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### The Public Space of the Prison

[Feature Article](#) by [Craig Willse](#)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, how can we productively interrogate not only the concept of public housing, but even public space? In this information age of accelerating globalization, many of our conceptual categories begin to break down. Edge city, suburbia, domesticity, and civic sphere lose some of their coherency and relevance as, for example, the speed of public transport extends the boundaries of the city and as private sector corporations take on more and more functions we previously associated with the state. A vocabulary that presupposes stable or natural spatial formations inadequately prepares us for the challenge of intervening in the production of homelessness, the obliteration of affordable housing, and the fortification of unsafe and substandard living conditions for millions of the United States poor.

On the other hand, moving an analysis of public housing out of a narrow conversation of housing per se—by discussing private housing versus public, rent-control versus market forces, ghettoization versus mixed-income communities—allows us to think of housing as one mode in a total system of organizing populations and bodies. Hence we might look at the creation and devolution of public housing alongside the demolition of mental health facilities under Ronald Reagan, the growth of corporate business improvement districts in the management of urban hot spots, and the closing off of social services and education to undocumented migrants. Looking at the U.S. prison industry also exposes something about the space of public housing and the control of populations. At an obvious level, in the white supremacist, racist, capitalist United States, public housing and prisons both exist to maintain and control similar and often overlapping sets of people: poor people, immigrants, and people of color. Just as the rhetoric of crime and safety veils a thinly coded racism and war on the poor, the language of public housing (from debates about an apparent culture of poverty to plans for developing "self-sufficiency" in residents) evidences an entrenched and racist belief that poverty stems from personal irresponsibility rather than structural market forces. And so the continual reproduction of "criminal classes" that meets and justifies the economic demands of the prison industry occasions another targeting of these same residents of prisons and public housing. In former mayor Rudolph Guiliani's new New York City the connections are painfully clear: the eradication of affordable housing programs and the drastic reduction of homeless shelter beds accompanied the creation of "quality of life" crimes that in fact criminalized the very displacement caused by administration housing policies. Homeless people looking to spend a night on the train but arrested for jumping subway turnstiles found themselves inserted into New York's most generously funded housing for the poor—jails and prisons. In this sense, to examine the "public" of public housing, we might look not so much at concrete forms of construction, but rather the circuitous movement of money and bodies.

At a talk in New York City, activist and writer Angela Davis posed the question, Where is the space of the prison-industrial complex? Her own reply—everywhere—required the audience to reconsider formal

architectural divisions that suggest a temporal and geographic containment within walls (in this case, prison walls) and to imagine instead the thorough prisonization of American social space over the past three decades. To think about how those of us outside prison confines move through the prison-industrial complex brings to mind the sale and purchase in the private market of consumer goods manufactured in prisons, the economic revitalization of post-industrial small towns with the creation of prison jobs, and the development of technologies of surveillance that track and police civic and domestic arenas, among other occurrences. In pointing out the reach of our implication in prisons, Davis effectively demonstrates the responsibility we all have in their maintenance.

And while much important writing and organizing has taken place around the crucial issue of the private prison (for-profit institutions run by state-contracted corporations), drawing from the insight provided by Davis, I wish to add to that conversation a consideration of the publicity of prisons that refuses a binary of state/corporate to explore how a carceral logic deforms the space of the public, and the very body politic of the public itself. We can clearly see how the prison shrinks the public sphere by instating a system of labor colonies with a continually growing population that currently exceeds two million people. We must also look towards such instances as the disenfranchisement of former prisoners who have been stripped of voting rights—thirty-one percent of adult Black men in Florida cannot vote—and in so doing see how the borders of the prison bleed out into larger social space and the bodies of "convicts" continue their incarceration in the civic spheres.

While voting rights may seem to some a symbolic loss with no practical consequences in the context of our Republicat electoral politics, in terms of housing, the implications of the of the extended carceral space manifest clearly and disastrously. We can look briefly at three forms of housing for a marginalized public: what we traditionally call public housing, private market low-income housing and homeless shelters. Applications to state-run public housing projects can now be rejected solely on the basis of former convictions. Given the over-exposure of people of color to the criminal injustice system, this obviously impacts an enormous segment of those seeking public housing. In the private housing market in New York City, tenants with drug convictions can find themselves evicted regardless of any aspect of their tenancy. While some landlords can use this policy as a way of emptying buildings of long-standing rent stabilized tenants in gentrifying neighborhoods with increasing rents, these cases may also effectively be brought through pressure from the District Attorney's office whether the landlord wishes to evict or not. Finally, someone seeking a bed in a city run shelter for the night will encounter an ID check to see if any outstanding warrants exist; again such a person's options at that point include possible arrest for violating a quality of life law on the subway or street, or certain arrest at a shelter/ante-prison.

When we remember that finding and keeping appropriate housing is often a basic term of parole; we can understand parole as a technology of carceral logic. By no means a method for releasing "dangerous criminals" early (the racist media myth), parole very much functions to extend prison sentences indefinitely, as former convicts are returned to prison for minor infractions. The impossibility of securing shelter almost guarantees, directly (violating parole) or indirectly (provoking illegal activities like being homeless), the continual return of the prison-laborer to the prison camp.

The prisonization of cities effectively creates permanent convicts with no place to belonging outside the prison cell. Home becomes a site of displacement, a location of criminalization. It does not seem a coincidence that new restrictions on who can qualify for public housing arrive at a time when cities across the country are demolishing high-rise buildings that contain thousands of units and replacing them with low-rise townhouse developments that can meet only a fraction of the present need. These new townhouses, "public housing-lite," will integrate more seamlessly into an urbane, rather than urban, aesthetic refiguration of the cityscape that benefits gentrification and the displacement of the poor. So

we can think of prisons and public housing in terms Sze Tsung Leong's characterization of control space: "Control space is engineered and obsessively sought after as a survival mechanism within increasingly irrational, volatile, competitive, and voracious markets.... It is the solution to a desperation born of the constant threat of terminal decline." In this sense we can see how public housing loses its former social welfare function and comes to serve the needs of a globalizing economy that refashions city centers into tourist enclaves. We can also see, of course, how prisons do not in any sense serve to reform criminals but rather to form new industries and labor forces. As what we used to call cities come undone around us, public and private fold into one another, producing the public space of the prison and the prison space of public housing: the prison is everywhere, the home is nowhere.

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