

SKETCHES AND REFLECTIONS

ON THE MODELS OF KERANIGANJ JAIL

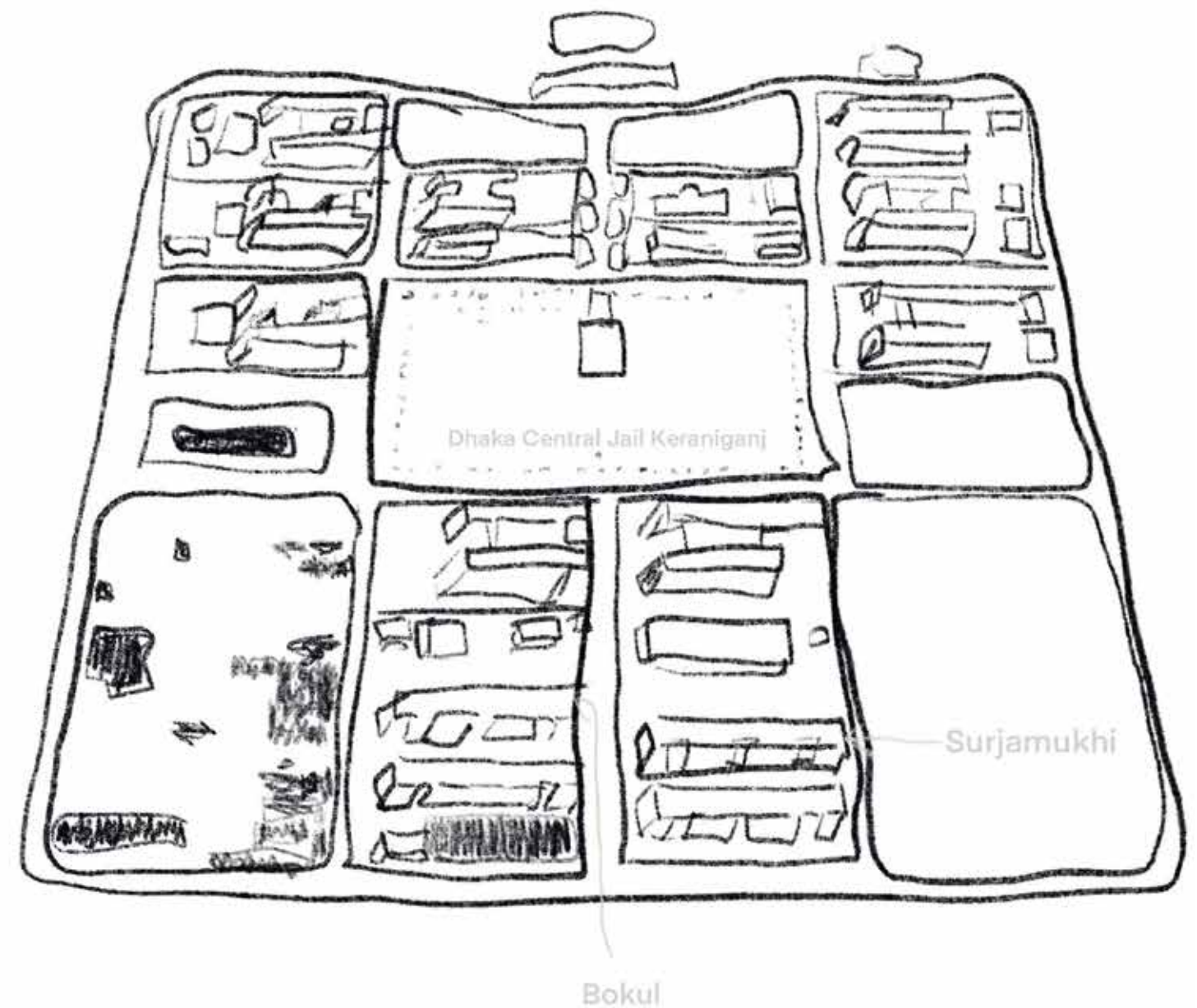
BY SOFIA KARIM

CONCEPT

In April Shahidul sent me a message with a small drawing he had done by hand. It was an aerial view of Keraniganj jail. "Teaching myself how to draw," he wrote.

I was taken with this view of the world he had inhabited for 107 days. I had thought about it so often. I wanted to zoom in and get inside it.

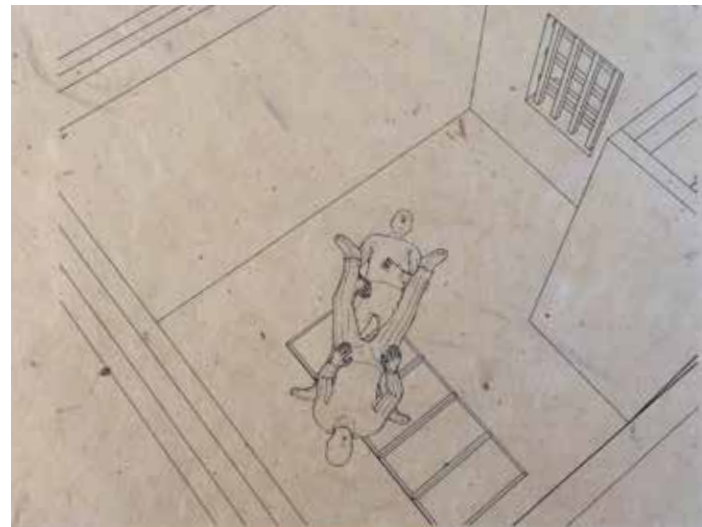
That was when the idea of making 3D models of the prison spaces was born.



Shahidul's Sketch, April 2019

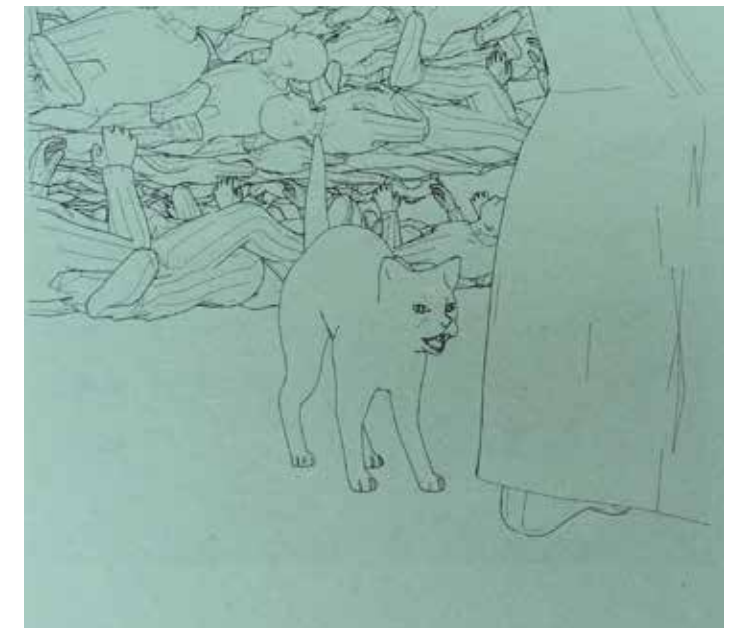
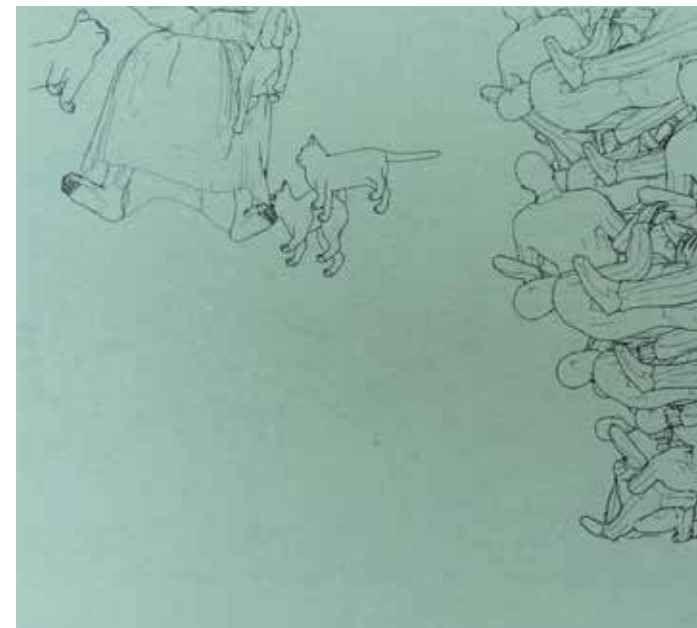


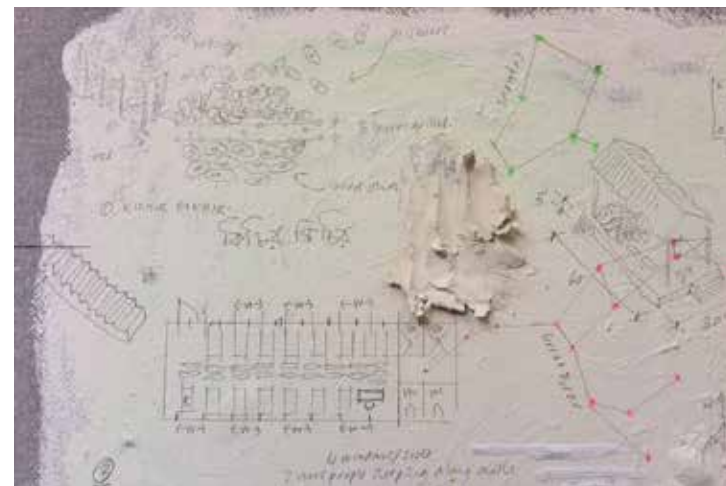
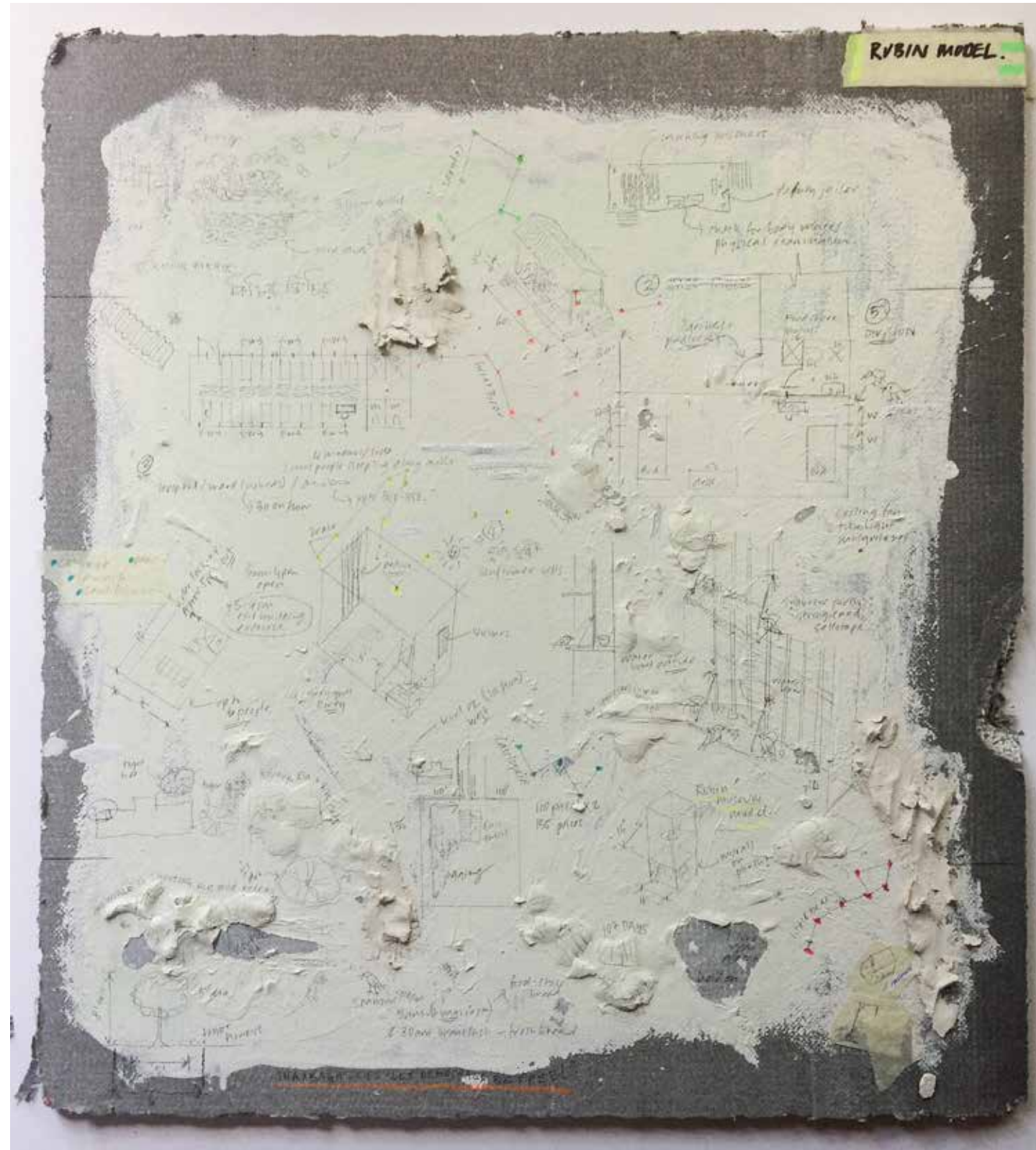
During his incarceration I often imagined the spaces Shahidul occupied, imagining if I could enter just for one day and hold his hand. My aunt, Rahnuma Ahmed, gave us news about my uncle after each visit, and from these stories I began to construct the spaces in my mind.



After his release Shahidul described the prison to me. He provided me with details and characters. As I listened in awe I was reminded of the way he used to tell me stories as a child, before his journey started, in a house that smelled of photo chemicals.

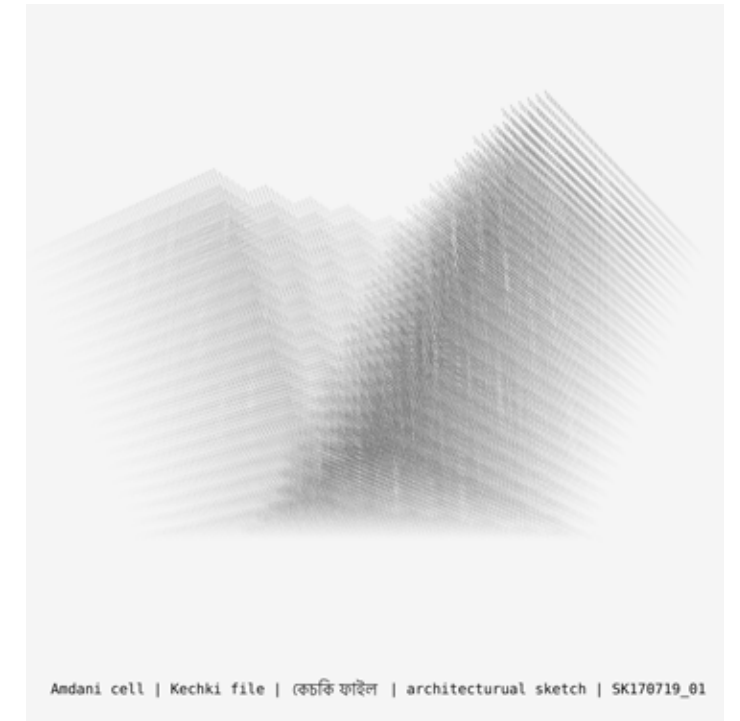
Using his memories and my imagination I began modelling the spaces in 3D, making drawings along the way.



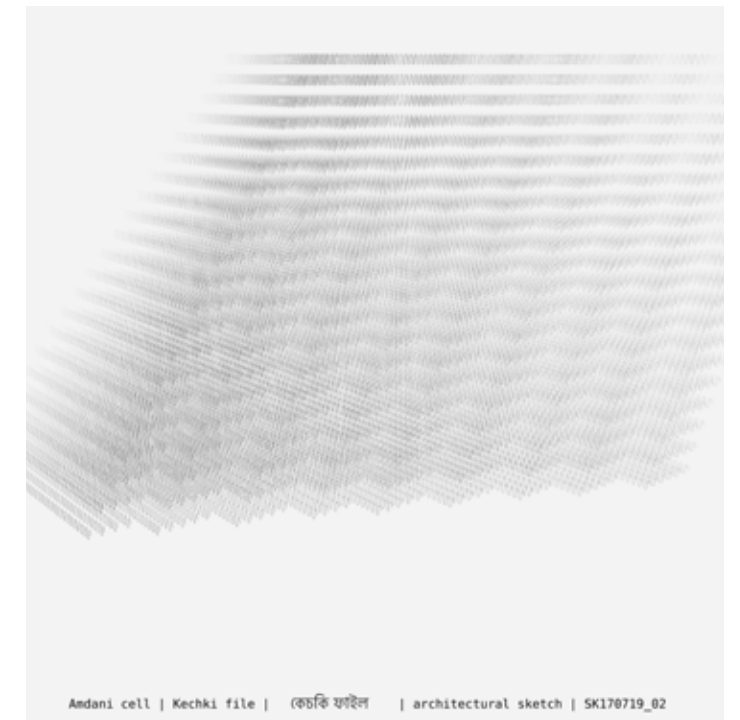
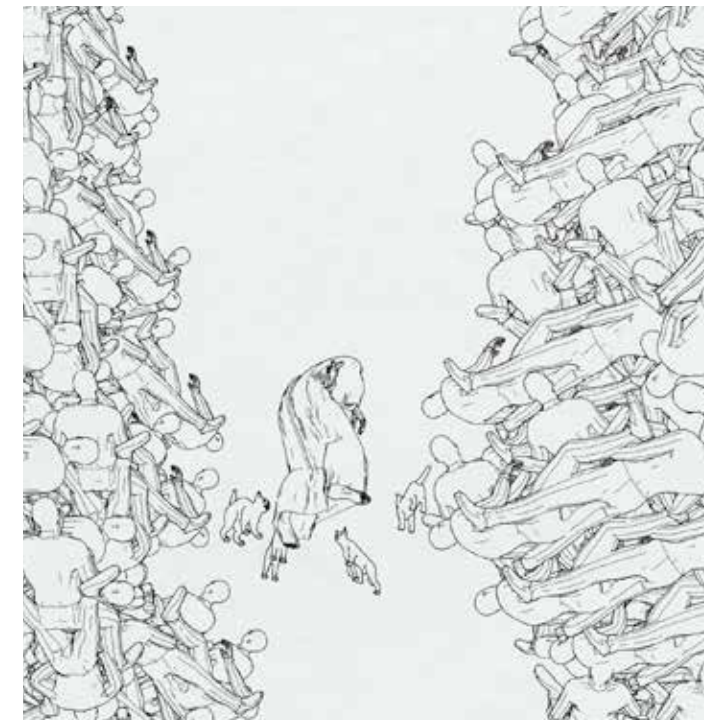


IV

My own ideas about architectural theory evolved in parallel. After everything that happened, I don't think I will ever design buildings in the same way again.



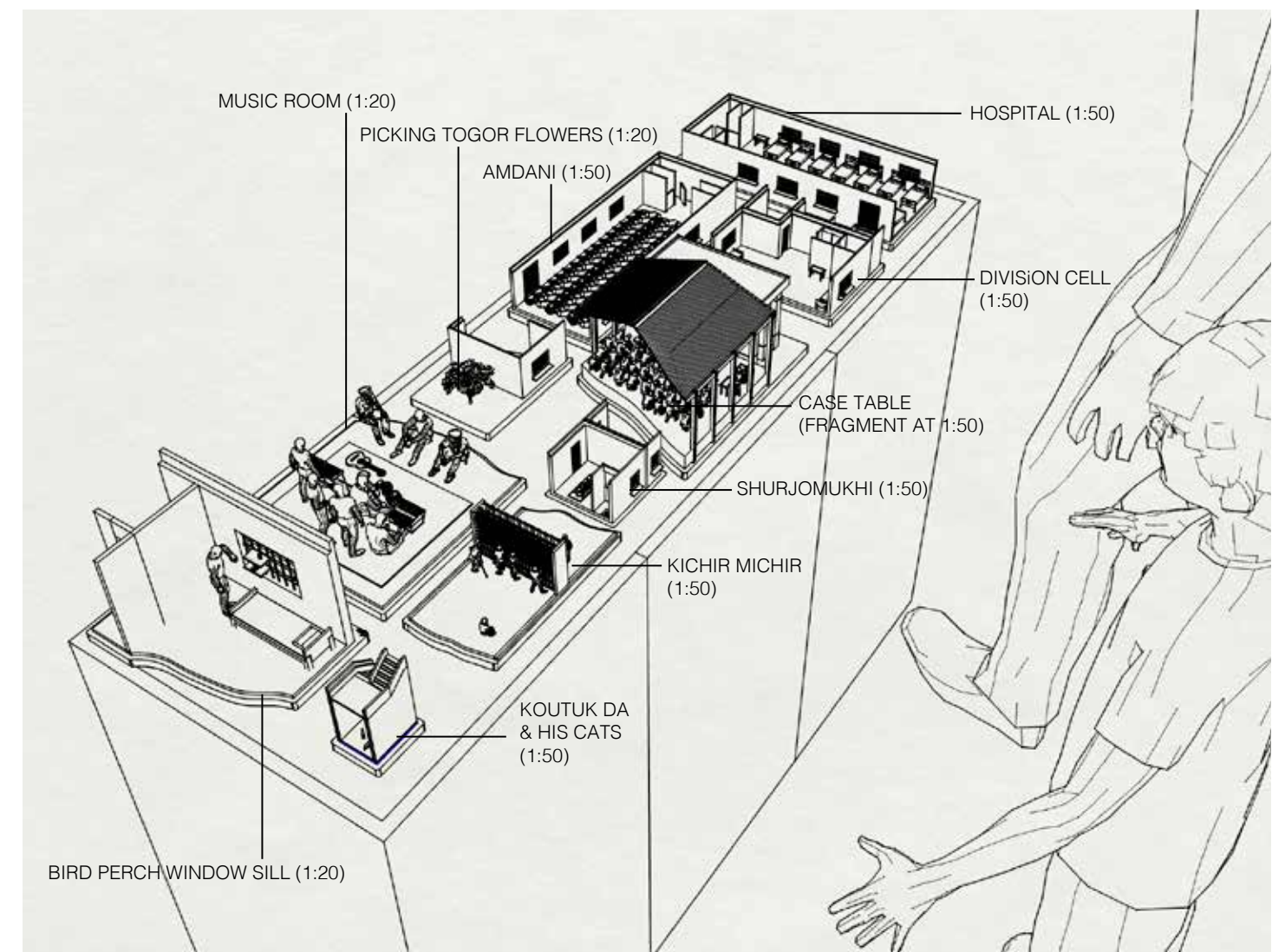
Andani cell | Kechki file | কেচকি ফাইল | architectural sketch | SK170719_01



Andani cell | Kechki file | কেচকি ফাইল | architectural sketch | SK170719_02

THE MODEL

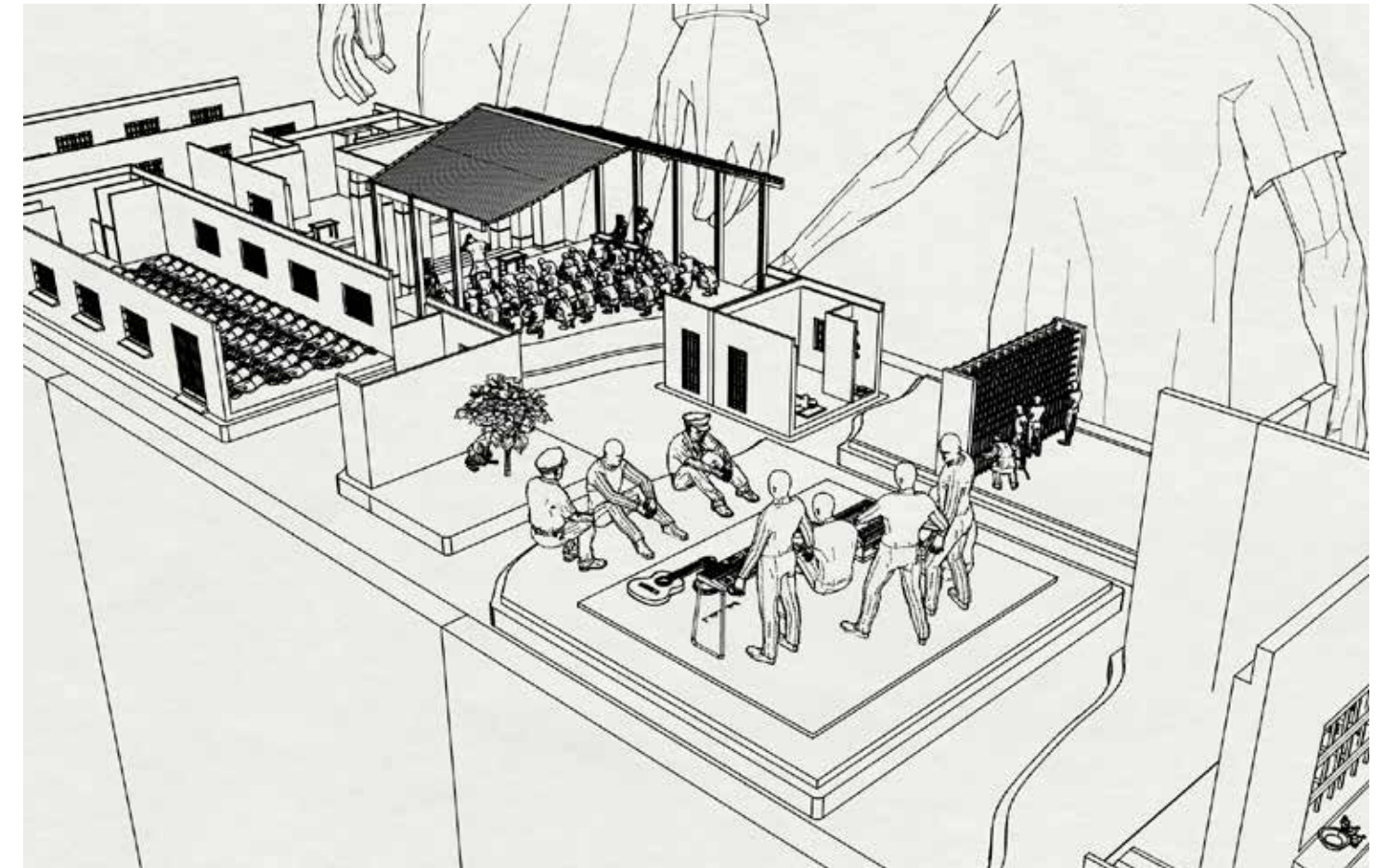
I selected ten spaces to model, ten fragments of Keraniganj, a new jail in Dhaka. Some are the spaces that Shahidul talked about the most. Others are spaces that stood out in my mind, because they tell stories that became prominent during the campaign or were meaningful to my family during that traumatic time.





The models offer a glimpse into the hidden world of Keraniganj jail and the lives of the people who inhabit it—a surreal netherworld where thousands are held in limbo.

The Togor tree continues to grow, the sparrows continue to fly, Koutuk-Da still prowls the corridors with his cats. Bodies lie in files in the Amdani cell, crammed together in the heat. All are locked in a state of imprisonment while the music plays on.

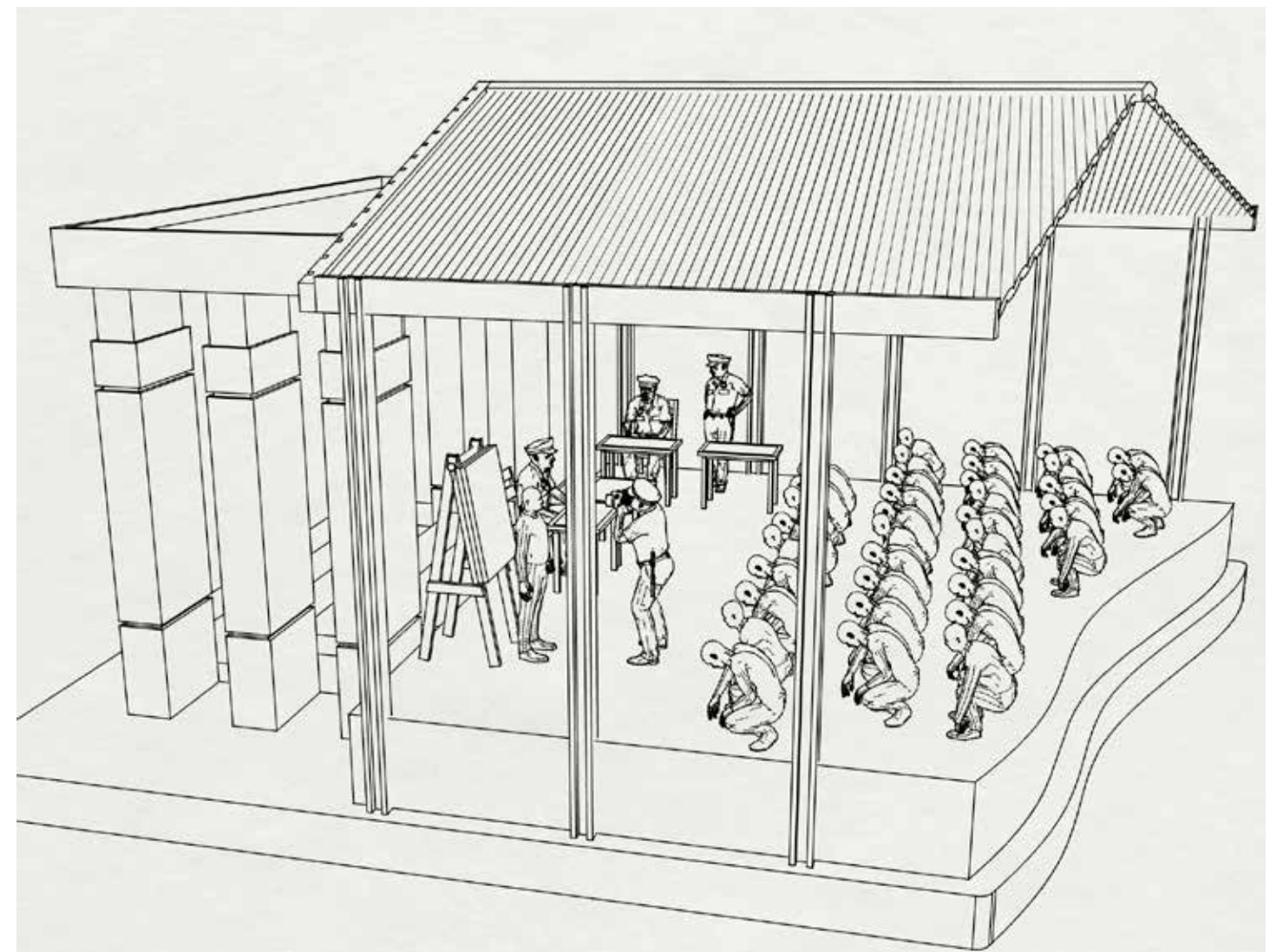


MODEL DESCRIPTIONS

1. Case Table

The point of arrival to Keraniganj jail.

Prisoners squat in rows. There is a head table and two side tables where officers gather information. Each prisoner undergoes a physical examination, and the condition of his body is noted. A mugshot is taken at the front of the room against a backdrop.



2. Amdani Cell

The holding cell.

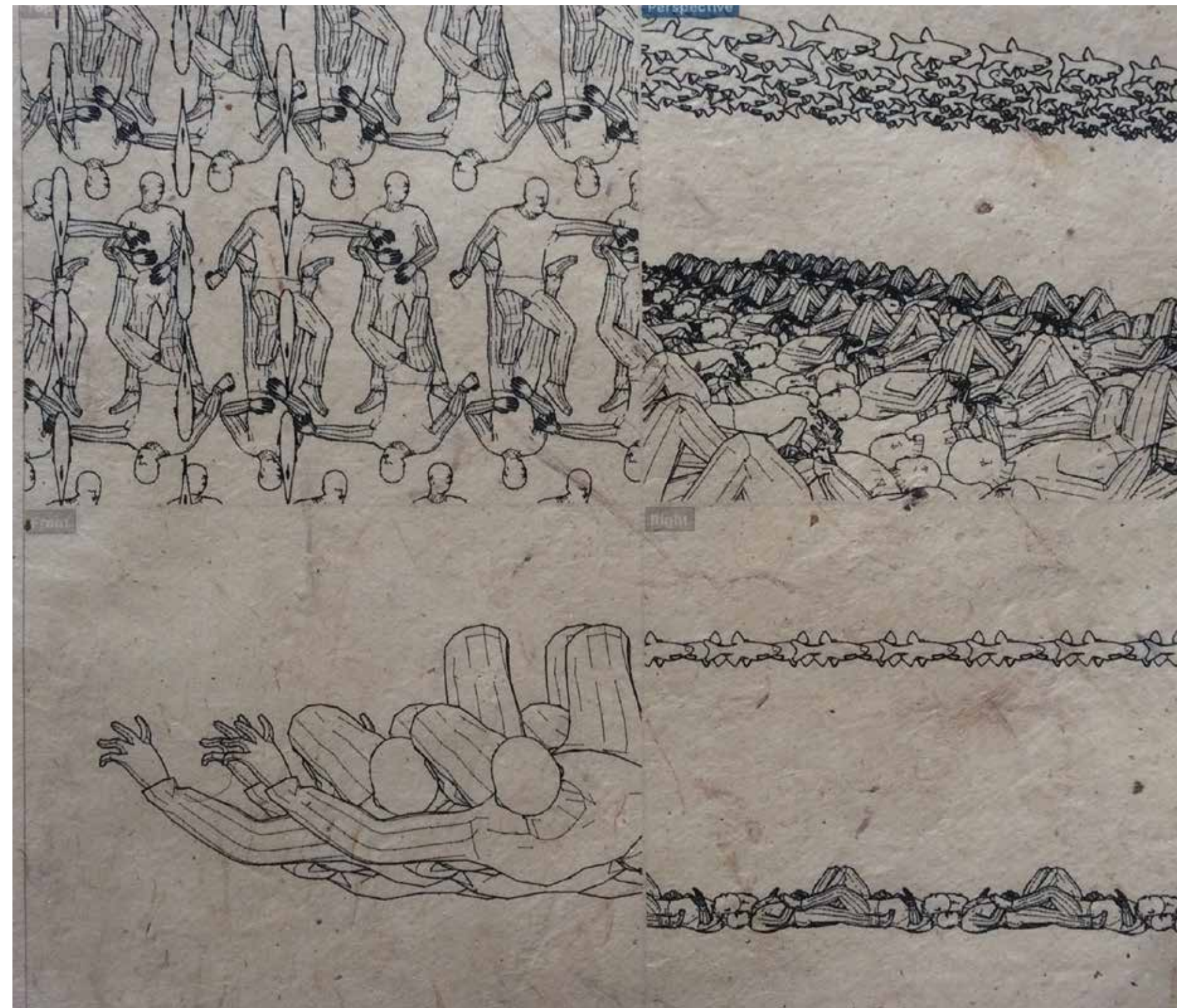
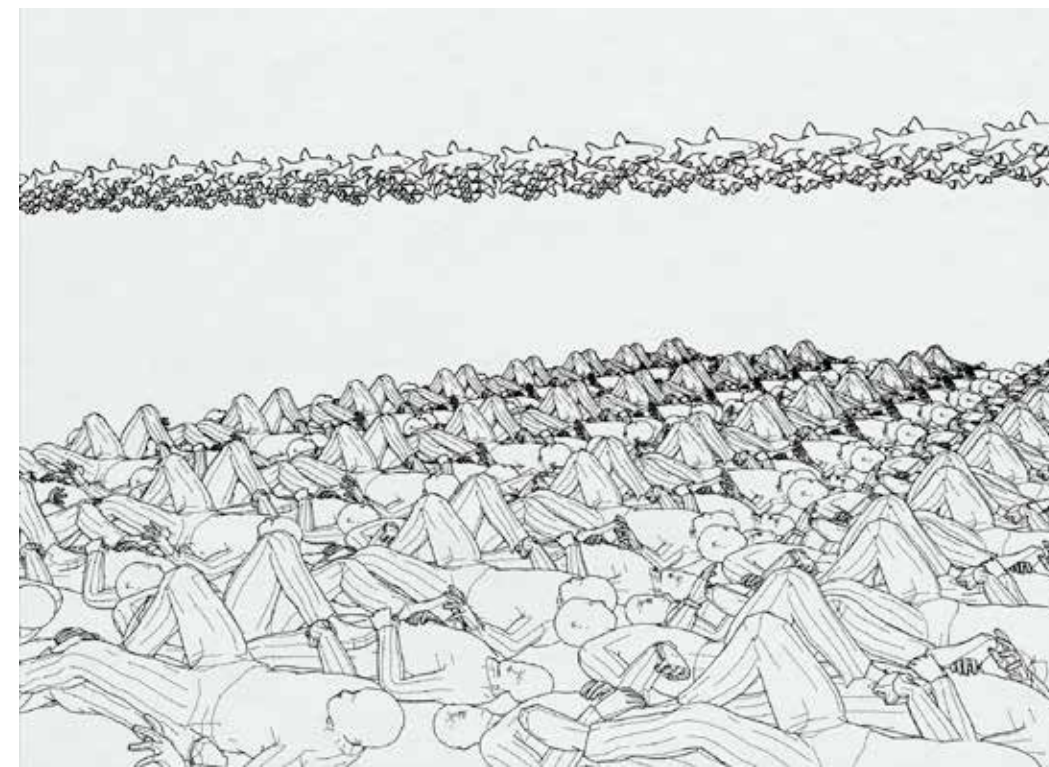
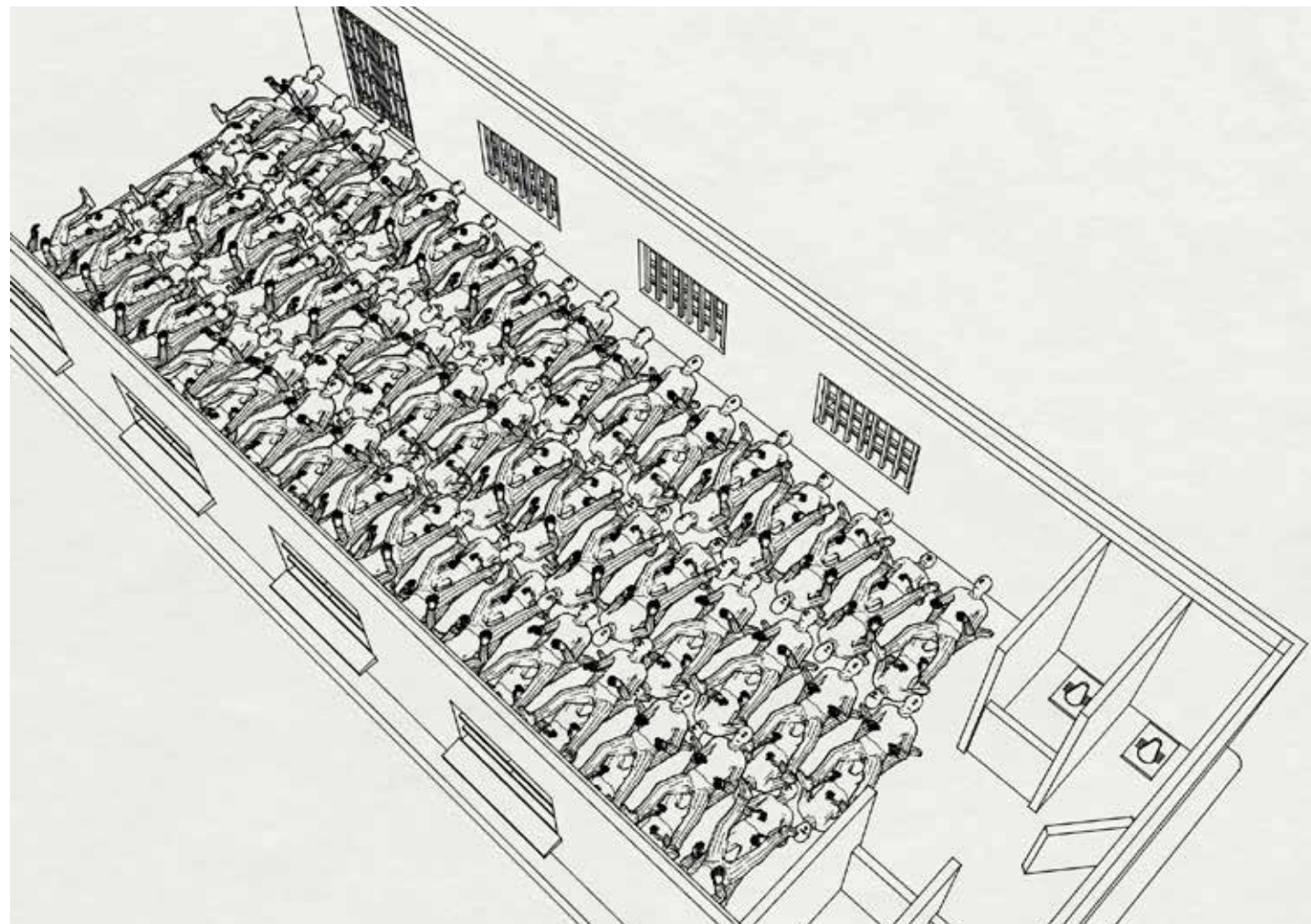
Prisoners are held here prior to being sent to their designated cell. The duration of the stay depends on how much a prisoner pays to get out. The cell is said to hold up to 350 prisoners at a time; the model shows around 100.

To pack in bodies at such a high density, prisoners arrange themselves in specific patterns, known as *kechki* file and *ilish* file (*kechki* and *ilish* are two types of Bangladeshi fish).

In *kechki* file, pairs of prisoners lie opposite each other, groin-to-groin, wrapping their legs around one another.

Those who pay extra can lie in *ilish* file, where each prisoner is allocated ten inches of space. They lie on their sides, slotting their bodies together.

Shahidul was able to bypass the Amdani cell entirely, without paying a penny.



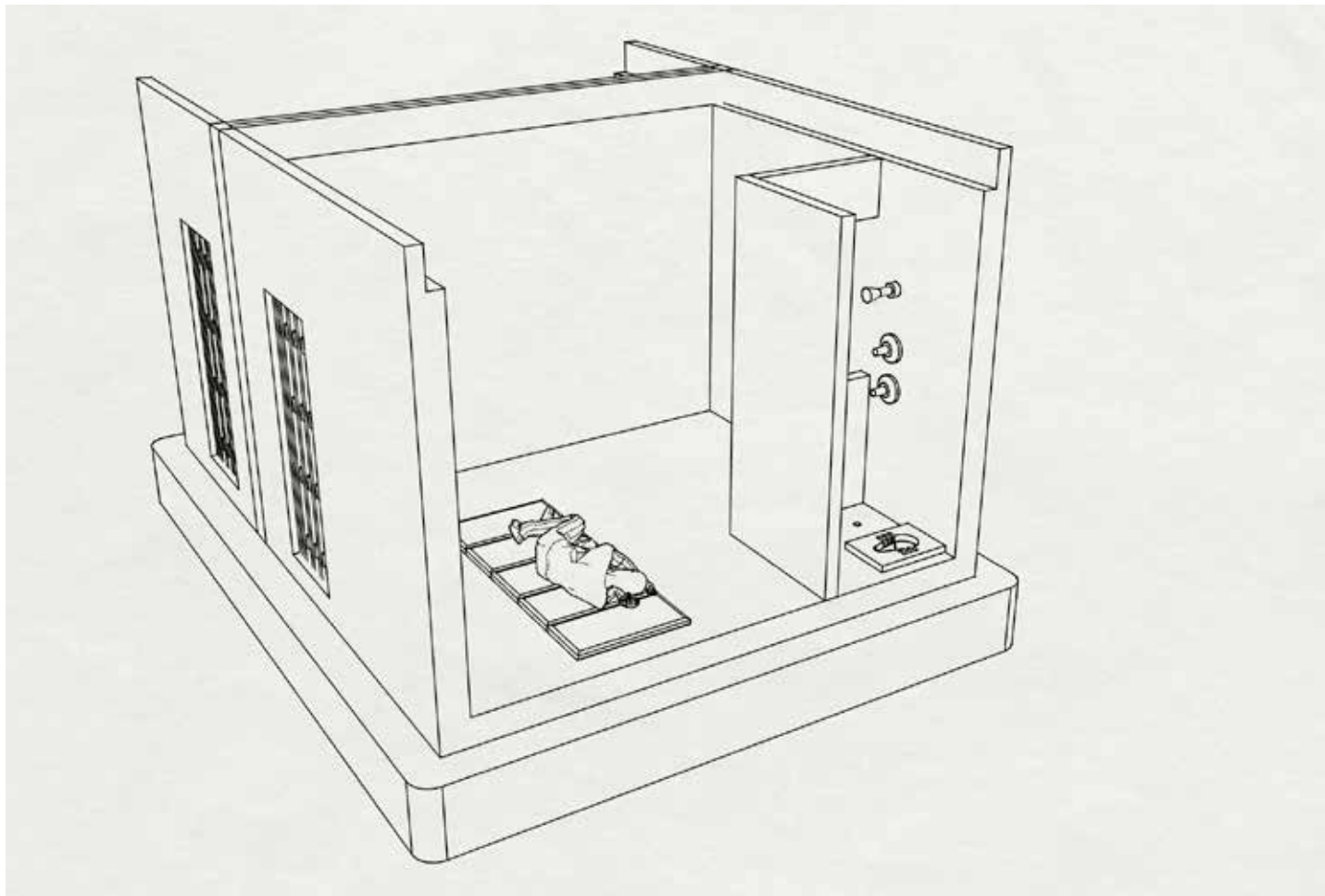
3. Shurjomukhi (“Sunflower” Cell)

The first cell Shahidul was held in.

Shahidul shared this space with one other prisoner. It can accommodate up to six.

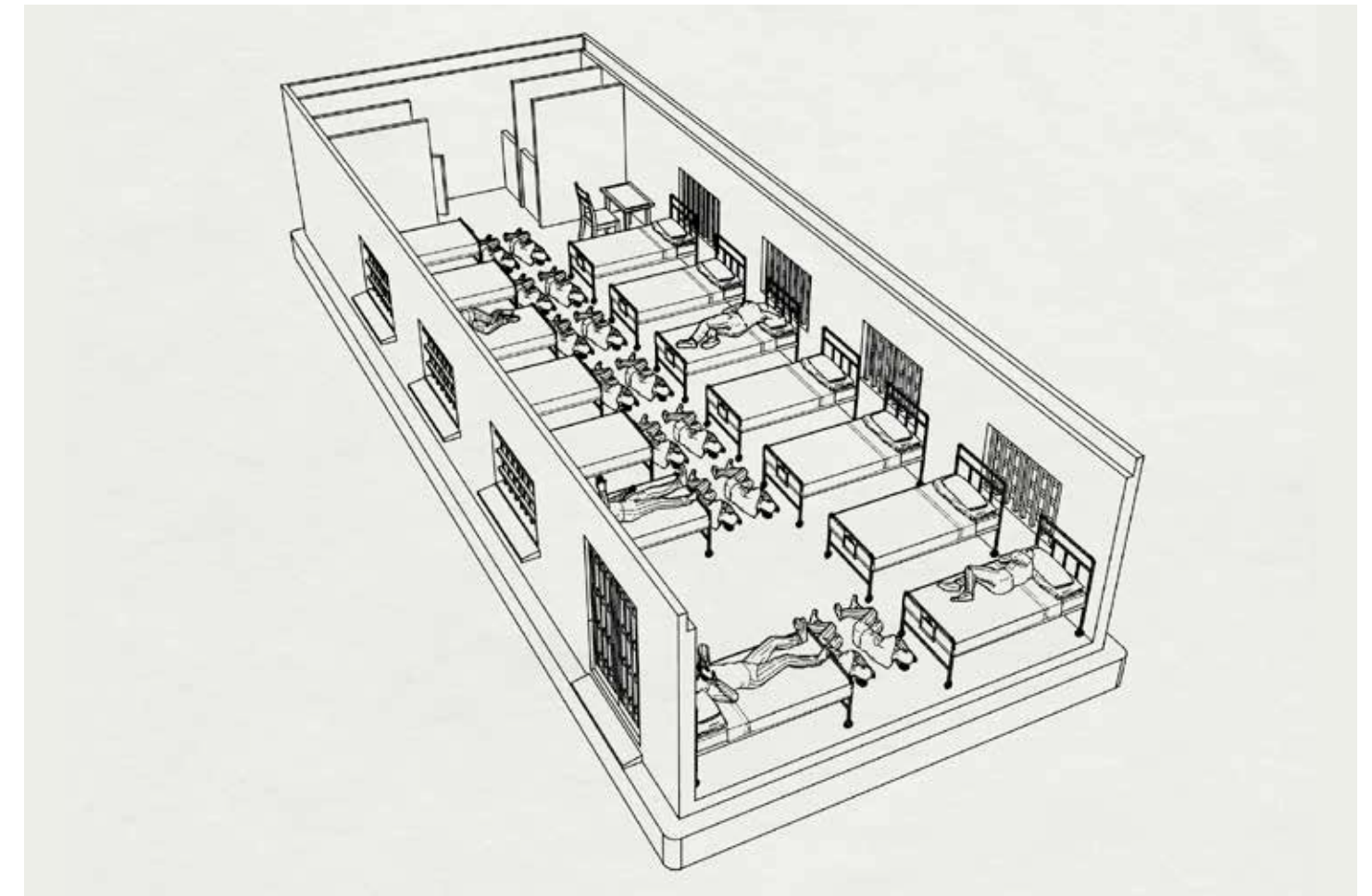
There was no bed. He slept on a dirty grey quilt on the floor. The toilet was a squatting toilet, a difficult situation for the elderly or infirm.

Shahidul was suffering from breathing difficulties, jaw pain, watery eyes, and psychological trauma (including flashbacks) in this cell. He was unable to chew solid food.



4. Hospital

Eventually Shahidul was moved from Shurjomukhi (“Sunflower” cell) and admitted to the prison hospital, a space with hospital beds along the walls and two rows of prisoners lying on the floor along the central aisle. The ward is a similar space, but without beds, where up to thirty prisoners lie on the floor.



5. Division

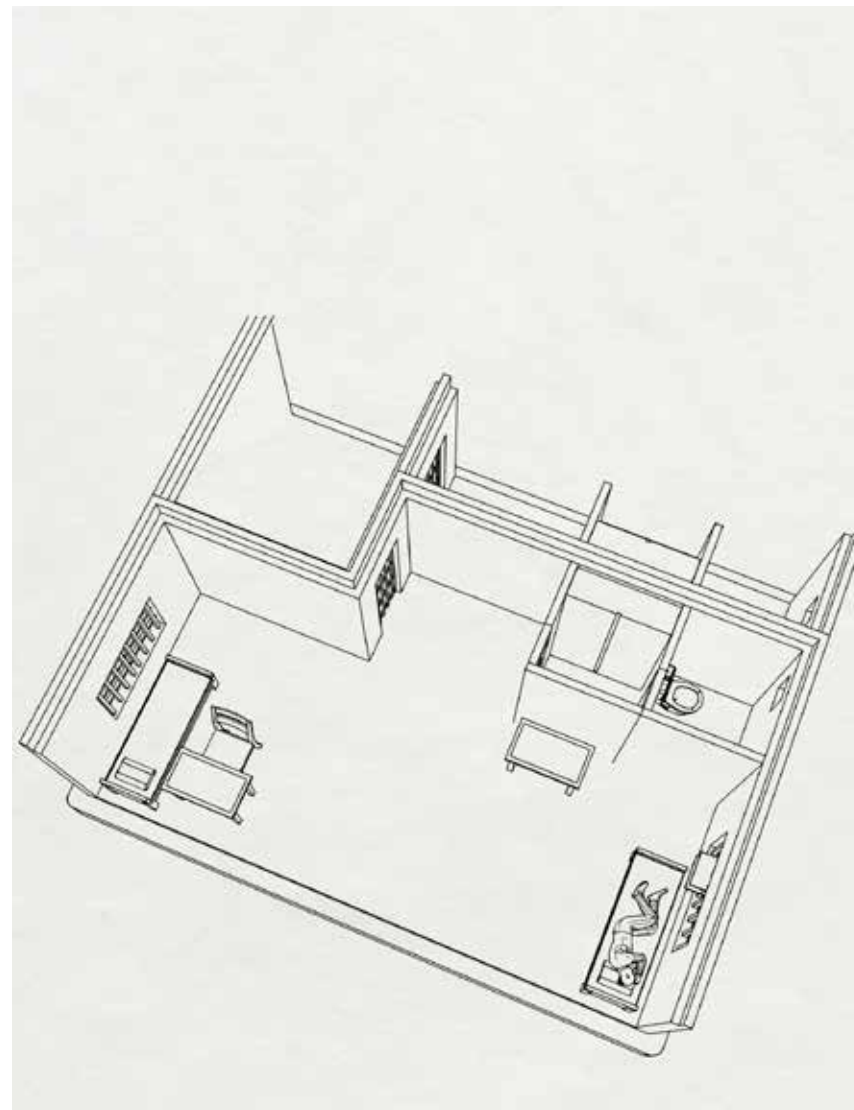
Division is higher status than the “commoner” cells. It is reserved for certain categories of prisoners (including Shahidul).

Initially Shahidul wanted to stay in Shurjomukhi, the “commoner” cells. But due to his deteriorating health we applied for him to be moved to Division. Facilities include a bed, pillow, fan, mosquito net, table, chair, and commode-type toilet.

In Division Shahidul formed a relationship with the sparrows that flew into the cell.

Just as Shahidul’s health began to improve, the government made a legal bid to have his Division status revoked. My mother was so upset she couldn’t sleep. To cheer her up my children and I put up a tent in her garden, and we all camped the night. I looked at the stars and wished the government would not succeed.

The government’s bid failed. Shahidul’s Division status remained.

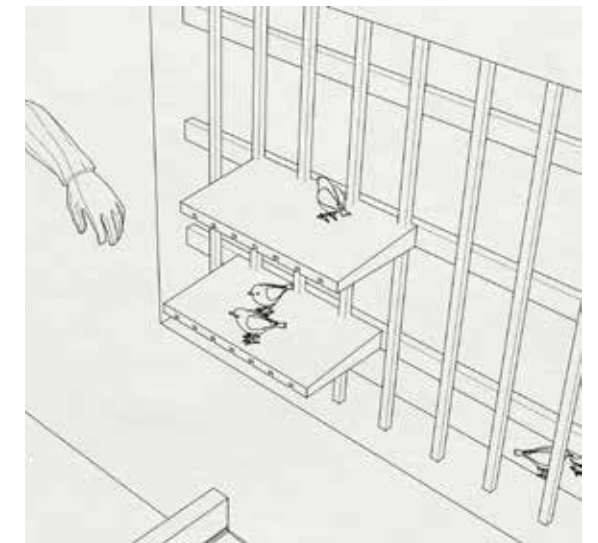
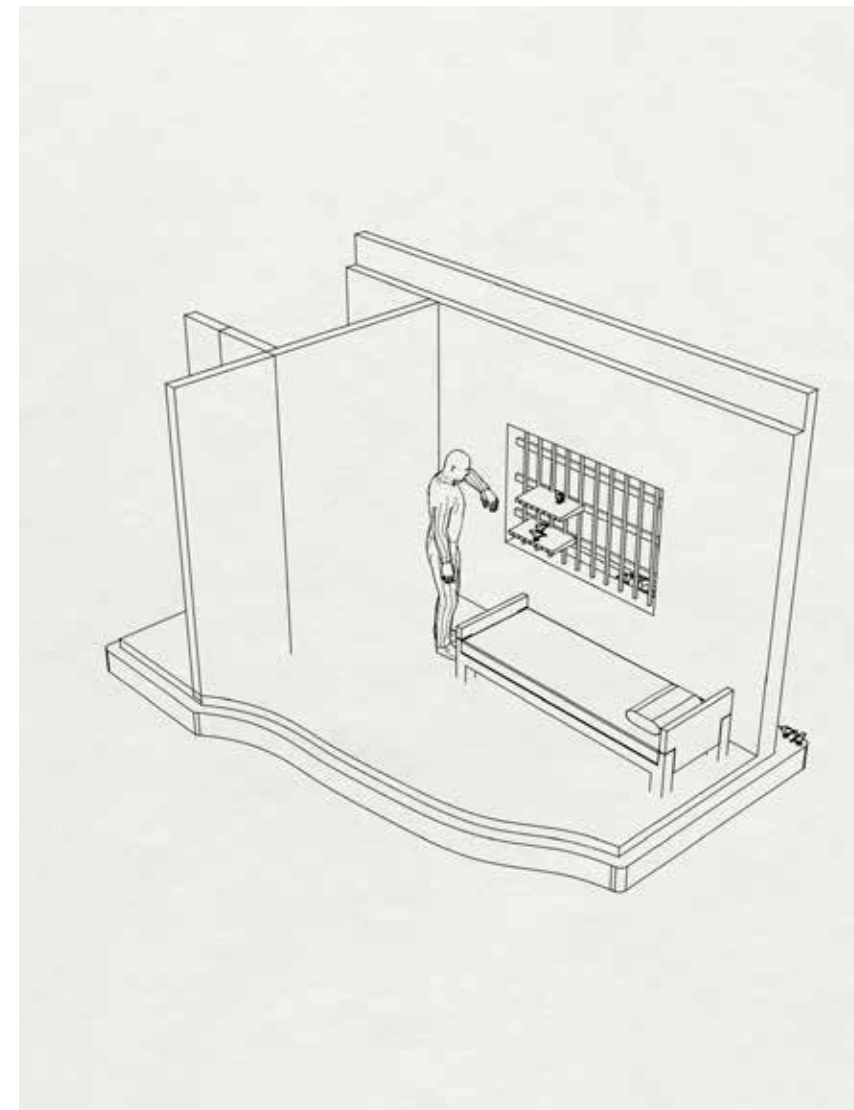


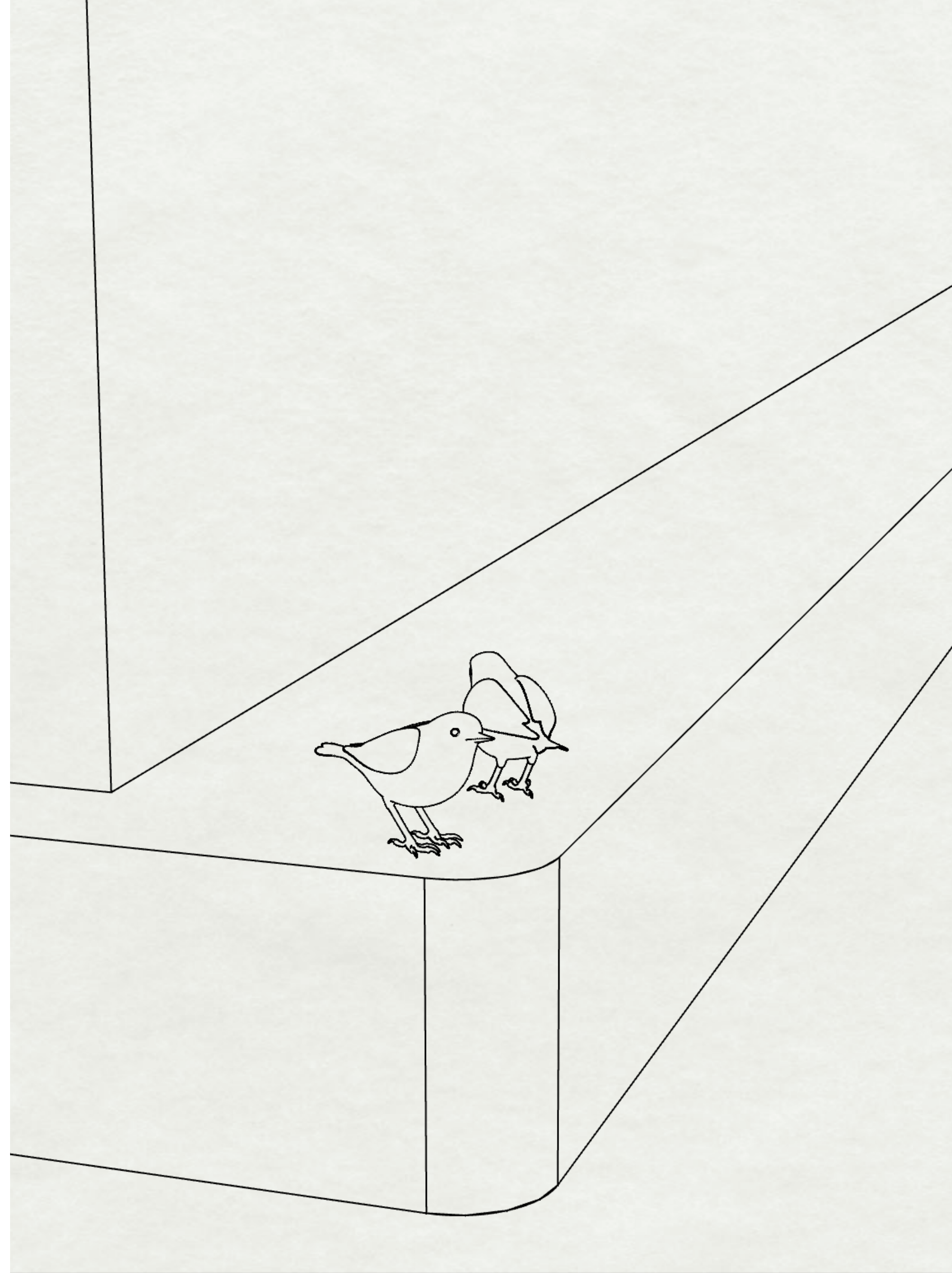
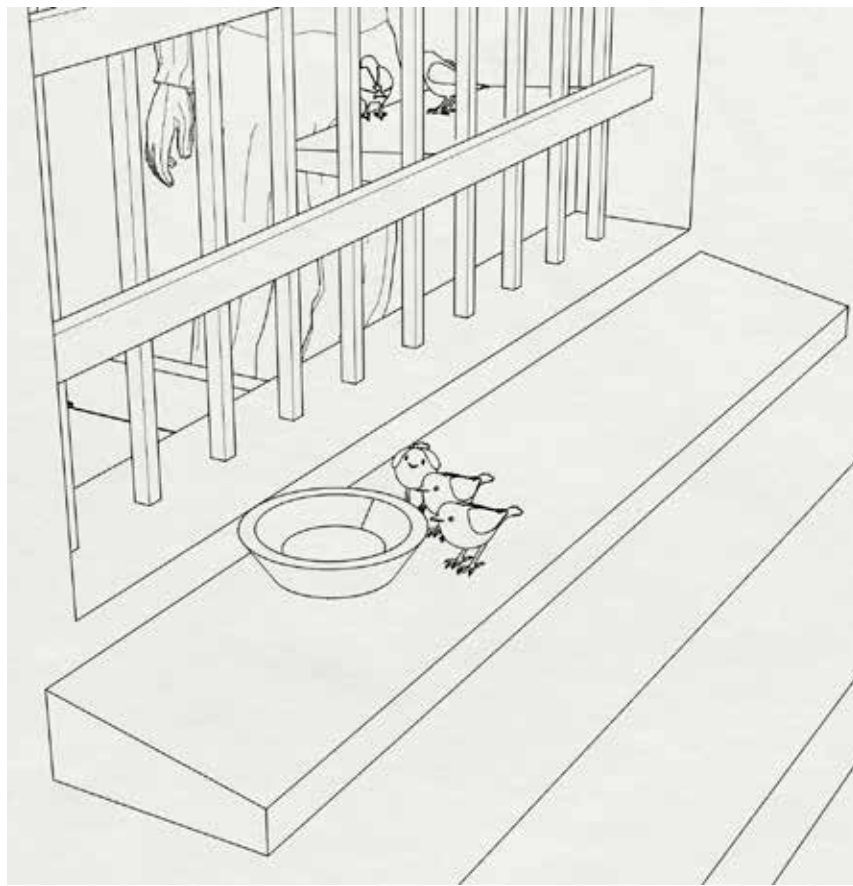
6. Bird Perch

A sparrow flew to Shahidul’s windowsill. He fed it. Soon the bird brought its friends, and they grew bold enough to fly into his cell. Shahidul made two feeding perches out of cardboard, tape, and string, which he fixed to his window bars. He fed the birds three times a day with food he reserved from his meals:

Stale bread stored in his cupboard at 5:00 a.m., when the birds were hungriest. Fresh bread from his breakfast at 8:30 a.m. Rice and chana-chur at lunch and dinner.

Shahidul has always loved animals. The story of the sparrows brought us comfort and became widely shared in the Free Shahidul campaign. These events were important—they provided hope to many around the world who were working hard for Shahidul’s release. I wrote the story of the sparrows on my aunt’s sari and tweeted it. James Estrin, co-editor of the Lens section of the New York Times, retweeted it to the world.





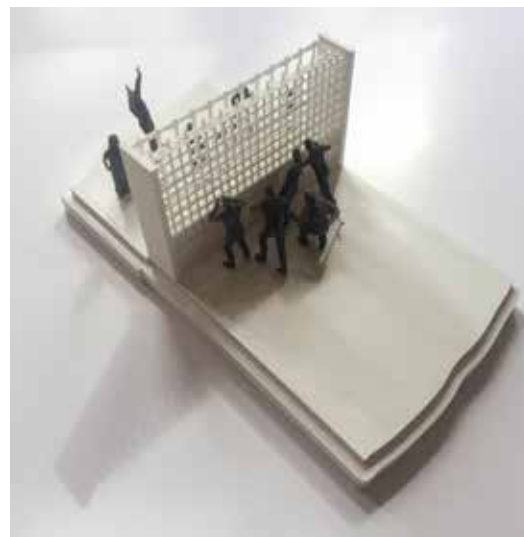
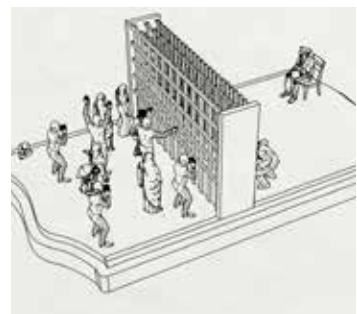
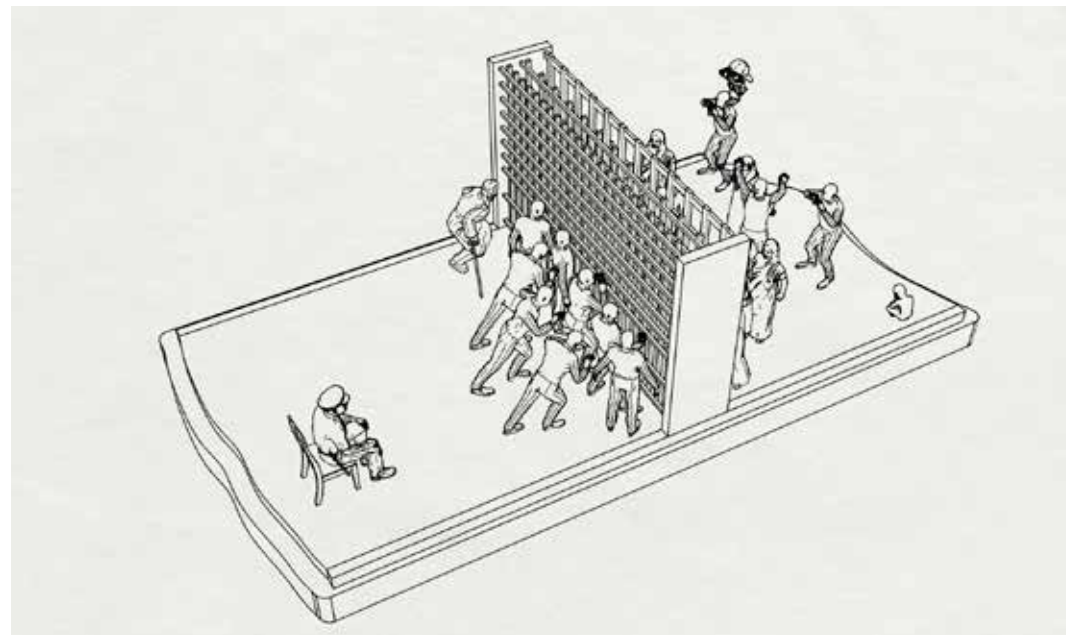
7. Kichir-Michir

The visiting room.

The visiting room is a communal space. Prisoners and visitors are divided by three layers of grilles. Prisoners, around sixty in number, heave and jostle, pressing against the grilles to catch a glimpse of their loved ones. It is almost impossible to communicate above the screaming din.

We came to call this space kichir-michir, which translates to “chatter of birds.”

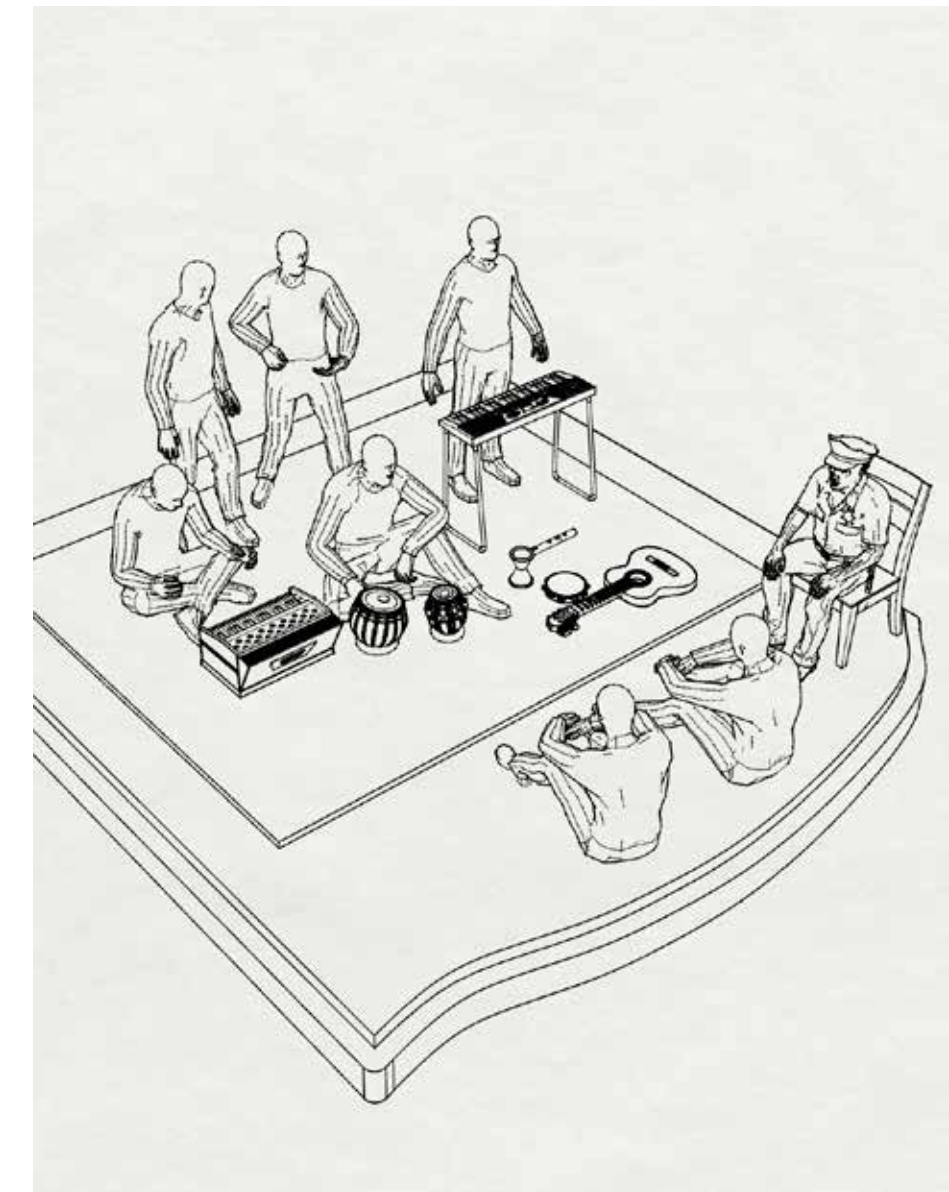
My aunt travelled a round trip of four hours daily to visit my uncle in kichir-michir. Once Shahidul moved to Division, she was also allowed a weekly half-hour (supervised) one-on-one visit with him.



8. Music Room

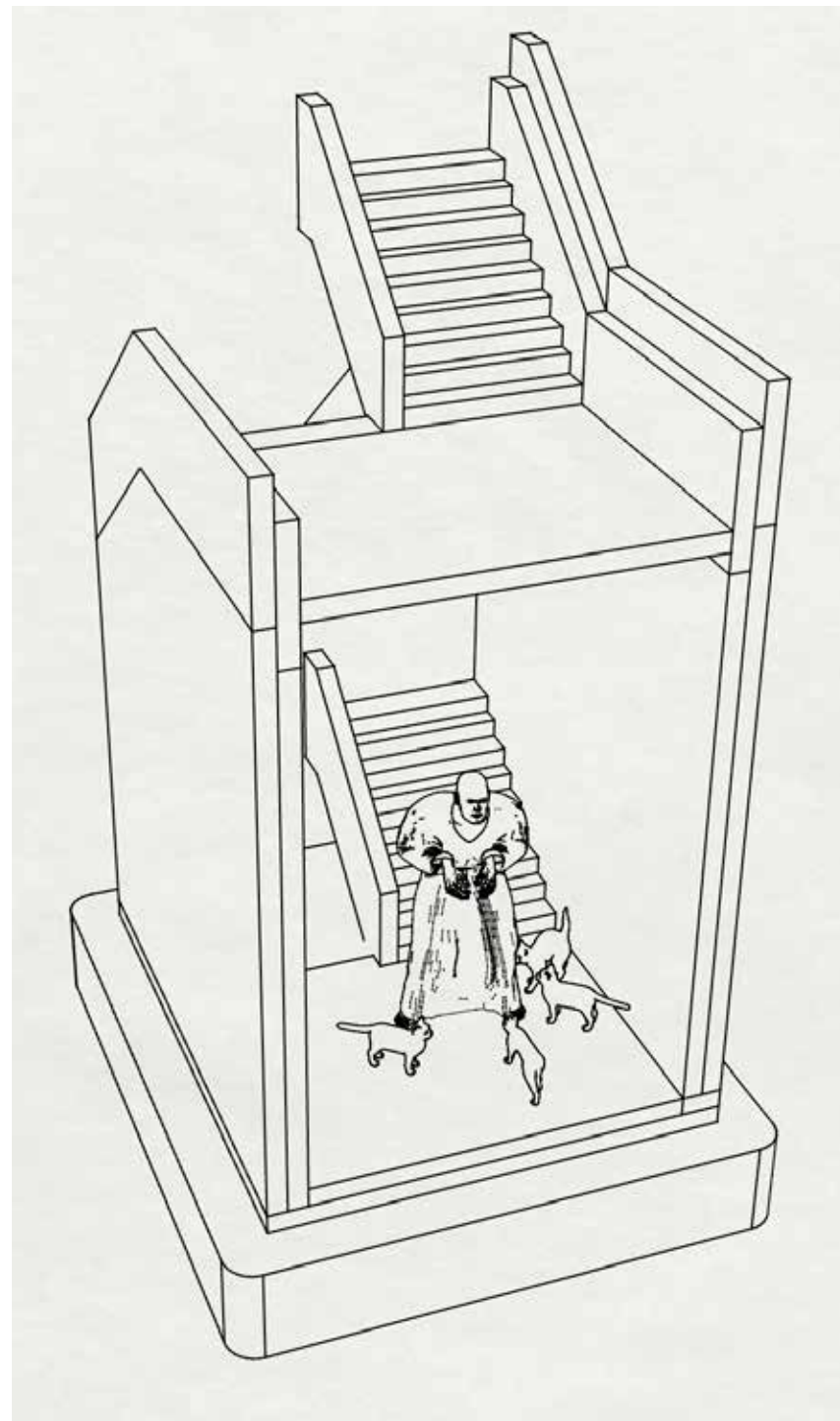
Shahidul managed to acquire secondhand musical instruments, and a band was formed. There was a keyboard, harmonium, guitar, Spanish tambourine, African dugdugi, tabla, and flute.

Since his release, the band has continued, and guards also attend performances. One of the prisoners has written over forty songs.



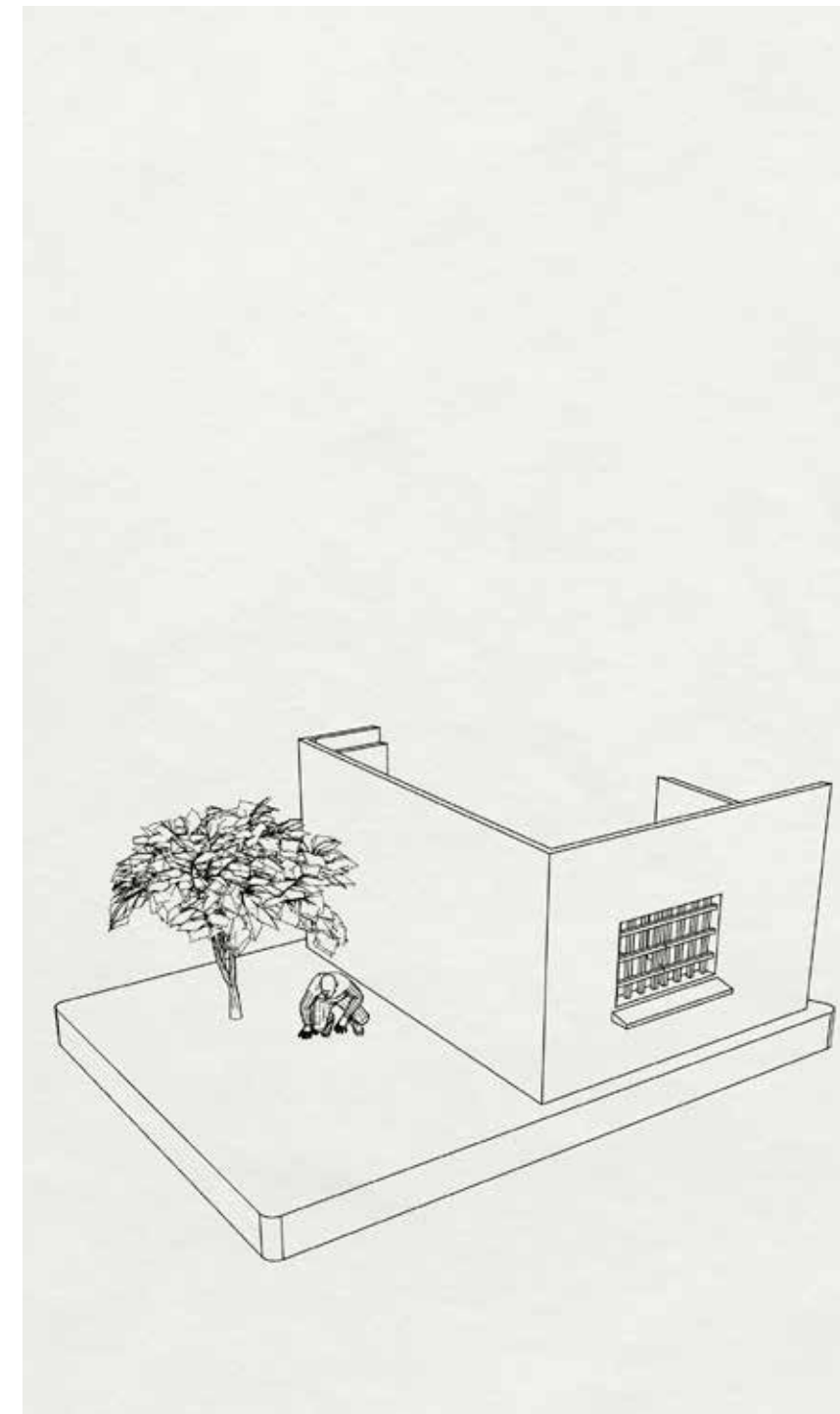
9. Koutuk-Da and His Cats

Koutuk-Da has around thirty cats that he brought with him from the old jail. He feeds them milk and together they wander the prison. The Bangla (Bengali) term *koutuk* translates to laughter, mirth, fun.



10. Picking Togor Flowers

In the yard there is a Togor tree. Shahidul gathered its white star-shaped flowers as gifts for friends, family, the teams at Drik Picture Library and Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, and all those campaigning for him. My aunt would bring them home, and we shared photos online to those campaigning in Bangladesh and across the world.



Shahidul Alam is my uncle, mentor, and artistic guide. He is my seventy-three-year-old mother's only living sibling. Shahidul and my aunt, Rahnuma Ahmed (Shahidul's partner), were instrumental in mine and my two sisters' upbringing.

I continue to think of the spaces of Keraniganj jail.

Sofia Karim, August 2019

