

FROM PRISON CELL TO WORKSHOP. THE DUESO PENITENTIARY (SANTOÑA, SPAIN), A PENAL COLONY ESSAY IN THE FIRST DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Carmen Gil de Arriba

Departamento de Geografía, Urbanismo y Ordenación del Territorio. Universidad de Cantabria
carmen.gil@unican.es

The Dueso penitentiary was set up in 1907 as an attempt on a Spanish scale at the first peninsular penal colony, that is to say it was established in the Peninsula in accordance with the reformist approach of the most prominent Spanish criminalists at this intersecular time. This remarkable architectural project, initially approved for this imprisonment space, never reached total development, due to diverse obstacles faced throughout the first years of construction and operation and as a result, many changes and transformations were already suffered in the first decades of the twentieth century. This paper discusses in great detail the historical and territorial factors which explain the origins of this space and the operational logic as a social regeneration project of ideological control and management of the convict workforce.

I. INTRODUCTION

The origin and evolution of The Dueso penitentiary in Santoña (Cantabria, Spain) at the beginning of the XX century is a significant and extraordinary case of shaping an imprisonment space. The architectural structure was used to symbolize a series of reformist ideologies. Moreover, the penal colony model was an expression of certain power, discipline and control strategies which easily exceeded local and regional scope.

Localizing prison space bears certain historical and territorial logic. An attempt at carrying out an in-depth study of this reasoning requires attention to social, cultural, political, legal and environmental factors which, throughout time, have conditioned the creation and permanence of a penal establishment in a particular place. This paper is an attempt at analyzing the construction and appropriation of a penal space from the social geographical viewpoint and the various sectors implicated.

The article is divided into five sections. The first, more general, introduces the objectives and methodology. The second deals with penal colonies in the XVIII and XIX centuries and the evolution of ideas in the matter of penal imprisonment in Spain. Thirdly, the article concentrates on the creation of the Dueso penal colony and on the motives for choosing Santoña. A fourth part analyses the architectural model in relation to the territory, the commencement of construction and the consecutive difficulties arising from an ambitious original project. Lastly, on considering the information previously mentioned, final conclusions are drawn up.

II. PENAL COLONIES AND PENITENTIARY REFORMIST IDEOLOGIES IN SPAIN AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

In the XVIII century, Britain and France confined outlaws in territories far from the metropolis. By increasing the population and workforce in the colonies they aimed as much at repression or punishment as at encouraging the colonization process. One century later, in the last quarter of the XIX century, after the Australian penal colony, Botany Bay had been created, a momentous debate related to the need for change in the penitentiary system and the methods of convict rehabilitation was well underway in Spain. Authors, such as Concepción Arenal and Pedro Armengol spoke out against the creation of penal colonies similar to the Australian ones, such as The Gulf of Guinea or the Mariana islands, in territories far away from the Peninsula.

Moreover, at this time of century change, (the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX), many Spanish academics reflected on the penitentiary topic and the need for reform: among which were Luis Silvela, Rafael Salillas, Fernando Cadalso, Constancio Bernaldo de Quiros and Pedro Dorado Montero. As a result, a way of thinking began to take shape and although several ideologies were drawn together as a whole modernization and changes in the Spanish penal system was favoured. Likewise, although the intellectual influence of authors such as Jeremy Bentham and Walter Crofton was considerable, the materialization of their ideas was limited.

The beginning of the XX century saw the development of the concept of an interior penal colony fitting in with regenerationist conceptions of «interior colonization». It aimed at reactivating waste ground and recovering lost labour by creating agriculture or industrial colonies. The objective was to correct demographic and economic inequality in the country.

The application of these interior colonization ideas to the penitentiary field besides contributing to the objective of reforming the system, gave rise to the possibility of ideological control and management of the criminal workforce. In this context the project of the Dueso penitentiary colony started to take form.

III. THE CREATION OF THE DUESO PENITENTIARY COLONY AND THE LOCATION OF SANTOÑA

Construction of the new penal establishment began in Santoña in 1907 and aimed at being an ideal example of reforming architectural material and penitentiary organization in Spain. The land chosen for this model of prison is in the north-centre of the Peninsula, 48 kilometres east of Santander and 71 kilometres west of Bilbao, dug deep into a coastal zone, an estuary of marshy wet land.

The initial purpose of the project was to transfer the penal population of prisoners from North Africa: Ceuta, Melilla, Chafarinas, Alhucemas and Peñon de Vélez de la Gomera to the Peninsula. A commission formed by Rafael Salillas and Lorenzo de la Tejera was responsible for carrying out the study regarding the location of the penal colony. The material implementation of the new penitentiary was based on the direct labour of the convicts from the outset.

IV. CONSTRUCTION WORK AND OBSTACLES FOR AN AMBITIOUS PROJECT

In accordance with Lorenzo de la Tejera's plans, the original project anticipated capacity for one thousand prisoners, distributed in an imprisonment system relatively similar to the progressive Crofton one. Such a regime had already been established a decade before in the prison in Ceuta. Defenders of these penal reform procedures, following the model instigated in other countries, aimed to maintain the prisoners' dignity by means of work, combining imprisonment with learning, labour in workshops, agricultural or industrial activities. A prison sentence was associated with redemption.

Nevertheless, the actual development of the project suffered increasing setbacks from the beginning. Despite relying on the prisoners' forced labour from sunset to sunrise, payment on a daily basis or payment by task, the cost of leveling the land, laying the foundations of the first building and draining the marshland turned out to be higher than anticipated, as with the expropriation of pieces of land belonging to private owners. Furthermore the width of the wall enclosing the colony involved considerable cost. As a result construction work was delayed and took longer than projected.

V. CONCLUSIONS: AN UNFINISHED REFORMIST PROJECT

The initial project set out for the Dueso penal colony suffered many changes throughout the first decades of construction. Changing criteria, disorganization, political and legislative vicissitudes and economic difficulties turned into huge obstacles. Consequently, a major part of the original architectural design had to be cut out and never reached complete and total development.

However, the essential conception of the penal colony as a workplace was maintained. Moreover, over time the daily activities of the prisoners in the industrial workshops (espadrille/shoe making, blacksmith, carpentry and basket making) or in the open air agricultural activities (highlighting cattle care) turned into an active part of day to day prison life in the Dueso. All of which were carried out within the actual colony, an enclosed space and active effort constantly controlled and under vigilance. Wasting time was avoided and even the daily food supply was rationed in the hope of increasing productivity.

Consequently, a close link between the cell and the workshop, imprisonment and work, prisoner control and material gain as a social regeneration experiment was the result but also the dominance of individuals on a small scale. The idea was to achieve a type of prisoner that would not only carry out a prison sentence but would also be made learn a trade and assume ordered honorable rules of conduct. The method of reaching these objectives among philanthropic and oppressors had to be the actual prison space with

architectural symbolism, conceived and designed as a tool of ideological imposition and of productive management of the workforce. In this way, despite initial complications, the Dueso prison was successful.