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## THE DIFFICULT HERITAGE. THE REUSE OF FORMER PRISON BUILDINGS

### TRUDNE DZIEDZICTWO. PONOWNE WYKORZYSTANIE DAWNYCH BUDYNKÓW WIĘZIENNYCH

#### Abstract

In recent years, there has been a trend to reuse abandoned buildings. Adaptive re-use allows preservation of the original structure and implements a new function to it. Such activity could help to preserve the historic value of buildings; moreover, many other advantages can be found in educational, ecological and economic fields. However, the question arises of whether every object can be freely adapted. This article examines the case of old prisons which have, for instance, been adapted into hotels and museums. Knowledge of the history of prison architecture as well as experience in preserving and adapting prisons could help to identify the appropriate function for the abandoned penitentiary facilities.

**Keywords:** heritage, architecture, prison, adaptive re-use, penitentiary architecture, correctional facility, panopticon

#### Streszczenie

W ostatnich latach zauważalny staje się pozytywny trend kładący nacisk na wykorzystanie istniejących budynków. *Adaptive re-use* pozwala na wprowadzenie nowej funkcji obiektu przy zachowaniu jego oryginalnej struktury. Tego typu działania mogą pomóc w zachowaniu historycznych wartości budynku, mają również zalety edukacyjne, ekologiczne i ekonomiczne. Rodzi się jednak pytanie: czy każdy obiekt można dowolnie zaadaptować? Niniejszy artykuł bada kwestię dawnych więzień, które zostały zaadaptowane jako m.in. hotele i muzea. Poznanie historii architektury więziennej i przykładów sposobu zachowania i ponownego wykorzystania tych obiektów może pomóc w odnalezieniu dla nich odpowiedniej nowej funkcji, a za razem posłużyć jako przykład dla innych, obecnie opuszczanych budynków więziennych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** architektura, więzienia, adaptacje, architektura penitencjarna, dziedzictwo, panoptikon

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the potential of abandoned buildings which we have inherited from the past has been noted. These objects could serve as catalysts in revitalising devastated urban areas. What is more, adaptive re-use has also many other advantages which are connected with economic and ecological studies [11]. Although, attention was focussed on designing new buildings for many years [12], today there is a growing trend for adapting existing, abandoned structures rather than constructing new objects. Such a solution is continuously gaining in popularity and this is evident in projects of students of architecture as well as in studies conducted by experienced architects and researchers [20]. Former factory sites, old shipyards and sacred buildings have, in recent years, become the subjects of many studies [16, 6, 3, 22]. These properties do not give rise to negative emotions and they have therefore been adapted for various functions. In contrast to the above, this article focuses on abandoned structures and it examines the possibilities of the adaptation of buildings which are named in literature as 'dark heritage', 'difficult heritage', 'dissonant heritage', 'heritage that hurts' etc. [19]. These places are associated with tragedies, death, crime, violence. All of them could cause negative emotions as well as a sense of fear. This group of objects includes concentration camps and prisons. Such places remind us of torture and despair; however, they are still simply buildings which require some action aimed at saving them before they fall into disrepair. This article aims to answer the question of whether it is possible to 'erase' and break the negative emotions related to the prisons and use them again as public buildings.

The preparatory phase of the study was to become familiar with a group of objects that are marked as dark heritage. From this group, European correctional facilities that had stopped to fulfil their primary function before the first half of the twentieth century were selected. The next step of the study was to examine the fate of the selected objects after changing their original function. The background for the research was to study the history of the development of prison architecture. Such a scheme of activities allowed distinguishing two groups among the adapted correctional facilities. The development of the prison system and its architectural transformation is based on source materials [1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 13, 15, 18, 28–31] as well as in situ observation. In this research, a comparative method and a logical argumentation were used. Owing to the presented activities, it became possible to divide the adapted prisons into two groups and present the possibilities of their reuse. The benefits of these solutions has been shown. All of this could serve as examples for other prisons that remain abandoned.

## 2. Historical background

The first prisons could be found in ancient times in Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome. There is not much information about them due to the fact that it is difficult to determine the structure of these buildings. Many of them were destroyed or covered by the subsequent layers of later constructions. In ancient Greece, men could be imprisoned for high treason or offense against the government. Life imprisonment was not a sort of a penalty then. A prison



was a place for detention prior to trial or it was used to force debtors to pay their debts. Roman law recognised only a death sentence or fines. Later, corporal punishment and forced labour were added. In Greece and Rome there were private prisons (*carcer privatus*) which were used only to coercion someone who did not want to pay. There were also public prisons which were used before trial or execution [7].

The Mamertine Prison, a Roman private prison which is located near the Forum Romanum, is an example of an ancient prison about which something is known. It was probably constructed around 300–200 B.C. Excavations which were performed in 1870 contributed to many interpretations of how the prison could have looked like. The remaining parts from the structure show that there were two chambers: a lower and an upper chamber. Only the upper chamber has some light which was provided only through an oculus or a hole made in the ceiling. This one might have been used for the confinement of minor criminals whereas the dark, lower pit may have been used instead of the death penalty [7, 1].

The growing popularity of the prisons could be associated with the position of the Church, which negatively referred to the death penalty and corporal punishment. In the thirteenth century, the Pope permitted imprisonment as a penalty for members of the public. However, treatment of the prisoners did not change much in the light of antiquity – they were still deprived of dignity and the penalty was characterised by brutality. It was common to subject the prisoners to torture until they confessed their guilt. Imprisonment resulted in slow death from starvation, inadequate clothing and lack of air. The prisons were often located in dungeons where there was no access to natural light and moisture dominated. Others could be found in the gatehouse, castles, fortresses etc. There were also manorial prisons which aimed to hold serfs captive. Many city gates were used as a prison, for instance Royal Prison, the Bastille in Paris.

Government funds did not usually allow construction of a new building for the prison function and because of this, criminals were incarcerated in already existing structures as shown above. Constructing objects especially for this purpose came later [1, 7, 2]. In the middle ages, many cities probably had their own small prison. These objects were usually small, wooden and with one room. The largest one could probably accommodate up to thirty prisoners. Not much is known about the architecture of these facilities. Their arrangement was makeshift which was probably associated with the uncertain financing of construction and maintenance. Nevertheless, a division of criminals also appeared there – most dangerous prisoners were incarcerated in underground chambers. Before the end of the thirteenth century, it was possible to recognise separate rooms for women [7].

Around the seventeenth century, prisons were constructed on a larger scale in Europe. This was connected with a recognition of the human dignity of the prisoners which led to the development of prison architecture in all countries. At the end of the eighteenth century, the panopticon model (Fig. 1) was designed by Jeremy Bentham. The draft presented the design of a prison in a shape of a circle with a head keeper's house located in the centre and surrounded by cells arranged in tiers. Such a solution allowed observation of the prisoners from the central tower but they did not know if and when they were observed because of reflecting light in the windows of the tower. The continual sense of surveillance aimed to

motivate prisoners to control their behaviour. This model reflected an idea that controlling inmates' minds might become a substitute or corporal penalties. Although this project was not implemented, other architects drew from this idea what is visible, for instance, in the project of the HM Prison Pentonville (Fig. 2).

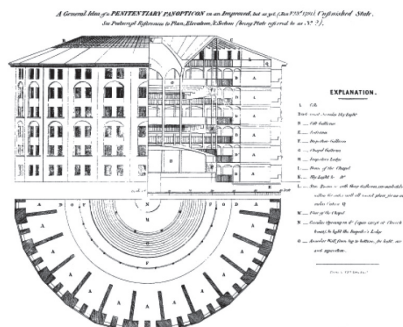


Fig. 1. The panopticon prison design by Jeremy Bentham [36]

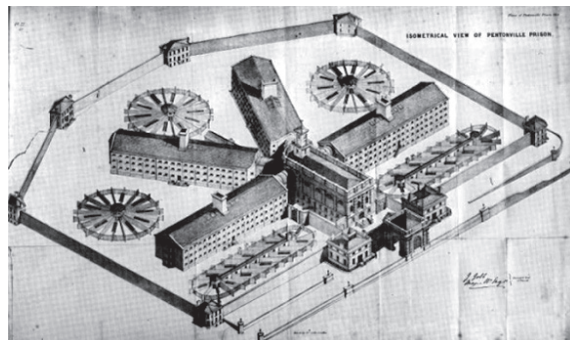


Fig. 2. Isometric drawing of the HM Prison Pentonville [37]

Contemporary architecture of prisons is guided by completely different rules which follow the changing philosophical trend and an understanding of the main aim of the punishment – to reform the prisoners. This goal could be achieved by adequate architecture, which is the current subject of research [12, 13].

### 3. Different ways of adapting penitentiary facilities

This section presents European examples of prisons which stopped their original functions by the end of the first half of twentieth century. Each one of the examined facilities was adapted to a new function.

#### 3.1. The Warszawa-Mokotów custodial facility, Poland

A custodial facility was opened in Warsaw by the Russian authorities in 1904. It was arranged for 800 prisoners, there was a kitchen, ironworks, hospital, bakery, carpentry shop etc. It also had a power station. All of these made it one of the most modern facilities of this type in Russia. In this building, mainly political prisoners were incarcerated. In 1915, Germany captured Warsaw and changed the name of the facility to 'Criminal Prison in Mokotów'. In the nineteen-thirties, the prison was attributed to a group of prisons which were intended for heavy penalty incarceration. Under German rule, this facility was the most overcrowded – at the same time, about 2500 people were imprisoned. From Warsaw, prisoners were exported to other prisons or concentration camps. The prison in Warsaw was used also for mass executions. After the war, the prison served as the Central Prison for Political Prisoners in Poland. After the fall of communism, the building was rebuilt and renovated.



In 1993, within the framework of rehabilitation activities and the fight against addictions, a department for the treatment of alcoholism was established in the former prison. After ten years, a modern pavilion was put into service. It was designed for prisoners who were dangerous to the public and other inmates. In 2011, a memorial place devoted to the history of the prison was opened in the area of the former penitentiary facility [28]. In 2016, the Minister of Justice announced the liquidation of the prison and intended its area for a museum. The exhibition in the Museum of Cursed Soldiers & Political Prisoners aimed to awaken people's reflection on Polish patriotism and show the history of people who in the name of higher values spent their lives in the fight against the form of government [29].

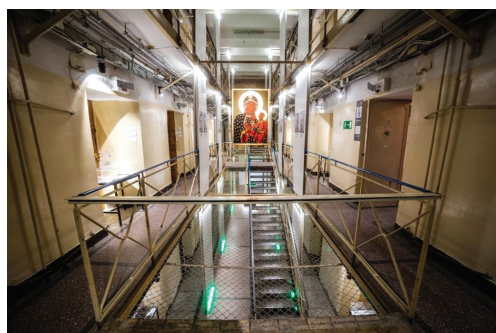


Fig. 3. Former prison in Warsaw – a corridor [24]

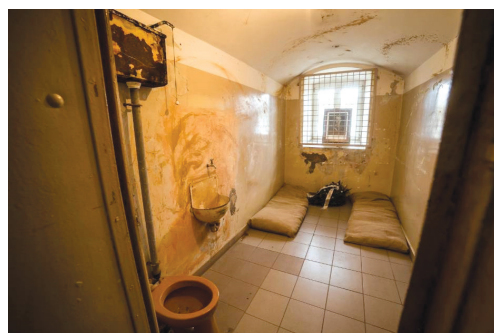


Fig. 4. Former prison in Warsaw – a former cell which belongs to the museum exposition [24]

### 3.2. Prison in Kielce, Poland

The prison in Kielce was constructed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. When it was taken under Russian rule, it was enlarged and it has existed in this form up to the present day. It was later taken under German management. At that time, there were about



Fig. 5. Former prison in Kielce, a main gate [27]



Fig. 6. Former prison in Kielce, interior [27]

2000 prisoners while its capacity was dedicated for 400. Prisoners were starved, killed, taken for execution, to concentration camps or forced labour. After the war, it served as a place of incarceration under the rules of the Polish authority until the nineteen-seventies. Due to the transfer of prisoners to a new location, this building became abandoned. In 1995 in the former prison in Kielce, a memorial place was arranged and the Museum of National Remembrance was opened. Between 2010 and 2012, refurbishment of the object was conducted and a new conference room and exhibition halls were planned. In the halls there are exhibits related to the history and fate of the prisoners, for instance, an original hook which was used for the implementation of the death sentence by hanging [5, 25, 26, 30].

### 3.3. Prison in Hasselt, Belgium

This prison was built in 1859 in Hasselt; it fulfilled its function up until 2005. Its plan was inspired by the model of panopticon (Fig. 1). At the end of the nineteenth century, it was seen as not functional. The Limburg University Centre needed more space and as a result, the authorities of the university began to look for a new location for the Centre of the Faculty of Law, the dean's office and other facilities. In actuality, the building of the former prison satisfied the needs of the university even though it totally differed from what the authorities had envisaged as a future location. A project for the adaptation of this facility was chosen through a competition. The selected project incorporated the dean's office, a café, meeting places and student spaces in the prison. The Faculty of Law and the rector's office were arranged in new buildings which were added to the prison.

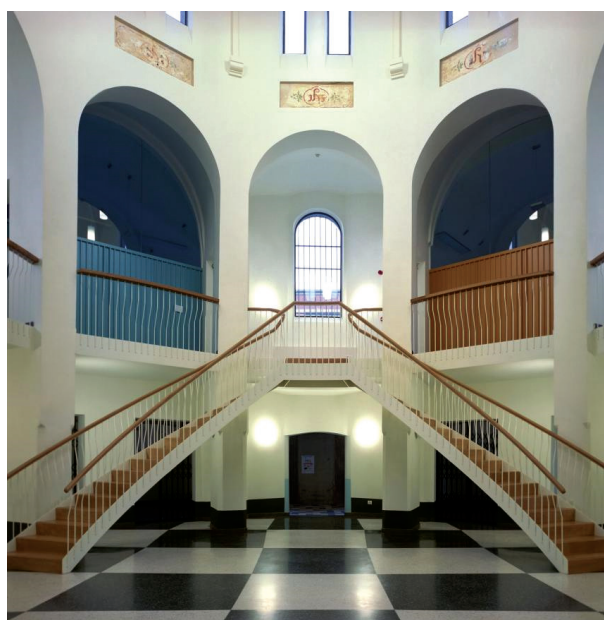


Fig. 7. Former in Prison in Hasselt, interior [31]



Fig. 8. Former in Prison in Hasselt, interior (photo by J. Szczepański)

All of the prison's walls were preserved. The only change which was introduced in the external façade was new doors. The old doors were replaced by fencing doors which enabled a view of the green courtyards behind them. The basic structure of the interior was also preserved. The centre of the panopticon serves as a hall (Fig. 7). A staircase and the floor were replaced. Cells were also preserved and now they function as individual rooms for students (Fig. 8). One of the characteristics of the prisons is the limited access of light. This problem was solved by adding some windows on the roof. The space between the buildings which dates from the nineteenth century and between those which have been recently added is used by the students and also serves as a meeting place or as a huge auditorium for various events (Figs. 9, 10) [18, 15, 31].



Fig. 9. Former in Prison in Hasselt, exterior  
(photo by J. Szczepański)



Fig. 10. Former in Prison in Hasselt,  
a bird's-eye view [15]

### 3.4. The Het Arresthuis Prison, the Netherlands

The Het Arresthuis prison was established in the mid-nineteenth century in the Netherlands. The most dangerous inmates were imprisoned in this object. The prison was closed in 2007. It stopped to fulfil its function after almost 150 years and soon after that, in 2013, it was opened as a hotel.

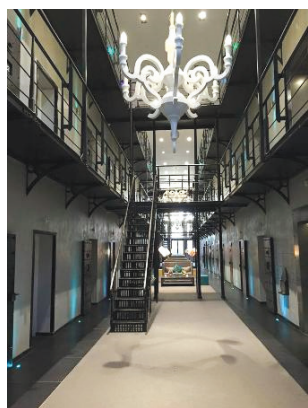


Fig. 11. Former Het Arresthuis  
Prison, an adapted corridor [33]



Fig.12. Former Het Arresthuis Prison, an adapted cell [33]



The structure and architecture of the former prison was only slightly changed. Over 100 cells were adapted for forty guest rooms which overlook the prison's old corridor (Fig. 11). Some original elements from the nineteenth century were left in the interiors, for example, doors in order to remind about the history of the place. The original elements were combined with modern furniture (Fig. 12). A canteen was located above the rooms, where it is possible to watch a slideshow of a chronicle of the prison during a meal at a common table [14, 32].

### 3.5. Långholmen Central Prison, Sweden

On the island of Långholmen, which was first mentioned in the fifteenth century, the Långholmen prison was located. In the seventeenth century, a customs house was established there. A few years later, a brewer bought apart of the island and constructed a residence called Alstavik. Soon afterwards, this building was acquired by the state and converted into a prison for women. In later years, it was extended and dominated the island for more than 200 years. In 1975, the prison was closed. Since then, the buildings of the prison slowly fell into disrepair. As a consequence of this, some of the buildings had to be demolished.



Fig. 13. Långholmen Central Prison, 1985 [34]



Fig. 14. Långholmen Central Prison after adaptation [34]

In 1989, a new era in the history of the island began – a youth hotel was opened in the former prison. The cells were converted into hotel rooms (Fig. 15) and a conference room was also incorporated. At present, this place is the combination of a hostel, hotel, museum and conference centre. The hostel is located in the old part of the ground floor. One of the cells is furnished according to the function which it held in the old days. The original windows were preserved as well as the training squares which serves as a café during the summer. One of the attractions is the opportunity to take part in a game which involves playing the role of a prisoner and making an attempt to escape from this facility. The new function of the former prison was selected precisely in order to attract customers through the entire year [34, 35, 17].





Fig. 15. Rooms in the former Långholmen Central Prison [34]

#### 4. Applications and summary

We inherit a lot from the past, not only buildings which prove the genius of human beings but also those that remind us about traumatic events, cruelty or violence. These dark objects evoke strong emotions; however, it should be kept in mind that they are still buildings which underwent a process of decay and deterioration and should be taken care of as every structure. Buildings associated with trauma and violence are called ‘difficult heritage’, ‘dark heritage’ and similar, and this group includes concentration camps and prisons. The feeling of empathy for the victims of the cruelty and crimes which were committed in the concentration camps is so strong that it is impossible to adapt them for any other function than a memorial place [19]. Prisons are apparently similar to the above-mentioned objects. From ancient times, prisons were also inhumane places, incarceration usually led to mental exhaustion and harsh

conditions repeatedly led to loss of health and the death of some prisoners [2, 7, 1]. However, the solution to an issue of adaptation of the penitentiary facilities is not obvious.

All of the prisons presented in the article can be linked with stories of crime and violence. Despite this, the analysed examples enable the differentiation of the abandoned prisons into two groups: the first concerns places of death of mostly innocent people, and the second includes those prisons in which serious offenders were incarcerated. The prisons in Warsaw and Kielce which were places of torture and execution of innocent people belong to the first group. Currently, both of these fulfil memorial and museum functions. The buildings from the second group are also associated with violence, but in a completely different dimension to the first group. The inmates incarcerated there had committed crimes. These buildings are not symbols of important events in history, thus they were adapted to community facilities: today the former prison in Hasselt is the headquarters of the University and the former Het Arresthuis Prison and the Långholmen Central Prison are now hotels.

The adaptation of buildings for which the previous function is no longer desired or needed could bring a lot of benefits in various fields. In the first group mentioned above, an inextricable link is visible between the building and the exhibits presented inside. As a result of this, a new function becomes a symbolic continuation of the old function. This kind of adaptive action highlights the authenticity of the exposition and the place even more. It is also indicated that places associated with death are visited because of a desire for educational and emotional experiences. These are also the motives of heritage tourism [4]. Research also shows that a country's heritage is good for tourism, which in turn benefits its economy [21].

The old, untypical structures adapted to new functions, for instance, as hotels, are becoming extremely common due to tourists who are increasingly looking for non standard accommodation. Furthermore, the former prisons also allow guests to take part in unusual activities and games, such as an attempt to escape like a prisoner. There are even weddings hosted in such places. The interest in these objects is also enhanced by the original features which were preserved in them. This provides individuality and originality for adapted place – such as example is a steel door in the hotel in Långholmen [7, 10].

The subjects of this research were prisons which were reused after fulfilling their primary functions. As has been shown, these places are classified in literature as 'difficult heritage'. However, they should not be unequivocally classified. Although prisons are places connected with violence and may cause negative emotions, it is possible to break the prejudices which arose from their original function and find them new, not obvious functions. These buildings can symbolically continue their original function and become memorial places which contribute to the education of young generations. Nevertheless, after a careful diagnosis of the history of the site, it is possible to detach these places from negative emotions and use them as non-memorial places. Adapted prisons could become a catalyst for change and have influence on the development of tourism in their area and thus bring the same economic benefits as any other building. It is important to find a good balance between the commemoration of past events and the introduction of changes to the structures related with history. As a result of this, it is possible to reuse former prisons without causing offence memory of these places. A properly implemented function will contribute to preserving the building and its integration with the contemporary environment.

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