

Snapshots

Window Washers on a Windowless Prison

Abstract



This photograph examines the erasure of prisons from the urban landscape. The false or blind windows symbolize an important point of reflection for understanding the process of community making that surrounds incarceration.

Keywords: urban prisons, activism, space-making

Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility (MSDF) is Wisconsin's largest urban prison, with a population of over a thousand inmates. In simplistic architectural terms, the facility is a concrete box within a concrete box. Most of the building's windows are a façade, both literally and figuratively, designed to adhere to Milwaukee's downtown aesthetics. These "false" or "blind" windows do not let light pass through, effectively erasing the presence of a prison and of prisoners from the urban landscape. I teach

anthropology down the street from MSDF and drive by the building on my commute. I took snapshots of window washers before class one day and showed the pictures to my students. They also drove by each day but were unaware that the building was a prison. In the months after taking these images, I met prison abolitionists who hoped to erase MSDF from Milwaukee's skyline by closing the facility. As an anthropologist, I sought to understand how activists created a sense of humanity and urban space while their neighbors were erased from the urban landscape. In terms of those inside, "real" windows would allow views of Milwaukee's Fiserv Forum a few blocks away. The Fiserv will host the Democratic National Convention (DNC) almost a year to the day after I took these photographs. I will pay close attention to how MSDF is erased from the celebration of Milwaukee and democracy during the DNC.

Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility, July 23, 2019. Photograph by Jason B. Scott.

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