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The late-modern American jail: epistemologies of space and violence

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One of the most troubling aspects of current trends in American mass incarceration is the extent to which ‘criminality’ is produced within prison walls, primarily in the form of inmate–inmate or inmate–staff assaults. Most methods of prison or jail control have the adverse, and perverse, effect of increasing inmates’ levels of fear, terror, and ultimately violence – with stabbings, beatings, and other types of assaults common occurrences. The design of podular ‘direct supervision’ jails and their accompanying philosophies of punishment aspire to change these conditions. Direct supervision features correctional officers inside each housing unit with no physical barriers impeding supervision, and is intended to create a safe, more humane, stress-free environment for both inmates and staff. This study draws on ethnographic evidence of inmate experiences with direct supervision at Douglas County Department of Corrections in Omaha, Nebraska (USA). The respondents generally do feel safe in this jail environment, for a combination of reasons, some of which are related to spatial design. Inmates identified a number of implications – gains and losses – of this more ‘humane’ form of incarceration in terms of power and empowerment. The study also documents the potential for inmate activism on their own behalf through this design.

KEY WORDS: American jail, spatial design, carceral geography, prison violence, direct supervision, prison architecture

Introduction

Scholars from many diverse disciplines theorise the multiple causes, impacts, and responses to the grossly inhumane trends in American mass incarceration over the past several decades (Gottschalk 2006; Alexander 2012; Wacquant 2009; Haney 2008). One of the most troubling aspects of the staggering rates of incarceration in the US, and one that is sometimes overlooked, is the extent to which criminal activity is produced within prison walls, primarily in the form of inmate–inmate or inmate–staff violence (that is, rather than ‘on the street’). Estimates are that the vast majority of American federal and state inmates are incarcerated for non-violent (typically drug-related) crimes (75% of federal inmates, 80% of state inmates and 50% overall; see Richards 2008; Gottschalk 2006, 21). And yet, once incarcerated and introduced into toxic prison environments, many formerly non-violent offenders become violent ones (Haney 2008). Simply put, prisons and jails are stressful, fearful places, and rather than stem violence they tend to reproduce and even provoke it. This in turn produces many problems but foremost among them are longer sentences and the exacerbation of prison overcrowding.

Scholars of prison architecture and design – including some geographers – have argued that part of the answer to the question of how to reduce high incarceration rates is to focus more attention on the conditions that prompt inmates to share in the ‘delivery’ of violence within prison walls – including examining the role of architectural design and associated management practices (Moran 2013; Morin 2013; Martin and Mitchelson 2009). In this paper I take as a starting premise that most (if not all) methods of prison control – both physical structures and their related penal philosophies – are the adverse, and perverse, effect of increasing levels of stress, fear, terror and ultimately violence in prisons. Stabbings, beatings and other types of assault are common occurrences, often correlating with the most punitive carceral practices found in the American context (arguably at the extreme end of a wide spectrum of such practices globally; Alexander 2012; Gottschalk 2006).

Though prisons and jails have become more closed off and inaccessible over the past few decades (Mears 2012), for this project I went inside one large US county jail, the Douglas County Department of Corrections (DCDC) in Omaha, Nebraska to conduct ethnographic research on relationships among spatial
structure, philosophies of punishment, and inmates’ perception and experience of safety and/or violence. Underlying my analysis is a common insight among geographers that the internal spatial design of an institution is both an integral part of the disciplinary regime but also a major influence on possible social relations (Martin and Mitchelson 2009; Moran 2013); in this case, with respect to relationships and interactions among inmates, and between inmates and correctional staff. My goal was to identify key spatial and social ingredients – from inmates’ perspectives – that helped alleviate or exacerbate some of the conditions under which violence was likely to occur, and specifically those taking place in what many consider the late-modern, progressive jail ‘ideal’, the direct supervision model.

Within America’s ‘carceral topography’ are three basic jail designs: traditional or first-generation linear design; second-generation remote surveillance design; and third-generation (or ‘new-generation’) direct supervision design. Like any building design, each carries intended as well as unintended outcomes (Kraftl and Adey 2008). Underlying each are particular philosophies of punishment, even if individual jail administrators may not follow accepted protocol (Wener 2006, 403). Omaha’s DCDC is considered a wholly direct supervision facility, which means that it features correctional officers (COs) inside each housing unit with no bars impeding supervision (NIC 2012). Direct supervision units are intended to be economical, to enable better choreographing of the daily movements and activities of inmates, and most importantly, to create a safe, stress-free environment for both inmates and staff. Today, direct supervision is widely regarded within the industry as the most practical, least violent, easiest to manage, and most cost-effective way to run a jail (Wener 2006; Parrish 2000; NIC 2014).

As I have argued, the ‘ideal’ spatial form of the late modern American penitentiary is a further extension and evolution of ‘supermax’ solitary confinement, where inmates are locked down, two to a tiny cell, for two years of ‘readjustment’ – the outcome of which is increased fear, stress, despair and ultimately violence (including killings and suicides) (Morin 2013). The principles of the ‘ideal’ spatial form of the late modern jail (direct supervision) – including offering inmates a measure of freedom to circulate, and closer, less restricted access to correctional officers – points to the possibility that loosening prison restrictions will overall effect better inmate behaviour and decrease levels of violence. And in fact the inmates I surveyed generally felt safe during their confinement, although for a variety of reasons, including those related to design. The survey also offered nuanced evidence that the open spaces, the ability to circulate, and greater interaction with COs strengthened feelings of safety and security for some while it diminished such feelings in others.

Ultimately my concern with direct supervision jails is twofold. First, as just noted, it is to understand better inmate experiences of the ostensibly ‘more humane’ direct supervision model of control. Second, though, it is to contextualise these experiences within larger epistemological questions about violence in the carceral setting more generally. In subsequent sections I discuss in more detail the principles of direct supervision as a means of containing violence, while framing my analysis of how different kinds of spaces/architectures enable and/or inhibit different types of experiences and interactions in the jail setting. These serve as preamble to the empirical research findings from the DCDC and their analysis. How do inmates fare today in this late modern jail? The ethnographical findings inform the final discussion, which draws out issues of power and empowerment as they relate to direct supervision, and also document the potential for inmate activism on their own behalf through this design.

**Space and late modern punishment: the direct supervision ‘ideal’**

Many geographers have begun to pay closer attention to the impact that architecture, design, and technology of correctional facilities have on the experience of imprisonment and on the behaviour of those who occupy and move through carceral spaces (Moran 2013; Van Hoven and Sibley 2008; Martin and Mitchelson 2009). Such scholars analyse a number of prison features, including the relationship of architecture to modes of punishment; cost–benefit relationships across types of prison designs; and the ways by which architecture, design, and technology impact prisoners’ emotional and psychological reactions to incarceration. Martin and Mitchelson (2009, 459–60) argue that study of prison architecture is an important intervention for geographers to take seriously, since confinement and the ‘social practices of immobilisation are fundamentally reliant on spatial tactics, or the use of space to control people, objects, and their movement’.

Many scholars working at the nexus of architecture and geography argue for moving beyond an emphasis on the symbolic meanings of buildings (representationalism) towards a more active and embodied analysis of the lived experience and everyday practices that go on within them – studying relationships among practice, materiality, and affect or feeling (the non- or more-than representational) (Kraftl and Adey 2008; Jewkes and Moran 2014). Kraftl and Adey (2008, 228) argue for more robust explorations of the ‘nitty-gritty, material, localised details of architectural design and form-making’. Several works have shown, for example, how prisoners influence their environments for their own ends, including attempting to maintain privacy, avoid
behind direct supervision is staff ownership of
(Garland County 2011). In addition, the concept
humanness instead of the cold eye of the T.V. camera'
moods of prisoners, to anticipate danger, to provide
every half-hour) in order ‘to see, to hear, to sense the
officer periodically circulates throughout the unit (e.g.
room and are locked into their cells at night. The
recreation yards. Inmates spend their days in the day
hygiene facilities and fixtures, food service areas, and
sleeping, dayroom space with tables and seats,
weapons). The self-contained units feature cells for
impeding supervision, carrying only radios (no
each housing unit or pod with no bars or glass
COs had visual (or other) access only from the front of
the cells. In the 1960s, second-generation podular
units were introduced with a remote surveillance
design that allowed officers to see as much of a
housing area or dayroom from a single vantage point
as possible. These placed staff inside a secure control
room from which they could see into dayrooms and
associated cells, but restricted their ability to respond
to problems or effectively interact with inmates since
they were not meeting them face-to-face (Parrish
2000, 84). Moreover, administrators feared that
inmates controlled too much of the overall prison
space. As Parrish (2000, 84–5) argues, ‘staff managed
the hallways and control rooms, generally about 10
percent of the facility, while inmates ran the housing
areas, roughly 90 percent of the area’.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons developed the
concept of direct supervision in the 1970s, in
response to a Congressional directive to build prisons
that were ‘humane institutions whose environment
would respect the legal and moral rights of
individuals’ (Zupan and Menke 1991, 185). The first
US direct supervision county jail, California’s
Martinez Detention Center, was built in 1981 and
Florida’s Orient Road Jail subsequently became the
largest direct supervision facility in the country
when it opened in 1990 (Parrish 2000). Today,
approximately 350 of the nation’s 3300 county jails
(or 5955 city and county jails combined) incorporate
design features and principles of direct supervision.

Direct supervision architecture is based on three
categories: podular design, interaction space and
personal space (Bayens et al. 1997). In the model
direct supervision facility an officer is placed inside
each housing unit or pod with no bars or glass
impeding supervision, carrying only radios (no
weapons). The self-contained units feature cells for
sleeping, dayroom space with tables and seats,
hygiene facilities and fixtures, food service areas, and
recreation yards. Inmates spend their days in the day
room and are locked into their cells at night. The
officer periodically circulates throughout the unit (e.g.
every half-hour) in order ‘to see, to hear, to sense the
moods of prisoners, to anticipate danger, to provide
humanness instead of the cold eye of the T.V. camera’
(Garland County 2011). In addition, the concept
behind direct supervision is staff ownership of
operation. The National Institute of Corrections (NIC
2014) describes direct supervision as combining ‘a
specific jail design that conveys an expectation of
positive inmate behavior, facilitates staff interaction
with inmates, and promotes management of inmate
behavior’. Zupan (1991, 99) also notes that many of
the ‘symbols of incarceration’ are absent in the
interior design – bars, gates, grills, metal and steel
furnishings – ‘the cage-like feeling typically
associated with incarcerative environments’ are
absent.

Epistemologies of space and prison violence
Historically the corrections industry has been
dominated by the assumption that jails house violent
and destructive individuals who will assault staff,
destroy property, and try to escape if given the chance,
and so facilities are designed to prevent these
behaviours (Zupan and Menke 1991, 181). The
progressive spatial design of direct supervision is
intended to allow inmates to feel safe during their
confinement, able to serve their time with ease and
confidence; as opposed to feeling tense, stressed and
fearful, and thus more liable to respond to negative
conditions of confinement with violence and
aggression.

Vast literatures from numerous disciplines
(including criminal justice, sociology, psychology,
health sciences and architectural history) offer
explanations for the putative causes of physical
violence within prisons and jails (of all types). Explanations span a very wide spectrum, ranging from
staff culture and behaviour to overcrowding and the
weather. Wortley’s (2002) situational control
approach focuses on ‘opportunity reduction’ in
managing prisoner violent behaviour. Other scholars
argue that the best predictors of violence are length of
sentence, type of sentence and time served; visitation
frequency and type; or participation in gang activity
and integration (e.g. Bales and Miller 2012; Worrall
and Morris 2012). Many sociological studies have
focused on inmate culture and demographics, arguing
that factors such as age, gender, race, education and
background are the best indicators of potential violent
behaviour (e.g. Wolff et al. 2007; McCorkle 2004).
McCorkle (2004, 204–11) for example isolates age as
determining types of prison behaviour. At Tennessee
State Prison he found that the fearful, older and more
socially isolated inmates primarily used avoidance
behaviours to maintain safety, whereas younger
inmates tended to use ‘pre-emptive self-defense’
tactics to convey a tough exterior and thus avoid
victimisation or exploitation.

Crewe et al. (2014, 57–67) offer a more nuanced
spatial analysis of such ‘masks’ or performances. They
argue that diverse ‘emotion zones’ exist in prisons (in
addition to ostensibly public and private spaces) –
such as visiting rooms, chapels, recreational areas,
and classrooms – which offer opportunities for a range
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of emotional expressions. Other scholars’ work resonates with this attention to space, particularly in finding significant effects of prison architecture and design on incidents of ‘misconduct’ (Wener 2006; Fairweather and McConville 2000; Morris and Worrall 2014). Just to name one further example: Morris and Worrall (2014) found that in selected Texas prisons, architectures similar to direct supervision (‘campus’ design) were associated with non-violent prisoner misconduct such as theft, but were not associated with violent misconduct.

Clearly, many factors are in play in the complex environment of the prison, and it is also admittedly the case that ‘violence’ in this context is very hard to document, and indeed, to define (see Discussion below). Federal or state prisons and penitentiaries (the focus of many studies) and the average county jail can be quite distinct kinds of places in the American context. People incarcerated in county or city jails are serving shorter sentences (typically less than a year) for less serious crimes, or are awaiting hearings or trials; while those in state or federal prisons are serving longer sentences for more serious crimes. One might question whether a useful comparison can be made between the violence occurring in such maximum-security facilities among the hardened recidivists incarcerated at them, with that of the county jail and their typically low-level or first-time offenders. For my purposes it seems that – yes – when it comes to the factors that produce cultures of prison violence, the comparison is apt one: county jails also employ disciplinary sanctions, restrictive housing and segregation; gang culture pervades prisons and jails at all levels of correctional facilities across the country, as does the oftentimes ‘macho’ staff culture; and many if not most inmate experiences of confinement that lend themselves to violent outcomes (loss of freedom, victimisation, crowding, untrained staff) cross these scalar divides.

Many studies that address violence specifically with respect to direct supervision begin with the presumption that incarceration itself produces symptoms of stress on inmates than those in traditional jails (Zupan 1991, 155–62). A number of studies provided evidence that the rate of violent incidents were significantly reduced with direct supervision, by 30% to as much as 90% (Zupan and Menke 1991, 191–3; Kerle 1998, 197–201; Wener 2006; Parrish 2000). Bayens et al. (1997, 60–1) also reported that assaults, batteries, sex offenses, attempted suicides, possession of weapons, and escapes were dramatically reduced. Yocum et al. (2006, 1804), too, found that inmates’ levels of boredom, aggression and stress decreased in direct supervision facilities, and they also found ‘partial’ evidence that direct supervision provided inmates greater autonomy and control over their environment.

And although from a context very different from that of the US, Beijersbergen et al. (2014, 6, 24), in their study of six different designs of remand facilities in the Netherlands, found that inmates’ perceptions of fear of violence as well as the actual occurrence of it came out best for those housed in the design type most closely resembling the direct supervision model.

Given the continuing growth of the prison industrial complex throughout most of the US, it is important to keep in mind that the most acknowledged downside to direct supervision jails is that they are prone to overcrowding – inmate to staff ratio has increased from 50–1, to 64–1, to 72–1 or higher in many places. Bayens et al. (1997, 60–1) found that when facilities were overcrowded, ‘rule infractions skyrocketed’. But what of other trade-offs and costs associated with direct supervision, particularly for inmates? It is especially with these and other concerns in mind that I turn now to the DCDC in Omaha – ranked one of the top 50 jails in the US (Jail Exchange 2013) – for a first-hand look.

Douglas County Department of Corrections: a case study

DCDC, a ‘medium rise’ jail, sits in the heart of downtown Omaha, Nebraska, surrounded by loft-style residences in restored buildings, restaurants,
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hotels and various retail establishments in this city of nearly a half million residents. The facility is adjacent to the bus station, as well as the Douglas County Criminal Justice Center that includes a work release centre, drug court, probation and Re-entry Assistance Program. DCDC is a 1453 capacity jail (NIC 2012, 90), but was only 70% occupied when the study was conducted in 2013. The average stay at this county facility that year was 21 days; with inmates’ sentences ranging from a few hours, to a few days, weeks, months, or several years for those in pre-trial status. Two-thirds of its inmates are considered county residents; the other third are awaiting hearings on federal crimes, or are detained Spanish-speaking ‘immigration cases’, being held for deportation. The facility employs approximately 425 correctional, kitchen, medical, engineering/maintenance and administrative staff. A pre-service training program requires all new COs to complete five weeks of classroom training plus an additional four weeks of field training (Earley, personal communication 22–25 April 2013; cf Tartaro 2006).

The DCDC opened in 1979 with an original capacity of 202, and has undergone two major renovations since (in 1989 and 2005) to bring it to its present capacity of 30 housing units, 26 for men and four for women, the largest housing 64 inmates. All visits, except with chaplains and attorneys, are conducted through video monitors. The facility features three types of housing unit, all considered direct supervision. The ‘Annex’ is a dormitory-style wing housing up to 64 minimum-security inmates per bay, and featuring open barracks and open showers and toilet facilities. One correctional officer sits at an open, raised station or podium with another in the ‘bubble’ (control station between units) at night. The ‘old side’ includes medium- and maximum-security units, each housing up to 36 people, as well as one unit set aside for protected custody inmates. Two levels of cells, which inmates are locked into during ‘counts’ and at night, surround the central day room area, with a single open, unraised officer station at the front. The ‘new side’ holds 64 medium- and maximum-security inmates per unit, which in turn feature open-air recreation, two levels of cells surrounding a central day room area, and a correctional officer situated on an open, raised platform/podium.

DCDC inmates are grouped by a risk classification – low, medium, high – based on the widely used NIC Model of Classification point system that takes into account a number of factors including age, number of times incarcerated, length of stay, substance abuse history, ‘demeanor’ at the time of booking, alleged crime, gang affiliation and pre-trial standing, among others (Foxall, personal communication 5 July 2012; DCDC 2012). A range of white, African-American and Latino gangs are active. I note this because what is termed the ‘keep separate’ policy is in use, where, for instance, known members of rival gangs are not housed in the same unit (if they in fact admit to such affiliation, which they may or may not do since such affiliation carries strong incentives as well as disincentives, including ‘risk points’). According to one authority, ‘keep separates’ include but are not limited to co-defendants, inmates involved in altercations, inmates who may be related to a victim of another inmate, and members of criminal threat groups; ‘about one-third of the population has at least one “keep separate”, some with many more’ (Earley, personal communication, 22–25 April 2013).

Census data at the start of the study indicated the facility overall was comprised of white prisoners (37%), black (48%), Hispanic (12%), American Indian (2%) and Asian (less than 1%) (not including immigration and federal detainees). Of those participating in the study, their self-reported racial identities ranged from white (25%), black (54%), Hispanic (11%), American Indian (3%), mixed (4%) and other (3%). Such demographics are important to keep in mind, considering that as of the 2010 US census, 73% of the city of Omaha (which is wholly encompassed within Douglas County) was white and the remainder racial-ethnic minorities (including 14% African Americans).

Methodology

I began thinking about direct supervision design in July 2012 when I was offered the opportunity for a tour of the DCDC arranged by my brother, who was Medical Director of the facility at that time. This first tour might easily be construed as what Piché and Walby (2010) call a ‘carceral tour’, a highly orchestrated visit with positive impression management key to the experience. The lieutenant-guide’s job was likely to present the institution in as positive a light as possible – and indeed my impression of the facility was one of relative calm, cleanliness, openness and order (at least in comparison to some of the truly ghastly prisons and jails I have visited). Nonetheless, I felt fortunate to be enabled access to the ‘inside’ and this one-on-one experience at all. This initial tour inspired me to investigate the inmate experience of direct supervision, and over the course of the next several months I discussed my ideas with the Director, who subsequently approved the survey instrument, while I meanwhile cleared the research through my university’s IRB protocol for working with and protecting vulnerable populations1.

I returned to conduct inmate surveys in April 2013.2

During this latter visit I received an official orientation and more comprehensive tour of the facility; collected documentation (e.g. the inmate handbook, incident reports); and after selecting individuals for participation from among the 18 eligible and occupied male units through a simple random sample technique,
conducted the inmate surveys over a period of one week in a classroom set aside for that purpose. I also ate ‘a tray’ – a typical inmate lunch (not recommended). By this stage the institutional ‘script’ being developed was categorically my own and that of the 100 inmates who volunteered for the study; any attempts at propagandising for the institution’s benefit were not evident (cf. Piché and Walby 2010)

The survey methodology was generally modelled on that of Wooldredge (1994), Drake (2012) and other cross-sectional, localised ethnographic studies that draw primary data from inmates’ written self-reports understood within broad social or historical contexts. The written survey approach, in combination with study of institutional records and archives, worked well within my (limited budget) constraints, primarily because of the short average length of imprisonment and high turnover of the population; because a CO was required to be in the classroom at all times, which allowed for more candid and confidential responses via quiet writing; and because my experience with a local non-profit prisoner rights group in Pennsylvania (which receives hundreds of letters from inmates each month) led me to understand that written documentation, especially with open-ended questions, is an effective medium of communication for people with lots of time on their hands (the survey took upwards of 45 min to complete).

The 17-question survey first asked inmates to describe the layout and design of their housing units, in order to get them ‘thinking spatially’. They were then asked to describe the types of interaction they had with other inmates and with COs within the units. The survey asked whether they felt the design or layout of the unit affected the type and content of their interactions and communications with COs and amongst each other, and if so, in what ways. The survey then questioned whether they felt the facility’s spatial design or layout contributed to their feelings of safety and/or danger and if so, in what ways. Individuals were also asked about private space (see below), and whether they had ever been involved in a physical conflict at DCDC. Finally, they were asked whether responding to the survey might carry any potential negative consequences from staff or other inmates (see Note 1).

**Findings**

First I should note that in addition to the written questionnaire, I talked informally with inmates while they awaited escort back to their housing units after completing the survey. To some extent they used this opportunity to discuss issues other than those on the survey, such as commenting on the (poor) quality of the food or infrastructural problems such as water leaks. However, during these sessions they also elaborated on their responses to the survey: anecdotally the lack of privacy in the bathrooms and showers in the dormitory side of the building was a frequent topic, as was the benefit of fresh air in the newer wing’s outdoor recreation area.

In written survey responses, when asked if they felt generally safe from harm at DCDC, a slight majority (59%) of the men responded yes; 23% responded no (‘I never feel safe in jail’; ‘No cuz if you want to fight you can for at least 2–3 min before they get there’); and 18% were unsure or ambivalent (‘Really I feel safe because I be damned if I let somebody harm me but it’s not safe because you never know what gone happen.’) Of the 59% who generally felt safe from harm, many referred to the layout and design as relevant to their safety (‘Yes there’s a camera, & the CO is right in there with us’; ‘Yes I do feel pretty safe because the COs are there and less chance of conflict with another inmate’; ‘Yes the correctional officers are always watching us’). However the singularly most consistent response (11%) related safety to personal behaviour:

Yes [I feel safe], but its not ‘cause of the layout of the facility, or even the staff. Its because when you respect others they give that same respect back.

I don’t depend on nobody to keep me safe but me.

I know ho[w] to protect myself and I’ve always been protecting myself for my whole life. I can watch my own back at all times.

When asked the safety question somewhat differently – had they ever felt in danger at the facility, either from another inmate or from correctional staff – a more conclusive 70% responded that they had never felt in danger at DCDC. Fifteen percent had experienced a sense of danger; and 15% responded ‘yes and no’. Of those who had definitely experienced feeling danger, 6% felt this from the staff (‘Sometimes I do from the COs cause they can do what they want to us and its our word vs. theirs’); and 9% felt this from other inmates (‘Yes people are always walking around with emotions running high and blow up for small things all the time like who is next on the phone or say something the wrong way’).

When asked explicitly whether there was anything about the spatial layout of the facility that contributed to feelings of safety or danger, 59% responded no, while one-third or 34% responded yes (and 7% were unsure or left the question blank). Some of those who felt the design related to safety attributed this to the protection offered by the CO (‘Yes I believe . . . it more safe for inmates and staff, and also give the staff chance to get to know the inmates in the mod, and slow down the chance of drugs coming in’; ‘Yes there is a CO in your mod to deter some of the danger issues’). However, the most consistent explanation (13%) was that the open unit layout presented a threat to their safety – it left them feeling more vulnerable.
Cameras don’t have sound, not enough cameras in mod & CO’s don’t always pay the best attention to stuff that is away from the CO [area].

I think that the units are to big and when I get around to many kids I get mad really easy.

I [would] feel safer being locked in a cell at night.

Perhaps most significantly in terms of the aspirations of direct supervision, when asked directly whether the layout of their unit affected the type of contact they have with COs, one-third (33%) responded yes, while just over half (56%) responded no, the layout had no such effect (the remainder were unsure). Those who felt the layout affected their relationship with COs offered both positive and negative impacts: 17% felt the layout made them feel safer because the COs ‘can see everything’; whereas 13% felt that the layout gave the CO easy opportunity to take action against inmates or invaded their privacy. Such responses ranged from:

Yes [the layout affects the type of contact I have with the CO] because they’re out in the open, there with us. They’re right there for you, if you need them.

I guess having the C.O. inside with you makes you feel a little safer.

Yes because there in the room with you so you don’t have to talk to them threw a window or a door you can see them and get better help that way.

One on one conversations appear that you’re snitching or sucking up, better to keep it formal.

If you are gonna do something against the rules only one guard to worry about.

It’s safer for CO’s now.

Yes some [COs] are really strict and do they job, and others let you get away with some stuff or really don’t care, it depends on who is the officer working.

One of the most significant findings of the survey was that the availability of open, interactive spaces in the housing units offered ample opportunities for inmates to share information and life experiences with one another. Rather than these ‘community spaces’ simply offering COs better access to inmates’ moods and behaviours (Wener 2006; Parrish 2000; NIC 2014; Garland County 2011), they also allowed inmates face-to-face interactive space to discuss topics ranging from their families, girlfriends, ‘old times,’ news, and TV programs, to self-help topics and those addressing their conditions of confinement and rights abuses. When identifying those topics discussed with one another, 69%, or over two-thirds of the men noted that they talked about their basic rights, including their legal rights, with one another. Specifically they talked about racial justice and the overall American justice system (9%), their rights on the inside (21%), and their rights on the outside (39%).

On the issue of privacy, when asked if there were any spaces in the unit that could be considered one’s own private space to occupy or control, 45% of the men (representing all three housing unit types), responded no (‘No, I have a cell, but I don’t control the space’; ‘Hell no in the bays there is no private area not even the bathroom or showers is private’; ‘No. It is very clear that everything here belongs to them’). Alternatively, 51% (in both the dorms and in units with shared cells) felt that they did enjoy some privacy and control of space – they considered either their bed or bunk, or the cell as a whole, their own (‘Yes my bunk and the little locker they give us for commissary [is my own space]’; ‘My bunk is mine only and my cell is me and my roommates home I feel safest there’; ‘Yes my room is my personal space’). The remainder understood the fleeting nature of what ‘occupy and control’ might mean in the prison environment: for example, ‘[Its only my own] if I’m currently occupying that space such as a phone or a chair or room but once I move it fair game’.

Finally, the survey questioned whether participants had ever been involved in a physical conflict during their current incarceration at DCDC; 23% responded that they had; 77% that they had not. Of those who reported positively, the reasons ranged from conflict over the telephone, the television, noise (especially at night), ‘standing up’ for someone, to conflict with staff. These self-reports can be usefully compared to Table 1, a summary of the DCDC’s ‘Significant Incident Reports’ for the four years preceding this survey (2008–12). These summaries offer an institutional viewpoint of measurable violence each year, which, among other things, prompt a fuller discussion of what we mean by prison violence and safety in the first place.

Discussion

One of the greatest misconceptions about prisons and jails today is that the violence that occurs within their walls originates solely in the individual; that criminals are locked up because they are bad or unfortunate people, driven to crime and trouble from some indelible social or psychological cause, and that their criminal nature will follow them wherever they go. Many legislators, judges, educators and journalists, as well as much of the public, seem unaware of the extent to which prison and jail violence is a product of the carceral system, not an explanation for its need. Many American politicians and court officials, particularly those who advocate a ‘tough on crime’
stance, often camouflage many of the institutional causes of prison violence and seek instead to further extend the prison sentences of offenders who commit crimes while incarcerated – and this in the name of ostensibly keeping our streets and communities safer (Gottschalk 2006). Such tactics, though, have not proven effective and we need to consider alternatives.

In this project I set out to explore the impacts that spatial design and correlated philosophies of punishment can have on the experience of imprisonment, on prison violence, and on relationships possible among inmates and staff. Underlying my ethnographic approach was the notion that an inmate’s perception or sense that a given environment is safe or threatening is tantamount to that environment actually being safe or threatening (James 2005; Kraftl and Adey 2008; Crewe et al. 2014). From that perspective it seems important to first observe that nearly a quarter (23%) of my respondents self-reported being involved in a physical conflict since incarceration (and this from the circumscribed sample of inmates allowed into the study; see Note 2). This number is considerably higher than the most recent (four-year) official counts shown in Table 1 which includes annual figures of inmate–inmate and inmate–staff assaults for the institution as a whole. For the year 2011–12, only 92 such assaults were reported, for example, approximately a 6–9% rate (for the institution as a whole and assuming 70–100% capacity). The numbers in the table are difficult to place within a meaningful context for various reasons, however, including that corrections do not make comparative information public or easily accessible, and there is strong disincentive for inmates themselves to report violence due to fear of reprisal or retaliation. On top of this, not all incidents of violence are perceived as such by inmates and staff (Wolff et al. 2007, 596), and some inmates are clearly victimised more than others (Crewe et al. 2014, 57; McCorkle 2004).

Accurate data reporting also varies from state to state and among different types of institutional cultures. Most institutions record only those incidents that reach a particular threshold of seriousness, such as those that require medical care or hospitalisation. And indeed without more information as to their cause (fights, recreational injuries, etc.) it is hard to say but the large numbers of ‘Medical injuries sustained’ could tell a bigger story of the DCDC than perhaps any other line item in Table 1 over the four-year period (and the notable drop that occurred between 2011–12 and previous years would require

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inmate on inmate w weapon</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inmate on inmate w/out weapon</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inmate on staff w weapon</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inmate on staff w/out weapon</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Forced moves’</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disturbances (fights, 4 or more)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical agents used</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sort team used</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5 point restraints</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical injuries sustained</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted escapes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustained grievances (inmate favour)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Death reason)</td>
<td>Illness, suicide</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>All natural causes</td>
<td>Illness, suicide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 DCDC significant incident summaries, 2008–12

The late-modern American jail

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its own separate study). That said, ‘forced moves’, ‘chemical agents used’, ‘4/5 point restraints’ and of course deaths are serious and critical barometers of a more inmate-centred understanding of jail violence since, of course, there is no line on the table otherwise representing staff-on-inmate violence.

Inmates in the current study experienced direct supervision for a relatively short period of time in comparison to the larger-scale longitudinal studies identified above (e.g. Bayens et al. 1997; Wener 2006). Yet the insights of DCDC inmates tell an important story about how they experience their imprisonment. Survey results showed that 70% of the men had never felt in danger at the facility; asked differently, 59% reported that they generally felt safe from harm there. While not losing sight of important policy factors that influence the production of violence inside Omaha’s DCDC – perhaps most notably that of ‘keep separates’ – a number of key factors emerged as relevant to their sense of safety. Eleven percent for example relied on their ‘own person’ and vigilance to keep safe, a measure that resonates with the findings of criminologists such as Crewe et al. (2014, 57), McCorkle (2004) and others who point out just how debilitating the ‘aura’ or threat of violence can be, in and of itself.

That said, unit design and layout emerged as a key factor in determining safety and danger for a third (34%) of the survey respondents, although notably 13% of these felt that open space increased their vulnerability and presented threats from both staff and other inmates. New generation jails are intended to be safer for staff as well as inmates, and they are also intended to reinforce institutional rather than inmate control of space. In this study, 30% of the respondents acknowledged that the spatial design impacted their relationship with the CO – and of these, 17% felt this was a positive impact, contributing to their sense of protection and safety; whereas another 13% felt this to have a negative impact. Placed in Yocum et al.’s terms (2006), 17% of inmates felt the trade-off for safety was worth the close proximity of COs, whereas 13% felt disempowered by what they considered the more insidious (overt or covert) way in which order and control was maintained (see Zupan 1991, 167; cf Parrish 2000, 84–5). Most inconclusive was the divide on the issue of personal space, with roughly half feeling they had some private space to occupy and control and the other half clearly articulating the opposite. If anything these views highlight how contradictory the aspirations of direct supervision can be within corrections generally (e.g. Zupan 1991; Bayens et al. 1997; Parrish 2000) as well as, we might speculate, among the COs and other staff at DCDC.

Does this ostensibly more humane model of prisoner treatment offer a meaningful, more civil direction in corrections? In many ways, the above responses are not unlike those one might imagine of other policed spaces: police patrolling an area might be seen as providing a feeling of safety to those who are most vulnerable or weakest, and/or those who ‘buy into’ their power and authority. For others, the police represent an intrusion or an obstacle, particularly for those who question the validity or credibility of police authority, the social structures in which they are embedded, and their fundamental ‘goodness’ or justness (Wacquant 2009; Shabazz 2009, 295). As many scholars have shown, a wide range of carceral techniques deployed particularly in African-American neighbourhoods – surveillance, policing, harassment and containment – are the same as those used in prisons. Thus they prepare young men for prison life while undoubtedly resulting in competition for power and control on the inside.

Many involved in the ‘justice architecture’ movement are at the forefront today in discussing the potential for humane prisons and jails (Buikema 2005; Wasserman et al. 2000; Swan 2013; Simon et al. 2012), as are some geographers (Jewkes and Moran 2014). Prison architecture is a booming business (with revenues expected to jump to a staggering 2.4 billion in the next five years; Swan 2013), and many architects are beginning to condemn the industry’s participation particularly in design of torturous security housing units and execution chambers but other forms of incarceration as well. While we should not be seduced into believing that we can ‘build our way’ out of the prison problem (Swan 2013), we in the US also cannot tolerate ‘fear-suffused environments’ either (Moran and Jewkes forthcoming). Perhaps the Nordic model can offer some useful insights into the rehabilitative ‘benevolent prison’, at least in comparison to the concrete municipal blocks common elsewhere which seek to do little else than warehouse and punish offenders (Moran forthcoming; Jewkes and Moran 2014).

Within the context of American mass imprisonment and correctional crack-down in recent decades, the design turn toward construction of inmate interaction spaces in direct supervision jails thus especially seems to be a step in the right direction. If all of the aspirations of direct supervision have not been realised at DCDC (Bayens et al. 1997; Wener 2006; NIC 2014), and if it is obviously the case that much remains to be done in reducing the threat and actualisation of violence in its many forms, it is also nonetheless clear that other human needs for social interaction and relation have been plausibly realised there (Yocum et al. 2006; Zupan 1991). In that sense Leder’s analysis (in Baxter et al. 2005, 207–9) is worth considering, as he insists on the power of space to enable community relations and empowerment in prison:

One of the ways to maintain political power over people is . . . to keep [them] isolated in cells. . . . space is crucial in determining the possibility of social interactions, because, after all, as an individual, you only have so
much freedom or power unless you associate with others and form communities to accomplish things in the world.

The DCDC ‘community spaces’ offer prisoners opportunities to meet, interact and potentially transform prison space into spaces of resistance – 69%, or over two-thirds of the men, noted that in them they talked about their basic rights, including their legal rights, with one another. This study then provides some evidence that direct supervision and its open and shared community spaces allows some measure of inmate activism on their own behalf for those with few such opportunities.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I owe a debt of gratitude to the 100 DCDC inmates who participated in the study. I hope I have captured in some measure, ‘what’s on an inmate’s mind’. I also offer my sincere thanks to Director Mark Foxall and the staff at DCDC, especially Captain Mary Earley, for their willingness to open the facility to my scrutiny. Alex Skitolsky offered immeasurable help in designing the survey. Thanks finally to Dominique Moran, two anonymous referees, and Klaus Dodds for helping me focus and tighten the script. This research was aided by a Bucknell University Presidential Fellowship for which I am most grateful.

Notes

1 Extensive measures were taken to protect the rights and welfare of participating inmates. This included explaining to each potential participant the intent of the research, the survey, and the consent form (which ensured their anonymity and confidentiality of responses). I was explicit about the ethical issues surrounding research with prisoners and the obvious uneven power relations inherent in my ability to conduct it, particularly as they related to my positionality as an academic as well as my relationship to my brother. After this introduction, those wishing to participate did so, and those who declined were escorted back to their unit’s day room. Not incidentally, the final survey question asked whether participating in the study might carry any potential negative side effects. Fully 94% thought it would not, and thanked me for asking their opinions: ‘it’s good to know what’s on an inmate’s mind’.

2 Out of 130 men invited to participate (which would have represented 30% of the total eligible population), exactly 100 chose to do so. They were brought to the classroom in small groups of 8–10. Eligibility was based on a number of criteria: they volunteered for the study and signed consent forms; they could read English at a fifth grade or higher level; and they were allowed to participate by the Director. Those excluded by the Director included those in the infirmary; those temporarily detained at the facility for immigration violations (‘they are not part of the local community’). I readily acknowledge that responses from men in these groups would have elicited valuable insights, but I had no control over these exclusions and worked with the inmates I could. (And I also note that the study focused only on incarcerated men; women’s responses to direct supervision have unfortunately been generally overlooked.) Not incidentally, the approximate cost of housing each inmate is $90/day, with meals accounting for 0.97 cents each (Earley, personal communication 22–25 April 2013).

3 That said, I inevitably encountered and talked informally with many staff who shared their opinions about the institution, most of which I would characterise as gossip. Because these informal ‘data points’ were not systematically collected I have excluded them from my analysis.

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