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CLOSED PRISONS. CONSERVATION ISSUE TO REUSE A DIFFICULT HERITAGE

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Abstract. Since the turn of the 21st century, Italy has implemented legislative measures designed to enhance the standard of detainment. These measures have resulted in the construction of new facilities and the closure of ancient prisons. Presently, some of them are still awaiting new uses. As known, these architectures have strong identities with significant psychological and social impacts on future users, as well as a significant economic potential due to their location in the urban context and to their large size. The aim of the proposal is to define what can be considered as critical issues to be taken into account when it is necessary to choose a new function for historic decommissioned prisons. This analysis enables the results of the proposed reuse to be evaluated, both in terms of the conservation and valorisation of the tangible and intangible values and in terms of their sustainability. Through the examination of national and international case studies, formulated since the latter half of the 20th century, the main design trends for the reuse of this difficult heritage have been discerned. The results, obtained from a thorough study, can be useful to support the decision-making process for the restoration and reuse of other former prisons still waiting for a new project.

Keywords: Abandoned architectures; New function; Psychological impact.

1 Introduction

In 2010, the Italian government launched an "Extraordinary Plan for Prisons" with the aim of addressing the issue of overcrowding in prisons and improving the conditions of the livability of the spaces by inmates, both in terms of health and psychophysics[1]. As a consequence, numerous historic buildings were abandoned, and new ones were constructed. Disused prisons and their reuse represent issues of relevance to academic community "which is called upon to perform an act of responsibility towards society by returning such architectures, through the research of possible design scenarios, to the city and the territory, according to a double gaze, combining the past with the present and considering their heterotopic nature" (Giannattasio 2023, 8). This applies

[1] According to Article 27 of the Constitution, which states «punishments may not consist of treatment contrary to the sense of humanity and must aim at the re-education of the convicted person».

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especially to Sardinia context where detention facilities have been widely distributed since the mid-19th century. The Sardinian penal heritage (Diaz 2017, 220) is made up of seven 'historical prisons' – four of which are disused and one demolished – eight 'contemporary prisons' – two of which are disused – and seven 'penal colonies' – four of which are disused (fig. 1).

Since 2010, Caterina Giannattasio and Giovanni Battista Cocco have been leading an extensive research project with the objective of comprehensively examining the decommissioned Sardinian prison system. Their approach includes collaboration between university and public administration and involves a variety of disciplines, such as architectural restoration, architecture design, engineering, materials science and building technology, social and economic studies, but also art and cinema fields, to cover a broad range of issues pertaining to knowledge and project development (Cocco, Giannattasio 2023). It emphasizes the necessity of a holistic approach to reuse this typology of buildings, strengthen local economies, and promote sustainable development. In fact, the strong identity connotation of ancient prison architectures, even if it varies in shape and size, means that in the choice of new functions to which they are put, in addition to the problems common to interventions of reuse, there are complex psychological and/or social implications and a considerable economic potential. Furthermore, in urban and peri-urban contexts, they represent benchmarks able to influence the development of the surrounding buildings. These issues make them even more vulnerable to the attention of speculative interests due to their central location and the size of the occupied areas.

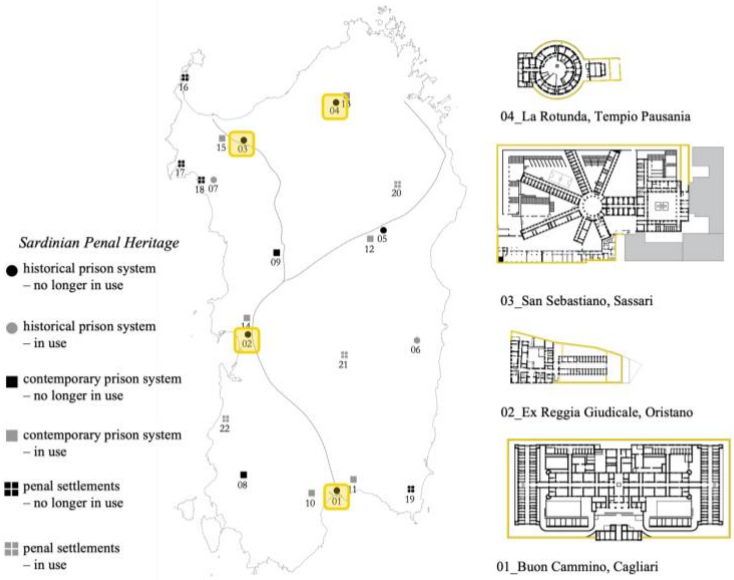

Fig. 1. The Sardinian penal heritage is made up of seven 'historical prisons' – four of which are disused and one demolished – eight 'contemporary prisons' – two of which are disused – and seven 'penal colonies' – four of which are disused (F. Musanti, V. Pintus).

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The purpose of the main research is to outline new scenarios of strategic direction, guided by the idea of giving each abandoned architecture a new and active role in its context, taking into account territorial, urban, architectural and socio-economic aspects, as well as the values of history, beauty and memory (Pintus 2023).

This paper examines national and international case studies of decommissioned prisons converted to new uses, with the intention of supporting the main research. It is well known that the decommissioning process began in the second half of the 20th century and continues presently. This survey specifically aims to identify design trends that have been implemented over time and to evaluate their outcomes in terms of the valorisations of the buildings. Preservation and safeguarding of both physical and 'non-physical' values, as well as sustainability considerations, are all encompassed within this evaluation.

2 Architecture and reuse. Issues

The meanings and values of heritage should be changed in the process of reuse. They should be overlaid on the previous ones – even to the point of obscuring them – and addressed to users who may be very distant – chronologically, culturally, socially, etc. – from the original ones. In order to achieve successful outcomes, it is crucial to create new connections between historical and modern architecture and establish empathetic relationships, despite the difficult heritage of values in the ancient buildings (Fig. 2).
In particular, the reuse of detention heritage poses difficulties due to the exceptional nature of the meanings and values stored in it; these difficulties are amplified by the dimensional and morphological characteristics that distinguish it. The prison is a "place of memory", able to evoke painful events, traumatic and violent experiences, physical suffering and psychological constraints.

Fig. 2. "Capriccio of stairs, arches and trusses", in Piranesi G.B., Carceri d'invenzione, tav. XIV, 1745-50.

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It is a "place of contradictions", stratified and complex from an empathetic and architectural point of view: once disused, it is abandoned and stripped of its furnishings and people, but it remains saturated with its painful experience (Giannattasio 2020). Moreover, the architecture of prisons is characterised by large dimensions and a monumental language that conveys the power of the state and the severity of justice, creating a sense of psychological domination and loss of identity in the inmates. This effect is reinforced by the disorientation caused by living in a depersonalised and repetitive environment (Cocco et al. 2019). Furthermore, prisons are separated from society by tangible and symbolic elements. The most representative of these is the "wall", which defines the insurmountable border between the inside and the outside: interaction is forbidden and any relationship between them is broken. The mystery of living "beyond the wall" creates conflicting feelings, such as attraction, curiosity, expectation, but also disinterest, repulsion and prejudice, on both sides (Lenzini 2018). In other words, prison architecture is a synthesis of immaterial values, which refer to the historical, social, emotional and psychic dimensions, and material values, which are expressed in terms of matter and space. This coexistence is fundamental in the processes of redefinition and re-interpretation of form and space that are involved in the re-use project, when the aim is to promote a new vision of the historical prison factories capable of providing new codes for their reading (Sulfaro 2014).

The assignment of a new function must necessarily be very different from the original one, and in this sense, there is a risk of generating a kind of emotional incompatibility. This risk lies in the excessive attenuation or, on the contrary, in the exacerbation of the emotional component – capable of recalling crimes, redemptions, injustices and violence. On the contrary, the exasperation of the emotional component – able to evoke crimes, redemptions, injustices and violence that have taken place in these places – can endanger the process of functional reconfiguration, with the consequent transfiguration of the sense of place. However, preserving their spatiality and connotative aspects can stimulate a new process of memory, conscious and respectful of all the values involved, able to reduce the sense of rejection such places can evoke (Edelman 1991, 138).

It can be said that the "atmosphere" that prevails in prisons allows them to become a "symbolic place" and a "place of identity", with cultural value: once the function of detention is over, prisons express a vocation of testimonial nature. Indeed, visiting a prison, even if it is no longer in use, has the potential to awaken the visitor's civic and moral consciousness. In the case of penitentiary, the fact that a change of function leads to the replacement or overlapping of the original symbolic value and emotional and sensory impact leads to the identification of the museum - to which an equally strong value is attributed - as the most congruent new destination, also from a conservation point of view.

3 Case studies. Overview

The following international overview illustrates a selection of case studies of former prisons that have been converted since the second half of the 20th century, all around

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the world. The case studies in this report have been selected in order to be representative of the variety of approaches in use. They also represent both national and temporal trends. Each case is analysed according to the type of function chosen (public, private, dual-use, educational, commemorative, receptive, residential, commercial, institutional, multipurpose, etc.) and the type of intervention (conservation, integration, transformation, demolition, etc.). This study outlines a cognitive framework tool to assess what are the limits and criticalities for the preservation of historical structures, collective and emotional memory, in the reuse of such buildings. This tool is also intended to guide the future of the many disused or decommissioned historical prisons.

By 2015, the number of prisons converted into museums had already exceeded one hundred (Aslan 2015, 605): the most famous case is that of Alcatraz, which in the collective imagination is a place from which it is impossible to escape. After its closure in 1963, it became part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco in 1972. The prison complex has remained essentially unchanged, and interventions have concentrated on displacing services related to its new function.

Another interesting but less famous episode relates to Kilmainham Prison in Dublin. It was built at the end of the 18th century with a double courtyard, later extended with a semicircular building inspired by the Panopticon. Initially, it was constructed for the imprisonment of common criminals, but later housed mainly political prisoners involved in the Irish Civil War. After its decommissioning in 1924, the Office of Public Works proposed to demolish the factory; nevertheless, the proposal met resistance from the local community, which assigned significant symbolic and identity values to the building. The community, led by two former inmates, undertook a demanding endeavour to convert the prison into a memorial museum honouring the Irish people's attainment of independence. The building's restoration, lasting from October 1960 to the year of its inauguration in April 1966, involved the conservation and the cleaning of the structure, as well as the rebuilding of the roof of the east wing, which was partially collapsed. The restoration of the second building has taken a distinct approach: it has "frozen" the state of the cells where the protagonists of the 1916 uprising were imprisoned, in order to highlight their living conditions as prisoners (McAtackney 2014).

More recently, the former Hapsburg prison in Treviso (Italy) underwent deep restoration. Built in the early 19th century, it was used until the mid-20th century. The Benetton Foundation acquired the building in 2013 and funded a project with the aim of converting it to contemporary art museum, with an exclusive exhibition space dedicated to the ‘Imago Mundi’ collection (Pesenti 2020, 476-477). The restoration, which was overseen by Tobia Scarpa, lasted approximately two years. It focuses on the preservation of some of the prison’s features, such as the lowered entrances to the cells, the doors with locks, the numbers painted on the walls to identify the cells and the inscriptions identifying the functions of the rooms. Important adaptations have also been made, such as: the joining of cells to create larger spaces; the opening of new entrances and the alteration of pathways to make better use of the site, including the installation of a new staircase and lift. In addition, with the exception of part of the first floor, the chromatic uniformity achieved by the perfect white paint on all surfaces, the renovation of the pavements and the insertion of designer furniture and lighting have had the effect of highlighting the characteristics of symmetry and redundancy.

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Fig. 3. Treviso, Benetton Foundation's exhibition space (ph. M. Pavan). Original entrance to a cell on the 1st floor and new entrances (https://www.abitare.it/it/gallery/architettura/progetti/tobia-scarpa-riconversione-carcere-treviso-benetton-gallery/?ref=352577&foto=4#gallery – last access: 15 October 2023).

However, they have also had the effect of weakening both the perception of the prison as a 'place of pain' and the perception of being in a space that was born as a prison (Franzoia 2018). In this case, it could be said that the design quality do not sufficiently compensate for the loss of the sense of place, leaving a feeling of betrayal of the original emotional charge and values.

A distinct approach has been taken to the restoration of Le Nuove in Turin built from 1857 to 1870 and decommissioned in 1980. The plan proposes minor changes to convert the jail into a museum of its own history and a memorial for former inmates (Varetto, Modica 2020). A cell block is now entirely devoted to guided tours, while an educational exhibition is presented, recalling the historical events and the people who were once imprisoned there. As part of a wide urban planning, which includes the establishment of a judicial citadel, a new project has been proposed to provide housing for judicial officers and an interception unit in the four wings of the former prison.

The dimensions and configuration of these structures allow them to be easily adapted for civic, organisational or governmental purposes. Their large sizes make them suitable for accommodating archives, libraries, educational establishments, universities and local authorities' facilities. Furthermore, public uses appear to facilitate greater control over transformations from a conservation standpoint, primarily through recognizing new uses that require minimal adaptation to historic spaces.

A significant example is the former Bourbon prison in Avellino, built in the first half of the 19th century and decommissioned in 1987. The building has a radial design influenced by the Enlightenment: the outer wall is hexagonal, while the interior has six wings arranged around a central tower. The earthquake of 1980 caused considerable damage, which led to the recommendation that the building be demolished in accordance with the 1972 Master Plan of the city. The location was left abandoned for a long time before it was decided to carry out a major restoration project. This project involved various interventions, with particular attention given to the enclosing wall, the central tower and the gardens, while leaving the cells in their original state. The facility's ownership is publicly held, with shared ownership between the State Property

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Office and the Provincial Administration. The two pavilions in the south, the former command building, the central tower, and the gardens are owned by the State Property Office and have been allocated to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage. The building block formerly utilized for women's detention has now been restructured to house the State Archives of Avellino. To facilitate the storage of historical documents, two new basement levels have been added to the existing three, with a study and exhibition area on the ground floor. This project allowed for the creation of areas dedicated to the conservation of historical documents, avoiding any damage to the ancient architecture (Vitale 2011).

Public use does not always lead to conservative results. The Saint-Paul and Saint-Joseph prisons renovation and reuse project in Lyon demonstrates this[2]. The major design challenges in this case were due to work in harmony with two very different architectural configurations. The Saint-Joseph prison (1827-31) consisted of six rectangular pavilions that were connected by galleries and porticoes, symmetrically arranged around a central building. Additionally, there were two other buildings facing east and west, associated with the main structure. The nearby Saint-Paul prison was built between 1860 and 1865. It also consisted of six buildings, arranged radially around a central rotunda.

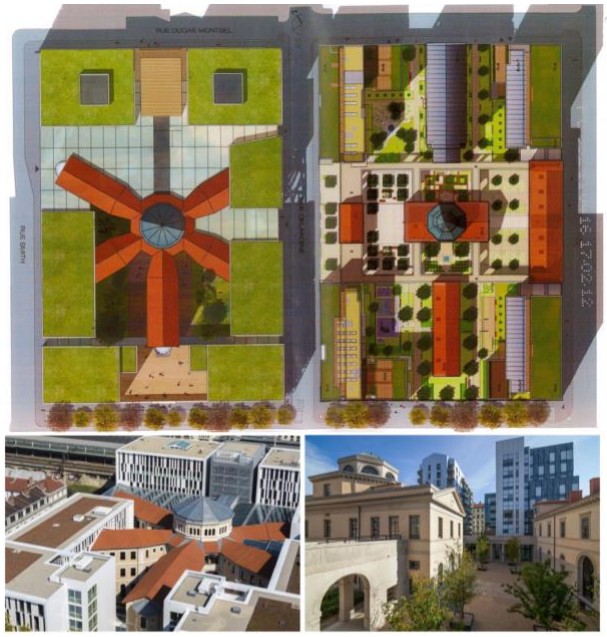

Fig. 4. Lione, Saint-Paul e Saint-Joseph Prisons. Masterplan (2010) and project views (culture.gouv.fr).

[2] https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Regions/Drac-Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes/Actualites/Accompagnement-a-l-architecture/Le-defi-de-la-reconversion-des-prisons-Saint-Paul-et-Saint-Joseph-a-Lyon – last access 15-09-2023.

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The first proposal was to demolish the architectural complex. However, in May 2009, a competition of ideas was held, and the intention was to preserve it and transform it into a university campus and a new private residential area.

A number of essential criteria were imposed on the project: maximum height, transparency and openness, respect for the morphology of the two organisms, and the preservation of the configuration ofthe site and the external walled enclosure. In relation to Saint-Joseph prison, the preservation of the central rotunda, entrance pavilions, central pavilion to the west, and porticoed galleries is required (Fig. 5). The campus is housed in the Saint-Paul prison, where it was asked to preserve the central rotunda, the radial staircases leading to the wings and the entrance gate. But of the six wings arranged radially around the rotunda, only the southern wing and the north-eastern wing survived in their entirety, while three others were partially demolished to allow space for the new volumes. The central rotunda maintained its role as a key point in the new layout of the entire campus. This was emphasised by the recovery of a space with a religious function at its summit.

While the conservative approach to the planimetric configuration has not modified the layout of the interiors, the original cells, which were too small, have been joined together to create more liveable spaces.

Additionally, the requirement to provide the campus with all the services (from living quarters to university classrooms, laboratories, libraries, but also recreational and social areas) was achieved by new glazed volumes built in correspondence with the open spaces or to replace pre-existing volumes that were purposely demolished. The boundary wall, originally designed to separate and enclose, also suffered a major transformation, becoming a physical and visual obstacle. Today, the architecture of Saint-Paul has been largely preserved around its perimeter, but now features new glazed volumes, projecting and stretching outwards. An even more radical change has taken place in the Saint-Joseph prison, which has undergone extensive demolition and the construction of massive new volumes: it has lost its exclusively public vocation and now houses mainly private homes and offices. The main transformation in this scenario relates to the perception of the space in the whole compound: from being a place of exclusion and confinement, it is now a welcoming and permeable place, both for those who live in it and for the surrounding urban context, to which it offers the possibility of enjoying new green spaces and gardens.

A comparable case in terms of functions, but with completely different results, also due to the obvious typological and dimensional differences, is that of Le Murate, a monumental complex, first used as a convent and then as a prison, located in the historical district of Santa Croce in Florence. It was then converted into a residential complex and a multifunctional cultural centre. The project balances a public and private purpose; however, it is guided by a philosophy that seeks to harmonise the preservation of the historic-architectural complex with the economic and social needs of the city. The objective was to integrate the isolated and self-contained urban component into the surrounding urban area (Pesenti 2020, 476). The Public Housing project provided not only housing, but also offices, services, social and museum facilities, and open spaces for public use. Demolitions were restricted and limited to the connection points between the interior and the exterior. The cultural space has a dedicated area for the self-representation of the former prison, achieved by preserving material traces from prison life at the time

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of decommissioning. The distribution of the interior spaces, originally subdivided into small cells, has been preserved in the exhibition and multifunctional areas. Modifications have been made to make them less oppressive and disturbing (De Vita 2015, 136-147).

Another trend, increasingly in Northern Europe and the United States, is the conversion of former prisons into accommodation, commercial, or residential spaces by private investors. In such instances, utilitarian and economic concerns take precedence over conservative considerations. The reuse project sacrifices the prison's historical and testimonial values to provide the local communities with a renovated building that has a comforting and reassuring appearance. This is exemplified by The Liberty Hotel in Boston, which was constructed in 1851 and in use until 1990, then converted into a hotel in 2007. The project, a collaboration between Cambridge Seven Associates and Ann Beha Architects, aimed to revitalise the structure of the prison while retaining only the memory of its former function as a prison. The furnishings and decorations in the luxurious rooms evoke the themes of segregation and the passage of time (Fig. 6). A similar instance can be observed in Slovenia at the Celica Hostel, where the spatial arrangement has been maintained by preserving the cellular subdivision; the cells, all differently furnished, have been transformed into highly sophisticated design environments.

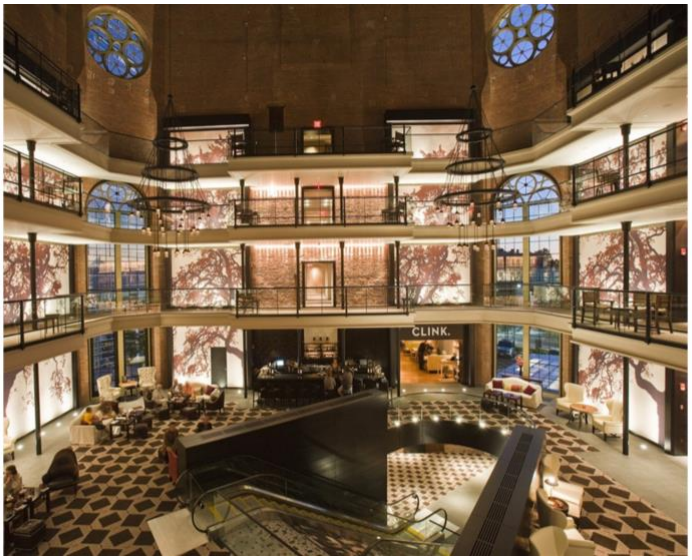

Fig. 5. Boston, Liberty Hotel (2007). Project by Cambridge Seven Associates with Ann Beha Architects.

In addition, it is interesting to note a totally opposite approach: the spread of what is known as "black tourism", with interventions on pre-existing structures that aim to enhance their negative emotional connotation (Aslan 2015, 601). The examined cases reveal a general tendency towards extreme citation, exaggeration and dramatization of original elements, with very different results. The aim is to evoke the original conditions of imprisonment and to satisfy the "voyeurism" of suffering. After its closure in 1994, the old Mount Gamber Gaol in Australia was converted into a hostel,

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retaining the original configuration of the cells and converting them into guest rooms with only the most apparently comfortable furnishings. The rooms are in truth a consciously disturbing experience using tight and claustrophobic spaces, with typical barred windows and heavy doors with spyholes and surveillance openings.

Finally, an alternative approach involves the conversion of pre-existing religious buildings into prisons. In some cases, the reuse of these places erases their past as prison and restores their original function. This reveals the significant resilience of the spiritual component within the local community on the one hand, and the desire to forget the emotional suffering associated with these places on the other.

An example of this approach is the prison of San Francesco del Prato in Parma. The former prison was established in 1810 after the Napoleonic suppression by transforming a 13th-century Franciscan convent. It was decommissioned at the close of the 20th century. The University of Parma currently owns the convent and is renovating it for educational activities. The church joined to the convent is presently undergoing restoration with the aim of removing all elements from the 19th and 20th centuries. A key aspect of the restoration involved eliminating the iron-grilled windows that once interrupted the façade of the church and reconstructing the single lancet windows, which have been reopened in accordance with iconographic and material traces (Fig. 7). The ongoing renovation has also impacted the inside of the building, with major cleaning, demolition and replacement of furnishings and finishes (Zampilli 2020).

Fig. 6. Parma, former San Francesco del Prato Prison (in progress). Project by Paolo Marconi, Giorgio della Longa and Michele Zampilli (V. Pintus)

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, the international overview presented shows a high degree of heterogeneity, both in the choice of new functions and in the degree of transformation of the architectures. Regardless of the function, however, it can be observed that the outcome of such operations still depends on the approach to the pre-existence, with reference to which two variants can be distinguished. The first one places the prison at the centre of the project, revealing a particular sensitivity to the strong emotional charge it contains, without giving up its potential in architectural and economic fields; the

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second one uses the prison as a scenic backdrop, exploiting its capacity to attract, derived from a widespread "disturbing" imagery, supported by the emphasis on the most easily recognisable elements and details associated with it (Fig. 7). The first group includes mainly less recent interventions, in European context, where the general tendency is to transform buildings into museum or memorial sites, reserving large space for self-representation. This function seems to guarantee greater protection and enhancement of the tangible and intangible components mentioned above, as it implies a low level of transformation of the original configuration. In general, public uses, such as archives, libraries, educational establishments, universities and local authority facilities, allow for greater control over change with minimal adaptation of historic spaces. Few exceptions have been noted. The second group comprises mainly more recent projects, carried out by private individuals in Northern Europe and the United States: in these cases, utilitarian and economic issues tend to prevail over conservative ones. The restoration of the ancient prisons, in order to create a comfortable and reassuring appearance suitable for accommodation, commercial, or residential purposes, sacrifices its historical and testimonial values. In some cases, the project aims to enhance the dark identity by amplifying typological architectural features. While this may be a good intervention for material conservation purposes, it can have a negative impact on emotional and psychological values.

Looking at the results acquired, some remarks could be highlighted: to ensure a properly reuse of former prison, the mere opening of their physical boundaries is not enough if it is not accompanied by actions devoted to the establishment of new relationships and flows, and to the encouragement of hospitality to be hosted in these historical spaces, thus "bringing the city into the prison" (Montanari 2018). When all these actions are carried out together, they can lead to gain different capacity to create new links between architecture and contemporary life. Only in a few cases has it been possible to overcome the criticism arising from the empathic and controversial nature of these architectures, without delaying, hiding or humiliating them. This can be done by seeking a balance between the "duty to remember" and the "desire to forget" is found, since these two conflicting ambitions are always present in the resignification of a difficult heritage (Ricour 2004).

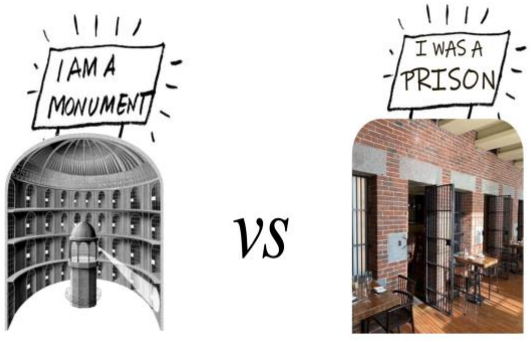

Fig. 7. Different approaches: the prison at the centre of the project; the prison as a scenic backdrop (V. Pintus 2023).

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