

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: FREEDOMS LOST AND GAINED:  
ENTWINING PRISON HISTORY INTO THE  
FUTURE OF LORTON ARTS FOUNDATION

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Master of Historic Preservation, 2010

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The Lorton Workhouse Museum is part of a 55-acre adaptively reused colonial revival reformatory complex in Virginia that once served the District of Columbia. While most of the site, including dormitories, gymnasium, and farm buildings, has been transformed by a grass-roots organization, the Lorton Arts Foundation, into a visual and performing arts center, one cellblock building remains as a stabilized ruin, reserved for interpretation of the site history. This project will examine the difficult and emotional prison history and explore potential models for integrating the narrative with the current arts use. Active public programs and audio tours are recommended as the best method to engage visitors with the entire site, and inspire thinking about historic and contemporary issues of social justice. Interpretive themes that tie art and performances created by prisoners with artists working in the reused structures are explored as a way to bring visitors into a dialogue between past and present.

FREEDOMS LOST AND GAINED: ENTWINING PRISON HISTORY INTO THE  
FUTURE OF LORTON ARTS FOUNDATION

By

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Masters Final Project  
Submitted to the faculty of the Historic Preservation Program,  
School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation,  
University of Maryland, College Park  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Historic Preservation.  
2010

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many people who have helped me with this project in both small and large ways. It is due to their generosity of spirit in sharing time, expertise, and information that this project was made possible. I offer my heartfelt appreciation to the following:

Bruno Grinwis of BBGM architects for his enthusiasm in sharing the designs and process of adaptive reuse of the Lorton Workhouse site.

Irma Clifton at the Lorton Workhouse Museum for sharing so much about the museum at present and her visions for the future.

Don Linebaugh, Ph.D. for his encouragement, thought provoking questions, and guidance throughout my time at the University of Maryland.

BD Wortham-Galvin, Ph.D. for offering to be my second reader without hesitation. Your thoughtful feedback always made me look at issues from another perspective.

Mary Alexander, for the unbounded enthusiasm and energy that you brought to reading my paper and which you bring to everything you do for the museum field.

My fellow classmates at the University of Maryland, whose friendship and constructive criticism were offered as support whenever I needed them.

The staff at the Institute of Museum and Library Services who everyday inspire me to think about museums and how they help shape our communities and our culture.

My family, for their support and encouragement when I needed it most.

Pete, for his willingness to take the blue highways with me whenever possible.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Twenty-five miles south of the District of Columbia along the Occoquan River is a 2,400-acre tract of land that is being rapidly transformed. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it held Lorton Prison [Figure 1], a complex of dormitories, fences, and guard towers surrounded by working farmland. The prison, a landmark in the region, housed and rehabilitated convicted criminals sentenced in the Nation's Capital. Once rural and isolated, today this land is surrounded by a swiftly growing middle-class suburban community; what once seemed distantly removed from the city is now part of the Greater Washington DC Metropolitan area. As the suburbs were growing, the prison was simultaneously being transformed from a Progressive Era model of reform and hope into a teeming bed of unrest; known to some as the District's Ward 9 and to others as a source of fear and menace, Lorton was a significant part of the local landscape for nearly a century.

In 1999, a Congressional oversight committee for District affairs finally addressed the dire situation at Lorton and the prison was closed; subsequently, the remaining prison farm structures were shuttered [Figure 2], prisoners were moved to distant federal penitentiaries, guards and administrative staff lost their jobs, and the surrounding community began a process that resulted in a Comprehensive Plan that laid out a vision to reuse the property. [Figure 3] The plan included construction of two schools, housing, shopping, nature trails, sports facilities, the preservation of nearly 150 historic structures slated for adaptive reuse, and most symbolically



Figure 1: Dormitory and watchtower, Lorton Workhouse Site.  
Photograph by author, 2009.





Figure 2: Lorton dairy barn. Photo by author, 2009.

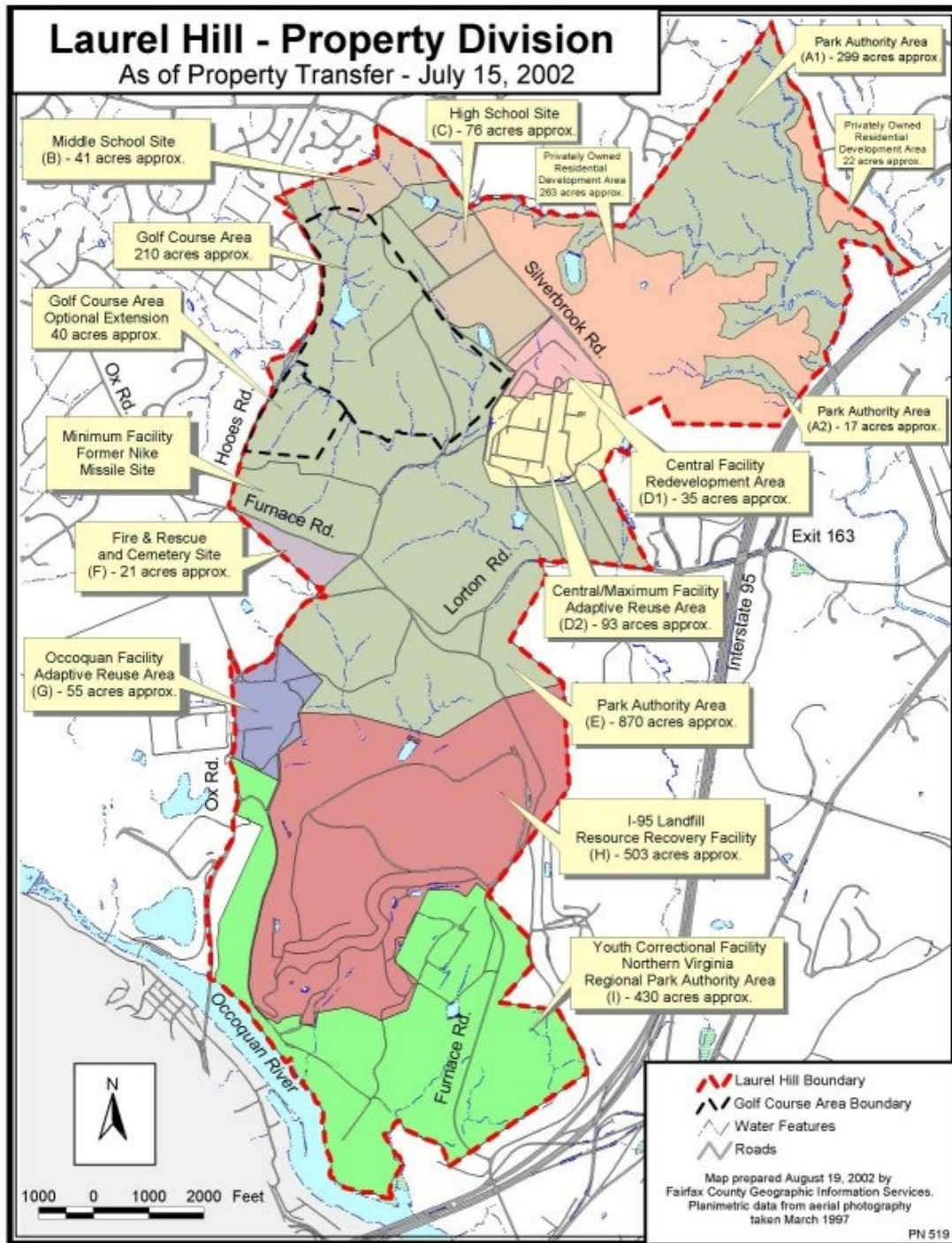


Figure 3: Laurel Hill Site Map, showing Fairfax County’s Master plan. Map courtesy of Fairfax County department of Planning and Zoning.  
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/laurelhill/maps.htm>

significant, changing the name from Lorton to Laurel Hill in memory of the deteriorated 18<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian house used as the prison superintendent's residence. [Figure 4]

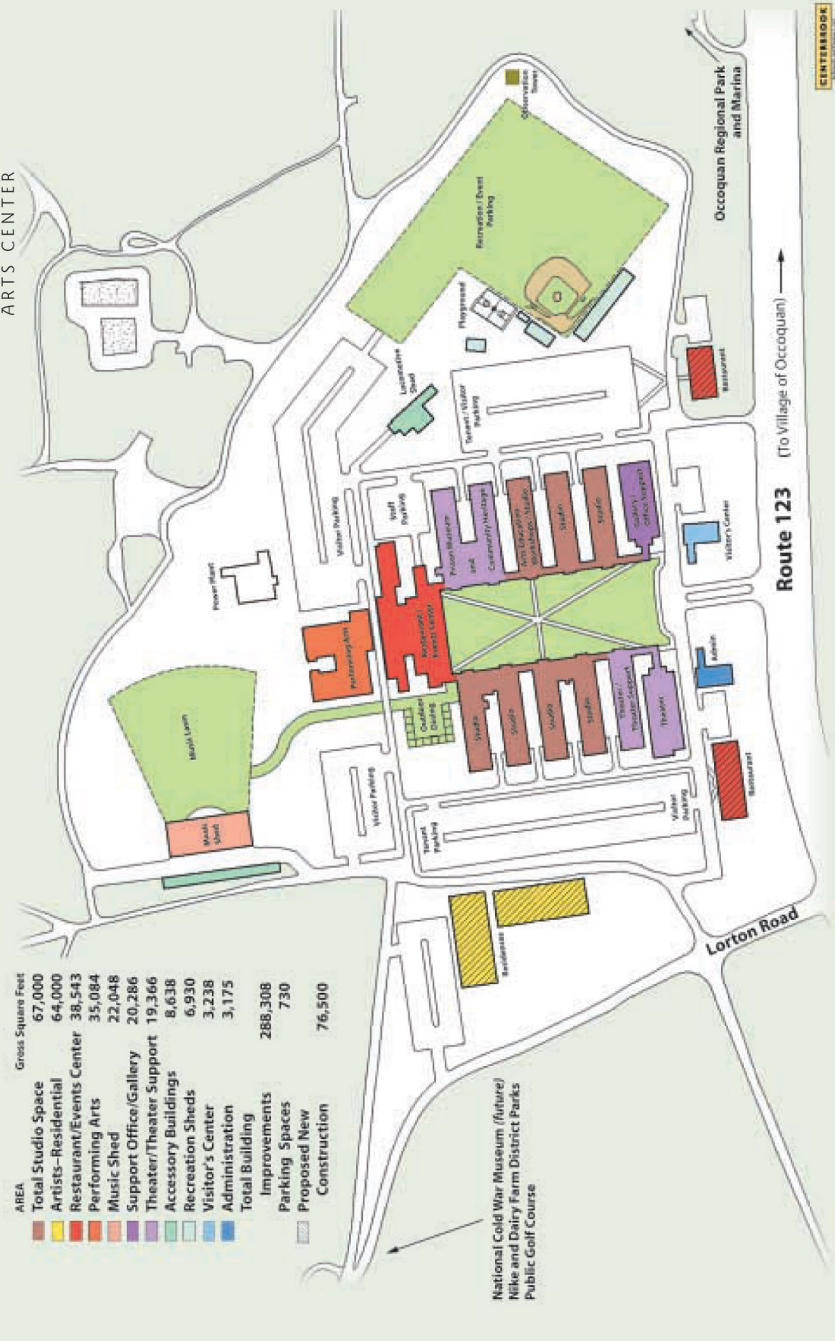
In the fall of 2002, a request for proposals (RFP) was sent out for redevelopment of a 55-acre portion of the site, known as the Lorton Workhouse. This section of the prison held a series of Colonial Revival dormitories in a campus-like setting where the facility's least violent criminals were housed; the Workhouse has resonance for generations of residents of the surrounding community as well as the city of Washington. The successful redevelopment proposal came from the Lorton Arts Foundation, a grass-roots artist collaborative that wanted to create a space for performing and visual artists to work, practice, show, and perform. [Figure 5] The arts foundation intended to create a cultural center for the southern part of Fairfax County, eventually attracting visitors from the entire metropolitan area to experience the arts in buildings that once housed prisoners; poignantly, visitors and artists alike would experience freedom of expression in a place that once restricted such freedoms.

As part of the adaptive reuse proposal, one deteriorated prisoner dormitory building, the only one retrofitted with traditional cellblocks, has been stabilized [Figure 6] awaiting the development of a prison museum that will tell the stories of the prisoners, the staff, and the local community. This paper will examine the idea of a prison museum on the site of the Lorton Workhouse and develop an interpretive plan for the 55-acre Workhouse site, using the historic cellblocks as the starting point for exploring stories of art, social policy, and civil disobedience.



Figure 4: Laurel Hill House at time of historic structures report. Photo courtesy of Fairfax County website.

THE LORTON  
**WORKHOUSE**  
ARTS CENTER



AREA	Gross Square Feet
Total Studio Space	67,000
Artists-Residential	64,000
Restaurant/Events Center	38,543
Performing Arts	35,084
Music Shed	22,048
Support Office/Gallery	20,286
Theater/Theater Support	19,366
Accessory Buildings	8,638
Recreation Sheds	6,930
Visitor's Center	3,238
Administration	3,175
Total Building	288,308
Improvements	730
Parking Spaces	730
Proposed New Construction	76,500

ARTS CENTER CAMPUS PLAN

Figure 5: Programmatic site map for Lorton Workhouse Arts Center. Courtesy of Bruno Grinwis, BBGM architects.



Figure 6: Stabilized but unrestored dormitory bathroom. Photo by author, 2009.

Research questions to be considered include:

- How can historic spaces and objects be used to raise questions about history and contemporary society?
- How can incorporating painful or difficult histories into a contemporary site enhance that contemporary use? How may it compromise that use?
- What interpretive tools can museums use to create a safe environment for dialogue about social justice issues?

Museums are often seen as static and unchanging places where time has stopped; their contemporary worth is regularly valued by the tourism dollars that are brought to the area. The popular notion of historic sites often involves a leisurely tour of the distant past that is entertaining, and perhaps even educational, albeit not actively so. Yet there is a growing movement of museums around the world to make these places more relevant to contemporary society. No longer content to only address events that are pleasant or at least innocuous, some historic sites are challenging their audiences to look at some very tough stories: imprisonment, civil rights struggles, and immigration among the most heated topics. In 1999, a collection of nine museums with focuses ranging from war, to Apartheid, to immigration, formed a group called the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to share ideas and best practices for addressing some of the most difficult and emotional history.

The following five chapters use the Lorton Workhouse site as a case study for developing this kind of activist museum. A brief history of the Lorton Workhouse site examines the Progressive Era roots of its construction, and explores how it signaled a

change in national prison and reform policy. Research of historical documents and texts on prison philosophy in the United States offers an understanding of the two prevalent penal methodologies, known as the Auburn System and the Pennsylvania System. A discussion of the findings of President Theodore Roosevelt's Commission of 1908 convened to examine the District's jail helps shape a picture of the revolutionary ideas represented at Lorton Workhouse. Finally, archives of the *Washington Post*, the *Washington City Paper*, and transcripts of Fairfax County Board of Supervisors meetings were used to investigate the process of transformation from prison to historic site and arts center.

Using site visits and interviews the next section describes the current Lorton Workhouse Museum and the interpretive methods employed. This is followed by a review of three brief case studies of other prison museums and their interpretive methods. Using texts on museum scholarship as well as virtual and actual site visits, resources and methodologies ranging from contemporary art installations to hands-on school activities are analyzed for the applicability to the Lorton Workhouse site.

This is followed by a discussion of the social justice issues embedded in the narratives of Lorton, both contemporary and historic. Using sociological studies, US Census reports, and contemporary Department of Justice statistics, this section will touch upon issues for potential dialogue at the Workhouse Museum such as criminal recidivism and the distance between criminal and family, the racial undercurrents of the justice system, particularly in the District of Columbia, and the social impact of prisons on a community.



Through examinations of museum practice literature and site visits, two examples of innovative programming will be explored. This will be tied to the burgeoning collective, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, drawing on their published best practices as guidelines for evaluation. Finally, several interpretative themes will be outlined for the Lorton Workhouse Museum. Sensitivity to the multiple functions of the site will be explored, and techniques for integrating these challenging and difficult narratives into the current joyful and spiritual arts use are examined.

In the field of historic preservation, there is a growing interest in preserving not only the physical remains, but also the intangible history of a site. Through the integration of narrative and oral history into the bones of a site, the story of history does not stop at a point in time, but continues to have relevance and meaning that evolves as time passes. This study explores interpretive techniques for sites with a troubled history, and how that history can be used to launch dialogue about the past as well as the present. It examines the integration of contemporary uses and historical narratives in a dynamic and ongoing discourse with the many communities that the site represents. By weaving together the past and present of this historic site, this examination of the Lorton Workhouse Museum can act as a case study for other sites looking to find a balance between the many ways to value and preserve both the physical and intangible historic resources in their community.

## Chapter 2: Historical Overview of the Lorton Workhouse Site

In order to understand how the Workhouse Museum can inspire dialogue about historic and contemporary issues, it is first important to understand the social and physical context in which it sits. What today is known as the Workhouse Arts Center is a 55-acre slice of what was once a 2,400-acre complex of buildings and agricultural spaces that comprised the Lorton Prison, including minimum, medium, and maximum-security facilities. Operated as a prison from 1910-2001, Lorton evolved from a Progressive Era solution for treating criminal behavior in the hopes of reform into a modern solution of incarceration with a focus on discipline and punishment. In 2002, the entire site was transferred from Federal Government oversight to Fairfax County for redevelopment. As part of the transfer process, an inventory of historic resources was conducted and a National Register Nomination was completed for a 511-acre historic district, including the portion of the site known as the Workhouse. The Lorton Arts Foundation is the non-profit entity that created a redevelopment plan to adaptively reuse nearly 100 contributing buildings, structures, and objects within the historic district producing a lively visual and performing arts venue that will eventually include such supporting and potentially revenue-generating uses as housing for artists, restaurants, as well the Workhouse Museum.

Nineteenth-century prisons across the United States were harsh environments, with emphasis on solitary confinement and strict discipline as governments sought to reform prisoners through forcibly changing their character. Most prisons were based on one of two models created around 1820. The first was the Auburn System, named

for the prison in New York State known for its emphasis on hard communal labor, harsh corporal punishment, walking in lockstep, and silence as the way to reform. The other main prison philosophy was called the Pennsylvania System, created at Eastern State Penitentiary [Figure 7] in Philadelphia by a group of reform-minded Quakers. This approach was characterized by a system of solitary confinement cells with an emphasis on penance and moral reform as well as vocational training.<sup>1</sup> Each of these models relied on foreboding structures to underscore their disciplinary nature. In the case of Auburn, individual cells were built back-to-back, and eventually stacked on top of one another, creating the appearance of prison cellblocks most common in popular imagery today. Eastern State however, created long rows of cells radiating from a centralized guard tower. Both structures were constructed of large blocks of dark-colored stone. Wrought iron gates and bars secured any openings, and high thick walls encircled the structures, creating a hulking fortress-like appearance that was to act as a visual deterrent to criminal behavior.

By the early twentieth century, the Nation's Capital had one of the worst jailhouses in the country, with no separation between jail, prison, and asylum populations<sup>2</sup>; the 4-story masonry structure was overcrowded and outdated. [Figure 8] In 1909 Warden McKee vividly described the facilities in his charge: "The general conditions at the jail continue to be bad. The jail is still without sanitation. The old

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<sup>1</sup> "History of Eastern State Penitentiary" Eastern State Penitentiary.

<http://www.easternstate.org/history/sixpage.php> (accessed March 7, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> A jail is generally a holding cell where people are held when awaiting trial, or are sentenced after having committed minor crimes. A prison is a higher security facility where convicted criminals are confined for longer periods of time after conviction.



Figure 7: Front entrance of Eastern State Penitentiary. Photo courtesy of Steve Schwartzman, 2009.



Figure 8: Old DC Jail 1910c. Photo in public domain, from collection of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs.

bucket system of centuries is still in vogue...fills the entire jail with the foulest air possible. The heating plant is in bad shape...the lighting is very deficient.”<sup>3</sup>

Prompted by Progressive ideals of reform and change, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a 3-member penal commission in 1908 to study the problem in the District of Columbia and propose a new solution to housing criminals then held at a facility in the shadow of the White House. Recommendations were made to veer away from the predominant systems of punishment in favor of a new reformatory approach that centered on work on an “industrial farm” with an emphasis on individualized rehabilitation including education and vocational training. With reformist zeal, it took less than two years to select and purchase a 1,200-acre site in rural Virginia for the new District of Columbia prison.

Roughly 25 miles south of the city [Figure 9], the entire site eventually encompassed four separate detention facilities: the Workhouse, for the least violent offenders with light sentences, the Reformatory for criminals with longer sentences, the Penitentiary for the most serious convicts in need of the highest security, and the youth detention facility for criminals under the age of 18. [Figure 3] The rural nature of the site lent itself to agricultural pursuits, and most of the vast site was used for farming that allowed the facility to be self-sufficient. There was no rule of silence, no lock-step, and solitary confinement was only used as a last resort. Most strikingly, the Workhouse and the Reformatory were not surrounded with walls and guard towers, because the relative isolation provided the security. The structures were built

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<sup>3</sup> Oakey, Mary. *Journey from the Gallows: Historical Evolution of the Penal Philosophies and Practices in the Nation’s Capital*. Lanham, MD: University Press, 1988. p. 66.

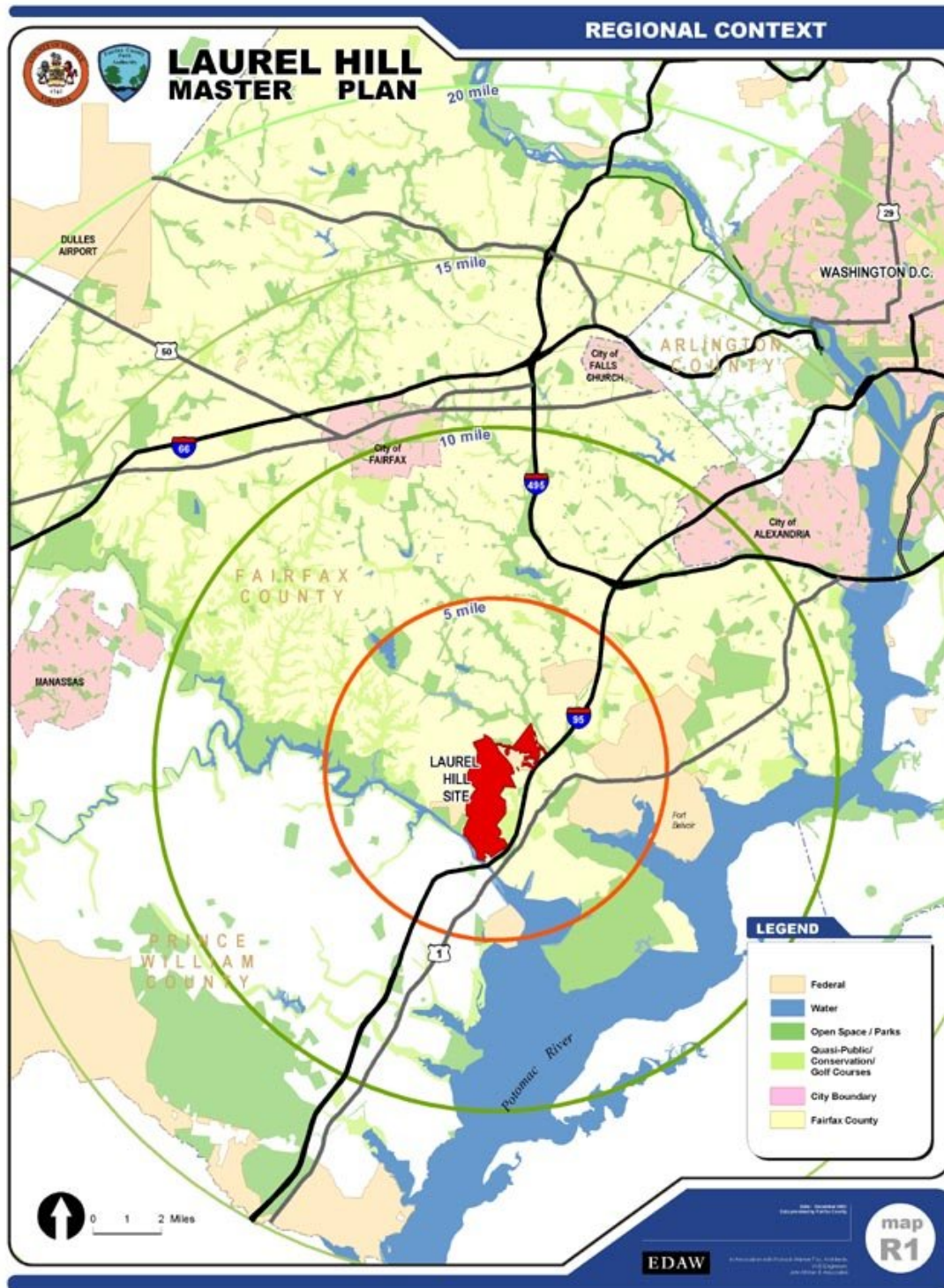


Figure 9: Regional Map with site of former Lorton Prison in red. Map courtesy of Fairfax County department of Planning and Zoning.  
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/laurelhill/maps.htm>

in the Colonial Revival style: brick gable-fronted rectangular dormitories evenly arranged around a central open space encircled with a running arcade [Figures 10-11]. Modeled on college campuses, this environment fostered interaction and community. The intention was to create an atmosphere that assisted the prisoners with readapting to life once they left prison grounds.<sup>4</sup>

The Workhouse, as the lowest security section of the 8,000-inmate complex, housed those prisoners that were the lowest risk, often serving sentences of a few days to a week for offenses ranging from drunkenness to civil disturbance; their rehabilitation included working on the farm or in the industrial facilities such as the canning factory. Even with these short sentences, by the 1950's the facility was one-third over capacity, with an average of 1,300 people on site at any given time. By 1966 philosophies of crime and punishment were changing, and in what became known as the Easter Decision, the District of Columbia decriminalized alcoholism. The Workhouse population then shrunk to less than half capacity, and by the early 1970's the facility was turned into an alcohol rehabilitation facility to address alcohol abuse as a public health rather than criminal issue.<sup>5</sup> While philosophies about alcohol changed, there was a ramping up of violent behavior and arrests related to narcotic use and by the 1980s the Workhouse was put back into service as the District's "medium-security" correctional facility, then called Occoquan after the nearby river.

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<sup>4</sup> John Milner Associates, Inc. "District of Columbia Workhouse and Reformatory National Register Nomination". September 2005. p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Oakey, Mary. *Journey from the Gallows*. Lanham, MD: University Press, 1988. p. 67.





Figure 10: Open courtyard with dormitories at Lorton Workhouse. Photo by author 2009.

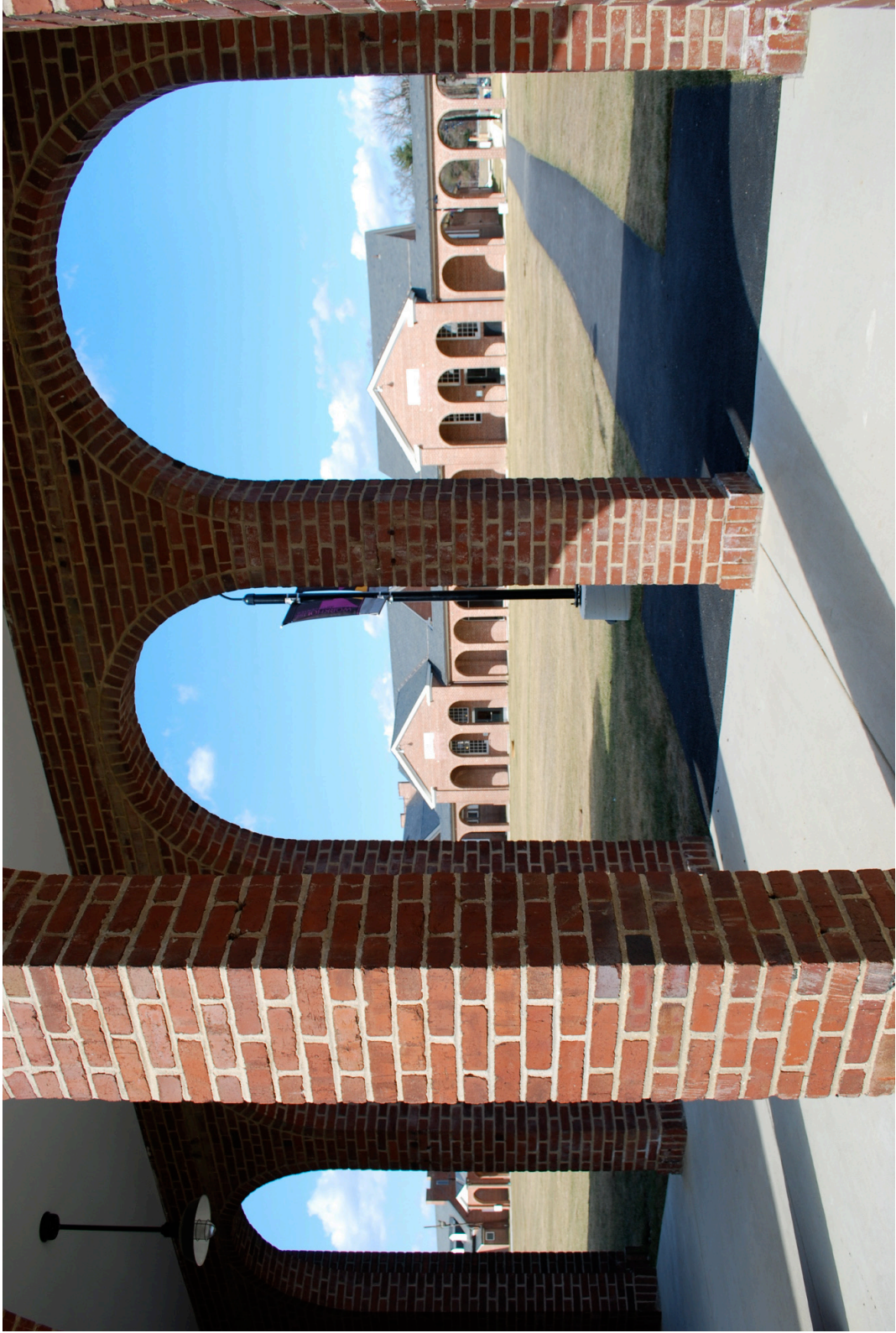


Figure 11: Open arcade that connected dormitories at Lorton Workhouse. Photo by author 2009.

It was at this time that guard towers and a system of walls and fences were added to the Workhouse, closing off the once open campus from the world.<sup>6</sup> [Figure 12]

With changing definitions of crime and policies that ran more toward punishment than reform, the entire Lorton Prison Complex was stressed by overcrowding and began to deteriorate rapidly in the 1980's. Although notorious for its violence, racial tension, and drugs within the prison, there was also a sense of community that the unconventional structures fostered among the inmates.

Sometimes referred to as "sweet time" by former convicts, sentencing at Lorton often involved reconnecting with friends, neighbors, and family who were on both sides of the correctional system. Inmates commented on the duality: "There was nothing like being able to see the sun rise in the morning and surrender your thoughts to the moon at night" but acknowledged it also as "a cesspool for anything that can be done wrong in the dark."<sup>7</sup>

As both the social and physical conditions continued to deteriorate [Figure 13], suburban development began to replace the once rural communities around the boundaries of the prison complex. Politicians and citizens rallied around its closure, remarking in the *Congressional Record*: "Lorton Prison is a finishing school for criminals."<sup>8</sup> In 1996, a House of Representatives Committee Report recommended the closing of the facility. Although generating mixed reactions from long-term residents, employees and families of the inmates, the plan was eventually carried out

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<sup>6</sup> John Milner Associates, Inc. "District of Columbia Workhouse and Reformatory National Register Nomination". September 2005. p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Shyn, Annys. "Ten Things to Do Before Closing a Prison," Washington City Paper, vol. 21, no. 10, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Hon. Frank R. Wolf, "Lorton Correctional," *Congressional Record* 9 January 1995, p. E 59.



Figure 12: Fencing and other security measures added in the 1980's when the Workhouse was upgraded to a medium security facility. Photo courtesy of Bruno Grinwis, BBGM architects.



Figure 13: Improvised infill of the open courtyard added in the 1980's when the Workhouse was upgraded to a medium security facility. Photo courtesy of Bruno Grinwis, BBGM architects.

in 2001 with a transfer of the land to Fairfax County via a temporary ownership by the U.S. General Services Administration.<sup>9</sup>

As part of the condition of transfer, Fairfax County was tasked with developing a reuse plan for all 2,400 acres that had to be presented to Congress. Beginning in 1999, the County's planning staff worked with a citizen task force to develop the plan that was approved by the Fairfax Board of Supervisors. [Figure 14] Simultaneously, GSA undertook a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review of the site and assumed fifteen million dollars of environmental remediation completed in 2001. As part of the NEPA review, numerous historic resources were identified [Figure 15], resulting in consultation with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and a memorandum of agreement (MOA) signed in 2001. The parties to the MOA included the Advisory Council, the GSA, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Fairfax County, an umbrella Lorton-area citizen group (South County Federation, at the time called "Federation of Lorton Communities"), and the Lorton Heritage Society (the entity eventually responsible for the Workhouse Museum).<sup>10</sup> Among other provisions, the MOA stipulated: the recognition of a 511-acre National Register-eligible historic district, including the Occoquan (Workhouse) site, and that one or more buildings must be used as a "museum/display" dedicated to the "history of the Prison, the DC Department of Corrections, and/or the surrounding community."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> P.L. 105-277

<sup>10</sup> MOA p. 1. Full text of the MOA is available at [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/laurelhill/moa\\_laurel\\_hill.pdf](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/laurelhill/moa_laurel_hill.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> MOA p. 3.

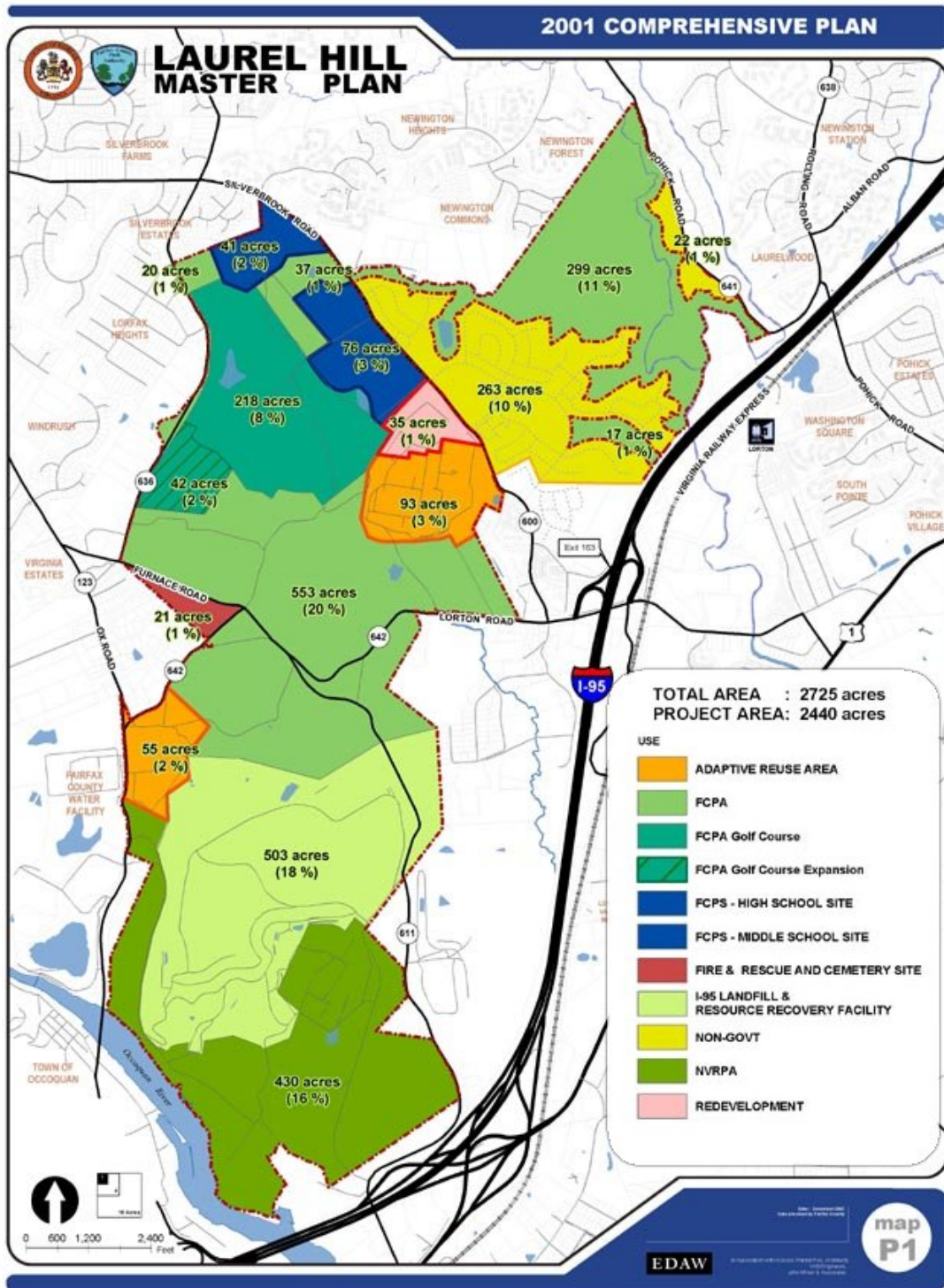


Figure 14: Comprehensive Plan for the Laurel Hill (formerly Lorton Prison) redevelopment. Map courtesy of Fairfax County department of Planning and Zoning. <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/laurelhill/maps.htm>

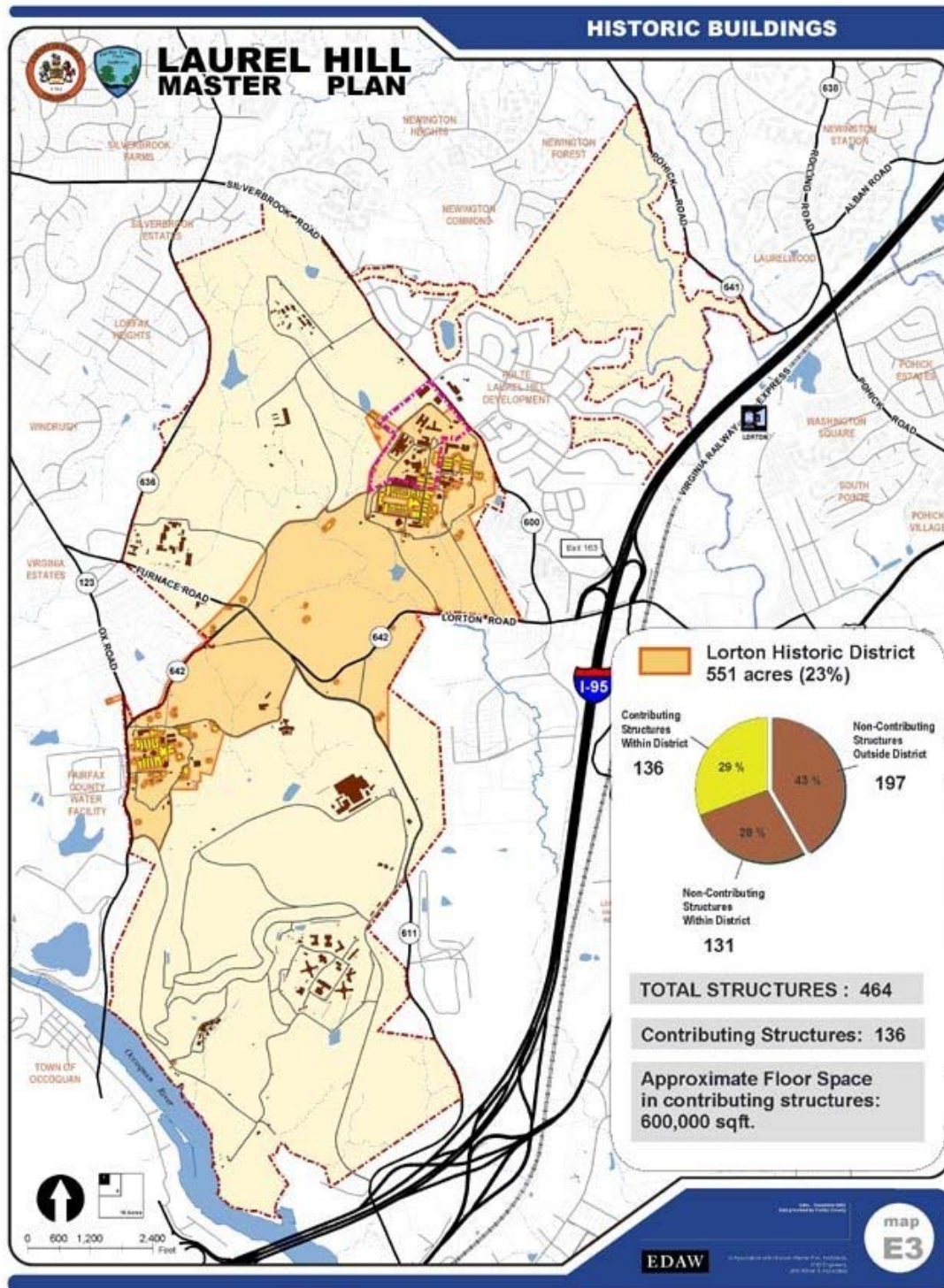


Figure 15: Map of historic resources at the Laurel Hill (formerly Lorton Prison) site. Map courtesy of Fairfax County department of Planning and Zoning. <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/laurelhill/maps.htm>



On July 15, 2002, Fairfax County acquired title to 2,434 acres, now referred to as Laurel Hill after the Revolutionary-era farmhouse used as the prison superintendent's residence until the 1970's. Shortly thereafter the Fairfax Board of Supervisors created the Adaptive Reuse Citizen Task Force to formulate "guiding principles for development" and work with the county planning staff to create a master plan. The guiding principles included "concern for preserving the historic core of the Workhouse and Reformatory while allowing adaptive reuse that compliments the surrounding community and provides something of far-reaching significance and consequence – both exciting and uplifting."<sup>12</sup>

After public workshops were held to hear proposals for adaptive reuse of the site, a newly-formed private non-profit "Lorton Arts Foundation" (LAF) proposed a mixed use arts center with visual arts studios, gallery space, performance arts venues, and a music barn with indoor and outdoor seating.<sup>13</sup> Inspired by a similar reuse of the World War I Torpedo Factory [Figure 16] in nearby Alexandria, the LAF saw the space as a way to invite in the community and transform the site in a positive and creative way. LAF was also conscious of the economic strain that a non-profit arts center could put on the county, and made provisions to ultimately become self-sufficient with integrated revenue-generating uses such as a restaurant, an events center, and artist's housing. [Figure 5 and Appendix 1]

In order to keep costs within budget, the construction and rehabilitation was divided into three phases [Figure 17], with the artist studios, galleries, offices, and performance studios open as of October 2008. Because of the current economic

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<sup>12</sup> Laurel Hill Adaptive Reuse Citizens Advisory Committee, accessible online through <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/laurelhill/recommendations.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes



Figure 16: Interior of adaptively reused Torpedo Factory Arts Center, Alexandria, Virginia. Photo by author, 2010.

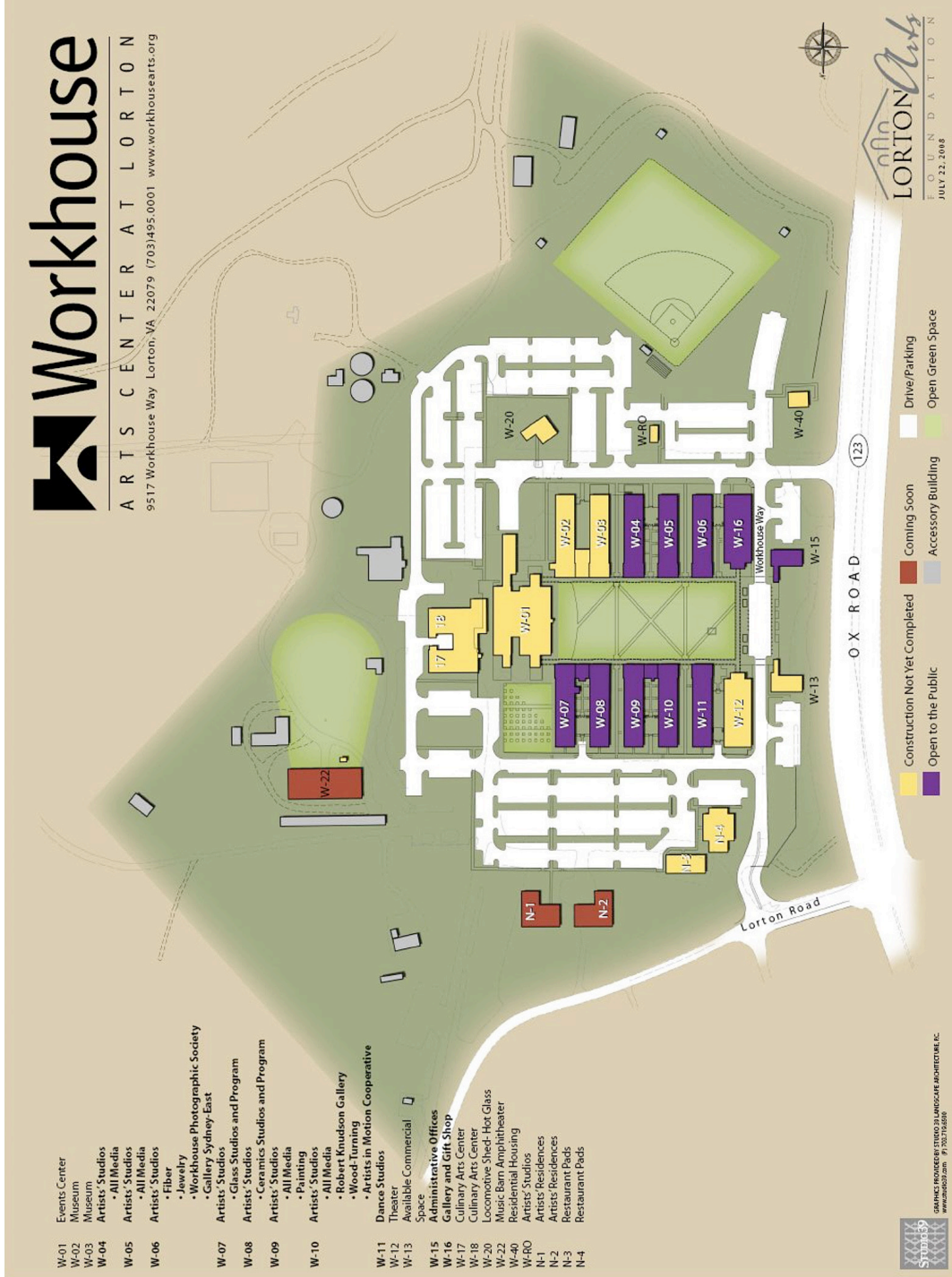


Figure 17: Map of phased redevelopment Lorton Workhouse Site. Map courtesy of Bruno Grinwis, BBGM architects.

situation, the artist colony housing project and the museum development have been postponed, although the museum has a temporary space in Building 9. [Figure 17] Visual artists, from sculptors to painters are actively working in the light filled studios [Figure 18], classes regularly bring in aspiring artists of all ages, and performances have begun to fill the indoor and outdoor spaces with theater, music and dance. Although the current facilities constitute only a portion of the final vision, there is a sense of the transformation from a place inward looking and shameful to one that is lively and an integral part of the greater community.



Figure 18: Visual artists at work in the renovated studios. Photo by author, 2009.

## Chapter 3: Current Interpretation at Lorton Workhouse Museum

Tucked away in a corner of Building 9 on the north side of the grassy quadrangle is an eighteen by thirty-foot space that holds the Workhouse Museum. [Figure 19] Announced only by a sandwich board propped up within the arcade [Figure 20], this corner of one of the prison dormitories is the only place on site for a visitor to be oriented to the multi-faceted history of the Workhouse. The museum space is an interim solution, only a taste of the collections that will be exhibited when the next phase of construction transforms a stabilized dormitory (known as W-02 [Figures 16 and 21] on the site plan) into a potentially evocative look at life in Lorton.

Within the current limited space, the size of one of the visual artist studios, there are many artifacts and accompanying information panels to lead a visitor through three main eras at the prison. Of particular emphasis in the interpretation is the time period 1917-1918 when approximately 168 women were arrested for their participation in the Women's Suffrage Movement. Cited for trumped up offenses, such as "obstructing the sidewalk," committed while protesting for the right to vote in front of the White House, they were sentenced to time in the Workhouse. On exhibit are such artifacts as multicolored sashes worn by Suffragists and the DC Jail Register where the protestor's sentences were recorded.

Another set of artifacts is the farm implements on exhibit in one corner along with some interpretation about how these were used at the Lorton working farm. The panels provide brief background information about the Progressive Era prison



Figure 19: Current site occupied by the Lorton Workhouse Museum. Photo by author, 2010.



Figure 20: Sandwich board at entrance to Lorton Workhouse Museum. Photo by author 2010.





Figure 21: Building W-02, a stabilized dormitory building that is the future home of the Lorton Workhouse Museum.  
Photo by author 2009.

philosophies and the integral nature of the farm within daily life at Lorton prison. In the opposite corner of the studio space are photographic reproductions from the more recent past showing images of some of the violent uprisings and troubled history in stark black and white. Irma Clifton, the museum director, is on site whenever the museum space is open, guiding the visitors through the collections. As a retired long-time prison employee, her personal anecdotes help to draw the visitor's attention away from the written interpretation and bring the stories and buildings to life. She often points visitors to the high windows in the space which not only served to secure the inmates when the facilities were prison dormitories, but now act as wonderful sources of indirect daylight for the working artists around the campus. Her presence is the connective tissue between the museum and the arts center.

The small physical space the museum occupies has led the museum to rely on informational handouts and the website to convey more in-depth information about historical themes. The online presence of the museum also provides an interesting insight into how the Lorton Arts Foundation and the community are dealing with the troubled history of the site: the museum web site is only accessible through the parent organization, Lorton Arts Foundation's web site, and is not directly linked to the arts center. Furthermore, the museum webpage states that there are clearly two museums, one on prison life at Lorton, and one about the Women's Suffrage Movement. Available online are digital images of the exhibit space itself as well as an extensive selection of captioned archival photos from the Library of Congress' collection that begin to put the prison's role in the Suffrage Movement in context. There is, however, no larger site interpretation either on the website or at the physical museum that could

help a casual visitor understand the extent of the entire Lorton Complex or the role that the Workhouse played in that long history. Although there were two performances on the topic of suffrage in March in honor of Women's History Month in various spaces around the workhouse campus, the museum appears programmatically and socially rather isolated from every day activity of the arts center.

Eight of the ten former dormitory structures, long and low brick structures with wooden details painted white [Figure 22] have been adapted as studio spaces for visual artists of all disciplines. Made open and airy by excising oppressive drop ceilings to reveal steel trusses, now painted bright red, the renovated dormitories draw the eye and the mind upward. [Figure 23] Individual studio spaces were created by inserting a wall system of white plasterboard that does not extend to the roof, reinforcing the feeling of a light-filled shed. Hot walls, those with all the electrical services, run parallel to the historic exterior brick walls. Partition walls, easily moved to suit individual artist's needs, are constructed between the hot walls. All of these dividers have been painted white, an inexpensive solution that allows flexibility and does not compete with the artistic process going on inside. [Figure 24] The flexibility of the space was paramount to Bruno Grinwis, Principal with BBGM, the design firm involved in the project; the intention was to create spaces that cultivate imagination while allowing the other stories to also be told.<sup>14</sup>

The remaining dormitory and cellblock, W-02, future home of the museum, retains the drop ceilings, iron doors and security bars that speak of increased violence and security on campus. Years of accumulated paint is peeling, forming piles of

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<sup>14</sup> interview with Bruno Grinwis, April 16, 2009.



Figure 22: Rear view of prison dormitories renovated into artists studios and classroom space. Photo by author, 2009.

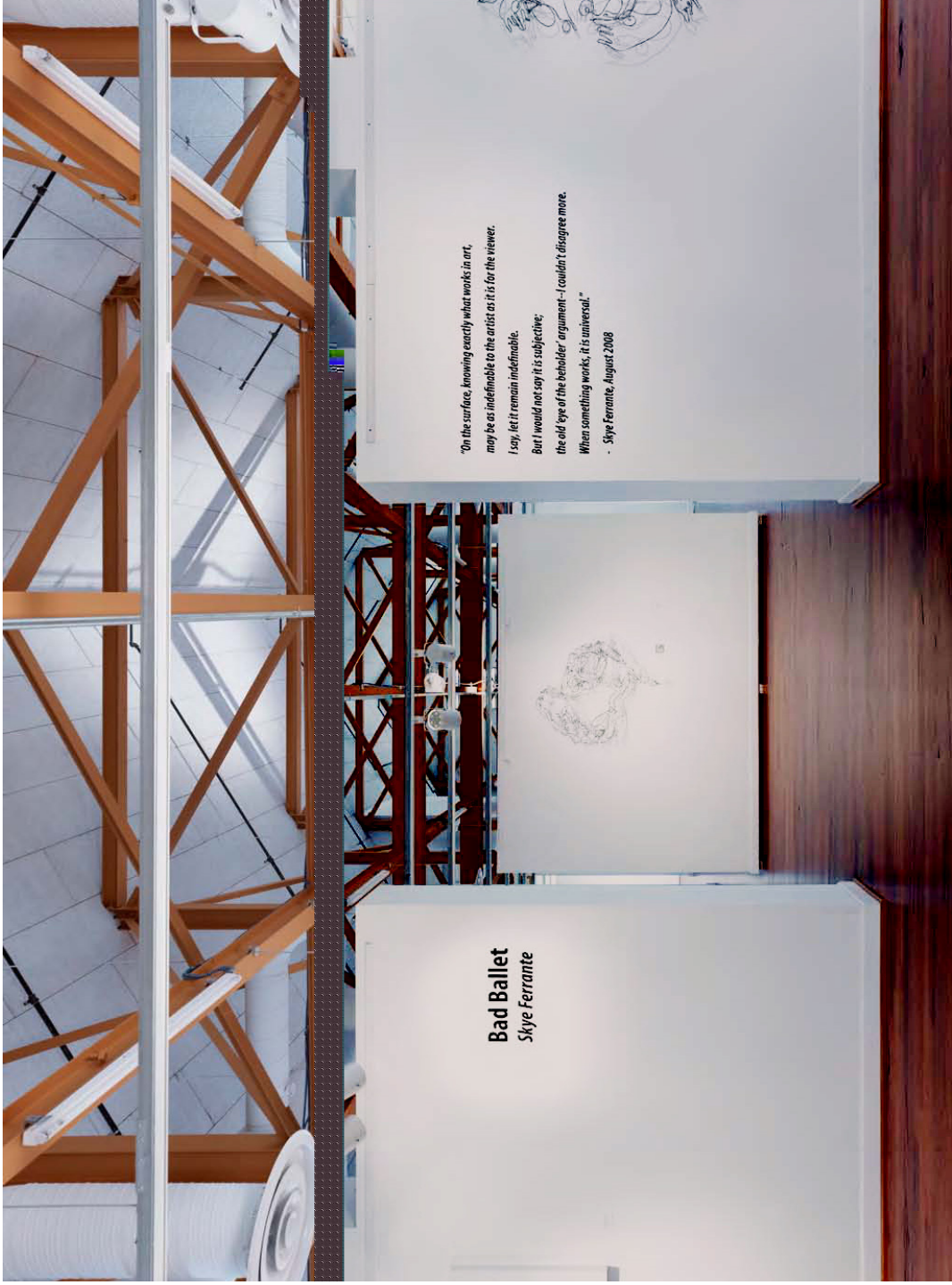


Figure 23: Renovated interior of dormitory space with art exhibition. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Totaro Photographer, 2008.



Figure 24: Interior of renovated prison dormitory with moveable walls that create individual artist studios. Photo courtesy of photographer, Jeffrey Totaro, 2008.

rubble on the floors, a visual reminder of the troubled times spent within these walls [Figure 25]. The confining spaces and institutional feel are in sharp contrast to the nearby open art studios, yet the intact dormitory also has stories about expression and freedom worth sharing. Once issues like lead paint abatement have been addressed, these spaces would be evocative of prison life and could serve as a starting point for dialogue about the criminal justice system of the past and the present.

Even in its current state, there is opportunity for the historic structure to tie the past to the present. On the concrete floor of all of the dormitories are the remains of a grid of painted lines that organized prison bunk beds and the guards' nightly rounds. Instead of removing these ghosts from the structure, the lines were preserved as palimpsests. The floors are now highly polished, which only serves to highlight these scars from the many lives that passed through the buildings [Figure 26]. Discretely underfoot, without any accompanying interpretation, these lines remain silent reminders of the past. It begs the question of why so much trouble was taken to preserve them if the stories they could tell are being allowed to wither away. Allowing the memory of a place to completely disappear, even one as fraught with sensitive issues and multiple conflicting perspectives inherent in a prison, runs counter to the modern historic preservation practice of preserving not only the physical remainders but also the intangible history of a place. Though the Workhouse Arts Center is explicitly an adaptive reuse project, Fairfax County, by nominating a majority of the structures on the site to both the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register, recognized that these spaces contribute to an



Figure 25: Deteriorating restroom facilities before renovation. Photo courtesy of Bruno Grinwis, BBGM architects, 2006.





Figure 26: Interior of prison dormitory before renovations. Clearly shows the painted lines on the floor that organized the beds and the guards' rounds. Photo courtesy of Bruno Grinwis, BBGM architects, 2006.

important story that the new use may not highlight or even acknowledge without such designation. The arts center could easily install interpretive markers on the walls of the studios to contextualize these important reminders of the many lives touched by this grid.

Another connection around the site that the museum could use to integrate history with the contemporary arts center are the murals that still exist on several of the buildings, notably on the basement entrance to W-03 where a barber shop was announced with exuberant writing and a barber pole painted on the brick exterior. [Figure 27] This simple expressive act could be compared and contrasted with the paintings in the studios and classrooms around campus. There is also a matchstick construction [Figure 28] on exhibit in the current museum space that could be used as a way to explore art theory and concepts of additive versus subtractive construction in sculpture, as seen in action around the center. Both works could be used to inspire dialogue about the origin of the creative process, and the common human need to create; the creative spirit of the inmates is the same spirit that drives the artists of today.

It seems that there is a reluctance to celebrate the prison's history, with the exception of the relatively short period when the Suffragists were regularly in residence, because of its associations with violence and crime. Yet the sanctification process of a site could be part of a communal healing process.<sup>15</sup> This approach would allow multiple voices and perspectives to be heard, with the museum providing a safe

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<sup>15</sup> Foote, Kenneth. *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*. Austin: University of Texas Press: 2003. p. 81.



Figure 27: Barber poll mural on basement level of dormitory building. Photo by author. 2009.



Figure 28: Building model and box made of matchsticks by prisoners while at Lorton. Currently on exhibit at the Workhouse Museum. Photo by author, 2010.

place to talk about the history of the site, not just a brief period that is already safe. The current nascent museum provides some intriguing collections that will inspire questions and evoke interest on the part of the visitor, but there needs to be more integration of the past and the present stories at the Workhouse as well as the entire Lorton site. The interpretation of these stories should reach beyond the walls of the museum, regardless of what space houses the collections, and be integrated into the artist studios, the performance spaces, and the campus as a whole. It is not enough that the museum be neighbors with the arts center, it needs to be part of the family. Once there is that kind of integrated approach, it will be imperative that the sensitive nature of many of the topics, such as imprisonment, racial injustice, and civil rights be dealt with in an open and supportive manner so that the visitor is not confronted but invited to contemplate these issues if they choose.

## Chapter 4: Prison Museum Interpretation Case Studies

In 2010, the Institute of Museum and Library Services counted 17,500 museums of all disciplines located in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Within that universe there is a small subset of approximately 60 museums located in old jails or prisons that interpret the history of those institutions.<sup>17</sup> [Appendix 2] They range in size from a single room to the rambling 11-acre complex at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. More importantly their interpretive methods also vary widely; from photographs and text panels to costumed interpreters and audio tours, they use many approaches to explore the stories of the incarcerated, guards, and family members whose lives were shaped by the prison. Of course there are many such museums that are merely used as stage sets to underscore an idealized view of crime and punishment, complete with a photo opportunity for tourists to pose in a set of stocks or jail cell.

The following case studies, two in the United States and one in the United Kingdom, explore three different approaches to addressing many facets of the sensitive topic of the justice system. While each site has tailored its methods to meet the needs of their specific community, each has also created an engaging, educational, and informative experience for their visitors, portions of which could be adapted at the Workhouse Museum.

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<sup>16</sup> “2010 Grant Opportunities Guide” Institute of Museum and Library Services. [www.imls.gov](http://www.imls.gov) (accessed February 25, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> There is no professional association of prison and jail museums, so these figures are based on the author’s searches of web sites of individual museums, museum associations, and tourism bureaus. Museums housed in jails or prisons that do not dedicate at least part of their interpretation to the story of the jail or prison and only act as a historic setting, such as the Old Jail Art Center, were not included in the count.

The first case study is Alcatraz Island, now under the stewardship of the National Park Service and maintained as both a museum and a bird sanctuary. Located in the tumultuous waters of the San Francisco Bay, Alcatraz was among other things the site of an infamous yet short-lived federal penitentiary created in 1934 to house some of the most recalcitrant offenders. The isolated location and foreboding architecture were intended to inspire fear in the hearts of prisoners, acting as a visual deterrent. This powerful image also captured the popular imagination, becoming the subject of numerous films and television programs over the decades.<sup>18</sup>

Late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the expense of maintaining such a remote prison was seen to outweigh any deterrent benefits, and the prison was closed. In 1969, the General Services Administration (GSA), manager of all federal properties, sought proposals from the surrounding community for redevelopment of the site. While there were many factions represented, including commercial interests and those concerned with the natural history and environment of the site, few were focused on the history of the prison. There was a sense of shame, “many Bay area residents did not want their skyline linked with the inhumanity they association with the prison.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the troubled history of Alcatraz, the prison remained in the popular imagination, and eventually historical as well as natural-themed tours were developed for visitors to the site. At first, Park Rangers were not allowed to address

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<sup>18</sup> Alcatraz Prison’s mythic presence has been the site and subject of works of popular culture since just a couple of years after it was closed. Films include *Birdman of Alcatraz*, 1962; *Escape from Alcatraz*, 1979; *Murder in the First*, 1995; *The Rock* 1996; Television programs range from a David Copperfield magic special from 1987 to an episode of the Discovery Channel’s *Mythbusters* filmed in 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Grefe, Christiana Morgan. “Museums of order: 'Truth', politics, and the interpretation of America's historic prisons”. PhD Dissertation, Brown University, 2005. P. 31, quoting from “A New Look at Alcatraz” USDOJ publication.

controversial or disturbing topics such as contemporary prison conditions, rape or homosexuality, racial divisions, the death penalty, or the Native American protests and occupation of the island.<sup>20</sup> Naturally because of the myths surrounding Alcatraz prison in popular culture visitors were interested in these topics, and were encouraged by the Park staff to express their desire to explore these issues through a series of informal and formal surveys. Because Alcatraz is a federally-owned site, there has always been a need to strike a delicate balance between visitor desires for narrative and the government's position on incarceration.

By the early 1980's the Park Service had embraced the prison history as part of the story at Alcatraz, and had begun to gather oral histories from former inmates, guards, and others with close ties. This led to Alcatraz being among the first sites to employ audio tours for visitors.<sup>21</sup> Using a hand-held listening device, each person can hear analysis, first-person accounts, and descriptions of the prison buildings, spaces, and the island as a whole. This approach has allowed more control over the interpretive focus than with individual rangers who may add their own biases or preferences, and it freed rangers to offer more specialized tours on specific topics. It has also allowed visitors to tailor the tour to their tolerance for graphic detail and controversy; families with smaller children can choose a tour that is more age-appropriate but still be able to explore the site. This approach would be particularly applicable at Lorton because the prison only closed in 2001, so many who were part of the prison: guards and other staff, former prisoners like Chuck Brown, local go-go

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<sup>20</sup> Grefe, Christiana Morgan. "Museums of order: 'Truth', politics, and the interpretation of America's historic prisons". PhD Dissertation, Brown University, 2005. p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> Grefe, Christiana Morgan. "Museums of order: 'Truth', politics, and the interpretation of America's historic prisons". PhD Dissertation, Brown University, 2005. p. 96.



musician, families of the prisoners and perhaps victims families are likely to still be in the geographic area and could be invited to share their memories as part of an oral history gathering project. It would also complement the arts center use as individuals with listening devices, whether iPods, cell phones, or more traditional audiophones, do not tend to move in large groups and would not necessarily disturb the regular operations of the art studios or other visitors who may not be interested in the historical aspect of the site.

The second case study is the Workhouse at Southwell, a property maintained by the National Trust of Great Britain. Applicable not just because it provides a look at an institution with some parallels in narrative to Lorton, it is also a model for the methods it uses to engage children and adults in age-appropriate activities surrounding the harsh history that the Workhouse embodies. Created in 1824, the Southwell Workhouse was one of hundreds of such dormitories built around the countryside in answer to the reform of the Poor Law in Britain. The purpose was to remove those who were not actively employed from society. Then the task was to differentiate those deemed “blameless” and unable to work thus deserving of charity from those who were judged “idle and profligate,” and thus by contemporary standards in need of punishment. This last category also included those who had issues that were later reclassified as health concerns, such as alcoholism. The Workhouse then put those who were determined fit to work into action performing various monotonous tasks like breaking stone for roads as a way to encourage the perceived virtues of industriousness.

The most remarkable part of the Workhouse interpretive approach is its use of the web site to prepare visitors of all ages for the complex and emotional issues they will encounter when on site. As is increasingly common for history museums in the United States, the Workhouse web site provides printable teachers guides with links to the national curriculum, analogous to our state standards of learning, that tie the historical narratives to issues of social welfare through activities that the teachers and students will participate in during their visit. Teachers can download activities for the students to perform before arriving as well as worksheets and interactive history lessons and experiences to be completed while onsite. There is a spectrum of age-appropriate role-playing exercises and participatory lessons to engage students to think about complicated issues of policy and its human impact.<sup>22</sup> The Workhouse Museum could easily take a similar approach, and develop a series of activities that engage older students to think about the evolution of treatment for alcoholism, exploring the Easter Decision in 1966 that changed alcoholics at Lorton from inmates into patients, tying this to the Virginia State Standard of Learning for civics, where “students should develop an understanding of the values and principles of American constitutional democracy.”<sup>23</sup>

The final case study is Eastern State Penitentiary historic site, located on Cherry Hill in what is now downtown Philadelphia. Much like Lorton, but nearly a century earlier, Eastern State was built on the outskirts of town as an experiment in

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<sup>22</sup> Based on several visits to the Workhouse website, <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-theworkhouse.htm> over the course of the fall of 2009 and spring 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Virginia Department of Education, “Standards of Learning Documents for History & Social Science – Adopted 2001”, [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards\\_docs/history\\_socialscience/index.shtml](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/history_socialscience/index.shtml)

more humane prison practices. The focus of the penitentiary in Philadelphia was on penance; punishment was important, but the main focus was on reflection and spiritual reform of the inmate. Each prisoner was put into a solitary cell, where they were kept 23 hours a day. Made of thick stone, individual spaces were oppressive; the only light in the cell was from a skylight, said to represent the eye of god.<sup>24</sup> As the prison evolved, more wings were added, and eventually the cells were no longer solitary. Overcrowding led to deteriorating conditions, which ultimately led to closure of the site. After much discussion with the community about reuse, the site was turned into a museum and historic site in 1999.

Eastern State is one of the most politically engaged prison museums in the country. Significantly, it was still owned by the activist Quaker organization that founded it nearly two centuries previously; this allowed the interpretation to become activist as well. “They had to focus on the ennobling story of the founding of the prison instead of its dismal reality.”<sup>25</sup> Activism in interpretation has taken many forms, but the most applicable to the Workhouse Museum is the integration of art programs within the prison walls. Beginning in 1997 with an exhibition titled “Crucible of Good Intentions” co-curated by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Eastern State exhibited art created by inmates in order to challenge visitors to rethink their assumptions about what goes on behind prison walls and in the minds of inmates. Eastern State also has an innovative program for contemporary artists; holding a juried competition every year, the prison walls are a changing tableau of site-specific

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<sup>24</sup> Eastern State Penitentiary website, “History of Eastern State Penitentiary”, <http://www.easternstate.org/history/sixpage.php> .

<sup>25</sup> Grefe, Christiana Morgan. “Museums of order: 'Truth', politics, and the interpretation of America's historic prisons”. PhD Dissertation, Brown University, 2005 p. 165.

installations throughout the historic site that express multiple viewpoints on crime and prison life. Competing artists are encouraged to include history of the site, and staff is available to assist with any research and factual questions artists may have. The application instructions encourage an exploration of crime not only from the perspective of empathy for the incarcerated, but also empathy for the many victims of crime, including families of the victims and families of convicted criminals.<sup>26</sup> In a truly visceral way, the art adds to the emotional impact and dialogue inspired at Eastern State. This is a good model for the Lorton Workhouse Arts Center because of the active arts studios and classes that have begun in the adaptively reused spaces. This kind of intertwining of missions could help visitors not only encounter art in an old prison, but could help the artists confront their ideas about working in such a shadowed landscape.

Thus, each of the three prison museums described above use different types of interpretive methods to address complex and difficult issues at the site. Although none of the sites is completely analogous to Lorton, each have similarities in historical narrative that make the interpretive methodology applicable as a model. Narratives touch on reform practices, prisoner and victim empathy, social history, and even environmental history of each site, all of which are potential sources for rich discussion. The Workhouse Museum could adapt these methods at the site, providing a safe place for dialogue using art to question community issues both historic and contemporary [Figure 29].

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<sup>26</sup> Artist's Proposals Guidelines, <http://www.easternstate.org/exhibits/guidelines.php>.



Figure 29: Mural on the wall of former cafeteria building at Lorton Workhouse, painted by prisoners depicting a father with children. Photo by author 2009.

## Chapter 5: Social Justice and the Lorton Workhouse Site

The Lorton Workhouse Site, including the artist's studio, the museum, and many other structures around the 55-acre campus, are physical reminders of both struggles for freedoms and deep-seated social ills, locally as well as nationally. The buildings and grounds of the Lorton Workhouse represent a Progressive Era solution that attempted to inspire penance and provide opportunity to rejoin society. Yet they also embody a more oppressive and dark side to American justice, a system that weighs more heavily on some portions of society than others. Ultimately, the stories at Lorton revolve around issues of social justice for all parts of society, a theme that is both historically significant and important in contemporary times.

One way that the Workhouse Museum could begin to address these larger themes of social justice and American society is by joining the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and using its resources to develop programs that actively engage visitors with the Lorton collections and site to begin to address these issues. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is a group of historic sites dedicated to remembering past struggles for justice and addressing the resulting contemporary legacies.<sup>27</sup> Brought together by the idea that buildings and objects have the potential to be especially evocative, these sites share an ideal to activate the past by creating programs to stimulate thinking about pressing social issues, promote humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function, share opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at the site, and foster dialogue among diverse

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<sup>27</sup> "About Us" section of International Coalition of Sites of Conscience web site <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/about-us/en/>

stakeholders on these issues.<sup>28</sup> Members include highly visible institutions such as the Tenement Museum in New York and the Birmingham Civil Rights Museum, both of whom are nationally renown for their dedication to civic engagement.

At first blush many people may not see the connection between Lorton, a prison intended to hold criminals, and a hallowed place such as the Civil Rights Museum. But there are many narratives connected with the Workhouse Museum that could be used to discuss larger issues of a democracy. For example, the most accessible and the least addressed issue at Lorton is the complicated matter of self-determination and self-government for the citizens of the District of Columbia. Since its inception, the capital of the United States has had a quasi-territorial relationship with the Federal Government. With the numerous oversight committees and need for Congressional approval on often very local matters, the District of Columbia challenges many assumptions about our representative democracy. In fact, at various times in its history, citizens of the District have not even had their votes counted in the Presidential election. While this structure is a legacy of the founding fathers, and may have made sense when the city was composed only of representatives and their staffs who lived elsewhere and thus had representation at their permanent residence, this is no longer the case. This issue ties to Lorton because even the decision to place the prison in Virginia was not made by the citizens of the District, who the prison ostensibly served, but by a Presidentially appointed commission. Nor was the closure of the prison made by the Government of the District of Columbia, which was at the time under a Congressional oversight board. While it may have been the only realistic solution to the problems at the facility, those touched more deeply by this decision

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* “About Us” section of International Coalition of Sites of Conscience web site.

were not given a chance to weigh in. The prison closure has had tremendous consequences for the citizens of the District: people convicted of crimes in the District are now sent to federal penitentiaries (much higher security facilities with more violent criminals) in far-flung states. This increased distance between inmate and hometown has meant far fewer meetings between inmates and their legal counsel, calling into question access to equal protection under the law. The increased distance has also resulted in much less contact between inmates and their families. While distance from the District was seen as one of the advantages of Lorton when it was first constructed, there is both historic and contemporary sociologic evidence to indicate the negative impact of distance on the families and children left behind when a parent is in prison. In a study in 1966, after interviewing families and prisoners at Lorton, Donald Schneller concluded that regular transportation from the District for visits would assist in family adjustment and reduce recidivist rates.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the walls of Lorton could be used to discuss representative democracy and current criminal justice practices in DC.

Another related yet larger issue in the United States criminal justice system is the apparent racial imbalance in American prisons, a historical and contemporary situation that reflects a long and painful history of race relations. As of 2008, according to a report by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics over 2.3 million US citizens are currently incarcerated in local jails, state, or federal prisons.<sup>30</sup> That is 1.3% of the total population. Yet while the United States population is only 12%

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<sup>29</sup> Schneller, Donald P. "An Exploratory Study of the Effects of Incarceration on the Families of Negro Inmates of a Medium-Security Prison." PhD dissertation, the Catholic University of America, 1966.

<sup>30</sup> US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Correctional Populations, Key Facts at a Glance". <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/glance/tables/corr2tab.cfm>



African American as of the 2000 US Census, 35% of the US prison population is African American. In 1966, during Dr. Schneller's survey of Lorton, the population of the District of Columbia was 54% African American while the Lorton prison population was closer to 85% African American.<sup>31</sup> Thus the data could be linked with narratives and collections held by the Workhouse Museum to begin a dialogue about the US justice system and the possible continuing legacy of slavery and racism.

A final area of interest with direct connection to the Workhouse Museum is the exercise of the First Amendment right of freedom of speech. Already at the Workhouse Museum, there are some exhibits and artifacts from the era between 1917 and 1918 when dozens of Suffragists were arrested and sentenced to days and weeks at the Workhouse for protesting for the right for women to vote. These women were rallying for the right to be heard in the democracy, much like the citizens of the District of Columbia still are.

Another less well-known case at Lorton involves Norman Mailer, who along with dozens of other Vietnam War protestors, was arrested and spent time in Lorton Workhouse for his participation in the March on the Pentagon in 1968. Mailer writes evocatively, if somewhat dissonantly, about his experience at Lorton in the non-fiction novel *The Armies of the Night*. Vividly describing the prison campus as part of a vast conspiracy to make all architecture the same across America, he details the food, the other inmates, and the spaces he encountered while in residence.<sup>32</sup> Clearly

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<sup>31</sup> US Census historical data tables by race, 1790-1970,

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/twps0056.html>

<sup>32</sup> Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night*. New York: The New American Library, 1968. p. 213.

his experience can be seen as an example of citizens exercising their freedom of speech.

Thus the structures and collections at the Workhouse Museum could be used to evoke past struggles while allowing insights into contemporary issues. Many may protest that material of such a strident political nature could not coexist with active arts functions around the Lorton Workhouse campus. Yet it seems a natural fit to explore abstract ideas of expression and freedom through the visual and performing arts. Based on recent shows in the gallery spaces, not only are artistic techniques being explored, so is the expressive nature of art and in the power of the First Amendment. Thus tying the current art studios and performances to larger issues of a democratic society may not only complement one another, but may enhance the creative forces already at work.

The Sites of Conscience organization has developed standards to measure the success of programs that are created at member sites to inspire civic engagement. They are powerful statements of the potential for museums and sites to inspire dialogue and thought among visitors and could be used as guidelines for Workhouse Museum when developing their own engaging and interactive programs. Those measures to strive towards are:

- The museum uses the site – its location, structure, features, feeling – to help visitors “read” the issues the site represents. The museum explores the social or political forces that define how the site came to look as it does, and uses the physical shape of the site as a starting point for education and discussion of social or human rights issues.
- The museum offers a wide variety of different opportunities for visitors from different backgrounds and learning styles to engage in dialogue with one another in different ways (e.g., through comment cards or bulletin boards, large public forums, small groups).

- Dialogues involve people involved in the issues the sites raises on many different levels: for instance, victims, policy-makers, grass- roots groups, international visitors, educators, students.
- Stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values is part of the museum’s mission statement or other institutional mandate.
- The museum defines and evaluates its own success on how well it stimulates dialogue on pressing social issues.
- The site provides every visitor with extensive resources from a wide variety of perspectives on how they can become involved in shaping the issues raised at the site in many different ways.<sup>33</sup>

The sites in the coalition have also created model programs that could be adapted at the Workhouse Museum. Most notably, the Japanese American National Museum’s program titled “Dilemmas + Decisions” could provide a wonderful bridge between the museum and the active arts classes.<sup>34</sup> The program is designed to engage youth by making videos on a variety of current dilemmas that explore the relationship between rights and responsibilities in a democratic society; one theme of the co-creative process that would have particular resonance at Lorton Workhouse would focus on the question of whether freedom is a state of the nation or a state of mind. The students are given readings and are guided through a facilitated discussion about the issues and consequences involved in each dilemma and its relation to the site and the collections. Then they write a skit and act out their own play that explores the issue and record it on video. This type of program would have particular resonance at Lorton because it involves both performance as well as new-media art when

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<sup>33</sup> Excerpted from “Annotated Accreditation Criteria” International Sites of Conscience, <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/about-us/en/>

<sup>34</sup> Included on the Sites of Conscience website as an exemplary program in the resources section. <http://www.ncdemocracy.org/node/1182>

examining issues that the site itself evokes. The videos could be shown in the gallery, and programs with the community could extend the impact of the exercise.

Another model that would adapt well to the circumstances at Lorton Workhouse is the program called “kitchen table conversations” at the Tenement Museum. These are informal yet facilitated dialogues among visitors about the issues brought up through the exhibits and tours concerning historical and contemporary immigration policies. At the end of the tour, visitors can choose to take part by sitting at a kitchen table; the setting provides both a familiar setting for most people to hold discussions as well as a direct and visceral connection to the historic site which is composed of multiple apartments from various eras of the building’s history. At Lorton, this could be adapted and the conversations about the site and criminal justice issues could be held around a small table within the dormitory. In Norman Mailer’s account from the 1968, he provides a detailed description of the warehouse feel of the dormitory and the central table where ham sandwiches and used books were placed for the inmates. It provided both a central gathering point and a place of exchange, and in a museum setting could provide a unique opportunity to not only see the cells but to inhabit the prison dormitory and experience the site with senses beyond sight. To connect the ideas to the greater arts facility, visitors could be given an opportunity to draw or write about the things they think they would miss most if they were living at the Lorton Workhouse. Once again melding the visual arts mission with the museum’s mission, programs at the Workhouse Museum could provide incredible opportunities to open dialogue about historic and contemporary issues of social justice.

## Chapter 6: A Framework for Interpretation of Lorton Workhouse Museum and Arts Center

Now that some of the issues and methods for interpretation and programming at other museums have been explored, it is important to outline a few themes and processes that could be employed at the Lorton Workhouse Museum. These themes and approaches are provided as a foundation on which the museum can build a dynamic and responsive range of activities and programs as the institution grows and becomes an integral part of its community.

The first step in any effective interpretive plan involves reaching out to the community served by the museum in order to make them active partners in shaping the programs, goals, and mission of the museum. At this point, the Workhouse Museum will need to define its community and define the major stakeholders. Ideally this should be part of a larger strategic planning process undertaken by the museum to envision not just the physical expansion, but goals for outreach and education. Currently the museum defines community by geographic proximity to the site. While this is an important constituency for the museum because proximity does make repeat visitation more likely, it does not encompass all of the stakeholders in the narratives at this site.

Certainly new and long-time residents should be involved in the interpretative planning process, but also citizens of the District of Columbia, particularly those who have family members or friends or who themselves spent time in any of the correctional facilities at Lorton would be an important constituency. Teachers, community, and religious leaders from both Fairfax County and the District of

Columbia are important stakeholders in the process as museums provide opportunities for informal learning that cannot be provided in a traditional school setting.

According to a study by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, skills that will be imperative for success in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century include critical thinking, problem solving, civic literacy and global awareness.<sup>35</sup> A historic site as rich in narrative and collections as the Lorton Workhouse is an ideal place to engage people in dialogue about civic engagement as a crucial component in a representative democracy.

Finally, the leaders, artists, and participants of the Workhouse Arts Center are important stakeholders as they not only share the physical space with the museum, but also contribute greatly to the ongoing history being made at the site. The compatible missions of the museum and the arts center could be used to strengthen outreach programs of both organizations, as each group has expertise to contribute to developing the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills of visitors. With all of these stakeholders, the museum should develop a vision and a set of goals and benchmarks for reaching those goals. This plan will act as the guiding force behind developing programs, fundraising efforts, and interpretation.

Because of the ongoing performances, classes, and active art-making at the Lorton Workhouse site, the best solution for interpretation that goes beyond the walls of the prison dormitories take the form of audio tours. These would be self-guided and directed experiences with designated points for contemplation and interpretation, but would allow the visitor to design the experience for themselves. Audio tours have many advantages, but of primary concern for this site is the ability to convey information in a way that will not interfere with other users; this is achieved because

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<sup>35</sup> “Museums Libraries and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills” July 2009.

most audio tours are now recorded to be used on devices with earphones. iPod (or the generic MP3) tours are the most up-to-date method for delivery of audio tours and are particularly well suited for the Lorton site because the staff does not maintain the hardware, only the content, which can be updated and regularly changed with the addition of new content or as the needs of stakeholders evolve. Each visitor will use their own device, which cuts down on the need for staff expertise on the technology; the user will already bring their own familiarity to the process.

This delivery method will allow the museum to incorporate oral histories and interviews as well as readings from historical documents that can bring the spaces alive to visitors in a way that a guided tour cannot. The immediacy of first person accounts has particular resonance for the potentially powerful issues that can be addressed in these tours. Audio tours also allow users to determine the age-appropriateness of the content so that families with children can learn about topics they feel are appropriate, while other users may want to investigate more controversial subject matter.

Since the late 1990's museum professional Roy Ballantyne has explored the potential impact of what he and his research partner David Uzell call hot interpretation where an "event or issue attempts to ensure that visitors do not leave a site, or experience without being emotionally involved and aim to engage the public's attention and challenge them to examine their attitudes and actions with respect to specific social, environmental, and moral issues."<sup>36</sup> Discussed below are two "hot

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<sup>36</sup> Ballantyne, Roy "Interpreting Apartheid: Visitor's Perceptions of the District Six Museum" *Curator* 46, no. 3, July 2003 p. 279-92.

interpretation” themes that could be applied around the entire site of the Lorton Workhouse Arts Center and Museum.

The first interpretive theme is one that could integrate as much or as little of the physical site and the historical narrative as the user cares to explore: the theme of art and creativity. Spaces that could be incorporated into this theme include several points around the prison complex where visitors could get a visual perspective of the whole design: from the open space in the quadrangle, from the dining hall, beneath the arcade. During this narrative, discussions could include the social context of 1908 and how the buildings, the site design, and even the working farm idea were innovative in correctional practices.

As mentioned previously, there are several murals on existing workhouse structures that were painted by prisoners. These works of art range from strictly informational in nature, such as the barber polls, to more abstract and expressive paintings such as the fatherhood mural on the dining building. Through oral histories with inmates and staff it may be possible to uncover who painted these murals, how the scenes may have changed and evolved over the years, and perhaps gain some insight as to the meaning and value of these artworks to the prison community as a whole. Then parallels in art processes could be drawn between these existing historic murals and the ongoing work of the visual artists in the studios. Discussion could also include greater art theories about the rehabilitative potential of art and how other prisons around the country have incorporated art programs (or not) into their facilities.



Depending on the progress of redevelopment in another part of the large Laurel Hill parcel, visitors could also be directed to a chapel that was part of the minimum security facility in the northeastern part of the site, also part of the historic district. This interfaith chapel was designed by Farmer C. Thomas, a counterfeit artist serving a sentence at Lorton, who earned his architecture degree while in prison at San Quentin.<sup>37</sup> Opened in 1961, the design was truly a collaborative process between Farmer, who had never designed a building nor been in a church, the clergy who performed services at Lorton, and the prison administration. With three separate service spaces that could be joined or enclosed as the congregation dictated, the building was both innovative and functional. [Figure 30] Within the chapel was a crucifix with a life-sized Christ modeled on a prisoner who was sentenced to death. The poignancy of the model is apparent when images of the cross are shown. Finally, there are stained glass windows in the chapel designed and assembled by prisoners. Once again, all of these visual arts disciplines could be tied to the current artistic endeavors at the Lorton Workhouse artist studios and classes as a way to examine larger issues of expression and creativity in society.

One historic program that could be incorporated into the tours is the Inner Voices dramatic troupe, a group of prisoners who wrote and performed plays as part of the rehabilitation process. In 1970, the Inner Voices troupe performed at the Anacostia Community Museum an aspect of a multi-media exhibit about life at the prison. Contemporary accounts of the performance describe the craft and vibrancy as

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<sup>37</sup> Lorton Historic District National Register Nomination narrative. 2006.



Figure 30: Non-denominational chapel at Lorton Reformatory. Photo courtesy of Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

surprising. According to the show's narrator speaking in an interview about the astonishment expressed by the audience, "they saw us as prisoners instead of men, as criminals instead of human beings."<sup>38</sup> This statement could be employed to introduce ideas of justice and rehabilitation in a democratic society and how changing definitions of criminality have impacted not only the prison population but perceptions of public health.

Another interpretive theme that could be introduced at the Workhouse Museum is freedom of expression and the First Amendment to the Constitution. The museum already has accumulated a good base of research on the Suffragists who were sentenced to time at the Lorton Workhouse for protesting for the rights of women to vote. This narrative could be tied to the arrest of Vietnam War protesters using the first person narrative of Norman Mailer published in *Armies of the Night*. Both of these stories could be used to discuss the ideas of rights and responsibilities in a democracy.

The theme could be easily tied into the ongoing activities at the Arts Center by integrating protest music into the audio tour. There is a long tradition of American music written and performed for the purpose of protesting injustices from taxes to racism. Songs could be chosen from each of the decades that the Lorton Workhouse operated as a prison, and the issues addressed in the songs could be examined in light of current social issues. Some suggested songs to be included are: Leadbelly singing in the 1920's "Bourgeois Blues" that includes the lyrics

the home of the brave and the land the free,  
I don't wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie...

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<sup>38</sup> Martin, Judith. "'Beyond Time': Prisoner-Performers", *The Washington Post*, October 12, 1970, p. B1.

I tell all the colored folks to listen to me  
Don't try to find you no home in Washington, DC  
'Cause it's a bourgeois town<sup>39</sup>

Sam Cooke singing versions of negro spirituals that were used in the early Civil Rights movement of the 1950's; Bob Dylan singing the quintessential Vietnam War protest song "Blowin' in the Wind" from the 1960's; Jimmy Cliff singing "Vietnam" that describes a letter from a soldier in the 1970's; and Grandmaster Flash singing the poignant "The Message" from the 1980's describing urban isolation and the lingering effects of racism. Each of these songs could be used to introduce not only the ideas of social justice specific to the time in which they were written, but could also be used to explore the expressive potential of performance art and music which could be tied in with the performance arts at Lorton Workhouse Arts Center.

A way to make the music portion particularly poignant is to focus on local Washington, DC, musicians who either have ties to Lorton or to protest music. Songs could include Marvin Gaye singing "What's Going On?" in the 1970's. This song could have many layers of interpretation at the Lorton site, as in itself it is a protest song, but it also could lead to a discussion of family violence and crime as he was murdered by his father in Washington. Another important local musician is Chuck Brown, known unofficially as the "Godfather of Go-Go" a music type native to Washington that blends high-energy funk and dance music. Mr. Brown, who served some time at Lorton in his youth and openly discusses how his experiences at the prison shaped his life and his career, could be a great addition to the audio tour. Oral histories could be integrated with samples of his most famous song "Bustin' Loose" or other songs that speak of life in Washington, DC, in the 1970's and 1980's.

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<sup>39</sup> Excerpted from Leadbelly's "Bourgeois Blues" 1926.

Fugazi is a more contemporary band with ties to the local Washington community that is known for supporting open expression and artistic freedom. Their music is considered punk rock, and grew from a vibrant punk scene in Washington in the 1980's and early 1990's. The song "Waiting Room" with lyrics that include "I am a patient boy; I wait, I wait, I wait, I wait; My time is water down a drain" could be used to introduce a discussion of prison time and sentencing and varying philosophies of criminal justice that were practiced at Lorton. By using music as a way to connect the contemporary performing arts at Lorton Workhouse Arts Center with the narratives of the past, the Workhouse Museum could begin to plan collaborative programs with the artists, bringing larger audiences to the museum.

Ultimately, these suggested interpretive themes are just a beginning for the Workhouse Museum. There is a rich and layered history in the collections and the building that could be brought to life with the addition of oral histories and historical narrative integrated into the fabric of the entire site. An arts center can be a vibrant addition to a community, but only when the community values the many gifts that such a site can bring to their lives. The current focus on active art-making and classes is an important chapter in the ongoing history of the site, but is only one dimension of the story. The intangible narratives of the many lives that passed through those buildings over the span of nearly a century are ripe with possibilities to enrich the art as well as the life of the community, however it is defined. Preserving the structures at Lorton Workhouse has allowed a new use to fit into a growing community, but important work must be done soon to preserve the intangible remains and weave them into the stories of today, because there are important questions to ask and lessons to

learn from this site. Much emotional turmoil and pain as well as joy can be found within the walls of Lorton Workhouse, but it needs not only to be unlocked but made relevant again, because today is only a moment in time, yet history keeps building.

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<http://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/>

<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-theworkhouse/>

<http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=107>

<http://www.workhousearts.org/>

<http://www.nps.gov/alca/index.htm>

## Appendices

### Appendix 1- Square Footage for LAF Proposal for Economic Sustainability

Artist studios and classrooms	50,800 rehab square feet
Art gallery and exhibition space	19,220 rehab square feet
Prison museum	18,760 rehab square feet
Theater and performing arts studios	18,580 rehab square feet
Multi-purpose events center	27,010 rehab square feet
Visitor/community heritage center	6,700 rehab square feet
Administrative offices	3,560 rehab square feet
Two upscale restaurants	11,175 new square feet
40 units of housing	48,600 new square feet
Performance barn/amphitheatre	20,000 square feet

## Appendix 2: Jail and Prison Museums in the US

Name	City	State	Web site
1897 Pauly Jail Museum	Union Springs	Alabama	<a href="http://www.unionspringsalabama.com/paulyjail.html">http://www.unionspringsalabama.com/paulyjail.html</a>
Yuma Territorial Prison	Yuma	Arizona	<a href="http://azstateparks.com/Parks/YUTE/">http://azstateparks.com/Parks/YUTE/</a>
Old Jail Museum (Greenwood, Arkansas)	Greenwood	Arkansas	<a href="http://www.greenwoodarkansas.com/localhistory/jail.php">http://www.greenwoodarkansas.com/localhistory/jail.php</a>
Alcatraz Island	San Francisco Bay Area	California	<a href="http://www.nps.gov/alcatraz/">http://www.nps.gov/alcatraz/</a>
Jail Museum (Truckee, California)	Truckee	California	<a href="http://truckeehistory.org/jailmuseum.htm">http://truckeehistory.org/jailmuseum.htm</a>
Old Tolland County Jail and Museum	Tolland	Connecticut	<a href="http://www.tollandhistorical.org/tollandcountyjail">http://www.tollandhistorical.org/tollandcountyjail</a>
Old Newgate Prison	East Granby	Connecticut	<a href="http://www.eastgranby.com/HistoricalSociety/newgateprison2.htm">http://www.eastgranby.com/HistoricalSociety/newgateprison2.htm</a>
Hamilton County Historical Museum in the Old Hamilton County Jail	Jasper	Florida	<a href="http://www.hamiltoncountyflorida.com/cd_historical.aspx">http://www.hamiltoncountyflorida.com/cd_historical.aspx</a>
Florida Heritage Museum in the Authentic Old Jail	St. Augustine	Florida	
Old Jail Museum	Barnesville	Georgia	<a href="http://barnesville.georgia.gov">http://barnesville.georgia.gov</a>
Old Jail Museum	Knoxville	Georgia	<a href="http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2318">http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2318</a>
Old Idaho State Penitentiary	Boise	Idaho	<a href="http://www.idahohistory.net/oldpen.html">http://www.idahohistory.net/oldpen.html</a>
Alton Confederate Prison	Alton	Illinois	<a href="http://www.altonweb.com/history/civilwar/confed/">http://www.altonweb.com/history/civilwar/confed/</a>
Carthage Jail	Carthage	Illinois	<a href="http://www.carthage.lib.il.us/community/museums.html">http://www.carthage.lib.il.us/community/museums.html</a>
Kosciusko County Jail Museum	Warsaw	Indiana	<a href="http://koscbv.org/museum.html">http://koscbv.org/museum.html</a>
Old Jail Museum	Albion	Indiana	<a href="http://www.noblehistoricalsociety.org/">http://www.noblehistoricalsociety.org/</a>
Old Jail Museum	Crawfordsville	Indiana	<a href="http://www.oldjailmuseum.net/">http://www.oldjailmuseum.net/</a>
Old Jail Museum	Valparaiso	Indiana	<a href="http://www.oldjailmuseum.org/">http://www.oldjailmuseum.org/</a>
Anamosa State	Anamosa	Iowa	<a href="http://www.asphistory.com/m">http://www.asphistory.com/m</a>

Penitentiary Museum			<a href="http://www.cityofdubuque.org/useum/index.htm">useum/index.htm</a>
Old Jail Museum (property of the Dubuque County Historical Society)	Dubuque	Iowa	<a href="http://www.cityofdubuque.org/index.aspx?NID=704">http://www.cityofdubuque.org/index.aspx?NID=704</a>
Pottawattamie County Jail Museum	Council Bluffs	Iowa	<a href="http://www.thehistoricalsociety.org/Jail.htm">http://www.thehistoricalsociety.org/Jail.htm</a>
Old Jail Museum	Iola	Kansas	<a href="http://www.cityofiola.com/attractions.html">http://www.cityofiola.com/attractions.html</a>
1811 Lincoln County Museum & Old Jail	Wiscasset	Maine	<a href="http://www.lincolncountyhistory.org/lchaparts/oldjail.htm">http://www.lincolncountyhistory.org/lchaparts/oldjail.htm</a>
Old Jail Museum	Allegan	Michigan	<a href="http://www.allegancountyhistoricalmuseum.org/">http://www.allegancountyhistoricalmuseum.org/</a>
Old Jail Museum	Canton	Mississippi	<a href="http://www.cantontourism.com/christmas.html">http://www.cantontourism.com/christmas.html</a>
Squirrel Cage Jail Museum (	Gallatin	Missouri	<a href="http://www.daviesscountyhistoricalsociety.com">http://www.daviesscountyhistoricalsociety.com</a>
Liberty Jail	Liberty	Missouri	<a href="http://www.lds.org/placestovisit/location/0,10634,1811-1-1-1,00.html">http://www.lds.org/placestovisit/location/0,10634,1811-1-1-1,00.html</a>
Old Jail Museum	Thompson	Montana	<a href="http://www.montanamuseums.org/glaciercountry.html">http://www.montanamuseums.org/glaciercountry.html</a>
Old Prison Museum	Deer Lodge	Montana	<a href="http://www.pcmf.org/prison.htm">http://www.pcmf.org/prison.htm</a>
Burlington County Prison Museum	Mount Holly	New Jersey	<a href="http://www.prisonmuseum.net/">http://www.prisonmuseum.net/</a>
Old Jail Museum	Taylorsville	North Carolina	<a href="http://www.taylorsvillenc.com/museumsOldJail.htm">http://www.taylorsvillenc.com/museumsOldJail.htm</a>
Ohio State Reformatory, Mansfield Reformatory Preservation Society	Mansfield	Ohio	<a href="http://www.mrps.org/">http://www.mrps.org/</a>
Eastern State Penitentiary	Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	<a href="http://www.easternstate.org/">http://www.easternstate.org/</a>
Old Jail Museum	Jim Thorpe	Pennsylvania	<a href="http://www.theoldjailmuseum.com/">http://www.theoldjailmuseum.com/</a>
Old Jail Museum	Smethport	Pennsylvania	<a href="http://www.smethportchamber.com/old_jail_museum.htm">http://www.smethportchamber.com/old_jail_museum.htm</a>
Moore County Old Jail Museum	Lynchburg	Tennessee	<a href="http://www.lynchburgtn.com/JailFlyer/default.html">http://www.lynchburgtn.com/JailFlyer/default.html</a>
Old Jail Museum	Lawrenceburg	Tennessee	<a href="http://www.cityoflawrenceburgtn.com/Visit_Historic_Lawrenceburg.htm">http://www.cityoflawrenceburgtn.com/Visit_Historic_Lawrenceburg.htm</a>
Old Jail Museum	Winchester	Tennessee	<a href="http://www.winchester-tn.com/things-to-">http://www.winchester-tn.com/things-to-</a>

			<a href="#">do/attractions/old-jail-museum/</a>
Mills County Old Jail Museum	Goldwaite	Texas	<a href="http://www.goldthwaite.biz/Attractions.html">http://www.goldthwaite.biz/Attractions.html</a>
Old Jail Museum	Gonzales	Texas	<a href="http://www.gonzalestexas.com/visitor/attractions.asp">http://www.gonzalestexas.com/visitor/attractions.asp</a>
Old Jail Museum	Silverton	Texas	<a href="http://www.texas-online.com/graphic/silvertn.htm">http://www.texas-online.com/graphic/silvertn.htm</a>
Sabine County Jail Museum	Hemphill	Texas	<a href="http://sabinecountytexas.com/public_html/Attractions.htm">http://sabinecountytexas.com/public_html/Attractions.htm</a>
Texas Prison Museum	Huntsville	Texas	<a href="http://www.txprisonmuseum.org/">http://www.txprisonmuseum.org/</a>
Wilson County Jailhouse Museum	Floresville	Texas	<a href="http://www.wilsoncountyhistory.org/Jailhouse_Museum.htm">http://www.wilsoncountyhistory.org/Jailhouse_Museum.htm</a>
Old Jail Museum	Goochland	Virginia	<a href="http://www.goochlandhistory.org/Jail.htm">http://www.goochlandhistory.org/Jail.htm</a>
Old Jail Museum	Warrenton	Virginia	<a href="http://www.fauquierhistory.com/index.cfm?pagesID=9">http://www.fauquierhistory.com/index.cfm?pagesID=9</a>
Old Gaol, Colonial Williamsburg	Williamsburg	Virginia	<a href="http://www.history.org/Almanack/places/hb/hbgaol.cfm">http://www.history.org/Almanack/places/hb/hbgaol.cfm</a>

General statistics:

- 48 museums in US; represents 23 states; 3 already in Virginia; most located in Texas, with 6
- list does not include other adaptively reused prison/jail buildings that are other types of museums such as the Old Jail Art center in Texas.
- Only 62 other prison/jail museums in the rest of the world; 4 in Russia, 7 in United Kingdom