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Careful control: The infrastructure of water in carceral space

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This paper advances carceral geographies by situating water in relation to the nexus of care and control in the carceral setting. Critical for both hygiene and health, but also requiring control and management, consideration of water offers an analytical lens to uncover everyday, intimate and embodied institutional spaces of care and control mediated by water both in its elemental form, and via water infrastructures. Drawing on extensive qualitative data generated with serving prisoners in the UK, the paper considers carceral relationships with water as variously and simultaneously unruly, restrictive, health-enabling and therapeutic.

KEYWORDS

architecture, carceral geography, health, infrastructure, prison, water

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent work in Geography has addressed the significance of carceral space, which loosely encompasses the prison (Moran, 2015), as well as detention centres (e.g., Hiemstra, 2013; Mountz et al., 2013), halfway houses (e.g., Allspach, 2010) or secure holding facilities for children and young people (Schliehe, 2015), but may extend to sites beyond the traditional conceptualisation of incarceration or confinement (Moran et al., 2017). Such work encompasses a wide empirical and conceptual focus, ranging from studies of embodied and gendered experiences of incarceration (e.g., Moran, 2012, 2014; Rosenberg & Oswin, 2015) to the political-economic impacts of carceral space (e.g., Bonds, 2006, 2009; Che, 2005; Conlon & Hiemstra, 2016; Mitchelson, 2014; Shabazz, 2015a, 2015b) and negotiations of the carceral boundary (e.g., Moran, 2013a, 2013b; Turner, 2016b). Although a multitude of work within Geography (and in other disciplines such as Criminology and Sociology) has made comments about the impacts, and particularly the pains, of infrastructural and design elements of the prison environment (e.g., Sykes, 2007 [1958]; Wener, 2012), water infrastructures have yet to feature in these discussions.

While water may have a therapeutic potential in certain spaces (see Foley & Kistemann, 2015), we must recognise that in the prison environment it does not generally have a history of positive associations. In the history of crime and punishment, water has been used to control populations via the regulation of behaviour and spatial activities. In particular, we may think, for example of water cannons being used to control unruly crowds (Donnelly, 2001). Further it has been used as part of extreme means of control and coercion such as in water misting – a punishment technique that involves spraying a light mist of water on an individual's face when they exhibit undesirable behaviour (Arntzen & Werner, 1999); water torture – a process in which water is slowly dripped onto the forehead of a restrained individual, which allegedly is designed to drive them insane; and water-boarding – where water is poured over a cloth covering the face, nose and mouth while an individual is immobilised in order to induce the sensation of drowning (Rejali, 2009). However, water forms part of the central infrastructure – the basic physical or organisational structures and facilities required for the operation of the institution – of prison life. Yet, while water (indeed like the prison itself) can be a means of control, access to water is also

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crucial if prisons are to serve their prescribed function of enacting the custody of individuals through operational priorities “to ensure safe, decent and secure prisons” (National Offender Management Service, 2014, p. 13). Taking note of these problematic aspects of water in carceral space, we interrogate the nuance of this assumed negative relationship to explore water and “unruly” infrastructures of water at the nexus of control *and* care in the carceral setting.

This paper draws on findings generated as a part of a wider ESRC-funded research project investigating how penal aims and philosophies (that is, what prison is “for”) are expressed in prison architecture and design, and how effective prison architecture, design and technology (ADT) is in conveying and delivering that penal purpose. The data collection entailed a multi-method approach comprising ethnographic observations, surveys of the prisoner populations and focus groups and interviews with staff and prisoners. Observations were carried out in various areas of the prisons, including, but not limited to, individual prison cells, residential wings, special care units, health centres, visiting suites, education centres and workshops. In this paper, we refer to data collected in two UK-based custodial facilities generated through 42 interviews and 29 focus groups (comprising between two and six participants) with adult male and adult female prisoners; eight interviews with young people (juveniles under the age of 18) held in custodial facilities; and 45 interviews with prison staff. Water was critical to dialogues surrounding infrastructure such as in-cell sanitation and, notably, agency and control in the prison environment and subsequently forms the focus of the following discussion.

2 | CAREFUL CONTROL BY WATER IN CARCERAL SPACE

In the prison environment, *caring* for those in custody through safety measures and security mechanisms is a primary concern resulting in the implementation of certain design choices to both prevent escape of prisoners and ensure that they are not physically harmed while incarcerated (National Offender Management Service, 2014). In this vein, for example, in newly built prisons exterior perimeter walls and fences are built to a prescribed height (to prevent scaling of these walls and transfer of contraband); windows are made of sealed units with ventilation panels rather than opening panes (to prevent items being passed between cells); under-floor heating is often installed as standard (to regulate temperatures and remove the ligature points that pipes and radiators provide); and storage furniture is made from robust materials (to limit damage and prevent the fabrication of weapons). Although this is clearly a landscape of *control*, it is arguably couched within a rhetoric of care of the individual and those around them. Similarly, this *careful control* is also exerted using water infrastructures. In particular, water may be considered to be an element requiring restriction because it poses some kind of risk, that is, a risk of an individual flooding their immediate environment or the risk of an individual causing bodily harm to themselves or others. Ordinarily this manifests itself in prisoners having access to showers rather than baths, and taps and showerheads being time-restricted to reduce the volume of water flow, which causes significant frustration as well as concerns for personal hygiene among those who inhabit prison spaces (Jewkes et al., forthcoming; Turner, 2016a).

In other circumstances, water has been controlled for the management of prisoner health, such as for cleansing and anti-contagion mechanisms. There are numerous historical examples of the forced bathing of inmates as part of the prisoner reception process (One-Who-Has-Endured-It, 1877). Indeed, the remaining infrastructure – such as communal baths and “assembly-line” showers – has often become a key part of the narrative at penal tourist sites, such as in the infamous prison on Alcatraz Island, San Francisco. However, in recent years, the significance of water and ablutions has featured heavily in the rhetoric for creating humane prison environments. In contemporary prisons, this is also reinforced by infrastructural sanitation for basic life-giving and the provision of cleanliness and hygiene. Guidelines, such as those outlined by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2012, aim to ensure adequate standards are met. Ranging from suggestions on the volume of water required per prisoner per day to the litre-per-minute flow and number of taps that should be provided for a set number of prisoners, water has become a quantifiable resource for the maintenance of health and wellbeing. The ICRC has also recognised variances that occur according to geographical location and cultural context. Although the practice is still employed in other parts of the world, England and Wales in 1996 ended its practice of slopping-out (where prisoners without in-cell sanitation were forced to urinate and defecate in their cell in pots emptied in the morning). In-cell sanitation has now become the norm for new-build prisons in the UK. “En-suite” cells have received criticism (alongside other “luxuries” such as televisions and games consoles) from some media outlets (Mason, 2006), but they are recognised as an essential way to meet the basic needs of prisoners, while arguably placing a renewed focus on time spent within an individual cell.

In our study, personal washing facilities were not only appreciated for their safety in relation to the perceived threats of communal showering (as discussed previously) but also for the dignity, privacy and sense of independence they afford to individuals. Both prisoners and staff members agreed that this standard feature of the contemporary prison cell was

beneficial and an improvement on older facilities. Here, a prisoner interviewee explains the significance of in-cell sanitation for daily life:

- Interviewer: Can you describe to me what a difference it makes to your life having your own en-suite?
 Respondent: Well, I remember the chamber pots, so they're treating you with a bit of dignity, instead of using . . . squatting and that. Especially on a Friday, a Saturday night, you know what I mean? You'd try and do the toilet before you got locked up at half four. Or sometimes that would be there to the next morning at eight o'clock until they came in. So having the toilets in the cells is good. It's just respecting you, you're treated like a human.
 I: Is that a basic entitlement?
 R: I would say. Totally basic. If you've not got that then you should at least have access to one. That's what they done in [older prison in which participant was previously incarcerated], they left us open in the halls, they had like chamber pots like in caravans . . . Port-a-potties. (Interview, Jimmy, male prisoner, UK)

Significant issues were raised by participants concerning the perceived (and indeed often real) threat of contagion presented by communal washing facilities. Many participants placed value on the "wet room-style" in-cell sanitation facilities in terms of their ability to be easily cleaned and the reassurance that such facilities would only be used by themselves:

- R: Aye the en-suite facilities are absolutely boosts. I think just about every prison has got en-suite toilet, but having the shower built into it, it's a wet room so it washes your pod [cell] for you every day. You pick up infections no matter what if you're sharing a shower unit, a shower block. (Focus group 10, male prisoner, UK)

Yet, in raising such attention, we also understand from interdisciplinary work that water is often uncontrollable, as elements are not stable substances (Adey, 2015; Barry, 2013; Peters, 2012). In a similar vein, participants from our research also described inability to control water in its various states. While all three states of matter (solid, liquid and gas – ice, water and water vapour) are potentially significant in a carceral context (as are phase transitions between them – evaporation, condensation – such as boiling water being used as a weapon, or unwanted build-up of steam in an enclosed space) in this brief paper we deal only with the liquid state, albeit in a variety of scenarios. Perspiration is an example. Excess water, in the form of sweat, has been notably problematic for individuals in prison establishments, where the number of bodies combined with the limited ventilation imposed by security measures often increases temperatures and restricts fresh air flow (Moran & Turner, 2016; Turner, 2016a). This presents a similar notion of the paradox of careful control as perspiration creates some unwanted characteristics (of moisture and odour, perhaps) but is ultimately the body's mechanism for temperature control, i.e., care of the self. For that reason, the showering facilities provided are critical to mitigate the unwanted effects of excess perspiration in the prison environment and simultaneously to allow individuals to exert control over their own bodily functions.

Accordingly, the presence of individual toilet and showering facilities in the single cells was also considered to be important in creating feelings of ownership and control. Respondents were prompted to recognise that most family homes do not provide en-suite bathrooms for all members of the household. In these instances, responses considered the differences between a prison and a domestic household and highlighted the importance of personal bathing spaces in the prison environment in particular:

- I: Why does having your own shower matter so much?
 R: You don't really want to be sharing a shower with seven other lads. . .
 I: I mean you . . . people would share their bathrooms back home, I guess?
 R: Yes but it is . . . you have still got like . . . here it is the one bit of privacy you do have, it is one thing that you can call yours. And everything else like the kitchen and everything you can't call it yours, you have got to share it. So . . . but it might sound weird because it's toilets with a shower and a sink, it is still the one thing that you can call yours. (Interview, Chris, young person, UK)

Consequently, individual sanitation facilities not only instilled feelings of pride and ownership, but reinforced messages of care and respect for the individual as part of a wider philosophy towards decent and humane living considerations within the prison system. Beyond these discussions of careful control, in the following section, we also consider the scope of water in the carceral setting to extend to a propensity for therapeutic effect.

3 | WATER FOR THERAPEUTIC EFFECT

The terms “healing” or “therapeutic” “generally refer to a beneficial process that promotes overall well-being” (Velarde et al., 2007, p. 200). Following Cooper-Marcus and Barnes (1995), these words describe processes such as relief from physical symptoms, illness or trauma (e.g., a recovering postoperative patient); stress reduction and increased levels of comfort for individuals dealing with emotionally and/or physically tiring experiences; and an improvement in the overall sense of well-being. As such, as Gesler explains, a therapeutic landscape is traditionally one with an “enduring reputation for achieving physical, mental and spiritual healing” (1993, p. 171). Recent scholarship has paid particular attention to the impact of “blue” landscapes and specifically embodied experiences of water (Anderson & Peters, 2014; Strang, 2004; Wylie, 2007). In 2015, Foley and Kistemann developed the term “healthy blue space” after collating a wealth of literature concerning the documentation of the value of blue spaces for health and wellbeing, such as the value of coastal or inland water areas known as “urban blue”. Bodily immersion in natural water bodies has long been considered as “therapeutic acts” (Foley, 2015, p. 218) from studies attending to the development of Victorian spas in seaside towns and those focusing on contemporary interactions with blue spaces such as through outdoor- and open-water swimming (Corbin, 1994; Deakin, 2000; Parr, 2011; Shields, 2013).

Drawing on such definitions, the links to carceral space may not be immediately obvious. Although this type of bodily immersion is a rare occurrence in carceral environments – bathing is predominantly conducted in a shower in new-build prisons in the UK, with baths limited to particular cohorts of prisoners due to the safeguarding and security issues surrounding harm to self or others described in the previous section – we have noted that the ability to cleanse oneself of the “contagion” of the prison setting arguably renders even the limited immersion in a cell shower a therapeutic blue experience. Moreover, we have also considered the capacity of a view of blue landscapes to have a health-enabling effect in a carceral environment (Turner et al., 2017). Here, as well as recounting particularly notable occasions, most participants generated positive associations with the sea view, using words that may be considered to be descriptions of surroundings having a therapeutic effect on the body, such as feelings of comfort, ease, relaxation, stress-reduction, restfulness and peace. The respondent here extends these feelings to ones of “tranquillity”:

I: What’s good about looking at the [sea]? How does it make you feel to do that?

R: Sort of tranquil. You can gather your thoughts and just think about what you’re going to do when you get outside again. (Interview, Stephen, Male prisoner, UK)

Much as in this example, many prisoners commented on the possibility of the view for passing time or “escaping” from the monotony of prison life. Although much literature about the sea considers its monotony and repetition – as it is often the case that watery landscapes become unnoticed after a period of time – the sea also often provides both a comforting rhythm and repetition or offers vibrancy and variability through its tidal behaviours, waves and weather influences (Steinberg & Peters, 2015). In particular, prisoners explained that being able to see the sea enhanced their ability to sleep (or would provide that benefit if they were able to move to a cell with a window that overlooked such a view). Others reflected on the feelings of relaxation and peace that they felt, which were often derived from the ability to visually interact with weather features or sunsets, often augmented by the elemental characteristics of the water (such as the smells and sounds of the sea [Steinberg & Peters, 2015]). Such interactions are critical to a discussion of the porosity of the prison boundary (Turner, 2016b), as they allow prisoners on the “inside” an embodied interaction with the world “outside” of prison. Although such aforementioned literature highlights the potentialities (or otherwise) of perceptions and sentiments towards elements of nature (in this case, water), this is particularly distinct in carceral environments where the stark absence of such elements arguably contributes to the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 2007 [1958]).

4 | DAMPENING SPIRITS?

Despite the multitude of data that support positive connections and associations between water and careful control in the prison setting, there are also noteworthy examples to the contrary. Poorly functioning water infrastructures were identified as significant contributors to feelings of frustration that had a negative effect on staff–prisoner relationships. Some prisoners commented on the design of the bathroom area, which did not contain shelves or a lip to prevent flow of water to the external bedroom area (as each of these items may be used as ligature points by the most desperately-creative individuals).

Although the majority of prisoners might not present this kind of risk, the impact on the majority is seemingly-banal but prevalent:

Yeah. The only thing I don't like about there is there's no storage space for your toothbrush, and I know people like their stuff handy at the sink, the only thing wrong with that there's no shelves or anything you can have anything like that, your soap and . . . your toothbrush, your stuff like that. [Here] the floor from the shower goes pretty much directly into the same living space as you're always working in. So your feet always end up wetting the floor . . . and you come back out and your trainers have got the wet residue from the floor and then it goes back to the floor again, it makes you feel dirty. (Focus group 5, male prisoner, UK)

Further frustrations were created by the lack of toilet seats (which might potentially be removed and used as a weapon) or sink plugs (which may allow prisoners to flood cells). Although some prisoners reported that rubber stoppers could be provided to push into the sink hole to allow male prisoners to shave, most reported that there appeared to be a shortage of these stoppers. Additionally, this provision did not appear to be available to female prisoners. Dwelling on the lack of a sink plug may appear trivial, but it is clear that these micro-scale issues both reflect high levels of frustration and affect feelings about the wider penal system.

In one facility, shower water flow was limited to four pushes of two-minute duration at a set temperature (much as in a public swimming pool), available every 30 minutes – a restriction common to the custodial setting. The most common complaint in one of the study prisons, which held both males and females, was the assumption that this setting would be sufficient for all users. One prisoner described how infrastructural-controlling mechanisms had a direct impact on her ability to conduct body-care activities:

The only problem is your shower, you only get to push your button four times and it's only on for a minute at a time, so really you're like . . . shampoo on quickly, shampoo off, conditioner on, conditioner off. Water's off when you're shaving your legs and whatever because there's just no time to do it with the water on. (Interview, Michelle, female prisoner, UK)

Women prisoners frequently described “rushing to get everything” else done – noting that women may have other hygiene and personal requirements, such as shaving of body hair, which may not be a task carried out by their male counterparts:

. . . And even the length of time that the water's on for, it's on for a really short amount of time so you're at speed; you're rushing to get everything done. You can't shave your legs. I've got to fill up my bucket with the extra water that comes down off of me into the bucket to shave my legs afterwards. (Focus group 26, female prisoner, UK)

In addition to frustrations at the individual level, feelings towards such “malfunctions” are often symptomatic of wider frustrations with the running of the prison and often result in distrust towards operations management, largely obstructing the transfer of overarching penal function or philosophy (Turner, 2017). Therefore, in highlighting these examples, we can question whether the infrastructures of water succeed in their goal to both maintain “decent” standards of cleanliness and hygiene and ensure the personal “safety” of the individual and the others around them (National Offender Management Service, 2014). With such malfunctions placing bodily restrictions on the individual and limiting their ability to perform basic human needs, we might reassert the balance between care and control more negatively than was first substantiated in the early sections of this paper.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have drawn on data collected as part of a wider research project focusing on the architecture, design and technology of new-build prisons to consider the particular significance of infrastructures of water at the nexus of care and control in the landscape of incarceration. In summarising our contribution, we highlight the potentiality of watery infrastructures in fulfilling a “caring” role in the lived experience of carceral space, which could be further enhanced to the benefit of residents in such spaces. For example, there is a significant possibility for the incorporation of blue landscapes into the

design of a prison, and we call for the inclusion of water in the form of blue landscape alongside other water infrastructures at the prison design stage. However, there were inevitably feelings of dissatisfaction when systems malfunction. At their core, water infrastructures are associated with intimate activities such as toileting and bathing and therefore, as is clear from the examples highlighted, such intimacies also invoke strong reactions. As we have intimated, there are significant repercussions of even the smallest or most micro-level malfunctions, particularly when dealing with these mechanisms of health and hygiene. We could extend this to ideas of infrastructural failure, such as supply and demand; defects (such as condensation and water leaking from showers); the absence of water (dry air, etc.); and even infrastructure being used for a purpose that is “out of [the] control” of prison authorities (e.g., prisoners tapping on water and heating pipes to communicate with each other). In this respect, we might consider the legitimacy of careful control in the carceral environment and consider a broader discussion encompassing other elemental characteristics of this type of environment. Additionally, and taking lead from physical geographers who have described water as “unruly” (Jones & Macdonald, 2007), we might extend this plea to consider what we might term “unruly infrastructures”, particularly in settings, such as the prison, which exist at the nexus of care and control.

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