Urban Europe

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16. A quiet transfer

The disappearing urban prison, Amsterdam and beyond

G. Geltner

Golden Age Amsterdam played a key role in the history of Western punishment. For centuries beforehand, penal incarceration and purpose-built prisons were already integrated into European penal practices and common constituents of the European cityscape. Yet Amsterdam's elders in the 16th century founded a new type of institution, a workhouse designed to retrain convicts and help them become productive members of society. The men's Rasphuis and the women's Spinhuis, established in 1596 and 1597, respectively, were built on former convent grounds within the city and operated as small factories that disciplined both their inmates and the population at large, in ways reminiscent of the era's hospitals, almshouses and mental asylums. Political, religious, social and economic forces certainly took their toll on the founders' lofty ideals, but the institutions they set up continued to run for centuries, inspiring later reforms in and beyond the continent.

Premodernity

In the Western imaginary, Rasphuis and Spinhuis inmates are transitional figures, partaking in experiences that are both quintessentially medieval and recognisably modern. For, on the one hand, they were subject to significant physical hardships, including corporal punishment; and on the other, their strict routines and harsh conditions were also meant to be normalizing and rehabilitative rather than merely retributive or deterrent. Further, and perhaps more importantly in the context of this
volume, their punishment took place at the physical heart of a bustling city, indeed a world capital at the time. Thanks to their prominence and central location, Amsterdam's workhouse prisons served the moral and political needs of the community around them effectively, not least by announcing a formidable presence of municipal institutions with strong claims on maintaining urban order. For better or worse, prisons, like law courts, reified local justice systems for centuries to come.

Present-day urban dwellers, however, would probably find the vicinity of prisons troubling rather than comforting. In part this has to do with prisons' national rather than municipal administration since the late 18th century, when central governments took over criminal justice duties that previously fell under the remit of cities. Since then, neither inmates nor the crimes for which they serve sentences are by default local or even provincial. Prisons' situation within the urban social fabric was thus no longer obvious, let alone politically desirable. That, along with pressures on municipalities to broaden their tax base, promoted the so-called amicable divorce of cities and punishment in late modernity. The process allowed urban centres to keep the courts and tasked suburbia or more preferably the countryside with hosting prisons.

The departure of prisons from cities is a lamentable development. Lamentable in the first place because it succumbs to a Nimbyism that hides its chief concerns regarding property value under the rhetorical guise of public health and safety; and because it serves neoliberal agendas of decreasing the state's visibility, but not necessarily the prison system's size, brutality, costs or complicity in private-sector profiteering from what is effectively becoming the warehousing of an urban underclass. Beyond its hypocritical underpinnings, moreover, the process is dangerous since it reduces urban populations' tolerance to social diversity and promotes ignorance about criminality's sources and consequences. Last but not least, the process further victimises prison inmates and their families by severing them from the urban environment they mostly came from and to
which they will most likely return. However we choose to exile or camouflage our prisons, we accelerate inmates’ social death rather than take active responsibility for their fates. In doing so, we weaken ourselves as a society and drain the remaining meaning from a democratic system of justice.

The quiet transfer in Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a case in point. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries the city housed one major detention centre (Huis van Bewaring; founded 1850) and one prison (1890); the first just off the Weteringschans, the second on the Havenstraat. A third facility, carved during the early Nazi occupation out of the Lloyd Hotel, near the Entrepotdok, signalled an initial move of such spaces away from densely populated areas as well as a new desire to render them less conspicuous. A pronounced suburbanisation began in 1978, when the first two facilities mentioned above were replaced by a new one, built in a new south-eastern neighbourhood just within the city’s ring road. Seeking to humanize inmates, calm local residents, or both, architects of the Bijlmerbajes (‘the Bijlmer slammer’), as the site came to be known, excluded window bars from the buildings’ original design. But even this facility was comparatively short-lived. In 2016 the quiet transfer of Amsterdam’s prisons will be complete, with the opening of the PI Zaanstad, a massive new facility with a capacity to hold up to 1000 inmates, located in an industrial park across the IJ and towards the North Sea.

The city’s recent history of complicity in government efforts to move prisons away from the centre or disguising them within it undermines its reputation as a tolerant and inclusive place. Indeed, it highlights how much Amsterdam has become unoriginal and uncreative about dealing with deviance and diversity. Still worse, Amsterdam is typical of the country as a whole: many prison facilities in the Netherlands are either already situated in sparsely populated areas or are fast en route to the countryside.
Most of those that are not (or not yet) can only generously be described as suburban, a remarkable fact in one of Europe’s most urbanised countries. The process is slow but steady, and without understanding what is socially and politically at stake in allowing it to run its course, myopic politicians and opportunistic urban planners will likely continue to boast their efforts to make urban environments safer (read: less diverse ethnically and socio-economically), or at least wealthier.

Beyond Amsterdam

From a cultural-historical perspective there is something forced if not outright disingenuous about such claims. In the United States, where incarceration is a veritable epidemic, prisons evoke a combination of shame and fear. Shame about a broken penal system and fear of its products scaling the prison walls to become a menace in our midst. US prisons moreover are historically more rural institutions (and, as such, large employers of economically depressed communities), which means that Nimby support is all but guaranteed when it comes to ruralizing prisons or battling plans that would bring such facilities near any but the poorest urban neighbourhoods. In Europe, by contrast, municipal prisons have a far stronger civic tradition, associated with city liberties (hard-earned from popes, bishops, counts and kings) often dating back to the continent’s first major wave of urbanisation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In subsequent eras prisons’ urban location in or near major government compounds rendered them focal points of social and political protest and helped crystalize their image as local and national lieux de mémoire. Europeans’ relations with urban prisons are thus historically more ambiguous, given that the latter were welcome administrative burdens and their edifices served as an accoutrement of state apparatuses.

Yet even in Europe active prisons are now viewed with increasing unease as a blemish on an otherwise attractive urban
landscape, an obstacle on the road to gentrification. True, older penitentiaries are sometimes saved from demolition, even celebrated, but usually with the proviso that they must be decommissioned, at which point the sky is truly the limit: shopping malls, boutique hotels, museums, schools, galleries, ateliers… Social progress and economic development appear to be epitomised in the transformation of such sites, and it is ironically often the most effective way to preserve prisons’ memory and physical fabric. (Of course, few bother to ask how the relocation actually impacts inmates; presumably, progress benefits everyone equally.) But when a detention centre is still active, who would regale their guests with a tour of the local prison to show them how we deal with criminals and how important it is for us to impress our social values upon those built environments? But what if we were actually comfortable with the penal system in ways that are at least comparable to our basic faith in our justice system? Considering they are one and the same, the very dichotomy seems odd.

One explanation for late-modern urbanites’ aversion to prisons is that they are usually exposed to them through the mediating lenses of blockbuster movies and TV drama. Designed for popular consumption with at best a dash of social critique, series like Oz, Prison Escape, and, most recently, Orange is the New Black, emphasise inmates’ (and guards’) sexuality, corruption and violence, often at the expense of other human vulnerabilities, social structures and disabling political agendas that could collectively bridge between rather than separate detainees and the world at large. Without critical, first-hand knowledge, however, our generation sees prisons as an ultra-violent world unto itself and likely finds socially affirmative institutions such as Philadelphia’s Walnut Street Jail (founded 1773) and the Mettray Penal Colony (founded 1840), let alone the Rasphuis and the Spinhuis, difficult to fathom. Faith in social deviants’ ability to act differently given the right environment and incentives and a conviction that they should be allowed to acquire the necessary skills to reintegrate are rare commodities today, at least outside
Scandinavia. And even among our northern neighbours, rehabilitation usually takes place in a rural and fairly secluded context, despite the overwhelming urban profile of Scandinavian society.

Stopping the silent transfer of prisons from cities, let alone reversing the trend, is a hard sell. It is expensive and it may not reduce crime or recidivism rates in the short term. Yet there is much to gain socially and politically from prisons' reintroduction and integration into cities in creative ways that do not put residents at unnecessary risk. At the very least, it will raise awareness about social deviancy, its diverse origins, and the complexities of dealing with it in an open, democratic society. The alternative is to allow civic apathy to continue operating by default against the same communities that are already marginalised by officialdom, a process that over time will constrict and constrain our capacity for empathy and inclusivity. Whatever our positions on dealing with crime may be, we cannot afford to be too complacent about our legal experts' capacity to make crucial and sometimes irreversible decisions about what is best for our society. Before we know it, our justice system will cease to be ours. Or was that, too, an illusion?

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Further reading


