Art, architecture and social space

As an artist and an architect, we are approaching ‘Jeremy Bentham and the Arts’ from the perspective of practice. We are presenting a narrative of our experience of practical research and developing work connected to Bentham’s project for an inspection house and its proposed site in Millbank. As an interdisciplinary team we have been collaborating on projects where we have been using site-related architectural plans in order to subvert or open up the uses and interpretations of found spaces and to create socially active/alive/democratic spaces. These projects explore the relationship between architectural form and social behaviour – a dependency that Bentham built upon with his plans for the inspection house or panopticon. In contrast to his utilitarian ideas, our work aims at opening up a discursive and undetermined relationship between the articulation of a place and its potential social effects. The process of editing and reinterpreting architectural plans in this context is central to our ambition of redefining found spaces and reconditioning any normative behaviour to which they might be linked. This use of local plans has the added value of providing recognition of the memories and understanding of site-related communities.

One of the spaces we have been working with is the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground in Millbank, central London. This large open public square is situated at the heart of the Chelsea College of Arts and
adjacent to Tate Britain. The site was part of the land originally purchased by Jeremy Bentham in 1799 to realize his visionary panopticon prison, a plan that would never materialize. It subsequently became the site of the infamous Millbank Prison, the largest prison in the UK of its time, and characterized by its isolation cells. After the demolition of the prison, the site accommodated a military hospital with a parade ground and is now home to the Chelsea College of Arts and Tate Britain (Figure 10.1).

Figure 10.1: Ordnance Survey. London, Sheet XI. 3., 1895.
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Physically all four structures – panopticon, prison, parade ground and art school – occupied the site at different times and have left their traces. In an overlay (Figure 10.2, overleaf), we traced the vast expanse of Millbank Prison against the present urban layout of the Chelsea College of Arts, Tate Britain and the Millbank Estate, thereby demonstrating how the shape of the prison remains inscribed into the urban fabric of today.

The construction material of the prison never really left the site; it too remained and is very much still part of the physical make-up of the site. For instance, the ground floors of the Millbank Estate are constructed from the original bricks of the prison after its demolition, with part of its perimeter ditch presently used for drying clothes. Behind Tate Britain, which still houses some of the prison’s underground structures, is a section of the original perimeter wall.
The Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground thus represents a cross-section through different social modes and architecture’s power to orchestrate them: from the social confinement of the isolation cell of Bentham’s earliest imagined panopticon (he later rejected solitary confinement in favour of cells holding two inmates) and the real Millbank Prison, to the military organization of a group as ‘one’ in a parade ground, to today’s neo-liberal forms of socializing and gathering in the context of the arts. We decided to build on these different strata and the site’s social history of controlling and (dis)empowering the individual and the crowd, focusing on the floor plan of Millbank Prison.

The two very different structures of the panopticon and Millbank Prison are widely conflated in the public mind. The panopticon was brought to the public’s attention by Foucault, who added considerably to the interest in Bentham’s plan for an inspection house/panopticon while underplaying the fact that it was never built.
The imagined panopticon: The physical structure

Although Jeremy Bentham’s ideas for a panopticon would never be realized at Millbank, his plans for the penitentiary inspection-house remain an ongoing source of inspiration and point of reference. We begin by examining several aspects of this plan: first, the proposed physical structure; second, Bentham’s influences and references; third, the legacy; and fourth, the dreams and utopias that were related to it.

Bentham’s inspection-house was a circular building with a radial layout. The circular shape and radial organization is one of the key characteristics for Bentham, offering a number of important advantages. The accommodation for the prisoners, or the ‘cells’, are situated on the perimeter of the building with the apartment of the inspector, or the ‘lodge’, located at its centre. The empty space between the ‘cells’ and the ‘lodge’ is called the ‘intermediate’ or the ‘annular area’, and separates the two realms – the realm of the prisoner from the realm of the inspector (Figure 10.3).

Figure 10.3: Willey Reveley (1760–99), Plan of the panopticon penitentiary, UC cxix. 120v (c. 1791).

University College London Special Collections.
It is this particular spatial arrangement, with the ‘lodge’ at the centre of the building and the ‘cells’ arranged in a circle at a distance around it, that formulates the key relationship Bentham seeks to organize with his plan: the relationship between the inspector and the prisoner, between the observer and the observed. All other moves that follow are set by this fundamental arrangement and articulate it further. Principles of perceptibility (conditions of light) and the detailed organization of the relationship based on visibility (spatial geometry) are at the core of this arrangement. Through the distribution of physical structures and light, the inspector surveys the prisoner while the prisoner is not able to see him. The inspector is ‘seeing without being seen’ and he does that at a distance. This is a one-to-one relationship, inspector to prisoner, individual to individual, as everything is done to keep the prisoner in isolation and from being able to communicate with his fellow inmates. Spatially the ‘cells’ are divided from one another by the means of partitions, radial walls running from the circumference of the building towards its centre, extending beyond the cell’s enclosure so that the prisoner cannot look around them, his visual field constrained. These ‘protracted partitions’, as Bentham called them, were also extremely thin, a fact that Bentham liked to underline as it exemplified the superiority of his system of surveillance and visual containment. He writes: ‘the thickest walls have been found occasionally unavailing: upon this plan, the thinnest would be sufficient’.

Towards the lodge, the cells were enclosed by iron grating. The combination of the thin walls laid out in a radial fashion, the transparent iron grating, and the position of the inspector at the centre of the house, meant that the inspector would have the ‘perfect view’. This ideal view of seeing everything at once, this instant panoramic gaze over the entirety of the cell and indeed the whole house, would allow just one man to observe many by barely moving himself: an extremely efficient set up. The circular form plays an important role, offering an ideal shape in plan that no other geometry can rival. The circular layout also provides the shortest travel distance between ‘lodge’ and ‘cell’, meaning that the circle renders the relationship between the inspector and any prisoner equally close.

The extreme proximity between inspector and prisoner is important to note here. Bentham explains that, in his inspection house, prisoners would not need to be chained because their every move or facial expression could easily be seen. If we look at the actual distance between the lodge and the cells in Bentham’s plans, this only measures 14 feet or 4.26 metres. This is a surprisingly short distance and means that the relationship between inspector and prisoner would indeed have
been quite intimate. Bentham’s inspection house as a whole was small, measuring only 100 feet or 30.48 metres in diameter.

The inspection house was also surprisingly transparent. Another efficiency that the circular building shape offered was the maximum penetration of light into and through the building, based on the principle of the shortest distance. Every cell contained a large window – as large as technically possible – to allow light to penetrate deep into it, fully illuminating it, and all the way into the lodge at the centre. The outer circumference wall in Bentham’s plan shows more windows than wall sections, resulting in a perforated prison building. Later, Bentham considered using materials other than stone to make the inspection house even more transparent. At night, the idea of a see-through and well illuminated building was extended through the use of lamps with reflectors.

The section drawings of the panopticon clearly demonstrate the penetration of light and the idea of an illuminated building (Figure 10.4).

![Figure 10.4](image_url)

**Figure 10.4:** Willey Reveley (1760–99), Section of the panopticon penitentiary, UC cxix. 122v (c. 1791).

University College London Special Collections.

Bentham’s inspection house was to be bright, light, healthy and clean; well heated and well ventilated; it had sanitation and there was running water to all the cells. Bentham’s cells measured 6 feet in width and 13 feet in length, which equates to about 7 square metres of space for two prisoners. Contemporary American jail cells often provide only 4.4m² of space. The Red Cross currently recommends 5.4m² and the
European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment recommends 6m² of living space for a single-occupancy cell, rendering Bentham’s cells less than generous by today’s standards. There were 48 cells on one floor. One lodge could serve two floors. This arrangement could then be repeated by vertical stacking or horizontal repetition. Bentham drew up different variations, including some inspection houses with a central lantern that would bring additional light to the centre of the building.

Figure 10.5: Willey Reveley (1760–99), Sketch of the panopticon penitentiary and its airing yards, UC cxix. 129 (c. 1791).

University College London Special Collections.

Bentham did not only consider the interior of the prison but also made plans for possible external spaces surrounding the inspection house. He
sketched out plans for integrating airing yards, work yards and gardens. Some of these return to the idea of a circular layout for the surroundings but some work with a square plan around a circular building at its centre (Figure 10.5).

**Bentham and Foucault**

When we started working on the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground, we noticed that Millbank Prison was widely conflated with, and referred to as, Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. In common with many people, we first read about, and initially saw the panopticon, through the prism of Foucault’s employment of it in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) as ‘an emblem of modern power’. We then reconsidered this in light of the work of the historian Janet Semple in her article ‘A Defence of Panopticism’ (1992) in which she considers the complexity of the relationship between Foucault and Bentham. She observes that Foucault brings his own 1960s Parisian historical perspective to his work, is ill-informed on the subject of eighteenth-century English penal history and has a negative interpretation of the aims and intentions of the Enlightenment reformer’s motives. She concedes that Bentham made many problematic statements, which appear to support Foucault’s thinking, but argues that Foucault, when talking about the panopticon, did not consider it in light of Bentham’s later constitutional writings and tolerance of individual diversity. She concludes that ‘Foucault extrapolates from the particular device of the panopticon inspection tower to generalize that “Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. … The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad … in the central tower, one sees everything without being seen”.’ However the ‘panoptic qualities of [Bentham’s] *Constitutional Code* were designed to allow the subject to observe the ruling few’ and this is what Foucault should have taken into account. Bentham insisted that his prison must be accessible, and this would control the power of the governor, or the inspector, in the centre of the prison. ‘Bentham believed that democracy was essentially fragile’, notes Semple, ‘and could be upheld only by the light of freedom of information and discussion.’ Bentham wanted to create a humane prison. ‘His three principles of management were lenity, severity and economy’, ‘but the overriding principle was lenity that the prisoner should be deprived only of liberty not of health or life.’ But, according to Semple, Foucault had a negative interpretation of reformers’ motives. He believed that ‘they
were being deceived or rather were part of a process that masked their real intentions’.11

Bentham compared criminals to children. He considered that ‘criminals were a work in progress and the problem was with drink and idleness’, that ‘criminals, like other men, were potentially rational beings responsible for their own actions. … Bentham’s central belief was the rational mechanism of human morality could be refashioned, the criminal mind literally reformed’ by sobriety and work.12

Figure 10.6: Samuel Bentham (1757–1831), Plan, elevation and two sections, 1807.

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The reach of the panopticon

For Bentham, the panopticon was more than effective prison design. He believed that the panopticon principle could be beneficial in other contexts where surveillance was important. He therefore considered it for use in schools, hospitals and workhouses. His brother Samuel, with whom the idea of the panopticon originated, adapted the panopticon principle for an art school project in St Petersburg as well as for a house of industry (Figure 10.6, opposite).

Other industrial estates of the time started to borrow Bentham’s principles of efficient and well-surveyed buildings, such as the now demolished Round Mill at Belper, Derbyshire, constructed in 1811, following the plans of architect William Strutt.

Figure 10.7: Guillaume-Abel Blouet (1795–1853), *Plan du Rez-de-chaussée Prison Départementale*, 1841.

Brown University.
Although Bentham’s panopticon was never built, his plans were widely known and have remained highly influential for prison design until today. French architect Guillaume-Abel Blouet’s design for a Department Prison in 1841, included in ‘Instruction et programme pour la construction des maisons d’arrêt et de justice: atlas de plans de prisons cellulaires’, bears a strong resemblance to Bentham’s panopticon both in terms of internal layouts as well as its setting in the site (Figure 10.7, previous page).

Blouet saw himself as a reformer in his country, attempting to redefine prison design. Like Bentham, he believed in architecture as a tool for implementing social reform and understood the prison as a reformatory institution that acted through work and education.

In twentieth-century prison design, moreover, there are a number of built examples that make reference to Bentham’s plans. The Presidio Modelo, a model prison on the Isla de la Juventud in Cuba built in 1926 and consisting of five circular buildings, displays many of the characteristics of Bentham’s panopticon, such as the radial plan with the central watchtower topped by a lantern. Five floors of inmates were surveyed from one single tower. A photograph of the prison cells from 1926 demonstrates most dramatically the transparency of the building, with the prisoner’s silhouettes lined up in rows and lit starkly from behind, as Bentham intended (Figure 10.8).

![Figure 10.8: Presidio Modelo, Cuba, 1926.](image)

Arnhem Penitentiary, designed in 1884 by architect Johan Frederik Metzlaar, is one of three panopticon-style prisons in the Netherlands that were built for solitary confinement and used a central watchtower. Similar in size to Bentham’s inspection house, Arnhem measures 56 metres in diameter, and has the same number of cells per floor.
Interestingly, Arnhem prison became popular with inmates once prison rules were relaxed and inmates were allowed to wander around in the central area, which was used for playing football and other games. The watchtower was subsequently converted into the guard’s canteen, thereby reversing the relationship of the observer and the observed. In 1980 the Office for Metropolitan Architecture proposed an architectural project for the adaptation of the by then iconic prison, which was already operating almost like a public space with work, recreation and meetings ongoing in its central yard. OMA took this idea further and proposed to cut two sunken streets into it. This would have taken away the eye of the panopticon and created communal and entertainment spaces for the prisoners out of sight, but was never implemented (Figure 10.9).

Figure 10.9: Koepel Panopticon Prison, Arnhem, 1980.

   Image courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA).

Another prison influenced by Bentham’s panopticon is the Stateville Penitentiary in Illinois designed by architect C. Harrick Hammond, built in 1919 and operating until 2016. This high security prison had an armed central watchtower and four storeys of cells, and is the only surviving panopticon-style prison building in the United States. It was famously photographed by Andreas Gursky in 2002.
Dreams and utopia

For Foucault, the panopticon ‘presents a cruel, ingenious cage. The fact that it should have given rise, even in our own time, to so many variations, projected or realized, is evidence of the imaginary intensity that it has possessed for two hundred years. But the panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is a diagram of a mechanism of power’.14 But Foucault acknowledges the lightness of the panopticon and how it would replace the old prisons with ‘their fortress-like architecture’.15 Bentham’s wish was for the panopticon to be ‘a lantern’, a thing of beauty, ‘a glass beehive’.16 There were particular cultural influences on Bentham’s panopticon plan. ‘Bentham’s vision was of a beautiful building’, notes Semple, ‘a stately pleasure dome … comparable he said to the Rotundas at Ranelagh and Dublin, or the circus at Bath’.17 Ranelagh Gardens were a public pleasure garden in Chelsea, outside London. The Rotunda there was designed by William Jones and could indeed have served as an inspiration for Bentham. As the Rotunda was already complete in 1742, one could assume that Bentham might have visited this prominent venue, which Canaletto had famously painted in 1754 (Figure 10.10).

Figure 10.10: Canaletto (1697–1768), Interior of the Rotunda at Ranelagh, London, 1754.
National Gallery, Wiki/ Commons.
Built entirely for the purpose of pleasure, the Rotunda displays surprising similarities to Bentham’s later plan for the panopticon prison. It, too, was a circular building with a lodge and a lantern at its centre. The division of walls was radial. Even the diameter of the Rotunda at 120 feet (37 metres) was close to Bentham’s projected building. Most strikingly, the Rotunda’s façade and gallery design were of an unusual transparency for its time – one could almost see through its filigree structure (Figure 10.11).

![Figure 10.11](image)

*Figure 10.11: After William Jones (d. 1747), *Ranelagh*, 1742. Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 702471.*

As stated previously, Bentham was considering using the very latest materials and manufacturing innovations for his panopticon; for example cast iron for the pillars, the arches, staircases and galleries. The first iron bridge at Coalbrookdale had been built in 1779, only 12 years before Bentham printed ‘Panopticon; or, The Inspection-House’. Techniques had recently been invented for manufacturing glass on a larger scale. Bentham wanted plaster floors instead of wood, because he thought they would be more hygienic and fire-proof. As Semple suggests, ‘Architecturally, the panopticon foreshadows Paxton’s Crystal Palace rather than Pentonville’.18

Bentham not only referenced architecture, but also found inspiration for the panopticon in novels. He acknowledged Bishop Fénélon’s pastoral Arcadian novel *The Adventures of Telemachus* as the inspiration for utilitarianism. This was an instructive French novel originally published in 1699 that proved very popular, being republished many times in the course of the eighteenth century. Inventing a sub-plot
to Homer’s *Odyssey*, the story recounts the educational travels of Telemachus, son of Odysseus. The heroine in this story has a glass palace that Bentham considered to be the archetype for the panopticon. This may explain why the panopticon looks so pink and pretty in the architectural section drawings.

Bentham made private notes and had secret visions for the panopticon. Semple describes him as ‘a man with a vision, a vision that had its origins in the English utopian tradition and in the Arcadian romance of the pastoral idyll. The panopticon was an enclave of reason, isolated from the temptations and disorders of the ordinary world.’ She makes the argument that Bentham was influenced by utopian ideas; although he described Thomas More’s *Utopia* as anti-rational, there are noticeable similarities between More’s ideas and Bentham’s. More’s fictitious capital Amaurot was to be built on a gentle slope of a tidal river, not unlike the Thames, and similar to Bentham’s detailed plans for the panopticon. It had piped water, spacious housing, gardens and music at meal times. In More’s Utopia, there was a strong emphasis on labour, of which Bentham would have approved. As in the panopticon, idleness was the worst sin. Bentham also admired the work of seventeenth-century philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon, who harnessed scientific inventions for the benefit of his new society in his fictional utopia New Atlantis. Reflecting Bentham’s own wide-ranging interests, Bacon’s plans for his new society included breeding silkworms, keeping bees, curing diseases, inventing flying machines and submarines, harnessing and reflecting light and inventing ‘conversation tubes to convey sounds through pipes’. Conversation tubes, of course, were incorporated in the design of panopticon.

George Bentham, the son of Bentham’s only surviving sibling Samuel and his wife Mary Sophia Fordyce, became a prominent botanist, inspired no doubt by his mother’s interest in the subject. Mirroring Bentham’s own early ambitions, George travelled the world and published books on the classification of plants, with several being named after him. Jeremy Bentham maintained a keen interest in botany and in discovering new plants; in his private thoughts and ambitions for the panopticon he talks about it being a centre for collecting plants, even sending out explorer expeditions from the panopticon to collect seeds that would then be propagated in special panopticon nurseries. His planning went as far as drafting an advertisement for a panopticon physician in which he states that it would be useful if the applicant had an interest in plants.
Bentham had plans for creating an extensive infrastructure around the prison: he envisaged a complete panopticon town. Building houses into the walls of the prison, he proposed a tavern with a terrace where visitors could watch firework displays and promenade along a covered walkway to the river. He had fantastical structural ideas for how he would like his new town to be developed. There would, for example, be aerial garden walkways inter-connecting the balconies of his shops and buildings.

**The real Millbank Prison**

Bentham’s panopticon on London’s Millbank site remained a dream. The site was hugely problematic and after many obstacles the government abandoned the plans in 1803, much to Bentham’s dismay. In 1812 a new competition was announced to find an architect for the National Penitentiary at Millbank. It was a troublesome project from the start and involved a succession of architects: William Williams, Thomas Hardwick, John Harvey and finally Robert Smirke, who completed the building. The task to build on swampy and unstable ground meant that design and construction processes were riddled with problems and excessively expensive. In 1816 the Millbank Penitentiary opened as the largest prison in Britain of its time (Figure 10.13, overleaf).
Millbank Prison is often confused with a panopticon structure. William Williams’s design, however, owes little to the idea of the panopticon except for some formal motifs, such as the placement of the chapel in the centre of the building, while isolation cells and watch towers are used entirely differently. As a whole, the structure did not function as a panopticon, since it lacked clarity of conception and layout. Semple describes it as ‘a labyrinth of a building, full of dark corridors and passages, winding staircases and innumerable doors and gates. So confusing it was that wardens would blaze their trails with chalk marks on the walls.’ In many ways, this vast labyrinthine structure was the exact opposite of what Bentham had imagined.

The overall layout of Millbank Prison was configured as a series of hexagonal shapes, or petal shaped wings, each of them three storeys tall with a central watchtower. Each of these petals was further divided into five separate courtyards. It was a massive fortress-like structure with very small windows, little visibility and a significant distance between watchtower and cells. One wonders how the watchtower/inspector actually functioned without the immediate access that Bentham would have provided between the tower/inspector and the cell/prisoner. The intimate relationship he envisaged was not at all possible here. From the
tower the guard could observe only parts of the cells at great distance, and gaining access was a difficult and time-consuming undertaking. Moreover, the access corridor to the cells was located on the outer wall of the building, so that it was not possible to observe wardens interacting with prisoners. For Bentham, the visibility of this interaction was an important part of his plan. The fact that the inspector was able to inspect the wardens and their contact with the inmates, just as he might inspect the prisoners themselves, was another layer of transparency within Bentham’s well thought-out system.

Only when one compares the physical dimensions and numbers of cells in Millbank Prison to Bentham’s panopticon does one really start to grasp the sheer excess of Millbank’s slack structure opposed to the neat efficiency of Bentham’s lean inspection house (Figure 10.14).

![Figure 10.14: Scale comparison: Jeremy Bentham's panopticon and Millbank Prison.](image_url)

While Bentham’s inspection house was visually transparent and productively so, Millbank’s transparency was acoustic and problematic: its ventilation system was so bad that it would carry sounds across the facility, allowing prisoners to communicate with each other, even though kept in isolation. Poor sanitation and lack of ventilation meant that the prison was soon riddled with disease. While Bentham’s panopticon was heated, healthy and well lit, Millbank was dark and unhygienic. As one Victorian author noted:

If the ground plan of the building at Millbank is a geometric puzzle, the interior is surely an eccentric maze, long dark and narrow corridors, twisting passages in which the visitor unaccustomed
to the dubious twilight has to feel his way. Double locked doors, opening at all sorts of queer angles and leading sometimes into blind entries and frequently into stone staircases so steep and narrow, are not unlike the devious steps by which the traveller reaches the towers of Strasbourg or some other cathedrals except that they are even more gloomy.  

The prison’s ultimate failure was due to a combination of facts, but particularly the unhealthy environment and the lax rules and regulations that led to mutiny. After a major epidemic, the prison had to be evacuated and became a depot for convicts awaiting transportation, before reverting back in 1853 to an ordinary prison. In 1892 the prison was closed down and the site started to be redeveloped into its present shape.

Pentagon Petal, architectural (un)determinism or pleasure: Bentham and Herzberger

In his work on the panopticon, Bentham uses architecture as a device to control and organize human behaviour and to promote social discipline. Architecture, or more specifically the physical structure of a building, is utilized to forge particular relationships and to formalize certain structures, hierarchies or orders. Architecture, in this context becomes an important tool in the process of establishing order and executing discipline and, with it, punishment. Pain in the context of Bentham’s panopticon is not inflicted through maltreatment, hunger, cold or disease, as in the case of Millbank Prison, but through the means of architecture. The panopticon is well lit, has large windows, is heated and clean, but yet it is still a cruel place. It is through the architectural tools of layout, spatial arrangement and the configuration of light and material that Bentham establishes his idea of punishment and reform.

Moving from pain to pleasure, we would now like to consider pleasure in the context of architecture’s power to organize human relationships and ensure social discipline. Beyond the panopticon, people are surprisingly resistant to architecture’s power to control them and are often sceptical towards overtly functional set-ups or any form of social determinism, employing imaginative responses to subvert or re-appropriate. In fact, a lot of pleasure can be generated in daily life from misusing objects and spaces or using them for purposes that were not intended or uses that were not part of their original function. There is positive engagement in the creative and active moments of these acts of appropriation. Developing this context, in our work as an artist and an architect,
we refer to Herman Hertzberger, a contemporary Dutch architect and educator who has spent most of his life collecting and designing architectural settings that allow for and stimulate the spontaneous interpretation of users in pursuit of pleasure and empowerment. He argues that architecture has to be conceived in an open-ended way and advocates making spaces more receptive to unexpected uses and forms of interpretation and appropriation. Hertzberger states:

If something is geared very specifically to a certain aim it functions the way it has been programmed to function, i.e. as it was expected to function. This is the sort of functionalism that the functionalists talked about, but it is also the minimum of utility that can be expected of architecture. And in order to achieve more than the minimum in the diversity of situations as they arise I am pleading for form and space with a greater ‘accommodating’ potential, like a musical instrument that sounds the way the player wants it to sound. The point is to increase this ‘accommodating potential’ and thus to make space more receptive to different situations. Once you start looking for them it is easy to find even in the most unexpected corners examples of usage that the designer (if any) certainly never envisaged.

When working on our proposals for the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground, Bentham’s original panopticon site and the site of the failed Millbank Prison, we envisaged strategies that would oppose the idea of utilizing architectural means for the implementation of power/pain and were looking for structures that could be more open-ended and pleasurable, that could somehow be interpreted and appropriated, an intervention where use might not be predetermined, but an offering, something that could be imagined and would contain an active and creative act.

**Pentagon Petal**

Pentagon Petal was a temporary intervention in the summer of 2016 that reorganized the social environment of the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground. The intervention was based on the plan of Millbank Prison, editing and reinterpreting it into a more socially active figure: a flower-shaped bench. The intervention played with ideas of exclusion and segregation while offering a generous place within the larger barren square *(Figure 10.15, overleaf).*
This process of editing and reinterpreting floor plans is key for us in redefining and reconditioning any normative or social behaviour linked to a particular space and recalibrating power structures. For Millbank, we went through a number of steps: we started by looking at the original plan of Millbank Prison and erased all structures that were related to control, oppression or surveillance. We removed the watchtowers, the guards’ quarters and the prison administration from the plan, leaving only the prisoners’ cells, accommodation and communal kitchens from the original floor plan. At the next step we radically scaled this figure down to a manageable size. By scaling it, we could reimagine its use. Figure 10.16 shows the vast plan of Millbank Prison drawn at 1:350 scale in comparison to our bench drawn at 1:40 scale. Both geometric objects seem similar, yet each of them has a very different potential in terms of use, sociability and scope for public interaction. At the final step, we brought this new figure back onto the site and calibrated it for the specific location and its communities.
When scaling and editing the plan, we were thinking about spatial dimensions and their impact on social uses and possible interpretations, very much like Bentham, but with the opposite motivation. We wanted the dimensions of this new object to be ambiguous and open, and yet relate to something familiar. We looked at the widths of a bed in the prison cell and we looked at the dimensions of a garden bench, and arrived at something that could be interpreted as either a bed or a bench. Our bench was an enormous 120 metres long and was able to accommodate up to 300 people, the same number as the first generation of prisoners in Millbank or the approximate number of prisoners in a Bentham-style six-storey panopticon.

What interested us in the bench was that it is a very unassuming object. It is one you usually share. On a bench, you accept that you may be sitting next to somebody you do not know. More profoundly, sitting is a way of taking hold of a site – of appropriating and occupying a public site. In the urban environment, benches can be seen as highly problematic since they can produce loitering, which is often not desired. Contemporary urban benches can specifically be designed so that they cannot be slept on or used to congregate. We wanted the bench for the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground to be as generous as possible. This unconditional generosity was a very important aspect for us (Figure 10.17).

Figure 10.17: Cottell/Mueller, Pentagon Petal, Terry Watts, 2016.
To achieve this, the dimensions of the bench were kept deliberately ambiguous. You could see it as a platform or a pier, suggesting that you could walk on it. Or you could use it as a bench, and there were different opportunities for how to sit or lie on it: in a one-to-one in order to have a private conversation, or in a group around the pentagons, or you might lie down and enjoy the view. Each of the six pentagons or ‘petals’ – originally shaped to facilitate social control and designated for solitary confinement – was now reinterpreted by groups of students, staff or tourists for informal gatherings and for pleasure, in different configurations and were used almost like rooms. The corners became specifically productive: many people liked to sit there, where they could face each other, or they would sit on the edges surveying the scene. Others would have picnics on it, sitting next to each other or opposite each other (Figure 10.18).

By sitting together, the project brought the disparate communities loosely linked to the site together: the community of the college, the students, the staff, the tourists that were passing by on their way to the Tate, but also local communities living in the housing estates nearby. There was a group of local youngsters who used to congregate every night on one of the V-shapes around our bench, moving every night to a different section. When it was used for a staff party, the participants
unilaterally adopted one of the pentagon shapes as the ‘dancing room’. Local residents walked their dogs on the grass in the centre.

Through the intervention, there was suddenly an opportunity for people to gather in informal and unpredictable ways, in ways that were not forced and which brought together people who would usually not congregate. We were amazed at how many people came to us and said: ‘I sat on your bench and still remember that as a special moment on the journey from one place to another.’ The installation tried to make sense of the otherwise barren nature of this large urban square by shrinking it into a confined space with a clear definition. We deliberated over whether the bench should be open or not, and how, if it was closed, this large object would form a barrier within the site. But this barrier turned out to be productive in generating and disrupting social activities. By providing a physical back for the occupants, the bench turned this previously unappealing exposed central grass square into an enclosed social, almost private, space. From being negative, it became usable and interactive, providing a small arena within the larger open square.

This brings us back to Bentham and another scale comparison. Figure 10.19 shows an overlay of Bentham’s prison and the Pentagon Petal installation. From our previous description, the relatively intimate size of the Benthamic panopticon should be clear. Pentagon Petal is of comparable size, slightly smaller, tracing out Bentham’s building on the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground into which it would have easily fitted; the two structures of comparable size facilitate very different types of social observation and interaction.

Figure 10.19: Scale comparison: Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon and Panopticon Petal.
Pentagon Petal could be observed from three sides from the windows of Chelsea College of Arts, as seen here in Malcolm Quinn’s photograph taken from his office window (Figure 10.20).

Unlike the panopticon, the viewing point is shifted from the centre to the periphery. As previously noted, for people who live and work in the area, including the staff and students at the college, the plan of Millbank Prison is often, albeit mistakenly, referred to as Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. It is an image that is part of the cultural memory of this site, a figure that everyone recognizes.

Our intention with this intervention, reflecting Bentham’s spirit, was to bring some clarity and utility to this place, but in contrast to him, in a non-determined and open-ended way. We were not pursuing an architectural determinism, we were not attempting social levelling, but rather to challenge fixed hierarchies and to produce a dynamic and, perhaps, democratic type of space that preserves life or rather the breadth of aliveness – a place of leisure rather than oppression. This
intervention, which temporarily re-configured this site, re-calibrated its social offering from one of pain to pleasure.

Notes

7 Semple, 1992, 117.
12 Semple, 1993, 155.
14 Foucault, 1991, 205.
18 Semple, 1993, 117.
19 Semple, 1993, 304.
20 Semple, 1993, 301.
24 ‘Convict Life at Millbank Penitentiary’, Penny Illustrated Paper, 14 October 1865, 308–9, at 308. This article was apparently written by Thomas Archer and reprinted in his The Pauper, The Thief, and The Convict; Sketches of Some of their Homes, Haunts, and Habits (1865, 189–207).

References

Archer, T. The Pauper, The Thief, and The Convict; Sketches of Some of their Homes, Haunts, and Habits. London: Groombridge and Sons, 1865.