

The Panopticon and Penitentiary Architecture: Rehabilitation or Punishment?

Clemencia Echeverri's project, VOICE (VOZ), searches for a rapprochement to the former Central Penitentiary of Cundinamarca, which was housed in the building that today is the National Museum of Colombia for over 70 years. As a starting point, we assume that when a place of confinement changes purpose, it is necessary to peel away every layer of meaning that such places accumulate¹, since a penitentiary's structure, the building and its interior spaces—from which Echeverri creates her audio-visual installation—are inseparable from the events that led people there and from the social context in which these events occurred, as stated by Lucy Lippard².

Thus, the approximation to the institution's past, known as *The Panopticon*, generates a series of questions that one cannot answer immediately: how does one approach topics such as punishment, incarceration, the deficiencies in delinquents' lives? How does one represent them? VOICE is an initial response to these questions. The project that emerges from the first floor of the building refers back to what the architectural space brings to the understanding of these problems.

The construction of *The Panopticon* was begun within the frame of the penitentiary system that was put into practice in the United States in the beginning of the 19th century to provide more humane conditions for those who broke the law and to carry out discipline in a more effective and less violent manner. These changes in the prison model and in the treatment of criminal punishment took a long time to be applied in Colombia. At the end of the 1840s, President Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera contracted the architect Thomas Reed to design the plans for a penitentiary. Reed firmly believed that the mission of incarceration should be to "Fortify character, edify the mind, and strengthen will; these are essentially the means for reform. Hard work, good instruction...."³

Reed's proposal for Colombia was based on the concept of the "regeneration" of the prisoner by means of deep reflection, work, study, and religion. The plans effectively reveal a workshop area on the first floor and calls for night-time isolation on the second and third floors. The purpose of these cells, along with the chapel, was to provide time for meditation. The chapel was considered essential for rehabilitation and was located in the rotunda of the third floor.

Despite intentions to invalidate corporal punishment by means of this system, it was not until late in the 20th century that this practice became obsolete. Although there has been no real cause to discuss corporal punishment since the 1940s, the body has remained the central issue in the discourse surrounding confined spaces, given the country's high rates of overcrowding⁴.

This glance toward penitentiary political history is a way to enrich a contemporary debate. The images brought about by the past of the *Panopticon* spaces, along with the contemporary testimony of persons who serve sentences in jail precincts, aim to show a complex situation. The short narrations that form part of VOICE enrich reflection in that they invite us to know an aspect

¹AAVV. *Prison Sentences. The Prison as Site. The Prison as Subject*. Philadelphia: Moore College of Art and Design, 2005.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ "Overcrowding increased from 31 to 38.5%". In: *El Tiempo*. November 13, 2004, pp. 1-5.

of life that speaks of incarceration, that awakens memories, and that feeds desires. In the words of the intellectual Tzvetan Todorov, "No crime is an automatic consequence of a cause. Understanding evil is not justifying it, but it is the means to prevent it from occurring again"⁵. The voices evoke motives and refer to society's responsibility before those voids that may have caused them.

The testimonies connect the building's history to the present and they are an appeal to recuperate the deepest history of the jail and the voices of jailed men and women about whom we know little. The stories of the edifice, of the jail, of the prisoners, are intimately linked to the political and cultural processes that determine the ways in which society conceives the criminal "other" that it wants to keep isolated.

The story of penitentiaries and that of the building is the story of those processes, and it is because of this that the National Museum cannot remain indifferent to these reflections, which may seem distant at first glance. This text merely sketches a scene about the possibilities of continuous analysis regarding the Museum's space and its relationship to its own memory, and it invites the expression of certain issues by means of voices of the present and images of a past that is very much alive.

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⁵Tzvetan Todorov. *Hope and Memory. Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003 [transl. David Bellos], p. 124.