

2010

# On Prisons and Theatres: Santo Stefano and San Carlo

Patricia Branco

*Centro de Estudos Sociais, University of Coimbra, Portugal*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc>

## Recommended Citation

Branco, Patricia, On Prisons and Theatres: Santo Stefano and San Carlo, *Law Text Culture*, 14, 2010, 277-285.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol14/iss1/15>

---

# On Prisons and Theatres: Santo Stefano and San Carlo

## **Abstract**

The interconnection between law and theatre can be seen as having both specular and spectacular functions, in which space acts as a manifestation of power to shape the place or stage where law and theatre come to life and perform their spectacle. To explore this link I will use the example of the eighteenth century prison at Santo Stefano Island in Italy. The curiosity regarding this building arises from the fact that its architectural plan may have been copied from that of the San Carlo Theatre in Naples. Bentham's Panopticon was published between the date of construction of the theatre and that of the prison. While the two buildings span the publication of the Panopticon, they also mirror each other in the panoptical direction of their gaze. I will explore these mutual influences and inversions.

## **On Prisons and Theatres: Santo Stefano and San Carlo**

**Patrícia Branco<sup>1</sup>**

They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible. (Foucault 1975: 233)

The interconnection between law and theatre can be seen as having both specular and spectacular functions, in which space acts as a manifestation of power to shape the place or stage where law and theatre come to life and perform their spectacle. To explore this link I will use the example of the eighteenth century prison at Santo Stefano Island in Italy. The curiosity regarding this building arises from the fact that its architectural plan may have been copied from that of the San Carlo Theatre in Naples. Bentham's *Panopticon* was published between the date of construction of the theatre and that of the prison. While the two buildings span the publication of the *Panopticon*, they also mirror each other in the panoptical direction of their gaze. I will explore these mutual influences and inversions.

### **On Prisons and Courthouses**

The space where law is administered is always the result of the dominant conceptions of law, justice, sovereignty and state, thus influencing the architectural programs of courts or prisons (Mulcahy 2008). As a result, the first move will be the demarcation of a space where rules are

## Branco

defined, goals are set, and actors are established (Garapon 1997). This means that to be effective jurisdiction has to be inscribed, apparent and available to spatial dissemination (Goodrich 2008: 214). Hence, the architecture of these spaces assigns legal discourse to a proper place and supports the theatrical dimension of the hearing or disciplinary program. Thus, buildings and rituals define a landscape through which people materially experience judicial authority (McNamara 2004; Lucien 2010).

Courthouse architecture (notably in Europe) has evolved as a response to different needs: from the Roman Forum to the medieval tree of justice — as painted by Hieronymus Bosch in *The Table of the Mortal Sins* (c 1485)<sup>2</sup> — and court itinerancy (the hearings were held at the residence where the king settled). We then had courthouses installed in markets and taverns and church halls (in Europe and other parts of the world, like the US or Australia) (Jacob 1994, Garapon 1997, McNamara 2004). But as process and proceedings became more complex, courthouse architecture changed in order to accommodate these new procedures. As the Temples of Law appeared, law and justice became distant from everyday life because these new buildings projected the idea of an authoritative, powerful and sacred law which citizens learned to fear more than respect.

Prisons as purpose-built structures were not common until the late seventeenth century and the prison as a sanction was not thought of until philosophers (like Beccaria) started debating sanctions, their functions and rationale, along with types of crime and the penalties that would best serve the purposes of sentencing. It was only with modernity that punishment started to be equated with the deprivation of liberty. Prior to that, people were incarcerated as a form of prevention, but physical punishment, including the death penalty as spectacle, forced labour or deportation were common ways of dealing with ‘criminals’.

At the height of the Enlightenment Jeremy Bentham and his brother Samuel, an engineer, arrived at a ‘solution’ that they called a *Panopticon* (‘an all-encompassing view’) that would revolutionise the world and minimise the costs of controlling a large number of people:

and 'all by a simple idea in Architecture!' (Bentham 1787). The major effect of the *Panopticon* is to induce in the prisoner an awareness of an omniscient and permanent state of visibility which assures the automatic functioning of power, and involving only a small number of controllers. This power dresses itself in the architecture of its spaces; in Foucault's words, 'space is fundamental in any exercise of power' and, thus, 'stones can make people docile and knowable' (Foucault 1995: 178). The birth of the prison, as the most civilised sort of punishment or discipline, acts to dress up a new mode of justice (Foucault 1975). The prisons are constructed to permit hierarchical observation: with the controlees subjected to visibility and thus control at all times.

Panopticism, as Molinaro (1996) claims, strategically enforces the epistemological difference between visibility and invisibility, secures the network of power relations, and expands it into an increasingly efficient mechanism. The same happens in theatre, where the organising principle involves both engaging and disengaging the audience's behaviour even though this may be done in an unreflexive or unconscious manner. This means that power flows dramaturgically from a process of mystification; a mystification that exists through control over what is seen, heard and experienced (Asma 1997).

### Il Carcere di Santo Stefano

Immagina di vedere un vastissimo teatro scoperto ...<sup>3</sup> (Settembrini 2005: 39)

Santo Stefano (700 x 500 metres) is an island in the Pontine Archipelago (together with Ponza, Palamarola, Zannone, Gavi and, closest to it, Ventotene). It belongs administratively to the Italian region of Lazio and, as reported in Roman chronicles, has a history of confinement and turbulence. From the first century BCE, women belonging to the imperial family were sent there in exile including, for example, Giulia, the daughter of Augustus, and Octavia, Nero's wife. The absence of fresh water and the roughness of its territory added to its inaccessibility, making it a suitable place to settle prison colonies.

## Branco



Figure 1 Prison on Santo Stefano Island Photograph by Giancarlo Giupponi (copyright) PhotovideoGG. Reproduced with permission

During the eighteenth century the Bourbon Kings of Naples proposed the idea of building a prison on the island. King Ferdinand IV was very interested in and supportive of the Enlightenment ideals concerning penology and the rehabilitation of delinquents. The latter would be accomplished by removing delinquents from the contaminated society they were in and placing them in distant and 'clean' environments. In 1793 the King commissioned the architects Winspeare and Carpi to construct a gaol on Santo Stefano (Parente 1998; Pepe 1999).

The prison was inaugurated on 26 September 1795 and was built by prisoners. It was finished in 1797 and remained active until 1965. During its lifetime there were several periods of intense tumult when large numbers of inmates were housed there, for example, during the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799 and during the fascist period when many of Mussolini's opponents were sent there. One of its more famous inmates was Sandro Pertini, who was incarcerated there from 1929

until 1931 and later became President of the Italian Republic during the 1980s (Parente 1998: 90). Today, unfortunately, this unique piece of architecture is falling apart. The following is a description of its structure and design.

The prison is built in the shape of a horseshoe and consists of three floors which differentiated the prisoners into categories: ground floor, bad behaviour; first floor, good behaviour; second floor, the ill. Each floor had 33 cells, making a total of 99 cells, each of which measured 4.20 x 4.50 metres. Although originally designed to hold 200 prisoners, at various times almost a thousand men have been imprisoned there, which meant cells had to be divided to increase capacity (Parente 1998). Although it was built on an island, the windows were positioned so that prisoners had no possibility of seeing the sea. They were able to see only a morsel of the sky above, the interior of the prison, and the omnipresent hexagonal-shaped chapel at the centre of the complex (Pepe 1999).

Every inmate was closely monitored, either by the 'eye of the Law' (the surveillance guards, representatives of the law of the State who, given its configuration, would have the whole area covered) or by the 'eye of God' (represented by the chapel in the centre of the yard). The three floors resemble the balconies of a theatre, but in reverse: in place of the stage — but separated for security reasons from the rest of the structure by a drawbridge and a ditch — there were the guards' quarters (including those for the commanders, priests and medical doctors), administration offices and a hospital. Instead of balconies or box seats there were cells; and then there were the actors — the prisoners. And yet, these last were also, and foremost, spectators — because of the horseshoe shape everything that happened inside the prison could be heard and seen. The performative repetition of each physical punishment, of each mess and of each mass, was heard or seen and served its purpose: to constrain, to observe, to discipline. The act of watching and being watched played a decisive role in this theatre-like Panopticon.

Authors who have studied the prison speculate about the possible

## Branco

origins of its design plan. There are three plausible hypotheses. First, the prison's architects may have been aware of Bentham's ideas, since the *Panopticon* was published ten years before the design was commissioned, but there is no documented connection with it (Parente 1998: 103).

A second alternative is that Carpi and Winspeare may have employed the model of the *teatro all'italiana*, a type of Italian theatrical architecture that started to be very common during and after the Renaissance period. Egginton asserts that Italy was the origin of many aspects of the theatre we recognise today and that this form of Italian Renaissance theatre traces its origin to two influences: the development of perspective in the early part of the fifteenth century and the rediscovery of Vitruvius' *Architecture* (Egginton 2003: 87). Hence, the main characteristics were: (1) the typical rectangular shape became horseshoe-shaped which allowed a better view of the spectacle; and (2) the greater depth of the stage allowed the use of the innovative perspective wings and the opportunity for the actor to play in front of as well as behind the proscenium.

The third possibility is that the construction plan of this prison was a copy of the plan of one of the oldest opera theatres in Europe, the *Reale Teatro di San Carlo*, designed by the architects Medrano and Carasale and built in Naples in 1737. This suggestion is entirely plausible since there is an almost perfect correspondence between the two plans, their difference lying in the number of floors: the San Carlo Theatre has five floors (Parente 1998: 104). Schiano di Collella<sup>4</sup>, an archaeologist who has studied the Santo Stefano complex and works there as a tour guide, claims that 'the horseshoe configuration and the proportions are exactly the same' (2006).

Carpi and Winspeare, conscious of the benefits of the theatre's improved sight lines, may have incorporated them into the prison architecture (Parente 1998: 105). That is why Settembrini, who was a prisoner there during the nineteenth century, describes the prison by proposing that one imagine a vast uncovered theatre. It is possible to do this by comparing Figures 1 and 2.





## Branco

San Carlo Theatre the audience (box seats) observes the centre (stage); in Santo Stefano Prison the audience (prisoners) is observed from the centre (surveillance guards). It is possible to claim that the spectacle, in Santo Stefano, was played on a different stage: the prison, a tactical and strategically conceived space where the prisoners performed the dual role of actors and spectators.

The prison building at Santo Stefano island can thus be seen as a good illustration of Bentham's ideas regarding the panoptical architecture, a kind of architecture where, as Foucault has shown, space serves the purpose of inflicting the power of law over the prisoners and where each and all are both actors and spectators in the spectacle of oppression that involves them all.

## Notes

- 1 I wish to acknowledge the comments made by Richard Mohr, Marett Leiboff, Sophie Nield and Valerio Nitrato Izzo. I also want to thank Adelaide Mazzarella and Giancarlo Giupponi for their assistance in obtaining the images used here.
- 2 Please see <http://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/table-of-the-mortal-sins/> (September 2010).
- 3 Imagine you are seeing a vast uncovered theatre ... (my translation)
- 4 My interest regarding this prison comes from a summer trip there in 2008, when I had the chance of visiting the islands of Ventotene and Santo Stefano and listening to the enthusiasm of Salvatore Schiano di Collela as he showed us photos and copies of the original plans by Carpi. The statement in this text was taken from a newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, from 2006, a news item called *Ispirato alla teoria del Panopticon. È a ferro di cavallo: poche guardie controllavano tutto. Per due secoli ha ospitato I detenuti politici, è chiuso dal 1965* in [http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2006/settembre/17/Bresci\\_Pertini\\_salvo\\_carcere\\_teatro\\_co\\_9\\_060917013.shtml](http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2006/settembre/17/Bresci_Pertini_salvo_carcere_teatro_co_9_060917013.shtml) (March 2010).

## References

- Asma D 1997 *Genuflecting at the Bench: Rituals of Power and Power of Rituals in American Courts* in <http://www.critcrim.org/redfeather/journal-pomocrim/Vol-5-Dramaturgy/genuflecting%20at%20the%20bench.htm>
- Bentham J 1787 *The Panopticon Writings* in <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/Publications/public.htm>
- Egginton W 2003 *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Question of Modernity* State University of New York Press New York
- Foucault M 1975 *Surveiller et Punir: naissance de la prison* Gallimard Paris
- Garapon A 1997 *Bem julgar. Ensaio sobre o ritual judiciário* Trans P F Henriques Instituto Piaget Lisbon
- Goodrich P 2008 'Visive Powers: Colours, Trees and Genres of Jurisdiction' *Law and Humanities* 2/2: 213-31
- Gutting G 2005 *Foucault. A Very Short Introduction* Oxford University Press Oxford
- Lucien A 2010 'Staging and the Imaginary Institution of the Judge' *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* DOI 10.1007/s11196-010-9150-4 (online first)
- McNamara M J 2004 *From Tavern to Courthouse. Architecture and Ritual in American Law, 1658-1860* John Hopkins University Press Baltimore
- Mohr R 1999 'In Between Power and Procedure: Where the Court Meets the Public Sphere' *JOSCCI* in <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/joscci/joscci1/mohr.html>
- Molinaro N 1996 'Discipline and Drama: Panoptic Theatre and Griselda Gambaro's *El campo*' *Latin America Theatre Review* 29/2: 29-41
- Mulcahy L 2008 'Architectural Precedent: The Manchester Assize Courts and Monuments to Law in the Mid-Victorian Era' *King's Law Journal* 19/3: 525-50
- Parente A 1998 *Architettura ed archeologia carceraria. Santo Stefano di Ventotene ed il 'panopticon'* Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca Dello Stato Rome
- Pepe P 1999 *Ventotene e Santo Stefano* Edizioni CEP Monteroduni
- Rabinow P eds 1984 *The Foucault Reader* Penguin Books London
- Resnik J 2009 'Courts: In and Out of Sight, Site, and Cite' *Villanova Law Review* 53: 101-40
- Settembrini L 2005 *L'ergastolo di Santo Stefano* Fratelli Frilli Editori Genoa