



A STIRRING STORY

A complete but very, very short history of prison architecture

Norman Johnston

At first castles and fortresses were used for prisons. That worked out just fine for a while. There were no complaints. But there wasn't enough space for all the prisoners so they started building prisons from scratch. Nobody knew how to arrange them on the inside, least of all the architects, but they did make them really fancy on the outside - towers, gates, battlements and all. Hardly anybody minded these prisons except taxpayers, who thought that they looked too nice, and prisoners, who didn't like the filth, lice, shakedowns and lack of food.



The Old Tombs Prison, New York

Now a few people on the outside started thinking that all this mess on the inside should be straightened up and that the occupants should be reformed (prisoners and guards). Architects, philosophers and others, hard to classify (reformers and prison experts), had some wonderful ideas. Build prisons round or star-shaped so the prisoners and staff could keep an eye on each other. The round prisons didn't work very well but the star-shaped ones, which they called "radial", made almost everybody happy because they thought they'd finally found the right way to build a prison. Except for a few people who thought the fronts of these Victorian prisons were too fancy, and the idea of having plumbing in every cell, well, that was too much.

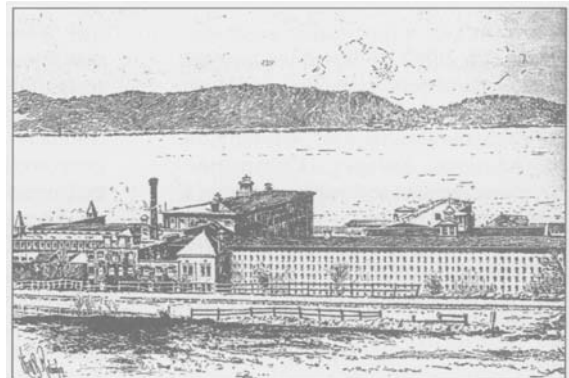
Very expensive, but who knew?

These prisons didn't work so well after all and they got crowded too. Then in most parts of the world, but not in Britain, they started building bigger and bigger prisons on a new plan that for reasons hardly anybody can still remember, they called the "telephone pole" plan. Parallel buildings were bisected by a single long corridor so supposedly the prisoners could be better controlled in their comings and goings. Everybody was really happy about these new prisons. They were big so they wouldn't become over-crowded. And they had huge, plain concrete walls around them (very expensive, but who knew?). The architects stopped making fancy fronts. Taxpayers didn't notice any more. But things got more complicated inside. Work training. Psychiatrists. Reform schemes. Great stuff! But two other things happened to make people unhappy again. It turned out all the new stuff didn't seem to improve the prisoners much after all. And the prisons got to be too crowded and the prisoners too tough and not respectful and manageable any more.

We're stuck with a lot of those old prisons which had been planned for a very different time, but nearly everybody thinks we've finally got the prison architecture thing **right** this time. Build lots of new prisons so they won't become overcrowded (though they're looking too nice again for some people's satisfaction). Make the buildings for prisoners smaller so the officers can keep an eye on them and actually mingle with them (though that doesn't please all the prisoners and guards either). The Americans build the smaller living units in triangles. Why triangles? Well, circles didn't work. Rectangles weren't good. Telephone pole layouts had real problems. Let's try triangles. A real challenge to builders but so were the circles.

The super-max

Because some of their prisoners are such troublemakers, the Americans have invented the "super-max" or "maxi-



Sing Sing Prison

maxi" prison. Kind of a Frankenstein thing. Resurrecting odds and ends from the prison past - extended solitary confinement in often windowless cells, leg irons, individual exercise cages or spaces. And no frills! No work, no school, no religious services, no therapy. There are a lot of electronics though. These prisons cost a heap to build but nobody's complaining and the states do find the money.

Is everybody happy now that we finally know how to build prisons? Well, not really. Usually there's not enough money to build them. (In the U.S., there is a magic device called a "bond issue" so you don't need money. That way, we've been able to open hundreds of new prisons. If we could open a new prison every week for a thousand inmates, we could almost keep up with the increased number of prisoners).

In spite of all this, prisons are **still** too crowded every place. The public still is likely to feel the new buildings cost too much and are too fancy. And a few people continue to worry that they don't reform many prisoners. At least now prison officials and architects know what kind of prison to build. But wait. Haven't we heard this before?

*Professor Norman Johnston is a specialist on the history of prison architecture. See in particular, **The Human Cage: A Brief History of Prison Architecture** (The American Foundation, NY, 1973) and **Crucible of Good Intentions**, (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994). He is Professor of Sociology at Beaver College in Glenside, Pennsylvania.*