

Crime and Punishment

Can architecture make a difference in prison reform?

IN LATE JANUARY, with a polar vortex blasting the wintry East Coast, the power went out in part of the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, New York, a federal facility for inmates awaiting trial. For the next week, according to a flurry of news reports, an untold number of the 1,600 prisoners in the infamous jail remained locked in dark cells, shivering in freezing temperatures, with little or no heat or hot water—and no idea about what was going on. Reportedly, medication was not regularly dispensed, and food, when delivered, included a supper of undercooked oatmeal. On top of that, lawyers, family members, reporters, and even lawmakers could get few answers during the blackout. After Congressman Jerrold Nadler toured the jail, he decried “an absolute lack of urgency or caring on the part of the leadership, particularly the warden.” The U.S. Justice Department said it would investigate.

When we talk about civic architecture—which is featured in this issue (page 91)—we usually mean places like courthouses, libraries, or community centers. Yet prisons are civic buildings, too—albeit a category that offers the least transparency or public accountability of any institution paid for by tax dollars.

Here in the U.S., we seem to need a lot of prisons. America has 2.2 million inmates—more than any other country on earth, with a highly disproportionate number, about half, who are people of color. These prisoners are locked up in 1,800 federal and state penitentiaries, as well as in 3,163 jails and 1,852 juvenile-detention centers, places that range from the somewhat comfortable minimum-security prisons, to which white-collar criminals beg to be sentenced, to those that are unspeakably squalid, overcrowded, and dangerous. Recidivism rates are high in our country—as much as 50 percent for federal inmates—with penal facilities largely designed for punitive retribution, not rehabilitation.

But attitudes toward imprisonment show signs of shifting, as a bipartisan spectrum of elected officials begin to acknowledge the crisis of mass incarceration. The FIRST STEP Act, passed by both houses of Congress and signed by the president in December, is, well, a first step: by ending extreme mandatory-minimum sentences for federal crimes, it will shorten the prison stays of many inmates. At the same time, the overall prison population—including the much larger share in state facilities—is also slowly dropping.

Yet reformers are pushing for far more profound changes. They want to create a criminal-justice system that is fairer and more humane, geared toward restorative justice and to helping inmates successfully reenter their communities and not head right back into jail.

Can architecture make a significant difference in the movement to reform our prison system? We asked this question in a special report (page 81) and found a variety of perspectives. Some architects, like Raphael Sperry—the president of Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility, who has tried, and failed, to get the AIA Code of Ethics amended to prohibit the design of solitary-confinement cells or execution chambers—believes mass incarceration is a policy problem, not an architectural one. But some architectural firms that engage in prison work—such as RicciGreene Architects and HDR—are using de-



sign to improve conditions, by employing softer materials and colors; using larger windows, without bars, to bring in natural light, ventilation, and, where possible, views of nature; and creating suites of cells without doors that open onto common spaces.

Last fall, the nonprofit Vera Institute of Justice released a compelling report, *Reimagining Prison*, after 18 months of consulting with a wide range of experts, historians, and ordinary people on whom incarceration has had an impact. The report delves into the pervasive history of racism in America's justice and prison systems, and proposes that “human dignity be the foundational, organizing principle of the nation's corrections system.” (It applies to the corrections officers and crime victims who were studied, as well as inmates themselves.) Further, Vera invited the Boston-based MASS Design Group to explore the history of prison design and propose a radical rethinking. MASS's concept design (page 89) was inspired in part by the humane prisons in places like Norway, where the loss of liberty is considered punishment enough for most crimes. But Michael Murphy, cofounder of MASS, says his firm would face a moral dilemma before accepting a real commission in prison design today. “Can we actually reform the system as it exists through architecture?” he asks. “That's a valid question, which we have to ask on a case-by-case basis.”

While human-centric design can clearly help improve prison conditions, architecture can't upend the deeply embedded culture that has led to America's dreadful first place in mass incarceration. But architects do have a unique perspective to offer in the wider and urgent call for far-reaching change.

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