

Some notes on Prisons and Warehouses

Want to give some context:

About 3 years ago I moved to Chicago and was asked if I could teach a class at Stateville Prison.

I'd just moved from central Illinois where for about 5 years I'd been teaching art history at a prison. I had worked with the University of Illinois to start a college program at a prison, I facilitated reading groups in prison and more.

So I said yes.

Stateville was built in the 1920s and has one of the last round houses in the nation-- these are buildings built on the Jeremy Bentham model and was later theorized by Michael Foucault. The prison was built for about 1000 men but holds more than 1800. People in Stateville range in age from late teens to late 60's. Many people in Stateville will die there, they are serving extraordinarily long prison terms often for crimes that had they been sentenced in a different county or 20 years before, they'd be out.

I knew that my teaching one or four or 10 classes would not be enough and I started to ask other scholars and artists if they would also teach. Together, we started with almost nothing. The prison had a building that served as evidence of an education program that was once there. But all that was left was one lonely, ready to retire GED teacher, Ms. Coleman.

We called ourselves the Prison and Neighborhood Arts Project and negotiated with the prison to give us rooms, tables, chairs and bookcases.

From there we started to collect books for a small library-- in Illinois the state cut funding for prison libraries back in 2002 and before that interlibrary loans were eliminated. So incarcerated people are really cut off from the most basic resources. Over the last year we've organized classes + workshops on a semester schedule. We don't have a credit program-- it's actually really difficult to get a university or college to pay for this kind of project --- so until we can get a for-credit program in place, we are at the liberty to teach what we want. In two years we have taught classes such as "Political Poetries", "Visual Stories", "Art of the Letter"; "Coming of Age Narratives"; "Intro to Feminism" "Poor People's Movements" a class on Richard Wright, a year long Social Movements class and a year long class on Time and Freedom.

We also organize guest lecturer to come to the classes-- we've hosted more than 25 guest lecturers ranging from Civil rights activist and Mississippi freedom rider Diane Nash, to the Executive Director for the center for wrongful convictions, Rob Warden, to artists like Micheal Rakowitz, Laurie Palmer, Alberto Aguliar, and Nicholas Lampert, prison abolitionists such as Mariame Kaba from project NIA, a Chicago Alderman, Walter Burnett, and environmental rights organizer Emmanuel Pratt from the Sweetwater foundation.

Finally, our goal is to host annual exhibitions and events in the Chicago area with the intention of connecting the prison to Chicago neighborhoods in a way that makes visible and present questions of mass incarceration and the people it effects-- which is all of us.

I want to recognize all the people that have made this happen-- Ben Almassi, Aviva Futorian, Erica Meiners, Jill Petty, Claire Pentecost, Feresteh Toosi, Fred Sasaki, Nadya Pittendrigh, Tess Landon, Amy Partridge, Damon Locks, Laurie Palmer and many, many more people and area institutions.

But I'm here tonight to think more about the time and space through which we travel to get to Stateville.. So how did we get there?

To get to Stateville, we drive down the I-55 fwy which is a industrial corridor. It's an *atypical* drive. Most prisons in the state were built during a boom of prison construction in the 1980s and 1990s (Illinois built 25 prison facilities in those two decades alone) the prisons were built outside of population centers in towns like Tamms, Vienna, Taylorville, Shawnee and other small towns across the state. Thus, our drive to Stateville is quite unique because it's in a metropolitan area. Along the freeway is a range of industries like INtegrated INdustries Corporation, Barr Transportation Network, CBSL Transportation Services, UPS, La Grou Distribution Services, Pierce Distribution Services, Roadlink Intermodal Logistics, APL Logistics and more. From the seat of the car we can see mega-warehouses for RR Donnelly, Home Depot, Quantam Foods, JMK Handtools, D and H Computer Parts and Service.

An article from Midwest Real Estate News in 2012 stated:

“Several submarkets throughout the Chicago industrial market have reported strong results....but none seem better positioned for growth than the southwest I-55 corridor. The growth of the SW I-55 corridor has been nothing short of amazing during the past 20 years....the roughly 10-mile span of I-55 ... has transformed from vast empty cornfields to roughly 60 million square feet of industrial facilities.

During the hottest periods of real estate activity recorded from 1997 – 2000 and again from 2004 – 2007, nearly 45 million square feet of new space was added to this submarket..... “

This area, built over the last 25 years constitutes one of the world's largest and busiest intermodal facilities where products are transferred from barge or train to trucks for distribution. Chicagoland is the number one container handler in the Western Hemisphere with 25 intermodal facilities. Will County, the county that Stateville prison is in, is now home to the biggest intermodal facility in the region called Logistics Park Chicago. It was built with 150 million dollars of public funds and is situated in a Foreign Trade Zone which is a area outlined as juridically outside of US customs territory so it offers discounted fees and tariffs to companies. There are an estimated 150,000 workers who load and move products in these facilities. They are often referred to as "Perma-Temp" meaning they are laid-off and re-hired under temporary contracts-- The companies that own the warehousing and supply chains keep labor costs low through contracting with temp. agencies who hire, fire and re-hire workers-- making union organizing almost impossible.

So how did we get here?

In 1980 one of every 800 people in the U.S. was in prison or jail. In 1980 the national prison population at the time of 350,000 was declining.

Today one of every 99 people in the U.S. are in prison or jail (not including the thousands held by U.S. Marshals and Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). 2.3 million people are incarcerated today:

- 70% of people in prison are people of color.
- 60% of people in prison are illiterate
- 10% are women of all races
- 2.7 million children have parents that are in prison.

- More than half of all state prisoners reported an income of less than \$2000/month prior to their arrest.

- 20,00 to 30,000 thousand people in U.S. Prisons are held in solitary confinement at any given time-- a practice that is considered torture by many international bodies.

Sex offenders are often held in confinement for decades in administrative units, after serving their sentence, with no option of parole.

In other words people in prison are black and brown, they are uneducated, underemployed, they are poor men and women and their families and communities often 'do time' with them.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Illinois (and most other states too) were busy building prisons and passing laws to confine people for longer and longer prison terms, while industry was busy offshoring factory labor and building intermodal networks to connect products made elsewhere to people in the region.

Between 1985 and 2010 new drug laws imposed longer or more severe sentences, and any 'good time' served in prison was eliminated meaning that there is no reduction of sentences for any rehabilitative work that people in prison do. As such, people spend much longer time in prison than they or even the state's budget offices anticipated.

In 1994, Bill Clinton signed a federal crime bill act that:

--created 60 new offense eligible for the death penalty

--funded 100,000 new police officers

--dedicated 9.7 billion for prison building and 6.1 billion for prevention programs

and

--The bill also eliminated the pell grant to people in prison. At that time there were over 700 college programs in more than 1100 state prisons. All but a handful of those programs closed. Also in 1994 Bill Clinton brokered the North America Free Trade Agreement (or NAFTA). In that decade, the US worked in partnership with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (or APEC), we negotiated the US-Jordan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the US-Vietnam bilateral trade agreement, and helped China enter the World Trade Organization.

During this same time more and more people are moving to cities, while the industrial corridor and prisons are built outside of the city, out of our view, off our radar. If spatial relationships is one block that builds a carceral landscape, concepts of time could be another. The following section was co-written with Erica Meiners.

Inside prisons, time is slow. People mark time, struggle to accrue good time, and imagine ways to make up for lost time with loved ones. Time crawls: waiting to be 'keyed out', waiting for a letter, waiting for a hearing, waiting to get through the gates, waiting in the visitors' room.

Racialized and heterogendered, time works against people: select nine-year-olds become juveniles culpable for their actions, fifteen-year-olds are tried as adults, and people struggle to survive sentences of 80 years (equivalent to natural life, yet not sentenced as such). Mandatory minimums, indeterminate sentences, truth in sentencing, parole, probation-- all indicate a specific kinds of 'hard' time, surveilled time, analog time and slow, stretched time.

While the US spends tax dollars to slow time and to lock up the largest number of people in the world, other "free world" segments of the population experience frenetic time. Just-in-time production, contingent and flexible labor contracts, and digital devices elongate hours of labor

and require some to be perpetually at work. Networked machines require attention in many places at once, transporting messages and demanding responses while on the bus or in our cars. “I’m *so busy*” is the acceptable and assumed professional knowledge workers’ response to “how are you?” Others across the carceral continuum (1) also experience work speed up, heightened surveillance, and devalued time. The push to raise the minimum wage in the US highlights the question: what is the base price for one’s labor, for our working time? The federal government sets this at an already low \$7.25 an hour, but many - including undocumented or temporary workers, day-laborers, nannies and others - cannot access even this wage.

Disposable, cheapened, the labor time of the worker and the hard time of the ‘criminal’ is integral to the accelerated “good life” promised by a global city.

Once coveted by workers, time was made visible in the labor movement’s slogan, “Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep and eight hours for what we will.” United Auto Workers political education materials from the 1950s included posters with the message to work less for equal pay: “Fight automation fallout with fewer hours and no loss in pay.” Union reformers encouraged policies that would give time to “do with what we will,” for the citizenry to participate in democracy. “What we will” is still a challenge to defend. The “fierce urgency of now”, in Martin Luther King’s words, often makes claims for life and pleasure that feel impossible. When we are all free we can rest and play, right?

These are symptoms of how institutions across the carceral continuum shape free and unfree worlds/lives: in an era of radically unequal compensation, underemployment and

unemployment,-- speed up and overwork is a norm in contrast with the slow-down of time inside controlled conditions of confinement.

So as a way to understand how do we get to Stateville-- I'd like to keep these two examples in mind: the movement of the industrial corridor, with it's just in time, globalized production time at work, and the static space and slow time of the prison, that's just down the road.

When first I was asked to teach at Stateville I thought it was important work that could forge solidarities and after teaching in prison for 6 years I knew that men in prison were smart, they had keen ideas about the world around them, they acutely understood racism, violence, their own mistakes, labor and time, and they had something to say about it. I also knew that no matter what kinds of programs or educational opportunities there were in prison, no matter how many garden projects or theatre programs existed at the end of the day prison is still a cage.

This fact is evidenced again and again as education or vocational programs and even recreational resources for incarcerated people have been eliminated due to our state of permanent budget crisis. With our motley crew of artists, writers and scholars at Stateville, we recognize that we must both recreate what the state has eliminated but do it with a deep knowledge of the mechanisms of control, we must do it much better with a sense of solidarity and a vision of decarceration and justice.

We must keep in mind what economies control our clock and keep in view what has been designed out, what has been spatially organized off our paths and ask questions about about how

we can use our institutions, our skills and knowledge to collaborate with incarcerated people, workers and other segregated groups to create new visions.