

Postcards From a Prison Pandemic

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Moon Shot: Part 5

The Wall

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MCI-Norfolk

Early in the 1990s, the Massachusetts Department of Correction faced a dilemma at MCI-Norfolk. The concrete wall built in the 1930s that surrounded the prison was crumbling. Cracks ran through portions of the imposing perimeter. Bits of concrete that had fallen to the ground were collected regularly by correctional officers as they walked the green space between the inner perimeter fence and the wall, a space called the "Dead Man Zone."

The DOC was presented with two fixes. The wall could be rebuilt or a high-grade security fence could be installed in place of the wall. Rebuilding the wall was the more expensive of the two options and tall concrete security walls had gone out of vogue in prison construction by the 1990s. In fact, when the DOC converted Bay State Correctional Center, next door to Norfolk, into a medium security prison a few years earlier, they had chosen to use fencing.

Yet, when the time came for the DOC to make a choice, the department chose the outdated and overpriced option. The DOC rebuilt Norfolk's wall. Why? Because no one in authority could imagine Norfolk without a wall.

One thing I have learned during my nearly fifteen years of incarceration is that the primary driver in how individual prisons function is not a mission statement, governing philosophy, or five year strategic plan. What really determines how a prison operates is architecture.

In this edition of Postcards From a Prison Pandemic's "Moon Shot" series, we look at prison architecture and how many prison facilities can no longer be used in a COVID-19 world.

From office parks to college campuses, a critical examination is going on to determine what kind of spaces are needed in a COVID-19 world. While today's news contains reports of possible vaccines and potential treatments to try to stave off the coronavirus, medical experts will tell you that there is far more that we do not know about this virus than we do know.

We do not know how long it will take for us to fully mitigate COVID-19.

We do not know what the next wave will be like. We do not know if antibodies provide those who have had the virus with any level of extended protection. We do not know if this virus will easily morph into multiple strains that will require us to develop multiple vaccines. We want the coronavirus and COVID-19 to go away, but we do not know if it ever will.

What we do know is that public spaces built to reinforce the tight congregation of people are currently obsolete. This means that every prison in Massachusetts, perhaps every prison in America, is obsolete. I know how difficult this idea will be for many to grasp. But the facts are the facts.

Since 1877, when what is today MCI-Framingham was built, prisons in Massachusetts have been built to house people in close quarters. Over the past 143 years, as more prisons came online in the state, more people found themselves trapped inside.

Through the years, Massachusetts has gone through periods of prison building and renovations. The first was in the late 1870s, followed by one in the 1930s, another in the early 1970s, and one in the late 1980s. The state last built a prison in 1998, but has continued to remodel and repurpose facilities over the past twenty-two years. Almost every building project had at its core one purpose: Incarcerate more people more efficiently.

Today, MCI-Norfolk holds 1300 people. Many of the lifers who have been here for more than thirty years can remember a time when the prison held 800 or fewer. So, how do you pack an additional 500 people into a prison, pack them in tighter. Two-man cells, four-man cells, six-man cells, and large dormitories are now a central part of the DOC's housing plan. Woman and men are shoehorned into living spaces that were never built to accommodate current populations.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, which is spreading through most state prisons, what has been the DOC's solution to this congregational health crisis? The prisons went into lockdown and the DOC issued a memo instructing people housed in multiple bunk cells and dorms simply to sleep head-to-foot. Okay, but what is a person supposed to do during a month long (so far) lockdown? Are these people supposed to spend weeks on end laying in bed head-to-foot until the present crisis passes? As soon as one person in such a cell stands or even sits up in bed, social distancing is over. When I noted this problem to a staff member two weeks ago, the response I got was, "It is what it is."

Earlier in this series, I wrote about the challenges of delivering education and programming in a COVID-19 world. I talked about how the buildings where prisoners go to school and attend rehabilitative programs are far too small to continue to serve the prison population. When you look at these areas and prisoner living spaces, it is clear that there is almost nowhere inside prison where a person can go to be safe from COVID-19.

In 2018, the state legislature passed an omnibus crime bill to begin the process of overhauling the state's criminal punishment system. During the reform push, Governor Charlie Baker negotiated and received the ability to issue \$560 million in bonds to build and remodel prisons in the Commonwealth. The governor was quietly on his way to using the first \$50 million of that money to build a new women's prison until Lois Ahrens and The Real Cost of Prisons Project shined a spotlight on the process. In late February, the DOC informed me in a letter that the new prison had been put on hold and would be re-evaluated.

In a COVID-19 world, the DOC is now also forced to re-evaluate all the state's current prisons. Let me be clear, the answer is not to build new prisons that allow for social distancing. As I wrote earlier in this series, there are many people incarcerated who should not be locked-up. Like Lois and all those who support The Real Cost of Prisons Project, we must stand guard to prevent the DOC from using the coronavirus to expand its physical footprint, rather than reducing its unnecessarily high prison population.

A better solution to the DOC's housing crisis is to look to Europe where in many locations, authorities house those sentenced in far different ways than America. Countries like Germany and Norway have created facilities that look like modern apartment complexes, not gulags. In these complexes, sentenced people live in a community of other sentenced people, but they often work, study, and attend programs in the larger public community.

What is odd is that some of the progressive thinking that led to this form of corrections was nurtured in America -- in Massachusetts -- in Norfolk. The prison where I am housed was built in the early 1930s as a social experiment. The Norfolk Prison Colony was conceived and run in its early days by Harvard Professor Howard Gill. Professor Gill invented a space that was meant not only to reflect the world outside, but also to interact with it daily. Instead of cells, Colony residents lived inside rooms. Instead of multi-tiered housing units full of bars and concrete, Norfolk's residents

lived inside three-story houses that looked like English row homes. There were no housing officers. Instead, each house had a House Manager -- a civilian employee who not only managed the house, but slept there each night as well.

The experiment lasted only a few years. Over time, the architecture of Norfolk changed as more fences and gates were installed. Today, it functions in most ways like any other medium security prison in the state. During that same time, America abandoned the idea of communities like Norfolk Colony and began building concrete boxes filled with cages.

In a COVID-19 world, prisons can no longer function as presently built. The question remains as to which government officials will be the first to have the imagination to embrace this reality. The physical transition of America's prison infrastructure will be one of the many big challenges faced by state governments moving forward.

The DOC is responsible for my care and custody. But in a COVID-19 world, my custody is now detrimental to my care. Like Norfolk's wall in the early 1990s, the entire infrastructure of prisons is crumbling due to the coronavirus. I hope that officials will this time choose not the unacceptable architecture of the past, but will instead choose to imagine something new.