



Research Paper

# Architectural, Museographic and Cultural Dialogues Between the Prison and the Museum: The Case of Horsens' *Fængselsmuseet*

Elena Montanari

<sup>1</sup>Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano

**ABSTRACT:** The relationship between prisons and museums is complex and multilayered, and in the last decades it has been further enhanced by the growing number of transformation processes implemented on former carceral sites. Building on the observation of an emblematic experience, that of the Horsens' Prison Museum, the paper aims at reflecting on the potentialities and challenges implied in the musealisation of former prisons, and at analyzing the dialogues that ensue from the intertwine of the architectural, museographic and cultural layers embedded in the project.

**KEYWORDS:** Prisons, Museums, Difficult Built Heritage, Reuse practices, Musealisation practices.

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## I. FORMER PRISONS: A CULTURAL AND ARCHITECTURAL CHALLENGE AND RESOURCE

Prisons represent a challenging chapter of the legal, cultural and architectural history of a city. Developed as a public architecture of confinement since the Renaissance by Vitruvio, Alberti, Palladio and Milizia, through the Baroque Period until the Enlightenment and the renown projects by Ledoux and the Bentham brothers, prisons are “complete and austere institutions” [1]. These places of discipline and punishment are complex sites, containing contradictions and a stratification of social, historical and architectural layers [2]. Their spaces talk about confinement, punishment, incarceration, and an often inhumane system. At the same time, they often bear memory of past events, the changing position about what is legal and what is not, freedom and power relations [3].

Their complexity is not only related to their memory but also to their physical features. They are a kind of micro-town, whose boundaries are physically marked by containment walls and controlled accesses, that enclose completely introverted and very compact spaces, organised into rigid layouts. Their extension and their out-and-out nature are peculiar of their design. In most cases, these extraordinary large complexes constitute up to today impressive architectural structures in the landscape in which they are located. When they were built close or inside the walls of a city, they considerably affected the urban development, and often continue to do so. Together with the stigmas and bias surrounding them, their size (equal or even bigger than the major public buildings), their “hermetic” and monumental characterisation, and their architectural closure have often been impeding and influencing the urban growth around them.

The difficulty of dealing with these architectural complexes becomes evident once they are closed [4]. Today in Europe and overseas the problem of the reuse of former prisons is a quite urgent one. Several prisons are too old; therefore, for many reasons they cannot be upgraded and must be decommissioned. These architectures are often completely or partially abandoned, misused, and subject to negligence. Many remain as unsettling traces of a past deemed to be forgotten – eerie ruins, ruled out of the urban and social life that passes off around them, and largely contributing to the urban decay.

Nevertheless their presence is not less problematic when they undergo adaptive interventions. Reuse practices span from luxury hotels to entertainment parks, up to museums and tourist places, and not always succeed in effectively tackling the complexity and the cultural implications embedded in these sites [5].

Prisons are indeed a “difficult built heritage” – i.e. standing for a “past that is recognised as meaningful in the present, but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive and self-affirming identity”. As such, it may be “troublesome because it threatens to break through into the present in disruptive

ways”, and raises questions about its “public representation and reception”, as well as “about practices of selection, preservation, cultural comparison and witnessing” [6]. Prisons have also been considered within the spectrum of “uncomfortable heritage” [7] and “dark heritage” [8]. Actually, the recent development of dark tourism [9] is one of the phenomena that has triggered the raising of interest about these sites, together with the overall enhancement of reuse practices, the gradual expansion of the notion of heritage [NOTE 1] [10], and the ongoing “heritage epidemic” [11] and “memorial rush” [12]. As a consequence, those buildings that up to the end of the 20th century used to be excluded from conservation and valorization processes – due to their association with local (or national) political and social traumas, “difficult” memories and stigmas, such as prisons, asylums or sanatoriums – have started to be object of a growing number of reactivation interventions.

The reuse of difficult built heritage for residential, leisure or third sector functions poses special challenges. The repurposing of such a connoted structure requires a delicate negotiation with the past, the history of use and the architectural features of these buildings, but it also imposes the management of the difficulties in meeting modern standards and requirements in these “static” places and of the memory claims that may come from different communities who have any association with the site (and ask for their stories and voices to be heard).

All types of interventions on such sites tackle all these problems, and demand the intertwining of architectural preservation stances with cultural ones – as they always require decisions on selections “over what to keep and what to discard in terms of both the material fabric of buildings and in terms of how they are to be narrated, both of which have profound effects on how the past of buildings are subsequently received and understood” [13].

The musealisation project implies a further level of complexity: whether its aim is education, commemoration or entertainment, it includes also the design of the visitors’ experience and the display of collections, hence it addresses how the place, its material culture, stories and memories are presented, and with which intents and effects. This work involves the commodification of those who have suffered or died [14], the selection of the points of view that are given a “voice” within the exhibition, and a profound responsibility in respect of the authenticity and ethics of representation [15].

In the reactivation of such sites, architectural, museographic and cultural stance need to be intertwined and tuned. Obviously this task can be achieved through different strategies. The paper aims at observing the solution implemented in the transformation of the former prison of Horsens, in Denmark, as an emblematic example offering the opportunity to reflect on the challenges and potentialities that pertain the dialogue among the sum of aspects that coexist in such interventions.

## **II. FROM PRISON TO MUSEUM: THE CASE OF HORSENS *FÆNGSELSMUSEET***

The Horsens *Statsfængsel* (Horsens State Penitentiary) was built between 1847 and 1853 as the first prison in Denmark designed on the basis of modern criminal law principles. Hence it is considered the first modern carceral site of the State, implementing the progressist reformation of the prison system [NOTE 2] carried out by King Christian VIII [16]. At the end of the 19th century, this prestigious project resulted in an innovative facility, provided with electricity and central heating (hence offering better conditions than those many detainees would experience at home). The incarceration site was realised in an elevated area, overlooking onto the small city of Horsens, located on the east coast of the Jutland region and at that time populated only by 6.500 inhabitants. The prison was an imposing structure, organised around four wings and a middle wing, spreading over 20.000 sqm, and able to accommodate up to 500 detainees. In its 153-year-long function, it housed male prisoners from all over Denmark, convicted of a penal crime hence serving long prison sentences [NOTE 3]. Life in the prison was organised according to modern theories and practices for internment, punishment and improvement – and in particular to the Auburn system [NOTE 4] [17], which aimed at curating and rehabilitating prisoners (they would spend the night in their cells, but during the day they worked in the prison’s “workshops”, and in the evening they would move freely in the wards).

The prison was closed in 2006, when the last remaining inmates were moved to another structure (i.e. the new State Prison of East Jutland at Enner Mark, west of Horsens). At the moment of this decommission, Horsens was starting to develop an overall urban regeneration plan. Being the life of the penitentiary strictly intertwined with that of the city [NOTE 5], and due to its outstanding historical, architectural and urban values, immediately after its abandonment the site was acknowledged as a cultural landmark and a resource to be enhanced. In 2008 a major renovation project was started in order to reactivate the carceral structure and turn it into a complex institution. The €4.5 million intervention was financed through the cooperation of Horsens Municipality (which acquired the prison from the Danish state) and the support from two major funds in Denmark.

The renovation project was based on a “conservative approach”. The refurbishment of the buildings aimed at consolidating the original material and formal identity of all the spaces, and included a limited number of technical and spatial updates that were needed to accommodate the new functional program and to improve

the connections between the city and the prison. The core idea was to preserve and to “exhibit” its architectural identity, and thus to exploit its remarkable communicative power. In this case, the implementation of this approach was made possible by the good conservation state of the prison. Indeed, although some interventions had been carried out over the decades, including renovations and expansions [18] [19], the penitentiary had mainly retained its original form and identity features; furthermore, unlikely many other decommissioned structures, after its closure it has not undergone a long period of abandonment. These conditions not only enabled but also oriented the conservative intervention – so as, in other cases, the state of neglect and decay usually imposes different choices, pertaining to “erasures” or reconstructions.

In 2012 the historic penitentiary reopened its doors as a multifunctional cultural centre, called *Fængslet* (i.e. the Danish word for “prison”), which gathers many different functions. It houses the city’s tourist information point and a prison shop (which offers touristic merchandise and guides to the local attractions, but also crime fiction literature and several products made by the inmates in Tønder Jail), the prison hostel *SleepIn Fængslet* [NOTA 6], the shared office space *Fængslet 2.East* (located in the old 2.East cell block), and a venue for concerts [NOTA 7], conferences and exhibitions [NOTA 8]. Furthermore, some of the facilities of the old penitentiary (i.e. the workshops, the gathering hall, the gym, and other additional rooms) can be rented by artists as well as by private citizens or associations to organize meetings, courses, conferences or parties. This functional concentration ensues from the idea to exploit the large dimensions of the former prison and its central position, but it is also a response to the will to conserve the structure as a whole and consistently, without fragmenting it.

Within this framework, the responsibility to narrate the history of the place has been set on a prison museum. The *Fængselsmuseet* offers a visit around the 4.000 sqm of the penitentiary’s central building, and occupies all its four floors. The spaces of the old penitentiary have been “frozen in time” in the moment of the closure, i.e. they have been restored and set up to reproduce the carceral conditions that were to be experienced when the prison was an operating carceral facility.

A special contribution to the arrangement of these conditions was given by the interplay between the penitentiary’s architecture and the very rich collection it houses. The institution owns more than 15.000 objects, that in time span the entire prison term. This unique trove, which had already been started before the closure of the prison [NOTA 9], includes personal effects left behind by the inmates, devices pertaining to the various activities carried out in the prison (furniture from offices and workshops, such as beds, tables, chairs, cupboards, telephones and old computer screens), medical reports, historical photos, audio and video interviews. Most of these objects and documents are used to set up the thematic exhibitions that are distributed along the visitors’ pathway – i.e. “Prison tales” [NOTA 10], the “Last execution” [NOTA 11], the “Occupation and court cases behind bars” [NOTA 12], “Children of prisoners” [NOTA 13] and, in the basement, “Lorentzen’s tunnel” [NOTA 14] and the “Dark side” of the prison and strict systems [NOTA 15]. These exhibitions merge the history of the Horsens prison with general themes addressing the realm of incarceration, opening up various discourses about specific topics concerning justice and punishment from the mid-1800s to the present day. The use of the collection and its constructed relationship with the former prison spaces is meant to immerse the visitors in an evocative spatial experience that gathers its major strength from its “locational authenticity”. As highlighted by director Anne Bjerrekaer during the 2016 Museums + Heritage Award presentation, the main goal of the museum is indeed “to present history in a context”. While walking in the building, around a tour which covers all four floors – crossing the entrance and the common wards, the cells, the workshop, the kitchen, the medical ward, the chapel, and finally the basement – visitors are offered an in-depth, personalised journey through the life of the penitentiary.

Since 2015, after the implementation of a major award-winning renovation, this task was enhanced through the interplay between analog and digital exhibition tools. The intervention, designed by Kvorning Design & Communication in cooperation with AV-Huset, aimed at restructuring and enhancing the visitors’ experience by providing a more immersive and personalised path, providing audiences with wider and easier access to the historical records conserved in the archives, giving voice to the multi-perspective memories related to the life behind walls, and enhancing the narration of the place itself. Today the exhibitions largely deploy technology-based installations, dialoguing with the museum spaces and objects, and animating the tour through projections, lighting, video, audio and sensory settings.

Some of these digital systems have been integrated into the furniture and objects pieces on display. By directly interacting with them (e.g. by sitting on a bed, lining on a desk, opening a drawer, answering to a ringing phone, etc.), visitors activate a range of new “presences” animating the tour.

Such presences are virtual “guiding figures”, aimed at enriching the dialogue between the past and the present of the place. Indeed, although various types of guided and targeted visits are offered (for tourists’ groups, families, etc.), large numbers of people embark on the tour without the support of a guide. In this case, at the beginning of their path visitors can choose to be led by a virtual guide. This happens when starting the tour in the “Lock”, an initial room filled with the original lockers. Here visitors are asked to choose an ID

CARD among the ten ones that hang in the open cupboards; each one corresponds to a specific character, who will accompany them throughout the whole tour, by meeting them in eight selected places along the exhibition path. The “meeting points” (highlighted on a map, which visitors are provided with) and the means through which these characters come to life change according to their peculiar personal story.

This system aims at enhancing the engagement of the public – without resorting to the now recurrent “identification strategy”. At *Fængselsmuseet*, when visitors select an ID CARD, they do not acquire a new “identity”, but rather a personal guide who has a long-standing experience of the site. Witnesses appear to the single visitors, establishing a one-to-one relationship, and almost setting up a (mono-directional) dialogue with them. This leading presence not only complements and moderates the visit, but it also opens up different perspectives (hence favoring return visits, to view the exhibit through different eyes each time) and especially stirs the attention of the public and engage them actively (because the virtual guides’ contribution is activated by a gesture of his/her associated visitor).

The “virtual guide” combined to each ID CARD is a person who actually has spent part of his/her life in the Horsens prison; each one refers to a different range of experiences, ranging from former inmates to guards or members of the support staff, in the attempt to address the goal of “inclusive integrity” [20]. In some cases, people who actually lived or worked in the prison have directly participated in the production of the contents. Their contributions have been filmed (in the form of short talks, shoot on a black background) and are projected by means of 56 Panasonic Solid Shine™ laser projectors on the darkest walls of cells and offices, exploiting digital mapping to allow virtual images to efficiently interact with the furnished spaces (e.g. in the case the character needs to seem perched on top of an actual desk). These alive characters appear in the form of a movie figure, coming in life size and giving a speech directly addressing the visitor, just if they were talking and standing in front of him/her. In other cases, when the “virtual guide” belongs to the past of the prison, stories have been documented and collected through archival researches and then materialised in the form of “voices” and “writings”. These testimonies can be heard through an old telephone (reenacted by a registered voice) or can be read through the words extracted from their diaries or letters (as also these virtual presences speak in their own words), projected on walls or desktops. In order to strengthen these “voices”, they are often complemented with the projection of authentic historical pictures (depicting the character, or a related situation), that sometimes are animated.

Through the intertwine of historical and contemporary records, and the interplay between analog and digital means, these presences come to life to present their stories, which offer a multi-perspective and filter-less narration. They can refer to dramatic and regretful memories, but also to amusing or trivial ones – spanning from despised weekly fish-day and go-to-guy for contraband to the use of illegal drugs in the prison, from fights among the prisoners to the emotions towards their children.

These witnesses are also meant as an opportunity to unfold wider discourses: the museum in fact aims at operating as a platform where visitors can participate in the current debates about controversial topics, during the visit (in the Discussion Rooms or the Insero MediaLab [NOTE 16]) but also after the tour, later at home (where, through a personal code, they can access to even more knowledge about their personal narrator on the museum’s website).

The immersive experience of the “authentic” life of the Horsens prison is further enhanced by another contribution. There is indeed a complementary type of “virtual presence” which accompanies the visitors showing up in the form of shadows moving along the walls, voices and noises (from tussles between prisoners on the gangways, to the clanging of heavy cell doors), in some areas also accompanied by smells (e.g. of smoke along the wards, or of food from the kitchen). Brought to life by animations, lighting and sounds, these indistinct figures enact the movements of detainees and guards – who shade out of the corner of the eye as they walk past the hallway, jogging around the stairs or knocking on a cell door. Sometimes blurred, confusing and unsettling, these presences reenact behaviors, rituals and noises. While the “virtual narrators” expand the contents provided during the visit, these vague figures appearing in the collective spaces contribute to add other multi-sensorial inputs in the construction of a real-life experience. The interplay between these presences activate a multiplicity of stimuli, and engage visitors from the intellectual, physical, perceptive and emotional point of view, to enhance the understanding of the place and the memorability of the experience.

### III. PRISONS AND MUSEUMS: ARCHITECTURAL, MUSEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL DIALOGUES

The project of the *Fængselsmuseet* represents an interesting platform to reflect on the musealisation of former prisons, as it merges traditional and innovative strategies, and effectively unfolds the challenges and the potentialities that are being tackled within this type of interventions.

The former prison can be mainly defined as a museum of its own, that offers a special type of “immersive experience”; indeed, by walking around the site, visitors are engaged in a journey that make them “step back in time” and, through the combination of intellectual and emotional stimuli, become acquainted with

carceral life and the history of the place. The immersive nature of this visit draws first of all on the thorough preservation of the building fabric, enabled (and probably solicited) by the remarkable conservation state of the penitentiary, whose original spatial and material features inextricably operate as a prominent part of the display. Because of the highly evocative connotation of the architecture of the prison, the mere experience of these historical spaces conveys contents and information.

The “authenticity” of the place is matched and emphasized by the use of objects and furniture pieces that had belonged to the life of the prison – again made possible by the uncommon conservation of an “informal” collection that a guard had started in the basement fifty years before the closure of the penitentiary. These items are used to set up the thematic exhibitions and especially to reenact the life of some spaces. These cannot exactly be defined as recreated “period rooms”, as these settings have a more active and performative nature. Objects are not only exhibited in their “original” environments; some of them are integrated with the technological systems that, through the interaction of the public, make the “virtual guides” come to life. Visitors are expected to actively engage with items and spaces, by touching, sitting, opening drawers or playing table tennis, just as a detainee would have done. This strategy, based on the personal engagement of the audience in playing actions that reenact the life of the prison, contributes to further enhance the immersive experience, hence boosting its memorability and impact.

Further strength to the visit is provided by the multisensorial presences that populate the site. On the one hand, they improve the understanding of the place, by intertwining the visual stimuli to auditive, olfactory and kinetic ones (as spaces resonate with voices, noises, odors and faint figures’ movements). On the other, these virtual presences perform and reenact personal stories, and thus provide visitors with different glimpses on carceral life. These contributions allow to unfold multiple and sometimes untold narratives and possibly conflicting memories of different prison users, who may have experienced the place in different ways and in different positions of power.

The strategical interplay among analogic and digital strategies and tools performed at *Fængselsmuseet* seems to illustrate a particularly efficient solution to the many issues involved in the museumisation of former prisons. The institution is capable to balance and match a respectful consideration of the “difficult” identity of the site and the implementation of a more “trivial” side of the experience, which is produced by the multisensorial stimuli and the interactivity and performativity of some installations, and that allows the museum to welcome a variously targeted public (also including children and youngsters). Notwithstanding, it doesn’t shy away from dealing with and triggering the debate about controversial topics. These are anticipated by the “virtual guides” testimonies and throughout the thematic exhibitions, in a way that allows visitors to control the level of engagement with them, and they are more widely explored in the workshops and labs where the public can further reflect not only on the specific Horsens prison’s experience but also on the related topics around justice, incarceration and the penal system.

This complex combination of various instruments and different experiential layers make the *Fængselsmuseet* capable to house an efficient dialogue among the architectural, museographic and cultural issues that gather in the reuse of former prisons, and thus offers to many different publics the possibility to benefit from the civic and pedagogical potential of these specific heritage sites.

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- [21]. [NOTE 1] Being heritage a constantly in-progress construction – i.e. a “constitutive cultural process that identifies those things and places that can be given meaning and value as ‘heritage’, reflecting contemporary and cultural social values, debates and aspirations” –, its definition has been evolving and expanding.
- [22]. [NOTE 2] Following the renovation of the justice system as was being implemented in Europe and the United States, traditional carceral methods based on corporal punishments or forced labor were integrated with new strategies aimed at rehabilitating the detainees through moral improvement.
- [23]. [NOTE 3] Among the famous prisoners interned here, it is worth mentioning Carl August Lorentzen (who escaped in 1949 through a 20 m tunnel he initially dug with a spoon), the politician Peter Adler Alberti, Jens Nielsen (who was the last person to be executed in Danish peacetime in 1892), and German Nazi Werner Best (who was the administrator of Denmark during the World War II occupation).
- [24]. [NOTE 4] This “silent system” evolved during the 1820s at Auburn Prison, New York, as an alternative to and modification of the Pennsylvania system of solitary confinement, and promised to rehabilitate criminals by teaching them personal discipline and respect for work, property and other people.
- [25]. [NOTE 5] For example, in the 1990s, it had participated in the spread of decay and stigmas surrounding the area, ensuing from various criminal actions committed by former detainees that had showed the failure of the rehabilitation tasks promoted by the prison.
- [26]. [NOTE 6] This accommodation is situated in the sick ward of the former penitentiary, where cells have been renovated and provided with new services to house the guests, but also reconstructing the life experience of the prison.
- [27]. [NOTE 7] The former prison yard where inmates used to enjoy fresh air and exercise is used throughout the summer semester as a concert arena, and is now an internationally renown venue for outdoor concerts and events.
- [28]. [NOTE 8] Temporary art workshops and exhibitions take place regularly within the prison walls, also including famous annual events like the European Medieval Festival and the Crime Fiction Festival.
- [29]. [NOTE 9] Fifty years before the closure, a prison guard had already started to conserve old materials, items and records, to organize them and to display them in the basement (inside simple cases, or hanging them on the walls), where a small prison museum was already visible, forming the original core of the contemporary institution.
- [30]. [NOTE 10] In this thematic exhibition the prison’s otherwise anonymous prisoners are given life, face and personality; this display is set up in some cells, where visitors can “meet” specific prisoners (e.g. Peter Adler Alberti, the Minister of Justice from 1901-1908 and convicted here in 1910 in the largest fraud case in Danish history; Mozart Lindberg, who spent a total of 60 years in prison; Julius Rasmussen, who shot against Council President Estrup in 1885 and 4 years later hung himself in his cell) and hear about their very personal story.
- [31]. [NOTE 11] This themed exhibition focuses on the execution issue by following the story of Jens Nielsen, from childhood in poverty, over youth at educational institutions and prisons, to three death sentences in a Denmark where the resistance to ultimate punishment was growing, until his execution on November 8, 1892, in the west yard of the prison; he was the last prisoner in Denmark to be executed by decapitation.
- [32]. [NOTE 12] The section examines the effect of the German occupation of Denmark 1940-1945, and the subsequent court settlement, which had great significance for the life behind bars. The German occupation gave e.g. special challenges in the closed state prison in relation to air defense evacuation plans and blackout in a 25 m high building with skylights. Also, the prison population changed with resistance men sentenced by German courts as prisoners during the occupation, while guardians and war criminals served their sentences during the trial.
- [33]. [NOTE 13] Dry figures say that between 4.000-7.000 children annually experience a mother or father in prison; this special exhibition narrates the story of 3 of these children’s experiences, thoughts and feelings. Follow one of them through a labyrinthine tale, and afterwards explore the facts and opinions of this group of innocent convicts.
- [34]. [NOTE 14] The prisoner Carl August Lorentzen fled the prison in 1949, by digging a 18 meter long tunnel deep under the prison toward freedom; this particular story related to the memories of the Horsens penitentiary is narrated through the reconstruction of the tunnel (as part of the exhibition sections in the basement), documented by historical proves, and animated through audio and video contributions.
- [35]. [NOTE 15] This permanent exhibition located in the basement, named “Underworld”, was opened on October 11, 2019, to bring the story of the dire side of prison, harsh systems and punishment; it tells of that time over 100 years ago when this space was used for punishment, discipline and execution of the prisoners: the basement has been set up as it looked around the beginning of the 20th century, with its bare walls and dim lighting, peephole in the doors and rooms without daylight. The dark basement is home to the lion cage, the cold virgin, the nine-tailed cat, the jumpsuit and other tormented criminal gear.
- [36]. [NOTE 16] Along the visit, the public intersect seven “Discussion Rooms”, where current issues concerning punishment and prisons are dealt with through a combination of historical knowledge, experts’ opinions, statistics, as well as contents from newspapers and social media; in these spaces visitors can read, hear as well as express their opinion, hence contribute to the debate. The museum indeed offers the public different space where to elaborate the visit experience and leave comments and contents – e.g. in the Insero MediaLab (five contiguous rooms, located in the heart of the museum, furnished with a film and sound studio, a mini-cinema and a meeting room, where to try media production and storytelling).