

Spring 2001

Book Review: Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture

Gaylene Armstrong

University of Nebraska at Omaha, garmstrong@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/criminaljusticefacpub>

 Part of the [Criminology Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Armstrong, G.S. (2001). Review of Johnson's Forms of Constraint. *Criminal Justice Review*, 26(1), 98-99.
<https://doi-org.leo.lib.unomaha.edu/10.1177/073401680102600113>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Criminology and Criminal Justice Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture. By Norman Johnston. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. Pp. 197)

Gaylene S. Armstrong

Arizona State University West

In his recent book, *Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture*, Johnston bridges the gap between the impact of the sociopolitical context of penal perspectives on prisons and the development of prison architecture over time. Prior literature has provided interested readers with historical accounts of prisons through examinations of penal philosophies as they have impacted the treatment of prisoners, their quality of life, and the outcomes (successes and failures) of the prison system. Few authors have ventured into a contextual discussion of the developing physical prison structure and its interaction with prison life and the goals and outcomes of the prison system.

In *Forms of Constraint*, Johnston describes the physical structures that have housed prisoners throughout the world, beginning in the Middle Ages and continuing to the post-World War II era. The book is presented in a chronology of eight chapters, embarking on Johnston's historical journey with a presentation of prisons that existed primarily in fortified sites such as castles and civic buildings. It concludes with a presentation of architectural styles of prisons that were built post-World War II, some of which continue to exist in the present day.

Throughout, Johnston elaborates on the physical environment of the various prisons, and the daily experiences of prisoners within, through an explanation of the philosophies surrounding the architectural style itself. For example, in some prisons during the Middle Ages, common criminals were held separately from noblemen; in other prisons, all inmates were held together without regard for age, class, gender, illness, or pretrial detainee as opposed to convicted offender status. Herding of individuals in this manner led to a poor quality of life and to scarcity of resources such as food, water, and light. Johnston parallels the description of prisons in this era with a discussion of architectural features such as large common holding areas. His vivid descriptions are further illustrated through the presentation of prison floor plans and their exteriors.

Although Johnston primarily focuses on prisons that were built for the purposes of punishment within North America and Europe, he also presents a limited discussion of prisons that were developed in Asian and African countries. Johnston explores the sources of inspiration for prison design, the changing goals of prison design, and the question of whether these goals were adequately met within each time period. For example, the emergence of English "Bridewell" style prisons in the sixteenth century was the result of large increases in vagrancy, prostitution, and other criminal activity. The increase in these types of activities resulted from a change in social conditions. In response to the changing social conditions, prison philosophies were also altered, becoming increasingly based on "the rehabilitative value of work and the formation of habits of industry" (p. 33). The purpose of these prisons moved away from the punishment philosophy of years before, toward the goal of instilling an earnest work

ethic. The resulting architectural style of prison incorporated a communal work area within which inmates would develop their work ethic while accumulating money. In addition, Johnston suggests that, because of rising concerns over sanitation within prisons, prisoners were isolated in individual cells during the evenings.

Another of the distinguishing characteristics of *Forms of Constraint* is Johnston's meticulous illustration of exemplar prisons during each era. He includes photographs that were taken either during the prisons' operation or subsequent to their closure. For prisons that existed in the early centuries but have since been demolished, illustrations based on early writings provide the reader with a visual appreciation of Johnston's extremely detailed descriptions of the facilities.

Most interesting is Johnston's perspective, incorporated as a theme throughout, that the prison architecture was often a reflection of the sociopolitical context and penal philosophy of the time period. For example, during the Middle Ages, Johnston notes that a dual system of courts existed, ecclesiastical and secular. A consequence of this duality was the existence of ecclesiastical prisons, which held individuals (most often newly converted monks) for very lengthy periods of penitence. Because of the precedent that criminals could be sheltered from immediate action of the law if they confessed to their crimes (and took an oath of obedience to the abbot), the ecclesiastical prisons were well utilized. An interesting architectural consequence was that ecclesiastical prisons were usually annexed to religious sites, availing a view of the church's altar to those in individual cells seeking forgiveness for their behavior through penitence. The precedent within ecclesiastical prisons also led to cellular seclusion for personal betterment (through penitence and contemplation), which was subsequently

incorporated into penal philosophies of prisons outside the church. Johnston's discussion of these and other unique features and occasional quandaries of the time allows for a greater understanding of the current state of our prison system.

In conclusion, *Forms o/Constraint* is a very informative reference book that provides an orientation and understanding for prison structures throughout history. In his exploration of prison development, Johnston provides the reader with vivid images and colorful descriptions of prison structures. Readers interested in the history and development of the correctional system and laypersons alike will be intrigued by this survey of prison history that provides glimpses not only into the architectural styles of the era but also into the sociopolitical context in which these prisons developed.