

ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Angelique Bamberg

Western State Penitentiary: The Architecture of Incarceration, Part 2

After the Civil War, Western State Penitentiary outgrew its 1836 facility on the site of the present National Aviary in Allegheny Commons Park. With public sentiment strongly opposed to expansion within the park, the prison's warden and governing board selected a new site about three miles away on the banks of the Ohio River. The move provided an opportunity for them to implement new ideas regarding penal reform.

The new penitentiary was built largely by the labor of prisoners to the design of architect Edward M. Butz between 1878 and 1893. It was influenced by a penological theory known as the Auburn System after the New York state penitentiary at Auburn. Unlike the Pennsylvania System, which governed the design of Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia and was based on housing inmates exclusively in solitary confinement, the Auburn System permitted prisoners to congregate in dining halls, workshops, and recreational, educational, and religious facilities. Auburn-style cell blocks were long, multi-tiered, back-to-back double rows, with full-height ventilation spaces separating them from the building walls. Appended to Western State Penitentiary's riverfront facade, the warden's house provided a contrast of comfortable upper-middle-class domesticity against the monumental, institutional backdrop of the cell blocks.

Western State cost over \$2 million and was, at the time, the most expensive prison

ever built. It was also the most technologically advanced. It was the first prison in the world to equip each cell with running water, individual toilets, and individual heat and exhaust ventilation. It was the first equipped with gang locks, which made it possible to open and close an entire row of cells with a single lever, and in 1900 it became the first prison to furnish each cell with electric lights from the penitentiary's own on-site power house. The technological advances of the industrial revolution also supplied important materials for innovations in prison construction. Cast iron was used extensively for columns, doors, windows, roof trusses, and cell bars.

To this "most advanced model of Auburn-type construction," Butz applied a pastiche of styles. He abandoned the militaristic Gothic Revival of the early Victorian period for an eclectic combination of severe Romanesque cell blocks and, above the cornice, a curiously fanciful roofscape of High Victorian Gothic dormers, turrets, soaring rooflines, and ornamental cresting. Romanesque—a style

Western State Penitentiary nearing completion, c. 1890–91.

Carnegie Museum of Art, 85.4.15.





Cell block, north wing, showing Auburn-style arrangement of tiered ranges facing full-height ventilation shafts. Original iron barred doors were replaced with steel doors in the 1980s, and metal grates were installed to protect guards from objects thrown or dropped from above.

Photo by author.

characterized by the stolid, massive appearance of its heavy stone walls—was an appropriately strong and sober choice for the cell blocks. The almost palatial roof of the prison may have been an expression of the state's lofty goals for the new penitentiary and its residents.

A similar combination of institutional severity and ornamental flourishes is found in this undated description of conditions inside Western State Penitentiary from the late 19th century:

Instruments of music are allowed and playing is permitted from six to seven o'clock in the evening. City water from Allegheny City reservoir supplies the entire establishment. The doors of the cells are double-locked by Yale jamb locks and a draw bar. The floors are of stone both in the halls and in the cells. The cells are numbered and each prisoner is known by his number. A greenhouse brightens the place bringing summer into winter, and blooming plants in great varieties are seen in the institution. A hospital for the sick is on the grounds, and the cleanliness of the whole institution is noticeable.

The late Victorian prison embodied the conviction that an environment conducive to rehabilitation could achieve that goal. When Western State Penitentiary's Victorian roof was removed in 1959, the new flat roof was in



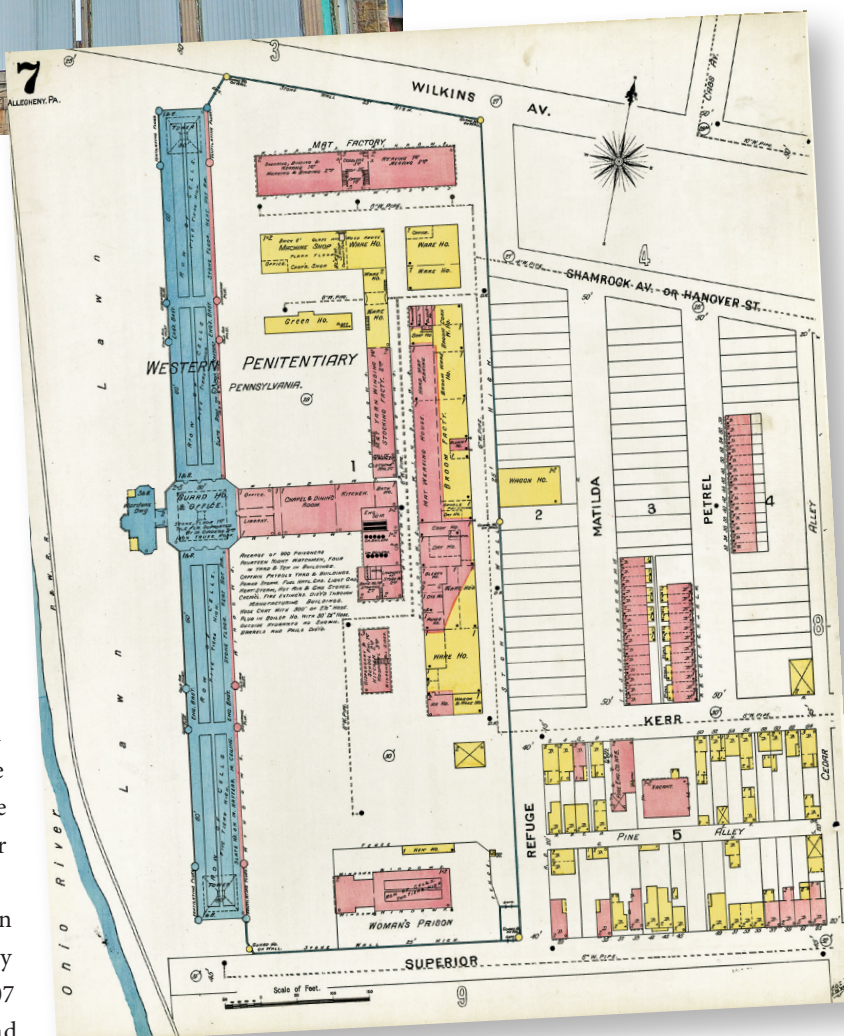
The former warden's house faces what was originally the penitentiary's front yard on the banks of the Ohio River. Prisoners once entered through the basement. A 1984 master plan re-oriented the site entrance to face a parking lot on Beaver Avenue. The flat roof of the cell blocks dates to 1959.

Photo by author.

keeping with the less-is-more architectural preferences of the modern era and reflected practical concerns with maintenance and funding. Symbolically, the removal of the prison's ornamental roofscape left the formidable facades of the cell blocks to speak for themselves.

In 2005, the prison was mothballed, only to be reopened in 2007 to house low- and medium-security inmates for substance abuse treatment. Then in January 2017, Governor Tom Wolf's administration announced in that the 136-year-old state prison would close permanently by June 30, saving the state an estimated \$81 million annually.

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An 1893 Sanborn map of the prison complex shows that, in addition to the main cell blocks, administrative offices, and warden's residence, the campus contained a separate women's prison, chapel, dining hall, and several industrial workshops where inmates performed labor. Work was a reformatory strategy intended to provide convicts with purposeful activity and vocational skills. Sale of goods also helped support the prison.

Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Map of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County*, 1893.