

# To See Inside: Examining Prison Architecture

## Gallery Packet

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# To See Inside: Examining Prison Architecture

Sarah McKenzie

I have been making paintings for nearly three decades, and—from the beginning—my work has focused on architecture and the built landscape. I am interested in the way that architecture can serve as a lens for understanding our society and the cultural, economic, and political shifts that have shaped it over time. What we build tells us a lot about who we are—as a people, as Americans—and about what (and who) we value and prioritize, versus what (and who) we cast aside.

Nowhere is our architecture more revealing than in our institutional buildings—often massive structures, designed to communicate our collective ideals and mythologies. In 2014 I began painting art world institutions—the white-walled, minimalist spaces of major museums. Through that work, I began to wonder about other forms of institutional space. In particular, I was curious to know more about prison architecture, because those are spaces that are generally hidden away from mainstream society. We are not meant to see inside our correctional institutions, despite the fact that we incarcerate more people per capita than any other country in the world. Indeed, America’s prisons are inextricably, painfully bound up in our national identity, at odds with our claim to be the “Land of the Free.”

I began my research for this project in the spring of 2020, just as the Covid pandemic was forcing us all into lockdown.<sup>1</sup> Through this research, it quickly became clear to me that any work I might make about the carceral system would need to include the voices and experiences of the people most impacted by that architecture. As an outsider, I might gain permission to document prison spaces, but I could not speak directly to the way that these

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<sup>1</sup> The final page of this gallery packet includes a list of suggested readings and podcasts that I consulted in the early months of this project.

structures impact the human psyche over time. For that perspective, my work would need to be in conversation with artists and others on the inside.

I was fortunate to be offered the opportunity to teach with the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) in early 2021, and my involvement with this impactful organization has been humbling and life-changing. I am still learning. That first spring, while state facilities remained on lockdown, I was invited to design and co-teach a twelve-week, video-based drawing course that was broadcast throughout the Colorado Department of Corrections, engaging over 250 students across thirteen facilities. A whole team of people on the outside provided weekly written feedback to the students on their drawings, and I was assigned to correspond with eighteen men at the Fremont Correctional Facility near Cañon City. Several of those artists at FCF (Anthony Cole, Luther Hampson, Joseph Taylor McGill, Billy Scott, Clinton Thomas, and Anonymous) agreed to share their evocative and highly-personal drawings of prison beds and doorways for this exhibition.

In April 2021, while teaching that video course, I learned that I had been selected for the Marion International Fellowship for the Visual and Performing Arts. I am profoundly grateful to Cathy and Jesse Marion and all the Marion Circle organizations, particularly SUNY Fredonia, for this major support for my project. This generous grant provided funds for my supplies and research materials and enabled me to travel to Philadelphia, San Francisco, and San Diego to photograph historic and active prisons outside my home state of Colorado. The fellowship also included a transformational week on *Building a Culture of Empathy* at the Chautauqua Institution in New York in the summer of 2021, and a fall artist residency at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming, where I first began making my own paintings of prison spaces.

This past spring, I was able to teach with DU PAI again . . . and this time, in person. For ten weeks, I drove every Thursday to Sterling Correctional Facility, the largest men's prison in Colorado, in the remote, northeast corner of the state. I was paired with a co-facilitator named Matthew LaBonte, a brilliant writer and teacher who is incarcerated at Sterling and has been

involved with DU PAI for several years. Together, Matt and I led a collaborative visual arts and writing workshop called *Creating (in) Place*, which asked participants to reflect on the challenges and possibilities of pursuing a creative practice within the prison environment. In the final weeks of the workshop, with the support of DOC admin, our group was invited to develop and submit a list of recommendations for changes the men would like to implement in the physical space of their housing unit, particularly the common living area. I feel such enormous gratitude to Matt and all the men who joined us in that work, for welcoming me into their community and sharing their insights and ideas for change. Several artists in that class (Ryan Flint, JR Gilbertson, Victor Gonzales, and Lynell Hill) contributed drawings to this exhibition, exploring prison as place.

The final two visual artists in this show, Mario Rios and Hector Castillo, are incarcerated at the Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility, east of Pueblo, Colorado. I learned of both these artists through DU PAI, and—deeply impressed by what I had seen of their work—I extended an invitation to them to take part in this show. I am honored that they both agreed. The curating of this exhibition was no simple feat, since I was unable to communicate directly with any of the artists this summer. I am indebted to the team at DU PAI—Executive Director Ashley Hamilton, as well as Tess Neal, JoyBelle Phelan, and Lillian Stannard—for all their assistance with communication, picking up artwork, securing the necessary permissions, and believing in the value of this project.

This packet is intended as a written supplement to the visual artworks on display in this exhibition. In these pages, you will find a detailed introduction by Ashley Hamilton to the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative and their guiding principle of Artistic Justice; an essay by my co-teacher at Sterling, Matthew LaBonte, reflecting on ways that incarcerated people might be invited to reimagine and reshape prison spaces for the better; and a number of poems and short writings by William Daniels, Raul Luevano, Justin Moore, Jose Mandujano, and Mike Severson, all of whom contributed their insights and wisdom to our *Creating (in) Place* workshop this spring. Together, we invite you *To See Inside*.

# DU PAI and Artistic Justice: Art as Culture Shifter

Ashley Hamilton

The University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) is a robust prison arts and educational program that brings arts-based, educational, and therapeutic programming—covering numerous artistic modalities—into thirteen prisons in Colorado and serves thousands of incarcerated people and their family members. DU PAI offers fifteen-week courses, group leadership programming, and other on-going special projects, including large scale theatre productions, a podcast ([thisiswithin.com](http://thisiswithin.com)), a state-wide prison newspaper ([insidereportnews.com](http://insidereportnews.com)), a literary arts magazine ([insidereportnews.com/reverberations](http://insidereportnews.com/reverberations)), the only state-wide, public-facing prison radio station in the world ([coloradoprisonradio.com](http://coloradoprisonradio.com)), an annual visual art exhibition ([chainedvoices.org](http://chainedvoices.org)), and more.

At DU PAI we engage the leadership of incarcerated people in the development, production, and delivery of all of our programming. We also conduct rigorous research to examine the impact of the arts on personal and social narratives of crime, incarceration, harm, and healing. DU PAI is committed to generating creative and collaborative learning experiences by opening dialogue between incarcerated people, staff, and their communities. We believe our work empowers individuals to improve the quality of their lives and prepares them to make positive changes in their communities upon release.

In 2021, six currently incarcerated DU PAI students and artists (Chavez, Draper, LaBonte, Lopez, Mosley, Phillips), alongside Dr. Ashley Hamilton (Executive Director of DU PAI) claimed the praxis of Artistic Justice (AJ). Artistic Justice is the philosophy upon which all of DU PAI's work rests. Artistic Justice strives to create individual and community connection and healing in and around systems through storytelling. Artistic Justice uses the vehicle of an artistic project or process which utilizes personal storytelling or narrative as its foundation. The practitioners involved in the project must hold a willingness to heal and transform individually and

systemically. Practitioners must believe that individual change and healing can lead to community and systemic healing. Additionally, this shared space and experience of the artistic process must be based in intentionally crafted spaces that support new possibilities and a willingness to travel through the liminal.

Prisons are places where histories of violence and trauma reign commonplace, and opportunities for connection and recognition of shared humanity within prison walls remain sparse. However, many folks inside prison find ways of breaking down these barriers between themselves and other incarcerated individuals, and even with correctional staff. Art is one medium for such connection. AJ is a new model for forging shared humanity in correctional settings through artistic practice. AJ is as a tool and philosophy which can shift understanding of our shared humanity in carceral spaces and beyond. The creators of AJ are in the process of publishing their first paper on the praxis, and have lectured together on their work at New York University, University of Colorado, Denver University, the Correctional Leaders Association and more.

# Creating (in) Place

Matthew LaBonte

Prison. The word conjures very specific images for most people. Images constructed of concrete, razor wire and steel, materials meant to contain. Unyielding. Confining. Secure. This is what it is designed to do, and for good reason. A harsh reality whose purpose is to separate. To hopefully prevent. Sometimes to rehabilitate. There was a time in my life when I didn't question the way this world had been built or what it was supposed to accomplish. I hunkered down and tried to move through it while being affected by it as little as possible. For many years I was successful at this. I looked for ways I could transcend the physical, turn inward, and find sources of strength within myself that would allow me to not only survive prison, but maintain and grow the best parts of me. A little over five years ago, this journey—which is by no means nearing a destination—led me to the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) and Dr. Ashley Hamilton.

I have had the privilege to work closely with and learn much from Dr. Hamilton, especially around the concept of “creating space.” When I first started working with her, we would meet once a week in a cramped, linoleum-tiled classroom in the Programs Building at Sterling Correctional Facility. She led us through a variety of theatre games that stretched our comfort zones and asked us to reimagine ourselves and those around us, even if it was just for a couple of hours. We caught imaginary balls of energy that we would transform into our own and then pass along to someone else. We looked at pictures of seemingly random people and came up with stories about who they might be. Then we acted those stories out in scenes of improvisation with the rest of the class. We practiced seeing each other and being seen by others as well. Eventually we learned to close our eyes (a very vulnerable act in prison) and just be in the present moment. I began to look forward to these Saturday morning escapes as a way to once again *transcend* the negative environment of prison. Dr. Hamilton invited us to collaboratively create a different kind of space for one another for a few hours each week.

For some it was just “fun.” Art can trick you in that way. It takes the form of a silly game, or a bunch of color smeared across a page, or a diverting collection of stories, easy to dismiss at first glance. It didn’t take me long to grasp the concept of what she was offering us, although I’m still sorting through the nuance and application in my own life. Creativity is required for change to be possible. If we can’t imagine things to be any different, they probably won’t be.

Prison is a very static environment. There’s not a lot of fluidity here. The architecture and operational structure don’t change much. Consistency is one of the benefits of that. What I’m more curious about is how this setting affects us psychologically and spiritually. Anyone who has driven up to a prison knows what I’m talking about when I mention the sheer, oppressive feeling that one experiences upon seeing this physical structure. It conveys a sense of impending doom. Imagine living with that impending sense of doom for years or decades without cease. The mind becomes as locked in place as the body is. We slowly erode and begin to conform to the environment. Some call this process institutionalization; some call it adapting. It’s quite normal, though. Our environment works in many very subtle ways to shape the individual. Sadly, we change who we are because we don’t think we can change our environment. But what if we could?

In the spring of 2022, I had the privilege of working with artist Sarah McKenzie to co-facilitate a visual arts and creative writing workshop at Sterling Correctional called *Creating (in) Place*. A primary objective of our class was to reimagine and redesign one of the living units, called the Purpose Forward Pod (PFP). Many of the men in the workshop had recently volunteered to move into the PFP, which had been, just months earlier, the worst living unit in the facility. Violence was commonplace, and lockdowns were frequent. It was dirty and in ill repair because staff was in a constant reactive state to all of the problems that arose. No one cared what it looked like because it really only had one purpose: to contain. Many of the guys who moved to the PFP under the new vision came from an incentive unit, where they had earned access to extra privileges as a reward for good behavior. The incentive unit had been quite comfortable, especially in comparison to the new space.

We spent a lot of time in our workshop talking about who we wanted to be as a community and how the physical environment could support us. What does a space filled with positive, purposeful people look like? I found it curious, as we began cleaning and fixing up this rundown living space, how grateful people were to be there and to be involved. We talked about it in class one day, and the thing that stuck out to me was that people weren't as concerned with the actual conditions as they were with the opportunity to make it better.

The opportunity to make it better...

What if incarcerated individuals were given the power to shape the prison environment? How could that affect the fundamental ability to mold the inner parts of ourselves that require overhauling and maintenance as well? Could prison become a place where hope lives? A place where healing is possible?

DU PAI was birthed in a classroom that held a very finite space, a small bubble of possibility for 20 or 30 individuals. Today that bubble is expanding in ways none of us could have foreseen. Where I once was only concerned with moving through prison while being affected as little as possible and seeking out isolated transcendent experiences, I now move in concert with a group of creative innovators known as the Artistic Development Team. We are still led by Dr. Ashley Hamilton, but when we move, we generate ripples that call upon the rest of the prison to rise and transcend the old ways along with us, reimagining what could be. We now know we have an opportunity to make it, and ourselves, better.

# First Day

William Daniels

Come in, sit down, and watch this hour-long movie.

Don't ASK anything; especially about where you're moving.

Sign this, take this pen, and, no, you can't keep it.

In this prison you're subhuman, and that is no secret.

Grab your bags, grab your clothes, go lock down in your cell.

We strip you of "you," so welcome to your hell.

Now you can ask just one question, don't say anything else.

This is a prison, not a clinic; we do not offer help.

Oh, you're hungry? Too bad. Your sack lunch is coming soon.

Don't make any more stops, just head straight to your room.

Straight ahead, make a right, up the stairs, 302.

When your food does show up, we will bring it to you.

# Sentences & Silences

Justin Moore

Numbed out tracking numbers . . . as they tumble through my head.

Rifling round, a reality rocked by commingling clocks, each with its own acerbic agenda.

Ticking this . . . tocking that . . . conversant in an inestimable language, URGENTLY chattering and chiding their tick-tock tongues, draining air from my lungs with unctuous insalubrity.

Time-in-time, slanderous and circular in its unending notion of censured seasons UNBROKEN, the seamless series of cackling clocks publishing and plowing through pages of so many colorless calendars.

The spiralic spell of solitude . . .

Clock faces erasing the dialogue of days, dismissive of memories or moments that **I'll never know**, as the arc of the minute hand marks like a mouth an insouciant sneer, sneaking and streaking across a vitriolic veneer, grinning and spinning revolutions through space, leering like a silent insult.

Counting confinements and illuminating limitations and eliminating destinations . . . time taking us nowhere.

Time's intermarriage of institution and identity . . . each **unlived** . . . **unloved**.

Counting down days . . . decades . . . every second of this sentence

suffocated

by its own insignificance.

Falling . . .

deeper into this SENTENCE . . .

deeper into the SILENCE . . .

# Shower

Mike Severson

It is mostly too cold,  
but occasionally too hot.

Thank goodness it's always lonely.

It's often too dirty for my personal liking,  
but a cheap pair of shoes  
and careful footing  
keep me from touching.

The pressure is off  
until I find my favorite.  
Then I'm agreeable to its push.

The barrage of water  
helps slough off the day.  
I can't help but feel  
what I can only compare  
to a whole-body massage,  
since I've never had one.

With the fresh smell  
of perfumed glycerin  
I do my best thinking,  
but sometimes do no thinking at all.

When all is done,  
and the timer has quit,  
I reluctantly emerge  
from my self-imposed seclusion.

Clean,  
Clear,  
and ready for bed.

# Bunk Bed

Jose Mandujano

A portal, a door  
to infinity and more  
a favorite place  
in a life that's a mess

Upside down & inside out  
what this life is now about

When I dream, I am really awake  
and that door is my escape  
from a life of black and white  
that puts living on pause

Jack in the box  
out on a mission  
out to the freedom  
inside this prison

These nails keep me in the physical  
a crown of thorns brings me the mystical

Only the spiritual is eternal and true in this life  
to which my bunk bed in cell 205  
leads me every night  
as a friend and a guide  
as a door, as a portal  
an escape from the now  
this threshold I cross  
when sleep lays me down  
where I find all my joys  
and erase my frown.

# Home Is Where the Heart Is

Raul Luevano

A place called home  
Shared memories of the past  
An essence that's meant to last  
Yet every year goes by too fast

It's about time  
To be cast away  
To be cast into the gray  
Into a place between white and black  
Into the night  
Where I can contemplate the things I lack  
Just because I feel homeless  
Doesn't mean that I am broken  
For it is truth  
That needs to be spoken  
So on nights when I question  
How I got so far from home  
I remind myself  
That it actually lives  
In my mind, body, heart, and soul.

*Note by the poet: Our assignment was to reflect on a place that holds significance for you. Initially I thought about my grandmother's home, which for me was significant due to all of the memories that were made there and because of the familiarity of it. That started a domino effect in my mind and made me ponder what "home" is for me. I realized that "home" is less of a tangible place, and more the knowing that- no matter the circumstances, good or bad- I am right where I need to be.*

# Disappeared in a Diaspora of Displaced Souls

Justin Moore

Place is a space that resides on the inside. I **reside on the inside**. And not **just** the inside of an institution. Both these living and layered locations, the internal as well as external, are replete with personal, reflective histories and memories and ever-moving moments of meaning for those of us that inhabit this “haunted palace of reform,” as it were.

Institution, Prison, House of a Hundred Windows, Home for the Criminally Gifted . . .

**Punishment, deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, revenge**---- whatever its imperative, its existence intends to effect power AGAINST. Not **to** and not **for**, but directly **against** those persons both living and working in here, and also, most interestingly, **against** the interests of the very ACCOUNTABILITY it purports to instill (at least as expressed through its definition as I understand it). The question that needs asking is: to what end(s) is all this power applied? And at what consequential cost TO ALL? Is **this** the method of JUSTICE we wish to employ as a central emphasis of our culture and its ever-evolving moral standards of decency? **Prison is the price I pay for my transgression, but . . . who’s cashing the check?**

Prison by design is the epitome of the most bang for the buck. Commodifying and capitalizing, warehousing and wholesaling human suffering. Built and designed with the explicit intent of VIEWING ALL WHILE TRULY SEEING NOT A ONE!

Hardly a place hospitable to service or self-evaluation or awakening to one’s greater purpose.

The idea of place in relation to a prison and the people and the teams of untenable traumas breeding in this place and expanding through this space strains the mind in the worst of ways, and stains the soul for the rest of its days.

A sentence of straight, flat, unforgiving, and unforgettable lines . . . Straight, flat lines do not letters make. No letters, no words . . . and without words, there isn’t much to be said. Could it be that that is the reason why the language of FORCE, communicated through the “might

makes right” mentality, rules the realm and the day alike? Leaving the cold, colorless concrete of the space to translate what the tongue cannot conjure.

THE VIOLENCE OF CAPTIVITY NEEDS NO INTERPRETER!

If we are honest with ourselves, and with that inherent humanity we all hold (which it is sometimes easier or more convenient to hide), we as a society build such callous institutions intentionally as places and spaces to inflict pain, belligerent and bellicose in their very nature, with a vitriolic view into the most vexing aspects of our shared human nature. A PLACE INTENDED TO ADMINISTER THE MOST UNHEALTHY DOSES OF SEPARATION, ISOLATION, AND INJURY IN THE SERVICE OF SOCIETY . . . A PLACE TO INSTILL A SURROGATE SET OF SYMPTOMS . . .

This vicious vortex, this envenomed environment where the intended purpose and the people impacted work against the interests of each other. Intentionally isolated people confined behind mile after mile of chain link that rests below row after row of razored wire ribbons rimming in the besieging boundary line, and—as is the recent trend of correctional facilities—electric fences designed to incapacitate, cook, and/or KILL. Barred windows offering little more than a sliver of sight to the greater world beyond, and layer after layer of locked and levered doors. Limited access to phones (families), mail (meaning), and human contact with loved ones through in-person visits. This place where, as Thoreau stated, **“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”**

WHAT KEEPS ALIVE THE HALF-IMAGINED MEMORY . . . ? What, indeed . . .

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Prison is PLACELESSNESS—rather than place. The geography of NOWHERE . . .

## Suggested Readings and Resources:

Abbott, Jack Henry. 1981. *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters From Prison*. New York: Random House, Inc.

Alexander, Michelle. 2020. *The New Jim Crow* (10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition). New York: The New Press.

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Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

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Smith, Caleb. 2009. *The Prison & the American Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Story, Brett. 2019. *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power Across Neoliberal America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wener, Richard. 2012. *The Environmental Psychology of Prison and Jails*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Podcasts:

*Ear Hustle*: <https://www.earhustlesq.com/>

*With/In*: <https://www.thisiswithin.com/>