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THIS IS NOT A SQUARE OF A RURAL VILLAGE

Sabrina Puddu

fig. a. The central-square-that-is-not-a-square in the penal colony of Isili, Sardinia, Italy. The colony, established in 1878, continues to function as a prison. Drawing by the author, F. Spanu and A. Taccori.

«It was not exactly a prison. Central supervision was given up and replaced with twelve independent but still autocratic family units, planned to appear as part of a small rural village. [...] Authority had been given another structure, equally severe yet more domestic, in which architecture, though still a force, was less central to the process of reformation.»[1]

There are instances where design does not aim to portray a perfect present, but a fallible one at the service of an envisioned perfect future. The result is the displacement of familiar certainties so that what would appear to be the square of a normal rural village is in fact the core of the institution most detached from the flow of everyday life. This is the central open space of a prison – indeed a very peculiar one.

It was the second half of the 19th century when six penal colonies were built on the island of Sardinia under the auspices of the Italian Ministry of Justice. They occupied large portions of rural areas that the national government erroneously considered vacant of people and activities and sought to reclaim through convicts' labor. To list them in a chronological order, the first to be established were the colonies of San Bartolomeo (1860) in the south of the island and of Cuguttu (1864) in the northwest. Both were opened at the moment of transition from the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia to the Kingdom of Italy that was unified in 1861. After about a decade, additional four penal colonies followed: Castiadas (1875) in a vast territory on the southeastern coast; Isili (1878) and Mamone (1883) in the inland; and Asinara (1885) on a smaller island in the northwest. During fascist regime among the many colonies planned by Mussolini only one was actually built in Sardinia – Porto Conte-Tramariglio (1938) – also on the coast. The final episode of this historical trajectory was the establishment of the colony of Is Arenas (1960) under the auspices of the Italian Republic and located in derelict mining areas.[2]

Most of these penal settlements were planned with the final objective to become colonies for civilians in the not too distant future. To 21st century eyes – eyes that supposedly live in an age of total communication and cannot but take for granted the separation of prison and everyday life as two incompatible domains – there could probably be no starker contradiction than conceiving of a settlement planned for delinquents that can be smoothly turned into civil society. Such contradiction, however, is much more blurred if one considers penal colonies within the cultural context in which they were conceived. Indeed, if we look at some of the settlements for civilian productive communities that were planned in the 18th and 19th century under the will of enlightened entrepreneurs or national governments – like for example the Royal Saltworks at Chaux planned by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux – the similarities with a prison would appear clearer than commonly accepted.[3] We are in fact accustomed to read such settlements as instances of a growing society of control and discipline, where communities of production were created in vitro either at the service of newly born industry or of modernised agriculture.

The civilians who were envisioned as the future inhabitants of the Sardinian penal colonies were supposed to be farmers. They would be relocated from other villages into the former colony where they would have become owners of houses and agricultural plots. Taking on the rural labor previously done by the prisoners, the new dwellers were to become exemplar for a new society – a modern, productive, and respectful of new regulations one. Moreover, it was a society that was to accept an economic paradigm based on the absolute private ownership of the land. Such a paradigm had to be imposed on local communities in order to change their ingrained habits and socio-economic condition.[4]

The tension between a carceral present and a potential civic future informed the design of the colonies. Doubt and uncertainty were inherent to them; flexibility and symbolism were at odds. The main challenge for the founders of the colonies was how to design a spatial structure that could be reused for another – and in many respects opposite – purpose. They had to solve the practical question of how to organize the basic necessities and contingencies of prison management while keeping in mind those of a civilian settlement. Concomitantly an image of architecture was to be found that could at one moment represent a penal environment and subsequently an emerging sense of ‹civitas›.

The extension of these prisons was so vast – up to 6,000 hectares for a single settlement – that it implied a wide territorial project, in which extensive infrastructure organised the main components of the prison-settlement in a kind of network: a central core and a number of detached branches scattered in the vastness of the countryside. The core was a proto-urban settlement whose layout recalled that of a rural

fig. b. Most of the Sardinian penal colonies were conceived with the purpose to become, in the future, the setting for rural communities of civilians. A family of farmers, posing in a 1950s picture in front of their new homes in the converted former penal colony of Castiadas, Sardinia, Italy. Picture by Elio Poddighe, from Archivio Fotografico Ersat, Fondo Ufficio Stampa ETFAS, Agenzia Laore, Regione Autonoma della Sardegna.

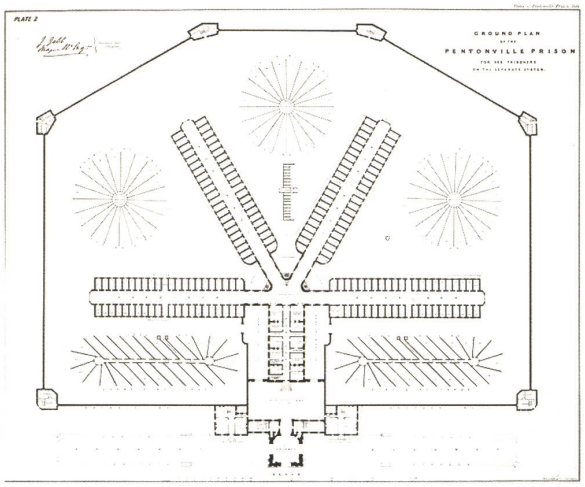
village and comprised a series of single-function buildings: the inmates' dorms, the agents' barracks, the infirmary, the administration, as well as production facilities, the school, the church, the cemetery, the post office, the bakery and, finally, the houses and all the general services for the unusual community of the colony. In addition to the inmates other inhabitants including the director, the priest, the doctor, the agronomist and the agents were planned to live there. Most of them lived in this surrogate village with their wives and kids. Indeed, from the very beginning, colonies were to satisfy all the basic needs of civil life and of a free society – leisure and death included, hence the presence of cinemas and cemeteries. Buildings were usually located along one or more streets departing from the central core and leading to the fields and pastures. Whilst most of the buildings had one storey and a basic rural appearance, some others – like the administration building, the church, the hospital, the military barracks and the inmates' dormitory – retained an institutional, monumental character. The latter stood out for their size and were endowed with distinctive architectural dignity in stark opposition to the utilitarian, rural or industrial aspect of other ancillary buildings. Moreover, their disposition was related to the formation of gathering spaces such as squares and gardens, or to other conventional urban devices like tree-lined boulevards.[5] The everyday urban character of these spaces remained at a potential level in wait for its final redemption.

The plans for a second wave of colonization – a civic one – foreshadowed the transformation of the colony's central core into the service and institutional center of a rural territorial city, whereas the small detention branches were to support an extensive territorial grid empowering an agrarian urbanism.[6] In this fiction, civilian institutions – such as a town hall, a library, or a civic center – would take charge of the buildings of the former prison and unleash the full urban potential of the settlement. Yet, such urbanity would retain as part of its DNA the ambiguity that characterised the settlement from the beginning of its life as a penal environment and that derived from its inherent imperfection.

To phrase it with Michel Foucault, the founders of the colonies were creators of ‹Prisons Boiteuse›; limping prisons where the perfection and precision that characterized the rational design of canonical walled-prisons was given up.[7] Their birth dates back to the exact moment in which the architecture of prisons had reached its spatial and technical climax. The construction of the model walled-prison of Pentonville – based on rigid radial geometry with equally distributed cells and a central point for supervision – began in England in 1840 and was immediately elected as a model throughout Europe. In the same year the ‹Colonie Agricole at Mettray› was opened in France. While European cities were increasingly being spotted by walled-prisons, the countryside started to become the domain for a vast number of penal colonies. This was a type of institution apparently more permissive, but also more selective and impalpably invasive.

The birth of modern penal colonies – for which Mettray stands as prototype – is acknowledged by both Michel Foucault and architect Robin Evans in their respective studies of 18th-19th century prison reform – the former's ‹Surveiller et Punir› (1975) and the latter's ‹The Fabrication of Virtue› (1982)[8]. According to Foucault it is the opening of Mettray – more than the celebrated Panopticon – which marks the moment when the formation of the modern carceral system is finally accomplished.[9] He discusses the ‹Colonie Agricole› as a marginal para-carceral institution that frees discipline from the core of the penal system – the prison – to project it onto the wider domain of human activities whilst making explicit its objective: to impose discipline in order to fabricate productive bodies – «both docile and capable»[10]. Robin Evans argues that the reform of prisons serves as the testing bed for a new kind of architecture. That is to say, it is in the prison that architecture becomes fully aware of its power of shaping and directing human activities. For him, Mettray marks the moment in which such awareness – of which Pentonville is the ultimate manifestation – begins to weaver. Reformative discipline – empowered by the architecture of prisons – does not evanish but is retained only for those who deserve it, namely the young or good inmates to be hosted in institutions other than the prison – penal colonies being a point in case – while the latter remains targeted to particularly dangerous individuals for whom there is no hope for rehabilitation whatsoever.

The first Sardinian penal colonies were established twenty years after Mettray and in parallel to the development and refinement of compact cellular prisons. Like in the



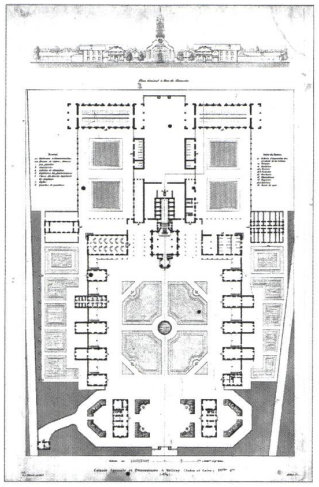


fig. c. Penal Colonies are ‹Prisons boiteuse› where certainties begin to weaver. Comparison between the model prison Pentonville built in London, 1840–1842 and the prototypical Colonie Agricole at Mettray, opened in France in 1840 (right).

French colony strict confinement and central supervision were given up, for there was neither a wall enclosing the colonies nor a central place for observation. Redemption of the inmates – now selected on the basis of good behaviour and non-violent attitude – was to be achieved through the deployment of social control that rarely relied on solitary confinement and was inseparable from a routine based on work in the open-air. However, if Mettray had a style coherently rural and bucolic, Sardinian colonies were a pastiche of rural imagery and of a minor version of the neoclassic or revivalist styles – considered more appropriate to institutional buildings.

The exception to this divergence is the colony of Porto Conte-Tramariglio, the last to be designed with the original double aim and timing of its 19th century predecessors, and built between 1938 and 1941.[11] The neo-ruralist propaganda of the fascist government fostered an accurately planned fast pace with which the stages of design, construction, first (penal) colonisation, and handing over to civil society were to happen. In this way the 19th century dream of instrumentally using penal colonies as tools for a future modern agriculture and a selective gentrification of the countryside was reinvigorated. Engineer Arturo Miraglia was commissioned to produce a plan for the settlement and its surrounding territory. He designed each building in a rationalist style with the only exceptions of the church and the main dormitory, which blinked to neoclassicism. The coherence of style was paralleled by the coherence of the overall plan of the colony. As illustrated in a scale model produced for Tramariglio, the spatial principles of the 19th century penal settlements and those of the modern garden city merged, while rationalism was elected as the totalitarian style that, by matching sobriety and sophistication, could simultaneously handle the domestic, the rural and the institutional dimensions as well as the present and future values of the resident community.

The building where the translation from penal to civil had always proved the most challenging was the inmates' dormitory. The dorm of the older colonies was a centripetal monolith – a sort of compact prison in miniature that would be difficult to imagine as anything but a dormitory. Conversely, Miraglia designed the dorm in Tramariglio as a U-shaped building that was opened onto the seaside if it wasn't for a wall closing the fourth side and creating a quadrangle.

To erase any doubt about his intentions he wrote a memo in which he listed the few architectural operations to be done in order to transform the dormitory into a town hall overlooking the public square, once the wall had been easily knocked down. To illustrate the potential civicness of his architectural design he drew a wide-angle central perspective depicting the buildings surrounding a square. In this way also the last formal taboo – that is, the possibility to transform a building designed for confinement into a civic infrastructure for the future – was overcome.

Today, the dormitory of Tramariglio houses the historical archives of the colony and the headquarters of the natural park that has been established on its territory. While it has been turned into a civilian building, none of the architectural operations programmed by Miraglia have been accomplished. Thus the wall facing the seaside has never been knocked down and probably never will, given today's predilection for preserving the memory of the former prison in the service of our – and the tourist industry's – fear of erasing history. Vice versa, in the three penal colonies that are still in operation today in Sardinia the institutional buildings and open spaces continue to play a central role for the prison community. However, the community does not inhabit them according to common imagery of village-life taking place in gardens and squares. Nobody stops to chat in the potential square just as no one sits to rest, or plays in the gardens, or brings flowers and prays on the cemetery tombs. Nevertheless, the square, the garden and the cemetery are all clean and decorously maintained. While never really turned into civilian settlements, the ambiguous nature of the colonies remains ingrained within an idea of urban decorum and keeps our doubts alive about the nature of these settlements. Whereas in Tramariglio the resident cultural institution wishes to recover the memory of the prison – a place of sufferance and enclosure whose memories are being philologically rebuilt in the spaces of the archive – the central-square-that-is-not-a-square of one of the colonies still in operation reminds us of the lucid dream of its founders. It was a dream depicting buildings and open areas as spaces of transition waiting for future ‹civitas› – places of doubt and ambition rather than tedious certainties.

fig. d,e. The surrogate village, pictures of the penal colony of Isili, Sardinia, Italy, 2014 by the author and F. Spanu.

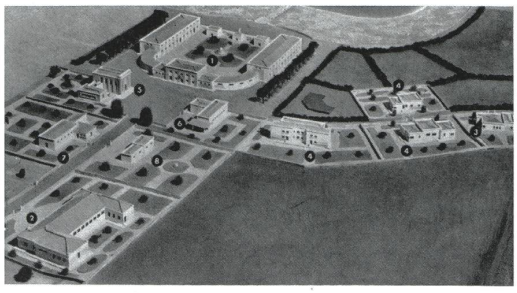


fig.f. The spatial principles of the penal colony and those of the modern garden city merge, while rationalism is elected as the style that simultaneously handles the domestic, the rural and the institutional dimensions. Scale model of the project for the village of Tramariglio in the penal colony of Porto Conte, by Arturo Miraglia, aprox. 1938, published by Giorgio Peghin e Gianluca Zini (eds.), La Colonia Penale Di Porto Conte, Delfino Editore, Sassari 2015.

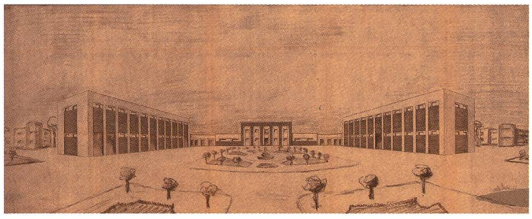


fig.g. Imagining a building designed for reform and confinement as a civic infrastructure for the future: representation of the central square of the inmates' dormitory in the penal colony of Porto Conte-Tramariglio, Sardinia, Italy. Drawing by Arturo Miraglia, aprox. 1938, from the historical archive of Laore, Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, Folder 95.

1 Robin Evans, ‹The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture 1750-1840›, Cambridge 1982, p. 393.

2 For an overview about the experience of Sardinian Penal Colonies see: Franca Mele, ‹La fondazione della colonia penale›, in: M.Gutierrez, A.Mattone, F. Valsecchi (eds.), ‹L'isola dell'Asinara. L'ambiente, la storia, il parco›, Nuoro 1998, pp. 94 ff.; Franca Mele, ‹L'Asinara e le colonie penali in Sardegna: un'isola penitenziaria?›, Mario da Passano (ed.), ‹Le Colonie Penali nell'Europa dell'ottocento. Atti del convegno internazionale organizzato dal Dipartimento di Storia dell'Università di Sassari e dal Parco nazionale dell'Asinara›, Roma 2004, pp. 189 ff.; Franca Mele, ‹Le isole sono nate fatte per luoghi di pena. Pianosa e le colonie penali agricole nell'Italia dell'Ottocento›, in: MSCG, XXVI/2, dicembre 1996, pp. 359-382.

3 Anthony Vidler, ‹Architecture, Management, Morals›, in: Lotus, n. 14, March 1977; Anthony Vidler, ‹The Writing of the Walls: Architectural Theory in the Late Enlightenment›, Princeton 1987.

4 Gian Giacomo Ortu, ‹Ager et urbs: trame di luogo nella Sardegna medievale e moderna›, Cagliari 2014.

5 See also Sabrina Puddu, ‹Colonie Penali Agricole In Sardegna. Appunti per una comprensione dei principi insediativi›, in Giorgio Peghin e Gianluca Zini (eds.), ‹La Colonia Penale Di Porto Conte›, Sassari 2015.

6 Differently from the proto-village the multiple detention branches, scattered in the territory, were usually composed of one single building. This was an introverted structure where inmates' dorms and productive annexes shared the same courtyard. They were located close to the boundary of the vast prison-territory and in correspondence to the more fertile fields so that they could serve as garrisons of the borders and as prison-farms, with the double aim to control the territory and enhance its productivity. They also had a role in the perspective life of the territory: by colonizing peripheral areas the detention branches had to become the future support for an extensive territorial grid of civilian inhabitation. Such grid would be superimposed over the fields of the former penal colony to subdivide them into small plots, each corresponding to a house and assigned to a family of farmers.

7 Michel Foucault, ‹Surveiller et Punir. Naissance de la Prison›, Gallimar 1975, pp. 303-304.

8 In both studies, Mettray appears at the end of the trajectories traced by the two authors. Foucault's is a trajectory leading towards the formation of a vast carceral archipelago and to the establishment of a capillary disciplinary society. Evans builds an argument for finding in the history of reformed prisons the testing bed for the accomplishment of architecture's full potential as agent of reform.

9 «But why choose this moment as the point of emergence of the formation of an art of punishing that is still more or less our own? Precisely because this choice is ‹unjust›. Because it situates the ‹end› of the process in the lower reaches of criminal law. Because Mettray was a prison, but not entirely [...] Mettray, a punitive model, is at the limit of strict penalty. It was the most famous of a whole series of institutions which, well beyond the frontiers of criminal law, constituted what one might call the carceral archipelago.» Michel Foucault, ‹Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prison›, New York 1977, Part Four, Chapter III, The Carceral.

10 Ibid., p. 294.

11 Giorgio Peghin (ed.), ‹La Colonia Penale di Tramariglio. Architetture del Novecento nel Parco di Porto Conte›, Taranto 2010; Giorgio Peghin e Gianluca Zini (eds.), op.cit. The original drawings and documents of the projects for Tramariglio are held at the historical archive of Laore, Regione Autonoma della Sardegna.

Sabrina Puddu, born 1981, is an architect, teacher and researcher based in Sardinia, Italy, where she co-founded ‹urbanaarchitettura› with Francesco Zuddas. She holds a PhD in architecture and studied at the University of Cagliari and the Architectural Association. Her research focuses on the role of major public institutions—universities, hospitals, prisons—in shaping contemporary space.