

Power and Pain in Penal Architecture: Contortions and Creations

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Abstract

Perhaps more than any other State institution, the prison symbolizes control and absolute power. Imposing and somber, these facilities of spatial lockdown have a monopoly on the practice of punishment and the control of bodies through the pain of isolation and other disciplinary measures. Though changes in policy over the years have attempted to mitigate this experience of pain—or at least the public perception thereof—this particular facet of imprisonment is coded into the very logic of the institution, as it has been since the inception of isolation as a punitive measure. This paper offers a contextual analysis of prison architecture as it relates to these topics. It will trace the history and examine the reasoning behind this ingrained measure of subjugation, and it will illuminate the intended capillary effect on the individual prisoner, as well as on the correctional officer and civilian outside its walls. Particular attention will be given to the symbolic meaning and sovereign authority of the prison tower. While the emphasis will be on the tower's function and utility within the correctional setting, examples from non-prison perspectives will be used to situate said meaning.