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“A Prison within a Prison”?: Examining the enfolding spatialities of care and control in the Barlinnie Special Unit

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“A Prison within a Prison”?: Examining the enfolding spatialities of care and control in the Barlinnie Special Unit

Abstract

This paper uses one of Scotland’s most controversial experiments in penal reform– the Barlinnie Special Unit – to examine the enfolding nature of care and control in carceral space. Connecting with recent arguments relating to “caring architecture” and using the framework of historical carceral geographies, it showcases the spatial complexities of implementing caring practices alongside reforming tactics. Beginning with a discussion of the care and control nexus within institutional spaces and its historical legacy, it considers the use of small units within the Scottish Prison System. Using the Barlinnie Special Unit as a pivot, the paper opens up the complex spatial arrangements and spatial tactics of experimental prison reform. It first examines the spatial and architectural dimensions of the Special Unit. Second, the paper focuses on issues of routine and inhabitation and the emotional uncertainty this generated for prisoners. Overall, this paper seeks to argue the importance of examining experimental spatial practices in prison reform history to highlight the interwoven spatialities of care and control in every-day institutional life.

Keywords: Barlinnie Special Unit; caring architecture; Scotland; historical geography; small units

Introduction

> Entrance to the Special Unit is through the front door of the main prison. The front door is electronically controlled and once it has been opened the visitor enters an outer foyer … A glass partition separates the visitor from the three or four prison officers who operate this gatehouse … The visitor is then asked to wait in an adjoining waiting room until an officer from the Special Unit arrives to escort the visitor through the main prison courtyard. This part of the prison is surrounded by high walls, some of old sandstone, others of concrete. After passing through a small gateway in an inner wall the visitor arrives at the small red door of the Special Unit, set in a high, grey concrete wall. Only the small white sign on the door indicates that it is the entrance to the unit. The door is unlocked by the escorting prison officer, and the visitor enters (Carrell and Laing 1982: 13).

This opening passage, written by Glasgow art gallery director Christopher Carrell and art therapist Joyce Laing in their pioneering text 'The Barlinnie Special Unit: its evolution through its art', heralded as 'a landmark in Scottish "penological" writing' (Nellis, 2010), describes the typical visitors' entrance to the Barlinnie Special Unit. Frequent visitors to the Unit since its opening in 1973, Carrell and Laing's insights offer a rare view inside one of Scotland's longest and most controversial experiments in penal reform. The Special Unit closed in 1994 due to numerous institutional and societal pressures (Nellis, 2010), and there is no obvious visible trace left of the space in Barlinnie today. To some the Unit remains a legendary institution which enabled the rehabilitation of some of Scotland's most violent prisoners, including Jimmy Boyle heralded in the press as 'the most violent man in Britain' (Milner, 1996). For others, it is representative of an unsavoury moment when penal authority was inadvertently conceded to manipulative prisoners and is therefore best forgotten (Nellis, 2010: np). This piece of historical carceral geography seeks to use a range of visitor and prisoner accounts to venture inside the experimental space of the Special Unit and to importantly counterbalance the processes of erasure that can subsume controversial elements of 'penal heritage' (Nellis, 2010; Turner and Peters, 2015) such as small units and their 'difficult' prisoners. In doing so, this paper seeks to examine, from the inside, the enveloping nature of care and control through attention to architecture, routines and inhabitation in the Special Unit.

In recent discussions of covertly entangled lines within institutional geographies, Philo (2017: 26) signals towards a wider consideration of the 'doubling of care-and-control logics', questioning the balance between benevolent gestures (care, reform, compassion) and more authoritarian demands (control, discipline, dispassion) that often exist simultaneously in institutions. This relates to a large body of literature that has frequently discussed the disciplinary powers that percolate through and uphold a number of institutions (Philo 2012; Moran 2015). However, it also calls to attention the need to investigate, in more precise detail, how care can exert control and how control can often succeed in igniting care. Philo (2017: 28-29) notes that 'care demands control, control demands care – to the point where it becomes hard to tell where one ends and the other begins', and therefore more acute attention to the (micro-)-spaces where this folding occurs becomes of crucial significance to understanding the workings of this nexus in more critical detail.

These discussions complement recent debates in carceral geography where the rigid boundary of the prison have been tested (Moran 2015) and the porous nature of these institutional spaces has been explicitly revealed (Turner 2016). While this perspective highlights the different ways in which discussions about prisons within geography are no longer being confined by their walls, the materiality of such places still play a significant role in conceptualising and understanding the corporeal, embodied experience of prison worlds (Ugelvik 2014; Crewe et al 2014). In this respect, discussion around the architecture of institutions, such as prisons, take on new life by considering, not only their physical structure and buildings, but also their 'inhabitation' (Jacobs and Merriman 2011). Connections can therefore be made to recent debates within cultural and architectural geographies whereby the geographies of "being-in" architecture (Jacobs & Merriman, 2011: 213; Kraftl & Adey, 2008) reveals the different embodied, emotional and affectual experiences of inhabitation in these institutional spaces.

'Caring architectures' and historical carceral geographies

In recent conversations concerning 'caring architecture', Gunnar Olsson noted the falsity of the term, stating that 'I immediately sense an inevitable closeness between caring architecture and imprisoning architecture' (Olsson and Gren 2017: 1). Advancing this statement, Olsson explains that architecture 'is always about power-relations, about moving from physical infrastructure, like the concrete walls in front of you and me, into

our malleable minds' (Olsson and Gren 2017: 1). Institutions, stress Nord and Högström (2017: 7) 'constitute perhaps the most difficult of architectures' in part due to their scale but also due to their coercive qualities (Foucault 1977) that bring to the fore the entangled nature of caring and controlling strategies and experiences. This renewed attention to institutional "caring" architectural space opens up avenues for geographical investigation into the intersections between institutions and architecture that problematise assumptions about the "being-in" (Kraftl, 2010) of these places.

It is recognised that architecture is always a partial and incomplete project showcase the importance of understanding the broader relations between time and space in the investigation of these institutional geographies. Morin and Moran (2015) push this element of time in their recent discussions concerning the unlocking of the usable carceral past through attention to excavating the historical geographies of prisons. This work highlights the different ways in which the past can be used to frame and unsettle the carceral landscape of the present and the future through new insights into the embodied experience of imprisonment. Examining past lives and practices through historical sources enables the possibilities for tracing shifts in thinking and providing 'temporal depth and richness to carceral geography' (Moran 2015: 222). Morin and Moran (2015) note the complexity of generating historical evidence for such carceral geographical work, demonstrating the lack of available sources that give insights in to the experiential worlds of these institutional spaces. This paper seeks to work with fragments and traces (McGeachan 2016) of evidence that exist from the Special Unit in order to illuminate histories relating to architecture, inhabitation and routine. While this remains a partial account of a particular set of the Unit's histories it is hoped to act as springboard for a new set of histories to be written about the design, implementation and inhabitation of experimental small units. Nellis (2010: n.p.) argues that '[i]f the Special Unit's story is known at all, it is more through the testimony or prisoners who experienced it than through any official (or professional) account'. This being the case, this paper draws heavily from published prisoner accounts, including memoirs written while inside the Special Unit by Jimmy Boyle (1977). Also utilised are personal accounts from visitors to the Special Unit, particularly during its first eight years in existence, including social reformers, psychiatrists and art therapists. To aid in tracing the broader histories of small units in Scotland, a range of policy reports have been used that when analysed together highlight the challenges of bringing a carceral space into existence.

This paper seeks to bring together 'caring architecture' and historical carceral geography through the Barlinnie Special Unit in order to reveal the significance of researching experimental and controversial spatial practices in penal reform. Beginning with a discussion of the use of small units within the Scottish Prison Service during the period 1950-1994, the following section will contextualise the Special Unit within the broader experimental use of spatial strategies to control and contain 'difficult' prisoners. The paper will then turn to investigate the micro-spaces of the Special Unit with particular attention to the architecture and spatial arrangements of the Unit. Finally, attention will be given to routine and inhabitation within the Unit, noting the difficulties inherent for prisoners navigating these new spaces and their unusual routines in order to tease out the enfolding spatialities of care and control in this experimental space.

Small Units and the Barlinnie Special Unit

The implementation of small units within the Scottish Prison Service reveals a micro-spatial history that is intimately bound to broader notions of conflict, segregation and violence alongside ideas of care, management and protection. The first official small unit for long term prisoners in Scotland was established in 1951 at Peterhead prison. This was a specialised segregation unit intended for a small group of prisoners who had been responsible for a series of violent and 'subversive' incidents (Scottish Prison Service [hereafter SPS] 1990: 55). Little documentation relating to the operation of the unit exists but the philosophy was simply to segregate disruptive individuals in a group formation, therefore reducing levels of violence and subversion among other prisoners in the main prison. The unit fell in disuse and was finally closed in 1957 and yet Peterhead continued to develop unit strategies for less violent prisoners (Bottomley et al 1994: 4).

In 1965, the death penalty for murder was abolished in Britain forever changing the carceral landscape inside and outside of the prison walls. The abolition of the death penalty and the increase in longer sentences coincided with a surge of violent behaviour in Scottish prisons leading, once again, to the implementation of spatial strategies in the form of small units. A second segregation unit was established at Inverness in 1966. Described as the 'Siberia for prisoners in the Scottish prison system' (Boyle 1977: 167) this was a space deliberately cut-off from the main prison where the main principle was to segregate prisoners deemed too 'difficult' or 'dangerous' for mainstream incarceration. Prisoners sent to Inverness were expected to stay for 6 months on average but retribution

for behaviour deemed bad or disruptive was an extension in the length of stay within the unit, usually at 2 month increments (SPS 2002: 14). The result of this regime was a cycle of violence that had serious and long-standing psychological and physical implications for the prisoners and prison officers involved (Sparks 2002).

The accommodation at Inverness was developed with the ethos of maximum security for staff and minimum interaction between prisoners and this was conceived through the use of the controversial "cages" approach. The units involved a wall of mental bars dividing the length of the cell and this design was to guarantee that there could be no physical contact between prison officers and those inside (Scotsman 2002). An account of conditions within the segregation unit at Inverness is recounted by the now infamous Glasgow criminal Jimmy Boyle in his memoir, *A Sense of Freedom* (1977). In the text he gives an important glimpse into the space of the segregation unit and the spaces that he occupied during his time in solitary confinement that he labels the 'silent cell':

> [T]he few [prisoners] on Punishment [were] situated in the smaller of the prison's two halls which held sixteen cells. It was a two-tier system with eight cells on the bottom flat and eight above … Guys would crack up in their cells at night … Some would shout and scream and smash the small pieces of furniture which they had … The following day they would be taken in front of the governor and punished (Boyle 1977: 179).

The cycles of violence displayed in this narrative highlights the complex nature of these spatial reforms whereby severe forms of spatial tactics, in the implementation of cages and solitary confinement, are seemingly designed to punish violence that, in turn, they perpetuate. However, while Boyle's account presents the design of this approach as relatable to punishment others have viewed it as a protective strategy. One perspective on the "cages" design is that it enabled prison staff to encounter prisoners in a safe way declaring that their existence had saved many prison officers' lives' (Herald 1994). However, following a serious incident in the unit in December 1972 when four prisoners violently assaulted officers the unit was temporarily suspended and did not reopen until 1978 where its remit was altered (SPS 2002: 14-15).

In the late 1960s, a Working Party with the support of the Prison Department was set up to consider issues relating to the custody of longer term or potentially violent prisoners

(SPS 2002,16). In line with the political tensions relating to the controversial treatment at Inverness, the SHHD Departmental Working Party, *Treatment of Certain Male Long Term Prisoners and Potentially Violent Prisoners* (SHHD 1971) recommended that a 'Special Unit' should be set up under the ethos of a 'therapeutic community' whereby prisoners and staff would work together to create mutually beneficial relations in a supportive environment. The Special Unit opened in Barlinnie Prison in 1973 sited in a small, self-contained unit previously used by female remand prisoners. The remit of the Special Unit was summarised by the Secretary of State for Scotland in his official parliamentary report, *Prisons in Scotland* (1977):

> The Unit was set up in 1973 for prisoners who posed exceptional problems of management and its basic concept is a flexible and relaxed regime within a secure perimeter, involving a substantial degree of trust between staff and inmates (quoted in Carrell and Laing 1982: 9).

This significant penal experiment, the longest in Scottish history, has received little academic attention yet it offers rare insights into the experimental spatial tactics of prisons and their ramifications on individual lives. While this section has sought to contextualise the implementation of small units within the Scottish Prison system, the next section seeks to go inside the Special Unit in an attempt to showcase its architecture and spatial arrangements in order to highlight the folding nature of care and control in this context.

Inside the Special Unit

The Special Unit was housed within Barlinnie Prison, located in the residential suburb of Riddrie in the North-East of Glasgow. The experimental design of the Unit was showcased in its architecture and the spatial arrangements put in place to encourage the development of therapeutic community principles. While the Special Unit was not a purpose built facility and was merely a converted use of the previously used women's quarters (Sparks 2002: 564), the space itself became a significant component of the experiment's ethos. The Unit, occupying two floors, contained ten cells, staff offices, such as the chief officer and governor's rooms, but also a gym, meeting room, kitchen, garden, sculpting area, courtyard, workshops and studios. These different pockets of space were deemed crucial in the creation of an environment where altered staff-prisoner

relationships could form, and opportunities for personal development could be given (Bottomley et al 1994: 11). Prisoners were able to move freely around the unit utilising the spaces in ways that were deemed appropriate by the 'community'. For example, in a typical day prisoners cells were open from 6am to 9pm with free access to spaces such as the outside yard and the kitchen area where prisoners made their own arrangements regarding cooking and making coffee (Carrell and Laing 1982: 24). Ideas around community were central to the Unit with weekly meetings held in the meeting room to discuss and debate anything of importance to each member (Carrell and Laing 1982: 26). This creation of a social milieu where each individual of the Unit could be accepted, form a social identification and begin to develop a sense of social responsibility towards the community (Wardrop in Carrell and Laing 1982: 26) is a key principle of the therapeutic community model (Jones 1953) that was applied on the ground in the Unit.

The small manipulations of the spaces within Special Unit are evident in the micro-spatial arrangements and 'tiny tinkerings with shapes, decorations and furnishings' (Philo 2017: 23) devised by prisoners within the unit. For example the cells showcase one way in which the space works across the spectrum of care and control principles. Cells in the Unit were standard in size for Scottish prisons, ten foot by seven and a half foot area, and each prisoner was provided with a bed, table and chair. A barred window was situated above eye level and each cell had a heavy, lockable door with an aperture for staff observation (Carrell and Laing 1982: 20). Yet, despite this standard design, the cells in the Unit developed a different interior shape and form:

> Each cell becomes a little world, the only space in which the inmate has privacy. Each cell is decorated according to the individual taste by its occupant. As with any home an unwritten code of behaviour operates (Carmichael 1982: 28).

The choice over decoration, furnishings and occupancy created a sense of pride, ownership and care over cell spaces. This is articulated in the multiple layers of decoration evident throughout the Special Unit. Many of the cells were adorned with elaborate artworks, books, typewriters and plants giving a homely feel (Figure 1). These became 'little worlds' where compassionate connections could be made, however, they were also locked spaces where doors would be closed at 9pm daily and remain so until 6am the following day.

Routine and inhabitation

Importantly, throughout the first 15 years of its existence the prisoners admitted to the Special Unit were thoroughly ingrained in the Scottish prison system with many having spent years incarcerated in different prison spaces. Most of the prisoners had convictions for violence (either assault or murder), some showed signs of psychopathy and many had considerable histories of the use of violence and disruptive behaviour within the prison setting (Cooke in Wozniak 1989). All of the first prisoners admitted had spent considerable time, often amounting to several years, in segregation and solitary confinement with many experiencing the "cages" at Inverness. For these individuals the new routine of the Unit became an equally frightening and liberating experience as evidenced through prisoner testimonies (Boyle 1977). For example, in a section entitled 'Inmates' impressions of the Special Unit', Carrell and Laing (1982: 24-25) showcase some of the mixed experiences of prisoners from the Unit. Ben Conroy, who had requested a transfer from the Unit, highlights these diverse emotions by noting that he 'was too embittered to appreciate what all these people were doing trying to be nice to me' and did not appreciate the Unit until he left prison when he stated that it had changed his life (Carrell and Laing 1982: 25). Revealing these layered experiences sheds new light on the tensions that can exist between care and control in these small spaces.

As noted previously, the spatial arrangements of the Unit were designed to encourage a certain freedom of movement, responsibility and expression that was previously unavailable in the wider space of the prison. Recent work in carceral geographies draws attention to the differing ways in which space itself can shape the penal experience (Moran, 2013). In doing so it brings to the fore the permeability between inside and outside (Schliehe, 2016), and the importance of considering the lived liminal spaces in-between. The official daily routine, as noted by regular visitor and social reformer Kay Carmichael, differed greatly from the more regimented regime of the tradition prison. From Monday to Friday cell doors remained open from 6am to 9pm and there was no collective or fixed working day (Carmichael 1982: 24). The work undertaken therefore became individually selected with many inmates choosing exercise, educational activities and artmaking. The unstructured nature of the Unit, designed to empower and enable prisoners to take back control of their lives, was often very difficult to navigate for

individuals who had spent a great deal of time in incarceration. This is highlighted acutely by the prisoners themselves recounting their transitions to the Unit:

> Being suddenly given access to more of the norms of society … from dungeons of dire despair, you know, from that position … entailed a degree of culture shock, disorientation and rapid readjustment (Unit prisoner quoted in Bottomley et al 1994: 14).

The difficulties in readjusting to a new regime where also compounded by a deep-rooted suspicion and fear of the authorities that had sent them to the Unit:

> When I got there I didn't know what to make of it. I was very suspicious and, like Jimmy Boyle, thought it was a launching pad for Carstairs [a psychiatric facility]. We had to talk to staff and call them by their first names. I couldn't do this and found it embarrassing and uncomfortable. I'd been in prison for several years and before coming to the Unit had spent twelve months in the cages in Inverness. By the time I arrived at the Unit I had so much bitterness and hate to work through that I just couldn't accept the place at all (Conroy quoted in Carrell and Laing 1982: 24).

Many similar stories exist which show the vulnerability and fear felt by the prisoners at this change of space and routine (Bottomley et al 1994). Concerns over how to fill the time given and to navigate the freedom awarded was often bewildering with one prisoner noting that '[f]or the first six months I spent each day wandering around without an escort not knowing what to do' (quoted in Carrell and Laing 1982: 25). Yet for many it was an opportunity that ultimately changed their future and, for some like Conroy mentioned previously, their very sense of themselves.

The core remit of developing altered prison-staff relations in the unit was not only to try and alleviate some of the violent and disruptive behaviour previously displayed but to also generate an environment where individuals could be treated in a humane way (SHHD 1971). However, as noted by Carmichael (1982: 22), this was not always an easy task for the staff or the prisoners involved, as each had to shed roles that had been deeply ingrained during the incarceration process. Despite this difficulty in trying to breaking down long-built barriers between staff and prisoners is it evident that the space of the Unit could enable small caring acts to permeate this divide. Recognising the complexity

of emotional terrains within prison, Crewe et al (2014: 67) discuss the marginal spaces where normal rules of prison society can be partially suspended and a broader emotional register is enabled, for example the display of warmth and tenderness. In the case of the Special Unit the entire space was designed to act along these marginal principles, in this wider emotional context, attempting to produce an 'emotional microclimate' (Crewe et al 2014: 67) where vulnerabilities were exposed and kindness could be shared. Boyle (1977: 229) recounts one of these small yet significant acts in his memoirs:

> I was then *asked* by a screw if I would come round and sort out my personal property with him. I went, and while we opened the parcels containing old clothes he did something that to him was so natural but to me was something that had never been done before. He turned to me and handed me a pair of scissors and asked me to cut open some of them. He then went about his business. I was absolutely stunned. That was the first thing that made me begin to feel human again. It was the completely natural way that it was done. This simple gesture made me think. In my other world, the penal system in general, such a thing would never happen.

This 'mind-blowing' moment for Boyle, after all '[h]ere I was, still awaiting trial for six attempted murders of prison staff and being given a weapon by one of their colleagues' (Boyle 1984: 11), relates to the significance of these marginal spaces to the remit of the Unit. However, these are also often mediated acts where boundaries and relationships are deliberately tested. In the above example the individual who controversially handed over the scissors to Boyle was Ken Murray, an experienced prison officer and advocate for penal reform. As a principal investigator of the Special Unit concept, Murray was keen for it to succeed and knew the significance of his actions (Wilson 2007). Murray first met Boyle in Inverness and was keen to gain his trust in the new space of the Unit. He was acutely aware that giving Boyle access to scissors was a gamble but it paid off. A marginal space was therefore created where emotional bonds were made and a platform created for a new type of relationship to build that highlights in miniature the complex synergies between care and control in these experimental spaces.

Conclusions

> The Special Unit challenges a system of values which demands punishment, without looking too far into the causes of "badness", or the effects of that punishment. Yet it is still a prison, the doors are still locked, the outside world far away, the pressures enormous (Mooney 1976: n.p.).

This statement appearing in the *New Statesmen* during the 1970's, highlights the complex nature of the space of the Special Unit, in relation to care and control. Clearly the development of the Special Unit as shown through attention to its architecture, routines and inhabitation, was a key experimental site in penal reform demonstrating the potential to humanise reforming practices. However, for all that the Unit achieved it was still undoubtedly a highly controlled space - 'a prison within a prison' - where locked doors still applied and complete freedom remained at a distance. The delicate overlapping of caring and controlling principles manifesting themselves in architectural designs, spatial manipulations and marginal spaces shown in this paper brings to the fore the spatial complexities "on the ground" of implementing caring practices alongside reforming tactics that are often overlooked within traditional historical accounts of penal reform.

This brief insight inside the Barlinnie Special Unit gives only a glimpse into the vast histories and geographies of this brave experiment in penal reform. However, increased attention to examining historical carceral geographies through fragmentary sources reveals the possibilities for opening up new carceral spaces that have been overlooked, ignored or overwritten. The intriguing folding of care and control shown to be bound up within the Special Unit paves the way forward for the writing of new types institutional geographies that pay acute attention to experimental spaces, architecture, inhabitation and ways of 'being-in' these complex places. Through attention to the Barlinnie Special Unit, this paper has argued for further critical insight into the (micro)-spaces of prison reform in order to further understand the enfolding spatialities of institutional life. In doing so, it is hoped that new ways forward for excavating innovative historical carceral geographies of experimental penal spaces have been illuminated.

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Figure 1: Photograph of a cell in the Special Unit turned into an art studio (courtesy of Joyce Laing).