

New Design Helps Point the Way to Prison Reform

By Wolf Von Eckardt

IN A typical, large state prison, visitors can walk from the prison hospital to the gas chamber. And it has happened more than once that offenders, too, have taken this walk between the two extremes of our attitude towards them. They were saved by the public demand that the ill are treated humanely only to be destroyed by the public demand for punishment and vengeance.

Prison authorities, according to many penologists, are irresolutely caught in this conflict. In one recently completed state prison, for instance, they authorized a large swimming pool. But when it was built, they feared being accused of "coddling" criminals and covered it over with earth.

After Attica, the very thought of prison swimming pools seems unthinkable — at least for a while. Prison authorities and

can begin. The buildings themselves—people warehouses that provide its inmates no room for exercise, no space for recreation, no room for a man to work away frustrations, anger or energy, defeat the whole notion of reformation, correction, rehabilitation, or whatever you call it. More often than not, as many penologists admit, they are schools of crime.

"For far too long prison architecture has consisted primarily of revising old designs to reduce escape risks," says Norman A. Carlson, the director of Federal Prisons in an article in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects. "What has really happened, and what correctional administrators and architects are beginning to recognize, is that disguising security with cosmetic techniques has done little to reduce the chances that an inmate will commit a new crime upon release. We now have a new approach and realize that the design of such an institution must follow the modern correctional philosophy: that with proper treatment an individual who has violated the law can be corrected and become a law-abiding, contributing member of society."

CONGRESS has reflected similar concern about the need for reform of the penal system. Part E of the Omnibus Crime Control Act of 1970 authorizes federal assistance to the states to improve outmoded prisons and jails and to establish programs for rehabilitation, probation and parole. A good deal of federally financed research on all this is currently under way. It is conducted by various universities under the auspices of the

the prisoners," says John P. Conrad, a LEAA official. "Even more important, they are easier on the prison population itself because of the closer contact with the personnel. In no way, though, will the smaller facility automatically eliminate every problem, for instance the very serious problem of protecting the prisoners from one another."

New facilities are to be built in the cities and metropolitan areas because professional services, educational institutions, citizen volunteers and other advantages are more readily available and it is easier for families and friends to visit the inmates.

The most important new trend, however, is a new, creative prison architecture with-

out bars, designed to aid treatment and make the traumatic aspects of confinement as inconspicuous as possible. "Being confined is negative and 'punishment' enough," says Gruzen, "but the place of confinement need not be negative to be escape-proof. In fact, the environment must be a constructive force, as well as serve as an effective instrument of organizational policy."

Gruzen and his firm designed the new State Prison at Leesburg, New Jersey, on this concept. It houses some 500 "medium security" inmates and is considered perhaps the most enlightened penal institutions in the country. The housing units are linked to each other around pleasantly landscaped courtyards, thus eliminating the need for a prison wall. The bars are replaced by plate glass, projecting cornices and other devices. Cells are painted in cheerful colors and pleasantly furnished and the dining hall has a view on the South New Jersey farmlands. "We have been attacked for building 'marble halls for prisoners,'" says Lloyd B. Westcott, president of the New Jersey State Board of Control, a dairy farmer by vocation and, in his own words, "a one-man rooting section for more creative and effective prison architecture" by avocation. "But the cost is probably less than that of a conventional prison. And Leesburg has a healthy atmosphere that permeates the men. They



guards are likely to be nervous. Inmates are hardly encouraged by the bloodbath. The state troopers' volley that killed 32 inmates and ten hostages at the Attica Correctional Facility also cut short reasonable communication within the country's prison system.

But Attica made big news and called public attention to the desperate need to correct our correctional institutions. If this attention can somehow be sustained, the long range effect is bound to be salutary. Public opinion in America has, in the end, always come down on the side of humanitarianism. "The martyrs of the Attica tragedy have shown everyone the failure of our penal system," says Jordan Gruzen, an architect who is among the pioneers of a more humane prison architecture.

THE failure of the system is perhaps best illustrated by one simple statistic: Of all persons released from prison in 1963, 65 per cent were rearrested within six years.

The causes of this failure are not only that most of our penal institutions are hopelessly overcrowded and dilapidated. It is also that they are largely designed on the principle that the offender's spirit must be broken before reformation of his character

Law Enforcement Assistance Administration in the Department of Justice.

The research is far from conclusive and bound to be accelerated. But certain trends are clearly discernible to give substance to what Carlson calls "the new approach." It is, first of all, to build or rebuild as few conventional prisons, or "correctional institutions," as the jargon now has it, as possible. The emphasis instead is on the use of half-way houses, probation and other supervised release programs. Federal funds for new local prisons, reports the AIA Journal, will be granted only if the community has done all it can to deal with officers in ways other than simply putting them behind bars.

Another clear trend is to keep new prisons small and to build them not out in rural isolation but in the city. It has been a mistake to build prisons for 2,000 inmates or more (Attica has 2,245 inmates). LEAA now tells the states that they need not apply for funds for prison projects planned for more than 400 adult or 150 juvenile inmates. "Smaller facilities are easier on the guards who may become nervous and uneasy under difficult circumstances and take it out on

actually smile at you when you visit. There is no sense of anger and animosity. The guards like working there and do a better job."

Another model institution was built by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. It was once the National Training School for Boys here in Washington but totally transformed after it moved to Morgantown, W.Va., where it opened two years ago as the Robert F. Kennedy Youth Center. The center looks like a campus and only one of its housing units, or cottages, has built-in security features. Otherwise there are no bars or fences and the 300 16- to 20-year-old "students," as they are called, learn to talk openly with each other and the staff in a relaxed atmosphere without tensions or pressures. The aim is to "graduate" law-abiding young citizens rather than potential recidivists or backsliders. It is too early to tell how well the "graduates" are doing. But the early indications are encouraging, according to Gary Mote, the chief architect of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

643

MOTE is now engaged in directing the design of similarly experimental metropolitan correctional centers in five cities—New York, Chicago, San Francisco, San Diego and Philadelphia. The first one, an 11-story building adjacent to New York's federal courthouse, designed by Gruzen, and to be started this fall, seems more like a mental health clinic than a prison. It serves as both, a halfway house whose inmates work in the community and a short-term place of detention for people awaiting trial or serving short sentences. Everything in the center is designed for individual case work which aims to reintegrate the offender into the community.

But what about the hard core, the tough criminals who are a threat to their fellow men? There will still be maximum security prisons. But it can be flexible security, that is, a system that allows doors and bars to be

added as required. "These places, too, need not be Bastilles," says Mote. "And they can have a human scale, designed for a few hundred beds, rather than more than two thousand as in Attica."

It will be some time, of course, before the Atticas are replaced or rebuilt. Meanwhile it is reassuring, however, to hear a high official of the Federal Bureau of Prisons speak of "beds," rather than cells.

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—Gruzen & Partners, architects.

The new state prison at Leesburg, N.J., has a glass-walled dayroom in each cell block, opening onto a central court.