

Optical Illusion

Prison Landscaping and the Performance of Space

By Dana Greene

It was the warden's idea.

I know this because he told me just as soon as we met. With cheerful zeal he asked me *if* I saw it. Really? How could I miss it? I was grateful he said something because I was trying to formulate a way to inquire without tipping my hand. I was unprepared for his enthusiasm and unable to generate a neutral tone with which to ask follow-up questions. It is a private institution, and I cannot imagine anyone authorizing funds for such an expenditure at a public facility.

A white picket fence wrapped partially around the outer perimeter of a high-security prison.



What can I say? I took the photo. I stood there. I walked the fence; it consciously does not go all the way around the perimeter. I've presented, published, and written about the irony, absurdity, and ghoulishness. Yet, it demands continued looking.

The white picket fence is a small, quaint material feature with a heft of meaning, Americana. It is a potent cipher, an illustrative shorthand, an emblem of white middle-class American suburbs, respectability, prosperity, pastoral nostalgia, private property, wholesomeness, and normalcy. It says all is well here, I am a good neighbor, an upstanding citizen, and my house is in proper order. Though it is an enclosure, it is a symbol of freedom and the American Dream. Startling at a prison, yes, but maybe not as discordant as it initially appears. After all *white* home ownership for which the white picket fence is the quintessential sign, was built on segregation and a web of racial injustices

effectively fueled by federal legislation that demanded prejudicial lending and racialized zoning.

Though the picket fence montage was something I'd not seen before, at every correctional facility I have visited, there is a sort of "land-scaping," a deliberate decorative gesture, some subtle others elaborate, marking space. What space exactly? It is the space between the spaces. The territory, the district, the cosmos between the *inside* and the *outside*. This most definitely militarized zone is really neither *in* nor *out*, witnessed, utilized, and populated by only a select few. What is this space, just outside the razor wire, relatively unregulated in comparison to one side and wholly restricted in comparison to the other? Since my first prison visit in 1994 I've had my eye on this peculiar spectacle.

The images here come from my archive of over 14,000 photos. Anyone who has visited a prison knows it is not easy to get through the



gate. To be an outsider and get inside is a feat. I don't want to give away my craft, but in 2013 I was granted a full-access security pass to photograph each of New Mexico's eleven adult correctional institutions, six state-run and five privately operated prisons. Using a handheld digital camera, I spent three days at each site, exploring the facility and walking the perimeter during the day and at night. There are, deliberately, no people in my pictures. The images expose everyday penal realities with the aim of placing prisons in a material, historical, and geographical context.¹ I've named these pictures *prisonscapes*, a term that marries the fine art tradition of scenic imagery with what I was photographing.

The camera in my hand did not go unnoticed. It blew something open. My gazing at the unpeopled setting raised the prison up as a designed environment.

The very presence of a person, a civilian white woman, taking photos, put the surrounds into relief for its inhabitants. Like in *The Truman Show*, the camera shook off the everydayness and changed the environment. My action was somehow a counter to the omnipresent surveillance. It brought a reflexivity for everyone, me, those incarcerated, and corrections officers alike.

Landscape architecture's changeable elements are imported and exported across oceans, centuries, and state lines. It is a practice that is culturally, temporally, and geographically specific. The components vary. Nonetheless, the definition is relatively fixed, landscape architecture is "a manmade feature that resonates with the built structure to create an ecosystem and harmony between various elements" (Chauhan, 2020) The intention is to make something aesthetic that will affect a relationship between edifices

and their locations. Landscaping is meant as an entreaty that unites by forging a threshold between disparate milieus. It writes a script and inhabitants, pedestrians, and passersby are both players and audience. How then does this schema operate in the carceral sphere? What are these "manmade features" saying within the orbit of the manufactured prison? Who are the players? Just what is *this* performance and who is the audience? What of this landscaping gesture in *this* space between the spaces?

A very brief side note on prison architecture and history. By and large prison architecture is informed by the day's reigning criminological theory, form follows function. The nation's original prisons, built in the early to middle 19th century were located near or within community life. They incorporated grand foreboding architecture, including landscaping, and were meant to be seen. The criminological theory driving their construction was deterrence. As ideas and feelings about crime, rehabilitation, prison management, and

so-called 'criminals' shift the architecture follows suit. Local and federal economic and political pressures are also key determinates. These forces exist in historical time resulting in a range of variations including prisons moving to rural sites (an enduring practice today), the creation of penal farms, separate facilities for men and women, private for-profit incarceration, and the corporate production of prisons and their infrastructure. However, these socio-political influences do not account for the continued habit of marking the space between the spaces in a decorative way. While it may have made 'sense' when prisons were built front and center, why bother once these institutions are hidden away as they have been for 150 years?

I contend that the prisonscapes presented here illuminate a carceral logic—one intrinsically tied to the meanings, signs, and symbols associated with the nation's landscaping customs.



¹ All photos are in color. I do not crop, retouch, or edit the images in any way.

The scenes are carefully constructed, with a bit of kitsch and artistry, to, I argue, expressly perform normalcy, and convey legitimacy. So much so that one institution, the site of the nation's most violent prison uprising, can proudly proclaim to all who drive by, its location on the Turquoise Trail—a nationally declared scenic byway meant to guide and attract tourists in the Land of Enchantment, New Mexico's effective promotional moniker. Note Geo Group's banal name and copyrighted logo confidently illustrate an international reach with a world map in the letter o. These photographs demonstrate a disciplining of the physical environment, convey the respectability of the institution and communicate that the 'criminals' are under control. To what I dub the carceral collective unconscious prison landscaping underscores pervasive myths by performing an intentional sleight of hand that not only reifies the respectability of these institutions but neutralizes them, rendering them normal ordinary buildings and obscuring the ethical and social disturbance they represent.

Landscaping aims to veil the prison project and defuse these potent sites of state power and human suffering.

The wagon wheel, the tenderly planted cactus, the corporate insignia, and yes, the white picket fence—each artfully curated tableau—says this house is in order, reputable, it fits right into the neighborhood, nothing to excavate here folks! However, these scenes also serve as potent foils. For those of us, inside and out, not toeing the hegemonic line on prisons as essential customary instruments of public safety, the white picket fence spotlights horror, consequently demanding our gaze and inviting all the more scrutiny.

But who is this performance for? Prisons built in the 20th and 21st centuries are

deliberately located far from urban centers or any passersby. They are built on swaths of land meant to engulf and disappear them. Even Santa Fe Penitentiary, proudly touting its place along the Turquoise Trail, is well beyond the sign and invisible from the roadway. Does this decoration “create an ecosystem and harmony” for the employees walking past or for those visiting their child, parent, lover, family member, or friend? Incarcerated people do not enter or leave prison through the front but come in and out through the sally port—a fortified series of gates with augmented surveillance and by my account no landscaping montage. Additionally, the construction and maintenance of prison landscaping are typically executed by people incarcerated in the institution. Does this provide an opportunity to be outside and creative? Probably. It is definitively another layer of the masquerade.

The white picket fence does not, cannot, hide the razor wire any more than orchestrated flora or ornament can. The warden certainly knows the fence is a prop, one he personally made sure I saw. Like the scenery on a stage, it is make-believe and serves no explicit penological function. There are two security fences with sensors in between them surrounding the entire prison; the plastic picket fence doesn't even bother to travel the full length of one side of the square perimeter. Everyone on site knows they are in a prison and that a so-called correctional facility is no ordinary building. Everyone. Is the landscaping meant to invite or restrict? In practice, the public is not actually welcome in the space between the spaces. In fact, civilians are not typically allowed close enough to even view the scene. There is a complex security system to keep the unauthorized far away from the prison gates. It comes to me then that the prison perimeter—much wider in area than the fencing itself—is in effect a redline and the prison a laager of state power and its attendant racial and economic

disenfranchisement. The fortified space around these civic institutions operates to defend the prison from public view. The landscaping routine is a conceit to dress up the garrison-like quality of the nation's prisons, and like a funhouse mirror, contorts the macabre into a bucolic scene. These images are phantasmagorical.

The audience is us, all of us.

These landscapes provide a basic ideological function, calling us in, forming identity with the carceral state. The script is well-worn, effectively shaping the national carceral collective unconscious for two centuries. Prison landscaping conveys a place that is in community.²

This is an optical illusion. The pretense, buoyed by these tableaux, is that these institutions are *connected to* and *part of* the social fabric when in fact they are isolated forts and secluded factories of disconnection. Prisons fracture social cohesion, foster detachment, and rupture relationships, networks, *and* bonds between people and within communities.

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References

Chauhan, A. (2020, December 12). The evolution of landscape architecture. <https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/landscape-architecture/a2441-the-evolution-of-landscape-architecture/>



² This is not to say that those on the inside (the incarcerated, the employed, and those visiting) do not have community, are not in community, or that they are not making community, inside and out.