

Essay on prison architecture

[Design](#), [Architecture](#)



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Architecture Wallace Stegner once said, “ Nothing in our history has bound us to a plot of ground [since] feudalism once bound Europeans” (Stegner 301). The only exception is being imprisoned. For those who brake society’s set laws, “ Prisons and their many variants are built environments whose intended purpose is punishment, deterrence, rehabilitation and incapacitation” (Awofeso). Prisons began to be more widely used because the early Catholic Church disapproved of physical punishments.

In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII authorized that incarceration and lack of liberty will take the place of the “ eye for an eye” way of settling disputes previously employed (Awofeso). Today, architects are still debating what the best way to design a prison and punish guilty people is. Architects’ and theorists’ many differing morals such as how cruel one can treat an inmate, can influence their opinions of prisoner treatment and rehabilitation driving their designs to be unique, often having varying negative psychological effects on their inmates.

Jeremy Bentham, a theorist, had sketched quite a harsh prison concept in 1781 called the Panopticon. He believed prisons should be a form of strict discipline. His structure allowed one guard to watch all the prisoners without them knowing when they were being watched. “ The mental uncertainty implicit in prisoners’ not knowing when they are being watched was promoted as a crucial instrument of discipline” (Awofeso). The prisoners were to have no contact with any other inmates. The prisoner “ is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject incommunication” (Foucault 226).

Without being able to talk to one another, the inmates could not discuss their crimes and get encouragement to repeat them. There also exists no chance of a planned rebellion or escape, making it only necessary to have one guard. Bentham believes to truly punish the perpetrators; their authority and dignity must be undermined. They must be stripped of any power or worth they have. They are to constantly live without knowing when they are being watched, which would translate after they are released. The prisoners would be so used to acting as though they were being examined and possibly become better people outside the prison.

Bentham's Panopticon was never directly erected so the effects on prisoners are unknown. However, through Craig Haney's studies of other prisons, one can be sure Panopticism would have had adverse effects on those incarcerated there. Being watched constantly, Haney believes prisoners may, "labor at both an emotional and behavioral level to develop a "prison mask" that is unrevealing and impenetrable; many for whom the mask becomes especially thick and...[they find themselves] disincentive against engaging in open communication with others [and leads] them to withdrawal from authentic social interactions altogether" (Haney).

Panopticism would dull inmates to a point of no emotions. They would become accustomed to the paranoia of being seen so they hide their feelings and actions. And since they would have no contact with any other person, they could lose all communication skills. In today's society, the Panopticon's form of punishment may be dubbed by the Constitution as cruel and unusual punishment. In contrast, John Haviland designed The Eastern State Penitentiary in 1821.

The design was based off of the values of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons of “ correctional reform and social justice” (Eastern State Penitentiary) with a purpose to bring inmates to god and a righteous way of life. “ Many leaders believe that crime is the result of environment, and that solitude will make the criminal regretful and penitent” (Eastern State Penitentiary). The designer utilized unique architectural details to enhance the religious atmosphere to encourage this regret.

He incorporated components of famous religious architecture such as the immense churches built in the era of grand Gothic and Romanesque cathedrals to enforce the idea that god is almighty and constantly watching. Their hope was to have the prisoners repent their crimes and embrace a new life of innocence. Haviland factored in a religious element into almost every detail of the structure. The facade is fitted with lancet windows and stained glass. The entrances to the cells are small and short, forcing the new inmate to bow his or her head to enter.

Inside the cells themselves, the sole form of light is a skylight representing the light of God or the all seeing eye of God. This system attempts to spiritually cleanse the new comer or in other words, the approach to the prison is a realization of one’s sins, the entrance into the cell is an act of submission, and the time spent in the cell is the beginning of a new life of holiness. The prisoners of Eastern State Penitentiary were not permitted to have contact with anyone, not even the guards.

The inmates were meant to not even know where they were and were often masked when entering the building and their dwelling. Wendell Berry once

stated “ If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are” (Stegner 299). This was meant to allow the prisoners to have a fresh start and a new beginning; to become a new and improved human being. Haviland wished to truly improve the lives of the individual prisoners and society at large in a way he thought was philanthropic. Although Haviland’s intentions seemed benign, studies show that isolation can be one of the cruelest forms of punishment.

In fact, “ there are few if any forms of imprisonment that produce so many indices of psychological trauma and symptoms of psychopathology in those persons subjected to [isolation]” (Haney). With a lack of communication with others, “ many may develop emotional flatness that becomes chronic and debilitating in social interaction and relationships, and find that they have created a permanent and unbridgeable distance between themselves and other people” (Haney). There is quite a list of possible negative psychological effects including clinical depression, paranoia, rage, helplessness, violence, and cognitive dysfunction to name a few (Haney).

If Haviland knew of these side effects, maybe he would have designed the Eastern State Penitentiary differently. Today, the average United States prison is quite different than the ideas of Haviland and Bentham. The prisons are known to have many negative trends. They usually tend to be very overcrowded with two or more prisoners sharing a cell with men or women they have never met before living in close quarters with often one toilet in a cell with no privacy. Most are subjected to extreme violence and intimidation from both other inmates and often overworked staff.

Many prisoners live in constant fear that they will be harmed physically or mentally by their peers. This type of prison system is not very effective. “ Few people are completely unchanged or unscathed by the experience ... [and] suffer long-term consequences from having been subjected to pain, deprivation, and extremely atypical patterns and norms of living and interacting with others” (Haney). Many cannot re-adjust to normal life outside prison where every activity and meal is organized for them. Some continue to be violent or paranoid that violence will be done unto them. Therefore, some designers have unique ideas to counter these negative effects like Josef Hohensinn. Josef Hohensinn believes the prison system should be changed. He believes “ The more normal a life you give them [in prison], the less necessary it is to resocialize them when they leave” (Lewis). So, he created a resort-like prison in Leoben, Austria. His structure features floor to ceiling windows, full kitchens, and balconies.

It is still secure; it is in a completely isolated area, the glass is all shatterproof, and the balconies all have bars. In Hohensinn’s opinion, prisons are merely a place to hold captives for a period of time. The inner workings of more common prisons are not natural and cause criminals to become possibly more dangerous by stripping them of their dignity, often abusing them, and making them slowly forget how to live a normal life. “ About 67 percent of the prisoners who are released are arrested again within three years” (Lewis) in a normal prison.

Hohensinn believes it’s just “ an expensive way of making bad people worse” (Lewis). Above the door of his building, there is a quote that reads “ All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and

with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person” (Lewis). His type of prison is very controversial. It was erected only eight years ago so the effect on inmates and the return rate are still unknown, however in comparison to the Panopticon and Eastern State, Leoben should have no negative effects on prisoner’s mental health.

Craig Haney says “ There is little or no evidence that prison systems across the country have responded in a meaningful way to these psychological issues, either in the course of confinement or at the time of release,” so Hohensinn is one of the first (Haney). The inmates at Leoben are permitted to have normal contact with others eliminating any social problems that may occur from solitary confinement. They are also allowed to cook and eat when and what they choose. Prisoners typically are denied their basic privacy rights, and lose control over mundane aspects of their existence that most citizens have long taken for granted” which can be the most damaging (Haney). The scheduled life style employed by common American prisons causes inmates to be unaware how to run their lives when they return home. But with Hohensinn’s design, they maintain a normal life, just in another place away from society for a while. While many may not find his prison a true form of punishment, it stands to be the best way to date of how to treat inmates so they have less of a need to readjust to normal life in society.

Architecture can reveal so much about how a society or person wishes to discipline and rehabilitate law breakers (Awofeso). There are few laws and regulations dealing with architecture of prisons in particular, therefore the architect has significant freedom to design a facility he or she sees as fit and productive. All plan to benefit society even if it is through very different

ways. While some wish to punish cruelly like Jeremy Bentham, others wish to reform and improve the lives of these criminals. Both ways can be effective.

If prisoners are punished cruelly, they may be too intimidated to commit another crime for fear of being imprisoned again. But if they are reformed, they may have the understanding of why the crime should not be committed in the first place. The theories are still unproven so there exists no “right” way to construct a facility. It remains up to the governing officials to approve and fund the architect’s designs and set them into action. Possibly in the future there will be a set way the world treats those who disobey the law, but today’s designs and the designs of the past remain up to the unique individuals who create them.