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REIMAGINING THE URBAN PRISON: A NEW PARADIGM OF RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL REINTEGRATION *NOTES FROM SAN VITTORE, MILAN*

By Gianfranco Orsenigo (Politecnico di Milano)

ABSTRACT

The relationship between prisons and cities has long been characterized by spatial and symbolic distancing. While detention facilities were once integrated into the urban fabric, they have been progressively relocated to peripheral and marginal areas over time, reinforcing their isolation from society. This article explores the historical trajectory of prison architecture, from the Enlightenment-era transformation of punitive spaces into places of rehabilitation to the modern-day reintegration challenges.

Focusing on San Vittore Prison in Milan, a historic institution embedded within the city, the contribution investigates whether a prison should be considered an urban anomaly to be removed or a potential resource for both inmates and the surrounding community. The ReverseLab project, developed by Laboratorio Carcere- Politecnico di Milano, takes an innovative approach to rethinking the relationship between detention and the city. Through artistic interventions, it seeks to reopen dialogue between the prison and society, challenging the notion that incarceration must mean exclusion. Instead of dismantling historical prisons, ReverseLab suggests revitalising them through community engagement, transforming them into hybrid spaces of culture, creativity, and rehabilitation.

The case study of ReverseLab at San Vittore Prison tested the potential of interdisciplinary research, artistic production, and participatory processes in reshaping the prison's role within Milan. Through an experimental transformation of a disused prison space into an 'art gallery', the project exemplifies how integrating the voices of inmates, prison staff, and the public can challenge traditional paradigms of incarceration. In doing so, it envisions a model where prisons are not merely invisible institutions at the city's margins but active spaces of social reintegration, education, and cultural production.

> *I think very few people would remember to include the prison when drawing a city map. They might add the hospital, the courthouse, the school, the playground, and the kindergarten, but they would rarely think of the prison. We look at the prison from afar and consider it something separate from us. For example, while driving on the highway to Varese, we might notice this enormous grey building blending in with the grey of the highway – that is Bollate Prison.*

Cosima Buccoliero[1]

This is the exercise that Cosima Buccoliero, director of several Italian prisons, proposes to the audience at the beginning of her TED Conference talk. It is a practical exercise that allows her to introduce a fundamental question: "What do we see of the prison? Or rather, when do we see the prison? We never actually see it"[2]. The director reminds us that, despite Italian laws promoting detention facilities focused on rehabilitation and a necessary relationship with the outside world, society still perceives prisons as "real places outside all places"[3].

DISTANCING THE PRISON: A LONG PROCESS

If today we are used to thinking of prison as a place outside the city, the process of distancing began centuries ago in a slow, complex, and non-linear way. This shift started when the prison became the subject of specific architectural reflection, imagining it as a specialized space, just like other modern city functions, rather than being integrated into different buildings, repurposing existing structures such as convents, hospices, castles or fortified architectures.
To summarize this evolution, it can be stated that, until the 18th century, prisons were conceived as places of punishment and containment. Consequently, they were accommodated within various structures, often situated near courthouses or even integrated into them, “with the austerity of the court itself serving as a symbolic representation of justice”[4]. This tendency began to change in the Papal State, which is usually credited with building the first cellular-structured prison: the *Carceri Nuove*, complex in Via Giulia in Rome. It was built between 1652 and 1655 by Innocente X, based on a design by Antonio del Grande. A few decades later, with the San Michele correction house 1701-1704 also in Rome[5], we witnessed the first detention institution where the idea of treatment informs the building structure. The inmates are segregated at night in individual cells overlooking a large room for collective work, in silence, during the day.
During the Enlightenment, a profound rethinking of punishment began. The principle of legality is affirmed as a guarantee of individual freedom and the distinction between the moral sphere and that of law. Punishment, now seen as a humanized measure, was transformed into a tool for prevention and social security, placing rehabilitation at the center of detention. The evolution of the aims of imprisonment inevitably reflected on the first prison theories that questioned the most appropriate methods to achieve them. In this context, prison architecture took on specific functional characteristics and was designed with special building types. Based on this new radical vision of detention, two mutually divergent projects were drawn up at the end of the 18th century.

The first proposal was designed by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s Aix-en-Provence Prison (1784), a square building with four inner courtyards. The strength of

the proposal, however, lies in the exterior appearance: a sizeable prismatic body with four massive towers at the corners, a barrel vault covering the central portico and a series of imperceptible windows punctuating the full and unadorned walls. The project is part of an extensive series of public buildings that Ledoux designed for Aix, though it was never realized.
The Panopticon is the second model. It was developed by the Bentham brothers (1787) and was based on the principle of "total inspection", allowing a few guards to oversee many prisoners efficiently. For this reason, it is considered the first architectural figure of surveillance. The layout consisted of two concentric rings: the outer ring contained cells, each equipped with an external window and an inner grate to ensure constant visibility. The inner ring housed a watchtower, allowing guards to monitor all detainees without being seen. The idea was to create a sense of perpetual observation, encouraging inmates to regulate their behavior.
This second model gained widespread popularity, particularly in America, where it led to the formalization of two prison systems. The Philadelphia model advocated for constant isolation combined with prayer and labor. In contrast, the Auburn model permitted daytime communal work but enforced night-time solitary confinement, with an absolute prohibition on communication among prisoners. The term panoptic

> in 19th-century literature and subsequent prison manuals, was often associated not with Bentham's original design but rather with the star-shaped or radial layouts, where cell wings radiated from a central hub[6].

In this period, the prison building gained increasing autonomy, both in its meaning and spatial configuration: "it is freed on all four sides, having four façades"[7]. However, these reformulations did not foster "a perspective that engages with the environment in which the penitentiary is situated, measuring its interactions, criticalities, and potentialities"[8]. The specialization of prisons coincided with their distancing from the city.
A significant example is the *Millbank Penitentiary* in London, built along the Thames in a swampy area on the southwestern edge of the city. Bentham's Panopticon was initially intended to be built here, but the project was abandoned for multiple reasons. A competition was then launched and won by William Williams with a design that envisaged a hexagonal central courtyard surrounded by pentagonal courtyards, each positioned outside the central space. Inaugurated in 1816, it was demolished in 1892. In Paris, with the decision to replace the Prison of *Madelonettes* in 1861, the construction of La Santé began, and it was inaugurated in 1867. The chosen site was a former coal market, a marginal area typically used for large-scale urban infrastructure and functions. A similar case occurred in Rennes (1867–1876), where the prison was built south of the city, beyond the railway, near the train station, in a city sector where, in addition to the station, it also housed the barracks and parade ground. From the nineteenth century, prisons followed the broader phenomenon of expelling major urban functions, relocating them to low-value lands, often marginal, unhealthy, and environmentally precarious sites. This process reflects the logic of clustering new service facilities[9], a large network of objects, practices, and actors that Wacquant later described as "urban outcasts"[10].

PRISONS IN ITALY SINCE THE UNIFICATION

Italy experienced similar processes. In the *Regno delle Due Sicilie*, the Bourbons, fascinated by the philosophy of the panopticon, built two new

central prisons: one in Avellino (1832) and another in Palermo (1836): the *Ucciardone*, the famous detention house of the city. These were designed following the radial model inspired by the *Cherry Hill* Prison (1829) in Philadelphia. The radial or star-shaped layout became the predominant model. However, the *Auburn* model prevailed in the Regno di Sardegna e Piemonte. In Alessandria, a competition was announced for the construction of a new prison on the site of the former convent of San Bernardino, along the bastions of Porta Marengo, at the city's edge. The competition was won by the French architect Henri Labrouste (1801-1875), who rigorously followed the detailed functional program provided. The prison was built between 1840 and 1844.

With the unification of Italy in 1861, there was an immediate need to collect and standardize the various existing legal frameworks, including those related to the penitentiary system. Initially, the Sardinian Penal Code was extended to the entire Italian territory. However, within two years, the government issued five new regulations, each governing a different type of detention facility: Penal baths (September 1860), Judicial prisons (January 1861), Houses of punishment (January 1862), Houses of relegation (August 1862) and Houses of custody (November 1862). Each regulation outlined the institutions' operation and the custodial and administrative staff structure. The rules required nighttime separation of prisoners and mandatory daytime work with continuous silence.

Alongside these regulations, a survey was conducted about the conditions of the prisons inherited by the Italian state. The outcome was a harshly negative evaluation: "it reveals a heterogeneous and poorly functional space. Few buildings can be considered 'modern'"[11]. This assessment laid the groundwork for a new prison construction program. Of particular significance was the initiative to organise a competition, with a well-structured program, for constructing new judicial prisons in Turin and Genoa. In the case of Turin, the winner was Giuseppe Polani (1815 – 1894), the chief of the city's land registry, who would go on to design numerous prisons in Italy[12]. His rectangular proposal represented an evolution of the panoptic model, incorporating advanced technical solutions regarding cell design, ventilation systems, and heating. However, difficulties arose during its construction, not technically, because, as Dubini explains, "the building is a standardised object, designed to be inserted into any context"[13]. The resistance was primarily related to the choice of location and conflicting interests tied to urban land dynamics and aesthetics. When the Ministry identified a location near Piazza d'Armi, in the southern part of the city, the Municipal Council strongly opposed the choice:

> it is very unfortunate to see such an important and beautiful area, the most appropriate for the future expansion of the city, occupied by the prison [...] and that the nature and destination of the planned building and the wall that is to enclose it can only make that joyful and pleasant place of recreation, so dear and popular with the people of Turin, becomes sad and melancholic.

As a result, the Ministry decided to relocate the prison to a more peripheral area, near the railway, in a district that also housed the *Foro Boario* (cattle market) and the *Nuovo Macello* (new slaughterhouse). This case is similar to other European examples previously mentioned, and it would become a model for large-scale prison constructions, influencing both technical guidelines and location criteria. In a comparable context, the new prison in Milan was later built near the new slaughterhouse and the San Vittore monastery, but we will return to it later.

In 1889, the new Penal Code (Zanardelli) was enacted, followed by the first law on prison building, allocating budget funds for constructing and maintaining penitentiary facilities. The new law and penal code laid the foundations for the General Regulation of Prison Facilities.
These reforms attempted to go beyond the cellular model, drawing inspiration from the “gradual model”, also known as the "Irish model", which provided four differentiated treatment phases. In the first period, the offender is placed in strict solitary confinement, followed by night-time segregation only, with collective work during the day and, ultimately, conditional release. Inevitably, the model for building the new prisons also changed, adopting the so-called ‘telegraph pole structure’. This layout consisted of parallel buildings connected by a central corridor, generally aligned with the prison's main entrance. The adoption of this model responded to several needs. It facilitated the categorization of prisoners, simplified internal circulation, and enabled quick access to buildings in case of emergencies. It also allowed for future expansion of the facility and ensured security by encouraging the segregation, division, and control of many inmates.
While the philosophy of punishment and the prison model evolved, one constant remained: penitentiary institutions continued to be built outside urban centers. This trend did not change even with the second prison reform of 1932. The only exceptions were prisons built under the Austro-Hungarian government, which were functionally and organically integrated with court services, as seen in the cases of Gorizia (1902), Trieste (1911), and Trento (1881).

This heritage built, initially constructed in peripheral, isolated, and often disadvantaged locations, soon found itself “reached by the city”. The urban area of the prisons changed radically. The more marginal they had been at the construction time, the more they now found themselves in dense urban conditions, where new centralities had developed, property values had increased, and diverse populations had settled.
In the twentieth century, especially after World War II, the trend of distancing prisons from urban centers became even more pronounced, following increasingly banal location logic. Marcetti notes that prisons were placed “no longer on the outskirts but in whatever available areas lay along the shifting frontier of contemporary urbanization”[14]. In the new locations, the construction of a relationship between the city and the prison became slower and more complex, due to their remoteness from essential services, which could otherwise help mitigate their isolation, and from the associative networks that play a crucial role in fostering social and cultural reintegration processes. In this context, the prison increasingly reinforces its role as a “scanned or avoided place”[15]. The only territorial connection sought for new penitentiary institutions is infrastructural, such as proximity to relevant road junctions: “the prison near the motorway”[16]. Some of them are: the Nuoro Prison (1953-64) designed by M. Ridolfi (1904-1984), W. Frankl (1907-1994); Rebibbia Prison (1971) designed by S. Lenci (1927-2001), and Sollicciano Prison in Florence (1983) designed by A. Mariotti, G. Campani, P. Inghirami, I. Castore, P. Rizzi, and E. Camici (fig. 1)[17].

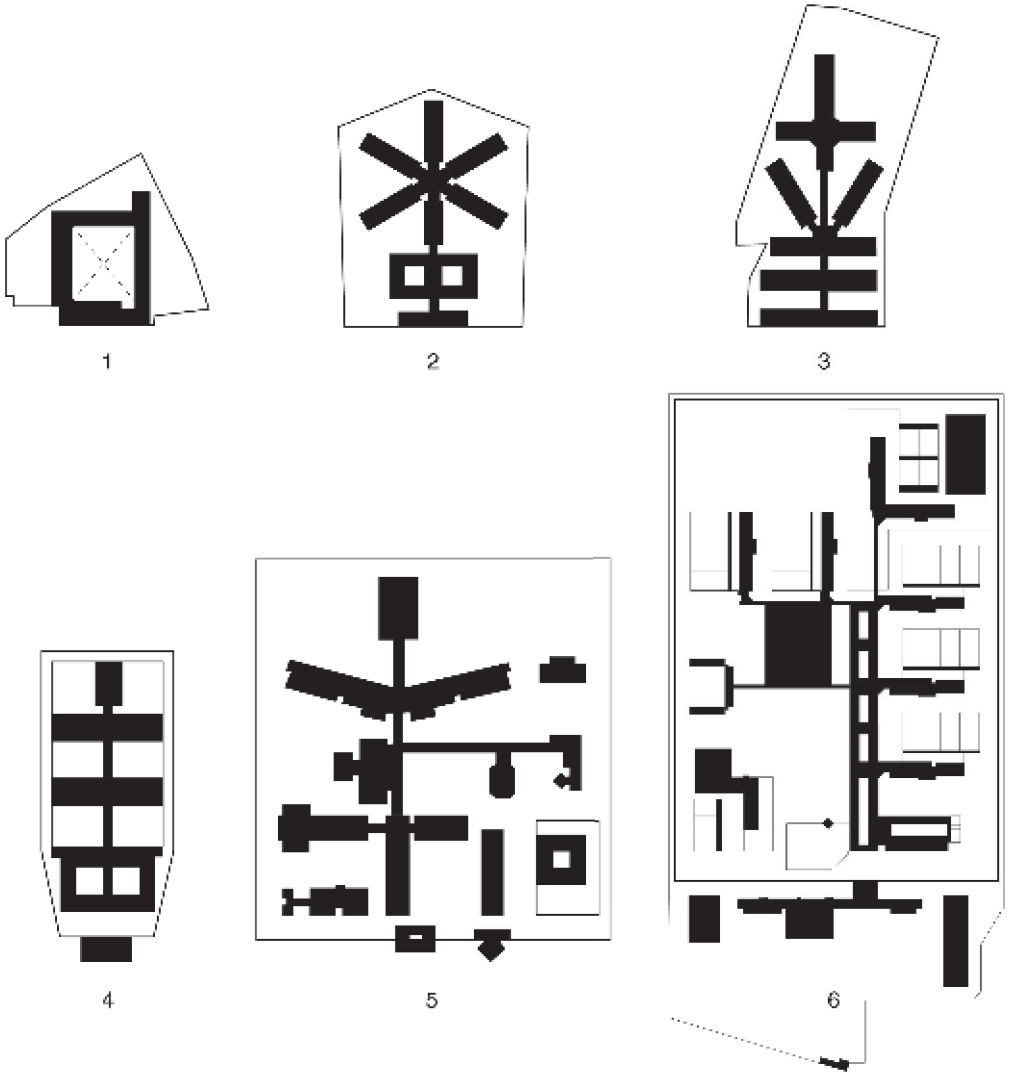

Figure 1. Comparison of prevailing types of prisons in Italy: 1. CC of Lucca (14th century); 2. CC of Milano - San Vittore (1879); 3. CC of Regina Coeli - Roma (1882); 4. CC of Caltanissetta (1908); 5. CC of Foggia (1963); CR of Milano- Bollate (2000)

BETWEEN DISMANTLING AND REUSE: SEIZED AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The construction of new prisons in the last century often started from the demand for new beds[18], frequently justified by the need to decommission historic prisons. The arguments for decommissioning are commonly based on technical reasons, particularly the poor living and working conditions that these older structures allow. While this is a valid concern in many cases, it should not be the only factor considered in the evaluation.

Starting in the late 20th century, many prisons were disused, but not all have been followed by recovery and valorization projects. Sometimes, facilities have been converted to house services related to justice, as in the ongoing process of the new *Cittadella della Giustizia* (town of justice) in the Perugia prison, which finally closed in 2005.

In some cases, these spaces have been transformed into museums. In Italy, one example is the Prison Museum at *Le Nuove* prison (1870-1986) in Turin, which was permanently closed in 2003 and now narrates stories of imprisonment. Another case is *Le Murate* in Florence (1883–1985), which now houses a center dedicated to contemporary Florentine culture and beyond.

Numerous similar examples exist across Europe and beyond, including the Horsens Prison Museum (Fængselsmuseet, 1853-2006) in Denmark, Peterhead Prison in Aberdeen, UK (1888-2013), and Patarei Sea Fortress Prison in Tallinn, Estonia (1919-2018).
In other cases, prisons have been transformed into tourist facilities, often entirely disconnected from their penitentiary past or merely exploiting their imagery. This is the case for small Italian island prisons, such as Pianosa (1858-1997) and Asinara (1885-1998). As well as more striking examples of luxury hotel conversions, including Het Arresthuis (1863–2007) in Roermond (Netherlands), Malmaison (closed in 1996) in Oxford (United Kingdom), and Långholmen (1725-1975) in Sweden. In these transformations, the theme of detention disappears or becomes purely vernacular.

Even in cases that seem more promising, such as the reactivation of the Palencia prison (1851-1997) in Spain and its transformation into a cultural centre[19], or the participatory process of reopening the spaces of *La Model* Prison (1904-2017) in Barcelona to the city following its recent closing[20]. These sites often bear witness to significant historical events. In the case of *La Model*, for instance, the prison was both a symbol and a tool of political repression under Franco's regime, as well as a site of human rights violations that occurred within it. These buildings carry a layered and often contradictory legacy. Dealing with historic prisons usually means confronting what has been defined as "dissonant heritage", that is, "a condition in which there is a lack of congruence at a particular time or place between people and the heritage with which they identify"[21]. In the case of prisons, this dissonance is extreme: they are places that can evoke vastly different interpretations – symbols of oppression for some, instruments of justice or rehabilitation for others. These conflicting perceptions, shaped by past events and present values, tend to resurface in discussions about their future. As such, prisons often become contested spaces, where competing narratives struggle for visibility and legitimacy. They are no longer just buildings but stages where society negotiates meaning, memory, and identity.
Working to affirm the principle that the prison is a service to the community, on the one hand, the dismantling of historic prisons in urban centres often brings profound changes to the urban history of a city, as prisons have frequently shaped the social fabric of their surrounding territories. On the other hand, those prisons still in use possess a valuable resource: the proximity to society. Returning to the reflections of Director Cosima Buccoliero, she emphasises that through her years of service, she has learned that

> the breath of the prison must be in sync with that of the city to which it belongs. Without that thread connecting inside and outside, there is no breath. Milan has nourished Bollate, and Bollate represents one of Milan's many faces – the face of an active civil society, of volunteering that becomes the extended arm of public administration in caregiving[22].

It should be remembered that the prison community is made up of multiple actors. In addition to inmates, there are prison officers, who often live in barracks within the prison walls, as well as administrative and healthcare staff, educators, and a varied group of volunteers. A location that is easily accessible primarily facilitates encounters, interactions, and overlaps between the 'internal community' and the 'external community' linked to these groups.
Several nineteenth-century prisons, including *Ucciardone* (1834) in Palermo, *Poggioreale* (1905) in Naples, *Regina Coeli* (1881) in Rome, and San Vittore (1879)

in Milan, are still in use today. Every so often, public debates arise over whether they should be closed. However, rather than simply removing them, the priority should be to evaluate whether they can be upgraded to improve conditions. If possible, at least acceptable, the desirable approach would be to enhance their urban location to fulfil their legal mandate better: to be places of rehabilitation and social reintegration. In Italy, Law No. 354 of 1975 defines rehabilitation and reintegration as the core objectives of imprisonment.

REACTIVATING HISTORIC PRISONS: THE REVERSELAB CASE STUDY

With the belief that community involvement is fundamental for the success of the prison system, a multidisciplinary research group from the Politecnico di Milano – *Laboratorio Carcere* – has been investigating the relational nature of detention spaces for several years. Their work focuses on developing interventions that sensitively open up the lived experience of incarceration to broader society[23].

Since October 2022, the group has been leading activities at Off Campus San Vittore, a space opened by the Politecnico di Milano within the historic prison of San Vittore[24]. These two rooms work as a research-action hub, allowing academic inquiry for and within the prison environment. The overarching aim is to strengthen and concretely establish a dialogue between the inside and the outside worlds, highlighting the opportunities that emerge from this relationship. Within this framework, the team developed the project *ReverseLab. A Space for Contemporary Art Between the Prison and the City*[25].

Opened in 1879, San Vittore Prison was built during the transformation of Milan into a modern city, between Italian unification and the adoption of the first city's urban development plan, drafted by engineer Cesare Beruto (1835-1915) between 1884 and 1889. At that time, various urban improvement projects were carried out to enhance the efficiency of city life. Infrastructure networks such as potable water and sewage systems were developed. New public services, including schools, charitable asylums, a new slaughterhouse, a cemetery, and the new San Vittore prison, were built (fig. 2). These services, essential for the city's expansion, were constructed in the area known as the *broli* between the built-up city and its fortifications. In 1864, the Milan city administration decided to start the project for a new prison to replace the city's three existing detention facilities, which were no longer considered suitable. The new facility was planned along the city bastions, between Porta Genova and Magenta. Designed by engineer Francesco Lucca, it featured a star-shaped cellular structure of six wings, inspired by the panoptic model and reminiscent of the contemporary *Carceri Nuove* in Turin. A five-meter-high perimeter wall surrounded the prison. A 30-meter buffer zone was established where no buildings taller than five meters could be erected. For the next 20 meters, the maximum allowable height was set at 11 meters. This regulation was intended to conceal activities within the prison from public view. By 1910, historical maps already show that the urban expansion of Milan had reached San Vittore, integrating it into the city's growing fabric (fig. 3). Today, the area is one of the most valuable areas of the city.

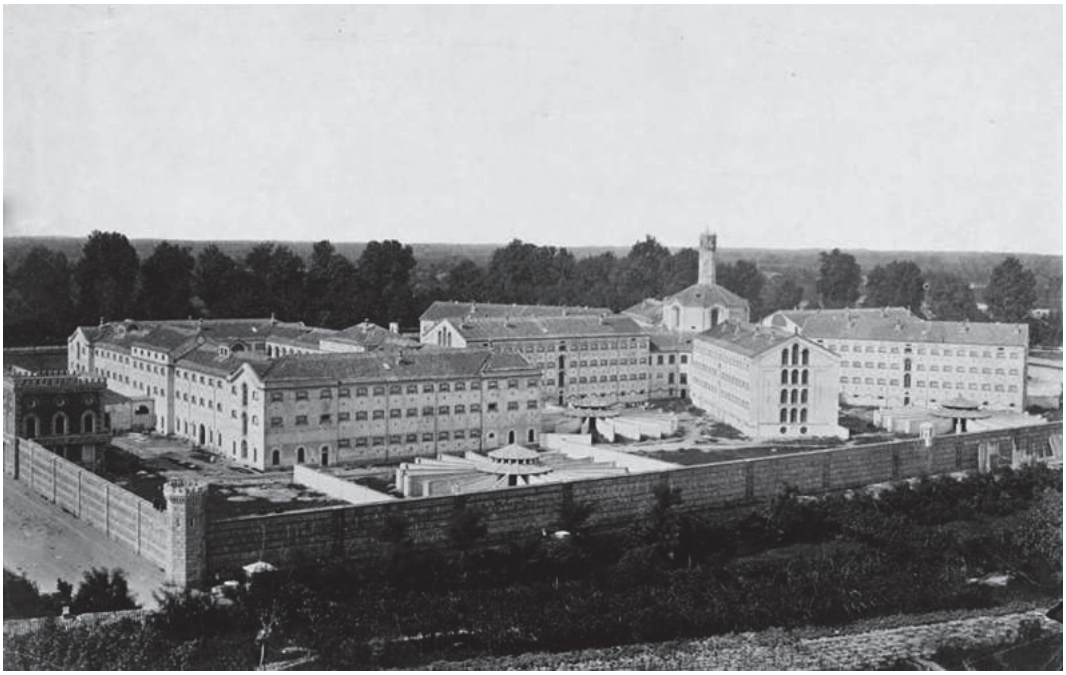

Figure 2. The San Vittore prison has just been completed

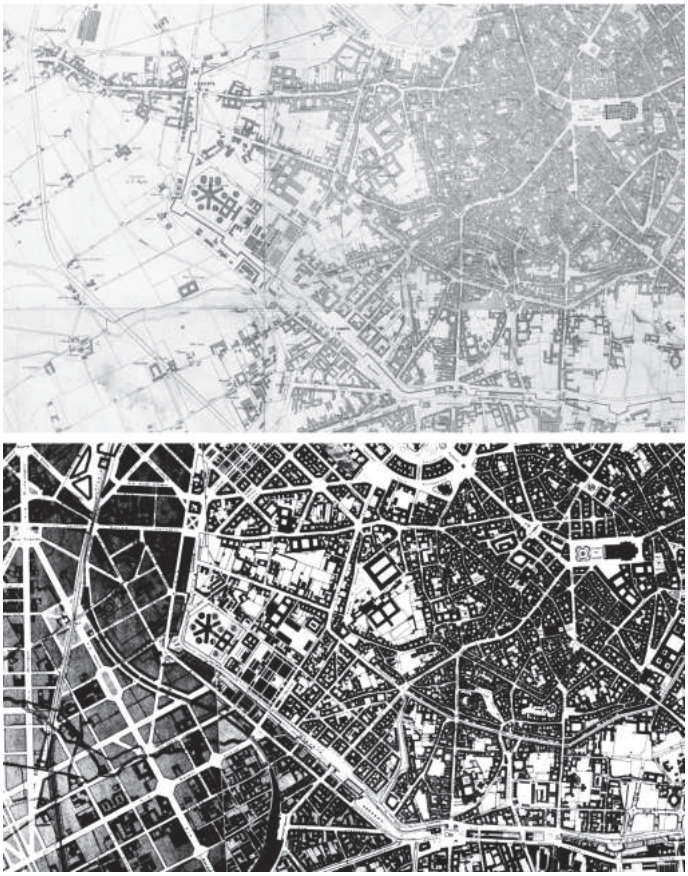

Figure 3. The San Vittore Prison in the western part of Milan: city map from 1886 (above) and 1910 (below)

San Vittore Prison and the city of Milan have always had a complex relationship. Today, one must ask: is the prison an alien body that should be removed from the city, or does its location represent an opportunity and

resource for both the institution and urban life? *ReverseLab* embraces the second hypothesis, reversing the prevailing perspective of the prison as an inconvenient function, especially in areas like San Vittore, where real estate values have skyrocketed. In contrast, the city should be a complex, dialectical space, where differences coexist and engage. But dialogue requires mutual knowledge. Understanding the presence of a prison is not straightforward: often, what creates distance is not the physical wall but rather the "suspension of urbanity"[26] imposed by the prison on its surroundings – what we might call a "neutralization" of ties between prison and its environment.
Facing the "San Vittore problem" and fully aware of the fundamental shortcomings and contingent issues affecting the prison, the *ReverseLab* project focuses on the ability to "see inside from the outside and outside from within". Contemporary art has been adopted as a tool to interpret this duality and develop a shared language between the city and the prison. The project has two complementary components. One is the spatial intervention, the redevelopment of an abandoned basement corridor in the first wing of the prison, which has been closed since the 1980s (fig. 4). The second is a participatory art workshop, led by an artist, involving inmates and prison staff in co-creating a contemporary artwork that reflects life inside San Vittore. The exhibition of this collective artwork in the newly reclaimed space became a tangible encounter between internal and external communities.

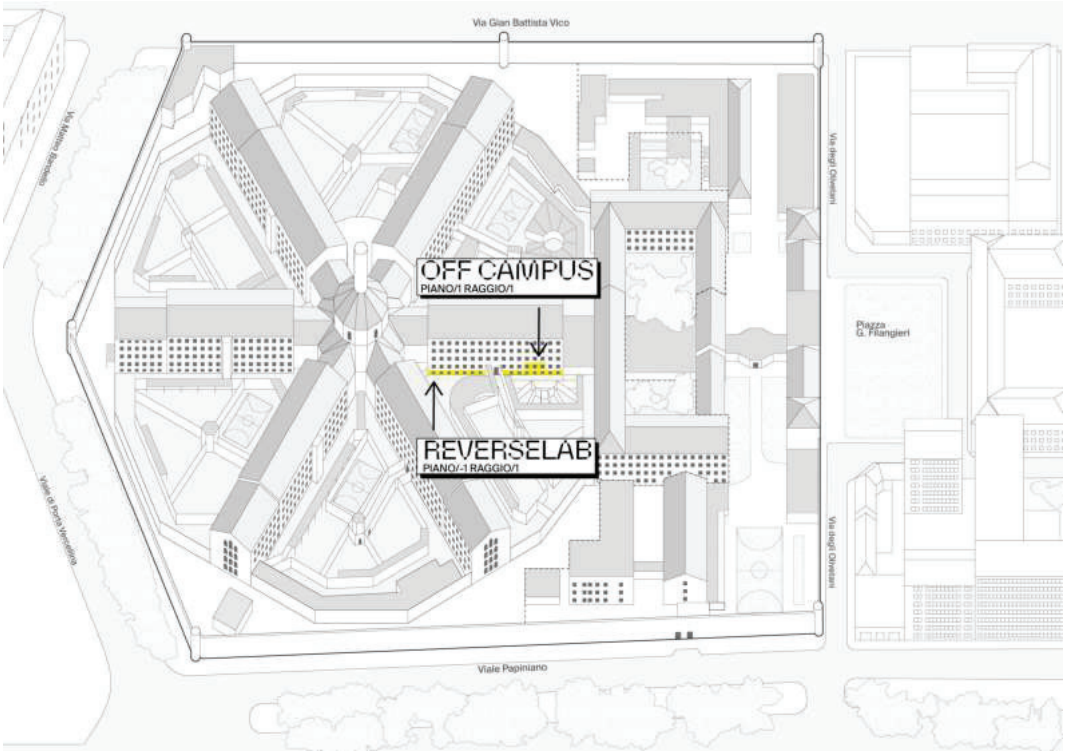

Figure 4. San Vittore prison axonometry with location of ReverseLab space and Off-Campus San Vittore office

The research developed in collaboration with the prison administration has involved the Milan Pavilion of Contemporary Art (PAC) for artistic curatorship, along with two local cultural associations – *Forme Tentative ETS* and *Philo-Pratiche Filosofiche*. It has also received funding from the *Fondazione di Comunità Milano*. The network of partnerships established through this project already represents a small but tangible step toward dialogue and engagement.

RECLAIMING SPACE AS A PRACTICE OF CARE

As previously mentioned, the space chosen for the project is the basement level of the first wing, which, after its closure, had been used as a storage area (fig. 5). The research focuses on this place in close dialogue with the prison administration. Despite its state of neglect, the site has significant potential. It has the exact dimensions and layout as the active prison wings. It is structured around a central gallery measuring 50 meters in length and 5 meters in width, with side cells that inmates once inhabited. Compared to the other basements, this area holds a unique position: not only is it inside the detention area, where external activities are typically not allowed, but it also sits along the mandatory circulation path connecting inmate spaces, service areas, and the prison's main entrance. The access is through a small door to the left of the monumental staircase, which leads to the first-floor corridor and then to the 'rotunda', the symbolic device of the panoptic structure. An unused second entrance at the opposite end connects this wing to the upper detention floors in use. In the past, this wing was designated as a maximum-security area, housing inmates considered highly dangerous, particularly during the years of terrorism in the '70s and '80s of the 20th century, and the *Brigate Rosse*, a profoundly traumatic period in Italian history. Its "tragic beauty" remains evident, still visible in the historical memory of the site (fig. 6).

Figure 5. The ReverseLab space in San Vittore before the regeneration works

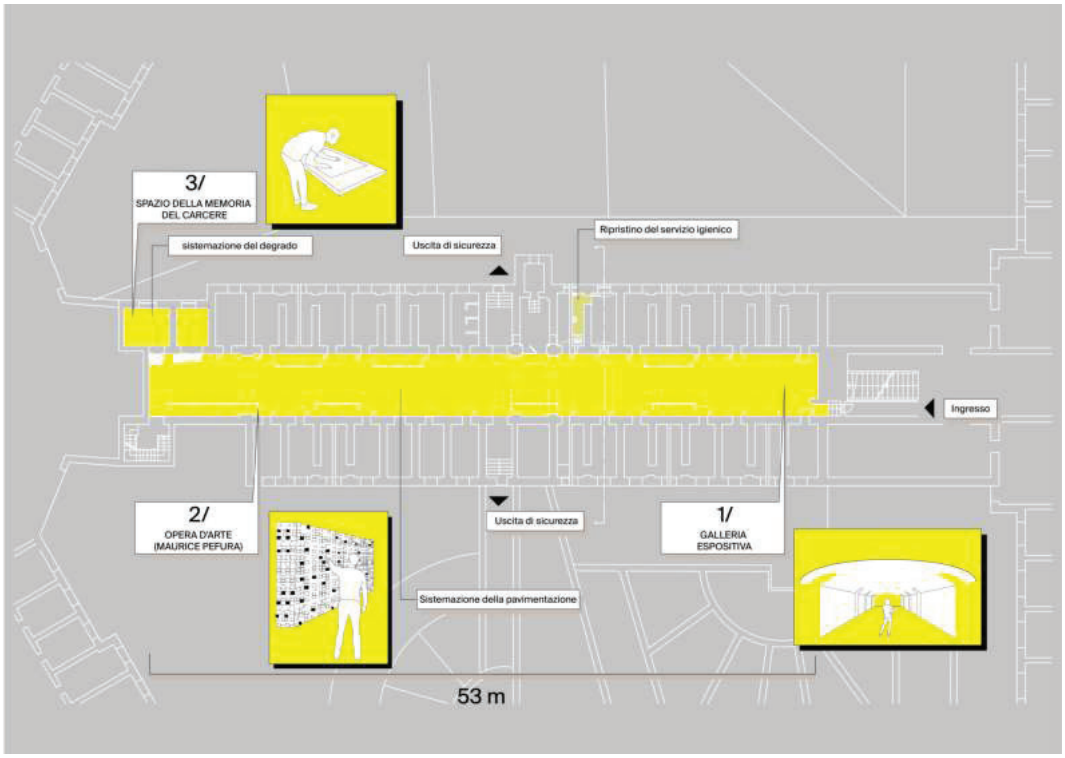

Figure 6. Exhibition layout: Gli artisti sono quelli che fanno casino

The space transformation was conceived as "a collective act of care". The institution, particularly with the collaboration of prison officers, carried out a clearance and archiving operation, removing decades of accumulated objects and documents that had contributed to the space's abandoned appearance. Once emptied, the renovation process adopted an incremental approach, focusing on a few essential actions in line with the limited budget. Visible intervention appears minimal: cleaning, repainting, and new lighting of the central corridor. However, the invisible work was more substantial, involving wall restoration and the initial reactivation of electrical and plumbing systems. More than a simple refurbishment, the project laid the foundations for new infrastructure: a space designed for immediate use, but also open to future adaptation and growth (fig. 7). Its open-ended character was not just a practical decision, but a deliberate methodological choice to keep the space flexible, evolving through new collaborations between the prison and the city. An external contractor carried out the work but also involved the *Manutenzione Ordinaria Fabbricati MOF* (ordinary building maintenance) team, composed of prison officers and inmates who routinely handle repairs within the facility. Their participation strengthened the project's message that renewal is both a physical and relational process.

Figure 7. Redevelopment of the space and setting up of the work in the basement

ART AS ENCOUNTER: THE WORKSHOP AND EXHIBITION

A workshop was held from March to June 2024 to create a collective contemporary art piece. Led by artist Maurice Pefura, with support from the Laboratorio Carcere team and the cultural associations Forme Tentative and Philo, the workshop involved around 40 inmates, who participated every Monday morning. Together, they explored a range of interpretive and expressive techniques, including writing, painting, drawing, and performative practices. Over several weeks, participants produced hundreds of paper fragments – like pieces of a mosaic – which were gradually assembled into a larger, unified artwork. The creative process became a space for dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and reflection on life in prison. It also fostered meaningful interaction among participants, encouraging individual expression and collective engagement. Maurice Pefura later reinterpreted the material generated during the workshop to develop the final piece presented in the pilot exhibition. The installation process became an additional moment of collaboration: prison staff and volunteers were invited to contribute, leaving their mark on the work and reinforcing the project's emphasis on shared authorship and relational creation.

On September 24th, the exhibition *Gli artisti sono quelli che fanno casino. Frammenti dal carcere di San Vittore* was officially inaugurated (fig. 8). Curated by Diego Sileo (PAC Milano), the opening event was attended by the prison director, the Rector of the Politecnico di Milano, the Regional Head of the Department of Penitentiary Administration, Milan's Cultural Affairs Commissioner and the National Guarantor of detained persons, a clear demonstration of institutional commitment to the initiative. For the following two months, the prison opened its gates twice a week to allow pre-registered visitors to experience the exhibition. The guided tours, led by researchers and workshop participants, offered more than a viewing of the artwork: they allowed visitors to enter previously inaccessible areas of San Vittore and engage directly with the lived realities of the prison today.

Figure 8. The opening day of the exhibition (Laboratorio Immagine Politecnico di Milano)

The artwork occupied the entire central basement corridor. Two long paper walls faced each other, interrupted by open cell doors, from which the recorded voices of project participants emerged (fig. 9). A narrow path between the walls invited visitors to walk through, creating an intimate and reflective experience. At the far end, two original cells were transformed into screening rooms: one showing a documentary on the artistic process[27], and the other presenting a video on the transformation of the space (fig. 10), from abandoned corridor to cultural gallery. Also featured were three interviews with former inmates, exploring how the project reshaped their understanding of the prison's historical and personal significance.

Figure 9. The artwork produced by Maurice Pefura with inmates is set up in the central corridor of the ReverseLab space. (Laboratorio Immagine Politecnico di Milano)

Figure 10. The memory room with the video that describes the transformation of space using the photogrammetry technique

The exhibition encouraged movement, reflection, and a shift in perspective. Visitors were not passive viewers but active participants, invited to interpret the work and co-construct its meaning. In this sense, they became co-authors of the experience. The project had a dual objective: to offer insight into daily life inside the prison, and to give incarcerated individuals a platform to share their experiences, free from stereotypes and preconceptions. The exhibition was a resounding success, with over 700 visitors and participation from two