ROOMS AND VIEWS: THE ARCHITECTURAL WEALTH AND POVERTY OF WINDOWS

Gold is but one representation of wealth; just as a lack of gold is not a singular articulation of poverty. This paper considers the window as an architectural articulation of wealth which, in its later history, also signifies lack of wealth through size, wall position and absence. The paper hence examines a history of glass and windows and wealth and poverty, and inevitably the view as a mechanism of power and control with an Anglo-colonial focus, which is ultimately played out by considering prison window design. The eighteenth-century is significant for reasons other than Bentham’s Panopticon, and the gaol is understood in terms of the geometries of survey and surveillance complicated when brought into the confines of the heritage prison cell and the stretch of colonisation. An idea of heritage as an specific view implicated in a lineage of power and wealth concludes the paper, and perhaps undoes any simple binary of wealth and poverty. More specifically, a cell in the former Addington Gaol, reserved to represent the heritage of the building, now converted to hostel accommodation, is lined with sheets of glass in order to make this interiorised view explicit heritage.
Power Viewing

“Landscape,” the word we use to describe a view, was first a term to describe a type of painting; distinguishing a picture of the land “from a sea picture, [or] a portrait.”1 Etymologically, then, the term binds an idea of panorama with that of representation. Early landscapes include miniatures by the Limbourg brothers, in the early fifteenth-century book of hours, the Très Riches Heures (c1412-16, 1485-89), with its “fascination with light and shadow and innovative aspirations in the projection of planar landscapes.”2 The calendar cycle depicts, for each month, a different landscape linked to the book of hours’ owner, the Duc de Berry. Typically architecture, a castle, backgrounds a foreground of serf peasant agrarian labour. Hugh Honour and John Fleming describe this book of hours as “a view not only of but, as it were, from a castle, both literally and metaphorically looking down on the peasants,”3 and observe that “[t]he Très Riches Heures is one of the very few great medieval works of art made for a private patron’s delectation.”4 Their description articulates the relativity of class (peasants vs a private patron’s delectation) with a spatial position and direction of viewing and being viewed (“from a castle ... looking down”). The Très Riches Heures is also a property portfolio; each month of the calendar depicting one of the Duc de Berry’s many estates and castles, complete with his servants and serfs. It is a view of wealth, and, a view from the position of wealth; a looking down on people, by the owner of castles and the reader of the book of hours. The precious miniature identifies the manuscript as representation, or as Susan Stewart more precisely puts it: “a diminutive, and thereby manipulative, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination.”5

This book of hours enacts the privilege of viewing particularised in the architecture of window; when glazed became an indicator of wealth. Prior to the Duc de Berry, and the Limbourg brothers’ work of art, windows and views did not necessarily co-incide. Windows began small and unglazed. As Alan Gore and Ann Gore note, it was issues of defence and weather that determined “the small size of the windows in Norman castles and fortified manors.”6 Braun evocatively describes humble medieval structures with “holes or ‘wind-eyes’ ... a basket was made with a wooden bottom having a large hole cut in this ... then built into the [cob] wall as it rose, the boarded ‘wind-eye’ on the outside of the wall, the basket forming the ‘reveal.’”7 These were unashamedly pragmatic. Culture in a different sense. Even with the gothic development of larger windows at the end of the twelfth century, the elaboration of tracery – perhaps deriving from the basket “wind-eye” – must have privileged the foreground wealth of window decoration over any distant view.8 It is likely that glazing was much more precious than the view without; small panes being frequently set in moveable frames in the fifteenth-century so that they could be “packed up for safety when the owner was absent.”9 When tracery receded, the “decorative possibilities of the windows were not ignored.”10 Myopic attraction was retained with “[s]tained glass ... [and] glass, whether stained or not, was framed in numerous and ingenious patterns.”11

The apparent focus on the near view is also reflected in an historiographic emphasis on the window’s impact on the interior, rather than a view out. Windows brought light in, and highlighted and shaped interior space. For example, the dais of the great hall (medieval and Elizabethan) embellished its occupant’s significance with window lighting,12 and, much later, the regular fenestratic pacing of Inigo Jones, provided: “a more even distribution of light and affected the arrangement of furniture and the development of curtaining.”13 Braun speculates that any true appreciation of the window waited until the scholarship (and light-dependent reading) of the Renaissance, and after the defensive (and window-less) house elevation aligned to confront the Black Death (“borne on the south wind”).14 Prior to this, he states that the experience of windows was as “a nuisance, letting in wind and rain, expensive to glaze, and affording entry to robbers. Nobody needed light to read by, and when the sun shone it was time to be out of doors.”15

By the fifteenth-century, when the Très Riches Heures was made, glass had become “more readily available and windows became larger and fixed.”16 Despite this, most glass was imported and “extremely expensive, but towards the end of the sixteenth century there were fifteen glass factories in England,”17 which no doubt facilitated a new architecture of the country house. The late sixteenth-century Woolaton Hall’s Prospect Room (1580-88), with its “extended views across the park”18 – built shortly after the invention of the theodolite (1571) – firmly indicates an appreciation of the glazed window as a vehicle for viewing through, and for the building to be placed within a view. As
Friedman notes, in relation to Hardwick New Hall, Derbyshire (1590-1597); the late sixteenth-century country house was positioned to be strategically seen:

In the 1580s, the fashion in country house design called for a high site, preferably on a hill, so that a distant view of the house would be possible. The view and approach across a “straight fairway” were extremely important, both because the treatment of the gatehouse, porch or frontispiece was the focus of considerable artistic attention and because the long approach enabled the visitor to take in the building as a whole. As always, size communicated power, and the richness of materials, visibility ... contributed to its value, but, increasingly, symmetry and height were prized.19

Hardwick New Hall famously had “more glass than wall,”20 its windows “glitter in the sunlight,”21 securing a jewel-like association with the physicality of windows. The next century would see legislation formalise the coincidence of wealth, power, view and glazed windows, with the introduction of the 1696 English window tax. This tax amplified the distinction between glazed windowed wealth and a windowless poor. As Wallace Oates and Robert Schwab record, “[t]he tax led to efforts to reduce tax bills through such measures as the boarding up of windows and the construction of houses with very few windows. Sometimes whole floors of houses were windowless.”22 The architectural perversions created by the tax were extreme, causing: “especially wretched conditions for the poor in the cities, as landlords blocked up windows and constructed tenements without adequate light and ventilation,”23 while other houses were designed to have “numerous windows as a means of displaying ... wealth.”24

This distinction between those who could see out of a window, and those who lived in spaces where windows had been boarded up (or were not built at all), has particular relevance in eighteenth-century England, played out in beliefs connecting land ownership (via their appreciation of the panorama) to a specific fitness for government. As Barrell notes, a taste for panoramic landscape painting was thought to demonstrate “the ability of the man of ’liberal’ mind to abstract the general from the particular.”25 In other words, “[t]he man of independent means ... will be released from private interest and from the occlusions of a narrowed and partial experience of the world, and from an experience of the world as material. He will be able to grasp the public interest, and so will be fit to participate in government.”26 Landed gentry were hence considered to be the rightful occupants of Parliament; revealing “the social and political function of the distinction between panoramic, and ideal landscape ... and ... actual portraits of views, and representations of enclosed, occluded landscapes, with no great depth of field.”27 Control over the land extended, often literally, to the view from it, and an abstract domain beyond. It was the representational mechanism of the panorama effected by a sweeping vision from a high point which ideologically qualified those fit to govern, and so to represent.

From Fear to Power and Absolute Representation

The socio-economic and political consequences of myopia and hyperopia, represented by the specific architectures of windows and their degrees of: expansiveness, clarity, and wall position, had required a dramatic cultural shift from fearing landscape to an understanding of the prospect as a domain of control and power. The landscape and the view were not always cherished possessions of the rich. Good roads, the Grand Tour, and abstract representational apparatus made all the difference. Christopher Hussey begins the explanation:

The conversion, by early Christian teachers, of the ancient gods of wood and spring into evil spirits, and of Pan into the Devil ... [meant that] the forests and mountains and rivers of Europe were not only considered vaguely sinful, but positively dangerous. ... As soon as the western traveller had decent roads, and was relieved from the fear of robbery and murder whenever he passed by a wood, he began to look about him with relish .... The awakening in England to an appreciation of landscape was a direct result of the Grand Tour fashionable with the aristocracy after the isolation of the country from the rest of Europe during the greater part of the seventeenth century.28

Drawing, as an abstract representational system, made the three dimensional architectural world two dimensional and portable, but it also enabled geometric projection and a panoramic coherence of the world. Christopher Hibbert records that: “[o]n entering a strange town the tourist should at once ascend the highest steeple to gain a good view
of it and take note of any interesting buildings worthy of further inspection,”29 while Robin Evans identifies eighteenth-century architectural drawing as a technique increasingly detached from building,30 and describes how the geometry of surveying became critical to an organisation of architectural space. The Grand Tour reinforced the idea of the aristocratic panoramic competency. As Stephan Oettermann observed, it was first claimed in the eighteenth-century, “the age of the Grand Tour, that ‘travel broadens one’s horizons.”31

Evans’ example is the adoption of the prison into the professional realm of architecture, and its shift into a specific institutional form. He associates this change with the deployment of plan geometry and the shift from “the ... keepers ... [to] the ... Justices of the Peace ... as the architect’s proper clients.”32 Plans, elevations and sections, Evans notes “made it possible to see a building from a distance ... to survey it from an abstracted, privileged vantage point.”33 Geometry in architectural drawings hence operates as a window does in building – to frame a view; to produce a representation mediated by distance.

The larger political context included the design in the UK (via competition) for two national penitentiaries. The resulting drawings by William Blackburn were to remain as representations, because the prisons were never built due to a change in government and associated policy shift, but they did become the influential model for extensive penal reform and ensured Blackburn’s recognition as the eighteenth-century’s most significant penal architect. His “ruthless radial geometry”34 took the dynamic of aristocratic surveying and redrew it for the terrain of the prison:

> So that all the exterior parts of the prison were visible from the gaoler’s and turnkey’s apartments in the central hub ... These blocks were held in place by imaginary radii emanating from the gaoler’s parlour, bringing the entire range of buildings under his eye. Wicket fences took the place of walls along the inner and outer boundaries of the airing yards so as not to inhibit the vista stretching right out to the edge of the prison.35

Tourists, climbing steeples to gain a panoramic view, and Blackburn’s central situating of turnkeys to survey prisoners, were applications of an abstract geometry common also to Barrell’s landed gentry. The rising liquid capital of the eighteenth-century’s merchant class would soon challenge the comfortable position of the landed gentry and aristocracy, just as Bentham’s Panopticon would likewise render continuous human occupation at the point of surveillance redundant. Both enabled the illusion of consistent power and control, as merchants’ daughters marrying into indebted aristocratic families maintained the class status of the aristocracy,36 and Bentham’s prisoners were to be watched by an unoccupied guard tower. More radical though was the exercise in abstraction which comprehensively occurred when England dissolved the relationship between gold and its representational form: money. Here the signifier became completely self-sufficient of the signified and eventually replaced it.

In 1797 the Bank of England ended its obligation to convert its notes into gold. This severance of the link between gold and the money supply, itself an advanced stage of representation, to be sure, was a reaction to the shaken confidence resulting from the need to import food and to prepare for armed conflict with the unpredictable French Republic. The virtual disappearance of gold and the substitution of banknotes and tradesmen’s tokens were evidence that the layer of represented value were delaminating.37 Blackburn’s diagram of surveillance was similarly vulnerable to representation. The geometry of his national penitentiary design was replicated into de Haviland’s Cherry Hill Penitentiary in Pennsylvania, and Jebb’s Pentonville Model Prison in London, and then throughout Britain’s colonies, and its Blackburn origin became largely forgotten.38

Containment and Restricted Viewing: The Prison Cell

The lengthening and lowering of windows “to just above the floor level in the 1760s”39 (resulting in French windows), the increasing size of windows,40 the slenderness of glazing bars,41 and the development of polished plate glass (1838),42 suggests that a more transparent relationship between interior and exterior had occurred by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. The Georgian reintroduction of the Elizabethan bay window and development of bow and Venetian windows,43 indicate a movement outward into the landscape from the house interior. The French windows of nineteenth-century town houses and their balconies overlooked the street.44 In country houses, the rural equivalent provided physical access “through which the owner might step to reach his garden or park.”45 These developments were contemporary with the prison innovations of Blackburn, the Benthams’ Panopticon and Jebb’s Pentonville,
which cells frequently had windows with increasingly thick bars devoid of glazing, and were intent on preventing visual and physical access across boundaries dividing inside from outside.

Bentham’s Panopticon (1791), which placed inmates on a backlit circumference subject to the inspection of the centrally-placed prison warden, literally contained surveillance indoors. As Evans notes: “When Bentham developed the principle of central observation and allowed it to penetrate the interior a dramatic change of purpose occurred.” The Panopticon tower, which caused the act of surveillance to remain unseen, made particularly apparent the asymmetrical power relations between the viewer and the viewed. As Foucault asserted:  

Visibility is a trap ... this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers ... Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable.

In doing this, Bentham’s Panopticon constructed the inmate as both highlighted and blind. The inversion of the medieval use of daylighting to express and highlight the significance and status of the occupant of the dais of the grand hall, is now used to control and confine. John Rajchman observes that panopticism was “the construction of buildings ... involved in the new ‘art of light and the visible,’ which doesn’t look up to the glory of those who possess or embody power, but looks down to the marginalized anonymous mass that escapes it.” The Panopticon’s “combination of iron, or steel, and glass to create unified, brightly illuminated interior spaces ... [meant that] the function of inspection [once the premise of the Grand Tourist] was greatly enhanced.” The prison was hence a microcosm exhibiting the logic that Barrell described of government, articulated in the aristocratic panoramic view; the prison governor surveying his jailers surveying their inmates, or as Jonathan Crary observes: “the deployment of individual bodies, which codified and normalized the observer within rigidly defined systems of visual consumption,” or as Foucault more succinctly put it: “Visibility is a trap.” Likewise it was a diagram of England’s imperial eye reaching outward, echoed in the contemporaneous developments of: Pentonville Model [State] Prison (London) (1840-1842), whose architecture populated the colonies; the Burfords’ Panorama at Leicester Square (1838) (which exhibited scenes drawn by New Zealand artists, such as Augustus Earle); and Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s New Zealand Company venture, contrived while in Newgate prison (1827-1830).

From Prison to Paradise and Back Again

Augustus Earle arrived in New Zealand in 1827, the same year that Wakefield arrived in Newgate prison. Wakefield’s biographer, Philip Temple, refers to Wakefield’s knowledge of inmates sentenced to transportation as if they, in part, initiated his abstract speculations on Australasian colonisation: “For most of these convicts, he thought, the prospect of ‘transportation to the colony offers them prospects of wealth and happiness far beyond any that they could indulge if destined to remain in England.’ Wakefield’s theory of colonisation subverted Barrell’s prospect as land coaxed the English out to the circumference of their vision, ordering the geometry associating landownership and surveillance. His system of colonial land ownership aimed to provide “just the right incentive level for labourers to work for landowners in the hope that, after a few years, they would accumulate enough capital to buy land themselves. ... [but] to prevent labourers from turning into landowners too soon.”

While Wakefield spent three years in Newgate conjuring his plan to populate the Antipodes with English people, Earle spent six months in New Zealand drawing. His Distant View of the Bay of Islands (1827) prompted Francis Pound to describe the eighteenth-century practice of panorama resituated in New Zealand:  

There is a figure standing, with its back to us, in the foreground centre of Augustus Earle’s Distant View of the Bay of Islands ... The figure is European – the immaculately white hat, the burdenless back, the trousers and coat are sufficient signs of that. It stands, absolutely still, and gazes into the landscape, while the Maori figures move in the land. This stillness, this movement, is significant, for landscape painting, the pictorial attitude to nature in New Zealand, is a European code of behaviour. ... Landscape, the pictorial attitude to the land, stopping still just to look at it, to see it as a picture, is purely an imported convention. The European well knew that climbing to a high spot for a view, stopping to contemplate it, and experiencing the emotion that resulted, was an entirely European performance.
The panorama was not simply imported to New Zealand, the Burfords' Panorama at Leicester Square was used to sell colonisation through representing scenes of New Zealand on the walls of its rotunda. Here the English looked out to Pahia and across the Bay of Islands to Kororareka, seeing "Natives in the European Costume" next to "The Rev. S. Marsden... founder of the New Zealand Mission." Pentonville in London also had its interests overseas, being built in response to the resumption of transportation (with Australia largely replacing America as a penal destination). Pentonville was a prison for convicts serving a mandatory 18 months before transportation to the southern hemisphere. Jebb's design was accomplished rather than original. Evans describes it as "not only the most advanced prison, but the most advanced building of its time." Its architecture of surveillance followed the radial geometry established by Blackburn: "the governor's eye would survey the prison from its internal centre; as in the Panopticon, the interior was thrown open to him, but significantly his gaze could no longer penetrate the cell." Instead, it enabled "surveillance of the silent space that separated [the inmates]." Built in 1840-1842, the idea of Pentonville was contemporary with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand. It pervaded the colonial imagination regarding penal infrastructure with a "plan to build a replica of Pentonville prison in Wellington in 1843," which was partially built.

Evans' description of the Pentonville cell demonstrates the experiential counter to Barrell's "man of independent means," who was unlike those dependent on a mechanical art, said to be unable to "abstract the general from the particular;" to comprehend the abstract power represented by a panoramic view. Nineteenth-century prison reform, apparent in Pentonville, denied the capacity for an expansive view for prisoners. As Evans states: "[the window ... was located just high enough to be difficult to see out of ... The cell was blind: the form and content of the exterior world were obliterated," seemingly anticipating the introversion of the more extreme Supermax or SHU units "where inmates are generally subjected to solitary lockdown for approximately 23 hours a day in windowless cells that allow for very little visual stimuli."

Heritage Views

The nineteenth-century also consolidated another view of the world, which by the twenty-first century would implicate historic prison architecture. As Laurajane Smith notes, a specific heritage discourse emerged in the late nineteenth-century which has gained dominance in the twenty-first-century. She argues that this idea of heritage (which "focuses attention on aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations 'must' care for, protect and revere so that they may be passed to nebulous future generations for their 'education,' and to forge a sense of common identity based on the past"), works to privilege "the expert and their values over those of the non-expert ... [and] constructs heritage as something that is engaged with passively." It "takes its cue from the grand narratives of Western national and elite class experiences, and reinforces ideas of innate cultural value tied to time depth, monumentality, expert knowledge and aesthetics ... it continually legitimizes the experiences and worldviews of dominant narratives about nation, class, culture and ethnicity." This idea of heritage is intrinsically a representation of wealth. Smith refers to the insideousness of the relationship, referring to: the dominance of the upper classes in the British conservation movement, the primary association of the English National Trust with "the country house and other properties of the English elite," the idea of heritage as monuments deriving from "ruling and upper middle class experience," and the exclusive ability of "the well-educated who had the necessary cultural literacy to understand grand social and national narratives that were inherent in the fabric of such monuments."

Smith's argument services her proposal that heritage is only intangible and a cultural process. She positions a focus on tangible heritage as an artefact of the discourse which privileges the values and point of view of western elites to the exclusion of others. The designation of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century prisons as heritage buildings has, in New Zealand, as elsewhere, co-incided with a realisation of their inadequacy as socially productive instruments in an era refoocussed on rehabilitation rather than punishment, and, following Smith, perpetrates an exclusive heritage process.

Addington gaol (1870-1875) is such an example. When it was built, what a prisoner at Addington saw was the view of a prisoner, 18,960 km away, in England. Confinement and a restricted view denied privilege. Its cell block, designed by Benjamin W. Mountfort, has an Historic Place Category 2 registration. The late nineteenth-century building, with its projected radial cell wings, reverberates Pentonville so compellingly that Heritage New Zealand stakes its claim as representative of "the country's status as an intellectual as well as an economic colony."
Closed as a prison in 1999, the building re-opened as a backpacker hostel (Jailhouse Accommodation) in 2006. With the prisoners gone, and new inhabitants (backpackers and tourists) arriving, a more expansive window into heritage has literally been installed. It provides a cell ("Room 20") with preserved authenticity and museological presence as one backpacker observes: "This room has been left untouched and is preserved to how it was after the last prisoner left. You can see the inmate's art all over the walls, although it is protected by glass, giving it a bit of a museum feel." This new view of Room 20 is a different kind of surveillance. Lined in glass, the interior now an expansive window and panorama into history.

The glass distorts and improvises architectural space on its surface, displaced from the cell wall. Its refractions shimmer, denying a straightforward transparency. At some points, it is as if the interior of the room is peeling off into representation. In contrast, the glass in the building's nineteenth-century window had confirmed its specular redundancy, its placement reneging on the view. The removal of a substantive exteriority from the prisoner's vision contrasted that intrinsic to landowning wealth and the expansiveness of the larger, newer, twenty-first-century glazing (approximately 2m high), which promises the panoramic view of the rich, using -- as they do -- the steel spigots, effects, what advertisers remind us, that "[t]he ultimate view deserves the ultimate frameless glass balustrade." The clanging vision of unobtrusiveness tells us care has been taken to look after this heritage architecture; its semiotic violence operating to transplant the cell into representational discourse. As Pound observes of the frame, in relation to colonial landscape painting: "the painted surface is a system of signs, not a transparent medium ... The frame is a familiar sign of 'depictivity,' a sign we are seeing not the world, but a depiction of the world. For the world is not framed, nor are things in it. We do not see life sliced at its edges." The glazed protection though is selective -- privileging the wall, built-in furniture (slat beds and a folding table), but leaving vulnerable, the floor and door, as this new view of an encompassing heritage biases a vertical picture plane. The aesthetic promise of the frameless balustrade refuses the myopic and interior containment opening up the possibility of the abstract panorama of heritage glazing into a distant history. Where the prisoner's view was confinement; the heritage architecture tourist's expansive. The glazing is spatially confronted by the shallow depth of the room, but greeted with the abstract potential of history. The glass wall hence provides a physical separation which traditionally signals the value of display and museological material cultural heritage. Situated in an heritage interior, the space is both old and contemporary; the glass a conceptual barrier between contemporary and historic space; a spatio-temporal partition abstracting the panorama to be a temporal as well as a spatial concept, hinging on the long tradition of glass as conveyor of wealth, power, and privileged view.

Conclusion

A window is a building's framing of the exterior world. It edits and composes what we see. Its material history is one marking degrees of privilege; its deprivation signifying poverty. The mechanics of windows and surveillance depict the double vision of fenestration, while heritage as a specific cultural perspective, materialised in building, plays the game of viewing history and the idea that building fabric time travels.

It is the frame, that Pound reminds, alerts us to a representation, distinct from reality, and in Room 20 this appears in the glass' shine as much as the sight of its edge condition. The sight and expanse of each piece of glass brings with it socio-economic as well as cultural expectations of viewing. The use of glass in heritage sites provides the high gloss of desireability and preciousness, and aesthetic signals that this space is valuable. Heritage is the transformation of architecture into cultural commodity.

The windows in Room 20 are both very small and very large, as heritage it collapses two ends of vision, those of the optically deprived inmate and the expansive and privileged view of the architectural heritage tourist. The geometries of surveillance, which displaced wealth from poverty, now fain a trans-temporal panorama and refigure the room into a representational mechanism.

Endnotes
"Introduced as a technical term of painters; the corrupt form in [land]-skip was ... a few years earlier than the more correct form." "Landscape" Oxford English Dictionary.


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