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# The Politics of Narrowness: When Walls Tighten on Bodies

In 2014, Rem Koolhaas, guest curator of the 14th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, organized this six-month event under the theme of “Fundamentals.” In particular, the exhibition curated by Koolhaas himself, “Elements of Architecture,” is instrumental for its historical study of fifteen supposedly elemental components of architecture. [1] One of these fifteen elements, the corridor, was presented through a research project directed by Stephan Trüby. [2]

Though he cites a few examples from Antique Rome (second century), Abbasid Iraq (eighth century), and Mayan Guatemala (eighth century), according to Trüby, it wasn’t until the seventeenth century that the corridor became a fundamental element in the Western organization of residential space. [3] This architectural invention then allowed for new hierarchies of space along with the bodies hosted therein: Noble rooms were dedicated to the house’s owners, while the corridors allowed the servants to circulate in the house without being in the way. [4] Trüby also describes how nineteenth-century corridor-based paradigms of psychiatric hospitals and prisons they capitalized on the optimal control this spatial organization allows. [5] Although Trüby’s historical exploration of this architectural invention gives us a significant account of the various uses that have been made of the corridor, it is regrettable that his study does not go back to the “fundamentals” of the corridor itself. Here I attempt to define this architectural typology through its materiality, its function, and its political implications through two seemingly disparate objects of inquiry: Temple Grandin’s corridor spaces designed for a few American slaughterhouses, and the corridors of Israeli checkpoints in occupied Palestine.

Although the corridor has a rich cultural and symbolic history, I will adopt a rather simple if not simplistic approach to define it here. [6] We tend to think of a corridor as a narrow space that allows bodies to go from a point A to a point B and vice versa. This definition will be useful, but I would like to propose another one that helps us to understand how it is the bodies are made to move. Let us consider the corridor as a space that tends toward the maximization of its wall surface for a given area. For instance, a 100-square-foot square room has 40 linear feet of walls, whereas a 100-square-foot corridor might count 200 linear feet of walls. This means that all rectangular rooms can be called corridors, and I will thus speak of degrees of “corridor-ness,” evolving in

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[1] The fifteen elements are as follows: ceiling, window, corridor, floor, balcony, façade, fireplace, wall, toilet, escalator, elevator, stair, ramp, roof, and door.

[2] Stephan Trüby, Hans Werlemann, Kevin Mcleod, Rem Koolhaas, AMO, Harvard Graduate School of Design, Irma Boom, eds., *Corridor* (Rome: Marsilio, 2014).

[3] Trüby et al, *Corridor*, 939.

[4] Robin Evans, “Figures, Doors and Passages,” in *Architectural Design* 48 (1978): 267–78. See the case of Coleshill House, Berkshire (1650–1667) in particular, designed by Sir Roger Pratt.

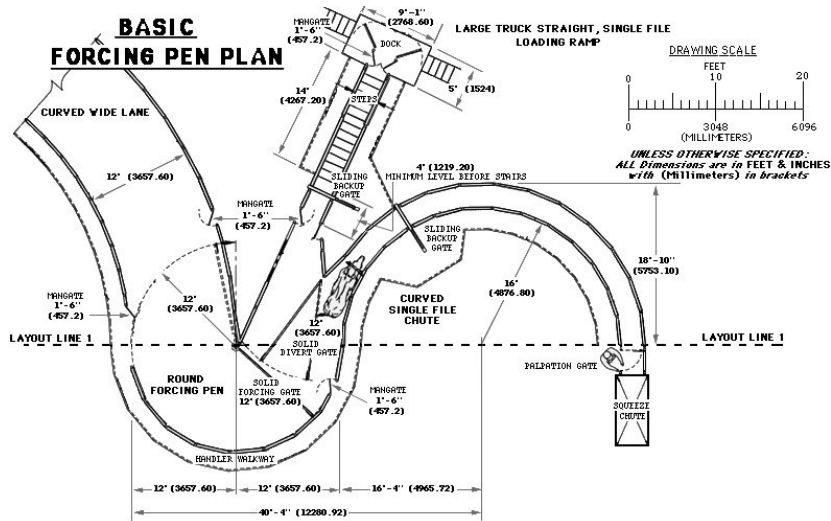
[5] Trüby et al, *Corridor*, 930–45.

[6] For a more cultural and historical account of the corridor see for instance Mark Jarzombek, “Corridor Spaces,” in *Critical Inquiry* 36 (Summer 2010).

proportion to the wall area for a given floor area. Envisioning the corridor in this manner is useful since the wall is a key element of architecture, the discipline that organizes bodies in space. A large surface of wall therefore tends to offer an increased control over the bodies in comparison to a smaller surface. A square room tends to restrict the possibility of action for the bodies it hosts less than a longer and narrower one (a corridor) does. I am aware that such a literal understanding of architecture eludes the entire symbolic and cultural dimension of this discipline. I am however voluntarily eluding such an important dimension since it presumes a universal understanding of its meaning and therefore excludes bodies that do not register within this universality. The approach here is instead resolutely oriented toward the materiality of the encounter between architecture and bodies. Although such an approach can appear reactionary at first glance, it is my conviction that the organization of bodies in space through the materiality of architecture remains the most implacable political manifestation of the discipline.

This methodology also allows us to focus more on architecture's political effects than on its original intentions. If we attribute the minimum of common intentionality to corridors, we can go back to the definition as narrow directional spaces allowing the movement of bodies from a point A to a point B, and vice versa. The framing of this space by lateral walls ensures that the movement can only be accomplished from A to B and vice versa due to their physicality—we suppose here that these walls, like the overwhelming majority of those that surround us, have been built in such a way that the energy required to change their position or undermine their structural integrity is greater than the energy that an individual body can muster without tools. When tracing the lines that will materialize into walls defining the corridor's space, architects—by “architects” I mean professional architects but also the engineers, technocrats, and politicians who intervene in the conception of space—thus anticipate the bodies' movement from A to B and from B to A. Such anticipation cannot be done without there being a preexisting interest in allowing bodies to circulate solely between these two spatial points.

I would like to insist on the absence here of any other predetermination of what bodies are than their most simple definition as living material assemblages. This allows us to think of them in a non-anthropocentric manner, and thus to ignore (at least in a first methodological move) the normative categories generally imposed upon these bodies. Using such a methodology, we can see that whether the architects' interests consist of facilitating a house's inhabitants' access from the living room to the bedroom, or in bringing cows from their pasture to the space of their slaughter is irrelevant for the moment. They both manifest an explicit organization of bodies in space preceding the actual materialization of this same space, and thus demonstrate an exercise of power that architecture allows.



Temple Grandin, "Basic Forcing Pen Plan," photograph from grandin.com.

The paradigmatic scheme of such power relation can be found in Dr. Temple Grandin's design for cattle corridor systems in slaughterhouses. According to Grandin, her autism allows her to perceive the cattle's level of stress more accurately than other neurotypical people. Thanks to this acute perception, she is able to establish an inventory of objects, spaces, and behaviors that tended to significantly increase the cattle's stress, as well as their architectural resolution, in the form of these elementary yet precise series of corridors leading each animal calmly to its certain death. The essence of Grandin's architectural system consists of understanding the cattle's behavior and movement as that of prey. Grandin uses the "natural" pattern of herd behavior to calmly transport the cattle first through a semicircular corridor that comforts the herd in allowing it to follow this counterclockwise trajectory of flight while, on the other side of the fence, the ranchers adopt a clockwise walk to perpetuate the movement. The next curve of the sequence constitutes a sort of funnel that allows the individualization of each cow in a third circular corridor leading to the sanitizing pool and, further, the space of the slaughter itself, where the animal arrives calmly, not conscious of its imminent death. Grandin's architecture thus incarnates an ethics of death. By this, I do not necessarily mean that the spatial apparatus she proposes is "more ethical" than the traditional one—one could argue for the cow's right to be aware of its imminent death and its right to fight against it—but, rather, that her design understands and embraces its political effects on bodies.

Earlier in this text, I defined the minimum intention of corridor design as the movement of bodies between a point A and a point B and vice versa. The reciprocity of this movement, however, is not necessary. The walls framing a corridor can facilitate a directionality in the movement of the bodies: Walls are not necessarily parallel and the resulting space can potentially shrink toward one direction. As we saw in Grandin's designs, shrinking a corridor can also be used to individualize each body and thus control their passage one by one. The subsequent methodological move from "animal" bodies to "human" bodies might appear inappropriate at first glance and, indeed, there are political risks implied in a non-anthropocentric approach. In order to proceed with this methodology without falling into the trap of faulty political comparisons, we need to

refrain from thinking of the considered situations in terms of essences (“cows in slaughterhouses are the same thing as humans in military checkpoints”) but, rather, in terms of political degrees: “cow bodies in slaughterhouses are organized in space with similar spatial apparatuses as human bodies are in a military checkpoint; the political degree of these two situations is however not the same.”



Screenshot from *Temple Grandin* by Mick Jackson, HBO Films, 2010.

Let us thus move toward the example of the military checkpoint as a political architectural typology and its drastic effects on bodies. The checkpoints set up by the Israeli army along its apartheid wall in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, as well as in the old city of Hebron, function in such a way. Despite the inadequacies of directly comparing the two situations described in this text, when waiting in line for one or two hours in one of these crowded corridors, it is difficult not to think of our bodies as similar to those of cattle. While waiting, human bodies no longer exist as individual identities but, rather, a fluid mass that the technocratic corridor undertakes to canalize. At its end, our individuality is reestablished by an exiguous turnstile and our identity is reattributed in its administrative form and its control. The turnstile is what ensures the unidirectionality of the movement implied by the corridor in this case. As Eyal Weizman describes in *Hollow Land*, their design is carefully calibrated (“55cm in the West Bank and Gaza”) so as to crush the Palestinian bodies crossing it. [7] “People got stuck, parcels got crushed, dragged along and burst open on the ground. Heavier people got trapped in the narrow space, as were older women and mothers with small children.” [8] Checkpoint 300, the main access to Jerusalem for authorized Palestinians in Bethlehem and the southern portions of the West Bank, requires each body to walk a 150-foot-long corridor before even entering the terminal. On busy days (during Ramadan for instance), the packed Palestinian crowd of bodies has first to funnel into the corridor that ultimately slowly presents one body after another to the Israeli permit inspection and bag search. In a land where a substantial embodiment of the occupation consists in the regulation of movement, we should not be surprised to observe the weaponization of the corridor.

[7] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), 151.

[8] Report of the Israeli NGO Machsom Watch (2004), as quoted in Weizman, *Hollow Land*, 151.



Checkpoint 300 in Bethlehem, photographs by Magne Hagesæter, 2008 [left], and Ted Swedenburg, 2008 [center and right].

What happens when the line attempts to reduce its thickness to an exponential minimum, regardless of the bodies that find themselves in it? What happens when the walls of a corridor clasp the body situated between them? In contrast to Grandin's slaughterhouses, Checkpoint 300 and others like it no longer comprise corridors *leading* to death but, rather, *death by corridor*, what we call "immurement." This practice of letting a body die by asphyxiation within a wall has been used as a form of capital punishment periodically in various places around the world, most recently in Mongolia during the early twentieth century. The Eastern European legend of Master Manole, however, provides the most expressive narrative of such an execution. [9] This legend has many versions but it essentially depicts a mason who accepts a pact with a devil that will authorize him to construct the most beautiful monastery in the world, on the condition that he place his pregnant wife within the building's main wall during its assembly. Her screams as the corridor clasps her body are unequivocal about architecture's violence:

*Manole, Manole, Master Manole! The wall presses me too hard and breaks my little body! [...] Manole, Manole, Master Manole, the wall presses me too hard and crushes my breasts and breaks my child. [10]*

The politics of narrowness characterized by the corridor thus reach the paroxysm of their violence when bodies are crushed and asphyxiated by the very materiality of architecture. The space of immurement is one where bodies are stripped from any legal rights: We can say that they are no longer inside the corridor but, instead, inside the wall itself. They are trapped within the thickness of the line, a space that has no geometrical, and therefore no legal, existence (geometry defines a line as a one-dimension infinity of aligned points without thickness). When the line traced by architects materializes into a wall, it acquires this geometrically impossible thickness. It is within this thickness that bodies can escape from the interest and anticipation of architects, since this liminal space was forgotten by the geometrical and legal absolute, but it is also the space of the "bare life" stripped from every legal right. [11] A particularly illustrative example can be found in the seven days during which a group of twenty Eritrean migrants were trapped *within* the border between Egypt and Israel. They had succeeded in leaving the Egyptian territory but not in entering the Israeli one, and had to live for a week in the long and thin zone between the two countries, manifested by a single line on a map. These bodies, situated

[9] See Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), and Alina Payne, "Living Stones, Crying Walls," in *The Secret Lives of Art Works*, ed. Caroline van Eck, Joris van Gastel, Elsje van Kessel (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2015), 308–39.

[10] Romanian version of the Master Manole legend as quoted by Leach, *Camouflage*, 189.

[11] The concept of "bare life" comes from the work of Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), in which it is used to define the figure of the victim of the Nazi extermination camp. Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) offers a thoughtful reexamination of this concept in the context of the slave trade.



somewhere (a corridor) that didn't exist and accordingly stripped of rights, were only offered the bare minimum to survive by the Israeli authorities—one woman miscarried—before finally being brought to a migrant detention center. From Guantanamo's Camp Delta to Abu Ghraib, we know all too well that the ambiguity of the law hosted by the thickness of the line is where the most absolute power over bodies is exercised with impunity.



Qalandiya checkpoint between Ramallah and Jerusalem, photograph by Vida Daher and Sabrina Nasr, 2015.

Although I have carefully avoided considering bodies according to the normative categories that they are sorted into, the examples given in the second part of this text show that the bodies subjected to the corridor's potential political violence do not escape such normative categorizations. Although the design itself of the corridor might not bear the marks of the specificity of those bodies, its architects, its geographical situation, and its supervision are often part of a larger political situation in which the power of some populations of bodies is exercised over others. Bodies do not simply find themselves within

the spatial technology embodied by the corridor; their very presence is the result of a system whose political degree can vary from almost innocuous to the most explicit forms of racism. Here lies the delicate balance between a methodology that first considers bodies for *what they are*, i.e. living material assemblages surrounded by other material assemblages (some of which we call architecture), only later to consider bodies for *how they are normatively marked*, to inscribe our thinking within the complexity of a reality with variable degrees of violence.

Although this text might imply a struggle between architecture's oppressive function and the forms of truth expressed by the bodies within it, I would like to deny the chance for such a clear vision to emerge. Bodies should not be defined as victims of the corridor in particular, nor of architecture in general, as there is no original corporeal truth that architecture prevents bodies from fulfilling. The physicality of design that affects bodies (and reciprocally, where bodies' physicality affects design) is necessarily instrumentalized by political agendas and thus contributes to the way bodies exercise power within the society they together constitute. The corridor, in the complex simplicity here described, allows us to examine this contribution and its potential violence.