

CHAPTER 2

Humanity Rather than Materialism - A Short Essay About the Prison Environment

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Describing how buildings, colours, designs and furnishings can affect people is beyond my understanding. I know that a lot of research has been done into how institutions should be built and designed, but I have never concerned myself with this and must say that giving more weight to these materialistic aspects than to human relationships amazes me. You can guess from my opening statement where I stand in respect to this topic. I will attempt to explain my point of view, and my conclusions will surely surprise scientists, architects and interior designers. But this is what I believe, and the following reflects my perception of reality.

Location

I served several years of a long sentence in Halden Prison. These were difficult years for me and I look back on them with pain and bitterness. Halden Prison is Norway's newest, and possibly one of the most talked about prisons in the world. That at least is what we inmates were told. "Welcome to Europe's most humane prison". Considering the rest of the world's attitude to imprisonment, you may well assume they meant that Halden is the world's most humane prison.

Halden Prison was completed in 2010 and was built in the middle of nowhere near a small town called Halden in the county of Østfold. This is off the beaten track and far from civilization. The world's "most humane prison" was built here, away from the town, so as not to annoy the few people who, by their own choice, have settled in this small town. Halden is really just the gateway to the Swedish town of Svinesund where Norwegians cross the border to buy cheap meat.

The prison was built far from man and beast. It was built out here in the woods and, as a modern prison, it was constructed so that nature could be preserved within the walls. Halden Prison was to be built on a different plan to all other prisons in the country. Several buildings were erected in an area with lots of woods and wild Norwegian nature. The trees were to be preserved and function as green "lungs" for the great pleasure and recreation of the inmates. (I could not help slipping in that bit of typical Norwegian irony).

When I arrived at Halden Prison, I was in shock. I had just confessed my crime and struggled hard to accept what I had done. I was seeking human contact, I cried and I had difficulty getting through each day. I asked for help, I asked for a psychologist, but no help was available. The prison did not have the capacity to give me an appointment with a psychologist. I was locked up with cruel thoughts, deep remorse and a fierce desire to escape from my situation. I did not want to escape from prison, but to escape from my own body, leaving all those I had failed and would continue to fail by being absent for many years.

So, here I sit in Halden Prison. Beautiful nature! Trees outside my window! A peace and quiet I simply was not used to. I am an Oslo lad, a "townie", and will remain so until this lonely body gasps its last breath. The fact that so-called experts have decided that Norwegian nature, trees and silence will be good for me makes me more angry than you can imagine. I wasn't aware of my surroundings at first. How could I be? My mind bubbled, my brain was working overtime, my emotions tore my heart into pieces and I missed those I loved. This caused me so much internal *noise* that I could not find comfort in those bloody trees outside my window. The silence was more of a torment than a consolation. If noises were to influence my mental state, what I needed was what was normal for me: the sound of traffic, stress,

people, the noise of the city and the smell of asphalt and exhaust! Peace and quiet may sound inviting to a researcher ... but for me it was totally meaningless.

Colours

The colours in Halden Prison are, I'm told, intended to be calming and soothing. I am a man, an honest man used to speaking my mind. It is possible that research has proven that different colours elicit different moods in humans. But it does not make sense to me in my situation. Choice of colours seems a trifling irrelevance when I am locked up in a place without the help I need to deal with my internal demons. That is just how it is with me. I was suffering so much that I was not aware of the colours around me and they had no meaning. I did not see anything clearly, not colour, not the future, not the present ... everything was just full of pain. Looking back, I was living the life of a zombie. In some periods I was an outgoing windbag, in others I could be silent and detached. It was my mood that decided who I was and who I socialized with. That is what really mattered: who I met, how I behaved and how I related to other inmates. I always try to be polite and if I like the person I am talking to, I can joke and be open. However, if I do not like the person I am talking to, I tend to retreat politely. I think most people are like this. People are influenced by those they interact with. Further, I think I have some degree of colour blindness! (Part joke, part truth)

Interior

Interior...if interior means furniture, then I admit to being more aware of fixtures and fittings than of colours as I like to have things neat and tidy around me. As I managed to put some of the pain behind me, I actually began to notice that the furniture in Halden Prison was totally neutral in form, without any distinctive design. All departments were alike: grey sofas; square, beech coffee tables; white dining tables and white/steel kitchen furnishings. The cells were all furnished in beech: a bed, a desk, a chair, a cupboard. Everything is neutral – as though taken from an absurd catalogue of minimalist cell-furniture where Halden Prison was the finest model on display!

On several occasions, I have been told to my face: “The prisoners in Halden have even got their own bathrooms - with tiles on the walls.” My response to this is: Yes, we all had our own bathroom. A bathroom that can be compared to one in the cheapest cabin on an overnight ferry. I accept that prisoners are not entitled to a private bathroom, but the point of this article is to comment on how inmates are influenced by the prison environment. In this respect, I would point out that these bathrooms are only just sufficient for a grown man to maintain a basic level of personal hygiene. White tiles and a shower do not impress me. I’m not saying this because I was dissatisfied, but because, again, they seem totally unimportant to the pain I was still bearing. A tiled bathroom is not a substitute for a hug from someone who wishes you well. A tiled bathroom could not remove the sense of desolation. A tiled bathroom does not make you happy.

Other circumstances influencing inmates

Other inmates played an important role in my life in prison. It may surprise some people to discover the degree to which intrigue is a central part of prison life. I believe this applies to all prisons, independent of security level or in which country they are found. I am still serving the same sentence for which I was sent to Halden prison. This is my first and only conviction and all my impressions should be understood as based on this first-time experience. I had no prior experience of prison life. Looking back, I see that my image and the way I presented myself to others resulted in me building a wall around myself. I am *myself*, have always been *myself* and am proud of it. But being *myself* took some time for others to accept. I know some saw me as naïve, strange, different and referred to me as “the straight guy”. But I was not weak and often spoke my mind even though this resulted in some conflicts that I could have avoided. As a result, I received a level of respect I could live with. The other inmates knew who I was because I was genuine. But I still had to adapt myself to fit in with the system. Prison life is not easy! Some rules must be followed and some individuals should be avoided. That’s how it is. It is precisely the point of my contribution to this work. How interpersonal relationships function is much more important than colour, shape and surroundings! There is not the time nor opportunity to allow environmental trivialities to determine

daily life in prison. The most important issues must be confronted: it is the people around you that count.

Staff

I have now written a bit about other inmates, but there are others we have to relate to: the employees. The fact that I am no longer serving my sentence in Halden Prison, allows me to write more generally about the staff. For there are always good and bad staff in all workplaces. I have heard staff uttering vicious comments intended to provoke or hurt, and I have met empathetic staff who, in spite of the constraints imposed by the regulations, still manage to convey a caring attitude and let you know that they wish you well. Just seeing such an employee gives hope for better times.

I have met employees who suspect you of planning manipulation or deception. And if a female employee shows care and understanding, some will interpret this as attempted seduction. But I have encountered staff willing to offer something approaching friendship – something that contributes to a feeling of self-worth. The staff in a prison play an enormous role in the life of inmates. Being locked up for so many hours a day, belief in human dignity counts for more than anything else. That is all that is needed – just to be respected as another human being. You just long to be treated normally.

The alternative to a high materialistic standard

I am now serving my sentence in a low security (open) prison. It is not fantastic here either. I am a prisoner, I am bound to a place I do not want to be in and I am deprived of time with my loved ones. This prison is old and shows the wear and tear of heavy use by the all people who have passed through it. When I came here, to Bastøy Prison¹, I had to share a bathroom and bedroom with another inmate, which was not pleasant. I'm a grown man used to being independent and enjoying my privacy. Still, it was much easier to accept this as there is a different atmosphere in Bastøy. The way officers treat me is quite different. Naturally, there is the occasional obnoxious grouch, but for the most

¹ Editors note: Bastøy Prison is on the island of Bastøy in the Oslo Fjord. The island is not exclusively a prison area and a popular site for visitors, particularly in summer.

part, employees have a positive, humanitarian attitude. By that, I mean that they talk to inmates and colleagues with respect. I know my place here and I do not forget that I am a prisoner, and yet I feel more like a human being than I have done for several years!

After a period in the main building on Bastøy one is eventually transferred to a house with one's own separate room. I still share a bathroom with several men, but that is OK. The place is worn and equipped with furniture from the 90s, but that is not important either. Colours are from 80/90s or freshly painted in sterile white, but we may hang up pictures and "decorate" as we wish. In a strange way, this is a cosy existence. We are allowed to personalize our house and in an important way this makes life just that little bit easier. We feel we are allowed to live almost like "ordinary people" and not as models in a photo in a glossy magazine, in which an artist has been asked to show what he thinks a modern prison should be like. Here, I feel a calm and am not continually reminded that I'm somewhere other than where I want to be.

Human values

In Halden Prison, I was constantly being reminded that I was a prisoner, of less value than prison officers, and I existed at their mercy. There were some good employees who tried to improve the daily lives of us inmates but there was little they could do. When I came to Bastøy Prison, I was given responsibility and shown trust. I have a job where I sometimes forget that I am in a prison. This is of course my own denial of reality but it helps me to make the days pass. I have a boss who I see as boss and who treats me like a human being. I feel I have value because the boss and several employees see me as a person. I do not care about colours and modern buildings; I care about the people that give me a feeling of personal value. I hope they understand that the way that they treat us inmates – all over the world – is far more helpful than an artist smartening up the walls and choosing the colours to be used in prisons.

Someone has decided to focus on the prison environment for inmates and I have been asked to comment on the materialistic aspect. I am unable to see the value of this exercise and in fact find it quite amusing. But I still want to make my contribution in the hope that someone might listen. My hope is that

some researcher may open his eyes and see how vulnerable the human spirit is. Location, colour and furniture are no substitute for the need of humans to feel that they belong, to be accepted, to be recognized and possibly even forgiven. I have been placed somewhere I do not want to be. I know I deserve it and the only forgiveness I really seek is from those I am kept away from. With my hand on my heart I can say that the world's most humane prison, decorated by artists and architects crushed me more than I had thought possible. It is only now, here in the old, worn-out, obsolete prison that I begin to feel dignity again. My maxim is: *Humanity rather than materialism*. Things mean nothing, relationships mean everything.