



INSANE ASYLUMS IN THE UNITED STATES

CARLA YANNI

The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States

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Elaborately conceived, grandly constructed insane asylums—ranging in appearance from classical temples to Gothic castles—were once a common sight looming on the outskirts of American towns and cities. Many of these buildings were razed long ago, and those that remain stand as grim reminders of an often cruel system. For much of the nineteenth century, however, these asylums epitomized the widely held belief among doctors and social reformers that insanity was a curable disease and that environment—architecture in particular—was the most effective means of treatment.

In *The Architecture of Madness*, Carla Yanni tells a compelling story of therapeutic design, from America's earliest purpose—built institutions for the insane to the asylum construction frenzy in the second half of the century. At the center of Yanni's inquiry is Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, a Pennsylvania-born Quaker, who in the 1840s devised a novel way to house the mentally diseased that emphasized segregation by severity of illness, ease of treatment and surveillance, and ventilation. After the Civil War, American architects designed Kirkbride-plan hospitals across the country.

Before the end of the century, interest in the Kirkbride plan had begun to decline. Many of the asylums had deteriorated into human warehouses, strengthening arguments against the monolithic structures advocated by Kirkbride. At the same time, the medical profession began embracing a more neurological approach to mental disease that considered architecture as largely irrelevant to its treatment.

Generously illustrated, *The Architecture of Madness* is a fresh and original look at the American medical establishment's century-long preoccupation with therapeutic architecture as a way to cure social ills.

Carla Yanni is associate professor of art history at Rutgers University and the author of *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display*.

The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States Details

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Cara says

Interesting book about the history of the architecture that went into these hospitals. A lot of pictures.

Anne says

A very good overview about the thinking surrounding architecture and recovering from mental illness. The author was certainly limited by the few patient accounts of how their physical setting affected their recovery (ergo the 3 stars - without those personal accounts, the book was just not as engaging as it could have been). Otherwise, very well researched and written.

AJ says

The Architecture of Madness is a really interesting look at the link between building design and the treatment of the mentally ill in (mostly) the US. Way before Prozac, before even Thorazine, and between the profoundly inhumane treatment eras of the 18th and mid-20th centuries, psychiatrists reasoned that the best way to treat mental illness was to have patients live in relaxed, outdoorsy, open settings. Places where they could be with nature, be productive, and not simply be locked away in a dirty cell until the end of time. This is where influential figures such as Kirkbride came in, who designed probably the most famous psychiatric hospitals in US history.

Of course, eventually, overcrowding became a problem, turning the very buildings that were supposed to help treat mental illness back into a system of warehousing people in deplorable conditions. The introduction of psychiatric medications such as Thorazine and removal of funding away from state hospitals led to the ultimate demise of many of these psychiatric hospitals, although some are still around today.

This book was rather academic (which is to be expected) and at times hard to slog through, but I found the ultimate question to be very compelling: was the architecture of the buildings helpful, or were the odds stacked against them in a way that disallowed us from even answering that question?

The author argues that after deinstitutionalization, architecture no longer factored into the treatment of the mentally ill. I actually disagree somewhat: one need only take a trip to any major city in the US to see benches that are equipped with unnecessary handles every foot or so, spikes driven into the ground near places one could curl up to sleep at night, purposefully uncomfortable bus shelters, etc. An entire subset of urban design has arisen to make the homeless go elsewhere, and the sad fact is that kicking the mentally ill out of state hospitals left most of them no other option than to live on the streets. Of course, the issues of the homeless mentally ill, the hospital to jail/prison pipeline, and other horrific consequences of deinstitutionalization are best left to (and are) addressed in other books.

Jason Medina says

I found this book to be quite useful during my research on the Kings Park Psychiatric Center and asylum construction in general. It had plenty of photos and illustrations to aid with the visuals for the types of architectural plans used when it came to the construction of asylums. I also liked how quotes were used at the start of chapters. In fact, I liked the idea so much, I decided to do the same with my book about the Kings Park Psychiatric Center. I took it a step further and used a wide variety of quotes, but all are pertinent to the subject and specifically to the chapter in which they have been used.

Liz Clappin says

I do really like this series, the books are approachable and beautifully designed with excellent photographs. I would have preferred more general commentary as opposed to straight case studies like much of the book. Still a very strong definitive study, good for lay enthusiasts or professionals.
