



@LARGE
AI WEIWEI
ON ALCATRAZ

ALCATRAZ BACKGROUND
@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz
Installation Locations

Ai Weiwei has created seven large-scale sculpture, sound, and mixed-media site-specific artworks for installation in four places on Alcatraz Island: the two-story New Industries Building, where “privileged” inmates were permitted to work; the main ward and psychiatric observation cells of the Alcatraz Hospital; the A Block cells, the only remaining section of the military prison that was constructed in the early 20th century; and the Alcatraz Dining Hall. With the exception of the Dining Hall, these spaces are not usually open to visitors, but all will be open to the public throughout the run of the *@Large* exhibition.

New Industries Building:

The New Industries Building is located on the northern end of the island. It was constructed from 1939 to 1941 for \$186,000 (approximately \$3.1 million in today’s dollars) as part of a \$1.1 million modernization scheme which also included the Water Tower, Power House, Officers’ Quarters and remodeling of the D Block. The building was designed so that guards could observe the two shops at once, enabling a more secure environment than the previous building, which had been the site of several escape attempts.

The ground floor of the two-story building contained a clothing factory, dry cleaning plant, furniture plant, brush factory, and office, where well-behaved prisoners were granted the “privilege” to work for money or earn time off their sentence. Many products for government use were produced by prisoners, including gloves, brushes/brooms, furniture, uniforms, and cargo nets. The laundry facility contained huge modern washers, dryers, extractors, presses, and mangles and occupied the entire upper floor, the largest in San Francisco at the time, and prisoners provided laundry services for most of the military bases in the area during World War II.

According to former prisoner accounts, working in the New Industries could be a welcome diversion, offering freedom from the claustrophobia of the cellhouse, and providing spectacular views of San Francisco and the Bay. However, for some inmates, the view was tormenting because it reminded them that actual freedom was so close, yet so far away.

Alcatraz Hospital:

Alcatraz staffed a fully functioning hospital throughout its military prison and federal prison years. A general practitioner doctor lived on the island, and specialists and surgeons came over from the San Francisco Public Health Service and the Presidio military base as needed. Medical care was one of only four “rights” Alcatraz inmates received (food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention). They had the right to line up for sick call every day, or request to be seen by a doctor. Hospital cells could hold six men each, but were generally limited to one man per cell for safety reasons.



The hospital included the Main Room, Operating Room, X-Ray Room, Hydrotherapy Room, and the Psychiatric Cells. According to both prisoner and guard first-person accounts, some inmates went insane whether from absolute monotony, absence of privacy, or complete lack of freedom. Al Capone spent time in a hospital cell suffering from syphilis and dementia; and Robert Stroud, the Birdman of Alcatraz, was moved to a hospital cell permanently for inciting riots and disruption among the general prison population.

A Block:

A Block is the only remaining section of the military prison that was constructed in the early 1900s; other sections of the cellhouse were remodeled when the prison became a federal penitentiary in the early 1930s. During the military prison era, six cells on the top tier of A Block were used for solitary confinement; the solid doors with just a few air holes were the equivalent of the "Hole" cells in D Block. The steps in the floor of A Block go down to the Citadel, the bottom floor of Fort Alcatraz, which dates from the 1850s. On a few occasions during its time as a military prison and in the early years of the federal prison era, storage areas in the Citadel were also used for solitary confinement.

There are significant differences in cell design and security between the minimum security military prison era cells in A Block and the later, maximum security cells in B and C Block. As a result, A Block cells were rarely used for containment during the federal era, with the exception of holding prisoners during strikes such as the 1936 demonstration and after the 1946 escape attempt. Some A Block cells contained typewriters, where inmates could type legal briefs or correspondence, and in the 1940s, several of the cells were combined to make a small space for administrative meetings. By the 1950s, much of A Block was used for offices and storage of extra equipment and property.

Dining Hall:

Alcatraz Dining Hall, often referred to as the Mess Hall, is where the prisoners and staff ate their meals. Supervised prisoners did all of the cooking, and the quality and variety of the meals were reputed to be the best in the prison system—Alcatraz officials claimed they spent more money for food per inmate than any other prison. The hall could seat more than 250 people, and dining protocol was a scripted and rigid process, with a whistle system to indicate which block and tier of men would move into and out of the hall at any given time, who sat where, where to place hands, and when to start eating. During the first decade of the federal prison era, prisoners were forbidden from talking while eating, although many would do so discreetly, and escape plans were often put forward this way. Inmates were permitted to eat as much as they liked within 20 minutes, provided they left no waste; waste would be reported and could make the prisoner subject to loss of privileges.

Security was tight, and in addition to unarmed guards on patrol in the hall, there were several tear gas canisters mounted on the ceiling, and armed guards on a catwalk kept watch. The armed guard in the west-end gun gallery also monitored prisoners in the hall. At the end of each 20-minute meal, the forks, spoons and knives were laid out on each table and counted to ensure that nothing had been taken as a potential weapon.

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