

DIFFICULT MEMORIES: RECONCILING MEANING



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Interventions

Adaptive Reuse

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PREVENTING AMNESIA

NEGATION AND RECONCILIATION IN JAIL CONVERSION

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An inmate emerges from his cell and begins his journey towards his ultimate fate. A nearby guard calls out 'dead man walking' to signify the beginning of the end.

Of all building typologies, jails are most often associated with negative connotations and difficult memories that are often hard to overcome and to forget. Once the site of public executions and beatings, jails continue to be places of violence, disease and drug use for criminals awaiting trial. Heritage jails were often built to invoke fear. They are particularly charged with sensory probes and have the ability to provoke the profound in us. One feels constrained and uneasy, standing inside a small and dark jail cell as a cast iron gate closes and locks. One imagines the scene of a hanging, standing inside a former gallows. The closure of a surplus or outdated heritage jail need not signify the death of a heritage building. With selective intervention, a heritage jail can be redeemed through a new use while preserving specific architectural features.

According to Raimund Abraham, "the process of design is only a secondary and subsequent act, whose purpose is to reconcile and harmonize the consequences of the initial intervention, collision, and negation."¹ It is this sensitive negation and reconciliation that allows the historical and architectural integrity of the jail to be maintained while implementing a new function. In this act, the architect becomes responsible for framing and constructing an implied deeper meaning through the use of both remembering and forgetting.

The conversion of a heritage jail for any other function presents owners, architects and constructors with a unique set of challenges. Commonly consisting of narrow and confined spaces, jails require significant physical transformation to reconcile alternate functions. Built solidly to prevent escape, their exterior envelopes

are difficult to deconstruct. Patience, foresight and strategic planning are required to make the building viable and to convince stakeholders that negative connotations need not overshadow the success of the building's adaptive re-use.

One must also consider the purpose and objective of the conversion and whether or not forgetting should trump remembrance. Forgetting in whole or in part is often the objective of a jail conversion. Though, if forgetting is the goal, amnesia can result in a society numb to the richness of history.

In Sao Paulo Brazil the former Carandiru Penitentiary is most well known for the once poor physical condition of its prisoners and for the 1992 massacre where 111 prisoners were brutally killed. Shortly after its closure in 2001 the prison was demolished to make way for a new school and sports complex. One block of the prison was left intact as a reminder of a prior existence and as an opportunity to recall the history of the site. One might view the Carandiru example as a responsible approach to a difficult site with difficult memories. The retention of one block of the former prison tells the truth without overtness, acting as a compromise between forgetting and remembrance.

In Boston, Massachusetts the luxury Liberty Hotel is the transformation of the former Charles Street Jail. Originally built in 1851, the strength and dignity of the former jail's Boston Granite Style is the centerpiece for the conversion. Although the interiors have been significantly altered, the building playfully pays homage to its former use in the introduction of new program. Original architectural features can be seen throughout the hotel, especially in its rotunda entrance lobby and its jail themed restaurants appropriately named CLINK, Alibi and Scampo. The Liberty Hotel is an example of a jail conversion where forgetting and memory coexist to

provide a completely new experience. The same can be said of numerous heritage jails in Ontario, Canada.

The Old Don Jail

As early as 1849 each county in Ontario was required to build a county courthouse and jail. The jails were often built as additions to existing courthouses or town halls in the centres of towns or cities, in the finest architectural styles of the day including Romanesque, Italianate, Classical and Gothic. As populations grew and crime increased, county representatives showed little interest in maintaining the facilities. By the middle of the twentieth century the jails were considered surplus and outdated, and were slowly decommissioned. Inmates were moved to newer, larger facilities in outlying regions.

Since the 1970s, 'heritage' jails in Ontario have been repurposed as offices, libraries, museums, hotels and town halls². In some instances the original exteriors were restored while the original interiors were completely altered. In other cases, both exterior and interior features were reconciled to a new use. A number of heritage jails were demolished due to a belief in the inconvertibility of their dark history.

Originally constructed in 1864, the Old Don Jail is a provincially and municipally designated heritage jail in Toronto, Ontario. Designed by architect William Thomas, it was the largest of its kind in North America at the time of its construction, boasting a plan of reform and rehabilitation rather than incarceration and confinement. Situated on the top of a hill across from the Don River and next to a farm, the Old Don Jail inmates were encouraged to work in the fields during the day and retreat to solitary confinement at night. The location of the jail was also thought to improve the physical and moral health of the prisoners.

Although the Old Don Jail was designed and built according to the latest ideas of penal reform, the inhumane conditions of the jail, due to overcrowding and lack of maintenance, are well documented. In December of 1977, the Ministry of Correctional Services for the Province of Ontario officially closed the building. At the outset of the jail's closure the Ministry was determined to demolish the jail. In anticipation that "preservationists" would advocate restoration, the Ministry removed all the locks from the original cast iron cell gates, original arched wood doors, and the macabre gallows structure.

These actions were not well received by the Toronto Historical Board. As early as November of 1977 the staff of the Heritage Trust and Historical Research and Promotion Section issued their own conclusions about the Don Jail:

On architectural and historical grounds, the future of the Don Jail deserves to be the subject of further study:

1. *It is a solidly constructed and carefully composed building of unique stylistic detail.*

2. *It is the work of a major Toronto architect and dates from a period that has left us few other important public buildings.*

3. *It was erected in a significant era of penal reform, and remains a fascinating testimony to Toronto's social history.*

4. *It is of special importance since relatively few jails survive and most of those that have, have been successfully adapted for re-use.*

In light of these facts, it is clear that the Government of the Province of Ontario should ensure that whatever decision is finally taken about the Don Jail is taken in an atmosphere where thoughtful people can deliberate without haste.³

As a result, the jail sat vacant and unused in the Toronto neighbourhood of Riverdale for over 30 years. Numerous alteration proposals were submitted, including a home for the aged and a heavy duty nursing facility, by architects Howard D. Chapman and Howard V. Walker of Toronto. Each proposal was reviewed and considered but none had sufficient financial backing to be viable. Prospective owners continued to be thwarted by the stigma surrounding the jail.

The alteration plans presented by the Howards in 1978 set the stage for the current conversion of the Old Don Jail. In their letter to the Committee on the Old Don Jail, the Howards suggest their "conversion of the Old Jail building is seen as the first phase in the development of a health care – social and community service campus on the total site⁴." In effect, the Howards were proposing to support functions of Riverdale Hospital (now Bridgepoint Health), located immediately north of the jail site. Through an alternative financing and procurement model established by Infrastructure Ontario, Bridgepoint Health is presently giving new life to the Old Don Jail. The current rehabilitation scheme being implemented by the Plenary Health team of contractors, architects and building specialists attempts to maintain a harmonious balance between the conservation and interpretation of original building fabric and artifacts, and the adaptive re-use of spaces as administrative offices for Bridgepoint Health. The alteration project will render the building compliant with current building codes and barrier-free standards.

Bridgepoint Health is also building a new hospital adjacent and connected to the Old Don Jail via a second floor link on the jail's west side. While the promotion of recovery and wellness and the connectivity between the hospital and the community have become the key principles at work in the design of the new hospital and the conversion of the Old Don Jail, an equal effort was expended toward the issue of heritage, both positive and negative, associated with the jail and site.

As an approval condition for the issuance of site plan control by the City of Toronto, a Heritage Interpretation Plan was prepared by +VG Architects on behalf of



the Plenary Health team that recognizes the tangible and intangible heritage associated with the Old Don Jail. The objectives of this plan are:

- To cast the jail in a positive light through its adaptive re-use while accurately and objectively recounting its history, design, construction and use;
- To raise public awareness of the history associated with the jail;
- To encourage the public to become engaged with the site and the jail in its new adaptive re-use through individual personal encounters and organized public tours.

Over the course of the alteration project the Plenary Health team has moderated negotiations between Bridgepoint Health and heritage authorities, to find a balance between the negation of jail references, and reconciliation of hospital administration functions. In these discussions a number of spaces and features of historic and architectural interest have presented spe-

cific challenges to the team in terms of their conservation, interpretation and accessibility to the public. These features include the detention cells, the death row cells, the gallows, the yards and hangman's graveyard, and the exterior iron security bars. Differentiation in the physical characteristics of cells found in the Old Don Jail is based on their purpose and location. Cell types found in the jail include the one person, double, death row, segregation, punishment, search room, and iron cell.

Although the majority of the cells are removed as part of the conversion, representative examples are retained, conserved and interpreted throughout the building in areas away from daily office use. In all instances the cells are conserved in a manner representative of their original and intended purpose and are viewed as artifacts. As such, one can still stand inside a one person cell and feel the constraint and uneasiness similar to that of its former inmates.

The death row cells were built in 1939 on the second floor of the north centre block, a short walking distance



from the interior gallows. There were four self contained cells in death row, each with a bed, toilet and wash basin. Members of the notorious Boyd Gang spent time in the death row cells and additional security bars were installed here after the Gang escaped the jail in 1952. While the metal cell structure could not be retained in place adjacent to the new boardroom, its components were fully documented insitu prior to being dismantled. The additional security bars remain at the original site of the Boyd Gang escape and act as a visual reminder of their story.

Within Canada, hanging was the only form of capital punishment. Inmates found guilty of capital crimes prior to 1976 were sent to the gallows of the Old Don Jail for execution. The east exercise yard was the original location of the gallows until 1905 when they were relocated to a former latrine space. Seventy executions took place at the Old Don Jail including Canada's last executions on December 11, 1962 of Arthur Lucas and Ronald Turpin.

In the jail conversion, the former gallows is segregated from the daily activities of the hospital to prevent contact with its difficult memories. The doors to the gallows are locked shut in an attempt to remove the constant visual reminder of its former use. Behind the locked doors of the gallows the double height space is left in its 'as found' condition. As such, one can still

stand in the space, look up at the ghosting on the walls of the former macabre structure, and envision the scene of a former hanging. The former gallows remains a sensitive space within the converted jail.

The Old Don Jail exercise yards were located immediately north of the jail proper. Inmates were allowed access to the exercise yards during the day when they were not tending to the fields or working in the jail. The east exercise yard was also used as the site for public executions. If the body of a prisoner was not claimed by the family after an execution, the body was buried in an unmarked grave in the east exercise yard. In 2007, an archaeological team located the remains of fifteen separate burials along the west and north walls of the east exercise yard.

As part of the jail conversion the former extents of the east exercise yard are delineated in the new landscaping plan. A concrete walkway lines the northwest boundary of the former east jail yard wall, leading the public to and around the space. Concrete benches also help to frame the former northwest boundary of the yard. Landscape lighting in the benches and along the walkways, as well as the use of colourful and aromatic trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses propose an inviting space that encourages the public to rest, contemplate and reflect. The original use of the yard is not overtly expressed in order to remain sensitive to the new users of the site.

The original exterior iron security bars are an integral part of the heritage significance of the Old Don Jail building. The security bars are installed in every window opening and have caused the stone window surrounds to crack and to spall. Original security bars have been rehabilitated, restored and reinstated in lower level windows and windows on the east and west elevations of the former gun tower, gallows tower, and north centre block. These representative locations respectfully remember the building's former use without negatively affecting the outward appearance and image of the converted jail.

When incorporated in a thoughtful and sensitive manner, spaces and features of jail architecture can and do actually enrich the adaptive re-use project, providing meaning and justification for specific strategies and details. Although forgetting was once seen as the objective of a jail conversion, the adaptive re-use of the Charles Street Jail, the Old Don Jail, and numerous other examples, offer thoughtful acts of remembrance and selective amnesia.

These examples affirm that new life can be given to our built heritage to reveal the potential and inherent value in the particularity of the site. The incorporation of the different features from the Old Don Jail into the new is representative of different approaches to adaptive reuse from rehabilitation to restoration, from preservation to adaptation. □



Stairwell in former Governor's residence quarters