

Advanced Studio V, Spring 2016

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#CLOSErikers



Rikers island is New York City's largest jail complex, located on the East River between the Bronx and Queens. This semester our studio will consider what it might mean for New York City to close the jail at Rikers Island. We will propose speculative, activist, and evidence-based design prototypes and infrastructures for its alternatives. We will dismantle, decentralize, and reimagine this famously inhumane -- and failing -- institution, which sadly still occupies a central role in the architecture of justice in this city. Our work will necessarily be embedded in debates about public interest architecture, equality and race, data and design, as well as architecture and justice.

What is the difference between jails and prisons? According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics: “Jails are locally-operated, short term facilities that hold inmates awaiting trial or sentencing or both, and inmates sentenced to a term of less than 1 year, typically misdemeanants. Prisons are long term facilities run by the state or the federal government and typically hold felons and inmates with sentences of more than 1 year.” So, with very few exceptions, the people in U.S. jails have not been convicted of crimes. They have been arrested and charged with crimes, but not yet been tried. They await their days in court, and are considered innocent until and if they are found guilty. Most people who are arrested spend a very short period of time in jail, and have the options to post bail to guarantee that they appear for their court date. Many people however cannot afford bail, often in amounts lower than \$2,000, and spend too long in jails awaiting trials.

Jails should be temporary processing institutions that mediate between courts, prisons, and neighborhoods. Rikers Island, New York City’s main jail complex, is anything but temporary for its average daily population of more than 10,000 inmates and 11,500 guards and administrators. Glen Martin founder and president of Just Leadership USA and one of the organizers of #CLOSErikers, in an interview in Atlantic magazine says, “as an organization(JLUSA), we argue that there is a third city that (de Blasio) is not paying attention to and that city is sitting just 200 yards from LaGuardia Airport, Riker’s Island, what we call our torture island, here in one of the most progressive resource-rich cities in the United States. It seems like such an abomination for us to have this facility continue to operate. To people who want to be pragmatic: we are spending \$167,000 per bed per year to operate a facility that churns out so much damage to New Yorkers, particularly young New Yorkers of color.”

Rikers is at once a symbol of a discriminatory and dysfunctional criminal justice system, an artifact of this country’s mass incarceration epidemic, and an actually existing catastrophe. We will explore the way it functions procedurally, politically, and in the imagination and memory of New York City residents.¹ We will engage with the #Closerikers campaign which, if imaginatively pursued, has the potential to disrupt and perhaps even undo not just the results but the causes of the injustice that defines our justice system.

Background

The rate of incarceration in the United States is the highest in the world. This country has 5% of the world’s population and 25% of its prisoners.² Furthermore, prisons and jails are disproportionately populated by poor people of color, predominantly black and latino men.³ The Center for Spatial Research (CSR) has been studying the phenomenon of mass incarceration for over ten years, with maps and visualizations that reveal the invisible geography of incarceration and its costs to urban neighborhoods across the country. In many places the concentration of people who have been sentenced to prison is so dense that the state spends in excess of a million dollars a year to incarcerate the residents of single city blocks. When these people are released and reenter their communities,

1 The Marshall Project: This is Riker’s Island by the people who live there, June 2015

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/06/28/this-is-rikers>

2 World Prison Population List, 10th edition (London, England: International Center for Prison Studies, 2013.)

3 U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics
<http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/scefy8210.pdf>

roughly forty percent are reincarcerated with three years. CSR has created maps of these “million dollar blocks” and of the city-prison-city-prison migration pattern in New York City. The maps suggest that the criminal justice system has become the predominant government institution in these communities and that public investment in this system has resulted in significant costs to other elements of our civic infrastructure — education, housing, health, and family. Prisons and jails form the near and distant exostructure of many American cities, including New York City, today.⁴

Today, there is an active and growing campaign in New York City to transform the city’s criminal justice infrastructure. Rikers Island is one of its focal points. City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito established an Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform to advise Mayor DeBlasio as “an independent body of experts, policymakers, and advocates charged with exploring the ways to reduce the population held at Rikers, the feasibility of moving the jail facilities off Rikers Island, and the feasibility of alternate uses of Rikers Island itself.”⁵

Coinciding with this top-down approach, a grassroots campaign called #CLOSERikers initiated by the non-profit Just Leadership USA (JLUSA) has developed considerable momentum. JLUSA “is dedicated to cutting the US correctional population in half by 2030, while reducing crime.” For them “#CLOSERikers isn’t just about shutting down a building, it is about healing and rebuilding communities.”

Rikers is already getting smaller -- but not any better. The city jails only about half the number of people on a daily basis at Rikers as it did twenty years ago. But the population still comes disproportionately from the same five neighborhoods, and the conditions have worsened.⁶ The Reimagining the Incarceration in New York City project points out that, as a result of this shrinking population, “New York City [should be] the best example of de-incarceration in the nation ... and provide an opportunity to explore what a model system of pre-trial and short-term incarceration in a major urban area could look like.”⁷ This has not happened -- yet, and our studio will develop and imagine a rich set of ideas and visions for this exploration. This means, though, not just focusing on the jail itself. For #CLOSERikers to be successful, and to become a national example of justice reform, we need to ask: what might the city look like?

Alternatives for Island Architecture:

The most obvious move for architects in this situation is to rethink the island. There has not been a real blank slate in New York City since the era of “urban renewal,” when it was common practice to demolish entire neighborhoods in the name of progress. So it’s no surprise that in response to the prospect of closing Rikers, Crain’s New York Business magazine saw the real estate possibilities and launched what

4 <http://c4sr.columbia.edu/projects/million-dollar-blocks>.

5 <http://islg.cuny.edu/sites/our-work/current-projects/independent-commission-on-nyc-criminal-justice-incarceration-reform/>

6 These 5 Neighborhoods Supply Over A Third Of NYC’s Prisoners, Aaron Mark, May 1, 2013
http://gothamist.com/2013/05/01/these_interactive_charts_show_you_w.php

7 The Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform is running this project as part of its research agenda:
<http://islg.cuny.edu/sites/our-work/current-projects/reimagining-the-incarceration-in-new-york-city/>

it called “Rikers Reimagined: Innovative ideas to turn the infamous island into a New York destination. Moving the jail could create a world of opportunity.” They invited architects to put forward “some innovative ideas to get the conversation started.”⁸ Many familiar ideas were proposed: an eco-park, a bikers island, the extension of LaGuardia Airport, a hub for industrial workspace, mixed use housing, and recreation areas. This will not be what we do.

Alternatives for Justice Architecture:

Our studio will take a somewhat more daring approach, proposing to replace the jail with institutional, architectural, and infrastructural alternatives to it. Using the ten-year time frame set up by the city, how might a design unfold? Beginning with a premise set out by a group at the Columbia Law School, we will ask: might a jail be better named a Center for Public Health and Safety? They suggest a small community program that includes secure housing, transitional housing and a mental/behavioral health center, a day reporting and reentry center, a mediation center and multifunctional space, and green space. We will use this program as a point of departure, assessing its vision and its limitations, and address other proposals for alternatives to jails as well. Should jails be transformed altogether into what Deanna Van Buren calls Restorative Justice Cities in Oakland? If young people, the disabled (physically and mentally), and the homeless are relocated from the court system into facilities more appropriate to their needs, jails could be radically smaller -- and maybe even almost disappear, except to house those actually sentenced to short terms (currently only about 20% of the Rikers population). Then we could work on designing buildings and programs that are humane, and investing in communities rather than in punishing the poor. Rikers could be ‘replaced’ with transitional housing, restorative justice, and no doubt a range of other ideas we have not yet considered, and they can form the basis of new kinds of institutions that are much more dispersed, and much more diverse, than the architecture of punishment represented by the island that is Rikers.

Work:

Your projects must aim to integrate your proposed design in terms of the physical, social and temporal city. How will your project unfold over 10 years? Your work will be prototypical and stand in for something can be replicated, not only formally, but methodologically in another neighborhood. During the first half of the semester you will do two things:

- a. You will be assigned a zip code which shows a high concentration of people who have been jailed for further research. Using an evidence based design approach you collect more data to visualize, map and learn more about this urban territory. Your analysis will allow you to navigate the physical, social, and temporal scales such that you finally discover and construct a site for developing your design work.
- b. You will think abstractly about the criminal justice system and the place jails have within them and design a prototype of an alternative to Rikers Jail.

8 http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20160228/REAL_ESTATE/160229896/rikers-reimagined-innovative-ideas-to-turn-the-infamous-island-into-a-new-york-destination

During this phase, your work can address any scale. Should an alternate jail be a building, or an infrastructure? Permanent or temporary? Stationary or mobile? A closed or open system? Participant in an existing surveillance network or proposing alternate networks for safety?

During the second half of the semester, you will develop your design to demonstrate to its place in the #CLOSErikers campaign; describe how it works within a proposed new infrastructure of criminal justice. What is the specific program and what does it look like? You will define the program and design what it looks like and how it fits within the community.

#CLOSErikers is an active hashtag and might even be called public space. It is certainly a public and unrestricted communication medium. As a group, we will discuss what we feel is respectful and relevant to their campaign, as well as reflects the goals of our work as a studio within GSAPP.

Collaborators:

There is a network professors and students addressing #CLOSErikers at Columbia this semester coordinated by the interdisciplinary [Center for Justice](#). You will have an opportunity to attend [workshops at Rikers](#) if you choose with the [#Rikersbot](#) project run by Dennis Tenen, and the Architecture in Rikers Project run by Leah Meisterlin and Cameron Ramsusen in Sociology and a Co-Director of the Center. Faculty from the Center for Justice will attend our reviews, and give guest lectures in the class, as will members of [Just Leadership USA](#) and the #CLOSErikers campaign.

Selected Reading for the Class (a full bibliography will be distributed in studio):

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, The New Press, 2010

<http://we-aggregate.org/project/black-lives-matter>

<http://www.closerikers.org>

Can a Notorious New York City Jail Be Closed?

A former Rikers Island inmate has made it his mission to close the infamous facility.

Atlantic Magazine, April 26, 2016, Interview with Glen Martin, Founder #CLOSErikers

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/04/will-rikers-island-be-closed/479790/>

The Marshall Project: This is Riker's Island by the people who live there, June 2015

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/06/28/this-is-rikers>