Architecture of Control: Spatial Justice in the Moria Camp and Europe's CCACs

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Abstract

The transformation of the Moria Refugee Camp into Kara Tepe's "Closed Controlled Access Centre" (CCAC) on the Greek island of Lesvos serves as a case study for this paper's analysis of the evolving spatial politics of European migration governance. It argues that this transition was not solely created in response to infrastructural failure; rather, it is a deliberate reconfiguration of the architecture of detention, institutionalizing monitoring, spatial restriction, and legal precarity. Through a spatial analysis of both camps, the article traces how built environments are mobilized to facilitate control, producing exclusionary geographies that normalize containment as a modality of governance. In addition, a discourse analysis of policy frameworks and political rhetoric demonstrates how the language of crisis and security allows a shift from ad hoc humanitarianism to a permanent securitized infrastructure. The paper argues that, simultaneously to spatial changes, the CCAC model incarnates a broader shift in border policy - where architecture becomes a strategic tool in regulating mobility, denying agency, and reinforcing the externalization of Europe's borders.

Key Words
Border Detention Camps, Migration Governance, CCAC, Spatial Justice, Biopolitics

Introduction

Border detention camps are spaces where architecture, politics, and law intersect to regulate human mobility. In recent years, European migration policy has become increasingly restrictive, leading to a shift in the design and function of detention infrastructures. The transition from informal and overcrowded reception facilities such as the Moria camp in Lesvos to more structured and highly regulated Closed Controlled Access Centers (CCACs) makes this shift spatially legible. Unlike Moria, which operated through conditions of systemic neglect and administrative disorder, CCACs exercise control through zoning, surveillance infrastructure, and restrictions on movement. Located in border or peripheral zones, CCACs represent the transition from temporary refugee camps or settlements to permanent, enclosed spaces that utilize a high degree of control over detained residents' mobility and agency. CCACs function under stringent surveillance and control procedures, in contrast to those of open receiving centers. This reinforces a carceral ideology that portrays migrants as security threats rather than asylum seekers.[1]

The European border detention camps function as both architectural and biopolitical instruments, shaping the regulation of mobility through spatial design, governance mechanisms, and policy-driven transformations. The change from informal, overcrowded camps to tightly controlled CCACs reflects a broader strategy of deterrence and exclusion, where architectural form materializes the legal ambiguity surrounding asylum procedures and migrant rights and reinforces state narratives about migration management. These spaces do not just react to migration pressure; they actively structure the conditions of confinement and impose restrictions that extend beyond the physical borders into the legal and social realms.[2]

The spatial design of migration detention centers cannot be understood without considering the larger discourse around migration and security. The analysis of the discourse surrounding migration illuminates how the narratives of crisis, securitization, and national sovereignty

play a powerful role in shaping public perception and thus translating into policy options that determine the constructed forms of detention infrastructures. Institutions like detention facilities and prisons are the built manifestations of ideological conceptions of control and discipline, as Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish*, where he traced how discourse structures power through institutions.[3] In a similar vein, Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *"zone of exception"* further explains how emergency discourse-driven legal frameworks suspend normative rights and produce areas where detainees live in a legal limbo—neither fully included in state protections nor entirely outside of state control.[4] These frameworks are reflected in the restrictive architecture of CCACs, which includes monitored communal areas, controlled pathways, and high-security perimeters that exacerbate the precarious legal status of migrants and their social exclusion.[5]

The shift from discourse to architecture is evident in the spatial typologies of detention centers, which serve as physical manifestations of deterrence and exclusion policy. These camps not only govern migration but also shape and influence it through architectural design, which enhances legal and political structures that reduce migrants to subjects of control rather than autonomous individuals. The concept of *necropolitics* developed by Achille Mbembe offers an important lens for understanding how detention infrastructures serve as sites where the state exercises control over life and death—not only in the literal sense of survival but also in the erosion of agency, autonomy, and social existence.[6] Beyond the power to kill, *necropolitics* also includes the ability to control the circumstances in which people are disposed of, violently attacked, or imprisoned in spaces where their rights are suspended.

This form of control is enacted via calculated spatial practices: the segregating of services, restricting movement within regulated physical spaces, and systematic removal of resources. These facilities are often situated in remote and inaccessible territories, hidden from public scrutiny, which ultimately supports the state's narrative of migration as a security threat.[7] Their design—prefabricated container units, sterile corridors, high-security perimeters, and monitored communal areas—materializes necropolitical strategies to reduce individuals to subjects of surveillance and control. These spaces do not simply detain. They create a form of legal and political limbo where governance operates through restrictions and deprivation, not care.[8]

The transition from Moria to Kara Tepe's CCAC exemplifies this shift from a humanitarian space to a securitized detention space. The shift, while framed and narrated as an enhancement of the infrastructure and management of the space, serves to entrench the carceral logics and normalize control through spatial design. As Mbembe argues, necropolitical spaces serve as *"zones of exception,"* where the law is selectively applied or suspended entirely.[9] Under these parameters, the built environment of detention camps becomes an apparatus of power, reinforcing the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, while materializing state desires over migration management through architecture.

Besides their function as containment areas, they also play a symbolic role in supporting and reinforcing the state's narrative about border securitization. Built elements such as walls or detention camps materialize anxieties about national sovereignty at a time of large-scale globalization.[10] In Europe, CCACs represent a broader shift from open refugee camps to highly securitized architecture that obscures visibility and prevents social integration.[11] These spaces do not just contain migrants; they actively participate in shaping public discourse, influencing how migration is perceived and governed.[12]

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[8] Mountz, The Death of Asylum, 90–114.

[9] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 20–35.

[10] Wendy Brown, Walled States, Waning Sovereignty (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 32–60.

[11] Düvell, Molodikova, and Collyer, Transit Migration in Europe, 105–120.

[12] Conlon and Hiemstra, Intimate Economies, 114–131.

This transformation encapsulates broader shifts in European detention infrastructure. Although framed as a humanitarian reform, the shift invokes carceral logics of spatial control, surveillance, and movement restriction. These spaces operate under a larger system of spatialized power, as theorized through *Foucault's biopolitics*, *Lefebvre's production of space*, and *Sigona's notion of campizenship* - marking the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion while producing a legal and political limbo wherein the governmentality of the state is enacted through architecture.[13] In investigating this transformation as a strategy of governance, this research explores how spatial and architectural organization materializes legal frames and enforces exclusionary policy. By using architectural analysis, critical theory, and discourse analysis, this study interrogates how built environments operate as instruments of control over mobility, identity, and state power. The case study of Moria to Kara Tepe emphasizes how the transformation in detention infrastructures reflects larger political shifts in governance of migration across Europe. In considering architecture, biopolitics, and legal frameworks, this research reemphasizes the role of spatial design in state power and, ultimately, reveals architecture not just as a reflection of governance but as a central apparatus in the enforcement of migration regimes.

fig 01: Context Map

Historical Context: The Evolution of Detention Spaces

Detention spaces have a longstanding history as tools of governance and are closely tied to the regulation of mobility, sovereignty, and state security. From early quarantine stations to present-day camps for migrants, detention spaces have evolved in tandem with shifting political, legal, and humanitarian frameworks. The contemporary Closed Controlled Access Centers (CCACs) are the most recent iteration in a long history of states regulating population movement through physical confinement. This section follows the historical path of detention spaces from origins in quarantine and their expansion into refugee and migrant detention facilities, and the transition toward CCACs as a response to contemporary migration challenges.

From Quarantine to Migration Camps: Controlling Mobility Through Space

The practice of detaining individuals based on mobility control originates from quarantine stations developed to control the spread of diseases. During the 18th and 19th centuries, many port cities in Europe and North America established quarantine stations where travelers, particularly people returning from colonies, were detained prior to being allowed to enter. These spaces were designed not only as public health measures but also as mechanisms to control certain populations perceived to pose a threat to public order. This form of spatial control was typically legitimized through public health legislation that permitted the indefinite detention of individuals. Often situated on islands or in regions of the coast, these facilities were already isolated from the general population in order to prevent the spread of disease by incoming passengers. Marked by peripheral placement, strict regulation of movement, and indefinite confinement, the spatial and legal logic of these early quarantine sites anticipated later architectural and political strategies that characterize modern migration detention regimes.[14] This practice was not only limited to Europe alone. In 19th-century Egypt, quarantine infrastructure served the dual purpose of disease prevention and colonial governance.[15] Moreover, similar facilities in the broader Ottoman world became tools for managing trade, movement, and imperial anxieties.[16] These precedents reveal how health and security discourses justified spatial segregation and the containment of mobile and racialized bodies.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, detention practices began to be explicitly linked to migration control in settler-colonial states such as the United States and Australia. Ellis Island, opened in 1892 as a processing facility for migrants, represented the idea of detaining certain groups of migrants deemed undesirable (e.g., those afflicted with diseases like tuberculosis or lacking sufficient economic means).[17] Similarly, Australia's *White Australia Policy* resulted in the detention and deportation of non-European migrants, supporting racialized migration regimes.[18] These examples demonstrate how detention spaces have served as tools of exclusion for a long time, shaping migration governance through spatial regimes of exclusion. These early examples show that spatial tools of exclusion have long underpinned migration governance. In these spaces, individuals were abstracted into data points: bodies were counted, quantified, and processed through administrative sheets, columns, and queues. This bureaucratic structuring of human mobility generated a form of state legibility that rendered people not as individuals but as entries to be managed, introducing an early biopolitical order wherein spatial design facilitated population control.[19]

By the early 20th century, global migration flows increased, and detention camps became increasingly aligned with national security agendas. With the emergence of nation-states and the introduction of stricter immigration control, detention centers were institutionalized as instruments for exclusion, reinforcing the notion that mobility control was integral to sovereignty. During World War II, internment camps were created across the United States, Canada, and Europe to detain individuals based on nationality, race, or political affiliation.

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Although these camps were different from modern migration camps, they legitimized detention as a tool of state governance during exceptional circumstances and contributed to the normalization of spatial confinement.[20]

After the war, the large-scale refugee movements led to the creation of camps for displaced persons that were often managed by Allied forces and organizations like the *United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration* (UNRRA). Framed as temporary humanitarian actions, many of these camps went on to last for decades, highlighting the paradoxes of *"permanent temporariness,"* a term used to describe the indefinite duration of spaces meant to be temporary.[21] While they were ostensibly offering assistance and shelter, they also functioned as mechanisms of containment, limiting the mobility and legal status of those inside. Although this response is characterized as exigent, it reflects larger assumptions about who belonged within specific national borders and who did not. The securitization of migration—whereby concern focused on national identity and the control of borders—reinforced detention as a central strategy in migration governance.

The establishment of refugee camps by the *UNHCR* (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in the 1950s and 1960s expressed a new international paradigm in which containment became a primary response to forced migration.[22] The humanitarian framing of refugee camps often masked their exclusionary nature, with severely restricted freedom of movement and limited access to the basic rights of work, movement, and political participation. Many of these camps became permanent settlements, with some lasting for decades, effectively emerging as permanent situations of displacement rather than as temporary sites of relief.[23]

Given the EU's expansion and the Schengen Agreement, migration governance increasingly dealt with external border control. Hotspots and detention centers emerged in Southern Europe, representing a broader strategy of outsourcing migration control to buffer zones at geopolitical frontiers.[24] While officially referred to as reception facilities, these centers often operated under restrictive conditions that limit access to asylum procedures and reinforce spatial segregation.

The Transition to CCACs: Restrictive Detention in Contemporary Migration Policy
Detention spaces have historically evolved in response to shifting migration dynamics. A major transformation regarding their approach to migration control took place within the European Union after 2015. The so-called "migrant crisis" of that year—caused by conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and other regions—led to the arrival of over one million asylum seekers in Europe. The EU and member states adopted increasingly restrictive border policies as a response, which institutionalized detention as a core instrument of migration governance.[25]

A significant shift in the EU migration policy came with the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement in 2016. This agreement aimed to restore control over irregular migration to Europe by designating Turkey as a "safe third country," permitting the return of asylum seekers from Greece to Turkey. Subsequently, Greece established "hotspot" centers on its Aegean islands, where migrants would be held for extended periods in conditions of legal and spatial uncertainty while their asylum applications were processed. These hotspots, particularly Moria on Lesbos, functioned as de facto detention facilities characterized by overcrowding, legal liminality, and securitized spatial organization.[26]

To understand this transformation spatially, the concept of territory is essential. As scholars such as Björkdahl have noted, the border no longer aligns with the territorial edge of the nation-state but manifests internally and externally through spatial governance strategies.[27] The hotspot, then, becomes a fragmented zone of exception—a territorial discontinuity where spatial organization is mobilized to suspend legal protections and due process. This approach

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bridges architecture and geography: the camp simultaneously functions as infrastructure, a legal grey zone, and a geopolitical tool.

The transformation from informal reception centers to Closed Controlled Access Centers (CCACs) represents the latest evolution in the EU's approach to migration detention. Unlike the chaotic structures of previous camps, CCACs are designed as formalized detention infrastructures with controlled entry and exit points, in conjunction with increased surveillance and regimented spatial organization. The Greek government began constructing these facilities in 2021 under pressure from the European Commission as part of a broader strategy to replace informal camps with a more securitized form of detention.[28] The transformation of sites such as Moria into CCACs reflects a broader trend in migration governance: architectural space to regulate mobility, enforce legal ambiguity, and deter prospective migrants. Moreover, they reflect broader efforts to externalize border enforcement and contain asylum seekers within designated zones.[29] These centers are designed not only to detain but to dissuade future migration, enacting what Wendy Brown describes as a *"fortress mentality,"* wherein national identity is protected through spatial exclusion and architecture becomes an extension of the border itself.[30]

The design of CCACs reflects a departure from earlier humanitarian narratives surrounding migration camps. Traditional refugee camps cloaked themselves with humanitarian narratives of temporariness, while CCACs implemented a deterrence-based logic. The employed spatial strategies—like perimeter-type fencing, restricted movement zones, and biometric surveillance—conform more closely to carceral architecture than humanitarian shelters.[31] This shift raises significant humanitarian, legal, and ethical concerns regarding the role of detention in migration management, as well as its broader implications for human rights and spatial justice. The European Union has increasingly justified the expansion of CCACs under the rhetoric of efficiency, order, and humanitarian governance, framing them as improvements over overcrowded, informal encampments. However, scholars like Anna Pratt and Nicholas De Genova are critical of this narrative, arguing that CCACs act primarily as instruments of spatial exclusion and reinforce a two-tier system in which migrants are physically and symbolically divided from host societies.[32] The transformation towards CCACs shows how design and architecture are being used not merely as logistical solutions to migration but as spatial manifestations of state control.

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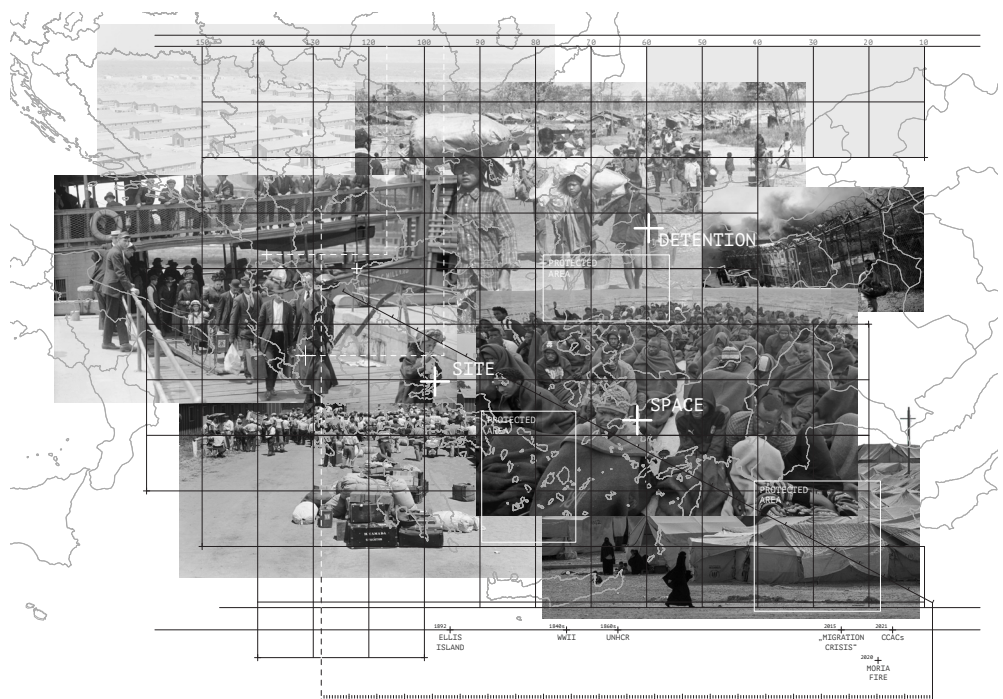
fig 02: Detention & Migration

The Transformation of Moria and the Emergence of Kara Tepe

Moria – an Informal Containment Site: Overcrowding, Infrastructural Neglect, and Controlled Disorder as a Governance Strategy

Moria Refugee Camp, located on the Greek island of Lesvos, embodies the intersection of migration management, spatial control, and the EU's external border regime policy framework. Established in 2013 on a former military base and designated as an official EU „hotspot" in 2015, Moria was built to register, accommodate, and process asylum seekers entering EU territory on the island.[33] Although initially designed as a temporary *Reception and Identification Center* (RIC), it soon became a space of overcrowding and semi-permanent containment. Designed to hold 3,000 people, Moria often held over 20,000, with makeshift shelters spreading beyond designated boundaries to accommodate the surplus population.[34] The camp's physical deterioration was not simply a symptom of logistical failures but rather part of an intentional governmental strategy, or what Agier refers to as a state of *"controlled disorder."*[35] By ensuring that conditions remained at a level of barely tolerable precarity in order to deter the arrival of new camp residents, European policymakers demonstrated an apparent unwillingness to provide humane alternatives for those who sought them.[36]

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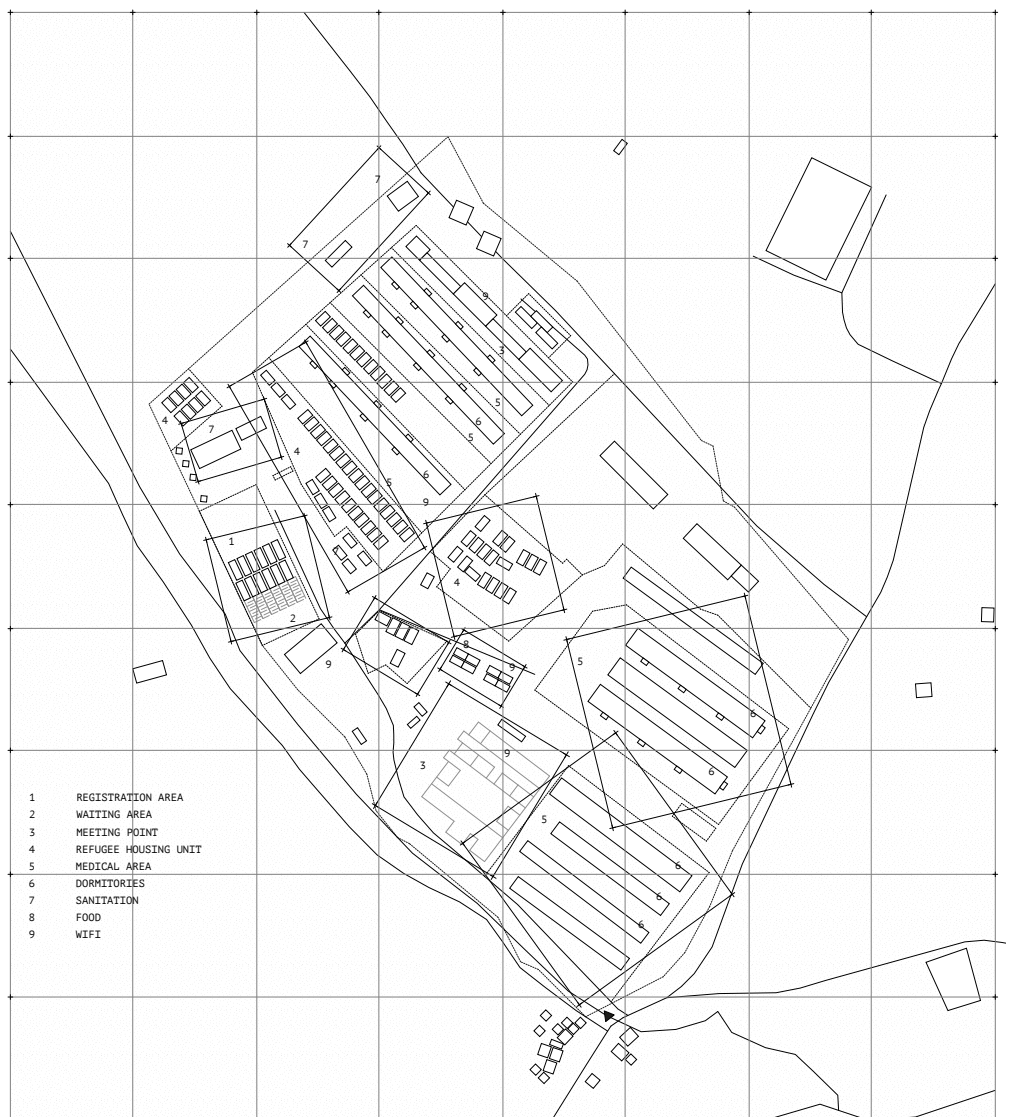
1   REGISTRATION AREA
2   WAITING AREA
3   MEETING POINT
4   REFUGEE HOUSING UNIT
5   MEDICAL AREA
6   DORMITORIES
7   SANITATION
8   FOOD
9   WIFI

fig 03: Intended Layout of Moria Refugee Camp

This deterrent strategy must be understood in the context of broader EU asylum and migration frameworks, particularly the *Common European Asylum System* (CEAS) and the Dublin Regulation. Both instruments disproportionately allocate responsibility for asylum processing to peripheral countries like Greece, reinforcing a containment logic at the EU's external borders.[37] The EU–Turkey Statement of 2016 further cemented this by making returns of asylum seekers from Greece to Turkey dependent on the inadmissibility of their claims, effectively transforming islands like Lesvos into liminal detention zones.[38] In protest at the deal's implementation, the *UN Refugee Agency* (UNHCR) withdrew some services and *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) suspended activities inside Moria, refusing to be *"complicit in a system we consider to be both unfair and inhumane."*[39] Consequently, Moria became not simply a humanitarian site, but a product of EU-wide policy mechanisms designed to externalize and diffuse migration management.[40]

Greek officials echoed this deterrent logic. Former Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi stated, *"We cannot afford to create an illusion that Europe is a place where anyone can come without controls. The reality must reflect the policy."*[41] This political position aligns with Foucault's biopolitics, wherein the state regulates life by not only control and punishment but also by structuring spaces that produce vulnerability and dependence.[42] The camp's infrastructural deficiencies— insufficient access to medical care, poor hygiene, and shelters unsuitable for winter—illustrated how neglect was used as a tool of governance.[43] The UNHCR warned as early as 2018 that the conditions were at a „boiling point," with extensive overcrowding, inter-communal conflict, and tension running high.[44]

Moria operated in a legal and political grey zone, compounding the material deprivation that already defined the camp. In this sense, Moria prefigured Agamben's „*state of exception*", in which rights and protection are suspended under the pretext of managing an emergency situation.[45] This juridical liminality was not unique to Greece but part of a broader shift in European migration governance toward securitized and exceptionalist paradigms.[46] The physical layout of the camp—its intentionally designed structure and the way it evolved in practice—also reflects the intent. Initially conceived as an organized reception center, Moria's rapid overcrowding led to the proliferation of informal extensions, bottlenecks in infrastructure, and increasing territorial fragmentation.[47]

fig 04: An aerial view of the official refugee camp of Moria and the makeshift camp around it

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A comparative spatial analysis of Moria's official design versus its eventual sprawl highlights this transformation. Planned by the *Greek Ministry of Migration Policy*, the blueprints indicated a centralized and largely linear organization with a main processing center in the center and then modular housing types, service points, and controlled entry exit. However, satellite imagery and field reports from NGOs and independent journalists between 2016 and 2020 document a radical departure from this plan.[48] As the camp's population ballooned to over 20,000—more than six times its official capacity—informal settlements began to sprawl far beyond the original perimeters into adjacent olive groves, forming what became known as the *"Jungle."*[49]

The contrast of plan and reality is stark: the modular grid collapses into haphazard clusters of makeshift shelters formed from materials like wood pallets, tarps, and sheet metal. Sanitary infrastructure does not expand with the sprawl, creating large areas without access to clean water or latrines. Circulation paths turn to mud tracks, firebreaks vanish, and the camp becomes increasingly disorienting and unstructured.[50] In architectural terms, this transformation expresses the dissolution of planned order into tactical improvisation, a condition that serves not only to highlight infrastructural insufficiency but also to enable control through disorder.[51] The degradation of space is not simply a symptom of overcapacity but rather a spatial condition that renders life precarious and subjects unworthy of spatial legibility.[52]

fig 05: A wooden path crosses a trench filled with plastic bottles

Photos from humanitarian organizations illustrate deliberate zoning: fenced, padlocked gates divide the site into areas designated for distinct demographic groups. Children's areas are enclosed; so-called "vulnerable" groups are physically segregated in poorly equipped zones, often closer to the forest's edge.[53] Informal housing units stack in unplanned tiers along sloped terrain, exposing inhabitants to landslides, cold, and flooding—risks that were well-documented in local government reports but not addressed.[54] This failure is not accidental; it illustrates what Eyal Weizman calls *"organized abandonment,"* a tactic that turns infrastructural failure into a technique of governance.[55] By 2020, some aid workers described the camp as *"hell on Earth,"* while MSF clinicians noted an alarming rise in self-harm, particularly among children, some as young as ten.[56] Mental health professionals working in Moria reported a correlation between time spent in the camp and increased instances of psychological distress and trauma.[57]

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Moria's transformation into a de facto detention site—complete with biometric checkpoints, curfews, and surveillance—was underpinned by evolving political discourse across Greece and the EU. Politicians and media outlets increasingly framed migration as a security threat, especially during election cycles.[58] The rhetoric of "invasion," "burden," and "unmanageable crisis" became normalized, which eventually led to the normalization of spatial and legal restrictions.[59] EU Commissioner Margaritis Schinas even emphasized that policymakers must avoid „pull factors," implying that improved conditions would undermine the deterrent goals of the camp system.[60] This securitization narrative obscured the structural causes of displacement and reduced migrants to mere subjects of control.

At the same time, public perception and media framing shifted from humanitarianism to a normalization of detention. Coverage of the 2015 "refugee crisis" focused on evoking empathy and emphasizing the urgency of the situation. However, later portrayals increasingly aligned with state discourses of containment and deterrence.[61] The framing of Moria as both a humanitarian necessity and a symbol of caution signals a broader discursive shift toward what Ticktin has called „casual humanitarianism"—compassion that is selective and follows carceral logics.[62] NGOs were often caught in this contradiction: advocating for improved conditions while their presence legitimized the camp's continued operation.[63]

On the ground, abstract migration policies became spatially embodied. Checkpoints, turnstiles, and double gates segmented internal movement —often based on nationality or asylum claims.[64] Checkpoints were manned by police and military personnel, while the camp was enclosed with barbed-wire fencing and subdivided internally to create "zones of exception," where rights are suspended.[65] Entry and exit were managed using biometric systems and enforced curfews.[66]

The camp's plan documented routing of circulation, checkpoints, and spatial hierarchy among registration, habitation, and administration zones. Yet in practice these were repurposed as spatial filters: movement was slowed or blocked according to one's legal or demographic status.[67] Field reports from *Human Rights Watch* document how these mechanisms immobilized individuals with unresolved asylum claims, while delaying others with scheduled appointments in Athens.[68] The visible infrastructure—double gates, turnstiles, arm-length fencing—transformed architecture into an apparatus of migration control. The camp thus enacted what Tazzioli and Garelli call a *"spatial grammar of deterrence"*: not chaotic, but precisely choreographed.[69]

fig 06: Tents line a muddy slope scattered with debris and wooden pallets.

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The internal zoning created informal castes. Syrians and other nationalities with higher asylum acceptance rates were placed near processing centers, while those from less "desirable" countries, such as North Africans and South Asians, were pushed to the periphery.[70] Signs demarcating "national zones" and handwritten placards reinforced this division.[71] The "safe zone" for unaccompanied minors, ironically named, was overcrowded and isolated from basic services, while access to food and healthcare was tiered according to legal status.[72] In this way, Moria became not just a space of residence but a space of governance, where legal limbo translated into spatial marginality.[73]

Officials often defended the camp's conditions as „inevitable" due to migrant flows, but leaked documents and internal communications show that infrastructural upgrades were often delayed to avoid upgrading the camp's living conditions.[74] This resonates with Tazzioli's idea of „*strategic neglect*," where suffering is not accidental but instrumental.[75] This neglect served as an implicit policy choice aimed at creating a perception of crisis, justifying the strict measures of border control and deterrence. It is crucial to understand that this failing was not simply the result of mismanagement but was deliberately engineered to reflect a punitive approach to migration management.

In this context, architecture becomes a weapon—not through monumental walls but via the incremental erosion of livability. As Mbembe emphasizes in his work on *necropolitics*, the power to let die is spatially exercised in the creation of zones where life is neither sustained nor entirely extinguished.[76] Moria was an example of this form of governmental management, operating at the intersection of legal exceptionalism, political discourse, infrastructural degradation, and public complicity. It was not simply a failed camp; rather, it was a spatial technology of migration control, crafted as much by policy as by concrete and wire.

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Moria Refugee Camp

Map illustrating the spatial contradictions between the planned containment structure of Moria Refugee Camp and the informal, expanding realities of daily life within and beyond its official boundaries.

30.000 m²
Planned footprint

120.000 m²
Informal sprawl

20.000
Inhabitants
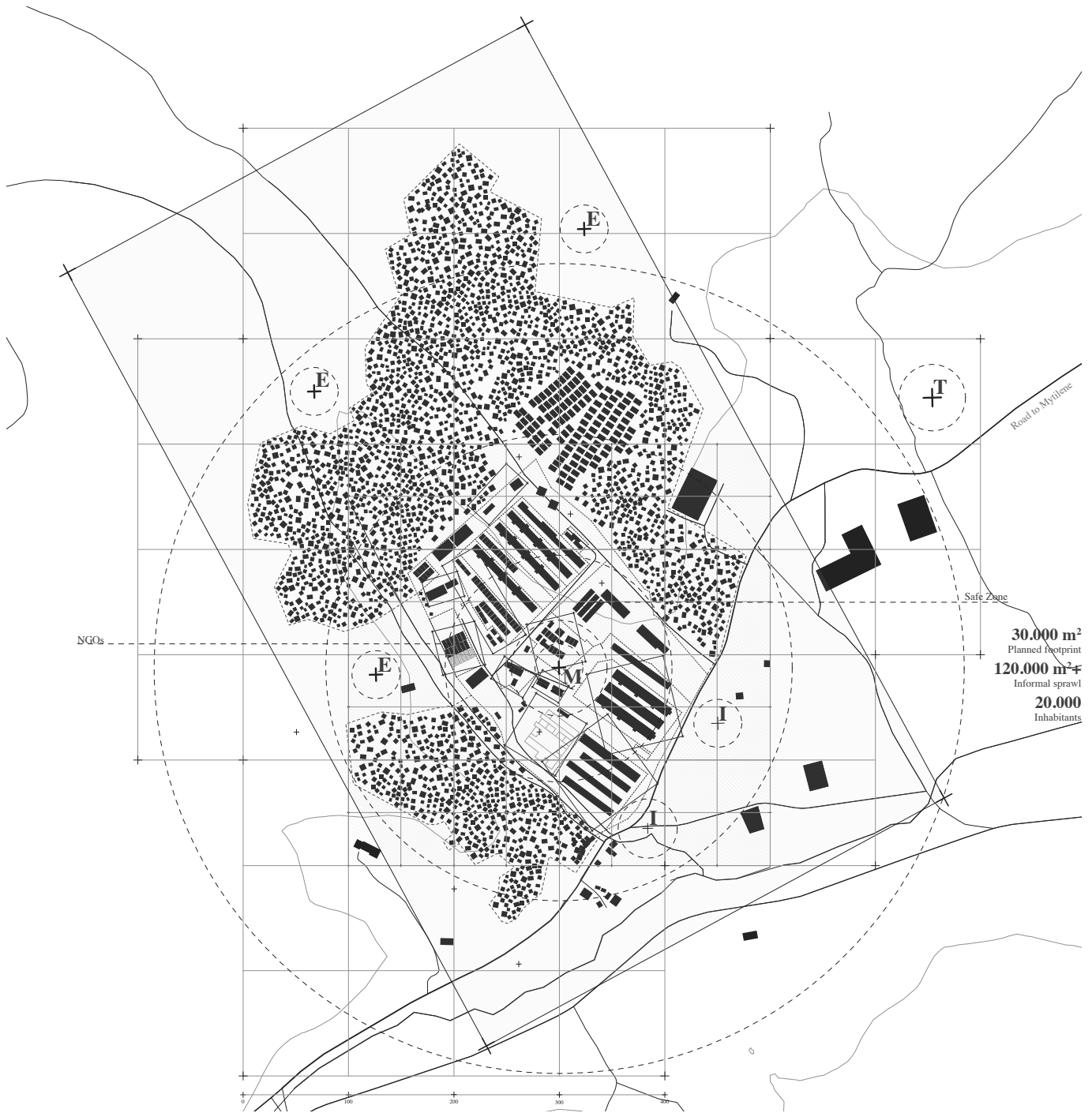
M
Moria
Initially built to host a few thousand, the Moria Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) was located on a former military site outside the village of Moria.

E
Extended Settlements
These areas reflect the informal sprawl of the camp, where asylum seekers erected makeshift shelters beyond the official perimeter in response to a lack of capacity and services.

T
Territorial Context
Situated in the eastern Aegean, Lesvos is a critical node in the EU's border regime. Its proximity to Turkey places it at the frontline of Europe's migration containment policies.

I
Infrastructural Lines
Main access roads, administrative checkpoints, and service routes connect Moria to the surrounding reflecting the logistical skeleton of both aid and control.

fig 07: Moria - Planned Order vs. Lived Chaos

The Fire as a Political Event: How Destruction Justified the Shift to a Stricter Detention Model

On the night of September 8, 2020, a series of fires engulfed Moria, destroying much of the camp. Initially, Greek officials blamed camp residents for the fire, but the event soon became a focal point for European migration discourse. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, framed the fire as an opportunity to *"build a new, more resilient migration management system."*[77] The *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* presented just two weeks later, focused on border screening, expedited return procedures, and interoperable security systems to interrupt „unauthorised movements."[78] These frameworks, which predated the Moria fire, had already prioritized externalization and deterrence over solidarity.[79] Reforms to the *Asylum Procedures Regulation* and *Eurodac* suggested expanded biometric surveillance and automating identity registration through linked databases, reinforcing detention-based strategies at Europe's periphery.[80] As such, the fire provided a convenient trigger to deploy pre-existing policy tools and advance systemic securitization.

Rather than sparking humanitarian reforms, the destruction of Moria accelerated the transition to a securitized model of migration containment. The widely circulated images of the aftermath—scorched containers, tarpaulin shelters, flattened housing structures, blackened olive trees, and scattered belongings—served as political optics, documenting a scene of "failure" now requiring a solution prioritizing order and discipline over care and repair.[81] These visual representations, often repeated in the press and humanitarian appeals, constructed a narrative in which chaos and degradation were not only inevitable but also necessary precursors to policy reform.[82] News coverage emphasized unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, and sporadic violence—real issues that contributed to a narrative of disorder.[83] Humanitarian organizations expressed concern that this framing naturalized the idea that closed, securitized camps were not only necessary but preferable.[84] The normalization of detention was not solely a top-down imposition but an affective process shaped by visual politics, bureaucratic language, and securitized media discourse.[85]

fig 08: Vast stretches of the camp and an adjacent site were destroyed in the fire

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis seized on the fire to advocate for stricter border controls, declaring, *"Moria is a symbol of what must change in European migration policy. No more uncontrolled camps. No more lawlessness. The new system will be secure and orderly."*[86] His rhetoric resonated with the wider European Union discourse, where crisis events are instrumentalized to justify exceptional and often restrictive measures.[87] As political scientist Didier Bigo argues, securitization constructs migration as an existential threat, enabling extraordinary responses under the logic of control.[88]

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The securitizing discourse intensifies in contexts of political contestation. During national and EU election campaigns, migration was framed as a crisis needing a decisive and even punitive response.[89] Politicians have also used narratives about chaos and lawlessness to reassert authority, portraying migration control as both a sovereign right and electoral necessity. Thus, Mitsotakis' response to Moria should not only be read as crisis management but as an electoral cue, consolidating his party's tough-on-migration position, particularly in light of rising pressure from the far right.[90]

Within days of the fire, government representatives began circulating plans for a new, closed facility—heavily policed, with biometric access, barbed-wire fencing, and 24/7 surveillance—framing it as a necessary improvement. This aligns with Naomi Klein's concept of the *"shock doctrine,"* where disaster is used to introduce controversial policies under the guise of urgency.[91] The fire created a temporal rupture that suspended normal democratic scrutiny, legitimizing rapid shifts in policy and spatial design that had been in preparation before the blaze.[92] According to observers, Greek authorities used the fire as a "foundational moment" to reassert central control over migration infrastructure and bypass island-level resistance.[93]

A leaked strategy document from the *Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum*, National Strategy for Migration 2020, explicitly outlined plans for Closed Controlled Access Centres months before the Moria fire.[94] The fire merely accelerated their implementation. Additionally, legal instruments like the *Greek International Protection Act (Law 4636/2019)* had already restricted asylum processes and expanded detention powers, reflecting policy continuity within Greek and EU governance structures.[95] These developments demonstrate how spatial strategies such as closed centers and geographic restrictions acted as enforcement mechanisms for legal reforms.[96] Evangelia Tsourdi highlights that the EU's structural approach to asylum management increasingly relies on *"spatialized legality,"* where rights are geographically contained and access to legal protections becomes conditional.[97] Under *Law 4636/2019,* procedural efficiency was prioritized, restricting appeals and enabling widespread pre-removal detention, effectively laying the groundwork for CCACs as legally sanctioned carceral spaces.[98]

fig 09: Satellite images showing the refugee camp before and after the fire (20 Aug. 2020 & 9 Sept. 2020)

The dominant narrative of disorder, amplified by unsubstantiated allegations of arson by migrants, allowed for political cover to escalate these measures.[99] Although no evidence confirmed a link between the migrant population and the fire, a finding of the Greek Ombudsman, which was confirmed by later independent investigations, six Afghan asylum seekers—labeled the „Moria 6"—were sentenced in trials widely criticized for lacking due process.[100] Human rights observers like *Amnesty International* and *Legal Centre Lesvos* identified violations in the judicial process, including the absence of direct testimonies from

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witnesses as well as reliance on secret evidence.[101] In 2023 - a Greek appeals court acquitted four of the six defendants, further undermining the state's narrative.[102]

National policies in Greece, especially *Law 4636/2019*, were critical in transforming the migrant reception landscape.[103] It sped up asylum procedures, broadened detention grounds, and narrowed procedural safeguards for applicants, aligning with broader European shifts toward deterrence-based migration management.[104] When the *Reception Conditions Directive* (Directive 2013/33/EU, amended in 2020) was recast, detention viability was legitimized under vaguely defined grounds of public order and security.[105] The *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* reinforced these dynamics, introducing mandatory border screening and "pre-entry" detention that effectively delays access to national asylum systems.[106] At the municipal level, local authorities welcomed replacing informal migrant camps with closed structures on security, hygiene, and public order grounds.[107]

The transition from Moria to Kara Tepe, along with the establishment of CCACs, marks a significant change in the governance of migration. These new infrastructures, co-financed by the EU and constructed in geographically and politically remote and militarized zones, are defined by their architecture of exclusion: double fences, surveillance towers, biometric checkpoints, zones for controlled mobility, and minimal contact with the local society.[108] Loïc Wacquant's notion of „*advanced marginality*" becomes relevant here: these populations are not just physically marginal but are also symbolically excluded from public life, along with being rendered invisible via the bureaucratic architectures and digital surveillance infrastructures they are confined to.[109] Camp residents describe feelings of 'imprisonment,' 'psychological exhaustion,' and a 'loss of dignity.'[110] These structures are not merely shelters; they are disciplinary spaces, purpose-built to contain, sort, and depoliticize mobility.[111]

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The Fire as Threshold
The destruction of Moria marked a shift in European border governance. No longer informal, containment became architectural. Flames enabled policy acceleration: from soft edges to hard walls. Spatial ambiguity gave way to legible control. The event was framed not as a failure of policy but of disorder—calling for order. Humanitarianism aligned with securitization. Detention infrastructures emerged from the ashes, legitimized through crisis. The camp burned; the system expanded.
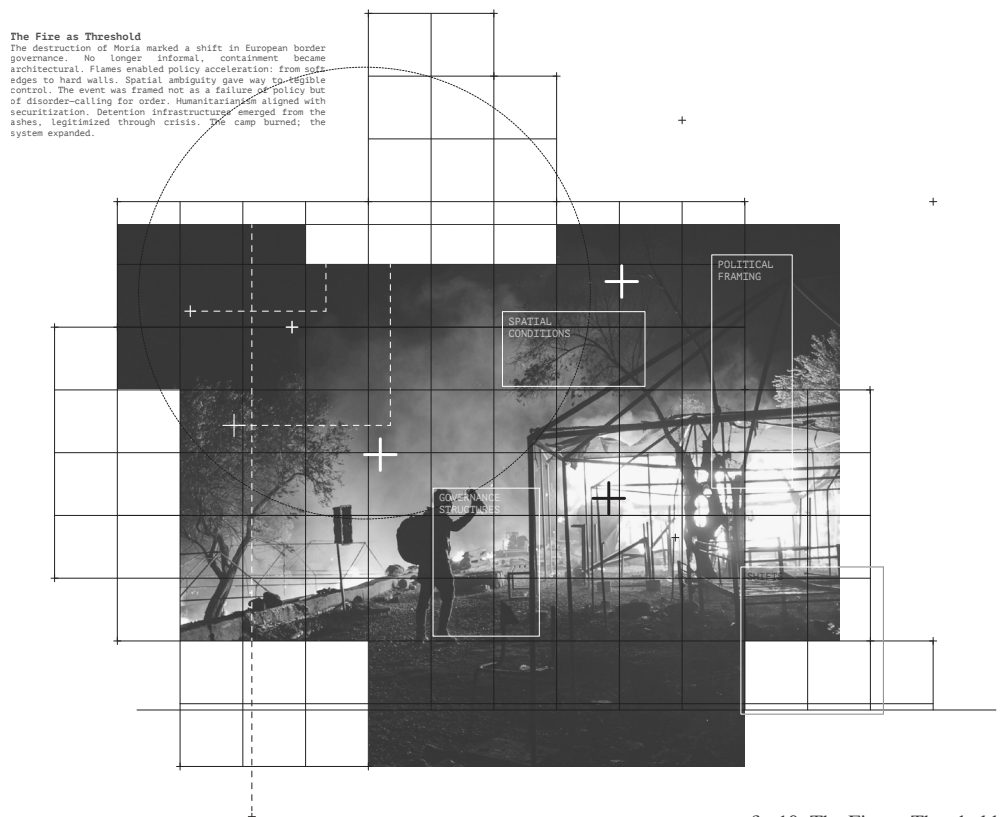
fig 10: The Fire as Threshold

Moreover, the official framing of the fire as an act of internal sabotage—despite the absence of credible evidence—further delegitimized refugee communities, portraying them as security threats rather than victims of governance failure.[112] This rhetorical inversion, replicated across media and political discourse, blurred the lines between criminality and displacement.[113] Public officials capitalized on the image of migrants as instigators to justify punitive infrastructure, while news outlets often reproduced these framings uncritically.[114] As Holmes and Castañeda argue, such depictions shift the blame from structural failings to individual actors, effectively erasing systemic responsibility.[115] This legitimized expanded detention under the guise of *"disciplinary humanitarianism,"* where care is extended only in exchange for obedience.[116] Heath Cabot notes how such portrayals justify repression while shielding state actors from accountability.[117] Greek Minister Notis Mitarachi's vow to "restore order" in the wake of the fire encapsulates this punitive logic.[118] Didier Fassin calls this the inversion of *"humanitarian reason,"* where aid is no longer about solidarity but about controlling the lives of the marginalized.[119]

Hence, the fire at Moria was not simply an event—it was a political tool. It constituted the dissolution of a failed governance model, to be replaced with a design of containment and invisibility. The spatial logic of Kara Tepe and the CCACs are not about safety or dignity; they are about control, deterrence, and the reconfiguration of asylum into a penal, securitized framework. Understanding the fire through this political and spatial lens reveals how moments of destruction are used to entrench structural violence under the guise of reform.

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Kara Tepe's Spatial Logic: Modular Units, Surveillance Infrastructure, and Movement Restrictions as Tools of Exclusion

Kara Tepe was built to replace Moria and represents a radically different spatial logic. While Moria grew informally around its original plans with tents placed in olive groves and improvised muddy paths, Kara Tepe was designed with military precision: prefabricated standardized tents and containers, ordered in orthogonal grids, surrounded by wide and open corridors to maximize visibility and reduce social density. The camp's layout prevents anything that could develop collectivity or informal self-organization. In spatial terms, the camp's design eliminated the possibility of dwelling as a political and social act and can be described as a move away from humanitarian shelter towards spatial containment—an architecture driven not by care, but by control.[120]

The transition from Moria to Kara Tepe was shaped by evolving EU asylum law and migration policy frameworks emerging in the aftermath of 2015. They prioritized externalized border control and standardized detention infrastructure under the *Common European Asylum System* (CEAS). This shift prioritized securitization and containment over integration or rights-based approaches. Member States were enabled to detain asylum seekers in border zones under the pretext of efficiency under the so-called Article 43 of the *Asylum Procedures Directive*.[121] It can be further observed that measures like the EU–Turkey Statement of 2016 promoted a containment strategy that de facto suspended legal protections in favor of migration deterrence.[122] In Greece, this strategy was materialized through the transformation of hotspots into CCACs, institutionalizing a spatial exclusion based on a constructed idea of security.[123]

Humanitarian organizations and advocacy groups have sought to reframe the controversy surrounding these shifts by emphasizing the erosion of asylum rights and the negative humanitarian implications of detention-based policies. *Amnesty International* warned in 2021 that new EU-funded facilities (for example, Kara Tepe and the Samos CCAC) blurred the line between reception and detention, with little oversight and nearly fully restricted access.[124] These camps are advocated for as being "European standards," yet their physical formats, restriction of free movement, and 24/7 surveillance share the meanings of a carceral logic. Didier Bigo's notion of a *"security continuum"* helps explain how this shift allows state and EU actors to justify forms of exclusion under the language of safety and order.[125] The temporary becomes permanent, the emergency becomes normalized, and the refugee becomes a monitored subject rather than a protected individual.

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1	REGISTRATION AREA
2	WAITING AREA
3	MEETING POINT
4	REFUGEE HOUSING UNIT
5	MEDICAL AREA
6	DORMITORIES
7	SANITATION
8	FOOD
9	WIFI

fig 11: Layout of Kara Tepe Refugee Camp

Media narratives about Kara Tepe were significant vectors of public perceptions of migration governance, mirroring the polarization in migration discourse. Humanitarian organizations and more progressive media outlets portrayed asylum seekers as victims of structural violence, recounting poor living circumstances, mental health impacts, and insufficient legal assistance. A 2021 *EUobserver* article described Kara Tepe as *"an empty promise"* that repeated many of Moria's failures, including cold-weather exposure, lack of services, and movement restrictions.[126] In contrast, pro-government media and EU institutions framed the camp as an improvement: more organized, more secure, and more compliant with EU regulations. The Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*, for instance, described it as *"a step toward European efficiency."*[127] This divergence in framing echoes Robert Entman's theory of *"selective emphasis."* This describes how the media does not merely report facts but also shapes how policies are received through constructed narratives.[128] Kara Tepe's spatial logic was, therefore, not simply material but discursive and rearticulated in official rhetoric and public imagery.

The perimeter of Kara Tepe was tightly sealed, confined by a barbed-wire enclosure, with access further regulated by biometric gates made possible by EU-funded migration and security programs. Located on state property, this site reinforces a sense of isolation and remoteness. This regulation of entry and exit represents a growing trend towards the securitization of humanitarian spaces in Europe. As Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President of the European Commission, stated in 2020, *"We must ensure that asylum seekers do not disappear into our societies unchecked."*[129] Statements like these contribute to a framing that positions asylum seekers as a security risk rather than a population deserving rights. This is emphasized by camp infrastructures like the CCAC model—they are developed to surveil, detain, and filter rather than to welcome.

Biometric surveillance and digital tracking highlight the growing influence of technology in the field of migration management. The *Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum* implemented the *Centaur surveillance system* in CCACs across Greece with funding from the *EU's Internal Security Fund*. This platform integrates thermal cameras, motion sensors, biometric access control, and drone feeds into a centralized AI-monitored command center in Athens.[130] According to a 2021 *Al Jazeera* investigation, Centaur is capable of "threat detection" based on algorithmic assessments of behavior, effectively automating surveillance in real time.[131] Stefania Kalogeraki notes that this digital infrastructure marks a shift toward *"techno-humanitarianism,"* where safety is defined by visibility and monitored compliance.[132] These measures extend governance into what Jan Zielonka calls *"digital biopolitics,"* in which refugees become data points in predictive systems of exclusion.[133]

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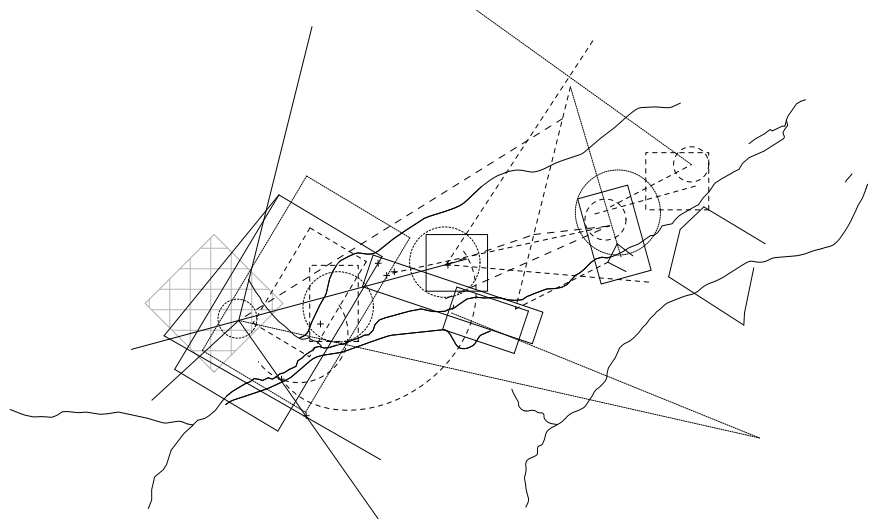
fig 12: Zones of Avoidance

These technologies and design choices reflect the growing intersection of immigration enforcement with criminal law, a phenomenon described as *"crimmigration."*[134] Kara Tepe and similar sites did not merely respond to logistical crises—they became extensions of state authority through spatial and technical discipline. Such sites form part of an *"enforcement archipelago,"* linking physical marginalization with legal indeterminacy.[135] The camp becomes not only a space of confinement but also one of control over the body and its movement. Michel Foucault's concept of *panopticism* is realized here: surveillance becomes internalized, and behavior is reshaped by the mere possibility of being seen.[136] Residents of CCACs have reported avoiding common areas for fear of constant monitoring, creating informal "zones of avoidance" produced not by walls, but by surveillance lines of sight.[137]

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fig 13: A woman pushes a stroller through rows of UNHCR tents in Kara Tepe

The design of CCACs reinforces this logic. The camp is organized into highly regulated and compartmentalized spaces. Biometric checkpoints demarcate the camp into zones, primarily sleeping, canteen, and hygiene, with monitored pathways connecting them. Social services are more centralized in administrative buildings that are mostly inaccessible after business hours and on weekends. The spatial segregations of the camp align with what Nicholas De Genova calls the „*border within,*" where daily life is organized by internal barriers that mirror external ones.[138] In this context, architecture is not a neutral vessel; it is political technology of governance—it materializes control and enacts policy through spatial ordering.

The way the public perceives and the media frames these camps is critical to justifying their ongoing existence. NGOs and international organizations have condemned CCACs as carceral, but many mainstream media outlets and the EU frame them as modern, effective, and humane. The narrative of "cleaner and safer" camps often hides the disciplinary function of their design and governance.[139] Media coverage of conflicts or disturbances at the camps often strengthens the portrayal of migrants as troublemakers, thus legitimizing the surveillance and lockdown measures. Media discourses alternate between victimization and securitization, producing a form of *"ambivalent empathy"* that enables exclusion while appearing compassionate.[140]

The geographical siting of CCACs—on remote islands, former military zones, or depopulated border areas—contributes to their marginalization.[141] These locations are not arbitrary. By removing asylum seekers from public visibility and civic proximity, the state curtails access to legal aid, media scrutiny, and urban solidarity networks. As Achille Mbembe notes in *Necropolitics*, spatial seclusion determines who is rendered visible, who is grievable, and who is left in zones of decay.[142] The architecture of CCACs thus performs a dual function: it contains and erases.

The marginalization of asylum seekers is augmented by the legal liminality imposed in the camps. The state of waiting by asylum seekers is indefinite; their authorized presence is provisional, and their rights are suspended during administrative processing. Geographical restriction—legal obligations preventing movement from the islands like Lesvos—sustains this status into a bureaucratic no-man's-land. As noted in the *AIDA* (Asylum Information Database) country report, these policies have been systematically applied since 2016, often keeping people on islands for years.[143] The architecture mirrors this temporality: container units and fenced pathways produce a spatial vocabulary of transit that is paradoxically permanent. The notion of a *"state of exception"* becomes spatialized—a provisionality that becomes the norm.[144]

Although CCACs are often defended as "pragmatic" or "humane alternatives" to chaotic camps like Moria, the architectural logic of CCACs exposes a more complex political agenda. CCACs are not neutral interventions or spaces but rather tools of a biopolitical project that governs life through spatial control. By tracking bodies, enclosing movement, and flattening social life, these camps transform migrants from rights-bearing individuals into governable units. As Michel Agier has observed, such spaces do not merely "house" displaced people—they produce them as subjects of humanitarian governance.[145]

Recognizing architectural complicity in the migration containment regime is critical. The stark geometries, surveillance technologies, and remote sitings of CCACs are not just afterthoughts; they are a system of managing migration based on suspicion, deterrence, and control. Future reimaginings of asylum infrastructure must begin with legal reform and an architectural ethic rooted in dignity, transparency, and the right to presence. The design of Kara Tepe, with its regimented spatial management, surveillance, and compartmentalization, is biopolitical architecture in action. By controlling movement and visibility, it ultimately confines bodies and simultaneously has an active effect on constructing identities and lives of people seeking asylum—producing them as *"subjects of governance."*[146]

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[144] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253–264.

[145] Michel Agier, Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 3–20.

[146] Agier, Managing the Undesirables, 13.

fig 14: Street View of Kara Tepe Refugee Camp

Kara Tepe Refugee Camp

Formed through spatial and legal instruments of control, this map illustrates how surveillance infrastructure, access regimes, and spatial zoning produce a tightly regulated camp environment, reinforcing containment and limiting autonomy.
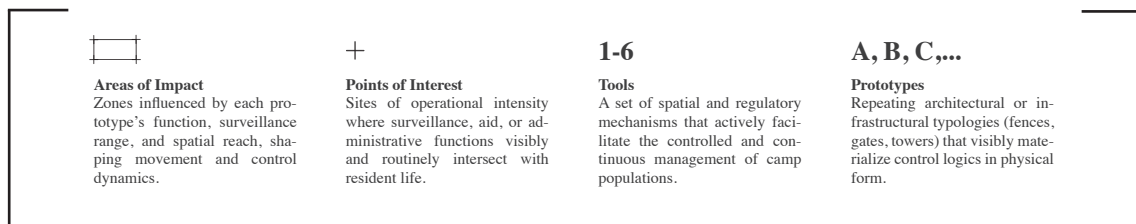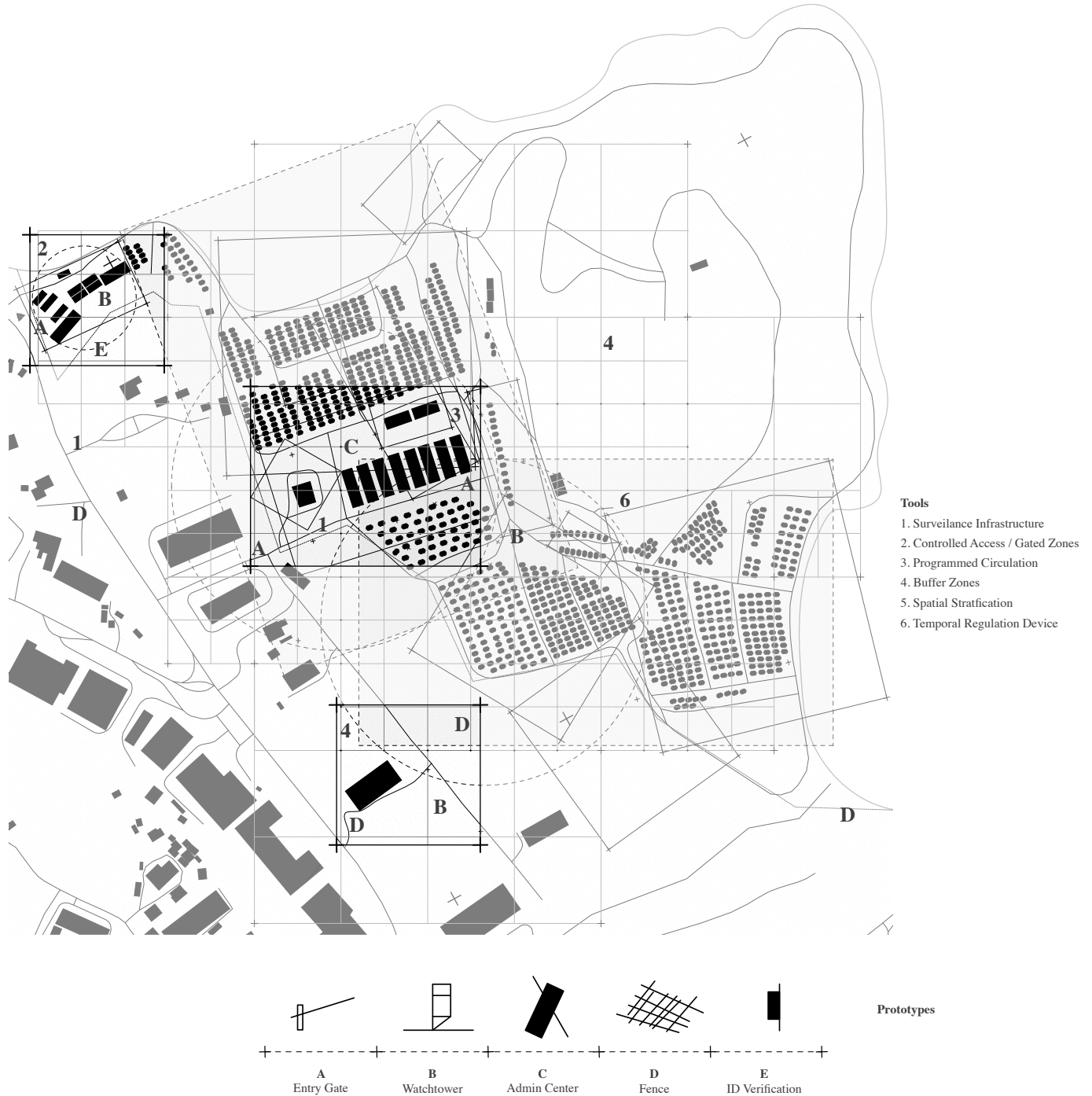

Tools

1. Surveilance Infrastructure
2. Controlled Access / Gated Zones
3. Programmed Circulation
4. Buffer Zones
5. Spatial Stratfication
6. Temporal Regulation Device

Prototypes

A	B	C	D	E
Entry Gate	Watchtower	Admin Center	Fence	ID Verification

Areas of Impact
Zones influenced by each prototype's function, surveillance range, and spatial reach, shaping movement and control dynamics.

Points of Interest
Sites of operational intensity where surveillance, aid, or administrative functions visibly and routinely intersect with resident life.

1-6
Tools
A set of spatial and regulatory mechanisms that actively facilitate the controlled and continuous management of camp populations.

A, B, C,...
Prototypes
Repeating architectural or infrastructural typologies (fences, gates, towers) that visibly materialize control logics in physical form.

fig 15: Mechanisms of Control: Surveillance and Spatial Regulation in Kara Tepe

Conclusion

The transformation of Moria into Kara Tepe and the broader institutionalization of Closed Controlled Access Centers illustrate the fundamental role detention now plays in European migration governance. However, these spatial shifts are not simply logistical rearrangements. Embedded within them are deliberate strategies of control, deterrence, and exclusion. Through their spatial configuration, CCACs materialize political ideologies, enacting a biopolitical regime in which migrants are no longer treated as individuals seeking protection but as securitized subjects to be managed, contained, and rendered invisible. The architectural logic at these facilities represents a radical shift in migration policy—a shift that renders space a means of ideological enforcement that governs not only mobility but also access to rights and recognition.

The transition from informal, overcrowded camps to formalized detention infrastructures within a regime of strict containment represents an extension of the carceral logic evident in all European border regimes. Surveillance, restricted movement, and restricted access are themselves not neutral governance technologies but actively produce legal and social liminality. In doing so, they also reinforce the marginalization of those held within. Consequently, the CCACs operate as both material and symbolic mechanisms of exclusion, embodying the EU's geopolitical priorities through a rigid spatial language of control. Their design prioritizes order and containment over care and dignity, reflecting a securitized border imaginary in which migrants are constructed as threats rather than rights-bearing individuals.

Moreover, the political narratives accompanying this spatial transition illustrate how moments of crisis—such as the fire at Moria—are used as pretexts to justify the expansion of carceral infrastructures. Crisis is mobilized not only as a rationale for restrictive policy but also as a discursive mechanism to naturalize architectural change in the name of humanitarian improvement. Political and media representations that frame migration as a threat enable a shift in public discourse—from asylum to security—normalizing detention, enforcing surveillance, and ultimately undermining support and integration.

This research highlights the need to critically assess the role of architecture in systems of governance, specifically in contexts where spatial strategies are used to regulate and exclude. While the rise of CCACs represents the establishment of exclusionary border practices, architecture also offers opportunities to resist those logics. Engaging with alternative spatial imaginaries is essential—imaginaries that dismantle the carceral foundations of current policy and reimagine spaces of asylum as environments of dignity, autonomy, and care. Intervening in the architectural production of migration governance requires a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from architecture, critical policy analysis, and human rights advocacy. Only through such collaboration is it possible to challenge the normalization of detention and to envision infrastructures that foster not containment, but belonging.

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