

# Panopticon versus Port Arthur

## Empire and Communication Through Networked Landscapes

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# Panopticon versus Port Arthur

## Empire and Communication Through Networked Landscapes

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1.  
Joan Kerr, "Panopticon Versus New South Wales," *Fabrications* 1, no. 1 (1989): 4.

2.  
Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon; or The Inspection House* (1791; reprint, London: Robert Baldwin and James Ridgway, 1812), 1. Citations refer to the 1812 edition.

3.  
Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon Versus New South Wales; or, the Panopticon Penitentiary System and the Penal Colonization System, Compared* (1802; reprint, London: Robert Baldwin and James Ridgway, 1812). Citations refer to the 1812 edition.

4.  
Philip Steadman, "Samuel Bentham's Panopticon," *Journal of Bentham Studies* 14, no. 1 (2012): 1–30.

5.  
Stuart King, "The Architecture of Van Diemen's Land Timber," *Fabrications* 29, no. 3 (2019): 338–358.

6.  
Kerr, "Panopticon Versus New South Wales," 9.

7.  
James Kerr, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Australia's places of confinement 1788–1988* (Sydney: S.H. Ervin Gallery, 1988).

8.  
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (France: Gallimard, 1975; reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1991): 297. Citations refer to the Penguin Books edition.

With the opening lines of the inaugural *Fabrications* journal (1989), Joan Kerr declared, "Jeremy Bentham has to be the ultimate believer in the literal and sacramental power of architecture."<sup>1</sup> The historian points to the philosopher's conviction that the panopticon, a perfect diagram of surveillance, would transform convicts into moral, industrious citizens. Consequently, he launched multiple campaigns against the British government to abandon transporting criminals to the antipodes, and fund a "simple idea in Architecture!"<sup>2</sup> This culminated in a published omnibus of letters, entitled *Panopticon versus New South Wales* (1802), contrasting each system on ethical and economic grounds.<sup>3</sup> With the latter concern, Bentham called upon his brother Samuel Bentham's original plan for panopticons to be industrial facilities – specifically shipyards – to accentuate the potential profits derived from convict labour.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, he assumed the distant colony offered no scope for exploitation and extraction. Refuting both Benthams, one of the colony's main industries, especially in Van Diemen's Land, was shipbuilding.<sup>5</sup>

Responding to Jeremy Bentham's contrasts, Kerr questioned whether

turning an entire continent into a "total landscape" of incarceration marks a uniquely Australian contribution to spatial discourse.<sup>6</sup> Although these questions were partially answered by her husband, James Kerr, in *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (1988),<sup>7</sup> this survey gave little attention to Port Arthur, on the Tasman Peninsula, which haunts the national psyche as a particularly innovative and iniquitous geography of control.

Van Diemen's Land transforms Michel Foucault's metaphors of "carceral archipelago[s]" into literal landscapes.<sup>8</sup> From Hobart, colonial authorities scanned this archipelago for potential prison sites, finding Sarah and Maria Islands, before settling on the Tasman Peninsula – close and closed – as a "natural penitentiary."<sup>9</sup> This peninsula was choked into an island by the chained dogs of Eaglehawk Neck. It would have been further isolated if Governor Arthur's infamous Black Line(s) achieved its unjust ambitions of trapping the Palawa people on Forestier Peninsula.<sup>10</sup> Still, Port Arthur remained connected, internally and externally, by transportation and communication networks. In 1836, Commandant Booth cut through the fern forests between Long Bay and Eaglehawk Neck with 4.5 miles

of hardwood track, where four convicts pushed carts, loaded with provisions and passengers.<sup>11</sup> From 1833, Booth extended a nascent network of semaphore stations from Hobart to Port Arthur, where towers coordinated six moveable arms and patterned flags to transmit coded messages between government buildings, prison camps, mining sites, and guard posts.<sup>12</sup>

These networks are thoroughly historicised within Australian colonial studies. However, they rarely extend beyond our “Fatal Shore” as analogues for technological geographies of command and control, in a manner approaching Foucault’s theorisation of panopticons in *Discipline and Punish* (1975); whose sources describe Australian precedents, while he avoids them.<sup>13</sup> To situate these histories within a larger discourse, this paper measures Port Arthur against Harold Innis’ Staples Thesis – documenting the extraction economies of another dominion, Canada – and his pioneering works on *Empire and Communications* (1950), which argues that the constitution of social institutions are formed by their diet of media technologies.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, Port Arthur complicates his clear distinction between

space-traversing media, which transmit government policies, military orders, and economic transactions, and time-transcending media like architecture, which consolidate messages of social unity and continuity across generations. Finally, this paper assesses how this prison-industrial complex fits within recent scholarship connecting Innis’ work to electronic conflict spaces.

9.

Richard Tuffin and Martin Gibb, “Early Port Arthur: Convict Colonization and the Formation of a Penal Station in Van Diemen’s Land 1830–35,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 23 (2019): 585.

10.

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William A. Bayley, *Port Arthur Railway Across Tasman Peninsula* (Bull: Austral Publications, 1971).

12.

W. E. Masters, *The Semaphore Telegraph System of Van Diemen’s Land* (1949; reprint, Hobart: Cat and Fiddle Press, 1973). Citations refer to the 1973 edition.

13.

Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

14.

Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (1950; reprint, Toronto: Durden Press, 1972). Citations refer to the 1972 edition.