

The Human Factor in Prison Design: Contrasting Prison Architecture in the United States and Scandinavia

Prison design is a controversial topic in the field of architecture. The “all-seeing” Panopticon prison of the eighteenth century introduced by British social reformer Jeremy Bentham brought academic attention to the issue of prison design. Two centuries later, French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault used the Panopticon as a metaphor for society and its power to control beyond the physical.

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In the United States, there are two penal and prison systems -- the Pennsylvania System and the Auburn System. The Pennsylvania penitentiary system was influenced by the idea of penitence; solitude was thought to serve as punishment as well as giving time for reflection and contrition. The prison designs often recall the Panopticon with centralized configurations. The opposing system is known as the Auburn System, after the eponymous facility in New York, where imprisonment was punishment instead of a chance for reformation. It was at Auburn where the core idea of total surveillance from Bentham’s Panopticon became a reality. The Auburn system and corresponding architecture have been described as “machine-like” where prisoners are kept in tiny cells under total control. Since the 19th century, the Auburn System has predominated prison design and theory in the United States.¹

In American society today some resist involving architects in creating prison facilities. “Architecture” for these buildings is discouraged.² The environments in American prisons create opportunities for violence, tension, and hostility in inmates.³ Even employees in American prisons have been found to have a higher risk of various stress-related health issues.⁴ In 2013, Pelican Bay super-max prison, with its “8x10-foot, soundproof, poured-concrete cells with remote controlled doors and no windows,” provoked hunger strikes across California in solidarity for the appalling living conditions. Simultaneously, a petition to the American Institute of Architects attempted to forbid architects from creating prisons.⁵ Most of the debate concerning prison architecture has centered on the ethics of the architect’s role in prison design. Why would an architect create a space that has such negative effects on human life and morale? Yet, what these events prove is that there is a dire need in places like Pelican Bay for the touch of an architect.

Different approaches to crime and criminals also reveal different justice systems and the public's beliefs about punishment. The justice system in the United States has a largely negative reputation and is often criticized both within and outside of the country, while Scandinavia is internationally known to have one of the most humane prison systems. Exploring the two extremes of Scandinavian and American approaches to prison design -- to determine how the differences affect the inmates and the overall effectiveness of the prison system -- illustrates the importance of considering the human experience in the design of these buildings.

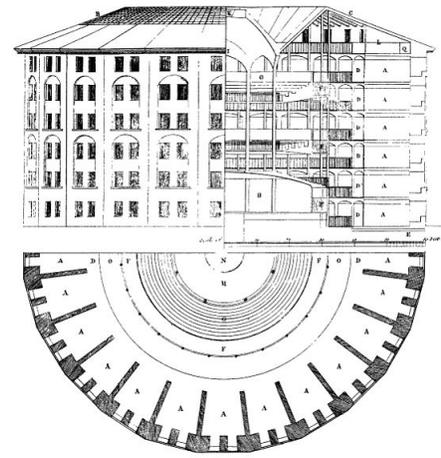
A BRIEF HISTORY OF MODERN PRISON DESIGN

A criminal-reformation line of thought in the early modern period instigated the creation of new types of buildings for imprisonment as punishment.⁶ The Enlightenment philosophy advocated solitary confinement as a way to give prisoners time to reflect and repent.⁷ Over time, prisons took distinct forms meant to solve the problems and behavior of the inmates, signaling the beginning of self-conscious prison architecture.⁸

In the late eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham devised his revolutionary scheme for an "all-seeing" Panopticon prison. It was a prison with a centralized configuration around a guard tower from which a supervisor could maintain constant surveillance of all prisoners while himself being shielded by a beam of directional light. Bentham's Panopticon has inspired considerable theory as well as physical solutions for prison architecture with centralized planning.⁹

At the beginning of the nineteenth century in the United States, two penal systems existed; the penitentiary, focused on the idea of penitence, was one approach and the other was imprisonment as punishment instead of as a chance for reformation.¹⁰ The so-called Pennsylvania System was epitomized in Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, the first facility where the penitentiary philosophy was put into practice.¹¹ The design recalled the Panopticon in its centralized configuration. Unlike in earlier American prisons, at Eastern State almost complete solitude was to be maintained day and night. The reformers believed that if punishment and reform took place in solitude, the problems such as physical violence and collusion between prisoners, security problems, and unhealthy conditions, which were all common to other prisons, could not occur.¹² Influenced by Quaker philosophy and the idea of penitence, solitude was thought to serve as punishment as well as to give time for reflection and contrition.¹³

The Auburn System, named after Auburn Prison in New York, emphasized the imprisonment itself as punishment. Auburn Prison immediately encountered multiple problems concerning the living conditions of the cells, in which the most serious offenders spent their entire sentence. The prison became known for inadequate heating, dampness, rodents, and a high level of insanity and illness among the prisoners confined to the tiny spaces (seven feet six inches by three feet eight inches and seven feet high).¹⁴ Eventually those involved in the design and running of the prison devised a solution that allowed inmates to spend some time outside of their cells; inmates would work together silently during the day under a strict schedule and be confined to cells only during the night. This system, which was adopted by all states except Pennsylvania, has been described as "machine-like" with the goal of keeping prisoners under "complete, demeaning control at all times,"¹⁵ ensuring that imprisonment itself was a severely punishing experience. Although Eastern State took design inspiration from Bentham's Panopticon,



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Figure 1: Elevation, section, and plan of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon penitentiary, William Reveley (1971)¹⁶

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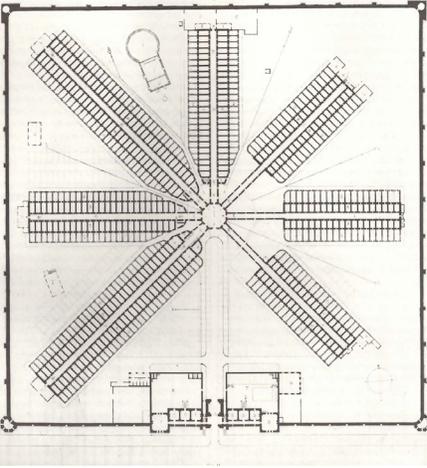


Figure 2: Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, 1821, plan as completed 1836, Frederic-Auguste Demetz and Guillaume Abel Blouet (1837)²⁹

it was at Auburn where the core idea of total surveillance became a reality. The Auburn philosophy and corresponding architecture were largely determined by builders who had the main responsibility of containing all of the inmates in their institutions in an orderly way, not by architects who could have created a more humane solution within the necessary constraints.¹⁷ Yet, the Auburn System predominated as the prison model in the United States.¹⁸

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, isolating each prisoner in the solitary confinement model had become too costly, leading to an increased focus on industrial production and vocational training in prisons, which was expected to lead to character reformation.¹⁹ In the late twentieth century French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote about the changing nature of power relations in imprisonment from punishment of the body to control of the mind and soul, as epitomized in his prime example, Bentham's Panopticon, which Foucault used as a metaphor for society as a whole.²⁰ In his book, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault makes use of various analogies to describe the function of the theoretical "all-seeing" institution, including comparisons of the Panopticon to a menagerie and a laboratory, which are illustrative of the way society views prisons and prisoners.

In describing the Panopticon, Foucault emphasizes that each person is alone and constantly visible, which reverses the concept of the dungeon where prisoners are enclosed, deprived of light, and hidden. The Panopticon scheme, with its central beam of light illuminating each prisoner, holds true only to the principle of enclosure. Foucault states that this "visibility is a trap"²¹ and that because the prisoners are "seen but cannot see"²² their supervisor, there is a guarantee of order. Because the power is visible yet unverifiable, the Panopticon automatizes and dis-individualizes power to the effect of inducing in an inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that Foucault states as the major effect of the Panopticon.²³

American prison design shows the effect of the Panopticon while Foucault goes so far as to argue that the Panopticon can be viewed as a "generalizable model of functioning" and a "way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men."²⁴ Foucault describes the Panopticon as a power mechanism in its ideal form, making it applicable to any program where a number of people require supervision. Foucault believes that the ideas behind the Panopticon, so called "Panopticism," have so pervaded the everyday thinking and functioning of society that it has bred a "disciplinary society," a "society of surveillance."²⁵ In prisons in the present day, however, more attention is placed on the relationship and interaction between staff and inmates and the idea of surveillance has switched from a Panopticon-like idea of absolute visibility to a focus on awareness of happenings and direct supervision, which has led to changes in the design of the facilities.²⁶

AMERICAN PRISONS TODAY

In the United States there has recently been a significant amount of controversy surrounding prison design and specifically the architect's role in prison design. At virtually the same time that prisoners across California were holding a hunger strike in solidarity with the inmates at Pelican Bay Prison against the "intolerable living conditions"²⁷ architects were petitioning to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) "to prohibit the design of spaces for killing, torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment."²⁸ In a sense, these two situations are contradictory. When an architect's job is to make the best spaces possible to meet the needs for a building's function and when there exists a type of building that

functions so poorly that its inhabitants would rather die than inhabit the space,³⁰ does that not indicate a need for architects to design these spaces instead of a reason to prohibit them from doing so?

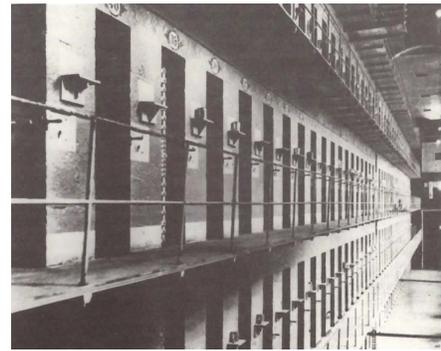
If architects are not the ones designing prisons, more than likely it will be someone less trained in place-making, someone who does not have the human experience in mind, and the end result will be less humane spaces. Yet when architects design prisons, in their aims to foster a more positive environment that is proactive rather than reactive, architects have struggled against a general lack of concern for their goals; in some cases, “architecture” for prisons is actively discouraged.³¹ Often in the design of prisons in the United States, cost and efficiency are the most important considerations. Costly extras like windows and spaces for dining, exercise, and counseling are limited and the goal is to spend as little as possible per cell³² instead of to provide a space that accomplishes the aims of imprisonment: namely reformation and rehabilitation.

The true goals of the prison system are often forgotten in American prison design and instead we construct spaces that inadvertently create violence and tension as a reaction to past problems. An architect could have designed a better solution to proactively solve the problems while also creating a more positive, humane environment. A solitary confinement area at Pelican Bay is comprised of “8x10-foot, soundproof, poured-concrete cells with remote controlled doors and no windows”³³ where prisoners may spend up to twenty-three hours a day; surely there exists a more humane and equally (if not more) effective way to encourage prisoners to reflect upon their crimes. Yet therein lies the problem again, as in the Auburn System of imprisonment as punishment; what does imprisonment in this way truly accomplish and does it reflect the underlying goals of the justice system? If the primary goal is not for the prisoner to reflect but instead to feel punished, is that enough for him/her to be expected to reform?

The rates of recidivism in the United States suggest that punishment alone is not enough and in fact U.S. prisons have been said to “[breed] cynical resentment” to the point where it “can overflow the psychological space where reflection and self-searching might occur.”³⁴ Politics and media portrayals of inmates and prison conditions often influence public opinion of the prison system in the United States, which has a significant effect on the design and operation of the facilities.³⁵ In the book *Living in Prison: A History of the Correctional System with an Insider’s View*, prison inmate Stephen Stanko aims to disprove media portrayals of prison life to illustrate that U.S. prisons are not “a mass of lazy individuals with televisions and pool tables and in-house stoves where meals are prepared in a gourmet fashion,”³⁶ and that in fact the tough punishment environment advocated by politicians and applauded by the general public is not the most effective solution to crime.

Stanko’s discussion of the institutional custody levels (Level I-V) and the corresponding visual identity of a facility and its amount of perimeter fences³⁷ illustrates a distinctly American approach to prison design best epitomized in the description of a Level V facility:

“[T]he Level 5 institution in South Carolina, which houses Death Row prisoners, is accented by covering all walkways with fence. A roof made up of fence and razor wire contains every inch of space in which a Death Row prisoner may make any type of passage, thereby imposing immediate threat to any attempt at absconding or escaping.”³⁸



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Figure 3: Inside cells, Auburn Prison, New York (photo 1949)³⁹



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Aside from avoiding any risk of escape by prisoners considered especially dangerous, the fences and razor wire serve an additional purpose by making the un-institutionalized population feel “safe” knowing such dangerous criminals are well contained. The barriers are in place as much for the benefit of those outside as for those inside the walls. In America, the public wants punishment for criminals to be explicit. With so many razor-wired perimeter fences, one can only imagine the type of punishment taking place inside to match such a threatening exterior.

In Stanko’s description of the various spaces in a prison, from the cells to the laundry to the cafeteria and more, it is apparent that American prison design is a fully reactionary process. Prison shower and bathroom spaces create opportunities for violent and inappropriate situations as a direct consequence of the design while the small cells create “a constant sense of enclosure and confinement,”⁴⁰ which also leads to high tension and violence. One of the most clearly reactionary design decisions is the recent renovation of prison cafeterias across the country to create “blind” serving lines with stainless steel walls twelve feet high between servers and inmates “to stop waste of both food and time,”⁴¹ which means that conversation between inmates at mealtimes is minimal.⁴² Had the spaces been designed to maximize efficiency in the first place, surely the solution would be more intelligent than twelve-foot steel walls. Even the recreation rooms are so poorly designed that they often become “a mass of men standing in front of televisions,”⁴³ where the channels are strictly controlled and cannot be changed at leisure.⁴⁴

The striking part about Stanko’s need to make his case is that the idea of there being any comfort in a state prison is appalling to the general public and that reading a bleak account like Stanko’s reassures Americans. However, as Stanko argues, a focus on punishment is ineffective and leads to spaces of violence and danger. A focus on the spaces themselves and how they might be used and even misused by the inmates could mean avoiding spaces that create unwanted behavior in the first place as well as creating spaces that have more positive effects on their inhabitants. The most important message from Stanko’s writing is the fact that American prisons are in dire need of architects to rectify the current situation, much of which could be changed by more careful design at the outset. Scandinavian prisons prove that punishment and humane treatment of inmates are not mutually exclusive and provide a more effective environment for both retribution and rehabilitation than the environment Stanko describes.

SCANDINAVIAN PRISONS

The Scandinavian prison system is fundamentally different from the American prison system in multiple ways. Most importantly, the primary goal of imprisonment in Scandinavia is rehabilitation, as opposed to punishment. Throughout Scandinavia criminal justice policy is left to professionals in the field and therefore is unaffected by politics; instead, decisions are often made by published criminologists who consult closely with academics. The difference between who is in charge of the decisions in Scandinavia and the United States has a substantial effect on the objectives of the prison systems and on whose interests are held in mind. Judges and prosecutors in Scandinavia are not elected officials and their only political pressure is to minimize prison populations. Prison policy in Scandinavia is results-based instead of cost-based and the media does not sensationalize crime, if they report it at all.⁴⁵ All these differences are factors that

Figure 4: Pelican Bay Prison, California, aerial view⁴⁶

allow for a unique type of prison to exist in Scandinavia, the “open” prison.

Not all Scandinavian prisons are open prisons and the closed prisons garner a similarly unfavorable reputation to American prisons, yet in general Scandinavia has a reputation for humane prison conditions. Suomenlinna Prison is an example of a typical open prison in Finland, located on Suomenlinna Island. Opened in 1971, Suomenlinna is a maximum security prison, but all of the ninety-five male inmates are on the verge of release. Each prisoner has a “contact officer” who provides security and rehabilitative services. The men leave the facility every day, go into the community for paid work or study, and are also allowed to visit their families in Helsinki with electronic monitoring. The room that an inmate of an open prison returns to could be equipped with large, bar-less windows, wood furnishings, painted walls, and possibly a TV, a sound system, or a mini-refrigerator for the prisoners who can afford to rent them.⁴⁷

In these prisons there is no perimeter wall, no razor wire fences, no barred windows, and the rooms are relatively comfortable. From an American perspective, Suomenlinna may not seem to be a punishment at all. However, the comfortable environment in fact serves as a more effective, harsher punishment than the desolate environments of some American prisons. Recidivism rates in Scandinavia are one-half to one-third of those in the United States (twenty to thirty percent versus forty to seventy percent.) The prisoners have a strict curfew and carry an electronic anklet, but do not consider it unreasonable; they understand that they are in prison because they committed a serious crime. In a place like Suomenlinna, the inmates are unable to be distracted by an unfair or biased system, unreasonably enforced rules, violence, or unhealthy conditions and can find nothing to blame or resent. These prisoners’ living conditions are comfortable, but what this truly makes them aware of is how close they are to a worse environment; one misstep could send them back to a closed prison. The contrast between open and closed prisons and how similar open prisons are to the real world in fact amplifies the fact that this is not the real world, not their home, their families and friends are not there, and they did this to themselves. It is so close to normal that it is painful, and all the time any shame, anger, or recrimination is brought back down upon the prisoner himself. There is nothing in the environment on which he can place his blame.⁴⁸ Any remorse American prisoners feel may quickly become overshadowed by anger and bitterness toward the prison system and its intent to punish. In Scandinavia, the goal is not to punish and break down the prisoner, but to monitor and to help him/her eventually reintegrate into society, yet “there is no punishment so effective as punishment that nowhere announces the intention to punish.”⁴⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Different justice systems create distinct prison environments. Comparison of the history and theory of prison design, media portrayals, and prison inmates’ experiences in the U.S. and Scandinavia suggest that the Scandinavian approach is better. Scandinavia’s justice system allows the opportunity for an “open prison,” which emphasizes reintegration rather than punishment. There are obviously many barriers to an open prison in America; the reaction of the public being only one of them. Some of the major issues are overcrowding in American prisons, a reliance on prison laborers, and the rise of an \$80 billion incarceration industry. There is also a large difference in scale. Not only is the population of the United States much larger than that of Scandinavian countries, but U.S.



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Figure 5: Typical cell in Halden Prison, Norway, deemed the most humane prison in the world⁵⁰

incarceration rates are the highest in the world and about ten times higher than those in Scandinavia, which are among the lowest. Scandinavia also has a completely different home and prison culture and the gang culture that exists in the United States is not present.⁵¹ However, there are still concepts of design from Scandinavian prisons that can be applied to the United States' context.

While it may not be obvious to the American eye, Scandinavian prisoners are punished for their crimes. Yet, the Scandinavian designs create environments that are more efficient at lowering crime and recidivism while still remaining humane. Scandinavian prison environments induce remorse and responsibility and are more effective than those causing resentment and cynicism. Scandinavian prisons are proof that punishment does not need to be physical and explicit to be effective. Focus placed on an environment for reflection and rehabilitation instead of punishment helps the goals of the prison system, which should be to rehabilitate prisoners, to help them see what is wrong in their ways, and to help solve any underlying mental health or other issues so that they can return and be productive members of society once more instead of returning to prison months or years later. The differences in the successes of Scandinavian versus American prisons and the reactions of the inmates proves the profound effects that the prison environment has on those who inhabit it, which means that the importance of thoughtful prison architecture cannot be overestimated. Instead of discouraging architecture in American prisons and attempting to banish architects from designing them, prison facilities should actively seek architects to create more humane, functional spaces that will better accomplish their daily tasks and larger goals.

Architects are uniquely trained to create spaces that respond to human and functional needs; there is no better profession to accomplish the task of designing prisons. If architects design prisons, they will not have to be inhumane spaces, rendering the AIA petition obsolete. One of the reasons these spaces are inhumane today is because architects are not designing them. The conditions in existing prisons in the United States obscure the true goals of imprisonment to everyone including the prisoners themselves who come to simply hate the system and the environment instead of gaining anything valuable from their imprisonment.

Prisons like Suomenlinna function in a middle ground of Foucault's ideas. With pleasant environments and little visible restraints, the focus is less on a punishment of the body than on the mind. Foucault's critique of the Panopticon's control of the mind is negative, but in Suomenlinna the mental aspects of imprisonment are emphasized and effective without causing detriment to the psyche of the prisoners. The prisoner-to-guard relationship at Suomenlinna is also a form of mental control. The accountability from establishing mutually respectful and trusting bonds urges restraint and reform in prisoners' behavior. Although the guards need not act as physical restraints as often as in the United States, these psychological bonds between guards and prisoners are equally effective. The environment of Suomenlinna creates a pro-active form of control by reminding prisoners that they are human regardless of their crimes. The mind is controlled in such a way that it encourages prisoners to realize their wrongdoing and reflect on it by not allowing the mind to digress towards anger at their situation, all the while suggesting punishment by the subtle differences between prison and the outside world. The key difference between the mind control of Suomenlinna and the mind control Foucault cautions against with the Panopticon is this subtlety.

ENDNOTES

1. Norman Bruce Johnston, *Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2000), 68.
2. C.C. Sullivan, "When Architects Design Death Chambers," *SmartPlanet*, July 31, 2013. <http://www.smartplanet.com/blog/the-take/when-architects-design-death-chambers/>
3. Stephen Stanko, Wayne Gillespie, and Gordon A. Crews, *Living in Prison: A History of the Correctional System with an Insider's View*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), 152.
4. Doran Larson, "Why Scandinavian Prisons Are Superior," *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2013, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/why-scandinavian-prisons-are-superior/279949/?goback=.gde_142881_member_276468044
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Iona Spens, *Architecture of Incarceration*, (London: Academy Editions, 1994), 8.
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9. Spens, 8.
10. Johnston, 4.
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13. Ibid., 69.
14. Ibid., 75-76.
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Foucault criticizes the demeaning and dehumanizing effects of the Panopticon's constant surveillance and the way in which it is accomplished. Subtler methods of control like responsibility, personal relationships, and the lack of distractions are not considered control of the body. The mind and soul are being harnessed and in some ways restricted, but not in ways that are detrimental or dehumanizing, because these tactics have the opposite effect. Hence, the powerful effects that architecture can have on the human soul and spirit, as recognized by Foucault, should be utilized in a positive way to design prisons and accomplish both goals of inmate retribution and rehabilitation.

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35. Sullivan.
36. Stanko, Gillespie, and Crews, 170.
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