

Should Prison Architecture be Brutal, Bland or Beautiful?

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Jewkes, Y & Moran, D 2014, 'Should Prison Architecture be Brutal, Bland or Beautiful?', *Scottish Justice Matters*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 8-11. <http://scottishjusticematters.com/wp-content/uploads/SJM_2_1_PrisonArchitectureLo-Res.pdf>

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Moran_2014_Scottish_Justice_Matters

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scottish JUSTICE matters

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Edited by
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on Inspiring Change

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on the Easterhouse Project

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on Stop and Search in Scotland



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ISSN 2052-7950 (Print)

ISSN 2052-7969 (Online)

Scottish Consortium on Crime and Criminal Justice is a registered charity [SC029241]



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Halden Fængsel, Østfold, Norway. Erik Moller Architects

SHOULD PRISON ARCHITECTURE BE BRUTAL, BLAND OR BEAUTIFUL?

Yvonne Jewkes and Dominique Moran

IN 2013 the Ministry of Justice for England and Wales announced proposals for a new prison holding up to 2,500 inmates, to be constructed in Wrexham, north Wales. Built on the site of a former tyre and rubber factory that previously provided employment in the area, the planned privately run facility is due to open in 2017. When Wrexham was announced as the 'winner' of the competitive process to get the new 'super-prison', many local councillors treated the news as if they had won the lottery which, in a sense, they had, as the new prison is expected to create 1,000 jobs and bring £23m a year to the local economy (BBC News, 2013). Drawings and plans of HMP Wrexham show that it will look virtually identical to other recently built prisons in England and Wales: so dull and characterless that it practically disappears.

What do these large, bland warehouses say about society's attitudes to prisoners? Differing so markedly from the heavy, decorative symbolism encrypted in the designs of nineteenth century prisons (which were modelled largely on medieval dungeons and Gothic palaces), do these new prison designs have something equally meaningful to say about the boundary between prisoners and community? Might the nondescript external appearance of new-build prisons be regarded as a visual metaphor for the loss of public

empathy for the excluded offender? Do we turn a blind eye to the plight of those confined if we cast an invisible cloak over them with architecture that might most kindly be described as 'municipal'? These questions are informing a major research project we are conducting called "'Fear-suffused environments' or potential to rehabilitate? Prison architecture, design and technology and the lived experience of carceral spaces" (ESRC Standard Grant ES/K011081/1). In this project, we will be investigating how differently Nordic countries have approached prison design compared to England and Wales. Although a benign façade might, superficially, suggest a benevolent regime, it has recently been argued that security within many countries' penal systems has risen to a level of prominence that eclipses every other consideration, including what it means to be human (Drake, 2012). To illustrate, the designers and constructors of England's most recent prison, HMP Oakwood, 'future-proofed' it (Jewkes, 2014). Although a Category C facility, holding those prisoners deemed unlikely to try to escape, the prison has been built with all the security paraphernalia of a Category B institution, designed to hold prisoners for whom the potential for escape should be made very difficult. The rationale is that, if at some point in the future, it needs to be used to accommodate high security inmates, it

can do so without the need for expensive retro-fitting of security.

As a facility that accommodates up to 2,000 prisoners relatively cheaply (that is, £13,200 per inmate per year as opposed to the England and Wales average of £21,600 per year for Cat C prisoners and £31,300 for all prisoners) the G4S run Oakwood has been lauded as a 'model' prison by the Secretary of State for Justice. In a sense, it is a showcase prison used, by the government that commissioned it, as a symbolic manifestation of its penal policy and philosophy. However, in recent months, the relatively minor difficulties that it reportedly was experiencing (passed off as 'teething troubles') have escalated significantly, causing alarm among residents living nearby. The local newspaper, Express & Star, reported in January that the prison "has dominated the lives of people here since it was first mooted more than four years ago... Now it looms over them both physically and emotionally".

The relationship between a prison's physical appearance, layout and location and public feelings about offenders and punishment is a neglected topic we will be interrogating in our research. Several commentators have focused on the traditional opposition of communities to location of prisons in their midst, based on concerns similar to those expressed by Oakwood's neighbours; that a prison lowers property values, increases levels of crime, endangers residents' safety, attracts 'undesirable' elements and damages the reputation of the area. But increasingly, this resistance is tempered or submerged by the demands of local councillors and business leaders for the building of prisons to stimulate local economic development.

In this sense, Wrexham's perceived need for the generation of profit through punishment is following the lead of many small rural towns in the US, where policymakers are actively locating prisons in 'lagging' communities. It has been suggested that policymakers in states including California, have located 'inferior' public facilities in less affluent communities because there was less 'NIMBY' protest than in prosperous neighbourhoods and because, unable to attract private commerce, these areas are seemingly more willing to accept opportunities 'discarded' by others.



Correctional facility, Nuuk, Greenland. Schmidt Hammer Lassen Architects.



Halden Fængsel, Østfold, Norway. Erik Moller Architects

A different approach

Prisons such as those in England and Wales are not the only facilities held up by the governments that commissioned them as models which communicate something of their countries' attitudes to offenders. When Halden prison in Norway was opened in 2009, its Governor told *Time* magazine (Adams, 2010) that Halden was proud to be called "the world's most humane prison". The first prison to employ interior designers, Halden's varied colour palettes, natural construction materials, emphasis on maximising daylight (there are no bars on any windows) and location in a scenic forest might be regarded as a physical manifestation of the Norwegian prison system's focus on "human rights and respect" (ibid).

Now, a number of other countries are following Norway's lead and building humane, sensuous, architecturally innovative facilities. In some cases, this approach goes well beyond avoiding an institutional feel and aims to design prisons that, perhaps not uncontroversially, might be described as beautiful. Architects' websites give a flavour not only of the leading-edge designs being employed but also the penal philosophies underpinning them. For example, a new state prison on the island of Falster in Denmark is to be built by architects C. F. Møller. They say:

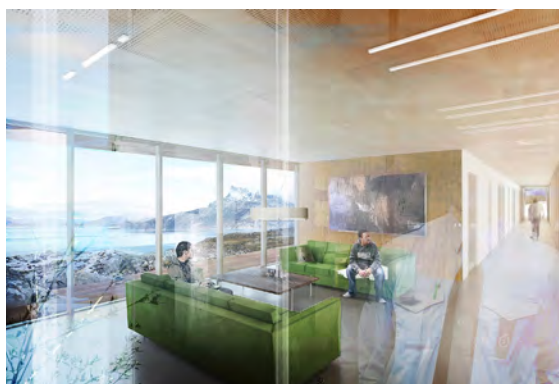
we have deliberately created a very varied and stimulating environment of different spaces and landscape features - hopefully this will contribute to the re-socialization of the individual and to create renewed confidence in the community and mutual respect for society as a whole

(<http://www.dezeen.com/2011/01/07/danish-state-prison-by-c-f-møller/>)

Another Danish architectural company, Schmidt Hammer Lassen, has won the competition to design Greenland's first closed prison (Nuuk Correctional Institution) which aims to be the "world's most scenic prison". Set within a stunning, rugged landscape, the prison will exploit the "contrast between the rough and the beautiful":

The whole idea behind the project is to add qualities to the complex that will enhance rehabilitation and diminish physical and psychological violence... The thought process behind this is that access to nature – watching the clouds, birds, daylight, weather and so on, can aid in rehabilitation

(<http://www.archdaily.com/375056/ny-anstalt-correctional-facility-winning-proposal-schmidt-hammer-lassen-architects/>).



Closed State Prison, Falster. CF MØller Architects.



Conclusion

Whether aesthetic considerations in their environment are significant matters of concern to prisoners is a moot point, although plenty of prisoner autobiographies suggest that architecture and design are intrinsically related to the pain and harms inflicted by incarceration. Meanwhile, the heated discussion that accompanies proposals for any new prison suggests that architectural and aesthetic considerations matter to most people in the wider community. Of course, it is not just a prison's external appearance that elicits controversy, and public opinion about what a prison should look like may be complex and conflicted, with tensions surfacing between a desire to make prisons look like places of punishment and a more self-interested desire to allow them to blend unobtrusively into their surroundings. Bland, functional, and sometimes austere, the aesthetics of the new prisons in England and Wales succeed in communicating authority, efficiency and, above all, security, but do not possess qualities that might be interpreted as human or humane, far less enriching or beautiful. We wait with interest to see how Scotland's new prisons, informed by a 'community-facing' agenda, respond to the divergent approaches of its Nordic and southern neighbours.

Adams, W. L. (2010) 'Norway builds the world's most humane prison', *Time* 10th May. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1986002,00.html>

BBC News (2013) 'Firms set to cash in on Wrexham £250m super-prison', 5th September. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-north-east-wales-23965267>

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

Jewkes, Y. (2014) 'Afterword: Abolishing the Architecture and Alphabet of Fear', in T. Mathiesen (ed.) *The Politics of Abolition, second revised edition*, London: Routledge

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