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Incarceration

An essential role for designers is to continually question and analyze the function of a space. As people and society change, the built environment must adapt and respond to that. There are corners of the built environment that do not see the same scrutiny in design and function as others. Ignoring these programs and institutions is a disservice to our practice and in turn, our society as it stagnates development around it. One such institution is the American prison system. Prisons function in many ways, as they always have in this country, and it is clear that the architectural profession, a historically white male dominated field, has invested little in amending this condition. Just because something has been a certain way for a long time, does not mean it has to stay that way. It should not be the practice of architecture to leave it alone because it is controversial. That will not be our legacy.

According to criminologist Bob Cameron the five goals of a prison are retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, restoration, and rehabilitation. The current American prison system has set the primary goal as retribution and has failed at its final and most essential goal: rehabilitation. Under this system, there are currently three million incarcerated Americans. A disproportionate number of those incarcerated are minorities. Americans have been persecuted and stigmatized for

generations in an effort to keep the powerful in power and punish people for their race or "otherness", and the progress to change this is not quick enough. The legacy of racism has shaped our prison system and it will continue to do so until we address it.

Retribution

In the American prison system retribution comes not only in the prison sentence handed down by the Justice system, but permeates their entire life behind bars. Individuals endure psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, unsafe living conditions, and are withheld healthcare. This is beyond the function of a prison. Research has shown that punishment deters recidivism most effectively when it is

SHAPED BY HATE

Between 1980 and 2015 the number of incarcerated Americans increased from around 500,000 to 2.2 million.² This increase and the current prison population is not aligned with our population. The US makes up about 5% of the world's population, while our incarcerated makes up 25% of the world's prison population.² African Americans and Hispanics account for 32% of the US population and 56% of our incarcerated population, and African Americans are incarcerated over five times the rate of white Americans.¹³ In 11 US states 1 in 20 African American adult males are incarcerated.¹³

applied quickly and consistently. In the case of the prison system, this is applicable when the individual is sentenced to prison. The prison sentence effectively separates these individuals from their communities. The impact of this is three-fold. First, it protects American citizens from the perceived danger the incarcerated individual poses. This means the streets are viewed as safer, fewer innocent victims, and policing is easier. Second, it punishes the individual by removing their freedom, privacy, and lifestyle. This is psychological punishment. Finally, it cuts ties to the prisoners' support system. As part of their limited freedom, prisoners can only see family during visiting hours. In some places, this is now being shifted to a virtual format and will no longer be a free service. Which has raised the question of whether visitations are a human right. Studies show that regular visits from family reduce recidivism, chipping away at prison overcrowding

and easing the burden on the criminal justice system.

The US prison system is overpopulated and cases of assault, rape, and murder within prison walls are not

uncommon occurrences. So much so that Americans often joke about these crimes. It permeates our pop culture, our slang, and our songs. It isn't just inmate on inmate violence either. Accusations of physical, mental, and sexual abuse from prison officials are common. Corruption has fed the chaos and suffering within these institutions. All of this amounts to an environment of fear and suffering, which can have damaging effects on an individuals' psyche. Below is an excerpt of a letter from a man with schizophrenia serving a life sentence for murder in a Missouri prison.

"Please pray for me because I'm lost with what God wants of me and I want to do God's will but I just can't take all this anger that everyone has here. Every time I look at these four walls around me, I can't help to fall into everyone's spell. There's always someone getting under someone's skin. Then before you know it, they are fighting. I'm just tired of the violence. All my life I have seen violence and I'm just tired of it. I had to watch my mother take abuse from her husband. I was even sexually abused by my big brother. So I grew up with anger and this place adds to it. I just want to feel joy and happiness again. I wrote all this to the governor, hoping he would understand."

Solitary confinement is often used for individuals who act out in prisons. These individuals are locked in a small cell for 23 hours a day and only let out briefly to shower, exercise, and see a physician. They are kept from all other inmates and are denied family visitation. Over 60,000 Americans are in solitary confinement. The suicide rate for those in solitary confinement sits at 50%. Solitary confinement amounts to cruel and unusual punishment, though often touted as an action that is in the best interest of the individual. Countless studies have shown that loneliness is one of the most damaging and lasting effects on a person's health.¹ Additionally, there is negligible proof that this

CORRUPTION

In 2011, an FBI investigation of human rights abuse in the Los Angeles County prisons and subsequent attempt by prison officials to derail the investigation led to the arrest of 11 prison officials.¹⁵ In 2014 Operation Ghost Guard led to the indictment of 26 prison officers in Georgia involving smuggling contraband that was used for financial fraud, drug trafficking, and a kidnapping scheme.¹⁵

HEALTH CARE

CCS, now WellPath, is the health care provider to more than 500 prison facilities across the US.¹⁴ A recent investigation shows they acted in the best interest of saving cost and in lieu of saving lives. CCS was sued for over 70 deaths under their supervision, with individuals alleging prolonged suffering, ongoing complications, shortened life expectancy, and debt.¹⁴ After terminating their contract less than two years in, one county called CCS's performance was "morally reprehensible."¹⁴ Over five years, 11 different government agencies filed complaints about CCS.¹⁴

form of punishment is effective. B.F. Skinner wrote, "Punished behavior is likely to reappear after the punitive consequences are withdrawn." So while the benefit of these punishments may be short-lived, the negative ramifications can last a lifetime. The American Institute of Architects finally denounced the design of torture and execution

spaces, which includes solitary confinement in 2020.¹⁸ This is a small step in the right direction.

Access to medical and mental health care are the rights of those imprisoned, but they are not guaranteed that in our current system. Their right to live without constant fear of attack and rape from those around them is a human one. Their protection from cruel and unusual punishment is guaranteed to them by the 8th amendment. There are numerous ways the current prison system punishes incarcerated Americans, and much of it is beyond what is just.

Rehabilitation

"Research has proven that the most effective way in reducing such criminal acts is simply through education. Inmates with at least two years of college education have a 10% re-arrest rate compared to a 62% re-arrest rate. Prisoners with associate's degrees have a re-arrest rate of 13.7%, 5.6% with a bachelor's degree, and 0% for those with a master's degree."¹ The recidivism rate in the US is 76.6%, one of the highest in the world. Research shows that one of the primary causes of

recidivism is unemployment. With 75% of released individuals unable to find employment a year after their release.⁵

As a case study, we can look to Norway, which has taken the radical perspective of treating the incarcerated like human beings. Their recidivism rate is a staggeringly low 20%.⁴ These prisons appear more like dormitories, and vocational training is provided to all inmates. The individuals who are incarcerated here are all treated with respect and dignity, with officials believing that stripping them of their freedom is punishment enough.⁴ These individuals will come back to their communities and if we want them to be productive members of society, we must give them the tools to do so.

The Call

The issues in our prison system run deep and reflect the issues in our country. They are not an anomaly, but rather a symptom. That doesn't mean that we should not seek to address the problem of prisons. The purpose of the prison system is to separate individuals violating the law, punish them for their actions, and rehabilitate them. Their separation from society and the public shame that comes from that is punishment. Increasing prison time for the increasing severity of the crimes committed is punishment. There are limits to the efficacy of punishment,

and architects should not contribute to the suffering of these individuals. Rehabilitation should therefore be the focus of the architecture of prisons since the other goals are achieved by the separation inherent to a prison. We should be designing prisons that not only focus on the betterment of individuals in its care, but on what the afterlife of the prison could be. We can reshape our society and redefine what capital punishment is. We can no longer be complicit in the suffering of American citizens. Architects are responsible for the health, safety, and welfare of the users of a space. When the purpose of a space is to harm the user's health and welfare, architects must put their oath first and recognize that people are suffering. The suffering of any group will send ripples through society. We do not live in bubbles, the suffering of some affects us all. We have the power to change this, and it is our commission to do so.

Endnotes

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