

**Rethinking the Architecture of Incarceration:  
A Closer Look on Rikers Island's Jail Facilities**

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## **Abstract**

The architecture of incarceration has undergone many well-documented changes since the late 18th century. However, one of the constants has been the architectural symbolism of incarceration itself and its role in emphasizing prison's objective as a place for punishment rather than reformation. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the role architecture plays in both causing and ameliorating cycles of crime and punishment. The study combines an investigation of historical prison typologies with an inquiry into the role of punishment and reformation in carceral systems in England and the United States. Throughout the analysis, the thesis looks at different examples of prison systems and architecture. It then employs these studies' tools and conclusions to investigate the change over time of the prison facilities on Rikers Island in New York City. By answering the question: What positive methods of rehabilitation and reintegration, from an architectural standpoint, can be implemented into the design of incarcerative facilities? Alternative proposals for borough-specific facilities are explored. This research will lay a foundation for an architectural design project.

[keywords: prison architecture; incarceration; punishment; reformation]

## **I - Introduction**

“Buildings are not static things...they work with or against the people that are intended to be within them, and there is no better example than a prison,” said Michael Murphy, co-founder and executive director of MASS Design in Boston, Massachusetts. “Even in the most well-intentioned prisons, they are intended to separate or to torture people who are incarcerated and restrict access to freedoms. There’s almost an intentional lack of design,” he added (Darius Jaafari 2018).

Prisons were built as an extension of castles in the 14th and 15th centuries. Their goal was to confine people until their trial or the imposition of corporal penalty or exile. By the end of the 18th century, the concept of imprisonment started to change, as did the architecture of the prison. Imprisonment started to be used as punishment. The architecture of prison started reflecting the concept of punishment and guilt, which leads to the questions: Should the punishment and repression of crime lead us to a penal aesthetic? Should ugliness or vulgarity be a part of punishment?

Prison reform movement began to take shape in the 1800s. Instead of only punishing criminals, prisons were now expected to reform them. Philosophers and thinkers started asking the questions: Should incarcerative facilities be moving toward rehabilitation rather than punishment? With evidence from his personal experience, John Howard (who will be discussed later below) managed to create legislation that helps incarcerated individuals and their living situations during their sentences. His legislation explored different economic models and created new prison architecture. One of the design concepts was solitary confinement. Even though solitary confinement, in one form or another, has remained in use at the deep end of punishment for more than two centuries, at first, it was created as a classification system where incarcerated

individuals are isolated, preventing the worst offenders from influencing the less experienced offenders (T. Rubin and Reiter 2018).

The prison architecture has always been evolving. In the late 18th century, philosopher Jeremy Bentham proposed the Panopticon prison, a radial structure preventing inmates from seeing or communicating with each other by placing their cells at the structure's perimeter, all facing a central watchtower. Bentham argued that, due to optical distortion, a prisoner could not tell if they were observed by the guard or not. Therefore, the concept of surveillance and control started to be an essential part of prison architecture. As a result, different economic systems were being introduced and experimented with in order to profit from incarcerated individuals.

Over a century later, Angela Y. Davis has put forth the argument that punishment in the form of imposed surveillance has a historical connection to creating a self-driven worker to fulfill the demands of the then newly emerging capitalist system. She contends that the current prison system is financially beneficial to a few large corporations - either contracting inmates as a labor source or receiving contracts to supply the population of over two million incarcerated individuals with food, clothing, and personal hygiene products. In her book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis asks: "What would it mean to imagine a system in which punishment is not allowed to become the source of corporate profit?" (Abolina 2009).

How can we create more healthy, rehabilitative, and respectful jails for the incarcerated and the communities that interact with them? And What positive methods of rehabilitation and reintegration, from an architectural standpoint, can be implemented into the design of incarcerative facilities? I begin answering those questions by looking at the jail complex of Rikers Island in New York City. Rikers Island, since its creation, has been a controversial and problematic site. From a training base for Union soldiers to a garbage dump and currently prison

facilities, the island has been through extensive changes; however, it has yet to be used for its full potential. As it has been evident that the island is damaging the community rather than benefiting it, the decision to close it down is an essential next step. Mayor Bill de Blasio has set a goal of closing the island by 2026 by reducing the incarceration rate and building four new smaller prisons each in a New York City borough.

Since spatial and visual interaction with the outside world is necessary for the sustainable reformation of prison inmates, the New York City Department of Design and Construction, on behalf of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and the NYC Department of Correction, announced the first two Requests for Proposal for early work for the City's Borough-Based Jails Program. Architecture firms and local non-governmental organizations were encouraged to submit proposals imagining what the new prison facilities should look like and exploring the questions: How can prison design promote rehabilitation and influence recidivism? And How can architecture assist in reforming the prison model?

## **II - History of Prisons**

Incarceration was not considered a form of punishment until the 14th or 15th centuries; instead, prisons were meant only to confine people until their trial or the imposition of corporal penalty or exile. Prisons were used to detain those who had fallen out of favor with the rulers, i.e., political prisoners, common criminals, slaves, prisoners of war, debtors, and those convicted of treason. Incarceration was used to coerce the payment of debts, detain those awaiting trial, and provide a venue for prisoners' exhibition prior to mutilation (Woodruff 2017a). By the end of the 18th century, the United States authorities had begun to use imprisonment as punishment. The



Catholic Church, which taught that sinners could be led to see the error of their ways and change their behavior, has influenced this change (Woodruff 2017b).

Even though when prisons began to be built, their primary goals were not punishment, early prisons' living conditions were deplorable, and many incarcerated individuals did not survive. Prisons were built underground with little to no light. Some were constructed out of bedrock and accessed by a trapdoor through which incarcerated individuals were dropped to the cell below. Up until the 13th century, prisons were not separated by gender or offense. However, in the 13th century, some prisons began to separate men and women and separate offenders by crime. Based on the type of offense, the prisoner will either be put in an underground cell or a larger above-ground room. For instance, felons and serious wrongdoers were kept underground. In contrast, debtors, political prisoners, and prisoners of war were held in a larger room above the ground (Woodruff 2017a).

Prisons between the 12th and the 17th centuries were built in castles and fortresses, many of which are still standing today. Prisons were usually made out of wood inside a stone castle. There was no standard castle architecture, yet the prison rooms share common features. Tiny slit windows were often more than seven feet above the floor, but since the walls were typically more than 10 feet thick, the windows did little to provide light or airflow. The toilet was usually a bucket or hole in the floor through which the sewage dropped to the moat. Since the castle also housed the lord and his family, a separation between the spaces was needed. A *donjon* (today's dungeon) or *keep* was typically a defensive structure built several stories above the inner yard. This area was used to detain political prisoners as well as criminals. Some castles had iron cages suspended from the ceiling in which to house incarcerated individuals. Others featured multiple detention levels, with the lowest level commonly referred to as *the pits*, reserved for the most

heinous offenders or those of low social status. The Tower of London, one of the oldest towers in Britain, is probably the most famous of this prison type (Woodruff 2017a).

England has been one of the pioneer countries to think about prison, its architectural design, and its influence on the community it's based in. Just like other countries, England's history of prison design has been evolving. Throughout history, a lot of philosophers and thinkers have proposed different concepts that directly influence its architecture. Evidently, the American carceral framework was inherited from British models and experiments. Even though this thesis mainly focuses on Rikers Island in New York City, understanding the roots of the British carceral system is essential for understanding the American one.

The Tower of London consists of four levels: with the lowest level, the vaults, used as a prison for rebels, pirates, and Jewish people subject to religious persecution until the end of the 15th century. It has also held political prisoners throughout the centuries and prisoners of war in World War I and II. Castle or tower prisons have window slits which are two inches wide by 44 inches tall, making them suitable for shooting arrows, but not escape. The prison part of the castle was usually divided into three floors. The first floor typically housed the prison keepers and their servants. The second floor held imprisoned noblemen and their families in spacious rooms. And lastly, the upper floor housed the imprisoned noblemen's servants (Haram, Villas and Road 1896).

Incarcerated individuals were living in different conditions, and the interaction between them, their families, and their community varied between one prison and individual to another. Wealthy individuals did not suffer much; they had plenty of food and sometimes were able to have their families stay with them for a price. The Kilmainham Gaol, a former prison in

Kilmainham, Dublin, Ireland, had windows along the street so that the incarcerated individuals could beg for food or liquor from passersby (Kilmainham Gaol Museum n.d.).

### **III - Punishment versus Reformation**

As mentioned above, at first, incarceration was not considered a form of punishment. However, with the inhumane conditions that the incarcerated individuals were forced to live in due to the undesigned prisons, slowly, the concept of punishment started to get highlighted instead of reformation. Prison building increased to accommodate the influx of those charged with crimes, yet, prison architecture remained trapped in the past, supporting the idea of confinement and physical punishment rather than inmate reform.

In Warwick, England, a prison was built as an underground dungeon beneath a county jail. The dungeon is an octagonal room, 21 feet in diameter and almost 19 feet below ground, and the grill over the opening in the roof can be seen in the grassy part of the outside courtyard. It is now reached by 18 steps, although this was originally 31. The dungeon center is a small open drain for sewage, which was added shortly after completion. Around this pit were eight posts, to which heavy chains were attached. Incarcerated individuals were chained by the leg to these posts in a circular fashion laying down (figure 1). When more than 40 individuals were housed in the dungeon, only a side-lying position was possible. The most recorded as being kept in the dungeon was 59. The dungeon was liable to flooding, as it was built over a constant spring. During the day, prisoners would spend their time in a standard room, and the dungeon was used as their night room. Prisoners would lay with their feet chained towards the eight posts (The Dungeon in the Country Gaol, Warwick n.d.).

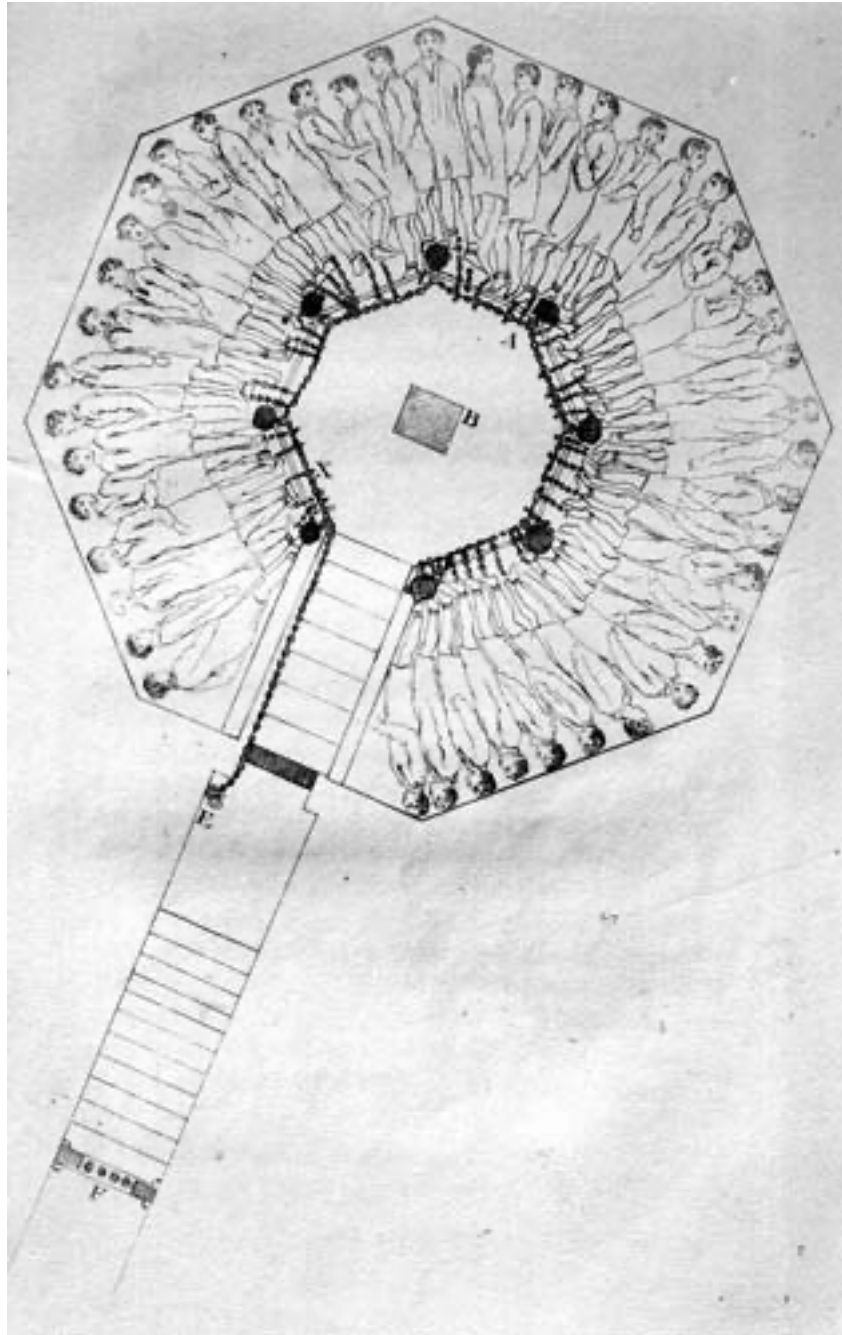


Figure 1 - The dungeon in the country gaol, Warwick, England  
(The Dungeon in the Country Gaol, Warwick n.d.)

Over time, the crimes that people were being punished for got more severe. There were more violent offenders, convicted murders, robbery, rape, and arson. In England in the 1770s, 60 percent of prisoners were debtors; by the 1870s, only 3 percent were debtors. As a result, sentences were longer, and the prisoners' treatment became harsher (Woodruff 2017b). There are

no facts that people became more violent over the span of 100 years, yet the data shows that the justice system then had to deal with more severe crimes.

#### **IV - The Architectural Realization of Penal Ideas**

In their book *Prison Architecture: Policy, Design and Experience*, Fairweather and McConville (Fairweather and McConville 2000) questioned the connection between prison as a building and the concept of punishment that evolved. Should the punishment and repression of crime lead us to a penal aesthetic? Should ugliness or vulgarity be a part of punishment?

In the late 1700s and 1800s, a strong prison reform movement began to take shape. Instead of only punishing criminals, prisons were now expected to reform them. John Howard (1726 - 1790), a philanthropist who did time as a prisoner when French pirates captured his ship, served a brief stint as High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, where he was exposed to the deplorable conditions of the local jail, Bedford Jail (John Howard (1726 - 1790) n.d.). At that time, the jailers were not salaried officers but depended on fees from prisoners. Some incarcerated individuals were kept in prison because they had not paid their payments, even though they had been acquitted by the courts (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.). In 1774, Howard managed to persuade the House of Commons, the popularly elected legislative body of the bicameral British Parliament (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.), to pass two acts. First, “discharged persons should be set at liberty in open court and that discharge fees should be abolished.” Second, “justices should be required to see to the health of prisoners” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.). Howard continued to visit hundreds of prisons in Europe and abroad and advocate for improvements in prisoners’ and jail security and order treatment (John Howard (1726 - 1790) n.d.). The parliamentary statute of 1779 authorized the building of two

penitentiary houses where employing solitary confinement, supervised labor, and religious instruction, prisoners' reform might be attempted, which Howards was mostly responsible for (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.).

#### **IV.I - Solitary Confinement**

Defining *Solitary Confinement* has been a significant focus of various organizations. In October 2015, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) released its first national report seeking to systematically quantify the use of solitary confinement in state and federal prisons across the United States. The report suggested the term *restrictive housing* to encompass the constellation of practices involving solitary confinement.

Whether it is disciplinary segregation, administrative segregation (largely non-punitive in nature), or solitary confinement (involving isolation and relatively little out-of-cell time), restrictive housing typically involves limited interaction with other inmates, limited programming opportunities, and reduced privileges (T. Rubin and Reiter 2018).

The UN Standard Minimum Rules on the Treatment of Prisoners has also focused on defining *Solitary Confinement* in January 2016. The rules laid out a seemingly straightforward definition of *Solitary Confinement* as “confinement of prisoners for 22 hours or more a day without meaningful human contact” (United Nations 2016, 17) and of *Prolonged Solitary Confinement* as “solitary confinement for a time period in excess of 15 consecutive days” (United Nations 2016, 17). However, “meaningful human contact” is subject to interpretation: for instance, would housing two prisoners in the same cell for 22 hours per day constitute meaningful contact?

Reform concepts were embraced as prison building began to take off in the United States. The first U.S. penitentiary was the Walnut Street Prison (figure 2), built in Philadelphia in 1790. Men and women were housed separately, no liquor was available, and the seriousness of their offense classified offenders. Prisoners worked silently in their cells during the day and were encouraged to meditate on their evil ways at night. *Solitary Confinement* was necessary to eliminate “contamination” from other prisoners. This jail was the model for the *Pennsylvania System* (or “separate system”) in the northeastern states. However, it did not last due to the increased rate of suicides and mental illness caused by it. The negative results of *Solitary Confinement* along with prisons overcrowding have demanded a change (T. Rubin and Reiter 2018).

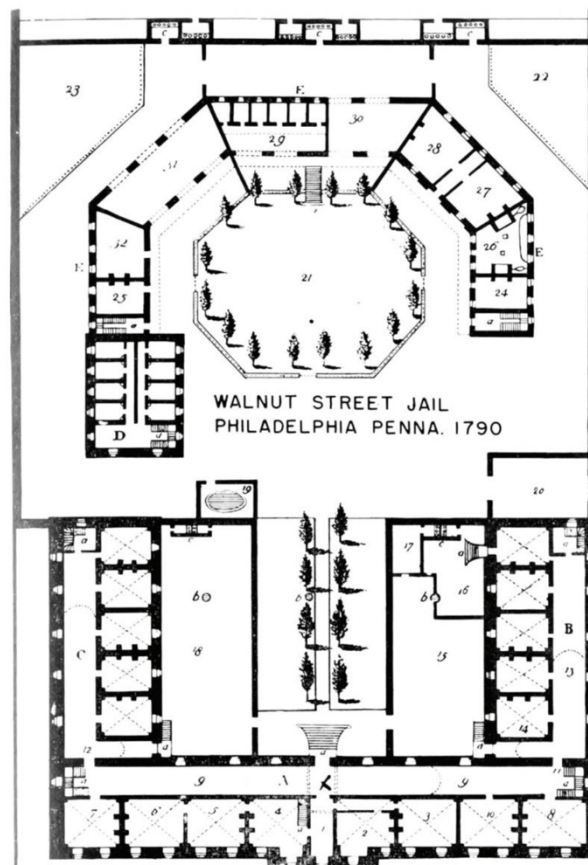


Figure 2 - Walnut Street Jail, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
(Santayana 2013)

*Solitary Confinement* was first authorized in the United States in the 1790s when states began building their first prisons. As separation became a central organizational theme of prisons, by gender, age, and offense, solitary confinement was considered a reformation. Solitary offered the advantages of separation—in this case, preventing the worst offenders from influencing the less experienced offenders. However, it went further. It also served as an additional threat to encourage following the prison's rules as a terrifying experience. Moreover, with no distractions, it would allow prisoners time for reflection and reformation. However, the place of solitary confinement was more limited in practice. The country's model prison, Philadelphia's Walnut Street Prison, had only sixteen solitary cells—a disproportionately small number for the prison's hundred and later, more prisoners. At the same time, judges tend to avoid sentencing convicted individuals to any period in solitary confinement. For both these reasons, solitary confinement was only used for short periods to punish in-person. It was often the last, not the first resort of discipline. Simultaneously, the punishment was the more common response (T. Rubin and Reiter 2018).

#### **IV.I.I - Pennsylvania System**

Multiple policy systems have been created by putting the concept of solitary confinement at the core of the system. One of the earliest examples is *The Pennsylvania System*. The system “separates each convict from the presence of his fellows, and confines him to labor in an apartment by himself, where he also eats and sleeps; thus secluding him night and day from all intercourse with the world; and suffering none to see or converse with him but the officers and inspectors of the prison, or such as have authority by law. Hence it is called the separate or solitary system.” (V.Blake 1839, 3). Pennsylvania's reformers were among solitary



confinement's strongest supporters believed it was the ingredient missing from their first experiment with incarceration at Walnut Street. Solitary confinement was authorized for all prisoners with no distractions in 1818. In 1826, Western State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania's new prison, was opened just outside of Pittsburg; its architectural design proved problematic. The cells were too small and poorly ventilated for long-term solitary confinement; prisoners frequently had to be released from their cells to preserve their health (Melossi and Pavarini 1981).

In New York, Newgate prison was modeled on Walnut Street, which has failed to achieve either its disciplinary or order maintenance goals. Therefore, New York legislators sought to implement solitary confinement more systematically:

The legislature passed an act, April 2d, 1821, directing the Inspectors to select a class of convicts to be composed of the oldest and most heinous offenders, and to confine them constantly in solitary cells. At this period, the legislature and public at large had become so dissatisfied and discouraged with the existing model and effects of penitentiary punishments, that it was generally believed, that unless a severer system was adopted, the old sanguinary criminal code must be restored. In dread of such a result, the legislature ordered the experiment of exclusive solitude, without labor, and it is now believed, that in avoiding one extreme, another was fallen into (Powers 1826, 32).

#### **IV.I.II - Auburn System**

On December 25, 1821, the Auburn State Prison implemented what was later called *The Auburn system* (T. Rubin and Reiter 2018). Based on the Pennsylvania System, the Auburn

plan was slightly different. The Auburn system “separates the convicts, but suffers them to work together during the day, requiring the most rigid non-intercourse, however. Hence it is also called the social and the silent system.” (V.Blake 1839). The goal of this system was to break the spirit of the prisoner and make them completely submissive.

The experiment was a disaster. The cells were too small for prisoners to exercise, and their muscles atrophied, even though these prisons’ cell size varied greatly; for instance, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, the cells were roughly 10 feet by 6 feet and 7 feet high, but in Jackson, Michigan, they were only about 3.5 feet by 7 feet (Woodruff 2017b). The intensive reliance on solitary confinement was even more devastating on prisoners’ mental health. Auburn’s Warden, Gershom Powers, reported that “one [prisoner] was so desperate that he sprang from his cell, when the door was opened and threw himself from the gallery upon the pavement. Another beat and mangled his head against the walls of his cell until he destroyed one of his eyes” (Powers 1826, 36). The surviving prisoners—whose “health and constitutions...had become alarmingly impaired” received pardons, and the experiment was officially discontinued in 1823 (Powers 1826, 36).

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the U.S. was experiencing labor shortages. Reformers and lawmakers believed that prisoners should work to support their incarceration. Because this plan could produce labor, it was a profitable system and was followed in several states such as New Jersey, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Tennessee, and Indiana. One of the objections to the Pennsylvania system is its significant expense (V.Blake 1839). Yet a result, during the early 20th century, prisons were overcrowded, the fact that eliminated the single-cell theory of the Auburn plan (Woodruff 2017b). Still, prison officials experimented with different

variations on the solitary confinement theme, attempting to legitimize new practices by distinguishing them from old practices while consistently seeking to maintain order and control.

## **VI.II - The Panopticon**

Slowly after that, classification was introduced as a way to control the violence common in prisons. In England, one of the goals of the Gaols Act of 1823 was to bring organization to prisons. Separate cells were too expensive for most governments, so administrators began to classify the prisoners according to sex, age, and seriousness of charges. The act introduced the concept of classification of inmates, and prison design during this time reflected the concept. Prison architects began to include varied geometric shapes in their designs, including rectangles, squares, and circles (Woodruff 2017c). The Gaols Act of 1823 stated that:

prisons should be made secure; gaolers should be paid; female prisoners should be kept separately from male prisoners; doctors and chaplains should visit prisons and lastly, attempts should be made to reform prisoners (Methods of punishment: The need for prison reform n.d.).

During this period, the most famous prison design is the *Panopticon* (figure 3), envisioned by prison reform activist Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). The panopticon is an idea in architecture describing a new mode of obtaining power. Based on a Russian textile mill design, the panopticon was proposed to be a vast hollow building with individual cells around the outside and a guard tower in the center. The cells had large outside windows providing natural light and silhouetting prisoners so that the guards could see their activities at all times. The guard tower had louvers so that inmates could not see in and had an entrance out of sight of inmates, so inmates never knew if they were being watched. The original panopticon design included many

technical innovations such as mechanical air conditioning and indoor plumbing. The panopticon was based on the separation of inmates from each other, the centralized grouping of officers in guard stations, and anonymous remote surveillance. Bentham even went so far as to suggest that inmates would not need to be under constant supervision because they would not know when they were being observed, so they would be compelled to behave at all times (M. Zimring, Munyon and Ard 1988).

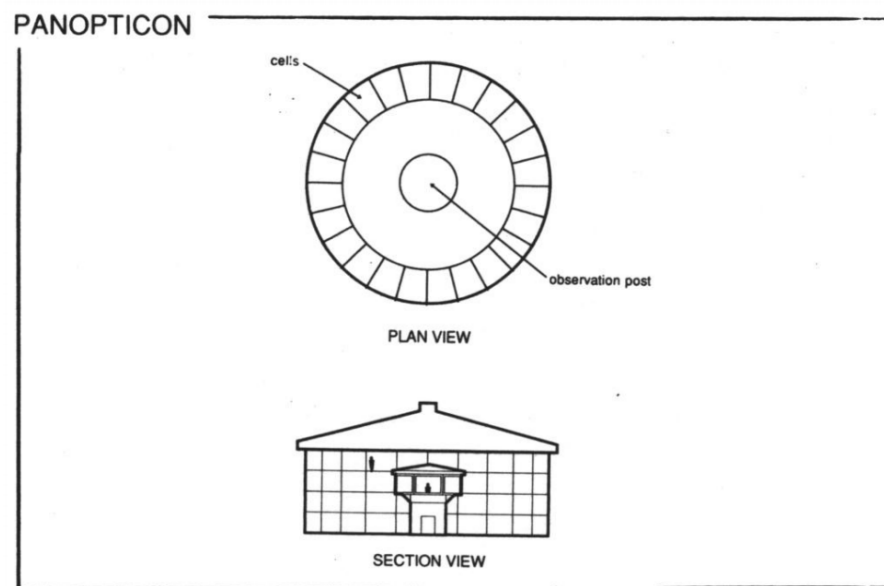


Figure 3 - Panopticon Design  
(M. Zimring, Munyon and Ard 1988)

The publication of Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), especially of its translation in English in 1977 with the title *Discipline and Punish*, was an essential landmark in the study of surveillance (Manokha 2018). According to Foucault's analysis of panopticism in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Bentham's Panopticon as a vital representation of a spatial figure in the modern project and a key device in the creation of modern subjectivity. The social trajectory represented by the panopticon figure drives self-monitoring through the belief that one is under constant scrutiny, thus becoming both a driving force and a key symbol of the modernist

project (Wood 2003). “A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation,” Foucault stated (Foucault 2008, 7).

In 1870, the National Congress on Penitentiary and Reformatory Discipline, now known as the American Correctional Association, met for the first time in an attempt to coordinate professional effort in corrections. This group established 37 principles for prisons’ operation, emphasizing: education, incarceration by stages from maximum security to daytime work release, indeterminate sentence, classification, and programs specifically for the different classifications of the incarcerated people. Following this meeting, minimum custody institutions began to be built, and classification became more widely used during the 1930s. These principles, born out of the reform movement that began in England, are the foundation of contemporary jail standards. They reflect the commitment today to house inmates in humane conditions, focusing on their rehabilitation while also guaranteeing security and order to enhance public safety (Woodruff 2017b).

In the United States, only a few prisons were built in the Panopticon tradition. Stateville Correctional Center, built with inmate labor in Crest Hill, Illinois, between 1916 and 1924, is probably the most well-known. The central guard tower had underground access, so additional officers could get to any cellblock when there was a disturbance. Despite Bentham’s grand vision for a revolutionary prison design that would drastically reduce prison costs while enhancing inmate reform through menial labor, the panopticon was not conducive to prisoners’ proper housing. The design of the panopticon was based on the concept of discipline and punishment rather than architectural functionality. Therefore, at the Stateville Correctional Center, ventilation was poor, and the cells were damp, leading to disease and, in turn, a high mortality rate. Overcrowding prevented the solitary confinement of unruly prisoners, and

eventually, the prison was demolished (Woodruff 2017c). Boyne (2010), in *Post-Panopticism*, concluded that developments in screening and surveillance in prisons require the retention of the Panopticon as an analytical type. However, changes in the sites of application have been such as to require more adjustment in the concept (Boyne 2010).

The panopticon design did, however, influence the next major design concept: *Radial* design (figure 4). This design retains Bentham's central building housing the keeper but features prison wings or hallways that radiate out like spokes on a wheel. Some cell designs included raised cells that allowed for better ventilation and heating and prevented prisoners from digging through the floor. Two limitations that continued to cause problems were the lack of proper sanitation and the keepers' inability to easily inspect the prisoners (Woodruff 2017c).

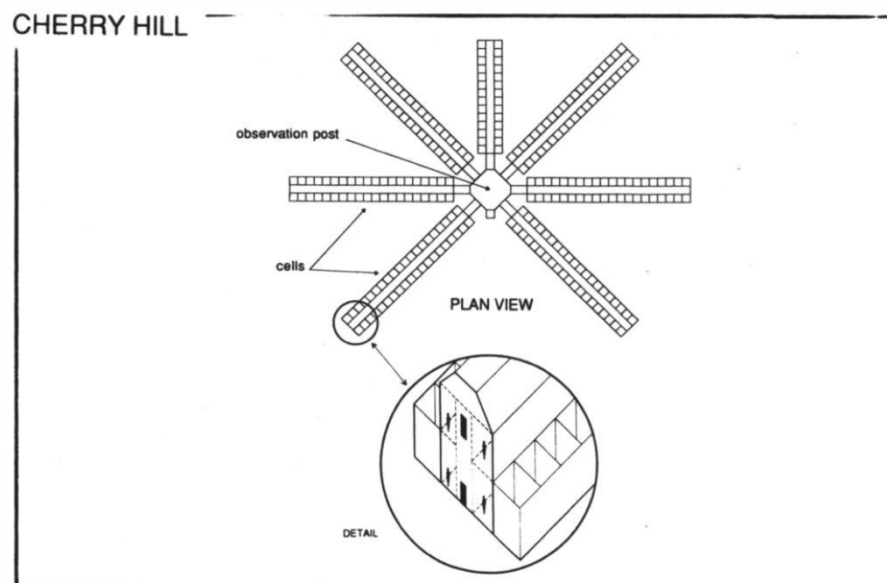


Figure 4 - Radial Design  
(M. Zimring, Munyon and Ard 1988)

Even though the panopticon and the radial design both were designed for all-day surveillance purposes, however, the inspection of prisoners had been neglected over the years, resulting in assaults, collusion, and unsafe conditions. Bentham, Howard, and their

contemporaries pushed for continued surveillance, which it was believed would lessen the abuses and bad influences of the prisoners, as well as prevent riots, escapes, and bad behavior. Other improvements they sought included: segregation of prisoners by age, gender, and severity of the offense, individual cells instead of shared rooms, salaried staff to prevent prisoners' extortion, provision of adequate clothing and food, and hiring chaplains and doctors. Howard's single-mindedness of purpose, as well as that of Bentham's, who was a leader of the reformers of the time, positively influenced prison building and administration. Originally constructed based on fear of incarceration, prison designs began to accommodate religious instruction, education, and prisoners' health.

Prison designs continued to evolve around the turn of the century, and a lack of state or federal guidelines led to significant variations. However, most prisons still sought to limit prisoner contact. By the 1930s and 40s, the *Telephone Pole* design was the most popular. This design included a central corridor with housing wings built at 90 degrees from the corridor. Prisons built in this manner included the Maryland Reformatory, Soledad in California, Utah State Prison at Draper, and Eastern State Penitentiary in Graterford, Pennsylvania. During the Great Depression and through World War II, prison building slowed tremendously but as soon as WWII ended, prison building in the U.S. took off. The *Medical Model* of criminal justice influenced this new building boom. The *Medical Model* held that offenders were not necessarily responsible for their actions; instead, society had to diagnose and cure the offender's illness, which could be caused by psychological issues (mental illness), sociological (family environment), economic (unemployed), or physiological (improper diet). Prisons became responsible for rehabilitating offenders and successfully returning them to society (Woodruff

2017c). At this point, the influence between design and prison policies have become clearer. The construction of different models was better thought of.

In the United States, the modern politicization of penal policy has been traced to Richard Nixons' 1968 presidential campaign. In 1970, Congress repealed almost all mandatory sentences for drug offenses. State prison populations were falling, despite the increase in the US general population, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons was planning to close some of its large and outdated prisons (Fairweather and McConville 2000).

### **VI.III - Direct Supervision Model**

Until the 1970s, all US correctional facilities used an *Indirect Supervision Model*. Typically, armed officers spent much of their time in workstations surrounded by bullet-proof glass or hardened screens (M. Zimring, Munyon and Ard 1988). Although this plan lost favor over time, it foreshadowed the *Direct Supervision Model's* classification aspect commonly used today. Direct supervision facilities, also known as new generation jails, were created by the Federal Bureau of Prisons with the goal of reducing violence, suicide, and disorder. The *Direct Supervision Model* of correctional management and design was first used in adult detention facilities in 1974. Since then, it has been adopted by hundreds of prisons and jails and accepted as best practice by professional associations and accrediting organizations in corrections (Wener 2006). Metropolitan Correctional Centers (MCC), built during the 1970s, are prisons and prototypical jails that the Federal Bureau of Prisons has learned from in order to develop the approach of the *Direct Supervision Model* (Wener, Frazier and Farbstein 1987).

In this approach, officers are placed in housing units with constant, direct contact with inmates rather than in control booths. The design provides a standard type of setting with rooms



rather than cells, and inmates have much more privacy than in traditional jails. Correctional officers get to know inmates well and recognize and respond to trouble before it escalates into violence. Staff skills in negotiation and communication become more important than physical strength. Compared to traditional jails of similar size, MCC's and other direct-supervision jails have much less violence, rape, vandalism, and graffiti. The jails cost the same or less than traditional models. Operating costs are difficult to compare, but sick leave is generally lower, and job satisfaction higher in direct-supervision jails. These facilities require careful classification and screening to eliminate the 5 to 10 percent who are mentally ill or violent and need more structured settings. Direct supervision does not directly reduce recidivism, but it can reduce the harm caused by traditional jails and help provide an environment in which rehabilitation programs may work (Wener, Frazier and Farbstein 1987).

By the mid-1970s, however, societal changes such as rising crime rates, conservative public attitudes, and high recidivism rates forced a shift toward a “get tough” attitude against offenders. In 1974, the Martinson Report effectively ended the medical model. Martinson detailed the ineffectiveness of treatment programs and argued that rehabilitation was rarely successful. Martinson’s ideas drove the rise of the *Justice Model* of criminal justice. Society began to believe that offenders had personal responsibility for their actions—they were not “sick.” Because offenders chose to commit crimes, it was thought they must be punished, not treated. Punishments were of determinant lengths of time, no longer dependent on the success of the treatment. This resulted in a new core function for corrections: to safely and securely control inmates and not focus on their rehabilitation (Woodruff 2017c).

## V - Alternative Prison Designs and Programs

Evidently, the different architectural designs, along with prison models, have not been fulfilling the goal of reformation. They all have been negatively influencing the incarcerated individuals, their families, and communities. Therefore, the need for alternative prison designs and programs is essential. *Arresting the Cycle: Design for Porous Prisons* is an architectural prison reformation model. By answering the question: “What are the architectural implications of a prison that is both secure to prevent escape and porous to allow for the infiltration of the community that surrounds it? And what are the urban implications of an institution that, instead of benefiting corporations, gives back to the community in terms of space and resources?” The thesis merges the two propositions. First, “spatial and visual interaction with the outside world is necessary for the sustainable reformation of prison inmates.” Second, “Economic revitalization of the areas with high rates of incarceration can subsequently reduce these rates.” (Abolina 2009).

After looking at the architecture, urban plan, and the community dynamics of New Orleans in Louisiana, the thesis proposes a program that provides a connection to the community and the staff through integration functions such as a cooking school with restaurant open to the public, a beauty school where women would be trained for employment in a salon, childcare facility maintenance training, and gardening and craftsmanship training programs. The program also “accommodates child-friendly visitation, a clinic for substance abuse, STD testing, education, pregnancy monitoring, and a childcare facility for infants born while in prison and children under the age of two.” (Abolina 2009).

The ground floor is mostly open to the public, consisting of commercial programs such as shops, a restaurant, and a spa facing the street and connecting with the business district to the north. The other side of the building, which faces the community, also offers entry into a public library, parts of which are used by inmates and other parts by the public, making the library resources available to both. Additionally, there is a childcare facility and a free clinic for the community.

The second-floor acts as a buffer zone. Similar to a fence circumventing a traditional prison, this sectional barrier is a high-security zone, allowing only minimal access to the ground floor. However, this area hosts the most open program: areas for crafts, a clinic floor for inmates, a space for infants whose mothers are incarcerated in the facility, and a dining hall. This program's communal nature allows for a significant level of learning and interaction and creates conflict; therefore, only women at the low and medium-security levels (thus having maintained a good behavior record) are allowed on some if not all of the parts of this buffer zone. The library is mostly available to the public but does host five classrooms for adult learning for prison inmates.

The third-floor hosts twenty low-security units with access to a private garden maintained by inmates and secured by an ornate fencing system, a framework for growing plants. The rest are medium-security units and a gym, and the library for the inmates.

The fourth and fifth floor (the plans of which are not shown) have a mix of medium and high-security inmate units, access to the library for inmates, and computer classrooms (Abolina 2009).

## **VI - Case Study: Rikers Island**

### **VI.I - History of Rikers Island**

Rikers Island is a 413.17-acre island in the East River between Queens and the Bronx that is home to New York City's main jail complex. The island has a long history of serving different uses before it housed a jail complex. The name of the island, Rikers Island, comes from its owner. In 1664, Abraham Rycken purchased the previously uninhabited island. By the time the Civil War began in the 1860s, ownership had passed on from Rycken's descendants, and the island became a training base for Union soldiers. In the early 1800s, Magistrate Richard Riker, an ancestor of Abraham Rycken, was the island's owner. Therefore, the jail was named after him; hence, the name Rikers Island. Richard Riker was known for abusing The Fugitive Slaves Act, which was put in place to allow for the capture and return of runaway slaves in the U.S. "In accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act, members of the club would bring a Black person before Riker, who would quickly issue a certificate of removal before the accused had a chance to bring witnesses to testify that he was actually free" (Rikers Island was Named After a Judge who was Eager to Uphold Slavery n.d.). Due to Richard Riker's negative reputation and inhumane actions towards Americans and specifically African Americans, New York City residents have been trying to change the island's name. In 2015, Jacob Morris, Harlem Historical Society Director, started a petition that seeks a new name for Rikers Island, which does not tie to its history of slavery (Small 2015).

The city of New York bought Rikers Island in 1884 and became a garbage dump. The city first considered using it as a workhouse. Nothing happened until the late 1920s when officials announced plans to build a modern jail to replace the crumbling Blackwell's Island complex (now Roosevelt Island) of badly deteriorating jails and asylums that had held prisoners and people with a mental health condition for over 100 years. Construction of 26 buildings consisting of seven cell blocks for 2,600 inmates, an administration building, receiving center, mess hall, shops, a chapel, and homes for the warden and deputy warden began in 1932—and disaster struck almost immediately (Milrose Consultants 2020) (Marques 2019).

Since the island serves as a jail complex, it is overlooked by the New York City Department of Correction (DOC). The DOC provides for the care and custody of individuals accused of crimes or convicted and sentenced to one year or less jail time. The Department manages nine facilities for detainees, seven of which are located on Rikers Island, one in Manhattan, and one in the Bronx. In addition, the Department operates two hospital wards, Bellevue and Elmhurst hospitals, and court holding facilities in each borough. In the Fiscal Year 2020, the Department processed more than 23,000 admissions and managed a combined average daily population of approximately 5,800 (NYC Department of Correction n.d.).

Currently, Rikers Island has eight active facilities and one inactive, the George Motchan Detention Center (GMDC). The eight active facilities are:

1. Anna M. Kross Center (AMKC) - Completed in 1978 and named for DOC's second female commissioner. AMKC houses detained and sentenced male adults in a facility spread over 40 acres. It includes a Methadone Detoxification Unit, 2 PACE units, and 1 CAPS unit. AMKC is the largest facility on Rikers Island;

2. Benjamin Ward Visit Center - Serves the various jail facilities on Rikers Island. All visitors must coordinate their visits through the Benjamin Ward Visit Center;
3. George R. Vierno Center (GRVC) - Opened in 1991 and was named after a former Chief of Department and Acting Commissioner. GRVC was expanded in 1993. The facility houses detained and sentenced male adults;
4. North Infirmary Command (NIC) - Consists of two separate buildings, one of them the original Rikers Island Hospital built-in 1932. It houses people in custody with acute medical conditions and requires infirmary care or a disability that requires housing compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. NIC also houses some general population detainees;
5. Otis Bantum Correctional Center (OBCC) - Opened in June 1985, it was completed in less than 15 months using modern design and construction methods. OBCC has dormitory and cell housing. The jail was named for its second Warden. OBCC houses detained male adults;
6. Robert N. Davoren Center (RNDC) - Opened in 1972, the jail was formally dedicated to the Robert N. Davoren Center in May 2006 to honor a former Chief of Department. RNDC primarily houses detained and sentenced males and young adults;
7. Rose M. Singer Center (RMSC) - Opened in June 1988, RMSC is an 800-bed facility for female detainees and sentenced women in custody. Subsequent additional modular housing was added. In 1985, the Department's first

nursery was born, featuring a 25-bed baby nursery. RMSC was named after an original member of the New York City Board of Correction, and;

8. West Facility – Communicable Disease Unit (WF) - Opened in the fall of 1991, WF was constructed of ‘Sprungs’ - rigid aluminum-framed structures covered by a heavy-duty plastic fabric. The facility includes single-cell units, some of which make up the Department's Communicable Disease Unit (CDU). Other cells house detainees separate and apart from the CDU (NYC Department of Correction n.d.).

Despite steady overcrowding—press reports in 1954 show that the city’s jails held 7,900 inmates in spaces designed for 4,200 prisoners—no new buildings were added until the mid-1950s. When additions and alterations were made to facilities, housing adults and adolescents could accommodate another 1,900 inmates. In addition to cell blocks, kitchens, and enlarged mess halls, the city built a 107,000-square-foot industrial building to house a new bakery, print shop, shoe shop, garage, and diagnostic center. New facilities for adult males, women, and adolescents, were added in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Still, overcrowding continued to worsen; in 1969, the city held 14,000 prisoners in spaces designed for 8,000. Severe overcrowding and a spate of riots and legal battles across the jail’s first 45 years of existence led the city to try to get rid of it and replace it with eight smaller detention centers across the boroughs in the late 1970s and 1980s. That highly touted, but the controversial effort ultimately failed, and, despite its well-earned notoriety, the 413-acre island jail continued to grow, fester and become increasingly dangerous for the inmates as well as the correctional officers who worked there (Marques 2019). While the City's current incarcerated population is at its lowest

rate since the 1970s, overcrowding has been a persistent issue as Rikers is the destination for adults and adolescents with sentences less than one year (Milrose Consultants 2020).

In 2014, federal prosecutors found the conditions of the nine jails on Rikers Island unconstitutional. Because the island is so remote, jail buses must transfer 900 people to and from courts each day at the cost of \$42 million per year. Family members lose connection with their incarcerated individuals because visiting someone can take all day. Lawyers rarely visit their clients to plan their defense—those defuncting jails cost over \$2 billion each year, \$302 thousand per bed. Therefore, protests led by people who have been incarcerated began to call for closing Rikers (Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform 2020).

JustLeadershipUSA, “a national non-profit, is led by directly impacted people and is dedicated to decarcerating the United States by educating, elevating and empowering the people and communities most impacted by systemic racism to drive, amplify, and sustain the kinds of policy reform that builds thriving, sustainable and healthy communities,” (JustLeadershipUSA 2020) launched the #CLOSERikers campaign in April 2016. Their goal was to demand the closure of the notorious jail complex. In the span of a year, organizers took the demand to close Rikers from a lofty ideal to the stated policy of New York City. Today, this movement continues to gain strength and momentum for the demand that Rikers is closed forever (JustLeadershipUSA 2020).

## **VI.II - Closure of Rikers Island**

After the pressure that the DOC, along with Mayor Bill de Blasio (hereafter de Blasio), went through from local residents and organizations, Rikers Island is now set to enter a new



phase in its history as New York City plans to close the jail and convert Rikers Island to public land. Now, 85 years after it officially opened, the city wants to shutter it for once and for all and replace it—again with several smaller jails across Manhattan, Brooklyn, The Bronx, and Queens (Marques 2019). The city's plan faces a long road ahead as it proceeds through the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) process with the overarching goal of banning incarceration on the island located in the East River between Queens and the Bronx (Milrose Consultants 2020).

New York City is leading a historic decarceration plan. The city of New York and NYC Criminal Justice have issued a document titled *Smaller, Safer, Fairer: A Roadmap to Closing Rikers Island*. The document states that three fundamental principles guide the plan to close Rikers Island and build a borough-based jail system: “the jail system can be much smaller with thousands fewer people in jail, jails should be safer with modern, well-designed facilities that promote the dignity of those who visit, work, and are incarcerated, and the justice system should be fairer, changing the culture inside the jails, fostering community connections, and providing greater access to service” (City of New York n.d.).

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to indicate whether smaller jails would produce similar outcomes. Kevin Lockyer, a U.K.-based prisons expert, has found that “the key determinant of ... effectiveness of a prison was not its size, but its age.” Nevertheless, the Lippman Commission has offered a radical reimagining of what a New York City jail could be like. Utilizing a “clustered housing” model, a sort of mixed-use development style for jails, it found that each unit should ideally contain between 32 and 56 beds, “enabling correction officers ... to develop a relationship with residents and work with them to maintain order.” (City of New York n.d.).

On the other hand, as compelling as the decarcerating plan sounds, some activists are opposed to the idea of building new jails in the boroughs. The opposition does not come from a place of supporting the facilities on Rikers Island, rather from a place of rethinking the distribution of the \$10 billion the mayor is planning on investing in building new jails. They believe that instead of building new jails, this money should be used to create safe, healthy neighborhoods by addressing the community members' needs (No New Jails n.d.).

### **VI.III - Borough-Based Jails Program**

After publishing the plan to close Rikers Island, the NYC Department of Design and Construction (DDC), on behalf of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) and the NYC Department of Correction (DOC), announced the first two Requests for Proposal (RFPs) for early work for the City's Borough-Based Jails Program in the first quarter of 2020. The announcement was made at an Industry Day event held at DDC headquarters in Long Island City for firms and companies interested in learning more about the program and participating. More than 200 industry professionals representing 122 firms attended the event (Michaels 2019).

"In evaluating responses from firms that want to contract with us, DDC will emphasize a proven history of exceptional performance along with good labor relations and the ability to meet important diversity goals, while seeking innovative designs that will become civic assets in the years to come," said DDC Commissioner Lorraine Grillo. "The response to our Industry Day event indicates there's great interest in our Design-Build program by designers and builders." (Michaels 2019).

"Our understanding about design and incarceration has evolved significantly since the jails on Rikers Island were built," says Elizabeth Glazer, director of the Mayor's Office of

Criminal Justice. “Light, sound, and the arrangement of space are important in creating a safer, calmer environment for the people residing and working there.” (Darius Jaafari 2018).

Val Alen Institute, a non-profit organization that helps create equitable cities through inclusive design, is one of the institutions that proposed an alternative plan to the small borough-based facilities. *Justice in Design* is an initiative to develop healthier and more rehabilitative jail infrastructure launched by Melissa Mark-Viverito, an American Democratic politician and former speaker of the New York City Council, the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, with Van Alen Institute. The project aims to create innovative, realistic, and progressive programming and design guidelines for new jail facilities (Van Alen Institute 2017). *Justice Hubs* is the term used to describe the innovative design and programming guidelines for future borough-based New York City jails. By responding to the needs of detainees, officers, lawyers, visitors, and community members, these hubs create healthy environments and support rehabilitation for incarcerated individuals while simultaneously providing neighborhoods with new public amenities (The Independent Commission for New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform 2017). The essence of the design concept is that prisons do not have to be isolated away from the community. By creating public spaces that are accessible by both locals and incarcerated individuals, the reformation and reintegration process of the individuals will be part of their sentence time in jail.

The proposed plan was designed based on a series of workshops held in three New York City boroughs. The workshops included groups affected by the justice system, formerly detained and incarcerated individuals, families, correction officers, staff, and interested community members. There were three main questions that participants responded to: How they interpreted the idea of community, how they perceived the experience and environment of jails, and how jail

experience could be improved. Besides, the team also toured two existing jails, attended Independent Commission round-table discussions, and met with family members of people who were detained and with former correction officers. Each of the workshops, tours, and meetings informed the broad range of issues at hand and guided the design principles' formation. The design team prioritized three elements in the reconsideration of existing jail facilities: providing all people in residential areas with a more positive living and working experience, fostering effective programming and communication and creating a respectful and supportive visitor experience (The Independent Commission for New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform 2017).

## **VII - Epilogue: Prisons in the time of the Pandemic**

Around mid-March, New York City had the highest cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. As a response, the lockdown was enforced, and people started quarantining. As the virus was spreading across the boroughs, Rikers Island was not an exception. The jails were getting more restrictive every day, and the people's movements were limited. Incarcerated individuals were banned from going to the law library and the commissary. Instead, materials were delivered to them in order to avoid crowding in the waiting room. Transfers stopped to upstate prisons. Visitations stopped. With the uncertainty that everyone was going through, the officers were the first ones to reflect the outside world to the prisoners. Officers were required to wear masks and face shields to protect prisoners from themselves and vice versa. After some time, the virus had made its way into the prison, and some inmates started getting sick. Mayor de Blasio was considering releasing prisoners (Kagan 2020).

As NYC is facing the pandemic, Mayor de Blasio has managed to create another virus, a “criminal-justice virus,” as Bill Bratton put it, a former police commissioner, who helped engineer Gotham’s stunning drop in crime in the early 1990s, then came back under de Blasio to ensure offense kept coming down. As part of his creation of a smaller, safer, and fairer system for all, de Blasio started opening city jails doors and freeing incarcerated persons. City Hall is now emptying jails even faster, worsening the problem; as The Post reported, 50 of the first 1,500 who were released were already rearrested, and some of them were released yet again (Post Editorial Board 2020). “On the one hand, we’re trying to protect [people] from the coronavirus,” Bratton said (Fitz-Gibbon 2020). Across the five boroughs, burglaries have spiked, complained, the current NYPD Commissioner Dermot Shea. After 38 inmates tested positive for COVID-19 in NYC jails, de Blasio authorized the release of 63 inmates by March 22nd. He believed that it would help lessen the burden on city jails and manage the virus’s spread. De Blasio said that the other inmates released would be those who have limited time remaining on Rikers Island. “Those individuals are over 50 years old and low risk to re-offend,” said the mayor. “Some others we’re awaiting a response from the state before they can be released. We are now starting immediate work on a group of 200 additional inmates who are being reviewed for release.” (Johnson 2020). By looking at the bigger image, de Blasio might be protecting incarcerated individuals and prison staff from the spread of COVID-19 in Rikers Island facilities, as well as moving forward with his plan of closing the island by 2026, however, freeing people right when the pandemic started seems to be done without a plan looking into the future. The release has erupted locals' stable lives.

## **VIII - Conclusion**

Prison architecture and policy have gone through multiple changes separately and parallel to each other simultaneously. Yet, as it currently exists, it must undergo a fundamental physical transformation to meet the goals of reducing crime and improving community health for which it was intended. The goals and aims of prisons and the incarceration system have to be redefined since evidently our current understanding of the importance of prison is not reflecting positive outcomes.

To that end, New York City has a great opportunity to undergo an essential change and develop its incarceration system. The architectural design and the location of the new smaller borough-based facilities are going to play a crucial role in how the community responds to prisons and incarcerated individuals. It is an opportunity to rethink the purpose of prisons and their goals. A prison is nearly a full functioning town by itself. It includes most of the public and private spaces that are found in urban areas. They just serve different people. From that point of view, some spaces can be overlapped and used by incarcerated persons and locals at the same time. This integration will help change the stigma around incarceration and will support the reintegration process of incarcerated individuals with the community.

With the pandemic highly affecting New York City, incarcerated individuals were not being taken into consideration. Reducing the number of incarcerated individuals in the facilities of Rikers Island is one of the main goals the city is working on at the time of writing, yet the pandemic is being used as an excuse to release people without thinking about the implications that it has on incarcerated individuals, their families, and the community. It was evident that a noticeable percentage of people who were released were rearrested. This data shows that the

decision and the process in which people are being released are not well-planned. For New York City to reach its goal of decarceration, a plan has to be put in place specifying the individuals who get to leave the prison before fulfilling their sentence and planning a reintegration plan for them into the community so they would not be rearrested. In addition, taking the pandemic into consideration and thinking about life after the vaccine and potential future pandemic, a post-pandemic, and resilient prison design should be one of the main focuses when building the next prison.

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