
The New York Times

Prisons, by Design

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “It’s Time for Architects to Stand Up for Justice,” by Michael Kimmelman (Critic’s Notebook, Arts pages, June 13):

I was shocked by the brutal efficiency of the cells at San Quentin State Prison when I began representing inmates there who were charged with new in-prison offenses more than 17 years ago. One client likened it to “living in a bathroom,” with a roommate. Yet the prison, which opened in 1852, is not without some architectural charm — or at least honesty.

The wrought-iron bars and hand-operated locks, gates and levers (which “throw the bar” to open or close 25 cells at once) make no pretense about their purpose. In contrast, modern penal facilities have adopted a clinical aesthetic, with featureless passageways and invisible staff operating remote-controlled doors and cameras.

Each design dehumanizes inmates in its own way. But as the French philosopher Michel Foucault pointed out in his historical study of prison design, “Discipline and Punish,” it’s the lack of privacy, the sense of always being watched, yet not knowing by whom, that is both prison architecture’s most insidious feature, and its most effective means of control.

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