

Irene Romano
Inhabiting the prison.
Design proposals for the female body

Authors: Francesca Giofrè and Pisana Posocco
 Title: Donne in carcere
 Subtitle: Ricerche e progetti per Rebibbia
 Language: italian
 Publisher: LetteraVentidue
 Characteristic: 16,5x24cm, 288 pages, paperback, colours
 ISBN: 9788862425056
 Year: 2020



Prison is a place for living, rehabilitation and socialization: this is the assumption behind the proposal by Francesca Giofrè and Pisana Posocco, collected in “Women in prison. Research and projects for Rebibbia”, a book published by LetteraVentidue in the series “Alleli”, dedicated to research. The book deals with the spaces dedicated to women prisoners. Women in prison are a minority within the minority underrepresented and often ignored¹ because, like most places, prison is historically thought and designed for men. In order to understand women prisoners, it is strictly necessary to physically access their spaces, just as in order to design them, it is necessary to understand their invisible world of rhythms and ways of life. The two authors entered the women’s prison with the respect required when entering someone else’s home and this volume guide us through it.

The publication is the result of a research funded by Sapienza University in 2018. The book’s structure mirrors a clear methodological approach, aimed at verifying of the possibilities of intervention on existing spaces. The research does not offer further typological models. Instead, the architectural theme of the prison is originally approached as a project of analysis and recovery of the heritage in use. This concrete approach derives from the cooperation with the women’s Casa Circondariale of the Rebibbia prison and from the constant collaboration with the Department of Penitentiary Administration. In the first part of the volume, the authors and Letizia Gorgo, Ph.D. and member of the working group, address the relationship between the prison’s institution, its spaces and the lives of women prisoners. The study is led on three levels: through a historical and critical recognition of spatial models, through official data analysis and through the study of the interviews with prisoners.

These premises defines the design operational guidelines for the interventions at Rebibbia, illustrated in the second part of the book. Practice occupies, not by chance, half of the publication: from the arrangement, realized, of the Orchidea detention wing for working inmates, to the proposals of the thesis workshops, ranging from architectural redevelopment to product design, up to the construction of the M.A.MA., a small building for family gatherings built within a green area of the prison as part of Renzo Piano’s G124 program².

This book proves that academic research can have important practical impact: it is possible by entering on tiptoe into an enclosed and complex cosmos, intervening on the built environment with humility and a considered lightness. This approach emerges even from the beautiful pastel pink book's cover, it's no coincidence if it resembles themes emerged in the interviews with the prisoners. It refers to the possibility of giving physical body to immaterial needs, such as recognizing a space as one's own. The research thus seems to work on the relationship between two bodies, that of the existing prison and that of the inmates, based on mutual care.

The direct involvement of the users, both in the process of investigation and of intervention is substantial in shifting the gaze on the cell from a punitive space to a space of life. If depersonalization is one of the strongest violence felt by the inmates and the deprivation of liberty is the only real punishment to be served, in this regard, in Italian prisons, there is still much work to be done. However, the book asserts an optimistic confidence that change can also come about through taking care of the little things. It is not a matter of finding extra square meters, but of making existing surfaces 'three-dimensional', responding to needs that might seem trivial but are often ignored. The material translation of these needs requires a specific and trained sensitivity of the interpreter-architect, who responds with light, air, sounds, colours, visuals. As it unfolds, space allows the prisoners-inhabitants to tame the places and to recognize their value, hence finding a home in them.

Notes

¹ Women form the 4% of all the Italian prisoners. However, this percentage does not consider gender identity: being imprisoned in a male or female institute depends on which sex is acknowledged by identity documents. For instance, trans women with male reproductive organs are directed in male prisons.

² Pisana Posocco worked at the project with the architects Tommaso Marenaci, Attilio Mazzetto and Martina Passeri, publicly selected for the 2019 edition of G124. For further information: "Diario delle periferie 2019. G124, Renzo Piano al Senato", edited by S. Pellizzari, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa 2020.