

Ventotene and Gorizia: Opening the Panopticon

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What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of the Leviathan?

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*¹

Ever closer

Amid the ruins of a war-torn continent, European integration was set up both as a project of openness and as an open project. It was a direct response to the horrors of war and, on a deeper level, it set out to reform the structure of power that had led to that crisis: the state, in its nationalist degeneration.² In a spatial sense, it pursued openness by removing borders and connecting previously separated domains. From Locke to Schmitt, enclosure was understood as the basis of statehood.³ The act of fencing off generated identity as well as conflict. Or, rather, identity through conflict. Rob Walker has described it as the politics of 'inside versus outside.'⁴

The concept of openness also underlay the temporal dimension of European integration. From the very beginning, it was envisioned as an open work of economic and political integration that could move in different directions over time, without a pre-determined destination.⁵ In the literature on European integration, this is known as the issue of finality. Joschka Fischer has provided a thorough reflection on this issue, analysing the integration of Europe as 'a gradual process with no blueprint for the final state.'⁶ The term 'process' is key in this discourse. Although there are countless diverging readings of European integration, the one aspect on which everyone agrees is that it constitutes a process. This is far from a value-free interpretation.

Embracing such open-ended, processual logic meant abandoning the toolkit on which previous polities had relied to establish themselves. For example, the European community does not have a constitution. In his seminal declaration of 1950, Robert Schuman set the tone right away: 'Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan.'⁷ The dichotomy between plan and process is at the core of this development.⁸ Historically, planning had provided the most effective way to control events in space and time, generating closure.

While many see it as a frustrating shortcoming, the indeterminate unfolding of European integration is not an accident. The openness of the process, its proceeding through gradual spillovers, must be understood in the light of the historical context from which it sprang forth. After two global conflicts, the European project grew out of a profound critique of closed systems of power, which, as illustrated by thinkers like Popper and Hayek, had turned out to be incompatible with freedom and peace.⁹

At the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957, the foreign ministers of the founding states put in writing their determination to 'lay the foundations of an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe.'¹⁰ The same formula was echoed thirty-five years later, at the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht, as the member states agreed to 'continue the process of creating an ever-closer union.' The source of inspiration was the notorious reference to a 'more perfect union' in the preamble of the United States constitution.¹¹ But the focus on perfection gave way to a reflection on spatial

relations, pointing to an increasing degree of proximity and integration within a common house, while recognising that neither complete closeness, nor closure, would ever be achieved.

Can of tuna

The inherent challenge behind European integration is giving form to an open process, somehow anchoring it in an institutional framework. The challenge is made even more complex by the necessity to contend with a pre-existing, extremely well-established foundation, which responds to a different logic: the closed foundation of state power. In light of such complexity, a vast literature has been devoted to the 'institutional architecture' of the European community.¹²

In spite of the constant use of architectural metaphors, the actual role of architecture in the construction of the 'European house' has remained largely unexplored. In previous systems, especially as it pertained to state-building, the institutionalisation of power had been one of the primary domains of engagement. While itself going through a process of institutionalisation, architecture proved to be a valuable contributor in the effort to translate an abstract idea of power into a set of concrete, operative institutions.¹³

Because of their unique trajectory, two buildings in Italy that are commonly associated with this chapter in the history of architecture-power relations, have now come to occupy a new position, intersecting with the dynamics of Europe-building: the prison of Ventotene and the hospital of Gorizia. As such, they provide a rare opportunity to examine the tensions behind the European project, focusing on tangible objects, beyond the metaphorical level. Two panoptical structures, conceived at opposite ends of the nineteenth century, they are now undergoing a radical transformation, as local authorities set out to convert them into EU buildings. If European integration is about openness, then a panopticon – the closed architecture par excellence constitutes the most challenging laboratory

to discuss European power and its relation with the aforementioned foundation.¹⁴

Shortly before these proposals took form, a new movement entering Italian politics famously proclaimed its intention to crack open the parliament like a can of tuna fish – a rallying cry that was eventually toned down when its members came into power.¹⁵ The proposals at work in Ventotene and Gorizia may be reminiscent of this operation, while outlining a very different project of opening. On the one hand, the panopticon is the hardest 'can' to crack open. On the other hand, there is no better site to play out the tensions between the openness of European integration and the closedness of the structures on which (and, partly, against which) it was imagined. In both cases, the question behind the design prompt is simple, yet very difficult: how does an open process engage with a closed plan?

Myopia and the political

Recent studies have questioned a series of long-held assumptions concerning the relationship between architecture and political power. Albená Yaneva made a long list: 'architecture reflects politics and can produce political effects; architects are agents of power; architectural styles mirror political shifts; architecture helps the construction of identities; building types embody politics.'¹⁶ Rather than issues of meaning or representation, scholars are increasingly focusing on what buildings do, underlining the political forces within the process of architecture. Moving away from overshadowing theories of power, the political claim of architecture is given a new, albeit smaller home at the 'myopic, microscopic level of the practice.'¹⁷ The argument is that architecture needs to be refocused on its own inner workings, after having been improperly instrumentalised by (or in the name of) external forces, which made it into a site of projection, mirroring and embedding.

Because of its open, borderline ambiguous articulation, defined by contingencies rather than plans, European integration does not fit into this

understanding of power relations. Since their inception in the 1950s, the institutions of the European community have gone to great lengths to avoid any direct architectural statement – anything that could be interpreted as a projection of power or the representation of a new order. The hodge-podge that is the Quartier Européen in Brussels is the result of such withdrawal.¹⁸

This is not a case of architecture being manipulated by an overbearing authority for its own purposes. On the contrary, the European institutions have mostly stepped away from the field of architecture, precisely because of its representational baggage, understanding that any misstep in the manifestation of their fragmented, fragile power could lead to a nationalist backlash. Even the apparently simple project of elaborating a set of architectural images for the euro banknotes – a rare attempt by the community institutions to touch an architectural topic, albeit in a very limited, cautious manner, nevertheless generated a major controversy.¹⁹

As addressing ‘big political forces’ has increasingly become taboo in architectural theory, some of those forces have already stopped considering architecture altogether, especially in Europe.²⁰ Only recently, a handful of individuals have started to bridge this gap, trying to explore ways to engage, in architectural terms, with such a reluctant, often cryptic form of supranational power. For example, a group of young architects from Venice has put forward a proposal to create a pavilion of the European Union at the Biennale.²¹ Of course, the goal is not to produce a representation of European power, but rather to stimulate a much-needed, critical conversation about that power, employing architectural tools and methods.

Although the nationalist matrix of the Biennale constitutes a radically suitable testing ground, the cases of Ventotene and Gorizia push this conversation into an even more extreme setting, effectively outlining a scenario where some kind of European pavilion may emerge from an existing panoptical

structure. As these proposals are starting to gain momentum, the purpose of the following analyses is to take a step back, provide context and trace the history of these two buildings, in an effort to examine both the big and the small political dynamics that intersect with such projects of opening.

The powers of the state

The case of Ventotene has the deeper historical roots, going back to the late eighteenth century. Its relevance to the current discourse, however, has to do with a series of contingencies that, during War World II, turned this remote outpost into an unlikely cradle of the European project.

The Ventotene manifesto, originally titled *For a Free and United Europe*, took form in the summer of 1941. The document that paved the way for the process of European integration, projecting a vision that transcended national borders, was drafted, clandestinely, by a handful of outcasts – political troublemakers who had been arrested by the Fascist regime and confined for years to this small island in the middle of the Mediterranean. Altiero Spinelli, in collaboration with Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni, wrote the manifesto on cigarette paper and, with the help of Ursula Hirschmann, managed to hide it inside a dead chicken and smuggle it to the continent, where it was eventually disseminated by members of the Italian resistance.²²

Due to its ideal position and rocky coasts, the island of Ventotene, one of the Pontine islands off the coast of Gaeta, at the border between Lazio and Campania, was one of the main ‘colonies of political confinement’ during the Fascist period.²³ The individuals detained there were those at the top of Mussolini’s list of ‘maximum dangerousness’ – political prisoners. They were divided into groups, the size of which can be discerned from the number of canteens at their disposal: seven canteens for the communists, two for the anarchists, one for the socialists (led by future president of the Italian republic, Sandro Pertini), one for the



Fig. 1: Map of Ventotene (below) and the scoglio of Santo Stefano (above), early nineteenth century. Source: Studurba, Piani Regolatori, Florence.



Fig. 2: View of the interior courtyard of the Santo Stefano panopticon, featuring a fictional glass chapel, first half of the nineteenth century. Source: Società Napoletana di Storia Patria, Naples.

so-called manchurians or political spies and, last but not least, one for the group that revolved around Spinelli, which would later become the European Federalist Movement. It just so happened that the latter was branded with the letter 'E' and, of course, came to be called 'canteen Europe.'

While the regime aimed to isolate its opponents, bringing together all of these activists – almost nine hundred people, including some of the most influential minds of the antifascist resistance – transformed Ventotene into a vibrant political laboratory, a place to workshop ideas and imagine how Italy and Europe could move forward after the war.

Spinelli arrived on the pier of Ventotene in July 1939. He was thirty-two years old and had been incarcerated for most of his adult life: the charge was 'conspiracy against the powers of the state.'²⁴ He was first arrested in 1927 and, before being sentenced to confinement in Ventotene, he had been detained in the prisons of Milan, Lucca, Viterbo, Civitavecchia, Rome and Ponza. The particularity of Ventotene was that it was a penal colony: the inmates lived in regular buildings near the port, kept small livestock and managed their own canteens. The island itself was the prison.

Panopticon on the rocks

There was, however, a separate structure for the prisoners upon whom the regime wanted to inflict a special level of confinement. It was located on a rock in front of Ventotene's harbour, the island of Santo Stefano. [Fig. 1] The penal history of this archipelago actually started on this *scoglio* (literally: rock).²⁵ In 1795, when this region was under Bourbon rule, Ferdinand IV (king of Naples) ordered the construction of a panopticon on Santo Stefano, the first and only prison of this type in Italy. The project was carried out under the direction of Antonio Winspear, a military engineer and heir of an aristocratic English catholic family that had moved to Naples after the Anglican schism, along with architect Francesco Carpi, a disciple of

Vanvitelli. They were both influenced by Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* and, more importantly, by the theories of Jeremy Bentham, which had been published only a couple of years earlier. According to Rossanna Bellizzi, this is one of the built architectures that comes closest to the utopia of the English philosopher.²⁶

While the building followed Bentham's model quite closely, there was a significant change – somewhat of a Southern European twist. The centre of the composition was occupied by a chapel. In a watercolour painting of the early nineteenth century, this structure appears to be made of glass, which would have undermined the visual mechanism of the panopticon, but historians have agreed to dismiss that representation as fictional: in reality, the chapel was hermetic, with narrow windows.²⁷ [Fig. 2] What is worth noting, however, is the integration of the work of the guard, who would survey the inmates from the inspection tower located above the entryway, with the work of the priest, who would say mass every day in the middle of the prison, so that every inmate could listen from his cell. In this context, the notion of bringing the prisoner to his knees in an attitude of 'penitential prayer' took on a double meaning.²⁸ As much as Utilitarianism and the movement for penal reform were on the upswing, they still had to contend with the Catholic Church, whose expertise in the business of surveillance and redemption was second to none. In Santo Stefano, church and state were literally sharing the centre of the panopticon.

The other peculiar aspect of this building was that, in contrast with the trend of detaching punishment from the pre-modern realm of the spectacle, Winspear and Carpi explicitly modelled it after the Teatro San Carlo of Naples.²⁹ In terms of both size and layout, the plans of the prison and the opera house were perfectly superimposable. The boxes of the auditorium were replaced by cells in an analogous horseshoe-shaped structure, as the prisoners took the place of the spectators.

State building

At the time of its construction, this architecture spoke to an absolutist idea of power, whereby there was no degree of separation between the king and the state. Notably, Ventotene and Santo Stefano were part of the so-called allodial estates of the Bourbon family: these were private properties of the king of Naples. And the funds for the construction of the panopticon came from the allodial coffers – the funds that the Bourbons derived from their private activities, which were separated from the kingdom's public finances. The motivation for building such a unique prison was also quite personal to the royal family: as noted by Gea Eliana Miranda, the declared objective of this project was to 'dampen the effects of the French revolution' and create a powerful deterrent against the so-called Jacobin contagion that was taking over Naples, posing a serious threat to the Bourbon rule.³⁰ The short-lived experience of the Neapolitan Republic in 1799 proved that Ferdinand IV's concerns were not unfounded.

The Bourbons were eventually able to hold on to power until Garibaldi's expedition. During the war for the unification of Italy, in 1860, the inmates took advantage of the fact that part of the Bourbon contingent had left, took control of the prison and proclaimed the Republic of Santo Stefano. For roughly a year, until the Italian navy recovered the island, the panopticon itself operated as a small autonomous state, with its own statute and government.³¹ After this brief parenthesis, the new Italian monarchy picked up where the Bourbons had left off and used Santo Stefano as a place of detention for its most dangerous enemies, including the anarchist who killed king Umberto I in 1900.

The building-island ceased to be a prison in 1965, precisely as a new wave of thinkers had just started to examine the architecture of panopticons, reading it – to quote Barry Bergdoll – as a 'veritable metaphor for the economy and distribution of power and surveillance in modern society.'³² During the 170 years it was open, the prison

experienced and documented, in a microcosm, a series of fundamental shifts in power dynamics: the absolute monarchy of the kingdom of Naples, the parenthesis as an autonomous republic in 1860, the establishment of the Italian state and its nationalist degeneration in the form of the Fascist regime, up to the planting of the seeds of European federalism. In the end, the prison was closed for rather utilitarian reasons, namely the costs and logistical difficulties of maintaining such a unique structure. In other words, the decision did not come from an official at the Ministry of Justice who had enjoyed reading Foucault or Himmelfarb.

All-seen architecture

From the viewpoint of Ventotene, which was used as a place of confinement for a much shorter period of time (roughly corresponding to the Fascist *ventennio*), the all-seeing architecture towering over Santo Stefano had a profound effect. To this day, it is impossible to go anywhere on the island of Ventotene without being aware of the imposing presence of the panopticon on the other side of a tiny stretch of sea. Although it was conceptualised as an inward-looking apparatus, this structure also had an impact on those who, from the outside, were constantly seeing it. It was an unescapable architectural reminder of the power of the regime and how it functioned. Confinement in Ventotene worked on two levels: in addition to being stuck on a remote island, the prisoners spent all day contemplating an extreme representation of their condition, placed a few yards away on a rocky pedestal.

In the opening section (titled 'The Crisis of Modern Civilization') of his manifesto, Spinelli started by framing the problem that his vision of a united Europe set out to address:

The nation is no longer viewed as the historical product of co-existence between men who, as the result of a lengthy historical process, have acquired greater unity in their customs and aspirations and who see their state as being the most effective means of organising

collective life within the context of all human society. Rather the nation has become a divine entity, an organism which must only consider its own existence, its own development, without the least regard for the damage that others may suffer from this. The absolute sovereignty of national states has led to the desire of each of them to dominate, since each feels threatened by the strength of the others. This desire to dominate cannot be placated except by the hegemony of the strongest state over all the others. As a consequence of this, from being the guardian of citizens' freedom, the state has been turned into a master of vassals bound into servitude.³³

While much has been written about Spinelli's confinement, historians have overlooked the fact that, as he was writing about the 'state-machine' and the project of a European federation during his forced stay in Ventotene, he was looking at a panopticon from morning to night. It was the clearest possible illustration of the 'apparatus of repression' behind Spinelli's object of study: 'the modern Leviathan – the all-powerful, totalitarian sovereign state.'³⁴

The Museo Nazionale San Martino of Naples holds a series of cardboard models of the Santo Stefano panopticon, made by inmates in the late nineteenth century, under the supervision of their guards. [Fig. 3] It is unclear how and why this exercise came about. On the one hand, countering the logic of the panopticon, this reversal of roles allowed both the prisoner and the guard to step out and gain an overview of the power mechanism in which they lived, turning the prison into an object of information. On the other hand, the out-of-body experience of looking at a model of one's own domination must have made that condition even more insufferable.

Ship Europe

In 2016, as a way to symbolically relaunch the European project after the Brexit referendum, Italian prime minister Renzi organised a summit

in Ventotene with German chancellor Merkel and French president Hollande. The meeting took place on the Italian aircraft carrier *Garibaldi*, which had been anchored between Ventotene and Santo Stefano for the occasion. [Fig. 4] The iconography of European integration as a ship was not new: for example, as far back as 1950, the Marshall Plan was promoted through a poster titled 'All our colors to the mast', which depicted a ship called 'Europe' whose sails were made of all the flags of the European countries. [Fig. 5] Before visiting Spinelli's grave in the Ventotene cemetery, the three leaders convened on the deck of the carrier and held a press conference, which was the main photo-op of the event. Towering in the background of all the photos was not Ventotene, but rather the body of Santo Stefano, surmounted by the panopticon.

In the same year, moved by the spirit that had informed the ship summit, the Italian government launched a project to restore the panopticon, which had been completely abandoned for fifty years, and turn it into a *Scuola di alta formazione Europea* (European school of higher education). Seventy million euros was allocated to the project of transforming the prison into a European school – an endeavour that is currently going through the preliminary design phase. At the beginning of this effort, the prime minister made very clear what the goal was: 'Here we want to educate and form the élite that is going to govern the European Union in the coming decades.'³⁵

Ironically, the ease with which the Italian government thought this building could go from being a prison to being a school, without modifying the layout, seems to align with the theory behind the panopticon. In his writings, Jeremy Bentham explained that his 'plan of management' could be applied to a wide range of structures that required the 'inspection' of large numbers of people: in addition to prisons, the list included 'hospitals, mad-houses, houses of correction, work-houses, poor-houses, houses of industry, manufactories and schools.'³⁶ The point of reference was the work of his brother,

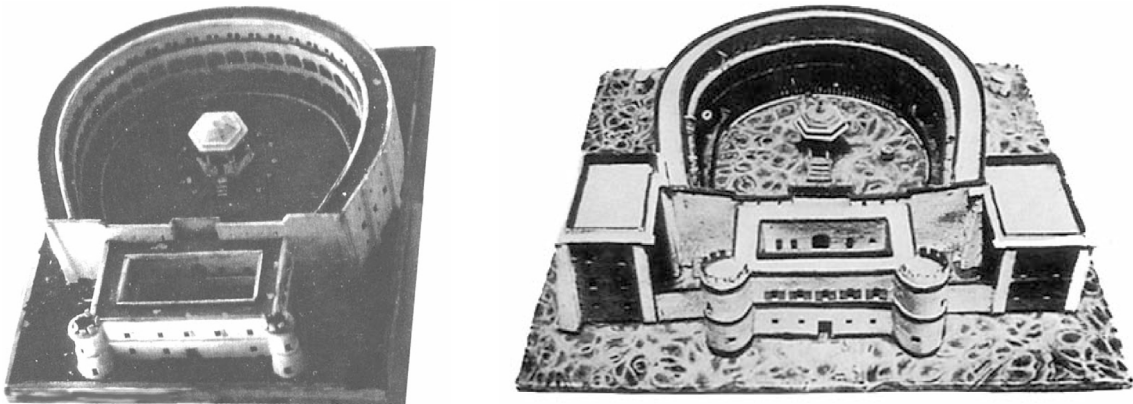


Fig. 3: Models of the Santo Stefano panopticon, built by inmates in the late nineteenth century. Source: Museo Nazionale San Martino, Naples.



Fig. 4: The European summit held on the Garibaldi aircraft carrier, in front of Ventotene, on 22 August 2016. Santo Stefano is visible in the background. Photo: Ansa, Rome.



Fig. 5: Poster for the Marshall Plan, designed by Reyn Dirksen in 1947. Source: Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Samuel Bentham: the only panopticon he managed to build while working in Russia for Prince Potemkin was not a prison, but rather a school.

Madness and crime

This versatility was one of the aspects that drew the attention of Foucault, who interpreted the panopticon as an archetype that informed a wide range of institutions concerned with discipline through surveillance. As noted by Paul Hirst, at the heart of Foucault's reflections was an effort to relate 'a new form of power and a new class of specialist structures, which both developed towards the end of the eighteenth century.'³⁷ It was very much a question of architectural typology. While *Discipline and Punish* focused on the birth of the modern prison, the first step into this field centred on another, adjacent 'specialist structure' that featured prominently in Bentham's work: the hospital and, more specifically, the asylum.³⁸

From this perspective, the proposed Europeanisation of the panopticon in Ventotene goes hand in hand with a similar proposal that took form during the same time in the city of Gorizia: two years ago, the municipal administration launched a project to turn the local, abandoned hospital into a 'European prison.' Notably, this was not a simple, small-town hospital: it was the hospital where Franco Basaglia began his career in 1961 (incidentally, Foucault published *Madness and Civilization* in the same year) and developed the groundbreaking theory of mental health that inspired the so-called Basaglia Law – a comprehensive reform of the psychiatric system that led to closing all *manicomi* (asylums) in Italy.³⁹ In June 2020, the city council of Gorizia unanimously approved a resolution to begin elaborating a 'project for the institution of a European prison' on the site of the former hospital.⁴⁰

The historical connection between these types of institutions is well documented.⁴¹ In Santo Stefano, a notable incident shows the degree to which the line between asylums and prisons was far from clear. During the Fascist period, the Ministry of

Justice decided to devote a section of the panopticon to an experimental programme for extremely unstable, agitated prisoners, mostly people with mental illnesses, who were brought in from other penitentiaries and 'judicial asylums' to receive special treatment. The experiment consisted in subjecting these individuals to complete isolation, uninterrupted surveillance, daily medical examinations, a special diet, continuous cell searches and other severe disciplinary measures. The goal was to 'tame' the subjects that, because of their conditions, had not been able to adapt to life in other disciplinary institutions. This section was called *Teratocomio*, meaning a place for the treatment of monsters.⁴² An inscription in Latin placed above the entrance of the panopticon pressed the point: 'As long as the monsters are in chains, the state is stable and your house is safe.'

Institutional care

Like Ventotene, Gorizia has always been a border area, a place of confinement. Along with Nova Gorica, it delineates a continuous city unfolding on the two sides of the Italo-Slovenian border. After Slovenia joined the European Union in 2004, the two towns constituted a 'European Group of Territorial Cooperation' – one of the most advanced examples of cross-border integration. Notably, the former hospital straddles the line between the two counties. In fact, when the *manicomio* was still operational, one of the problems was that patients would often try to jump over the wall and escape into what, at the time, was Yugoslavia. It was a rare case of people attempting to clandestinely jump towards the east side of the iron curtain – an attempt that, in the eyes of the doctors at the time, consolidated the diagnosis of mental illness.

The hospital had been built when this region was still part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, in 1911. The idea was to group in this remote town all the unwanted and problematic individuals from the western province of the empire. The Franz Josef asylum of Gorizia was modelled after the Steinhof,

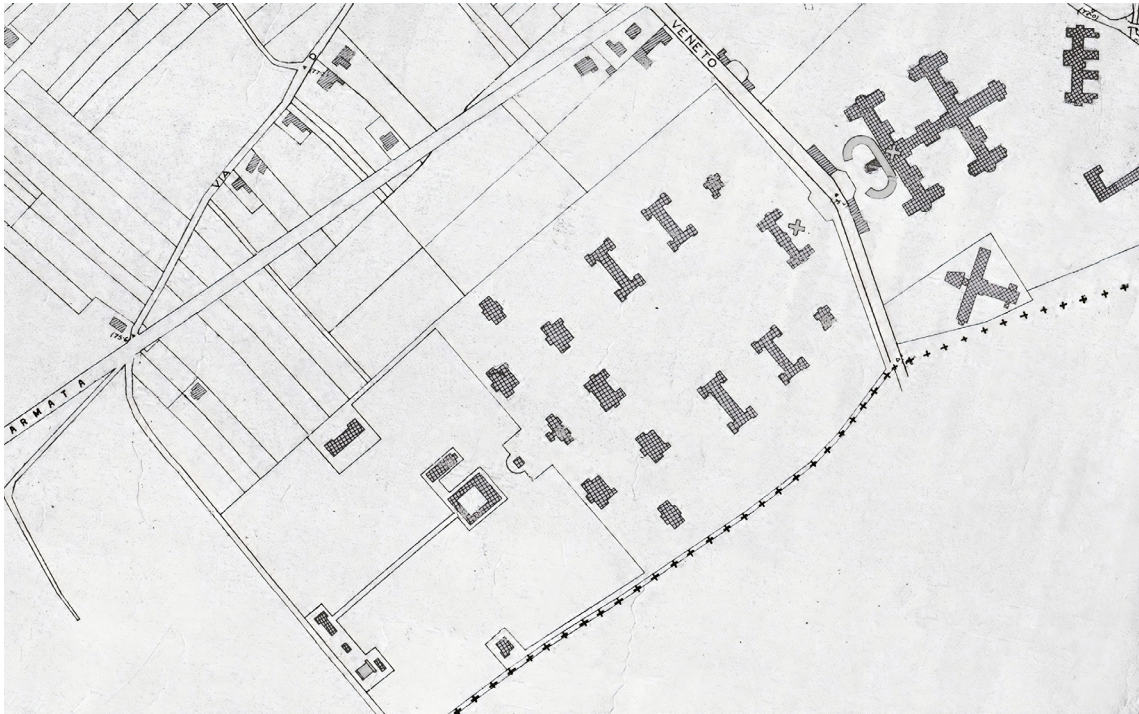


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Fig. 6: Plan of the Gorizia hospital, excerpt from the *Piano Regolatore Generale* drafted by Luigi Piccinato in 1965. The dotted line in the bottom-right corner marks the border with Yugoslavia, now Slovenia. Source: Università La Sapienza, Archivio Luigi Piccinato, Rome.

Fig. 7: Series of photographs of a patient at the Gorizia asylum, by Carla Cerati and Gianni Berengo Gardin, 1968. Source: Regione Lombardia, Archivi dell'Immagine, Milan.

the Viennese psychiatric hospital designed by Otto Wagner.⁴³ It was made of a series of pavilions, rigidly arranged around a central open space and subordinated to the director's building on one side and a small chapel on the other. [Fig. 6] At the time, what Florence Nightingale called the 'pavilion principle' (which typically relied on a panoptical layout) was the primary architectural template for this type of institution.⁴⁴

As in the case of Santo Stefano, the Gorizia asylum predated the Italianisation of the region. The city became Italian only in 1919, after World War I. By that time, the hospital had been badly damaged by bombings. Following the rise of the Fascist regime in the 1920s, the building was restored and brought back to its original function, this time confining all the outcasts from what had become the new eastern province of the Italian state.

As noted by Schepers-Hughes and Lovell, when Basaglia took over as superintendent of the Gorizia hospital, he was 'revolted by what he observed as the conventional regime of institutional care: locked doors only partly successful in muffling the weeping and screams of the patients, many of them lying nude and powerless in their excrement.'⁴⁵ In his own writings, Basaglia often remarked on the similarity between the asylum and the prison. For example, in an early essay titled 'The Destruction of the Psychiatric Hospital as a Place of Institutionalization', he made the case that the former was even more oppressive than the latter.⁴⁶ [Fig. 7] Like Spinelli, Basaglia had experienced the effects of incarceration himself, as he had been jailed during the war because of his contribution to the antifascist resistance.

His views were influenced by Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (also published in 1961) and, specifically, by the concept of 'total institutions' – a term that was meant to define a range of institutions where large numbers of people were 'cut off from the wider society' and forced to 'lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life' in which every activity was conducted collectively 'in the same place and under the same single authority.'⁴⁷ As in Bentham's

panopticon, everything revolved around a 'single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfil the official aims of the institution.' Again, the question of typology was key. Goffman pointed to five 'types' of total institutions: in addition to hospitals and prisons, he included schools, poor-houses and convents – the same functions that kept being juxtaposed.

Limits to supranational power

On one level, the cases of Ventotene and Gorizia confirm the overlap or continuity between these institutions, which took form in the same period and responded to the same logic. From this point of view, it should not come as a surprise when a prison is turned into a school and a hospital becomes a prison. But these two specific proposals bring about an additional level of complexity, which forces a change of perspective: in both cases, the declared objective is to open these structures to the centrifugal forces of European integration.

The first problem concerns the fact that European integration has not replaced state sovereignty, but has rather reduced it, creating a hybrid system where power is shared between the national and the supranational level. Although the European Union operates in a multitude of areas, there are a few areas where the competence has remained in the hands of the states. The ground-breaking 1963 judgement of the European Court of Justice famously proclaimed that 'the European community constitutes a new legal order of international law, for the benefit of which the states have limited their sovereign rights, albeit within limited fields.'⁴⁸ Not included in this set of Europeanised fields were all the affairs that responded to the logic of Bentham's inspection house or Goffman's total institution: criminal law, education and public health. The European Union has no 'legal competence' over prisons, schools and hospitals – the institutions that have historically relied on panoptical models to control, discipline and cure people.⁴⁹

In the latter area, at the very beginning of the process of European integration, in 1952, a committee

of experts (known as the ‘white pool’ – alluding to the colour of medical coats) was assembled to draft a proposal for the establishment of a European Public Health Community, which would have included the creation of common hospital structures. But this plan was immediately rejected by the member states, as well as by most pharmaceutical companies, which wanted to maintain their consolidated positions within national systems. As it pertains to incarceration, there are no provisions of EU law that say how to administer a punishment or manage a prison. The only agency that the European Union has in this field concerns the effort to help member states ‘approximate’ or ‘harmonise’ their national penal codes.⁵⁰

The idea of the promoters of the Gorizia project was to use this first ‘European prison’ as an opportunity to codify a set of supranational penitentiary standards. As noted in the resolution approved by the city council, the new prison would serve as a ‘prototype’ and provide a ‘model’ to which all EU member states could ‘conform.’ Notably, the person chosen by the mayor of Gorizia to oversee and coordinate this project was the former director of the local prison, Enrico Sbriglia. In his statements, he made clear that the goal was not only to design a prison for Gorizia, but also to establish a new European standard, starting with defining the minimum size of the cells, the width of the windows, the airflow and then addressing all the other aspects of the penitentiary space, including the furniture, the appliances and even the clothes that prisoners should have at their disposal.⁵¹ According to the city council, the new European prison would also function as a ‘place of study and research for governments and jurists’ – a laboratory for the exploration of new ways to fulfil the ‘re-educational purpose of punishment.’⁵²

Guards without borders

While launching this project, in the autumn of 2020, the mayor of Gorizia also signed an agreement with the Italian Ministry of Justice regarding the expansion of the local prison, a state investment of almost five million euros.⁵³ Speaking of study and education, this

expansion will consist in incorporating the building of the adjacent elementary school *Riccardo Pitteri*, an all-boys’ school built in 1909, which is currently unused and abandoned – another fitting reminder of the degree to which schools and prisons are commonly perceived as being spatially compatible and interchangeable.

According to the mayor, the two endeavours would not interfere with each other: the (enlarged) local jail would continue to accommodate ‘national criminals’, while the proposed European prison would serve to address ‘supranational crimes.’ Although, from a legal standpoint, European crimes do not exist, Sbriglia pointed to a series of criminal activities characterised by a cross-border dimension, such as the counterfeiting of euro banknotes. Following this line of reasoning, the city council also proposed that each EU member state could send a group of guards to Gorizia, effectively having a rotation of national staffs throughout the year.

The precedent that comes to mind is Spandau, the prison in Berlin that housed the German war criminals sentenced to imprisonment at the Nuremberg Trials.⁵⁴ Until 1987, when the last inmate died, the four occupying powers (the United States, United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union) alternated control of the prison on a monthly basis, each having the responsibility for a total of three months of the year. Every thirty days, a highly choreographed ceremony performed in front of the prison gate marked the changing of the guard. Spandau is also a peculiar case vis-à-vis the panoptical model: while Bentham’s ideal was that a single guard could survey a multitude of prisoners, Spandau housed a contingent of one hundred guards, whose task was, initially, to control the seven Nuremberg convicts: during the last twenty-one years, however, there was only one prisoner to watch.

Foucault’s diagram

In the Westphalian framework, modern statehood established itself through a theory of power that had at its core a theory of the ordering of space and the

people within it.⁵⁵ The North Star was the principle of sovereignty, which went hand in hand with that of territoriality: within a delimited, enclosed space, everything came under a single authority, which took it on itself to survey and shape every aspect of society. As noted by John Howard in *The State of the Prisons*, the state was taking over for God in the business of 'saving men.'⁵⁶ Toward the end of the eighteenth century, one of the results of this all-encompassing ambition was, in the words of Barry Bergdoll, the 'rapid proliferation of new kinds of buildings to house unprecedented institutions.'⁵⁷ Robin Middleton has argued that the most problematic aspects of society – sickness, madness and crime – actually became the 'grounds of form' for these new public institutions, as they led to the development of the most efficient ways to bring people under the eye of power and discipline them.⁵⁸

In the Foucauldian reading, this type of structure is invested with a diagrammatic quality, due to its ability to represent both a thing and a function – a space and a social regime.⁵⁹ For Foucault, the 'closed architecture' of the panopticon is the *esquisse géométrique* of a modern, rational society.⁶⁰ In his 1968 manifesto *L'Istituzione Negata* (The Negated Institution), Basaglia echoes this reading, establishing a link between the structure of the asylum and the structure of 'our social system'.⁶¹ However approximate this generalisation may be, it speaks to a deep-seated understanding of the historical connection between the process of state-building, its theory of power and space, the establishment of a set of disciplinary institutions and the architectural mechanism that made them work.

If the panopticon is a diagram of anything, however, it may represent the opposite of the way the European Union works. After World War II, as everyone had seen the consequences of nationalism pushed to its limit, the consensus was to dilute statehood into a fragmented, interdependent, multi-level system of governance. In addition to openness, the most evident characteristic of this system is the absence of a centre. The European

Union does not even have a capital city, but rather what Carola Hein has described as a 'polycentric and networked capital' whose decision-making bodies are spread over dozens of cities.⁶² Robert Cooper points to this process of decentralisation to make the case that the European Union is 'the most developed example of a postmodern system.'⁶³

Form and function

When a building is juxtaposed with a social regime or a form of political power, the risk is to establish an asymmetric analogy, overlooking the nuances that underlay any socio-political system. Furthermore, one must take into account the Rossian understanding of typology and the notion that the same form can be appropriated, over time, by a multitude of different functions.⁶⁴ However, in the panoptical architecture of Ventotene and Gorizia, the interdependence between form and function is so deep that, as soon as function was recalibrated, the form was abandoned. Then, when the proposal to reopen it came around, the (unconscious) instinct was to associate it, again, with another disciplinary function, within the same Benthamian pool.

By the same token, the form of this architecture has proved to be very resistant to change. For example, in the case of Ventotene, the governmental commission in charge of this endeavour set it up as a preservation project, partly because the panopticon was listed as a national monument in 2008, but also because it would be very hard to modify a structure that was conceived as a complete, spatial mechanism, in which every single component contributes to the whole.⁶⁵

In the conclusion of his seminal essay 'Bentham's Panopticon: An Incident in the Social History of Architecture', published in 1971, Robin Evans mentions how a group of young dissidents had created an anarchist commune within the panopticon of Isla de Pinos, in Cuba – one of the most repressive disciplinary *dispositifs* in the world.⁶⁶ Just like Ventotene, that prison had been closed in the mid-1960s. Shortly afterward, however, the

anarchist project faded away, and it came as no great surprise when the structure was converted into a school and museum. In an effort to underline the educational purpose of the site, Fidel Castro (who had been detained there before the revolution) went as far as to rename the island, which became known as Isla de la Juventud (youth island).⁶⁷ Even a revolutionary movement could not ‘crack open’ this architecture-power mechanism and, after a brief interlude, reactivated its disciplinary gears.

Architectural leviathans

In a not-so-revolutionary context, a group of architects will soon find themselves navigating in even more uncharted waters, around Ventotene and Gorizia, where these tensions are amplified by the question of Europeanisation. In Ventotene, the government-appointed commission has just set in motion an architectural design competition, and Gorizia may follow suit.⁶⁸ Perhaps some of the participating architects will take this unique opportunity to reflect on European integration and explore, through a tangible object, the relation between old and new forms of power.

For example, some might suggest that the panopticon should accommodate a different type of function – one of the things the European Union actually does, which is neither education nor incarceration. Others might try to intervene directly in its physical structure, disrupting its closed articulation by means of a series of material openings, despite the preservation requirements. Leaning heavily on the side of symbolism, one might even try to break the structure down as a way to produce an architectural representation of the unfolding of European integration, in its transition from closedness to openness. It might also be possible to reflect on the concept of openness on a different level, reconfiguring the ways activities are performed and people engage with the building. Going in a different direction, a more radically inclined designer might be tempted to exaggerate the structure of the panopticon and emphasise its dystopic character, as a

reminder of the reason the European project was created. This might also be an opportunity to make a statement about recent developments in said project, considering, for example, the areas where openness has withered and Europe has increasingly reverted into a ‘fortress.’

Understandably, this type of exploration is not likely to come out of an official competition, which, unlike a research studio or a doctoral seminar, must address very concrete, sometimes prosaic issues. Nevertheless, from an architect’s perspective, these projects should be seen, first and foremost, as a pretext to reclaim a critical role in the conversation about European integration. On the one hand, the European institutions have systematically avoided or downplayed any engagement with architecture: it is no coincidence that both these initiatives have been promoted by Italian authorities. On the other hand, there is a tendency among architects to revert into an autonomous bubble – a space where politics can unfold only at the micro-level. Ventotene and Gorizia provide the ideal setting to try and bridge this gap. These panopticons can now become critical *dispositifs*, stimulating a set of questions concerning architecture vis-à-vis the open work we call the European Union. For the architects who will get involved, the fundamental challenge is to elaborate a project of opening, capable of subverting the physical and conceptual structure of these architectural leviathans, to the point where, perhaps, they might start doing and meaning something different.

Notes

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