

The Historical Architectural Symbology of British Prisons

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Over time, prisons have mobilized aesthetic and spatial values and practices to function simultaneously as technologies of control and systems of cultural symbolism. Although there is no 'typical' prison, the majority display exterior architectural features that render them instantly recognizable as places of detention and punishment. Although existing research focuses on structural economic change associated with prison siting, it has been unable to tackle questions about the response of local communities to the aesthetic appearance of the prisons themselves, and the importance of prison architecture in the 'acceptance' of prison siting close to existing communities. This paper draws on my own archival research to explore the community response to a prison siting in Manchester, UK, in the 1860s, examining the architectural symbology of British prisons of that era with a focus on their imbued 'see and beware' function.