

Talented Trio – Three impressive architects talk justice and correctional trends

By Zach Chouteau

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For the 2023 version of the design forum, CN reached out for fresh perspectives from a trio of truly impressive design leaders in the industry. Our sincere appreciation for their intriguing input goes out to Kristine Bishop Johnson AIA, NCARB, LEED AP, Principal and Director of Justice for HOK; **Henry Pittner AIA, Justice Practice Leader and Partner, BKV Group**; and DLR Group Principal April Pottorff, FAIA.

What do you think is the most significant current trend with correctional and justice design as we begin 2023?

BISHOP JOHNSON: There seems to be a renewed focus in the justice community on outcome driven approaches. We are shifting our focus to alternative incarceration environments and providing a supportive foundation for those within the justice system to receive treatment, education, healthcare, and other life-skills that will assist them with a successful reentry into their communities. We need to continue to research and educate our clients and communities about how the built environment can support and transform justice facility types to support treatment focused vision and mission.

PITTNER: The most significant trend I see is a shifting of paradigms

from a carceral model of punishment and punitive facilities to a post-carceral model that is more healing and restorative. The goal is to have an emphasis on the expected outcome, reinforcing the dignity and human worth of each resident in the facility. This shift is causing the environmental factors to be reconsidered by 1) creating smaller housing units that provide more separations and classifications to better manage special populations; 2) providing more space per inmate in dayrooms, with ample natural light and acoustical treatments, to go beyond the minimum state and national guidelines and requirements; 3) introducing brighter, warmer interiors that feel less institutional; and 4) upgrading HVAC systems to mitigate the spread of infectious diseases.

POTTORFF: As planners and designers who work in the justice arena, we find ourselves caught in the crosshairs of today's culture. For the past 30 years, I've worked exclusively in the justice field. Alongside many of my peers and colleagues, we actively advocate for improving the conditions and experiences of justice-involved individuals, decriminalizing mental health and substance abuse issues through treatment and alternatives, and sentencing reforms. But we now find ourselves defending our motives for

working in the justice field - accused of monetizing incarceration and marginalized by our own professional organization. Organizations that advocate for the justice-involved oppose building replacement facilities intended to improve conditions of confinement for those in the justice system. Instead, advocates seek policy reforms, the elimination of systemic racism, alternatives to incarceration and treatment, and to address community challenges associated with K-12 education, access to healthcare, and food and housing insecurities, especially in our BIPOC communities. As planners and designers focused on justice, we agree with each point and support the advocacy. I'm thrilled that discussions around these issues are gaining traction. We cannot define justice reform as a singular either-or solution. We need a village to right this ship. I believe this discourse will continue to gain traction, and I'm optimistic that it will lead to meaningful long-term change.

Has this trend been a part of any recent or forthcoming projects you've worked on?

BISHOP JOHNSON: Yes, our clients are extremely focused on planning their facilities around outcome driven approaches. They are also increasingly aware of the challenges of

recruiting and retaining staff. This isn't limited to correctional facilities, but a recurring concern across all justice facility types. Facility planning must look holistically at the user experience and provide for programming, amenities, building features, and technology that can support a positive experience while also maintaining a safe environment. We must continue to leverage the research and experience of colleagues who work in the healthcare and education communities to implement strategies that promote healing and reinforce positive behaviors.

PITTNER: This past year or so, we have developed concepts for more housing separations in existing housing units for both large and small facilities. These separations are taking a direct surveillance model housing unit and subdividing them to function as a popular/remote surveillance model, and depending on the jurisdiction, does not always require an increase in staffing.

POTTORFF: I experienced the impact of the advocacy groups' work on several occasions. In one case, a client canceled a project due to advocacy groups opposing the project. In another instance, my team interviewed for a project via Zoom where the advocacy groups watched the interviews of the three shortlisted teams and posted condemning criticism, taking soundbites out of context. Finally, for a recent pursuit with defined W/M/DBE participation requirements, a local consultant, with whom I collaborated in the past, appreciated our push for change, alternatives, and transformative ideas but declined to partner on a justice project, believing it compromised their commitment to their BIPOC community.

What is the frequent challenge you face as a correctional/justice architect and how do you approach it?

BISHOP JOHNSON: The most frequent challenge I face is educating project stakeholders, clients, and members of the public who hold misconceptions about justice architecture. The work we do within the market touches buildings that support a variety of community, government public safety, emergency management, healthcare, education, and criminal justice system needs. These building types are complex and inherently political. I recently chaired the AIA Academy of Architecture for Justice Conference which focused on the intersections between justice architecture and other markets. The conference discussed the ills of the criminal justice

system and how justice architects should broaden their scopes to learn lessons from other facility types. We determined that the environments and facilities we design are only one part of the justice system, and any true reform must be combined with policy, behavioral, process, and societal changes.

Working with our clients and partner organizations, architects can be advocates for positive change by collecting and presenting data that substantiate how our designs can support more positive outcomes within the criminal justice system. Desired, positive outcomes will be defined individually by each community. They may include reduced recidivism rates, enhanced community partnerships to provide on-going support for formerly incarcerated persons and their families, improved victims services, and the development of additional alternatives to incarceration and treatment or problem-solving court programs. We owe it to our communities, and to the residents, staff, victims, families, and others that are engaged or will be engaged in the criminal justice system, to advocate for facilities that support successful reintegration of people into their communities and policies that detain individuals only when they are truly a danger to themselves or the community.

PITTNER: The most frequent challenge we face is the ability of our clients to fund a new jail project. Material and labor costs have risen significantly during the pandemic. Many projects have also encountered delays due to supply chain disruption and the consolidation of Detention Equipment Contractors across the country, which in some cases has increased lead times. Our approach has been to: 1) design an appropriately modest, well-designed building that is durable and staff-efficient for today's needs, plus five to 10 years of growth; 2) create a plan that allows for future expansion; 3) add an escalation factor to the budget to help offset the impact of rising labor and material costs; and 4) build in potential reductions in project scope and program that can be easily bid to better understand the value proposition.

POTTORFF: I'm perplexed that daylight easily gets negotiated out of a project or reduced to skylights when designing detention and correctional facilities because of costs. Reducing daylight to skylights is not the solution - spatially, it darkens the ceiling and makes it feel heavier and more oppressive. We don't monetize and eliminate access to daylight when designing and building a new medical center, school, office building, hotel, etc. Daylight is not a luxury. Numerous studies document the benefits of access to quality daylight and views - specifically views of nature. As

correctional designers and planners, we look to studies conducted in the workplace, education settings, and healthcare facilities to supplement the limited number of studies conducted in secure environments. Medically we require access to daylight to produce Vitamin D. Studies demonstrate the benefits of daylight on productivity, reducing stress, and overall well-being. So why does our industry (planners, designers, contractors, stakeholders) assume the position that daylight is an expendable luxury for correctional staff and those in our custody and care? It's even more poignant amidst the current staffing recruitment and retention crisis and our discussions around staff wellness. We must tirelessly explore and advocate for design solutions that celebrate daylight. As an industry, I challenge us to do better and prioritize daylight.

On a personal note, what do you find most satisfying about designing correctional and justice facilities?

BISHOP JOHNSON: I have always been fascinated by high-security building types, so justice architecture was a natural career path. I enjoy the complexity of the space programs and the intersection of sociology, psychology, and architecture that comes with planning and designing these facility types.

Justice facilities often take years of study and advocacy to secure funding before the project officially kicks off. I love starting a journey with a client to develop their project by understanding their needs, sharing lessons learned, and collaborating to create a facility that is customized to their unique mission and community. I pride myself on the lasting relationships made with these clients by helping them realize their visions and designing to improve facility conditions.

The work we do within this market impacts the lives of so many people. I am most satisfied when I hear from clients about the positive outcomes building stakeholders achieve based on spaces, programs, processes, or design elements we helped introduce. Positive outcomes can range from reporting enhanced productivity and satisfaction expressed by staff working in environments that provide them dedicated spaces for amenities, work areas, and interactions with clients to tuning lights and acoustics to support a calming environment for residents in correctional environments. I am especially proud when clients come back to brainstorm with us on how they can implement similar strategies

in their other buildings. These positive testimonials, and data showing reduced recidivism or increased staff retention, reinforce the positive effects of our expertise and remind us that the environments we create greatly influence the staff, residents, and public. Working in the civic, justice, and government markets provides us the opportunity to have a greater impact on the building types that knit our communities together.

PITTNER: To me, the most satisfying part of designing correctional facilities is seeing that our design matters in the lives of everyone who spends time there. Creating a rehabilitative environment that is easy to operate and maintain, that prioritizes the safety and comfort of staff, inmates and visitors and that prepares those in custody for an eventual return to society are goals for each project.

POTTORFF: Those moments of discovery and innovation - whether working with clients, team members, or architecture students. The planning and design process is a journey we embark. I enjoy digging in with clients, exploring ideas and innovations, defining the problem, translating it into the design, and bringing the project to fruition - all in pursuit of improving the conditions and experiences of staff and every individual who intersects with the justice system.

Looking ahead a bit, how do you anticipate design in our industry might continue to transform over the next 5-10 years?

BISHOP JOHNSON: Over the next decade, we will likely see an emphasis on replacing aging infrastructure and developing consolidated justice campus environments. Consolidating services assists with operational efficiency, and these campuses can help the greater stakeholder community access to the facility and the services it provides.

In addition, we will continue to see a blurred line between traditional justice facility types and health and human services facilities. These buildings will likely be more community-centered and may allow for private or non-profit services to be collocated with governmental agencies and services. These facilities will help support alternatives to incarceration and provide many more support services including health and substance abuse treatment plans, education, and job and life skills training. We may see these facilities combined with residential, long-term transitional housing programs.

As the industry continues to transform and adapt to shifts in policy, we cannot lose the momentum we have now. We must continue to leverage our expertise and that of our colleagues in allied fields, such as healthcare, education, and policy to push for facilities that better support our communities.

PITTNER: My hope is that our industry will play a significant role in reimagining the criminal justice system through the development of new facility types that are restorative and therapeutic without compromising safety and security. This trend, which is already evident in new facility designs, seeks to incorporate family and the communities and to provide programming that recognizes client status, respects culturally specific needs, and improves inmates' ability to eventually re-enter society. Examples include programming related to healthcare, substance abuse, trauma healing, education, job training and improving family and support systems integration.

POTTORFF: I believe the advocacy discussions will continue to gain traction, and these are healthy discussions to hold if we want to reduce our incarcerated population. Although our incarceration rate (per 100,000 population) has declined since 2010, the United States currently has the 6th highest incarceration rate in the world but incarcerates more individuals than any other country - we have a long way to go to shed our unwanted No. 1 ranking. We seek to improve the conditions and experiences for justice-involved individuals, but we recognize that change and advocacy for tangential systems and policy overhauls also reside beyond our sphere of daily influence as justice planners and designers.

While advocates may view planners and designers as part of the problem, we sit at a pivotal moment that presents us with opportunities to work together, learn from each other, and realize we have more in common than either side currently realizes or acknowledges. We both want to address the community issues that put individuals at risk of intersecting with the justice system - focus on prevention; and the need for reform to remove policies that entrap individuals in the system. For those that commit offenses and require incarceration, let us learn from lived experiences to change the paradigm for treating those individuals - returning them to communities better than before with deployable skills and assets, breaking down the barriers that stand in the way of their success.



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