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Jeffrey Ian Ross, Ph.D.



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Why and How Prison Museums/Tourism Contribute to the Normalization of the Carceral/Shadow Carceral State: The Primacy of Economic Realities

Jeffrey Ian Ross

Situating the Argument

Around the world, both natural and human-built structures attract tourists. The ones constructed by people run the gamut from buildings to towers, to dams, to religious institutions, to museums, and so on. Sometimes, the draw or interest of these lies in the breathtaking architecture and/or incredible feats of engineering that have been achieved, while at other moments the significance is related to the activity that took place at that site. Occasionally, both factors capture the public's attention.

One of the human-built institutions that has attracted both public and scholarly attention has been prison museums and the related practice of penal tourism (e.g., Wilson 2008; Ferguson, Piché, and Walby 2015).¹ Over the past few decades, the number of prison museums throughout the world has increased (Ross 2012a). Almost every advanced industrialized democracy has one or more of these tourist attractions. Prison museums serve numerous

¹The author uses the terms "prison museums," "penal tourism," and "prison tourism" interchangeably. Although borrowing from the literature on "penal museums" and "penal tourism," the latter term is consciously avoided as it primarily focuses on the subject of punishment rather than corrections (one of several methods used to punish lawbreakers).

J.I. Ross (✉)
University of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD, USA
e-mail: jross@ubalt.edu

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functions including, but not limited to, assisting the local economy by attracting tourists to the neighborhoods and cities where they are located, employing local citizens, building cultural heritage, and disseminating the kind of information relevant to the site.

Just like newspapers, movies, radio, television, and educational institutions, over time prison museums have become part of the cultural industries that have developed in cities, states, or countries (Schiller 1989; for a detailed explanation and analysis of the role of culture in prisons and punishment, see Smith 2008). Along with films (e.g., *Cool Hand Luke*, among many others), television series (e.g., *Prison Break*, etc.) and quasi-documentary television programs (e.g., *Locked Up*, *Locked Up Abroad*), prison museums/prison tourism are important fixtures contributing to the popular culture of corrections (Munro-Bjorklund 1991; Wright 2000; Ross 2003). The contribution of prison museums/tourism to the popular culture of corrections is difficult, perhaps impossible, to measure/determine. The reasons for prison museums "can range, however, across the scales of remembrance, education and study, local history and sightseeing, to pure entertainment" (Morin 2013: 7), but these aspects are not the major concern in this chapter.

More importantly, this chapter argues that

1. Prison museums/penal tourism contribute to the popular culture of prisons, perpetuate the myths, misperceptions, and stereotypes about corrections (i.e., jails, prisons, prisoners, correctional officers, and prison administrators).
2. These myths, misperceptions, and stereotypes contribute to the normalization of the carceral/shadow-carceral state.
3. The ability of any prison museum to achieve this goal is a reflection of the prison museum's economic viability.
4. The economic viability of the prison museum necessitates a pandering to myths, misperceptions and stereotypes about prisons, prisoners, correctional workers, and the assumed purpose of jails, prisons, and other correctional sanctions.

This argument is made by defining and clarifying terms that are used in the chapter, briefly examining relevant scholarship on prison museums, reviewing why prison museums exist, why might prison museums support prevailing attitudes toward punishment, looking at some of the more important challenges facing prison museums, and then examining what the administration of prison museums must take into consideration to make these economically viable.

The chapter is bounded by five interrelated hypotheses/assumptions:

1. Museums are not value free.
2. The greater the number of prison museums, the more they contribute to the normalization of the carceral/shadow carceral state;
3. The greater the number of visitors to prison museums, the greater the ability of these institutions to contribute to the normalization of the carceral/shadow carceral state;
4. The worse the interpretive aspects of the museum are, the greater the possibility is that the museum will contribute to the normalization of the carceral/shadow carceral state.
5. The more manipulative the displays of the museums, the greater contribution to the normalization of the carceral/shadow state.

Since these are ambitious propositions, it is very difficult to gather data to refute or reject them. Thus, they provide an epistemological context, but are not specifically tested.

Scholarship on Prison Museums/Tourism

The study of prison museums/tourism is typically situated in the scholarship on heritage, museum, and/or tourism studies, and/or criminology/criminal justice. This topic is also subsumed under the fields of dark tourism (Lennon and Foley 2000) or thanatourism (Seaton 1996).

The body of research that examines prison museums/tourism has focused on a diverse set of practices, including the growth of this phenomenon (Ross 2012a), intensive case studies of well-known museums including Eastern State Penitentiary (e.g., Brown 2009), Robben Island (Strange and Kempa 2003; Shearing and Kempa 2004) and Alcatraz (Loo and Strange 2000; Waite 2011), and practices at particular penal tourism practices (e.g., Adams 2001; Schrift 2004). Some of the more theoretical work has explored the notion of prison spectacle (Brown 2009) and prison voyeurism (Ross 2015). Brown argues that the visitors who come to the prison museums often lack suitable critical engagement with the subject matter. Ross looks at the different levels of engagement people have with the field of corrections and with the reality of jails and prisons.

In a complementary fashion, the authenticity of visiting prison museums has been discussed by scholars examining the subject of prison tours (e.g., Walby and Piché 2011). This prompts certain questions. What do visitors actually see when they go to prison museums? How is the interpretative program presented? What do visitors really remember afterward about their experience? Thus, building on Welch (2015: 4), "Among the many areas of

interest belonging to museum studies is the overarching impact that museums have on their visitors, culture, and society. The museum effect is produced by a complex interplay between objects, images, and space."

This research has been an important building block in our understanding of what takes place at prison museums. Less known are the reactions of visitors to prison museums. One of the more recent and important analyses of this theme is the work by Ferguson, Piché, and Walby (2015). They examine visitor comments posted on the website *TripAdvisor* regarding prison memorialization places in Canada. The writers argue that "visits to penal history museums in Canada seldom translate into humanizing conceptions of the criminalized and views that challenge punitiveness among visitors, at least online." Their research "highlight[s] how new media communications shape the actions of penal history museum workers in ways that tend to reinforce memorialization practices that foster social distance between authors and recipients of punishment" (Ferguson, Piché and Walby 2015: 1).

Other research conducted by Walby and Piché (2011) at Canadian prison museums has indicated the presence of a certain smugness that the Canadian system has moved beyond its barbaric past, and a perception that the incarcerated are dehumanized, while the jailers and police are lionized.

This presentation can foster tourist reactions that range from a congratulatory feeling that Canada has moved on from a cruel and brutal past to more punitive views whereby visitors lament the end of practices that embody what "punishment should be like." Second, most Canadian penal history sites depict prisoners and prison staff in ways that foster distance from the incarcerated, but solidarity with jailors, prison guards, police officers, and other repressive state actors (Fiander et al. 2016: 2).

Defining and Clarifying Terms

Before continuing, it is important to answer a handful of questions. To begin with, what does "normalization" mean in this context? Essentially, it refers to a widespread acceptance of a practice or, at the very least, a failure to be bothered or affected by it. Additionally, what is the "carceral state"? The term acknowledges that through a combination of policies, practices, laws, and institutions, most advanced industrialized democracies have become increasingly punitive (e.g., Pratt, Brown, Brown, Hallsworth and Morrison 2013; for a dissenting view of this trend, see, e.g., Matthews 2005). Moreover, in order to support and maintain what some also refer to as a law-and-order

approach to crime and justice, there has been a widespread and complimentary acceptance by the public that jails, prisons, and other similar correctional facilities are the best way to deal with lawbreakers and deviants. (Compare, for example, the differing criminal justice system responses to criminality between the USA and the Scandinavian countries.) The collective effect is that a phenomenal amount of resources (in particular taxpayers' money) is channeled into supporting this vast infrastructure, which negatively affects those who are incarcerated, their families, and the communities whence they came, with minimal impact on crime (Weaver and Lerman 2010; Gottschalk 2014; Murakawa 2014).

Building upon this original notion is the concept of the *shadow carceral state* or *shadow penal state*. These terms, crafted by Beckett and Murakawa (2012: 239), refer to "government policies, legal doctrine, and institutions with the power to impose sanctions that either mimic the coercive practices widely considered to be of punishment . . . or impose significant hardship and carry with them social and political opprobrium." It is easy to understand this explanation of the negative features of the contemporary state.

More recently, Kleuskens, et al. (2016: 2), building on Beckett and Murakawa's work, argue for "a refined conception of the shadow carceral state that includes cultural institutions and processes of representation that reproduce punishment as the way of responding to criminalized conflicts and harms." They add, "Such theorization is warranted when cultural entities like penal history museums have material connections to repressive state agencies, and operate in concert with them to naturalize the deprivation of liberty."

Similar to the concept of the carceral state is the notion of mass- or hyper-incarceration (Simon 2000; 2010). This phenomenon concerns the exponential increase in the number of individuals that American local, county, state, and federal criminal justice systems have incarcerated over the past two decades (Gottschalk 2010, 2011). Alternative explanations for this phenomenon are provided by Garland (2001), who sees the growth as an embodiment of Americans' need to control lawbreakers, and Wacquant (2001) who interprets the growth of jails, prisons, and prisoners as a state response to dealing with a dislocated and largely unemployed and unemployable urban (typically African-American) underclass (for a recent review of the literature on hyper-incarceration, see, e.g., Gandy 2014; for comparative definitions of mass incarceration versus hyper-incarceration, see, e.g., Wacquant 2010; Weisberg and Petersilia 2010).

In order to support the carceral state, including the construction, operation, and staffing of correctional facilities, an insidious narrative has been developed, disseminated, and widely accepted. This has been accomplished through a variety of communication channels such as culture, the news

media, and so on (e.g., Gramsci 1971/2011). It is assisted by the public's lack of knowledge, and their alienation, apathy, and tendency to obey authority (Ross 2000: Chapter 5). The lack of knowledge has also been facilitated by the news media, which finds it difficult to gain access to jails, prisons, other correctional facilities, and the people who work and are housed there, and by the limited number of reporters who specialize in this beat (Ross 2011).

The messages that support the existence of the carceral/shadow carceral state are embedded in the ideologically tinged popular discourse on the role and meaning of jails, prisons, prisoners, and correctional officers. In many respects, a simplistic story is told to the public, one that can be easily grasped, but it is often a distortion of the truth about who criminals and victims are, what lawbreaking is, and the role, purpose, and accomplishments of jails and prisons. This story is disproportionately full of myths, misconceptions, misrepresentations, and misinformation (Ross 2012b). Overall this communication and rhetoric minimizes our ability to properly reform corrections, minimize our reliance on jails and prisons and principle types of sanctions, and rehabilitate individuals whom we typically deem deviants and criminals.

What are some of the core messages of the carceral/shadow carceral state? Most of those communications are aimed at supporting the primary goals of jails and prisons, to punish, deter, and rehabilitate inmates, and that they contribute to keeping the community safer. Most of the scholarly research on this subject, however, suggests that the ability of corrections to achieve these objectives is more nuanced. In short, if the primary question relates to whether jails and prisons really fulfill these goals, then the answer would be: only in limited contexts (e.g., Cullen and Gendreau 1989; Ross 2008).

Why Do Prison Museums Exist?

As correctional populations in many countries have increased, the demand for carceral facilities has grown too. There are only so many temporary housing solutions (e.g., double and triple bunking, repurposing of gyms and cafeterias as cell space, etc.) that can be used before a proposal is introduced to build a new correctional facility. In turn, correctional planners are faced with numerous decisions about where, when, and how to build new facilities.

Additionally, almost all built structures have lifespans. And correctional institutions are no different. Over time they deteriorate, and it is not economically viable to keep them operating. The jurisdiction where they are located may also be under court order to address crowding/overcrowding and health-related problems and challenges. The jurisdiction may decide that

it could be cheaper and safer to build a new structure for the inmates and correctional officers who live and/or work there than to continuously renovate existing ones or use temporary solutions.

Alternatively, sometimes a community develops around a jail or prison (Eastern State Penitentiary, for instance, opened in Philadelphia in 1829; or Maryland Penitentiary, opened in Baltimore in 1811, and others), and then the facility may eventually be deemed an eyesore, and property values may have increased, thereby making the land under which the facility sits a valuable commodity.

Finally, new designs (such as new-generation jails with podular systems) for correctional facilities are developed and championed, which make the old ones obsolete. Once the decision to build a new jail or prison is taken, the question becomes, what to do with the remaining structure. Sometimes, they are torn down or repurposed, a process that has been dubbed "carceral retasking" (Ferguson et al. 2014).

Why Might Prison Museums Support Prevailing Attitudes Toward Punishment?

One of the reasons why prison museums might support prevailing attitudes toward punishment and criminals is because museums, like other public institutions such as libraries, organize existing knowledge in society and tend to legitimate the existing social order (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Hein 2005). Bennett (1995), for example, traces the origins of discussions regarding the purpose of museums. Echoing Gramsci's (1971/2012) arguments, Bennett (1992: 4) quotes Karp: "the institutions of political society exercise coercion and control, while civil society creates hegemony through the production of cultural and moral systems that legitimate the existing social order." According to Bennett, Karp believes that:

Museums belong wholly within the field of civil society. Museums he says, might be run by local, state, or national governments but they remain agents of civil society and, as such, as places for defining who people are and how they should act and as places for challenging those definitions. . . . [They] can be thought about separately from the agencies of government specifically charged with social control, such as the police and the courts. (Bennett 1995: 864).

This point may be true, but most prison museums are run by for profit or nonprofit organizations, so their ability to reproduce the dominant culture may be limited. Other subtleties should be taken into consideration when assessing access. For example, some may argue that because the National Park Service runs Alcatraz, access is free. Although this is true, in order to visit Alcatraz one must take a ferry across San Francisco Bay to the site, a trip that involves a nominal fee, as does the trip across Table Bay to Robben Island.

Garton-Smith (2000: 8) states:

Although the prison space is preserved physically, it is rarely presented textually to visitors in terms that mark out prisons from the flow of other heritage and tourist experiences Indeed, the marketing of prisons as part of day's leisure reinforces the perception of the prison as a space within a continuum of heritage and tourism, which lacks specificity.

She outlines four difficulties of prisons museums, including her contention that "The tourism context of prison museums results in an ambiguous presentation and experience of sites"; visitor identification with infamous inmates confuses interpretation; that there is a "failure to promote dialogism"; and "the exhibition of a site as apparently unique and disconnected from other types of histories and issues" (Garton-Smith 2000: 8–12).

This position, however, is not universally held. For example, Strange and Kempa (2003: 387) say that "The commodification of history for mass consumption frequently leads to trivialization . . . but it does not precede the presentation of counter-hegemonic stories or tales of injustice." Likewise, it is worth noting that, in some cases, prison museums do not solely support a superficial understanding of incarceration. Fiander et al. (2016: 1), in one of their analyses of penal museums in Canada, present rich data on visitor impressions. The authors state: "While representations that reinforce the penal status quo are observable at most Canadian penal history sites, there are outliers that situate imprisonment as a form of oppression, and account for prisoners' struggles and resistance."

And most importantly, these sites perpetrate misperceptions, myths, and stereotypes challenging the authenticity of the experiences of prisoners, correctional officers, and correctional administrators. Although generating misperceptions, myths, and stereotypes is not their main function, they are the by-product of trying to attract visitors and thereby remaining economically solvent.

Additionally, the idea of normalization with respect to the carceral enter-

its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power." In other writings, as Adams (2001: 96, drawing on Foucault 1972/1994: 220) recounts, he added that "Through the normalization process . . . social divisions are generated by discourses with vested interests in the maintenance of a particular hierarchy; moreover, normalization causes these divisions to appear 'natural.'" Although Foucault's limited statements might translate well to prison museums and prison tourism, this was not his intent. They were directed toward correctional facilities. Nevertheless, there is some semblance of this kind of extension in the recent work of Welch (2015).

Welch provides an engaging, interesting, theoretically informed (mainly via Foucault and Durkheim) and detailed analysis of ten prominent prison museums throughout the world. He is most concerned about the relationship between these structures and notions of punishment. Welch (2015: 1) claims that prison museums "invert the 'Disney' experience," and portray them as depressing and morose environments. He adds: "Setting the record straight is an important dimension of penal tourism because visitors are positioned in ways that convince them of the overall authenticity of the institution" (Welch 2015: 7). He further argues that "cultural power plays a crucial role in prison museums. It is through the transmission of meaning that such sites, educate, enlighten, and in some instances, even civilize visitors" (Welch 2015: 9).

Periodically Welch provides his views on why tourists may be attracted to these places. Supported by numerous descriptions of interactive exhibits, he believes that visiting prison museums enables tourists to get "a sense of hands-on power." He notes: "Curators, however, manage the experience by encouraging visitors to 'take the role of the other,'" and adds, "That form of safe contact gives tourists a tangible experience without feeling its negative consequences. Such distancing is a common phenomenological technique in prison museums" (Welch 2015: 255, 257).

Welch (2015: 263) concludes by stating that "penal tourism is hardly cathartic, since visitors are likely to leave the exhibit pondering the post-modern futility—and inhumanity—of imprisonment." For prison activists and reformers, this might be a much-desired outcome. However, Welch's conclusion does not logically flow and contradicts some of the evidence presented. Why? It is because he has primarily undertaken an observational study. It does not appear that he conducted interviews with visitors, guides, or administrators, and thus one could equally argue that the visit simply reinforces prevailing attitudes about incarceration and the penal experience (e.g., the normalization of the carceral state).

Like the larger literature of dark tourism (e.g., Stone 2006), there is probably a continuum with respect to the degree that prison museum/prison tourism varies with respect to the amount they normalize the carceral/shadow carceral state. Again, this chapter is not meant to lay out a typology but simply spell out the argument and provide examples where they occur.

Other items to keep in mind are the following. In reference to Robben Island and Alcatraz, "penal histories has altered over time; in addition the intervention of external stakeholders and story tellers and the pressure of audience expectations have shaped and reshaped distinctive interpretive molds" (Strange and Kempa 2003: 388). Although managed by state agencies, "official heritage managers and tourism marketers do not control interpretation; rather, the presentation of the penal past is the product of site-specific and historically contingent convergences in the heritage context" (Strange and Kempa 2003: 388).

Challenges Facing Prison Museums

A close reading of the scholarly and popular literature on prison museums/tourism, combined with site visits, informal conversations with visitors and interviews with prison museum directors suggest that prison museums, like most physical entities, are faced with numerous challenges that are often complementary and conflicting. One of the most important hurdles is the generation of enough revenue to pay their expenses (which may be minimized via nonprofit tax status, favorable lease terms, judicious use of volunteers, etc.). If the local, state, or federal government (e.g., Alcatraz and Robben Island) operates the museum, then they are primarily dependent on taxpayer dollars and budgetary allocations to the department that manages them (respectively, in the case of Alcatraz and Robben Island, the United States National Park Service, and the South African Heritage Resource Agency). Other models include the government-run department of corrections administering the prison museum. For example, Kleuskens et al. (2016: 3) point out how "a number of prison agencies around the globe financially support penal history museums, and are involved in the donation of relics and/or site curation." They add, "the symbiotic relationship between penal history museums and agencies responsible for operating carceral facilities is pervasive." Other hybrid models of funding exist. Robben Island, for example, is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site. This attribution should provide increased

media attention and tourists that may come along with that status. And because South Africa is a developing country it is eligible to get some grant funding from UNESCO to operate the museum.

Alternatively, unless there is a well-funded nonprofit foundation running the prison museum, the leadership will typically need to derive income from a combination of ticket sales, donations, grants from government entities, private foundations or benefactors, sales of items from a gift shop, rental of the premises for private events (including themed holiday parties and film crews shooting a movie or television series), and special events. Eastern State Penitentiary, for instance, relies heavily upon what its program director calls "shameless publicity events," including a re-enactment of a famous 1945 escape and an annual celebration of Bastille Day, complete with guillotine, in order to boost awareness of the facility. The annual Halloween event at Eastern, which is allegedly haunted, brings in approximately 60 % of the prison's annual income. In 2007, Eastern's administrators hired 145 seasonal employees (typically unemployed actors) for the Halloween event. The "Terror Behind the Walls" Halloween fright night has garnered several awards from organizations that monitor this type of tourist attraction and/or event (interview with Sean Kelly, Program Director, Eastern State Penitentiary, 23 January 2008). In this manner Eastern shares elements with Fright Tourism, which is defined as "phenomena associated with the tourist attraction to sites with a history of war, genocide, assassination and other tragic events" (Bristow and Newman 2004: 215).

In short, income is mainly earned by presenting an attraction and experience that is engaging and/or entertaining. In order to achieve this latter goal, the administration must take into consideration a number of important factors: competition, perceptions of competition, the nature of visitors, and the presentation of information/quality of display. Some of these challenges are embedded in discussion of marketing techniques, networking, and souvenir sales used by prison museums (e.g., Luscombe, Walby and Piché 2015), while others simply flow from basic business practices. For example, one of the Eastern State Penitentiary Museum's more innovative enterprises is its recent work with artists on on-site installations, thus increasing the status of the institution as a patron of the arts.

Competition for Tourists

Visitors have limited resources including money, time, and interests. For example, tourists to San Francisco wishing to visit Alcatraz must devote a minimum of a morning or afternoon visiting the site. The city also boasts

other attractions that tourists could see, such as the Golden Gate Bridge, a ride on the iconic streetcars, Chinatown, etc. In Philadelphia, Eastern State Penitentiary is considered a medium-sized tourist attraction, with its most immediate competition being the battleship New Jersey and the Mutter (medical) Museum. According to Sean Kelly, Eastern's program director, these destinations are "experiential, off the beaten track, and quirky." There are five must-see tourist attractions in the area, including the Philadelphia Art Museum, the zoo, the Benjamin Franklin Institute, the National Constitution Center, and Independence Hall. There is a huge drop in size between the most popular attractions and the next level of tourist sites, such as Eastern (Kelly interview, 23 January 2008).

Similarly, London, England, is full of interesting tourist attractions. Visitors can explore mainstream sites like the Tower of London, Big Ben, and the British Museum, while those with a taste for the macabre or bizarre might head for the London Dungeon or Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. Then again, tucked away on the Thames River's South Bank, not far from the Millennium Bridge and the Globe Theatre, is The Clink, the former medieval prison, now museum. Touted as London's very first prison, it does a respectable job of introducing its patrons to the more gruesome aspects of London's historical prisons and punishment practices. If the purpose of a visit to The Clink is educational, then the tour must make sense in terms of the curriculum of instructors. Just like prison visits (Smith 2013), an instructor has to justify that the trip is suitable for his or her students as an appropriate educational tool and/or experience. Regardless, competition is rarely between or among other local prison museums. It is typically with other interesting, engaging, or less resource-intensive attractions.

Typical Visitors to the Museum

Who visits prison museums? These can range from elementary to high school students, to college and university students, to tourists on vacation, to researchers. Understandably, not all persons will interpret the exhibits and experience the same way. There will be age and absorption differences among the visitors. Another factor to consider is how literate and knowledgeable are the visitors (e.g., Tsybulskaya and Camhi 2009).

James Kislisbury, former director of The Clink, identified the museum's main target market as educational groups, including those representing public schools and colleges. He aimed to develop a larger market in

London; however, the increased fear of terrorism (resulting especially from the London Tube bombings of 2005) among public school students, teachers, administrators, and parents prevented this. In this, The Clink is not alone. The same situation has occurred within many London museums. However, museum directors hope that if their facilities are successful in the educational realm, students will later visit with their families (James Kislisbury, interviews 11 and 13 July 2006).

Presentation of Information

Other aspects of the prison museum experience are important. Prison museums provide information to their visitors. Exhibits, tour guides, and the post-experience sales of mementos can reinforce the ideas that are presented. Some museum scholars question the quality of the exhibits (Serrell 1996). Welch (2015: 5) notes that:

As objects become part of the collection, they undergo a cultural transformation, passing from use-value (in their initial incarnation) to signifying-value (in their current incarnation). Curators tend to select objects based on one of three criteria . . . The object boasts signifying-value by being rare or revelatory . . . an object may be selected for being typical and representative of a category . . . [or] an object [is selected] due to its remnant-themed iconography; that is, for having belonged to a remarkable person or group.

Prison museums typically display prison memorabilia and paraphernalia, archival photographs of prisoners, staff, and prison life, prison hardware, confiscated weapons and contraband, a death penalty display, and inmates' arts and crafts. Other questions remain: Is there signage? Is it readable? Does it require much previous knowledge on the part of the visitor to understand the message? Are the exhibits interactive and/or tactile? In order to be successful in communicating the intended ideas, do the exhibits present their information in a manner, form, and content that is accessible to their patrons? Sometimes this material is presented in a simplistic manner, and couched in a language that is unsophisticated, bringing in anchors from popular culture (i.e., movies, books, television shows, etc.). The narratives that accompany the displays, which do not always encourage more complicated and complex debates, sometimes perpetuate myths.

According to Kelly (interview 23 January 2008) at Eastern State Penitentiary museum,

We've let the buildings be in a state of semi-ruin and practiced a policy of hands off or light touch in terms of what we have done to improve the place. This means that signage is innocuous. We worry about the number of signs. We also don't have a lot of technology. We probably err on the side of too little. The building speaks for itself.

It is not clear if this is intentional or due to lack of resources. Exhibits may or may not have an exhibit or item label that explain what is taking place. In The Clink, when I visited, there were very few signs. Lack of signage allows visitors to come to their own conclusions (or not) about what they see. It seems logical to assume that these opinions are based on incomplete knowledge (often derived from popular discourse).

Some of the prison museums have tour guides. These range from volunteers to interns. They might be former inmates, correctional officers, or other stakeholders (Shearing and Kempa 2004: 70–71). Other sites do not have this element. Despite the presence of park rangers, there are no tour guides at Alcatraz. Nonetheless, the Alcatraz personnel (including rangers) who work for the National Park Service and are primarily stationed at the site's entrance are very vocal in recounting stories of the prison, its famous inmates, and the island's history—especially given its previous function as a military and federal prison. The narratives of some of the tour guides can be overly reductionist and may solely consist of a series of war stories. Some sites, including Alcatraz, also offer audio self-guided tours via headsets (Levy 2001). These are alternative channels of communication to disseminate and process information and interpretations about the facility.

Alternatively, many prison museums have gift shops that sell trinkets, mementos, souvenirs (such as key chains, wallets, hats, patches, buckles, shot glasses, coffee mugs), arts and crafts made by prisoners, clothing, and books. These items may also contribute to the normalization of the carceral experience (e.g., Luschcombe, Walby and Piché 2015). For example, with respect to Alcatraz, from the site's gift shop—run by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, a nonprofit arm of the Park Service—patrons can buy a whole host of predictable souvenirs, such as replicas of the key used in a 1960s escape, shot glasses that read “I escaped Alcatraz,” toy handcuffs, a model of the “Alcatraz Island” prison, striped pajamas, and “psych ward” uniforms. Naturally, the store also sells many Alcatraz-related books and videos (for a description of the items sold by the gift shop, see, e.g., Welch 2015: 259–62).

In a complementary fashion, some of this material can be purchased at other locations in the city. For example, the commercialized Fisherman's Wharf offers a number of stores selling Alcatraz-related merchandise and

souvenirs. One of the most well known is Cell Block 41 Gift Shop, which bills itself as selling “all things Alcatraz.” The store is owned by Alcatraz Enterprises and has been in business since 1974. There is not only a main store at Pier 41, the original debarkation place for tourists to the island, but also several other stores in the San Francisco area. Although Cell Block 41 hosts a fledgling website, it is almost entirely a brick-and-mortar, retail store-based operation. Most of its wares comprise apparel items, such as shirts and sweat-shirts, though the chain also does a decent trade in Alcatraz-related books.

Like the retail store on Alcatraz itself, Cell Block 41 sells items such as tin cups, nine-inch-high plastic Alcatraz lighthouses, and nickel-plated, hand-cuff-shaped earrings. Customers can buy t-shirts on which are printed the words “Alcatraz Health Club—Swim for Your Life,” “Penitentiary Swim Team,” “Alcatraz Swim Team,” “Property of Alcatraz,” “Alcatraz Reject: Too Cute,” and “Alcatraz Triathlon: Dig, Run, Dive.” Also for sale are black-and-white-striped shirts that resemble the old prison uniforms.

Moreover, just in case you cannot make it to the Island or to Cell Block 41, many other souvenir stores in San Francisco sell, in addition to San Francisco-related items, Alcatraz-relevant items, too. If one is so inclined, from the comfort of your own home, you can peruse a plethora of Alcatraz Prison-related articles sold on Internet auction sites like eBay. Other Alcatraz-related items include keys, postcards, and all sorts of memorabilia.

Finally, although extensive information about any given jail or prison may not be available inside the museum, visitors may be able to gain access to information through pamphlets, brochures, websites, and books. Information may also be disseminated by a tour guide. Sometimes the tour guides are former prisoners and at other times correctional officers who used to work at the facilities (Wilson 2008; 2011). If a tour guide is available, the quality of the information is dependent on how knowledgeable they are, and their biases. Again, not all visitors avail themselves of a tour guide, because of the cost or their personal disposition (i.e., they may not desire this opportunity). Regardless, this information tends to be very basic, focusing on the celebrity cases and most noteworthy events, presented in simplistic manner, and sometimes engages in historical revisionism.

A Tendency Toward Historical Revisionism

Part of the problem faced by prison museums is the tendency to engage in historical revisionism (for a review of this process, see, e.g., Wilson 2011; Walby and Piché 2015). This is not done in a conspiratorial fashion, but as a

consequence of trying to attract a big enough audience to pay the bills. Prison museums are typically underfunded, so they need to attract visitors, while simultaneously explaining a subject that is complicated and subject to misinterpretation. Kelly (interview, 23 January 2008), for example, admits that the tension between Eastern State's true focus on education and its revenue-generating focus on its tourist/kitsch aspect is both good and bad. "This is something we debate about a lot. We do a lot of bait and switch. Visitors come to see Al Capone's cell, but then the bulk of the audio and tour program has a lot of human interest." This is the tightrope that some of the administrators who run these museums face.

The conversion of sites into prison museums may be a highly controversial practice because of the tendency to "Disney-fy" the memory of the institution. For example,

When Alcatraz was closed in the mid-60s, the idea of turning it over to tourists as a "prison museum" was one of the least favored schemes for its reuse. Much more viable were commercial or recreational developments that would have erased its history as a place of punishment or merely featured it as a colorful setting for shops and amusements... Policymakers argued that allowing people to inspect the former prison would be ghoulish and vaguely disrespectful. (Strange and Kempa 2003: 301)

Conclusion

Prison museums have the potential to inform and educate the public about the history of incarceration and what conditions inside were like for both the incarcerated and those responsible for supervising them. Numerous factors that are part of the museum experience affect the information that is presented, interpreted, and retained by visitors. There is also a high likelihood that among visitors to these sites, a self-selection bias comes into play, in that prison museums attract certain types of visitors and repel others. (There is also the phenomenon of the post-tourist (Urry 2002), who acknowledges the commodification involved in the tourist experience, but is happy to go along for the ride. This notion, however, takes my argument in a different direction.) Some tourists may have no more than a wish to engage in a voyeuristic experience with minimal engagement (Ross 2015). This is an important inter-action that cannot be taken overlooked in speculating about the dynamics of prison museums. For example,

Heritage designers...inherit official accounts and popular stories and they constantly catch up with and cater to tourists' preconceived notions and expectations. South Africa's anti-Apartheid movement and Hollywood's myth factory largely set the stage for story telling once these closed prisons were opened up to tourists. In spite of rangers' best efforts to encourage tourists to see Alcatraz in all its complexity, many continue to pose comically inside open cells. In contrast, Robben Island's interpretation staff...preserve an official message...of victory over adversity, even as many South Africans' feelings of disillusionment and frustration in the "new" South Africa mount. (Strange and Kempa 2003: 400–401)

Moreover, these facilities cannot be run on a shoestring. Income must be secured and money must be budgeted for well designed and selected exhibits and displays, ideally ones that engage the visitors. This is often accomplished through skillful administrators, ones who have a deep appreciation of penal history, not only of the site they manage, but also of other similar ones. If their budgets allow, they must also hire capable personnel, and otherwise provide acceptable benefits to volunteers to ensure their continued participation.

In order to better understand this process, the field of prison museum studies needs to go beyond case study analysis and interpretive analysis and move toward more holistic studies that compare multiple museums. This includes the full range of survey and database analysis.

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- Jeffrey Ian Ross**, Ph.D. is a Professor in the School of Criminal Justice, College of Public Affairs, and a Research Fellow of the Center for International and Comparative Law, and the Schaefer Center for Public Policy at the University of Baltimore. He has researched, written, and lectured primarily on corrections, policing, political crime, violence, abnormal-extreme criminal behavior, urban subcultures, and crime and justice in American Indian communities for over two decades. Ross’ work has appeared in many academic journals and books, as well as popular media. He is the author, coauthor, editor, or coeditor of several books. Ross is a respected subject matter expert for local, regional, national, and international news media. From 1995 to 1998, Ross was a Social Science Analyst with the National Institute of Justice. In 2003, he was awarded the University of Baltimore’s Distinguished Chair in Research Award. During the early 1980s, Jeff worked almost four years in a correctional institution.