

What Prisons Reveal: The Relationship Between Time and Architecture

Michael G. Flaherty

Eckerd College and University of South Florida

flahermg@eckerd.edu

Abstract

K. C. Carceral (his pen name) was convicted of murder in 1982, when he was nineteen years old. He was in one prison or another for the next thirty-one years, until his parole in 2013. He knows what it means to endure a long stretch of time behind bars.

On July 18, 2010, he sent a letter to me out of the blue. Finding it in my mailbox a few days later, I was surprised to see that the sender's name was followed by a six-digit number. A curious message was stamped in red on the back of the envelope: "THIS LETTER HAS BEEN MAILED FROM THE WISCONSIN PRISON SYSTEM."

Having published two previous books about life in prison, he had become "enthralled by the subject" of time and temporal experience. And having come across my own research, he asked if I would be interested in working with him on this project. As he put it, "I do time, you study time; would you like to collaborate? His invitation was irresistible. Eleven years later, this study culminated with the publication of our book, *The Cage of Days: Time and Temporal Experience in Prison* (Carceral and Flaherty 2021).

Carceral has been an inmate at twelve correctional facilities in three states (Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Tennessee). Most of these penal institutions were run by the states, but he also

spent years in a for-profit prison. He has served more than eighteen years in maximum-security, almost two years in medium-security, and more than ten years in minimum-security facilities. First and foremost, this study is based upon Carceral's observations and experiences during incarceration, but he also interviewed thirty-nine fellow prisoners, and we have read more than fifty convict autobiographies, which extended the breadth of our data in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

When we posit a relationship between time and architecture, we presume that aspects of the built environment can bring about variation in the perceived passage of time. In most settings, this relationship is subtle and difficult to discern. In prison, however, the extreme conditions have the virtue of making this relationship strikingly visible. Thus, in an effort to theorize the interface between time and architecture, let us consider two concepts that proved helpful in our study of time and temporal experience in prison: the prison sensorium and the affordances of prison architecture.