



# The Moral Treatment Model of Early Modern Psychiatric Care: Insights from Postcards of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Psychiatric Hospitals

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## Introduction

- Psychiatry in the late 1700s to early 1900s entered a reform known as the moral treatment movement.<sup>1,2</sup>
- This period of reform involved work therapy in a retreat style setting to restore normalcy.
- Large open spaces were incorporated into hospital architecture to accommodate this shift.<sup>3,4</sup>
- The movement's ideals of healthfulness devolved into institutionalization and abandonment<sup>5</sup> which became evident through exploration of cultural artifacts.

### Objectives

- Evaluate the role of cultural artifacts in charting the historical evolution of psychiatric care.
- Characterize the degree to which the public was exposed to moral treatment and its decline.
- Document relationships between moral treatment and postcard depictions of psychiatric hospitals.

## Methods

We performed structured qualitative examination of more than 138 postcards, 58 photographs and illustrations, and supporting psychiatric hospital records and periodicals.

Items were sorted by date when possible. Postcards, photographs, and illustrations were examined to note accompanying annotations, interior versus exterior depiction, foreground and background contents (such as buildings, vegetation, livestock), and subject qualities.

In the second phase, periodicals, building plans, and hospital reports were reviewed to identify historical context, themes, and incongruencies with preceding materials.

## Results

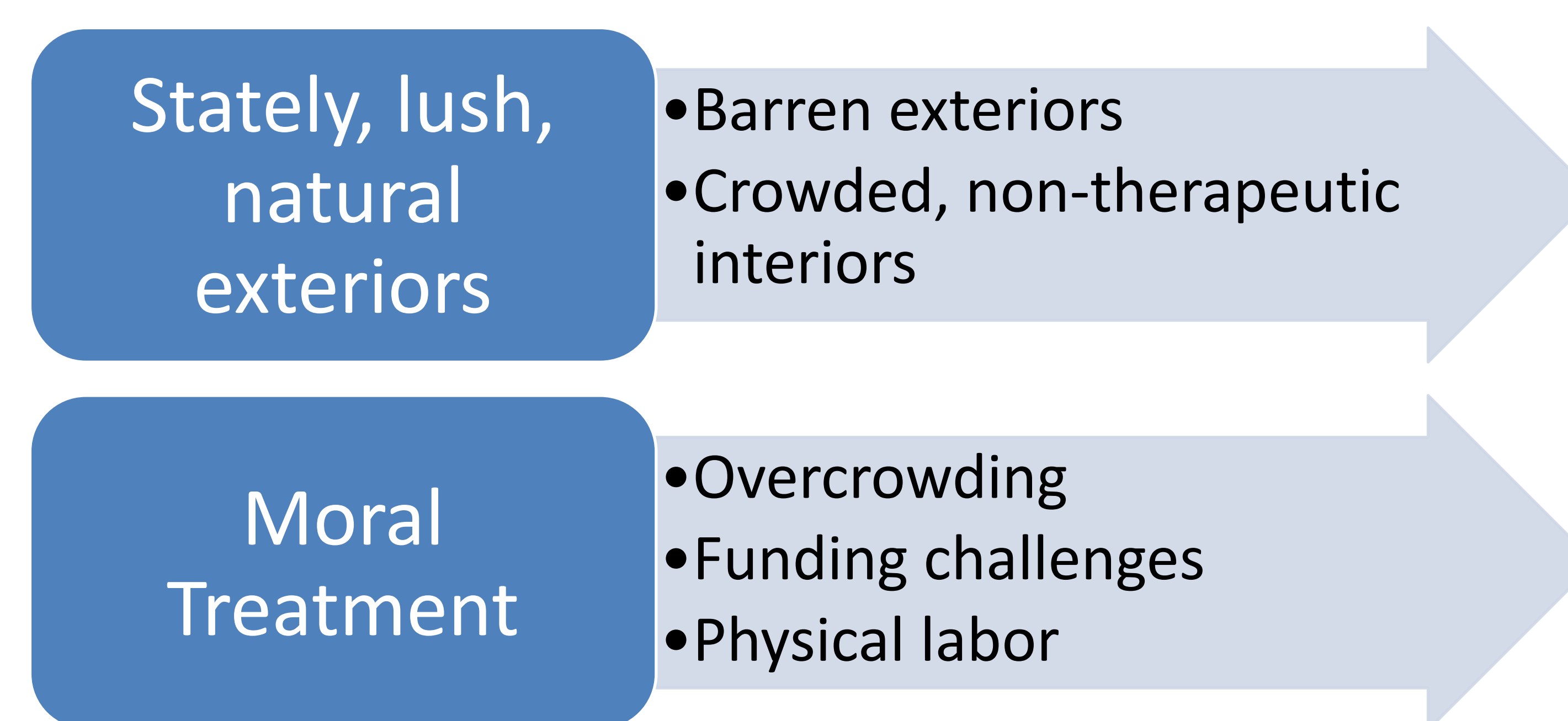


Figure 1: The parallel nature of the decline of moral treatment and its visual depictions in postcards throughout the 1800s-1900s. The relationship between visual depiction and decline of moral treatment as an acceptable treatment modality was occasionally evident in postcards and explicitly in supporting documentation.

## Conclusions

- Transinstitutionalization as a result of the failure of moral treatment is supported by qualitative review of archival images.
- Postcards represented highly curated exterior views of hospital spaces incongruent with historical records.
- Postcards represented marketing of "cottages" and "retreats" which camouflaged real conditions.
- Changing depictions of postcards narratively characterizes the shift to biomedical treatments in 1900s, and the holistic model of today.

## Discussion

Postcards are the cultural artifacts through which psychiatric hospitals offered themselves as models of reform. Although moral treatment was never achieved, its depiction offers valuable historical insight and future perspective.

1. Moral treatment thrived on attractive public narratives and medical tourism through postcard imagery.
2. The ideals of moral treatment remain attractive today with the advent of holistic psychiatric treatment.
3. However, the historical narrative of moral treatment, from deinstitutionalization onward, warns of continuing need for funding, social support and improving stigma surrounding psychiatric treatment.<sup>8</sup>

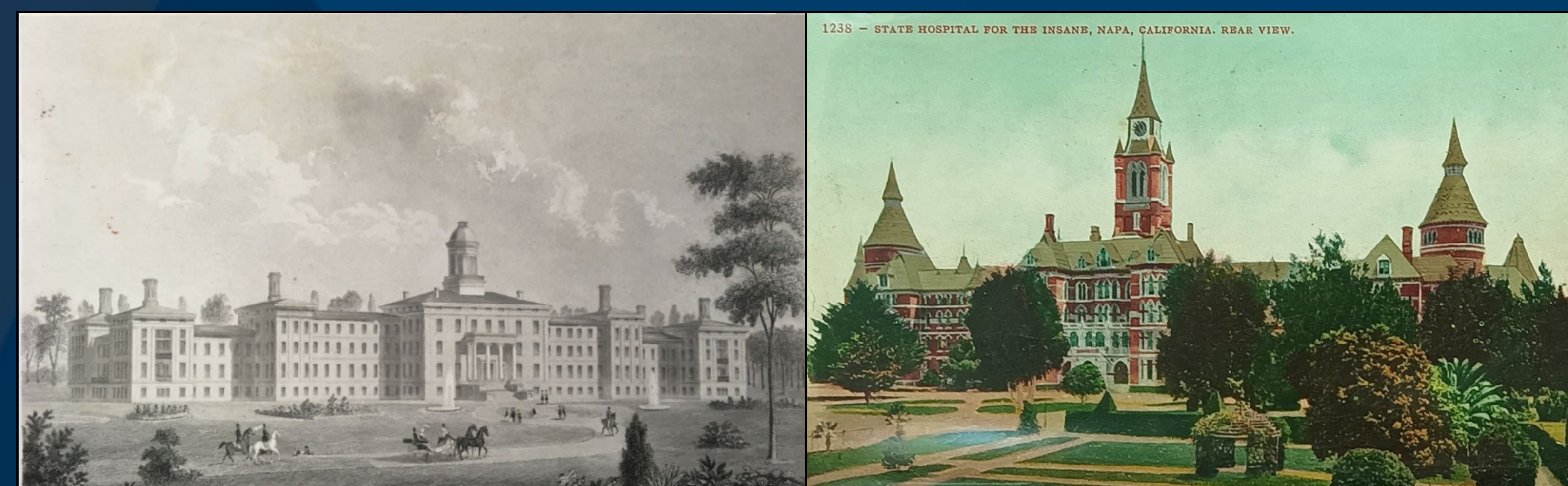


Figure 2: Left: Indiana Hospital for the Insane, Indianapolis, IN (1852). Right: State Hospital for the Insane, Napa, CA (undated).

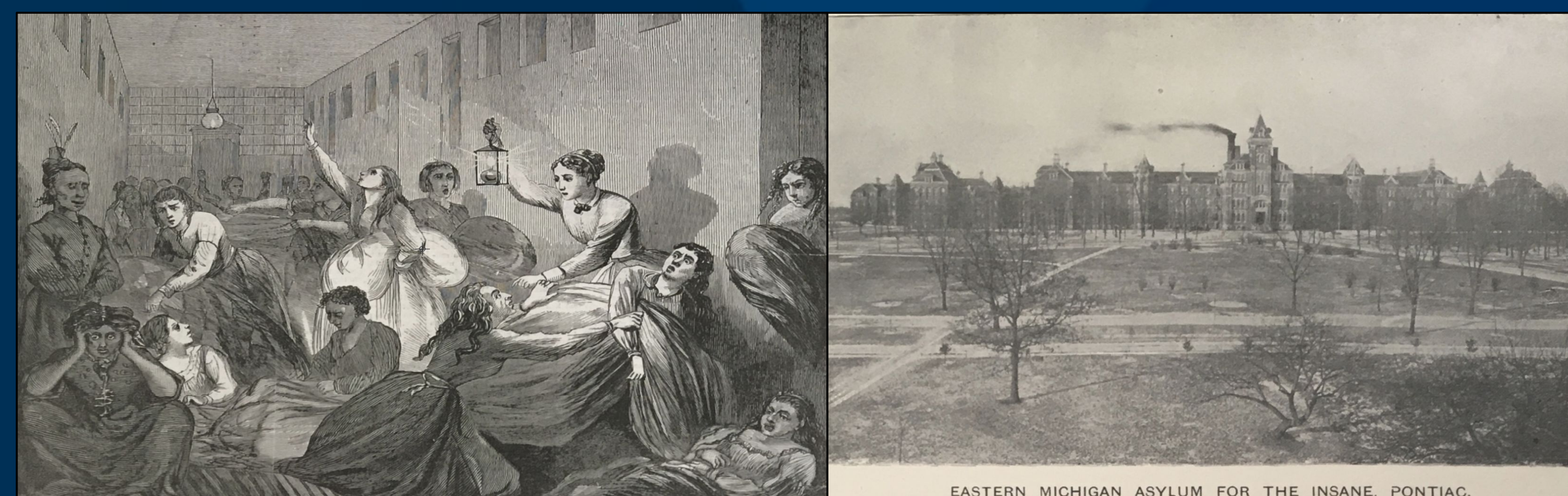


Figure 3: Left: New York Lunatic Asylum at Blackwell Island, East River, NY (1868). Right: Eastern Michigan Asylum for the Insane, Pontiac, MI (1898). Environments in postcards were natural and inviting (Fig 2), only later becoming barren (Fig 3R). Artist depictions of interiors more closely reflected true conditions (Fig 3L).<sup>6,7</sup>

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