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Endless Privations:

Archaeological Perspectives on Penal Heritage

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How would an explicitly material perspective contribute new understandings of penal heritage? Drawing from recent archaeological research on historic prisons, POW camps, asylums, and detention facilities, this paper explores the materiality of incarceration to illuminate how these architectural spaces and artefact assemblages play a central role in the creation of institutional lives. As multi-purpose places developed for punishment and exile, rehabilitation and education, deterrence and neutralisation, heritage prisons demonstrate the ideals of disciplinary intention perpetually adapted through insubordination and pragmatic compromise. Archaeological perspectives reveal how these carceral worlds become materially fabricated through the interplay of three distinct modes of social power: domination, resistance, and ultimately, negotiation. As Oscar Wilde observed:

> *For prison life with its endless privations and restrictions makes one rebellious. The most terrible thing about it is not that it breaks one's heart — hearts are made to be broken — but that it turns one's heart to stone.… And he who is in a state of rebellion cannot receive grace … for in life as in art the mood of rebellion closes up the channels of the soul, and shuts out the airs of heaven.*[1]

How do people experience the materiality of confinement? With scholars, reformists, philanthropists, social engineers, clinicians, and politicians writing about incarceration since the late eighteenth century, a vast interdisciplinary literature exists on the institutional landscape. While historians and architects have examined how early communal forms of social welfare and punishment transformed into the stark penitentiaries and fortified compounds of the nineteenth century, criminologists, legal theorists, and philosophers have debated the relative civic effects of imprisonment as a mode of punishment, deterrence, and retribution.

Others from sociology, anthropology and culture studies have considered the lived experience of institutionalization by exploring the psychological impact of the custodial environment on inmates, staff, dependent children and families, and even the researchers themselves. Finally, archaeological perspectives have illuminated the material and spatial conditions of the modern institution. This work has revealed a profound dissonance between ideal designed landscapes of disciplinary intention, and embodied landscapes of insubordination and compromise. Ultimately, places of confinement are fabricated through the interplay of three distinct modes of social power: domination, resistance, and negotiation.

Disciplinary Spaces

The years between 1770 and 1850 witnessed a rapid emergence of institutional confinement as a uniquely modern form of social management. The movement began with John Howard, an English county sheriff who conducted inspection tours of existing gaols and debtor's houses across England, Wales and Ireland. His influential 1777 report *The State of the Prisons* offered a meticulous account of the scandalous conditions behind the perimeter walls of Britain's prisons: subterranean dungeons contaminated with human filth, male and female prisoners freely associating in a state of perpetual drunkenness, desperate paupers starving in chains unable to pay the bribes required by corrupt gaolers. Governed primarily by local customs and medieval laws, the vast majority of traditional civic punishments assumed a corporeal form — involving periods of public humiliation administered through the stocks or pillory, or sanguinary retribution such as flogging, branding, and increasingly over the eighteenth century, public hanging.

Howard's relentless exposure of these penal horrors to Parliamentary Committees eventually resulted in a new 'reformed' penitentiary architecture. Working in close collaboration with Howard, the English architect William Blackburn perfected four influential 'reformed' designs intended to not only improve the ventilation and sanitation of prisons, but also introduce a strict regime of spatial order, classification, and segregation upon all inmates. A decade later, the early industrialist and utilitarian

1. Wilde, O (1897) *De profundis and other writings* (1986 edition) Harmondsworth: Penguin.

philosopher Jeremy Bentham published his radical designs for the Panopticon — a cylindrical model devised to emphasize a disciplinary self-reform of the prisoner's soul over corporal punishment of his flesh. Based on new technologies of surveillance fabricated through the spatial medium of architecture, the Panopticon subjected the male inmate to constant (yet unverifiable) judgmental observation. Encased within a ring of cells around a central observational hub, prisoners were exposed to 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power'.[2] Further, Bentham's penitentiary introduced the solitary cell as a primary mechanism for both isolating inmates from contaminating associations, and encouraging rehabilitative moral self-reflection. By the 1790s, Bentham's fearful design offered a rational, humane, and yet entirely brutal machine for 'grinding rogues honest'.[3]

When Bentham's principles of surveillance and isolation were merged with Blackburn's radial plan, a dreadful carceral landscape was born. Consisting of a series of cellblock wings arranged around a centralized custodial hub, penitentiaries of the early nineteenth century were open internally from ground floor to skylight roof, thereby providing unhindered visual and auditory surveillance over all inhabitants. As guards perambulated the cast iron balconies of these silent wards, their footfalls muted by the soft leather soles of their specially designed boots, all stray noises were amplified along the long empty corridors. Spy holes were installed into each cell door. Covered by a hinged metal flap on the external side, the mechanism exposed the cell interior to routine inspection while limiting views of the adjoining corridor. Walls and grated windows circumscribed all sensory experiences of the external world. A perpetual disciplinary regime choreographed all movement throughout the institution, with segmented stalls and enclosed exercise yards maintaining inmate solitude even during daily periods of recreation and chapel attendance.

Textures remained similarly prescribed. To both humiliate and discipline the male inmate, expressions of self-identity were restricted through the provision of an identity number and institutional uniform of coarse wool and cotton. Sparsely furnished with an identical set of artefacts, prisoner cells each contained a tin cup, bowl and spoon, an iron or wooden cot, a wool blanket, a white earthenware chamber pot, a broom, a Bible, and a framed list of institutional rules and regulations.

Over the 1820s, as a 'carceral enthusiasm' swept the young American Republic, two distinct and competing models of penal management achieved international acclaim. The 'Separate System' of the Eastern State Penitentiary at Cherry Hill, Pennsylvania (1829) assigned inmates to solitary labour at leather boot manufacture within their isolated cells. Conversely, the 'Congregate System' of New York's Auburn State Penitentiary (1823) collected inmates into communal workshops for silent assembly-line work. Two decades later, Imperial Britain established its own infamous 'Separate System' penitentiaries for men at Pentonville, England (1842), Port Arthur, Tasmania (1847), and Mountjoy, Ireland (1850). Thus, by the 1850s the institution had emerged as a rehabituative landscape, one designed to forge a progressive and internalized transformation of the male criminal.

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Britain has retained its Victorian era prisons throughout the twentieth century. Reflecting the gradual modernization of living standards and social rationale behind 'imprisonment', penal facilities have been periodically updated with new security features (reinforced skylight and window glazing, CCTV cameras, high tension wire mesh between floors) and social amenities (expanded visitation rooms, learning facilities, gymnasiums, multi-faith chapels). Nonetheless, as the prison population reached crisis levels over the 1990s, incarceration has all too frequently transformed into a daily routine of 23 hours of lock-down within a dangerously overcrowded cell.

In the United States, as state authority became increasingly centralized over the early twentieth century, modern technologies of imprisonment continued to perfect the construction of disciplinary space. Established under the Department of Justice in 1891, the federal prison system developed a particularly severe form of penitentiary architecture. These forbidding monuments consisted of two separate structures: a three to five storey block of adjoining rows of individual cells, all encased within a massive stone,

2. Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 201.
3. Evans, R. (1982) *The Fabrication of Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 198.

Figure 1: View looking south from third level guard station. Cell Block 'B' on the left, and Cell Block 'C' on the right. Alcatraz Island Federal Penitentiary, California. (US Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey, California [HABS CAL, 38-ALCA, 1-A-20]).

steel and concrete façade (Figure 1). A landscape of complete surveillance, iron bars (and later, clear reinforced plastic) replaced solid cell doors, and free-standing watch towers guarded the fortified perimeter boundaries. In a stark departure from the optimistic rehabilitative philosophies of the nineteenth century, these 'total institutions'[4] were designed to enforce imprisonment as a painful form of civic retribution. Currently in operation, Leavenworth Penitentiary, Kansas (1895) continues to serve as the largest American maximum-security facility, with approximately 2,000 male inmates incarcerated.

Resistance and Insubordination

Despite the disciplinary weight of this carceral world, not all inhabitants yield to institutional conditions. Since power exists as both forces of compliance and forces of action, resistance is born at the same moment as domination. Further, the shared experience of incarceration frequently cultivates a unique social cohesion amongst inmates, with various studies revealing a distinct 'society of captives'[5] within the penal environment. Through these alternative social worlds, inmates actively challenge the penal order by materially deploying acts of both individual and collective resistance.

While recalcitrance does take the extreme form of riots and open rebellions, typical expressions are carefully designed to thwart, rather than conquer, systems of domination. Providing means for a gradual erosion of authority, resistance operates as a loose constellation of daily activities undertaken by inmates for 'working the system to their minimum disadvantage'.[6] As a result, insubordination tends to address the worst pains of imprisonment: deprivation of liberty and freedom of movement, deprivation of goods and services, deprivation of personal identity, deprivation of autonomy, and deprivation of personal security.

Archaeological studies have observed that institutional zones related to 'unfree labour' frequently provide a focal site for inmate subversion. Originally established in 1838, the first Rhode Island State Prison adopted the 'Congregate System' with the 1845 addition of a communal industrial workshop to its fortified compound. Through archival research, James Garman linked the failure of an ambitious scheme for the prison manufacture of decorative ladies' fans to intentional inefficiencies, or 'foot-dragging strategies', adopted by inmate workers along the assembly-line.[7] Additionally, his work mapped collective patterns of resistance across excavated architectural features by locating 'intra-institutional' offences from 1872 through 1877 according to specific activity zone. Results demonstrated a clear focus of recalcitrance. Ranging from challenges to the code of silence and refusing to work, to outright destruction of prison property, approximately 60 per cent of the infractions occurred within the penitentiary workshops — that

4. Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums*. New York: Anchor Books; Casella, E.C. (2007) T*he Archaeology of Institutional Confinement*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
5. Clemmer, D. (1940) *The Prison Community*. Boston: Christopher Publishing House; Casella, E.C. (2000) 'Doing Trade: A sexual economy of nineteenth-century Australian female convict prisons' in *World Archaeology* 32(2):209-21.
6. Hobsbawm, E. (1973) 'Peasants and Politics' in *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1(1):3-22.
7. Garman, J.C. (2005) *Detention Castles of Stone and Steel*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, p. 146.

exact institutional space, in other words, specifically designated for inmate congregation and communal labour.

Of course, the most admired form of spatial resistance entails a total rejection of the penal landscape. Material evidence of escape attempts can be found throughout places of confinement. At Johnson's Island (1862-5), an American Civil War prison camp for captured Confederate Army officers, archaeological excavation of the latrine features revealed numerous escape tunnels dug into the rear of privy vaults, particularly those nearest the stockade's western perimeter wall. Probable escape tools were additionally recovered in association with some latrine tunnels; these objects included a large iron bar, a table knife, and the worn distal end of a bovine long bone.[8]

A similar escape attempt was recovered from Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin. With the incarceration of anti-Treaty and Irish Republican Army (IRA) activists during Ireland's Civil War (1922-3), female political prisoners were confined within the recently decommissioned prison on the western edge of Dublin. By March 1923, 'B' Wing inmates developed plans for an escape tunnel. After establishing a roster, and disguising their digging activities with noisy handball games in the adjoining exercise yard, the women commenced excavation with spoons stolen from the prison kitchen.[9] When a matron discovered their plot one month later, the inmates had created a hole four feet deep — an 'archaeological' feature still preserved within the Kilmainham Gaol museum. To pass on the benefits of their stymied efforts to future prisoners, inmate and dedicated nationalist Sighle Humphreys inscribed the plaster at the base of her cell wall with a pencilled message:

> Tunnel begun
> in basement laundry
> inside door on left
> may be of use to successors
> good luck, S.

Requiring a substantial degree of organization and subterfuge on the part of inmates, these escape attempts materially represented a fermentation of collective resistance and inmate solidarity, as communicated through their dramatic physical rejection of the prison itself.

Negotiated Worlds

Nevertheless, the experience of incarceration cannot be reduced to a simple oppositional struggle between 'staff' and 'inmates.' Recognizing the limits of traditional binary models, an increasing number of scholars have interpreted power as a social relationship characterized by plural, varying, and circumstantial moments of opportunity. Offering the term 'heterarchy' to emphasize the lateral, nested, and transient structures of power, this theoretical approach supports an exploration of how the austere penal landscape becomes re-shaped, negotiated, modified and compromised.[10]

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Within the carceral setting, a primary arena of negotiation involves the architecture and basic layout of the institution. As extensively demonstrated by Michel Foucault, disciplinary technologies function by standardizing institutional inhabitants — separating them into isolated, yet fully identical, units. Thus, elements of the built environment that deviate from the standard institutional template represent a form of compromise, an acknowledgement of diversity, and a limit to disciplinary power. The presence of 'Secure Wards' within modern penitentiaries demonstrates one such architectural negotiation. Established for the 'protective custody' of disenfranchised inmates (such as former police or prison employees, disabled, elderly, young, or gay prisoners, recovering addicts, informers and pedophiles), these 'prisons within prisons' reveal the hierarchies, violence, tensions and vulnerabilities that internally fracture inmate society.

While material evidence of clandestine adaptations do exist within institutions, most large-scale architectural modifications require some degree of staff collusion. Excavations at Sarah Island (1822), a nineteenth century British colonial penal settlement on

8. Bush, D (2000) 'Interpreting the latrines of the Johnson's island Civil War military prison' in *Historical Archaeology* 34(1):62-78.
9. McCoole, S. (1997) *Guns and Chiffon*. Dublin: Government of Ireland, p. 50.
10. Ehrenreich, R.M., C.L. Crumley and J. E. Levy (1995) *Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies*. Archaeological Paper No. 6. Arlington: American Anthropological Association; Casella, E.C. (2005) 'Prisoner of His Majesty: Postcoloniality and the archaeology of British penal transportation' in *World Archaeology* 37(3): 453-467, Casella, E.C. (2007) *The Archaeology of Institutional Confinement*. Gainesville (FL): University Press of Florida.

Figure 2: Detail of modified cellblock and recycled brick features, Gaol interior. Sarah Island Archaeology Project, 2010. Photograph by E.C. Casella.

the remote west coast of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), exposed a particularly impressive negotiation of disciplinary architecture inside the establishment's Gaol. Constructed by 1827 for the solitary punishment of secondary offenders, this brick structure originally contained a row of six isolation cells along an access corridor, each measuring 7 foot (2 metres) by 3 foot (1 metre), with floorboards and ceiling height of 9 foot (3 metres). The single entrance to the Gaol was located in the short eastern face of the structure, and opened into a large timber-floored guard room at the front of the building.

Demolition debris lay across the surviving remains of the brick internal wall that separated this guard room from the first solitary cell. Removal of these soil layers revealed a curious modification — at some point during the Gaol's use-life, the brick wall had been partially dismantled, with the component bricks recycled into a free-standing stove and chimney built inside the first solitary cell (Figure 2). Since these bricks had also been reused as floor paving within the guard room (creating a cosy hearth feature in front of the tiny stove), this structural adaptation had most likely occurred during the final years of this penal settlement (1846-47), when the derelict Gaol no longer retained its original wooden floors. In his July 1846 report to the Comptroller-General of Convicts, the Visiting Magistrate observed that 'two or three' of the Gaol's cells were to be reconditioned for solitary punishment of recalcitrant convicts.[11] Meanwhile, the front of this disciplinary structure had been quietly transformed into a collective space for socialising, cooking and personal warmth.

Gender has also necessitated a compromise of the ideal disciplinary landscape. Since its origins in the eighteenth century, the carceral landscape has functioned as a distinctly masculine environment — with the presence of women as both inmates and custodial staff posing an enduring set of difficulties. In particular, penal administrators have struggled to provide secure and hygienic accommodation for the dependent children of female inmates, with various solutions proposed and rejected over the last two centuries. From the 1830s, when the first dedicated female prisons were established in the British penal colonies of Australia, designs for women's institutions were modified to include separate Nursery Wards.[12] By the 1870s, this architectural practice was globally extended as independent female prisons were constructed in Britain and the United States.[13]

Archaeological excavations at the Ross Female Factory (1848), a women's prison established in the Van Diemen's Land penal colony, revealed architectural

11. Archives of Tasmania (AOT) Misc 62/16/A1103/5087, 24 July 1846, Visiting Magistrate to Comptroller General, report on Macquarie Harbour Probation Station.
12. Casella, E.C. (2002) *Archaeology of the Ross Female Factory*. Records of the Queen Victoria Museum, No. 108. Launceston (Australia): QVMAG Publications.
13. Rafter, N.H. (1990) *Partial Justice*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers; Zedner, L. (1991) *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

remains of the Nursery structures and adjoining Work Room.[14] Despite formal regulations intended to enforce a strict separation of this ward from the prison dormitories and work rooms, artefact assemblages recovered from the underfloor deposits contained a substantial number of labour-related artefacts: bone, ferrous metal and shell buttons, copper-alloy sewing pins, copper-alloy hook-and-eye wire fasteners, copper-alloy thimbles, and (surprisingly) part of a bone lacework bobbin.

The assemblage also included three cloth bale seals, stamped into lead. Clamped by a strap around a finished bale of woven textiles, and into the cloth itself, these bale seals hindered the pilfering of off-cuts, and thereby ensured the secure transmission of these manufactured commodities across the British Empire. Of the three lead examples recovered from the Ross Female Factory, two were corroded. The third displayed a detailed insignia (Figure 3) identified as that of the Royal Army Ordnance Corp, or that division of His Majesty's army charged with provisioning the Imperial exiles. As part of their carceral regime, female convicts were required to produce uniforms for distribution to inmates throughout the penal colony, in addition to a prescriptive range of clothing items for sale to the civilian population. Thus, the presence of these unique artefacts within underfloor deposits may have indicated that prison authorities stored valuable work materials within the Nursery Ward at times when the infant population was low.

nine months, women were returned to the main wards and henceforth separated from the infants to prevent the transmission of vice through maternal contact. Thus, the presence of textile-related artefacts offers material evidence for an unofficial negotiation of penal guidelines. Despite rigid orders issued by the Comptroller-General of Convicts, perhaps Ross Factory inmates were quietly permitted to complete their mandatory labour duties while in the company of their infants — and thereby enjoy some limited degree of affective contact and maternal connection with their children within the confines of the prison Nursery.

A final arena of material negotiation has involved the presence of illicit black market networks across all carceral institutions. This 'sub-rosa' exchange of contraband mobilizes four generalized types of desire: the embodied longing for food, personal safety, or sexual activity inadequately provided through official channels; the addictive craving for cigarettes, alcohol and drugs; the social desire for solidarity, reciprocity, and obligation amongst inmates and complicit staff members; and the strategic quest for influence and social status within the penal environment.[15]

Requiring a degree of staff collusion, black market networks circulate valuable commodities through both recreational and functional modes of transaction. Representing the first centralized state apparatus in the New World, the Walnut Street Prison of Philadelphia was established during the early 1790s to cultivate inmate rehabilitation through constant industry, religious

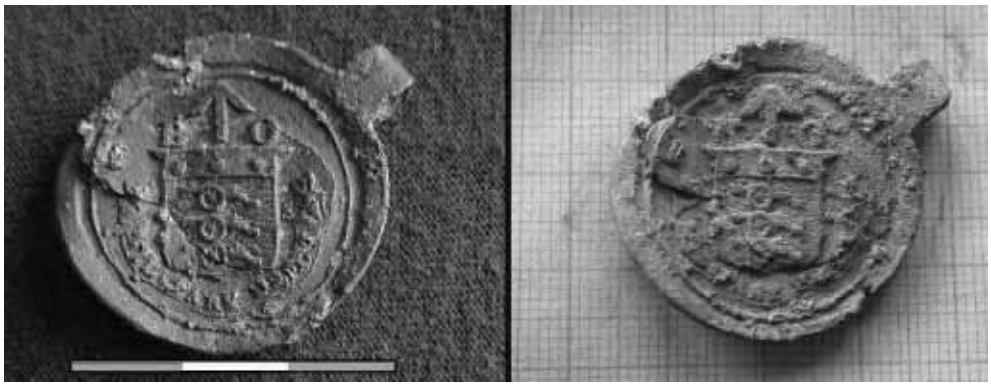

Figure 3: Detail of excavated lead bale seal, Ross Factory Archaeology Project, 2007. Left: artefact (special find 20) after conservation treatment. Right: artefact after field recovery. Photograph by E.C. Casella.

Alternatively, the frequency and sheer diversity of sewing-related artefacts within this assemblage also suggested a degree of quiet circumvention of the strict separation between the Nurseries and adjoining Work Room. While temporarily accommodated with their infants before enforced weaning, convict mothers were not required to undertake official taskwork duties. After

instruction, and moral supervision. During the spring of 1973, excavations sampled from two of the prison workshops.[16] Evidence from the bone assemblage indicated a frequent co-option of institutional resources for clandestine forms of production, with 14 small fragments carefully worked into cubic and rectangular shapes. Since two artefacts had been inked with dots,

14. Casella, E. C. (2012) 'Little Bastard Felons: Childhood, affect and labour in the penal colonies of nineteenth-century Australia' in B. Voss and E.C. Casella (eds) (2012) *The Archaeology of Colonialism: Intimate Encounters and Sexual Effects*, pp. 31-48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
15. Williams, V.L. and M. Fish (1974) *Convicts, Codes, and Contraband*. Cambridge: Ballinger.
16. Cotter et al. 1988 Cotter, J.L., R.W. Moss, B.C. Gill and J. Kim (1988) *The Walnut Street Prison Workshop*. Philadelphia: The Athenæum of Philadelphia.

the items demonstrated that a covert manufacture of bone dice occurred within the prison workshops. Providing a mechanism for both personal amusement and prohibited gaming activities amongst inmates, these illicit objects suggested that alternative social networks cut across the disciplinary landscape.

Similar contraband was recovered from Hyde Park Barracks (1819), an early Australian accommodation and administrative facility for male felons in the British penal colony of New South Wales. This assemblage consisted of handcrafted bone and ceramic gaming tokens excavated from underfloor deposits located below the stairway landings. While gaming served as a recreational diversion, it also provided a structured functional mechanism for the illicit circulation of desired goods and services throughout the penal environment.

A distinct spatial focus of these clandestine activities was archaeologically revealed during excavations at the Ross Female Factory (1848) of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). Although contraband appeared throughout the inmate dormitories of the main penal compound, the greatest concentrations of illicit artefacts (coins, olive glass alcohol bottles, and tobacco pipes) were recovered from the earthen floors of the Solitary Cells.[17] As places of ultimate punishment, these isolation cells were architecturally fabricated to discipline repeat offenders — those women located at the apex of the 'sub-rosa' economy who were best able to exploit its operation to their own benefit. Thus, the high frequencies of contraband indicated the shadowy dynamics of an alternative inmate landscape within this institution, with covert pathways of internal trade negotiating the disciplinary force of incarceration.

Conclusions

A uniquely modern human experience, incarceration reveals the simultaneous operation of three material forms of social power. From the eighteenth century, penal architecture has sought to elaborate, if not perfect, the imposition of self-discipline and social control. Institutional inmates have responded in kind, undertaking material acts of insubordination designed to reject the penal landscape. But binary models of domination and resistance limit our understandings of incarceration. With the ideal disciplinary template architecturally modified to accommodate a myriad of diverse inhabitants, inmates further negotiate penitential structures by forging their own alternative material worlds of collusion, exploitation, obligation, and object exchange. Analysis of the archaeological elements of these penal sites has exposed how dynamics of spatial order, social practice, and insubordinate agency shape the heritage of imprisonment. Thus, the carceral landscape ultimately represents a complex world of built intention perpetually negotiated by lived compromise.

17. Casella, E.C. 2000 'Doing Trade: A sexual economy of nineteenth-century Australian female convict prisons' in *World Archaeology* 32(2):209-21; Casella, E.C. (2002) *Archaeology of the Ross Female Factory*. Records of the Queen Victoria Museum, No. 108. Launceston (Australia): QVMAG Publications.