

# A look ahead at Her Majesty's Pen



Architect Jim Case stands in front of H.M. Penitentiary Centre Block during a tour of the facility Wednesday.

RHONDA HAYWARD/THE TELEGRAM



# Consider what comes, after new prison is built: architect

BY ASHLEY FITZPATRICK  
THE TELEGRAM

At the heart of Her Majesty's Penitentiary (HMP), in what is still called "the dungeon," iron chains were stripped from the stone walls long ago.

With a new prison on the horizon, there are calls to bring back the chains — if only for tourists to have a good gawk.

The dungeon is in the bowels of "Centre Block," the original HMP building, with walls made of imported English stone and finished more than 150 years ago, in 1859.

The original building is part of a much larger facility today. A floor above where prisoners were once left on a dirt floor, the cells have become offices for senior corrections staff. The once largely open structure, where the view ran three-floors high, has been closed in, catwalks removed and prisoners transferred to newer housing in the add-ons made as decades have passed and needs changed.

The provincial government said its needs have changed again and, this time, an entirely new facility is in order.

In February 2014, it announced a \$235,000 expenditure as a first step to the replacement of HMP. It hired Parkin Architects to produce a report, including a conceptual floor plan, suggested site location, potential schedule and cost estimate. That report was received before Christmas.

"Minister (Judy) Manning expects to present recommendations from that report to her government colleagues in the near future. A public update on the project will be provided once the important final decisions on budget, site design, location, etc. have been made," a department spokesman stated in an emailed response to questions. "The provincial government remains committed to the project."

Standing inside the oldest part of the existing penitentiary, Jim Case, a principal at Lat49 Architecture in St. John's, encouraged a

discussion now about the future of the old HMP.

"(HMP) is valued for its superb stone materials, construction techniques and architectural style. It has held countless inmates in its 150-year history, employed hundreds of people and is a social icon, representing law and order, and is a great contribution to the cultural landscape of the area.

*Historian Deborah O'Rielly*

"You couldn't bulldoze a building like this," he said, looking at the exposed stone walls of Centre Block. "What you need to do is tear down all of the interventions which would have been, as the personnel are saying to us here now, the stuff that was built in the '70s, the stuff that was built in the

'90s, of really no historical significance. And basically clear it away so you have the centre block standing as it was essentially from 1859 all the way up to 1949."



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When you get past the other buildings, when you get past any remediation concerns, the property becomes a highly valuable one, he argued, saying it can become a cultural and recreational resource for the community.

In a letter to the editor, published Jan. 27, he suggested using the exercise yard to create a Victorian walled garden, as can be seen at Kylemore Abbey or Lisadell House in Ireland.

Re-purposing of shuttered prisons is not a new idea. The Ohio State Reformatory, for example, the setting for filming of *The Shawshank Redemption*, was

closed, sold and since transformed into a cultural centre, through the efforts of the Mansfield Reformatory Preservation Society. In addition to home shows and ghost hunts, it now hosts special events such as classic car shows or the "Ink in the Clink" festival this July, featuring more than 75 tattoo artists.

There also have been prison restorations for museums and historical tours. Particularly notable examples are Alcatraz, the Chateau d'If and the Tower of London. Other lesser known names have been sold as tourist draws, such as the prison on Con Dao Island in Vietnam.

Even today, HMP staff have taken to gathering prison artifacts — everything from old shackles to the weapons fashioned by inmates. All are potential future museum offerings.

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George Chalker, executive director of the foundation, said he never considered the walled garden before reading Case's letter.

"I thought that would be nice," he said Wednesday.

Chalker added there are few heritage buildings still standing representing government institutions, making note of top-of-mind exceptions in Government House and the old military hospital.

"Some windows have been sealed up with concrete block but to maintain the exterior fabric is really what we would like to see done," he said. "And it could have a number of potential uses — re-uses, I should say."



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A corrections officer unlocks an inmate's cell at HMP.

[afitzpatrick@thetelegram.com](mailto:afitzpatrick@thetelegram.com)