Spider-Man and the Penal Colony

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I have been in a few prisons…but fortunately only by choice. There is a great one in Stockholm – now a classy hotel – where the rooms are of course the old cells. But its hard not to be a bit daunted as you shut the great heavy door with a mighty CLANG and hope that it will open again in the morning. Or perhaps it might not…and maybe they'll ignore my cries for help and just stuff a bowl of tasteless gruel through that tiny hatch. Like something out of the scariest 'Scandinavian noir' film.

In early December I was doing some work in Tasmania, and I took the opportunity to visit one of the most fearsome of prisons; the convict penal settlement at Port Arthur in the south-east corner of Tasmania. It's a chilling place – not just because of the tragedies that were played out there in the name of British justice – but also because of its location. At the end of a lonely peninsula facing down to the south, there is nothing between Port Arthur and the South Pole…just a very unforgiving ocean and a whole lot of ice.

"Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage"

The words from Richard Lovelace, a political prisoner in the 17thC, came to me without conscious thought. There I was looking at the windswept grey vista and suddenly I was recalling them from my school days. The reason I think was that the guide had just drawn attention to the fact that Port Arthur doesn't have any restraining walls topped with barbed wire and studded with look-out posts. And since the place was premised on work parties (chain gangs) cutting the forests, building the roads and any number of other productive activities beyond the prison, it would not be too hard for prisoners to just wander off into the bush. But then what? Swim for it (it's freezing and infested with sharks) or maybe just walk out through the bush. But one of the clever things about Port Arthur's location is that the peninsula on which it is built has a natural 'choke point'. Half way up the peninsula, at Eagle-Hawk neck, it thins out to a land bridge about 30m across. And that – of course – was bristling with reputedly vicious dogs and well-armed soldiers. Very few convicts escaped, and many died.

The technology of imprisonment is as long-lived as humanity. The manacles in Port Arthur were ruthlessly effective – but very crude. The work of the blacksmith rather than the techno-specialist. The locks and security devices of current gaols are – I'm sure, rather more sophisticated. And one of the most recent manifestations of the flourishing imprisonment industry has been the electronic tag. But who designs all this stuff? Do you suppose that there are industrial design awards for the latest un-pickable lock, or (more controversially) the latest tazer or tag. Are there design companies out there who proudly present such products on their web-site? It raises all sorts of interesting questions about user-centred design.

I can imagine a tag designed by Apple's Jonathan Ive. It would be an i-tag; a sleek affair – pure white and polished aluminium – with a blue-tooth link to i-tunes for the savvy prisoner. Or a Dyson-tag; naturally it would be made from coloured transparent polymer, revealing the cyclone that rotates silently at 10,000 rpm and sucks up all the villains within 10m – with no loss of suction. I know that the arms industry is a huge exporter for the UK, but what about the imprisonment industry? Are we serving the needs of dodgy governments around the world by producing the world's most inventive and stylish tools of constraint?

I was intrigued by the idea and did some exploring, though I confess that I wasn't completely sure what I was hoping to find. Half of me wanted to find that we are indeed the world's leading designers for such products – like the Swiss for watches. But the other half of me was a bit scandalised by that idea – and hoping that we had nothing to do with it. Well – interestingly – there is a whole mass of information out there about electronic tags and even a dedicated journal; the *Journal of Offender Monitoring*. I'm not sure where it ranks in the research assessment stakes.

But, getting back to the business of whose idea the Tag was in the first place, you might not believe the answer. It is a seriously convoluted story involving contributions from Spider-Man, Harvard University, a judge in Albuquerque New Mexico, and an old Etonian.

Starting with the old Etonian, he was one Tom Stacey; an adventurous soul who (amongst many other travels) went overland across Africa in the 1950s and led the 1st water-borne exploration of the upper Blue Nile in the 1960s. As a writer and foreign correspondent he had suffered a period of imprisonment in India and subsequently in the 1970s became a prison visitor in England. In 1981 he

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launched the idea of a more positive alternative to imprisonment – the Tag – and he formed the Offender's Tag Association (which still exists). He took the idea to the Home Office and followed it up with a piece in the Times in 1982.

But the fact is that the idea did already exist; the product of a group of researchers at Harvard university in the 1960s, headed by R. Kirkland Schwitzgebel and his twin brother, Robert Schwitzgebel (family name shortened to "Gable" in 1983). In 1964 they were granted a patent and published an article about how such monitoring devices might work and be used. But it all went very quiet on the tag front until 1983, when all hell broke loose.

First, following his Times piece, Tom Stacey and his Association launched a national press conference to make a big splash about 'his' idea for tags. And interestingly (significantly?) it was exactly that year that the Schwitzgebel's renamed themselves 'Gable'.

Enter Spider-Man
Towards the end of that frenetic year of 1983, the story switches to a district court judge called Jack Love in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was a great fan of the Marvel comic Spider-Man and he had seen a recent edition that had a really plausible story line that involved 'Kingpin' – the villainous boss-man. Kingpin puts an electronic bracelet on the superhero, primarily to follow his movements. Jack Love – perhaps a liberal judge who wanted an alternative to gaol – persuaded a computer salesperson (Michael Goss), to make bracelets to monitor five offenders in Albuquerque. Perhaps Goss did some homework in the literature and turned up the articles by the Gable brothers or by Tom Stacey, because he really did make them and this really did turn out to be the first court-sanctioned use of electronic monitoring. Twenty years later, by 2006, an estimated 130,000 units were deployed daily in the United States.

Returning for a moment to the 17thC Lovelace piece '...stone walls do not a prison make...' the point he was making in his poem becomes clear once you get to the end. It's all in the mind. Walls and bars don't make a prison if you see them differently. As he says '...Minds innocent and quiet take that for a hermitage'. So where does that leave us with offender monitoring? Or indeed with Port Arthur?

Well interestingly, that isolated, windswept bay in the southern ocean was the site of a radical mind-experiment with prisons, and all inspired by Jeremy Bentham – the English liberal and 18th/19th C philosopher. I suppose he is most famous for his utilitarian principle that *right* and behaviour should be defined by reference of the outcome of that behaviour; good = that which creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Bentham saw the prison problem as a mind problem. And he set about creating a completely new regime in his 'Separate Prison' at Port Arthur. As with Pentonville in London, he created 'a machine for grinding rogues into honest men'. And much of it struck me as sadistic rather than enlightened, using a frightening array of mental torture techniques including separation, classification, isolation, surveillance, and non-identity (no names and no faces – as prisoners wore masks) and with a bit of religious instruction thrown in. To sustain it all he developed an interesting bit of architecture – the Panopticon – which enabled constant surveillance by warders without prisoners being aware of it. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panopticon)

Which just serves to remind us that, even when well-meaning philosophers make decisions about the need to modify the minds of rogues – they need designers. Bentham could conceptualise a prison system, but as soon as an idea meets the reality of people and place, then it needs designers. In our world of design education, we are familiar with phrases like 'human need' and 'user-centred'. They are commonplace terms that give us a warm, cuddly feeling about our humanitarian role in the world. But writing this piece has underscored for me the harsh truth that there is nothing inherently righteous about designing – even the user-centred variety.

Someone helped Bentham design his appalling 'Separate Prison'. And, a hundred years later, someone designed Auschwitz.