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David Scheer and Colin Lorne

It is a dream project for an architect because this is a global project. To think a prison is thinking about everything. It is to think of life. A prison is a dormitory, it's a restaurant, it's a sports club, it's a hospital, it's a factory, it's a school, it's a public square (Eric, prison architect, Belgium).

Introduction

Whilst prisons are increasingly built away from cities, prison architects imagine prisons *as* cities. Such an urban metaphor is perhaps unsurprising; both the prison and the city are often assumed to be relatively bounded places, prisons arguably resembling self-sufficient cities with facilities such as accommodation, classrooms, workshops, laundries, health clinics, and gardens contained within their walls. The vocabulary of the city is also pervasive when justifying prison architecture. In this chapter we consider why prison architects use the metaphor of the city to describe the prisons they design, using terminology such as 'walled bungalows', 'penitentiary houses', 'vertical prisons' and 'cell apartments', and we examine the significance of this rather dystopian urban imaginary in allowing architects to retain some agency within a design process which minimises their creative input.

Whilst recognising that prison boundaries can be understood as porous (e.g. Moran, 2013), we are not, here, examining the multiplicity of spatial relations between prisons and cities *per se*. Although these are worthy of exploration, not least in that prisons are often located

in rural areas on cheaper land away from both the urban populations they serve, and their associated institutions (courthouses, rehabilitation centres, schools and workplaces) (Combessie 1996), what we are specifically concerned with here is the imaginary of the prison as a new form of city in itself: ‘the prison-city’. Exploring the idea of the prison built as a city, we examine why prisons are conceptualised in this way by architects who are increasingly marginalised in their design and delivery, with minimal capacity to challenge or rethink the conditions of such carceral spaces. We argue that prison architects are able to deny the discomforting, unsettling and mundane experiencing of carceral spaces by imagining such prison-cities as sealed, static utopias, their actions diminished to the arranging of blocks akin to the computer game ‘Tetris’.

The chapter unfolds as follows. We first examine the historic links that ‘place’ the prison in relation both to the city and to notions of utopia, suggesting that the utopian spatial imagination of the prison-city is distinct from previous prisons models based upon the ideals of redemption, rehabilitation or education. As such, we consider the ways in which attempts to realise utopian architectural visions often manifest in the securing of rather *dystopian* carceral cities. From this position, we draw upon empirical research to examine contemporary prison building projects in Belgium, questioning the role of architects in the design and construction of carceral spaces. In the context of recent privatization of construction and design processes, we echo Moran et al (2016) in arguing that architects are largely restricted to an apparently technical role in prison design and construction. By exploring architects’ entanglements in the production of the ‘prison-city’, in which they seemingly fail to question the ongoing experiencing of such spaces, we argue that the creative practices of architects are limited to the *imagining* and ‘*selling*’ of universal utopian projects rather than rethinking the lively materiality and social conditions of carceral space.

Methodology

This chapter is the product both of sustained empirical engagement with prison design processes in Belgium, and sustained discussion between a criminologist and a geographer, its co-authors, and as such it operates as a reflection upon contemporary prison architectural practice, utopia and the city. The first author, Belgian criminologist David Scheer, has undertaken doctoral research examining the processes of design and daily experiences of different users and inhabitants of Belgian prison architecture, including professionals and prisoners (Scheer 2016). The second author, British architectural geographer Colin Lorne, has been examining the changing roles of contemporary architects, with particular focus upon the practices of social and political engagement, and architects' explicit rejection of claims of being artistic form-givers or expert technical problem-solvers (Lorne 2016).

We draw here from David's embedded ethnographic research undertaken in three Belgian prisons built in different eras, spending four months at each site, as well as his interviews with prisoners, as well as guards, directors and others professionals, including six prison architects (Scheer 2016). Archival research was also undertaken and proposed prison projects were closely examined, with David attending design meetings and tracing the tendering of prison projects. Following sociological convention, and in order to protect the anonymity of those interviewed, we specify neither the architectural office nor the prison project on which architects have worked. All respondents have been given pseudonyms.

A genealogical inquiry: A logical reconciliation of the prison and the city?

The advent of the modern prison in the nineteenth century was deeply influenced by notions of architecture as the ultimate treatment for prisoners, as an architecture of control, surveillance and conversion of souls and bodies (Foucault 1975). This was the prison as a *theoretical* project

rather than rooted in socio-material reality (Bentham 1791). Then, as a concrete construction, the modern prison was intended to serve, through architecture, a punitive project of reform (Evans 1982). Solitary confinement, correction, work in silence or coercive education could only take place in a space designed for that purpose. Indeed, the birth of the prison immediately gave birth to the statement of prison failure (Foucault 1975) where the following centuries sought to legitimize the existence of the prison as punishment.

Particular utopian ideals have often been evoked, associating prison models with the city. Although the concept of utopia far predates this, and can be traced back to the Plato's theory of 'idea', notions of utopia are often attributed to Thomas More (1516); meaning simultaneously a 'good place' and 'no place'. Whether a village or city, this place is imagined to be conducive to the ultimate happiness of its occupants. Such utopian spaces include the city built anew on an island (as imagined by Thomas More) or limited by the inescapable confines of the desert and surrounded by walls (such as the religious Carthusian city). The effect of this utopian thought has been to try to make possible an ideal society:

Utopia was to be the fortress of certainty and stability; a kingdom of tranquillity. Instead of confusion – clarity and self-assurance. Instead of caprices of fate – steady and consistent, surprise-free sequence of causes and effects. Instead of the labyrinthine muddle of twisted passages and sharp corners – straight, beaten and well-marked tracks. Instead of opacity – transparency. Instead of randomness – a well-entrenched and utterly predictable routine (Bauman 2003, 16).

Utopia tends to be portrayed as free from the prison as a necessary construct. If everyone is happy, the argument goes, there should be no need for a prison. Yet somewhat ironically, many attempts at building ideal communities have been cited as 'golden prisons', with Marchal and Stébé (2010) describing such gated communities as cultural and fortified 'isolates'. The apparent (but contested) hermetical 'seal' of prisons provides the potential to build an ideal

city, be it an ‘untouched’ island or an inhospitable desert. Thus the ideas of the contained spaces of the city and the prison begin to be associated with each other.

Particular notions of isolation, surveillance or education have often been evoked in relating prisons and cities. So, for instance, if we take the ‘prison-monastery’, such spaces have often been considered as institutions *in* the city:

Experience has shown and proves every day that the inmate in the cell is much more accessible to good advice, exhortation, teachings of morality and religion than in public areas where he is surrounded by his companions and exposed to their influence. Isolation causes the reflection which usually was a consequence for the submission and repentance of committed sins (Ducpétiaux, 1834, 2, our translation)

This particular model aims to protect (male) prisoners from the ‘temptations’ of the city. It is not intended to reproduce the city, but to provide shelter from it. In this instance, the ‘safe-keeping’ and ‘correction’ of inmates is made possible by confinement. Alternatively, and more recently, the ‘prison-container’, or warehouse, is built to hold a mass of ‘undesirable’ people *out of* the city where only road access provides a link, so that the prison is far from urban life (as is the case of the Belgian Ittre prison, discussed below, built between 1996 and 2002):

A comparative study of two locations, one in Tubize and the other in Ittre was performed. Ittre, located near the Clabecq’s forges, was chosen in particular because of its shape and its size as well as the proximity of road infrastructure (Public Federal Service, Justice section, Ittre prison website, our translation).

Moreover, the ‘prison-school’ is constructed to educate, and ultimately reintegrate, convicted people with the aim of bringing them *back to* the city. In this way, the prison is seen

to need separation from, but also integration into, urban infrastructure. Indeed, this is explicitly declared as the ambition for the Belgian Haren prison, still under construction, although originally scheduled for completion in 2016:

The prison complex is part of society and should be built there. This also means that, as a built landscape, the prison complex should also be integrated into the environment and, if possible, that the environment must be able to enter the prison complex (DBFM contract for the Haren prison complex. Specifications, 2010, 7, our translation).

Urban metaphors are often found in alternative Belgian prison projects (alternative inasmuch as such models have been proposed, but not realised). For example, intentions to accommodate prisoners in domestically-scaled ‘houses’ rather than large cellular prisons, has been proposed by prison directors and supported by some architects and criminologists, as a means to (re)inscribe the prison into the city:

Detention houses are connected to the neighbourhood where they are located. From the idea of reparation, they play an economic role, social or cultural in their environment. Under the principle of standardization, they use the offer of help and services from the immediate area (Claus, 2015, 36; our translation).

Observing these relations between the prison and the city, prison spaces are understood as a functional component of the urban fabric and contribute to what Foucault (1975) understands as society’s institutional disciplinary mesh.

The utopian prison-city?

These relationships between the prison and the (actual) city are historically and geographically diverse multi-faceted, and we can do little more than gesture towards them here. Instead, it is the prison seen *as* a city in itself that we focus upon. When we refer to the ‘prison-city’, we are talking about the concept of the prison developed *as* a city with as many necessary facilities as possible located within its walls. In this way, the prison doesn’t just allude to utopia, it *is* utopia.

If we treat prisons-cities as utopian projects, we uncover a problematic relationship with the meaning of utopia. Whilst it may be relatively sealed-off, and may gather together useful functions, the prison-city in fact negates everything that makes the city project utopian: participatory democracy, connection with nature, architectural vision. Instead, the prison-city is more like the *Stahlstadt* (as described by Jules Verne 1986) or perhaps Charles Dickens’ *Coketown* (1854). Its role becomes purely technical and utilitarian; a place that although designed with utopian aspirations, quickly becomes dystopian. Consider, for example, San Pedro prison in Bolivia. This is a prison without guards that is self-managed by inmates. It has a sponsorship deal with Coca-Cola. Tourists visit the prison and hear guides talk of the benefits of its self-governing system. Yet further examination exposes the prison as a setting for trafficking, injustice and other forms of oppression (Langlois 2006, Skarbek 2010). Prisons are becoming simultaneously more open and porous – open to various associations, external controls, researchers and so forth (Moran 2013) – yet at the same time ever more closed and secured, with increasing technical safety devices and proliferation of walls and gates (Scheer 2015). This runs counter to official speeches made about prisons claiming increasing openness and exhorting the rehabilitation of prisoners (Mincke and Lemonne 2014). The notion of the ‘prison-city’ model as utopian may not be all that it seems.

Securing utopia: An architectural dream

Architecture has long been enrolled in visions of a utopian society, where appeals to the presumed permanency and firmness of architecture facilitate radical societal transformation. As Picon (2013, 17-8; our emphasis) argued: ‘There was an expectation that beyond the critical stance usually adopted by utopians, there lay the possibility of some real social and political progress. Architecture and urban design thus offered a path *towards concrete reform*’. Replacing industrial urban slums, for example, was intended to bring about harmony, acting as a symbolic and material break from existing conditions (Picon 2013).

There is a danger inherent in such utopian association that architecture is thought to smooth out conflict, ‘fixing’ social relations, rather than being situated as continuously open to the multiplicity and possibility of space (cf. Massey 2005). It is precisely these appeals to controlling and ordering space by architects and planners that inspired much of the utopian visions of Modernism in the twentieth century which sought to reconcile societal and technological change. Yet as David Harvey (1989) has argued, in Europe, the appropriation of utopian rational Modernist planning and architecture was instrumental in the provision of post-war housing and urban reconstruction which simultaneously helped ensure society remained capitalist. A tension emerges: where utopia has often envisaged the abolition of private property (Jameson 2004), the constant circulation of capital is integral to architecture and architectural practice (Tafuri 1976). To be clear, we attribute blame for social-urban problems neither solely to architects and planners, nor to design or the style of modern architecture, (as is often the argument made by those citing Jane Jacobs (1961)). Rather, we propose that the ability – the desirability – for architects to programme and fix notions of a perfect place which is always in flux, which has always been a dream, is in fact a fantasy.

And yet we *may* trace these seemingly utopian ambitions through Mike Davis’ (1990) *City of Quartz*, an examination of a controlled, divided Los Angeles composed of increasingly policed, *securitised* ‘carceral’ urban space. From the remnants of urban visions comes the post-liberal

‘fortress LA’, a dystopian, prison-like city mobilised through technologies of security and control, privatised space and the enforcing of social boundaries. The work of architects is thus enrolled in the wider regulation of urban spaces, be that through ‘defensible space’, closed circuit television (CCTV), chain fences or security guards. Notions of ‘fortified’ or ‘revanchist’ cities typify these accounts of a patchwork city composed of utopian and dystopian spaces (MacLeod and Ward 2002). As Kraftl (2007) has noted, ‘traditional’ notions of utopia tend to enrol ideas of stasis and comfort, yet through a recognition of unevenness, recent utopian accounts of cities are turning to engage with more processual understandings that attend to notions of risk, dynamism and unsettling. Kraftl makes an appeal for utopian thinking through performativity and post-structuralism so as to foster affective and ethical utopia (drawing upon work such as Grosz 2001, Law and Mol 2002). In particular, this emphasises the ways in which utopian desires, practices and visions may themselves be examined, wherein an open-ended, post-structural understanding of utopia may well be far less comfortable. Through this mode of thinking, Kraftl (2007, 124) calls for us to become ‘more attentive to the unsettling impact that all utopias can have’, whilst questioning the ‘stability, comfort, and homeliness that many utopias have historically offered’. In this spirit, we might consider how architecture is understood not in terms of a *blueprint* for utopia (or, for that matter, dystopia), but how open-ended, contingent utopian desire and ethics is enrolled in performative understandings of architectural space.

Recent work within carceral geography calls for attentive examination of the experience of material spaces of incarceration (Moran 2015). This corresponds with the perspective of critical geographies of architecture that has called for a shift in our attention towards the ongoing performances, actions and experiences involved in producing ‘big things’ (Jacobs 2006, Rose et al. 2010). In this way, rather than a finished artefact or architectural form, we can recognise the many different processes and practices that are involved in the life

and death of buildings (Lees 2001, Llewellyn 2003, Kraftl and Adey 2008, Jenkins 2002, Jacobs 2006, Yaneva 2009). Even before a building is constructed, architects and digital visual technologies may be enrolled within the production and branding of atmospheres that compose urban architectural spaces, a process mediated through many human and non-human actors (Rose et al. 2014). Together, these new geographies of architecture have clear implications with regards to the designing and experiencing of prisons: not only are prisons particular symbolic expressions of power in society, but they are continuously and variously experienced by different actors in myriad, predictable and unexpected ways. As such we can begin to examine prison architecture in much more lively, processual and unstable terms, with architects as one of many actors involved, blurring the distinction between the ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ of buildings (Llewellyn 2003). In this way, any capacity for architects to bring about concrete reform seems much less certain.

The marginalisation and creativity of prison architects

There are strict specifications for prison projects, communicated through the predetermined design briefs for prison builds (Moran et al. 2016). Though recognising the many human and non-human actors involved in producing buildings, there is a danger of over-emphasising the capacity by which architects can influence the design and inhabitation of prisons. The actual role of architects is reduced to subcontracting for a powerful consortium who have already received the design brief for a project. Through multiplicitious regulations, standardizations and stipulations (Imrie and Street 2009, Faulconbridge 2009), architectural projects are shaped in ways well beyond the control of the architect. The example of prison building is a strong case in point. Projects are constrained by a set of detailed and weighty specifications predetermined by the brief of a prison project:

We have no grip on the project. For example, for the cell window, the brand and model are inscribed in the specifications. That will be it, period. [...] We could have offered an alternative, but we risk not getting the job (Eric, prison architect).

The specification describes the buildings. This is programming. This is not architecture. It is [Company X] who wrote the specifications for the benefit of the Buildings Agency, which has been receiving information from [The Ministry of Justice]. How, in this process, the information ends up in the document that becomes “the Bible”, we do not know (Michel, prison architect).

Much as Moran et al (2016) described for England and Wales, in the Belgian case, officials directed by the Justice Minister, who acts on behalf of the elected government, decide upon the construction and capacity of new prisons. The correctional administration then writes the design specifications with technical assistance from other government departments, and further guidelines are agreed upon during the writing of these specifications. Moreover, with the increasing privatisation of the design and construction processes of prisons, architects are also subject to the processes of commissioning private companies to undertake work for the state. As one architect explained:

This type of project is ... It's very complicated to create. We must make decisions in the void without being able to consult with the client. It's a simple project: just follow the specifications. But if we want to go further, thinking of the impact on society, this is very complicated in my opinion. Rethinking, rebuilding a prison system is a huge ambition. A challenge. In our proposal, we have not tried to rethink how it works. We have strengthened the system that exists but with a humanist point of view. [...] And we do not know the prison. We had no exchanges with the Prison Administration. The only contact we have had is with

the Buildings Agency to obtain the specification but that's all (Bart, prison architect unsuccessful in tendering for prison work).

The architects interviewed all expressed frustration about their lack of power to influence prison projects. Their descriptions of involvement in prison projects suggest that they simply maintain the 'sterile reproduction of outdated models' (Espinass 1989, 375). It is clear that technical or aesthetic expertise – encouraging the saturation of natural light, designing gates that provide shade, drawing windows without bars, for instance – is annihilated in prison design where specifications require certain features, such as window bars spaced at set distances. One architect put it like this:

There are many things that escape us. You know, we are in a consortium. It's [a big company] which is selected for the entire logistics component. It is they who take care of the laundry, the kitchens, et cetera. And we, we cannot change anything. The visiting room, the workshops. Specifications are respected. We can almost not change anything. And there are things we would like to change. But it's the specifications, it is the price, it is the offer. We try to work the acoustics a little. So all in all it is good, but we cannot do it everywhere. The difficulty is that they demand that everything be anti-vandalism, given the context. And anti-acoustic materials, they are soft and fibrous materials. We must find a way to put the materials in inaccessible places, where you cannot hide things, you cannot break things. But our actions are limited there. [...] We will not rethink the prison. We're not in secret discussions. It is to think the space, as is possible within the given limits (Michel, prison architect).

As Moran et al (2016) have argued, security demands, as well as the financial model of project commissioning and delivery inexorably stifle architectural innovation in prison projects. In our experience, we suggest that in prison design, architects do find a *semblance* of creative power, but that this power is relative, especially when the prison comes to be understood as a technical object. As a result of their experience of the restrictive design and commissioning context, Belgian prison architects have adopted a position of ‘distance’ from the social issues entangled in designing for imprisonment. In England and Wales, Moran et al (2016) described prison architects as unable to engage in face to face discussion with the client (the Ministry of Justice) because of the distance imposed between them by the legal tendering process, and therefore unable to raise questions about the purpose of a proposed prison in respect of the overall purpose of imprisonment. We find that the situation is the same in Belgium, and that as a result, Belgian prison architects frame their discussions of designs for proposed prisons in terms of architecture and cities, rather than using the terminology of imprisonment or rehabilitation. Architects talk of producing new architectural forms, such as the ‘cell apartment’ or the ‘walled bungalow’. This discourse serves two purposes; first, it provides a sense of architectural control in the design of prison buildings, when genuine creative scope to shape design is diminished. If architects cannot actually design prisons to be different from the specified plan, they can at least engage in aspirational (if not utopian) discourse about them.

The second reason for this terminology is that it enables architects to avoid raising ethically challenging questions about the lived experience of imprisonment, open discussion of which may jeopardise the business interests of the bidding consortium of which they are part.

In a democracy, we need prisons as we need supermarkets or hospitals... But it’s not for me, as an architect, to ask whether the place of prisoners is in prison or not. We’re not here to talk about that (Steve, architect).

This type of terminology was argued by retired architect and author Arthur Allen to enable the architect to refrain from ‘comment on the moral and ethical character of captives and captors’, flattering the client ‘with limited moral and ethical comment on the nature of prison designs’ (Allen 1981, 5). He also argued that such euphemistic language is used by architects in public relations terms, in deflecting attention from troubling issues; for example in architectural designs where groups of cells are called ‘villages’ and corridors between ‘villages’ are called ‘walks’ or ‘streets’. These, he argued, are labels, through the use of which ‘we are only fooling ourselves’ (*ibid*, 6). He concluded that:

If architecture continues to support questionable institutions and movements, and to defend them with euphemistic and specially constructed ethical languages, then the profession’s part in deception and its self-centred indifference to moral and ethical issues cannot be defended on moral and ethical grounds (Allen 1981, 7).

The role of the architect in prison design, at least in our empirical example, seems to no longer be to think about the purpose of the project (to ‘answer the [client’s] question’, as the architects put it), let alone to ask a different question about what imprisonment might be for: ‘If you successfully built a prison, you can design anything else’ (Anthony, architect). The way in which architects are encouraged to project visions of the prison, activities which extend their practice beyond the technical production of the architectural object, is in the ‘selling’ of a utopian vision of the prison.

Urban metaphors to ‘sell’ the prison

This process was witnessed in the ‘performances’ of architects involved in early stages of bidding for future prisons. During the presentation phase for a proposed new prison in Brussels

(when potential consortia ‘pitched’ ideas in person to a panel representing the client), architects were present as part of each bid team. However, rather than presenting and explaining architectural designs that they had creatively generated, their role was to only to ‘legitimize’ the design choices that had been made in advance of their professional involvement - i.e. the choices that had been made by the client in preparing the design brief, and which they as architects had interpreted and worked-up within very restrictive technical and security specifications. The prison designs proposed by the various consortia were necessarily very similar, since they had all worked to the same design brief, and within the same restrictive specifications. Only the architects’ speeches about the proposed prisons were different; in terms of the terminology they used and the style they adopted to present to the panel. For example, during the presentation of ‘improved offers’ for the Brussels’ prison, all projects were similar, yet the ways in which their performances were enrolled into the ‘branding’ differed. One casually-dressed architect displayed ‘artistic flair’ to convey the originality of the creative process, giving an impression that the design had architectural merit in addition to its technical quality. A suited, austere figure bet on technical rigor through a ‘serious’ presentation style stressing technical and security characteristics through complex technical patterns of flow management. Architects were thus used to legitimize the choices that were made for prisons.

This is a difficult position, the architect’s position in a PPP [public-private partnership]. Traditionally, in a conventional competition, the architect is the adviser of the client. An architect drafts a specification for the benefit of the client. Then, the client and architect brawl together against the contractor to obtain compliance with specifications. Here we are in a quite different pattern. There is a specification that is written by the applicant, the project owner. And on this basis, there is an offer made by a contractor who employs an architect. It completely reverses the positions (Eric, prison architect).

Architects are aware that they have become communication tools for more powerful entrepreneurs. Presentation brochures of future prisons follow the same path by posting bright views of the prison, cell windows without bars, inmates smiling, yards without cameras, a presentation far from reality. The ‘game’ is always to show a prison where detention conditions are humane and ‘normalized’, all the while re-emphasizing security. They must show that the prison is evolving yet providing reassurance that prisons haven’t changed *too* much. The role of architects is to present this in different ways.

This diversity in architectural ‘sales pitch’ for near-identical plans for new prisons resonates with longstanding concern for the ways in which architects ‘sell’ urban projects (for instance Knox 1987, see also Harvey 1989, Goss 1993). Tracing changing trends in the architectural profession, the postmodern city exemplifies a shift from ethics to aesthetics: ‘As the forces of late capitalism make themselves increasingly felt, profit for the professions becomes a motive more compelling than status or class, and the interest of architects falls into line with that of the construction industry’ (Saint 1983, 160). Architects know they are being manipulated, that they have become tools of communication for more powerful clients, as they shift from being a ‘principled professional into a hustler’ (Banham 1982 cited in Knox 1987, 371). Considering again the prison architect’s sales pitch, it becomes more commercially expedient, and perhaps more ethically palatable, for prison architects to sell the universal ‘good’ of the prison-city, than to challenge the principles of imprisonment. One way in which this happens is through the deployment of city metaphors in descriptions of prisons.

The vocabulary of the city is omnipresent within discourses justifying the architectural characteristics of prison buildings. Architects often use the metaphor of the city to describe or legitimise the prison they have designed. Take, for example, Fresnes Prison in France, composed of blocks intended to resemble French suburbs, ostensibly so as not to

disorientate inmates (Carrier 1998). Recently built juvenile detention facilities have resembled – on the surface, at least – holiday resorts, with living units located around a central square in an attempt to reduce the impression of confinement (Chantraine et al. 2011). Haren prison, currently under construction in Belgium and due to open in 2018 will be the country's biggest prison, with bedspace for 1200 prisoners. It has been described by the correctional administration itself as a trial version of a 'prison city'. Within the same walls, there will be three men's prisons, two women's prisons, a juvenile prison, a hospital, buildings for prison work, a gym and gardens (Kozlowski and Scheer 2015). The publicity surrounding the project is very clearly orchestrated towards a goal of creating a prison-city that promotes rehabilitation (*ibid*). Alongside the explicit pretext of removing offenders from society and placing them in a secure environment where they can receive social education; there is a tacit desire to pursue the far more 'technical' achievement of efficiently and safely providing various services in a closed container.

The unfamiliar prison-city

Although the metaphorical use of urban terminology to 'sell' the prison may be an effective use of architects' creativity in the absence of other outlets within the design process, it also perhaps arises from unfamiliarity with the lived experience of this architectural form. Unlike their intimate knowledge and experience of 'actual' cities, many prison architects know very little, initially at least, about the lived experiences of imprisonment. Never having been imprisoned, and disincentivised within the design process, from engaging in costly and challenging consultations with an alternative set of clients (i.e prisoners themselves), prison architects deliver impassively planned and assembled buildings. As a prison architect stated:

We know nothing about the prison. Personally, I have never built a prison. I never even thought about the prison before the project. We were in contact with another

architectural firm that had been working on prison projects in France. But obviously, they did not know the prison better than me. *So we are talking architecture, we do not talk prisons* (Jacques, prison architect).

This limited knowledge of the prison is highly significant. One of us had the opportunity to spend thirty hours in one of these new prisons, as an ‘inmate’ to test infrastructures and procedures. Everything is visually very clean and circulation is well-regulated. But it was very quickly noticeable that this new architecture was not designed to be lived in. Although at best, human design dimensions can be found in the ergonomic design of cells, their soundproofing, interior fixtures and so forth, this prison was uncomfortable at the human scale. The bed was too high to sit on comfortably. There was not enough room on the table for a plate. The shower splashed and soaked the toilet paper. In short, many basic human experiences were forgotten or ignored.

Reflecting on the marginalisation of their design role, one architect said ‘This is the evolution of the profession’. If we were to follow Jean-Denis Espinas, who wrote in 1989 that architectural design was the way to prison revolution, and the realisation of social transformation, we might conclude that it is off to a bad start.

When prison architects play Tetris

To measure the life ‘as it is’ by a life ‘as it might or should be’ is a defining, constitutive feature of humanity. The urge to transcend is nearest to a universal, and arguably the least destructible, attribute of human existence. This cannot be said, however, of its articulations into ‘projects’ - that is, of cohesive and comprehensive programmes of change and of visions of life that the change is

hoped to bring about - visions that stand out of reality, adumbrating a fully and truly different, alternative world (Bauman, 2003, 11)

In this chapter we have considered why the ‘prison-city’ may be the dream project for architects. We have outlined a shift towards conceptualising prisons *as* cities, as apparently bounded ‘universal’ places. For prison architects, they evoke a vision of utopia in deploying a language of the city to design life as it *ought* to be. For those who are increasingly marginalised as a profession, imagining prisons as a city is a dream. Yet it is an illusion.

We are not arguing that the diminished role of architects mean that they no longer have any influence in prison projects. Rather, we suggest that their roles are more nuanced, serving to legitimise particular prison constructions. Even ‘alternative’ projects surround themselves with architects – seen as technicians of the prison space – to give weight to a proposal. We argue that it is the language of the city, the urban metaphor, that both helps justify such spaces, and assists architects who become entangled in the marketing and selling of prison building, to distance themselves from consideration of the complicity of their practices in the ongoing production of carceral spaces. These metaphors may enable them not to think about how such spaces are lively and lived in, about life *as it is*.

So what of the prison architect today? If they are to win commissions, within the restricted tendering process they cannot protest against imprisonment, challenge these new projects or propose innovative alternatives. The briefs are already written, the specifications already set. The potential power of architecture is already heavily imbued within these plans. We are not the first to point towards the problems facing prison architects, as just one particular actor in the multiple lives of prison buildings. Those within the broader profession, such as returned architects Arthur Allen, are themselves questioning their own complicity (Allen 2014). Such protests rely on the recognition that architects are not merely technicians, but they

instead they have to confront the messy, ethically contested, lively challenge of space (Awan et al. 2011, Kraftl 2007, Till 2009). But for now, the Belgian prison architects in this study talk *architecture*, not imprisonment. The question of whether such mega projects are appropriate or ethical remains unaddressed. Instead, they merely assemble boxes and arrange different services on site. They can do little more than play Tetris.

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