

Carceral Geography

Working Group of the RGS-IBG

Donne in carcere: Ricerche e progetti per Rebibbia [Women in prison: Research and projects for Rebibbia]

Reviewed by Roberto Catello, Liverpool Hope University, UK

Francesca Giofrè and Pisana Posocco (Eds.) (2020) *Donne in carcere: Ricerche e progetti per Rebibbia* [Women in prison: Research and projects for Rebibbia], LetteraVentidue. (<https://www.letteraventidue.com/it/prodotto/456/donne-in-carcere>).

From gender-sensitive prison design to abolitionist feminism



(<https://carceralgeography.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/donne.jpg>).

At least since the publication of Francesco Milizia's (1785) *Principj di Architettura Civile*, it has been widely understood that the form and shape of a prison must go along with its purpose. Penal reformers from the 18th century believed that the only way for prison to work effectively as a deterrent against crime was by making the prison experience uncomfortable and unbearable. Accordingly, prisons have historically been built in ways that make the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes, 1958) an integral component of prison design. In their edited book *Donne in carcere: Ricerche e progetti per Rebibbia* (*Women in prison: Research and projects for Rebibbia*), Francesca Giofrè, Pisana Posocco, and colleagues forcefully remind us that such a carceral logic can and must be revisited. The purpose of prison is not limited to punishment and social exclusion but involves rehabilitation and social reintegration. On this basis, prison spaces ought to invariably incorporate therapeutic elements. *Women in prison* begins with this simple but powerful premise: incarceration is not just a form of segregation but a practice of rehabilitation and resocialisation that relies heavily on spatial and architectural principles and variables. In the context of the incarceration of female offenders, Giofrè and Posocco argue, we have an additional responsibility to create gender-sensitive spaces that respect the specific needs of women and that do not strip incarcerated women of their dignity.

The book explores the relationship between womanhood, carcerality, and spatiality in the Casa Circondariale Germana Stefanini in Rome (Italy) – one of the largest female prisons in Europe where almost 350 women are currently detained. The book's key objective is to show that

carceral spaces can be re-designed and rearranged in (gender-sensitive) ways to better accommodate the needs of female prisoners. In that regard, it is a must-read for those interested in reforming female prisons through spatial tactics of rehabilitation and affective design. The first part of the book opens with a brief historical contextualisation of the Italian penitentiary system, followed by a detailed account of the construction of the Casa Circondariale of Rebibbia and the architectonic, penal, and political principles that have informed its design (*Rebibbia: A guide for architects*). The book then turns to the issue of female incarceration in Italy, with an emphasis on the notion of wellbeing for women in carceral settings, spatial considerations about the quality of prison life from a gendered point of view, and the possibility of non-punitive prison design (*Incarcerated women: Institutions, processes, and spaces in search of wellbeing*). Having being conceived as a punitive space for men – this chapter argues – prison fails to adequately serve the needs and respect the rights of female offenders, who regularly find themselves living a carceral reality that was not designed for them. As Giofrè (pp.50-51) points out, in Italy today there is no such a thing as gender-sensitive prison architecture – spaces and places of detention are identical for men and women.

Interestingly enough, questionnaires with the women detained at the Casa Circondariale of Rebibbia discussed by Posocco in the next chapter (*Living in prison: The cell and the space between the cells*) do not seem to suggest that hyper-masculine prison architecture is the most pressing problem faced by female detainees. Most respondents appeared to be predominantly bothered by the prison's inhumanity rather than by its masculinity: the fact that prison is an unpleasant place to live and inhabit, an often painful and boring experience, a space that does not afford sufficient privacy, that denies intimacy and prevents human encounters, that lacks adequate furniture and appliances, with inadequate bathrooms and problems with hygiene and sanitation, etc. Posocco seems to implicitly acknowledge this on p.139 when stating that prison is experienced as especially violent because of the 'depersonalisation' it tends to induce. In other words, incarcerated women at Rebibbia perceive detention to be painful because it is dehumanising, not because it deprives them of their femininity. Similarly, Giofrè (p.91) admits that many of the book's findings 'transcend gender specificity'. This is a rather significant finding given the overarching orientation of the book.

The book then proceeds to discuss experimental projects for the re-design of carceral spaces at Rebibbia, focusing in particular on two projects that came to life thanks to the authors' research efforts: a new prison space called 'Sezione Orchidea' (Section Orchid) and a new 'affective space' called 'Modulo M.A.M.A.' (the M.A.M.A module) designed with the help of Renzo Piano. The purpose of Section Orchid is to serve as a space that is as responsive as possible to

the requirements of 'domesticity' (p.17), that is, to create a carceral area for female detainees that is 'as domestic as possible' (p.149). The guiding principle behind this project is that women in prison can experience incarceration as a rehabilitative and reintegrative process through the transformation of existing carceral spaces into 'home-like' spaces. By living in carceral environments that are more home-like, female detainees come to experience a therapeutic sense of 'belonging and respect' (p.164) that is too often denied to them. The M.A.M.A module is a meeting place – a space of affective encounters for incarcerated women and their families. It is a 'tiny house of affectivity' located within the prison perimeter but away from areas of detention – in a garden area designed to 'protect' those who meet there and to guarantee 'happy encounters' (p.189). This project aims to facilitate contact with the outside world through a 'de-territorialisation of punishment'. Incarcerated women meet their family members in a home-like, affective space that fosters 'intimacy and closeness' (p.169). The project effectively transforms the overly bureaucratic, detached, and often inhumane nature of prison visits as we currently know them into therapeutic and rehabilitative encounters.

Projects like Section Orchid and the M.A.M.A module show that architecture can unquestionably valorise carceral spaces. More generally, the contributions to Giofrè and Posocco's edited collection lucidly reveal the valuable social role that a responsible architecture can play in the improvement of prison life. In many ways, the book makes an important contribution to what Jewkes (2018) calls the 'architecture of hope' – and to what Ettore Barletta in the conclusion of the book refers to as the 'architecture of redemption'. The book helps us imagine and offers practical proposals for healthier and more liveable prisons through a critical re-evaluation of what it means for women to navigate carceral spaces. But what makes such a revalorisation of prison spaces distinctively feminine or especially needed in the case of incarcerated women? What do we mean by the 'feminisation' of prison spaces? With the exception of detention for incarcerated mothers – who clearly face additional struggles in prison that relate directly to their womanhood and their perceived social roles – it remains unclear what exactly this process entails. As pointed out, the authors seem to imply that this is primarily about building or re-designing and re-arranging existing spaces in ways that are more home-like and domestic, through organising cells, spaces between cells, corridors, etc., in a way that reminds inmates of 'the domesticity of free life' (p.154).

The authors clearly do not mean it in patriarchal way (i.e., relegating women to the 'home') but in the Heideggerian sense that building (*costruire*) is always-already a way of inhabiting a place (*abitare*) and that *abitare* is *the way* of being in the world (p.95). In that case, however, it is unclear how making prison more habitable and hospitable and re-designing prison in a way that is

more home-like is about 'gendering' prison spaces. In fact, it could be argued that the projects described in the latter part of the book are premised on the idea that prison spaces are hostile and must be made more 'habitable' and 'hospitable' rather than more 'feminine', as well as more 'therapeutic' rather than more 'gender-sensitive' or 'gender-responsive'. While the book highlights that a critical understanding of carceral geography and prison architecture can make us rethink the penitentiary system in important ways and reconsider the lived significance of penal aesthetics and carceral spatiality, it does not clearly address how fundamental (gender-sensitive) changes can be brought about through such disciplines alone. As the authors of *Women in prison* claim at various points in the book, there is something deeply political about studying and seeking to change our relationship with judicial punishment.

Ultimately, then, the most important message to consider is the politics of the book. Just like the 'greening of prison', the 'gendering of prison' is at risk of becoming another example of what Norwegian sociologist and prison abolitionist Thomas Mathiesen (1974) called 'reformist reforms' in the penal sphere – that is, the kind of penal changes that serve the interests of penality and carcerality and help carceral regimes and logics consolidate even further, in this case by normalising and legitimising the practice of female incarceration through making the prison experience of female detainees in Rebibbia a bit less inhumane. Instead, there is potential for the ideas and proposals outlined by Giofrè and Posocco to be read as part of a package of 'non-reformist reforms', i.e., initiatives that are intended to improve life in prison while also negating the basic prison structure and that are therefore aimed, ultimately, at the abolition of female prisons rather than at the rehabilitation of a broken system. I believe Giofrè and Posocco have at least considered this political dilemma, since they mention calls for the abolition of female prisons at the start of the book (p.13).



(<https://carceralgeography.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/poster.png>).

As I was reading the book, I could not help but reflect upon a poster about gender-sensitive prisons published some time ago by the abolitionist organisation *Critical Resistance* – founded in 1997 by Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and others. The poster says “We do not want cages that are ‘nicer’ for women”. I wonder what the authors of *Women in prison* would make of such a statement. My question for Francesca Giofrè and Pisana Posocco, then, is this: how are we to make sense of the projects that came to life thanks to your research in Rebibbia – namely, the new Section Orchid and the M.A.M.A. module for the creation of affective spaces – and other proposals found in the book? Are they part of a plan for reformist or non-reformist reforms? If the kind of gender-sensitive prison design that the book advocates is part of a broader framework for abolitionist feminism, then I am all for it.

References

Jewkes, Y. (2018) ‘Just Design: Healthy Prisons and the Architecture of Hope’, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 51 (3), pp.319-338.

Mathiesen, T. (1974) *The Politics of Abolition*. New York: Wiley.

Milizia, F. (1785) *Principj di Architettura Civile*. Bassano: Remondini.

Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[BLOG AT WORDPRESS.COM.](#)