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**Contraction in an age
of expansion**

Prison Contraction in an Age of Expansion:

Size Matters, but does 'New' equal 'Better' in Prison Design?

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Introduction

With the largest prison in the country — HMP Oakwood near Wolverhampton, run by G4S — now up and running, and plans for a new 'super-prison' in Wales, it seems that 'Titan' prisons (or something very close to them) are firmly back on the agenda. Along with new accommodation planned at HMP Parc in Bridgend, HMP Peterborough in Cambridgeshire, HMP The Mount in Hertfordshire and HMP Thameside in London, an extra 1,260 places are to be added to the custodial estate. At the same time, 2,600 old places will be lost through the closure of six prisons and partial closure of three other sites; a capacity reduction which, it is hoped, will save £63 million per year. Among the prisons to be mothballed are Shrewsbury (originally built in 1793 and redesigned in the 1880s), Canterbury (1808) Gloucester (originating 1782 and rebuilt in the 1840s) and Shepton Mallett (on whose site there has been a prison since 1610). It has not yet been revealed what these prime sites might be turned into, but one can well imagine that if converted into apartments with the façades kept intact, they are likely to appeal to the kind of affluent young professionals who stay in the boutique hotel housed in the former HMP Oxford. But is it the case that 'old' always means 'bad' in the prison estate, and does 'new' necessarily mean 'progressive' or 'humanitarian'?

Why is the study of prison architecture and design important?

Prison architecture and design are under-researched, despite longstanding implicit recognition of the significance of prison space, which can be traced from Bentham's 18th century idea that prisoner reform and wellbeing are achieved in part by a simple idea in architecture; through the mid-19th century belief, as expressed by the Chaplain/Governor of Millbank, that

good behaviour among prisoners could be maintained *with the passive instrument of the building itself*;¹ to Sykes' evocative description of the Kafka-like architecture and layout of New Jersey State prison in the mid-twentieth century.² In 1961 a special issue of *British Journal of Criminology* was devoted to prison architecture but, subsequently, criminological scholarship on prison design has been sparse and largely historical, focusing on the 18th/19th century 'birth of the prison'. More recent studies introduce themes including: discourses of legitimacy and non-legitimacy security; therapy; compliance and neo-paternalism; prison size, quality of life and 'healthy' prisons; normalization; the depth, weight and tightness of imprisonment; the resurgence of the doctrine of less eligibility; and the Prison Service Instruction that prisons must meet a public acceptability test.

However, somewhat surprisingly, these studies have not included architecture and design as key variables and the most vivid descriptions of their form and effects are to be found in prisoner (auto)biographies. One of the most striking examples is *Life Without Parole: Living and Dying in Prison Today*, written by Victor Hassine, a 'lifer' in the American system who committed suicide after nearly 28 years inside, after being denied a parole hearing. His observations about the different prisons he served time in, which varied considerably in age, size and layout, tell us much about the effects that carceral design has on its occupants; in fact, Hassine states that many of the crises facing penal systems in the developed world — including overcrowding, violence, mental and physical illness, drug use, high levels of suicide and self-harm — are intrinsically related to the 'fear-suffused environments' created by prison architects:

To fully understand the prison experience requires a personal awareness of how bricks, mortar, steel, and the endless enforcement of rules and regulations animate a prison into a living, breathing entity designed to manipulate its inhabitants... Prison designers

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1. Nihill cited in Evans, R. (1982) *The Fabrication of Virtue, English Prison Architecture, 1750-1840*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 323.
 2. Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

and managers have developed a precise and universal alphabet of fear that is carefully assembled and arranged — bricks, steel, uniforms, colors, odors, shapes, and management style — to effectively control the conduct of whole prison populations.³

More recent developments in penal architecture in the UK can be traced back to the escapes from Whitemoor in 1994 and Parkhurst in 1995. The resulting Woodcock and Learmont inquiries and reports ushered in a new regime of security and control, including fortified perimeters, increased use of CCTV internally as well as externally, strict volumetric control of prisoners' property and a dramatic reversal of policy on many privileges that could be presented by the media as inappropriately conceived indulgences to an anti-social population. In essence, countless everyday procedures, practices and activities were introduced, curtailed or changed that combined to form insidious and pervasive erosions of humanity. In fact, Deborah Drake argues that the prison is a useful barometer for understanding the methods and parameters of state power and that security within the penal system has run parallel to it rise in prominence in a post 9/11, risk-attuned and retributive society.⁴ With a growing political and public appetite for excessive punishment to be inflicted on the 'worst of the worst', Drake observes that the high-profile escapes that precipitated these measures were viewed politically as a fortuitous catalyst for change.

This nascent preoccupation with repressive structural and situational security as a means of controlling risk coincided with the prison service becoming an executive agency in 1993, and a period of new managerialism, with performance measures for prisons and a system of incentives and earned privileges awarded or withdrawn according to prisoners' behaviour and complicity. In addition, in the early 1990s, the introduction of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) enabled awarding of contracts for design, construction, management and finance (DCMF) of penal institutions and, by 2007, warehouse-style 'Titan' prisons were being mooted as the way forward in

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prison construction. In a sense, the newest prison in England and Wales, HMP Oakwood near Wolverhampton, represents the culmination of these events and processes. Designed by Pick Everard, built by Kier and run by G4S, Oakwood is the largest prison project in the UK. It is also the cheapest in terms of cost per prisoner. Oakwood accommodates its occupants at a cost of £13,200 per prisoner place per year, whereas the average direct cost at Category C prisons is £21,600, and the average overall annual cost per prisoner is £31,300. Completed in June 2012, with three main house-blocks each containing 480 cells, together with the associated ancillary buildings, accommodation is currently provided for 1620 prisoners. Oakwood is situated adjacent to two existing custodial facilities, HMP Featherstone and HMP Brinsford YO1. It is designed and constructed as a stand-alone facility, but with potential to share facilities and staff with the other prisons on the site, if the need arises. Although holding Category C prisoners, Oakwood has been flexibly constructed so that it can hold higher category inmates without expensive retrofitting of security. The result of 'future-proofing' Oakwood is that it is replete with all the security and control paraphernalia one would expect to find in a dispersal prison and arguably feels over-securitised for the inmate population it currently holds. As Drake observes security in new-build prisons has risen to a level of prominence that eclipses every other consideration, including what it means to be human.

An alternative approach

A prison in Norway, Halden Fengsel, highlights the different approach taken to prison design in parts of northern Europe, where the strategic application of architectural and aesthetic principles to the design of new prisons encourages personal and intellectual creativity, and even a lightness and vividness of experience.⁵ Designers have not only experimented with progressive and highly stylized forms of penal architecture but have also designed internal prison spaces that explore more open, creative, even playful spatial planning. An absence of hard fixtures and

3. Hassine, V. (2010). *Life Without Parole: Living and Dying in Prison Today*, 5th edition, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 7.

4. Drake, D. (2012) *Prisons, Punishment and the Pursuit of Security*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

5. Hancock, P. and Jewkes, Y. (2012) 'Penal aesthetics and the pains of imprisonment', *Punishment & Society*, 13(5) 611–629.

furnishings, the use of psychologically effective colour schemes, attention to the maximum exploitation of natural light, and the incorporation of unevenness and differing horizons in the belief that distances, shadows and minimization of spatial repetition ward off monotony, are all to be found in these new prison buildings.⁶

Halden, a high security facility, is Norway's second largest prison and is set on a 75 acre site in the south of Norway, near the border with Sweden. Halden also represents the first time that interior designers have been employed to work on a prison. According to the Norwegian government's public construction and property management consultants, in each area (or 'zone') of the prison, different colour palettes make it easier to find one's way around and provide a varied and pleasant atmosphere; for example, the colours in the activity rooms are bright and energizing, while the cells are painted in more subdued, soothing shades.⁷ While reportedly costing approximately the same as Oakwood, Halden houses a maximum of 252 prisoners, as opposed to the 2000 capacity of Oakwood. In some senses they have a similar feel from the outside and in the public visiting areas and the prisoner reception and induction areas. But internally they feel very different and as a visitor the overriding impression of the UK prison is that it is predominantly driven by security and control imperatives (and achieving these at low cost), while in Norway the watchword is 'normalization'. The family house, where prisoners can invite their partners and children to stay with them for a night and the communal living spaces with a high-spec kitchen area separated from the TV lounge by a low-level island on which meals can be prepared, are the most obvious differences when compared to prisons in the UK. The living 'pods' in Halden contain heavy, vandal-proof furniture like their British counterparts, but their domestic spaces emulate the designs considered by contemporary house-builders to be most desirable for aspirational family living.

The cells at Halden are reminiscent of rooms in student halls of residence with their flat-screen TVs and mini-fridges. Designers chose long vertical windows for the rooms because they let in more sunlight. Every 10

to 12 cells share a living room and kitchen which, with their stainless-steel countertops, wraparound sofas and birch-colored coffee tables, might be likened to the display kitchens found in Ikea showrooms (except of a higher quality; all the fittings in the prison are solid maple and were made in the carpentry workshop at another high-security facility in Norway). Design plays a key role in Halden's rehabilitation efforts. According to the architect, the most important thing is that the prison looks as much like the outside world as possible. To avoid an institutional feel, exteriors are not concrete but made of bricks, galvanized steel and larch; the buildings seem to have grown organically from the woodlands. In addition, Halden is equipped throughout with state-of-the-art lighting designed to imitate natural daylight (regarded as having a positive effect on inmates' state of mind, including the reduction of aggression — and a commodity in relatively short supply during Scandinavian winters); and none of the

windows anywhere in the prison have bars. In the prison exercise yards Banksy-style murals created by Norwegian street artist, Dolk, adorn the walls.

Like Oakwood, Halden has been described as a 'showcase' prison. Both have been used politically by their governments who have held them up as symbols of their — markedly different — penal policies and philosophies. While Oakwood might be considered a model prison in a country characterized

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by penal excess, Halden may be regarded as an example of the Nordic countries penal exceptionalism, a concept characterized by low imprisonment rates, humane prison conditions and a large number of small prisons, many housing fewer than 100 prisoners. According to Pratt,⁸ 'the exceptional conditions in most Scandinavian prisons, while not eliminating the pains of imprisonment, must surely ease them', while a spokesperson for the Norwegian Ministry of Justice has stated that what matters most for prisoners and staff in Norwegian prisons is to be seen, heard and respected as human beings.⁹ In the Nordic countries, where there has not been the same marked shift of emphasis from the welfare model to the punitive, populist penal model, prisoners are referred to as 'clients' and prison officers as 'prison carers' or 'treatment staff'. Of course,

6. Spens, I. (1994) *Architecture of Incarceration*, London: Academy Editions.

7. <http://www.statsbygg.no>

8. Pratt J. (2008) 'Scandinavian exceptionalism in an era of penal excess. Part 1: the nature and roots of Scandinavian exceptionalism', *British Journal of Criminology*, 48(2): 119-137, p. 124.

9. cited in Johnsen, B., Granheim, P. K. and Helgesen, J. (2011) 'Exceptional prison conditions and the quality of prison life: Prison size and prison culture in Norwegian closed prisons', *European Journal of Criminology*, 8(6): 515-529.

there are huge differences in crime and imprisonment rates in each country and prisons in many Scandinavian countries are very unlikely to become overcrowded, with all the problems that gives rise to, because when prisons are full, convicted offenders simply join a prison waiting list. These differences arguably reflect a broader discourse and moral relationship to groups often constructed and treated as 'outsiders'. There is more routine interaction and less social distance between officers and prisoners in Norway than in the UK. These differences in culture are reflected in the training the officers receive as well as the structure of their working environment. In England and Wales the basic prison officer training is eight weeks with a focus on professional attitudes, interpersonal skills, security, control and restraint techniques, managing prisoners and professional standards, searching, diversity, and understanding prisoners' behaviour, including suicide and self-harm, substance misuse and mental health.¹⁰ In Norway, prison officer training is a two-year university accredited degree.

Halden is proud to be called 'the world's most humane prison', and the Governor is quoted in *Time* magazine (10 May 2010) as saying 'In the Norwegian prison system, there's a focus on human rights and respect'.¹¹ The same article notes:

[Halden] embodies the guiding principles of the country's penal system: that repressive prisons do not work and that treating prisoners humanely boosts their chances of reintegrating into society. 'When they arrive, many of them are in bad shape', [Governor] Hoidal says, noting that Halden houses drug dealers, murderers and rapists, among others: 'We want to build them up, give them confidence through education and work and have them leave as better people'.¹²

Underlining the importance of staff-prisoner relations that can be facilitated in a prison like Halden, its Governor also says:

Research on morale, leadership, safety and quality of prison life all also indicate that 'small is better'.

Halden's greatest asset, though, may be the strong relationship between staff and inmates. Prison guards... routinely eat meals and play sports with the inmates. 'Many of the prisoners come from bad homes, so we wanted to create a sense of family,' says architect Per Hojgaard Nielsen. Half the guards are women — Hoidal believes this decreases aggression — and prisoners receive questionnaires asking how their experience in prison can be improved. There's plenty of enthusiasm for transforming lives. 'None of us were forced to work here. We chose to... Our goal is to give all the prisoners... a meaningful life inside these walls.' It's warmth like that, not the expensive TV sets, that will likely have the most lasting impact.¹³

Once again, this is partially determined by size of prison. Liebling and Arnold¹⁴ in the UK and Johnsen et al¹⁵ in Norway have found that the humanistic values central to the prison experience and to forging positive prisoner-staff relationships are respect, humanity, trust and support and

that these are greatly enhanced in small prison environments and significantly undermined in large establishments. Research on morale, leadership, safety and quality of prison life all also indicate that 'small is better'. Ian O'Donnell has further argued:

[G]enerally speaking prisons work better if they are small... large prisons need to be highly regimented and life within them has an assembly line quality. Individual needs can quickly become lost in the drive to meet institutional priorities. These are dehumanising places where security and order are difficult to maintain, vulnerable prisoners become isolated, and the slim chance of reform is further attenuated. To minimise the harms of confinement prisons must be modest in size.¹⁶

10. Arnold, H., Liebling, A. and Tait, S. (2007) 'Prison Officers and Prison Culture', in Y. Jewkes (ed.) *Handbook on Prisons*, Cullompton: Willan, pp. 471-495.

11. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1986002,00.html>

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Liebling, A., assisted by Arnold, H. (2004a). *Prisons and their moral performance: A study of values, quality and prison life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

15. Johnsen et al (2011) see n.9.

16. O'Donnell, I. (2005) 'Putting Prison in its Place', Address to the Annual Conference of the Irish Association for the Study of Delinquency, 5 November, p. 65. Available http://www.iprt.ie/files/putting_prison_in_its_place_ian_odonnell_nov_2005.pdf

Of course the rationale for building giant prisons is cost-effectiveness and efficiency, but this seems a very short-term view based on what we know about recidivism. All countries must decide what is a suitable amount of pain to inflict on individuals defined in relation to cultural discourses — and, putting it crudely, those discourses are dominated by themes of vengeance and punitive punishment in the US and UK, and of welfare, citizenship and rehabilitation in Norway.

Looking to the future

A new ESRC-funded research study is planned which will address these issues.¹⁷ With Dominique Moran (University of Birmingham) I will explore whether it is the case that a prison is a prison, regardless of the way it is designed. Is the loss of liberty everything? Or, if we think of prisons as punishment, not *for* further punishment, might we stand a better chance of returning prisoners to society as reasonably well-adjusted, rehabilitated citizens and thus reducing future prison population numbers if we follow elements of the Nordic model? Imagine that in some Utopian parallel universe we *could* start building small, aesthetically pleasing and spiritually nourishing prisons at low cost. Would they aid rehabilitation? Are open, colourful, flexible spaces like those at Halden in some senses ‘liberating’? Or do good *intentions* in architecture, design and technology sometimes have unintended outcomes or perverse consequences?

Certainly ‘new’ does not necessarily mean ‘better’ and the designers behind the new ‘super-prison’ being planned for construction in Wrexham, north Wales (starting mid-2014 and due to open in 2017) might be cautioned that size does matter in prison construction. According to an artist’s impression published on the BBC website, HMP Wrexham will continue the design model found in recent prison construction in England and Wales; a bland but functional approach which calls to mind Victor Hassine’s words about Graterford State Prison, Pennsylvania, built in 1920s:

There are no trees in the great walled fortress of Graterford and very few shrubs. In fact,

there isn’t much of anything green that hasn’t been painted green. Also, the prison has been designed so that you can never get an unobstructed view of anything. Walls keep getting in the way.

But he also describes his time in a prison built in the 1990s which, on the face of it, would appear to lend weight to the Ministry of Justice’s view that new, cost effective, modern facilities are the way forward:

Albion was an ocean of plush green fields of grass with handsome geometric outcroppings of earth-toned brick buildings of various shapes and sizes. The buildings were generously spaced so that the deep green of the grass, the proportionate lines of the buildings, and the surrounding cerulean blue of the sky combined to create an eye-pleasing and harmonious vision of tranquility that evoked safety and relaxation. All of Albion’s buildings are climate-controlled, well-lit, spotlessly clean, and color coordinated. There are security cameras everywhere and blind spots nowhere.

There are eight separate housing units of only 128 cells each, three separate dining halls, and two huge recreation yards...Albion is the most comfortable, best designed, most structured, and most attractive prison that I have ever lived in. It looks and feels like it can actually work as a rehabilitative prison.¹⁸

However, he goes on to dispel the notion that a prison such as Albion promotes quality of life and has a rehabilitative function:

In fact it is the least effective prison of all. It is a dysfunctional, mean-spirited facility that callously steeps you in despair while it lavishes you with physical comfort. Albion provides the inmate a sterile environment with faceless bells and voices precisely controlling time and movement for no apparent purpose other than order. It is a place where everyone is suspicious of each other and superficial

17. ESRC Standard Grant ES/K011081/1: ‘Fear-suffused environments or potential to rehabilitate? Prison architecture, design and technology and the lived experience of carceral spaces’, www.prisonspaces.com

18. Hassine (2010) see n.3 p. 125.

friendliness is all that can exist. It is a place where perception is the only reality that matters and where induced poverty is used to generate illusory wealth.

Hassine's descriptions of Albion's sterile, warehouse-style environment accommodating an inmate population of 2,300 men, might also be regarded as a cautionary tale for those who commission and design future prisons in the UK. Clean, humane and safe environments are unquestionably desirable for prisoners and prison staff and factors such as natural daylight, aesthetic stimuli and comfort are clear indices of quality of life. But at Albion (and perhaps at Halden), the illusory, progressively modern architecture made the 'hard and gritty daily grind of prison outwardly appear natural and even benign'.¹⁹ Hassine compares the manufactured effect of this environment to that of an ant farm:

The visible order, regularity, and routine of the seemingly content ant farm fails to expose the violence and crushing hopelessness the trapped ants are actually forced to endure. Albion is ...paradoxically more hopeless and indifferent than any prison that had ever housed me.

Another consequence of Albion's combination of warehousing and controlled movement is sharply limited inmate social interaction which produces a dominance of self-interest over social integration. As more media technologies are introduced into prisons like Oakwood and Wrexham, including in-cell phones, TVs, play stations and video links to courtrooms, fewer opportunities for human interaction become available. As we know from research, criminal activity is sometimes the result of poor socialisation skills, and this can be exacerbated by tuning in to personal media and 'tuning out' of the prison culture, with vulnerable or fragile inmates becoming entirely invisible and unheard, and *all* prisoners losing out on the benefits of association.²⁰

Concluding thoughts

A wide-ranging, public discussion about the purposes and impacts of penal architecture is long overdue. Proposals for the building of Titan prisons appeared to initiate such a debate. However, following Lord Carter's recommendations and a consultation document published in June 2008, dissenting voices claiming that Titans would be monolithic prison warehouses meant that the plans were shelved. Instead, an approach was promised that would offer small units within a shared secure perimeter. But now the powers-that-be appear to have returned to the 'bigger is better' approach, seduced by the economies of scale which have drastically reduced the cost of imprisoning offenders at prisons like Oakwood. But has the market society forgotten the transformative power of aesthetics in its desire for consumption and profit?

In most countries rethinking prison design is low down on the penal agenda and frequently clashes with public ideas about what prisons should be like, or becomes politically embarrassing to ministers trying to prove their 'tough on crime' credentials. One of the few scholars to write about prison design, Iona Spens pointed out nearly two decades ago that unattractive prisons cost just as much to build as ones designed with a view to aesthetic appeal. She observed that more dignified accommodation in an environment which facilitates movement, interaction and behavioural change is evidently more conducive to rehabilitation and, ultimately, reintegration into society. Prisons, she said, need to be more than human filing cabinets. But now that the UK is following the American model prisons that are cheap to build and effective at keeping prisoners inside them are understandably attractive to the Ministry of Justice, one has to wonder if there are other costs, human costs, attached to the new model prisons. The MOJ promised the delivery of rehabilitation in the new prisons. Is this an achievable goal in buildings that resemble vast, sterile ant colonies?

19. Ibid.

20. Jewkes, Y. (2002) *Captive Audience: Media, Masculinity and Power in Prisons*, Cullompton: Willan.