The panopticon: explore the model

Jeremy Bentham's inspection house, as a 3D model. A text version of the interactive explainer, for anyone who cannot use it.

About this document

The explainer is an interactive 3D model of the panopticon, with no sound. You can use it in two ways: step by step, building the model one part at a time over 11 steps, or freely, by choosing viewpoints and switching parts on and off.

This version gives all the explainer's text word for word, describes what the model shows at each step and in each view, and rewrites the "Things to try" activities so they work without the model. In each section, "On screen" gives the exact words shown, and "What you see" describes the model.

The page has a pale, paper-coloured background, headings in a classical serif typeface and a red accent colour. The model shows a pale stone ring of cells, four storeys high, around a dark round tower with a pointed roof, on grassland under a pale sky. People are small dark silhouettes. The inspector and the lines of sight are red, the colour that marks everything to do with watching.

If you find any problems with this document or the explainer, please contact Steven Williams at s.williams10@lse.ac.uk.

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The page

On screen

The heading reads "The panopticon: explore the model". Beneath it:

> Jeremy Bentham's inspection house, as a 3D model you can turn, cut open and step inside. Go through it step by step, or explore it freely, and tap a label to learn what each part does.
>
> A demo of what educators can make with Claude. The panopticon is an example topic, and the content is quick and unchecked.

Two buttons choose how to use the model: "Step by step" and "Explore freely". Under the model, a group labelled "Turn and zoom" has four buttons: "Turn left", "Turn right", "Zoom in" and "Zoom out". A note in the corner of the model reads "Drag to turn, or use the buttons below". In the views from a cell and from the tower, it reads "Drag to look around, or use Turn left and Turn right".

At the bottom of the page:

> Modelled and built in code by Claude Opus 5.5 in a Claude chat. Directed by Steven Williams.

What you see

The model fills a wide panel near the top of the page, with a panel of text beside it on larger screens and below it on phones. Labels on the model are small rounded tabs, each joined to the part it names by a short line ending in a dot. Below the model come the “Things to try” activities, then a short note about the model.

Step by step

The explainer opens in step-by-step mode. Under the model, a box shows the step number, the step’s heading and its text, with “Previous” and “Next” buttons. Beside the model, a panel headed “Steps” lists all 11 steps by number, so you can jump to any of them. It reads: “Jump to any step, or press Next to build the model one part at a time.”

Each step adds one part of the building, in the order the explanation introduces them. The newest part’s label is outlined in red, and labels for earlier parts stay on the model. Between steps, the camera moves smoothly to the new view, or jumps straight there if your device is set to reduce motion. Choosing a label on the model jumps to the step that introduces that part.

In this mode the model is shorter than in “Explore freely”, so the model and the step text fit on the screen together. Choosing “Step by step”, “Previous”, “Next” or a step in the list scrolls the page to show both, if either is out of view.

Step	Heading	What the step adds	View
1	An inspection house	The outline of the building on the ground	From above
2	Cells	The ring of cells	From above
3	Window	A label for the windows	From above
4	Iron grating	A label for the gratings	Cutaway
5	A person in a cell	A person in each cell	Cutaway
6	Inspection tower	The tower	From above
7	Open gap	A label for the gap	Cutaway
8	Blinds	A label for the blinds	Cutaway
9	Inspector	The inspector, inside the tower	Cutaway, inside the tower
10	Lines of sight	Lines from the tower to every	From above

Step	Heading	What the step adds	View
		cell	
11	The whole building	Nothing new: the complete building	From above

Step 1: An inspection house

On screen

> Step 1 of 11. An inspection house. In letters written in 1787, Bentham described a circular building: cells in tiers around the outside, an inspection tower at the centre, and an open gap between them.

What you see

An empty site on grassland under a pale sky, seen from above at an angle. On the ground, a broad dark ring and a small dark disc in its centre mark where the building and its tower will stand. There are no labels yet, and the “Previous” button is unavailable.

Step 2: Cells

On screen

> Step 2 of 11. Cells. Cells are arranged in tiers around the outside of the circular building. Each one runs the full depth of the ring, from the outer wall to the side facing the tower.

What you see

The ring of cells stands where the outer mark was: a thick, circular building of pale stone, four storeys high, with rows of small square windows on the outside. Through the open centre you can see the inside of the ring, lined with bars. The centre is still empty. A label, “Cells”, outlined in red, points to the outer wall.

Step 3: Window

On screen

> Step 3 of 11. Window. Each cell has a window in its outer wall. Daylight from behind makes the person in the cell easy to see from the tower, their outline sharp against the light.

What you see

The same view. A new label, “Window”, outlined in red, points to a window in the outer wall. The “Cells” label stays.

Step 4: Iron grating

On screen

> Step 4 of 11. Iron grating. The side of each cell facing the tower is an iron grating rather than a wall, so nothing blocks the view in from the centre.

What you see

The camera moves round and closer, and part of the ring is cut away, so you look into the building from the side. You can see the cells' floors in four tiers, a window in each outer wall and, on the side facing the centre, a grating of upright iron bars. A new label, "Iron grating", outlined in red, points to the grating on the top tier. The "Window" label stays.

Step 5: A person in a cell

On screen

> Step 5 of 11. A person in a cell. Each cell holds one person, separated from their neighbours by solid walls. They can see the tower, but cannot see whether anyone inside it is looking at them.

What you see

The same cutaway view. Small dark silhouettes of people now stand or sit in the cells, one in each. A new label, "A person in a cell", outlined in red, points to a figure on the second tier.

Step 6: Inspection tower

On screen

> Step 6 of 11. Inspection tower. At the centre stands the inspection tower. From here, a single inspector can see into every cell.

What you see

The camera returns to the view from above, and the ring is whole again. A dark, round tower with a pointed roof now stands at the centre. A new label, "Inspection tower", outlined in red, points to it. The "Cells" and "Window" labels stay.

Step 7: Open gap

On screen

> Step 7 of 11. Open gap. An open gap separates the cells from the tower. It keeps the people in the cells at a distance and gives the tower a clear view all round.

What you see

The cutaway view returns, now with the tower in the centre. Between the cells and the tower, the paved ground is empty. A new label, "Open gap", outlined in red, points to it.

Step 8: Blinds

On screen

> Step 8 of 11. Blinds. The tower is kept dark, with blinds at its windows, so no one in a cell can tell whether anyone is inside. Bentham also used partitions inside the tower so no light shone through.

What you see

The same view. A new label, "Blinds", outlined in red, points to the tower's windows, which are covered by dark horizontal slats.

Step 9: Inspector

On screen

> Step 9 of 11. Inspector. The inspector. From a cell, you cannot tell whether this person is here or not, so the only safe assumption is that you are always being watched.

What you see

The same view, but the tower's walls and blinds are hidden, so you can see inside. The tower's floors show as dark discs, one above another, and on one of them stands a red figure. A new label, "Inspector", outlined in red, points to it. The "Blinds" label is hidden while the blinds are.

Step 10: Lines of sight

On screen

> Step 10 of 11. Lines of sight. Lines of sight run from the tower to all 96 cells.

What you see

The camera returns to the view from above, and the tower is whole again. Thin dark red lines run from the tower to every cell, seen through the open centre of the ring. Labels for "Cells", "Window" and "Inspection tower" are shown, and none is highlighted.

Step 11: The whole building

On screen

> Step 11 of 11. The whole building. That's the whole building. Choose Explore freely to pick a viewpoint, switch parts on and off, or try the activities below.

What you see

The complete building from above, with labels for "Cells", "Window" and "Inspection tower", none of them highlighted. On this step, the "Next" button reads "Explore freely".

Exploring freely

Choosing "Explore freely" shows the whole building, with buttons for four viewpoints, five switches and a list of the building's parts. A status line beside the model describes each change as you make it.

Viewpoints

Overview

On screen: "Overview of the whole building."

What you see: The complete building from above, as in step 11. You can drag to turn it, or pinch or scroll to zoom.

Cutaway

On screen: “Cutaway: part of the ring is removed so you can see a cell’s window, its grating and the tower.”

What you see: The side view into the building, as in step 8, with labels for “Window”, “Iron grating”, “A person in a cell”, “Open gap” and “Blinds”.

From a cell

On screen: “View from a cell, looking out through the grating. The tower is a dark shape: you cannot tell whether the inspector is there. The inspector is in the tower right now.” If the inspector has been switched off, the last sentence reads “The tower is empty right now.”

What you see: You look out through the upright iron bars of a cell’s grating, across the gap, to the dark tower in the middle of the view, its windows covered by blinds. On either side are the tiers of cells across the ring, each with a person outlined against a bright window. A “Blinds” label points to the tower. You can drag, or use “Turn left” and “Turn right”, to look around.

From the tower

On screen: “View from the tower, as the inspector. Drag to look round: every cell is visible, each person lit from behind.”

What you see: You look out between the tower’s window bars at the inside of the ring: four tiers of cells, each person a dark outline against the bright window behind them. The view can be turned all the way round, and every cell is in view.

Show or hide

Five switches change what the model shows. “Inspector in the tower” and “Labels” are on to begin with. The status line shows the message in the table when you switch each one on or off.

Switch	When switched on	When switched off
Inspector in the tower	“The inspector is now in the tower.” The red figure appears inside the tower, visible only when you can see inside.	“The tower is now empty.” From a cell, the message adds: “From the cell, nothing you can see has changed.”
See inside the tower	“The tower walls and blinds are hidden so you can see inside.”	“The tower walls and blinds are back.”
Cut away part of the ring	“Part of the ring is cut away.”	“The ring is whole again.”
Lines of sight	“Lines of sight run from the tower to all 96 cells.”	“Lines of sight hidden.”
Labels	“Labels shown.”	“Labels hidden. The parts list beside the model still works.”

Parts of the building

The panel beside the model is headed “An inspection house”. It reads:

> In letters written in 1787, Bentham described a circular building: cells in tiers around the outside, an inspection tower at the centre, and an open gap between them.
>
> Choose a part below, or tap a label on the model.

Below this are buttons for eight parts: Cells, Window, Iron grating, A person in a cell, Open gap, Inspection tower, Blinds and Inspector. Choosing one shows its description, which is the same text as steps 2 to 9. For the inspector, if the inspector or the inside of the tower is switched off, the description adds: “Switch on Inspector in the tower and See inside the tower to spot them.”

Turn and zoom

“Turn left” and “Turn right” turn the view a little at a time. In the overview and cutaway, they turn the building; in the views from a cell and from the tower, they turn your view. “Zoom in” and “Zoom out” move the camera closer or further away. They are unavailable in the views from a cell and from the tower.

Things to try

On screen: “These use the controls in Explore freely. Choose Explore freely first, or press Set this up to go straight there.”

The explainer has three activities. Each one has a “Set this up” button, which switches to “Explore freely” and chooses the view and switches the activity needs. Below each activity’s on-screen text is a version that works without the model: make your prediction first, then read what the model shows.

Is anyone watching?

On screen: “Choose From a cell, then switch Inspector in the tower on and off. Does anything you can see change?”

Without the model: Imagine you are in a cell, looking out at the tower. Before reading on, predict: if the inspector leaves the tower, will anything you can see change?

In the model, the view from the cell stays exactly the same whether the inspector is there or not. The tower is a dark shape with blinds at its windows. Only the status line changes, from “The inspector is in the tower right now” to “The tower is empty right now”.

Swap places

On screen: “Choose From the tower and look around. How many people can you see, and how clearly?”

Without the model: Now imagine you are the inspector, inside the tower. Before reading on, predict how many people you could see, and how clearly.

In the model, the view from the tower takes in all four tiers of cells, all the way round. Each person is a sharp dark outline against the bright window behind them.

Check the trick

On screen: “Choose Cutaway and switch on See inside the tower. What does the design hide from the cells, and how?”

Without the model: Before reading on, predict what you would find if you could see inside the tower, and what stops the people in the cells from seeing it.

In the model, the cutaway with the tower’s walls and blinds hidden shows the tower’s dark floors and, on one of them, the red figure of the inspector. With the walls and blinds back in place, the inspector can’t be seen from the cells.

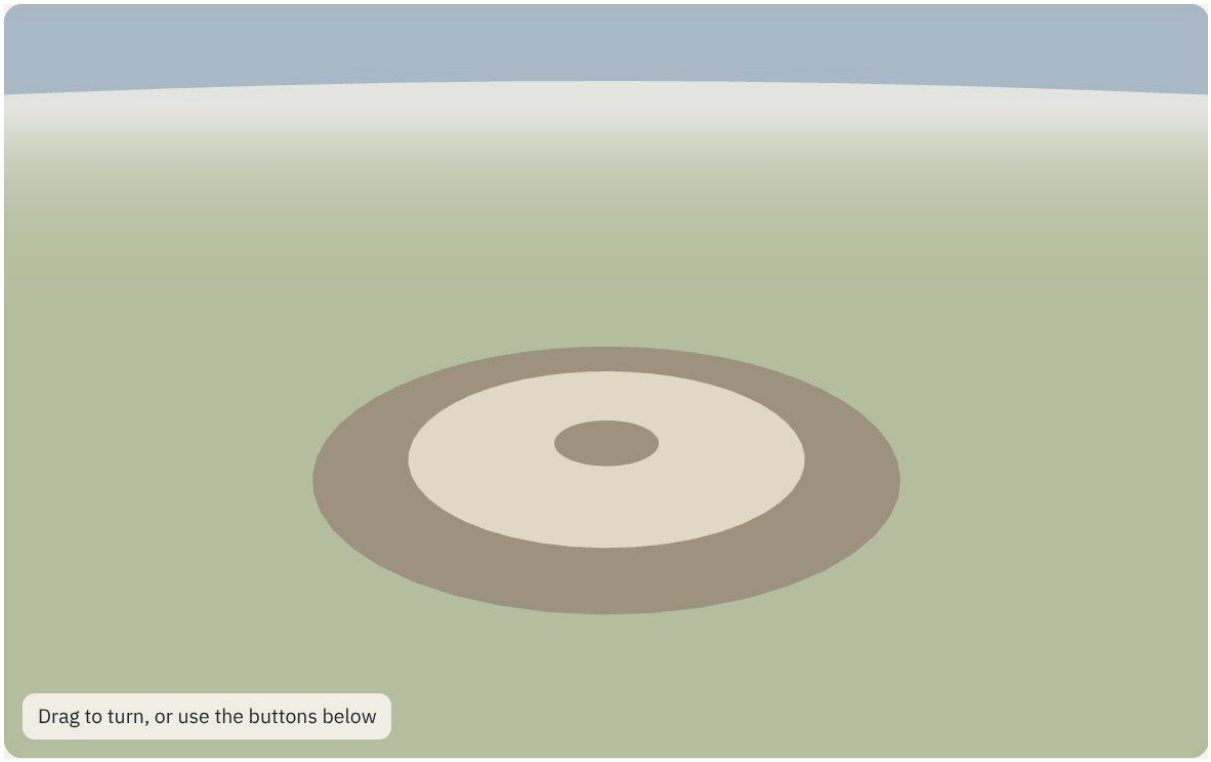
About this model

On screen:

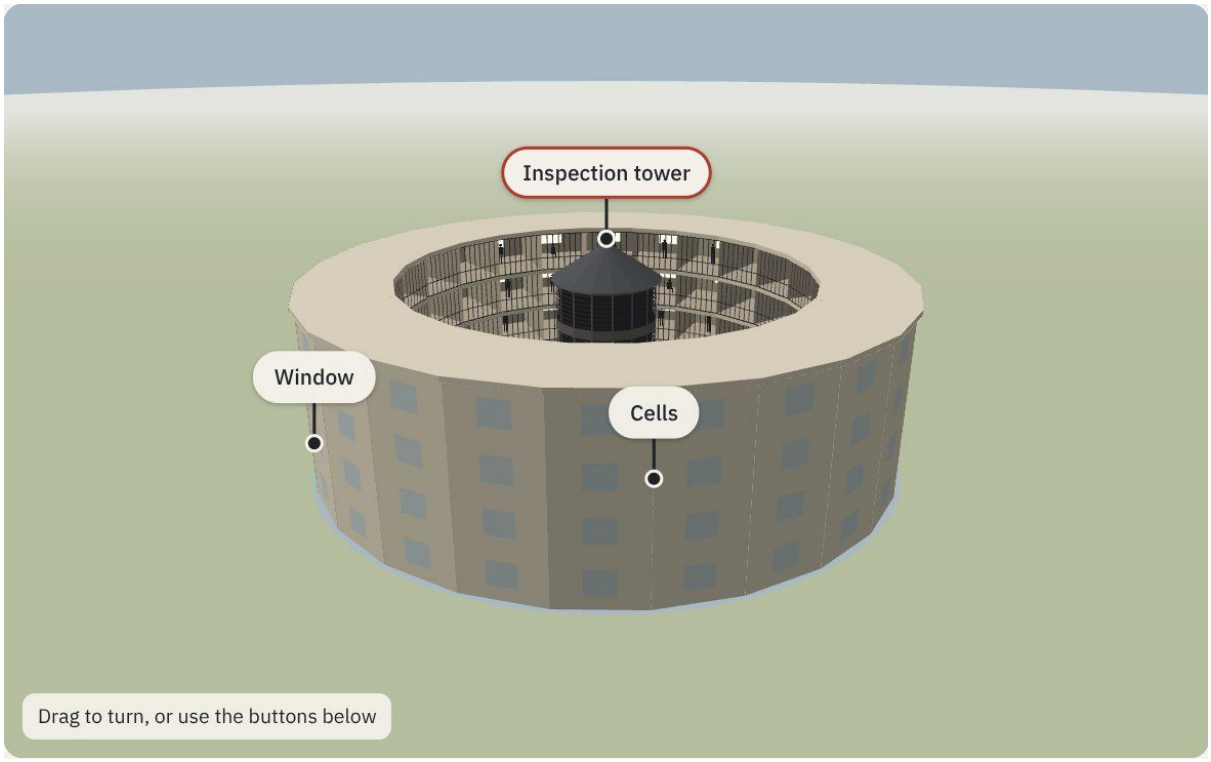
> This is a simplified diagram, not a copy of Bentham’s drawings. It has 96 cells in four tiers for illustration, and leaves out the galleries, stairs and roof he specified. Bentham used partitions inside the tower so no light showed through; here that is a solid dark core. No panopticon was built exactly as he planned, though later prisons such as Presidio Modelo in Cuba, built from 1926, borrowed the idea. Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1975) made it a symbol of power that works through the possibility of being watched.

Key frames

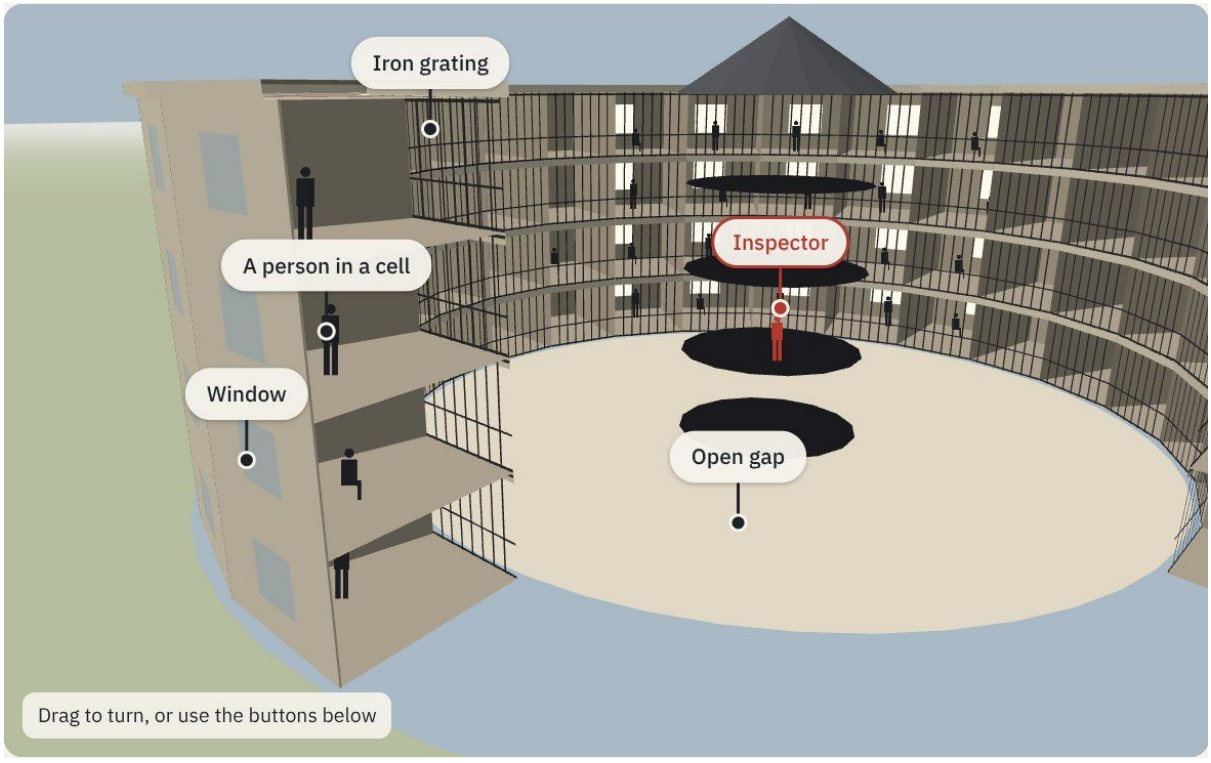
These are stills from the interactive model.



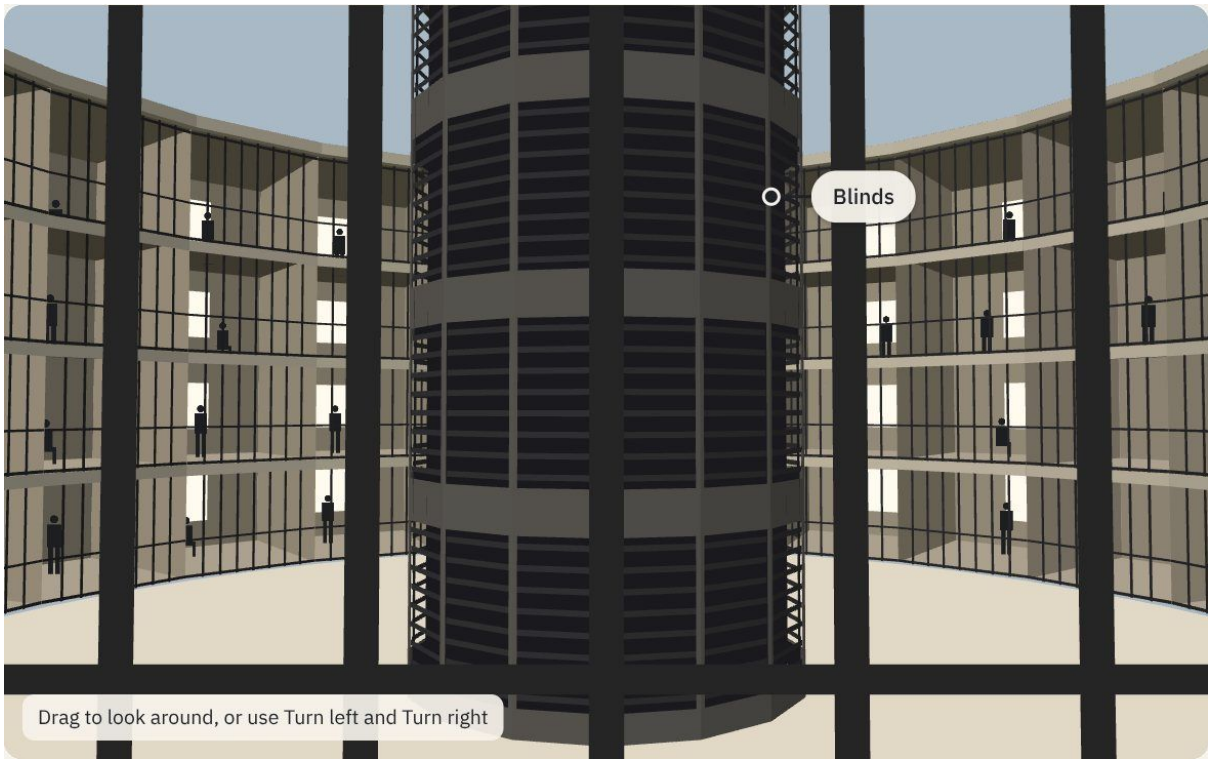
Step 1: the outline of the building on an empty site.



Step 6: the tower appears at the centre of the ring.



Step 9: inside the tower, the inspector.



The view from a cell: the tower gives nothing away.



The view from the tower: every person in sight.