

DOING TIME WITH DESIGN

With the prison population now over 50 000 and the building programme faltering, the PSA has come up with a new concept that resembles a university campus. Martin Spring reports.



England's current £660m development programme of new prisons seems ideally suited to a production-line – or even system – building approach that would make the most use of repetitive forms, prefabricated components and economies of scale.

Three prominent characteristics point to a system building approach. As the prison population surges through the 50 000 barrier, political pressure mounts to relieve the increasing congestion through rapid development. Second, the prison system in England is tightly administered and controlled through a central government department – far more so than in other public development fields, such as education or health. And third, a house of correction can be regarded as a utilitarian building type, essentially little more than a collection of identical prison cells.

As soon as the Home Office decided on a new prison building programme in 1976, their agent the Property Services Agency adopted a rational production-line approach. Exhaustive briefs of prison accommodation and technical details of security requirements were painstakingly drawn up by the two government departments.

But more than a decade on, only three new prisons housing a total of 1100 inmates have been completed, even though the pressure on existing space has been mounting all the time.

The fourth prison complex in the current programme, Full Sutton in Humberside, which was due for completion last May,

is now running more than a year late. And as if slowness of development and lateness of completion are not bad enough for such a politically embarrassing issue, the PSA has now abandoned its original design concepts, and indeed its entire production-line approach. And far from offering speedier development, the changes are likely to increase the delay in providing new prison accommodation even further.

Learning from mistakes

What has happened is that the original prison designs of the 1970s have proved themselves to be fallible in practice. Flat roofs have developed those exasperating defects that flat roofs do. But incorporating lessons learnt into projects currently in the pipeline has been no simple matter, as all design and technical changes must be exhaustively vetted by the Home Office and the PSA for their security aspects.

Another weakness of the new prisons has emerged in their overall design concept. Cells were grouped together on either side of a central corridor, an arrangement that could be stacked up on top of each other up to three storeys in height. As well as being simple and straightforward, this "hotel corridor" format was a modern reaction to the open galleries of the Victorian prisons. But it transpired that each stretch of corridor demanded a prison officer to supervise it, requiring very high staffing levels at a time when the prison service's corps of specially trained staff are stretched to the limits by the ever-growing population of prisoners.

In appearance, the earlier prison designs lived down to their utilitarian briefs. Though anything but cheap to build, they were grim and claustrophobic buildings that did nothing for the morale of either prisoners or staff.

Finally, when it came to actual construction, the PSA made no attempt to build by the system method. To prevent prisoners attempting to hack their way out,

the buildings have to be constructed as concrete boxes 150 mm thick using insitu concrete and no less than three layers of reinforcement. Other components such as windows and doors need to be laboriously fitted to render them impervious to attack. A system approach, which could result in speedier construction, would rely on the assembly of prefabricated components. And no matter how hefty the components might be, they would inevitably have weak points at the joints.

In response to their findings of how the earlier prisons have operated in practice, the Home Office and PSA progressively adapted those prisons coming up for design.

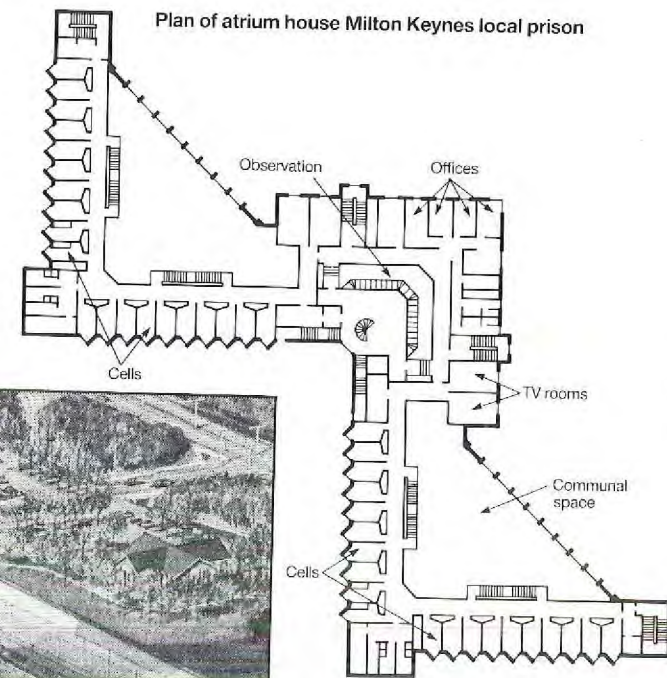
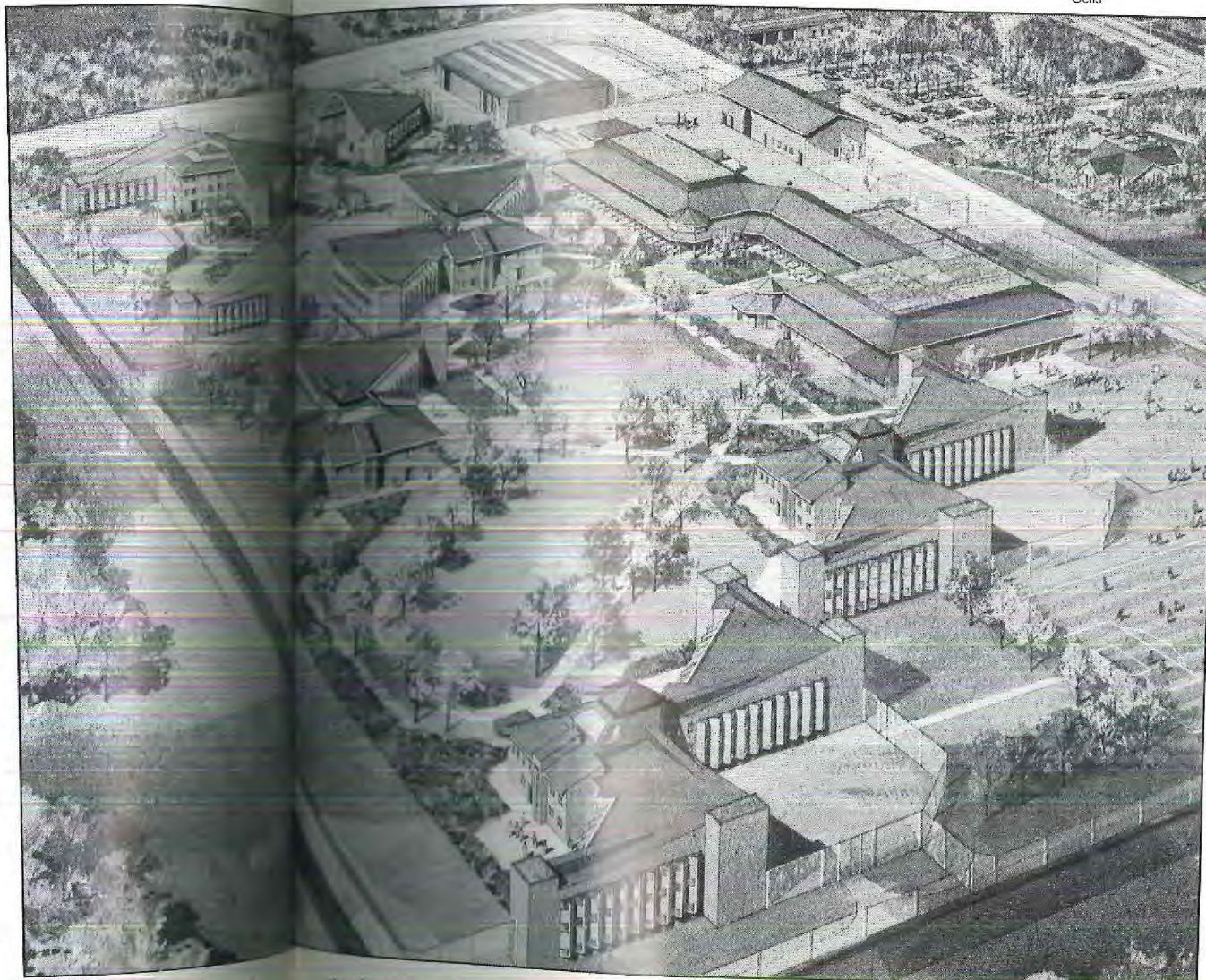
Then in 1985, the development team took the plunge and undertook a study tour of a radically different tradition of prisons in the United States. Soon afterwards, they committed themselves to American-style designs – though not American-style procedures of control – at Milton Keynes and later prisons.

Radical departure

The radical departure of the £45m Milton Keynes prison is immediately apparent. A collection of smallish blocks scattered loosely within a campus of grass and trees, it looks more like a university than a prison.

In the accommodation blocks themselves, the hotel corridor linking prisoners' cells has been replaced by a large communal atrium on to which the cells open on three floors. The cells are arranged in two wings at right angles to each other and the space between is taken up by the communal atrium. Two such blocks are linked together at their corners, and this link point provides a critically located surveillance post where a single supervisor can visually sweep the whole space enclosed by both blocks.

The prime motive behind the design rationalisations is the absolute need to keep prisoners securely under control. But the American trip has opened the



Left: A collection of smallish blocks scattered within a campus of grass and trees, the Milton Keynes development resembles a university more than a prison.

Below left: The atria in the accommodation block simplifies surveillance, as well as providing an attractive communal space.

eyes of British designers to the fact that absolute security is far from incompatible with an attractive environment. Thus the parklike landscape not only provides a pleasant setting, it functions as a means of circulation between buildings that can be easily supervised from a central point. The atria in the accommodation blocks perform a similar dual function. And the pitched roofs with generous eaves also happen to be near impossible for prisoners to climb up on to.

The new campus concept is regarded as a new generation of prison designs by the PSA. This does not mean it can now progress quickly by applying a

standard design for all new prisons. In fact, the PSA has now totally abandoned its standard design approach, as it now regards each site as a unique design problem in its own right. Doncaster, for instance, comprises a tight urban site where the atrium blocks will have to be stacked up to four storeys, making additional complications for circulation and security arrangements.

However, one aspect where standardisation still reigns supreme is in the construction details. In the new generation of prisons, there will be no lay-up of the laborious construction methods. Although the PSA is

now experimenting with the management form of contract in order to speed up construction, almost no scope will be offered to the contractors to rationalise detailing.

The Home Office and the PSA are cautious not to claim that their new generation of campus-style prisons will reduce stress in prison and recidivism of prison-leavers. The most they will say is: "We're providing every opportunity for that to happen by developing less negative environments than we used to."

It will, however, take another five years at the very least before their less-negative prisons are put to the test

