

The Panopticon

This paper examines the geometries and legacies of Jeremy Bentham's 1787 scheme for a Panopticon, or 'inspection house', scrutinising his claims to have designed an architectural device combining 'the best contrivances for seeing without being seen.' The Panopticon has entered the lexicon to describe an all-powerful system of surveillance which, I hope to demonstrate, Bentham's model could not (and did not) deliver. Analytical architectural drawings will complete the 'unfinished' nature of the Panopticon's original drawings on Willey Revely's 1791 Plates, explaining how his refinement of a 'simple idea in architecture' led towards a theatrical design that did not just utilise fiction, but was fiction.

Two years before French revolutionaries overthrew the old prison at Bastille, Bentham's typological revolution dissolved the traditional fortifications of mass in the pursuit of an architecture of light. His Panopticon proposed a lightweight architecture employing the nascent technologies of iron construction to form a literal annular precursor to the London Police's ring of steel; the spy-helmet that he designed (but never drew) at the heart of his final scheme foreshadowed the immobilisation of the contemporary CCTV control-room operator. My paper will end with a parallel analysis of a particular ongoing electronic evolution of Bentham's thought (proliferating as I write across the same London he designed for) - the centripetal and automated optical networks of the Congestion Charge.

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