Planning & Design of Correctional Facilities

Insight into Today’s Design of Correctional Facilities and A Look Into Future Applications

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Commissioned By Norix Group Inc.
Over the last several years, the planning and design profession has gained significant knowledge of what constitutes a normalized and therapeutic environment. When considering architectural design that calms and provides wellness this may seem more applicable for healthcare needs, but professionals working in Corrections such as facility managers, healthcare workers, architects and designers (A+D) also recognize this need. As medical experts peer further into Correction populations, it is becoming clear that large percentages struggle with mental and addiction disorders. In addition, populations are increasing in quantity and in age. Since many under incarceration will return to our communities, concerns grow that the more often we elect to “warehouse” rather than humanize and rehabilitate, the greater the adverse impact this segment of the population will continue to have on public health and welfare.

Therefore, architects and consultants are working hard in this area to reinvent the fortress and meet changing needs, while preserving the non-negotiable issues of security and economics. Ensuring the public is protected from criminal behavior is without debate the foremost goal. However, the biggest question still stands: how can society balance the conflicting needs for security and the need to rehabilitate, but still protect the public and minimize criminal behavior?

Reasons for Rethinking The Design of Correctional Facilities

At the dawn of the 21st century, Correction demographics report populations are aging, have more physical and mental disabilities, and include more women and juveniles. These statistics indicate the industry must address more complex issues than mere warehousing and overcrowding. This has inspired many planners and architects to rethink how we design and manage Correctional facilities. Questions are being raised, is there a way to modify plans to reduce population sizes and expand programs while protecting needed security? Are there methods and new technologies that assist in security, relieve Correctional officers, and allow their resources to be placed back into productive management? Is there a way to plan and design that helps to humanize the inmate, reducing their anxieties, and increasing safety for all?
According to Leonard Witke, who spent 20 years as director of facilities management and staff architect for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, “The essence of any prison today is the housing unit.” Witke says that with the dawn of direct supervision and the expectation that inmates spend more time in controlled environments, housing and program areas need to be physically linked, making activities from dining to dayroom use more manageable.

The first change with this was seen in 1983 as federal prisons switched from linear facility designs to triangles and squares. It had immediate impact. “These new shapes created a day space in the middle that gives designers more to work with, an open space that lets the staff perceive issues before they become problems,” states Stephen Carter, a consultant in justice planning with Carter Goble Associates and who helped develop the first set of building and space standards established by the American Correctional Association (ACA). With demonstrated positive results, inmates are being housed in groups of limited size, 100 – 200, in lieu of the previous 500 - 1000, in part as a way to more easily contain aggressive behavior but also to support expanded programming. Witke says the smaller, campus-like configuration offers the ideal framework for classifying and segregating inmates with special needs. “I see us being able to create safe areas for geriatric inmates, for instance, so they don’t have to confront young, active inmates.” Similarly, female inmates often have a greater need for privacy and family contact, and juveniles require more order and direction in their lives. Both benefit from the “facility-within-a-facility environment.”

Yet, the flip side to the smaller “pod” design and the shift to helping prisoners modify their behavior essentially creates more contact between them and correctional officers, and can stretch resources to the limit. According to Witke, currently an architect and justice consultant with The Durrant Group in Madison, this has provided opportunities to A+D to think the possible and bring forth vision.
The challenge becomes that of parallel concerns: how to change the way people act, control inmate disruptions, and protect vulnerable individuals. According to the leading experts in the field, the best Correctional facilities recognize the challenge of creating spaces that do not confine the spirit or crush self-esteem, while also sending an unmistakable message of order.

However, planning and design within Correctional facilities, more than any other building type, demands a deep understanding of a layering of issues – all of which can be life-enhancing and life-threatening. Again, depending on whether the facility is of minimum, medium or maximum security plays a distinctive role in the decisions relating to planning, design, and the human element. Therefore, the following is a list of key variables to consider:

- Facility Mission and Operational Philosophy
- Inmate and Staff Safety
- Degree of Necessary Surveillance
- Ability to Serve At-risk Populations
- Level of Staff Skills and Training
- Staff Retention
- Type and Quality of Support Facilities
- Proximity to Outside Services
- Community Concerns and Involvement
- Presence of Alternatives to Incarceration

With these issues in mind, the question becomes how planners and designers address these needs and preserve the non-negotiable factor of security yet create outward tools that provide a normalized environment.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR NEW CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

The following are key “design tenants” that leading professionals are reviewing and incorporating into new Correctional facilities. These are not listed by importance, but by need of conversation:
**Humanizing Materials & Color**

In all facilities that play a role in rehabilitation, designers strive to create spaces that humanize, calm, and relax. Such spaces ease anxiety, modify behavior and inspire dignity. Mainly applicable for minimum to medium-security Corrections and transitional facilities, appropriate materials and color create an environment where inmates can learn, socialize and be productive. In addition, these interiors produce a warmer environment for those who work there.

Behavioral studies advise the use of better acoustics, day-lighting, and the intentional use of color in order to produce a normalized environment that soothes the psyche and rehabilitates. Leading research shows that interiors which have an interesting use of material and color and that are not overly neutral will increase morale and mental well-being, ultimately reducing inmate and staff anxieties.

For Corrections, this translates to improved safety. When inmates are calmed, their misconduct is reduced, which directly improves staff safety and resources. In addition, it is seen that when staff experience a safer environment, job satisfaction increases and life-saving rules and policies are more likely to be enforced. Color is also being used to logistically zone areas. Therefore, when using color to zone, it quickly enhances an officer’s acuity to recognize when an inmate has crossed into an off-limits area. Using color to zone spaces also assists with keeping mobile furniture in its correct area.

**Staff-Focused Amenities & Happiness**

It’s been shown that before they retire, long-serving correctional staff will do more time “inside” than most prisoners will. Also, it is becoming more difficult to recruit, train, and retain a Correctional work force. Baby boomers are retiring from the workforce at an alarming rate and causing organizations to lose vetted people in critical positions. In addition, Corrections is recognizing that officers and healthcare workers require special training and with this special training these individuals become more marketable in the private sector. According to Joyce G. Fogg, Virginia Employment Commission Chair and member of the ACA Work Force Advisory Council, “This is one of the greatest challenges corrections will face in the future. State and local budget restraints have kept many state departments of Correction from being fully staffed, and competition is further adding to state’s staffing woes as some workers realize that jobs in the private sector may come with more pay and less bureaucracy.” In times of economic distress this speaks volumes.
As the need for correctional officers, social workers, health, mental health, and educational professionals increases during the next decade, vital incentives including stronger career platforms, “staff focused” amenities, and overall job satisfaction play a key role in Correction’s ability to attract qualified workers and compete with the private sector.

Kelly Dial, professor at University of Mississippi in the Department of Administration of Justice, states there are four variables that are significant predictors for job satisfaction within Corrections:

- Feelings of Job Danger
- Age of Worker
- Work Stress
- Caring from Supervisor

Dial says reports have indicated that the less likely an employee was to have feelings of job danger, the more likely he or she was to be satisfied at work. Work stress and age were the most significant predictors of job satisfaction. As the correctional employee’s age increases, his or her job satisfaction increases. Dial also cites that the final significant predictor of job satisfaction is care from supervisors. Employees who report having less care from immediate supervisors are significantly more likely to have decreased feelings of job satisfaction.

Job dissatisfaction leads to critical issues for Correctional facilities. With many agencies facing staff shortages, Dial says that first-line supervisors’ care for their employees may be a practical way of retaining staff. Many solutions currently being used have risen out of business and medical setting research; mainly, the “end user” focused approach. This approach places high value on the employee, with supervisors focusing more on people and relationships than “toner and spreadsheets.” These supervisors had higher levels of productivity than those managers who made decisions themselves and dictated to subordinates.

For architects and facility managers, the challenge is to create inmate and staff areas that humanize and provide normalcy. These spaces need alternative materials and a more interesting use of color to lift the psyche and boost morale. Staff spaces infused with natural lighting and that provide well-appointed areas such as staff break spaces help to ensure staff perceptions that supervisors directly “do care” about them and their relationships.
Security & Safety
Without debate, this is a Correctional facility’s main focus – to protect staff, vulnerable individuals, and the public as a whole. Few would also debate the significant role planning and design plays in the outcome of a facility’s safety. As discussed, many items are being implemented to enhance all aspects of security and safety: smaller “pods” with community centers that are easier to supervise, use of technology that relieves officers and alerts conduct disruptions, increases in inmate-expanded programs and the introduction of humanizing materials and color. These strategies positively impact staff retention, place valuable staff back into circulation and provide better resources to support expanded programs and oversee special needs groups. As these walls come down, it is believed by Correction experts and administrators that color play a key role. Not only does color visually soften the otherwise harsh, lack luster environment, it can also be used as a tool to designate key areas and ensure inmates are appropriately within their assigned area.

Healthcare Practices
With many state mental health facilities closing and “depositing” their patients into Correctional facilities added with Correction’s aging population and an explosion of woman and juvenile inmates, the number and variety of individuals who comprise the country’s correctional population is quickly increasing. This is causing the link between the justice system and public health to be more pronounced than ever before and experts realizing that any serious dialogue concerning Corrections cannot exclude the critical component of Healthcare. In order to minimize poor inmate physical health and conduct disorders, we must provide total care. Therefore, just treating traditional physical health issues is not sufficient, and Corrections professionals are just beginning to recognize the need to address an inmate’s psychological well-being.
A recent report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicated that at least 16% of those in Correctional facilities have histories of mental health issues. To some behavioral experts and Corrections professionals, this statistic seems low. It is also believed nearly two-thirds of those housed in Correctional institutions have, or have had, substance abuse problems and engaged in lifestyles that placed them at risk for deadly contagious diseases. Again, as Correctional facilities are being used as mental health depositories, these statistics are greatly increasing.

According to James Gondles, the ACA Executive Director, “Providing quality healthcare - both physical and mental - is a vital part of our efforts to return individuals to society better than they left and as contributing members.” This is influencing many A+D to “take a page out of medical facility design.” They are looking at how Corrections spaces can be weighted in therapeutic design and better promote mental and physical health, while not sacrificing safety and security.

**Therapeutic Design Tenants**

Many leading Correctional architects and medical consultants see direct physical and mental links in people who are incarcerated and those who are being treated in medical and mental Healthcare facilities. Science clearly shows that many inmates suffer from pronounced mental disorders and/ or serious addictions – many leading to complicated medical conditions. Adding in the issues of an aging inmate population, the influx of the “raging teenager” and an increase of female offenders, this produces a clear need for environments weighted in science which promote mental and physical well-being. In the medical world, these environments are highly valued and shown to reduce anxieties, positively change behavior and save costs. There is a wealth of research and data to support the incorporation of “therapeutic tenants,” such as day-lighting in inmate cells and program spaces, lowered acoustics, access to nature (literal and figurative), and utilization of softer materials and stimulating color. It has been demonstrated through research and medical facility’s “business models” that as fears reduce, anxieties decrease; the people within become more content – all producing a warmer, safer environment.

**CONCLUSION AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

The information contained in this excerpted report is intended as a guide for architects, designers, facility planners, wardens, other prison administrators, prison healthcare providers, psychologists and social workers that interact with inmate populations. It is a portion of a report entitled “The Contributions of Color” authored by Tara Hill, of Little Fish Think Tank.

Ms. Hill was commissioned by Norix Group Inc., in 2010 to research the role color plays in the safe operation of correctional facilities and behavioral health centers. More in-depth information specifically about the psychological influence of color and corrections facility design can be found by reading the [full report](#).
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Hill is a full-scope, state registered interior designer, and the founder and principle of Little Fish Think Tank. Before founding Little Fish, Ms. Hill was an Associate + Senior Designer at HOK, and the Director of Interiors at Stanley, Beaman & Sears. She has implemented award-winning, innovative design solutions for commercial and institutional interiors.

Ms. Hill also has significant experience regarding the science and theory of color, both as a design tool and a promoter of healing. She has conducted extensive research in evidence-based design regarding color and its profound impact on the human spirit.

Prior to her work with Norix, Ms. Hill developed the Healing Colors Collection for Corian® solid surfaces, by Dupont®, for the healthcare environment. www.golittlefish.net

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