

Affirming Forces: Race, Ethnicity, and Power

Prison Technology and the Carceral State

David Theodore

This paper explores the role of architecture and computer technologies in the history of the North American carceral state. The concern is that multiple technologies affirm and mediate the processes through which the state creates socially marginalized people: buildings and computers help subject citizens to penal regimes. I address the way carceral practices affect racialized groups through physical, bureaucratic, and conceptual segregation. The paper comes from a broader project examining the role of computers in postwar prison design, operation, and management.

Scholars have begun to analyze the roles of computers in the current North American prison system, especially the use of software algorithms to determine parole and predict recidivism. I'm curious about the origins of these algorithms in architecture—the historical moment that created a discipline of "prison informatics" with close parallels to the contemporaneous development of bioinformatics. The cross-development of computing innovation and architectural reform mark a vivid episode we can examine to assess the power of architectural segregation. That is, in the twentieth century, custodial institutions began to diverge around the issue of close surveillance. In hospitals, for example, only the privileged are subject to 24-hour isolation and monitoring; in prisons, only the abject. Whence this multiplicity of historical trajectories??

For this presentation, I build on the claim that computer technology allowed the expansion of segregation techniques from inside the prison system to the city. Computer programs such as CAPER (Crime Analysis – Project Evaluation – Research) were intended to help justice officials place citizens spatially, both in so-called secure settings (i.e. prisons, with an architecture of security barriers and walls), but also in communities. I focus on *Correctionetics*, a six-volume report published in 1972, by the American Justice Institute of Sacramento, California outlining "the utilization of advanced information system technology as a means of improving the correctional decision-making process." *Correctionetics* is a case study in how crime, imprisonment, probation, and parole came to be assessed as urban community problems.

It is important to recall that after World War II the US led the world in humane prison reform. Postwar reformers argued that imprisonment led to an increase in crime rather than a reduction, and that prisons should help rehabilitate rather than merely punish. The reform movement was fueled by a faith in the ability of emerging computer systems, rehabilitated architecture, and social intervention to aid in the organization and management of prison systems. Reformers anticipated a new facility that was to be therapeutic and rehabilitative instead of punitive. At the same time, conceiving prison reform on a model of funded scientific research spawned new problems in data privacy and data management. How should we assess the contributions of multiple disciplines and their technologies--architecture, sociology, criminology, and computer science--in the making of the carceral state?