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Squaring The Circle
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Squaring The Circle

Some thoughts on tracing the remains of Long Kesh/Maze prison in Northern Ireland

by Martin Krenn, Aisling O'Beirn

'The Circle' is not actually circular in form. This misnomer is a term that is commonly used for an area in the 'H Blocks' of the former prison Long Kesh/Maze.¹ The area is actually a rectangular cuboid shape which forms the central bar of the H in a H Block, with each arm of the H forming the wings of the block. Anyone coming onto an H Block had to pass through this architectural shapeshifter first for processing before proceeding onto the wings (McAtackney 2014, 99). The Circle was the administrative hub of each H Block in this high-security prison, hence it comes as no surprise that it was continually surveilled using CCTV. Although the prison shut its gates nearly 20 years ago (2000s), the surveillance of The Circle continues to be 'broadcast' by a surveillance box monitor, which was originally located in H Block 2. Layers of scenes witnessed over years have been seared into the monitor screen as, whilst operational, it relayed a constant stream of live footage from The Circle to staff monitoring the prison. This continuous act of surveillance has been frozen in time, burnt into the retina of a now unplugged, analogue tube TV. The hard-edged, architectural edifice of The Circle frames the blurred form of, one can speculate, a prison officer treading the same route over and over again. There is a repetitive redundancy to the image.

Transforming Long Kesh/Maze is a dialogical art project developed as one of TRACES Creative Co-Production by Martin Krenn and Aisling O'Beirn. www.tracesproject.eu

Our first encounter with this unique object was when researching lesser known narratives about the prison for the dialogical art project *Transforming Long Kesh/Maze*.² The monitor is one example of infrastruc-

1. Long Kesh/Maze Prison held the majority of both Republican and Loyalist political prisoners during the recent period of conflict in Northern Ireland. Over 3,000 people were killed and many more injured over the period of the conflict, primarily but not exclusively between 1969 and 1994. Many cases relating to the conflict still remain unresolved meaning that the legacy of traumatic events within living memory has not been dealt with. The prison, now partially demolished, with only a few indicative structures remaining, was to be transformed into a sports stadium and a peace centre, but these plans collapsed in 2013 against a background of political disagreement around conflict legacy issues. There is currently no access to the prison site for the public.

2. In making the project we engaged with a range of people, with differing political positions, who have had first-hand experience of the prison. This broad range of project participants includes Republican and Loyalist ex-

prisoners, ex-prison staff and former visitors. Our work with participants resulted in a set of dialogically produced photographs of existing objects and artefacts from the prison—including this monitor—as well as a range of newly produced objects, which were made with participants from the 50+ Group using many techniques traditionally used in the production of prison art.

3. The Eileen Hickey Irish Republican History Museum covers the history of Irish Republicanism through an extensive collection of donated objects, artefacts and documents, some dating back to the period of the United Irishmen in 1798 but the majority of material relates to the last 100 years. Material ranges from military, IRA, police and prison officer uniforms some dating back to the 1916 Rising, to documents, badges, artefacts and objects made by both men and women republican prisoners from various prisons in Ireland and Britain. The museum was established in 2007 on the first anniversary of the death of Eileen Hickey who collected researched and organised the material. Hickey was herself OC (Officer Commanding) in the IRA whilst she was imprisoned in Armagh Women's Prison from 1973 and 1977. The museum is distinctive in that it reflects a lot of women's history in relation to the conflict. It also has a reference library. The museum is run entirely by volunteers and dependant on visitor donations.

The Roddy McCorley Society Museum dedicated to preserving artefacts relating to Republican history from the period of the United Irishmen (1790s), to the present day. They see themselves as custodians of the objects until such time as a Peace and Reconciliation Centre, initially agreed for the site, comes into being. The museum occupies a set of interlinking rooms in the upper floor of a republican social club. The rooms are packed full of donated, preserved objects, artefacts and artwork with a significant amount of material from Long Kesh. Framed images, photographs, posters and documents are hung floor to ceiling in this room testifying to the scale of the collection.



Photoshoot in the Roddy McCorley Society Museum



molished jail speaks of time passing and the dispersed presence of the prison 'beyond building' (Betsky and Adrigard 2000). The prison itself has shape-shifted, now occupying both physical and psychological territories well beyond its perimeter walls.

As well as artefacts that were once part of the fabric or administration of the prison, artworks made in the prison also exist. It is of note how much of this artwork also performs a form of architectural shapeshifting. Intricately crafted structures using lollipop sticks, matchsticks, string, nails, time, tenacity and other available materials include wishing wells, cottages and dart boards. These are imaginary, sometimes even utopian structures, with the methods for their making passed from generation to generation of prisoners in Long Kesh.

A wishing well made from stacked lollipop sticks is both a space for wishing and a pragmatic solution to a dearth of materials in the confines of a prison.

It is grounded literally and metaphorically with its 'crisp box' base, 'fish bowl stones' gravel, 'grave stone' rockery and toothpaste lid bucket. The miniature and the throwaway become maximised. There is a pragmatism but also a poetry in this of space. Bachelard's imaginative territories are called to mind (Bachelard 1957).

To flip the lid of a thatched cottage reveals a hidden interior world in miniature, a plush-lined jewellery box/doll's house dedicated to a family member. That world is vulnerable now. Whilst in storage a mouse ate the porridge render from this cottage. Its owner and maker only discovered it on going to his attic to bring the object down for us to see and photograph. We repaired and returned it using the tried and tested prison techniques described in detail to us by its maker.

The restraints of prison methods and materials proved useful to us in trying to find a form for articulating participants anecdotes of intangible or absent artefacts. Such methods were also put into play by the 50+ Group⁴ in the making of four new objects that reflect their unique female experience of visiting loved ones in prison. Using lollipop sticks and matchsticks they grappled with fiddly and time-consuming techniques to make forms known to them through first-hand experience and through prisoner accounts. A lollipop stick minibus and lollipop stick black taxi recall their most common modes of transport to the prison for visits. Matchsticks and card were used to make a miniature H Block and Nissan Hut, process reflective of the privation and invention of prison making practices.

Whilst the women did not have access to either of these iconic structures, their forms were ubiquitous and familiar through aerial shots of the prison broadcast during media reports into the ongoing prison protests of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The H became a household image. It morphed from a locked down bricks and mortar structure of confinement to a graphic call to protest as H motifs appeared on gable ends and campaign posters throughout republican areas. Prison architecture had typographically morphed into the language of protest.

Even now, in its current semi-demolished and abandoned condition, the prison still has the power to prompt campaigners to seek a change in its status. Whilst its historical importance is undeniable as evidenced by initial plans

4. The 50+ Group is a group of older women who were very active in republican campaigns over the period of the conflict as well as visiting republican prisoner relatives and friends in Long Kesh. Some of the women were also imprisoned during the conflict. They still stay in touch and meet weekly under the umbrella of Tar Anall, an organisation dedicated to the welfare of Republican ex-prisoners and their families. There is a strong supportive camaraderie amongst the group. The participatory production of these images and objects acted as a catalyst to perform and channel the prison's lesser-known narratives, its ghosts and future, offering new insights into the human experience of a high-security prison.

for a peace centre on site and the obvious potential for it to be used for interpretive and reconciliatory purposes there are still concerns amongst some about how this could be done given the contested nature of the site. However, despite this impasse, rather than seeking its complete closure, there are calls from some quarters to see the prison used. This is a prime site. It is also vast, set on flat, rich arable land, articulated by the decision, in the last number of years, to host the annual *Royal Agricultural Show* on part of the site. This annual three-day event is one of the few times it is in use where the public have partial access. The Ulster Aviation Society also has a collection of historic aircraft stored on another section of the site, harking back to its previous role as an RAF base, but this collection, whilst reportedly very noteworthy, is not open to the public. The bulk of the site remains totally unused including the area with the remaining structures and the large areas adjacent to it.

This expansive site is also within easy access to the M1 motorway, the major thoroughfare linking Belfast and Dublin. These are the very qualities that former prison officer Phil Holland notes, lamenting that the site still remains disused, despite his personal reservations about its retention having the potential to rake up a very difficult and unresolved past. Holland has been involved in cross-community youth cycling for many years and recognises the site's suitability for safe cycling, a possible use for a small part of the sprawling site that has potential to gain cross-community support. He and others in the David McCall Foundation have been campaigning for years for the use of an identified part of the site to be opened up for this use. To date, their campaigning has fallen on deaf ears. His filed correspondence acts as a monitor of the groups' efforts to gain access to the site. Even seemingly benign requests relating to the site are met with an obstructive trepidation. It is clear that ignoring or shelving suggestions to deal with the site does not make Long Kesh/Maze or its intractable history disappear. It will always find ways to shapeshift, morph and broadcast the need for some form of productive political closure.



Bachelard, Gaston. 1957. *La Poétique de l'Espace*. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France.

Betsky, Aaron, and Erik Adigard. 2000. *Architecture Must Burn: A Manifesto for an Architecture Beyond Building*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Lanz, Francesca. 2018. *Patrimoni Inattesi*. Siracusa: LetteraVentidue.

McAtackney, Laura. 2014. *An Archaeology of the Troubles: The Dark Heritage of Long Kesh/Maze Prison*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



The Circle 2000

Everybody saw the monitors. They were mounted high on the wall. They were static monitors and only recorded one image. They monitored the front door, the sides of The Circle, right around the whole area. That particular monitor was no. 2, but there could be anything up to six monitors. There was also a secure room where a prison officer sat all the time monitoring the whole Circle because that was the hub of the administration block for the whole H Block. He was locked in there, so if anything happened, if the prison officers were overpowered or there was any sort of incident, he's within, he cannot be touched. He would hit the alarm. Within a few seconds, it would sound across the whole camp.

The monitor recorded one image continually which eventually became burnt into it. There is also a black, blurred shape visible on it because prison officers did the same route over and over again for years. It must be them moving across, simply because they did it so often over the years. They look like ghosts, you can actually see it on screen.

→ Testimony by a Republican contributor; artefact courtesy of Eileen Hickey Irish Republican History Museum, Belfast.

→ Materials: box-shaped Panasonic Video B&W security monitor, glass vacuum tube, metal and plastic control nobs, moulded plastic housing, yellow sticker.



Big Mid's Dart Board 1974

This dartboard* was probably sent out from Long Kesh in end of 1974 or 1975. It says at the bottom 'From Martin, with respect'. He would be among the last few internees to be released because he had such a big name in republican circles. He and certain other people were let out last, for whatever reason. The British obviously thought that up.

A guy called 'Big Mid' has given the dartboard to us. I said to the person who brought it in, 'could you give me an address and Big Mid's name so that I can let him know that we'd received it and put it on show in the museum?'. But he did not give me the name and replied, 'just call him Big Mid.' There must have been major security surrounding 'Big Mid'. Apparently, this guy is very well-known in Ardoyne.

→ Testimony by a Republican contributor; artefact courtesy of The Roddy McCorley Society Museum.
 → Materials: coloured metallic threads, lollypop sticks, green baize, metal chain, panel pins, plywood.

*The Andy Tyrrie Interpretive Centre also have a dartboard made by a Loyalist using the same technique.



Creative 1978

Darts and pool would have been played in the prison. We had a dartboard,* believe it or not. That's all you had basically. You'd have come out a professional dart player and pool player. Woodstock was the neighbourhood of the loyalist prisoner that made this. He'd have made that for his local bar, and the local darts club would probably have been in that bar. That would be the relationship with that artefact and the local area that he made it for.

→ Testimony by David Stitt Loyalist ex-prisoner; artefact courtesy of the Andy Tyrrie Interpretive Centre.
 → Materials: coloured metallic threads, gilt frame, panel pins, picture glass, purple base.

*The Roddy McCorley Society Museum also has a dartboard made by a Republican using the same technique.



Aunt Belle 1976

It can be lowered down or drawn up. The little bucket is made from the cap of a toothpaste tube. Maybe you recognise it. It was made in Long Kesh in 1976, by a prisoner who was since killed in a shooting in Belfast.

The well is made from lollipop sticks. The base is made from a panel of a crisp box. It's obviously been hammered and the gravel around the edge is the coloured gravel used to decorate the base of a fish tank. The bigger stones obviously have come from somebody's grave. These materials have got a type of family connection as they have been sent in or smuggled into the jail.* It's a wishing well sent out from the jail to his aunt Belle.

- Testimony by a Republican contributor; artefact courtesy of the Roddy McCorley Society Museum.
- Materials: crisp box, fish tank stone gravel, grave gravel, lollipop sticks, toothpaste cap, varnish, wire.

* Depending on the period of the prison's history or whether the prisoner was so-called 'conforming' or 'non-conforming', some materials such as mahogany or leather were let into the prison officially when people came on visits. Other materials were provided within in the prison via the tuck shop whilst some were recycled from day to day objects.

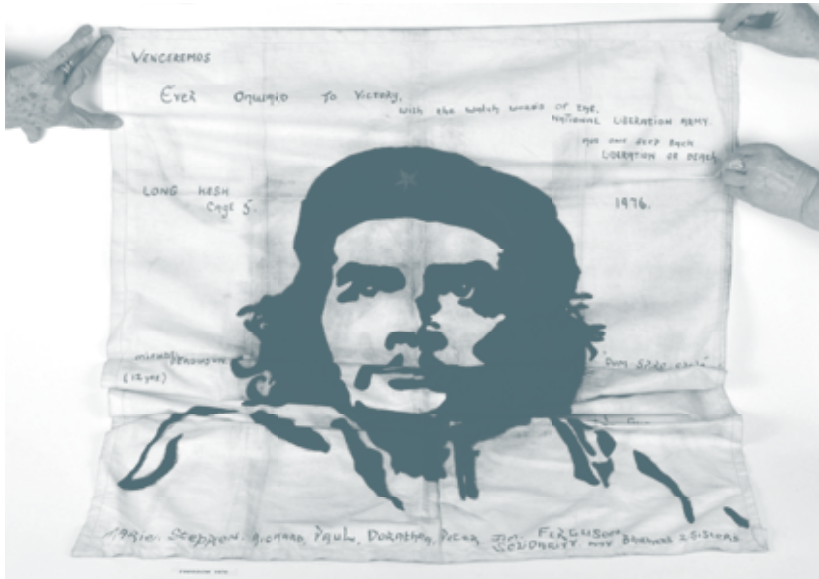


Porridge Stage 1 & 2

For the cottages that we made, we actually used porridge and it was painted with glue. It was ok for the exhibition in November 2016. It was put back up into the attic. When I went to get it last night a mouse had eaten all the porridge off it. I'd say it's dead after eating twenty-year-old painted porridge.

It would be pretty easy to repair, just glue it and stick the porridge on again. It is worth doing because it is very nice. I never look at it very often but it's there. It's nice to have it there you know.

- Testimony by a Loyalist contributor; cottage repaired by Krenn & O'Beirn.
- Materials: brass fittings, broom bristles, doll's bed, draughts pieces, lollypop.



Freedom 1976

The 'Che' Guevara banner* was made by my friend's brother Michael Ferguson** for his sister. Michael Ferguson later served as an MLA. 'Freedom' is the word we associate with it.

- Testimony and artefact courtesy of Mary Ferris of the 50+ Group
- Materials: bed sheet, marker, paint

* Bedsheets were often used to make banners by both Republicans and Loyalists. Images of or references to 'Che' can be seen in republican artefacts as many republicans would identify with other left wing and revolutionary figures. The Roddy McCorley Society Museum has another example of a souvenir portrait made as a gift for a soon to be released prisoner by fellow prisoners, 'Going Home', June 1976. This portrait of the prisoner also has a Che Guevara quotation. More unusually and perhaps surprisingly, we saw a leather bas relief of 'Che' in a private loyalist collection.

** Michael Ferguson served firstly as a Sinn Féin councillor for Lisburn City Council before being elected as an MLA (Minister for the Legislative Assembly) for West Belfast between November 26, 2003–September 24, 2006. He died of cancer in 2006.

Proud 1972

When he went into Long Kesh he was in 'the compounds'.* That was before the H Blocks and this was made in the compounds. When I saw it, I was proud of him for doing it, but it broke my heart to think that my child was in a place where this was what he did to pass his time. That's what I used to think. I'll never forget it. It's all done and dusted now, it's all in the past.

He was out for three years and then he was sent back again. He was sent to the H Blocks, which is a whole different kettle of fish. It could have had a bad ending. There were the fellas who died in jail or who came out and weren't ok, but he is fine. He's dealing with it. I'm really and truly proud of him and how he handled his time because he handled it much better than I did. You have to be thankful for that.

- Testimony and artefact courtesy of Kay Walsh of the 50+ Group.
- Materials: fasteners, leather thong, worked and stained leather, zips.

* 'The compounds' was a term used to refer to the fenced areas of Long Kesh. Each fenced area contained several Nissan huts.



PROUD 1972

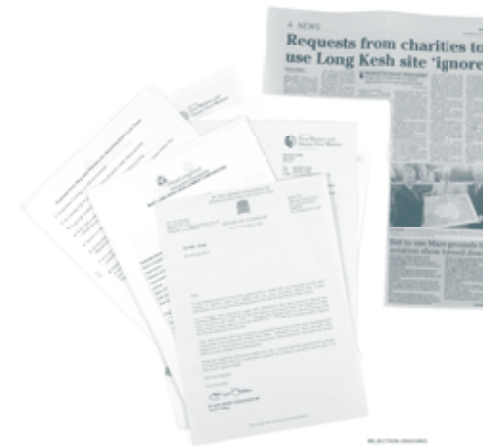
Souvenir 2000

The date would be 2000 because this was one of the souvenirs I took away at the end. There were a number of these lying around* when the prison was empty and it happens to be one of the phone cards that was for use in the prisons because on each wing inside the Maze there was a card operated phone for use by the prisoners. They had to have an appropriate card to be able to make their occasional phone calls out.

→ Testimony and artefact by Simon Bridge, former member of the Board of Visitors Belfast**.
 → Materials: credit card sized prison issue, 40 units BT phone card.

* A contributor in the Eileen Hickey Irish Republican History Museum also mentioned how documents and objects were seen to be strewn around the floor of abandoned wings soon after the prison shut.

** The Board of Visitors were independent observers appointed by the Prison Service to monitor the quality of prison life and who could visit any part of the prison. They had the trust of both prisoners and prison staff. The work was voluntary and unpaid



Rejection Ongoing

It would be fantastic for cross-community safe cycling and healthy lifestyles. It ticks all the boxes, unfortunately, it gets no further than OFMDFM (Office of First and Deputy First Minister). All correspondence that we have had with the prison was really a paper exercise, it's never gone any further. Politicians aren't interested in our requests, which would be important to most people. Our requests are way down their list of priorities. Nobody in Stormont seems to want to know. The last email I sent to a local politician didn't even receive a reply.

→ Testimony and artefact courtesy of Phil Holland, former prison officer.
 → Materials: collection of 'holding' and rejection letters from various public bodies, newspaper clipping from *The Irish News*, Thursday, August 26, 2014.

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Graphic Design

Zetalab – Milano

Contacts

Piazza Leonardo da Vinci 26
20133 Milano – Italy
www.traces.polimi.it
infoTRACES@polimi.it



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