

The Impact of Architecture and Its Applications to Prison Design:

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*Abstract*

Architecture is frequently viewed as “frivolous” and is thus not considered a serious political issue that deserves attention and funding. However, this view is too reductionistic and is consequently misguided. In this paper, I argue that architecture has a significant impact on human life and therefore deserves more consideration in public policy, which I then apply to the issue of prison design. I also posit architectural guidelines based on Heidegger’s conception of dwelling, as well as on architecture’s ability to facilitate psychological comfort and moral improvement.

## Introduction

Practicality and minimal effort have been the common approaches to designing and constructing buildings in the modern era. Cities are cluttered with monotonous skyscrapers that use their dominating verticality to attempt to house as many apartments and offices as possible. Suburbs are littered with cookie cutter houses, each the same as the next. Materials are selected based on cost effectiveness and vast availability.



This suburb filled with identical houses evidently does not treat architecture as an important issue.

Architecture has often been perceived as frivolous and unimportant, and has thus rarely been taken seriously as a political problem or a valuable use of resources. The effects that architecture has on people are not immediately obvious, which makes measuring its impact difficult. When considering how to allocate resources, architecture typically is put on the back burner because “Beautiful architecture has none of the unambiguous advantages of a vaccine or a bowl of rice.”<sup>1</sup> Based on this, Alain de Botton predicts in *The Architecture of Happiness* that constructing beautiful architecture will never be raised to a dominant political priority.<sup>2</sup> This common political approach, however, is overly reductive and devalues the benefits of architecture. As human beings, our feelings of happiness, security, and comfort depend on the places that we are in. Furthermore, architecture represents different values that influence our characters and outlooks on the world. In this paper, I will seek to articulate the significant impact that architecture has on human life and therefore argue that architecture should be more seriously considered in prison design. I will (1) begin by discussing Martin Heidegger’s work on dwelling and the importance of living a meaningful existence. Then I will (2) emphasize the significance of architecture’s impact on human life, especially in terms

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<sup>1</sup> de Botton, Alain. *The Architecture of Happiness*. Vintage Books, 2006, page 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

of psychological comfort and moral improvement, and posit architectural guidelines and ideals primarily by considering the work of Alain de Botton and Christian Norberg-Schulz. Finally I will (3) synthesize the previous two sections by applying these architectural considerations to prison design. Architecture has a tremendous influence on whether or not we can live meaningfully, be comfortable, and improve morally, and my goal in this paper is to illustrate this claim and show its importance to the issue of prison design.

### *Section I: Heidegger on Dwelling and the Subject*

In his essay titled “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Heidegger insists that in order to exist authentically, man must be able to dwell. His definition of dwelling is “the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth.”<sup>3</sup> Heidegger’s account of dwelling regards the ontology of a meaningful existence, which I argue is an important aspect of human life and that architecture should be used to help bring this into fruition.

In order to exist meaningfully, Heidegger places importance on an individual’s relationship to their environment. By this, he does not mean just their immediate surroundings but also how these surroundings fit into the greater framework of the universe. He says of dwelling that it means to be “on the earth” and it also means to be “under the sky.”<sup>4</sup> Even though we as human beings may only see our existences as us walking along the earth, we are in fact part of something much more expansive and dwelling means realizing how connected we are to the world around us. Heidegger asserts that dwelling means being in the fourfold of earth and sky, divinities and mortals,<sup>5</sup> which shows the depth that is actually involved in living a

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, Martin. “Building Dwelling Thinking.” From *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter. Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1971, page 147.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, page 149.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, pages 149-50.

meaningful existence. In order to concretize this goal of dwelling and preserving the fourfold in a material world, the act of dwelling brings the presencing of the fourfold into things, but this succeeds in its goal “*only when* [these things] themselves *as* things are let be in their presencing.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, natural things must be nurtured and man-made things must be specially constructed in accordance with these natural things. These acts of cultivating and constructing that promote dwelling are building, so in this way we can understand dwelling as the goal of building.

Heidegger also takes time to develop and explain the relationship between location and space and man and space. Within greater space as such, or “space,” there are spaces that are carved out and are available to all mortals. As such, “Spaces open up by the fact that they are let into the dwelling of man. To say that mortals *are* is to say that *in dwelling* they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations. And only because mortals pervade, persist through, spaces by their very nature are they able to go through spaces.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, there is evidently a strong relationship between man and space because “The spaces through which we go daily are provided for by locations; their nature is grounded in things of the type of buildings.”<sup>8</sup> As long as man exists, he will always exist in space, making his relationship with location intertwined with his existence. It is also important to understand how man relates to his environment in order to properly consider Heidegger’s idea of dwelling because “Man’s relations to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken.”<sup>9</sup> The locations that man builds allow him to dwell in the world that he creates, as “Building puts up locations that

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<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, page 151.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, page 157.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, page 156.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, page 157.

make space and a site for the fourfold,”<sup>10</sup> and then man can live a complete existence unified with the universe. The act of building makes possible man’s ability to dwell in the world, and, as such, this act must be taken seriously when constructing architecture so that man can indeed dwell and therefore have a meaningful existence. After all, “Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.”<sup>11</sup>

## *Section II: The Significance of Architecture and Resulting Considerations*

The intimate connection between people and their surroundings that are encompassed by Heidegger’s conceptions of dwelling makes the issue of architecture a significant aspect of human life. Architecture has a profound influence on human beings, as it possesses the ability to make people either feel safe or comfortable or lost or unwelcome, and its perceived meanings shape the characters of those who encounter it. It is thus important that care is put into our architectural endeavors because the buildings that we construct will in turn shape us.

### *The Psychological Impact of Architecture*

For thousands of years a common opinion of architecture has been that it has no value beyond its practical purposes of keeping human beings safe and sheltered. The Ancient Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus even supposedly said to his friend who lamented his house being burnt down, “If you really understand what governs the universe, how can you yearn for bits of rock and pretty stone?”<sup>12</sup> Acclaimed architect Le Corbusier also took a practical approach to building, as he maintained that the function of a house was to provide “1. A shelter against heat, cold, rain, thieves and the inquisitive. 2. A receptacle for light and sun. 3. A certain number of

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<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, page 158.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, page 160.

<sup>12</sup> de Botton, page 11.

cells appropriated for cooking, work, and personal life.”<sup>13</sup> He said nothing else of a building’s duty to provide anything beyond the essential functions of life. What Epictetus and Le Corbusier apparently did not understand, however, is the power that architecture possesses over the human psychological state. Architecture can provide either a psychological sanctuary or a feeling of alienation to those who encounter it.

Buildings indeed emulate certain moods and feelings, and they pass these on to the people that encounter them. Alain de Botton recognizes this aspect of architecture, and it features prominently in his *The Architecture of Happiness*. He says, “Of almost any building, we ask not only that it do a certain thing but also that it look a certain way, that it contribute to a given mood: of religiosity or scholarship, rusticity or modernity, commerce or domesticity. We may require it to generate a feeling of reassurance or of excitement, of harmony or of containment.”<sup>14</sup> Our environment has a tremendous power over our state of mind, as it can make us feel a certain way. This power has been harnessed by detectives who question suspects in a dark, windowless interrogation room with a wobbly chair or sticky table to produce a feeling of discomfort, or by the designers of the McDonald’s logo who utilized the colors red and yellow to elicit feelings of hunger in potential customers.<sup>15</sup> Architecture and design evidently have the ability to impact people psychologically, and others have acknowledged this. John Ruskin’s approach to architecture differs from Le Corbusier’s, as he proposed that architecture should be more than merely shelter and a functional structure in which to live. He suggested that when constructing buildings, not only do we want them to shelter us, but “we want them to *speak* to us – to speak to us of whatever we find important and need to be reminded of.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>13</sup> de Botton, page 57.

<sup>14</sup> de Botton, page 62.

<sup>15</sup> Milligan, Ceara, “There Is An Actual Reason McDonald’s Logo Is Yellow and Red,” Mashed, November 9, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> de Botton, page 62.

“Buildings *speak* – and on topics which can readily be discerned. They speak of democracy and aristocracy, openness or arrogance, welcome or threat, a sympathy for the future or a hankering for the past.”<sup>17</sup> Architects design with these messages in mind. For example, the recently constructed United States Embassy in London is a translucent crystalline cube that expresses the “core democratic values of transparency, openness, and equality.”<sup>18</sup> Architecture, then, should not be constructed carelessly or be thought of as merely shelter, as it impacts how people feel when they are in its presence.



Embassy of the United States, London, KieranTimberlake, 2017.

### *Architectural Idealization and Character Development*

In addition to architecture’s ability to make people feel comfortable or uncomfortable, it also has the ability to affect their morals and ideals. This belief was promulgated by early Christian and Muslim theologians, who proposed that “beautiful buildings had the power to improve us morally and spiritually.”<sup>19</sup> While cathedrals and other places of worship are often maligned as overly indulgent with their intricately crafted stained glass windows, marble columns, golden candlesticks, and the like, these theologians defended these investments in beautiful things because they held that there was “an equivalence between the visual and ethical realms. Attractive architecture was held to be a vision of goodness in a non-verbal idiom – and its ugly counterpart, a material version of evil,” and, thus, “exquisite surroundings could edge us

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<sup>17</sup> de Botton, page 71.

<sup>18</sup> “Policy & History: U.S. Embassy London.” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in the United Kingdom official website.

<sup>19</sup> de Botton, page 117.

towards perfection. A beautiful building could reinforce our resolve to be good.”<sup>20</sup> Architecture was seen as a fitting instrument to convey the ideals of religion because, since we as human beings were creatures of sense, “spiritual principles stood a better chance of fortifying our souls if we took them in via our eyes rather than via our intellect.”<sup>21</sup> This relation between beauty and moral goodness affords architecture a tremendous weight in shaping the beliefs and characters of mankind.

At first it may seem implausible and even silly that architecture has the power to influence which beliefs are adopted by people, but this phenomenon has in fact been experienced by some people. De Botton recounts a rainy afternoon in London when he stopped at a McDonald’s constructed from smoked glass and granite and was surrounded by harsh lighting and the sounds of frozen french fries being plunged into oil and the frantic behavior of the employees and customers eating alone while reading papers. The resulting mood was solemn and concentrated, and it “invited thoughts of the loneliness and meaninglessness of existence in a random and violent universe. The only solution was to continue to eat in an attempt to compensate for the discomfort brought on by the location in which one was doing so.”<sup>22</sup>



The beauty of Westminster Cathedral can even invoke the idea of the existence of God.

However, these negative and hopeless feelings dissipated when de Botton went across the plaza to Westminster Cathedral. The high-ceilinged Byzantine-style church was filled with candles, incense, marble, and mosaics, and, de Botton imparts, “After ten minutes in the cathedral, a range of ideas that would have been inconceivable outside began to

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<sup>20</sup> de Botton, page 117.

<sup>21</sup> de Botton, page 118.

<sup>22</sup> de Botton, page 108.

assume an air of reasonableness,” including the idea that an angel could emerge at any moment.<sup>23</sup> These ideas would have seemed “demented” forty metres away in the McDonald’s, but in the cathedral, surrounded by beautiful architecture, they acquired supreme significance and majesty.<sup>24</sup> If in a matter of minutes someone’s belief in whether or not life has meaning and the plausibility of the existence of spiritual beings can be affected by the place that they are in, then it is not so absurd to think that architecture can greatly impact the people that we become.

This ability of architecture to shape who we are is largely de Botton’s main point, as he asserts that “Belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places – and on the conviction that it is architecture’s task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.”<sup>25</sup> Architecture’s meaning, then, extends beyond encouraging people to better understand religious teachings, as was the intended purpose of religious structures, as churches’ interests in beautiful architecture spread into secular life as well. As de Botton says, “The gravity with which religions have at points treated the decoration of their surroundings invites us to lend equal significance to the decoration of profane places, for they, too, may offer the better parts of us a home.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, “In a secular context, too, our aim is to identify objects and decorative features which will correlate with certain salutary inner states and encourage us to foster them within ourselves.”<sup>27</sup>

Even the act of putting more effort into architecture could have the positive impact of helping people to see the goodness of human beings. Although intricately crafted gargoyles, columns, and embellishments do not appear to have any immediate practical purpose, “In the finest of these flourishes, we can read signs of goodness in a material register, a form of frozen

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<sup>23</sup> de Botton, pages 109-11.

<sup>24</sup> de Botton, page 111.

<sup>25</sup> de Botton, page 13.

<sup>26</sup> de Botton, page 118.

<sup>27</sup> de Botton, page 119.

benevolence. We see in them evidence of those sides of human nature which enable us to thrive rather than simply survive.”<sup>28</sup> Seeing the best parts of human nature in action in architecture could in turn inspire people to be as benevolent as those that created their environment.

### *Dwelling as a Necessary Aspect of Thoughtful Architecture*

Heidegger’s understanding of dwelling is essential to meaningful architecture, for “‘dwelling’, in an existential sense, is the purpose of architecture. Man dwells when he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment, or, in short, when he experiences the environment as meaningful. Dwelling therefore implies something more than ‘shelter.’”<sup>29</sup> Spending time and money carving details into woodwork or finding the perfect paint color, then, is not a waste, but in fact plays a large role in determining whether or not a person can comfortably dwell in a place, which is a need that they possess as a human being. Heidegger saw that in order to live a truly human life, one must live in places with meaning.

Norberg-Schulz concurs with him, asserting, “It is one of the basic needs of man to experience his life-situations as meaningful, and the purpose of the work of art is to ‘keep’ and transmit meanings.”<sup>30</sup> The duty of an architect, then, is to construct buildings that are meaningful and help people to dwell in places.

An important aspect of dwelling is the sense of peace and security that it provides. Heidegger says, “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature.”<sup>31</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz later corroborates this assertion by saying, “To be lost is evidently the opposite of the feeling of

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<sup>28</sup> de Botton, page 212.

<sup>29</sup> Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. Rizzoli, 1979, page 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, page 149.

security which distinguishes dwelling.”<sup>32</sup> When man is able to dwell, it is a feeling of profound comfort as he is able to live in harmony with his environment without feeling lost or uncomfortable with the lack of cohesion. Thus, the meaningful existence that dwelling affords also can bring about psychological comfort.

Dwelling as a way of achieving an authentic existence takes into consideration an individual as they relate to their environment. The meanings that surround each person are not always evident, and it is up to the built forms that human beings erect to properly convey these meanings to all of those who encounter them. In other words, man makes sense of the universe through built forms. As Norberg-Schulz says, “man ‘receives’ the environment and makes it focus in buildings and things. The things thereby ‘explain’ the environment and make its character manifest. Thereby the things themselves become meaningful.”<sup>33</sup> The structures that man creates are far from frivolous or arbitrary, as they are the tools that help man to parse meaning from an otherwise ambiguous space, and it is the meanings that buildings and things afford man that allow him to dwell.

Heidegger nears the close of “Building Dwelling Thinking” with a powerful thought for architects of the present and future to keep in mind. He argues, “Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling. The two, however, are also insufficient for dwelling so long as each busies itself with its own affairs in separation instead of listening to one another. They are able to listen if both – building and thinking – belong to dwelling, if they remain within their limits and realize that the one as much as the other comes from the workshop of long experience and incessant practice.”<sup>34</sup> I understand this as Heidegger’s way of telling those who build to be deliberate and thoughtful with the structures that they build, as their success or failure

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<sup>32</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 20.

<sup>33</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 16.

<sup>34</sup> Heidegger, pages 160-1.

in allowing man to dwell in these places either allows or prevents man from living a meaningful existence when in those places. Each architect must keep this goal in mind because all of man's existence on earth takes place in built locations. Man is inseparable from space, and so the space that we exist in is of crucial importance in determining the authenticity of our existence.

Dwelling as it is to live meaningfully can be brought into the fullness of its nature by us as human beings when we both build for the sake of dwelling and think for the sake of dwelling.<sup>35</sup>

Harmony must exist between the three paramount concepts of building, dwelling, and thinking in order for true dwelling and existence that is meaningful to come to fruition.

### *Architectural Guidelines and Ideals*

With the significance of architecture properly underscored, attention should now be turned to what considerations should be kept in mind when erecting new architectural structures, if these structures are to help foster dwelling for human beings.

First off, as expected in his *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Christian Norberg-Schulz emphasizes the importance of the *genius loci*, or the “spirit of place,” in choosing how to articulate an architectural structure. The *genius* denotes what a thing *is*, or what it “wants to be,”<sup>36</sup> and so, when deciding how best to express the *genius loci* of a place, it is of the utmost importance to ask, as Louis Kahn did, “What does the building want to be?”<sup>37</sup> Thus, “Architecture means to visualize the *genius loci*.”<sup>38</sup> There is also a sense of flexibility to building based on a place's *genius loci* which makes this approach to architecture adaptable and desirable in a world that is constantly in flux. As Norberg-Schulz says, “As a rule places change,

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<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, page 161.

<sup>36</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 18.

<sup>37</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 6.

<sup>38</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 5.

sometimes rapidly. This does not mean, however, that the *genius loci* necessarily changes or gets lost ... To protect and conserve the genius loci in fact means to concretize its essence in ever new historical contexts.”<sup>39</sup> Even as situations change as history unfolds, the *genius loci* persists and provides a guide to architects seeking to translate a space into man-made space that can satisfy man’s physical and psychic needs.

When erecting new constructions that allow man to dwell, it is the architect’s job to interpret a place’s *genius loci* and then translate it into concrete form that then articulates the essence of the place. Heidegger uses the example of a bridge to illustrate this power of built form. He says of a bridge that is built over a stream, “It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie



The bridge brings together the landscape and articulates its hidden meaning.

across from each other ... The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream.”<sup>40</sup> The bridge, then, is shown as possessing the ability to be placed in a setting and reshape it according to the meaning that the architect wishes to convey. After all, “the bridge, if it is a true bridge, is never first of all a mere bridge and then afterward a symbol”;<sup>41</sup> the bridge’s construction as an authentic object to facilitate dwelling is done carefully with full knowledge of the fact that it expresses a certain meaning to those who come across it. Norberg-Schulz emphasizes Heidegger’s example and the importance of the bridge because in fact “the landscape as such gets its value *through* the bridge. Before, the meaning of the landscape was ‘hidden’, and the building of the bridge brings it out into the open.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, architecture is indeed immensely

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<sup>39</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 18.

<sup>40</sup> Heidegger, page 152.

<sup>41</sup> Heidegger, page 153.

<sup>42</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 18.

valuable to the goal of living a meaningful life because it brings forth the meanings of natural place that would otherwise be hidden to us, and it is up to the architect to decide which meanings to emphasize through their design. The act of building that the architect takes part in carries with it the power to allow man to dwell in the resulting built forms, “For building brings the fourfold *hither* into a thing, the bridge, and brings *forth* the thing as a location, out into what is already there, room for which is only now made *by* this location.”<sup>43</sup> When space is transformed by an architect into a location, it is meant to convey a chosen meaning onto anyone who comes into its presence and this is only made possible by the fact that the architect constructed the location in this particular way in the first place.

Norberg-Schulz argues that when considering what to construct in a certain place, the natural place must be taken into account. He appears to build off of Heidegger’s notion that spaces receive their being from locations,<sup>44</sup> which solidifies the importance of considering the relationship that will result from building man-made structure in a natural place. Architecture should not be arbitrary, but should be an extension of a place so that harmony and cohesion are achieved. There is indeed an intimate connection between natural place and man-made place, for “The boundaries of a built space are known as *floor, wall and ceiling*. The boundaries of a landscape are structurally similar, and consist of ground, horizon, and sky. This simple structural similarity is of basic importance for the relationship between natural and man-made places.”<sup>45</sup> A lack of cohesion between a building and its surroundings conveys a building’s lack of a concrete identity that it then passes on to those who encounter it.

The ability to dwell in a place depends on the psychological functions of orientation and identification. Norberg-Schulz says, “To gain an existential foothold man has to be able to

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<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, page 159.

<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, page 154.

<sup>45</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 13.

*orientate* himself; he has to know *where* he is. But he also has to *identify* himself with the environment, that is, he has to know *how* he is a certain place.”<sup>46</sup> A building’s conversation with its surroundings is crucial to a person’s ability to orientate and identify himself within his surroundings. The uneasiness generated by an inability to orientate oneself is illustrated by a story that de Botton tells of a trip that he took to Japan. While he was there, he visited Huis Ten



One is not here able to correctly orientate  
themselves in Japan.

Bosch Dutch Village, which was designed to look like a traditional Dutch village. The theme park was complete with cheese shops, windmills, and a gigantic field of tulips.

However, even though the meticulously crafted streets and squares might have been beautiful, they resulted in a feeling

of discomfort for de Botton because he was in fact not in the Netherlands, but in Japan, and could therefore not properly orientate himself within his environment. The recreation of a Dutch village in rural Japan did not match what the landscape demanded, nor what was articulated by the rest of the country’s culture and architecture.

Clearly, when considering the example of Huis Ten Bosch Dutch Village, culture and already existing man-made places must be taken into account when thoughtfully constructing a building so as to achieve cohesion. Cohesion is a crucial element of thoughtful architecture, as de Botton asserts when he continues his argument for harmony between architecture and its context, saying, “We could say that nothing in architecture is ever ugly in itself; it is merely in the wrong place or of the wrong size, while beauty is the child of the coherent relationship between parts.”<sup>47</sup> Castle Ward serves as a warning for the consequences of building architecture without regard for cohesion between parts. The castle was designed for Viscount Bangor and his

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<sup>46</sup> Norberg-Schulz, page 19.

<sup>47</sup> de Botton, page 218.

wife Lady Anne Bligh, but they could not agree on a style to build the house in. The result was that the front half of the house was built in the Classic style, and the back half was built in the Gothic. The inside of the house, too, was divided between the two styles. De Botton equates this unrestricted choice of architectural styles to outright chaos,<sup>48</sup> and this chaos does not lend itself well to helping a person to meaningfully dwell. The meaning of a place can be interpreted in many ways, yet choosing to articulate too many interpretations of meaning can make a building's purpose appear muddled and it achieves confusion as opposed to a lasting impact.



Castle Ward's front and back façades clearly are lacking harmony.

The architect must be clear in how they choose to design a building so that their message is not lost.

### *Section III: Applications to Prison Design*

When considering all that is affected by architecture, it is truly confounding how little thought is put into prison design. As of 2019, the total prison population in the United States was nearly 2.1 million, making the country's prison population rate per 100,000 people equal to 629, which is the highest incarceration rate in the world.<sup>49</sup> These staggering numbers of inmates in the United States make it even more imperative for the national government to take prison design more seriously, as millions of people reside there for amounts of time ranging from brief periods to decades-long sentences. For the duration of an inmate's sentence, the prison building

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<sup>48</sup> de Botton, page 44.

<sup>49</sup> World Prison Brief. "United States of America: Overview." Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research. Birkbeck, University of London.

is the only one that they have as their environment. Inmates spend extensive periods of time in prisons, and the impact that their surroundings have on them is underestimated.

In order to argue for more thoughtful prison design, as I plan to do in this section, the purpose of incarceration must first be identified. In their article titled “Legal Punishment,” Zachary Hoskins and Antony Duff explore the intentions behind and the justifications of legal punishment. Criminal punishment (which hereafter will simply be referred to as “punishment”) can be described as involving “the imposition of something that is intended to be both burdensome and reprobative, on a supposed offender for a supposed time, by a person or body who claims the authority to do so”<sup>50</sup> (in this case, by the government). The interpretation of how burdensome punishment should be, however, has resulted in some conflict among penal theorists. Some believe that punishment should inflict on offenders pain and suffering, but others view this as a distortion and that it is not the state’s place to impose this.<sup>51</sup> Another interpretation is that punishment should cause harm to the offender, but some theorists object that punishment must be intended to be “intrinsically bad” for the person punished.<sup>52</sup> This range of what punishment should in fact entail exposes an inherent flaw in how inmates are treated. If the exact purpose of punishment is unclear, this leaves openings for inhumane and unjust treatment, and this can take place in the form of subjection to unfit prisons. A similar weakness can be seen in the facet of punishment that is intended to be condemnatory. It is widely accepted that punishment differs from mere penalties in their reprobative character.<sup>53</sup> However, when this intention to condemn offenders for their actions is taken too far, it can result in punishment that is excessive and infringes upon the unalienable rights of inmates.

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<sup>50</sup> Hoskins, Zachary and Antony Duff, “Legal Punishment.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

It is important that prisons do not overstep their bounds and are able to show respect to the inmates that reside there. As Hoskins and Duff rightfully assert, “we must – if we are to justify punishment at all – show how the imposition of punishment can be consistent with, or even expressive of, the respect that citizens owe to each other.”<sup>54</sup> The inmates that reside within the prison system are still human beings that retain rights afforded to them as human beings, and I argue that among these rights is the ability to live in places with meaning. Additionally, the powers of architecture to produce certain psychological responses and to potentially improve moral character can and likely should be utilized in order to improve the lives of inmates and perhaps to even decrease the total prison population. The purpose of incarceration can be generally identified as rehabilitation or retribution, and no matter which one a person believes, it is clear that more care must be put into the project of designing prisons.

If the purpose of incarceration is identified as rehabilitation, then placing inmates in an unthoughtful prison is impractical because the prison’s architecture can significantly affect an inmate’s character development. It is here in prisons that potentially the most vulnerable people are placed, as they have committed illegal and generally immoral actions, and the goal of rehabilitative incarceration is to alter an inmate’s outlook so that they will not engage in criminal behavior in the future. Each person experiences a wide range of feelings and commits morally good and bad acts, and this fluidity of character is honed into more lasting beliefs and overall moral character through exposure to architecture. As de Botton asserts, “Architecture can arrest transient and timid inclinations, amplify and solidify them, and thereby grant us more permanent access to a range of emotional textures which we might otherwise have experienced only accidentally and occasionally.”<sup>55</sup> With this in mind, the potential of an inmate to become more or

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<sup>54</sup> Hoskins and Duff.

<sup>55</sup> de Botton, page 121.



What meaning does this convey?  
Is it possible to be comfortable or  
improve morally here?

less morally good could be swayed by their architectural surroundings to remain on one side of the moral spectrum, making the design of prisons, where inmates remain all day, every day for up to decades, of crucial importance. Grey cinder block walls and dingy cells that only receive light from a small window covered with bars do not make prisoners feel like there is hope for them. The message that these buildings convey is that each inmate is inhuman,

undeserving of pleasure and beauty, and not to be trusted. These negative messages may in fact worsen the characters of inmates, counteracting the goal of rehabilitating them to be better members of society.

Putting more time and resources towards prison design and construction may be seen as superfluous in comparison to the other issues that the government needs to fund, such as the military, infrastructure, and social services. However, the money that is saved by the minimalistic approach to prison design that is often taken today can be assumed to be offset by the negative impact that these unthoughtful prisons have on inmates that are supposed to be rehabilitated. If these inmates do not in fact improve while in prison, then more money will be spent on them as they continue to reside in the prison system. Thus, increased attention spent on prison design could potentially save the government money and could support the agenda of rehabilitating inmates.

Even if retribution is identified as the purpose of imprisoning someone, then more thought should still be put into prison design because many prisons today could reasonably be called inhumane. As previously mentioned, Heidegger and Norberg-Schulz concurred that living in a meaningful place is a basic human need, and the inability to dwell in many, if not most,

modern prisons thus infringes upon a prisoner's right as a human being to live in a meaningful place. No matter where a prison is located in the United States, most of them look the same: dark corridors, minimal windows, fluorescent lights, bars on every door and window, all cloaked in shades of grey and white. In this environment, it becomes impossible for a person to orientate themselves. Within the walls of any given prison in America, an inmate would not be able to tell where they are. They could be in Texas, Vermont, Nebraska, or anywhere else. The appearances of these prisons also do not help human beings to positively identify themselves with their environment. These prisons are hostile, unwelcome, and convey that each prisoner is merely to be kept alive, that all other pleasures of human life are stripped away since they do not deserve them. This makes the ability to dwell while in prison an impossibility, and it goes against the basic human need to live in meaningful places. Perhaps adding more aspects of local design and more comforts to make prison life more livable would help inmates to more easily dwell. After all, being sentenced to reside in a prison does not make anyone less human or any less entitled to basic human needs. When living in a prison, an inmate retains the right to basic human needs such as food, clothing, and places to eat and sleep. Why should they be deprived of the human need to live in a meaningful environment?

A prison is more than merely a concrete box that is used to hold inmates until their release or their death. It is a residence that is meant to impart values on those that live there. Buildings "should not only harmonise their parts but in addition cohere with their settings; that they should speak to us of the significant values and characteristics of their own locations and eras."<sup>56</sup> A prison should thus be more carefully thought out and intentionally designed, for they directly impact inmates' worldviews, characters, and ability to live a truly human life. While in

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<sup>56</sup> de Botton, page 219.

prison, a person is not separated from the world but still remains a part of it, and so prisons should allow them to still be able to find their existential foothold even while incarcerated.

### *Conclusion*

Architecture forms the backdrop of human existence, and it should not be overlooked since it touches every moment of life on earth. This discipline has frequently been cast as a waste of time and resources in the face of other supposedly more pressing issues that have more specifically identifiable solutions with easily quantifiable results. The philosophy of architecture does not offer one right answer that can be easily exacted, yet the guidelines put forth here allow for a clear direction to be taken in the future of designing and constructing new buildings.

Devoting attention to architecture is essential because each and every person has been impacted by the architecture that they encounter. Whether someone has been moved like de Botton to even begin to believe in the spiritual world by entering a cathedral, or if they have only been moved to smile at a quirky house that they pass on the street, it is clear that architecture can affect our state of mind either permanently or temporarily. Despite Epictetus' disdain, bits of rock and pretty stone can make a person feel happy or sad, safe or unsafe, lost or at home.

Architecture is indeed an issue that pervades the entirety of human existence, and it is owed the respect and consideration that it deserves.

Beautiful architecture makes no guarantees about the kinds of people that we will become or how happy we will be, as picturesque mansions, apartments, and lodges have played host to horrific murderers and tyrants,<sup>57</sup> and even if we could live forever in La Rotonda or the Glass House, we would still likely often be unhappy.<sup>58</sup> However, no policy that ever has been or will

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<sup>57</sup> de Botton, pages 19-20.

<sup>58</sup> de Botton, page 18.

be enacted possesses the ability to guarantee its effectiveness. Are governments willing to take the chance that architecture really is so insignificant that it is rarely worth their efforts? Do they really believe that the millions of incarcerated persons deserve to live in windowless grey cells devoid of the ability to live a meaningful, humane existence? Perhaps governmental interests in how to best allocate resources to serve the community would benefit from considering Heidegger's emphasis on the human necessity to dwell, Norberg-Schulz's conviction that architecture coincide with each location's *genius loci*, and de Botton's acknowledgements of architecture's impact on people in everyday life. After all, "To the extent that modernity is ruled by the economic imperative, it fails to do justice to the whole human being. And just because of this failure, it needs architecture."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Harries, Karsten. *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997.

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