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The Right to Move a Chair

Our Current Situation

The alienating design of correctional facilities, their capacity to isolate those who reside there from one another and with the outside world, and the way in which they deprive their residents of autonomy is a problem because it does not serve the purpose of rehabilitation. This translates to leaving released detainees stranded in the same world they left upon becoming incarcerated. This often leads to recidivism. The restriction of self-determination in the context of a fluorescent-lit grey box serves only as a means of dehumanizing its inhabitants, creating toxic authority figures, and burdening society through recidivism and intergenerational poverty.

The players

Detainees:

The architecture of prisons and jails in the United States is, in a word, bad. There are better and worse examples, but the pervasiveness of exposed cinder block, stark white or grey walls, no privacy, no sunlight, and countless other deprivations surely reinforces this claim. After all, does a different image than the aforementioned elements come to mind without effort?

All of the architecture in correctional facilities is oriented toward the maintenance of institutional control over residents, as noted by the National Museum of Crime and Punishment's article on the design of prison facilities, which notes "[…] The most essential role of any prison is to ensure that people cannot escape" (Crime Museum). This paradigm of control, as Doctor Marayca Lopez notes in an article from Penal Reform International, is manifested in the architecture, and indeed, with the advent of incarceration becoming Euro-American society's primary form of punishment in the eighteenth century, the architecture itself became the punishment (Lopez, 2014). And as some recidivism statistics will show later on, it seems clear this architecture, designed to serve as a key element of an incarcerated person's punishment, is not having the desired effect.

Consider this paper's eponymous

design element: immobile chairs. In the typical carceral facility's dayroom (common area) there will be an arrangement of tables, each bolted into the ground and with chairs physically attached to them via an unjointed metal bar. In *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, a brief documentary filmed as part of an urban design research project in the 1960s, William Whyte, the principal researcher, notes that people in public spaces pick up and move chairs even when there is no real reason to do so. A person may only move their chair a foot from where they are, without changing the direction they face, whether they are in the sun or the shade, and so forth (Whyte, 1980). In prisons, the autonomy of a detainee to determine where they sit is taken away from them, and this extends to every moment of their day. Residents are only allowed out of their cells when they are told they can come out, and even then, must only go where instructed. If a person cannot decide for themselves when they want some fresh air, or when to eat lunch, or where to sit, how could they ever be expected to believe in their ability to choose a different life from the one which resulted in their incarceration?

Staff:

In light of the many conversations which have occurred in 2020 regarding the criminal justice system, it has become unquestionably clear that the dynamic between those with power, particularly the power of the state backing them, and those who have historically been subject to that power, and unjustly harmed by it, requires reassessment. Much like there have been calls for community policing, the integration of authority figures into the populations over which they preside can be applied to prisons. At the level of physical design, many prisons in the United States have adopted the indirect model of supervision, meaning there is very little direct interaction between staff and detainees.

This exemplifies once again that prisons and jails emphasize security over rehabilitation, and there is reason to believe that this model is actually detrimental to security goals. A study conducted for the Canadian Correctional Service indicated that detainee-officer interactions were less frequent and less friendly under this model, which creates a higher likelihood of unsafe situations arising (Werner, 1989). Similarly, the oft-cited Halden Prison in Norway has adopted the direct model of supervision and, among the myriad other design and administrative choices that make this prison a model of reform, this has resulted in the prison's two-hundred fifty-one residents (of whom, over half are convicted of violent crimes) experiencing very few violent incidents (Benko, 2015). Thus, the design of American prisons and jails renders staff less safe and more prone to needless violence, despite security resting at the core of these designs.

Designers:

There is a considerable dilemma faced by architects and designers in the United States regarding contemporary carceral design. Who is the client when designing a correctional facility? For whom should an architect design? Is it ethical to use one's skills, and to employ one's practice, to design a jail or prison? That final question is

even more complex than it may seem, as one might easily design a prison with the hopes of achieving their own goals and paradigms of rehabilitation and humanizing the incarcerated, but ultimately they are constrained by the desires of the entity that is paying them.

In a paper published for the School of Commerce at the University of South Australia, Giustina Consoli analyzes the discussions held between prison operators, contractors, and architects, and the dilemmas faced in particular by the latter. In interviews, there seems to be a consistent uncertainty among architects as to what their role was in these projects (Consoli, 2012). These interviews represent a microcosm of the field and its experience of this problem, but if one is willing to expand to the macro-scale, it is reasonable to infer that this uncertainty equates to a larger dilemma around how much architects and designers are responsible for upholding different philosophies of incarceration, and how much agency they have to change or maintain whichever philosophies may prevail today.

The importance of carefully crafting processions, indicating boundaries, delineating which spaces are meant to be used and which are not, and controlling the flow of foot traffic is central to the entire history of architecture. But the way these elements of design dictate people's behavior comes from a place of empathy, with the goal being more enjoyable and useful spaces for their inhabitants. To apply these techniques as a means of punishment, as a way of harming the inhabitants of the space is inherently contradictory to the common values with which architects imbue the spaces they create. So long as states and private prison operators require these design paradigms, the architect's dilemma will persist.

Society:

Eighty-three percent of state prisoners released in 2005 across thirty states were arrested at least once in the nine years following their release, according to the Department of Justice (Alper, et al., 2018). Aaron Gottlieb with the University of Illinois at Chicago, writing for the National Institutes of Health, notes that, while prior research is not extensive, "some evidence suggests that higher rates of incarceration may be associated with higher rates of relative poverty, while other evidence suggests the opposite" (Gottlieb, 2017). The list of social ills with strong connections to carceral phenomena goes on, but to simply list them ad nauseam contributes little to the discussion. One might conjecture that Gottlieb's notation about poverty and incarceration is circular rather than ambiguously unidirectional, where the already impoverished are more likely to be incarcerated, and as a result of this incarceration, their ability to leave or stay out of poverty is diminished, and they sink further into indigence.

The Equal Justice Initiative notes that the Bureau of Justice estimates the annual cost of mass incarceration in the United States at eighty-one billion dollars, but that this cost is incomplete, not factoring in policing, courts, and costs paid by the families of the incarcerated (EJI, 2017). The discussion around how prisons and jails seek to offset

their immense operation costs through unpaid prison labor programs is too large an issue to discuss in detail here, but it should be noted that this practice represents another programmatic means of dehumanizing detainees. This requires notation so as not to imply that prisons, still incurring the same costs, should seek to become financially self-sufficient through such programs. Instead these costs to society need to be mitigated through much more deeply impactful changes in the way people are policed, adjudicated, and incarcerated.

Society bears the cost of mass incarceration, and it is doing nothing to reduce or eliminate this expense with the way correctional facilities are designed now. Clearly, something needs to change if recidivism and prison populations are to be reduced, and the intergenerational suffering of the already disenfranchised is to have any hope of redress.

The History

There is already extensive writing on the history of incarceration in the United States, so further reading into some of the works cited here would be encouraged. State of the Art: The New Prison History, by Mary Ellen Curtin offers some excellent insights into the American prison system over time. Jermaine Thibodeaux has also published extensive academic writings on the subject which beg consideration if one seeks to learn more about how the

situation has developed into what it is today.

With that said, it is worth discussing a few key historical developments that most directly affect the concept of carceral design's effect on behavior while incarcerated and recidivism after release. An early design paradigm was isolation to facilitate contemplation. The idea being prisoners would have time to think about their misdeeds and resolve to improve their character. An obvious rebuttal can be formed as a question: how is prosocial behavior encouraged by placing someone in an antisocial environment?

Halden Prison in Norway.
Image Courtesy of AIA New York.

Skipping forward considerably, the prison system in the United States after the Civil War represents the earliest formal influence of almost all correctional design in America today. With a basis in racism and recapturing free labor for difficult but profitable industries, postbellum incarceration saw the design of today's most common prison layouts and construction methods: panopticons and long corridors lined on either side with cells, separated from the corridor by bars

or a solid steel door, walls of cinder block and floors of concrete, and so forth. Granted, these did not come about in the years immediately following the Civil War, but the new paradigms of justice, law enforcement, and incarceration all laid the groundwork for the mass incarceration seen today.

At its core, the design trends of contemporary correctional facilities reflect a longstanding history of justice philosophies that do very little to create a better society, or to in any way improve the lives of its inhabitants. Any designs from the past which one might cite as having the goal of rehabilitation have clearly been shown to be ineffective, and most of the design choices of today's carceral facilities have nothing to do with rehabilitation.

What Comes Next?

Aesthetics:

The aforementioned work by Doctor Lopez posits "The most effective types of living environments in aiding rehabilitation are those that are domestic in feel and enhance the quality of life. In housing units, an intellectually stimulating environment features abundant sunlight, openness, unobstructed views, landscaping, access to nature, bar-less wood doors and large windows, human scale, movable furniture, normalized materials such as carpet, wood, tempered/shatter-proof glass, commercial grade acoustic lay-in ceiling tile, low ceilings and acoustic wall panels […]" (Lopez, 2014).

Lopez describes the creation of a space resemblant of something that might be found in a house, an apartment, an office building, really anywhere but a jail or prison. The spaces she describes feel familiar and comfortable thus offering greater opportunity for detainees to seek

out and accept the kind of care they need. It also allows staff to feel at ease and develop good relations with detainees. People may protest this sort of design, making comparisons to nice hotels, however, prisons offering comfortable spaces does not equate to luxury. This is not to say architects and designers should not use this as an opportunity to employ the newest innovations in the field- color theory, lighting design, acoustics, materials choices, etc.

Layout:

Historically, there have been a few basic prison layouts which have been pervasive in designing facilities. Namely, as Ryan Jacobs notes for Pacific Standard, one can find plentiful examples of the panopticon, radial, rectangular, courtyard, and high-rise layouts. The study cited by Jacobs indicated that these layouts, particularly as they affect surveillance and interaction between staff and detainees, have considerable negative effects on staff-resident relations. Of these layouts, the campus style layout resulted in the most favorably-perceived interactions between staff and residents (Jacobs, 2014).

But the campus layout goes beyond the issue of surveillance and consequent relations between staff and residents, and returns to the idea of normativity. Of course, it also enhances physical activity, as well as access to nature, fresh air and

sunlight. In the free adult world, travelling outdoors between different buildings to solicit different services is much more normal than spending entire days indoors, walking between specialized areas of a single facility to obtain whatever one needs.

The campus layout is also a remarkably adept means of reducing the way a facility's design isolates it from its community. Its less institutional feel and less intimidating aesthetic should allow it to blend more naturally into its environment and community.

Ultimately, the layout of jails and prisons is a key design element alongside aesthetics which requires careful, rehabilitation-oriented decisions. It seems that designing correctional facilities such that their external appearance resembles other places in the "real world," allows for privacy, or at least non-continuous surveillance.

Spatial Programming:

At its core, the right to move a chair is a manifestation of good spatial programming. This term, spatial programming, exists in the world of GIS and similar fields of research, but here it will be defined as the way a space is intended to be used. The mobility of furniture offers an excellent insight into spatial programming; what can be moved, in what way, and to what extent, programs the space for certain uses and excludes others. Another example might

be ceiling heights. A space with a low ceiling is programmed for ordinary, everyday uses, where a space with a noticeably high ceiling might be programmed for special activities like sports, art installations, or anything else for which a space must be designed to capacitate that activity, i.e. programmed for it.

This concept overlaps significantly with the administrative methods of improving normativity, easing transitions, and creating resident autonomy, but does relate more to the physical environment than bureaucratic decisions as to what detainees are allowed and disallowed to do. With that said, the proposal here is to enable residents to have more control over the programming of the space, with mobile furniture again serving as a great example, or perhaps offering certain choices of color within cells, lighting arrangements which are customizable, and so forth. The autonomy itself acts as a form of normalization, and the outcomes on the environment of the facility will also help to render it less alienating, less isolating, and more conducive to rehabilitation.

Oklahoma County Detention Center in Downtown Oklahoma City.
Image Courtesy of InmateAid.

Work Programs:

Prisons are designed to isolate their inhabitants from the communities into which they are supposed to harmoniously reintegrate. Tracy Huling writes in I*nvisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, that "Since 1980, the majority of new prisons built to accommodate the expanding U.S. prison population have been placed in non-metropolitan areas, with the result that the majority of prisoners are now housed in rural America" (Huling, 2002). There is certainly an argument that there should be some rural correctional facilities, to offer a pathway to integration into those communities as well. With that said, most people in the carceral system are from urban areas, so incorporating these facilities into urban communities is the most effective means of establishing the connection between the facility, its inhabitants, and the community.

But incorporation is not tantamount to sitting- even with a majority of prisons being constructed in rural areas, there are still plentiful examples of correctional facilities located in urban areas. Take, for instance, the Oklahoma County Jail, in Oklahoma City- a thirteen-story red brick megalith not far from Oklahoma City's Downtown. While this is perhaps a better situation than if it were an hour's drive from downtown, the jail's design and form does not enmesh it with the community. It still alienates the community around it, and thus isolates its inhabitants from the community. Again, how are people ever to be dissuaded of antisocial behavior if they are kept in antisocial environments?

Incorporation with the community requires more than the reform of prison design; it must include administrative reform. This should include opportunities for detainees to interact with the community such as work programs. Perhaps detainees with artistic talents could paint murals or construct public art installations. Detainees with culinary interests could participate in work programs with a local restaurant. Any opportunities which encourage interaction between detainees and the remaining community offers means of destigmatization. This yields a situation in which detainees are able to self-actualize and serve the community. The barrier of anonymity which allows for prejudice and stigma is gone. The acknowledgement of incarcerated people will not stop at tragedy in this model, it will continue into the realm of hope.

Education Programs:

Extensive research exists which indicates a correlation between unemployment rates and crime rates. The scholarly article, Identifying the Effect of Unemployment on Crime, posits that "[…] between 1993 and 1998, victimization rates declined for every major type of crime,[1] with both violent and property crime rates falling by approximately 30 percent. Occurring concurrently with these aggregate crime trends was a marked decrease in the civilian unemployment rate. Between 1992 and 1998, the national unemployment rate declined in each year from a peak of 7.5 percent to a 30 year low of 4.5 percent" (Raphael, et al, 2001). The same literature, more specifically addressing recidivism, further asserts that "Holding all else equal, the decrease in income and potential

earnings associated with involuntary unemployment increases the relative returns to illegal activity" (Raphael, et al, 2001). This is reiterated by a study conducted for the California Legislative Analyst's Office (Peterson, et al, 2017). From this, one can gather that access to employment is a strong indicator of whether a formerly incarcerated person is likely to recidivate. Thus, jails and prisons which offer programs, vastly expanded in capacity, quality, and diversity of subject matter, will succeed in rehabilitating detainees by providing them education and skills.

Unfortunately, offering work and educational programs will not create change on their own. Even in states like California, where an exemplary degree of progress has been made toward ensuring incarcerated people receive education, and can learn skills valuable for obtaining employment, there are laws, policy norms, and cultural stigmas which render it extremely difficult for convicts to find employment upon being released. The Prison Policy Initiative notes "[…] formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27% — higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression" (Couloute, et al, 2018). Until September of 2020, it was not possible for the many prisoners in California who worked while incarcerated as firefighters, to become employed as firefighters once freed

(Romo, 2020). Consequently, this change must come not only at the level of program expansion within correctional facilities, but also legislative action to better facilitate the transition from incarceration to employment.

Encouragement of Prosocial Behavior:

The California Legislative Analyst's Office details cognitive behavioral therapy and substance abuse treatment as some of the rehabilitation programs, alongside the aforementioned education and employment skills programs (Peterson, et al, 2017). An expansion of counseling services, therapy, and access to psychological services is yet another critical administrative component of the reforms required to achieve better transitions and reduced recidivism. The National Institutes of Health indicates "some studies report that at least half of male inmates and up to three quarters of female inmates reported symptoms of mental health conditions in the prior year (compared with 9% or fewer in the general population)" (Gonzalez, 2014). This statistic necessarily draws a correlation between mental health issues, and antisocial behavior resulting in incarceration.

Counseling is paramount in helping people overcome the internal struggles which result in self-destructive behaviors and crime. With this incorporated into the experience of incarceration, residents of correctional facilities will be much better positioned to transition back into society at large, and not recidivate after doing so.

The Right to…. Autonomy

One of the two core pillars of the reforms herein suggested, offering greater autonomy to incarcerated people is essential. Examples of jails and prisons making administrative decisions to give autonomy to their residents include residents choosing

the color of their cell, mobile
furniture, arrangeable lighting,
and so forth. This autonomy can be
furthered by allowing detainees
to schedule their own time to a
certain extent, choose what sorts
of work or recreational activities
they participate in, and perhaps
even create their own activities
and initiatives. Further, allowing
detainees autonomy over their own
appearance may very well have positive
effects, with the psychological effects
of attire in general being discussed
by the Association for Psychological
Science, notably that it can affect
interpersonal relations (APS, 2015).

  Returning to spatial design, offering
incarcerated people the ability to
program their communal spaces is just
as important as allowing them options
within their cells. This concept once
again relates to the idea of mobile
furniture, in particular to allow for
residents of correctional facilities
to program their own spaces and
cultivate community organically.

  Through this introduction of
resident autonomy, inhabitants of
the carceral system are granted
responsibilities and the need to make
decisions for themselves that will
not only increase the efficacy of their
rehabilitative experience, but will
establish an opportunity to achieve
success when they are released.

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