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Panopticon

The automatic function of power

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A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So, it is not necessary to use force to constrain the convict to good behaviour, the madman to calm, the worker to work, the schoolboy to application, the patient to the observation of the regulations.¹

- Michel Foucault

¹ Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977, P 164.

The introduction

Foucault has brilliantly analyzed that the power depends not on material relations or authority but instead primarily on discursive networks. Panopticism as an expression of one of the most important component of this network will be discussed in this paper with the relevance to the architectural practice in historical and cultural context.

In the latter part of the 20th century, we have witnessed an increase in monitoring practices in everyday life. Today, we are being monitored at home, at work as consumers. Architecture has played a crucial role in this field. Many architectures especially in the late 19th century were influenced by a special type of designing called 'panoptic design' that been created by Bentham Jeremy to do a specific function of monitoring and controlling the users. Jeremy described this concept briefly in the Panopticon "All by a simple idea in Architecture!". Basically, the mechanism of the look has been applied in this kind of buildings to monitor the maximum number of people with the fewest possible costs. Foucault described this mechanism and relate it to the discipline.

At the other extreme, with panopticism, is the discipline-mechanism: a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come.²

In this paper I am addressing the question: What are panoptic principles? what makes up the panoptic structure? and how many buildings through the history have been indirectly influenced by them?

² Id., p. 209

There are many texts about this topic, most important to my work is one conference paper about Surveillance, Persuasion, and Panopticon³.

In the first chapter I begin with definition of panopticon, its role and sociological effect. In the second chapter I will introduce the comparative examples. Most important to me is chapter three, because I will summary the characteristics of Panopticon

Panopticon, its definition, role and sociological effect

The Panopticon⁴ is a type of institutional building designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham⁵ in the late 18th century. It was originally the name for a specific kind of prison, but it has come to signify the wish or the will to let everything be seen and recorded. The idea of the panopticon expanded into a symbol of social control that extends into everyday life for all citizens, not just those in the prison system. Jeremy adapt the principle of 'central inspection principle' for his proposed prison, an 'Inspection House' envisaged as a circular building, with the prisoners' cells arranged around the outer wall and the central point dominated by an inspection tower. From this building, the prison's inspector could look into the cells at any time-and even be able to speak to the prisoners in their cells but the inmates themselves would never be able to see the inspector

³ Palo ALTO, Surveillance, Persuasion, and Panopticon, Persuasive Technology: Second International Conference on Persuasive Technology, April 26-27, 2007, pp.109-120.

⁴ The terms of the Greek neologism 'Panopticon' ('pan' meaning 'everything' and 'opticon' meaning 'vision'), which was made famous by the British jurist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832).

⁵ Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher and social theorist in the mid-1700s, invented a social control mechanism that would become a comprehensive symbol for modern authority and discipline in the western world: a prison system called the Panopticon.

himself. That kind of conscious and permanent visibility is been described very well by Foucault.

*Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmates state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.*⁶

Bentham's conceptualization of the panopticon: Assuming that the omnipotent governor was always watching them, Bentham expected that this 'new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example' would ensure that the prisoners would modify their behaviour and work hard, in order to avoid chastisement and avoid punishment. Bentham proposed a universal solution to the problems of his day: "Morals reformed - health preserved - industry invigorated instruction diffused - public burthens lightened - Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock - the Gordian knot of the Poor-Laws are not cut but untied - all by a simple idea in Architecture!"

Panopticon was a 'machine' to carry out experiments with the aim of altering behaviour, training or correcting individuals, to strengthen social forces and spread effective education, to exerts a moral influence over behavior and as a center of observation disseminated throughout society. It was an instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance in a hierarchical network.

It was aiming that the prisoners are aware of the presence of authority at all times, even though they never know exactly when they are being observed. The authority changes from being a limited physical entity to be an internalized omniscience- the prisoners discipline themselves simply because someone might be watching, eliminating the need for more physical power to accomplish the same task. Just a few guards are able to maintain a very large

⁶ Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977, p. 201

number of prisoners this way. Arguably, there wouldn't even need to be any guards in the tower at all.

Bentham's idea of the prison building Panopticon is a prototype of Panopticism, where discipline, normalization, and surveillance come together. This observation led Foucault to ask the polemic question, why factories, military barracks, schools, and hospitals have a striking resemblance to each other⁷. Foucault's own answer was the contention that Panopticism has become general and is found everywhere.

Comparative examples

In this chapter I will introduce the comparative examples which are the Panopticon, the Kilmainham Gaol, the Padiglione Conolly, then I will summary the characteristics of Panopticon as a type of architecture.

First example: Panopticon, Jeremy Bentham, 1791.

The famous Panopticon building, 'the all-seeing place', was designed by Jeremy Bentham towards the end of the eighteenth century. The prison was designed to have an inspection tower in the middle surrounded by a circular building with cells. The prison guard should be placed in the tower and the prisoners isolated in the cells, which should all be visible at any time from the tower in the middle. As much as possible of the cells should be made visible, whereas the tower is designed to make the guards inside the tower invisible from the cells, using screens and light as devices to hide the guard from the prisoners. The principle that the prisoners do not know whether they are being watched or not is essential to Panopticon. The prisoners have to presume that they are being watched all the time and must thus behave accordingly. So, as we see All personnel and all prisoners as well as the building, that is, the prison as a whole, make up the panoptic structure. In relation to this Foucault

⁷ Id., p. 264

wrote about this mechanism of the look and how it relates to the principle of the dungeon.

The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide - it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.⁸

The decisive issue leading to the rejection of Bentham's plans was neither the prison design itself, nor its' underlying utilitarian ideas, but the other part of the project, namely the proposal that Panopticon should be open to private contractors. This is among other things due to its effective application to most kinds of institutions where people are to be watched.

Second example: Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, 1864

The east wing of Kilmainham Gaol opened in 1864, and 'was enthusiastically received with its 'panoptic design'. The design was modelled on that of Pentonville Prison, and like it was a '3 storey high, barrel vaulted space, lined on either side with a network of iron galleries and catwalks. The overall view from the hall demonstrated an ordered vista of salubrious space showing separate confinement from outside of the cell door without the visibility of the human form cornered in the wretchedness of isolation.

For Bentham the method of inspection meant far more than this. He did not invent the 'inspection principle' but his particular architectural solution to the problem of surveillance was original and facilitated uncertainty in the prisoner in a particularly powerful way. Foucault has brilliantly analyzed this environment.

The Panopticon, on the other hand, must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of

⁸ Id., p. 200

*men. No doubt Bentham presents it as a particular institution, closed in upon itself.*⁹

Third example: The Padiglione Conolly, Italy, Siena, 1876

It was a part of the now decommissioned Psychiatric Hospital San Niccolo. Designed by Francesco Azzurri, the Padiglione opened in 1876. The Padiglione Conolly is part of the now decommissioned Psychiatric Hospital San Niccolo' of Siena. It was designed and built in the late 19th century. The project was realized by the architect Francesco Azzurri. First opened in 1876, it was reserved for the treatment of the "clamorosi", the most difficult patients. In its original plan, it had two sections one for the men and one for the women. It is built according to the principles of the Panopticon. The key principle of construction of the panopticon was the constant surveillance of prisoners or patients, held in their cells, by virtue of a single observation point, invisible to the eye of the surveilled. The building in Siena presents all of these architectural elements, although realized in the milder version. The San Niccolo' is the only example of the Panopticon building used for the treatment of patients still existing in Italy.

Further examples in different countries:

Russia, St Petersburg. Designed and supervised by Samuel Bentham, the St Petersburg panopticon was a school rather than a prison. The Panopticon School of Arts, begun in 1806, was destroyed by fire in 1818.

Netherlands, Lelystad Prison built in 1995. Architect J.C. Putter of Van Meeren Putter Architecten. The building consists of two domes with central guard stations.

North America, Rahway Prison, New Jersey, USA.

Central America, Isle of Pines, Cuba, built 1932.

⁹ Id., p. 205

South America, The Bogota 'Panoptico', Columbia.

Panoptic Principles

Depending on the previous examples I can sum up the characteristics of Panopticism as following:

1. The observer is not visible from the position of the observed.
2. The observed subject is kept conscious of being visible.
3. Surveillance is depersonalized, because the observer's identity is unimportant.
4. Surveillance is made simple and straightforward. This means that most surveillance functions can be automated;
4. Surveillance is depersonalized, because the observer's identity is unimportant. The resulting anonymous character of power actually gives Panopticism a democratic dimension, since anybody can in principle perform the observation required;
5. Panoptic surveillance can be very useful for research on human behaviour, since it due to its practice of observing people allows systematic collection of data on human life.

Conceived in this way the Panopticon is not only a building. According to Foucault it is rather a schema which can be used for characterizing many aspects of society. In his own words it is “the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form”.

The conclusion

Not only prisons, but also many buildings that were designed for other purposes have also been called panopticons and yet other buildings resemble the Panopticon design by virtue of their circular plan.

The concept of Panopticon was not only about watching or monitoring these people, but also to give them a specific feeling about being watched continuously. So, the purpose was to spread the power not from outside but from within that assures the automatic function of power and do concrete dispositif. So, nowadays people tend to obey laws because those rules become self-imposed. As a proposal for a specific architecture the Panopticon is an idea of the past, but Panopticism, i.e. the underlying ideas, constitute a principle still at work today. This idea is well defined by Gilles Deleuze in the opening of *Postscript on Control Society*.

*Foucault has brilliantly analyzed the ideal project of these environments of enclosure, particularly visible within the factory: to concentrate; to distribute in space; to order in time; to compose a productive force within the dimension of space-time whose effect will be greater than the sum of its component forces.*¹⁰

¹⁰ Gilles DELEUZE. *Postscript on Control Society*, *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press, October, Vol. 59. (Winter, 1992), pp. 3-7.

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Abstract:

The idea of the Panopticon is a symbol of social control that extends into everyday life and has provided a metaphorical framework within which to discuss surveillance in a wide variety of contexts. Many prisons, factories, military barracks, schools, and hospitals all over the world have been indirectly influenced by the panoptic principles in design.