

Speaking Inside the Walls: Linking Past and Present through Art

► *Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

Eastern State Penitentiary is the world's first modern penitentiary opening in 1829 as part of a controversial movement to change the behavior of inmates through solitary confinement.



Communicating a Challenging Story

Eastern State Penitentiary is a startling place, both visually and interpretively. Over ten acres of ruined buildings filled with 1,000 empty cells provide a tangible foundation for illustrating America's changing views towards human imprisonment. Eastern State opened in 1829 as the culmination of decades of effort on part of Enlightenment thinkers, Quaker reformers, and Revolutionary War luminaries such as Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush to alleviate the miseries of prison life and reduce the numbers of repeat offenders. It pioneered a controversial approach to reforming prisoners by imposing a life of strict solitary confinement and physical labor. Prisoners had no contact with the outside world or even with each other.

Today Eastern State uses a range of innovative programs to present the still controversial issue of punishment and reform. To address such complex topics, the site uses nontraditional approaches to link historical experiences and contemporary issues. Through inventive program designs such as art installations, a conversation series on contemporary issues in corrections, alumni weekends with former prisoners and guards, and a self-guided audio tour, visitors are encouraged to consider new ideas, sort out their own thoughts, and use both intellect and emotion to examine an issue.

Eastern State's programmatic creativity, willingness to explore the links between past and present, and lack of fear in presenting politically divisive topics to the public have played a major role in boosting the site's attendance from 10,000 in 1994 to approximately 40,000 in 2004. The art installations have also received very good reviews from area papers over the past ten years.

In addition the New York State Council on the Arts is using Eastern State as a model for a pilot program which fosters collaboration between professional artists and historic sites in New York State.¹ The program is based on the belief that interaction between contemporary artists and historic sites can lead to new perspectives on the site's story, enhancing the visitor experience. As with the art installations at Eastern State, the installations must be site specific and relate to the site's interpretive themes.

Giving Voice to the Unheard

Two programs—the audio tour and alumni weekends—allow former inmates, guards, and staff members to speak to the public in their own words offering different perspectives on the past. Both programs present history as complex with the differing versions of the past reminding visitors that individual experiences vary and are often contradictory

The audio tour utilizes the site's vast audio archives mixing the voices of dozens of former prison inmates and employees. The alumni weekends are opportunities for the public and the former inmates and employees to meet face-to-face. At the 2004 alumni weekend over two dozen former inmates, correctional officers, and staff members attended an informal question and answer session with the public. Some of the topics addressed at the round table discussion included work details, recreation, race relations, prison violence, and daily life for inmates and officers at Eastern State Penitentiary.

Art in the Cells: The Artist Installations

Eastern State is a pioneer in the use of art in interpretive programming. Each year five to six installations address issues in criminal justice in general or at Eastern State in particular using a variety of traditional and emerging media.



The concept of art in the cells was born in the early 1990s as preservationists stepped up efforts to preserve the prison complex. Independent curators Julie Courtney and Todd Gilens recognized the site's artistic potential as a "ruin"² and began negotiating with the city of Philadelphia³ for permission to commission works for exhibition in the empty cell blocks. Funded primarily by the National Endowment for the Arts, their exhibition, *Prison Sentences*, opened to the public in 1995. The exhibition encouraged visitors to recognize the connections between 19th century penal practices and 21st century debates on criminal justice and incarceration.

The exhibit's success led to the assembling of a more permanent design review committee which selects four to five new proposals annually for on-site installation. The committee's composition is balanced between staff members and local art professionals whose vitas include successful exhibitions at the penitentiary.

The artistic interpretations change regularly and provide visual, aesthetic, and sensory avenues of approach to complex issues such as the morality of assigning the death penalty to juveniles or the near-paralyzing boredom of prison life. The highly individualistic artistic expressions provide the visitor with a visceral but less confrontational connection to the subject matter. A balanced perspective is sought by the design review committee, with projects that include for example, the memories of violent crime victims, or a reminder of the sufferings of victims' families.

Some of the exhibitions include a visitor participation element. One poet invited Amnesty International to set up information desks in her exhibit space to raise visitor awareness of human rights violations in prisons and provide opportunities for writing letters of concern to elected officials. While other opportunities for participation may be less tangible, they are equally engaging, calling forth a response within the viewer and a serious consideration of the issues and emotions raised.

Visitor responses to the exhibits have ranged from the incensed to the applauding—not unsurprising given the often disturbing nature of the exhibits. The design committee does not shy away from picking exhibits just because they might not be popular. They realize that not all the exhibits will be easily understood. However, they have sought to make all the exhibits emotionally and intellectually accessible to all visitors at some level. This includes a brief one minute recording by the artist explaining his or her work at the installation. The continued funding and strong visitation to the site indicate that their efforts are successful.

¹ The other model for the program is the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia.

² Eastern State Penitentiary stands today as an architectural shell with no running water, no heat, no air conditioning, and extremely limited electrical service.

³ The state of Pennsylvania closed Eastern State as a state prison in 1970 transferring it to the city of Philadelphia. The city operated the complex as a prison until 1971. During the 1980s, the city sought to redevelop the site for commercial use. After a long campaign preservationists succeeded in saving the site, and the city opened it for public tours in 1994. Today Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Inc. operates the site under a concessions agreement from the city of Philadelphia.

Contact Information

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Civic Engagement Principles & Practices

The audio program, alumni weekends, and art installations at Eastern State are an excellent example of using creative programming to link the stories and controversies of the past to their present day counterparts. From this unconventional approach, visitors take away an awareness of continuing debates, unresolved questions, and contemporary issues. The programs allow the site to:

- Present different perspectives on historical and contemporary issues.
- Include voices not heard in traditional historical narratives.
- Show the complexity of history by presenting memories of the past that are often contradictory.
- Use contemporary terms and media to talk about the past.
- Use multiple approaches to reach out to as many visitors on as many different levels as possible.
- Create unique opportunities for reflection and participation.

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