



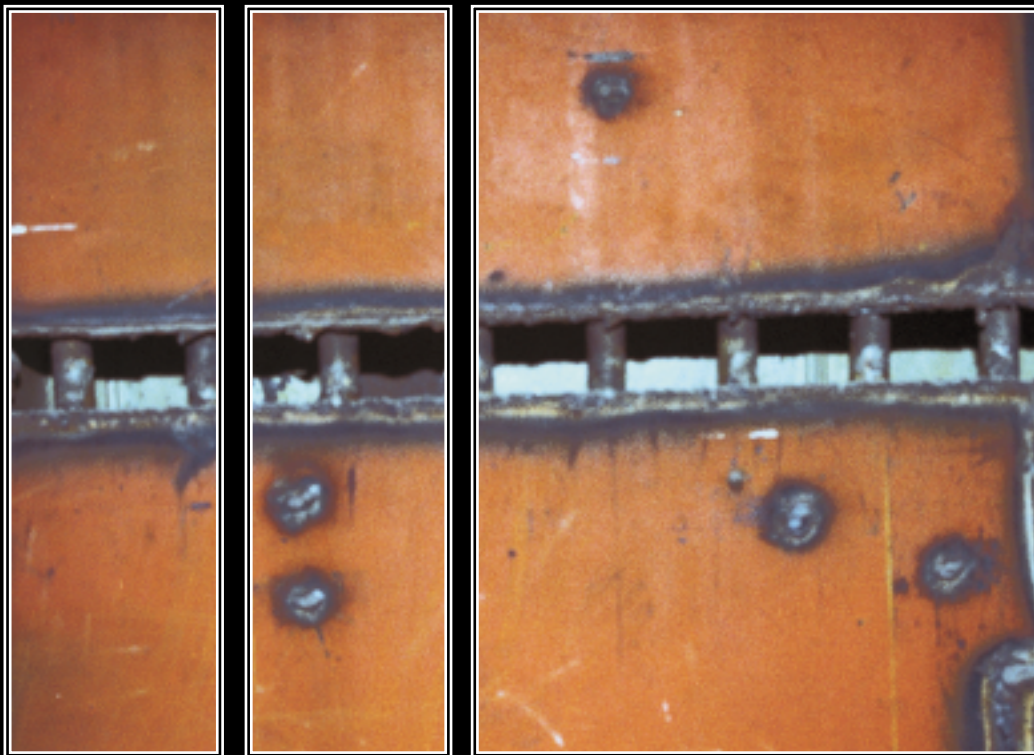
Cell Doors Close Forever

Just a few days before a striking and rarely seen part of Arizona history was converted into office space, ARIZONA ATTORNEY magazine was permitted to photograph the former Maricopa County jail, housed on the top floors of the courthouse at First Avenue and Washington. Because the jail was under construction, there was no electricity and no hope for lighting equipment or air conditioning. The photos were shot with only a 35mm camera, a flash, a couple of flashlights and a deadline. The goal was to capture, in just a few hours, the experiences of the staff and inmates who walked the cellblocks since 1929.

We were led up a small wood staircase. A steel door read “No Guns in Jail.” As the door opened, we were immediately enveloped in the scent of 100-degree heat and stale urine. Deputy Court Administrator Hugh Gallagher led us through a rusted metal hallway to a large open room, used as a holding cell. With two windows and a small toilet in the corner, this cell was the easiest to photograph because of the amount of natural light.



Blowtorch singes
and orange
steel mark
modifications
done to the cells
over 70 years
of use.



Farther from the waiting room, the cells appeared more menacing. Time has worked quickly on this place. The bars were so rusted that the metal was peeling away from the beams. We walked toward the cells with only two cylinders of light from our flashlights leading the way. Through the lens of the camera, I was alone in darkness surrounded only by the images on the walls. Naked women, Christ-like figures: These walls continue to hold so many trapped expressions. A drawing of piano keys surrounded by musical notes did not break the silence of a cell.

On the day these photos were taken, the courthouse top floor was uncomfortably hot. It is difficult to imagine the sweltering conditions—for the keepers and the kept—when each cell was occupied by up to 12 inmates. And we may never know whether the windows to the outside, providing wonderful views of the heart of downtown Phoenix, were a blessing or a curse to the imprisoned. Free people were only a sidewalk away.

You feel much closer to the grotesque when it is shot directly into your eye. Every name scraped into the side of a bunk, every rusted toilet seems only two inches from your face when you look through a camera. Your vision is limited to small sections of large places, so you see things more intimately. Throughout the entire day, I only pulled the camera away from my eye twice. Once, I found I was standing on an airshaft floor covered with dead pigeons. And the other time, I had just finished my last roll of film. ▽

