Illuminating the Margins: Engaging with the Carceral Image within an Abolitionist Framework

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[Figures 73–79, pp 301–305]

Given the entanglements and parallels between the history of photography and the history of criminology,[1] the image serves a vital role in the "making visible" of the prison. The image, broadly defined in this context as all forms of visualization, is a tool that can function both to construct and undo the tensions between the visibility and invisibility of the prison itself, and more importantly, as an abolitionist tactic to illuminate the carceral framework. The prison, conventionally understood to embody Foucault's disciplinary society, is often made socially and geographically invisible. However, the prison works on an axis of invisibility and visibility, where those inside the prison are always visible, heavily integrated into systems of surveillance, their information logged into massive databases; yet they are invisible to those outside the prison. The prison can be visualized as existing both as a remnant of Foucault's disciplinary society (static, separate from other institutions, hierarchical, centralized), and as a part of Deleuze's control society (connected to other institutions, flows of people in and out). Conceptualizing the prison as simultaneously embodying both Foucauldian and Deleuzian structures allows us to understand how it functions as both highly visible and highly invisible. The system of opening and closing allows for a simultaneous isolation and penetrability, for a simultaneous visibility and invisibility. The carceral system is strongly connected to the space outside the prison, impacting the lives of a large percentage of the American population, but these interconnections are often made invisible, hidden by the rhetoric that the prison is a space apart, both physically and metaphorically. I want to touch on two projects that engage with the dynamics between the prison and its representation, Stephen Tourlentes's Of Length and Measures and Spatial Information Design Lab's Architecture and Justice. Both projects can serve as the basis for looking at abolition in terms of the tension between

1
A concise and well-argued parallel is laid out in Allan Sekula's "The Body and the Archive," October 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64.

2 Stephen Tourlentes, Of Length and Measures: Prison and the American Landscape, www.tourlentes.com.

the visible and the invisible, but whereas Tourlentes's work engages with the Foucauldian framework of the prison as a static institution, Architecture and Justice makes visible the Deleuzian, networked elements of the prison.

In the same manner that the juridical archive served to catalogue the criminal body and place it within a hierarchy of other bodies, the prison quite literally serves the role of marking off the space of what is normal and what is abnormal, between the "criminal class" and the law-abiding citizen. As a demarcated and closed off physical structure, the prison is often relegated to the margins of the geographical and social landscape. As a medium of light, illuminating its subject matter, the photograph serves a very particular role in the documentation of the prison. Tourlentes's Of Length and Measures: Prison and the American Landscape documents prisons at night, as they illuminate empty landscapes. He has documented close to 100 prisons, in forty-six states, constructing a visual archive of these places of exile. In his project statement, Tourlentes writes that "the presence and location of these institutions of exile paradoxically reflect back upon the society that builds them" and that "these institutions tend to sit on the periphery of a society's consciousness."[2] Showing that the prison sits both illuminated by the unceasing need for surveillance and illuminating the landscape around it, Tourlentes attempts to place the prison back into the central focus of society's consciousness. His long exposure photographs point to the way in which the prison becomes present, rather than absent, at night. Such a slower form of documentation carries the potential for a different kind of political impact and open up the space for a dialogue about the relationship between the prison and the landscape it inhabits.

With the Foucauldian understanding that history functions as a series of emergences and fissures, we can begin to theorize the prison as simultaneously existing between two regimes of power. The prison also exists within a network structure, though its Deleuzian properties are obscured by the common understanding of the prison as a singular, bounded, and demarcated site. The space of the prison is precisely where this juncture between distributed control and rigidly defined hierarchies occurs, where the older institution of the prison and the networked structure of new media technologies are in tension

with one another. Projects that make use of new media technologies, like the Architecture and Justice project by the Spatial Information Design Lab (SIDL), work to make visible these network connections and highlight the extra-penal functions that the prison has taken up.[3] Since "civic, urban, and global networks today are formed not only of visible but also invisible information resources with concrete effects on our daily lives" and "(i)nformation builds and organizes most of the structures, policies, and landscapes of our cities,"[4] the translation of these networks of invisible information into visual images can help to refocus the understanding of the prison and its relationship to the rest of society. Architecture and Justice visualizes criminal justice data sets of criminal activity locations, but rather than placing the focus on the address of the crime, it maps the home addresses of the people incarcerated as a result. Different patterns emerge when the focus of the maps shifts from "crime events" to "incarceration events," showing that "the people who are convicted and imprisoned for urban crimes are often quite densely concentrated geographically."[5] The typical focus solely on the event of the crime works to eclipse the real factors that impact and influence criminal behaviour; SIDL's spatial mapping instead supports Loïc Wacquant's argument about the criminalization and imprisonment of the poor.[6] Incarceration maps help to visualize the massive migrations and flows of people in and out of the city and the potential impact that this kind of movement can have on stability within communities. Similarly, SIDL's earlier project, Million Dollar Blocks, maps the yearly cost of housing each prisoner, but places that economic figure physically within the context of the city and neighbourhood where the incarcerated individual is from. Supporting Wacquant's argument that the decline of the social-welfare state in America is tethered to the increase in penal spending,[7] the maps suggest that the criminal justice system has become the predominant government institution in these communities. Such tracing of the interconnections between prisoners and the rest of society, the making visible of the networked connections, can be extremely beneficial for public policy changes. Moreover, revealing these networks works to unhinge the prison from its solitary space at the edges of society and shows how it is woven into the urban fabric.

3
The unparalleled growth of the U.S. prison system over the last three decades is coupled with the growth of vast archives of data of criminal justice information, which is "used to regulate and organize the lives of individuals inside its system, playing its part in an institutional self-perpetuation." Spatial Information Design Lab, Architecture and Justice (September 2006), 4 www.spatialinformationdesignlab.org/MEDIA/PDF_04.pdf.

4
Ibid., 5.

5
Ibid., 8.

6
Loïc Wacquant, Prisons of Poverty (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

7
Loïc Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration," New Left Review 13 (Jan/Feb 2002): 41–60.

The Prison exists on contested ground between the disciplinary society and the control society. Tensions of power dynamics—of fissures in societal shifts—manifest themselves in the fluctuations between the visible and the invisible. For visual culture at the present moment, visibility is not as simple as a straight sight-line between seeing and being seen, but rather, as Nicholas Mirzoeff suggests, its objects of study are precisely those entities that come into being at the points of intersection between visibility and social power.[8] All forms of visual culture "visualize" the prison in some way, while other tendencies work to make the prison invisible. Through the analysis of various forms of visual culture and the way they depict the prison environment and interact with it, we can reach certain political conclusions, or open up possibilities for further investigation into the complex relationship between visuality and its objects within the contemporary political sphere. Indeed, the visualization of prison and its dynamics can help construct a counteracting force to mitigate the increasing invisibility of the prison within the American landscape.

8 Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Subject of Visual Culture," in The Visual Culture Reader, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 3–23.

Figure 76: Brooklyn, New York City

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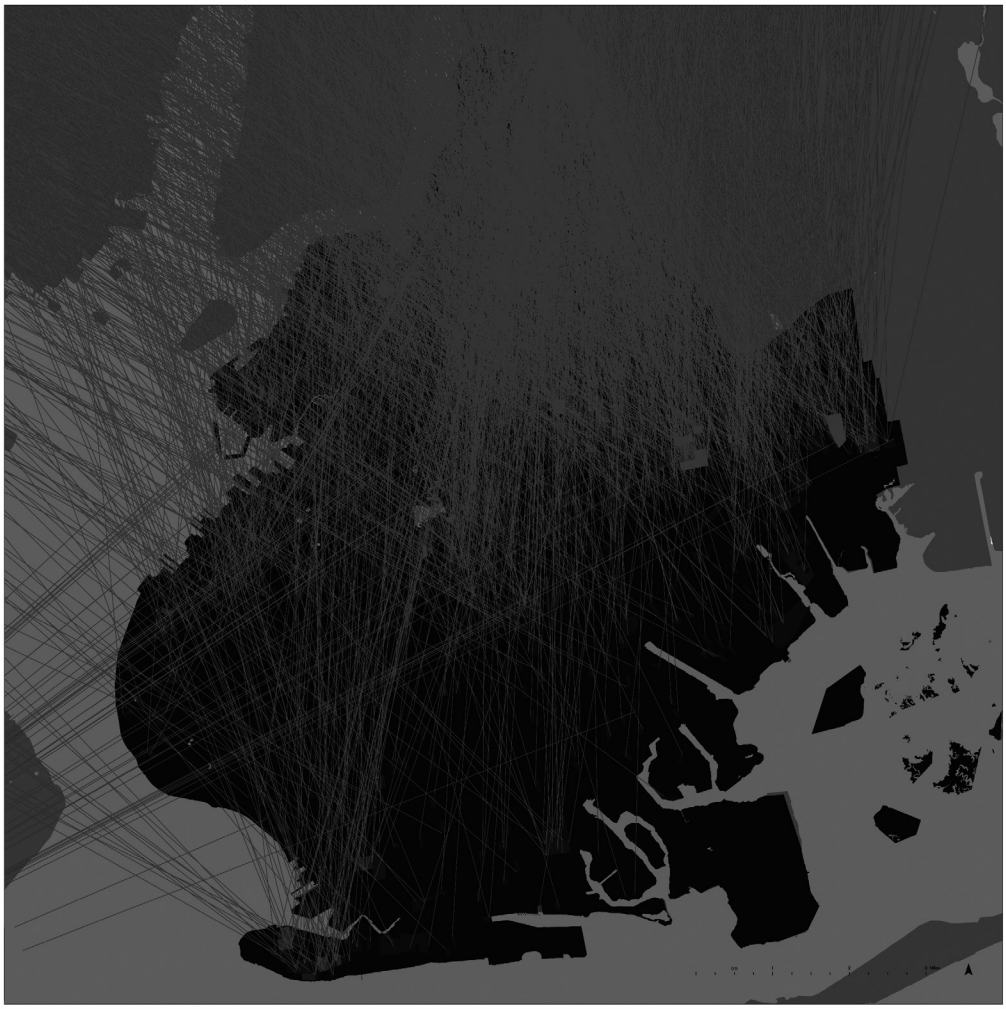
Percent Persons of Color, 2000.

Percent Persons Below Poverty Level, 2000.

Percent Adults Admitted to Prison, 2003.

BROOKLYN COMMUNITY DISTRICTS	% POPULATION	% POVERTY	% ADMISSIONS
BROOKLYN CD 1	6.51 %	9.08 %	5.37 %
BROOKLYN CD 2	4.03 %	3.58 %	4.64 %
BROOKLYN CD 3	5.83 %	8.10 %	16.51 %
BROOKLYN CD 4	4.24 %	6.34 %	9.34 %
BROOKLYN CD 5	7.04 %	9.30 %	14.45 %
BROOKLYN CD 6	4.23 %	2.60 %	3.08 %
BROOKLYN CD 7	5.02 %	5.03 %	3.82 %
BROOKLYN CD 8	3.78 %	4.15 %	9.46 %
BROOKLYN CD 9	4.26 %	4.14 %	4.43 %
BROOKLYN CD 10	4.96 %	2.79 %	0.91 %
BROOKLYN CD 11	7.05 %	5.54 %	1.35 %
BROOKLYN CD 12	7.39 %	8.54 %	1.32 %
BROOKLYN CD 13	4.23 %	4.94 %	3.41%
BROOKLYN CD 14	6.76 %	6.22 %	3.79 %
BROOKLYN CD 15	6.48 %	4.42 %	1.20 %
BROOKLYN CD 16	3.48 %	5.92 %	8.43 %
BROOKLYN CD 17	6.75 %	5.40 %	5.29 %
BROOKLYN CD 18	7.96 %	3.91 %	3.20 %
BOROUGH TOTAL	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %

Comparisons Expressed as Percent of Borough Total.



Prisoner Migration with Expenditures by Block, 2003.

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK CITY

ADDED UP BLOCK BY BLOCK, IT COST $359 MILLION DOLLARS TO IMPRISON PEOPLE FROM BROOKLYN IN 2003, FACILITATING A MASS MIGRATION TO PRISONS IN UPSTATE NEW YORK. 95% EVENTUALLY RETURN HOME.

Figure 78: Brooklyn, New York City

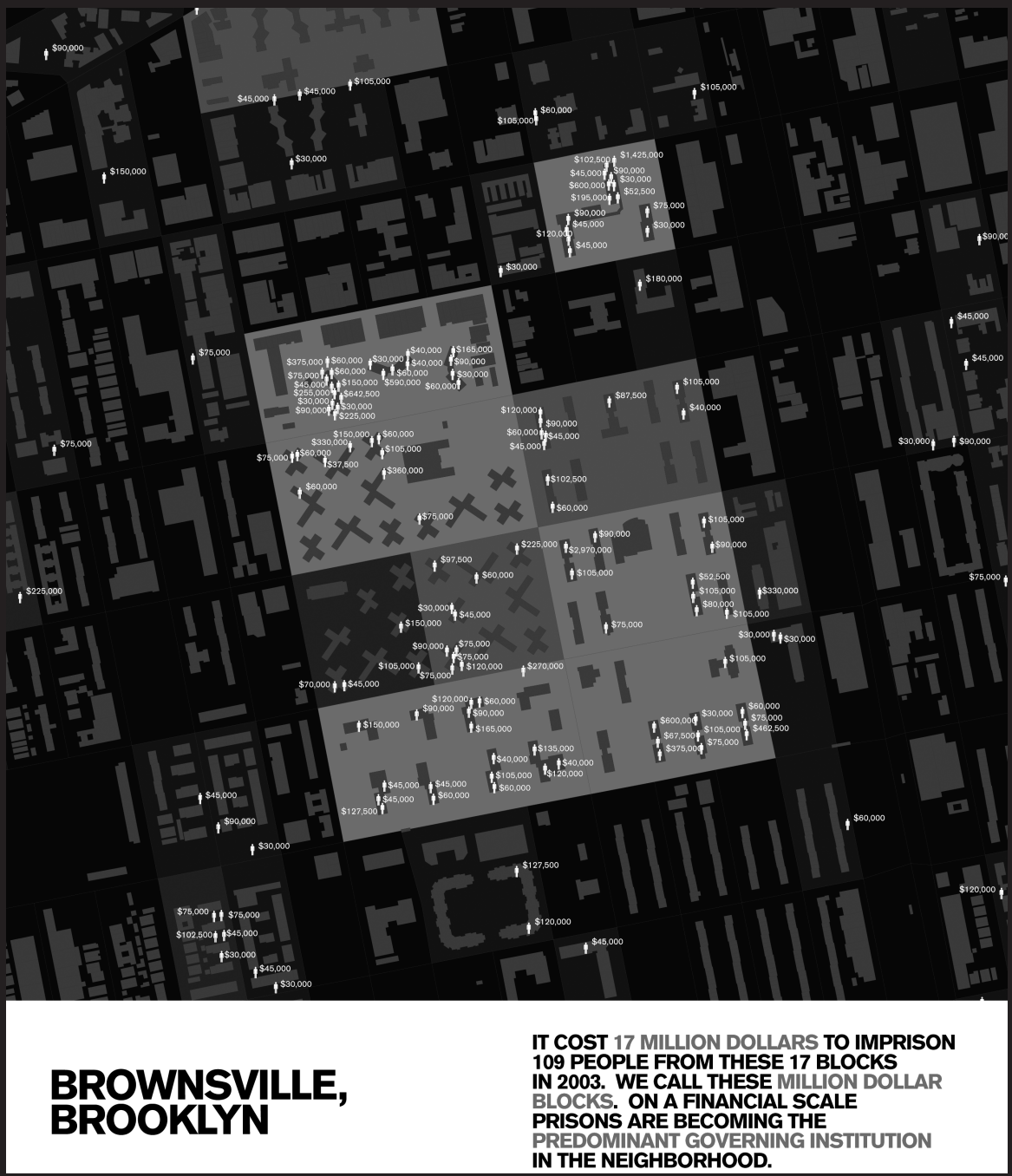


Figure 79: Brooklyn, New York City