Prisons are Not an Architectural Problem

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Prisons are not an architectural problem. The physical infrastructure is brutal, abusive, and inhumane; the core issue with the system of incarceration in the United States of America is a bureaucratic and a human rights problem.

This is not a new conversation, design in service to incarceration has often been taboo in the world of architecture. As of 2020, the design of solitary confinement cells or execution chambers violates the AIA code of ethics (Rule 1.404) will face consequences potentially including censure and removal from the AIA.

But like other architects, designers, activists, and theorists; I argue that architects should not contribute to the design of facilities which directly support the current prison-industrial complex in the United States of America. The country has an estimated two million incarcerated people, a number that according to the ACLU, represents 20% of the world's incarcerated population, despite the U.S. making up only 5% of the global population. These numbers get more atrocious when broken down by race: 1 in 3 Black men will go be incarcerated in their lifetime, that figure is 1 in 6 for Latino men, and this in contrast to 1 in 17 white men.

The U.S. has an incarceration problem. When the 13th amendment was ratified, it abolished slavery and banned involuntary servitude from the country as well as its territories and jurisdictions. This is with one major caveat, that being slavery is still acceptable when used as a punishment for a crime. This allowed for slavery to continue, through the guise of incarceration. While most work in prisons is currently paid, it is for mere cents on the dollar (13 to 52 cents

per hour) for the same work which would be compensated more "appropriately" outside of prison. . This being said, Seven states -Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas- do not pay a cent for the labor of incarcerated people (Economic Policy Institute).

Incarcerated individuals fight our wild-fires, Incarcerated labor is littered throughout our food supply chains and essential service providers (McDonalds, Target, Kroger, etc.), and the manufacture of goods (The AP and Malta Justice Initiative).

Mass incarceration destroys communi-ties, ruins lives, and rips families apart, all while enriching corporations and profiteering robber barons. Not all prisons are operated by the government, a good many are operated by private prison corporations who purely exist to turn a profit. The prison industrial complex is a dirty, abusive, inhumane, stain on any veneer of justice.

Prisons are awful, the prison industrial complex is awful, the "justice" system is failed. Architects cannot "make prisons better" through design. To think otherwise is either gross igno-rance or deliberate deception. No matter how well designed a prison it still cages those who are unjustly incarcerated and over-prosecuted. The system is rotten, and anyone involved with the design of such a core component of that system is complicit in that violence. From the architects which feign idealism to the corpora-tions masquerading as architects.

A better designed prison is a Band-Aid for a gunshot wound.