

The End of the Big House

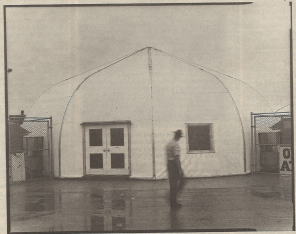
"I'm a King," says Frank A., one of the famous Latin Kings. Frank and I are sitting in the newest prison on Rikers Island. Our plastic tables and chairs are bolted to the floor. McDonald's style. A TV set suspended from the ceiling beams a car chase into the sketchy cell block. We're in a white, rectangular space the size of a tennis court, with two tiers of cells. Frank has hiding his face between his second-tier cell and the TV, set below for four months, awaiting a court date. "Parole violation," he says. "Moved, didn't tell them."

Rikers has 13,000 prisoners and 10 permanent jails, rims of them for men. I say "permanent" because there are plenty of quick-fix structures. Frank's home is something in between, a 500-bed addition to a prison called the George R. Verno Center that opened last November. It's the first prefabricated jail in the state.

Frank is wearing a rhinestone nose ring, green surfer's pants, and the Kings' signature, a black-and-gold plastic necktie that hangs to his navel. I look around. Most of the other prisoners are gone on compulsory work detail, doing laundry or tossing salad. A white terrazzo floor stretches out beneath us. Around three sides of the double-height space is the speaker, with 25 steel-doored cells; another 23 line the floor level. Where the fourth wall would normally be is a semicircular control room behind bulletproof glass, where stark work video monitors

and talker with instrument panels. A prefab pen where the cells are stacked like chicken coops is hardly a departure from the conventional prison design. It brings those conventions to their national, Levittownish conclusion. Nevertheless, prefab prisons have become desirable only since the prison-population explosion of the 1980s. CRSS Contractors of Houston provided the cells, which were designed in consultation with the city's Department of Correction. Each is a complete unit, six feet by nine, with a built-in sink, desk, and toilet. The bed is fixed to the wall. To build, the DC poured a foundation and piled the boxes.

When a riot broke out at Rikers Island on March 14, it was probably not because of the architecture. It's true that the disturbance, involving 75 prisoners, took place in a jail across the island where a second, 500-cell prefab addition is under construction. But according to Tom Antenen, spokesperson for the DC, inmates were in the pen of the Cas Bantam Correctional Center, when suddenly two inmates began to chase a third inmate. A guard tried to stop the assault, a miter erupted, and a 35-man squad was called in to crush things. But the prefab jail under construction was just an on-site convenience.



One of Rikers's new "pod pen" tents, up in just a few days

facade is relieved by two giant circular windows in the middle that look like eyes, while the windows of the cells describe ribbons around each floor. It wouldn't be out of place as an airport hotel, either. Frank has been locked up in several other jails on Rikers, making him something of an expert on

New York's penal architecture. "This one reminds me of condominiums. It's clean. You have a view of the water." He looks out at the East River through a window. The horizontal bars are disguised by metal jalousies. "Nice, quiet."

Prefab is only one of many new architectural thrusts on Rikers. Because of prison-population growth, the island is a virtual laboratory of jail design. The buildup became unmanageable in 1987. That year the city acquired two Staten Island ferry boats, parked them in the river, and revamped them as jails. Later, two more jail-boats sailed in from a barge company in Liverpool, England, and in January 1992, a fifth floating prison was delivered from a contractor near New Orleans and docked on the Bronx side of the island. It looks like a giant white shoe box hunkered in the water.

But easily the strangest of the many recent jails are the 38 "pod pens." The so-called spring structures are white blocks, 100 feet in diameter, that look like fat UFOs. Each houses 50 prisoners in a kind of barracks with single beds. I drive around Rikers, between endless fences of razor wire, and see the blobs popped down on the lawns of the "veal" jails. They have aluminum frames, can be tossed up in a couple of days, and

Schenini, who was police commissioner for the Westchester city of Rye from 1981 until this year. Schenini replaces Catherine Anne, a Diskins appointee who oversaw the arrival of the latest barge and masticating of many of the pods, though the Rikers prefab tent already been on

drawing board before her arrival in April 1992.

Prison construction has become big business. In 1983, New York's Department of Correction had an average of 9900 inmates with an annual operating budget of \$188 million. By 1993, inmates numbered 19,345, most of them on Rikers, and the budget had risen to 400 per cent, to \$745 million. At the federal level, it's much worse—or better—than that if you're in the business of correctional architecture. The federal jail population has nearly tripled since 1981—from 26,000 to almost 80,000 inmates. And the budget ran up for the federal Bureau of Prisons is the largest of any Washington agency: from \$10,020,000 for buildings and facilities in 1981 to \$462,950,000 in 1992, an increase by a factor of 46.

The city and the feds are building at a good clip, but neither can touch the New York State prison system. During the first nine years of the Corneo administration, Albany built 27 prisons with a total of 51,000 cells, more prison cells than built by all other New York State administrations that had gone before. The inmate population rose from 30,537 in 1984 to 61,736 at the end of 1993. And the budget to house them has

le Cutter." That's what his staff calls its designs for off-the-shelf prisons. According to James Fleuteau of the DC's, a Coughlin Cookie Cutter is the design for a single-story jail that houses about 750 prisoners. It has a frame structure, poured concrete floors, and a repeatable layout for a basic

wing. The pen is so simple, and the department so accustomed to it, that it takes only a year to build one floor the date of legislative authorization to the day the first prisoner walks into a cell. The latest three are on Lake Erie, the Pennsylvania border, and on Lake Ontario. "If we took you in the front gate of 10 of them, you wouldn't know one from the other," says Fluteau.

On a gritty, windy street in the shadow of the QBE stands the new federal Metropolitan Detention Center, in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. It's an eight-story former warehouse, circa 1910. The building looks like many in Tribeca. Big industrial windows grab the light. It has a heavily worked masonry facade. But there are tell-tale signs. Around the first floor is a large net, to catch people who might jump.

I enter the lobby, and I feel like it's 1986: classical detailing and scowls, hi-tech gray carpet, and turquoise walls that recall some ad agency for Honda. The architecture may be retro, but the jail is brand-new, an adaptive reuse job that opened in January. It will soon house 1000 white-collar and drug delinquents awaiting court dates. The day I arrive, a dispatch of detainees has just come in from

dorm, 40 men in crisp khakis and Mack-Cosmo sneakers (first-issue inmate togs) mill around. There are rows of single beds and lockers on the concrete floor, along azure racks and the inevitable TV suspended over fixed furniture. Each floor has two units that hold 200 men total. The most interesting thing about the spaces are the columns, which look like the ones in Frank Lloyd Wright's 1936 S.C. Johnson & Son administration building in Racine, Wisconsin. Slender in the middle, the columns flare out at the top. I glance at them and think about the Wright show at MOMA. Except to step outside onto a patio two or three times a week, the prisoners never leave their cocoon. It wouldn't be an uncomfortable living space if you are used to submarines.

The Brooklyn prisoners have use of a legal library, for which they make appointments, and a workshop room. In the latter, the crafts comes down and is replaced by an artistic crucifixion of the other iconography, as needed. The inmates' clinic looks like any doctor's office, except with security glass between the rooms, as in a Society liquor store.

The new theory of confinement seems to be "small is beautiful": a few cells here, a few there, no inlets between. The Rikers prefab cell blocks hold only 50 prisoners. Surveillance is easier, and incarceration, though sedated by TV and softened by spic-and-span

rooms, is less restrictive. Prisoners must feel the psychological harassment pulled together. The old image we have of prisons also breaks down prison populations so as better to micromanage. You could spend months there and get to know only 10 other prisoners. The old image we have of prisons comes from Rodman of Alcatraz on the one hand and Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish on the other: triple-tiered cell

blocks with catwalks, mass movement of inmates. It's confinement as adjustment, with surveillance provided by patrolling guards or parapets towers. But those days are gone, and the capitalizing of American prison architecture is under way.

The new prisons are armored. And while their isolating effects are freely sodic; the tendency to divide and confine is not necessarily shared, with surveillance allowed. The reduction of penal architecture to the smallest possible is an ambition in tune with wider social changes. The success

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