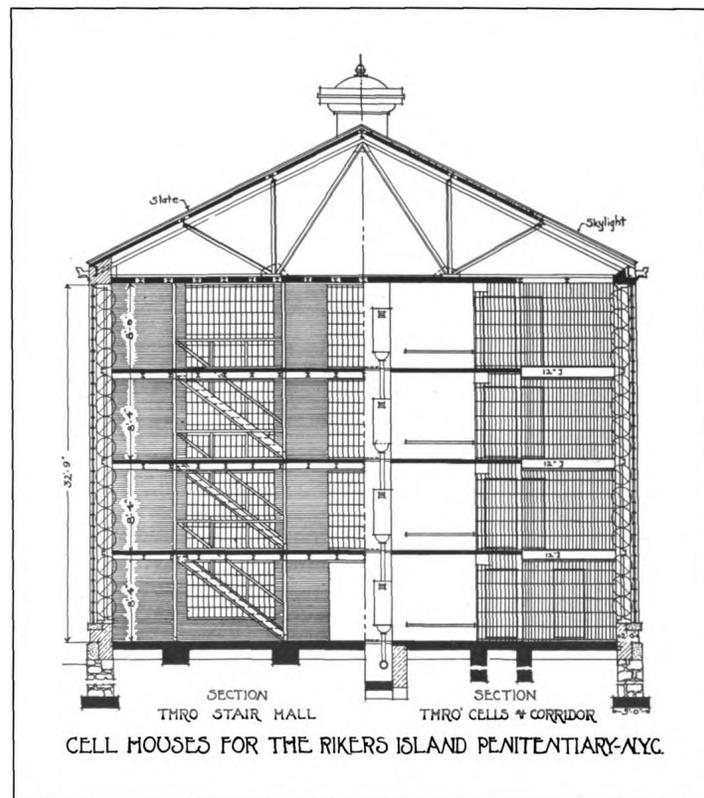


Consolidating the Carceral City

The Planning of Rikers Island, 1884–1925



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Table of Contents

	Acknowledgements.....	3
	Introduction	5
	<i>The Rikers Paradox</i>	7
	<i>The Jail in History</i>	9
	<i>The Carceral City in History</i>	13
I	Reclaiming the Carceral City	
	<i>The Production of Space</i>	17
	<i>Trash Island</i>	20
	<i>The Rikers Fix</i>	32
II	The Modern Carceral Vision	
	<i>The Trowbridge Plan</i>	37
	<i>Four Modern Logics</i>	42
	<i>Rikers Reprise</i>	47
III	Keeping Up With the Joneses	
	<i>Rikers and Reform</i>	50
	<i>The Decline of Blackwell's</i>	54
	<i>"Disgrace" and Boosterism</i>	59
IV	No More "Enormous Expenditure"	
	<i>Rikers as Investment</i>	64
	<i>The Grand Jury's Grand Plan</i>	71
	Conclusion.....	74
	Bibliography.....	76

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“History may operate less by laws of sequence than by simultaneity; its only detectable design may lie in what groups together in a proliferation of resemblances that extend, alter, and expand objects and events.”

—Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*

...

“How about we get away from thinking, ‘Ugh! They’re innocent victims, we’ve gotta step up and be empathetic,’ and instead say, ‘What are the political and social and economic problems that face us [...] and what should we do as people who can organize ourselves [...] to transform carceral geography into abolition geography?’”

—Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Introduction

On St. Patrick's Day, 1903, an Irish-American woman and her son made their way to Manhattan's East 26th Street pier to catch the ferry to Blackwell's Island.¹ The mother clutched a permit from the city's Commissioner of Correction, enabling them to board the boat for the short trip north.² "It is not 'over the hills to the poorhouse' in New York," a reporter on the upper deck joked.³ Instead, the city relied on an ever-changing network of islands designated for the warehousing, punishment, exploitation, and burial of certain New Yorkers.

Upon arrival at Blackwell's, a clerk told the woman that she could not see her husband.⁴ To her surprise, he had been sent farther up the East River to Rikers Island, where, along with other men incarcerated for domestic violence, he worked ten-hour days.⁵ This new program had been inaugurated by judges who were tired of letting "wifebeaters" off with a promise, lest their families starve while they were in jail; when a wealthy donor created a fund to cover expenses, the judges determined that incarceration was acceptable, and the city sent the able-bodied men to unload scows, empty ash barrels, break rocks, and perform other kinds of "manual labor of the hardest sort on Rikers," as Frank W. Fox, the warden at the penitentiary on Blackwell's, put it.⁶ "It's the hardest work we have and wife beaters always get it," the clerk said. "They don't want to come back."⁷

¹ "An Almost Sure Cure for Wife Beaters Can Be Seen Daily Doing Its Good Work on Riker's Island," *New-York Tribune*, 12 April 1903.

² "An Almost Sure Cure."

³ "An Almost Sure Cure."

⁴ "An Almost Sure Cure."

⁵ "An Almost Sure Cure."

⁶ "An Almost Sure Cure."

⁷ "An Almost Sure Cure."

The clerk's news surely dampened the visitors' holiday spirits. It also revealed, to them and to readers of the *New-York Tribune*, the early development of what was to become the jewel in the crown of New York's carceral archipelago: Rikers Island. Then as now, Rikers was a paradox: it was the frequent subject of sensational headlines, but determining what actually went on there was nearly impossible—even for a woman whose husband was incarcerated there. Considering that her ancestors had likely made their way to New York from Ireland via boat, the image of the family torn asunder signals the harsh reality that they had not flourished since arriving in the United States. They had gone from Ellis Island to Blackwell's and Rikers, with not much time for Manhattan's supposed glories in between.

On the boat, Willie had asked his mother, “Will Dad beat us this time?”⁸ The woman, noticing that several people on board had heard, was horrified. “Hush, Willie, hush,” she said. “You know your father never beats us.”⁹ In her humiliation and admonition, she showed her son that the violence that brought them to the boat was an unspeakable embarrassment. That day, Willie learned that he could not be publicly inquisitive about why his father was sent to Blackwell's, rather than let off with a promise, or about why he and his mother were following him there. In a brief, innocuous exchange, his mother reproduced the ideology of carcerality—created, as most ideologies are, by political elites, but reproduced by just about everyone.¹⁰

⁸ “An Almost Sure Cure.”

⁹ “An Almost Sure Cure.”

¹⁰ I use the Marxist definition of ideology conceptualized in the American context in Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery Race, and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review*, May–June 1990. An ideology, Fields writes, “came into existence for rationally understandable historical reasons and is subject to change for similar reasons.”

Carceral ideology was as strong and dangerous as the hellish waters of the upper East River. It was, and remains, difficult to resist, but not impossible. Willie retorted: “That’s what the cop arrested him for—knocking you down an’ blacking your eye an’ kicking you.”¹¹ His mother thought for a moment, and then searched aloud for the truth—ideology’s purest antidote. “Perhaps,” she said to Willie, “it is not all his fault.”¹²

...

The Rikers Paradox

In 1925, as the Roaring Twenties reached a ruthless capitalist apogee, New York City supplanted London as the largest city in the world and announced that it would build the largest carceral complex¹³ in its history on Rikers Island.¹⁴ The planning of the jail complex, an uneven and complicated process, had been underway since 1884, when New York State purchased the island from the Ryker family of Long Island City for \$180,000.¹⁵ ¹⁶ Since the 1830s, the majority of the city’s

¹¹ “An Almost Sure Cure.”

¹² “An Almost Sure Cure.”

¹³ I use *carceral complex* and *jail complex* interchangeably to refer to the carceral institutions that the city planned on Rikers Island. Even in the early years of Rikers, these institutions served different purposes—by turns to punish, to exploit, and to warehouse. *Carceral complex* and *jail complex*, I think, capture the general planners’ general intentions and the island’s general direction. Popular usage and changing functions have obscured carceral definitions. In general, polities use *jails* to warehouse people awaiting trial and convicted people serving short terms, while they use *penitentiaries* and *prisons* to punish people convicted of crimes, usually for sentences of a year or more. *Penitentiary* is no longer used in the United States. Today, Rikers is a jail; roughly 85% of people incarcerated there are in pretrial detention. Michael Schwartz, “What Is Rikers Island?” 5 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/nyregion/rikers-island-prison-new-york.html>

¹⁴ In New York’s grand tradition of de-apostrophizing, “Riker’s Island,” denoting the Ryker family’s ownership through the nineteenth century, became “Rikers” in the twentieth. I use “Rikers.”

¹⁵ Rikers was run by the city’s Department of Charities and Correction until 1895, when the department split into the Department of Public Welfare, responsible for hospitals and almshouses, and the Department of Correction, responsible for all carceral institutions, including Rikers. I use the names accordingly.

¹⁶ “To Build a Bigger Jail: Some New Great Works of the Charities Commission: A Model Penitentiary, Farms for the Insane, Bellevue’s Ventilation, and the Training School,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1886.

incarcerated population had been imprisoned on Blackwell's Island,¹⁷ a stone's throw from Midtown Manhattan. A large swath of mostly human-made land, Rikers slowly replaced Blackwell's as the center of the city's carceral archipelago and eventually became one of the country's most infamous jails. But despite the attention that Rikers has received since then, the story of its creation has yet to be told with the nuance that New Yorkers—above all, those incarcerated there—deserve.

As the debate over whether to close the jail on Rikers consumes contemporary New York politics, we still know so little about why it was planned and built in the first place.¹⁸ Few journalists who cover the routine human rights violations there say anything about its history.¹⁹ Even if they were to look for answers, they would find a dire paucity of scholarship, and errors in the few sources that do exist. Take, for example, the accessible "Rikers Island: New York City Guide," published by Fordham. "Rikers Island," the report's author writes, was first "identified to serve as the primary location for a jail to replace the dilapidated jails of Blackwell Island, now known as Roosevelt Island, in 1925."²⁰ That year was indeed important in the history of Rikers, but my archival research shows that the city first envisioned a jail on the island some four decades earlier. In fact, my thesis dates the *end* of the planning period to 1925. Rudimentary facts about the early history of Rikers ought not remain unclear or contested.

¹⁷ Blackwell's Island was renamed Welfare Island in 1921, then Roosevelt Island in 1973. I use "Blackwell's" and "Welfare" accordingly.

¹⁸ Nicholas Fandos and Jonah E. Bromwich, "Eric Adams Says He Wants to Close Rikers. It May Not Be That Simple," *New York Times*, 17 December 2021. For the abolitionist case, see the Twitter account @nonewjails_nyc.

¹⁹ Schwartz, "What Is Rikers Island?"

²⁰ Victoria L. McDonald, "Rikers Island: New York City Guide," 31 March 2020. https://www.fordham.edu/download/downloads/id/14783/mcdonald_rikers_island.pdf.

I set out to contribute to this history by reading thousands of documents in the mayoral collections at the New York City Municipal Archives from 1870 through 1932, in search of any and all materials on the early days of Rikers. In this thesis, I use municipal reports, correspondences, newspaper and magazine articles, and architectural plans to argue that the Rikers Island carceral complex was not a typical Progressive Era project, as the few scholarly sources on the subject may lead us to believe. New York planned Rikers to concentrate surpluses of labor and capital, modernize itself in the name of efficiency and other principles of modern architecture and city planning, improve its reputation on the national stage, and save money in the short and long runs. These related motives propelled the project to different degrees and at different times, but they were all buttressed by the spirit of consolidation that defined city politics after the unification of the five boroughs in 1898. In this sense, “Rikers” may as well be a synecdoche for twentieth-century New York—a modern carceral city.

The Jail in History

Only two scholars have studied the history of Rikers in any depth. Jayne Mooney, a sociologist, and Jarrod Shanahan, an environmental psychologist who was once incarcerated in the jail, have worked together in recent years to produce three papers—vital contributions to a nonexistent literature. But their respective forthcoming books are not chiefly studies of this thesis’s period. Billed as the “first definitive history” of Rikers, Shanahan’s *Captives: How Rikers Island Took New York City Hostage* is an “account of the prison’s descent into infamy” since the 1950s.²¹ In *The Road to Rikers: A*

²¹ Jarrod Shanahan, *Captives: How Rikers Island Took New York City Hostage* (New York: Verso, 2022).

Social History of the Other New York City, Mooney contextualizes Rikers in a centuries-old history of European settler-colonialism and racial capitalism.²²

Their joint study of the incarcerated labor that the city exploited to build Rikers is their most significant contribution. In “Rikers Island: The Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” which I will cite in Chapter III, they correctly argue that the jail complex was “planned in fits and starts” in the first three decades of the twentieth century.²³ Using contemporaneous newspaper accounts, they describe the basic facts of the planning process: that officials conceived of Rikers to replace the penitentiary on Blackwell’s; that a modern ideology informed its design; that it was to be the largest carceral institution in the country. But these claims only partially answer the question of why and how the city planned Rikers.

They also claim that there was a moral thrust behind the jail complex’s planning, and they attribute it to two major New York reformers: Austin Harbutt MacCormick, who became Fiorello La Guardia’s Commissioner of Correction in 1934, and Richard A. McGee, Rikers’s first warden.²⁴ MacCormick and McGee indeed drew their plan for the “re-education, re-direction, readjustment” of incarcerated people, which was intended to enable them to contribute to society, straight from the Progressive playbook.²⁵ But tracing Rikers’s fundamental philosophy to the 1930s ignores the preceding half century of planning. A researcher would have to look to earlier plans to understand the

²² Jayne Mooney, *The Road to Rikers: A Social History of the Other New York City* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2023).

²³ Jayne Mooney and Jarrod Shanahan, “Rikers Island: The Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” *The Prison Journal* 100, no. 6 (December 2020): 690.

²⁴ Mooney and Shanahan, “Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” 690.

²⁵ Mooney and Shanahan, “Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” 690.

jail-planners' visions. So while Mooney and Shanahan correctly acknowledge that "there is, perhaps surprisingly, little written about the history of Rikers," they only partially fill the gap.²⁶ No historian has yet investigated the archival materials of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to present a clear thesis about the planning of Rikers; this thesis seeks to do so.

The history of the American jail, like the history of Rikers, remains criminally understudied. In *The Jail*, which remains the only study of its kind nearly thirty years after its publication, the sociologist John Irwin argues convincingly that "social scientists, like the general public, have shown a great interest in the prison but have almost completely ignored the jail."²⁷ This remains true today; the growing field of carceral studies has largely ignored the history of American jails in favor of its prisons.²⁸ Given the astronomical rise of incarceration rates in the United States since the 1980s, this trend is understandable, but not acceptable. The historian Brianna Nofil recently argued that deportation centers are a crucial part of the carceral fabric of the United States²⁹; I argue that the same is true for jails. Irwin lists three reasons that the jail ought to be studied in addition to the prison: in the long run, more people are incarcerated in jails than prisons; a person's time in jail tends to be more consequential for their "future freedom" than their time in prison; and a person's experience in jail "often drastically influences their lives."³⁰ These motives are decidedly sociological. This thesis adds three reasons to examine the jail from the historian's perspective: jails were a fundamental and illustrative component

²⁶ Mooney and Shanahan, "Failure of a 'Model' Penitentiary," 691.

²⁷ John Irwin, *The Jail: Managing the Underclass in American Society* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), xxiii.

²⁸ See note 149. For the best account of the politics that produced the explosion of mass incarceration, see Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁹ Brianna Nofil, "Detention Power: American Jails and the Origins of Immigrant Incarceration, 1900–2002," PhD dissertation (Columbia University, 2021).

³⁰ Irwin, *The Jail*, 3.

of the development of modern urban planning and architecture; jails complicate our understanding of Progressive Era reforms; and, as the primary form of municipal incarceration, the landscapes of jails have much to teach us about how our urban environments became what they are.

Irwin argues that jails originated in eleventh-century England, where local authorities held people in pretrial detention before sending them to the royal courts for judgment.³¹ In this period of waning feudalism, increasing numbers of people were expropriated in a process that foreshadowed the coming centuries' violent transition to capitalism through the enclosure of the commons.³² Irwin labels the expropriated, displaced population the "rabble," a group defined by its poverty and vulnerability.³³ Using language that mirrors Ruth Wilson Gilmore's in her history of mass incarceration in the United States, Irwin claims that the "rabble" presented English political elites with "new social problems" that they solved by punishing and incarcerating more and more people.³⁴ No longer were suspected criminals permitted to live with their churches, guilds, or other trusted communities while they awaited trial; considered threats even before proven guilty, they had to be imprisoned.³⁵

The population and criminalization grew in tandem.³⁶ In the fourteenth century, as primitive accumulation occurred unevenly across England, the "rabble" were penalized for incursions of private property.³⁷ In the sixteenth century, England introduced bridewells, or workhouses, which were

³¹ Irwin, *The Jail*, 3.

³² Karl Marx, "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation," *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 431–438.

³³ Irwin, *The Jail*, 3.

³⁴ Irwin, *The Jail*, 5.

³⁵ Irwin, *The Jail*, 5.

³⁶ Irwin, *The Jail*, 5.

³⁷ Irwin, *The Jail*, 6.

steadily fused with jails; by the nineteenth century, the institutions were one and the same, serving as pre- and post-trial reformatories where incarcerated people labored productively.³⁸

The British colonists in the New World did not use incarceration as a form of punishment until the eighteenth century.³⁹ Irwin claims that in the colonies, where “the threat of the rabble was not as great as it was in England,” jails were in general more humane.⁴⁰ In the early republic, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia perceived the “rabble” as an increasing threat and built larger jails, including Newgate, in Manhattan’s West Village.⁴¹ Soon, every major American city had a jail, though Irwin provocatively claims that “no humanitarian theory of reform, no justification through public debate,” and “no plan at all” accompanied their development.⁴² While his acknowledgement of jails’ uneven growth and his skepticism of attributing their form to a single design philosophy is understandable, Irwin’s argument belies his own story. Containing the “rabble” was indeed a plan—one devised by political elites with discernible motives.

The Carceral City in History

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, jails were modern urban planning projects. Rebecca McLennan, a legal and political historian, argues that “the prison was a critical referent, and even a lightning rod, in the much larger debates taking place around America over the meaning of a

³⁸ Irwin, *The Jail*, 6.

³⁹ Irwin, *The Jail*, 7.

⁴⁰ Irwin, *The Jail*, 7.

⁴¹ Irwin, *The Jail*, 7.

⁴² Irwin, *The Jail*, 7.

just economy and society, and the proper means and ends of government.”⁴³ So too was the jail at the city level, which is yet another reason why historians ought to study it. While geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists have led the academy’s turn to carceral studies in this century, urban historians have been left behind. Urban historians tend to borrow theories from the century-old field of urban studies, and these theories are rarely drawn from history as a discipline: the traditional Chicago school,⁴⁴ the postmodern Los Angeles school,⁴⁵ the Marxist cities-as-surplus theory,⁴⁶ and the Global South–rooted theory of urban informality.⁴⁷ These theories are useful but epistemologically inadequate for a history of an urban jail. Accordingly, my thesis proposes a fusion of carceral studies and urban history from which new theories of the city can be forged.

Even scholars of New York City, the primate of American urban studies since the mid-twentieth century and the home of some of the most important developments in the carceral history of the United States, have not adequately attended to its jails. The major histories of interwar New York almost completely ignore the fact that the largest jail in the city’s history opened in those years.⁴⁸ In *Greater Gotham*, the definitive history of the city from 1898 to 1919, Mike Wallace argues

⁴³ Rebecca McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment: Protest, Politics, and the Making of the American Penal State, 1776–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 240.

⁴⁴ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds., *The Blackwell City Reader* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002): 11–19.

⁴⁵ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 2011).

⁴⁶ David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review*, September–October 2008.

⁴⁷ Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 147–158.

⁴⁸ See Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995) and Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Vintage, 2011). For a study of racism and crime in the urban North, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019). Rikers plays no more than an ensemble role in Mike Wallace and Edwin Burrows’s *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City From 1898 to 1919*, cited throughout, and in Ted Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound: The Ecological History of Greater New York* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

convincingly that during the first decades of the twentieth century, when the departments discussed in this thesis merged and modernized, the city consolidated under a “coterie of businessmen—financiers, industrialists, merchants, landowners, lawyers, and corporate managers—at the helm of the city’s and the nation’s economy.”⁴⁹ Wallace excludes jail-planners from his list; this thesis adds them.⁵⁰

The jail-planners were an ever-shifting group of mayors; officials from the Departments of Correction, Street Cleaning, Sanitation, and Docks and Ferries; city judges; and members of the Board of Estimate. This thesis tells the story of their complex coordination to organize a new landscape of incarceration in New York.⁵¹ In Chapter I, I tell the story of the unprecedented land reclamation project that drastically expanded the island and argue that Rikers was an early spatial fix that concentrated critical surpluses of labor and capital on Blackwell’s. In Chapter II, I show how architects and city officials created a vision of the city jail in 1907 using design principles that were self-consciously modern and American. Chapter III provides a detailed history of the transition from Blackwell’s Island to Rikers Island, placing this shift in the context of dramatic changes at the city, state, and national levels; here I argue that the city built Rikers as an early boosterist project aimed at improving New York’s reputation. Chapter IV details the city’s other key motive for bringing the jail to fruition in the 1920s, after the plans languished for two decades: to cut costs in the short and long runs. Each chapter draws from both forms of contemporary abolition: the social movement developed

⁴⁹ Mike Wallace, *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City From 1898 to 1919* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

⁵⁰ Wallace’s omission is somewhat glaring given his claim that authorities in the consolidated city were notable for “dealing with phenomena like crime” (5).

⁵¹ The archival erasure of incarcerated people’s accounts inevitably plagues the work of carceral history, including this thesis. For further discussion of archival limitations, see the Conclusion.

in the streets, and the theory developed by Gilmore, who, in the tradition of the communist W. E. B. Du Bois and the New Left, masterfully fuses the normative with the descriptive in her studies of incarceration. The ethical imperative to abolish prisons, jails, and migrant detention centers, as well as the conditions that produced them, entails a scholarly imperative to study their histories.

I. Reclaiming the Carceral City

The Production of Space

Rikers Island was one of New York's earliest and most consequential modern urban planning projects. It was entirely unlike the embodiments of "*Excelsior*" for which the city's twentieth-century planners are known: skyscrapers, bridges, tunnels, museums. If we remember these projects in part for their civilizing mission, and if, as Walter Benjamin wrote, "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," then Rikers stands as a monument to the barbaric side of modern planning in New York.⁵²

Two architectural historians offer instructive frames for this barbarism. Zeynep Çelik Alexander defines modern planning by the planners' will to change society through their projects,⁵³ and Manfredo Tafuri defines it as a "utopian attempt to preserve a form for the city."⁵⁴ These definitions may appear to be contradictory but are, in the case of Rikers, compatible: the jail reflected its planners' desires to make New York more efficient, and in doing so they created a form of modern carcerality that the city has since preserved. Tafuri argues that planners in capitalist societies find it "necessary to immerse the public in the *image of development*," as was true when the jail-planners, with the press as their aid, made much ado, first in 1907 and again in the 1920s, about the architectural plans for Rikers and the complex's place in the city's new carceral archipelago.⁵⁵ The planners thus produced an ideology of carcerality, convincing the public and themselves that their scheme was

⁵² Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 256.

⁵³ Zeynep Çelik Alexander, *Kinaesthetic Knowing: Aesthetics, Epistemology, and Modern Design* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).

⁵⁴ Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 169.

⁵⁵ Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 169.

necessary—the only possible solution to problems as wide-ranging as inefficiency, rising crime, and surplus. Like all ideologues, they presented these problems as ontological or innate, rather than historical or constructed.

As an urban planning project, Rikers Island had two interwoven strands: the expansion of the island through land reclamation, discussed in this chapter, and the design of the buildings, discussed in Chapters II and III. For nearly as long as the city had envisioned a carceral complex on Rikers, its officials had dreamed of expanding the island. At no one point did the planners articulate a precise plan for a new ecology of land and labor, but newspaper reports and government records reveal the steady sharpening and realization of their vision. The land reclamation project was doubly consequential: Rikers was the first territory in the city where waste was used to reclaim a significant portion of land, and incarcerated people were integrated through their labor into the city's waste disposal system, which rapidly modernized around the turn of the century.

To understand the radical nature of these transformations and their role in shaping New York's carceral landscape, Rikers must be contextualized in its city's long, understudied history of land reclamation. Since the Dutch colonized lower Manhattan in the seventeenth century, more than one quarter of Manhattan—a total of roughly four thousand acres—has been created with landfill.⁵⁶ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch and British colonists financed reclamation projects with

⁵⁶ Among the colonial powers in the New World, the Dutch were uniquely adept at land reclamation. See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 1987). No littoral history of New York has accounted for the role of land reclamation in New York's outer boroughs and minor islands. For the best account of land reclamation in Manhattan, see Ann Buttenweiser, *Manhattan Water-bound: Planning and Developing Manhattan's Waterfront from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 1987). For a history of waste, waste management, and landfill practices in the city, Steve Hunt Corey, "King Garbage: A History of Solid Waste Management in New York City, 1881–1970," PhD dissertation (New York University, 1994).

both public and private capital, organizing joint-stock ventures to purchase “water lots.”⁵⁷ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, land reclamation became a public, centralized venture that the city, in keeping with its country’s contemporaneous imperialism, framed as an imperative.

In *New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore*, the historian Kara Schlichting shows that reclamation became an important form of modern urban planning in New York in the early twentieth century, when planners, who “focused on clean, modern, public space,” created a comprehensive “vision of what a ‘reclaimed’ coastal environment should look like.”⁵⁸ Her case study is Robert Moses, the archetypal twentieth-century planner credited with bringing the totalizing urban master plan—a style developed in nineteenth-century Paris by Baron Haussmann—to New York.⁵⁹ One of Moses’s signature projects was the 1939 World’s Fair, the story of which Schlichting adroitly recasts. She shows that when Moses planned his ‘City of Tomorrow,’ as the fair’s site in Queens was known, he reorganized the city’s waste management system and created a landscape that endured for decades.⁶⁰

A hierarchy of land reclamation formed in the first decades of the twentieth century, in which some reclamation projects were spared the use of the least desirable kinds of garbage, while others were not. In the case of the World’s Fair, while Moses used “ash and street sweepings” for the fill at Flushing Meadows.⁶¹ In the same period, Schlichting writes, the waste used to expand Rikers was “unsorted and

⁵⁷ Henry Grabar, “Manhattan Transfer,” *Slate*, slate.com, March 15, 2019.

⁵⁸ Kara M. Schlichting, *New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 191.

⁵⁹ Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage, 2005).

⁶⁰ Schlichting, *New York Recentered*, 191.

⁶¹ Schlichting, *New York Recentered*, 191.

contained organic waste.”⁶² The people visiting the World’s Fair were deemed worthy of an urban landscape whose design took their health into account; the incarcerated people who worked or lived on Rikers were not.

Trash Island

As Schlichting notes, Moses was not the first New York planner to incorporate trash into an urban plan; she traces the first trash-dumping scheme on Rikers to 1894, and notes that the Department of Sanitation opened its official dump there in 1895.⁶³ My research shows that the first plan to enlarge Rikers using trash was proposed four years earlier, in 1890, just six years after the city purchased the island. In June of that year, the *New-York Tribune* reported that the city planned to extend the island with dirt and ashes, referred to as “earthwork,” to add over 450 acres—a startlingly accurate prediction of its contemporary size.⁶⁴ With plans for a jail complex in the air but not yet solidified, the city’s primary goal was merely to increase the island’s property value.⁶⁵ (The use of incarcerated labor to reclaim land predated the turn of the century: in the 1870s, officials orchestrated a similar project on a section of Blackwell’s and on Randall’s Island.⁶⁶)

⁶² Schlichting, *New York Recentered*, 197.

⁶³ Schlichting, *New York Recentered*, 197.

⁶⁴ “A Plan to Enlarge Rikers Island,” *New-York Tribune*, 26 June 1890.

⁶⁵ “A Plan to Enlarge Rikers Island.”

⁶⁶ *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1876).

The city launched the project in January of 1893, after securing federal approval.⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ The dumping started almost immediately, and in March, the *New-York Tribune* reported that contractors hired by Tammany Hall, who were under orders from the corrupt Department of Docks and Ferries to cut costs, had been doing subpar work; a city official had found the cribbing, a temporary wooden structure often used in littoral engineering projects, in “deplorable condition.”⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ (An investigation the following year confirmed the extent of the shoddy work.⁷¹)

The plan sparked the first major public debate about what the city ought to do with Rikers, but only because the odor from the dumping invaded the nostrils of Bronx and Queens residents. Since 1880, New Yorkers who lived across the East River from Rikers had complained about the private fertilizing establishment, Kane’s Manure Works, that graced the island before the city purchased it.⁷² Kane had moved there after being indicted for nuisances in Manhattan, but on Rikers his plant turned out to be an even greater nuisance.⁷³ Residents of Hunt’s Point, in the Bronx, complained of the “intolerable stench,” telling a court that they had to keep their windows closed and could not recreate outside.⁷⁴ Kane was arrested on nuisance charges three times, and finally the

⁶⁷ “Riker’s Island Secured: Garbage Can Now Be Dumped There by the City,” *New York Times*, 28 January 1893.

⁶⁸ “To Span the Ship Canal: Plans for the New Bridge Approved: The Riker’s Island Extension,” *New York Times*, 01 February 1893.

⁶⁹ “Tammany’s Recklessness: Contractors Damage the Cribwork on Riker’s Island,” *New-York Tribune*, 01 March 1894.

⁷⁰ “Defective Work on a Crib: Testimony at the Old Dock,” *New-York Tribune*, 28 November 1895.

⁷¹ “Defective Work on a Crib: Testimony at the Old Dock,” *New-York Tribune*, 28 November 1895.

⁷² “Riker’s Island Stenches: The Proprietor of a Noisome Establishment Arraigned in Court,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1880.

⁷³ “Riker’s Island Stenches.”

⁷⁴ “Riker’s Island Stenches.”

residents succeeded in booting him.⁷⁵ But the issue flared up far more intensely in the 1890s, when the source of the nuisance was not a mere business owner, but entire city departments.

Though the *Times* had reported in January of 1893, the month the plan was approved, that there was no opposition to dumping refuse on Rikers, protests began in early May.⁷⁶ In College Point, Queens, residents and business owners held a formal protest targeted at the Street Cleaning Department, urging the mayor, governor, and New-York Board of Health to “act at once.”⁷⁷ In July, Bronx residents formed a committee to “urge the city authorities to take immediate action to suppress the unpleasant and unhealthy odors.”⁷⁸ They had periods of success; that month, a judge issued an injunction, which the city refuted by informing residents that they had no choice but to dump—the federal government had recently prevented them from sending the garbage to sea, as had been common practice.⁷⁹ “What are we to do? Where can we send the garbage?” Mayor Gilroy asked his constituents.⁸⁰ In response, the judge reversed the injunction.⁸¹ The residents then appealed to Governor Flower;⁸² when the debate rose to the level of the state, the president of the Board of Health proposed a solution that was considered environmentally friendly: burn the trash.^{83 84}

⁷⁵ “Riker’s Island Stenches.”

⁷⁶ “Riker’s Island Harbor Line: No Opposition to the Plan of Dumping Refuse There,” *New York Times*, 17 January 1893.

⁷⁷ “Want No Garbage at Riker’s Island,” *New York Times*, 04 May 1894.

⁷⁸ “In the Northern Wards: Complaints About Riker’s Island,” *New-York Tribune*, 01 July 1894.

⁷⁹ “Commissioner Andrews Enjoined: Residents of College Point Trying to Stop Riker’s Island Nuisance,” *New York Times*, 03 July 1894.

⁸⁰ “Commissioner Andrews Enjoined.”

⁸¹ “Refuse Must Be Disinfected: Justice Gaynor Modifies His Injunction as to Riker’s Island Garbage,” *New York Times*, 04 July 1894.”

⁸² “Riker’s Island Dumping Nuisance,” *New York Times*, 08 July 1894.

⁸³ “To Get Rid of Garbage: A Question Giving Anxiety to City Officials,” *New-York Tribune*, 19 July 1894.

⁸⁴ “To Abate the Dumping Nuisance: Steps Taken by Citizens to Remedy Matters at Riker’s Island,” *New York Times*, 15 August 1894.

In early August, the *Tribune* reported “to many nostrils the odors seem less offensive than they were a few weeks ago,” possibly because the Department partially implemented an expensive solution that had been proposed earlier: they covered the trash with earth.⁸⁵ Finally, in mid-August, they reached a compromise: the city could dump the garbage, but only if they deodorized it with chemically treated seawater.⁸⁶ Some residents were still unsatisfied, claiming that the chemical treatment process had not undergone adequate scientific review.⁸⁷ In December, a lawyer for the city had grown so agitated with the remaining protestors that he said, “the Commissioner [of the Department of Street Cleaning] is so hemmed in with prohibitions and inhibitions that the only way he can now get rid of the garbage is to swallow it.”⁸⁸ He then claimed that a city official stationed on Rikers had improved his health by breathing in the garbage air.^{89 90}

In August of 1895, the *Times* reported that Rikers had become the opposite of a nuisance; the scent of clover had replaced the stench of trash.⁹¹ City officials on the island had opted to grow produce in the soil that they used for the waste’s requisite blanket.⁹² That summer, they had cultivated cucumbers, tomatoes, squash, onions, beets, melons, and carrots, and they planned for even more

⁸⁵ “In the Northern Wards: People Above Harlem Still Fighting the Riker’s Island Nuisance,” *New-York Tribune*, 05 August 1894.

⁸⁶ “Riker’s Island Odors Decreasing,” *New York Times*, 16 August 1894.

⁸⁷ “In the Northern Wards: The Riker’s Island Nuisance,” *New-York Tribune*, 19 August 1894.

⁸⁸ “Defends Riker’s Island Odors: Mr. Blandy Tells Judge Andrew of Their Beneficial Effect,” *New York Times*, 19 December 1894.

⁸⁹ “Defends Riker’s Island Odors: Mr. Blandy Tells Judge Andrew of Their Beneficial Effect,” *New York Times*, 19 December 1894.

⁹⁰ In a cruel twist, an Astoria lawyer who advocated on behalf of the concerned residents died after contracting a fever during the protests: “Death of Walter C. Foster: Lawyer May Have Contracted Fever During Campaign Against Riker’s Island Dumping,” *New York Times*, 24 July 1903.

⁹¹ “The Riker’s Island Farm: Fragrance of Clover More Notable Than Any Bad Odor,” *New York Times*, 19 August 1895.

⁹² “Rikers Island a Garden,” *New York Times*, 18 August 1895.

varieties of produce.⁹³ “The vegetables were as fine as any to be found in the city,” the *Tribune* reported.⁹⁴ The president of the state Board of Health caught wind of the development and proposed using the produce to feed prisoners, an early example of officials using Rikers as a catalyst to increase the carceral system’s internal economic efficiency. Soon, he advocated for the development of a full-scale farm on Rikers, called the “new Eden” by the press.⁹⁵ (In the 1910s, before the construction of the full-scale jail complex, the city used the farm as a drug-addiction treatment center.⁹⁶)

Shortly after officials recognized the vital potential of the island, they devised a plan for incarcerated people to inhabit it. In March of 1897, the Board of Estimate allocated over \$56,000 for the construction of wooden barracks on Rikers for 900 people.⁹⁷ The project was spearheaded by Robert J. Wright, the Commissioner of Charities and Correction.⁹⁸ With the farm now at sixteen acres, Wright expressed confidence that Rikers was an increasingly viable place for incarcerated people to live and work.⁹⁹ That fall, incarcerated laborers completed a series of one-story barracks with cellars, and planners spoke of building a “more substantial institution” in the coming years.¹⁰⁰ Early in 1898, as winter died down and the city approached its official consolidation, the commissioners of the Department of Correction and the Department of Street Cleaning proposed their plan for Rikers to

⁹³ “Rikers Island a Garden.”

⁹⁴ “Rikers Island a Garden.”

⁹⁵ “Exploring the New Eden: President Wilson’s Visit to Riker’s Island,” *New-York Tribune*, 19 August 1895.

⁹⁶ A Special Committee of the Regular Grand Jury August Term, “A Study of the Conditions Which Have Accumulated Under Many Administrations and Now Exist in the Prisons on Welfare Island, New York City, with a Plan for the Erection and Economical Financing of a New Penitentiary Elsewhere,” August 1924, 32.

⁹⁷ “Plans for the Riker’s Island Barracks Approved,” *New-York Tribune*, 05 March 1897.

⁹⁸ “Work on Riker’s Island: What Commissioner of Correction Wright is Planning to Do,” *New-York Tribune*, 28 March 1897.

⁹⁹ “Work on Riker’s Island.”

¹⁰⁰ “The New Branch Workhouse: Frame ‘Barracks’ on Riker’s Island Approaching Completion,” *New-York Tribune*, 13 September 1897.

Mayor Van Wyck.¹⁰¹ They wanted to send incarcerated people who were “idle” on Blackwell’s to Rikers, where they could work as land reclaimers—an efficient use of time and space, now that they could sleep on the same island that they were flattening and expanding.¹⁰² Francis J. Lantry, the Commissioner of Correction, estimated that the island was worth \$300,000, and that after its development, its value would skyrocket \$1,000,000.¹⁰³ The mayor admired the plan and said he would urge the Board of Estimate and Apportionment to approve it.¹⁰⁴

By 1899, the Board must have assented, as Lantry announced that the Department of Correction planned to move everyone incarcerated on Blackwell’s to Rikers. Tammany had backed the plan, undoubtedly contributing to its success; they even floated the idea of turning Blackwell’s into a club for the city’s Democrats.¹⁰⁵ In 1900, the *Times* reported that at Rikers, “200 [incarcerated] men are daily at work, year in, year out, preparing a site for a new home which they hope they will never enjoy and which in about ten years from now will prove the abode of many a hopeful young heart as yet unsuspecting of the impending fall.”¹⁰⁶ Reminding readers of the scale of the island’s recent transformation, the reporter called Rikers “the notorious little eight-acre patch which not overlong ago contaminated half of Manhattan with the odor of the garbage which the city then used in an effort to fill in the shoals extending around the island.”¹⁰⁷ The city’s original vision for Rikers was coming to

¹⁰¹ “To Improve Riker’s Island: A Plan to Employ Convicts and Workhouse Inmates There,” *New York Times*, 18 February 1898.

¹⁰² “To Improve Riker’s Island.”

¹⁰³ “To Improve Riker’s Island.”

¹⁰⁴ “To Improve Riker’s Island.”

¹⁰⁵ “Tammany Plan to Spend Millions: Commissioner Lantry and Other City Officials Wish to Remove Penal Institutions to Riker’s Island,” *New-York Tribune*, 04 February 1899.

¹⁰⁶ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island: Improvement of a Barren Waste Without Cost to the City,” *New York Times*, 25 November 1900.

¹⁰⁷ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island.”

fruition, albeit through an unexpected and somewhat extemporaneous organization of labor; the planners had successfully boosted the project to its purported success.

The press's enthusiasm helped them. In that *Times* story, the reporter reviewed the island's developmental history for a new generation of New Yorkers whose parents had read about the purchase in 1884. They wrote that "the island was originally bought for a site for a new penitentiary," and that, though funds were not available to build a full-scale jail at the time, the city constructed small buildings for "temporary prison quarters."¹⁰⁸ When the McDonough amendment of 1894 outlawed penal labor on the open market, "Riker's Island, lying within plain view of the granite walls on Blackwell's Island, solved the problem" of underemployment.¹⁰⁹ The Commissioner's goal was to triple the island's size, and by 1900, they were well on their way, having built a network of roads.¹¹⁰ The reporter vaunted the recent progress, comparing it to the laughable failure of 1893 and 1894, under the administration of Mayor Thomas Gilroy: boats responsible for the dumping accidentally filled in their only channel of passage through the cribbing;¹¹¹ then, after sections of the cribbing collapsed and "threatened to stroll toward the Brooklyn Bridge," a reporter wrote that "all further attempts at civilizing the stubborn little island were abandoned."^{112 113}

The reporter helped Lantry make himself the project's public face, reminding readers of his innovative proposal for the Department of Street Cleaning to use ashes from uptown Manhattan as

¹⁰⁸ "Reclaiming Riker's Island."

¹⁰⁹ "Reclaiming Riker's Island."

¹¹⁰ "Reclaiming Riker's Island."

¹¹¹ "Reclaiming Riker's Island."

¹¹² "Reclaiming Riker's Island."

¹¹³ "Reclaiming Riker's Island."

landfill.¹¹⁴ His plan was cheap and self-contained: the Department of Street Cleaning saved on the cost of bringing the ashes to the ocean, and the Department of Correction provided cheap incarcerated labor. The project required stones to prevent erosion, for which Lantry proposed dismantling an unused reservoir on West 42nd Street—the future site of the New York Public Library.¹¹⁵ In a moment of interdepartmental back-scratching that reveals the architectural homology of institution-building in turn-of-the-century New York, Lantry, who had the authority to issue municipal bonds for large public projects, agreed to “smooth the way” for the erection of the public library if the stones were given to his department, though only the Commissioner ended up holding up his end of the bargain.¹¹⁶

Lantry was more than pleased with his progress. And yet, at the time of the report, Rikers still had no consistent source of clean water—only a windmill with a well that had been built in 1899—and increasingly the island’s permanent population therefore remained impossible.¹¹⁷ Lantry asked, “Why should we not do better still?”¹¹⁸ He estimated another decade of work before the island would be ready for a jail.¹¹⁹ He continued to assure New Yorkers that Rikers would be worth millions, and that “the island can be made one of the most attractive of its kind in existence.”¹²⁰

In August of 1902, the nuisance debate flared up once again, as residents of Port Morris called on a judge to issue yet another injunction on garbage dumping.¹²¹ The filling by then consisted only of

¹¹⁴ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island.”

¹¹⁵ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island.”

¹¹⁶ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island.”

¹¹⁷ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island.”

¹¹⁸ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island.”

¹¹⁹ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island.”

¹²⁰ “Reclaiming Riker’s Island.”

¹²¹ “Call Riker’s Island a Menace: Bronx Residents Declare Stench of Refuse Dumped There Makes Them Ill,” *New-York Tribune*, 17 August 1902.

ash and dry rubbish—kinds of trash with slightly less offensive odors than street sweepings—but residents were still dissatisfied.¹²² This time, the city’s excuse revealed the extent to which incarcerated people had become part of the environmental fabric of Rikers: “It was admitted,” the *Tribune* reported, “that the prison laborers were unwilling to work any more than they could be compelled to, and the result would be that the work would not be finished for a long time.”¹²³ Still, the laborers were working at unprecedented speeds, filling up to 3,000 cubic yards.¹²⁴ So adamant were the city and the press about the project’s success that they squashed the nuisance complaints; a *Times* reporter wrote that “it is absurd to claim that this work is a menace to health or a source of annoyance,” and that “there is no ground for honest and intelligent objection to the work that is being done at Riker’s Island.”¹²⁵ This, of course, contradicted the claims of residents who lived near Rikers.

While there is no archival evidence of incarcerated people’s claims in the debate, the conditions were so terrible that their health must have suffered. In September of 1902, they continued to work without a consistent source of running water; the city had indefinitely stalled its plans to route the Croton Aqueduct, the city’s main water source, to the island.¹²⁶ Rikers had become a world unto its own, and in addition to filling, the laborers were responsible for “farming, repairing, much of the building, the plumbing, roadmaking and painting.”¹²⁷ By early 1903, the island had increased by 25 acres, with another 35 planned shortly.¹²⁸ And early that summer, after the completion of two

¹²² “Call Riker’s Island a Menace.”

¹²³ “Call Riker’s Island a Menace.”

¹²⁴ “The Filling at Riker’s Island,” *New York Times*, 27 August 1902.

¹²⁵ “The Filling at Riker’s Island.”

¹²⁶ “Utilizing City Refuse Work of Enlarging Riker’s Island: Prison Labor Employed,” *New-York Tribune*, 21 September 1902.

¹²⁷ “Utilizing City Refuse.”

¹²⁸ “Rubbish Becomes Land: Sixty-Three Acres Now Filled at Riker’s Island,” *New-York Tribune*, 18 May 1903.

residential buildings and one bathhouse, the first 150 incarcerated people were transferred from their cells on Blackwell's to Rikers.¹²⁹ Reporting on this development, the *Tribune* called Rikers a “prison settlement” that Commissioner Hynes intended to make “as complete as any other similar institution,” referring to those in other parts of the country.¹³⁰

As soon as the city incarcerated people there, Rikers became a permanent fixture of New York's cityscape that was open, if only intermittently, to New Yorkers who had never been there before. In August of 1903, a *Tribune* reporter described a tour of the island organized by the Department of Street Cleaning, on which young boys watched the incarcerated men do the brutal work of reclamation.¹³¹ The goal seemed to be to educate young New Yorkers about one of the city's largest infrastructure projects. “They stood watching the withered greenery from some midsummer bride's nuptials sail past with a dead cat on a pyramid of cinders,” the reporter wrote.¹³² The incarcerated labor force continued their work throughout the decade, ceasing only in July of 1905, when a trash fire raged.¹³³

In 1907, the *Tribune* announced that “an even greater Riker's Island than was contemplated in the original plans” was afoot.¹³⁴ Until then, the expansion had only occurred on the western side of the island; the city announced a plan to double the island's current size on the eastern side within five years.¹³⁵ The project was now divided between the Department of Docks and Ferries, which managed

¹²⁹ “First for Riker's: Workhouse Prisoners, 150, to Occupy Island To-morrow,” *New-York Tribune*, 21 July 1903.

¹³⁰ “First for Riker's.”

¹³¹ “A Visit to Riker's: Young Street Cleaners Learn About Garbage Mysteries,” *New-York Tribune*, 26 August 1903.

¹³² “A Visit to Riker's.”

¹³³ “Fire on Riker's Island: Burning for Two Weeks,” *New-York Tribune*, 18 July 1905.

¹³⁴ “Making a Big Island for New York Out of a Small One,” *New-York Tribune*, 05 May 1907.

¹³⁵ “Making a Big Island for New York.”

the cribbing; the Department of Street Cleaning, which brought the refuse to the island; and the Department of Correction, which continued to organize the exploited labor.¹³⁶ At an unknown point, the Department of Correction had hired Italian workers to supplement the incarcerated labor; they named their dormitory on the island the “Hotel de Bum.”¹³⁷ “At present, with its yawning valleys of marshland and its mountains of street sweepings and ashes, it is anything but a beauty spot,” the reporter wrote, but the city resolutely insisted, once again, that “the time will yet come when New York will be justly proud of Riker’s Island.”¹³⁸

Expansion continued apace while architects designed the full-scale jail complex, as described in Chapter II, and reached an apogee in the 1920s, when the city finally began construction on the full-scale jail. By then, the history of the island was already a mystery to some; when Commissioner of Correction Frederick A. Wallis proposed his plan for the jail in 1924, he could only write in vague terms about the four decades of land reclamation. Below one map of the island, he wrote: “It is said that the fill to the right of the illustration, the eastern section, have been practically completed”; he did not know for sure, and one wonders who did.¹³⁹

City officials clung to their old priorities of cutting costs and increasing efficiency, though in the 1920s, the scale at which they operated was much larger. According to a 1924 Grand Jury report, Wallis planned to force one thousand incarcerated people to unload refuse onto the island and build

¹³⁶ “Making a Big Island for New York.”

¹³⁷ “Making a Big Island for New York.”

¹³⁸ “Making a Big Island for New York.”

¹³⁹ Frederick A. Wallis, “New York’s Delinquents and Modern Correctional Methods,” 28 May 1924, 25. Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

new incinerators.¹⁴⁰ The jurors wrote: “The Commissioner estimates a direct saving to the City of about \$200,000 a year by simply taking over the unloading of the scows, *and this saving should be considered in connection with the plan for financing the new Penitentiary.*”¹⁴¹ The jurors vaunted Rikers as an economically successful modern urban planning project, as discussed in Chapter IV. The jurors, whose report is discussed in greater detail in Chapters III and IV, insisted that Rikers was already a successful modern urban planning project. They wrote:

Since [1884] it has been added to by filling, from city excavations, ashes and street sweepings, so that it has now an area of about 64 acres, and the U.S. Engineers have approved a further addition of about 400 acres. [...] The plans of [Department of Street Cleaning] Commissioner Taylor provide that the Department [...] take over the dumping scows and apparatus, so that refuse which has previously been transported to Riker’s Island under private contract, at a total expenditure which, it is said, amounted to about \$1,000,000 yearly, will be handled by the Department.¹⁴²

As the island’s acreage and value climbed higher and higher thanks to the labor of incarcerated people, the new carceral landscape hardened; the city sent the laborers further from Manhattan than ever before, while at the same time integrating them into three departments’ post-consolidation structures.

This transformation entailed disciplining incarcerated people to the wage. The Grand Jury report celebrated the passage of a 1924 law that made it “possible to pay prisoners a wage”; until then, there had been “restrictions limiting the earnings of prisoners in the State to one and a half cents a day.”¹⁴³ On this front, city officials saw themselves as reformers working for the good of incarcerated

¹⁴⁰ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 36.

¹⁴¹ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 36.

¹⁴² Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 32–34.

¹⁴³ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 36.

people; legislators before them, they claimed, had given “little thought [...] to the welfare of the family while the prisoner is incarcerated or to giving him a new start in life on his release.”¹⁴⁴ The Department also adopted an eight-hour workday.¹⁴⁵ But, as Wallis’s report revealed, cutting costs, not instituting fair labor practices, remained the city’s priority: “In the dumping and distributing of the ashes and refuse of the City,” Wallis wrote, “the city will save at least \$350,000 by using prisoners’ labor instead of contract labor,” which had been the norm for carceral capital projects.¹⁴⁶ This “tremendous man power” could also be put to use in “the erection of a new penitentiary.”¹⁴⁷ Here it was clear that the city had subordinated the “mental, moral and physical rehabilitation of the men confined” to its desire—framed, as always, as a public necessity—to build an island, and to build it cheaply.¹⁴⁸

The Rikers Fix

Considered over its four-decade course, the modern urban plan to reclaim Rikers and erect a carceral complex there clearly sprang from multiple motives. One of the least obvious was to concentrate surpluses of labor and capital. By far the most compelling development in contemporary carceral studies has been Gilmore’s argument that in the 1980s, American prisons drastically expanded in order to concentrate surpluses.¹⁴⁹ In this bold assertion, Gilmore contradicts the reigning scholarly

¹⁴⁴ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 35.

¹⁴⁵ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to John F. Hylan,” 24 February 1925, 2. Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

¹⁴⁶ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hylan,” 5.

¹⁴⁷ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hylan,” 5.

¹⁴⁸ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hylan,” 5.

¹⁴⁹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007).

and popular consensus.¹⁵⁰ Using California as her case study, she shows that following significant shifts in its political economy, the state embarked on “the largest building prison building program in the history of the world” to absorb four forms of surplus—“finance capital, land, labor, and state capacity”—by erecting dozens of prisons in the state’s rural Central Valley and filling them almost entirely with poor people, disproportionately people of color.¹⁵¹

Gilmore’s contribution—as much historical as it is geographical—draws from David Harvey’s theory of the spatial fix, which describes “capitalism’s insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring.”¹⁵² Harvey argues that “capitalism is addicted to geographical expansion much as it is addicted to technological change and endless expansion through economic growth.”¹⁵³ One major motive for states or corporations to pursue a spatial fix is the condition of overaccumulation, which Marx defines as the key indicator of a capitalist crisis: the existence of surpluses of capital and labor with no immediately apparent profitable solution.¹⁵⁴ Fearing the consequences of devaluation, capitalists expand spatially.¹⁵⁵ The spatial fix comes in many forms. In one case that seems to define the contemporary era of finance capital, overaccumulation manifests as a lack of demand, and the spatial fix is capitalist expansion into

¹⁵⁰ For the argument that mass incarceration is a result of the War on Drugs, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012). For the argument that mass incarceration is a result of rising crime rates, see John Pfaff, *The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform* (New York: Basic Books, 2017). For the argument that mass incarceration is a socio-spatial recapitulation of slavery, as popularized in Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th*, see Loïc Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration,” *New Left Review*, January–February 2002.

¹⁵¹ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 88.

¹⁵² David Harvey, “Globalization and the ‘Spatial Fix,’” *Geographische Revue* 2 (2001): 24.

¹⁵³ Harvey, “The ‘Spatial Fix,’” 24.

¹⁵⁴ Harvey, “The ‘Spatial Fix,’” 26.

¹⁵⁵ Harvey, “The ‘Spatial Fix,’” 26.

historically non-capitalist territories.¹⁵⁶ In another case, overaccumulation occurs without a lack of demand in a given territory, so capitalists export the surplus capital and labor to another territory.¹⁵⁷

The latter case describes what happened in New York City's carceral archipelago at the turn of the century. Early in 1898, Commissioner Lantry of the Department of Correction and Commissioner McCartney of the Department of Street Cleaning proposed their plan for Rikers to Mayor Van Wyck, who said he would endorse it to the Board of Estimate and Apportionment.¹⁵⁸ They proposed sending incarcerated people who were "idle" on Blackwell's, or not productively employed, to Rikers, where they would fulfill the city's long-standing goal of expansion through land reclamation. The men would sleep and work on the same island, rather than sucking up the municipal dollars required to ferry them to and from Blackwell's.¹⁵⁹ Lantry's goal was not reclamation for reclamation's sake: he was quite clear that his motive was to more than triple the island's current estimated value of roughly \$300,000.¹⁶⁰ And he believed that by doing so, the city could efficiently concentrate the critical surplus of labor on Blackwell's.

The groundwork for the spatial fix had been laid before the city purchased Rikers. In the Department's 1875 annual report, the warden of the Blackwell's penitentiary noted that only a small number of incarcerated people were employed in the workshops, and that they were only producing

¹⁵⁶ Harvey, "The 'Spatial Fix,'" 26.

¹⁵⁷ Harvey, "The 'Spatial Fix,'" 26.

¹⁵⁸ "To Improve Riker's Island: A Plan to Employ Convicts and Workhouse Inmates There," *New York Times*, 18 February 1898.

¹⁵⁹ "To Improve Riker's Island."

¹⁶⁰ "To Improve Riker's Island."

goods for home consumption.¹⁶¹ Of their own volition, the authorities at Blackwell's quadrupled the size of the labor force that year and put them to work in rooms not built as workshops.¹⁶²

Nor did the spatial fix cease after the implementation of Lantry's plan. In February of 1910, Henry Solomon, the vice president of the State Prison Commission, advocated strongly for closing Blackwell's after inspecting the island.¹⁶³ His reasons included the usual suspects—he noticed the overcrowding, and he thought the “dark punishment cells” were barbaric—but he also complained that Blackwell's was an inefficient factory.¹⁶⁴ “There have been no orders received from the Street Cleaning Department for a long time for horse rotary brooms,” Solomon pointed out, “and the machine for manufacturing them lies idle.”¹⁶⁵ He blamed this surplus capital on a lack of demand: “I infer that the various public departments are purchasing too many of the class of goods manufactured here in the open market.”¹⁶⁶ His insistence on “the great need of the new prison about to be built at Rikers Island,” then, developed in part because he imagined the island's capacity to concentrate the surpluses that he considered a significant problem.¹⁶⁷ The same was true for Wallis, fourteen years later, when he wrote that his new labor plan would not only discourage “the criminal activities of persons who are now repeatedly sentenced to prison,” but also “substitute hard work for idleness” in order to create a

¹⁶¹ *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1875).

¹⁶² *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1875).

¹⁶³ “For Riker's Island Prison: Commissioner Solomon Urges Need of It and Wants Dark Cells Abolished,” *New York Times*, 07 February 1910.

¹⁶⁴ “For Riker's Island Prison.”

¹⁶⁵ “For Riker's Island Prison.”

¹⁶⁶ “For Riker's Island Prison.”

¹⁶⁷ “For Riker's Island Prison.”

more efficient carceral complex.¹⁶⁸ The jail-planners' transformation of the city's incarcerated labor system, then, was not merely a penal reform designed to produce better workers outside of the prison walls, but a profitable solution to internal problems. And the labor in question was mostly the construction of the future site of the jail complex; the planners devised a scheme for Rikers to quite literally spatially fix itself.

¹⁶⁸ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents and Modern Correctional Methods," 28 May 1924, 28.

II. New York's Modern Carceral Vision

The Trowbridge Plan

New York commissioned the first plans for a full-scale jail complex on Rikers Island in 1907. That year, John V. Coggey, the Commissioner of Correction under Mayor George B. McClellan, held an architectural competition to which were invited five firms that the city thought were “the most representative [...] architects in the city”: Heins & LaFarge, Warren & Wetmore, Trowbridge & Livingston, Hoppin & Koen, and Henry Rutgers Marshall.¹⁶⁹ The jury included William Mead, of McKim, Mead & White, the major firm that brought Beaux-Arts design principles to the city’s institutions, including Columbia University, around the turn of the century. Trowbridge & Livingston, known at the time for hotels and mansions, won and signed a contract with the city on December 5, 1907.¹⁷⁰ Eager to seize the momentum from the previous decades’ land reclamation project, the city moved quickly: before the end of the year, they issued a municipal bond of \$2,250,000 for the erection of some of the buildings in the plan.¹⁷¹ Over the next two years, various city agencies signed onto the project.¹⁷² And although the city shelved them for unknown reasons in 1910, the plans served as the foundation for the Rikers revival in the 1920s.

The competition was an important moment in the crystallization of the city’s

¹⁶⁹ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 12.

¹⁷⁰ Katherine C. Moore research papers on Trowbridge & Livingston, 1892-2010. Dept. of Drawings & Archives, Avery Library, Columbia University.

¹⁷¹ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 14.

¹⁷² “Rikers Island Prison: Plans for it Approved” *New-York Tribune*, 22 May 1908.

post-consolidation modernizing commitments.¹⁷³ Trowbridge's plans were published in 1910 alongside a detailed description by one of the firm's architects, Frederick G. Frost, in *The Brickbuilder*, the well-known architecture magazine that later became *Architectural Forum*. In the plan and the essay, the firm and the city laid out a vision of the early-twentieth-century urban jail using modern design principles that were self-consciously new and American. Rikers was a "model" penitentiary in the making; the jail-planners knew that the city was watching.¹⁷⁴

Frost saw himself as a modern designer propagating a historically and geographically distinct vision of carceral architecture. He began his article by describing the difficulty of designing an American carceral complex, claiming that there were "few examples from which to draw any precedent."¹⁷⁵ Europe's models, he wrote, were useless, as the philosophy of incarceration there was too different.¹⁷⁶ In the United States, the period's demands included a cell for each incarcerated person to sleep in and shops where they could work productively side by side, though not collaboratively, during the day.¹⁷⁷ "Health and discipline," he wrote, "are the prime requirements for the proper confinement of criminals," and maintaining them meant ensuring incarcerated people had access to "sunlight, fresh

¹⁷³ The historiography of carceral architecture is so scant that it does not yet constitute a viable subfield. The first comprehensive study of the history of carceral architecture, Steven Alexander Niedbala's "Techniques of Carceral Reproduction: Architecture and the Prison System in the United States, 1799–1978," was completed at Columbia in May 2020 and is under embargo until May 2022. Niedbala provided useful background for this thesis, but his work cannot yet be cited directly. The publication of his dissertation will mark an important turn from policy-based to historical studies of prison architecture. See, for example, Leslie Fairweather and Seán McConville, eds., *Prison Architecture: Policy, Design and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Peter Krasnow, *Correctional Facility Design and Detailing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997). British carceral architectural historiography is slightly more robust but remains under the spell of Foucault; see, for example, Gillian Haggart, ed., *Behind Bars: The Hidden Architecture of England's Prisons* (Swindon, UK: English Heritage, 1999).

¹⁷⁴ Mooney and Shanahan, "The Failure of a 'Model' Penitentiary," 690.

¹⁷⁵ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," *The Brickbuilder*, March 1910, 67.

¹⁷⁶ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 67.

¹⁷⁷ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 67.

air, exercise, and good wholesome food.”¹⁷⁸ Frost aimed to consign the dark, backward, unhealthy architecture of Blackwell’s Island, discussed in detail in Chapter III, to the previous century and to the tainted waters of the lower East River.

With Europe out of the question, the Trowbridge architects and the jury scoured recent carceral architecture around the country for inspiration. As a member of a group that toured 18 jails and prisons across the country in advance of the competition, Frost claimed to be interested in “the very best and latest results in modern prison buildings.”¹⁷⁹ He did not distinguish between various forms of carceral design—jail from penitentiary, for example—which suggests that Trowbridge’s plan for Rikers drew from and produced certain design principles for the entire American carceral apparatus. And in an instance of what the architectural historian Kenneth Frampton calls “critical regionalism,” the firm’s plan at once added itself to the slew of Progressive Era carceral institutions and responded to its city’s specific demands.¹⁸⁰

Trowbridge’s two models, the state prison in Stillwater, Minnesota, and the Ulster County jail in Kingston, New York, were quite different from one another. The Minnesota plan impressed Frost. He wrote with enthusiasm about the prison’s hygienic and sanitary innovations, as well as its fireproofing.¹⁸¹ He found the overall scheme of coordination between different buildings and rooms according to their functions to be the pinnacle of efficiency.¹⁸² And the cost of \$2,500,000 seemed to him quite reasonable, especially given the state’s estimated annual profit of \$300,000 from incarcerated

¹⁷⁸ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 67.

¹⁷⁹ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 73.

¹⁸⁰ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980).

¹⁸¹ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 73.

¹⁸² Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 73.

people's labor.¹⁸³ Rikers—though not a state prison, of course—would be comparatively expensive, at \$2,000,000; one newspaper listed it with two other jail projects, one in Lorain, Ohio, to cost \$20,000, and one in Franklinton, Louisiana, to cost \$10,500.¹⁸⁴

Meanwhile, the jail in Kingston achieved architectural efficiency in a way that might have been even more meaningful to Frost. He wrote: “The new jail stands in the rear of the famous old Ulster County Court-house, where the first governor of New York State was inaugurated, and where the constitution of the state was promulgated.”¹⁸⁵ He celebrated the jail's sense of civic continuity and responsibility, as if the modern jail could fulfill the ideals of democracy better than any carceral structure before it.

Jails around the country were not Trowbridge's only sources of inspiration; the architects also looked to non-carceral institutions undergoing widespread redesign in this period. Trowbridge's victory received national press coverage; in an example of the homology of the period's public architecture, one announcement of its construction appeared in a magazine listing among libraries, asylums, hospitals, club buildings, opera houses, fire stations, electric plants, and waterworks.¹⁸⁶ “What is true about hospital orientation is equally true of a penitentiary,” Frost wrote, signaling a modern streamlining not only within, but among institutions.¹⁸⁷ And while efficiency was certainly the dominant design logic, not every decision was made in its name. “Hygiene should come before

¹⁸³ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 73.

¹⁸⁴ “Libraries,” *The Construction News* 24, no. 26 (December 1907): 441.

¹⁸⁵ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 73.

¹⁸⁶ “Libraries,” 441.

¹⁸⁷ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 70.

economy,”¹⁸⁸ Frost wrote, imbuing his description with a moral assertion that deviated from the rhetoric of city officials in its lack of an ulterior motive. The architects were at odds with the city on this front. “These buildings would be better planned as separate buildings,” Frost wrote, implying that the constraints of the competition, presumably financial, prevented his firm from designing its precise vision of a jail.

The struggle between the firm’s desires and the city’s needs may appear to be a classic contradiction of modern architecture, which, according to Çelik Alexander, is best defined philosophically, not aesthetically or historically, exactly like urban planning: it is distinguished by its architects’ intention to change society through buildings—a utopian mission. But can a building ever be utopian if it is constrained by a budget? The planning of Rikers compels us to think of modern architecture on a spectrum.¹⁸⁹ On one end was cost efficiency, favored by city officials; on the other was moral improvement—a more humane society—designed by the architects, who, in turn, were inspired by Progressive reformers.¹⁹⁰ The conflict between needs and desires in building was, of course, not new at the turn of the twentieth century, but the given needs and desires themselves were. Modern architecture took each end of the spectrum to new extremes. In post-consolidation New York, this

¹⁸⁸ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 70.

¹⁸⁹ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 70.

¹⁹⁰ The architects’ position at the end of this spectrum, much like the orientations of High Progressive reformers, should not be confused for progress itself. Though his report may have been more morally inflected than speeches by New York’s mayors, the pertinent common denominator is that they all believed firmly that some New Yorkers should be in cages. Frost referred to incarcerated people on Rikers Island as “gangs of prisoners” (Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 70). Nowhere is the contradiction of modern reform clearer than in Frost’s proposal for a wall around the entire jail, “high enough to prevent a prisoner from scaling it and at such a distance from the buildings that the surrounding air and sunlight will not be shut out from them” (Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 71).

logic anchored not only Art Deco skyscrapers and Beaux-Arts universities and libraries, but the Rikers Island carceral complex; the city's brand of modern architecture was carceral from its inception.

Four Modern Logics

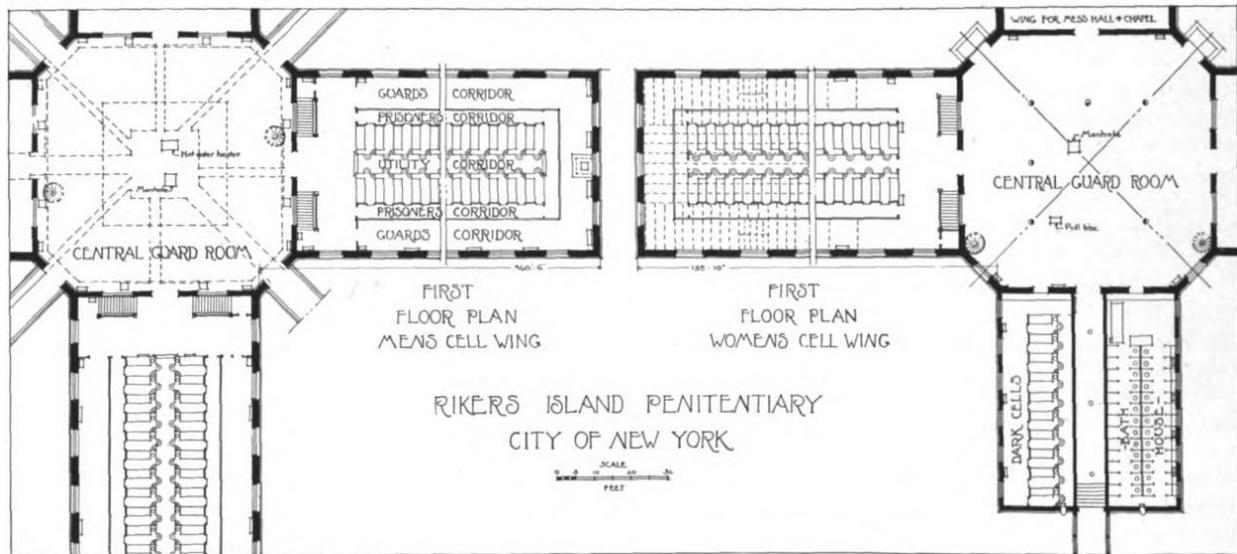
As with the modern urban planning scheme described in Chapter I, Trowbridge's program prized efficiency above all else. The firm proved to the city that they could build an efficient jail by implementing four fundamental logics of modern architecture. The jail would derive its form from its functions; appropriate a nuclear family model; incorporate new heating and cooling technologies; and improve upon the carceral panopticon program. The architects believed that the jail should be continuous with other public institutions in order to serve the larger purpose of changing the city for the better.

Frost's account displayed the indirect assimilation not only of reformist ideology into post-consolidation architectural discourses, but of the modern credo that arrived in New York via the Erie Canal, from Louis Sullivan's Chicago, and transformed the turn-of-the-century institutional architecture of the Paris-trained firms who dominated the 1907 competition: "form follows function."¹⁹¹ Each section of Rikers would be a part of a whole, a cog in a machine that needed to run smoothly, making the most efficient possible use of time and space. The most important cog was the cell, where incarcerated people would spend roughly half of their time.¹⁹² Then came the guardhouses, where large windows served a dual modern purpose: Rikers would be lighter than Blackwell's, and its

¹⁹¹ Louis Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered", *Lippincott's Magazine*, April 1896, 403.

¹⁹² Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 69.

prisoners easier to surveil.¹⁹³ The kitchen would be nearby, with a neatly divided butcher, vegetable rooms, dairy, and bakery.¹⁹⁴ The central workshop, where incarcerated people would spend most of their days, would also be given “proper arrangement for light and air.”¹⁹⁵ This efficient machine was the exact opposite of what officials thought was a broken penitentiary on Blackwell’s.



If the well-oiled machine is an apt metaphor for the efficient day-to-day operations that Trowbridge planned for Rikers, then the well-run family suits the long run. Çelik Alexander argues that the nuclear family became a model for public and private institutional architecture in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the private sector, companies—most famously the Larkin Soap Company, which moved to a cutting-edge Frank Lloyd Wright–designed building in Buffalo in 1906—coerced their employees into a familial structure.¹⁹⁶ The philosophy likened bosses to parental

¹⁹³ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 69–70.

¹⁹⁴ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 69–70.

¹⁹⁵ Frederick G. Frost, “The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary,” 69–70.

¹⁹⁶ Zeynep Çelik Alexander, “The Larkin’s Technologies of Trust,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 77, no. 3 (September 2018): 300–318.

figures, a pre-Fordist model that derived its efficient and profit-motivated model from age-old social formations, not new technology. On Rikers, many employees lived on site; before the advent of automobiles, commuting to and from the island was not an efficient use of time.¹⁹⁷ In Trowbridge's plan, guards, doctors, chaplains, and duty wardens would all have staff quarters on the upper floors.¹⁹⁸ Their segregation from the incarcerated people was entrenched all the way down to the laundry; Frost insisted that "their clothes may not mingle with those of the prisoners."¹⁹⁹ The proximity enabled the employees to surveil the incarcerated people.²⁰⁰ In an arrangement of buildings that avoided "all forms of courts, and as few angles as possible," they were parental figures responsible for watching their children and, more generally, for running a smoother operation than the one on Blackwell's, which officials considered the home of a comparatively dysfunctional family.²⁰¹

Trowbridge also planned Rikers as a site for the implementation of new ventilation technologies—the definition of a modern architectural program, according to the architectural historian Reyner Banham. Banham claimed that the Larkin Building, a paragon of early twentieth-century modern architecture designed by its foremost practitioner, broke from the past by implementing "radical improvements in environmental technology," especially heating, cooling, and ventilation.²⁰² After a new labor law required ventilated air for workshop and factory employees, a variety of businesses and institutions implemented the new technology.²⁰³ Among them were

¹⁹⁷ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 70.

¹⁹⁸ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 70.

¹⁹⁹ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 70.

²⁰⁰ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 70–71.

²⁰¹ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 70.

²⁰² Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980), 29.

²⁰³ C. M. Ripley, "Pure Air Law for Workmen: Is This Amount Arbitrary?" *Machinery*, September 1, 1909, 15.

department stores, the Baltimore Stock Exchange, and Rikers Island.²⁰⁴ Percival Robert Foses, who was in charge of New York's heating and ventilating engineering, praised the new system for its cost-effectiveness and efficiency, not for its positive effect on incarcerated people.²⁰⁵

The plan also used new technology to implement the reformist philosophy of individualized incarceration. Regardless of whether they were brought to Rikers in pretrial detention or after conviction, incarcerated people would be uniformly systemized upon arrival.²⁰⁶ First, Frost wrote, they would be registered, then taken to a bathroom, stripped of their clothes, given uniforms, photographed, measured, examined by the on-site physician, and, finally, assigned a number, cell, and duties.²⁰⁷ A reporter applauded the general integration of new technology into the plan, even in simpler forms: "An interesting feature is the locking device by which the doors slide and are controlled by a combination of levers in a lock box at the head of each cell wing. By settling the combination the officer who has charge of the lock box can open all the doors on a tier at once, or can open any one or any combination of doors at will."²⁰⁸

Michel Foucault, one of the few major twentieth-century theorists to give serious thought to carcerality, argued that the panopticon became the primary program of Western carceral architecture after the Enlightenment. First designed by Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon was a labor-saving design intended, as Foucault wrote, to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that

²⁰⁴ C. M. Ripley, "Pure Air Law," 15.

²⁰⁵ C. M. Ripley, "Pure Air Law," 15.

²⁰⁶ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 70–71.

²⁰⁷ Frederick G. Frost, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," 71.

²⁰⁸ "Rikers Island Prison: Plans For It Approved."

assures the automatic functioning of power.”²⁰⁹ By the early twentieth century, the panopticon was baked into the logic of carceral architecture in the United States; one would be hard-pressed to find a carceral building from the period that did not incorporate at least some elements of the program. Rikers was no different. “The inmates must be constantly watched,” the State Secretary of Prisons wrote in 1910. “If permitted to be in a place shut off from the view of keepers, they indulge in self-abuse and other immoral practices which will simply tend to accentuate their already depraved and perverted natures.”²¹⁰

But, as the architectural historian Steven Niedbala notes in regard to the general study of American carceral buildings, an overzealous application of Foucault must be avoided. American carceral design indeed transformed between the Enlightenment and 1907. In 1867, the reformer Enoch Cobb Wines published a widely influential report on carceral institutions in the United States and Canada in which he argued against the radial, geometric plans that defined the panopticon style, perhaps most famously in Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary. Anticipating the main chorus of the reformers later in the nineteenth century, they proposed an architectural program that took into consideration the differences among incarcerated individuals, perhaps most notably their labor potential.²¹¹ ²¹² Upon completion, the report was delivered to New York’s state Prison Association. The Trowbridge architects did not make an explicit reference to the panopticon or Wines’s report, but their

²⁰⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 201.

²¹⁰ “Letter to John F. Tremain, Secretary, State Commission of Prisons.” December 23, 1920, 5. Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

²¹¹ Enoch Wines, *Report on the Prisons and Reformatories of the United States and Canada, Made to the Legislature of New York, January, 1867* (Albany, NY: Van Benthuysen & Sons, 1867).

²¹² For a history of nineteenth-century technocratic individualization from a Foucauldian perspective, see Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

plans seem to reflect an untidy architectural reconciliation unique to the early twentieth century, in which Bentham's late-eighteenth-century design and the reformers' nineteenth-century interventions were givens, though not quite dogmas. With the grand credos of modern architecture not yet fully articulated, the Trowbridge architects subtly fused their inheritance with the still-malleable design principles of the day.

In an example that received press coverage, Trowbridge abandoned the central guardhouse from which, in the classic panopticon program, the guard could view all prisoners, but added galleries on the cell wings from which guards could surveil incarcerated people.²¹³ On the one hand, this was framed as an improvement on the panopticon, giving guards even more direct vision of the incarcerated people; on the other, given that it seemed to require multiple guards or one mobile guard, it chipped away at the efficient use of labor that made the panopticon such an appealing and revelatory plan in the first place. Additionally, the plan's open tiers made "proper heating and ventilation" impossible, which, as Banham argues, would have signaled a subpar work of modern architecture in that decade. Though the plans that other firms submitted are not available, Trowbridge's victory is curious given its obvious shortcomings. Perhaps the difficulty of squaring long-prevailing logics of carceral architecture with modern demands and desires is one reason why Mayor William Gaynor delayed the project in 1910—in other words, one other reason why there was not a political will to construct them right away.

²¹³ "Rikers Island Prison: Plans For It Approved."

Rikers Reprise

Nearly two decades later, after the hiatus in the planning of Rikers discussed in Chapter III, Commissioner Wallis delivered a lecture, which was broadcast on public radio, entitled “New York’s Delinquents and Modern Correctional Methods.” Wallis was the first Commissioner of Correction since the first decade of the century to implore the city to close the penitentiary on Welfare Island and open one on Rikers. Appended to Wallis’s transcribed lecture were plans for the “new Penitentiary” on Rikers Island—the same ones drawn up in 1907. Those plans incorporated every major design principle of modern architecture, and when Wallis dusted it off the shelf, he became the project’s champion; he was to Rikers what Moses was to the Whitestone Bridge. It is unclear whether he discussed the plans on the radio, but given the polemic nature of the prose, one imagines him articulating a commanding, Le Corbusier-esque diktat to a citizenry already convinced that reforms would serve them well.

Wallis’s map of the city provided an image of the Department’s proposed transition in its master layout. Though Rikers had been the first choice for over decades, Wallis floated Hart Island, even further up the East River, as a second.²¹⁴ The image was a striking bird’s eye view of the island, revealing Wallis’s obsession with the clean, efficient, logical potential of Rikers; he wanted the carceral city to reflect the order of the new consolidated city. When describing the Municipal Farm, the only facility operated by the Department of Correction on Rikers at the time, Wallis praised the dormitories’ “orderly condition,” juxtaposing them with the “disorder for the dumping grounds and

²¹⁴ Frederick A. Wallis, “New York’s Delinquents,” 25.

the unsettled condition of the hundreds of acres of filled ground.”²¹⁵ He split the island into zones: that which was settled and that was to be settled. With the Trowbridge architects as his forebears, he believed that he possessed a God’s-eye-view of a truly modern jailer who took account of *all* five boroughs, their rivers, and even their once-forgotten minor islands.

²¹⁵ Frederick A. Wallis, “New York’s Delinquents,” 27.

III. Keeping Up With the Joneses

Rikers and Reform

Just three months after Wallis delivered his speech to New Yorkers, the Grand Jury published its consequential report, endorsed and published by the Prison Association of New York, deeming the 1907 plan “acceptable for present use.”²¹⁶ Officials’ haphazard proposals, including one devised by Mayor Mitchel in 1914 to incarcerate anarchists on Rikers, had not come to fruition in the meantime.²¹⁷ In this limbo, New Yorkers who were not incarcerated continued their long tradition of protesting their proximity to fellow city-dwellers who were. “The people residing in Flushing and vicinity are complaining bitterly regarding their being obliged to travel in trolley cars from Flushing to New York with handcuffed prisoners on their way from the Flushing Police [to] the jail in Long Island City,” a Queens alderman wrote to Mayor John F. Hylan in November of 1918. “It would seem as if the people should not be subjected to this annoyance.”²¹⁸ The alderman’s frustration foreshadowed the socio-spatial carceral segregation that the city would re-enthroned in the coming decade.

By the time the Grand Jury touted the 1907 plans once again, Blackwell’s had grown so notorious, and Progressive reformist ideology had shifted from the vanguard to the mainstream. Jail-planners no longer had to make the same case for change as they had in the first decade of the twentieth century. The documents they produced in the 1920s reveal that the need for carceral change was already common sense in New York. That change, however, still did not necessarily entail an

²¹⁶ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions.”

²¹⁷ Thai Jones, *More Powerful Than Dynamite: Radicals, Plutocrats, Progressives, and New York’s Year of Anarchy* (New York: Walker & Co, 2012), 12.

²¹⁸ Unknown Alderman, “Letter to John F. Hylan,” 16 November 1918. Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

entirely new jail on Rikers; it could have simply meant reforming Blackwell's. So as a new generation of city officials revived the 1907 plan and advocated for its construction, they had to explain and justify the specifics of their plan to each other and to their fellow New Yorkers.

They did so under a bright national spotlight. They paid close attention to the transformations that had swept the nation in the last half century—one of the key periods of carceral change in the history of the United States. It is important, then, to understand the American narrative that they believed they were changing. Following Foucault (whose architectural history is discussed in Chapter II), Mooney and Shanahan trace reformist ideology to Enlightenment-inspired Americans of the late eighteenth century, most notably Thomas Eddy and Jeremy Bentham, who saw the New World as a space of experimentation for less cruel carceral systems than those in Europe.²¹⁹ They rely on Irwin's definition of the "rabble classes" to argue that the increased criminalization of vagabonds and beggars defined the carceral culture of the eighteenth-century United States.²²⁰ In 1796, New York State adopted its first genuinely reformist criminal code, and incarceration replaced bodily punishments like whipping.²²¹ Reform followed an uneven trajectory; after uprisings by incarcerated people over labor conditions in 1818, New York reverted to the use of corporal punishment.²²² The nineteenth century, as the historian Rebecca McLennan argues in *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, was the period of hard labor

²¹⁹ Mooney and Shanahan, "Rikers Island: The Failure of a 'Model' Penitentiary," 692.

²²⁰ Mooney and Shanahan, "Rikers Island: The Failure of a 'Model' Penitentiary," 692.

²²¹ Mooney and Shanahan, "Rikers Island: The Failure of a 'Model' Penitentiary," 693.

²²² Mooney and Shanahan, "Rikers Island: The Failure of a 'Model' Penitentiary," 695.

in carceral institutions like Newgate and Bellevue, which became infamous in the first quarter of the nineteenth century for derelict conditions.^{223 224}

Mooney and Shanahan argue that the second major period of reform began in 1870, when the National Prison Congress, held in Cincinnati, invited “wardens, prison advocates, social welfare advocates, and academics” from most states to establish a declaration of thirty-seven principles for “the reformation of criminals,” positioning themselves against what they saw as the *de rigueur* “infliction of vindictive suffering.”²²⁵ This was the beginning of the end of the punitive labor system that had reigned in the nineteenth century; the reformers proposed education and vocational training as alternatives.²²⁶ McLennan shows that across the northern states, new “penal-social laboratories” of the Progressive Era replaced the “great prison factories” of the Gilded Age.²²⁷ The Congress became an annual affair, and New York sent its officials, including the warden of Blackwell’s.²²⁸ But when they returned to the city each year, they were able to implement only mild reforms; eventually, Blackwell’s was seen as indefensible and unsustainable. An institution that, like Newgate and Bellevue before it and Rikers after it, was once imagined as a model institution noted for its “orderliness” and “neat and clean cells” fell into decrepitude, against the tide of the nation and the state.²²⁹

²²³ Mooney and Shanahan, “The Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” 696.

²²⁴ McLennan shows that the history of prison-based punishment in the United States, from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, constitutes “a long continuum of episodic instability, conflict, and political crisis” (5). Hers is a story of uneven reform, providing historical evidence for the idea, often attributed to Foucault, that the prison was itself a reform in the early republic. See also Adam Jay Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

²²⁵ Mooney and Shanahan, “The Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” 696.

²²⁶ Mooney and Shanahan, “The Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” 696.

²²⁷ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 3.

²²⁸ Mooney and Shanahan, “The Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” 697.

²²⁹ Mooney and Shanahan, “The Failure of a ‘Model’ Penitentiary,” 696.

McLennan takes New York as her primary example, showing how major reforms there in the last decade of the nineteenth century provided a model for much of the north.²³⁰ The transformation that began in the 1890s was in essence about a “state-use system” with “new bureaucratic ways of organizing prisons and prisoners.”²³¹ In 1894, after prisons had already begun to reduce the use of incarcerated labor, the McDonough amendment outlawed both private contracting of prison labor and the sale of goods produced in prison.²³² The private firms’ power was inversely related to the state’s power, and as New York settled into its new twentieth-century schema of centralized bureaucracies, McLennan writes that it “set in motion the abolition of the foundation upon which New York’s prisons had rested” for nearly the entire nineteenth century.²³³

The new system was nothing short of a “novel conception of the nature and responsibilities of the penal arm of the state” and “the ethical and social functions of government.”²³⁴ Much like Enoch Wines in his 1867 report, officials believed that they were reforming a system that treated incarcerated people like slaves, rather than understanding and attending to their individual needs and abilities.²³⁵ One example of bureaucratic reform at the prison level was the implementation of the case-history system, in which the state produced records of health, experiences, backgrounds, and “reform potential” of “each and every prisoner” under its aegis.²³⁶ Incarcerated people were then divided into “grades” that allowed the state to manage them more efficiently and effectively.²³⁷

²³⁰ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 5.

²³¹ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 241.

²³² McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 5.

²³³ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 194.

²³⁴ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 194.

²³⁵ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 194.

²³⁶ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 194.

²³⁷ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 194.

Prison reformers are traditionally understood as key actors in the American Progressive movement. But McLennan, who dates the movement in the Northern states to between 1896 and 1919—with a peak in the 1910s, when the Rikers plans languished—argues that prisons were reformed “as much by convicts, guards, wardens, labor organizers, manufacturers, workingmen, and political leaders as by these so-called reformers.”²³⁸ The question for average Americans was one of “democratic government in the face of the powerful new social forces at work in American society.”²³⁹ While New York State jostled for control over prisons, incarcerated people fought tirelessly for higher-quality sanitation and food, the elimination of the whip and the baton, and even the abolition of the barbaric dark cell.²⁴⁰ This powerful, if historically invisible, coalition of organized people had, of course, campaigned for various place- and period-specific versions of reform and abolition for as long as they had been in cages.

The Decline of Blackwell's

In their report, the members of the Grand Jury wrote: “Blackwell’s Island had always been known as a prison island, which cast a stigma.”²⁴¹ Here and elsewhere in the report, their concern lay not entirely with the conditions of the jail on Blackwell’s, but on various *perceptions* of those conditions—as the phrase “been known” reveals. The Grand Jury was embarrassed of Blackwell’s and the Department of Correction; along with the city that commissioned their report, they aimed to

²³⁸ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 239.

²³⁹ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 240.

²⁴⁰ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, 240.

²⁴¹ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 14.

determine how to catch up with American cities that had reformed and modernized their carceral buildings and systems. When the Grand Jury report implored the city to close Blackwell's and open Rikers, it did so in hopes of overcoming not the island's horrid conditions, but the stigma attached to them. The jurors argued that Blackwell's could and should be abolished, that its reputation as the city's overcrowded, unsanitary, backward hell could be "entirely overcome only by removing the prisons from it."²⁴² In this sense, the move to Rikers was an early form of boosterism in a rapidly growing city that was increasingly self-conscious about its image.

To understand how the city arrived at this unusual juncture, it is crucial to examine the history of Blackwell's, which, like the history of Rikers, remains under-researched. Like Rikers, Blackwell's, the largest of New York's minor islands, was originally named after the family who owned it. Beginning in the 1820s, a complex web of institutions transformed it from a remote island mostly outside of the city's ecosystem to one of its central carceral organs. First was an "insane asylum," which opened in 1824.²⁴³ In 1832, the same year the island was brought under the jurisdiction of the Department of Charities and Correction, a workhouse for incarcerated New Yorkers, of the variety that John Irwin describes, was built not far from the asylum.²⁴⁴ In 1852, the asylum was incorporated into the small penitentiary complex as a hospital.²⁴⁵ Blackwell's became the archetype of the urban island penitentiary in the United States, the most famous example of which was San Francisco's Alcatraz, as well as of the nineteenth-century carceral labor model.

²⁴² Grand Jury, "A Study of the Conditions," 14.

²⁴³ Grand Jury, "A Study of the Conditions," 14.

²⁴⁴ Grand Jury, "A Study of the Conditions," 14.

²⁴⁵ Grand Jury, "A Study of the Conditions," 14.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the city had concentrated the majority of its carceral resources on Blackwell's, a far cry from the diffuse system of the eighteenth century. The story the city told itself about Blackwell's was one of extraordinary transformation of form and function. Officials thought of the island and its institutions as having grown up with New York. "As the city continued to grow," the Grand Jury wrote, "penal institutions were built and added to the Department."²⁴⁶ Throughout the report, 'department' was at times interchangeable with 'island,' suggesting that city officials viewed the city as one and the same with Blackwell's.

In dwelling on the negative aspects of the history of Blackwell's, the 1924 report obscured the fact that its descent into infamy had occurred relatively recently. In fact, for more than the first half of Blackwell's history as a carceral island, it was well-regarded. The only major complaint about Blackwell's Island in the Department of Charities and Correction's 1875 annual report was that it was overcrowded: "The prison, although too small to accommodate the present average population, was found to be in very good condition," John M. Fox, the warden, reported to the city.²⁴⁷ He claimed that his only structural concern was the state of the roof, which he was personally fixing.²⁴⁸ In 1878, the warden reported that Blackwell's "retains its usual good reputation for cleanliness, and its general good sanitary condition."²⁴⁹ The requests for improvement remained minor: he called for the kitchen and mess halls to be moved further away from the incarcerated people's sleeping quarters to improve

²⁴⁶ Grand Jury, "A Study of the Conditions," 12.

²⁴⁷ *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1875).

²⁴⁸ *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1875).

²⁴⁹ *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1878).

sanitation.²⁵⁰ The sanitary conditions were reported as “excellent,” “thoroughly clean,” and “wholesome” again in 1879, with the buildings deemed “in good condition,” still only with the exception of the roof.²⁵¹ In 1880, the same was true, but the warden started to report overcrowding.²⁵² The city responded with plans for new stone buildings, the construction of which began in 1881 with incarcerated labor.²⁵³

But beginning in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, even average New Yorkers who read newspapers “began to realize that the conditions in the old buildings constituting the Penitentiary and Workhouse were getting to be neither safe as regards hazard, nor sanitary.”²⁵⁴ Blackwell’s came to be understood as anything but excellent: in addition to growing increasingly overcrowded, its sanitary conditions deteriorated, and soon it was a relic of a bygone era. After much agitation to have the penitentiary “overhauled and modernized,” in 1893, New York State authorized the reconstruction of certain buildings.²⁵⁵ The precise details of this plan are unclear, likely because “no actual work was started” at that time, for unknown reasons.²⁵⁶ This was the first of many major delays that dogged the city as New Yorkers called for change. Meanwhile, jail-planners were already doing damage control, eyeing European and other American cities for models. As early as 1886, the *Times* reported that “as

²⁵⁰ *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1878).

²⁵¹ *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1879).

²⁵² *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1880).

²⁵³ *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction of the City of New York* (New York: Bellevue Press, 1880).

²⁵⁴ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 12.

²⁵⁵ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 12.

²⁵⁶ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 12.

soon as the Commissioners determined to build the new penitentiary they entered into an energetic effort to obtain the best attainable knowledge concerning modern improvements in such institutions [...] They correspond with the best European authorities, consulted here with the National Prison Association.”²⁵⁷ In 1898, the Greater New York Charter ordered that inmates be removed from the two institutions on Blackwell’s Island—though the actual removal did not happen until the twentieth century—and completely transferred jurisdiction over Blackwell’s from the state to the city.²⁵⁸

Over the next two and a half decades, the Department of Correction grew rapidly, reaching its tentacles across the city. In 1924, at the time of the report’s writing, the Department’s jurisdiction included 19 institutions: the City Prisons of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens; eight District Prisons in Manhattan and the Bronx; the Traffic Detention Room in Manhattan; the New York County Penitentiary and Workhouse for Males, also known as the “Penitentiary,” and the Correction Hospital for Females, both on Welfare Island; the Municipal Farm on Rikers Island, where many incarcerated drug users were sent to work; the Reformatory Prison on Hart’s Island; the New York City Reformatory at New Hampton Farms, and another at Warwick Farms; and the Women’s Farm Colony at Greycourt, upstate.²⁵⁹ In its unification under a single city department, the city’s new carceral apparatus was administratively modern, but in the unevenness of its institutions’ forms and functions, it remained hung over from the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, the land reclamation project on Rikers had become a model for other cities—the exact opposite of Blackwell’s. In the summer of 1908, Mayor J. Barry Mahool of Baltimore visited the

²⁵⁷ “To Build a Bigger Jail.”

²⁵⁸ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 12–14.

²⁵⁹ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 12.

waste system that Lantry had developed as a spatial fix.²⁶⁰ By then, incarcerated laborers had more than doubled the size of Rikers, and after visiting the island, one of the officials who accompanied the mayor suggested that they use the same method Baltimore.²⁶¹ The mayor was enthusiastic about the opportunity to increase property values by simply increasing the amount of property owned by the city.²⁶² Needless to say, Mahool did not visit Blackwell's while he was in town.

"Disgrace" and Boosterism

As part of its report, the Grand Jury received the formidable task of inquiring into the case of every incarcerated person on Welfare Island, as well as the jail's management and the misconduct of the officers who worked there.²⁶³ The jurors clearly laid out their modernizing impetus when they described setting out to write their report:

We had learned from history, as taught in our school days, that there were some very old penal institutions belonging to the City, and as we have grown older we have read in the daily press and weekly and monthly magazines and annual, decennial, quarterly and semi-centennial reports, and intermittent recurrent accounts, of efforts on the part of various City departments to keep these old institutions in habitable repair, to modernize them against fire hazard and insanitation, and to adapt them to the increasing demands of the City, due to its growth and improvements in methods of the custodial treatment of prisoners for their welfare and social, intellectual and industrial improvement.²⁶⁴

They saw themselves as technocratic problem-solvers, as demonstrated when they took great pains to explain that they requisitioned and studied in detail recent reports from the Department of

²⁶⁰ "Making a Big Island for New York."

²⁶¹ "Making a Big Island for New York."

²⁶² "Making a Big Island for New York."

²⁶³ Grand Jury, "A Study of the Conditions," 10–12.

²⁶⁴ Grand Jury, "A Study of the Conditions," 10.

Correction, the Fire Department, and the Department of Buildings.²⁶⁵ Their ultimate aim was to take stock of the entire system in order to determine what to do with all of it. “If the conditions we should find would warrant our criticisms, we might, perhaps, offer some recommendations for betterment of a constructive nature,” they ventured, in a tone belying the extreme newness of their eventual proposal.²⁶⁶ The Grand Jury had not been commissioned only to study Welfare Island, but so thick was the mystique surrounding the island, so myriad were the problems there, that their report read as though they could not look away from the great trainwreck of New York’s carceral network. Welfare Island was, to them, an urgent cause for the city’s attention, though in the report they vacillated between claiming to know what the city should do and leaving that work to others, a sign of the peculiarly uneven and overdetermined authority vested in them.

“It is apparent,” the jurors wrote, “that the conditions in these old buildings have been a disgrace to the City and a by-word all over the country for half a century and more.”²⁶⁷ The jurors worried about judgments rendered on a city where “administration after administration has tried to eliminate [the buildings] but for one reason or another has failed.”²⁶⁸ This led them to claim that any additional delay would constitute a “further disgrace”—not to people incarcerated in the buildings, but to people watching from afar.²⁶⁹ By organizing its departments to work together in the interest of rebuilding its carceral city, New York could, in the jurors’ eyes, “make a name for itself.”²⁷⁰ They

²⁶⁵ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 10.

²⁶⁶ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 10–12.

²⁶⁷ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 12.

²⁶⁸ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 18.

²⁶⁹ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 18.

²⁷⁰ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 18.

avored a logic of internal efficiency by which the city could smooth out its post-consolidation kinks and become the envy of the country. And as revealed by their fixation on the physical infrastructure of the jail, rather than on the criminal justice system itself, the jurors were most occupied with what was immediately visible.

The same logic had animated an important report issued in April 1924 by the Manufacturers Trust Company. Commissioned by city agencies, including the Department of Correction, the report opened: “New York City has long been regarded from a distance as cold, mercenary and unsympathetic.”²⁷¹ Commissioner Wallis’s reports and communications in the preceding years oozed with the same humiliation. In a letter written in December of 1923, he claimed that while modern attitudes about the rights of the jailed had changed, New York City’s architecture had not: “The buildings of the Department are, in general, old, many of them hazardous in regard to fire and were designed at a time when no particular thought was given to the care of the offender except to prevent his escape.”²⁷² Not dwelling for long on the shortcomings of the buildings under his control, let alone on the ethical ideals of a criminal justice system, Wallis spent most of his time making the case that New York was not keeping pace with other cities:

The correctional institutions of the City of New York have existed in a condition which has made impossible the carrying out of a humane and enlightened policy in the care of those committed to them, which is a reflection upon the City and its Government, and I urge that in considering the request of the Department due weight be given to the fact that it was at one

²⁷¹ Thomas C. Jeffries, “Welfare and Correctional Work in New York City. April 1924, 1–2. Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

²⁷² Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hon. Murray Hulbert, Acting Mayor and Chairman, Board of Estimate & Apportionment, New York City.” December 16, 1923, 1. Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

time the policy of the City to place its correctional institutions abreast with those in which the greatest progress has been made.”²⁷³

Though, unlike the Trowbridge team, he provided no example of what an ideal jail ought to look like, he made it clear that he wanted New York’s jails to be on par with those in other cities. And, like the Grand Jury, he employed the d-word to embarrass his readers into action: “The manner in which the majority of inmates have had to be housed in the old institutions can only be described as disgraceful and the total housing accommodation is inadequate.”²⁷⁴ Wallis described Welfare as “altogether unfit” for the twentieth century, citing as examples inadequate bathrooms and high fire risks due to shoddy wooden construction.²⁷⁵ He was excited about progress on Rikers; he celebrated the makeshift wooden dormitories there.²⁷⁶ He used solitary confinement, the supposed reform to the dark cell, as an example of how Rikers was already more advanced in some respects than Blackwell’s.^{277 278}

While he conceded that the new penitentiary was “so large a project” even though it had been “recognized for twenty years or more that it was necessary and would have to be done at some time,” he positioned himself as the person who could make it happen.²⁷⁹ This was undoubtedly the centerpiece of his analysis. “I earnestly request that it no longer be considered a matter that can be indefinitely postponed, but that some positive action be taken to commit the City to its construction,” he wrote.²⁸⁰

He refused to watch New York fall any further behind. “The Penitentiary is the principal institution of

²⁷³ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 1.

²⁷⁴ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 2.

²⁷⁵ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 2.

²⁷⁶ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 2.

²⁷⁷ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 2.

²⁷⁸ New York Mayor Eric Adams made headlines in winter 2022 for referring to Rikers’s notorious solitary confinement apparatus as “punitive segregation.”

²⁷⁹ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 3.

²⁸⁰ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 3.

the correctional system of the City and until a new one is built New York City will continue to remain as an example of a municipality far behind the times in the case of the offender and his betterment.”²⁸¹

The city thought that it needed “the most advanced ideas of cell or room construction, facilities for classification and segregation and adequate means for industrial activities and instruction.”²⁸² Wallis estimated that the total cost for Rikers would be \$5,000,000—by far the highest estimate yet—though he noted that “a reasonably close estimate of the cost can only be given after the site has been determined, preliminary studies made, the size and number of the buildings determined and unit costs estimated, based on the condition prevailing at the city.” So desperate had city officials grown to improve the city’s reputation that they even at times repressed their most persistent concern: the budget.

²⁸¹ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 3–4.

²⁸² Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 3–4.

IV. No More “Enormous Expenditure”

Rikers as Investment

In the 1920s, city officials determined that Welfare Island was not only an overcrowded, unsanitary, and backward embarrassment—it had also become too expensive. The Grand Jury did, after all, claim that one reason to dust off the 1907 plans was the city’s “expenditure of a large sum of money on them.”²⁸³ And the opening line of Wallis’s speech revealed that his intention to fold incarcerated people into the fabric of the new city had a strong economic bent: “It is almost inconceivable that the great City of New York, first in all that is progressive and good, should have gone all these years without having provided facilities whereby every man and woman in our penal and correctional institutions could be placed in productive employment.”²⁸⁴ The appeal combined the competitive motive outlined in Chapter III with a drive toward economic productivity. Not every commissioner before Wallis could have made such an argument. He reminded New Yorkers that his Department of Correction was now, like New York, the largest of its kind in the world.²⁸⁵ And he argued that under the Hylan Administration, the Department had grown increasingly efficient and effective.²⁸⁶ Now, he declared, it was time for the city’s carceral institutions to follow suit.

Though the 1920s was the first decade when political elites forcefully advocated for an entirely new jail as a cost-saver, saving money had been on city officials’ mind since it purchased Rikers in 1884. According to an 1886 article in the *Times*, when the city bought the island, it estimated that “to

²⁸³ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions.”

²⁸⁴ Frederick A. Wallis, “New York’s Delinquents and Modern Correctional Methods,” 28 May 1924, 1.

²⁸⁵ Frederick A. Wallis, “New York’s Delinquents and Modern Correctional Methods,” 28 May 1924, 13.

²⁸⁶ Frederick A. Wallis, “New York’s Delinquents and Modern Correctional Methods,” 28 May 1924, 15.

enlarge the present building to an extent only sufficient to meet the current demand upon it would have cost, it was estimated, about \$150,000.”²⁸⁷ Meanwhile, the city viewed its outlay on Rikers as a good investment because the property value would increase:

On the basis of an original investment of \$180,000, and a not very large sum for cribwork—which is offset by the saving in handling the street dirt and ashes—the city, if the value of the property in its full reclaimed extent is proportionately as great as that of the natural island (which has doubled in two years) will have in 10 years a property worth \$2,000,000 for the land alone.²⁸⁸

By 1886, the article noted, the Commissioners proposed a carceral complex for 2,500 convicts, which would cost an estimated \$1,000,000.²⁸⁹ The labor was extremely low-cost, and New York State paid for the board for those guilty of felonies.²⁹⁰ When Commissioner Lantry developed his land reclamation plan in 1900, he assured his fellow New Yorkers that they had an excellent opportunity to cut costs: “I do not see why a community as well as an individual should not be anxious to save money.”²⁹¹ In fact, Lantry’s seemed to believe that Rikers had limitless economic potential; in 1900, he responded excitedly to reports of gold on the island only to discover that the nuggets were iron pyrites.²⁹² The incarcerated population of Rikers produced hundreds of barrels of rhubarb, spinach, swiss chard, and other vegetables that the jailers then “used to good advantage” at various jails around the city for two reasons: “to effect a slight variation in the general dietary,” and, crucially, to make “a big saving in

²⁸⁷ “To Build a Bigger Jail.”

²⁸⁸ “To Build a Bigger Jail.”

²⁸⁹ “To Build a Bigger Jail.”

²⁹⁰ “To Build a Bigger Jail.”

²⁹¹ “Reclaiming Rikers Island: Improvement of a Barren Waste Without Cost to the City,” *New York Times*, 25 November 1900.

²⁹² “Lantry’s Golden Dream: Only a Trace of the Metal Found With Iron Pyrites on Riker’s Island,” *New-York Tribune*, 11 December 1900.

inmates' maintenance."²⁹³ Rikers was thus a cost-saver not only for the people incarcerated on Rikers who would otherwise have been incarcerated on Blackwell's, but for the entire incarcerated population of the city.

In early 1918, New York County commissioned a Grand Jury to inspect and report on the conditions of the city's carceral institutions. To the surprise of James A. Hamilton, Hylan's Commissioner of Correction, their report was generous—far more generous than the 1924 jury's scathing report.²⁹⁴ Hamilton had been concerned about public scrutiny, especially of the penitentiary and workhouse on Blackwell's, for three reasons.²⁹⁵ The first was World War I: the draft had made it difficult to retain the department's employees, including doctors, guards, and administrators.²⁹⁶ Then there was the problem of the "abnormal conditions of the country generally," likely an allusion to the Spanish Flu, which ravaged the country that year, hitting jails and prisons particularly hard.^{297 298} Finally, there was the ostensibly "vicious character" of the inmates.²⁹⁹

After the jury released its report, the Commissioner wrote to Hylan that he was "just a little elated" about the "mildness" of the critique of conditions that, by then, everyone knew were deteriorating.³⁰⁰ He took credit for implementing some of the reforms that earned the jury's applause, including the replacement of "unclean, unsanitary and disgusting" pails with more sanitary toilets.³⁰¹

²⁹³ Frederick A. Wallis, "Letter to John F. Hylan," 24 February 1925, 1.

²⁹⁴ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to John F. Hylan," 25 June 1918, 1.

²⁹⁵ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to John F. Hylan," 25 June 1918, 1.

²⁹⁶ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to John F. Hylan," 25 June 1918, 1.

²⁹⁷ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

²⁹⁸ Alfred W. Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

²⁹⁹ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

³⁰⁰ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

³⁰¹ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

As someone skeptical of proposals by bodies not immersed in the details of the annual budget, he was surprised that the jury's recommendations subverted their usual "impracticability" in the form of "enormous expenditure."³⁰² He applauded the jury for making "feasible" and "practical" suggestions for reforms on Welfare, although, he noted, their price tag of \$200,000 seemed high.³⁰³ Still, Hamilton told Hylan that "the cost for making the change would add considerably to the budget for 1919."³⁰⁴ As the 1920s neared, those in charge of Blackwell's were concerned about dumping money into an institution they knew was struggling.

Purse strings remained tight. In the first month of 1920, Hamilton requested that Hylan implement a 24-hour boat service from East Harlem to Rikers, with a stop at the tiny North Brother Island, also in the East River. Hamilton's plan was to appropriate vessels from the Department of Health.³⁰⁵ Though the distance from North Brother's to Rikers was less than half a mile, Hamilton described the project in light of its "difficulty and great danger," especially in the winter months, when boats had to contend with ice near the shorelines of Rikers, North Brother, and especially Manhattan.³⁰⁶ Unfortunately for Hamilton, the Commissioner of the Department of Health swiftly conveyed his fleet captain's disapproval; neither of them wanted to cede their precious resources.

The small departmental battles suggest that when Hamilton's successor, Wallis, took office and wrote his reports and speeches, he was responding not only to the decades-old scrutiny of inefficiency on Blackwell's, but to internal concerns. On the subject of reforms, Wallis struck a tone far more

³⁰² James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

³⁰³ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

³⁰⁴ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 2.

³⁰⁵ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

³⁰⁶ James A. Hamilton, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

urgent and demanding than his predecessor's: "The need for extensive improvements that would permit the Department to function along modern lines has previously been brought to the attention of the Board but no appropriations have been made for a number of years to carry out the general plan of betterment that was commenced during the administration of the late Mayor Gaynor."³⁰⁷

One of Wallis's economizing plans was to exploit incarcerated laborers more efficiently. In line with the modern design principles of the 1907 plan, he called for the classification, segregation, and training of incarcerated people.³⁰⁸ He imagined a regime of classification: On the new Rikers, he said, "It would be possible to discriminate between the amateur and professional criminal and all the other types, whether the persons are essentially dishonest, immoral, illiterate, mentally defective, or have simply committed a crime due to a sense of bravado and a wrong set of standards."³⁰⁹ He argued that those who "violate the laws of this City should not only be securely incarcerated in our prisons, but they should be made to perform profitable labor, and by this labor relieve the taxpayers of a large burden."³¹⁰ The idea that incarcerated New Yorkers should be put to work was not new, but never had it been tied so directly to a plan for an entirely new carceral institution. Wallis's scheme was far more totalizing than the tweaks to Blackwell's that nineteenth-century commissioners had proposed.

In 1923, Wallis had reflected on a 1922 report by the State Prison Commission that claimed that "under present day conditions, there is no possibility of reformation of the more hopeful types of those committed here."³¹¹ With the admonition in mind, Wallis sent the mayor his own four-part

³⁰⁷ Frederick A. Wallis, "Letter to Hulbert," 1.

³⁰⁸ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 22.

³⁰⁹ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 22.

³¹⁰ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 4.

³¹¹ Frederick A. Wallis, "Letter to Hulbert," 2.

municipal bond request to the department. Three parts were the construction of an institution for drug addicts, provisions for the Tubercular Hospital and Old Men's Homes, and the additions and improvements on existing facilities; the fourth part was "the construction of an entirely new modern Penitentiary for Males on Rikers or Harts Island, as may be determined to be most advisable."³¹² Wallis was fully behind the plan.³¹³

In Wallis's ambitious plan, incarcerated people would learn valuable skills while in jail, then "return to society with practical knowledge of a trade."³¹⁴ While his motive may have appeared to be a reform intended to improve the incarcerated people's life and place in society—their new skills "would lessen the chance of his returning to crime and to prison"—Wallis's economic concerns triumphed.³¹⁵ "This vocational and industrial reform would save the City millions of dollars," he concluded.³¹⁶ Even in moments when Wallis attempted to transcend the language of the budget, as when he conceded that men and women would lead better lives with their new skills, he regressed by describing each incarcerated person as an "asset instead of an increasing liability."³¹⁷ He reduced each incarcerated person to their exploitable potential in the name of cost-efficiency.

³¹² Frederick A. Wallis, "Letter to Hulbert," 3.

³¹³ Rikers was not the only model penitentiary that Wallis and Hylan planned. Greycourt, a women's jail that opened at the beginning of Hylan's first term in 1918, was considered "the answer" to the Women's Workhouse, which Wallis described as "a disgrace to the City of New York." His framing of Greycourt as a victory ripe for continuous celebration was the clearest expression in his report of how interwar penal reforms in New York City both hardened and specified social hierarchies. Greycourt, he wrote, "made possible the proper classification and segregation of the women inmates of all our institutions, thus taking a long step forward in the transformation and rehabilitation of the many women inmates crowding our institutions." The precise contours of the classification and segregation to which Wallis referred are unclear, but the intertwining and even conflation of stated and actual intentions—ameliorating overcrowding on the one hand, and reifying social inequality on the other—are discernible.

³¹⁴ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 2.

³¹⁵ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 2.

³¹⁶ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 2.

³¹⁷ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 2.

Long-term calculations, not just the annual city budget, buttressed Wallis's argument that Rikers could be a cost-saver. He estimated that the new "industrial penitentiary" on Rikers would cost a whopping \$2,500,000, but he assumed that "the savings effected through such an institution would prove it to be one of the best investments the City could make," before adding the performative addendum— "aside from the humanitarian and moral benefits that would accrue."³¹⁸ He continued: "The city has spent many millions in the last twenty-five years in maintaining its present penal institutions."³¹⁹

While Hamilton had been mildly concerned over the money that the city had poured into Blackwell's, Wallis was outraged. (Wallis, it must be noted, did not confine this tone to public reports: "Every sentence and every line that has been employed in these criticisms are utterly false," he once wrote to Hylan, referring to a fresh batch of censorious press reports.³²⁰) He estimated that \$1,500,000 had been spent in the previous decade on "patching up the old worn out, inadequate and obsolete buildings," and then warned of double the outlay over the next decades "if new and modern buildings are not provided in the near future"³²¹ Wallis railed against upkeep and reform because they had become too expensive, not just on Blackwell's, but throughout the city's entire carceral network. He reached a boiling point on such subjects as district prisons, with their "fixed overhead charges and current expenditures"; he said the city should "abolish" them.³²² Above all, Wallis was enraged at the city for failing to invest in a new jail when it had the chance. "Twenty years ago \$2,500,000 was

³¹⁸ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 2.

³¹⁹ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 2.

³²⁰ Frederick A. Wallis, "Letter to Hylan," 1.

³²¹ Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 3.

³²² Frederick A. Wallis, "New York's Delinquents," 3.

appropriated for building a new Penitentiary, and was allowed to lapse,” he said. It was high time, he said, to make right by this “proposed modernization.”³²³

The Grand Jury’s Grand Plan

Wallis’s fiery report gained attention, including from the Grand Jury that issued the 1924 report discussed in Chapter III. In fact, Wallis served as the jury’s main source. The authors of the somewhat grandiose report felt the need to take stock of New York’s situation; they had a strong sense that they were writing during a period of change, and perhaps accelerating it with their own words. The report began by explaining the basics of crime and punishment, as if the moment required going back to the drawing board to understand what aspects of society needed to change. The authors wrote: “Crime, it is startling to learn, piles up such a staggering loss to the country every year that it costs more than our Army and Navy, more than our police systems, more, in fact, than any other item in our national ledger.”³²⁴ The report attributed the public’s apathy toward and ignorance of crime to “the inertia of custom which became crystallized and has remained practically static since the middle ages when the criminal lost his identity as a human being, much as a horse has lost its identity as an animal, and is treated as a machine, to be made to go by force, irrespective of inhuman treatment inflicted upon him.”³²⁵ They argued that “a criminal is [...] a human being. [...] Therefore, what is severe

³²³ Frederick A. Wallis, “New York’s Delinquents,” 3.

³²⁴ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 6.

³²⁵ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 5.

punishment for one has practically no influence upon, or is totally unsuited to, another.”³²⁶ They saw their task as nothing short of rehumanizing the criminal.

Humanization, for them, meant economization above all else. Alluding to the rise in crime, the report introduced crime as “our biggest tax,” “twelve times the price of peace.”³²⁷ Echoing Wallis, the report’s authors explicitly referred to the “economic value” of educating incarcerated people to ease reentry and decrease recidivism rates.³²⁸ “The public should come to understand that the education of the prisoner in the principles of right living would be a paying investment,” they wrote.³²⁹ Deploying the financial language of “asset” and “liability,” they argued that in order to be rehumanized, the criminal had to be properly segregated according to their background and value, given suitable work, and adequately cared for.³³⁰ “The value to the community,” they wrote, “is much greater than the cost necessary to produce such a result.”³³¹

When they moved from description to recommendation, the authors assured Hylan that, after all these years, moving to Rikers was a financially wise decision, selecting 1927 as their goal date for the completion of the transition. They also argued that it would be politically astute, given the taxpayers’ supposed awareness of the economic benefits: “There is now possible an economical method of financing [the new jail] which will, if adopted, be a permanent credit to his administration and of

³²⁶ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 5.

³²⁷ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 5.

³²⁸ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 5.

³²⁹ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 5.

³³⁰ Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 5.

³³¹ Frederick A. Wallis, “Letter to Hulbert,” 1.

immediate benefit of the taxpayers.”³³² As the Grand Jury saw it, the city had no choice, and the city agreed. So they poured the concrete.

³³² Grand Jury, “A Study of the Conditions,” 41.

Conclusion

The Rikers Island jail complex opened in the following decade. After roughly half a century, the city had planned a carceral institution more rock-hard than any in its history. The planners saw their design not as a temporary ameliorator of social problems, but as an unimpeachable part of the city's new landscape—a jail that favored concrete over wood.

While I have argued that forces other than the Progressive Era reform movement motivated and defined the planning of Rikers Island, I do not contend that concentrating surpluses, modernizing the Department's buildings in the name of efficiency, boosting New York, and cutting costs must have been the only ones; these were simply the reasons that appeared in the city archives. The period of the planning and construction of Rikers corresponded with one of the most dramatic changes in New York's demographic history and the entrenchment of spatial racism across the boroughs.³³³ As the historian Nancy Foner shows, between 1880 and 1920, nearly a million and a half people migrated to New York, most of them eastern European Jews and southern Italians who were racialized as non-white upon their arrival.³³⁴ In the 1910s, radicals sparked a major "period of crisis," as the historian Thai Jones calls it, for political order and control.³³⁵ And in the 1920s, the city's African-American population grew exponentially as a result of the Great Migration.³³⁶ The cultural

³³³ I use Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism: the state-sanctioned production of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, eds. (New York: Verso, 2017): 240.

³³⁴ Nancy Foner, *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 1.

³³⁵ Jones, *More Powerful Than Dynamite*, 2.

³³⁶ Great Migration historiography has largely ignored both New York and carcerality. It is possible that Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which received widespread acclaim, was a category killer. For the classic account of the Great Migration and urbanism, which uses Chicago as its case study, see St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1945). See also: Alferdteen Harris, ed.,

historian Hazel V. Carby calls the city's response to ostensibly "socially dangerous" behavior of black migrants, especially black women, "moral panics."³³⁷ While the jail-planners did not reference these new urban realities directly, the Grand Jury's claim in 1924 that crime "piles up" was one of many dog-whistles that appeared in the city's reports.³³⁸ They suggest that further research would confirm some form of the hypothesis that Rikers grew in part from the city's fresh racism and xenophobia.

If the prison, as McLennan writes, is "the outstanding example of an unfree institution in a putatively free society," then the jail on Rikers Island remains the outstanding example of an unfree institution in one of the putatively freest cities on the planet.³³⁹ Just as Gilmore insists that "prison building was and is not the inevitable outcome of ... surpluses,"³⁴⁰ I have attempted to suggest that as powerful as jail-planners were, the carceral landscape that they produced was not the only path forward for New Yorkers. Nor is it now. Calls from abolitionists today are clear: our goal must not be just to "close Rikers," as the reformist sloganeers and Mayor Adams now insist, but to abolish the conditions that produced it. We do not need new jails; we need an entirely new city. To paraphrase Gilmore, all New Yorkers have a right not just to decent apartments, adequate healthcare, and a living wage, but to lives of voluptuous pleasure. In these boroughs of unyielding social and spatial contradictions, utopia feels so distant but so gloriously close.

Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Jack Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); and Joe William Trotter, Jr., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

³³⁷ Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 739.

³³⁸ Grand Jury, "A Study of the Conditions," 6.

³³⁹ McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, PG.

³⁴⁰ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 88.

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