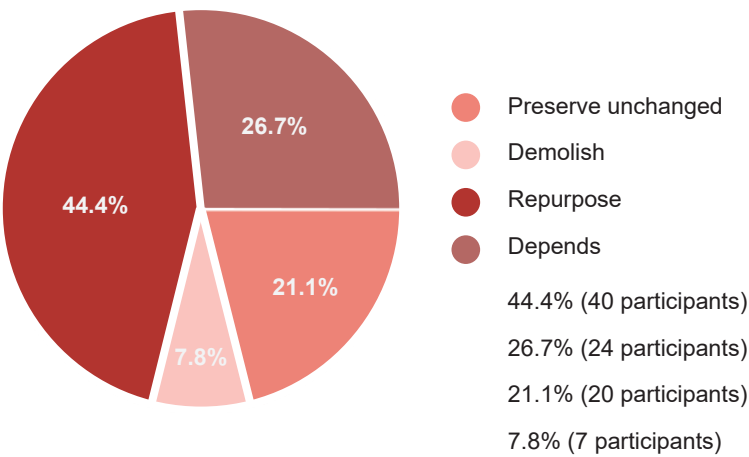
Responses 90



- Demolition vs Preservation

In your opinion, what is the best action that can be taken regarding buildings that were formerly detention centers?

Responses 90



The responses showed a clear recurrence of the idea of preserving the building as a historical witness. Many participants expressed their rejection of complete demolition, considering that removing the building would mean erasing memory.

A wife and mother of martyrs in Sednaya Prison:

“I want the place to become a source of happiness and joy, in contrast to how it was once a source of pain and torture.”

Family member of a detainee or missing person:

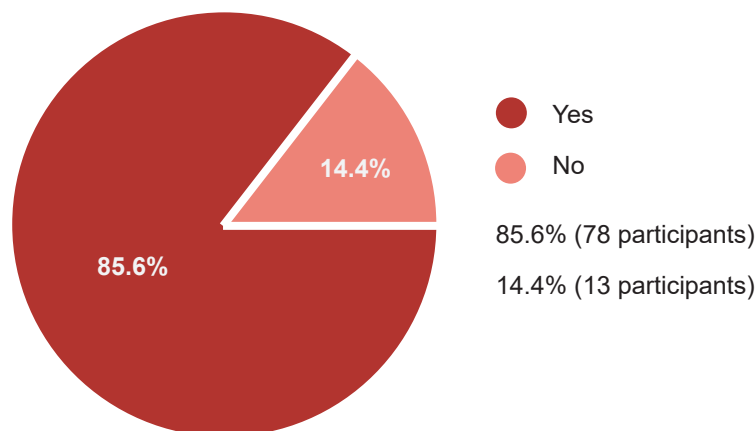
“Preserving the site is essential because it contains evidence that incriminates the perpetrators.”

Family member of a detainee or missing person:

“Sednaya Prison has become a symbol for Syrian, and demolishing it or removing it would mean erasing what happened there. It must remain, not for the present time, but for future generations, as a reminder to people of the thousands of missing persons whose fate remains unknown.”

Are there physical elements (walls, cells, tools, ect.) that you think hold special meaning and should be preserved?

Responses 90



Former detainee:

“Walls, Bathrooms, Torture rooms.”

Former detainee:

The detainees’ words on the walls, their signatures, their fingerprints, and their foot-prints on the prison walls.

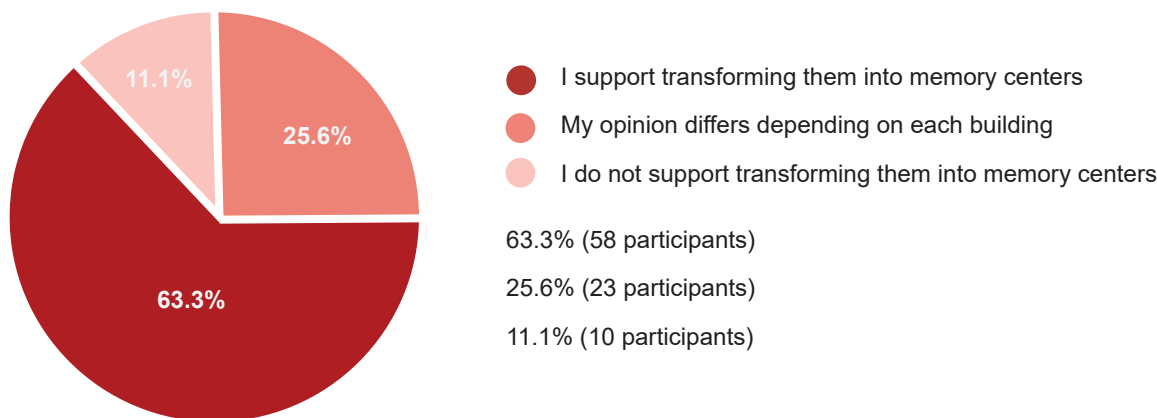
Family member of a detainee or missing person:

“I believe that some physical elements such as doors, walls that bear the marks of time, and the tools that were used inside the detention facility should be preserved as they are. They are silent witnesses to what happened and carry within their details the pain of the victims and their resilience. Their presence is essential so that the truth remains embodied, not only narrated in words, but seen with the eyes and felt in the heart.”

- Transforming the Building into a Site of Memory

In some countries, former detention sites have been transformed into "memory centers." These are places that document the past and commemorate its memory. They may also include therapeutic or educational activities that allow people to share their stories and connect with one another, becoming spaces for remembrance, dialogue, and collective healing.

What is your opinion on transforming these buildings, or some of them, into memory centers in this way
Responses 90



There was repeated support for redefining the building as an official site of memory. Participants emphasized the need for public acknowledgment of what occurred within the space and for transforming it into an educational environment that documents violations. Memory is perceived as a social instrument for future prevention, not merely as symbolic commemoration.

Friend and family member of missing people:

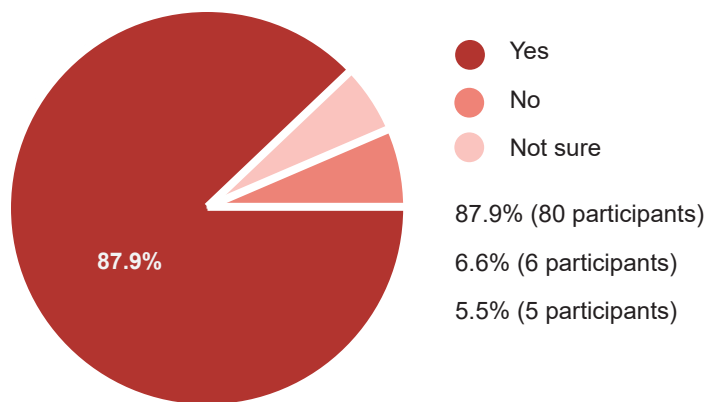
“I support transforming them into memory centers, as this type of initiative helps document crimes and violations to prevent their recurrence, and contributes to the process of transitional justice and societal reconciliation.”

Friend and family member of missing people:

”These places must not be erased from the collective memory. Transforming them into spaces for remembrance and dialogue helps people confront the past rather than forget it, and creates an opportunity for collective healing and building a more conscious and humane future.”

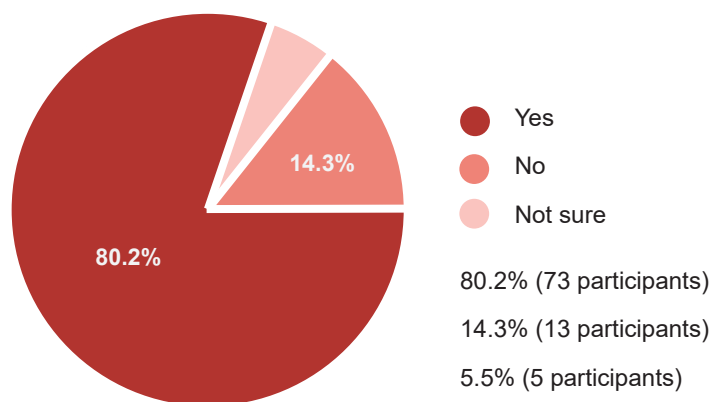
Do you think preserving these buildings can help convey the truth to future generations?

Responses 90



Do you feel that preserving these buildings and sharing the stories of those who lived there can give you a sense of justice or acknowledgment of suffering?

Responses 90



Friend and family member of missing people:

”preserving these buildings and narrating the stories of those who lived through their suffering represents a form of symbolic justice and human recognition of the victims. Documenting these stories and passing them on to future generations helps prevent the recurrence of violations and gives society an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of justice and reconciliation.”

- Proposed Future Uses

Participants' responses can be grouped into four main categories:

1. Community Support and Recovery:

- Psychological and social rehabilitation centers.
- Community support programs.

2. Memory and Documentation:

- Memory museums and documentation centers.
- Archives of testimonies.
- Living spaces for memory and justice.

3. Education and Empowerment:

- Schools.
- Vocational empowerment centers for the children of victims.

4. Public Commemorative and Cultural Spaces:

- Memorial gardens.
- Outdoor theatre for reflective and cultural activities.

The responses indicate that the proposed activities are not limited to the commemorative dimension, but extend to educational, cultural, social, and human rights-related aspects, including:

- Organizing exhibitions featuring survivors' testimonies, photographs of victims, and objects associated with the period of detention, alongside documentary film screenings and theatrical performances depicting detainees' experiences.
- Holding educational seminars, open dialogues, and workshops on human rights and transitional justice, as well as annual events linked to symbolic dates in the national memory.
- Engaging schools and universities through field visits and awareness programs directed at students.
- Organizing artistic and cultural activities that create spaces for expression and interactive events that foster community dialogue.
- Providing psychological and social support initiatives for survivors and families of victims.
- Offering sensory experiences or simulated presentations of detention conditions to reinforce legal and ethical lessons and prevent the recurrence of violations.

- Ethical and Psychological Concerns

Several participants expressed concern about the risk of reactivating trauma or turning the site into a space of consumption or voyeuristic tourism. There were calls for sensitive management that respects the dignity of victims.

Friend and family member of missing people:

"There is a concern that the site may be reduced to a merely symbolic or touristic project, or be politically exploited, instead of becoming a genuine space for remembrance and justice. There is also fear that visiting such places could retraumatize some survivors or victims' families if not handled with sufficient sensitivity and respect."

Former detainee:

"The erasure of the truth instead of revealing it: if the process is not managed transparently, the narrative may be rewritten in a deficient or distorted way, causing the place to lose its true meaning."

Based on these findings, the architectural project adopts an approach that preserves the site as material evidence of violence while introducing limited and carefully considered architectural interventions that enable its reuse as a space for memory, education, and community support. Design-wise, this translates into preserving and highlighting the original elements of the site, while introducing spaces dedicated to documentation and the narration of testimonies, alongside areas for dialogue, learning, and community activities. The project also takes into account participants' concerns about the risk of turning such sites into spaces that commodify trauma, by adopting sensitive architectural interventions that respect the dignity of victims and prioritize memory and testimony over spectacle.

Interviews

Introduction:

A total of four interviews were included in this research, all with survivors (former detainees). Two semi-structured interviews were conducted in September 2025, each lasting approximately [30–60 minutes], with participants selected based on their direct connection to the research topic. In addition, two documented interviews from online sources (Syria Prisons Museum, n.d.) were used, providing direct testimonies of the detention experience in Sednaya Prison, to support and enrich the research findings.

Detailed interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Dr. Jalal Nawfal



An interview was conducted with Jalal Nawfal, a psychotherapist and former detainee who currently serves as an advisor to the Syrian National Commission for the Missing. The interview highlighted the complex psychological impact of former detention sites on survivors and their families, emphasizing the need to approach the transformation or reuse of these places with great sensitivity. It also stressed the potential role these sites can play in processes of transitional justice, as preserving them may contribute to acknowledging victims' suffering, documenting past crimes, and communicating historical truth to future generations. These insights informed the design approach of the project, particularly in balancing preservation with carefully considered spatial interventions.

Thuraya Hejazi



An interview was conducted with Thuraya Hejazi, a former detainee and founder of a civil organization that supports women survivors of detention and families of the missing. The discussion highlighted the importance of acknowledging survivors' experiences and ensuring that former detention sites remain places that preserve memory and dignity. She also emphasized the importance of adopting a feminist perspective in dealing with these sites, one that recognizes the specific experiences of women who have been subjected to detention and violence and ensures that their voices and stories are represented in processes of documentation and memory. She stressed that these spaces should not be limited to documenting past violations, but should also contribute to supporting survivors and their families through recognition of their suffering, fostering dialogue, and providing forms of community support.

Muhammad Ahmad Saad Eddin



A former detainee of Sednaya Prison recounts his experience of arriving at the prison after being transferred from one of the security branches, where detainees were transported in refrigerated trucks typically used for carrying meat. Upon arrival, they were forced to disembark under severe beating and were then taken to the reception hall, where they were ordered to remove their clothes and stand naked inside cages. They were also forced to place their hands over their eyes and keep their heads lowered to prevent them from seeing the surroundings or the guards. This testimony reveals that certain architectural spaces within the prison, particularly the entrance and the reception hall were not merely functional areas, but formed part of a system of humiliation and control that shaped the detainees' first experience within the prison. This gives these spaces particular significance in understanding the spatial memory of detention.

Abdulkhaliq Ahmad Umair



The testimony of former detainee Abdulkhaliq Ahmad Umair reveals aspects of the harsh conditions inside Sednaya Prison. Speaking between detainees was strictly forbidden, and anyone who made a sound could be punished by being sent to solitary confinement. He also described the solitary confinement floor as severely deteriorated due to dirt and holes in the surfaces. The corridors were dimly lit, while the solitary cells themselves were in almost complete darkness so dark that he could not see his own hand. He also noted the severe overcrowding in the ground-floor cells, where six detainees were often held in a single cell under extremely unhygienic conditions. This testimony illustrates how spatial conditions such as darkness, isolation, and confinement were integral to shaping the experience of detention. Understanding these spatial characteristics highlights the significance of these spaces in the memory of the prison and underlines the importance of addressing them carefully in any architectural approach to preservation or reuse.



DESIGN PROPOS

04



SAL

Site and Building Analysis

This master's thesis explores the adaptive reuse of former detention buildings in Syria as potential sites of memory, justice, and healing. After examining several documented facilities as potential case studies, Sednaya Prison was selected as the primary case study for this research, based on its significance and the availability of detailed documentation.

Further details on the site selection process and the analysis of other case studies are provided in Appendix C.

Sednaya Military Prison:

Reports by multiple human rights organizations have documented widespread executions, torture, and inhumane detention conditions within the facility, establishing Sednaya as one of Syria's most notorious detention centers.

Location: Syria, Damascus, Sednaya.
Period of Use: 1987- 2024

Located approximately 30 km north of Damascus, Sednaya Prison was constructed in 1987 by the Military Construction Authority based on plans from a German engineering company.

Sednaya Prison's location on a high hill within a mountainous area gives it a strategic position with visual control over the surrounding landscape. Its distance from densely populated areas reflects the isolated and closed nature of the site. This geographical setting reinforces the prison's function as a tool of control and intimidation, making access difficult and limiting witnesses to what occurred inside. The site's isolation has also contributed to establishing its symbolic power as a space of fear



Figure 10. Location of Sednaya Prison in relation to Damascus.
Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.

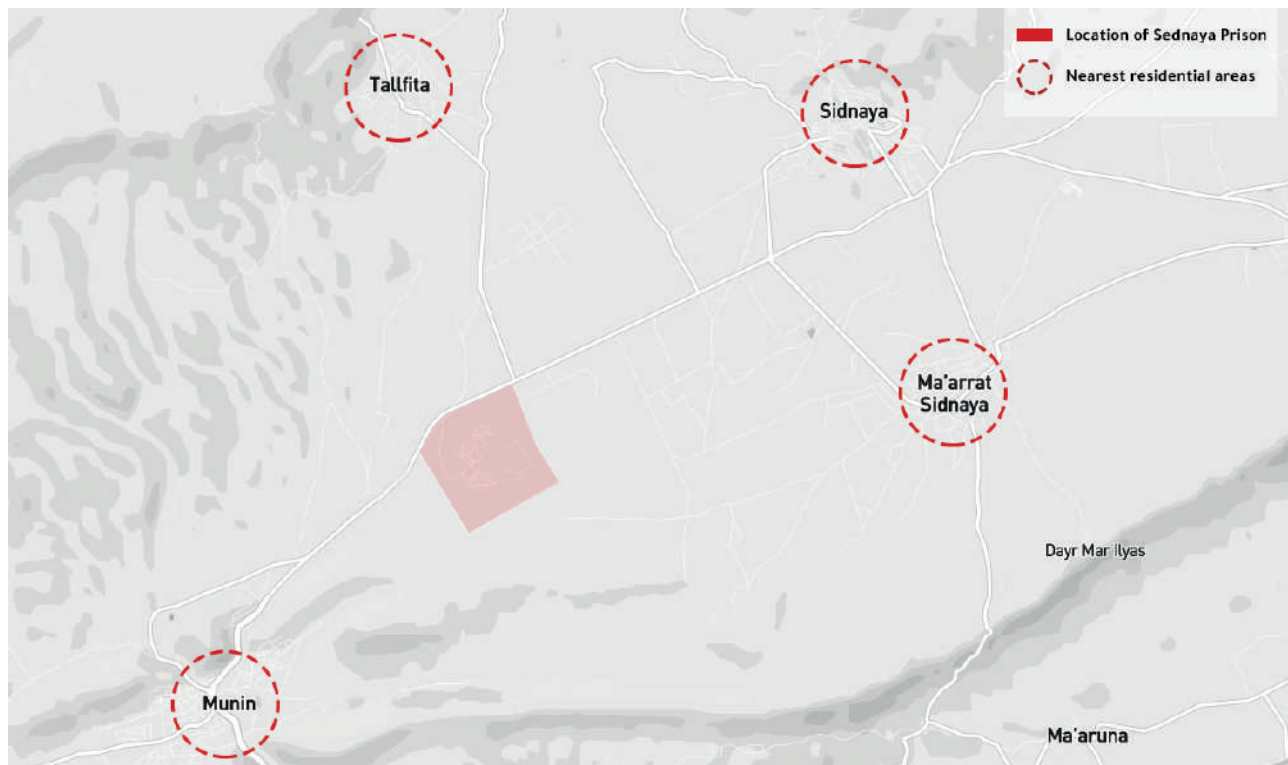


Figure 11. Location of Sednaya Prison and its surrounding settlements. Source: Adapted from Topoexport.

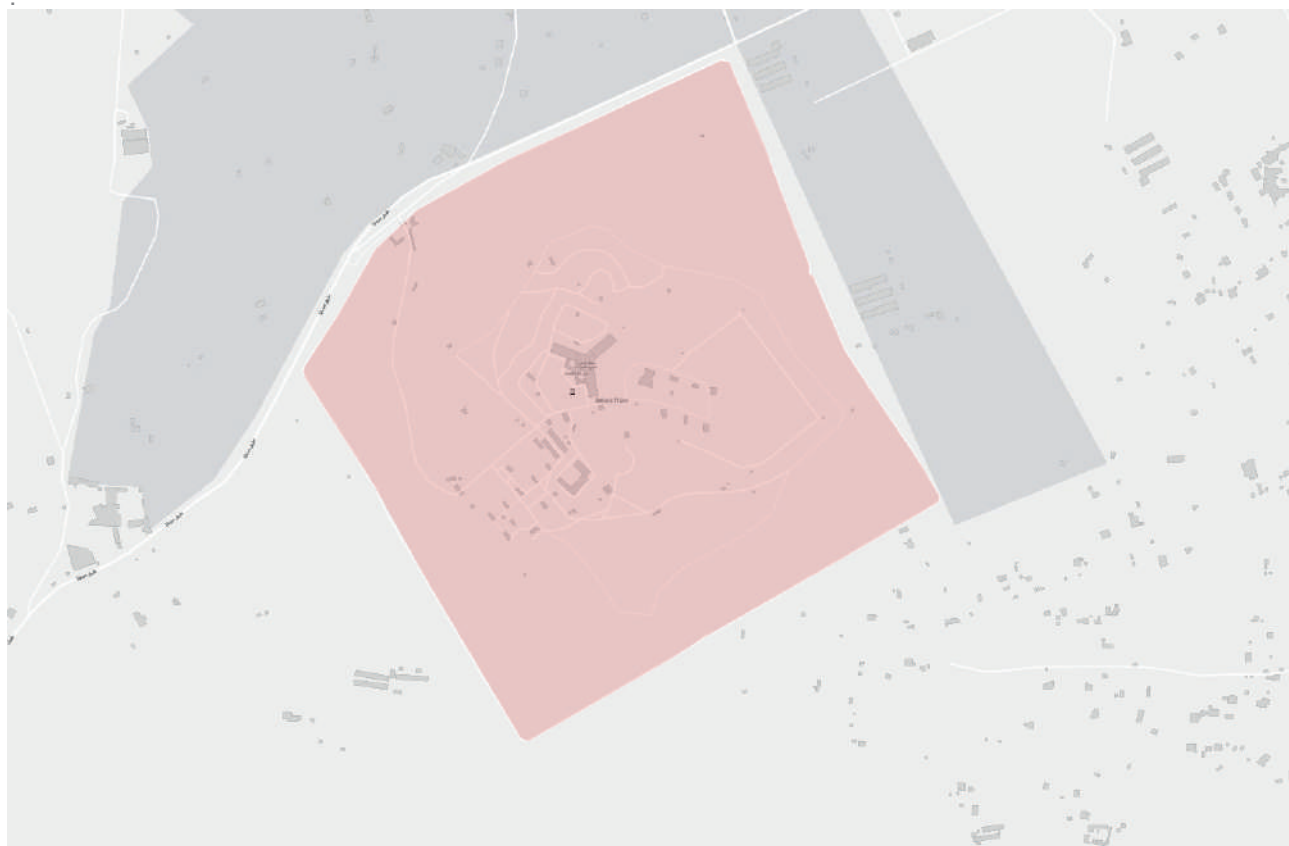


Figure 12. Sednaya Prison complex and its immediate surroundings. Source: Adapted from Topoexport.

The prison complex extends over an estimated 1.4 square kilometers and consists of two main buildings: the Red Building (constructed in 1987) and the White Building (added in the 1990s), along with garages, administrative offices, and service areas.



Figure 13. Aerial view of Sednaya Military Prison showing the main buildings.
Source: Adapted from Google Maps.



Figure 14. The main buildings of Sednaya Military Prison, the Red Building (left) and the White Building (right). Source: Adapted from Anadolu via Getty Images.

The Red Building, covering around 29,000 square meters, comprises three main wings (A, B, and C) arranged in a tripod formation resembling the Mercedes-Benz symbol. It includes five levels (from basement to fourth floor), containing approximately 170 dormitories and 61 solitary confinement cells, as well as offices, guard rooms, kitchens, and storage spaces (Syrian Prisons Museum, n.d.).

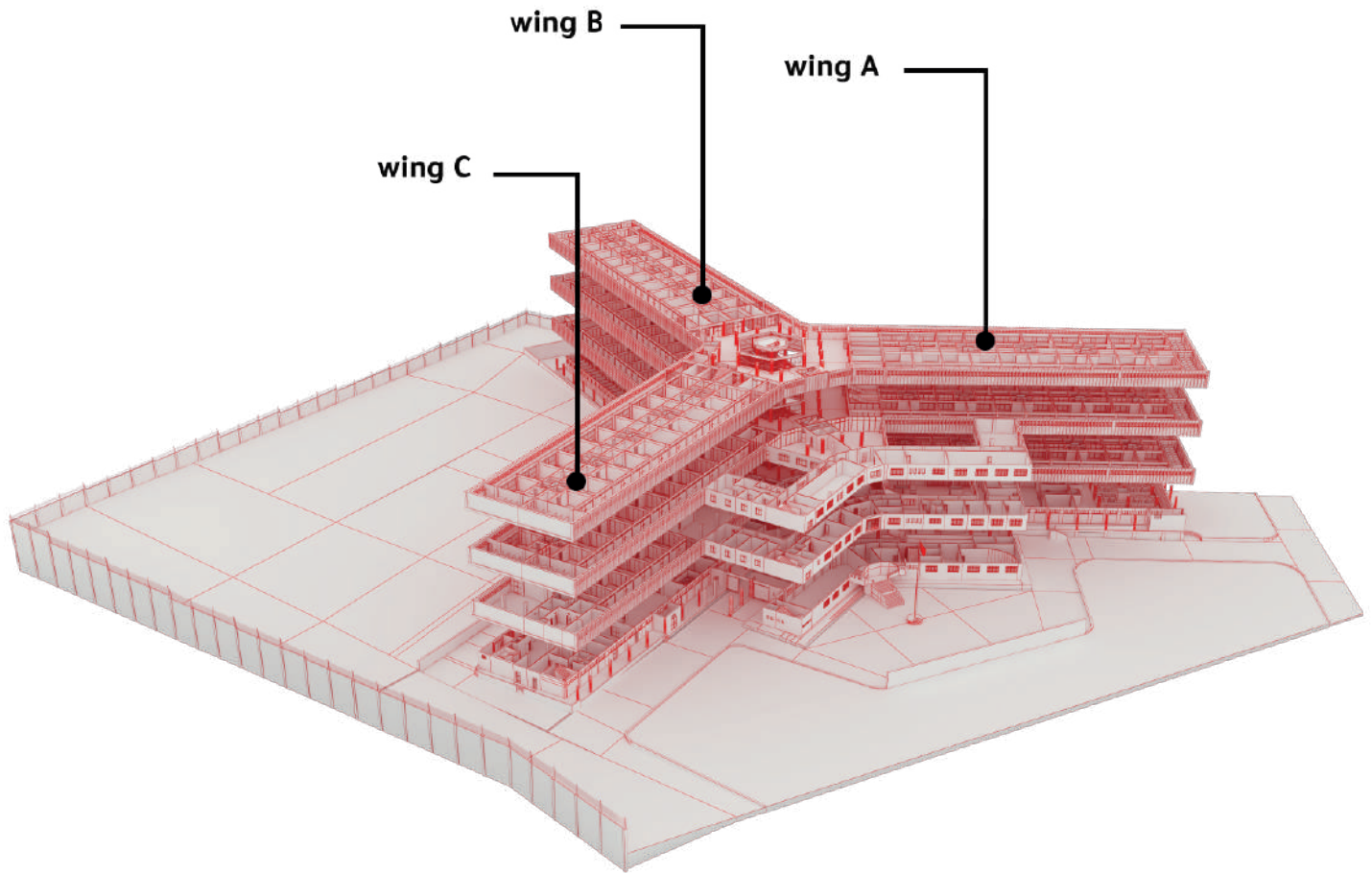


Figure 15. 3D model of the Red Building in Sednaya Military Prison. Source: Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 16. Floor plans of Wing A in the Red Building, Sednaya Military Prison. Source: Adapted from

Current Condition Analysis:

To analyze the current condition of the building, the study relied on multiple sources, including the website of the Syrian Prisons Museum, which provides a 3D virtual tour of the prison. The analysis was also informed by a field visit that I conducted to Sednaya Prison in February 2026, which allowed for a direct observation of the building's physical condition and spatial characteristics.

- Access and Arrival:

The distance between the main gate of the site and the entrance to the building is approximately one kilometer. The path is long and appears to be monitored along its entire length, with repeated openings and guard points. The road passes near barracks and service buildings belonging to the site, reinforcing the sense that it is part of an integrated system rather than an isolated structure. Vegetation is limited and scattered, leaving the path exposed and visually harsh.



Figure 17. Entry point and access route leading to the prison building.
Source: Adapted by the author from Google Maps.

At the entrance to the site, (the first entry point) there is a drawing of the Syrian flag that was a symbol of the revolution and the revolutionaries, along with phrases written by people in the first days after the fall of the Assad regime and the opening of the prison, when the remaining detainees were freed.



Figure 18. Entrance to Sednaya Military Prison. Source: Photograph by the author.

It reads:

“Free Syria,”

“The Human Slaughterhouse,”

“We will not forget and we will not forgive,”

“Our detainees, pain of the soul, the bitterness of victory.”



Figure 19. Views from the access road leading to Sednaya Military Prison. Source: Photograph by the author.

- The basement:

The basement, which contained the solitary confinement cells where prisoners were subjected to severe torture, starvation, and deprivation of water for long periods. Health conditions were inhumane due to mold, sewage leakage from the toilets, and the absence of light or ventilation except for very small holes above the door.

There are signs of fire damage on this floor, the cause and exact timing of which remain unknown, along with severe dampness and traces of mold.

There are also signs of digging in the concrete, likely related to the search for secret cells after the prisoners were freed in December 2024, and they can be seen in various parts of the prison.

Traces of writings are still visible on the walls, left by former detainees who had been held in these cells including names, dates, and short messages.



Figure 21. Current condition of the guard rooms in the basement level.
Source: Adapted by the author from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 20. Basement floor plan, Weng A, Sednaya Military Prison.
Source: Adapted by the author from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 22. Current condition of the solitary cell. Source: Adapted by the author from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 23. Current condition of the solitary cell. Source: Photograph by the author.

- The ground floor:

The ground floor contains the inspection hall, which was the first space where prisoners were brought upon arrival. The hall includes several metal cages positioned along the walls, where detainees were forced to stand and wait for their turn. It is connected to an exterior courtyard, and available evidence suggests that executions and the transfer of bodies took place in this area.

Movable metal stairs and other objects were observed on site, which testimonies and investigations indicate were used to construct execution platforms in the outdoor courtyard.

The bathroom wing is believed to have been designated for the guards and shows clear structural damage caused by humidity and water leakage.



Figure 25. Current condition of the guard area in the basement level.
Source: Adapted by the author from Syrian Prisons Museum.

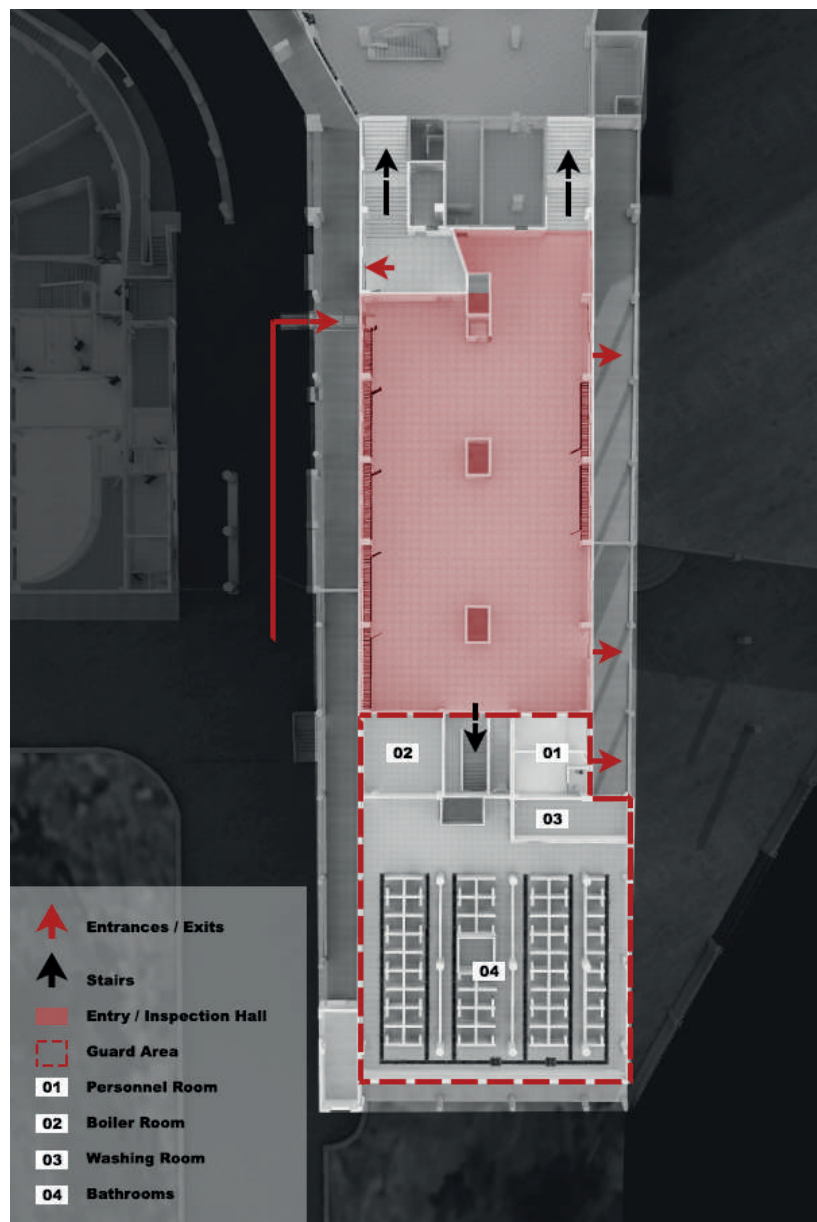


Figure 24. Ground floor plan,
Source: Adapted by the author from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 26. Entrance and Reception Hall – Wing A – Ground Floor.
Source: Photograph by the author and Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 27. Outdoor Courtyard. Source: Photograph by the author and Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.

- The first, second, and third floors:

The first and second floors contain collective dormitories connected to the central courtyard through corridors and iron doors. These spaces remain largely unchanged since the prisoners' release, preserving extensive physical traces of detention, including personal belongings, clothing, food remnants, and other material evidence left behind. The third floor, in contrast, appears relatively empty. According to testimonies, this level had not been actively used in the prison's final years, and some minor interventions had already been carried out by the prison administration, including repainting parts of the corridors and limited maintenance works.

Overall, the structural condition of these upper floors is better than that of the basement and ground floor, with the building appearing relatively stable despite localized deterioration such as humidity-related rust and peeling paint. There are also traces of fire in some dormitories on the second floor. Reports suggest that prison personnel carried out acts of sabotage before fleeing on the night of the regime's collapse in an attempt to destroy evidence, with setting fires inside the prison believed to be one of these acts.



Figure 29. central courtyard Plan
Source: Adapted by the author from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 30. central courtyard
Source: Adapted by the author from Syrian Prisons Museum.

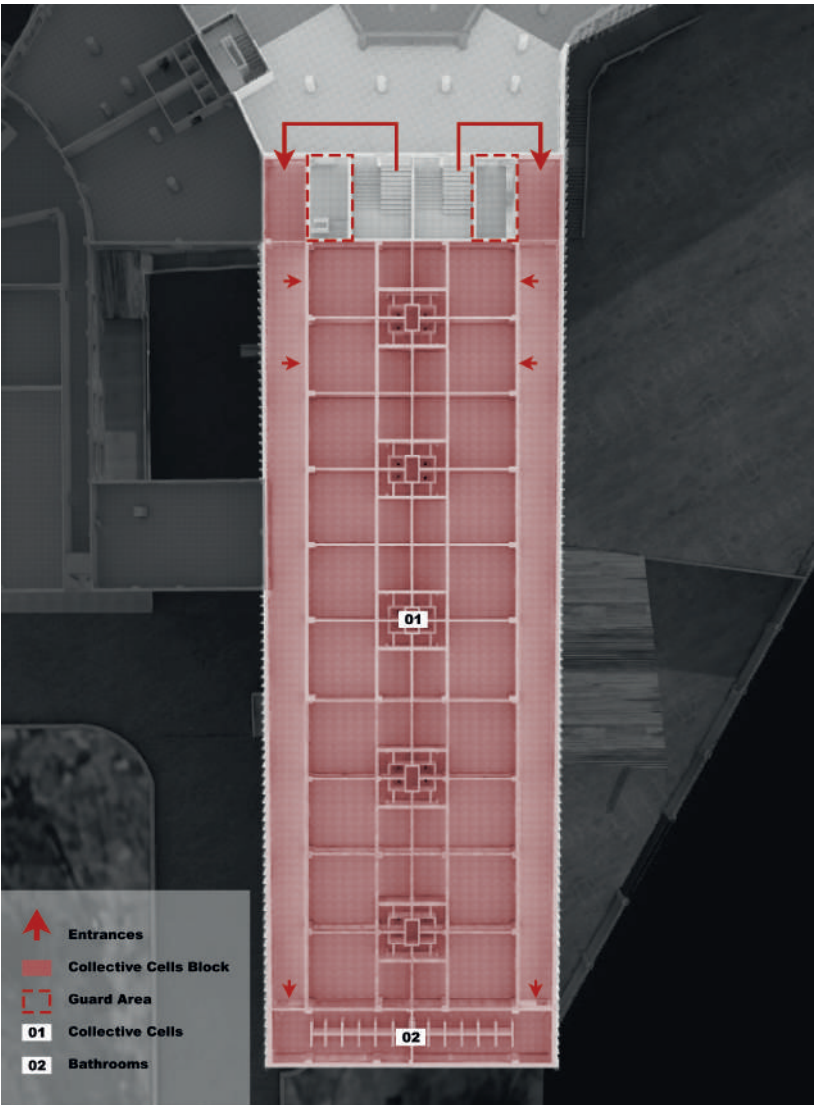


Figure 28. Typical floor plan of the first, second, and third floors, Weng A, Sednaya Military Prison. Source: Adapted by the author from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 31. Collective dormitories on the first floor, Wing A Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 32. Collective dormitories on the second floor, Wing A Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 33. Collective dormitories on the third floor, Wing A Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 34. Traces of fire in “Cell 1 – A Left”, third floor. Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 35. Traces of fire in “Cell 1 – A Right”, second floor. Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.

- Surroundings:

Although the area surrounding the prison is part of an agricultural landscape characterized by fertile land, the prison grounds themselves contain only limited tree cover and appear largely barren. This condition was likely intentional for surveillance and security purposes, allowing greater visual control over the site. A water tower was also observed within the prison grounds as part of the site’s technical infrastructure.



Figure 36. Surroundings of the Red Building, Sednaya Military Prison. Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.

Field Visit Observations

- The building is located in a very isolated mountainous area, surrounded by vast and empty land. This large emptiness around it intensifies the feeling of being cut off from the world.
- During the visit, the place was extremely cold, and it seems that its mountainous location, in addition to the use of metal in the cells, makes the sense of cold even harsher.
- The sound of the wind was strong and constant, giving the place a heavy and frightening atmosphere.
- The collective cells were extremely dark. No sunlight entered them at all; only small ventilation openings allowed a very faint light to pass through.
- The floor of the solitary cells was even harsher, with near-total darkness, to the extent that a person might not be able to distinguish between night and day.
- There was a strong and disturbing smell in the place. According to testimonies, it results from the mixture of dampness with blood and sweat. This smell gives the impression that the space still carries the traces of what happened inside it.

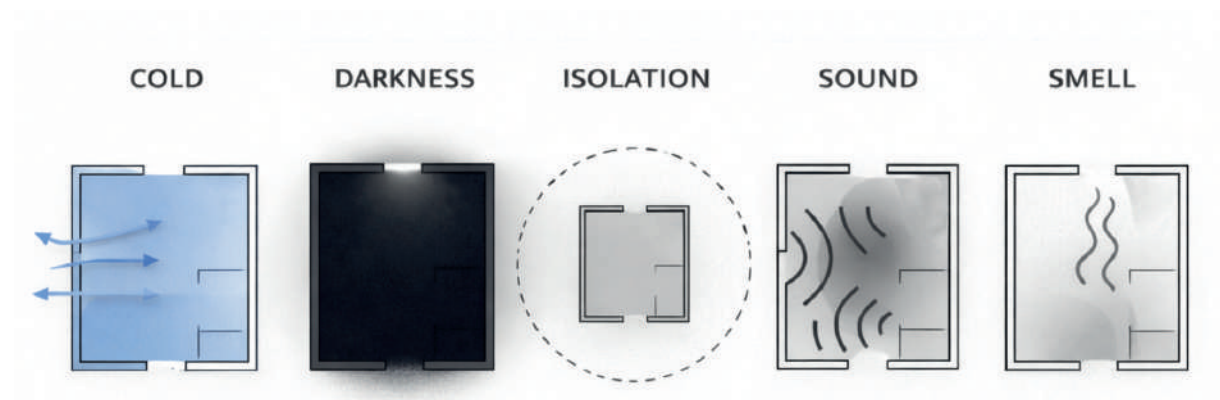


Figure 37. Diagram illustrating the spatial and sensory elements that contributed to the production of violence within the detention environment. Source: Author.



Figure 38 . Field visit photographs illustrating how the design of the cell doors severely limited access to natural light, contributing to the darkness experienced inside the detention spaces. Source: Author.

- Although the building is large, the atmosphere inside it felt oppressive and frightening.
- In every cell, there were large quantities of clothes and blankets, suggesting that the number of detainees was extremely high compared to the size of the cell.
- This disparity between the space and the number of people is evident and deeply painful.
- The bathrooms, which were the only service space available to the detainees, were arranged in an inhumane manner that reflects a clear policy of humiliation. There was no sense of privacy or dignity at all.



Figure 39. Field visit photographs showing detention cells and service spaces, documenting the inhumane spatial conditions within Sednaya Military Prison. Source: Author.

- Leftover food and utensils are still present, as if the place was suddenly abandoned and has not been touched since the day of liberation. This creates the feeling that time has stopped inside it.
- I noticed only a few writings on the walls, perhaps because there were spots for surveillance cameras in every cell. Some of the writings belong to detainees, and others to the guards.
- In the ground-floor bathrooms, military clothes belonging to the guards were found, and it is said that they removed them on the day of liberation and fled.

This means that the place still carries a clear trace of everyone who was there, whether detainee or jailer.



Figure 40. Material traces preserved within Sednaya Military Prison, documented during the field visit.
Source: Author.

01 Transfer to the Prison

Detainees were transported blindfolded in refrigerated trucks from Damascus to Sednaya Prison, facing fear, darkness, and unknown fate throughout the journey

03 Reception

Inside the reception area, detainees were placed in metal cages while their information was being collected, and they were reaching the cells

02 The Reception Party

Upon arrival at the prisoners' entrance, detainees were forced to walk between rows of guards from the truck into the prison while being severely beaten

07 Execution and Disappearance

Detainees were executed by hanging in the outdoor yard, and the victims' bodies were transported at night by trucks to mass graves in Damascus



Figure 41. Collage illustrating the system of movement within Sednaya Military Prison. Source: Author.

04 Solitary Cells

Up to 12 detainees were confined for days inside cells measuring only 6 × 5.5 feet, surrounded by darkness, cold, humidity, and sewage flooding, with little or no food and water



05 Hall

In the reception hall, detainees were stripped, caged, and subjected to further torture. No documentation was recorded. Many died before being processed.



05 Transfer to Collective Cells

Detainees were taken out of solitary confinement and redistributed into overcrowded collective cells under inhumane conditions



06 Isolation Before Execution

Detainees selected for execution were isolated on the third floor for three days without food or water before being taken to execution

The movement of detainees inside Sednaya Prison followed a repeated and systematic sequence, reconstructed through survivors’ testimonies. From transportation and arrival, to the reception hall, isolation, collective cells, and execution, detainees were forced to pass through the same stages as part of an organized system of control and violence. Based on this sequence, the design proposal reinterprets the movement of the detainee into a spatial journey experienced by the visitor, following the same order of spaces to reveal the oppressive structure of the prison.

- Levels of Intervention:

The proposal adopts a graded intervention strategy according to the sensitivity of each part of the site.

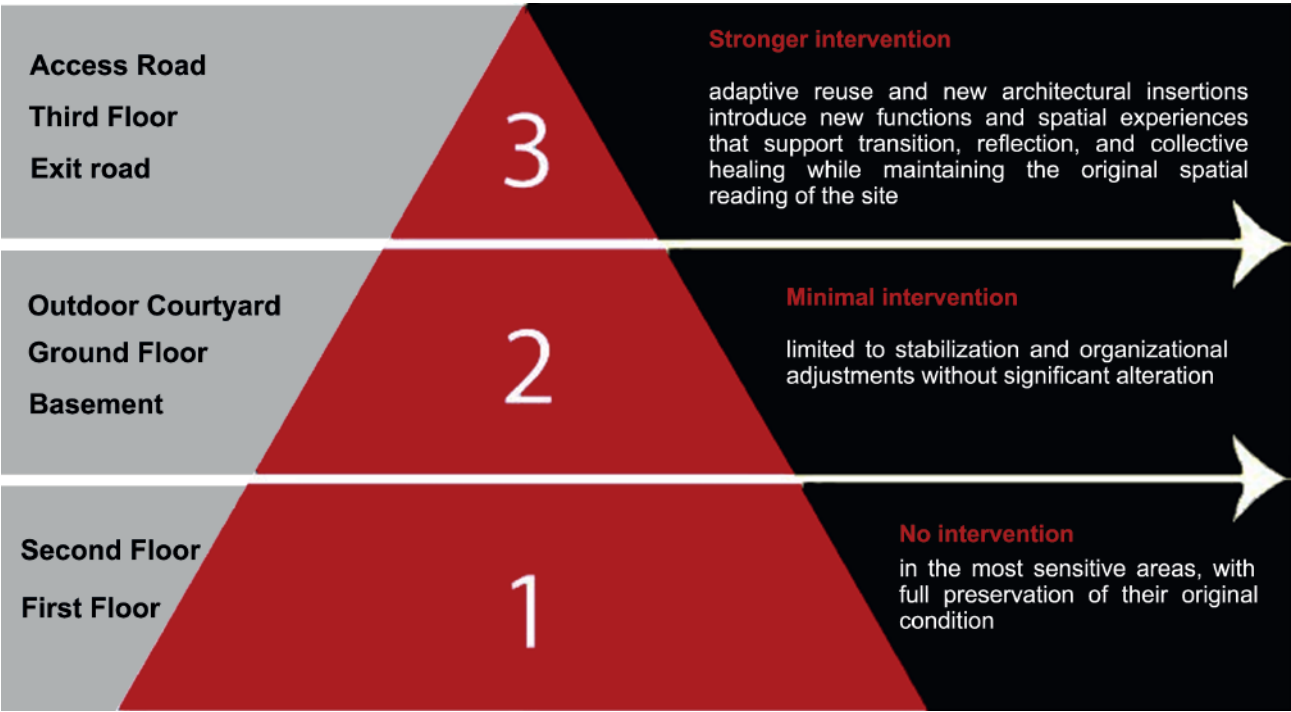


Figure 42. Diagram illustrating the levels of i ntervention. Source: Author.

- Current Site Condition:



Figure 43. Existing site plan of Sednaya Prison. Source: Adapted by the author from TopoExpert.

- Areas of Intervention:

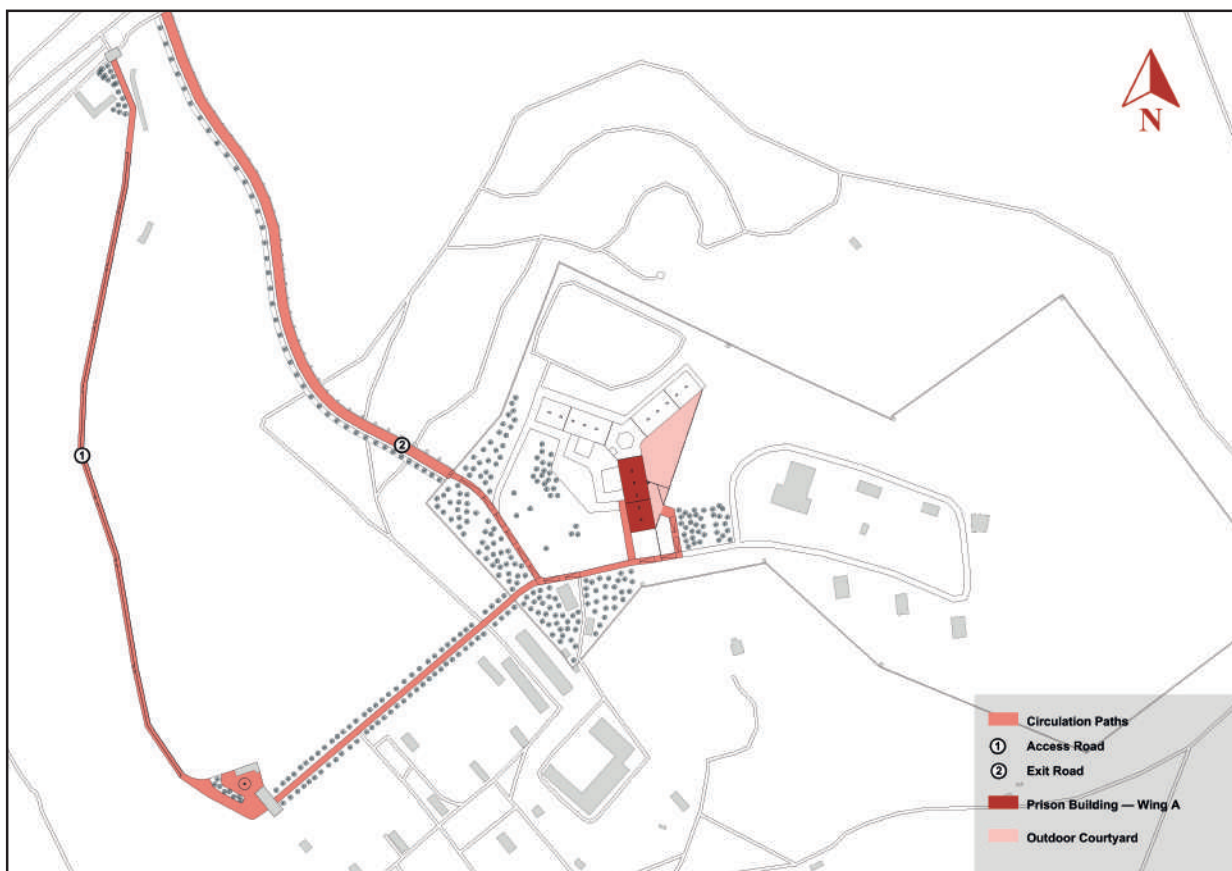
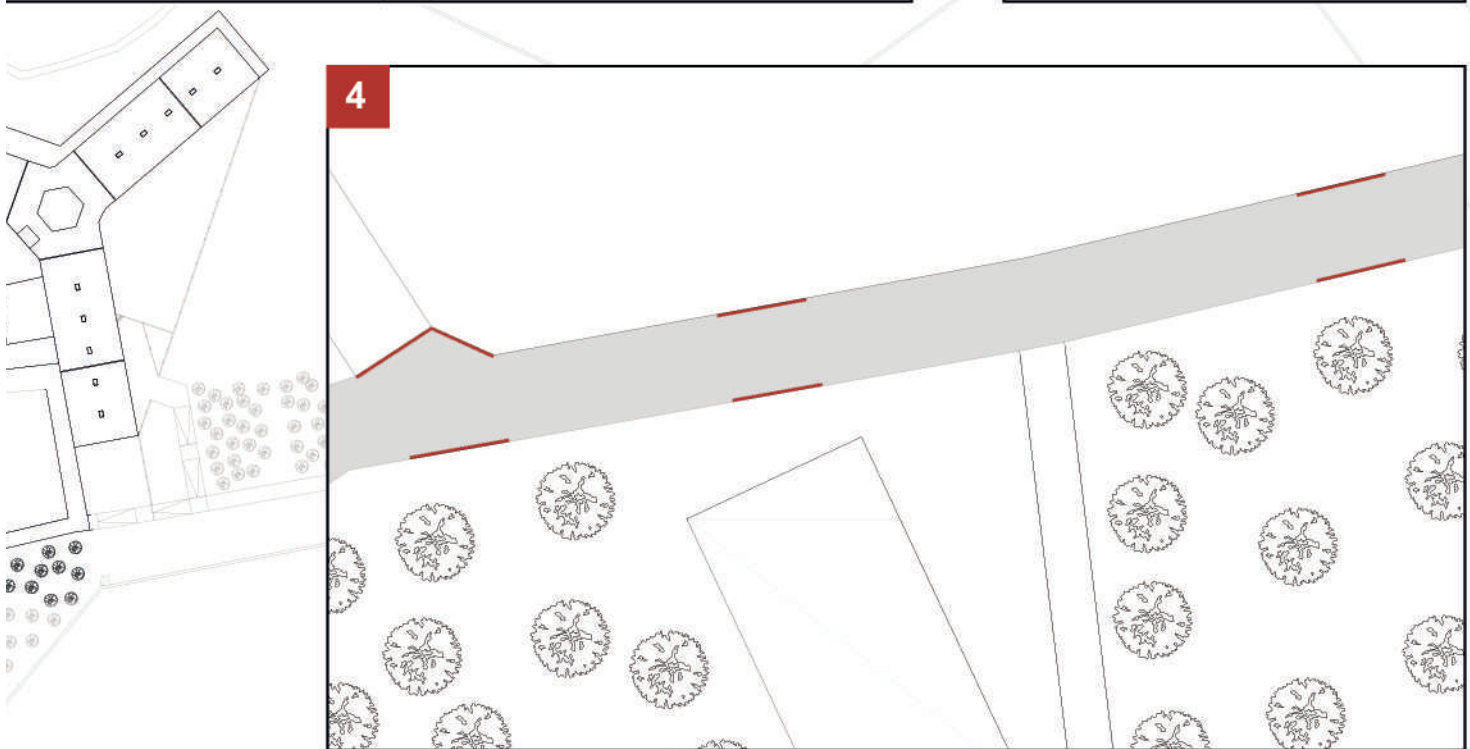
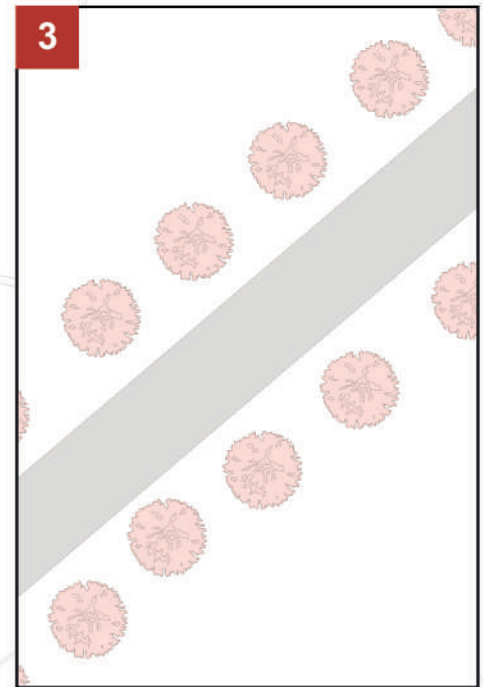
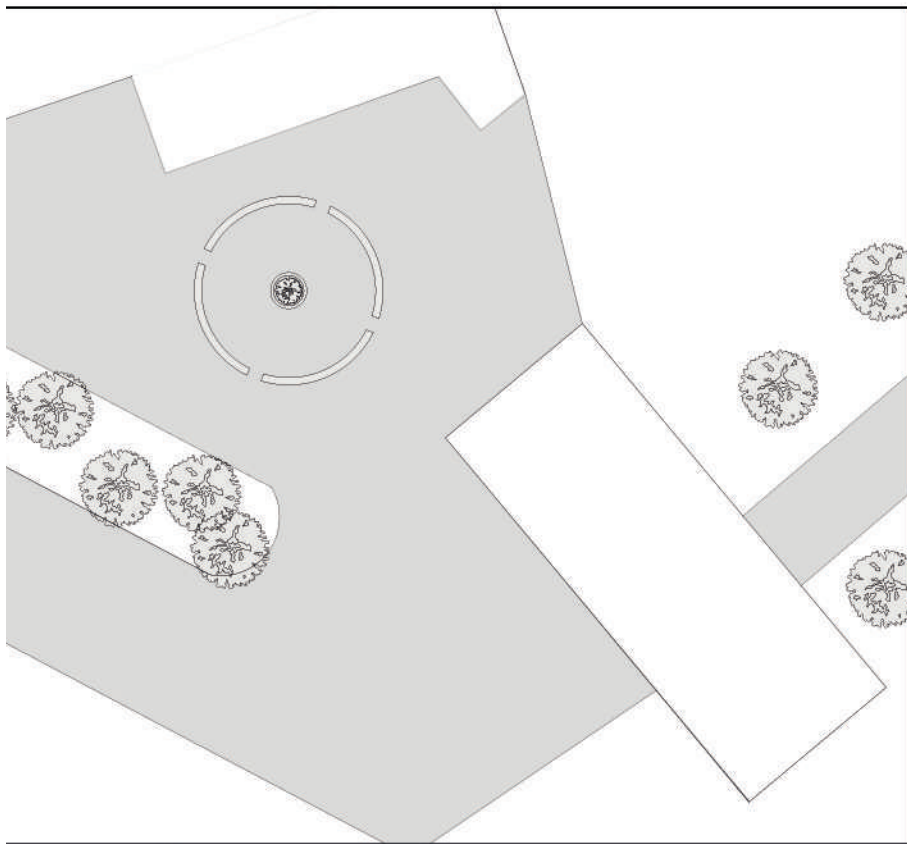


Figure 44. Proposed site plan showing the locations of the main intervention areas. Source: Adapted by the author from TopoExpert.





- Access Road:

The project proposes transforming the one-kilometer road (Path of Transition) between the entrance gate and the building into a gradual spatial experience. Rather than functioning merely as an access road, the path becomes a spatial sequence that prepares the visitor both psychologically and spatially before reaching the building. This approach is inspired by the concept of gradual exposure used in trauma therapy, where individuals are progressively introduced to environments associated with traumatic memories. Accordingly, the path is divided into several stages that gradually guide the visitor from the outside world toward the memory embedded within the building.

1- Memory Wall:

The path extends between two concrete walls, symbolically evoking the spatial experience of detainees as they entered the prison. The walls direct movement, narrow the visual field, and create a controlled corridor that guides visitors toward the building. The two walls are treated differently: one side remains solid and displays portraits, names, and short stories of the missing and detained. The other side contains openings that allow visitors to temporarily leave the path and move toward small resting areas outside the corridor. These openings create moments of pause and mental relief.



Figure 46. Proposed memory wall. Source: Author's rendering.

2- Pause Court:

This existing open space is minimally adapted with simple seating elements, creating a place for visitors to pause, rest, and mentally decompress after moving through the emotionally intense Memory Wall experience.



Figure 47. Proposed pause court. Source: Author's rendering.

3- Path of Silence:

This section follows an existing path naturally bordered by trees on both sides, creating a gradual psychological transition toward a calmer state. The presence of nature helps reduce stress and supports reflection and internal processing, in line with concepts from environmental psychology. Therefore, this path is understood not merely as a circulation route, but as a space for silence and gradual psychological processing before the final encounter with the prison building.



Figure 48. Path of silence. Source: Author's rendering.

4- Path of Encounter:

Visitors begin a gradual visual encounter with the prison building. At this stage, the path becomes partially framed by walls positioned at specific points, which serve not only as symbolic elements but also as structural supports for the bridge introduced as part of the exit route. As visitors pass beneath the bridge, the spatial atmosphere gradually shifts into a more enclosed and controlled environment, reintroducing a sense of containment and spatial pressure before entering the building. This transition is intended to prepare visitors psychologically for the direct confrontation with the architecture of detention, marking the final threshold before arrival.



Figure 49. Proposed path of encounter. Source: Author's rendering.

- Ground Floor – Reception Hall:

The ground floor is treated through a minimal intervention approach, preserving its existing spatial character and material condition as an important witness to the site's history. The intervention is limited to cleaning, stabilization, and minor organizational adjustments to improve safety and accessibility, including the addition of simple seating and resting areas near the basement exit in response to the emotionally heavy experience of the basement. This approach aims to maintain the authenticity of the site while allowing visitors to experience it in a clear and respectful way.



Figure 50. Proposed reception hall. Source: Author's rendering.

- The basement:

The basement is also treated through a minimal intervention approach, given the sensitivity of this part of the building and the intensity of the memories associated with it. Interventions are limited to cleaning the circulation corridors and improving basic safety conditions, while preserving the cells in their current state without alteration.

Some of the holes in the corridors are also retained, as they date back to the moment of the prison's liberation, when large numbers of families searched for their missing relatives, believing that hidden spaces existed within the building. These holes are therefore understood not merely as physical damage, but as part of the site's collective



Figure 51. Proposed the basement. Source: Author's rendering.

- First and second floors:

These spaces are preserved as memory-bearing environments, with no physical intervention, due to the fact that they largely retain their original condition, including direct material traces of the detention experience that serve as witnesses to the site's history. However, simple resting areas are introduced within the central courtyard to provide visitors with moments of pause and reflection as they move between floors, in response to the emotional weight of the experience.



Figure 52. Proposed the central courtyard. Source: Author's rendering.

- Third Floor:

Since most of the cells on the third floor are empty and the remaining material traces are relatively limited, this level is proposed as the starting point for architectural transformation. The intervention aims to shift the spatial experience from conditions of pressure, isolation, and darkness toward openness, light, and the beginning of a healing journey. At the same time, selected spaces that still carry memory traces, along with significant parts of the original structure, will be preserved to maintain the identity and historical continuity of the place, ensuring that the transformation does not erase its past but instead creates a dialogue between memory and renewal.

- The third floor, current condition 1/1000

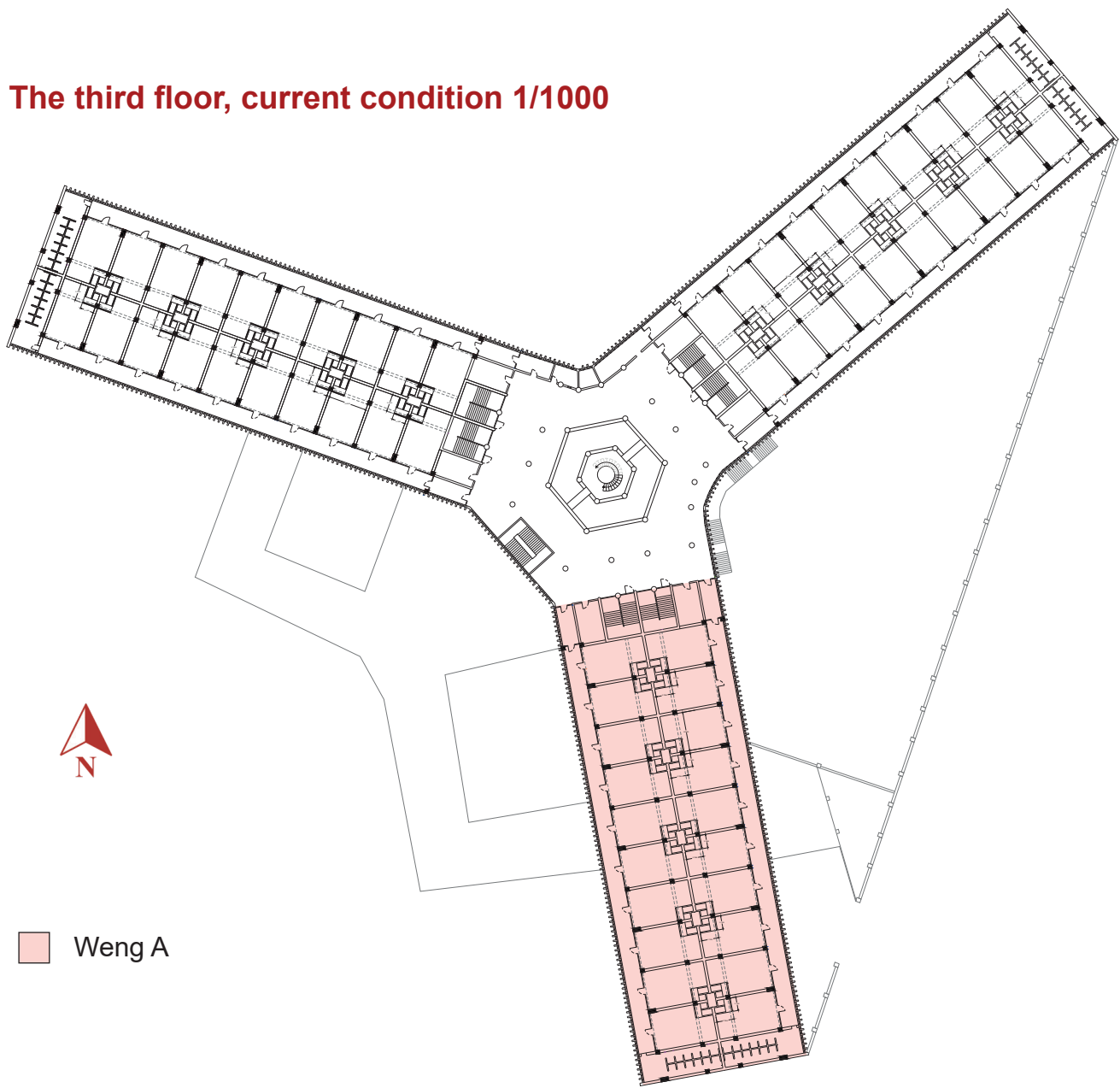


Figure 53. Existing condition plan of the third floor. Source: Author.

The preservation and demolition strategy on the third floor was determined based on the presence of remaining material traces and their memorial value. The former cells used for storing blankets were preserved in their original condition, as they still contain evidence connected to the site's history. In addition, the contents of the twenty cells within the studied wing were carefully examined, and only the walls bearing detainees' writings were retained, as these inscriptions are connected to the people who once passed through this place and form part of its memory that should not be erased. A portion of the bathroom area located at the end of the corridor was also preserved to maintain the legibility of the building's original spatial organization, allowing its former function and the spatial experience of the site to remain readable and understandable. The remaining partitions, where no such traces were found, were selectively removed to open up the spatial experience and dismantle the conditions of pressure, isolation, and confinement imposed by the building's original architectural design.

- The third floor - Weng A / Wall Retention and Demolition Plan 1/500

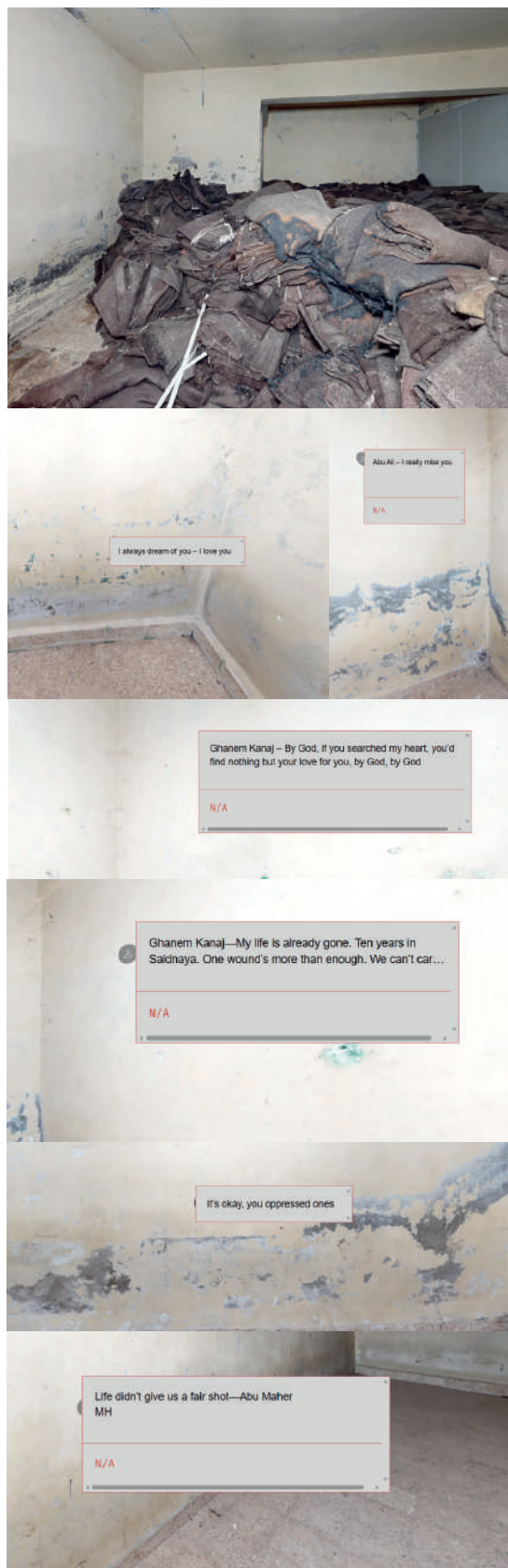


Figure 54. Preserved Detainee Inscriptions, Wing A, Third Floor.
Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.

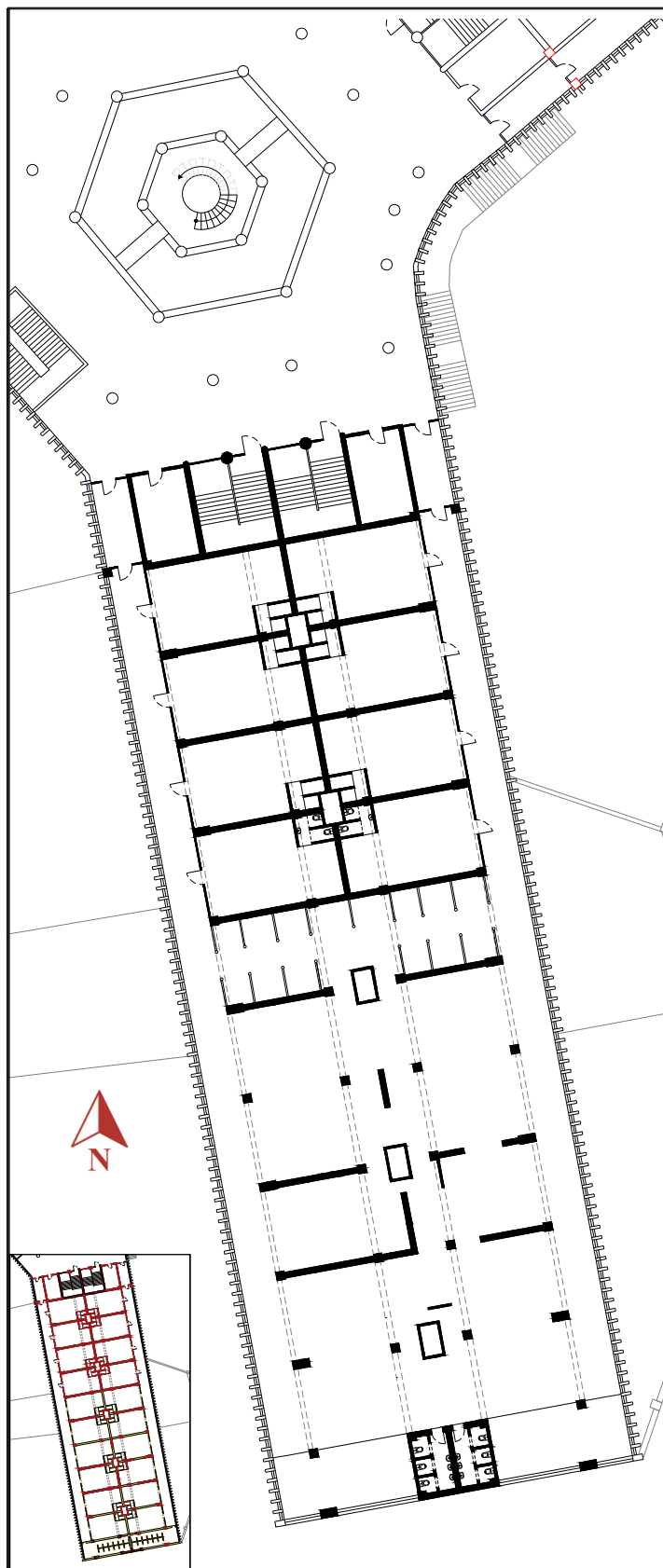


Figure 55. Weng A, Wall Retention and Demolition Plan
Source: Author.

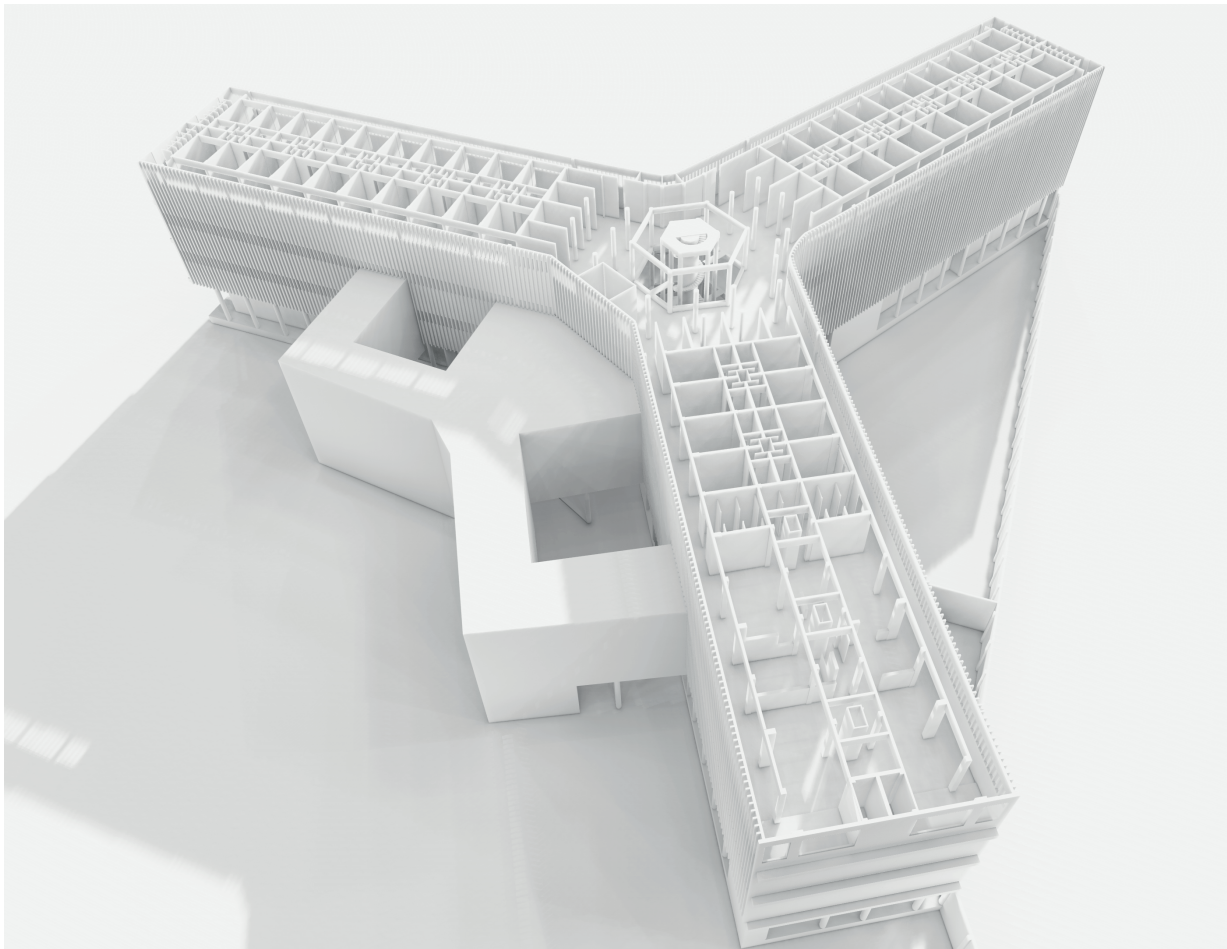


Figure 56. Perspective view of the proposed third floor. Source: Author.

The proposed program is based on reinterpreting certain experiences that were once prohibited or shaped by oppression within the prison, but under humane conditions grounded in dignity, freedom, and choice. Rather than functioning as a tool of control, deprivation, and isolation, the space is transformed into one that supports reclaiming agency and re-experiencing the site through a different human condition. From a psychological perspective, this approach aligns with trauma recovery frameworks that emphasize restoring a sense of control, personal agency, and choice as essential components of healing. In this sense, the intervention goes beyond functional transformation, becoming a symbolic act of reclaiming the place and redefining its meaning.

- Proposed Functional Program Plan 1/500

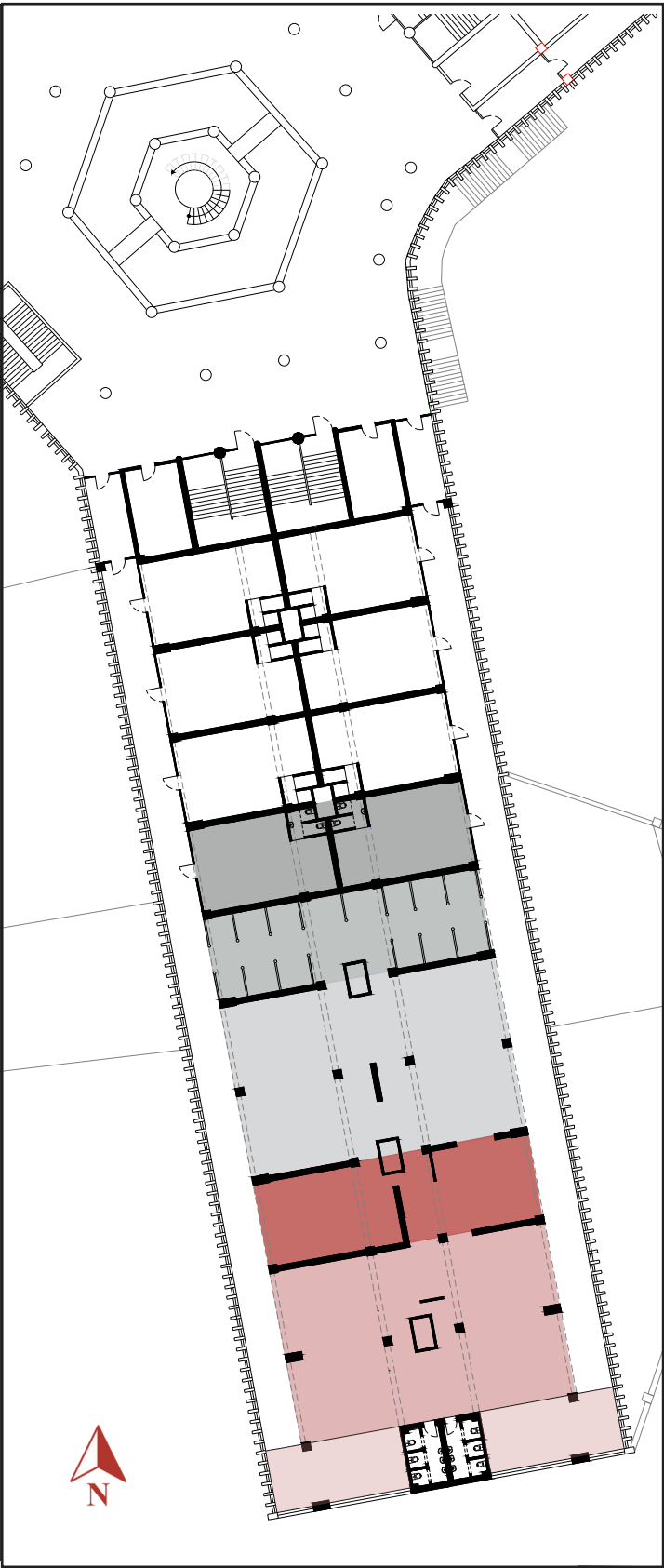
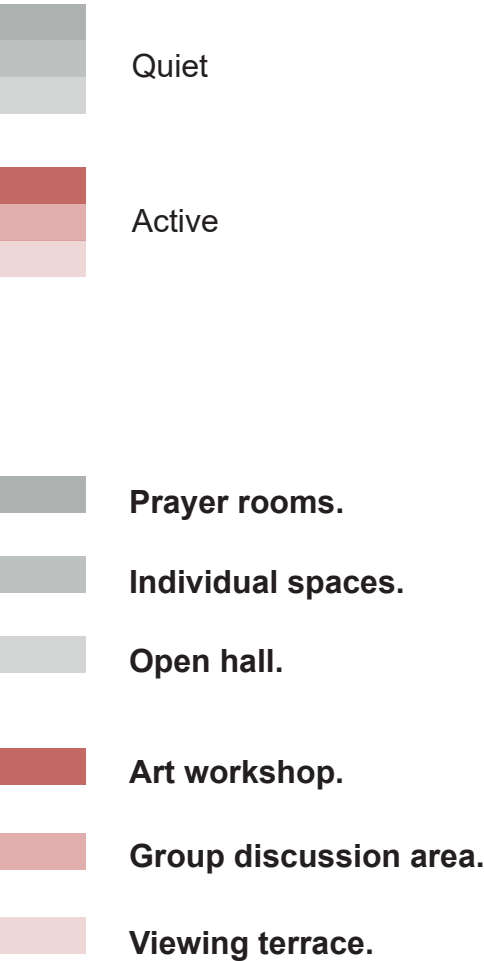


Figure 57. Proposed functional program plan, Weng A.
Source: Author.

- Prayer rooms:

Two existing cells are proposed to be adapted as prayer rooms, based on testimonies indicating that prayer and religious practices were strictly prohibited within the prison, with detainees facing severe punishment if discovered. The proposal also draws on survivor testimonies describing the moment of the prison's liberation, when detainees on the upper floors reportedly gathered in collective prayer while waiting to be rescued. The proposal seeks to restore the symbolic meaning of this historical moment within the same setting, but under different human conditions, positioning this space as the beginning of the healing journey. By keeping intervention in these spaces to a minimum and limiting changes to the rehabilitation of the associated bathroom facilities, their original character is preserved while making them usable once again.



Figure 58. Proposed prayer rooms. Source: Author's rendering.

- Individual spaces:

This space reinterprets the experience of detainees sitting on the floor, using blankets as a symbolic reference to those once used inside the prison. Designed as quiet individual spaces, the intervention uses soft lighting and light fabric partitions to create a sense of privacy and calm. It provides spaces for reflection and temporary withdrawal from the intensity of the overall experience.



Figure 59. Proposed individual spaces. Source: Author's rendering.

- Open hall:

This open space provides a quiet area where visitors can leave photographs and write messages for those they lost. It is designed as a place for remembrance and emotional expression, allowing personal grief and memories to be shared within a collective setting. Photographs and messages can be displayed on movable metal stands, allowing greater flexibility and enabling the space to be reconfigured for different uses.



Figure 60. Proposed open hall. Source: Author's rendering.

- Art workshop:

The proposed art workshop is conceived as a space for expression, collective remembrance, and emotional processing. It is inspired by testimonies indicating that detainees used limited available materials, including food leftovers, to create small objects as acts of coping and resistance. The space also serves as a place where survivors can share and teach these practices, transforming personal memory into collective learning. An adjacent exhibition space is proposed to display the created works, extending the process from making and expression to sharing and collective remembrance.



Figure 61. Proposed art workshop. Source: Author's rendering.



Figure 62. Handmade gift created by a female detainee for her husband in prison. Source: Former detainees' archive.

- Group discussion area:

Open area designed as a collective gathering space where visitors can sit in groups, share stories, and engage in conversation. Movable furniture is incorporated to allow flexibility and accommodate different forms of use.



Figure 63. Proposed group discussion area. Source: Author's rendering.

- Viewing terrace:

This space is informed by testimonies describing how detainees attempted to steal brief glimpses of the outside through the bathroom windows, despite having extremely limited time for washing and facing violence during movement to and from these spaces. In response, part of the former bathroom area is opened into a terrace with large glazed openings that allow daylight to enter and create visual access to the horizon, reinterpreting a once restricted connection to the outside.



Figure 64. Proposed viewing terrace. Source: Author's rendering.

After completing the experience on the third floor, visitors descend through the central spiral staircase to return to the first floor. This decision builds on the broader concept of the proposal, which seeks to reclaim spaces and actions that were once denied to detainees, as this staircase was originally reserved for prison guards and inaccessible to prisoners. From there, visitors exit through the door leading to the outdoor courtyard, which serves as the final station within the prison before beginning the exit road.

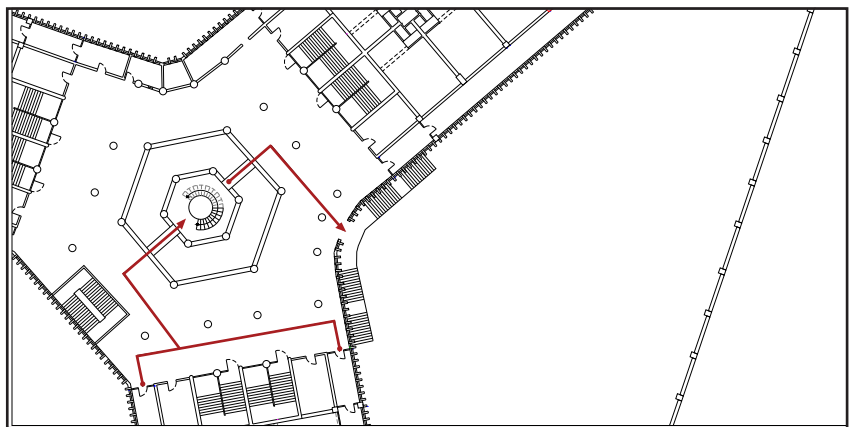


Figure 65. Plan showing the movement path from the third floor to the outdoor courtyard. Source: Author.

- Outdoor Courtyard:

This courtyard reintroduces the symbolic image of paper cranes as a quiet memorial element, inspired by their use during the Syrian uprising to carry the names of detainees and the disappeared. Reinterpreted here as suspended glass elements, each crane represents an individual life. This intervention takes on particular significance in this exact location, as it was the site where killings took place and from where detainees' bodies were transferred to mass graves. Suspended within this space, the cranes symbolically evoke the souls of those who passed through this place, as if they had taken flight from it. Using the existing metal structure as a support, the courtyard is transformed into a space for remembrance, light, and quiet reflection.

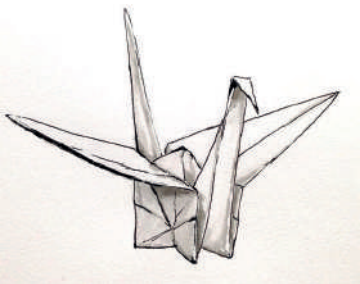
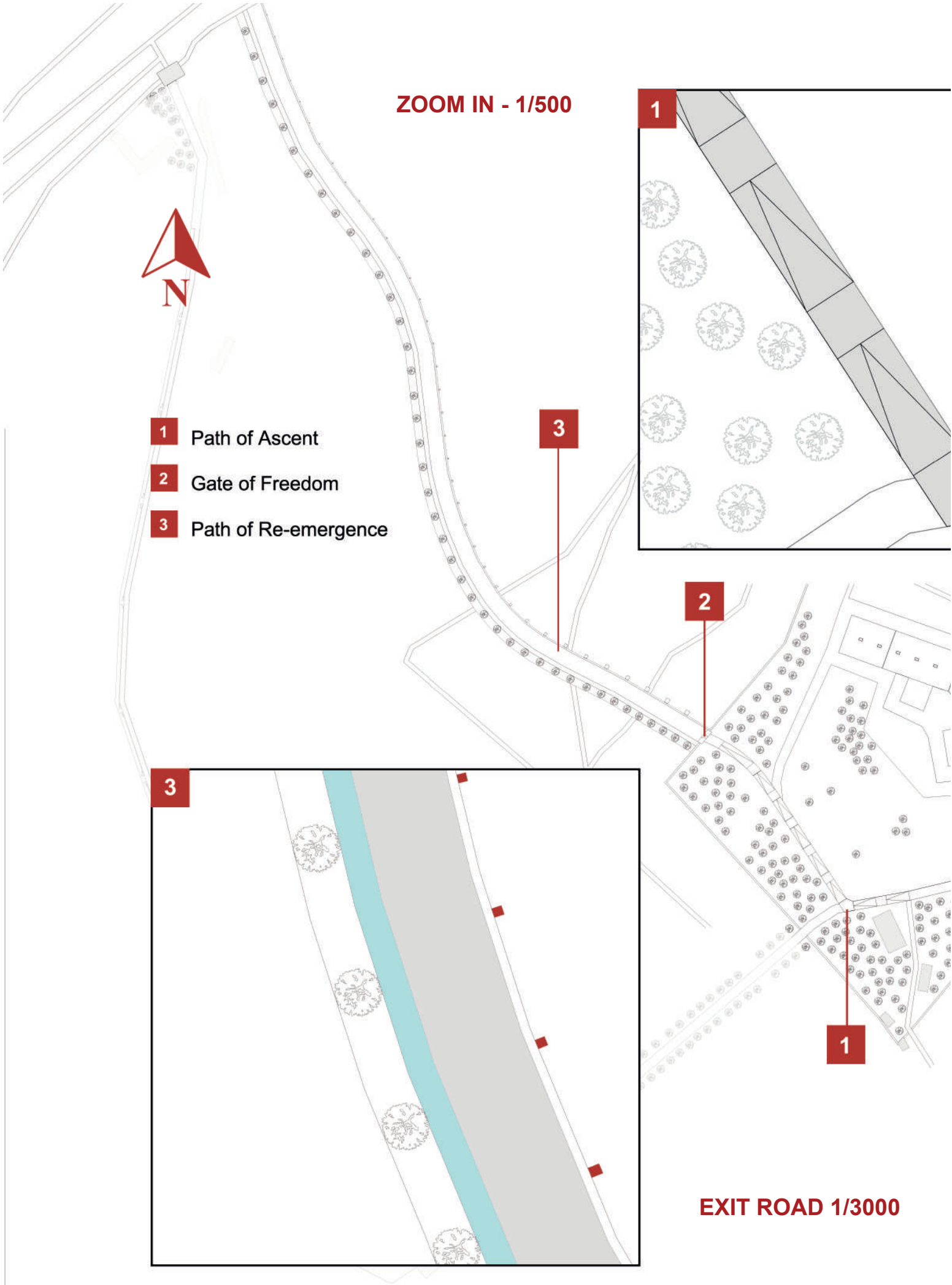
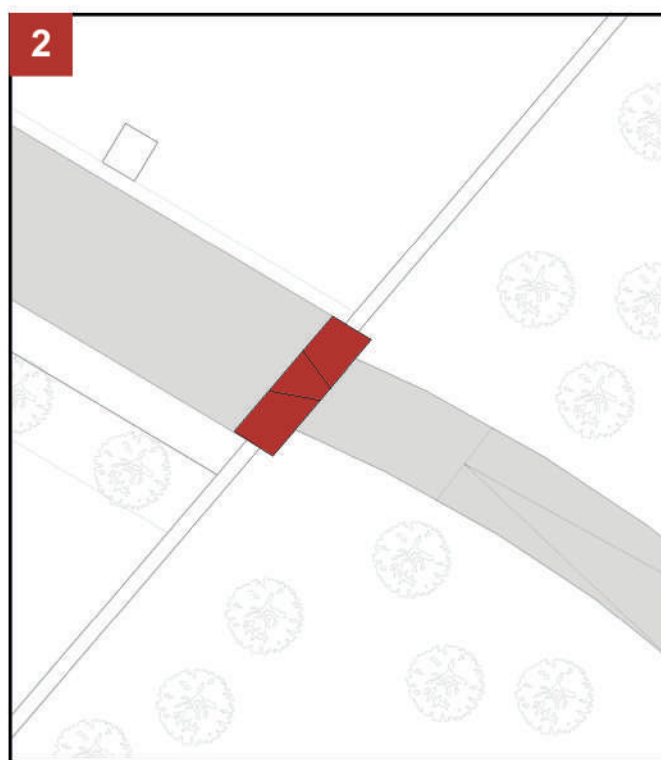
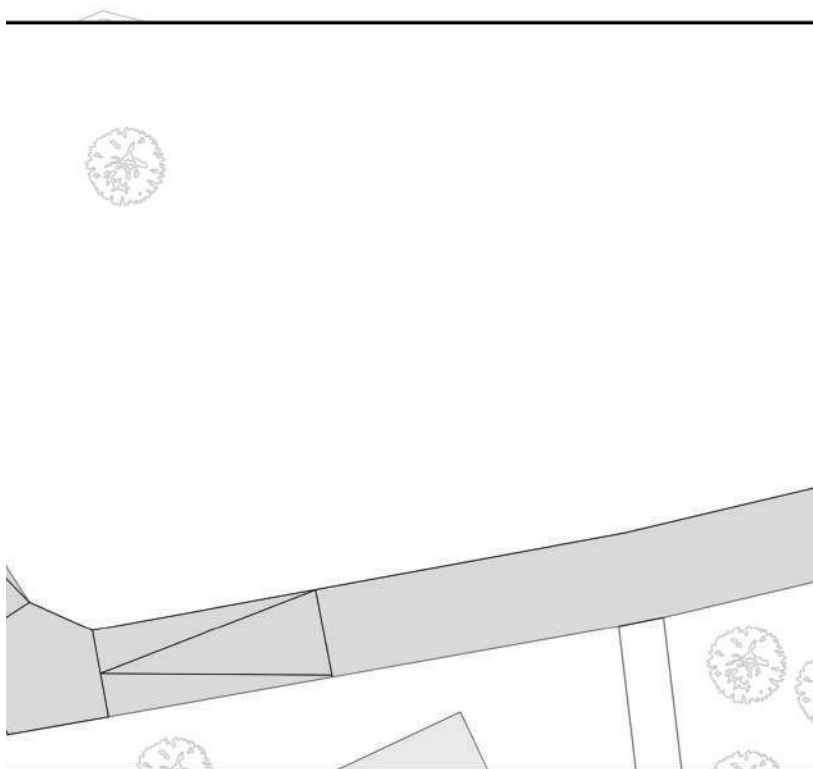


Figure 66. Proposed outdoor courtyard. Source: Author's rendering.





- Exit Road:

The exit path was designed as a spatial experience that expresses a gradual transition from confinement and enclosure toward openness, release, and the possibility of returning to life. Rather than functioning as a simple route of departure, it aims to transform the act of leaving into a symbolic experience that reflects both psychological and spatial transformation, while opening a vision toward a future beyond the experience of detention.

1- Path of Ascent:

The elevated bridge was conceived as both a symbolic and functional component of the exit journey. Accessed gradually through ramps, it creates a moment of physical and emotional transition, lifting visitors away from the prison ground before departure. At its highest point, the bridge offers a final visual encounter with the prison building and its surroundings, allowing a moment of reflection before continuing the descent toward exit. Beyond its symbolic role, elevating the path also serves a practical purpose by clearly separating the circulation of incoming visitors from those leaving the site, reinforcing distinct experiential narratives for entry and departure.



Figure 68. Proposed path of ascent. Source: Author's rendering.

2- Gate of Freedom:

The Gate of Freedom was conceived as a symbolic threshold marking the transition from confinement toward openness. Inserted within the existing prison wall, the passage is intentionally designed to begin as a narrow, compressed space with a low ceiling, evoking the physical and psychological conditions associated with confinement. As visitors move through it, the space gradually widens and the ceiling height increases, creating a spatial experience of release and expansion that reflects the transition from restriction toward openness and the possibility of freedom.



Figure 69. Proposed gate freedom. Source: Author's rendering.

3- Path of Re-emergence:

The final stage of the exit journey was designed as a spatial expression of the transition from confinement toward the possibility of returning to life. On one side, the path is bordered by water and vegetation, introducing elements associated with life, calm, and gradual reconnection with nature. On the other side, a sequence of vertical architectural elements gradually decreases in scale, beginning as large and imposing forms measuring 3×2.5 meters with a height of 3 meters, and progressively reducing to 30×20 centimeters with a height of 70 centimeters. This gradual transformation is intended to express the transition from feelings of spatial pressure and confinement toward lightness, openness, and release, allowing the architectural language itself to narrate this shift from detention toward freedom.



Figure 70. Proposed path of re-emergence. Source: Author's rendering.

Beyond the Studied Wing

Although the design intervention focuses primarily on the studied wing, the proposal also considers the prison building as a whole. During the site visit, the presence of birds moving freely within the abandoned structure created a rare moment of hope amid the heaviness of the place. This observation inspired the introduction of climbing vegetation across the façades of the preserved wings, not as an element to conceal the building's harsh history, but as a subtle and neutral layer that coexists with it, suggesting a gradual return of life. Beyond its symbolic meaning, this intervention may also encourage the renewed presence of birds and other natural elements within the site over time.



Figure 71. Proposed vegetation on the preserved prison wings. Source: Author's rendering.



Discussion and O

05

A black and white photograph of a man sitting in a room. He is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. He is surrounded by white plastic sheeting that covers the floor and some furniture. In the background, there is a window with multiple panes and a tiled wall. To the right, there is a metal cabinet or locker with some papers attached to it. The overall atmosphere is somber and institutional.

Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis explores how architecture can engage with former detention sites that carry traumatic memory, using Sednaya Prison as a case study. It examines how strategies of preservation and transformation can mediate between memory, transitional justice, and collective healing.

The design proposal does not aim to erase the painful history of the site, not to preserve it as a static monument. Instead, it adopts different levels of intervention, balancing the preservation of original spaces with carefully introduced transformations that support reflection, documentation, and emotional transition.

This discussion reflects on the main findings of the research and how they shaped the design decisions. It also addresses the ethical and spatial tensions that appear when working with sites of trauma, especially the balance between preserving evidence of violence and creating conditions for healing. In this sense, the project understands architecture not as a complete solution to trauma or injustice, but as a framework that can support remembrance, recognition, and possible collective recovery.

Memory, Preservation, and Witnessing

The research findings highlighted the importance of preserving parts of Sednaya Prison in their original condition, as the physical environment itself carries strong testimonial value. Former detention spaces are not neutral architectural containers; they hold material traces of violence, confinement, and lived experience. Walls, objects, spatial proportions, and signs of use become forms of evidence that communicate aspects of the site's history beyond written documentation.

This understanding directly informed the design approach, particularly in the decision to preserve the most sensitive areas with minimal or no physical intervention. Maintaining these spaces in their existing state allows the architecture to continue functioning as a witness, while respecting the authenticity of the site and its historical significance.

Preservation vs Healing Tension

One of the central challenges in this project lies in the tension between preserving the material evidence of trauma and creating conditions that may support healing. Preserving former detention spaces in their original condition is important for maintaining the authenticity of the site, its historical memory, and the physical traces of violence it carries. However, leaving these spaces entirely untouched may also risk reinforcing emotional distress, particularly for survivors, families of the missing, or visitors with personal connections to the site.

On the other hand, excessive transformation in the name of healing may weaken the historical integrity of the site and risk erasing traces that are essential for remembrance and accountability. Therefore, the project does not adopt a uniform approach, but rather a layered strategy that responds to the varying sensitivity and historical functions of different spaces.

This balance is translated in the design proposal through preserving the most sensitive areas, such as the ground, first, and second floors, in their original condition as much as possible, due to the direct traces they carry of the detention experience. In contrast, the third floor is approached as a space of transformation, introducing programs that support reflection, expression, and the possibility of collective healing, such as prayer spaces, art workshops, and open areas for contemplation and interaction.

This approach also extends to the broader spatial experience, through the design of an entry path as a gradual journey of confronting memory, contrasted by an exit path that symbolizes transition toward openness and the possibility of returning to life. In this sense, the project does not treat preservation and healing as opposing goals, but as conditions that require a careful balance between them.

Ethical and Practical Limitations

The challenges of this project are not limited to research constraints or access to information, but are also deeply connected to the complex ethical and political context surrounding such sites. These buildings cannot simply be treated as sites for adaptive reuse or architectural transformation, as they still remain potential crime scenes containing evidence related to serious human rights violations. They may play a crucial role in efforts to uncover the fate of the missing, document crimes, and hold those responsible accountable. Therefore, any actual architectural intervention at this stage may be premature, or could risk compromising evidence and ongoing processes related to transitional justice.

In addition, despite visiting the site and being able to access the building and directly experience its spatial conditions, including collecting on-site measurements that supported the redrawing and spatial understanding of the building, it was not possible to fully explore the entire surrounding site in the field. Furthermore, official architectural drawings of the prison were not directly available, which required relying on digital sources, documentation platforms, alongside the redrawing and analysis of available materials.

Additionally, despite drawing on interviews, the survey, and a significant number of published testimonies, it is not possible to claim that all survivor experiences or the perspectives of all affected groups are fully represented. Therefore, this proposal should not be understood as a ready-to-implement plan, but rather as an exploratory architectural framework that presents a future vision for how such sites might be approached when legal, political, and ethical conditions allow.

Conclusion

Based on this discussion, this thesis suggests that architecture can play a mediating role between memory, transitional justice, and collective healing through a combination of preservation strategies, layered transformation, community participation, spatial storytelling, and architectural interventions that are sensitive to the historical context, the material memory of the site, and ethical and justice-related considerations.

Accordingly, the findings of this thesis suggest a set of architectural strategies that may guide future approaches to similar sites:

- Preservation of evidentiary and testimonial spaces.
- Layered interventions based on spatial sensitivity.
- Creation of spaces for reflection and emotional transition.
- Support for collective expression and symbolic healing.
- Participation of survivors and affected communities in shaping the site's future.
- Design of spatial narratives of confrontation and transition.
- Recognition of justice as a precondition for architectural transformation.

Rather than offering a fixed model, these strategies propose a flexible framework that may guide future approaches to similar sites, while remaining responsive to the historical, political, social, and the specific spatial and architectural conditions of each site.

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Appendix A Survey Questions

Survey on How to Deal with Former Detention Buildings in Syria

Introduction

This survey is intended for the families of detainees and missing persons, former detainees, and individuals concerned with the issue. Its aim is to understand your views on how to deal with buildings that were used as detention facilities in Syria. This research assumes that Syria is entering a transitional justice phase, meaning that how these buildings are addressed should take place after investigations are completed and after all available information and evidence have been collected, in a way that can contribute to uncovering the truth and addressing sensitive issues related to fate and accountability. All responses are confidential and will be used solely for academic research purposes (Master's thesis).

Name (optional — you may write only your first name)
(Long answer text)

Gender

- Male.
- Female.

1. Describe yourself (you may choose more than one option):

- Former detainee.
- Family member of a detainee or a missing person.
- Friend of a detainee or a missing person.
- Supporter / ally of the cause.

If you wish, you may add a comment here:
(Long answer text)

2. What makes detention buildings in Syria personally meaningful to you?

(Long answer text)

3. In your opinion, what is the best way to deal with buildings that were formerly used as detention centers?

- Leave them as they are, without change
- Demolish them completely
- Convert them for other uses
- It depends from one building to another

If your answer is “convert them for other uses,” please specify the use you propose:
(Long answer text)

If your answer is “it depends from one building to another,” please explain the approach you propose for each case and why:
(Long answer text)

If you wish, you may add a comment here:
(Long answer text)

In some countries, former detention sites have been transformed into “memory centers.” These are places that document the past and preserve the memory of what happened. Such centers may include therapeutic or educational activities that allow people to share their stories and communicate with one another, creating spaces for remembrance, dialogue, and collective healing.

4. What is your opinion on transforming some or all of these buildings into memory centers in this way?

- I support transforming them into memory centers
- I do not support transforming them into memory centers
- My opinion differs depending on the building

If you wish, you may add a comment here:
(Long answer text)

5. If this place became a memory center, what would you like new visitors to see, and what message should this place convey?

(Long answer text)

6. Would you propose holding a specific type of activities or events in these buildings?

- Yes
- No

If your answer is yes, what are they?
(Long answer text)

If you wish, you may add an additional comment here:
(Long answer text)

7. What are your fears or concerns regarding the idea of transforming former detention sites into memory centers?

(Long answer text)

8. What memories or experiences do you feel must remain present in this place?

(Long answer text)

9. Are there physical elements (walls, cells, tools, etc.) that you believe carry special meaning and should be preserved?

- Yes
- No

If your answer is yes, what are they?
(Long answer text)

If you wish, you may add an additional comment here:
(Long answer text)

10. Do you think that preserving these buildings can help convey the truth to future generations?

- Yes.
- No.
- Not sure.

If you wish, you may add an additional comment here:
(Long answer text)

11. Do you feel that preserving these buildings and telling the stories of the people who lived through them can give you a sense of justice or acknowledgment of suffering?

- Yes.
- No.
- Not sure.

If you wish, you may add an additional comment here:
(Long answer text)

12. If you have any ideas or proposals for how these places could be used in ways that serve justice and honor victims and their dignity, and that have not been mentioned in this survey, please share them here:
(Long answer text)

Appendix B INTERVIEWS Questions

Interview with Dr. Jalal Nowfal

Doctor, former detainee, and member of the advisory team for the National Commission for the Missing recently formed by the new government in Syria.

1- Jalal Nowfal, the doctor:

- How do the buildings associated with detention affect victims and their families psychologically when visited or reused?
- Can recognizing local experiences (detainees and former detainees) play a role in the process of collective psychological healing?
- What are the psychological risks we may face if these places are turned into memory sites?
- What are the architectural strategies (tools/practices) used in psychology to treat trauma that an architect can benefit from and incorporate into design thinking for memory and healing sites?

2- Jalal Nowfal, the former detainee:

- How would you describe your personal experience as a detainee from the perspective of interacting with the place (visitors, architectural details)?
- In your opinion, can preserving these buildings and transforming them into memory sites contribute to achieving justice and recognition, or could it deepen the pain?
- How do you see the idea of turning them into sites that visitors can enter? Would that be a step toward awareness and justice?
- If the decision is taken to preserve them, how do you think these sites should be dealt with (demolition, leaving them abandoned, reusing them)?

3- Jalal Nowfal, the advisor to the National Commission for the Missing:

- How do you see the Commission's role in the process of transitional justice?
- Do you have plans to deal with detention sites (for example, converting them into museums, building memorials)?
- How do you evaluate the importance of academic research becoming part of the scientific effort carried out by the Commission in the field of transitional justice?
- To what extent do you consider that memory work should be concrete and practical, not only theoretical?

Interview with Thuraya Hejazi

A former detainee of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence Branch 215, founder of Transformative Pathways, and an advocate for the rights of women survivors and families of the missing in Syria.

- How do you view former detention sites today?
- Would you be interested in visiting the place where you were detained? Why or why not?
- Could you tell me about your experience in detention and how it has influenced your perspective on memory and justice?
- Could you introduce Masarat Ibdalia and the work it does with survivors and families of victims and the missing?
- What kinds of support does your organization provide, and do you think transforming former detention sites could contribute to this support in any way?
- In your opinion, do the experiences of women detainees differ from those of male detainees in Syria? If so, how?
- How can former detention sites better represent and acknowledge women's experiences?
- What role can these places play in supporting survivors and preserving their stories? In your opinion, what should the future of Sednaya Prison be?
- If Sednaya were to be transformed, what functions or activities would you like to see included in the site?
- How can former detention sites contribute to memory, justice, and recognition without causing further harm to survivors?

Appendix C Site Selection Process

Branch 235 - Palestine Branch

Location: Syria, Southern part of Damascus, Airport Road.

Period of Use: 1969 - 2024

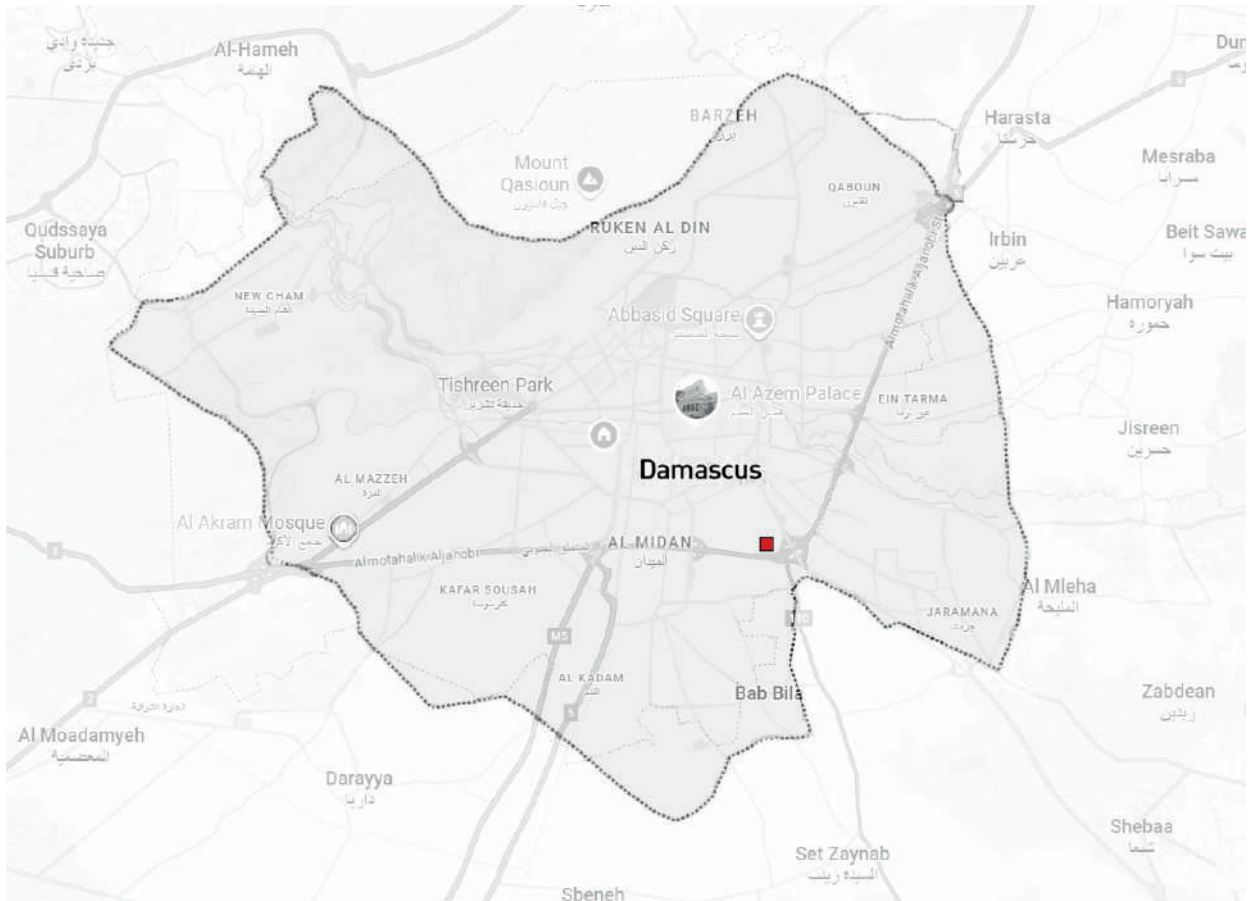


Figure 72. Location of the Palestine Branch (Branch 235) in relation to the city of Damascus.
Source: Adapted from Google Maps.

Unlike Sednaya Prison, located in an isolated mountainous area, the Palestine Branch (Branch 235) lies in central Damascus, surrounded by dense residential zones and major streets near the Faculty of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering (commonly known as “al-Hamk”). Despite its urban setting, it long symbolized fear and repression, as civilians avoided the area and were warned not to approach or look toward the building, reinforcing a constant sense of surveillance in the city.

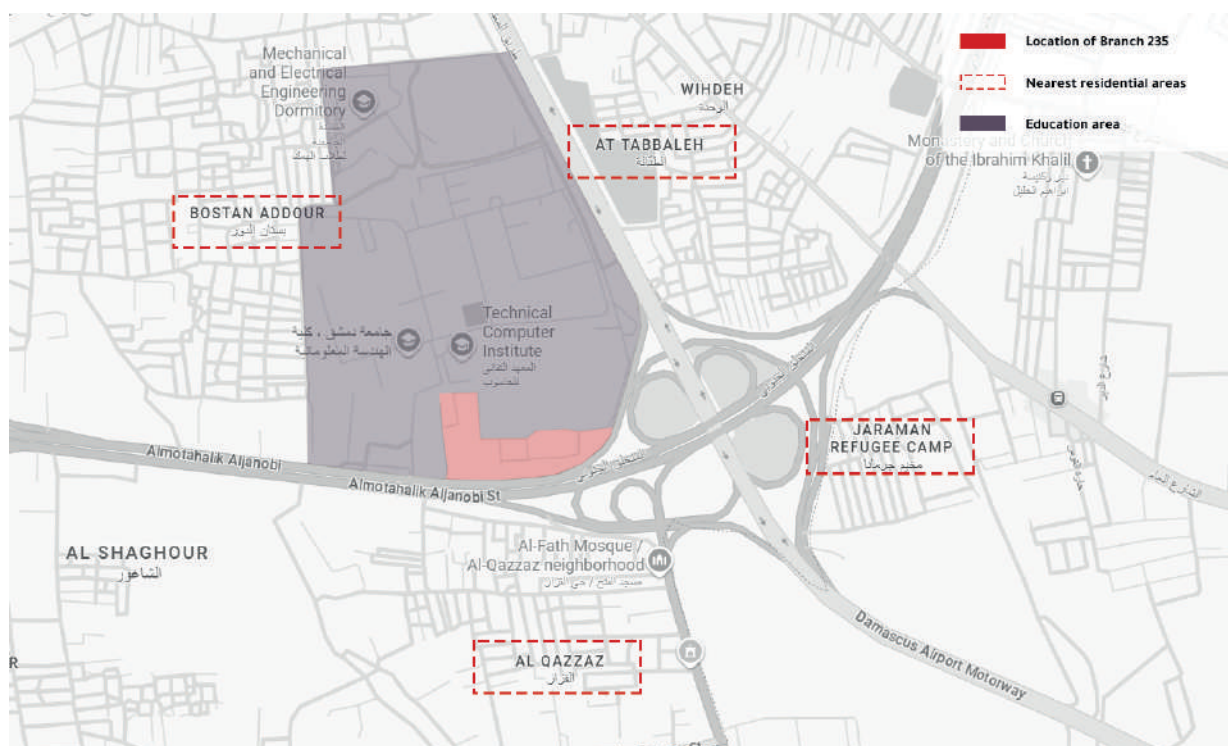


Figure 73. Urban context of the Palestine Branch (Branch 235) within Damascus.
Source: Adapted from Google Maps.

The building known as “Military Intelligence Branch 235,” or, in Syrian popular memory, “Palestine Branch,” stands next to another smaller security branch called “Patrol Branch 216.”



Figure 74. Site location of the Palestine Branch (Branch 235) within its security complex.
Source: Adapted from Google Maps.

The Palestine Branch building consists of seven floors with an organized administrative and security layout. It includes two wings connected by a corridor on each floor — one large with offices on both sides of the corridor, and a smaller one with offices on a single side. Each floor contains between 23 and 27 rooms. The internal layout reflects a clear hierarchical structure, with larger and better-equipped offices for officers and investigators located on the upper floors. The basement contains toilets that have become difficult to access due to sewage system failure and flooded corridors. On the ground floor, there are at least three rooms specifically designated for holding women. On the cell walls, writings and drawings can be observed, carved with fingernails or primitive tools used by prisoners to mark their presence.

The upper floors include what former detainees referred to as “torture rooms” — dim, grey spaces with large glass windows on one wall. The first and second floors suffered severe damage after many files were burned, most likely consumed by fire on the morning Assad left the country (Al Jazeera, 2025).



Figure 75. Exterior views of the Palestine Branch (Branch 235) building in Damascus, various views.
Source: Adapted from Al Jazeera Website.

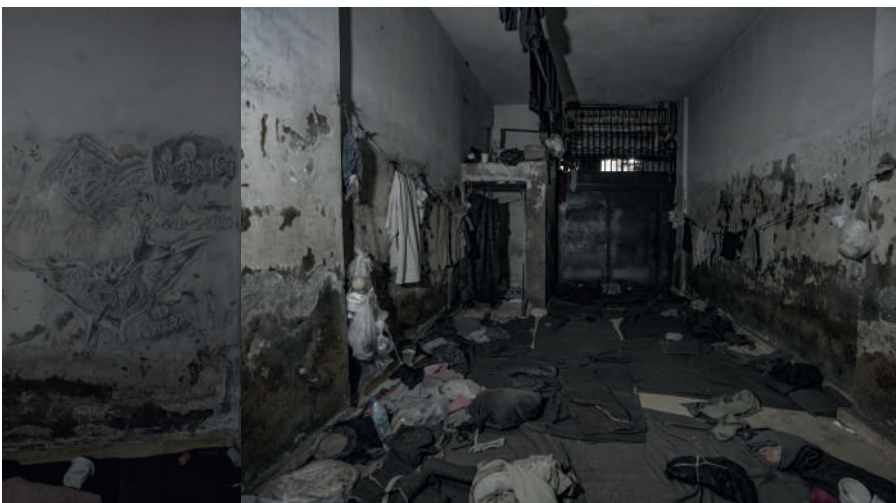


Figure 76. Interior views of the Palestine Branch (Branch 235) detention spaces, various views.
Source: Adapted from Al Jazeera Website.

Branch 215 - Death Branch

Location: Kafr Souseh Security District, Damascus, Syria.

Period of Use: Unknown – 2024

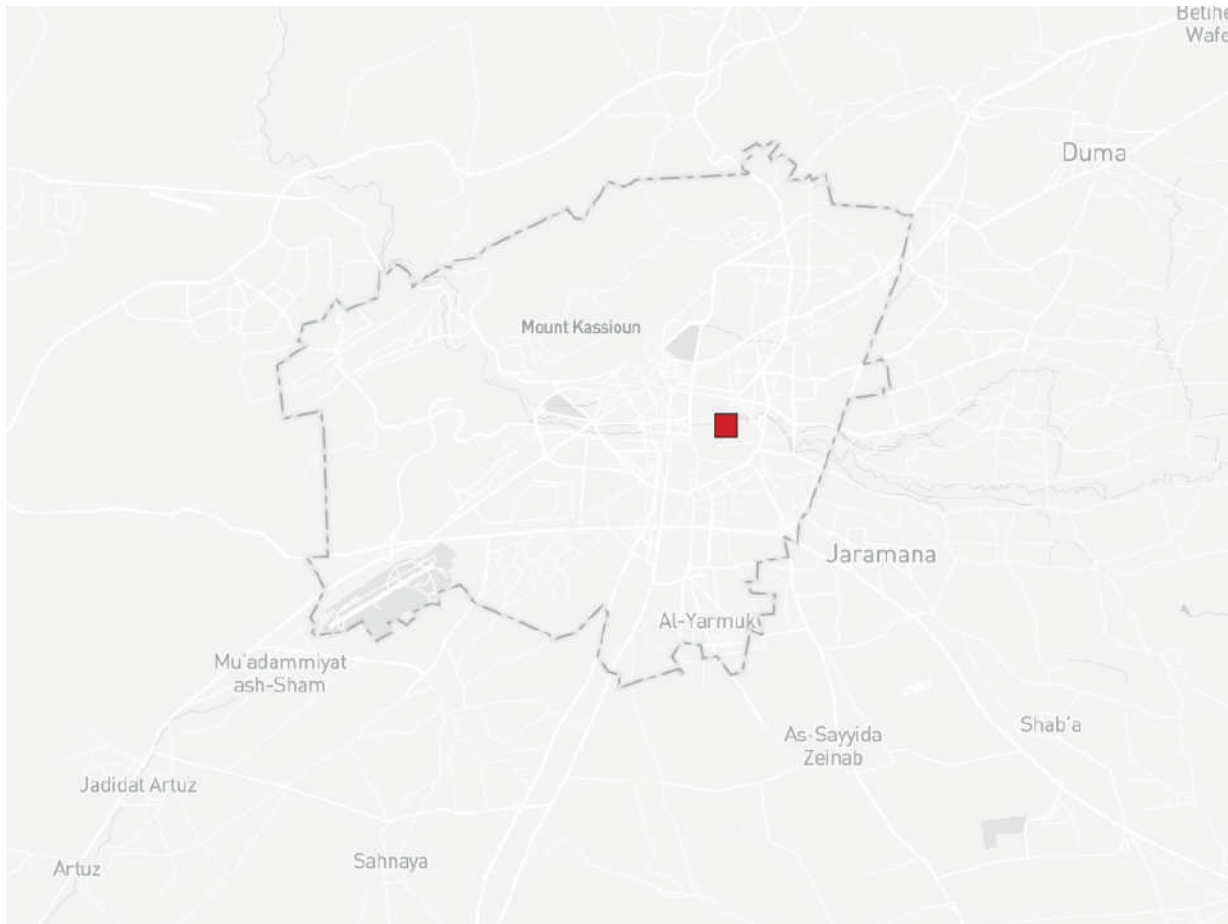


Figure 77. Location of Branch 215 in relation to the city of Damascus.

Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.

Branch 215 is located within the security district of Kafr Souseh in southwestern Damascus, alongside several other security branches. It is directly connected to Yousef Al-Azmeh Military Hospital in the Mezzeh district, commonly known as Hospital 601, where detainees' deaths were recorded before their files were transferred to Branch 248 for official closure.



Figure 78. Urban context of Branch 215 within Damascus. Source: Adapted from Google Maps.

Branch 215 consists of two adjacent buildings. The first building comprises nine floors and housed offices shared by several branches of the Military Intelligence Directorate. Its seventh floor contained Unit 215 Prison, which was used for detention and interrogation, in addition to investigators' offices and other administrative functions.

The second building consists of four floors and is located only a few meters away. It included a medical clinic, interrogation rooms, another detention facility in the basement, a women's section on the first floor, and extensive archive offices containing a large collection of the Directorate's paper records and documents.



Figure 79. Exterior view of Branch 215. Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 80. Second Building, Seventh floor plan, Branch 215.
Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.

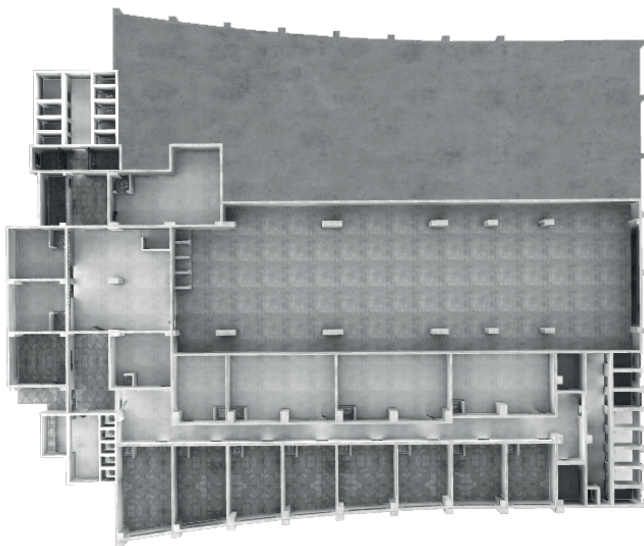


Figure 81. First Building, Basement plan, Branch 215. Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.



Figure 82. Interior views of Branch 215. Source: Adapted from Syrian Prisons Museum.