Uncanny beauty. Unveiling a prison interior

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ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on the paradox that invests common perceptions of prison interiors by presenting a formal investigation of the nineteenth century prison of Buoncammino in Italy and questioning its uncanny beauty.

While we unanimously refuse as abominable the pre-modern dark dungeon, we are also very ambivalent towards the (unrealised) promises of the carefully designed enlightened and ‘enlightening’ spaces of the modern prison, which in principle we consider superior but that, ultimately, we end up perceiving in a not too dissimilar way from the pre-modern imaginary of darkness. Is this survival of darkness inside modern institutions, born in the age of the Enlightenment, a sign of failure for the hopes embedded in the modern prison? Or does it derive from the imperfect implementation of the model modern prison in reality? Or, alternatively, was darkness already embedded in modernity itself? The apparently irresolvable paradox of the coexistence of ‘dark space’ in ‘light space’ relates to the dichotomous nature of contemporary debates on penal institutions: whether to humanise or abolish them.

Text by Sabrina Puddu. Photographs by Giaime Meloni.
Opposite

Figure 2. Photo Essay: Studio sulla forma n.02 (Photo by Giuseppe Meloni)
Figure 5. Photo Essay. Studio sulla forma n.05 (photo by Giaime Meloni)

Above

Figure 6. Photo Essay. Studio sulla forma n.06 (photo by Giaime Meloni)
We entered the prison of Buoncammino in Cagliari, Sardinia, a few days following its vacation in November 2014. As the inmates were moved to a new carceral citadel on the outskirts of the city, they left behind the city prison, a building that over 150 years of existence had become ingrained in collective memory as the embodiment of ideas of confinement and moral reform. By 2014 it was believed timely for a new architecture of incarceration. Whatever the reason, the beauty of the old Buoncammino prison interior was paradoxically overwhelming and stronger than any other feeling — Shame? Anger? Sadness? Curiosity? The suspension of its past use — of any event that had animated the building — and the sudden absence of human presence left behind a display of naked architectural splendour and squalor; inviting the eye to focus on a level of abstraction that otherwise only projective representation — the noble medium of drawing — could guarantee. This abstraction is captured in the photos accompanying this text, framing this now empty prison in the absence of the human targets of such power as a pure, silent object with its past charge of control and power now fully revealed. An uncanny beauty is unexpectedly attached to such charge.

Sardinia boasts an extended archipelago of correctional institutions. Due to the geographical and historical conditions of the island, this archipelago was implemented since the beginning of the modern era at the service of the national state and has always been significantly oversized compared to the small local population and the relatively low criminal rates. Nevertheless, as proof that an island is still considered a perfect condition for confinement, over the past decade the construction of prisons has continued, giving birth to four high security complexes. Evidence that, sadly, the times are still distant when we can imagine a society without prisons.

As a consequence of the new constructions, four older prisons dating back to the nineteenth century have been vacated. Buoncammino is one of these. Standing as an example of the modern attempts to reform penal institutions, Buoncammino shows how, in the late nineteenth century, the Italian debate over penalty was in line with the ideas discussed throughout Europe and North America and with the anxiety to design institutions that could contain, if not reform, crime. From an architectural perspective, the prison followed the then dominant principle of cellular segregation common to other international examples. Built on the top of a hill, in a dominating relationship with the city, it is perceived from the outside as a megalos, enclosed by a polygonal wall within which a series of symmetrically arranged blocks emerge. Despite its sculptural urban presence, however, like all prisons, Buoncammino is a project of interiors.
A PROJECT OF INTERIORS

In the 1982 book The Fabrication of Virtue, Robin Evans recognises prisons as the ultimate machines of architectural efficiency, and the locus where the project of modernity has been put to the test most explicitly. Newgate (1750s) and Pentonville (1840s) are respectively the starting and end points of Evans’ account of the history of British prisons, taken as a model case for a more widespread reform of western carceral systems between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The British case is a perfect demonstration of the fact that the modern prison, as it emerged in that period and developed into the twentieth century, was mostly a project of interior space. Such project was deployed through the scrupulous drawing of floor-plans and sections, conceived as perfect imprints of the patterns of human relationships that prison reformers imagined would unfold in space. As Evans writes, these buildings, with their proliferating components and patterned plans, were to map the location of staff and inmates, guide their movements and mediate the transactions between them. The pattern of walls in a plan and the distribution of apartments in a section are abstracts of a social reality defined by interdicted or extended communication between one place and another.

The formation of this new kind of institutional interior thus subscribed to principles of causality occurring between the physical space and the social realm. Alliances of the kind signed by reformer John Howard and architect William Blackburn in England were to promote a series of typological experimentations towards the implementation of an interior capable of tracing a correspondence between the institutional protocols, hierarchies and routines envisioned by the reformer, and the structure of space drawn by the architect. The latter was meant to define an ‘architecture of inescapable relationships’, drawing a building that could be regarded as a frozen image of intercourse. To prove this point, Evans consistently compares the floor plans of pre-modern detention buildings to those of reformed modern prisons, and highlights how the former — like the one drawn by Jacob Ilive for the Clerkenwell House of Correction in 1757 — mostly depicted a geography of rooms, each labelled with its correspondent use and suggesting a pattern of occupation. Yet the rooms were not structured according to a prescribing geometry. In contrast, labelling became almost superfluous to the prescribing value of the floor plan in modern prisons, where an intentional and instrumental use of geometry, composition, symmetry, hierarchy and proportions was clearly at play. The latent power of the floor plan (and of the section) in making real and material the principles of penal reform was masterfully understood by William Blackburn, as shown for instance in the project for the Liverpool Borough Gaol (1785-89), one of nineteen prisons he designed.

The interior of the modern prison was born as a confined environment, as much controlled and organised as it was carefully lightened and aerated. It developed according to a widespread rhetoric of refusal of another, precedent interior represented by the dark dungeon of the pre-modern era.

Vividly pictured in prints, literature, and reports written and popularised by philanthropists and reformists, this rhetoric found an outspoken advocate in John Howard. In the many editions of his book The State of the Prisons in England and Wales (1777-1780-1784-1792), Howard expressly contrasted the out-dated British prisons to buildings like the house of correction in Rome designed by Carlo Fontana in the 1700s, which he took as a precedent more fitting to his principles of reform, because it was rationally designed according to a precise discipline. But the accusations against the old dungeons were just a specific case of wider refusal for certain types of spaces encouraging promiscuity and what were conceived as its related social illnesses. Thus, Evans shows how the refusal of the pre-modern dungeon interior was transposed, with similar tones and argumentations, from the spaces of confinement to the domestic domain. Similarly to the dungeons, the houses for the poor in the eighteenth century were described as interiors scarcely organised, chaotically inhabited in promiscuity, unclean, smelly, dark, and poorly ventilated. As response to this line of accusation, these houses were replaced in the nineteenth century by the newly conceived model houses and residential estates promoted on grounds of hygiene, non-promiscuity, light and ventilation.
The dark interiors of dungeons and houses conveyed aesthetic repulsion as much as they were alleged to be the source of physical and moral disease, and of corporal and vicious epidemics. In the first steps towards a reform that would eventually lead to the construction of the model modern prison — exemplified by the facility of Pentonville in London (1842) by the Royal Engineer Joshua Jebb — light and air were among the most powerful drivers of typological experimentation. They were conceived as antidotes to the problems of physical contagion among inmates that had created an epidemic quickly surpassing the prison walls to affect the free society outside — as happened in the spread of the gaol fever in 1750. When, expanding the scope of Blackburn’s typological efforts, the Bentham brothers started developing their famous Panopticon Penitentiary in the 1780s, it became clear that light was to participate in the reformatory project to a larger extent than salubrity itself. The Panopticon was the ultimate affirmation of light as the key element in the toolbox for control and moral reform used to build the new physicality of the modern prison.

The cells in the Panopticon had two windows, one looking to the outside and allowing light to cross the cells, the other looking toward the inside and located in correspondence to one of the windows of the central control kiosk. The effect of backlighting created by this setup allowed the reduction of the confined human being inside the backlit atmosphere of the cell to a “small captive shadow,” a de-individualised, de-humanised actor in the Panopticon disciplinary theatre. The efficiency of the principle of inspection, clearly embodied in the centripetal architectural diagram of the Panopticon, was thus extended by this reduction of information achieved through light control. In particular the 1787 scheme prescribed the cylindrical kiosk to be further separated from the cells by a wider and lightened rotunda, thus merely worked to guarantee light and air to enter in a measure that was sufficient to provide some comfort within the interior of the prison and the exterior world, these windows thus merely worked to guarantee light and air to enter in a measure that was sufficient to provide some comfort within the cell.

A pure embodiment of the Panopticon has never been built and the attempts at reproducing it have been incomplete and clumsy. In contrast, many prisons were modelled on Pentonville, which provided a perfectly interiorised environment based on a radial building type, as opposed to the circular scheme deployed by the Bentham brothers. In Pentonville too, control was based on a central point of inspection. However, this was located at the convergence of wings housing the cells, each of which was composed of a central nave running the full length of the wing and flanked on both sides by three-storey batteries of equally distributed cells that were accessed from narrow galleries. Thus, the central inspection point overlooked the silent vaulted naves without exerting any direct scrutiny into the cells themselves. Accurately drawn internal perspectival views of Pentonville revealed the sensorial aspect of the big vaulted and galleryed naves sprinkled with light from the massive windows at their end and from skylights on the roof. These images show how light reached the cell as a diluted entity, mostly from the front-door facing the nave. On the other side, a tiny celestial beam of light penetrated from a window located high enough to avoid any visual contact between the interior and the exterior worlds. Stripped from a role of establishing a relationship between the interior of the prison and the exterior world, these windows thus merely worked to guarantee light and air to enter in a measure which was sufficient to provide some comfort within the cell.

In this newly defined prison architecture, floor plans were indispensable to control the hierarchical disposition of spaces and acted as crucial media to evaluate the power enforced by architecture over the carceral community. Yet, it was the section — often drawn as a shadowed section — that was to act as the key representational media to grasp the central role of light and shadows in the definition of the prison interior, depicting its quality and its sequential access from the nave to the cell.

Pentonville synthesised a discourse on penal institutions through the late eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, with the efforts of Blackburn and his European colleagues finding a major reply on the other side of the Atlantic in the Philadelphia (1830s) and Auburn (1820s) systems. With Pentonville, the main principles for modern prison architecture were finally fixed: solitary confinement, inspection, security and salubrity. The nineteenth century prisons built according to the Pentonville model made use of light as an element to ensure salubrity and to enhance control over the confined inmates and the staff. But beyond these utilitarian reasons, light also served as an essential element in the overall quality of the architectural articulation and composition. High ceilings and vaulted spaces,
zenith light, and carefully controlled proportions were retained in many projects, with symmetry, neatness, and cleanliness acting as guarantors of beauty. These features were so pronounced that they left a deep impression on contemporary observers, as demonstrated by the two passages below:

The first thing that strikes in mind on entering the prison passage is the wondrous and perfectly Dutch-like cleanliness pervading the place. The floor, which is of asphalt has been polished, by continual sweeping so bright that we can hardly believe it has not been black-leaded; and so utterly free from dust are all the mouldings of the trim stucco walls, that we would defy the sharpest housewife to get as much off upon her fingers as she could brush even from a butterfly’s wing. 18

Nevertheless, it is not the long, arcade-like corridors, nor the opera-lobby-like series of doors, nor the lengthy balconies stretching along each gallery, nor the paddle-box-like bridges connecting the opposite sides of the arcade, that constitute the peculiar character of Pentonville prison. Its distinctive feature, on the contrary — the one that renders it utterly dissimilar from all other jails — is the extremely bright, and cheerful, and airy quality of the building; so that, with its long light corridors, it strikes the mind on first entering it, as a bit of the Crystal Palace, stripped of all its contents. There is none of the gloom, nor dungeon-like character of a jail appertaining to it. 19

Was this ultimate architectural beauty an involuntary compensation for the guilt felt by both the national state and the architects for building the modern, ruthless machines of control that prisons embodied? Or, on the contrary, was this search for beauty a manifestation of pride in the prison as a new, enlightened institution pursuing the noble purpose of reforming and improving the human condition? Or, alternatively, were architects trained in a Beaux-Arts tradition — like Georgian architect Blackburn himself 20 — simply unable to design in any other way than in praise of beauty? It was a mix of these reasons that gave birth to a series of buildings located at the crossroads of top-down repressive power and ultimately uncanny architectural beauty. The prison of Buoncammino is such an example.

Buoncammino, which was mostly the creation of the engineer Oreste Bulgorini, was designed in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was a particularly tumultuous period for the newly born Kingdom of Italy established in the 1860s, which sought a shared and unified national penal code. Bulgorini was an in-house employee of the new planning department of the Italian Ministry of Interior that at that time was in charge of penal establishments throughout the kingdom. While very little information on Bulgorini has survived, what is sure is that he was in charge of designing at least four carceral establishments 21 in the 1880s-90s, all of which were based on the cellular system.

The debate on penal reform in the Kingdom of Italy was influenced, on the one hand, by the discussions happening at European level, and, on the other, by the many penal systems that were in place in pre-unitarian states. 22 As frequently noticed by studies of the history of penal systems, nineteenth century Europe endorsed a communal discourse on prison regimes, which favoured the circulation of architectural models. Among the common principles shared throughout Europe was solitary confinement, which acted as a protocol of reform, and materialised in the architecture of a specific building type — the prison. However, this was also a shared belief, which wavered under continuous critique. Partly because of recurrent doubts on the validity of solitary confinement, and partly because of economic reasons, many European countries — Italy included — vacillated in its unconditional application and often opted for its empowerment in mitigated, less severe systems. In Italy, this was the case of some of the most progressive pre-unitarian states, such as the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. The first had already approved, in 1853, a progressive penal code opting for a canonical Philadelphia system — a model based on strict solitary confinement and originally materialised in radial typologies with generous cells that were then attenuated, allowing prisoners to work in groups during the day. The Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia had a preference for the Auburn system — a model based on solitary confinement at night, and group but silent activities during the day, and originally materialised in a layout of little cells back-to-back. In contrast, the Kingdom of Lombardy and Venice, under the Austrian crown, had a particularly severe penal system and still enforced corporal punishment, whereas the prisons in the Papal State and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies were generally still unreformed dungeons, manifesting little awareness of the general reformative movements that were shaking the penal systems of western countries. 23 Following this schizophrenia in penal options throughout the various constituent states, united Italy was characterised by a varied and multifaceted archipelago of carceral institutions spanning from penal colonies to newly built cellular prisons to monasteries and fortresses adapted into prisons. 24 Accordingly, penal philosophies were different and differently interpreted from place to place. The cell itself, when it did not retain the character of a dungeon, was subject to shifting understandings: it could either be acknowledged as a reforming space or as an un-reforming container for subjects whose criminal attitude was considered innate and thus impossible to redeem. 25

Although Sardinia is today considered a peripheral and scarcely influential region in the national scene, it was then an important constituent part of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, the state that eventually initiated the process of unification of Italy in the 1860s. It thus participated in the progressive project of modernisation of the country. With regard to penalty and incarceration, the island was pervaded by the Kingdom’s progressive penal philosophy. For instance, Sardinian local politicians and philanthropists — either in newspapers or as part of Parliamentary Commissions — articulated critiques of the existing condition of detention with a similar rhetoric to the one that was pervading the European debate, and solicited the construction of new cellular prisons that could embrace the civilised principles of ‘discipline, light and morality’. 26 Evidence of the pre-unitary effort in penology in the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia and of its exposure to the European debate — with a particular link to France — is a series of competitions for the design of prisons that were held in the first half of the nineteenth century. One of these competitions, for a penitentiary in Alessandria, near Turin, was won in 1839-40 by the French architect Henri Labrouste. 27 Aware of prison reformism, Labrouste manifestly embraced the belief in the positive role of architecture and art in healing deviant and sick people within new types of institutional buildings. He endorsed an idea of penitentiary where prisoners were segregated at night and worked during the day, in line with the Auburn routine. A hint of Labrouste’s fascination for the Panopticon, the prison of Alessandria was designed with a central rotunda that housed a few radial single cells with open patios for those prisoners subjected to stricter solitary confinement. The rotunda had also the aim of distributing four identical radial wings, where little Aubumian cells were stacked back-to-back and were separated from the block-wards by a four-storey gallery. In his project, Labrouste worked to create a setting with soothing...
qualities, thus showing a new awareness of the role of atmosphere’ and ‘developed several inventive solutions that soften the prison atmosphere, such as large vertical windows surrounding the cell building, without bars or grates,’ or through the control of zenithal light in the central rotunda. Proposing a grand penal institution that embodied paradigms of space and luminosity so distinctive of the French architect’s oeuvre, Labrouste’s triumphal project must have exerted an effect on its contemporaries. The Italian architect Pietro Bosso, who would eventually lead the construction of the prison of Alessandria, later applied similar principles to other buildings.

Another international competition, held in 1857 for the prison of Turin and Genoa and, again, entered by many European architects, saw the victory of the Italian engineer Giuseppe Polani with a scheme that abandoned the radial geometry for a cruciform one. Polani’s prison also avoided the back-to-back cell distribution proper of the Auburn system and that Labrouste had faithfully reproduced. In contrast, he disposed the cells (measuring 2.2 x 4 x 3 meters) along the external walls of the wings, facing a central nave. The cross section of Polani’s wings was basically a replica of the typical section of Pentonville, where the cells, also of similar proportions and dimensions to those of Pentonville, were organised internally by a three-storey vaulted nave and distributed by galleries.

The influence of these competition entries can be retraced many years later in the prescriptions that the Italian Ministry of Interior had codified by the 1890s, and in the prison of Buoncammino itself. The design of Buoncammino developed in two phases, stretching into the beginning of the twentieth century. Buoncammino’s structure and space recorded both the uncertainty and tumultuous discussions that characterised Italy in the transitional period of unification, and the prison design principles inherited from the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, as previously described. In a first phase, between 1855-59, pushed by a state of emergency for the growing prison population, two large linear buildings hosting 16 dormitories for about 300 inmates were designed. A second and longer design and construction phase started in 1887, giving shape to the prison as can still be seen today: a megablock confined within a double boundary wall, where four courtyards organise, according to a principle of symmetry, a few longitudinal building blocks that were subsequently added to host the inmates. Whereas in the other main city of the island, Sassari, a prison was going to be built according to a radial typology (1862, designed again by Polani) that also characterised the two most recent achievements in Italian prison architecture (1882 Regina Coeli in Rome and 1892 San Vittore in Milan), this typology was not used for Buoncammino. We don’t know the reasons why a radial or cruciform typology was not pursued here, but we can assume that they could be found in site constraints (on top of a hill) and the presence of existing buildings.

The 1890s were crucial years for the Italian penal system, in which Italy finally agreed on a unified penal code (the Zanardelli Penal Code, 1889) and formulated rules and standards for the building of new prisons. Eventually, neither the Auburn nor the Philadelphia systems were adopted. Instead, the choice was for a mixed penal system, also known as the Irish system. In 1891, a design code was approved following the institution of an in-house planning and design department of the Ministry of Interior in 1888. This was constituted by about five in-house engineers, and relied on a pool of inmates who were draftsmen, recruited from a Roman prison. This team was not only assiduously working on the actual design, improvement, and enlargement of the prisons of unified Italy, but also pursued the goal of defining typological prescriptions and standards. Among the latter, a set of typical drawings was collated in an accurate and well-detailed dossier in the 1890s, that provided indications about details, proportions and geometry of the key elements for the so-called ‘Carceri Giudiziari’ (prisons for preliminary detention). Much space was given to represent...
in plan and section the cells, which were distinguished as cells for the defendant, cubicles for the convicted, cubicles for young offenders, and punishment cells for adults and young offenders. These respected the prescriptions given by the national board of health 36 that in the same year had fixed the dimensions of the cells in m. 2.10 x 4 x h. 3.30, and those of the cubicles in m. 1.40 x 2.40 x h. 3.30. While the dossier did not contain any drawing depicting a whole prison, the location and relation of the cell to the external wall or to internal corridors and galleries were hinted at in the drawings and mostly explicated in the construction of Buoncammino, which was classified as Carcere Giudiziario,37 and acted as a testing ground for the standards defined in the dossier.38

Buoncammino’s interior eventually developed as a collage of spaces organised in an imperfect courtyard typology and characterised by a neoclassical style that can still be appreciated today. On the ground floor of the older blocks, a central dark corridor gives access to large communal dormitories on either side, which are illuminated by the skylights placed in the vaulted ceiling. The cubicles for the young offenders on the second floor of the same block are arranged according to a back-to-back layout and located in the central axis of the block, thus facing two luminous, vaulted generous corridors on either side that overlook the courtyards. Replicating the nave section of Pentonville (and, by way of extension, of Polani’s scheme for Turin), the cells for the defendants located in the two most prominent wings are accessed by narrow galleries, and face a central vaulted nave sprinkled by direct and zenithal light. Finally, the punishment cells located in the most peripheral location — the basement of one of the two main wings — are totally devoid of natural light.

To cross this array of spatial situations means engaging in a ritual procession, through forced trajectories, and face a central vaulted nave sprinkled by direct and zenithal light. Finally, the punishment cells located in the most peripheral location — the basement of one of the two main wings — are totally devoid of natural light.

The progressivity to see beauty in darkness has been paralleled in recent times by a re-consideration of spaces of delight diverting from the modern canon of beauty of aestheticised, white or transparent interiors. Since the last decades of the twentieth century, environments boasting pre-modern and anti-western sensorial qualities have been brought back to attention and taken as a paradigm for the possibility of a new interior. As an example, we can consider some of the interiors designed by the Italian architect Antonino Cardillo who, in his built project ‘House of Dust’ 44 (Rome, 2013), declares primordial caverns and Renaissance grottos as sources of reference. In the accompanying poem praising dust, Cardillo argues against ‘That modernity that disowns sediment. That swallows walls, that sanitises space. That modernity that disowns dust. Dizzins even death.’ 45

Alternatively, we can consider how architectural education suggests students should reconsider the complexity of shadowed dusty congested spaces any first year student of architecture in London will at some point have to pay homage to Sir John Soane Museum, with its accumulation of antiques in the shadowed, articulated interior carved in the mass of three Georgian terraced houses. The house-museum of the great 18th century English architect is taken as an exemplar of how to eradicate the hyper-sanitised character of the clean, white, rational and bright spaces that have been ingrained in the mind of modern man as the ultimate physical representation of the spirit of his time.

Such fascination for a pre-modern space, however, hardly finds any easy application to the domain of prisons. Two centuries after its foundation, the prison — this very first test-bed building for modernity — still fails to convey an image of a sanitised, bright and modern building. In contrast to hospitals, which the public naturally recognises, accepts and requires to be hygienised environments, the common imaginary of the prison is always that of a pre-modern space of confinement. Two centuries of reforms, efforts and experimentation, while succeeding in establishing the prison as the only possible institution to deal with criminality, have completely failed to communicate to the public (and perhaps truly realised?) a modern aesthetic for prisons as they did for other institutions. Thus, the critique and disappointment expressed by John Howard in 1777 resonates cyclically in the protest campaigns for more humanised prisons. Any civilised society that is respectful of basic human rights,
activists and reformers argue today, should guarantee to inmates the right to a clean, bright and airy interior. This is the interior found, for instance, in the Norwegian ‘model prison’ of Halden, a high security facility built in 2010 by HLM Arkitektur and widely hailed as the ‘most humane prison’ in the world. 47 Perhaps, and this is the main difference from the eighteenth century rhetoric, these humanised interiors should also include colour; look more domestic, and establish a relationship with an outside of gardens and landscape, as in the case of the Norwegian facility. On the other hand, those proclaiming abolitionist theses seek an anti-model that refutes the very existence of the prison. For those who travel along this route, it would therefore be nonsense to find the seeds for a future prison-free society in the pre-modern and domestic, and establish a relationship with an outside of gardens and landscape, as in the case of the Norwegian facility. On the other hand, those proclaiming abolitionist theses seek an anti-model that refutes the very existence of the prison. For those who travel along this route, it would therefore be nonsense to find the seeds for a future prison-free society in the pre-modern and modern prison, which makes us also relatives of Bentham. And yet, we are facing a strong perceptive paradox. On the one side, we are all descendants of Howard and his refusal of the pre-modern dark dungeon – that we still consider an abominable threat in the realm of prisons. On the other, we are moved by the promise of the carefully designed enlightened (and ‘enlightening’) space of the modern prison, which makes us also relatives of Bentham. And yet, we are very ambivalent in our evaluation of the latter, so that we continue to perceive even the most advanced model prisons as not fundamentally different from their dark precedents. 48 This paradox is irresolvable, which sees ‘light space’ invaded by the figure of ‘dark space’. 49 is manifest at the level of aesthetics, and relates to the main doubt at the core of the recent super-prisons treat these buildings as a pure question of standards, numbers and functional zoning. In these projects, the word architecture is rarely mentioned. Needless to say, the word beauty falls completely off the radar.

Anthony Vidler’s account of the conscious search for uncanny beauty in modernity might offer the key to explaining this paradox. Vidler argues that the paradox of the re-emergence of dark spaces in light spaces does not derive from the ashes of the eighteenth century rhetoric, nor modern penal institutions to humanise or abolish them. Instead, Vidler locates the source of the uncanny beauty in modernity in the artificiality of neon lights. The feeling was that of living in an eternal Dantean circle similar to an underground carpark, where light quality always remained identical throughout the day. Not only were ornamentation and proportion fully dismissed, but also the manipulation of natural light appeared to have been given up. No beauty was left in that anesthetic, shameless interior.

The Alps, the edges of bodies, objects and furniture were sharply defined by the artificiality of neon lights. The feeling was that of living in an eternal Dantean circle similar to an underground carpark, where light quality always remained identical throughout the day. Not only were ornamentation and proportion fully dismissed, but also the manipulation of natural light appeared to have been given up. No beauty was left in that anesthetic, shameless interior.

Figure 17. Photograph of the juvenile department of Buoncammino prison, picturing one of the vaulted quadrants in front of the modern prison. 46 Published in Di Castri, A., and Pavarini, E., ed. Immagini dal Carcere. L’Archivio Fotografico delle Prigioni Italiane. Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1994, 217.
NOTES

1. This work derives from a preliminary research that I conducted when I was a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Cagliari. Italy. In many phases, this research took the shape of a collaborative investigation involving masters students (Ferrari, S. ‘Spazi dell’educazione continua. Progetto per una macchina educativa all’interno del carcere di Cagliari.’ (Masters diss., University of Cagliari, 2012)), colleagues from the Department of Architecture (Martino Tattara and master students (Ferreli, S. ‘Spazi dell’educazione continua. Progetto per una macchina educativa all’interno del carcere di Cagliari.’ (Masters diss., University of Cagliari, 2012)), colleagues from the Department of Architecture (Martino Tattara and Giamme Meloni. The research could not have been conducted without the assistance of PRAP Sardegna. Francesco Zuddas) and photographer Giaime Meloni. The research could not have been conducted without the assistance of PRAP Sardegna. Francesco Zuddas)


3. John Howard published several editions of The State of the Prisons in England and Wales, the first of which followed No. 1773 study and was published in 1777. This publication captured much public attention among its contemporaries and it is still a strong reference text for scholarship in prison architecture. However, as pointed out in R. McGowan, ‘The Well-Ordered Prison,’ in The Oxford History of the Prison The Practice of Punishment in Western Society, ed. Morris, N. and Rothman, D.J., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 79-10, rather than producing an original account, Howard’s contribution had the merit of synthesizing existing thoughts (like those of Josia Dornford and Jonas Hanway in England), to add to these a broader European perspective and to spread them with passionate commitment.


5. Plate 2.


10. Ibid., 14.

11. Ibid., 13.

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13. Plate 2.


17. Ibid., 12.

18. Ibid., 10.

19. I have so far ascertained that Enge Bay Bridge is supervised four projects. The 1884 design of the Penal Colony of Isol, Sardinia documents and drawings consulted at the Archive of the Colony of Isol. The 1886 adaptation of the criminal asylum of Villa Antonini in Tuscan see C. Marchetti. La doppia anima dell’Ambrosiana polifonale culturale del suo recupero, in L’abolizione del Manicomio Criminale tra Utopia e Realtà, ed. Fondazione Michelucci (Fondazione Michelucci, Fiesole: Fondazione Michelucci, 2011). The 1887 expansion of Buoncammino Prison. The 1902-1903 expansion and re-adaptation of Santa Maria Capua Vetere prison in Campania: the drawings are stored in the Archivio di Stato di Caserta (ASCa, Prefettura, Contratti, 391, Contratto d’appalto per la costruzione di nuove celle nel carcere giudiziario di S. Maria C.V. (10 maggio 1902), Carcere di S. Maria Capua (Progetto per aumento celle punizione, scala I/255 e ASCa, Prefettura, Contratti, 388, Progetto per la costruzione di un muro di cinta del carcere giudiziario di S. Maria Capua/Diesi/Pianta e Sezoni/Roma 10 giugno 1890 (Cretei Bulgare) and have been published in MSG Ponzio, S. Maria Capua Vetere. Il carcere Barbicani, in Dimore della Convenienza Le Sedì della Seconda Università degli Studi di Napoli, ed. C. Amantea and R. Goffi (Napoli: Edizioni
from comparing Buoncammino with similar buildings and related histories in Italy and Europe.

10. A description of the building in this first phase can be found in F. Corso, Guida di Calcio (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano di Arti Grafiche, 1894).

11. Criminologist Cesare Lombroso who, following biological determinism, believed in human reform because, for him, inmates could not be cured.

12. This is a very crude simplification, for it does not acknowledge the complexity of penal space in these states and in the Vatican state in particular, where institutions like San Martino House of Correction had been built.

13. The project is at Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Estampes, HZ-465 (1) – PET 01.06.1861 - 26.01.1862, vol. 25, 111-147.


15. For an example, we can read the description of Buoncammino written by a former inmate and reported in the website of humanitarian association ‘Associazione 5 Novembre’. He vividly describes his cell: a dark, wet and dirty ‘casaletto’. When someone was allotted to the Buoncammino, he usually found in one cell a piano terra del braccio destro. Una catacomba. Bua umida e sporca. […] Quella cella era talmente buia che anche di giorno tenevamo la luce accesa.’


17. Buoncammino belonged to the category of ‘Carcere Giudiziario’ (prison for preliminary detention) and was to host mostly inmates waiting for trial or condemned to short sentences, along with those who were unable to work in other penal settlements.

18. Localised in the main wing and accessed from a narrow gallery, Buoncammino’s cell for defendants are a copy of the typical cell for the defendant, whose measure was fixed by the Consiglio Superiore di Sanità in 4x2.1x3.3 and whose geometry and relevant features (the vault, the door and the window) were represented in the 1890s drawings. This is also a replica of the geometry and dimension (4x2) of Pentonville’s typical cell, with the main discrepancy in the position and size of the window facing outside. The cubicles for young offenders in Buoncammino also roughly correspond to those of the dossier (1.4x2.3x2.58), whose measure was fixed by the Consiglio Superiore di Sanità in 4x2.1x3.3 and were probably borrowed from the Aurburnian kind of cell (1x2.1x2) that was in place in the first experimental prisons of the Kingdom of Piedmont.


23. He received a PhD from the University of Cagliari, Italy, and the University of Paris-Ouest Nanterre La Défense, France. He is Co-founder of atmosphériques narratives and is visiting lecturer at the Ecole Nationale Superieure D’Architecture, surronded by territorie de Marie-La-Vette. The aim of his work is to explore the role of the photography as a sensible instrument to narrate the space complexity. His research has been published in various publications (MAM Sant Eterne, INTRUL) and presented at several international Conferences (CCA, FAUP).


25. In official reports written by the Parliamentary Commission constituted by Conti, Masci, Nelli, Testa, Pescetto, Mari, Sanna, Buoncammino is still limited. Thus, it is still impossible to reconstruct its genesis and development except as a fragmented and incomplete history. The very little information that has been published on the prison throughout the years is contained in official reports written by the council planning department (PPCS, Piano Particolareggiato del Centro Storico, Comune di Cagliari July 2015) or by the statutory body for the protection of historical heritage (Relazione storico particolareggiato del Centro Storico, Comune di Cagliari, July 2015) are mostly a repetition of the same information based on very few sources. This research relies on these limited resources and, in particular, on a process of investigation that has collected evidences from direct observation, drawing, photography, and