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PRISON, PERCEPTION AND CONFINEMENT

WIĘZIENIE, PERCEPCJA I ZAMKNIĘCIE

Abstract

The article investigates the relationship between architecture and perception, treating the prison as a limiting case, conceived as a space characterised by conditions of particular anomaly arising from its intrinsic nature. Within it, movement is confined by insurmountable physical limits, while the restriction of the subject's agency leads to the deformation of needs and behaviours.
The prison is read as the outcome of a dual relational condition. On the one hand, the dimension of exteriority is expressed in its scale, whose extensive spatial reach produces self-referentiality and isolation from the urban context. On the other hand, the dimension of interiority is articulated both through physical enclosure, expressed by the main control devices – the wall and the cell – and through perceptual enclosure, produced by the regulation of light, shadow and chromatic space, by proportion and scale, and by the materiality of surfaces.
The paper opens a critical reflection on the possibility of rethinking the spatial conditions of confinement and the relationship between the prison and the urban context.

Keywords: *architecture, city, perception, prison*

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje problem relacji między architekturą a percepcją, traktując więzienie jako przypadek graniczny – przestrzeń charakteryzującą się szczególnymi warunkami anomalii, wynikającymi z jej immanentnej natury. W jej obrębie ruch zostaje ograniczony przez nieprzekraczalne bariery fizyczne, podczas gdy ograniczenie sprawczości podmiotu prowadzi do deformacji jego potrzeb i zachowań.
Więzienie zostaje ujęte jako rezultat dwojakiego uwarunkowania relacyjnego. Z jednej strony wymiar zewnętrzności wyraża się w jego skali, której rozległość przestrzenna prowadzi do samoreferencyjności i izolacji od kontekstu miejskiego. Z drugiej strony wymiar wewnętrzności kształtowany jest zarówno poprzez fizyczne zamknięcie, wyrażone za pomocą głównych środków kontroli – muru i celi, jak i poprzez zamknięcie percepcyjne, wytwarzane przez regulację światła, cienia i przestrzeni barwnej, a także przez proporcje, skalę oraz materialność powierzchni.
Artykuł otwiera krytyczną refleksję nad możliwością przemyślenia na nowo przestrzennych uwarunkowań uwięzienia oraz relacji między więzieniem a kontekstem miejskim.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, miasto, percepcja, więzienie*

1. INTRODUCTION

Space is the fundamental medium of architecture, shaping behaviour, regulating movement, and influencing how individuals interact. From this perspective, the body becomes the primary vehicle of spatial perception within a dynamic relationship[1]: individuals both contribute

[1] S. Holl, *Parallax*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2000, p. 13.

to the production and interpretation of space and are, at the same time, conditioned by it in their movements and behaviours[2]. The dimension of action is added to this relationship, through which the use of space may come into tension with its formal and functional configuration, thereby altering its meanings[3]. Space, action, and perception therefore cannot be understood separately, but must be considered as interdependent components of a single relational system.

Building on this premise, these relationships can be seen to manifest differently across architectural and urban contexts. Under ordinary conditions, the relationship between space and function generates open systems in which actions are flexible and only partially predictable. Public spaces provide a clear example: they are characterised by open accessibility and a heterogeneous coexistence of uses, where individual actions do not significantly constrain one another.

By contrast, in contexts of containment – where the environment affects interpersonal relations and individual well-being – space takes on a prescriptive role, imposing specific modes of action and interaction and thereby producing spatial conditions that are more rigidly defined, including at the perceptual level. Such contexts constitute a specific field of inquiry for understanding the role of architecture in processes of spatial control and organisation.

Within this framework, the prison represents a limiting case in which these dynamics are particularly intense. It can be understood as a spatial device in which the condition of confinement structurally governs the relationship between space, action, and perception. From this perspective, space operates as an instrument capable of orienting, determining, shaping, and controlling behaviour, rendering places legible in relation to their specific function[4]. The prison can be characterised as a restricted-use space, based on a dual condition of separation.

On the one hand, there is the physical enclosure, which introduces a spatial discontinuity and is further articulated in the cell as the elementary unit of isolation. On the other hand, the prison functions as a total institution[5], separated from the city, in which its relationship with the urban context is progressively reduced, eventually producing a form of spatial and geographical estrangement.

Building on these premises, the study focuses, on the one hand, on the internal spatial conditions of the prison, understood as the articulation of the enclosure–cell system and its associated material and perceptual devices – such as light, colour, and materiality – which define the condition of restricted inhabitation. On the other hand, it addresses the prison's progressive separation from the city, understood as the configuration of a "city within the city" characterised by isolation and functional autonomy, whose scale and self-referential nature place it outside the ordinary urban condition.

This dual condition significantly affects the perceptual dimension of the individual, resulting in a restriction of action that reshapes needs and behaviours. Although the era of corporal punishment and the spectacularisation of detention has come to an end[6], imprisonment can still be understood primarily as a condition in which the body becomes the principal medium of punishment, with limited possibilities for rehabilitation and social reintegration.

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[2] H. Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*, Éditions Anthropos, Paris 1974, p. 19.

[3] B. Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1994, p. 9.

[4] G. Agamben, *Che cos'è un dispositivo?*, Nottetempo, Milano 2006, p. 22.

[5] E. Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*, Anchor Books, New York 1961, p. xiii.

[6] M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Gallimard, Paris 1975, pp. 8–72.

In light of these considerations, the paper concludes by offering a critical reflection on the role of architecture in carceral contexts, intending to explore possible alternatives to the model of the isolated and enclosed prison. From this perspective, it discusses a set of design strategies that may help reinterpret the spatial conditions of detention and redefine the perception of the prison among those who inhabit it, pass through it, or observe it from the outside.

2. THE PRISON, THE CITY, AND EVERYDAYNESS

To understand how perception changes in relation to the degree of separation between the prison and the urban fabric, the contribution of carceral geography is particularly significant. This field within human geography examines spaces of detention, the practices that run through them, and the forms of control and regulation that structure them[7]. From this perspective, the prison is not a mere functional container but a complex spatial system in which spatial configuration and relations with the outside world jointly shape everyday life.

Within this framework, the progressive relocation of penal institutions to the urban periphery is not a random phenomenon but the outcome of specific planning decisions[8]. Whereas in the historic city – at least until the end of the nineteenth century – the prison was located within the urban centre and maintained direct relationships with its built surroundings, alongside other public buildings, the twentieth century witnessed a systematic reversal of this tendency. The construction of new institutions in peripheral areas, together with the decommissioning of those located within the city, reflects a logic of progressive exclusion that produces a double spatial rupture: the prison is not only a place of separation by definition, but also a physically distanced space from the city.

This dynamic is evident in numerous Italian cities, including Florence, Verona, Cagliari, Trento, and Syracuse, as well as in smaller centres such as Santa Maria Capua Vetere, where the decommissioning of institutions historically embedded in the urban fabric has been followed by the construction of autonomous penal compounds, configured as true carceral islands, devoid of relationships with their surroundings and located at the edges of peripheral areas (Ill. 1).

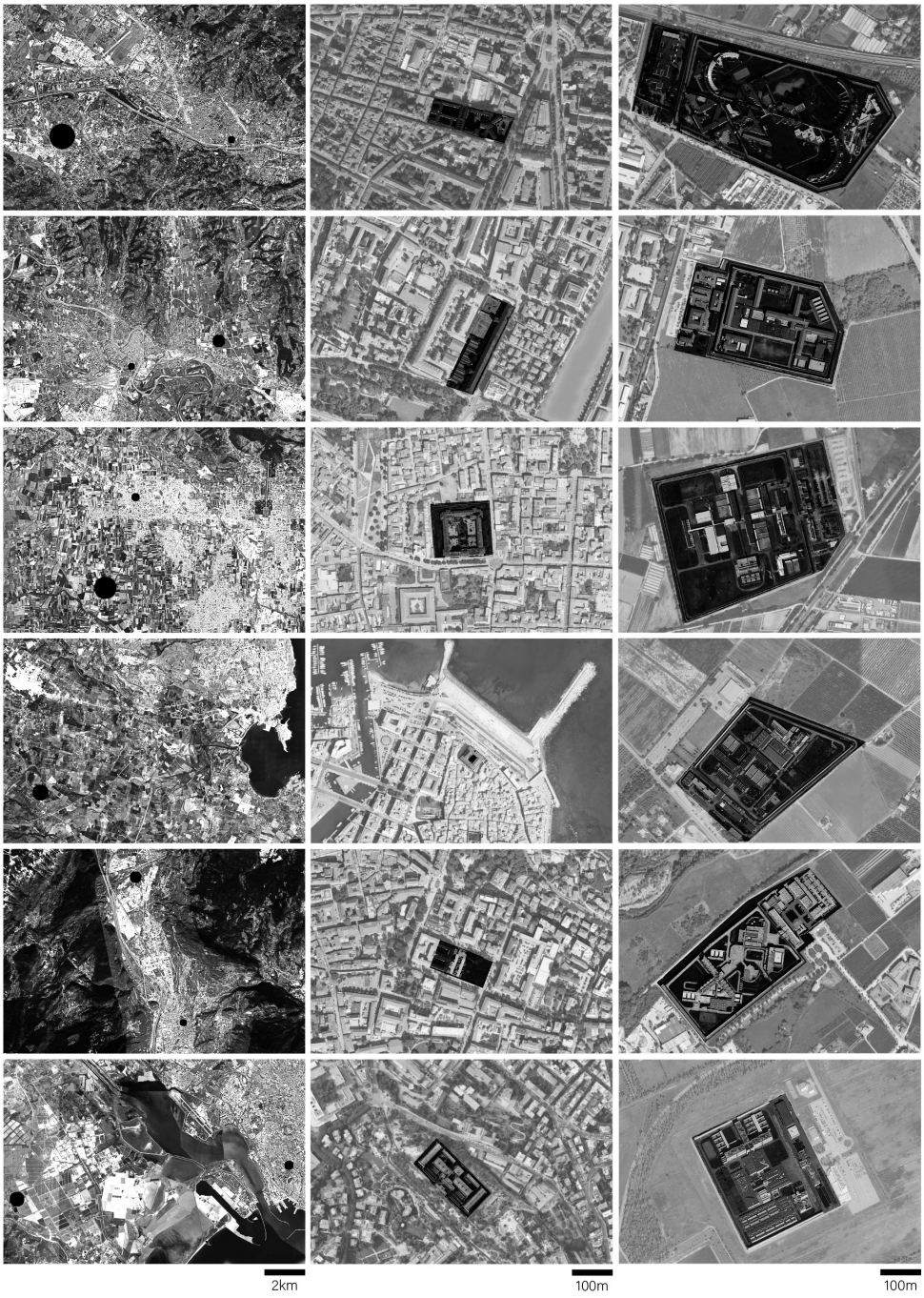
This process of progressive separation produces effects that are not limited to the reduced accessibility of the prison, but extend to the perceptual level as well. The prison's distance from the city contributes to diminishing its recognisability and familiarity within urban life, rendering it a hardly accessible and visible object, rarely encountered and progressively excluded from the city's collective imagination. This condition also affects the perception of those who are incarcerated: the limited possibility of observing urban life and the difficulty of maintaining direct relationships with their social ties – also due to the physical distance of the prison – contribute to reinforcing a condition of isolation. Unlike other urban buildings, the prison tends to take on the character of an opaque architecture. By contrast, Renaissance theorists such as Vitruvius, Alberti, and Palladio, while attributing austere qualities to such buildings, still classified them among public edifices to be located within the city[9].

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[7] D. Moran, J. Turner, A.K. Schliehe, *Conceptualizing the carceral in carceral geography*, "Progress in Human Geography" 2018, no. 42(5), pp. 666–686.

[8] S. Paone, *Dal carcere in città alla città-carcere*, [in:] S. Anastasia, F. Corleone, L. Zevi (eds.), *Il corpo e lo spazio della pena*, Ediesse, Roma 2011, pp. 119–131.

[9] M. Santangelo, *In prigione. Architettura e tempo della detenzione*, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa 2017, p. 16.



Ill. 1. Carceral geographies. From top to bottom: Florence, Verona, Sant'Angelo dei Lombardi, Syracuse, Trento, Cagliari. From left to right: map of cities with old and new prisons, old prison, new prison. Drawing by Filippo Marconi

In this context, the architectural question of the relationship between "inside" and "outside" – which had informed debates on the siting and integration of penal institutions as public buildings embedded in the urban fabric – appears to have progressively disappeared from cultural discourse[10]. The logic of excluding prisons from the city persists as a consolidated condition, widely accepted as inevitable and reproduced in new developments according to a logic of minimal impact.

The resulting physical and social isolation significantly affects the quality of the penal system itself: work, cultural activities, volunteering, and family visits – the main opportunities for engagement with the outside world – are increasingly limited, thereby undermining processes of social reintegration for incarcerated individuals. The prison, as a total institution, thus tends to operate as a system separated from its social, economic, and cultural context. Conceived as a self-sufficient organism, it assumes the characteristics of a closed device. An originally utopian orientation is progressively replaced by a dystopian condition, in which technical and functional considerations prevail over spatial and relational quality[11].

In response to this condition, a critical reflection is needed to reconsider prison architecture not as an isolated device, but as part of a broader system of relations, to be rethought in continuity with the urban and social context – as an integrated institution capable of acting as an active element within its surrounding reality.

3. THE ENCLOSURE THAT SHAPES THE MIND

If, in the relationship between prison and city, perception is shaped by distance and separation, within the prison it is intensified through the organisation and articulation of space. The quality of the carceral environment depends on the way living space is structured and on its capacity to respond to the individual's fundamental needs[12]. These needs unfold across multiple dimensions and find in architecture their primary condition of possibility.

They include, first, material and well-being requirements linked to basic activities such as eating, sleeping, and washing, which call for appropriate environmental conditions in terms of light, ventilation, material quality, and the presence of natural elements. Alongside these is the need for affective relations, which involves the maintenance of family and emotional ties and translates into the provision of spaces for encounter, capable of ensuring proximity and intimacy.

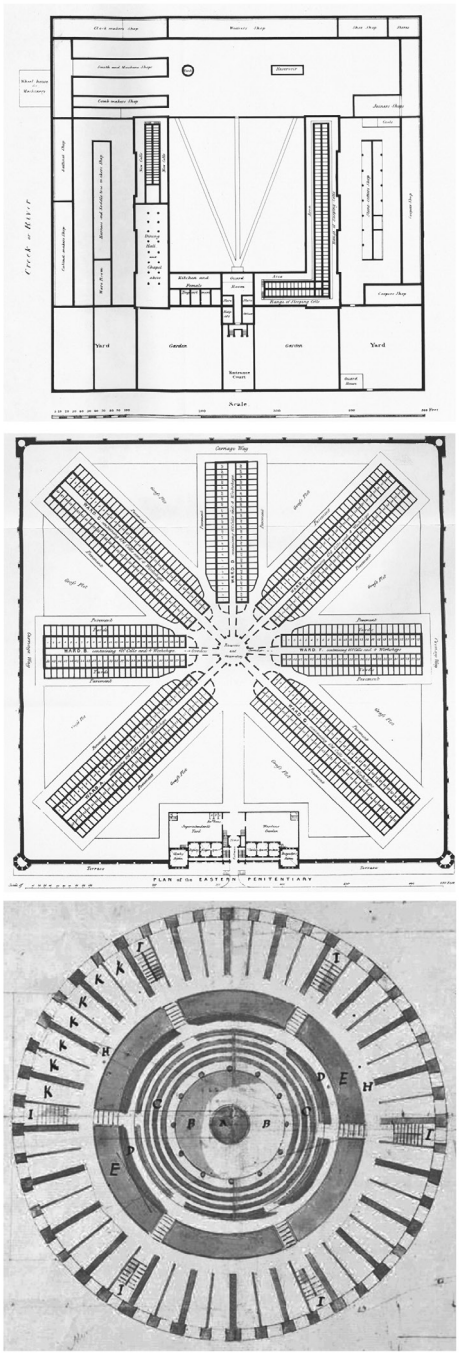
This is followed by the need for sociability, which concerns the possibility of establishing interpersonal relations, engaging in dialogue, and sharing experiences. This dimension is supported by collective spaces, as well as by the availability of places that allow, by choice, moments of privacy.

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[10] C. Marcetti, *Firenze, altri confini. La delimitazione della follia e gli spazi della pena*, [in:] G. Paba (ed.), *La città e il limite: i confini della città*, La Casa Usher, Firenze 1990, pp. 114–121.

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[12] C. Burdese, *Linee guida e idee progettuali per la nuova Casa Circondariale di Bolzano*, [in:] A. Pedrotti, M. Rottensteiner (eds.), *Dentro le mura, fuori dal carcere. Una ricerca sul nuovo carcere della Provincia di Bolzano*, Caritas Diocesi Bolzano-Bressanone, Merano 2014, pp. 30–49.



Ill. 2. From top to bottom: plan of Auburn Penitentiary (New York), image by United States Bureau of Prisons; plan of Cherry Hill Penitentiary (Philadelphia), image by United States Bureau of Prisons; plan of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, drawing by Willey Reveley

Finally, there is the need for self-realisation, linked to the provision of spaces for work, cultural activities, and religious practice, as well as the possibility – even if only to a limited extent – of personalising one's living space, thereby contributing to the construction of individual identity.

Within the carceral space, however, these needs are often constrained. The limited degree of control over one's environment and interaction with space affects individual well-being, while restricted mobility introduces a regime of control that undermines autonomy and may foster forms of apathy.

The presence of confined and overcrowded environments intensifies the perception of constraint, while repetitive spatial layouts, the chromatic and material uniformity of spaces, and the predominant use of artificial lighting contribute to producing spatial conditions experienced as oppressive by individuals in detention[13]. The result is a set of undifferentiated environments in which space does not respond to needs but rather redefines them, directly affecting behaviour, mental health, and interpersonal relations.

These dynamics are closely related to the constitutive elements of the prison: the enclosure, materialised through the wall, which, closing in on itself, has neither beginning nor end and establishes the distinction between inside and outside; and the cell, the minimal spatial unit of the prison and the primary space of confinement. Through their configuration, these elements structure the everyday experience of detention.

The perimeter wall encloses and circumscribes the prison space – a reinforced concrete barrier that holds together the multiplicity of buildings that compose it. It defines the penal institution and its community, giving physical substance to the enclosure and operating as a physical, visual, and perceptual boundary between inside and outside.

The cell, through its aggregation and serial repetition, contributes to defining the spatial organisation of the prison. It reflects the degree of humanity of an individual prison and, at the same time, that of society as a whole. Its configuration has shaped – and continues to shape – penal models, from the cellular prisons based on the linear Auburn system in New York, to the radial typology of Cherry Hill prison in Philadelphia, and finally to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon model (Ill. 2). These models have proved difficult to renew and continue to inform the configuration of contemporary penal institutions, which often remain tied to logics of spatial control and hierarchy, and to forms of confinement far removed from a conception of punishment oriented towards rehabilitation.

4. SCALE, INTEGRATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

Starting from the identified critical issues, architectural research is called upon to propose alternatives to current penal models, to challenge the conception of the prison as an autonomous and self-sufficient object, in favour of new forms of detention that are more open than closed.

From this perspective, the relationship between enclosure, building, and city must be reconsidered; it cannot be reduced to a logic of separation, but must instead be redefined as a field of relations. Within this line of thought, the wall can no longer be understood

[13] D.A. De' Rossi (ed.), *Non solo carcere. Norme, storia e architettura dei modelli penitenziari*, Mursia Editore, Milano 2016, pp. 233–278.

solely as a boundary device, but becomes an opportunity to develop an architecture that does not isolate but establishes relations with the city, transforming the enclosure from a barrier into a porous spatial device.

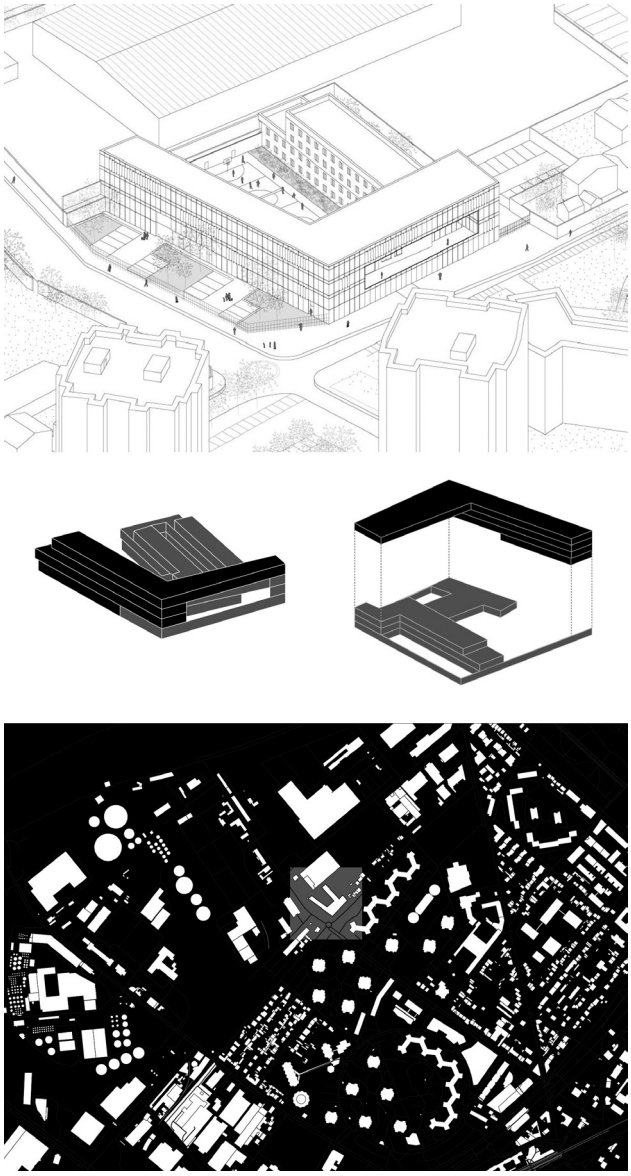
This paradigm shift unfolds through three interrelated design strategies: rescaling, integration, and differentiation, which directly affect the perception of the prison by altering the way it is experienced and recognised.

Rescaling refers to acting on the scale of the building, thereby influencing its perception as a lived space. In common perception, the prison building tends to be understood as an exceptional structure, detached from the logics of dwelling and hardly assimilable to domestic space. In reality, however, the prison cannot and should not be considered fundamentally different from forms of collective dwelling. Rescaling the building becomes a necessary step in implementing the principle of normalisation: to normalise carceral space means to progressively de-institutionalise the physical environment, bringing it closer to recognisable and everyday forms of habitation.

Integration refers to acting on the relationship between the prison and the city. Once its scale is reduced and its perceived exceptionalism diminished, its connection with the urban context alters the understanding of the prison as a separate and self-contained entity, fostering the involvement of the community in rehabilitative activities and reintegration processes. In this way, the prison ceases to function as an island and instead becomes a relational element within the city.

Differentiation refers, finally, to the quality of the internal spatial experience. The variety of spatial configurations and spaces interrupts the condition of uniformity and repetition that often characterises the carceral environment, introducing a more articulated perceptual structure. Within this perspective, and in compliance with the need to ensure safety and well-being for all actors involved, the diversification of spatial configurations may enable more coherent typological responses to different forms of incarceration and their related rehabilitative pathways.

A clear example of how these transformations can be implemented can be found in the case study of the Quartier de Semi-Liberté in Nanterre, within the metropolitan area of Paris, designed by LAN Architecture in 2019 (Ill. 3). The building takes the form of a compact, monolithic mass that opens towards the city through a large central void on its main façade. This void interrupts the physical continuity of the enclosure, transforming it into an inhabited thickness and producing visual openings that weaken the separation between interior and exterior. The wall is no longer conceived as a closed and opaque surface, but rather as an active interface capable of revealing and concealing, separating and connecting, restoring to the boundary a relational dimension in which closure coexists with openness. Within this framework, the organisation of the detention space also introduces significant innovations: the cells are accessed via wide walkways and oriented towards internal courtyards or planted gardens, thereby avoiding direct visual confrontation and fostering a more open, less oppressive spatial perception. Similarly, the collective spaces, located on the ground floor, are conceived as extensions of the courtyard, establishing a continuous relationship between indoor and outdoor environments and supporting everyday activities through spatial configurations that encourage interaction, autonomy, and a more diversified spatial experience.



Ill. 3. Minimum-security prison in Nanterre, designed by LAN. Image composition by Filippo Marconi

5. CONCLUSIONS

A modern penal system can be understood as an articulated network of institutions and professional practices, tasked with ensuring the continuity of the custodial function and the effectiveness of rehabilitative pathways. Within this network, the prison building is not a mere

operational support, but a primary spatial device through which the concrete conditions of the experience of detention are defined.

From this perspective, the quality of the system depends on the coherence between the aims of punishment and the spatial construction through which it is enacted. As a public building, the prison is not neutral with respect to the values it embodies: on the contrary, it makes them visible, structures them, and translates them into forms of experience through the capacity of architecture to produce liveable and domestic environments in which conditions of control do not entirely suppress the dimension of dwelling. It follows that the prison cannot be understood as a simple functional container, but rather as an architecture in which scale, degree of integration, and spatial articulation contribute to redefining the quality of the carceral condition and its perceptual dimension.

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