Panopticon Theory
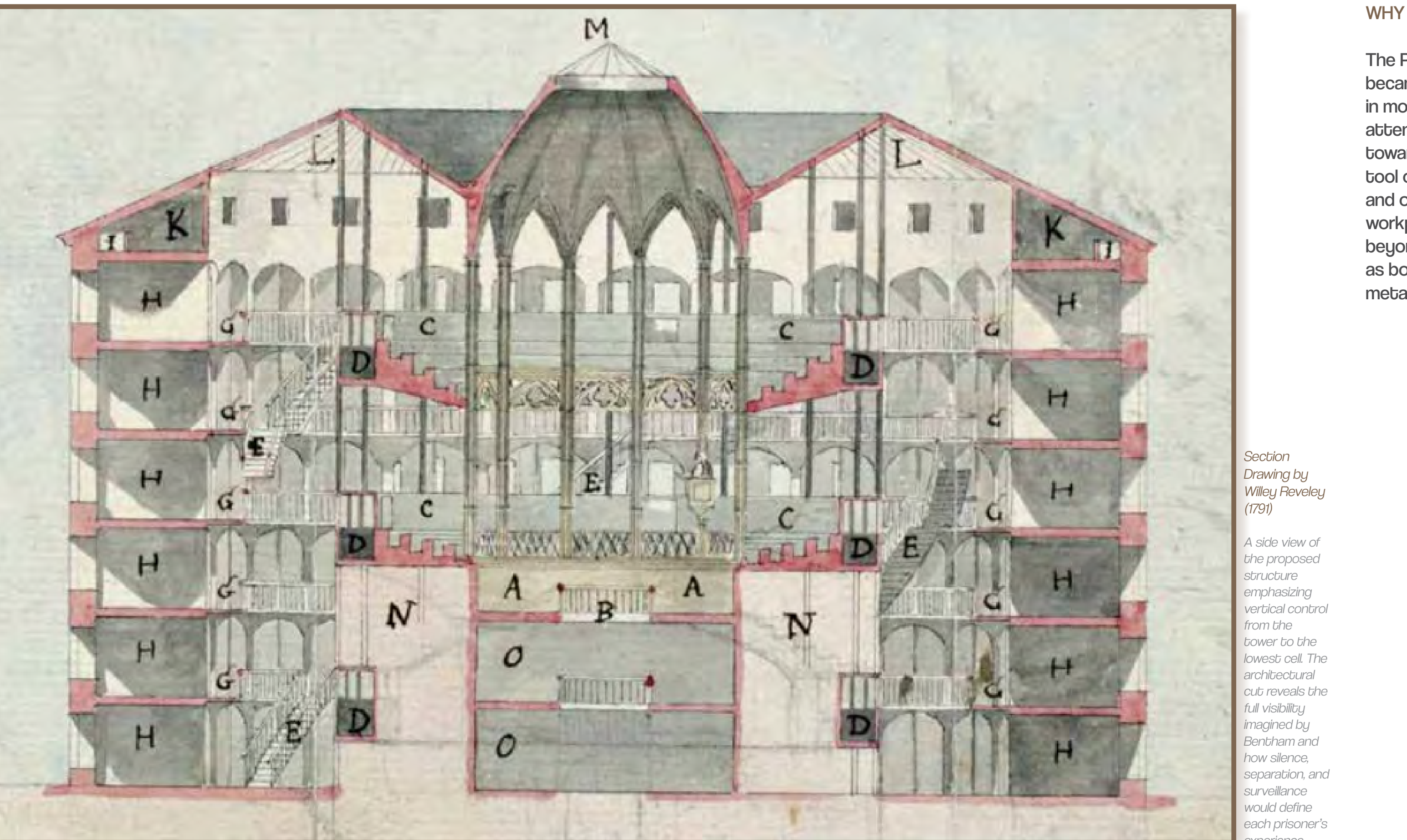
VISIBILITY, POWER, AND
CONTROL
VII

DATE
c. 1785 - 1850 CE

LOCATION
LONDON, ENGLAND

SYSTEM
DISCIPLINE THROUGH OBSERVATION

SPATIAL LOGIC
CENTRAL VISION WITH PERIMETER
ISOLATION

Section
Drawing by
Willey Reveley
1791

A side view of
the proposed
structural
emphasizing
vertical control
from the
tower to the
lowest cell. The
architectural
cut reveals the
full visibility
imagined by
Bentham and
the silence,
separation and
surveillance
would define
each prisoner's
experience.

WHY IT MATTERS

The Panopticon was never built in full, yet it
became one of the most influential prison ideas
in modern history. Bentham's theory shifted
attention away from physical punishment and
toward psychological control, using visibility as a
tool of discipline. Its circular form, central tower,
and one-way gaze inspired later prison models,
workplace structures, and surveillance logics far
beyond incarceration. The Panopticon endures
as both a diagram of carceral design and a
metaphor for modern systems of power.

Plan Sketch of Panopticon

An architectural diagram drawn by myself
showing both the radial cell arrangement
and the vertical slice of the central tower.
The form illustrates how observation and
isolation were built into every level of the
structure.
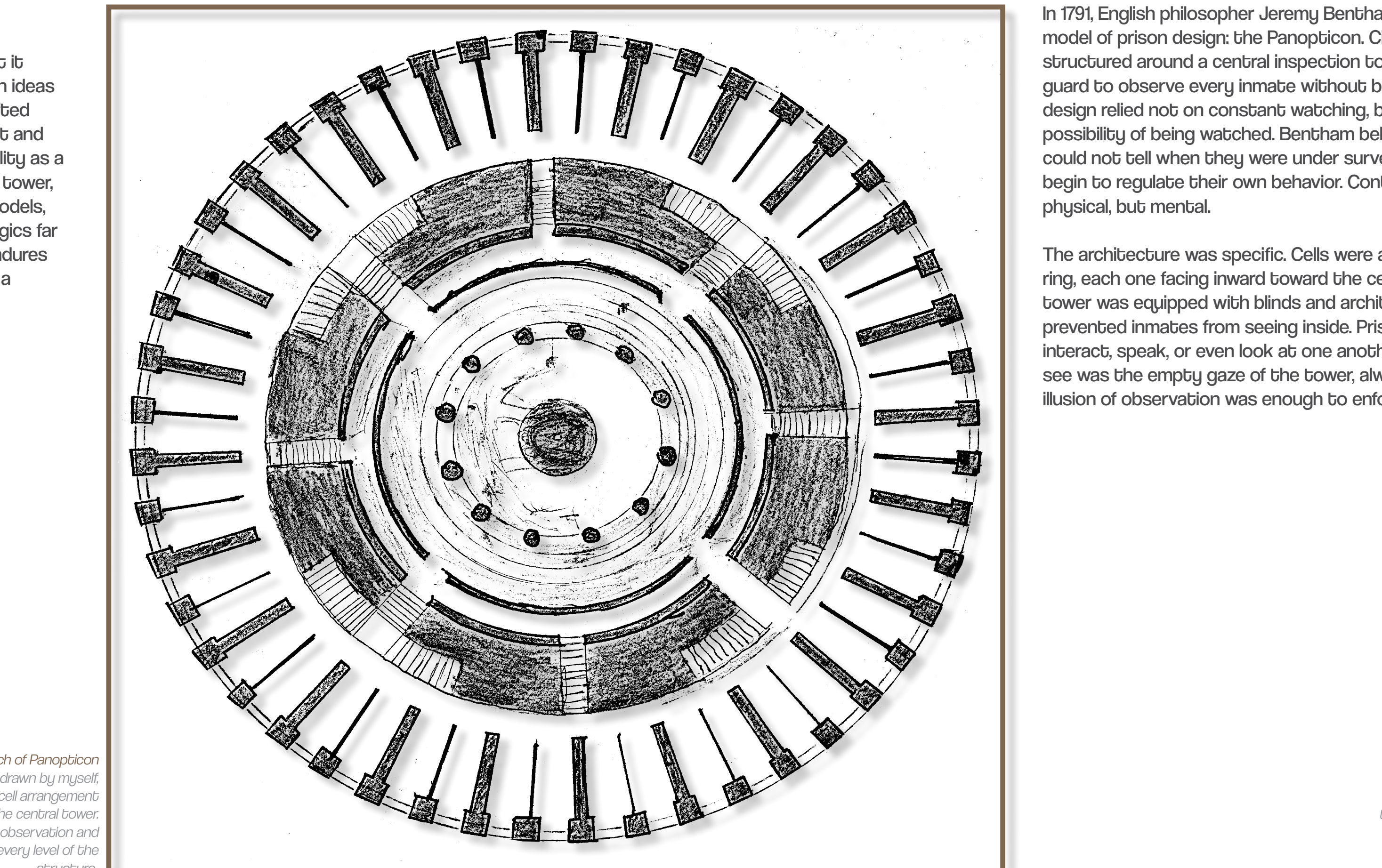
In 1791, English philosopher Jeremy Bentham proposed a new
model of prison design: the Panopticon. Circular in form and
structured around a central inspection tower, it allowed one
guard to observe every inmate without being seen. The
design relied not on constant watching, but on the constant
possibility of being watched. Bentham believed that if prisoners
could not tell when they were under surveillance, they would
begin to regulate their own behavior. Control was no longer
physical, but mental.

The architecture was specific. Cells were arranged in a perfect
ring, each one facing inward toward the center. The guard
tower was equipped with blinds and architectural barriers that
prevented inmates from seeing inside. Prisoners could not
interact, speak, or even look at one another. What they could
see was the empty gaze of the tower, always present. The
illusion of observation was enough to enforce obedience.

Interior View of a Panopticon-like
Rotunda

Circular tiers of cells face inward
toward a central void, illustrating the
core logic of surveillance through
exposure: the watcher is unseen, but
the prisoner is always visible.

Presidio Modelo, Cuba

Abandoned circular prison blocks
show the physical reality of
Bentham's persuasive ideas well
building once contained a hidden
guard tower, turning constant
surveillance into silent control.

Bentham's ideas extended beyond prisons. He
argued that the Panopticon model could apply
to schools, factories, hospitals, and asylums,
any place where behavior needed to be shaped
by oversight. Though his design remained
largely theoretical, it was partially explored by
his brother Samuel in naval contexts and later
adopted in prison planning throughout the
19th century. Thinkers like Michel Foucault later
reinterpreted the Panopticon as a symbol of
modern power, where authority is exercised not
through force, but through constant internalized
awareness.

Bentham, a founding voice in Utilitarianism,
imagined a world where happiness and control
could be neatly arranged, and the
Panopticon was his architectural formulas.