

Walking to School Through a Camp: A Short Tale of Infrastructure

Architectures of Education is a collaboration between Nottingham Contemporary, Kingston University, and e-flux Architecture, and a cross-publication with The Contemporary Journal. Drawing on a three-day public program at Nottingham Contemporary on November 7–9, 2019, the series features contributions by Ramon Amaro, Aoife Donnelly and Kristin Trommler, Gudskul, Elain Harwood, Tom Holert, Lesley Lokko, Sol Perez-Martinez, Irit Rogoff, Santhosh S., and more.



Appellplatz, Mauthausen, 2016. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Ralf and Robert arrive to collect me from my hotel on a snowy Vienna morning to drive to the wartime labor camp at Mauthausen. I've

been invited by the Austrian Ministry of the Interior to consider whether the site can be a museum of itself, and whether that performance of itself is the best way in which it can become a pedagogical reality. I am ambivalent about the coming experience, not wanting to get caught up in a discussion that demands having a clear and unambiguous position that performs a moral coherence I never feel I have. Camps, the site of so much abuse and devastation, instantiating horror as they do, seem to demand a more coherent response that I am able to muster, situated as I am at the intersection of so many critical discourses. At the same time, I am interested by this place that I have never seen and what it might potentially open up. Where Keller Easterling distinguished between infrastructures that dominate our concrete understanding of material grids and those of electronic beams, the cosmic murk of satellite communication, and space garbage, I intuitively think there is another kind of infrastructural network here—an infrastructure that emerges in the uneven paralleling of torture, destitution, and abjection facing a capitalist machine of supply and demand; not simply racialized exploitation, but one that is wrapped in layers of ideology, framing economies and facing obliviousness.^[1] It draws me in.

Ralf and Robert both work for the Ministry's Monuments Department, which has invited me to take part in a lecture series about new ways of thinking how the camp can be today. What is it still able to convey, in what ways, and to which audiences? It is not entirely clear to me how the parallel prongs of commemoration, museum, education, and performance might work here, in this situation. There were over 1,000 internment and labor camps across Europe during World War II. Large and small, many of these were located within small towns, hardly hidden or invisible. The situation of Mauthausen, however, is somewhat different.

I am a bit numb from cold and apprehension, while they are at ease, welcoming and wanting to see the place from another perspective. On our long, cold, snowy journey to the countryside in upper Austria, not far from Linz, I ask how they became involved with issues of commemoration and to work in the Ministry. They neither look nor sound like bureaucrats, but rather like members of a slightly studious Austrian subculture. Robert in particular is full of Post-Operaist terms and ideas. They seem to be politically progressive and aware, and have a slightly ironic detachment from their present enterprise. Both turn out to have chosen to do their national service in the archive rather than in the military. Their work deals with the need to face uncomfortable histories and the search to do so in a way that does not hector the audience. The day is definitely looking up, with the queasiness about the visit and what I might encounter mitigated by being in the company of decent, reflexive, thoughtful, and well-intentioned people.

We arrive at the camp which lies under a blanket of brilliant white snow. The winding road towards it goes through numerous housing enclaves and farms, many of which look quite old. Who was here, so near to the camp during its period of operation? What was their interaction with the inmates like? Would it have been possible to not see, hear, or smell what was going on?

While I don't know very much about the place I am visiting, this much I do know: Mauthausen was a business enterprise run by the SS and served a large array of German and Austrian construction, munitions, automotive, pharmaceutical, and battery technology companies. As production expanded, the camp became the heart of a network of smaller camps in nearby towns, as well a complex system of tunnels dug by inmates and used for transporting arms, tanks, and additional building materials. Not being an extermination

camp per se, Mauthausen's inmates were slave laborers producing stones for the Dest Cartel, as well as other goods for Bayer Pharmaceuticals, Steyr-Daimler, and many others.^[2] At its heart was the highly dramatized "Stairs of Death," a steep flight of carved stone stairs leading from the quarry to the camp, on which numerous prisoners died struggling under the weight of stone blocks.^[3]

Once we arrive, Ralf and Robert hand me over to Wolfgang who is in charge of education and mediation on the site. It is clear that he is a veteran of the rich culture of critical historical mediation that one finds in German and, to a lesser extent, Austrian public institutions. It is also clear that he is straddling several narratives and several sets of demands at once. He first takes me to look at a model of the camp from the 1960s made of papier mâché and plaster and painted in bright colors. He points out that the camp in this rendition has been entirely isolated from the surrounding population. The houses of the SS who ran the camp have also been omitted from the model. The orderly huts of the inmates, the stone quarry, and the outlying fields and tents have a pristine, calm, and neat internal organization. The rest of the world does not exist, neither looking in nor out.

As we begin our tour of the site, Wolfgang is not sure what to make of me. He is used to particular types of visitors: Austrian students, Japanese tourists, rambler walking through the area with rucksacks, historians of the period; the curious, the knowledgeable, the bored, the guilty, etc. Having been brought here by the Ministry must mean that I have some form of expertise, but perhaps also a set of other connections to the period, the history, the site. I decide to keep my complicated positions to myself, as well as my deep skepticism about the ability to represent and expose historical trauma. Almost all of the displays and expository efforts I have seen of this period

have had the effect of diverting my attention to something else at the edge of the desired effect or argument.^[4]

Wolfgang stops along our path and shows me the outline of what he says was a football pitch. Right next to it, he points out, was the sick ward, where inmates died—around 50,000 of them—almost as quickly as they were brought in. I am puzzled by the proximity between these two spaces, but perhaps even more by who could have had the physical strength to play football under the circumstances. Wolfgang explains that the SS played other SS teams in the area, and occasionally even the football league of upper Austria. In all the accounts of those who attended the games, however, the sick ward is not remembered.

It's beginning to become clear that the camp had parallel realities within it, and also how the camp became integrated within a larger civil infrastructure that normativized its activities. Human slave work translated into quotas of stone for buildings across the Reich, the work of the administrators facing the structures they were part of, and the economies that they had been seconded to. I shudder at the realization that this translation of human conditions into infrastructural networks are dependent on one another; human destruction in the service of material production without the slightest legitimating narrative.

The fact that infrastructure is so often unseen—supporting and making possible without any real inscription into an identified activity—here assumes another dimension, one that promotes invisibility. As we walk around, I am wracking my brain to grab at the snatches of theoretical writings that float around in my mind, like Shoshana Felman on extermination camps as the construction of invisibility in her pursuit of *Testimony*, or Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* and his doubling back to Benveniste's "metasemantics

based in enunciation."^[5]

Here, at Mauthausen, the distinction between what is being said and the fact of its utterance is curious. The site and its concrete evidence feel unstable, yet theory seems able to anchor these historical remains in something navigable. I never really liked Agamben's book. Its scholarly historical references that take every word of holocaust discourse back to linguistic and historiographical labyrinths always felt contrived to me, as if it was trying too hard. But I understood its drive better now, standing in this camp covered in a dazzling blanket of snow. You see what you can. You navigate what you are able to.

Walking along, I ask Wolfgang about interactions with the local population. He shows me a road that runs through the quarry where, during wartime, school children would take a shortcut twice a day on their way to and from school. He tells me that farmers and others with businesses could apply to the SS for day workers from the camp, boosting the productivity of the area and making up for the workers who had either gone to the front, joined the SS, or the civil administration of the Reich.

The camp was integrated at every level, be it a shorter journey to get to school, no doubt in bitter freezing winter conditions, or a source of labor for an economy that was wrenched out of the familiarity of a farming community. I am aware that I am here to encounter the camp itself—to have its realities assault my consciousness, to help think its external address as a teaching vehicle through its display strategies—but something else is actually happening. The camp is spreading its tentacles outwards, drawing in innocuous buildings and populations. It is expanding, spatially, rather than drawing in on its own specificity.

Wolfgang is a true mediator. He understands that I am seeking out minute connections with

the quotidian experience of those around the site. He shows me the many layers of signage that existed throughout the camp and how they are testament to the various ways it was both presented to the postwar public eager to find pathways to navigate the horror and how it was inhabited by the locals on a more quotidian level. There are signs from the 1950s forbidding the washing of cars in the quarry's water reservoir; signs forbidding drinking and cavorting in the wider regions of the site. In the aftermath of the war, the site became normativized again through a different set of activities: illicit drinking, sexual encounters, taking up whatever poor material resources remained in its wake.

Towards the end of my tour, we walk through a commemoration park in which virtually all postwar European nations erected memorials to their nationals who were lost at the camp. They are familiar midcentury modernist monuments: abstract, forbidding, trying to transcend a horror. Wolfgang points to an area within the park that held tents from 1944–1945, where a large number of Hungarian Jews were brought and perished towards the end of the war. There are grand humanistic gestures here, yet there is also the debris of daily life; minute gestures of accommodation to moral or spatial strictures in the immediate conditions of postwar life.

The more time I spend there, the more complex the camp becomes. At the heart of so many economies, it is impossible to maintain the clear-cut identity that was originally presented to me. In an exhibition that is now mounted in the barracks is a photo and small story of a Spanish Republican who fled Franco's fascists, ended up interned by the German fascists, worked in the quarry during the war, and miraculously survived. After the war he was unable to go back to Spain, as Franco was still in power, and so he stayed and worked in the quarry as a paid expert employee of the national company who then came to operate it.

My confusion knows no bounds. It is hard to navigate the contradictory narratives that fill the space. But a small infrastructural logic begins to emerge and stabilize my disorientation. Stefano Harney speaks of the slave trade as connecting to “the motley crews likely to be found working the floating factories of today's logistical capitalism in Shenzhen or Long Beach, as in Kingston or Liverpool.”^[6] Here, a principle of global capital established in the transatlantic slave trade is reflected in the contemporary work sites that bring together bodies from disparate places into sites that exist only within the machine of capitalist production. Once again, we find bodies subjugated to the logic of seamless racialization through inscriptions instantiating governance via biopower, the endless re-embodiment of capitalist production.

When we leave the camp at the end of the day, the Ralf and Robert tell me there were hundreds of camps throughout the country of various sorts: internment, labor, extermination, and eventually displaced persons. Most of them existed within civilian areas and were entangled in the local communities. I start thinking of a counter cartography of Europe, a kind of lacework of camps perforating the solid surface of what we read as self-evidently-named places. I start thinking of its parallel today in asylum seeker camps, of refugees, illegal immigrants, the displaced, equally dotting the quotidian landscape of contemporary Europe; of all the small hotels and B&Bs in London used by the UK Border Agency as holding places for the undocumented, the awaiting judgement, the about to be deported. With life in suspension, time stands still. It becomes elastic: it spreads out through these not quite real, transitory, partially-inhabited places in the service of a policy which has herded people together in contradiction of their actual identity.

Mauthausen has remained a commemorative site from the 1950s to the present. It has gone

through different modes of self-narration as befitting the different political styles of the period, their sense of implication, or their desire to humanize, universalize, and create historical distance. The nearby camp at Gusen, however, where we make a stop on the way back to Vienna, was largely destroyed following the war. But from what I can see, the material building infrastructure of the camp—water, electricity, sewage, telephone, etc.—remained, and subsequently served a range of new housing developments built on the site. The SS housing was renovated for use by locals after the fall of the Reich in 1945.

At dinner that night, Helge and Peter, who have curated much of the architectural proposals and lecture series for the Ministry, tell me of an encounter they recently had in Gusen. An old man who had moved into a former SS commander's house told them of a very old phone that was still in the building, and still connected to the original line from the camp. He used both the line and the phone for some thirty years, only having recently replaced it with a stylish new model.

My mind jumps to the opening of Avital Ronell's *Telephone Book*, to Martin Heidegger alone in his office at Freiburg University late at night in 1933, to the phone that rings, to the commander of the local Gestapo who tells him that he must fire all of his Jewish and Communist colleagues and expel the students. Ronell speculates on Heidegger's capture via the phone line, picking up the phone in the absence of his secretary; on the immediate confrontation with these demands by the state; on his inability to do anything but comply both to the ringing and the orders, the one seemingly exerting the same sense of compulsion as the other.^[2] While different, they are both anchored by the technology that reaches and addresses, that commands and captures

The present space of the camp at Mauthausen,

whose surface is rewritten and reformed for present demands and realities, is underwritten by past flows and infrastructures. What if the camp is not viewed entirely as a narrative of fascist oppression and violence, of the enslavement and killing of people, but also as the nexus of the infrastructures that made it possible? A death camp where tens of thousands have died is hard to see as the aggregate of infrastructural demands, but that is what normativized it at the time. Only recently have we been able to extract it from those norms. Only recently have we articulated demands to re-place it within a wider network of everything from production and transportation to the biopower that enabled regimenting working bodies and linking them to ends that the conscious mind would oppose at every level.

The next day I give my talk, having agonized about all this for the entire time. There is an eclectic audience of the great and the good in Viennese museum and commemoration culture. Are there ways of sketching out the long invisible networks of economy, emotion, normativization, commemoration, industry, and the false hope of universal humanity that I think it requires in order to be an active pedagogical site? On the whole, the talk is well received for its potential to think up and down the historical scale, from then to now and back again via spatialization and notions of "states of exception."

Only afterwards do I realize that the talk was an active effort not to get caught, not to fit neatly into any of the dominant discourses around the period and its memorialization. It was a talk that moved swiftly from one problem to the other in an effort not to be pinned down, not to get caught and identified, not to "have a position." I am less interested in the shadows of shame and guilt cast over by these dire histories, as in the ways that they project forward to principles that enmesh the present.

But making such statements is perceived as a mark of disrespect of the horrors that took place.

In the following discussion, audience members talk about how they have lived out the aftermath of the camp. An older gentleman shares how he set up “councils of wisdom” among the local population around Mauthausen, despite the fact that in the beginning there was great reluctance and no one came. But the incredible care and archival attention given to the site by the Ministry’s Monuments Department seems to have had a knock-on effect on the locals—they began to take themselves seriously, too. More and more people began to attend, to speak, to historicize their own experience, their situation.

Did any of the people attending the talk ever walk to school through a camp, past or present, and experience the impact of that spatial dissonance on their thoughts, that rapid shift from one reality to another? My friend Joshua once told me the story of his father, a great engineer who was the only one who could keep a wartime chemicals factory in Danzig operating for the Germans, and thereby guaranteeing the safety of his wife and children. A Jew, all alone in a factory at war’s end, keeping it going, keeping them alive. That duality, that “metasemantics of enunciation,” was enacted on a short walk to an ordinary school during a war, in between several communities turned in on themselves.



Bergkristall tunnel system, ca. 1945. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Epilogue

I have been writing this text in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic. In the middle of the self-isolation, the online work, the worry about family and friends, the countless hours on the phone, the ridiculous discussions of “how are we going to get food and toilet roll,” very small events—opening one’s front door, venturing outside, having a conversation with a neighbor, observing mandatory spatial distance, being normal for a second before going back into crisis mode—have taken on a new meaning. To pour a glass of water, to take a bath, to pick up the phone is to be implicated as a form of enactment rather than a form of agency or intention.

Keller Easterling established that “spatial products in difficult political situations” are always emanations of a duality. “Their recipes for organization are also recipes for political constitution, and the disposition of that organization embodies a capacity for collusion, persuasion and aggression.”^[8] Infrastructure, then, is a way of being implicated, spatially and materially. It normalizes, functionalizes, and makes mundane both governance and oppression.

What if we were to conceive of attention as infrastructure, as something that makes flow and delivery possible? Could it be not what was found out about Mauthausen, but the performance of attention to it that broke through people’s unease? Perhaps one of the ways into this huge problematic is to write small stories of infrastructure—as attention, as affect, as technological compulsion.

I had first written the story a few years earlier about the visit, something I often do when I cannot find sufficient objective distance to an

event to write about it analytically or theorize its import. But the experience of the past weeks has given me a very different understanding of how the small quotidian wisps and threads of daily habits and gestures matter. I've been trying to think the shortcut to school through the camp not as callous obliviousness (though there may have been some of that as well), but as the uneasy conjunction of the normal and abnormal that daily life so often produces; a kind of spatial whistling in the dark.

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[<http://localhost:4200/strands/critical-pedagogies/walking-to-school-through-a-camp-a-short-tale-of-infrastructure>].

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