

Representation and Reform: The Image of Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary

PAUL KARIOUK
University of Florida

PROLOGUE

This paper examines the limitations that we as architects place upon our discipline through a tendency to assume for ourselves the positions of "custodians of the built environment"; uncritically we often accept that the substitution of design authority for bureaucratic authority is the fundamental requirement to achieve improvement if not parity in the city. This bias is evidenced by the frustration that proceeds from the realization of our limited ability to effect broad-based changes in the urban environment. This frustration is also incongruous though with the fact that the basis of our academic and professional life proceeds from an intimate relationship with the act of representation and not a direct encounter with the city. And still, even when we recognize these considerations, the reality of our propositions—our representations—are conflated with action in the real environment. If our artifacts are made *only* to serve potentially as information guiding a one-to-one substitution—the representation for the reality—architectural production is thwarted. Architecture's reality, under these circumstances, cannot win the day. If then the intention and validation of the designer's work does not necessarily and perhaps should not necessarily be looked for in "reality," since we don't in fact customarily put to task the materials of buildings, we might find answers to the "poverty of architecture today by talking about representation."¹

INTRODUCTION OF A CASE STUDY

This essay examines the influence that representations of nineteenth-century urban space played in the progressive attempt to alter aspects of American urban life, that at that time, were believed to be in ruinous decline. To pose the complexities this topic raises and to account for the social dynamics that nuanced regional civic conceptions of urban life, particularly the relationship between urban and landscape spaces, this work is limited to a single case-study—representations of Philadelphia's panopticon-like prison, Eastern State Penitentiary. The landscapes directly associated with the penitentiary are described through varied representations; these representations merit study because they speak pointedly—albeit silently—of the different social missions each of the landscapes associated with the prison were expected to champion.

The power of this institution relative to the city was predicated upon the fact that the general urban public never directly saw its interior. The prison's social role was entwined with its representations which became the primary mediators between the institution and the city. This prison was a utopian projection of Philadelphia whose representations spoke of the optimism as well as the method by which the city of Philadelphia would be redeemed from its social ills. Philadelphia made this prison in its ideal image, with the hope that the prison's image might exude a force capable of remaking Philadelphia.

REPRESENTING EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY: CONTROLLING THE MODERN SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

As a prison with strong leanings towards Jeremy Bentham's panoptic system of confinement, Eastern State Penitentiary was itself a quintessential Enlightenment, modernist product. Built in 1820 outside the metropolitan fabric, it was summarily engulfed by the city. Its design coupled the period's most progressive technology with the most current ideals in social reform. Eastern State was intended by the civic and religious bodies that envisioned it to be a paradigm both in its physical structure and the philosophy that would operate it. It was a perfect, modern machine. Significantly, as far as a critique of the authority of representations was concerned, the architectural representations of these intentions bear little relation to the built product. Its form was altered radically no later than the start of construction, and changes continued for the duration of its history. As for its intentions to instigate social reform, the most frequent outcome of its system of profound isolation upon prisoners was not rehabilitation but insanity. The prison operated until 1972.

A brief description enables us to chart the two essential categories that insinuated themselves within the representations of the prison: understandings from outside its walls, and understandings made from inside its walls. Bentham, founder of Utilitarianism, stated: "Upon the principle of Utility, if [punishment] ought to be admitted, it ought to be admitted in as far as it promises to exclude some greater evil."² Punishment had to become an observable public rite in order to effect a greater good. But, punishment was not intended to cause extreme discomfort to the punished; the formula was to respect the prisoner's humanity through his/her placement in the public's eye,

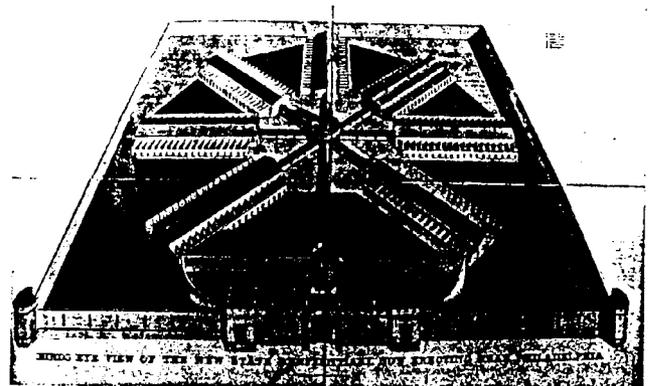


Fig. 1. John Haviland's Eastern State Penitentiary, c.1824. This drawing depicts the prison as it was designed though changes were implemented no later than the start of construction.

and only in this way to guide others away from comparable behavior. Repeatedly, Bentham speaks of the panopticon as if it were itself a public spectacle—a staged drama. More so, while pertinent scholars such as Michel Foucault reveal justifiably the odious dimension of the panopticon, Bentham imagined and designed it to be a beautiful and cheerful place. “It will add singularity to beauty; it will give life and ornament to the country. It will be a lantern.”³ (This almost humorous misalignment between reception and intention itself speaks well of the need to sustain a critique of the role of our profession to shape public realms.) Inside this lantern, the keeper of the light—the warden—sees all, all of the time, and with the assistance of technical contrivance, is never seen himself. He the viewer is omniscient but cannot himself be identified.

Let us consider then the first category: representations of Eastern State Penitentiary from the vantage point of social space—the “outside.” By relegating this problematic institution past the edge of the city in typical eighteenth-century fashion, the Quakers compelled the wayward to avail themselves of the supposedly heuristic merits of nature; nature was contrasted with the pestilential influences—moral, psychological, and bodily—imagined to be legion in the city. Comparing and contrasting the prison and the city beyond, we must also give consideration to the perceptions of this landscape that separated the two. The prison was sited facing the city, and it is always represented from that position. The structure is cradled in nature. It is worth noting that at the time of its construction, this area outside of Philadelphia was not the place of “wild” nature nor “savagery” though, but rather an already domesticated nature; Eastern State Penitentiary was constructed upon the site of a vast cherry. The association between Eastern State Penitentiary and earnest “fruitful human cultivation” was quite literal in the Quakers’ minds so much so they referred to the sinister prison as “Cherry Hill,” and this title remains to this day.

The prison is always shown bathed in light, but it does not receive light from an overhead, omnipresent, omniscient source in the heavens as so many of the landscape school representations contemporary with the prison do. Despite its sixteen-foot thick walls the prison emits light as if from a central source within—again, as if it were the lantern of Bentham’s characterization. Also, according to Bentham’s and the Quakers’ philosophy, the building and for our purposes its exterior representation, only maintains currency by the explicit knowledge that there are witnesses to the spectacle of incarceration it fashions. We the viewers outside of the prison are not solitary subjects as the prisoners within are, but become part of a community of witnesses, who, we are advised via the graphic representations, are better off to remain as part of that community. The representational use of brilliant light serves other ends as well. Contrary to the despoiled industrial city the prison appears sanitized. The conceit is moralizing but also it brings the institution under the



Fig. 2. Watercolor, c. 1840, after the engraving titled “A correct view of Eastern State Penitentiary.”



Fig. 3. Lithograph, c. 1833.

arm of a rational, medicalized authority; the suggestion is that ethical control can be maintained through precise, calculated social science.

It is this allusion to cleanliness that also provides insight into some of the perceptions of the natural landscape that isolate the prison from the city. Barthes writes, “the obsession with cleanliness is certainly a practice of immobilizing time.”⁴ The object is set apart from history and in this case, urban growth and influence. For the prison to operate “scientifically” and to achieve maximum social impact, the buffer of nature on the outside is a fully integral component of the process unfolding inside, and must remain so in perpetuity for the welfare of the city beyond. The depiction of the prison as unchanging is ironic because while this view *to* the prison as captured by representations scarcely changed during its century and a half of operation, the view *from* the prison to the city changed completely, as did also the physical reality of the prison inside. As we will see in later representations, even when the city grew to the edge of the stone walls, representations of the prison deny the altered context. This area outside of the prison remains in the drawings as unarticulated and empty of urban elements as the natural landscape that existed originally would have been.

Eastern State’s representation advocates an a-historical condition. In its Arcadian pasture, through its symmetrical appearance, with its functional programming that included a concern for the generation of balanced raw-material and economic resources, it was a miniature city. It was a representation of Philadelphia. In fact it was the better of the two in that its utopian overtones were more explicit, yet it was not utopian in conception. Neither Bentham who provided the template for Cherry Hill nor the Quakers were seduced by the pursuit of utopian conditions. Bentham derided *Utopia*;⁵ he held a fundamental distrust of human nature and believed that people were inherently jealous and this fact would always induce inequalities. Bentham’s enterprise was capitalist in inception, and his pragmatism as far as economic realities were concerned appealed to the Quakers. Eastern State Penitentiary did not need to, was not meant to, and did not function as an independent body; it was held in check by the warden who was an agent from outside its system. Its *raison d’être* was to establish a dialogue *with* the city and therefore it does not tear itself away from the urban fabric. Additionally, it was meant to pay off its construction cost and afterwards generate profit through industrious prisoner labor. It is important to recall its representation and how its exterior was depicted through perspective—the view of an engaged subject—with low vantage points emphasizing its instructional agenda. Finally, it was meant to be seen by many who upon witnessing it would be directed into harmony with a natural order that was seemingly lost in the city, and more so, on account of the city. This miniature city was not utopian, it was the progeny of a city gone awry; it was not an alternative to the city but a stabilizing tool. To this end we can imagine that any representations that evidenced their own

making would have been counterproductive as moralizing agents; to retain their authority and in order to persuade an audience of the prison's "reality," they had to remain seamless and devoid of architectural references to their own fabrication.

Many of these ideological subtexts exist throughout the representational oeuvre of the nineteenth century and in particular in Romantic iconography, but here their presence provokes more sustained inquiry. The prison's medieval imagery harks to a pre-industrial, "pre-urban" model; it confirms prevalent fears of metropolitan life and seeks again a manageable order, at once contented with the landscape but without forfeiting technological sophistication. Like the castle it superficially mimics, the prison suggests order is within, disorder is without—a dramatically ironic suggestion to be put forward by a prison. If we consider again this alongside Bentham's and the Quakers' original intention that Eastern State be a cheerful place and instruct through benevolent example, it is as if the interior represented a longed-for sanctuary.

Let us consider the second category of representations: representations of the interior. Projection to the interior existed on multiple cognitive levels. To clarify this several significant distinctions must be made between the interior of John Haviland's Philadelphia prison and Bentham's template for a panopticon. Whereas Bentham's model relied on shelf-like tiers of cells, Haviland's quarters of solitary confinement were placed on the ground. This move allowed the Eastern State's cells to be provided with solitary gardens, roughly equal in size to the cells. The arrangement bore a programmatic and spatial relationship to the Philadelphia rowhouse type. As the idea of absolute, solitary confinement was intended to counter the mass prisons currently in use in America and Europe and to accelerate the reform process, individual prisoner access to individual "landscapes" was intended to facilitate self-reflection and promote physical respite through fresh air, light, exercise. If the prison's cells were rowhouse-like, what can be gleaned from the equation of the prison's radial corridors with urban streets? As far as the original prison was concerned, access to the cells was only provided via the gardens; by any interpretation there was a complete eradication of communal interior space. Like access to the penitentiary, access to the cells was made originally by traversing the interior landscape and entering each private cell/garden pair through each garden. The value of communal interaction was conscientiously discounted; relationships between incarcerated citizens and the point of authority were not mediated by any form of a social place. If these interior streets are projections of what an early nineteenth-century Quaker city *should be*, set in contrast to the city *as it was*, the dissolution of public space announces a shift in their conceptualization of urban space. Domestic space in the city proper and domesticated space in the prison instead are offered as society's private "civilizing machines." When virtually every crime condemned by the reform system was of a public nature it was not consistent that the scientific scrutiny that generated this prison system made no provision for, or even experimented with, methods to induce acceptable sociability.

This attempt to interrupt social perspective within is reflected in the modes of drawing used to represent the panopticon's interior. While the exterior views depict the prison with romanticized generality and ostensibly from the eyes of multiple observers, the interior is revealed strictly through plans and sections—omniscient views—which became widely published and were circulated internationally. With passionless, fully unromanticized candor, the interior of the prison is revealed with surgical precision. The state of the art mechanisms embedded within its walls, circulating discrete doses of light, water, and air, are revealed as if the prison were a dissected organism. Incorporating the previous example, we should consider how this interior view differs radically from the exterior view regarding the self-same desire for (morally) sanitized, hygienic space. While the exterior of the panopticon was designed explicitly for the purpose of being seen by the public and was represented

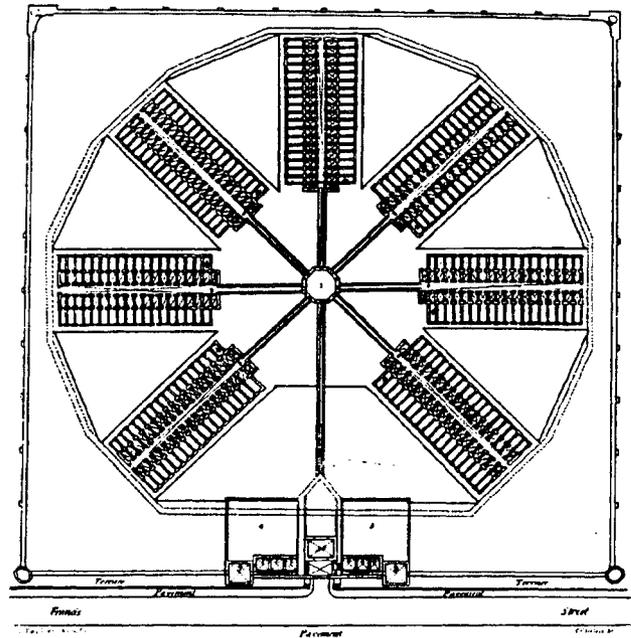


Fig. 4. Plan of Eastern State Penitentiary, c. 1829.

accordingly, the interior of the prison was seen by no one, save for the warden and a very small number of guards. Also, the prisoners were hooded upon entry and release therefore representations depicting personal experience would have been irrelevant. Only the point of view of a single observer was ever registered; in order to gain knowledge of the internal life of the prison subjectivity was surrendered to don the objective eye of the warden, but in doing so we the viewer vanish from the frame of the drawing.

The transposition of the watching exterior public to the prison's interior through intimations of familiar domesticity played itself out in another instance. Just as references to domestic life were implied by the spatial modules of the cells, the primary large-scaled organizational feature that was intended for the prison was also an essentially domestic element. The weightiest symbolic point within the site, the panoptic center, was not the warden's quarters or a corporeal disciplining room as might have been expected, but a thoroughly placid space—it was originally designed to be the kitchen. The kitchen, among the most private and fundamental spaces of domestic life, was intended to become here too a civilizing agent. The awareness of these overtones is revealed by the representation of Eastern State Penitentiary upon a set of costly dessert china issued in 1838. The prison has been so much "seen" and advanced in the mind of the general public as a civilized, polite, urbane element, that it commingled easily with domestic life and domestic trappings. Through its representational presence the prison now gained access to domestic space where it could begin to "exercise its discipline" over the Quaker homes, a realm that at first one might have assumed was without the need of its influence.

Despite the fact that Eastern State Penitentiary retained the title of "panopticon," in truth this was a misnomer. Its form, from the beginning did not coincide with its "perfect" representations, and by 1900 its mathematical exactitude and possibilities for comprehensive vision and therefore complete authority were entirely compromised by alteration projects. Yet, its exterior limit registered no parallel alterations. More importantly, the plethora of plans that documented its various changes never extended the prison's geography beyond the prison walls. Despite the passage of one hundred and fifty years of changes that contorted the interior, and the disappearance of the original natural landscape of the exterior, the

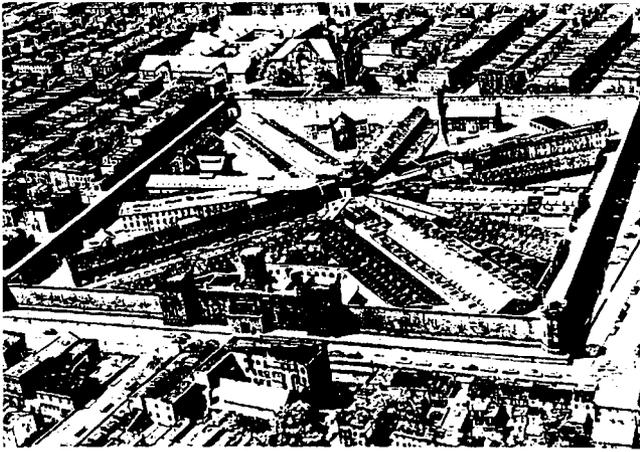


Fig. 5. Aerial view of Eastern State Penitentiary, c. 1954.

prison maintained its “panoptic idea” and its autonomy because perceptual, representational revisions that would have threatened its “perfect” image were precluded. This wall—this limit—and not the panoptic center, both in representations and in reality was the sole element that in the end defined the prison. It was the element that staged the prison for the city, and it was the element that by “blinding” the public and the city that soon grew fully around its base allowed the myths of superior internal sight to remain intact.

CONCLUSION

The case of Eastern State Penitentiary only begins to suggest the

potential of architectural urban and landscape representation as both an exploratory and expository tool; the roles of representation in interpreting and transforming our perceptions of the city continue to be as profound and revelatory as they were in the nineteenth-century example cited, but in order to be positioned in such a manner as to yield forceful, positive consequences for urban life, they must first be linked integrally to a conscious mode of scrutiny. The architectural representation of the city is not a lesser domain of practice and inquiry than literal acts of urban construction—in instances the two are synonymous. Within the act of representation lies among the most significant possibilities for strategically rethinking aspects of urban contexts. The failure to grapple with the potent, subliminal subtexts of representation in both architectural practice and pedagogy is tantamount to misguided design process and simply naiveté, neither of which well serve progressive reality in the urban realm.

NOTES

- ¹ Jorge Silvetti, “Representation and Creativity in Architecture: The Pregnant Moment,” in *Representation and Architecture*, ed. Omer Akin et al. (Silver Spring: Information Dynamics Inc., 1982), p. 161.
- ² Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), p. 170.
- ³ Janet Semple, *Bentham's Prison* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 116.
- ⁴ Roland Barthes, “La Voiture: Projection de L'Ego,” *Realite*, vol. 213 (1963): 45.
- ⁵ This was of course Thomas More's point in writing this seminal work—*Utopia* is a tale of nonsense. The edition that served as a reference for this essay was Thomas More, *Utopia*, Paul Turner trans. and intro. (London: Penguin Books, 1965).