Architecture of Oppression:
Slave Fortresses and Their Relevance to Contemporary American Urban Prison
Architecture

By

Afiya A. Whisby

Submitted to the Department of Architecture
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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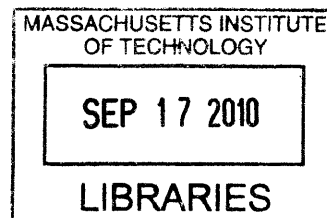
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ABSTRACT

No discussion on architecture and race would be complete without a look at the slave fortresses of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The importation of African slaves to the Americas was the economic catalyst that subsequently catapulted America in a world superpower, and questionably into imperial leadership. Speckled along the coast of West Africa, the architecture of the slave trade is as monumental and systematically oppressive as the institution it sustained.

Due to the rise in prison privatization and the common practice of leasing prison labor to corporations while paying the offenders a menial fee, the American prison industry is operating more and more like slave fortresses. Spatially, the spaces are particularly similar in the areas of exterior formal qualities and parallel evolution of urban planning.

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American urban detention centers are the new slave fortresses. Functionally both
are a holding ground for inmates, primarily of African descent, for the exportation of
labor for corporate endeavors. In both cases, the inmates do not reap the financial benefit
of what they sow. Pragmatically, the architecture of both institutions is presented with
the task of educating the inmates of their new position on society. Specifically with the
slave fortresses, the detainee enters the fortress as a human, and exits as some one else's
property. Language and cultural barriers heightens the responsibility of the architecture
to hierarchically dehumanize the Africans. Both slave fortresses and the American urban
detention centers, particularly those build during or immediately after the Reagan
administration, share similar architectural exterior formal qualities and parallel evolution
of urban planning.

As an architecture student, I understand the role of architecture to encapsulate
human activity. As a person of African descent, I was becoming increasingly concerned
about the architecture of modern black oppression in the United States- the prison system.
I knew the types of human activities that were occurring in the prisons, but had few clues
about how the architecture of these prisons collaborated in the demise of the prisoners.
Through an investigation, however, I came to discover, that the architecture of the urban
detention centers deceptively operated similarly to slave fortresses.

Even through the cultural and political situation has shifted substantially changed
between slave fortress construction and the building of contemporary American urban
prison sites, it is surprising exactly how the little racial polarization has changed. An

example of this long lasting stratification can be seen through the similarities of the map of the 2004 presidential election's map of red and blue states in comparison to the map of the slave and free states of the American Civil War era. This seemingly similar racial context between the Civil War period and that of the current age in American makes it less likely for critics to think that comparing slave fortress to American urban prison architecture is like comparing apples to oranges.

But throughout the history of architecture, many comparisons of seemingly unrelated objects have been made. In his *Vers Une Architecture*, Le Corbusier compares one of the greatest symbols of the industrialized world, the automobile, to the most explicit symbol of a Western advancement and imperialism, the temple architecture of ancient Greece. He links a present-day innovation with an iconic spatial tradition of which academia had already rendered a verdict[1]. Through his comparison, Le Corbusier simultaneously critiques the historical building tradition while at the same time articulates the qualities for a new type of architecture paradigm- 'modern' architecture.

With this in mind, as well as Venturi's idea of architecture's primary function as a symbol before it is a space, the current social and political situation, as seen through the structuring of the built environment, calls for new metaphors to test the barometer of architecture's relevance. Thus, the context of America's racial polarizations and class divisions calls for radical new approaches to criticism of the built environment. A comparison of structures such as twentieth century American detention centers with African slave-trade fortresses renders crucial cultural discussion.

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[1] Trachtenberg Hyman. *Architecture: From Prehistory to Postmodernity*. Second Edition (New York: Prentice Hall, 2002), 465-466

Deeply imbedded in this analogy is the idea of an inversion. After the 1970s much review and criticism of correctional architecture's intentional use of drearily oppressive and cruel forms, the articulation of these spaces of confinement transitioned into a seemingly less oppressive space[2]. Thus, with these modifications, modern detention centers occupied a new symbolic position in the urban landscape. Their new symbolic function was, however, co-opted by the oppressive system it was trying to avoid. Ironically, the correctional facility design's new concern for its public face and "nostalgia for modern office structures[3]" aligns the detention centers with one of history's most oppressive building traditions- Trans-Atlantic Slave Fortresses. The social uplifting intention of the new correction facilities has been inverted into a Post-Modern articulation of a slave fortress. In light of most recently built detention center facades, the leftist critic's argument that "Post-Modern architecture is the architecture of Reganism[4]" is plausible.

The basis of thesis discussion is to outline the formal and metaphorical relationship of the archetypical West African slave fortress and the architecture of contemporary American Urban prisons. This discussion will be explored through the lens this analogy of the classical Greek architecture and the automobile. In a sense, the analogy that is being formulated between the slave fortresses and the prisons can be understood through the analogy of classical architecture and the automobile. As with Le Corbusier's comparison, the items to be weighed, in this case contemporary urban

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[2] Johnston Norman. *The Human Cage The Review of Correctional Facility Architecture* (New York: Walker 1973), 54

[3] Howard Roberta. *Designs for Contemporary Correctional Facilities* (Crofton, Md.: Capitol Pub. Co., 1985),. p.5

[4] McLeod Mary. "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Post-Modern to Deconstructivism." In *Architecture Theory since 1968*, Hays, editor. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 680

detention center design and slave fortress architecture, share formal resemblances and parallel evolutions. In the case of the urban prisons and the slave fortresses, the parallel evolution rests in the arrangement of the urban planning. To compare these two architectural entities with fluidity, the comparison will focus on two specific instances of each.

The slave fortress, Elmina Castle in Elmina, Ghana, West Africa, will represent the architectural slave fortress tradition (see Figure1).

(Figure 1: Elmina Castle, Elmina, Ghana, West Africa. Photograph courtesy of author, Afiya Whisby)

Due to the scale and function of this slave fortress (which is also called a slave castle) in relation to the Trans-Atlantic African slave trade, Elmina Castle holds an exemplary space in the slave fortress building tradition.

As for the urban detention center, the architecture of the Atlanta Detention Center located on the edge of downtown Atlanta, Georgia will be explored (see Figure 2).

(Figure 2: Atlanta City Detention Center, Atlanta, GA. Photograph courtesy of author, Afiya Whisby)

This space provides the iconic example of contemporary correctional facility design and how Post-Modernism has given this discourse a language of capitalism (and historical references to the past) that allow a troubling link to be made between slave fortress architecture and that of American urban jails. Beginning with the history and description of the spaces, followed by with a discussion of similar formal resemblances and parallel evolution of urban planning, the relationship between the theses two architectural types suggests that these two spaces are closer related than may be initially perceived.

History and Description of Spaces

The Elmina Castle, also called Castle Saint Jorge, is a morbidly beautiful structure modeled after a medieval castle. Even though the Portuguese initially built it in the late 1480s, the castle was taken over and completely remodeled by the Dutch who were head quartered there from 1637-1872. The British subsequently took over the castle but made little revisions. Thus, what remains of the current structure is almost completely the way the Dutch remodeled it. The castle is located on the brim of the Atlantic Ocean, directly in front of Saint Iago Hill with a military fort, Fort Coenraadsburg on its top[5] (see figures below)

(Figure 3: View of Elmina Castle from Coentaadburg. Photograph courtesy of author, Afiya Whisby)

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[5] Van Dantzig, Albert. Forts and Castles of Ghana.(Accra: Sedco Publishing 1999)

(Figure 4: View of Coenraadburg from Elmina Castle. Photograph courtesy of author, Afiya Whisby)

From the exterior, the verandas and balconies of the governor of the slave fortress gives the impression that navigation throughout the space is a theme throughout the space, even through only certain people are granted mobility. Clearly this idea is debunked as a myth given that in reality the space was an inescapable prison for thousands of Africans.

Like all slave fortresses, the spaces are hierarchically arranged Entering the building requires crossing the castle's two drawbridge and molts. These drawbridges allow the controllers of the castle to carefully screen the people entering the structure. The first room encountered is a reception area where the scale of the building in this area

is relatively proportional to the human body. After passing though this area, the viewer enters a large courtyard area.

In this large courtyard area there is a remnant of the first church in Sub-Saharan Africa built by the Portuguese (See Figure) later, it was converted into a slave auction

(Figure 5: Portuguese Church in central courtyard of Elmina, Ghana, West Africa. Photograph courtesy of author, Afiya Whisby)

Hall and a mess hall for the guards stationed in the forts. The church was later relocated by the Dutch and placed directly on top of the male slave dungeon. Thus, literally and metaphorically, the establishment of the Christian church in Sub-Saharan African was built on the legacy of brutality of the African slave trade.

In elevation, there is a spatial hierarchy of occupants. The captain of the slave fortress lived on the top level above the cloistered courtyard space. Directly below his

living space were the higher ranked officials and below them were the officials below him and so forth. Below the lowest class of European soldiers were the barrel-vaulted roofs of the male slave dungeons that lined the interior of the curtain wall.

This urban prison in question, the Atlanta City Detention Center, is located in the heart of downtown Atlanta Georgia on the cusp of the border of a prominent interstate[6]. Built in 1995, this building is a modeled after a high-rise office structure (See Figure). It is often described as a third generation jail


(Figure 6: View of main Detention Center entrance, Atlanta, GA Photograph courtesy of author, Afiya Whisby)

because this is the center's third location. Before its location in on the brim of the business district downtown, the correctional facility was firstly located on a prison farm,

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[6] My knowledge of the architecture of the space is derived from close observation of the space from the exterior and limited interactions in the reception space. Citing "homeland security" as an issue and also due to the fact that the site is an active prison, the city of Atlanta denied my view of the official plan and sectional drawing of the Atlanta City Detention Center.

closely modeled similarly to a plantation, and before that it was located at a less

prominent location downtown. Even though this new prison was created because of the

increased incarceration linked to the drug trade,[7] the exterior
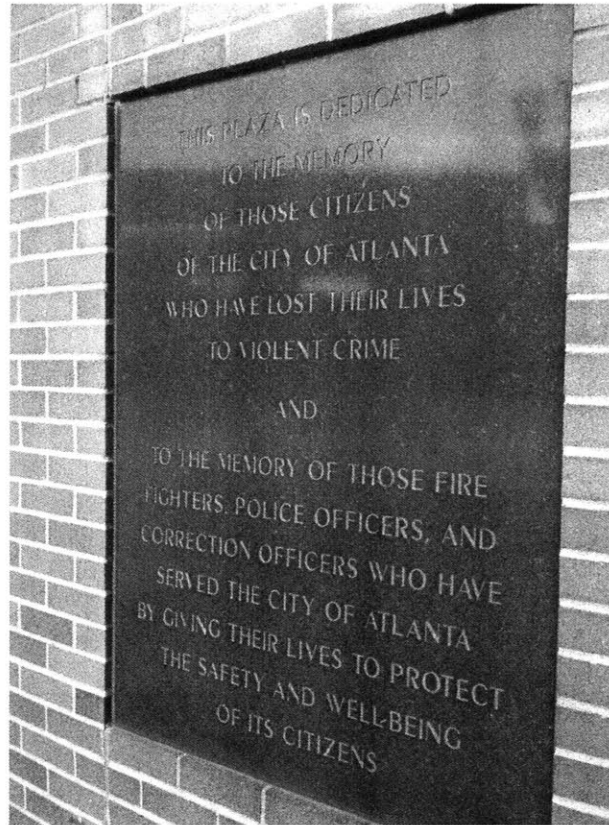
(Figure 7: Plaque in courtyard, Atlanta, GA Photograph courtesy of author, Afiya Whisby)

courtyard to the right of the building, through a memorial to victims (See figure above),

misguidingly suggests that the majority of inmates are imprisoned due to violent crime[8].

From the exterior, the building does not look like the archetypical jail. Nor does it

look like a prison. It has been given an exterior envelope that is reminiscent of the

corporate high rise.

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[7] http://www.atlantaga.gov/government/corrections/doc_history.aspx
[8] This tablet reads "THIS PLAZA IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE CITIZENS OF THE CITY OF ATLANTA WHO HAVE LOST THEIR LIVES TO VIOLENT CRIME AND TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE FIRE FIGHTER S, POLICE OFFICERS, AND CORECTION OFFICERS WHO HAVE SERVED THE CITY OF ATLANTA IN GIVING THEIR LIVES TO PROTECT THE SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF ITS CITIZENS."

Because of the spacing and size of the window openings, the façade gives the appearance of openness and access to the exterior world.

Like the slave fortress, this space too has its own sort of balcony. As seen in the figure above, the shape of the space immediately over the doorway of the main entrance may be a post-Modern articulation of a balcony. This same "balcony "form is continued up the front portion of the high-rise. However in reality spatially, this relationship does not exist. These are not real balconies, but dark openings that are heavily barricaded with a wire fence material. Inmates are cannot be seen from these openings, neither can they see out. Instead all that comes from these openings is muffled noise from the basketball court on the upper levels of the prison, cleverly hidden behind theses fences. Entrance and exit from the detention center is particularly difficult, even though the false window openings to do articulate this reality. In this space, the molt of the slave fortress has been replaced with guarded entrances, metal detectors and a rigid photo identification process.

Like the slave fortress, here the spaces are also hierarchically arranged. Because both the detainers and the detainees inhabit the space, the architecture must also allow for hegemony of certain interior spaces as opposed to others. Also as with the slave fortress, there is a central courtyard area. As with the male dungeons in the slave fortress, the inmate cells in this urban prison are also located around this central courtyard. Also as with the slave fortress, this central courtyard area is the location for dining and other congregational events. Particularly, however, the greatest resemblances between the Atlanta City Detention Center and Elmina Castle when the formal resemblance the evolution of urban planning are studied in isolation.

Formal Resemblances

Exterior Formal Qualities:

Interestingly, given Venturi's idea of architecture's function as a symbol before it is an actual space, the exteriors of both the Elmina Castle Slave Fortress and the Atlanta Detention Center do not explicitly give viewers a physical cue of the function of the spaces. In this respect, both the slave fortress and the detention center operate as faux facades for the actual interior spatial arrangement of the buildings.

On many levels, the politics of invisibility, typified by Ralph Ellison's <u>Invisible Man</u> has tightly laced the struggle of black oppression in the United States to a spatial dimension. Given, the historical precedents of the intentional architectural invisibility of the slave spaces in Monticello and similar hierarchical mechanisms in slave ships, architectural invisibility in urban prisons is placed in a disconcerting tradition of spaces of black oppression. All of these spaces -slave fortresses, slave ships, slave plantations, and the new addition of this slave tradition, American prisons as theorized by Angela Davis in her famed article "Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry"- offer interesting architectural challenges due to the fact that the imprisoned, and the imprisoners spatially coexist. To deal with this coexistence, from the exterior of the building, the functions of the spaces of the prisoners are not depicted to an exterior viewer of the space.

To render the prisoners invisible, the primary mechanism that is employed by both buildings is that the exterior formal qualities imitate those of buildings outside both buildings traditions. Specifically, the slave fortress's exterior articulates itself as a medieval castle, not a holding cell for thousands of African slaves. This architectural

unspecificity of function was a common practice in some European building traditions.

For example, the Norwich Castle, a pre-Bentham panopticon English prison, functioning

in the 1780s. Like the Elmina slave fortress, it too was modeled after a medieval castle.

Externally, both have the medieval fort characteristics- bastions, curtain walls, etc. Of

Norwich Castle, it was noted that

> "the physical likeness between the prison and other secular buildings is perhaps hardly surprising, since most buildings were modeled on dwellings of one kind or another: palaces, villas, mansions and so forth.[9]"

However, upon entering the space of this English prison, the user recognizes that the

adaptation of other noted architectural forms hides the function of the prison until it is

entered. One visitor of this prison specified that

> "Even so, the prison took patterns of so varied a character yet of such fundamental ordinariness that it could not be said to constitute a specific building type at all.[10]"

In other words the prison had invoked the signifiers of so many other architectural types,

that this prison itself was not discernible as a 'prison' building. In parallel, contemporary

urban detention centers, are using the same architectural technique. They are depending

on the similar "fundamental ordinariness" of the downtown corporate architecture, that

the detention centers are intentionally imitating, to hide the true function of the centers as

holding cells for thousands of prisoners.

Elmina castle employs a similar technique. Years before Christopher Columbus's

famed voyage, Elmina Castle was built by the Portuguese as a gold trading post. After

several re-buildings by the Portuguese, and later the Dutch, the function of the building

changed from a holding area for African gold to a large dungeon for African slaves. This

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[9] Evans Robin. The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture 1750-1840. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 16
[10] Ibid., 16.

change in function was not accompanied by a change in architectural style. The exterior formal qualities of the fortress remained as a medieval castle.

The building's self-articulation as a medieval castle is metaphorically important on many levels. First, it is a building, like the English prison, that has borrowed the architectural signifiers other building types. More importantly, the medieval castle architecture carries a commercial connotation. Primarily due to the trade function of the castles and that accompanied the persecution of the Muslims, at the time of the medieval crusades, Elmina Castle was established by the Portuguese as a for a solely commercial entity.[11]

Similarly the exterior formal qualities of the Atlanta Detention Center mask the function of the building by invoking the characteristics of another contemporary building type with a commercial connotation- the downtown office building. Both the slave fortress and the urban detention center are mirroring building types with commercial connotations. This masking is intentional. According to a leading book on the design of contemporary correctional facilities, the detention center should be "an asset to the cityscape," and be "concerned with its face to the public." Moreover, the best practice for the design of these spaces is correctional facilities that are often "mistaken for modern office structures.[12]" Thus the optimal detention center is one that, from the exterior, does not architecturally articulate itself as such. By doing this architecturally, the presence of the offenders in the space is hidden. Thus the building as a symbol negates the presence of the offenders, by projecting itself as a corporate structure, further driving the detainees into a spatial tradition of invisibility.

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[11] Lawrence A.W. *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 25.
[12] Howard Roberta. *Designs for Contemporary Correctional Facilities* (Crofton, Md.: Capitol Pub. Co., 1985),. p.7

This architectural act portrays the correctional facility not as a space for rehabilitation or punishment, but a corporate space. In relation to the history of African slavery in the Americas and the fact that the detention center's previous location was a farm setting similar to a southern slave plantation[13], this commercial connotation of the detention center cannot be ignored. Coupled with the 1988 Census of local jails, the reporting of overcrowding in the facilities[14] and the commercial facade of the building, seemingly link to the methodology of the slave trade. The building's Post-Modern facade's pseudo-historical nostalgia heightens the irony of this oppressive space's relation to its interior.

Corresponding Plan and Sectional Hierarchies:

Particularly, the layout of the spaces in the Atlanta City Detention Center is seemingly straightforward. It incorporates the progressive "direct supervision" model of design and management and is 17 stories tall and 471,000 square feet in size.[15]" The National Institute of Corrections, a segment of the U.S. Department of Justice defines direct supervision as allowing "correctional officers to interact with inmates to manage their behavior. By contrast, officers in intermittent or remote surveillance settings are less able to avert problem situations before they occur[16]." Plans of the inmate space show that the building is divided into in pods. The offender's cells are clustered around a common

[13] Atlanta, Georgia Department of Corrections website www.atlantaga.gov/government/corrections.aspx
[14] U.S. Dept. of Justice. *Census of Local Jail, 1998 VolumeIV*. (Washington, D.C.): Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics : For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1991.
[15] Atlanta, Georgia Department of Corrections website
http://www.atlantaga.gov/government/corrections.aspx
[16] http://www.nicic.org/resources/topics/DirectSupervisionJails.aspx

interior courtyard area, called a dayroom (See figure). By all means, this is not a rigid

Bentham space. Even though there is no secure control booth for the officer, and there
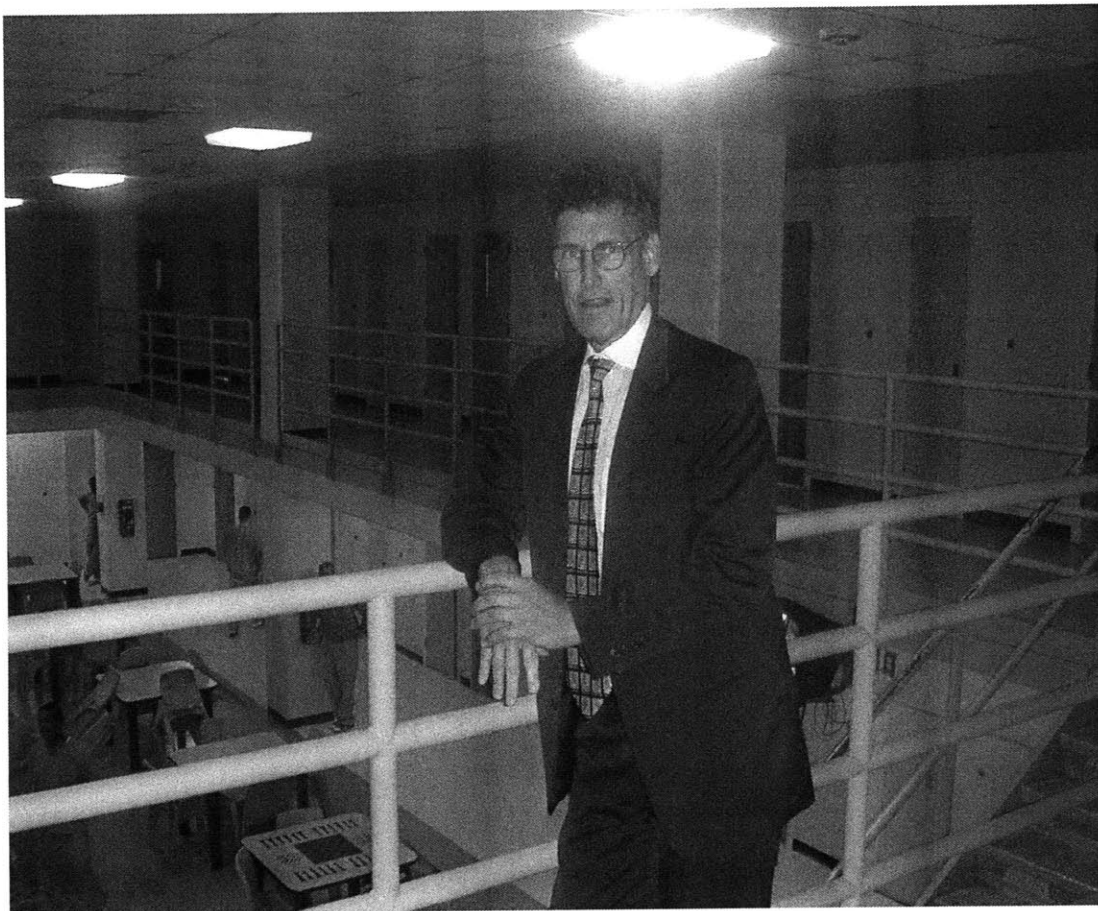
(Figure 8: Chief Thomas J. Pocok shown near the interior courtyard of Atlanta City Detention Center Cell Block, Atlanta, GA. Photograph from "City of Atlanta Online" Website)

are no physical barriers between the officer and the inmates, surveillance remains to be

an issue. As seen in this photograph, the balcony space allows Thomas J. Pocock, the

chief of Corrections, to have an architectural advantage because this balcony position

allows a commanding view of the inmates in the courtyard below. This same positioning

of the chief in the prison directly relates to the same commanding that was architecturally

given to the governor in the slave fortress (See figure below).

(Figure 9: Governor's Balcony looking down into the cloistered female slave area. Photograph courtesy of author, Afiya Whisby)
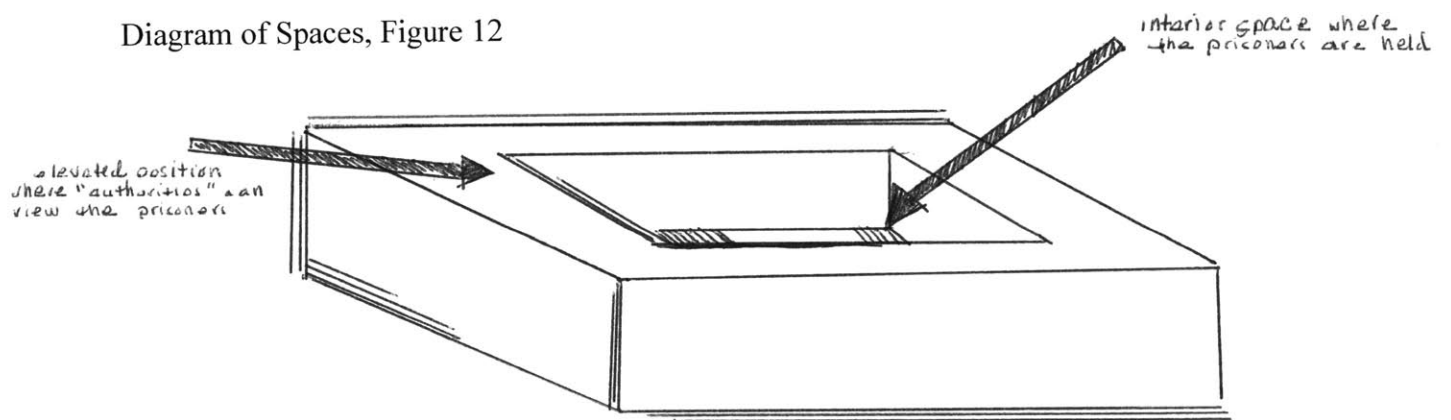
The regular officer assigner to a particular area in the urban detention center may have a desk or table for paperwork, but it is in the open dayroom area.[17] Thus, in plan, there is seems to be more of an equality of spaces. However, with Elmina castle, (See plan of Elmina below and diagram of spaces) as with many other slave fortresses, the interior common area was also used for forced and regulated exercise of the slaves. Even though the physical barriers have been lessened, the relation of the cells to the dayroom is the same as that of the slave holds and interior courtyards.

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[17] Ibid.
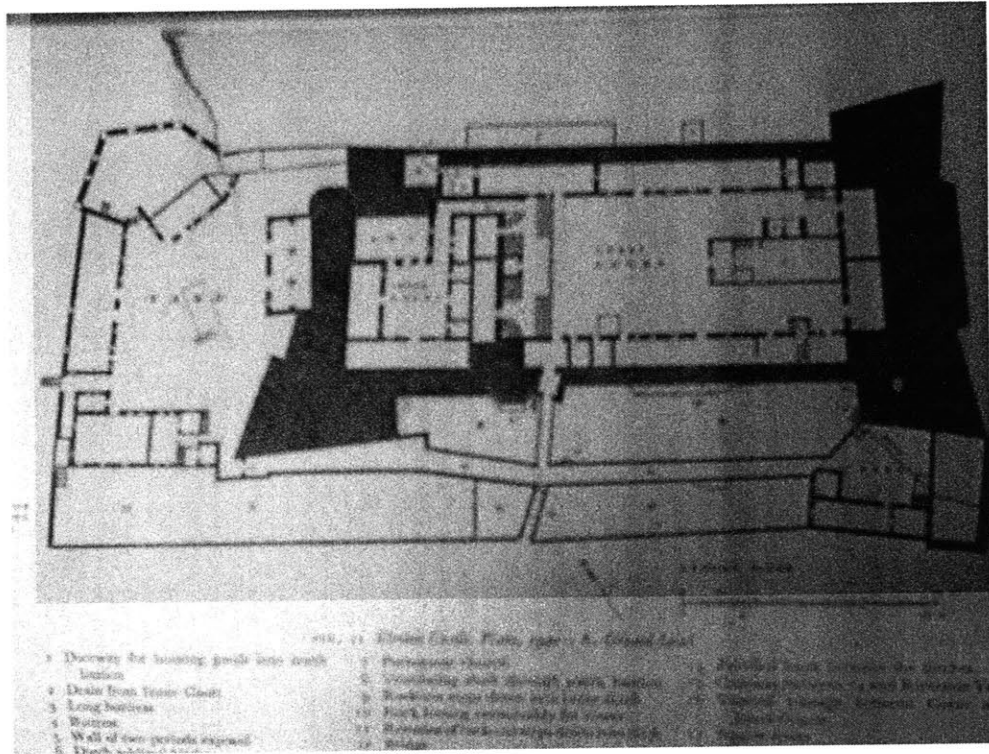
(Figure 11: Photograph of Plan of Elmina Castle, Dutch. Taken from <u>Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa</u> by A.W. Lawrence)

Diagram of Spaces, Figure 12

interior space where the prisoners are held

elevated position where "authorities" can view the prisoners

In both spaces, the slave fortress and the urban detention center, the overseers of the spaces spatiality and metaphorically "sit high and look low."

Parallel Evolution of Urban Planning

On different levels, the evolution of the urban context of the Elmina castle and the Atlanta City Detention Center allowed close proximity to capital resources and accessibility for the exportation of goods/services. Elmina was a logical site for a fortress for many reasons. Foremost the location allowed for sizeable economic opportunities due to the sizeable Fante African settlement near the site.[18] The resources of that site, namely gold and people could be found and traded for alcohol and firearms.

In a similar fashion, the Atlanta Detention Center is located in a culturally pragmatic zone, directly across the street from a strip club and bus station and a few blocks from a liquor store. This zoning arrangement creates a perpetual cycle where the nomadic re-offender, upon release from the detention center, is immediately interjected into an urban planning zoning that implicitly encourages actions that may lead to re-incarceration. Thus, as in the slave fortress, the businesses zoned in close proximity to the detention center are metaphorically operating as the African slave traders in the settlement close to the caste, by providing a physically close context for the confinement of the detainees.

In regards to Elmina Castle the physical setting of the site presented the space as a narrow rocky peninsula formed by the Benya Lagoon and the ocean granted easy physical access to the foreign markets that the goods were to be sold[19]. A functionally similar urban environment is created for the Atlanta City Detention Center. Given that

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[18] DeCorse Christopher. *Archeology of Elmina: Africans and Europeans of the Gold Coast 1400-1900.* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2001), 21.
[19] Ibid.

one of the goals of the detention center is to and to deliver the highest level of services to our customers,[20]"the center is conveniently located blocks from three large interstates where prisoners can be easily transported to and from job sites where their labor is leased.

In all, the exterior formal qualities, spatial relations seen in the plans of the spaces, and the parallel evolution of the urban context show how even after initiatives for design reform, the prison of slavery in Elmina castle is architecturally married to the slavery of prison in the Atlanta City Detention Center. Reverting back to Le Corbusier's comparison of Greek temple architecture and the automobile, this comparison is also calling for a re-equipping of architecture's social vision.

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[20] http://www.atlantaga.gov/government/corrections.aspx?section=Corrections