

REIMAGINING PRISON WITH FRANK GEHRY

By Bill Keller December 21, 2017



The architect Frank Gehry has never designed a prison, except for the concert hall that the town of Springfield subsequently converted to a state prison in an episode of “The Simpsons.”

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“I’ve personally spent only one night in jail,” Frank Gehry confessed. “I didn’t like it very much.” Gehry, eighty-eight, who has been described as our greatest living architect (and, by an admiring pro-cannabis Web site, as a “very important pothead”) said that he got his only taste of incarceration when he was busted for possession. Last Friday, in New Haven, that night behind bars was a kind of credential. An invited audience of architects and students, corrections officials, and campaigners for criminal-justice reform assembled, at the Yale School of Architecture, for the finale of Gehry’s semester-long studio on architecture and mass incarceration. A dozen students would present their projects—designs for a humane prison—to a jury consisting mostly of “friends of Frank.”

Gehry, best known for the billowing contours of his concert halls and museums, has never designed a prison, unless you count the episode of “The Simpsons” in which a Gehry concert hall is converted to a state prison when the town of Springfield discovers that it hates classical music. He admitted to approaching the subject with some trepidation. “It’s heavy stuff, and I’m going to be eighty-nine, and it’s a little late,” Gehry told me during a lunch break. “I’m on the learning curve with everybody else.”

The billionaire philanthropist George Soros put up the money for the student workshop, and a like-minded research and advocacy group called Impact Justice managed the logistics. “We asked Frank, ‘What would it mean to design a maximum-security prison if you treated the corrections officers and the prisoners as the clients instead of the state bureaucracy?’ ” Christopher Stone, the president of Soros’s Open Society Foundations, who served as a juror, said. (The Foundations are a supporter of the Marshall Project. Stone steps down as president on January 1st.) “Frank kept saying, ‘You don’t need me to design a prison. Nobody’s going to build a prison I design. We need to get a curriculum. We need to get architects thinking in different ways.’ ”

Yale, one of Gehry’s several academic affiliations, offered to host it. Connecticut, where Governor Dannel Malloy is a prison-reform enthusiast, invited the class to tour the hundred-and-four year-old, sixteen-hundred-bed Cheshire Correctional Facility, about twenty miles north of New Haven. That site, students were told, was to be “reimagined to house three hundred men convicted of serious, primarily violent offenses, serving sentences between five and fifteen years. . . . The speculative nature of the project, based on contemporary research and theory, requires you to examine closely the role of architecture as a means to provide safety, refuge, and facilitate personal transformation.”

The premise of the assignment was that only the most dangerous offenders will need to be confined if American prison populations are reduced to the levels in other developed countries, and even those incarcerated for violent crimes should be equipped with the skills and social discipline to rejoin society.

During the semester, Gehry accompanied the class to prisons in Norway and Finland, where sentences for even the most heinous crimes rarely exceed fifteen years and where prisons resemble college dormitories. Susan Burton, an activist who was in and out of jails as a young woman and now helps women released from prison find their feet, brought in parolees to educate the class about the grim reality of incarceration in America.

As students laid out their cardboard models for inspection and pinned up their master plans, it was clear that most had ignored the part about “men convicted of serious, primarily violent offenses.” They presented prison as a university campus, prison as a health and wellness facility, prison as a monastery, prison as a communal apartment complex, prison as a summer camp, prison as a textile workshop (complete with a mulberry orchard to feed the silkworms). Virtually every student incorporated classrooms, open space and fresh air, and spaces for family visits and therapy.

It fell to a formerly incarcerated juror, Dwayne Betts, to point out gently that neighbors might have security concerns about a prison where walls were decorative features and staying on site was more or less optional. “You seem to be designing prisons for people who shouldn’t be in prison,” Betts, who served eight years for a teen-age carjacking and emerged to become a lawyer and poet, told one student.

But the point was not to design things that would actually be built. It was to establish that there are public interests and human values other than retribution that ought to be reflected in the system we euphemistically call “corrections.” A society where prisons resemble cages and warehouses has lessons to learn from monasteries and college campuses. “It’s a lot more theoretical,” Gehry said. “A studio in architecture is to unlock students’ feelings about form and space and time, and how that relates to people. A prison program happens to be more emotional for them,” he said. “And for me.”

One guest who watched the presentation with particular interest was Elizabeth Glazer, the director of the New York City Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, which is overseeing the closure of the notorious Rikers Island complex and the restoration of jails in several boroughs. Unlike prisons, jails are designed for

short stays—the average at Rikers is sixty days—but many of the challenges are the same: preventing violence, easing access for families and lawyers, attending to mental health and addiction, and fitting the facilities into the neighborhoods around them. Glazer said that she was struck that the student projects treated prison as not just a place for rehabilitation but as a “civic asset.”

“You look at the jails that we currently have and they don’t feel like a part of our urban landscape,” she said. “Either we’ve put them far away, like Rikers, or we’ve made them forbidding, like the Tombs. Even though we may not be building those fabulous Gehry-like designs in our jails, the principles are something we need to pay very close attention to. We should try to normalize life inside as much as we can, because people are going to come back.”

This article was published in partnership with the Marshall Project.

Bill Keller is the editor-in-chief of the Marshall Project, a nonprofit newsroom that covers criminal justice. [Read more »](#)

Video

Tareaphe Richards—Retired Rikers Corrections Officer

“We Are Witnesses”: A Portrait of Crime and Punishment in America

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