Fear-suffused hell-holes: the architecture of extreme punishment

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Introduction

Is Hook at last heading for Hell? Abu Hamza to be moved to top security jail

'Hell' is what they call the fearsome jail where the soul-destroying isolation has driven some of America's toughest prisoners to suicide (*Daily Mail* 12 October 2012).

Prisons tend to reflect the society that oversees them; they are physical manifestations of a state's aims and approaches for dealing with offenders (Johnston, 2000; Wener, 2012). In recent years, the prison has been analogously compared to transportation and slavery (Davis, 2000; Alexander, 2010) and the urban ghetto (Wacquant, 2002) and used as a means of understanding state power and security apparatuses in post 9/11 societies (Drake, 2012). In these analyses, imprisonment is explicitly linked to wider processes of racial discrimination, criminalization and extreme punishment. A further analogous framework by which prisons might be viewed and understood, both structurally and experientially, is that of Hell.ⁱ This chapter draws on images of Hell from Dante's *Inferno*, the cultural purchase of which, it is suggested, remains undiminished seven hundred years after it was written.

Informed by the early findings of a comparative study of prison architecture, design and technologyⁱⁱ, together with the published findings of fellow prison ethnographers, the chapter focuses principally on case studies of architectural design in the UK and US, and briefly contrasts these with penal design elsewhere, in order to examine and explain how physical contexts influence fear and violence within and around high-security prisons. The chapter argues that the 'fear-suffused' environments (Hassine, 2011) of contemporary high and maximum security prisons resonate with Medieval imaginings of eternal damnation, and represent a form of barbarity that is out of place in twenty-first century civilized societies.

In making this claim, the chapter is premised on two related propositions. The first is that both the US and UK imprison many thousands of people unnecessarily, and many thousands more for dramatically over-extended periods of time under exaggerated and superfluous security conditions. The second proposition is that over the last two decades, crime and security have become the major battlegrounds on which political entrepreneurs have staked their hegemonic power and prisoners have become expedient tools for politicians wishing to look more tough on crime than their opponents. Of course, some crimes challenge the beliefs of even the most fervent abolitionists. Nonetheless, the actions of an individual (whether a particularly horrible or newsworthy offence or a security breach, e.g. an abscondment from prison) can be a fortuitous catalyst for those who seek

political gain by introducing more oppressive security and control measures across the prison estate, catching *all* inmates in a tightening carceral net (Drake, 2012).

The result of these interlinked processes is that we appear to have returned to pre-Enlightenment, expressive forms of punishment, in which penal strategies of excessive and unprecedented punitiveness are implemented and enacted in the pages of the popular press, for an audience perceived to be hungry for excessive displays of retribution (Loader, 2009). Politically advantageous discourses of crime and incarceration have thus become culturally embedded, recasting offending 'folk devils' as 'evil monsters' and generating widespread tolerance for subterranean, infernal hell-holes as the most fitting repositories for the permanently excluded prisoner (Dolovich, 2011).

The Contemporary Relevance of Dante's Vision of Hell

Now moans, loud howls and lamentations echoed through the starless air, so that I also began to cry. Many languages, strange accents, words of pain, cries of rage, voices loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands – all these whirled together in that black and timeless air, as sand is swirled in a tornado (*Inferno* 3: 22-30).

Dante's *Inferno* frames this analysis because it contains themes and motifs of a subterranean, multi-layered vision of Hell that lends itself particularly well to contemporary cultural ideas about the prison or penitentiary. Underpinning the collective imagination via novels, computer games, art, television and film, Dante's imagining of Hell has become part of the common stock of knowledge, informing ideas about justice and punishment, about what places of punishment should look and feel like, even among those who have not actually read *Inferno*. Dante thus offers an enduring analogy of perpetual suffering for the increasing numbers of individuals regarded as deserving extreme punishment.

Widely regarded as being as important as Homer and Shakespeare in literary history, Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321) wrote *Inferno* as a three-part work (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*) collectively titled *Commedia*, offering a vision of Hell and Heaven from the perspective of an observer who witnessed a period of almost constant war, political conflict and corruption in his home city of Florence. Revenge and retribution were the stuff of everyday life and inevitably shaped Dante's view of the universe and informed his writing. Part satire, part novel and part journal (it is narrated in the first person) the *Divine Comedy*, as it is now usually known, was intended to be read aloud to an audience who would recognize the historical and political allusions that underpin what is essentially a cracking story. For dramatic effect, Dante creates a dialogue by introducing a companion on his

journey to the 'horrid hole of Hell' (*Inferno*, 32: 6); the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BC) fulfills the roles of tourist guide, mentor and protector.

Dante specified that Hell is a deep conical indentation, the lowest point of which is precisely at the centre of the earth. The poor, tormented souls consigned to everlasting suffering occupy nine vast circular terraces that descend, in decreasing size, to the earth's core (Burge, 2010). At the outer edge of the abyss is an area occupied by those who have committed no sin except that they were morally neutral and did not act or speak out against others' wrongdoings. Illustrating the statement later attributed to Edmund Burke (1729-1797) that all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing,ⁱⁱⁱ the punishment suffered by these 'neutrals' might seem harsh to a contemporary reader. However, Bauman has mapped the symbolic geography of evil through numerous modern atrocities, and underlines that evil is not confined to totalitarian ideologies: 'Today it more frequently reveals itself in failing to react to someone else's suffering, in refusing to understand others, in insensitivity and in eyes turned away from a silent ethical gaze' (Bauman, 2013: 8). Although writing principally about the Holocaust, Bauman's words might be equally be applied to carceral atrocities. Indeed, in the penal context, the more extreme the punishment, the more likely it is to recede from the public gaze and conscience, as this chapter will illustrate in its discussion of prison architecture and design (below).

The unfortunate occupants of the edge of the abyss observed by Dante and Virgil swirl in their masses moaning into the howling wind, naked and surrounded by attacking flies and wasps as their faces run with blood. Following this is the descent down through the nine circles of 'that profound pit of pain filled with the howl of endless woe' (*Inferno* 4: 1). The field notes of two contemporary prison researchers, the first written inside a prison in Russia and the second as the writer emerged from the gloom of an American jail, contain powerful echoes of Dante's medieval vision of Hell, while at the same time suggesting that, at their most extreme, carceral environments are timeless and universal:

I'm not sure I feel safe tonight. It's midnight. The noises from inside the zone are getting louder...It sounds like dogs yelping but it's not. It's prisoners moaning and swearing...It feels really creepy...[I] actually feel too scared to move (Piacentini, 2005: 201).

Shock of the daylight, the sun, the fresh air...I drive silently straight to the beach [of Santa Monica], to wallow in fresh air and wade in the waves, as if to 'cleanse' myself of all I've seen, heard, and sensed...but my memory is seared by what I've seen...Every time my mind drifts back to it, it seems like a bad movie, a nightmare, the vision of an evil 'other world' that cannot actually exist (Wacquant, 2002: 381)

In the study from which the first quote comes, Piacentini describes her experience of 'deep immersion' in decaying Russian prisons, whose roofless buildings, crumbling walls and rusting fittings challenge the aesthetic idea of the prison as a secure, sanitised environment. Stating that Russian prisons resemble a mutated, fantastical form of the Soviet ideal, industrial zones where daily life is divided between work and rest, Piacentini also reflects on the very specific melancholia and darkness that incarceration can instill. The abiding image of the Russian prison, she tells us, is one of a hostile and austere environment of multi-cells, acute overcrowding, faceless voices, appalling squalor and death on a massive scale from freezing temperatures or from industrial accidents (Piacentini, 2002).

Evoking similar notions of deep entombment in a cold, industrial wasteland, Wacquant's research diary records the 'overpowering feeling of emerging from a dive into a mine shaft...[a] murky factory for social pain and human destruction, silently grinding away' (2002: 381). These field notes, written on Wacquant's first day in the Men's Central Jail (part of Los Angeles County Jail), vividly capture the author's relief at breaking out of the hellish physical environment of a jail which comprises 'seven mega-houses of detention' holding more than 23,000 inmates (Wacquant, 2002: 371). In an obvious echo of Dante's conical and subterranean rendering of Hell, the Men's Central Jail is organised on five floors, two of which are underground, and inmates are crammed in dormitories where up to 150 men live cheek by jowl on bunk beds which form a human filing cabinet in 'conditions that evoke the dungeons of the Middle Ages' (ibid: 372). Wacquant highlights three aspects which combine to form this vision of Hell: the noise ('deafening and disorienting'); the filth (both of the trash variety, which attracts rats and roaches, and promiscuity which, in this communal living environment, is 'pushed to the point of obscenity'); and the total absence of natural daylight, which leads Wacquant to describe the facility as 'a tomb. A subterranean grotto. A safe for men buried alive far away from society's eyes, ears, and mind' (2002: 373).

If he were writing about the jail now, Wacquant might add to his list of hellish experiences suffered by inmates at LA County the deplorable conditions under which prisoners with mental illnesses are kept, which have led to a dramatic rise in suicides; the horrifying abuse meted out to inmates by staff; and corruption on the part of management, which included a special hiring track - called FOS, or 'Friends of the Sheriff' - for friends and relatives of department employees, even if they themselves have criminal records (a detailed news archive of the problems and abuses uncovered can be found at <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-jails-sg-storygallery.html>). More than a decade after Wacquant described his shock at what he saw there, the facility has been the subject of several critical reports by the US Department of Justice, and in December 2013, federal officials announced that 18 current and former Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies were under investigation for offences including alleged 'unjustified beatings of jail inmates and visitors, unjustified detentions and a conspiracy to obstruct a federal investigation into misconduct at the Men's Central Jail' (ibid).

The unpleasant sensations described by both Piacentini and Wacquant in their field notes, and the graphic news reporting of prisoner despair in the face of staff cruelty and corruption in one

county prison system, echo Dante's experience as he descends into Hell and describes slamming gates, vile odours, ditches full of excrement, suicides, mutilations, many languages and strange accents, brutal and sadistic guards, pain and rage, anguished cries for help, voices loud and faint, deviant sexual practices and other degradations. Once again reminding us of the freezing conditions of post-Soviet confinement, Wacquant details how inmates at LA County are permitted one outing per week on the caged roof of the jail, which is:

[T]he residents' only chance to see the sky, to know whether it's sunny, rainy or windy, to breathe for two hours outside of the cold draft of the air-moving system that operates round the clock (to contain the risk of tuberculosis)... The inmates commonly complain...about the cold: in many tiers, the ventilation is set too high and the units are swept by gusts of chilly air; in the disciplinary cells, the atmosphere is downright frigid (ibid).

This truly is the lowest level of Hell; the ninth circle of the Inferno is freezing cold, an icy waste in which the atmosphere atrophies the soul. As Dante puts it, 'I did not die but I was not living either' (*Inferno*, 34: 25).

The Architecture of Prison Hell

There are some prison administrators who stress the need to create small maximum security facilities for the most troublesome offenders – 'maxi-maxi' institutions. Their plans read like the design of the inner circles of hell

(Morris, 1974: 88).

From Alison Liebling's male prisoner respondent who describes the hell of being 'behind the slab' at HMP Whitemoor (2011: 538), an evocative phrase with both physical and experiential dimensions, to Eleanor Novek's (2005) exploration of the American female inmates who experience confinement as a living hell with no redeeming potential (especially for the incarcerated women who are forced to relinquish their babies just a few days after giving birth while restrained by handcuffs), images of Hell are never far from the surface of ethnographic studies of imprisonment. But arguably it is in prisoners' (auto)biographies, poetry, journalism and creative writing that the hell of incarceration is most vividly conveyed, and where descriptions of poorly ventilated, putrid smelling prisons have a distinctly Dantean quality. Here, foul gasses, decaying dirt, prisoners' blood and tears and a pervasive and permanent sense of fear ('The Beast') are all trapped within the porous walls (Hassine, 2011).

It is perhaps Victor Hassine who has most excoriatingly captured Hell from a prisoner's perspective. A 'lifer' in the US corrections system who committed suicide after nearly 28 years inside, after being denied a parole hearing, Hassine was an educated, scholarly man. His observations about the different prisons in which he served time, which varied considerably in age, size and layout, tell us much about the effects that carceral design has on its occupants; in fact, Hassine states that many of the crises facing penal systems in the developed world – including overcrowding, violence, mental and physical illness, drug use, high levels of suicide and self-harm – are intrinsically related to the 'fear-suffused environments' created by prison architects:

To fully understand the prison experience requires a personal awareness of how bricks, mortar, steel, and the endless enforcement of rules and regulations animate a prison into a living, breathing entity designed to manipulate its inhabitants.... Prison designers and managers have developed a precise and universal alphabet of fear that is carefully assembled and arranged – bricks, steel, uniforms, colors, odors, shapes, and management style – to effectively control the conduct of whole prison populations (2011: 7).

Throughout western penal history, from the separate and silent systems of the mid-nineteenth century, when prisons were designed and constructed to prevent moral contagion (i.e. the belief that prisoners risked becoming 'worse' if allowed contact with other offenders), to the 1950s when the rehabilitation model paved the way for a raft of psychology programs aimed at treating the offender, commentators have noted the link between physical environments and operational regimes. Indeed, the origins of the supermax can be traced to both these penal experiments; its harsh conditions of solitary confinement are found in the nineteenth century separate (or 'Pennsylvania') system, but its penal ideologies were honed in the post-war era of behavioral psychology when various forms of sensory deprivation and social isolation were introduced in order to make prisoners susceptible to 'remoulding' through therapy and medication.

The supermax philosophy is also underpinned by the now infamous doctrine, 'nothing works' (Martinson, 1974), a statement intended to support a reduction in the use of imprisonment, but instead appropriated to support calls for more brutal regimes within psychologically numbing custodial settings. The supermax thus incorporates numerous architectural and environmental elements designed to have effects far beyond those engendered by architecture that is merely drab, institutional and grindingly dull. The coercive use of architecture to instill total psychic and bodily control over prisoners designated 'threatening', 'non-compliant' or 'high-risk' might be regarded as modern versions of *Inferno*: physical separation of prisoners and guards, hi-tech monitoring equipment, constant surveillance, electronic controls, hermetically sealed interior environments protected by bullet proof glass, windows positioned too high in the walls to see out of them, windows

painted over to obscure the view and obstruct natural light, and areas of both sensory deprivation and sensory overload which, taken together, result in psychic and physical pain on a par with techniques of torture.

While the UK – indeed Europe – has not yet embraced the supermax, neo-liberal, populist political agendas over the last few decades have intensified the punitive force of the experience of imprisonment (Brown and Wilkie, 2002), and perceived public endorsement for rigorous and unpleasant conditions have resulted in new prisons being built with ‘a level of security above “high security”’ and internal routines not seen for 150 years (Johnston, 2000: 4). As Drake (2012) describes, most recent developments in penal philosophy and practice in England and Wales, including prison design, can be traced back to the escapes from high security conditions at Whitemoor in 1994 and Parkhurst in 1995 which ushered in a new regime of security and control, including fortified perimeters, increased use of CCTV internally as well as externally, strict volumetric control of prisoners’ property and a dramatic reversal of policy on so-called ‘privileges’ (basically anything that could be presented by the media as inappropriately conceived indulgences to an anti-social population). In essence, the nineteenth century principle of ‘less eligibility’ (citation to Marx or Rusche/Kirchheimer?) has re-emerged, based on an understanding that prisoners should ‘suffer’ in prison, not only through the loss of freedom but also by virtue of prison conditions, which should be of a worse standard than those available to the poorest free workers.

It is against this backdrop that we must view much of recent penal policy introduced by a Conservative-led coalition government. A hardening of penal sensibilities has coalesced around new anti-terrorism legislation, resulting in the introduction or curtailment of countless everyday procedures and practices that have combined to form insidious and pervasive erosions of humanity (Drake, 2012). The current Secretary of State for Justice, Chris Grayling, has taken the politics of vengeance to a new level with a raft of petty restrictions, including limiting young offenders’ television access and imposing a blanket ban on families sending small items to prisoners, including books.^{iv} Grayling’s colleague, Home Secretary Theresa May, sums up the UK government’s attitude: ‘Prison works but it must be made to work better. The key for members of the public is that they want criminals to be punished’ (*Guardian*, 14 December 2010; cited Moran, Jewkes and Turner, forthcoming). That their policies have precipitated a 69% increase in prison suicides – widely referred to as a ‘secret death penalty’ – does not seem to trouble these politicians (Dunt, 2014); nor has a similar prevalence of suicide troubled U.S. officials (as detailed in the subsequent chapter by Reiter & Blair). They possess an unshakeable moral certitude that retribution is a greater goal than rehabilitation. For one commentator, the UK Government’s stance epitomizes the enduring appeal of *The Divine Comedy*: ‘Vendetta still rules. Entire foreign policies, not to mention civil wars and terror campaigns, are based on ideas of revenge and polarities of good and evil just as primitive as anything in Dante’ (Jones, 2011: n.p).

In the current era of criminal justice, then, despite crime rates that broadly remain steady or

are in decline, we might be said to be experiencing a similar synergy to that which underpinned Dante's worldview formed at the turn of the fourteenth century: a surge of populist punitiveness whereby sentiments driven from 'below' by an angry and anxious public collide with 'authoritarian populism' engineered by ambitious and manipulative politicians eager to capitalize on public fears and prejudices in order to maximize their electoral appeal (Hall et al, 1978). A foreshortened life on Death Row, an enforced state of Limbo via an indeterminate life sentence, or 'Life Without Parole' in a penal hell-hole, is simply a just and necessary consequence of a given activity. And all these have been supported by the media's 'terrifying counter-democratic language' of vengeance and dehumanization (Hartnett et al, 2011).

Contemporary penal architecture reflects these political, policy and media contexts, transforming prison security and with it prisoners' quality of life (Liebling with Arnold, 2004, Liebling, Arnold and Straub 2011, Drake 2012; see also Liebling this volume). Given that the nineteenth-century prison buildings still in service in the penal estate are usually considered the least desirable carceral environments, the 'new prisons for old' policy currently being rolled out by the UK Ministry of Justice might appear to be a humane intervention. After all, Victorian 'houses of correction' ensure inmates' restricted economy of space, light and color, imprisoning them psychologically as well as physically. However, it has yet to be established empirically whether 'old' always means 'bad' in prison architecture and design, or whether the kind of contemporary prison currently being commissioned in the UK necessarily equates to 'progressive' or 'humanitarian' (Hancock and Jewkes, 2010; Moran and Jewkes, forthcoming). Of course, clean, humane and safe environments are unquestionably desirable for prisoners and prison staff but, in recent years, UK prison new-builds have been driven by logics of cost, efficiency and security. The preoccupation with 'hardening' the prison environment to design-out risk has arguably swung towards an understanding of the situational, rather than social, dependence of behavior, 'creating safe situations rather than creating safe individuals' (Wortley 2002: 4). There is also a need in prison architecture to comply with HM Prison Service Orders about the specification of prison accommodation, which lay out 'measurable standards' that can be applied consistently across the estate (HMPS 2001: 1).

In this context, the UK Government has resurrected formerly shelved proposals for 'Titan' style prisons that may bear some of the hallmarks of the supermax. Frequently sited in remote locations and consisting of bland, unassuming and uniform exteriors, with vast expanses of brick, a few small windows, and no unnecessary decoration, these prison warehouses may communicate a particular message about society's attitudes towards prisoners (Jewkes 2013, Jewkes and Moran 2014). At a conceptual level, moral drive is, as Bauman says, 'limited by the principle of proximity' and the distance we feel from our actions is proportionate to our ignorance of them (2004: 193-4). Therefore, while we expect punishment to be exacting and are acquiescent about a popular media that takes on the role of vigilante on our behalf (bringing wrong-doers to justice, naming and shaming, criticizing sentencers who are 'soft' on crime, and so on), we are content for punishment to

be mediat(iz)ed and made visible, as it were, at one step removed. Indeed, the nondescript external appearance of new-build prisons with vast walls and discrete but omniscient security and surveillance technology, reducing the need for watch-towers and razor wire, could be regarded as a visual metaphor for the loss of public empathy for the excluded offender; the 'silent ethical gaze' that Bauman (2013) referred to. Their 'municipal' architecture enables us to turn a blind eye to the plight of the confined, while our daily newspapers reassure us that prisons are suitably hellish places. Simultaneously, then, the visible manifestation of extreme but 'fitting' punishment salaciously reported by the media and the invisibility of prisoners banished to these prison warehouses that are sited in remote, hard-to-reach locations, reduces their humanness and reinforces nineteenth century ideas of offenders as outcasts. In this way, the UK is once again following the American example and, while we do not have the landscape to expel convicted offenders to inaccessible islands or virtually uninhabitable deserts, it is becoming more common to site prisons in locations that lack transport networks and infrastructure. As a *Guardian* editorial puts it, 'even if your worldview can't compute a prisoner as a victim of anything, and sees his or her rights to justice as completely waived by the committal of any crime, however petty, you would nevertheless be able to see that prisoners aren't rehabilitated in these conditions' (Williams, 2014: n.p.).

Any hope of rehabilitation is further undermined by the requirement for prison architects and constructors to 'future-proof' their designs, in order to avoid the need for expensive retro-fitting of security if, at some point in the future, a facility needs to be used to accommodate higher security inmates. In other words, a medium security Category C facility holding those prisoners deemed unlikely to try to escape, will be built with all the security paraphernalia and controlling of movement associated with a high security Category B institution, designed to hold prisoners for whom the potential for escape should be made very difficult. This combination of warehousing and controlled movement represents a new and insidious kind of Hell, in the U.S. as in the U.K., as Victor Hassine underlines. After describing the bleak environments, dark tomb-like spaces and deafening noise of several old-style jails in which he was housed, Hassine described how the brand new SCI Albion Pennsylvania, built in the 1990s, appeared (initially at least) to be the most comfortable, best designed and most attractive prison he had ever seen; 'an ocean of plush green fields of grass with handsome geometric outcroppings of earth-toned brick buildings...generously spaced...to create an eye-pleasing and harmonious vision of tranquility that evoked safety and relaxation' (2011: 113-4). Looking like it could work as a rehabilitative prison, SCI Albion is in fact the 'least effective prison of all,' Hassine declares:

It is a dysfunctional, mean-spirited facility that callously steeps you in despair while it lavishes you with physical comfort. Albion provides the inmate a sterile environment with faceless bells and voices precisely controlling time and movement for no apparent purpose other than order. It is a place where everyone is suspicious of each other and superficial

friendliness is all that can exist. It is a place where perception is the only reality that matters and where induced poverty is used to generate illusory wealth (2011: 125).

This is the kind of model now followed in England and Wales. In the new prison warehouses, staffing costs are minimized; prisoner education, training and work are limited; prisoners are locked in their cells for increasingly lengthy periods with 'privileges' such as in-cell phones; and prisoner homicides, suicides and sexual assaults are rising (Williams, 2014).

My field notes, recording my first visit to a new privately-run prison in England, illustrate the similarities between new-build facilities in England and America:

Superficially it's 'nice' enough but the atmosphere is peculiar. The [prison] complex is vast – it feels like a small town with 'streets' connecting the buildings and a high, yellow mesh fence everywhere you look. It's easy to become disoriented because it all looks the same – it's like Toy Town or an architect's model come to life. Except there is nothing 'playful' or vivid about it. It feels completely unreal. Artificial and sterile...numbing in its blandness. No landscaping or trees so no birds or wildlife. No litter, no people visible. Really odd. Sensory deprivation made to seem acceptable (Author, field note, 24th May 2013).

It might be surprising to some that levels of assault, suicide and mental illness are rising in the very prisons characterized by the press as 'holiday camps'. Yet the kind of 'privileges' which give rise to such newspaper reports mask the harms that these 'warehouses in disguise' may inflict. Connection to the outside world via in-cell phone or video link (to family overseas, to lawyers and to court hearings) may be dressed up as a 'perk' but they make a poor substitute for real, human, interpersonal connection. The combination, then of bland, sterile architecture and a regime that minimizes costs by reducing prisoner association time and authorizing staffing-at-a-distance via TV monitors, produce a sterile and dehumanizing atmosphere. As Hassine notes, such prisons take on a manufactured, assembly line quality comparable to an ant farm, beneath which lies a 'violence and crushing hopelessness the trapped ants are actually forced to endure...more hopeless and indifferent than any prison' (Hassine, 2011: 119).

An alternative approach

Waves crash on to the beach, birds sing in clear blue skies and an idyllic nature reserve stretches as far as the eye can see. But this is no exotic holiday destination, it's Bastøy Prison, home to some of the most notorious criminals in Norway (*Mirror*, 10 December 2007).

Hassine's poignant observations about the seemingly benign SCI Albion alert us to the perils of architectural determinism and remind us that the success of any prison design must be viewed within the context of its operational dimensions, as well as the prevailing climate of opinion regarding prisons and prisoners. Even prisons which appear, to the outsider at least, relatively humane, are rendered hellish by the extreme spatial and temporal limits they place on the confined, and by the close proximity in which individuals have to live with others not of their choosing. As Jean-Paul Sartre (1944) observed, Hell is other people, and there may be no more vivid expression of this than the prison, whether it is in a deeply conservative US state or on a Norwegian prison island.

Nonetheless, the design process, is, as Wener notes, 'the wedge that forces the system to think through its approach and review, restate, or redevelop its philosophy of criminal justice' (2012: 7). In other parts of the world — in which the 'new punitiveness' of the US and UK has not taken hold — prison designers have focused on the rehabilitative function of imprisonment, and have experimented with progressive and highly stylized forms of penal architecture. There, internal prison spaces exhibit soft furnishings, color zoning, maximum exploitation of natural light, displays of art and sculpture, and views of nature through vista windows without bars. Arguably, Bastøy, the Norwegian island prison, is the most famous custodial environment in Europe. With its simple wooden accommodation, stunning setting and eco-philosophy, it resembles — superficially at least — a tranquil holiday retreat. However, the prison usually held up as being a 'model' of international best practice in penal architecture and design is Halden in Norway, a high-security facility, opened in 2009. The first prison to employ interior designers, Halden's varied color palettes, natural construction materials, emphasis on maximizing daylight (there are no bars on any windows) and location in a scenic forest might be regarded as a physical manifestation of the Norwegian prison system's focus on human rights and normalization: it is, says the Governor, 'the world's most humane prison' (<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1986002,00.html>).

Now, a number of other countries are following Norway's lead and building humane, sensuous, architecturally innovative facilities. In some cases, this approach goes well beyond avoiding an institutional feel and aims to design prisons that — perhaps not uncontroversially — might be described as beautiful. Architects' websites give a flavor not only of the leading-edge designs being employed but also the penal philosophies underpinning them (Moran et al, forthcoming). For example, a new state prison on the island of Falster in Denmark is to be built by C. F. Møller. They say:

we have deliberately created a very varied and stimulating environment of different spaces and landscape features - hopefully this will contribute to the re-socialization of the individual and to create renewed confidence in the community and mutual respect for society as a whole (<http://www.dezeen.com/2011/01/07/danish-state-prison-by-c-f-møller/>)

Another Danish architectural company, Schmidt Hammer Lassen, has won the competition to design Greenland's first closed prison which aims to be the 'world's most scenic prison'. Set within a stunning, rugged landscape, the prison will exploit the 'contrast between the rough and the beautiful':

The whole idea behind the project is to add qualities to the complex that will enhance rehabilitation and diminish physical and psychological violence... The thought process behind this is that access to nature – watching the clouds, birds, daylight, weather and so on, can aid in rehabilitation (<http://www.archdaily.com/375056/ny-anstalt-correctional-facility-winning-proposal-schmidt-hammer-lassen-architects/>).

Meanwhile, OOIO Architecture set out to design a women's prison in Iceland that 'doesn't look like a prison, forgetting about dark spaces, small cells, and ugly grey concrete walls ... we based the building design on natural light, open spaces, and natural green materials like peat, grass and flowers' (OOIO Architecture 2012: no page). Instead of designing one large building (like a 'typical repressive old prison'), they decided to break it into several 'human-scale, connected' pavilions, which must be efficient and functional to enable the spatial separation of prisoners, but must also have 'natural light and exterior views, to increase the feeling of freedom'. The architects also had an eye to the speed and ease of construction, and to the eco standards of the building, planning to draw upon Icelandic vernacular architecture to insulate the building. With a facade constructed from peat-filled cages planted with local flowers and grasses, they intended to deliver a building 'that changes with the seasons', making prison life 'less monotonous and more human and natural related' (ibid.).

Concluding Thoughts

The sole purpose of prisons is not just any human waste disposal but a final, definitive disposal. Once rejected, forever rejected' (Bauman, 2004: 86).

Whether the lofty aesthetic considerations hailed by architects are significant matters of concern to prisoners is a moot point although, as noted earlier, prisoner autobiographies suggest that architecture and design are intrinsically related to the pain and harms inflicted by incarceration. Perhaps, then, the kind of designs noted above in Norway, Iceland and Denmark, develop an alphabet of openness, flexibility and 'humane' treatment, rather than one of fear. Perhaps they even

encourage a different kind of inhabitation than their English and US counterparts; one that encourages intellectual creativity and maturity.

But as some countries of Northern Europe seek novel and creative solutions to the pains of imprisonment, both the US and UK appear to be returning to Medieval ideas about expressive forms of punishment meted out by harsh but just authorities. In these countries, the popular media's construction of prisoners as 'evil monsters' or 'human waste' makes 'hellish' prisons the most appropriate containers for them and images of subterranean, tomb-like, penal 'hell-holes' play large in the popular imagination. Prisons are necessarily heavily symbolic institutions and the popular media perpetuate the notion that people commit crimes because 'they' are not like 'us'. In this context, Dante's depiction of eternal suffering may be unrelentingly and mesmerizingly cruel, but arguably it is regarded by society at large as a 'half-desirable destination' (Nellis, 2006: 226) for those designated 'evil'.

Moreover, the notion of a benign God who ordains cruel punishment is one that governments of liberal democracies hold dear. Divine justice is immutable and there can be no more graphic and disturbing rendition of 'do the crime, do the time' (and be prepared to do the time in the circles of Hell) than *Inferno*. It is this moral absolutism that permeates cultural ideas about offenders and punishment. The folklorist images of devils and demons that formerly soaked up diffuse security fears have been transformed into images that construct the 'outsider' status of perpetrators as unequivocal and incontestable (Bauman, 2004). Offenders are beyond redemption; human waste who must be banished to a fitting location. Consequently, while capital punishment is unlikely to ever be reintroduced in the UK and seventeen US states do not currently have an enforceable death penalty, eternal damnation finds form in penal Hell; the ultimate punishment for those offenders designated the 'worst of the worst'.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Limitations of space preclude an analysis of the racial and ethnic dimensions of mass imprisonment here, but I provide an extended and more detailed analysis of prison Hell and cultural connotations of lightness and darkness as they pertain to the racial demographics of the prison population in Jewkes, Y. (2014) 'Punishment in black and white: Penal 'hell-holes', popular media and mass incarceration', *Atlantic Journal of Communication* special issue on 'Reframing Race and Justice in the Age of Mass Incarceration' 22(1): 42-60

ⁱⁱ ESRC Standard Grant ES/K011081/1 "Fear-suffused environments" or potential to rehabilitate? Prison architecture, design and technology and the lived experience of carceral spaces' (with Dominique Moran, School

of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, and Jennifer Turner, Department of Criminology, University of Leicester)

ⁱⁱⁱ This maxim, in modern times most frequently used in relation to the Holocaust, might also be pertinent to the crisis facing the prison systems of the US and UK. An anonymous reviewer of a book proposal for the *Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology* series wrote: 'Of all the things future generations will be shocked with in regards to our use of imprisonment in 2012 (and there is much to shock), probably the starkest will be the question of "where were all the voices shouting 'what is going on here?'"

^{iv} This restriction was subsequently challenged by a prisoner and overturned by the high court, but not before several authors took revenge on the Minister for banning books being sent to prisoners in new imaginings of Dante's *Inferno*. Announcing that they would impale him on their pens, Australian novelist Kathy Lette told the *New York Times* that her next book will feature a corrupt lawyer named after the British Minister of Justice who ends up in a prison where he is deprived of reading matter and goes insane. A *Guardian* blog reported this story under the headline 'Fire, torment and villainy await Chris Grayling in novel punishment for prison book ban' (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jul/04/chris-grayling-prison-book-ban-novelist-revenge-plots>). Meanwhile, British novelist Margaret Drabble said that she would be including Grayling in her forthcoming novel titled *Death By Fire*, adding 'He could die in the fire' (<http://www.politics.co.uk/news/2014/07/07/author-s-new-book-features-villain-called-chris-grayling>).