Hidden Monuments

mon·u·ment (*noun)* **a :** a lasting evidence, reminder, or example of someone or something notable or great **b :** a memorial stone or a building erected in remembrance of a person or event. (Merriam-Webster)

When we are made to think of architectural monuments, what immediately comes to mind? Is it the Guggenheim, home to fine art and high civilization? Maybe we think of the Eiffel Tower, a symbol of the French state and a reminder of patriotism to all nations. Or perhaps our minds are drawn to the "last American Architect", Frank Lloyd Wright, and his work with the residential United States embodied in *Falling Water*. All of these are, truly, lasting evidence of human spirit and effort. But does an achievement have to own a spot of limelight in order to be just that, a true accomplishment? What about the architecture that we as a culture take for granted, or literally wish to forget? Sometimes the most significant tasks are completed by those that are far from the public eye. Sometimes the least glamorous jobs build the foundation of society. When we are made to think of architectural monuments, do we ever think of prisons?

Imprisonment used as a punishment is a somewhat new concept, and incarceration as reformation is even newer. Throughout history, "jails" as we know them have been used simply to hold the convicted until their time of punishment (hanging, flogging, dismemberment, etc.). The Catholic Church was actually the first to offer imprisonment as we have come to know it. In Rome, during the reign of Constantine, churches and monasteries began a custom of granting asylum to convicted criminals as long as they agreed to resolve their crimes through suffering. The most frequently used form of resolution by the church was confinement. The guilty were sent to a remote monastic

facility or a hidden room in the church cellar and locked there (sometimes in shackles) until the head priest deemed necessary. Prisons and jails did not progress from ecclesiastical use until the Colonial era of America. Quakers and other early humanitarians were becoming appalled by the inhumane conditions of law enforcement,

and set out to fix the problem. In 1789, the Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth in conjunction with a group called the Prison Society officiated legislation that brought about a penitentiary system quite similar to ours today. The new laws called for confinement as the base of the punitive process, architectural improvement to the prisons, and more humane treatment of the prisoners, among other things.

Early prison architecture was centered on the idea of isolation, and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia led the rest of our developing country by example. Official cell size was six feet by eight feet by nine feet, and enclosed by thick cement walls. All communication with fellow prisoners was banned to avoid further contamination by more "hardened" criminals. This was facilitated by the implementation of plumbing and water heat for each cell by the mid 1800's. Each cell had a small bed and work bench where private, supervised labor would take place. The prisoners took their recreation in small enclosed yards, apart from the other inmates. In order to further seal the criminals off from outside society, a thirty foot high stone wall enclosed the whole complex. The idea behind this design was a belief in every human's inherent goodness, an idea that complete isolation (with the exception of Biblical Scripture) would allow the inmate's own conscience to "recharge" and correct itself, bringing about reformation. This way of thinking was almost completely accepted for a short time, but as problems and failures began to arise, so did an array of critics.

After viewing Eastern State Penitentiary in 1842, Charles Dickens wrote this of the architecture:

> *I believe it in its effects, to be cruel and wrong. In its intention, I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; But I am persuaded*
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> Webb 3
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> *that those who devised this system ... do not know what it is that they are doing. (...) I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.*

Dickens clearly points out the ability of architecture to influence thinking, growth and mood. Along with other supporters, he was beginning to believe that prison design's focus on complete isolation would eventually do more harm than good. This new group of critics thought that without a social aspect, social reform was impossible. The inmate will eventually become the space he inhabits. Therefore, if the intentional isolation of prison space teaches convicts to be devoid of social skills, losing the ability to interact, what good is it? The New York system of penitentiaries made slight modifications according to these new arguments, allowing prisoners to congregate in workshops during the day. However, all other time was still spent in isolation. Improvements in policy were much slower than the original push for incarceration, and didn't truly begin until the late eighteen hundreds.

By the early twentieth century, prison reform had begun again. The government began calling on architects and social scientists to create new models and solutions for the previously explained problems. Up to this point, the standard prison design consisted of rows upon rows of completely self contained cells with an occasional common mess hall or workshop (all extremely bleak and bare). New designs were being created, most of which strayed from the original intent of the reform, looking on other issues than the correction of the inmates. The majority of the new architecture focused on security and expense. Grilles (iron/steel bars) became extremely popular because of their small expense and the fact that they allow guards to see inside the cells. Architects also designated three different types of cells: outside, semi-inside, and inside. Inside cells are the most popular with designers and guards due to their ease of observation and, once again, small expense. They are small cubes enclosed on three or four sides by grillwork or cement blocking, and always with a grille front, removing all forms of privacy. They have no outside view or windows, making escape next to impossible and obliterating any concept of night and day. Semi-inside cells also have grille fronts, but are separated

from an external wall by a security corridor. This allows the inmates some natural light and returns a little sense of time. They are easy to guard, but increase the cost of building slightly. Outside cells are the least popular with jail keepers and designers because of

their greater expense and higher probability of escape. They may sometimes have a grille front, but usually exist as rooms with doors, allowing the prisoner at least an illusion of privacy. (Almost all prisons are completely monitored by closed circuit television.) They also contain windows. Although they are commonly blocked to avoid an outside view, windows allow natural light in, which is very important to the human condition. The second prison reformation also brought about the advent of open wards or dormitories. Wards are large, bare open cells walled by grillwork, containing only bunks and open toilets. They generally house twelve to sixty inmates, are extremely hard to observe, and remove all remaining privacy of the prisoner. Wards are open grounds for sexual and moral exploitation. These are extremely unpopular with both guards and prisoners, but still exist due to their low cost. One common improvement, however, was the dayroom. Dayrooms are usually simple, empty inside wards with a few tables bolted to the floor. Although they don't sound significant, they allow social interactions between prisoners and guards, increasing morale and social skills. The best dayrooms sometimes contain a television, an occasional ping-pong table, and comfortable seating. The second prison reformation also brought with it multiple different overall prison designs.

The **radial design** is centered by a central control room or "hub". Spokes or legs of cells and activity spaces radiate outward from the center. This design is very conducive to security, as all activity can be monitored by the central hub. The architecture is extremely uniform, however and decreases human value and self-worth. Several well known prisons such as Eastern State Penitentiary are built in this style, but it is slowly becoming outdated and is being replaced by newer prisons of different designs.

The **panopticon prison** was conceptualized by French philosopher Michel Foucault. It consists of a central guard tower surrounded by a several story ring of cells. Again,

observation is very easy in this design. Every single cell is viewable by one or two guards in the tower. The panopticon also has a huge capacity. Because of the openness, however, there is extreme light and noise pollution, and its disturbing resemblance to a factory or breeding grounds quickly and totally dehumanizes the inmates, breaking down social thinking. Only one panopticon prison was ever completed in the United States: Statesville Penitentiary in Illinois.

The **telephone pole design** carries a series of parallel, lateral cross arms connected by one or two long corridors. Movement throughout the complex is easily supervised and regulated by a series of locked doors throughout the two corridors. Seemingly endless hallways and a lack of variation distort the prisoner's sense of time and space, ultimately leading to a state of virtual autism, rendering the inmate unable to ever function properly in an outside world. The **high-rise** prison is essentially a vertical variation of the telephone pole design, transforming the side arms into stacked floors, and corridors into a single elevator shaft. Its characteristics are fundamentally the same as its derivative. Graterford prison in Pennsylvania is an example of the telephone pole design.

The **campus** or **courtyard design** is the most positive and advantageous of correction and reformation. In this design, clusters of buildings are placed around a central courtyard or "town square". Inmates are permitted to live in small, comfortable houses or apartments. Grillwork is only visible in the intake area. There are churches, schools and libraries available to the inmates, and the courtyard is often well landscaped and maintained by the

prisoners themselves. Privacy and other basic human rights are allowed the convicts, giving them a sense of responibility. At some of these institutions, inmates are giving a copy of the key to their apartment. Participation and work ethic are also taught through classes and "jobs" given to the prisoners in the microcosm of actual society that the

campus design creates. The entire complex is surrounded by a typical prison wall to make up for the security lost through multiple buildings. This design's advantages do come with a higher price tag, however. The complex requires a higher qualified, more attentive staff. The building costs are also driven up because of the nature of the design. One example of this design is Illinois State Penitentiary in Vienna, Ill.

Along with its obvious improvements, the campus design lowers the size of the inmate groups, allowing for a positive feeling of camaraderie and friendship with the staff. This has rarely led to a decrease of respect from the inmates, however. Respect is shown where respect is given, and even the seemingly open layout of the design has not led to more frequent thoughts of rebellion. On the contrary, both escape attempts and actual escapes have been rarified. Although it is not perfect, it has shown itself to be a vast improvement over the cold, dehumanizing architecture of previous designs; certainly a step in the right direction.

Repeat offenders make up the highest prison population in the United States. Let us hope that administrators look past the initial expense of improved prison design; instead viewing it as an investment, allowing architects to completely do their job in providing prison facilities that truly reform offenders and spare taxpayers the expense of repetitive prison stays. Looking back at the true definition of monument, what could be a better reminder of human spirit and ability than changed lives? What could be greater or more notable than a truly reformed individual? What more impressive event could the prison system present than a completion of a truthfully and ultimately effective penal sentence? As contradictory as it may sound, a completely effective prison is as much a monument to human spirit as is the Eiffel Tower. Being architects, we have the responsibility to make this happen.