

The Vertical Neighborhood From Hell

My neighborhood is a fetid shithole forcibly populated by society's dregs. I live in West Block, a five-story, monolithic concrete edifice that was built around the turn of the century here at San Quentin Prison. Viewed from the outside, it is an imposing structure; so solid looking it appears to have been hewn from a gigantic boulder.

Three-foot wide arched windows, four stories high and spaced about 25 feet apart populate the sides of the structure. Thick bars covering the front of them destroy any aesthetic beauty the windows might add to the building. The doors guarding the entrance are massive things, ten feet tall and six feet wide, made of solid steel three inches thick. All of the doors and entrances have grill-gates covering them, made of black rods of hardened steel spaced three inches apart, and set into frames bolted into the 18-inch thick concrete walls. Everything in this building is made of either concrete or steel. The building screams solidity and containment.

Walking over the threshold of West Block transports you to another world. The transition is startling, leaving the fresh air and sunshine behind when you enter this medieval dungeon. The first thing you notice is the radical change in air quality; it is a foul mixture of body odor, dirty laundry, and second-hand smoke from cigarettes and marijuana. It has a palpable thickness to it. It makes you want to turn around and flee back outside. The second thing to assault your senses is the noise, a relentless cacophony of screaming, yelling, laughing, and a constant stream of announcements blasting over the P.A. system.

Cordoned off by painted lines on the left side of the huge doors is a small command center for the local gendarmes, where they sit ensconced behind a high desk on a raised platform. A protective roof spans the area above their heads to prevent the multitude of objects tossed off the upper tiers from landing on them. The roof is littered with trash, dirty underwear and food.

There are four metal 'holding' cages bolted to the floor near the cops' desk area. The cages are mean-looking structures, made of thick wire mesh and only 4' X 4' in size. They are used to temporarily contain people who have misbehaved and are on their way to Segregation, aka The Hole.

On the right side near the entrance are a dozen phones the convicts can use to make collect calls to the outside world. A line of tense, impatient men await their turn to make a call, staring malevolently at those using the phones.

Sitting inside this long, rectangular structure is a bifurcated cellblock five tiers high and over a hundred yards in length. A vertical pipe chase full of 100+ year-old steam pipes and electrical conduit, caked over with decades of dust and dirt separates the two halves of the cellblock, which are referred to as the Bay side and the Yard side. There are 45 cells on each of the five tiers, 225 cells on each side of the building, 450 concrete boxes built to house the people who have lost their right to remain in civilization.

Each cell is 4 ½ feet wide and 11 feet long, theoretically giving the two occupants 49.5 square feet of floor space to live in. However, a 32" wide by 6 ½ foot long metal bunk bed is bolted to one wall, which kills off 35% of the floor space. A toilet and sink decorate the rear of the cell past the end of the bed, occupying that space. This leaves a 22" wide by 9' long area of open floor in each cell, a very narrow walkway that two men cannot navigate at the same time without becoming excessively intimate.

The cells are open-fronted, with bars for a wall on the end facing the tier. Outside the bars, a five-foot wide concrete "freeway" runs the length of the tier. There is zero privacy, ever. Guys will frequently loiter in front of your cell, lean against the railing, stand there and just stare into your cell; frequently smoking cigarettes and talking loudly to their friends who stand there with them.

The railing they lean against is there to prevent people from accidentally falling off the side of the tier. It is sadly inadequate to prevent people from intentionally jumping to

their deaths, an infrequent but nonetheless occasional tragedy.

Two gunner's walkways run along the walls opposite the cellblock, circling the inner perimeter of the building. A coiled spring of razor wire is strung along the bottom of these walkways, to discourage the residents from climbing over the rim and possibly taking the weapons away from the guards. Each guard carries a Mini-14 rifle and a 9mm pistol; he or she is less than 30 feet away from the cells. Posted on the walls are large signs:

“NO WARNING SHOTS FIRED IN THIS UNIT.”

Twin metal staircases at each end of the block provide access to the upstairs tiers. During the periods of “open unit,” the flow of prisoners up and down these stairs and back and forth along the tiers is endless, a human ant farm of activity as the inmates scurry to and fro to leave or return to their cells, shower, and frequently go on missions to procure food or drugs or tobacco.

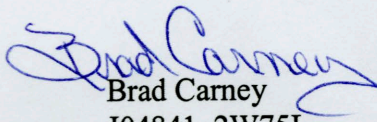
Roving vendors cruise the walkways, offering a wide variety of things for sale: stolen food from the kitchen, clothing, linen, canteen items, drugs, tobacco, almost anything imaginable is readily available.

The residents of this neighborhood are constantly throwing trash over the railings. They sweep out their cells, and then sweep the dirt and trash right over the edge of the tier. The men assigned to clean the walkways do the same thing. During clean-up time, a fine mist of dirt, hair and trash interspersed with large chunks of debris floats down from each tier and flows down into the cells below. Only the fifth tier occupants escape this nasty, airborne miasma.

Black mold and fungus line the walls and cracks where the walls and floor intersect in the communal showers located at the end of the block. They are accessible for only 4 ½ hours a day, and there is always a long wait to get in. The water temperature cannot be adjusted, and is frequently painfully hot, almost scalding. The shower area is, for lack of

better words, a multi-racial sausage-fest. Each ethnic group has their own section of showerheads; there are always about 50 men showering while 25 are drying off and another 50 or so are waiting to get in. The noise level is thunderous, almost painful. The drains often get plugged up, making it necessary to wade through a stream of dirty, soapy, contaminated water to get in or out of the shower. Bathing is a very unpleasant experience in my neighborhood.

Almost everything is unpleasant in my neighborhood. It is not a nice place to live, but none of us who reside here do so voluntarily. We are sent to prison as punishment for our crimes. West Block does a fine job of reminding us of this on a daily basis.



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