Post-apartheid prison architecture and the philosophy of history

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Kelly Gillespie, University of Chicago

> "Renewal" projects attempted to create social utopia by changing the arrangement of buildings and streets – objects in space – while leaving social relationships intact. … [S]chools and hospitals were built, and air and light were brought into the city, but class antagonisms were thereby covered up, not eliminated.
>
> (Buck-Morss [Benjamin], *Dialectics of Seeing* 1989)

> *Die gebou is net die gebou. Dis mens wat 'n plek maak*.
>
> [The building is just the building. It's people that make a place]
>
> (21-year-old prisoner, Malmesbury New prison)

Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, as narrated by Buck-Morss, may seem a strange place to begin an analysis of post-apartheid South African prison architecture. It is, after all, a text about the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century. But it is also a text about modernism and the philosophy of history, both of which have a great deal to do with the conceptualisation and design of prisons. The ethnographic and archival particularities of prison space in the post-apartheid period, in particular the trope of 'reform' and the moral satisfaction it entails, are well positioned by theoretical accounts which offer critical perspectives on the ideology and

practice of ‘renewal’. This chapter will chart the design history and implementation of Malmesbury Prison, the first South African prison to be claimed as an explicitly post-apartheid form. In so doing, it will question, within the context of a larger national politics, the validity of celebrating the improvement of the techniques of incarceration.

The arcades of Paris - the ur-shopping malls replete with walkways in the sky, huge iron-and-glass domes, and a multitude of shops offering the consumer an array of fashionable goods previously unimaginable - were for Benjamin an archetype of modernism, for they signalled the emergence of a devotion to novelty, and the creation of an urban public enthralled by the desire for new commodities. Such consumer demand was evoked by modernity’s new velocity of production, not only in capitalist production on factory floors, but in the intensity of continuous innovation in technology, transportation, media, fashion, increasing exponentially the possibility of the consumption of novel forms. Modernity’s mantra was progress, a portrayal of history as continuous disagreement with the past, as the inevitable work of creative destruction. This maelstrom of newness with its increase in the speed of production and consumption brought with it a hubristic way of understanding society as a system that could be reinvented and ennobled by innovative technologies and forms. Thus the revolution in commodity forms was accompanied by planning projects that sought to engineer new kinds of society, an intention that betrayed ‘more than a hint of the Enlightenment’ in its commitment to organised social reconstruction.[1] Large-scale social projects converged with a historical philosophy of progress to produce a fierce orientation towards social development, and in particular social *betterment*.

[1] Harvey 1990, p.111.

And yet Benjamin, writing within the tradition of modernism, was able to understand that the idea of necessary progress was not a simple technological possibility but an ideological project, created by modern capitalism, that presented history as a methodology of progressivism and improvement. As Buck-Morss writes of Benjamin's critique of modernism,

> The *Passagen-Werk* is fundamentally concerned with debunking mythic theories of history whatever form their scenarios may take – inevitable catastrophe no less than continuous improvement. But Benjamin was most persistent in his attack against the myth of automatic historical progress. In his lifetime, at the very brink of the nuclear age and the twilight of technological innocence, this myth was largely still unshaken, and Benjamin considered it to be the greatest political danger…. [His project was] "to drive out any trace of 'development' from the image of history"; to overcome "the ideology of progress… in all its aspects".[2]

The philosophy of history as progress was for Benjamin a history of 'homogenous empty time' that functions according to an additive method: one thing after another, moving incrementally towards improvement. It proposes events, forms, as a series of advances laying claim to the new. But as Benjamin reminds, '[w]hat is "newest" doesn't change; … this "newest" in all its pieces keeps remaining the same. It constitutes the eternity of Hell and its sadistic craving for innovation.'[3] This modernist conception of time does not hold the potential for the kind of unique and radical encounter with the past that Benjamin sought to cultivate, wresting history away from its powerful and self-satisfied handlers.[4]

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[2] Buck-Morss 1989, p.79.
[3] ibid, p.97
[4] Benjamin 1968, p.262. Benjamin is seeking 'a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.' (263)

There can be few social forms that better exemplify the philosophy of progress in service of a social project than the institution of the prison. Indeed, 'reform', fuelled by what has been called 'a lofty idealism and a dogged optimism'[5], is the determining principle in prison design as well as practice. Foucault defines it as the very birthright of the prison:

> Prison 'reform' is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme. From the outset, the prison was caught up in a series of accompanying mechanisms, whose purpose was apparently to correct it, but which form part of its very functioning, so closely has it been bound up with its existence throughout its long history.[6]

When we recall Harvey's reading of modernism as reinvigorating some of the older claims of the Enlightenment, the modernism typified in penal institutions can be understood to refract and amplify the terms of the prison acquired from its formulation during the Enlightenment. Reformism throughout the history of the prison provides for the ongoing justification of prison-building as it attempts to map each moment in the long history of reform, each set of ideas about the social function and possibilities of incarceration, onto the prison form itself. Prison architects and planners are aware of the accrual of design choices to a larger polemic about the shifting meaning and function of prisons as social institutions. They seek to formally demonstrate the prison's function to such an extent that the form comes not only to anticipate, but to *produce* a set of behavioural norms that correspond to the ideology of incarceration to which the prison is responding. The prison, perhaps more than any other built structure, has epitomised the hubris to determine human behaviour through design. It advances a functionalist dream that every singular act within a built form can be elicited from

[5] Rotman, 1998. p.151.
[6] Foucault 1979, p.234.

the buildings' design, and can accrue towards the total function of the institution. Foucault's famous reading of Bentham's prison refers to this 'perfection'. With its central tower and circular arrangement of cells allowing guards in the tower to see the movements of every single prisoner, it is an architectural apparatus, in Foucault's reading, that conditions its own inhabitation, no matter who might be using it. It affords almost no possibility for interpretation by inhabitants, creating an ideologically saturated space with little room for deviance or defiance. 'The panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power.'[7] Each successive architectural idea in the history of penal reform has sought to find the sort of 'machine' that would better resolve the problem of criminality.

The prison's references to the past are never palimpsestic or playful, gesturing nostalgically to past styles as a source of legitimacy, but avowedly processual and progressivist. The past exists in prison buildings by means of its absence, or at least the ideology of absence, furthering the idea of continuous and resolute improvement. Prison-building thus proceeds according to the ideological principle of progress and betterment, and prison architects understand old prisons not as an archival resource, but as a disaffected past. 'The British prison system today' writes one architect, 'is a kind of museum to penal architecture'.[8] Prison architects and planners are constantly searching for new forms to better exemplify the intentions of incarceration. Each new generation of prisons signals an attempt to redeem the institution from its own history, each generation of practitioners claiming that the newest

[7] Ibid. p.202
[8] Pawley, 1988.

might herald some kind of resolution.[9] But no sooner is a prison built than it becomes dated, as decried by a high-profile prison planner: 'The old prisons will get older and even some of the newer ones are already showing signs of wear and obsolescence. There is no country in the world which is not suffering from a surfeit of obsolete, overcrowded prison buildings. Conditions in many of them are vile and a disgrace to civilised society.'[10]

Throughout the history of the prison, reform has been a mark of international respectability. Prisons as mechanisms of punishment spread across the globe with the colonial project, as a both a means of colonial rule and as a vehicle of inclusion into the 'civility' of the metropoles. International minimum standards for prisons, as periodically published by organisations such as the United Nations and the Red Cross, continue to create inclusion and exclusion from an international community on the grounds of appropriate and renewed prison design and practice. In apartheid South Africa, international suspicion and later revilement of the white state, in particular the workings of its security apparatus, forced the South African Prisons Service to muster evidence of proper prisons as proof of a democratic sensibility, and as petition against international scorn. In a 1969 document compiled by the Prison Service and the Department of Foreign Affairs, the apartheid state attempted to convince an international audience that its commitment to international standards in prison design proved an alignment and contemporaneity with the 'modern' world:

> Substantial progress has been made in constructing modern institutions, with all the necessary ancillary buildings, designed to provide improved

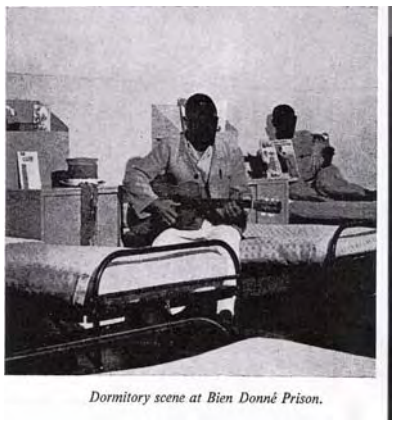
[9] A prominent prison architect declared optimistically in the late 1980s, 'There have been so many false dawns in prison design and management that it would be foolish to predict that here is the answer to all penal problems. But the chances are high that the Home Office is starting to get it right.' (Fairweather 1989)

[10] Fairweather, 1994.

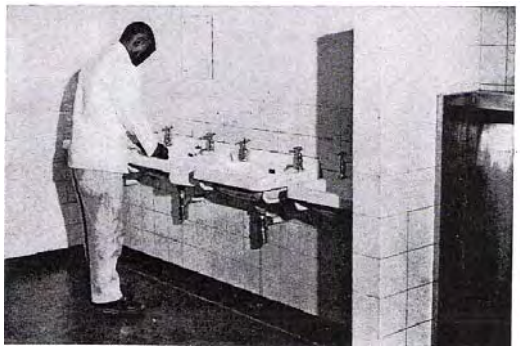
> facilities for the housing, treatment and training of prisoners in conformity with accepted modern ideas. The latest concepts in prison architecture have been incorporated in these new prisons, and … [t]he Prisons Department has already succeeded in eliminating many of the obsolete types of institutions which fail to conform to desired standards, and in replacing them with modern ones of the required standard.[11]

To substantiate these repeated claims of progress and modernity, the carefully-written statement was accompanied by pages of photographs depicting scenes from prisons around the country.

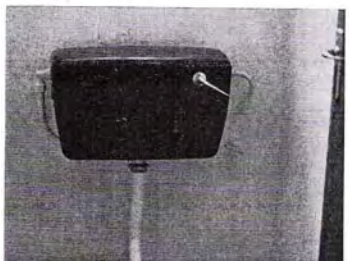
Hospital yard, Pollsmoor Prison.



Dormitory scene at Bien Donné Prison.



Robben Island Prison hospital (left, below and below left).

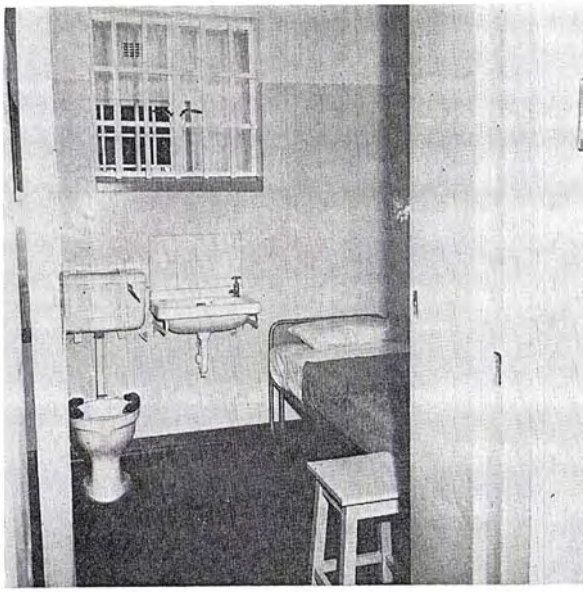


While the meticulously staged images of model prisoners, black and white, in training programmes, on sports fields, receiving medical treatment, belie the real conditions of life in

[11] Prison Administration in South Africa 1969, p.2-3.

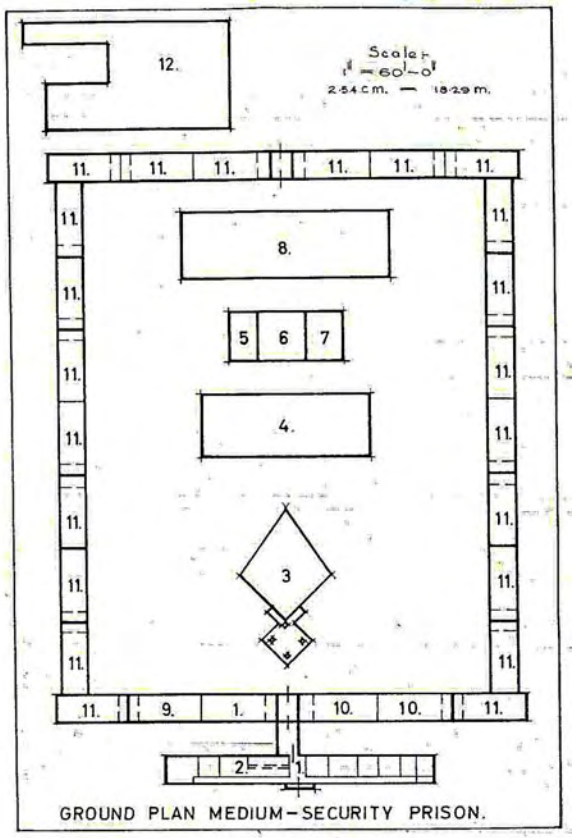
these prisons, and constitute apartheid propaganda at its slyest, what the document conveys is how the apartheid state relied on new prison buildings and design to constitute an argument against international pariah status. Another state document heralding the completion of Victor Verster prison in Paarl, where Mandela and many other political prisoners were held during the 1970s and 80s, provides 'a description of but one of the model penal institutions erected by South Africa over the last 15 years in her extensive programme of decentralization and modernization.'[12] Multiple photographs of the prison's buildings and planning diagrams, with corresponding lists of facilities and features, are used to demonstrate how 'prisoners' sense of personal dignity' is enhanced by 'floor and air space, ventilation, natural and artificial light, ablution and sanitary facilities', as well as 'undulating land commanding delightful views of the picturesque Franschhoek Valley'.[13] What is depicted perhaps most clearly by these documents is the degree to which the apartheid state was acutely aware of the terms of inclusion into international good standing, and that it utilised prison-building projects as a means of its attainment. Administrators of the Prison Service went though international protocol and standards with fine tooth combs and could reproduce in detail the most up-to-date designs and methods in international circulation.

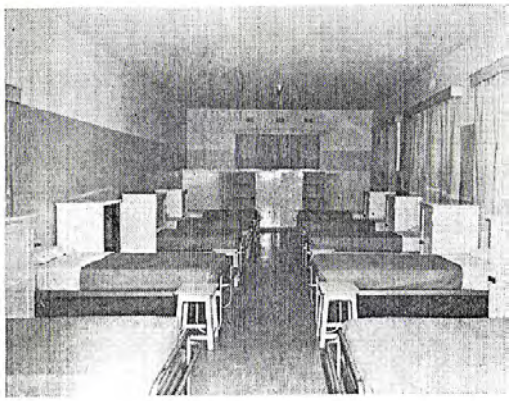
[12] *Victor Verster Prison Complex*. 1967 (?)
[13] Ibid.

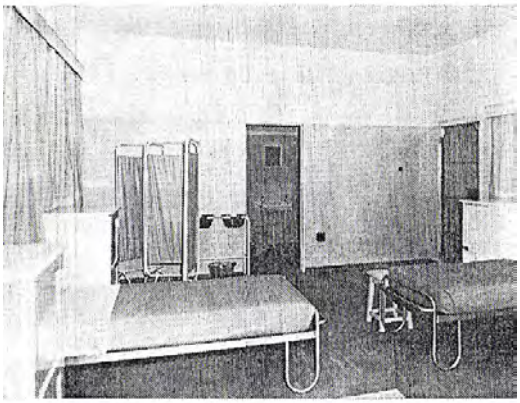


A single cell.

Victor Verster prison, 1967







So when, in late 1994, the year of South Africa's transition out of apartheid proper, a new prison was commissioned for Malmesbury, a town in the farmlands of the Western Cape, the

apartheid-era prison and public works bureaucrats, who had remained in office through the grace of various clauses in the negotiated settlement process, saw the project as a simple refinement of already existing prison plans. In particular, the architects were handed plans that had been passed shortly prior to the Malmesbury commission for the construction of prisons in Goodwood and Porterville. The design brief to the project's architects read,

> You have been appointed for stage 4 [of the planning phases of the prison] meaning that you don't have to design the prison. Malmesbury will consist of about 15 cell units identical to Goodwood and all the other facilities identical to Porterville re-using the same drawings and details. The site at Malmesbury being different from Goodwood and Porterville, the only design the Department expects from you is the implementation of those units on the site.[14]

While this brief may have been well received by architects working for the state during the apartheid era, the early implementation by the interim and post-apartheid governments of affirmative action policy in government contracting meant that the consortium of architects hired for the Malmesbury project included a fledgling black architecture firm opposed to being ordered into design choices by apartheid bureaucrats. In particular, the government brief was queried by a young architect named Gita Goven, who was handling the Malmesbury project for the black architecture firm, ACG. Goven had been involved in the United Democratic Front during the 1980s, a movement that was widely considered to extend the work of the exiled ANC from within South Africa, and was therefore familiar with many of the positions and agendas of the anti-apartheid movement. She co-founded the architecture firm ACG Architects in 1993, a practice that was unusual in the profession for having a large majority of black partners and employees. The award of such a large government project to

[14] Fax from Mr J. Poot of Department of Public Works, 17 May 1995

ACG was a considerable feather in the firm's young cap, but the fact that it came in the form of a prison made for a somewhat wary response. Prisons had acquired, after all, a ghastly political reputation from the perspective of the anti-apartheid movement.

Reading through Gita Goven's carefully archived files on the Malmesbury project, it is clear that what the architects wanted to accomplish with the prison design was the first self-consciously post-apartheid prison. They wanted, that is, to manifest in the prison's form the shift in political and ideological governance in South Africa, to indicate the 'new-ness' of historical era. Goven's marginalia throughout the many theoretical and technical documents she collected as reference for the project betray a concern with the alignment of penal philosophy and national liberation. The irony of searching for prison designs to reflect a national project committed to the pursuit of freedom did not escape attention. For example, Goven's notes in a chapter on the history of prison design include a circle being drawn around the phrase 'conditions for communal power through solidarity are denied', a basic tenet of prison design yet an all too familiar estimation of the logic of apartheid repression. Goven was drawn to instances in the texts that refer to social justice and relations of power. Her marginalia include comments such as 'the critique of power is justice', and highlight references such as a text called *Architecture for Justice*.

What is also apparent from Goven's notes, is how she was able to understand and relate to the larger structural critiques of the function of prisons within conservative criminal justice systems. As would be expected in 1994-5 South Africa, a social and political context in which issues of social trauma, violence, racism and systematic inequality were high on the national agenda, the Malmesbury architects understood that a person's imprisonment was not

simply a matter of individual failure or immorality. 'The narrative web' they wrote in a statement, 'whose endpoint is someone's imprisonment is known to entail early childhood, education, social agencies, housing, health, employment and economic circumstances – the entire social fabric.' Their conundrum was to design a prison that would form part of a national effort at social reconstruction. Indeed, the architects explicitly linked the Malmesbury project to the national policy of the Reconstruction and Development Project (RDP): 'The success of this project in the context of change, and the maximising of the contribution made by the project to the RDP, requires the formulation of a clear and compelling vision'.[15]

Part of the difficulty in developing this vision was the figure of the apartheid-era bureaucrat in the Departments of Public Works and Correctional Services. Although there had been a change of guard in Ministerial and top government positions after the 1994 elections, apartheid-styled, conservative bureaucrats remained at the level where much of the service delivery of the state rested. The civil service of the South African government under apartheid had primarily been used as a source of protected employment for white male Afrikaners. Thus correspondence within and between government departments, including correspondence with clients, was primarily conducted in the language of Afrikaans. Early in the Malmesbury design process, one of the architects from the consortium sent a letter to the Building Industries Federation, then South Africa's foremost building industry employer representative body, to seek support in requesting that the bureaucrats from the Department of Public Works change their medium of communication from Afrikaans to English. It was a request that carried with it much greater significance than a simple matter of clear

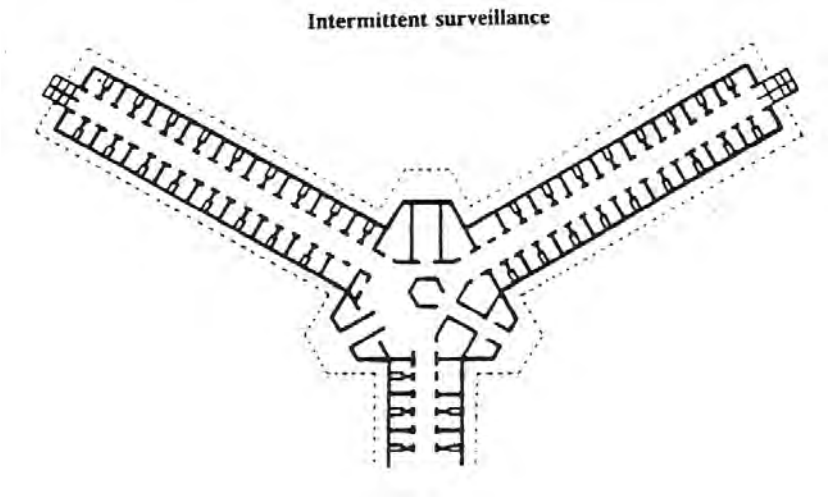
[15] Memo, June 5 1995.

referentiality. The Afrikaans language and its strategic use by the apartheid state as a means of educational instruction and social control had long been grounds for anti-apartheid political action. The metonymy that had by this point been established between Afrikaans as a language and apartheid as a political ideology meant that calls for its discontinuation contained an implicit critique of the apartheid-allied bureaucrats themselves. The tension between these bureaucrats, the upper structures of government, and the architects tasked with creating a design was at times excruciating, and led to serious communication breakdowns and near-derailments.

In May 1995 the Malmesbury architects sent a memo to the Department of Public Works complaining about the process: 'This is a shortsighted and extremely limited approach to the design of an environment for human beings….It is important that the designers understand the structure, rules, philosophy and key issues regarding a prison in order to design it. This should not be an exercise to shuffle lego blocks on a site but rather to design an optimally humane environment.' In response, the Public Works bureaucrats who were managing the project held a special meeting with Correctional Services and the architects to again convince of the value of using Goodwood and Porterville prison plans as a design template. It is important to note that the reasons given for this brief by both departments was to ensure 'a more humane environment for inmates as well as direct supervision.' Ironically, as will become clear below, this is exactly the same goal that was being sought by the architects. The primary difference between the two positions was that the architects did not trust the precedent of prior South African prison designs as sufficient in guiding a post-apartheid prison form.

Repudiating the state's insistence they *not* design the prison, but merely replicate South African precedent from the preceding few years, the architects began conducting qualitative design research alongside their ongoing argument with the state about the project's brief. The quantity of academic and technical illustrations of prison principles and design histories in the architects' files attests to their commitment. The archive also includes paper trails from interactions with other stakeholders interested in South African prison reform. One such trail involves Gita Goven's communication with Chris Giffard, a UCT lecturer, prison researcher and recently-released political prisoner passionate about transformation in the prison system. Public Works had made explicitly clear to the architects that they were not to consult with anyone other than members of Public Works on the Malmesbury project in the interests of national security. Nevertheless, Goven began communicating secretly with Giffard and Carl Niehaus, another ex-political prisoner, about the possibilities of new prison designs. Giffard and Niehaus were members of the newly formed Transformation Forum on Correctional Services, a 'civil society initiative' created to assist early post-apartheid prison reform. In late 1995, the Transformation Forum assisted the Malmesbury architects in organising a workshop on prison design attended by various local and international academics and practitioners, including the renowned prison researcher and law professor, James Jacobs, whose 1977 sociological study of a Chicago prison, *Stateville*, is considered a classic in the field. Throughout this process, the architects were searching for appropriate design precedent, explicitly avoiding drawing on prior South African prisons as exemplars, but rather searching international praxis for ideas. In challenging their given brief, the architects had to attempt a formulation of their own, and Goven, in particular, immersed herself in criminological ideas and penal history in order to prepare for the task.

Contemporary prison practitioners commonly periodize prison designs into three 'generations', each of which has an 'inmate management' technique attributed to it. 'First generation' prisons, which encompass the Radial and Telephone pole-type prisons in use since the 18th century, feature linear arrangements of cells along long surveillance corridors. Warders walk up and down the corridors to monitor behaviour, a technique that provides discontinuous observation, what is referred to as 'intermittent surveillance'. No matter how dedicated the warder, it is simply impossible to be watching every cell at once. Many of South Africa's large prisons are a variation on this model, particularly because it is difficult to arrange series' of communal cells in non-intermittent patterns. Throughout Africa, including South Africa, single cells have always been used exceptionally for purposes of separating individual prisoners from the communal cells for punishment or protection.[16]



From the 1920s, the United States led a movement to consolidate a set of design terms for prisons, including the 1930 establishment of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons that set standards for prison design across the country, the 1949 publication of a 'Handbook of Correctional Design and Construction', which further centralised design and had impact throughout the world. This was followed by the massive publication from the University of Illinois Department of Architecture, 'Guidelines for the Planning and Design of Regional and

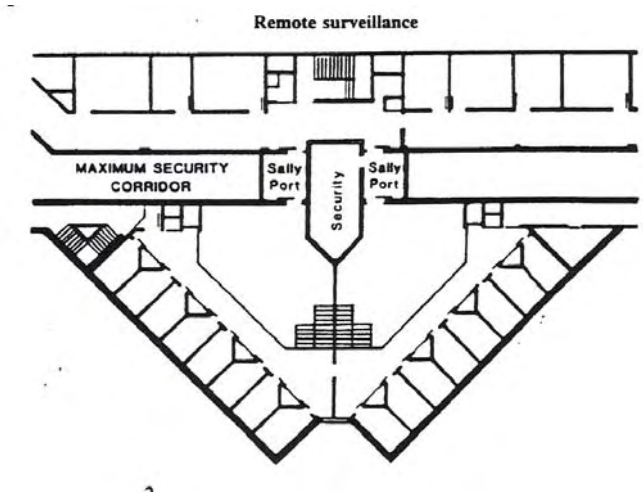
[16] Johnston, 2000, p.101; Bernault, Florence. 2003.

Community Correctional Centres for Adults', which was an attempt to account for every aspect of prison life and design.[17] In 1961 the first International Study Group on Prison Design met in London. Although South African representatives were not present at this event, the 13 countries from all over Europe, from Great Britain, the United States and Australia were represented, and the ideas discussed would certainly have had ramification in South African prison planning, especially given South Africa's relationship to the commonwealth. The most significant shift in design terms to emerge from the conference was an emphasis placed on planning for smaller, more manageable groups of prisoners.[18] While prisons such as Pollsmoor, which was commissioned during the early 1970s in Cape Town, were inconsistent with this idea, at least a rhetorical commitment to decentralisation is already apparent in the Prisons Service documents of the 1960s.

In 1975 the enormous 'Prison Architecture' was published, containing plans and design details of 27 prisons from 14 countries. Practitioners describe this document as having assisted a 'breakthrough' during the late 1970s and 80s in the form of a concept known as 'New Generation' prisons. With a strong 'small is beautiful' message that materialised decentralisation by clustering prisoners and staff in buildings separated by landscaped gardens and external walkways, prison designers began developing triangular cell units containing small groups of cells around a central multi-use association space. These separated units became known as 'pods', a term that indicates an architectural idea as much as it does an ideological project committed to an enclaved cultivation of model behaviour. The early 'pods', or 'units' were made up of around fifty cells, usually on two levels, occupying two

[17] Fairweather, 1994.
[18] Fairweather, 1961.

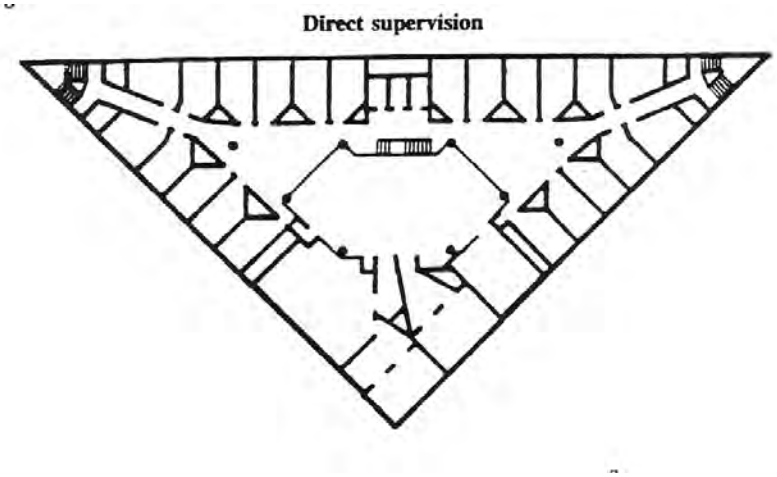
sides of a triangular day room, the third side being used by warders for surveillance from a control room, from which warders could watch prisoners in the dayroom and in their cells. All of the cell doors were electronically controlled from the officer's control room and communication with inmates was conducted via an intercom system, affording officers almost no direct contact with inmates. This continuous management of prisoners conducted from the vantage point of the control room came to be described as 'remote surveillance'. [19] This mode of visibility closely approximates the panopticon configuration, a warder occupying a position within an architectural configuration that allows for continuous visual contact with prisoners from the perspective of a security enclave.



Prison design called the 'third generation' or 'direct supervision' model was a reinvention of the 'pod' to bring warders into direct contact with prisoners at all times. The most important architectural change was the complete removal of the control booth from the 'pod', ensuring that warders must be physically in the unit alongside prisoners. 'In …direct supervision facilities officials freely interacted with inmates in an open setting. Many typical institutional features, such as bars and fixed furniture, were eliminated in favour of more non-institutional

[19] Nelson, W.R. 1988. p.2.

materials, furniture and décor.'[20] This became the horizon of the new prison aesthetic: the non-insitutional institution. In fact, one of the terms used to describe this horizon is 'normalization', the ability to make the inside of the prison feel much like normal life. In designing a structure that doesn't 'look or feel like a prison' designers of new prisons were to bring more sunlight into dayrooms, use laminate polycarbonate glazing instead of bars, and more generally use design to create secure environments without giving the impression of security.[21]



The 'third generation/direct supervision' design was accompanied by a turn in management technique that was hailed as revolutionary within international prison administrations. The philosophy was to disable any remote or intermittent surveillance of prisoners by warders, and to value human interaction as a security and rehabilitative ideal. This philosophy was synthesised in a strategy called 'unit management', that has been aggressively marketed as the 'concept that changed corrections'[22]. What hard labour was to the workhouse prisons of the 17th century, and solitary confinement and silence to 19th century prisons, 'unit

[20] Werner, 1995, p.79.
[21] Pearson, 1990, p.141
[22] Levinson, 1991.

management' is to prisons at the turn of the 21st century: an idea that seeks to finally herald a new kind of prison that will solve many of the problems that have plagued the institution's long history. Put most simply, unit management is the strategy of subdividing large facilities into smaller units that function as semi-autonomous groupings of warders and prisoners. Each unit should consist of 'a small, self-contained inmate living and staff office area', in which prisoners and warders exist as a small community.[23] Each prisoner is allocated a warder as a 'case officer', who becomes, to quote from warder from Malmesbury prison, 'the most important person in the inmate's life. The case officer is like the mother of the inmate, the father, the brother that he never had.' And most importantly, each prisoner must have a 'case file' in which a range of different documents about the prisoner's life, criminal history, psychological state, behaviour and sentence plan should be continuously updated by his/her case officer. Diagnosis, treatment and planning should be worked out by the case officer in relation to each individualised prisoner, a technique that amplifies strategies from the long history of classification within penal systems.

It was to this model that Gita Goven was drawn in searching for a design for Malmesbury prison. Throughout her notes are peppered references to this new design and management philosophy: 'light and colour', 'light and flexibility', 'Dignified accommodation in an environment facilitating movement, interaction and change is conducive to rehabilitation'. Even though Malmesbury's 'pods' eventually did include a control booth, its design was largely in line with the 'newest' of international designs, an appropriate precedent for the first post-apartheid prison. The Malmesbury project was certainly not a reflection of a clear and

[23] Houston. 1991. 'Unit Management and the Search for Excellence'. Corrections Today, April 1991, p.114.

streamlined process occurring in the Department of Correctional Services. Post-apartheid prison building has been erratic in its vacillation between different kinds of construction projects, invoking a number of different ideological positions in the conceptualisation and design of the space of incarceration. During the tenure of the first Minister of Correctional Services, many features of the United States prison service were imported wholesale into South Africa, including the notorious C-Max concept. South Africa's first C-Max prison was built in 1997 to replace the death row cells inside the walls of the existing Pretoria Central Prison. Built to lock down dangerous criminals, the C-Max design arsenal included,

> Single cells, exercise 'baskets' covered by wire grating, x-ray machines for all goods going in or out of C Max, and 'stun' instruments for use when a prisoner from C Max was outside the prison (e.g. to go to court). This stun instrument, activated by means of a waist/kidney belt worn by the prisoner, could be used at 50 metres to bring a prisoner trying to escape to the ground. Prisoners would also be handcuffed at all times when outside their cell…. [and] kept in isolation for 23 hours a day.[24]

There were also notorious proposals from within the Department to begin utilising various non-prison structures to accommodate the growing number of incarcerated South Africans. In a 1998 international report on private prisons, a British practitioner recorded,

> Representative from a private firm were in the Ukraine in February looking at two vessels that South Africa's Department of Correctional Services want to use as prison ships…. An earlier proposal to hold prisoners in disused mine shafts has been abandoned.[25]

[24] Sloth-Nielson, J. 2003, p.29.
[25] Shaw, 2000, p.153.

However, the Malmesbury project helped to initiate a set of changes within the Department of Correctional Services that gradually built momentum and was given full expression in the 2004 White Paper on Correctional Services, a document that has unit management and the case officer at the centre of its agenda for the transformation of South African prisons and the rehabilitation of South African criminality.

One morning in late September 2004, while walking in the corridors of Pollsmoor prison with a warder whose particular responsibility it was to gather information about gang activity within the sections, a nervous young prisoner carrying a red Tupperware approached us. He quietly and urgently requested to speak to the warder in private. We headed towards the warders' offices at the front of the prison, through several gates, each of which had to be unlocked by a warder on duty. The young prisoner became more and more restless the longer it took to get out of the corridors and away from the eyes of other prisoners. When we eventually reached an office and closed the door, the prisoner told the warder that he had been given the Tupperware by gang members in his section as a 'camouflage' to allow him to get out of his section with a weapon. The Tupperware served as a prop, a decoy that allowed him to convince warders to let him go to the kitchen to get some food. He confessed that he had been commissioned to stab a warder with a knife that had been given to him by a member of the 26s. The stabbing was ordered by the 26s because of the warder's strictness in not letting prisoners move freely enough around the prison: '*Hy kap jou gou op'* [He locks you up quickly]. The prisoner lifted the leg of his trousers and pulled out of his sock a large hand-made knife. His testimony captures something of the terror of being a prisoner in Pollsmoor.

> *Die 26s is druk besig. Hulle is in die lyne*. [The 26 gang is extremely busy. They are in lines]. Like the Numbers [prison gangs] are competing to see who

> can have more soldiers ready. *Ek is bang. Ek kon nie gister geslaap nie. My hele binnedele bewig, dit brand meneer*. *Die seksie lyk soos 'n mall, soos 'n stasie. Jy weet nie eintlik wat sal gebeur. Hulle soek ouens daar*.
> [I am scared. I couldn't sleep last night. My whole insides are shaking, they are burning, sir. The section looks like outside. It looks like a mall, like a station. You don't know what is going to happen. They are recruiting men (gangsters) there].

Pollsmoor prison is the largest prison complex in Cape Town and the hub through which thousands of petty gangsters from Cape Town's poorer neighbourhoods circulate every year. Constructed in the 1970s, while the Prisons Service may have imagined itself to be creating a 'modern' institution, its massive maze of large communal cells, sloping corridors and monotonous concentric passageways is testimony to the idea of prisoners as warehoused surplus, with warders in parts unable to sustain a secure environment for prisoners. Particularly in the sections of the prison in which the most active *ndotas* [men of the Number] are held, the surveillance technique is often reversed, with prisoner eyes more likely to be on the movements of warders rather than the other way around. Without the hindsight of having walked its linoleum and concrete corridors many times over, it is almost impossible to have any idea of your whereabouts inside the building. It is, however, a crucial part of the social life of the prison for prisoners to be able to negotiate prison space effectively, to be able to move through the prison with some degree of freedom. In Pollsmoor, particularly the sections of the prison where the prison Number gangs are rife, the ability for prisoners to communicate between sections is not only crucial to the survival of gang networks and structures within the prison, but also crucial to the management of violence in the prison. If warders close down altogether the movement of prisoners through the corridors, and

subsequently restrict too greatly their communication networks, the gangs will create havoc within cells, undermining the security of the prison, destabilising the conditions of life and work for both prisoners and warders. As a warder from Pollsmoor explains in conversation with a journalist,

> 'If you cut off the ability of gangs in your section to communicate with other sections, they get nasty. We have the safety of our members to think about.'…
> 'Seems to me it's a big game…. Your job is meant to keep the prison closed, the sections separated from each other. Theirs is to keep the prison open. But if you won, if you really kept the prison closed, they would stab you. So you lose on purpose.'
> 'It's actually not that simple. If we really lost, if the prison was really open, this place would be so dangerous we would not have allowed you to come in. Weapons would pass between the sections every day, death sentences would pass between the sections. We would have to patrol the corridors with automatic weapons. It's about striking a balance. The sections must be mainly closed, but a little bit open.'[26]

Locked gates at the edges of sections are gathering places for prisoners. Often, when a warder arrives at a gate, s/he will have to negotiate with several prisoners as to their intentions for moving beyond the gate into other parts of the prison. Depending on the veracity of the prisoners story, or the mood of the warder, or the social capital of the prisoner within the context of prison hierarchies, he will be allowed to slip out of the section to visit with other prisoners, collect food or medicine from the kitchen or hospital, tend to the cleaning of another part of the prison, do some ad hoc work for a warder, or official work as a member of a work team in the kitchens, gardens, or on buildings in the prison compound. Thus, while there are many prisoners that are locked into their cells for over twenty-three hours a day,

[26] Steinberg 2004, p.20

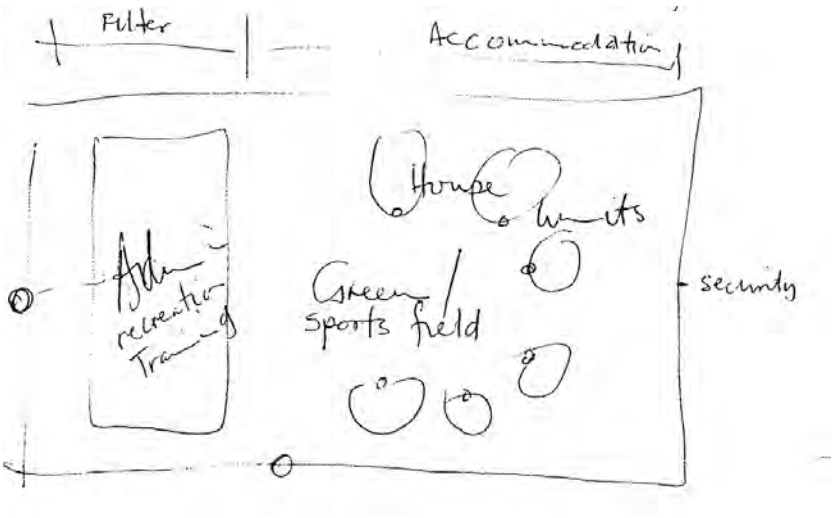
there is also always a degree of movement in the corridors of Pollsmoor during the day, a negotiated flow that ceases at three o' clock, when all prisoners are given dinner and locked up with the 20-60 other men that fill to over-capacity each of the prison's communal cells. Information collected during the day in various parts of the prison is discussed in detail at night in local gatherings in the cells. This spatial relationship between communal cell and corridor, and its concomitant relationship between the production and circulation of information, informs much of the social politics of the prison.

The young prisoner who handed over his weapon to a warder knew that this action would incur punishment from the Number gangs. He also knew that the warder he has approached understood the severity of that punishment, and thus had taken a calculated gamble. By handing the weapon over he held the warder to ransom for his safety.

> *Ek sal myself sny Mnr. M., ek se vir jou, as ek moet hier slaap sal ek eits vir myself doen. Ek gat nie daar slaap nie. Ek gat nie.*
> [I will cut (hurt) myself, Mr. M., I'm telling you. If I must sleep here I will do something to myself. I will not sleep there. I will not.]

The warder asked him where he expected to go, given how overcrowded all of the cells are and how difficult it is to negotiate transfers within and between prisons. The prisoner's reply was so quick that it was clear he had come to the office with it already in his mind: 'I want to go to Malmesbury. I have written three requests already to go, but with no luck. The other warders think it is a joke. Mr. F. told me that I will probably never go there because there is a huge stack of requests from prisoners wanting to get a transfer to Malmesbury.'

> When I arrived here I woke up laughing in my sleep. I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought I was on another planet.
>
> (43-year-old inmate, Malmesbury New prison)



Gita Goven's sketch of the Malmesbury prison layout

The eventual design for Malmesbury prison consisted of a ring of independent 'pods', educational, training and kitchen facilities arranged around large grass sports' fields. Circling the inside of the ring, and making various cross-routes between facilities is an open-air walkway that is covered with a roof and enclosed on the sides with wire netting. It is through this semi-enclosed system that prisoners and warders, except when using the sports fields or working on the grounds, must walk through the prison. At the entrance to each building, as well as at various points along the corridor and within buildings, electronic doors restrict, both for prisoners and warders, the entrance and exit of prison spaces. The doors do not operate with keys but are opened and closed via a central control room that sits in the administration offices at the entrance to the prison. Apart from the CCTV cameras and

intercom system located at every door in the prison, including the doors to each prison cell, the presence of the control room is entirely obscured. In fact it is difficult even to find it when searching for it, tucked away as it is down a corridor on the first floor.

From the intensity of the bright Boland sunlight, and the glare of white neon light reflecting off the bare walls of the prison's corridors, it took a while to adjust to the darkness of the control room. Two warders, eventually discernible in the dark room, sat in front of computer screens, television monitors, speakers and microphones in quiet concentration. When an intercom was pressed anywhere in the prison, including in any cell, a message popped up in a box on the computer screens alerting the warder. When the warder clicked onto the message, a diagram of the section of the prison in which the intercom buzzer was pressed came up onto the screen, and the corresponding intercom audio was activated to allow for the warders in the control room to communicate with the person at the door. The entire prison was diagrammatically represented in this computer software programme that monitored all access points in the prison. The cameras trained on each of these points allowed the warders in the control room to watch and control all movement around the prison. Functioning as a kind of high-tech panopticon, the CCTV system allowed the control room user to see and hear the prison without being seen or heard him/herself. As if in front of a computer game, the warders flicked their cursors across the screens, responding to incessant signals, queues of waiting calls from across the prisonscape, laid out in pulsing maps on the screens.

'The Panopticon… is the *diagram* of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure

architectural and optical system.[27] The 'diagram' here takes on a theoretical formulation for Foucault. The prison *as* diagram represents the conditions under which a particular form of behaviour is imposed onto human multiplicity and difference by an architectural apparatus. As Deleuze interprets, '[t]he diagram… is an abstract machine… that is almost blind and mute, even though it makes others see and speak.'[28] The ultimate horizon of the prison is to create congruency between the architectural diagram drawn in the planning of the prison, and this Foucauldian diagram which elicits a set of normative behaviours from those inhabiting the materialised prison space. The prison diagram seeks to become the prison *as* diagram. Warders at Malmesbury were reminded of the diagrammatic imperative every time they filled a shift on the main control room or went into the satellite control rooms stationed in every unit, where the *plan* of the prison was explicitly referenced.

Inside control room in cell unit/'pod', looking out onto the dayroom with cells in background

[27] Foucault 1979, p.205. (emphasis mine)
[28] Deleuze, 1986, p.34.

A Malmesbury 'pod', with cells leading onto a dayroom

Malmesbury is much more complex a system, however, than a straightforward high-tech panopticon. Within this broader surveillance technique, warders inside each unit were also tasked with 'direct supervision'. Case officers needed to see to prisoners in their care, case files needed to be filled, sentence plans needed to be devised. And this had to take place not only within the context of each podular community, but within the extended facilities of the prison as a whole. Malmesbury prison was designed to function as a kind of flow diagram, with inmates entering the prison at the assessment centre, being designated a cell and an institutional programme through a particular series of units, classrooms and workshops, and departing at the other end of the prison via the pre-release section. As the prison exists as a series of units arranged circularly around playing fields and gardens, prisoners enter and depart the space of the prison from the same location at the administration block, their circuit around the prison diagrammatically signifying the intended process of subject transformation, or 'rehabilitation'.

I requested to see the Assessment section of the prison, which was designed to be the entrance point into the prison's flow diagram. Here prisoners were to spend time under

‘assessment’ to enable warders to devise suitable, individualised ‘sentence plans’ designed to optimise each prisoner’s potential for rehabilitation. Here prisoners were to have their case files opened and filled by specialist social workers before being transferred to the units. On entering the courtyard of the section, however, it was immediately clear that this part of the prison had not been used for some time. It was empty, cell doors standing ajar, and waist-high weeds growing through the brick paving on the courtyard floor. The disrepair also indicated human activity, a broken basin, and several pieces of personal belongings left in corners and on floors. The prison section had briefly been used for its original intention, but quickly warders began to default on the prison’s intended plan. This was at least in part because the tremendous overcrowding of other prisons put pressure on Malmesbury to accept more inmates than the prison was designed to hold, and the increase in human traffic made it difficult to complete assessments properly. Also a factor, I was told by an accompanying warder, was low staff numbers, either because of a lack of employee provision by head office or because of the endemic abuse of ‘sick leave’ by staff. The overload of prisoners resulted in warders sending inmates directly to units. For a brief while, the assessment cells were used for female prisoners who were creating overflow from the older prison in Malmesbury, but they were quickly transferred to other prisons following their refusal to stop entertaining the male inmates by stripping their clothes off at the windows. The section was subsequently used to house juvenile prisoners, who were responsible for much of the damage to the section, before a separate unit was made available for juveniles. Thus the section was left to be taken over by the weeds. A warder informed me that ‘it will stay like this until somebody thinks of something better to do with it.’ Diagrammatic imperatives often find human limits.

Malmesbury wasn't planned to incarcerate juveniles, but the possibility of housing young prisoners in a new facility with more control over their induction into prison Number gangs proved appealing to the prison's authorities. Upon entering Malmesbury, all prisoners have to declare their intention not to practice gansterism in the prison as one of the conditions for being able to stay at the prison. Failure to live up to this demand was cause for immediate transferral to another prison. Most of the juveniles at Malmesbury were from the nearby coastal town of Atlantis, a place suffering from endemic poverty and unemployment. It was created by the apartheid state - with much fanfare about the opening of a corridor of commerce up the West Coast - as a place for 'coloureds' that the state wanted to move out of Cape Town. Most of the young prisoners could not read or write because of leaving school at young ages to get involved with drugs and the large gang networks in Atlantis. Because penal law does not permit juveniles to communicate with adult prisoners, the juveniles were kept inside their unit with no access to the school or workshops in the prison compound. There were several non-government organisations that came to the juvenile section to offer programmes, but this occurred infrequently and the young prisoners generally left the section only once a week when they were able to utilise the prison's facilities without coming into contact with other prisoners.

Most of the juveniles at Malmesbury were very committed to the Number gangs, and spoke with great seriousness about the worth of the Number in their lives, particularly in teaching them the two primary tenets of the Number: 'respect and discipline'. Most of them had been in other prisons before coming to Malmesbury, and had been inducted into the Number at these older prisons. Many said that they preferred the older prisons because the two-person cells at Malmesbury trap them in their own thoughts and drive them mad. In the communal

cells of the older prisons, they could walk around, talk to different people and, most importantly, further the work of the Numbers. Although Number-work was made difficult by the two-person sleeping arrangement, the juveniles still found ways to engage in Number activity. 'They do make Numbers here', a young prisoner told me. 'They can't do it in the cells, so they have to do it during the day and find places that the warders don't often see, like the lounge area at the top of the staircase, and also in the toilets…. *Die gebou is net die gebou. Dis mens wat 'n plek maak*.' [The building is just the building. It's people that make a place.] But the significance of the Number-work at Malmesbury is important for another more sinister reason. Once someone joins a Number in prison, he begins the process of learning the deep mythology, rules and language of the Number. Every time he enters a new prison and is asked the question 'Wie's jy?' [Who are you?][29] by prisoners at the entrance to a cell, he must prove his connection to the Number by reciting its myths, its structures, and where he stands in it. If he cannot perform this function adequately – if he stumbles over the words or forgets the hierarchy of ranks – he will be treated with suspicion and punished, either for pretending to be something he is not, or for not living up to the demands of the Number. If Malmesbury prisoners did not continue to rehearse the Number, they were setting themselves up for future danger.

The warders that work at Malmesbury prison often expressed their disappointment about the kinds of compromises that have upset the architectural integrity and intention of the prison. A common refrain is 'We are supposed to be a flagship institution, but we haven't been trained sufficiently to know how to use it', or other such frustrations around not being able to make

[29] It is standard practice in South African prisons that each prisoner arriving at a communal cell upon admittance to a prison will be asked the question 'Who are you?' in order to find out the prisoners gang affiliation and status.

the prison function as it *should* by virtue of its newness and its internationalism. Somehow the wrong kind of inmates are in the wrong sections, the CCTV cameras were not able to prevent cases of assault and corruption by warders[30], a unit window that was supposed to signify 'transparency' has been covered up with brown paper, a store room has over the years become a case officer's consultation room. The hyper-significance of space and form in the creation of a prison can seldom, if ever, approximate the kind of architectural determinism that Foucault ascribed to the panopticon.

The Malmesbury diagram is best understood as a polemic, a claim to a new proposition inaugurating a prison differentiated from an apartheid past. It draws on the long history of reform in prisons to make an argument – in space – for the possibility of improvement and progress. Malmesbury is clearly 'better' than most other South African prisons, as attested by prisoners themselves. But what are the terms of that betterment? What does it mean to have a *good* prison, apart from its more obvious contribution to the rights and 'dignity' of prisoners? Many reformers claim that it benefits *prisoners* when prisons are controlled, predictable and 'tranquil' institutions, falling within the terms of law.[31] But such tranquility also serves to passify an institution that holds to ransom the huge numbers of poor, marginalised citizens from the ghettos of South African towns and cities who are sucked into criminal networks in part because of the lack of alternative opportunities. A social worker at Malmesbury Prison, whose job it is to go through prisoners' case files and offer counselling, recounted that most of the inmates at the prison are serving sentences of theft or housebreaking because they have

[30] 'Judicial Inspectorate to probe abuses at Malmesbury prison', *Cape Times*, March 11, 2005.
[31] This argument is most forcefully madein the South African context by prison law theorist Dirk Van Zyl Smit.

no jobs from which to earn any money. In most of his interviews with prisoners, they get very emotional about the state of life in the West Coast towns from which they come. He usually tells them that 'Nothing is impossible from now. *Dan gee ek 'n bietjie van die Woord om dit 'n bietjie ligter te maak'* [Then I give them a bit of the Word (of God) to make things a little lighter.] Such lightening of the weight of penal institutions on their incarcerated subjects may well ease the passage of prisoners through institutions, but it also alleviates a sense of emergency about a larger social system in which a massive inequality in likelihood of going to prison is stacked against the urban poor.

The current policies of the Department of Correctional Services see the work of post-apartheid prisons as contributing to the development of social alternatives for prisoners, with prisons themselves constituting a vehicle for the reconstruction of South African society in service of a politics of transformation. Yet what kind of politics uses as its means the ever-refining apparatus of institutions of security? What kind of politics justifies the massive fiscal expense of new prisons while basic services to the poor are withheld? And what is at stake in rendering these institutions ever more sophisticated in their management and design techniques? It might be worth considering to what extent 'recent architectural developments might be seen as camouflage'.[32] Malmesbury's celebrated status exists subsequent to the bleakness of other prisons. Its validation rests on this principle of subsequency, a linear trajectory that is not subjected to interruption by a more radical reading of history. Any straightforward validation of reform and the progressivist philosophy of history it implies fails to account for the larger social structures that surround and permeate the reforming institution. To abstract the institution out of this larger context in the interest of subsequential

[32] Markus, T. 1994.

betterment is, to borrow Benjamin's critique of modernist progress, 'the greatest political danger'.

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