

*The Architecture of Punishment: Jeremy Bentham, Michael Foucault and the Construction of Stateville Penitentiary Illinois*, typed manuscript.

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Jeremy Bentham, Michael Foucault and  
the Construction of Stateville Penitentiary, Illinois**

**By John M. Lamb**

Until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the concept of the modern prison or penitentiary did not exist. The prisons were simply holding places where felons were confined before trial or punishment, and debtors before paying their debt. Inside these prisons the prisoners mingled together; the worst were chained to a wall or were confined to a dungeon. After sentencing they were executed, transported to America or Australia, sent to galleys, or, in England, sent to work houses.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century this system came under attack by reformers such as John Howard.<sup>1</sup> Howard wrote that the prisons were centers of vice and disease uncontrolled by the jailers who were paid by the prisoners, or rather extorted their pay from the prisoners. Things were so bad that Jail Fever spread from the prisoners in the dock to the judges, several of whom died in 1750. Howard led the way in prison reform, having learned a great deal about prisons from his conscientious supervision of the prison in his country. He demanded that new and better prisons be built that would help to reform and control the miscreants.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Jeremy Bentham,<sup>2</sup> the philosopher, put forth his idea about prison architecture. He enthusiastically adopted an idea developed by his brother, Samuel. Samuel had built a factory in Russia that was circular so that the foreman could at all times observe and correct the unskilled Russian shipyard workers. Jeremy expanded on this as the ideal architecture for buildings where people were confined, besides factories, such as hospitals, prisons and schools. He called this type of building a "Panoptican" (all seeing). His enthusiasm for the beneficial effects of this disciplinary architecture seems unlimited. His praise is unstinting in his work, *The Panoptican; or the Inspection-House*.

"To say all in one word, it will be found applicable, I think, without exception to all establishments whatever, in which, within a space not too large to be covered or commanded by buildings, a number of persons are meant to be kept under inspection. No matter how different, or even opposite the purpose...."<sup>3</sup>

Then he goes on to expand on the principle's usefulness...

"What would you say, if by the gradual adoption and diverse application of this single principle [i.e., the Panoptican], you should see a new scene of things spread itself over the face of civilized society? - Morals reformed, health preserved, industry invigorated, instruction diffused, public burdens lightened, economy seated as it were upon a rock, the Gordian knot of the Poor-laws not cut but untied-all by a simple Idea of Architecture."<sup>4</sup>

Bentham devotes the longest chapter in the book to the use of this circular building with an all- seeing inspector for schools. Since to Bentham the end of social reform is that one should be able to pursue happiness, he retorts to those who would criticize the use of the Panoptican for schools because it would make

the children monks, soldiers or machines, that "...it would be necessary to recur at once to the end of education - would happiness be most likely to be increased or diminished by this discipline? Call them soldiers, call them monks, call them machines, so they were happy ones I should not care."<sup>5</sup>

But it was to prisons or penitentiaries that Bentham sought most earnestly to apply this principle. He set out in a twenty-year effort, beginning in 1791, to persuade the English government to back the construction of a Panopticon. He would be in control, as Edmund Burke said "like a spider in the middle of a web," of a profit-making prison. The profit would come from the work of the prisoners, and to insure the honesty of the operation and to check abuse, it would always be open to inspection. The prisoners would be watched by the guards, the guards by the superintendent, and the superintendent by the public. As he says...

"You see, I take it for granted, as a matter of course, that under the



states of mind, his gradual improvement; the prisons must be conceived as places for the formation of clinical knowledge about the convicts...the theme of the Panoptican at once surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualization and totalization, isolation and transparency-found in the prison its privileged focus of realization.”

He then quotes Lucos’ 1836 work *On Prison Reform*.

“It [the Panoptican] was the most direct way of expressing the intelligence of ‘discipline in stone.’ Of making architecture transparent to the administration of power; making it possible to substitute for force or other violent constraints the gentle efficiency of total surveillance, of ordering space according to recent humanization of the codes of the penitentiary theory. In short, its tack was to constitute a prison machine, with a cell of visibility in which the inmate will find himself caught,...and a central point from which a permanent gaze may control prisoners and staff.”<sup>13</sup>

The principle of Bentham’s Panoptican remained important after the 1830’s, but the popularity of his architectural concept went into a swift decline. So in 1870 the Congress of Correction and Prevention at its convention in Cincinnati has as its 31<sup>st</sup> principle the following...

“It was a saying of Jeremy Bentham, that ‘A prison should be so arranged that its chief officer can see all, know all and care for all!’ We subscribe to the sentiment. The proper size of a prison is a point of much practical interest. Prisons containing too many prisoners interfere with the principle of individualization, that is, with the study of the character of each individual prisoner, and the adaptation of the discipline, as far as practical, to his personal peculiarities. It is obvious that the application of the principle is possible only in a prison of moderate size. 300 inmates?”<sup>14</sup>

But as to the Panoptican itself, after a few such prisons were built in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this architectural concept seemed to die out. A book published in 1910 by F. H. Wines called *Punishment and Reformation* said the Panoptican, since it was nowhere adopted, should be “regarded in no other light than as one of the curiosities of prison history.”<sup>15</sup>

In Illinois around the turn of the century, prison reform was in the forefront. The State had created the post of a full-time psychiatrist for prison work, the first State to use the new science in prison work. It was the first State to develop a system of parole. The aforementioned F. H. Wines had left a federal position to become State Criminologist. Edmund W. Allen was warden of Joliet Prison, and was an advocate of smaller prison establishments with less emphasis upon walls. Another leading figure was J. L. Whitman in charge of the Cook County Prison and was responsible for building Bridewell in an innovative design in which each cell had an exterior window.

The older view of prison architecture was the Joliet State Prison built before the Civil War. This prison, which still is used as a prison, was based upon earlier concepts of punishment and reform. [See note at end of document.] Its exterior is attractive with local limestone walls and turrets built as a monument to 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic. The outside grounds during the early years of this century were graced with gardens and ponds. The interior had small crowded cells built in blocks and tiers. This was called the Auburn plan. That is a rectangular building enclosing cells back to back in the interior. Between the cells and the walls is an open space with a cat walk for the guards to patrol. This type of cell house is less expensive to build. Joliet



This arrangement, he maintained, would be healthier and more sanitary than the rectangular cell blocks of the Auburn plan. The eight circular cell blocks would be connected by corridors to a circular, very large dining room that would feed all 2,000 prisoners at once time. The roof of the cell blocks would be made of glass so that each cell would receive during the day some sunlight. Each cell door would have glass instead of bars to make them more private, and less noisy. Each of the eight cell blocks would be dominated at the center by a large guard tower. Entrance to the guard tower would be via a tunnel coming from the main administration building. The guard tower would give the guard a view of each cell through narrow slits, and the guard would control the lights in each cell, and the slit will allow the guard to see the prisoner, but the prisoner could not see the guard monitoring them. The total area inside the prison proper, that is within the prison walls, was to be sixty acres making it one of the largest, if not the largest prison yard in the country. Zimmerman said it would be finished by 1915.<sup>20</sup>

In fact it was not finished until 1924, and only four circular cell blocks were even constructed, as it appears the cost kept escalating.

Naturally a good part of the promotion for this new expensive design was that it would reform the inmates, or the “regeneration of man” as the Prison Commission put it in 1919. Of course the prison had to be escape proof, and the design, the public was assured, would guarantee that. There was an equal emphasis on

In Bentham's Panopticon too, the prisoners were to be protected from their degrading criminal cohabitants, but more by complete isolation than by architectural blandishments.<sup>23</sup> However, not only would this arrangement at Stateville make the cells more like rooms, but the open space in the center, an atrium as it would be called today, unmarred by internal supports, could be used for pleasant recreational use, "...it can be used for the better grade of prisoners, who can be trusted with a certain amount of freedom, as a reading room."<sup>24</sup>

The cost of construction would mean the project would drag on for a number of years.<sup>25</sup> During this phase Zimmerman was consulting with Prof. Charles R. Henderson, President of the Internation[al] Prison Association, and a member of the Sociology Dept. of the University of Chicago. He and Henderson made a tour of European prisons, and so Stateville would be a radical departure from the "American Type" prison. Construction of the first cell block didn't begin until 1915, most of the labor being supplied, as directed by the legislation, from the Joliet Prison population.<sup>26</sup> The completion of the first cell block of the new prison in 1917 was widely acclaimed as a great step forward in penological architecture. K. N. Hamilton writing in the *Scientific America* noted...

"With every cell in the prison having sunshine and the best air, Illinois is doing her share toward safeguarding the health of her prisoners, and placing herself well above those states where a sentence of five years imprisonment carries with it a virtual condemnation to an early tubercular death."<sup>27</sup>

When construction was under way, an architect named Henry W. Tomlinson was appointed Superintendent of Construction, a post he would hold until 1924 when the prison opened.<sup>28</sup> While the original design was Zimmerman's and it was his concept, the actual details were worked out by Tomlinson. It was Zimmerman's idea to have eight circular cell blocks, circling the central circular dining room, but since the structures were made from poured concrete, this had to be prepared and overseen by an architect on the spot. This was Tomlinson. It was he who designed the concrete reinforced prison wall. This wall was one-and-a-quarter mile long, 33.5 feet in height, and enclosed 16 acres of prison area. It was the largest such prison wall when it was built; the idea of a concrete wall would be used by Sing Sing and other prisons. The cell blocks were a poured reinforced concrete. The outside walls were faced with a light buff-colored, pressed brick with terra cotta trimings.<sup>29</sup> Most of the work was done by convicts, who as a result must have learned much about poured concrete construction.

Great enthusiasm for the Stateville complex and the Zimmerman design was shown at its grand opening December 6, 1924. By that time there were four circular cell blocks completed, the grand dining hall, the central heating system, the high prison wall and several other wonders of the builders' art. By that time the cost was \$4.5million, and it was stated at the opening that it would only cost \$2 million more to complete the project. Telegrams of congratulation came pouring in, one from Maude Booth, a relative of the founder of the Salvation Army and head of the Volunteer Prison League. As she said in her telegram, "Heartfelt Congratulations to the State of Illinois on this splendid evidence of her care for the boys within the wall."<sup>30</sup> There were many others within the wall on that memorable day. The celebration took place in the great circular dining hall. The Prison Commission, consisting of James Patten, Ira Copley and Leslie Small, son of the Governor, Len Small who had replaced John Lambert after the latter's death, were honored. The 32-piece prison band played and members of the State Legislature assured the assembled that the \$2 million needed to complete this humanitarian endeavor would certainly be forthcoming.<sup>31</sup>

At the time of the grand opening the warden of the old Joliet Prison was John L. Whitman, who would become warden of Stateville, as it was presumed the old prison would be closed after inmates had been moved into Stateville. Joliet Prison is still in operation. Whitman, mentioned earlier as warden of Cook

County Jail, was an enthusiastic supporter of the concept of redemption via architectural design, and would become Illinois Superintendent of Prisons. In that capacity he wrote in celebration of Stateville sometime in the 1920's a pamphlet called the *Progressive Merit System of Prison Administration* which consisted of two parts, the first being "A Treatise on Prison Management" by himself, and the second part was entitled, "The New Illinois State Penitentiary at Stateville; A Treatise on Prison Design: by Zimmerman, Saxe and Zimmerman. The part Whitman authored celebrates the "Illinois Idea" which he says believes that prisoners should not only be kept in custody, but should also have "Training and treatment while they are in prison...so that their release will find them...no longer criminals or a menace to the community." Prison management should teach them not only the habits of industry, but also train them to become dependable and capable of good citizenship.

"This can be done with the aid of suitable and adequate prison construction.

"The new prison, as it is being constructed, provides, therefore, not only safe and secure custody, but also for the operation of 'The Progressive Merit System' which gradually and systematically assists in the development of stable character.

"It is no longer considered necessary to build an institution all of the cell houses of which are of a character strong and secure enough to prevent the escape of those classified

against interference with inmates from the outside and the passing in of drugs, liquor, tools, etc., and the

One reason for wrecking all but one of what are now referred to as “Panopticans” could very well be because the pipes and vents were inside the concrete walls and so they were difficult if not impossible to repair. “F House” was the last one built and the only one still standing.

There have been a number of recent reports on life in “F House,” known no longer as ‘The Mill’ for grinding rogues honest, but the “Thunderdome.” Its current name is ‘Thunderdome’...

“...because of the booming noises made when officers in the center guard tower fire shots into the ceiling, where paint has been stripped off by buckshot.”<sup>39</sup>

On December 3, 1991, a reporter from the *Joliet Herald News* gave her impressions of “F House.”

“Standing in the entrance of F House, the last circular cell house in the country, was spooky. Stateville was in the seventh day of lockdown when we were there, and the prisoners began throwing their lunches out of their cells. They were yelling for showers and blinking the cell lights on and off. They were like animals. I couldn’t see faces; it was scary as hell anyway.

“I can’t imagine what it must be like to be stuck in those small cells for seven days straight...what hell! It was also interesting to see them feed off each other’s anger. It’s not hard to imagine why there are no other circular cell houses.”<sup>40</sup>

F House is where the most dangerous and intractable prisoners in Stateville are now kept. They are still one prisoner to a cell, unlike the overcrowding in the rest of the cell blocks. One suspects they are housed in F House because it is the easiest to control.

One of the prisoners in Stateville who has turned to art while doing time, works mainly in ceramic. This inmate’s, Hector Maisonet, most interesting creation, is a ceramic depiction of the circular F House. The roof is covered with prison artifacts such as keys, guns, knives and handcuffs. A hole has been pushed through the roof from the inside and a teary-eyed inmate is struggling to break through.<sup>41</sup>

It is obvious that the Panoptican still dT0 1 1leTT0 1 Tf.



19. Ragen, *The Devil Stoned*, op. cit., pp. 127-128
  20. *The Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 2, 1912. Zimmerman (1859-1932), had a firm, Zimmerman, Saxe and Zimmerman. He studied architecture at M.I.T. He was State architect of Illinois from 1905-1920. He designed the Illinois Supreme Court Building.
  21. "The New Illinois Penitentiary Stateville," op. cit, pp. 5-7
  22. Ibid., pp. 5-7
  23. Ignatiefe, *Measure of Pain*, op. cit., p 113
  24. "The New Illinois Penitentiary Stateville," op. cit., p. 7
  25. *The Banker*, op. cit., p. 3
  26. *Illinois Blue Book*, Springfield, 1917. pp. 293-295. This article was written by Zimmerman's partner and son-in-law, Albert M. Saxe.
  27. Hamilton, K. H.: "Model Prison to be built in Illinois," *Scientific America*, Jan. 13, 1917, Vol. 116, p. 65
  28. New Illinois State Penitentiary at Stateville, a printed, four-page brochure in the Mss Collection of Gov. Small at the Illinois State Historical Library, p. 4
- Henry W. Tomlinson (1870-1942) graduated from the Cornell School of Architecture. Designed some buildings in Joliet, including the old Herald News Building. He was an expert on prison architecture and in 1928 was sent to Europe by Illinois for an international conference on prison design.
- H. F. and Elsie Wethey: *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects Deceased*) Los Angeles 1970, p. 602
29. *Joliet Evening Herald News*, June 10, 1924, Vol. 20, No. 203, p. 10
  30. Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield. Gov. Len Small Mss. collection. The "boys within the wall" a few years later in the same dining hall would stage Stateville's first riot which they started by banging their cups on the table. This incident would reverberate through several prison movies of the 30's and 40's, as the ne plus ultra of prison protest. See Erickson, Gladys: *Warden Ragen of Joliet*, New York, 1959, p. 25 and Jacobs, James B., *Stateville, The Penitentiary in Mass Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois 1977, p. 25. The riot started March 14, 1931.
  31. *Joliet Sunday Herald News*, Dec. 7, 1924, Vol. 31, No. 19, p. 2. The Joliet paper's coverage was extensive, and Tomlinson called it to Gov. Small's attention; the Governor being unable to attend because of illness.
  32. Whitman, John L. & Zimmerman, Saxe and Zimmerman, *The Progressive Merit System of Prison Administration*, printed authority of the State of Illinois, N.D., P. 3. Pamphlet in Lewis University Canal Collection.

33. Ibid., p. 9
34. Ibid., p. 15
35. Ibid., p. 30
36. Ericksen, \_\_\_\_\_, *Ragen of Joliet*, op. cit., p. 96
37. Ragen, Mss Devil Stoned, pp. 139-140. See also, Ragen, Joseph: *Inside the World's Toughest Prison*, Charles Thomas Publisher, Springfield, Ill. 1962, pp. 279-280  
Regan means by 'barracks,' the rectangular Auburn model. Regan was probably the most famous of the wardens of Stateville. He was warden from 1936-1961.
38. Letter to the Author, Oct. 16, 1991, from Howard A. Peters II, Director of Illinois Department of Corrections.
39. *Joliet Herald News*, Sunday, June 28, 1992. "A Matter of Time" A special section, p. 2
40. *Herald News*, Dec. 3, 1991, p. 5 Article by Kim Irwin.
41. *Chicago Tribune*, May 15, 1992, p. 14 Article by Monique Parsons.