

## Psychiatry's Disappearing Past

A review of



**Asylum: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals**

by Christopher Payne and Oliver Sacks

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For much of the 20th century, state psychiatric hospitals were overcrowded warehouses for the indigent mentally ill. The hospitals evoked fear in those likely to be sent there and a combination of alarm and pessimism in social reformers. As chronicled by Clifford Beers (1908) in his memoir *A Mind That Found Itself*, by 1900 hospitals were primarily custodial rather than therapeutic institutions. Their ill-trained staff was mostly concerned with keeping the peace, mistreating disruptive patients rather than helping them back to sanity.

In the ensuing decades, attempts at reform were followed by exposés of new abuses of patients, continued poor staffing, and deterioration of hospital buildings. During the Second World War, conscientious objectors serving as psychiatric aids testified to the horrific conditions on wards at many hospitals. Simultaneously, journalists investigated hospital conditions and offered lurid—but true—accounts of what they found. For the moviegoing public, the film *The Snake Pit* (Litvak, 1948) dramatized the plight of both staff and patients at a hospital that had become antitherapeutic. Filmed at Rockland State Hospital, that 1948

Hollywood hit helped launch a campaign to increase funding and facilities. But new hospitals filled as soon as they were built.

By the 1960s, state hospitals were pronounced essentially flawed by radical clinicians, philosophers, and academic sociologists, regardless of their conditions or staffing. In the writings of Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman, and R. D. Laing, state hospitals were portrayed as agents of social control and oppression. Once again, films captured the spirit of the times. Directed by Ken Loach, an admirer and friend of Laing's, the British film *Wednesday's Child* (1971) showed a young woman's descent into psychosis, facilitated by her parents and the staff of a public hospital. In the United States, Frederick Wiseman's documentary *Titicut Follies* (1967) portrayed Bridgewater State Hospital as housing patients who were saner and less alienated than the staff.

Simultaneous with these cultural and scholarly attacks on state hospitals was the birth of the patients' rights movement. Empowered by civil rights lawyers, this movement helped motivate the deinstitutionalization of the chronically mentally ill. In the resulting chaos, state hospitals were either closed or depopulated across the country.

## The Architecture of Psychiatric Optimism

In contrast with this recent history, the 19th century was a time in which state psychiatric hospitals were seen positively. Rather than evoking scorn and fear, public hospitals were objects of clinical optimism, individual hope, and civic pride. Compared with jails and poorhouses, hospitals seemed enlightened and therapeutic rather than punitive and purely custodial. When families were no longer able to care for mentally ill relatives, hospitals offered a therapeutic respite from the stresses and responsibilities of an increasingly industrialized society. A reliable source of jobs, state hospitals were coveted by towns and cities, which competed to have them located nearby.

For the social reformers who lobbied for hospitals to be built, both buildings and grounds promised to be therapeutic. The most popular architectural design was the Kirkbride plan, which specified branching wards off a central tower and homelike furnishings—creating an orderly environment to heal disorganized minds. Also, most asylums were built away from the ills of cities, on aesthetically pleasing sites in the country. There, landscape architects created beautiful parks that would calm and recivilize the patients (Yanni, 2003).

The resulting combination of elegant grounds and impressive buildings was a form of visual propaganda for the hospital. Postcards from the early 1900s, some of which are reproduced in *Asylum: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals*, created an iconography of optimism. While many views are uncaptioned, one can find cards at flea markets with captions such as “A Pretty Spot on State Hospital Grounds, Binghamton, N.Y.”

On one such card, this caption is superimposed upon a view of a pond and fountain, surrounded by trees and paths. On the horizon, beneath a lovely pink and blue sky, one can just glimpse the tops of the hospital's towers.

## **A Contradictory History**

Given the changing nature of the public psychiatric hospital, one should be wary of any single portrayal of the "state hospital." Equating it with horrific conditions in the mid-20th century is historically inaccurate and leads to the excesses of the antipsychiatric movement. Romanticizing is equally misguided but is tempting as one encounters images and writings from a more optimistic time.

Here, for example, is the view of a socially conscious resident of Madison, Wisconsin, in 1897, who bicycled to the local state hospital on Lake Mendota:

During the evening I saw the insane people dance in a pavilion, on the lawn in the beautiful grove near the asylum. They enjoyed themselves very well and I was very glad to find so many of them that could take part and laugh and be lively. . . . There were about two hundred out to the dance while there are over four hundred in the asylum. There are 120 persons employed in taking care of these persons and the grounds. (Bedall, 1897, p. 2)

Today's historians of psychiatry avoid romanticizing or demonizing the hospital. In case studies of individual hospitals and surveys of the genre, they show how the hospital changed over time, as wards silted up with patients suffering from dementia (both syphilitic and senile) and with those not responding to treatment (Tomes, 1984; Yanni, 2007). The result was the moral treatment of the mid-19th century being replaced by crowd control, managed chaos, and making do with inadequate staff and resources.

## **Gorgeous Photos of Crumbling Buildings and Overgrown Grounds**

The latest attempt at capturing the complex history of the public hospital is a large-format, visually sumptuous book, *Asylum: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals*. It offers two brief essays and an afterword, but the heart of the book is 200 photographs, most of which are in color. They are the work of Christopher Payne, an architect and photographer. Payne's specialty is old buildings and industrial architecture, which he approaches as a sort of visual archeologist.

For this important book he spent years visiting more than 70 hospitals in 30 states. Most were still open but with few patients, housed in a small portion of what had been wards for thousands. In his travels, Payne met administrators and staff who had worked at their local hospital for most of their lives. Neither secretive nor defensive, they showed Payne the formerly grand buildings and grounds, which had been built by an army of workers and were maintained by patients as well as staff.

What Payne's photos show are pride and hope expressed in the elegant architecture, building craftsmanship, and well-designed plantings. At Taunton State (Massachusetts), a graceful curved breezeway is supported by Grecian columns, with a ceiling of tongue-and-groove paneling echoing the curve. At Yankton State (South Dakota), a spacious lobby paved with mosaic tiles gives way to a grand marble staircase—hauntingly littered with broken plaster.

The photos also document the self-supporting, separate world that hospitals became. There is an overgrown greenhouse at Pilgrim State (New York), deserted dairy cow stalls at Marlboro State (New Jersey), an abandoned slaughterhouse at Broughton State (North Carolina), and massive sauerkraut vats at Danville State (Pennsylvania).

The most remarkable quality of the photos is their evocation of the sadness that surrounded lives spent secluded from family and friends. Most of the photos look like they were taken yesterday but show scenes composed 50 or 100 years ago. With no people in sight, one's imagination fills in the spaces with images of long-dead patients—real or imagined.

Missing patients are evoked by piles of abandoned equipment, furnishings, and clothing. Jumbled suitcases in an attic, for example, are a haunting memorial to the long departed residents of Bolivar State Hospital (Tennessee).

For well-known hospitals, one tries to insert prominent patients or staff. Did Mary Jane Ward, for example, wear any of the bowling shoes that we see neatly arranged at Rockland State before she was discharged and wrote the novel *The Snake Pit* (Ward, 1946)? Did Robert Neugeboren, profiled in *Imagining Robert*, see any of the patient-painted murals when he lived at Creedmoor State Hospital (Neugeboren, 1997)?

Accompanying the photos are essays by neurologist Oliver Sacks and the photographer himself. Sacks uses a patient's memoir to remind us that state hospitals were *asylums* in the 19th century, places of refuge before the pessimism and overcrowding set in. He also notes that even in the mid-20th century one could find "pockets of human decency, of real life and kindness" among the neglect (p. 3). This point is well illustrated by old snapshots of patients engaged in recreation and purposeful work.

Christopher Payne's essay is a useful short history of the "origin, construction, and demise" of state hospitals, illustrated with old photos and architectural plans (p. 7). He also supplies an afterword chronicling his quest to photograph the crumbling infrastructure of insanity. He ends with the sad story of the demolition of Danvers State Hospital in Massachusetts, bulldozed and replaced by condominiums. Fortunately for us, Payne

recorded the destruction of those beautiful buildings. As he notes, it is “ironic . . . that so much care and effort was put into a structure intended solely for society’s outcasts” (p. 205). His book is a soulful tribute to that vanished, benevolent spirit.

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