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SENS(E)IBLE DESIGN: A CALL FOR PARTICIPATORY PRISON DESIGN (PPD)

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Abstract

Sensory experiences play a central role in shaping everyday life in prison. These embodied dynamics cannot be fully anticipated through architectural plans, procurement processes or prefabricated design models alone. This commentary draws on emerging insights from carceral geography and sensory criminology to argue for more systematic inclusion of experiential knowledge in prison design, repair and refurbishment. It proposes Participatory Prison Design (PPD) as an approach to engage incarcerated people and staff in generating knowledge about how prison spaces are experienced, enabling design choices that balance safety and security with the embodied realities of living and working in these environments.

Keywords: Prison design; Participatory Prison Design (PPD); architecture; participatory methods; sensory experiences

#Day 5; Friday: The weather is pretty biblical today – the entrance seems much further away from the car park than usual. It's quite warm despite this. I'm not looking forward to my morning of interviews in the work-sheds, where it's frighteningly hot at any degree. A muddy smear greets me as I enter through the automatic doors. I make bad jokes about the rain and am asked for the 5th time in five days if I have authorisation for my Dictaphones. My buckle catches on my belt loop as I try to drop my belongings in the security scanner tray. I feel a droplet of sweat make its way down between my shoulder blades.

#Day 10, Wednesday: The wings do feel quite light and bright. But what is striking is the acoustics. Noise – or certain noise – travels. The vacuum cleaner was loud as hell, for example, but the officers trying to shout to each other were useless. You really have to yell. The smell of toast is wafting down the stairs. I am yet to understand the rationale for the green and blue stripes across the carpet. When the vacuum stops I can hear the whirring of the ventilation or some kind of other air system. And now the sound seems to travel, so the few conversations I can hear from the office staff seem like they shouldn't be heard.

#Day 11, Thursday: The cell was all set up to receive its next occupant. The TV and remote, a lamp and a small kettle were all waiting. Phone pin numbers were scrawled on one wall. The painted square that acts as a notice board was speckled with white spots where the toothpaste used to fix photographs to the wall had pulled the paint off. I run my fingers over the surface – a few flakes fall away … I'd say that the place was clean, but it still looked a bit grubby. … Nevertheless, it wasn't dull, it wasn't dark and it was smelling okay. You'd feel basic but you'd be equipped I'd say …

#Day 15, Monday: My staff alarm went off again today. It was about 12 noon, and my first thought is always that I've pressed something by accident. Everyone checked their belt and looked down to see where the source was. It was 1C. One second after the high-pitched siren, the thunderclap arrived – boots pounding stair treads and concrete like a runaway herd. Just as suddenly, it was over. The radio confirmed "all clear." The stampede faded, the roar of feet fracturing into irregular thuds as staff drifted back, shuffling and slowing, until the afternoon settled into quiet once more.

Introduction

Although prisons are typically designed with security and functionality in mind, their most powerful effects are often sensory – experienced through sight, sound, touch, smell and taste – and most apparent in the minute operational routines of these spaces. However, much of what shapes the experience of incarceration – and, indeed, the work of those who move through these spaces – rarely makes its way into architectural plans or policy documents. As the above excerpts from one of my field diaries demonstrate, it is often obvious how quickly the built environment communicates its sensory pressures and demands. The weather, the acoustics, the way heat accumulates, the persistence of smells, the choreography of movement – each of these elements shape how spaces are used, understood and endured. These are the kinds of insights that only emerge through close, embodied engagement with the facility, and they underscore why the perspectives of those who inhabit these environments are indispensable to any meaningful design process. Through this commentary, I propose the use of Participatory Prison Design (PPD) to not only capture the physical

and sensory character of the prison but to recognize and document the kind of experiential knowledge that could be translated into design and policy decisions. In the following, I briefly outline the existent literature that highlights the importance of prison design and sensory experiences of carceral space before introducing PPD and suggesting how it may be deployed on the premise that lived sensorial details are not peripheral but foundational – they constitute the very conditions that design must address – and that they must be captured from those who experience them.

Carceral space, prison design and sensory experiences

Wherever they are often positioned along the continuum between extreme punitiveness and progressive exceptionalism, all prisons deliberately shape the experiences of those within them. Traditional research, notably Sykes' (1958) "pains of imprisonment," has focused on the bodily, symbolic and societal impacts of incarceration, highlighting the oppressiveness of prison conditions. More recent scholarship, however, has begun to interrogate how the built environment itself produces tension, stress and affective responses among both incarcerated persons and staff (Moran & Turner, 2019: 63). Carceral geography has emerged as a vital lens for understanding prisons not simply as containers of life, but as socially and materially coded landscapes (Moran et al., 2018) by focusing on the significance of carceral *space*. Prisons are inhabited spaces imbued with meaning through practices, systems and spatial configurations. Architecture and design are central to these analyses, shaping how prison spaces operate and are experienced. Scholarship has explored prison origins, construction processes and operational philosophies, emphasizing both the punitive intentions and the potential for architecture to influence well-being and ergo support the wider goals of the prison system (Jewkes et al., 2019; Moran et al., 2016).

A growing body of work applies a multi-sensory lens, exploring how physical components of prisons – light, sound, air, water, spatial layout, and access to nature – intersect with human experience. For example, recent research indicates that restricted access to natural daylight and over-reliance on static artificial lighting in prisons can impair circadian regulation, disrupt sleep, and exacerbate stress, depression and aggression among incarcerated people (Urrutia-Moldes, 2025). Conversely, natural light and access to views of the outside world support physical and mental well-being, paralleling evidence on the benefits of contact with nature (Moran 2019; Moran & Turner, 2019; Turner, Moran, & Jewkes, 2020). Beyond light, other sensory dimensions – air quality and sound – critically shape prison experiences (Turner et al., 2023). Poor ventilation, overcrowding and aging infrastructure compromise respiratory health, increasing susceptibility to infections such as tuberculosis and influenza (Moxey-Adderley et al., 2016; Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011; O'Grady et al., 2011). Soundscapes, meanwhile, influence both hearing and psychological health: high ambient noise, reverberant surfaces and constant chatter have been linked to hearing loss, stress and difficulties in communication among incarcerated persons, particular those from ethnic minorities (Jacobson et al., 1989; Vanderpoll & Howard, 2012). These sensory environments do not only affect incarcerated individuals but those for whom prison is the workspace (Gacek et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2023), linking staff well-being directly to the design and materiality of carceral spaces.

Sensory experiences in prison are also politically and socially constructed. Air, for instance, is not merely a product of architecture; it can be managed, restricted or controlled in ways that reinforce disciplinary regimes (Martin, 2021). Similarly, noise and sound can be used to regulate behavior, enforce attention or degrade experiences, highlighting how sensory environments are intertwined

with power and governance (McClanahan & South, 2020). These dynamics underscore that the senses are not only biologically consequential but socially and historically situated: how individuals perceive and react to light, sound and air is mediated by broader cultural and institutional contexts.

This emphasis on sensory engagement aligns with emergent work in carceral geography and sensory criminology. Scholars have begun to analyze soundscapes, olfactory experiences, tactile interactions and visual stimuli within prisons, recognizing their cumulative impact on atmospheres of incarceration (Crewe et al., 2014; Herrity et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2022). Multi-sensory attention reveals both health risks and possibilities for more humane environments. For instance, gardens, greenery and visual access to nature improve mood, reduce aggression and enhance well-being for both incarcerated persons and staff (Moran & Turner, 2019; Moran et al., 2024; Richards & Kafami, 1999). Similarly, lighting, sound, and air can be harnessed to create health-promoting, restorative, or therapeutic spaces rather than solely security-focused environments.

However, whilst there is emergent work on sensory carceral experiences, there is less written about how these sensory experiences might be harnessed to improve and/or rethink principles of prison design, re-design and renovation. It would be easy to make strong policy recommendations that respond to the narrow but powerful range of academic work that already explains the impacts of architectural spaces; that is, making clear recommendations that would mandate, for example, increase natural lighting, acoustic planning and appreciation for the tactile and material qualities of cells and communal spaces. However, we still know very little about the acute sensory impacts of design choices in carceral space – a situation that should be rectified before more concrete recommendations are widely shared. Because sensory experience emerges only through occupation – how noise reverberates, how heat accumulates, how smells circulate around and via people – these dimensions cannot be fully anticipated by the planning process alone. Prisons change: their occupancy levels often deviate from what was intended; spaces are re-purposed following a transfer in management structure and financing; and security incidents often force usage into unexpected ways. This creates a structural gap that only participatory approaches can fill.

It is not to say that prison designers do not consider end users. However, it is commonly the case that new build prison design, for example, highlights restrictions in terms of the procurement process and often uses prefabricated design components to achieve the most cost-effective option in an increasingly punitive but budget-conscious society (see Moran et al., 2016). And, whilst each element of the prison experience is harnessed in the design process, it is questionable as to how far it can capture, understand and meaningfully deploy aspects of the sensory experience – such as the almost intangible notion of a prison atmosphere. If sensory experiences are both consequential and currently under-documented, then prison design requires a mechanism through which experiential, embodied and multisensory knowledge can meaningfully inform architectural decisions. Participatory Prison Design offers one such mechanism. In view of this, I call for a prison design process that places end-user consultation at its core, recognizing that the minutiae of sensory experience are fundamental to architectural decisions at every level. Participatory approaches to prison design can leverage this sensory knowledge to benefit both occupants and staff. By engaging those who live and work in prisons, architects, policymakers and researchers can better align built environments with human (sensory) needs while maintaining safety and operational effectiveness.

Participatory Prison Design (PPD) and its capacity for sensory appreciation

User participation in design has several desirable motivations including: "improving the knowledge upon which systems are built" and "enabling people to develop realistic expectations" (Gregory, 2003: 63). Such an approach would ensure that the design was "informed by the needs of actual building users rather than by generalizations form a non-representative group and that the architect was not designing of behalf of people beyond their own experience" (Luck, 2003: 525-525); the latter factor being a highly likely scenario. It is certainly the case that incarcerated persons are often included in decision-making in penal institutions. Useful examples can be drawn from the mechanism used to implement 'prisoner councils,' for example (see Soloman, 2004). Indeed, Bishop (2006) successfully utilized prisoner councils during the 1960s when he was a prison governor in England. Further successful examples of attempts to instill "co-responsibility" (Bishop, 2006: 7) were also found outside of the UK (with Bishop noting functioning prisoner councils in Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Herzegovina and Spain). The councils were intended to allow incarcerated persons to participate in the running of the prison, and as Soloman and Edgar explain, "[b]y giving voice to prisoners' concerns ...The council was seen by many governors as vital in order to change and to avoid resentment" (2004: 33-34). Baker long ago identified that prisoner councils served a "therapeutic purpose" where "[a] properly operated council offers an excellent vehicle for the harnessing and direction of the abundant energies and usually high abilities of many offenders" (Baker, 1964: 47) – a purpose that is still vital today.

Despite this, considerations of architecture or design do not appear to feature as a stable item in the extensive list of topics identified on the agendas of these councils (Bishop, 2006: 7). Other areas of research focus on the capacity to include incarcerated persons as vital components of participatory action research in the prison setting (McKenzie & Wright, 2024). Evidence from participatory research indicates that the inclusion of incarcerated persons in the design process – whether in terms of the design of entire prison facilities or for the modification and refurbishment of existing spaces – can improve both the functionality of prison spaces and the well-being of occupants (Massimi, 2019). As such, I call for what I term Participatory Prison Design (PPD), which provides a structured framework for integrating the voices of incarcerated persons and staff into architectural and operational decision-making, moving beyond tokenistic consultation toward meaningful involvement (Binder, 1996; Gregory, 2003; Luck, 2003). PPD builds on principles of user-centered and participatory design established in other sectors, including education, healthcare and community planning (Jeanroy et al., 2025; Juarez and Brown, 2008; Woolner et al., 2007).

Accordingly, PPD can have powerful outcomes in the carceral context. Allowing incarcerated persons to 'have their say' is part of a process of contributing knowledge about the functional and practical requirements of spaces that architects and managers may not anticipate, whilst simultaneously fostering ownership and agency within the prison environment (Baer, 2005; Baker, 1964; Solomon, 2004). Using, in particular, mobile methods and creative, embodied approaches to knowledge production (von Benzon et al., 2021), this type of end-user engagement has the capacity to understand the sensory impacts of everyday design choices in ways that have crucially been absent from both prison design research and implementation. Participation in design also enhances incarcerated persons' understanding of operational constraints and design trade-offs, aligning expectations with feasible solutions and promoting collaboration between staff, management and architects (Gregory, 2003; Wener, 2012). Even when recommendations are not fully implemented, the process itself can

positively influence perceptions of procedural fairness and engagement (Mobley et al., 2007; Solnit, 2001).

For policymakers, the integration of PPD into prison planning and refurbishment represents an evidence-informed strategy to improve design outcomes and operational effectiveness. Successful implementation requires careful attention to participant selection, methodological design and ethical considerations, including confidentiality, incentive structures and adaptability to the complex and unpredictable prison environment (Brown-Sica et al., 2010; Woolner et al., 2007). PPD is not a replacement for professional architectural expertise; rather, it complements it by incorporating experiential knowledge from those who live and work in prisons, providing a more holistic foundation for decision-making.

There are some caveats to be made about such methods to involve end-users in design strategies. As Woolner et al. found in their case study of the consultation of young people in school renovation plans, "the message which is heard by designers and architects is no more certain to lead to a complete design solution and still runs the risk of being unrepresentative of the full range of relevant views" (2007: 247). As Luck (2003) suggests, end users (plausibly, due to their likely inexperience in architectural design) are unlikely to be aware of all the design opportunities such as materials, technologies and innovations available for use in contemporary design. They might be unfamiliar with design language; not have an extensive vocabulary; or (as is often the case with incarcerated persons coming from lower-income backgrounds) have limited experience with a range of buildings across the architectural spectrum. As a result, Luck recognizes that "users suggesting 'solutions' can limit a design solution" (2003: 534). Additionally, Woolner et al. (2007) considered that such consultation processes are often complicated and lengthy, particularly if attempts are made to encourage participation from a wide range of people. As a result, it may be "harder to balance the long-term need of design with the day-to-day requirements" of that environment (Woolner et al., 2007: 247). However, Brown-Sica et al. also recognized that although such consultation adds "tremendously to the timeline," it was indeed essential for "authentic and user-centered" data in their design consultation for library improvements in Denver, Colorado, USA (2010: 303).

Accordingly, the PPD approach involves three key components: First, the active involvement of incarcerated persons and staff in identifying problems and evaluating existing facilities ensures that designs reflect lived experiences. Correctional authorities should establish formal consultation mechanisms, such as regular co-design workshops or advisory panels, to systematically gather input from both incarcerated persons and staff during planning and refurbishment. Second, the use of diverse research methods – including focus groups, walking interviews[1], creative design exercises and visual prompts – captures a richer, multisensory understanding of the environment (Evans & Jones, 2011; Leyshon, 2002; Pain, 2004). Research protocols in prison design projects should mandate multi-method engagement strategies that go beyond surveys or interviews, ensuring that sensory,

1 *Walking interviews are interviews conducted on the move. Typically, this involves a researcher walking alongside a participant during an interview where the route can be prescribed by either person. The method prioritises the places and spaces within which the conversation takes place, encouraging a different kind of reflection than in static interviews. 'Walking' interviews might also refer to other mobile practices such as running, and other terms such as 'go along' interviews describe situations where researchers may travel alongside participants using different forms of (accessible) transport (Riley et al., 2021).*

spatial and emotional aspects of the environment are documented and considered. Third, the provision of transparent feedback to participants validates their contributions and demonstrates the practical impact of their input (Luck, 2007; Soloman & Edgar, 2004). Institutions should implement structured feedback loops, such as workshops or brief user-friendly reports, showing how participant insights have informed design decisions and identifying any constraints that limited implementation.

In sum, prisons are more than sites of confinement; they are multi-sensory landscapes that actively shape behavior, health and experience. Both recognizing the agency of sensory environments and including the voices of both incarcerated people and staff in design is vital. Participatory Prison Design (PDD) offers a replicable and policy-relevant approach to prison design that situates incarcerated persons (and staff) as legitimate contributors to shaping their environments. Embedding PPD within prison planning and (re)development frameworks offers the opportunity to contribute to a more just, functional environment that can better serve the (rehabilitative) goals of the wider prison system. By foregrounding sensory experience and its implications in a user-centric, research-led policy approach, we can ensure that the voices of end-users – both incarcerated persons and staff – inform the design of safe, secure and sustainable carceral spaces in ways that are both sensory and sensible.

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