

ABSTRACT

Captives of a New Alcatraz: The New York City Department of Correction from 1954
to 1990
by
Jarrod Shanahan

Advisor: Dr. Susan Saegert

This dissertation examines the New York City Department of Correction (DOC) from 1954 to 1990—a period that began with an audacious program, led by progressive penologist and DOC Commissioner Anna M. Kross, to replace “custodial” prisoner warehousing with a rehabilitative model directed by civilian experts. As part of this plan the political legitimacy, executive strength, and most importantly, the institutional capacity of DOC were expanded, while the department’s plant facilities were increasingly concentrated on Rikers Island. The previously remote penal island was connected by bridge to mainland Queens amid plans for dazzling new jails and a university-affiliated research institute, to be a model the world over for progressive penology.

This dissertation examines the questions of how Kross’s plan went so horribly wrong. I demonstrate that by the early 1970s, amid economic crisis, racialized urban unrest, and rebellion in the jails themselves, Kross’s rehabilitative model was largely disavowed. DOC subsequently used the buildings constructed and planned during the Kross period as human warehouses attendant to the rise of a racially-infused movement of “law and order” and the present regime of mass incarceration. Specifically, I emphasize how the movement of rank-and-file unionism in DOC and New York Police Department (NYPD), empowered by the post-war recognition of municipal unions, capitalized on the mid-1970s fiscal crisis to carve out an indispensable role for itself in violently managing the City’s racialized working-class amid crushing austerity. This narrative history supports the radical *divestment* of police, courts, and jails from working-class life—not their repurposing for social good, as Kross attempted, and failed.