

Declinations of prison from past to future

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How to preserve (or not) what we have inherited is a critical contemporary issue that significantly influences the shaping of a sustainable and desirable future. In a world grappling with the challenge of conserving our cultural heritage for the years to come, the boundaries defining what constitutes heritage have grown increasingly nuanced.

This booklet delves into the ongoing international discourse surrounding the preservation (or not) of the built legacy. By examining how even unacknowledged aspects of our inheritance play an integral role in the broader conversation, this publication offers insights into the evolving perspectives shaping the potential futures of our built legacy.

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Designing the future of the past

# Designing the future of the past

A survey across the contemporary international debate



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The contributions, spanning critical heritage, architecture of reuse, future literature studies, post-preservation, and counter-preservation, outline the dual nature of the built legacy of the past—both a positive and negative commons influenced by social, cultural, economic, and environmental contexts.

By providing a comprehensive overview of leading international theories, the book aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue on the adaptation of urban legacy, heritage, and landscape.

This publication takes inspiration from the 2022 Intensive Seminar ‘Designing the Future of The Past’ and the concurrent PhD Excellence Course 2022-2023 at Politecnico di Torino. The records from the seminar guest lecturers point out diverse ways of approaching the Future of the Past, while PhD students’ works developed in the course assess the topic in the framework of their ongoing PhD research. In the end, the Q & A section addresses a few questions that have emerged from the seminar discussion.



# Designing the future of the past

A survey across the contemporary international debate

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This volume collects the outcomes of the International Seminar "Designing the Future of the Past," held on 17-18<sup>th</sup> February 2022 in Turin. The event was conducted in collaboration with the Doctoral programs in "Architecture: History and Project" and featured the participation of the PhD program in "Architectural and Landscape Heritage" at Politecnico di Torino. This intensive seminar served as an integral component of the DASP PhD Course titled "Designing the Future of the Past" for the academic year 2022-2023.

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# DECLINATIONS OF PRISON FROM PAST TO FUTURE

## Abstract

Over the centuries prisons have been and still are the place where people lost their personal freedom. In the past, imprisonment had a strictly punitive character: it was the place where prisoners served their punishment, often in inhuman conditions precisely because guilty. In more recent times, legislators achieved improvements for the condition of inmates, transforming the prison into a place of rehabilitation leading to the reintegration into civil society. Many complexes have lost their original function over time: some have become places of memory of a past that should not be forgotten, others have been converted to new uses compatible with the original structure.

## Introduction

Prisons have ancient origins, and can be said to have originated with the birth of cities. Until the middle of the 18th century, imprisonment was a way of preventing the accused from evading punishment while awaiting conviction or execution: prison was therefore not a purpose-built place of detention, but a building usually close to the court. From the middle of the 18th century prison became a place of detention and acquired social importance, because deprivation of liberty had become the predominant penalty for offenders. The first modern prison model was theorised at the end of the 18th century by Jeremy Bentham, who proposed the Panopticon: the prison design was arranged in a circle shape with an observation point located in the centre and cells organized in tiers; in this way few jailers could control many inmates. From this shape the architectural structure consisting of arms or radius and roundabouts derived. At the end of the 19th century the so-called telegraph pole model was proposed, where parallel blocks were connected by a central corridor forming courtyards closed or open on one side only. Both types are still in use today.

## Prison and memory

The concept of place of memory was defined in the 1980s by the French historian Pierre Nora: «A lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community»<sup>1</sup>. The place therefore enables memories to be preserved and passed on and prevents certain situations or events from being forgotten. Referring to the prison type, these are generally buildings, not necessarily characterised from an architectural point of view, which bear witness to the anguish experienced by prisoners who knew they were far from everyone and everything, made famous by books and movies, such as the Alcatraz prison across the bay of San Francisco, or because these places represented a fundamental part of the men's lives who in prison continued to struggle for their ideas.

In the suburbs of Berlin, since 1994 it has been possible to visit a complex that after the Second World War the Soviets used as a jail for Nazi prisoners or those supposed to be. The strongest part of the visit is the U-Boot: an armful of damp, windowless underground cells in which there was only a wooden bench and a bucket. In 1951 the prison was transferred to the German Democratic Republic which used it until the end of the 1950s when it was replaced by a new building in which psychological torture partly replaced physical one: prisoners lived here in total physical and sensorial isolation until the fall of the Wall in 1989. Visits are often carried out by former prisoners who give clear feelings of the atrocities they suffered.

The same is true of Robben Island prison off the coast of South Africa. The building was used in the 20th century as a prison for political prisoners at the time of apartheid and owes its notoriety

<sup>1</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Preface to the English-Language edition" in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

in the world because Nelson Mandela was imprisoned there from 1964 to 1982: the years spent in cell number 5 and in the stone quarries were told in his autobiography.

These examples tell stories of pain: the stories speak through small cells, long corridors, narrow slits, few furniture, writings on the walls, but all strongly full of meaning; emotional stories that want to remind those who visit these places the pain which prisoners had to suffer.

Prisons are today included in the so-called dark tourism<sup>2</sup>, a term coined by John Lennon and Marc Folley in 2000 and taken up shortly afterwards by Philip Stone to indicate that particular category of tourism that leads to visiting places of tragedy and coming into contact with an intangible dimension of suffering, pain and death.

## Prison and reuse

Adaptive reuse is the process of reusing an existing building, but we can also refer to a site, which has lost the function it was designed for, by adapting it to a new use and purpose. The process of building adaptation is a practice that has its roots in past centuries, but it was not until the 1970s that it became a reality: it came to establish itself as a creative discipline in its own right with a philosophy or a theory behind it»<sup>3</sup> with different approaches and models of intervention.

Prison buildings are not limited to housing units - in fact, prisons feature an array of spaces that have great potential for reuse including buildings for training activities, office buildings, relational areas and large outdoor spaces. These elements offer a wide variety of real estate for new uses, and cities around the world have begun to discover their potential and there are several examples.

<sup>2</sup> Stone, Philip, "A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions" *Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal*, 54, no. 2 (2016), 145-160. [https://works.bepress.com/philip\\_stone/4/](https://works.bepress.com/philip_stone/4/)

<sup>3</sup> Plevvoets, Bie, and Van Cleempoel, Koenraad. "Adaptive reuse of the built heritage". (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 16-23.

I'd like to start with a former 19th-century prison redesign as a hotel in Offenburg, Germany<sup>4</sup>. The first stage of the jail's adaptive reuse joined the prison's two historic wings, originally separated, together thanks to a new light-filled atrium with soaring glass ceilings and walls which now houses the restaurant and the living space with a mezzanine-level lounge overlooking it. The brick structure's internal spaces were transformed into a place for stay and relax. The hotel hosts 38 bedroom suites which have been set inside the former inmate blocks: some cell walls have been knocked through to create suitable guestrooms. It's easy to find traces of the buildings past: many of its extra-thick brick walls and steel doors have been retained. The old cell doors, for example, were reused, not as actual room doors but as features next to them, to remember the former function. Similarly the old window bars have been incorporated into mirrors in the bathrooms.

The prison in Hasselt, Belgium, built in 1859 closed its activity in 2005. Its design took inspiration by the typology of the panopticon with five arms and an observation point in its centre. It was organized in 58 cells back to back facing on small corridors. The transformation of the building came out through a competition won by noArchitecten<sup>5</sup>: their design proposed the restoration and extension of the former prison plus the proposal of two new buildings for the Faculty of Law and the Rector's Office of Hasselt University. The star shaped composition of the prison building with its many lateral corridors made it possible to fit two auditoria and a cafeteria into the outdoor areas between the wings. The centre of the panopticon serves as a hall and the former prisoner cells host individual rooms for students. The redesign of the building includes several entrances and exits, squares, streets, courtyards connecting the pre-existence with the new functions.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hotel-liberty.de/en> (access: 03-03-2022).

<sup>5</sup> <https://noaarchitecten.net/projects/5/041-city-campus-hasselt-university> (access: 03-03-2022).





Figure 1) Liberty Hotel: connection between old and new, Jürgen Grossmann, 2017, Offenburg, Germany (©Liberty Hotel source <https://www.hotel-liberty.de/en/>)

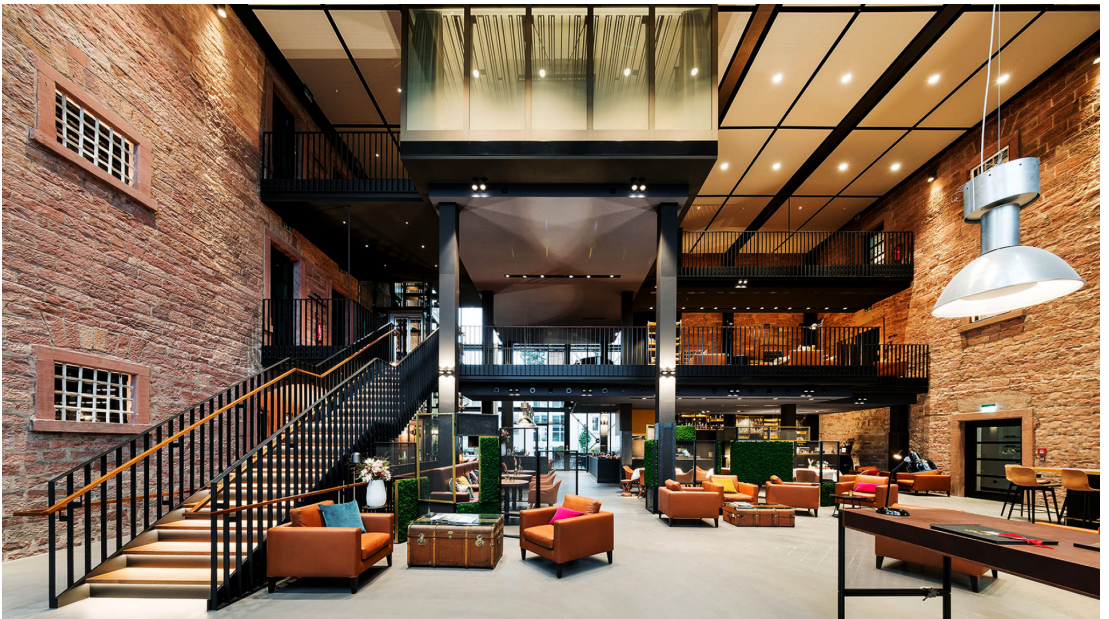


Figure 2) Liberty Hotel: interior of the new glass building, Jürgen Grossmann, 2017, Offenburg, Germany (©Liberty Hotel source <https://www.hotel-liberty.de/en/>)



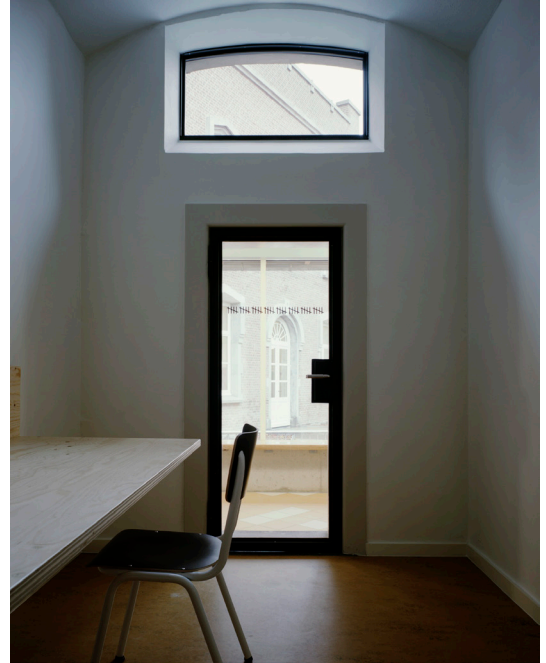


Figure 3) *Liberty Hotel: room corridor*, Jürgen Grossmann, 2017, Offenburg, Germany  
(©Liberty Hotel source <https://www.hotel-liberty.de/en/>)



Figure 4) *Hasselt University: aerial view of the former prison and new additions*, noAr-  
chitecten, 2015, Hasselt, Belgium (© U Hasselt source <https://noaarchitecten.net>)





**Figure 5)** Hasselt University: access corridor to auditorium and study cell, noArchitecten, 2015, Hasselt, Belgium (© Zim Zwarts source <https://noaarchitecten.net>)

**Figure 6)** Hasselt University: a former prison cell turned into a study cell, noArchitecten, 2015, Hasselt, Belgium (© Zim Zwarts source <https://noaarchitecten.net>)

The Murate complex<sup>6</sup>, rebuilt several times in its history due to floods and fires, was the men's prison of the city of Florence for more than a century (1883-1985), but it was born in the 15th century as a convent, later transformed into barracks. In the 1990s, the municipality of Florence, having become the owner, began a project of urban reconversion under the supervision of Renzo Piano that transformed it into a new centre for the city through different steps. Given the size of the complex, it is almost a district within the city, and the transformation was intended to emphasise its multifunctional nature, with particular attention to social housing

<sup>6</sup> Gensini, Valentina. "Le Murate: esperienza di riappropriazione" in *Patrimoni inattesi Riusare per valorizzare. Ex-carceri pratiche e progetti per un patrimonio difficile*, ed. Lanz Francesca. (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2018), 167-185.

for young couples and services for young people and workers; it is also a centre for the contemporary art, where shows, exhibitions, meetings, conventions, and opportunities for exchange, comparison and cultural growth among different cultures are held.



Figure 7) *Le Murate: a new public square surrounded by the restored buildings of the former prison, E.R.P. Office of the Municipality of Florence, 2014, Florence, Italy (© Comune di Firenze, source <https://cultura.comune.fi.it/leMurate>)*

These few example show how it is possibile to transform entire complexes into new vital functions for the city and the area they belong to without consuming land use: the discipline of adaptive reuse allows buildings to be reborn and this is particularly significant when they represent a cultural heritage value.

## Prison and rehabilitation

Prison is the place where inmates serve their guilt. The concept of punishment has changed over time, and so the prison should also have adapted its spaces to meet the new prisoners' perspectives. The design of quality spaces such as bright, harmonious in size and well-proportioned in the organisation of functions, can be a valid support in the re-education and rehabilitation of the inmates. In this sense, many European countries have implemented projects in which efforts have been made to encourage interaction between staff and prisoners, to reduce conflict, and to foster internal sociality.

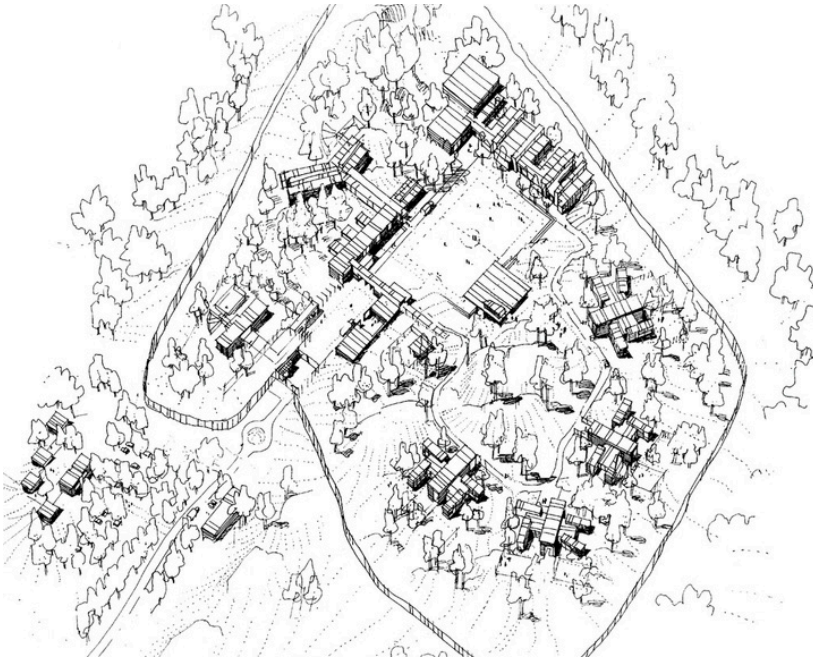
Halden Prison in Norway designed by Erik Møller Arkitekter + HLM arkitektur has been featured as the world's most human prison in the pages of *The Guardian*<sup>7</sup>. Opened in 2010, each block houses 10-12 cells, each equipped with a television, refrigerator and barred windows to allow more light in. As well as kitchens, prisoners have communal areas for physical, creative and educational activities. The facility boasts amenities like a sound studio, jogging trails, a climbing wall and a freestanding two-bedroom house where inmates can host their families during overnight visits.

Great importance is concerning to the spaces devoted to conversation with family members, where inmates can reappropriate, even if only temporarily, the concept of family. In 2015, at the Lorusso and Cotugno Prison in Turin, an open-air meeting space was created to facilitate conversations between inmates and their family members, especially those with minor children.<sup>8</sup>

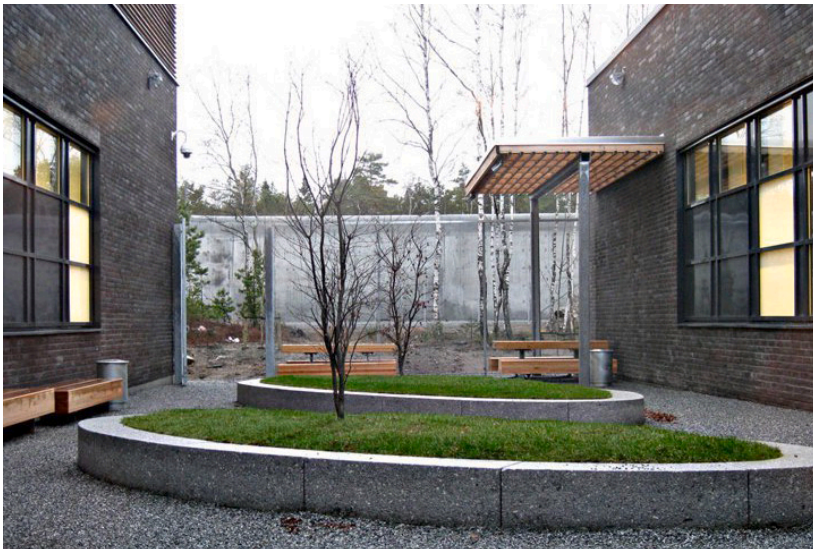
<sup>7</sup> Gentleman, Amelia. "Inside Halden, the most humane prison in the world", *The Guardian*, May 18, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/may/18/halden-most-humane-prison-in-world> (access: 08-03-2022).

<sup>8</sup> The project was led by "Spazivolenti" student team from a joint idea of the Departments of Architecture and Design of Politecnico di Torino and Law of University of Torino under the supervision of professors of both departments.





**Figure 8)** Halden Prison: sketch of the complex inserted in the forest landscape, Erik Møller Arkitekter + HLM arkitektur, 2010, Halden, Norway, (© Erik Møller Arkitekter source <https://www.archdaily.com/154665/halden-prison-erik-moller-arkitekter-the-most-humane-prison-in-the-world>)



**Figure 9)** Halden Prison: open air courtyard between the blocks, Erik Møller Arkitekter + HLM arkitektur, 2010, Halden, Norway, (© Erik Møller Arkitekter source <https://www.archdaily.com/154665/halden-prison-erik-moller-arkitekter-the-most-humane-prison-in-the-world>)



**Figure 10)** Lorusso and Cotugno Prison: open-air meeting space with some of the equipment made by students and prisoners, Spaziviolenti student team, 2015, Torino, Italy (© Spaziviolenti source <https://spaziviolenti.wordpress.com/>)

The unused area of about 1000 sqm. was equipped with eleven conversation areas and a playground for children. Each meeting place is shaded by a system of movable fabric curtains and is equipped with modular seating and tables arranged in different patterns. The children's games are scattered among the adults places. All furniture were realized by students and inmates in a process of participated design using recycled materials found in the prison structure.

## Conclusion

We have observed the transformation of prisons, where imposing walls once symbolized a tangible and symbolic confinement of freedom, and cramped cells offered little more than elusive glimpses of light, where dampness permeated the air, and where the walls bore witness to the passage of time for inmates. Now, these once secluded institutions are opening their doors to the public, revealing a often harsh reality. Prisons are evolving into places to visit, inviting people to understand, learn, and, most importantly, remember the harsh realities within. Simultaneously, this architectural typology is amenable to diverse forms of refunctionalization that can preserve the historical significance of these structures. Some cases involve a straightforward conversion of interior spaces for new purposes, while others may incorporate additional functional blocks to accommodate new activities. It is crucial to bear in mind that prisons must continue to fulfill their primary function, but with a conscious recognition that they play a pivotal role in preparing inmates for reintegration into civil society after serving their sentences. Consequently, the private spaces of cells, common areas, and meeting places with the outside world must be designed with features that ensure the physical and psychological well-being of prisoners, staff, and family members. Research has demonstrated that repressive prison systems are ineffective, and humane treatment enhances the prospects of successful reintegration into society. Thus, the transformation of prisons equates to the transformation of futures.

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