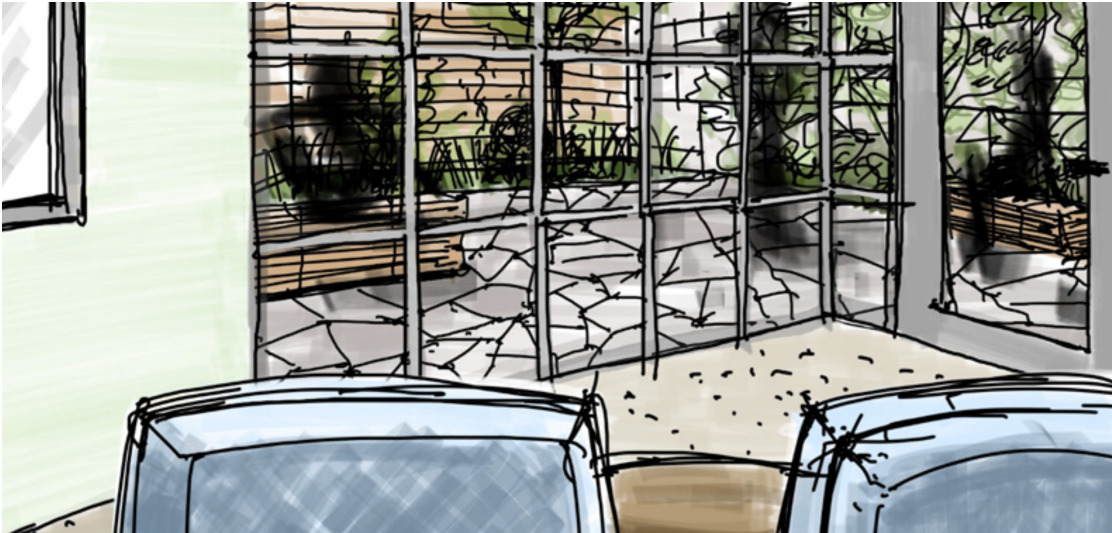


A New Approach to The Architectural Design of Jail Facilities

By Henry Pittner, Justice Practice Leader, Partner

Photo credit: BKV Group



The current carceral justice system in the United States of punishment and punitive practices has resulted in the country leading the world with more than 735,000 people in custody at county-run jails, according to a 2021 Pew Research Center report. Although jail design has evolved through the years from linear/intermittent supervision to podular/remote supervision and podular/direct supervision, both of which prioritize safety and security, the environments created maintain the carceral ethos, resulting in spaces that can be physically and psychologically harmful.

Standard jail configurations typically have bad acoustics, little privacy, limited daylighting with no views to the outside, harsh artificial lighting, few colors, hard materials like concrete and concrete block, and institutional furnishings in fixed configurations that are not conducive to social activities. On top of that, the unsafe living conditions created by overcrowding, obsolete facility design and atypical patterns of living and interacting are inherently damaging to the mental health of both inmates and staff.

A post-carceral future in the jail is about shifting to a new paradigm – from punishing and punitive to healing and restorative, with the goal of reinforcing the dignity and human worth of each resident.

In designing a new facility or improving an existing jail, a full range of environmental factors should be considered to prioritize the well-being of all building occupants, including inmates, while maintaining safety and security:

Smaller Housing Units

- Increasingly, jurisdictions are moving away from large housing units in

favor of smaller ones that are easier to manage. Previous configurations of 32, 48 or 60 beds do not allow for adequate classification or separations and can result in significant negative effects. Under the new model, housing units are designed to accommodate 10-15 people, all of whom are carefully classified to meet compatibility and separation requirements while providing more intensive program opportunities.

- An example of this type of change is occurring in a 200-bed facility in Minnesota. It currently has two 60-bed housing units and six special management units that range in size from six to 31 beds, providing as many as 16 total separations. For the same capacity, the new jail solution designed by my firm, BKV Group, provides 20 housing units of 10 beds each, allowing for 40 separation opportunities. Immediately adjacent to each dayroom are additional spaces for interviews and programs allowing for more interaction.

Indoor/Outdoor Connectivity

- Prioritizing indoor/outdoor connectivity has been shown to be restorative for persons in custody. In fostering the human-nature relationship, it can provide cognitive benefits and improvement in emotional well-being and overall mental health.
- The outdoor space should be connected to the dayroom and include a series of sensory experiences that usually are not afforded to inmates – for example, breathing in fresh air, feeling the heat of the summer sun or coolness of a

spring or autumn breeze, seeing how landscaping changes with each season, and hearing birds and other sounds of nature – all within a secure setting.

Enhanced Dayroom Space

- The dayroom, where inmates spend the majority of their waking hours, should act as an open-plan concept with communal dining and living areas that provide multiple settings for use throughout the day, mirroring life outside of the facility.
- Instead of a wedge-shaped room, a better configuration is to organize the dayroom space as a modified hexagon, a shape that allows for much better sightlines from staff workstations and limits the number of parallel walls, reducing reverberation and maximizing usable square footage. The hexagon also makes it easier to bring daylight into the living space.
- From a practice standpoint, we know that a 5-foot by 7-foot space per person isn't comparable to a residence. For that reason, we recommend a minimum of 50 unencumbered square feet per person, excluding restroom/shower areas, to provide a more homelike setting and avoid overcrowding.
- Natural light should be supplemented with energy-efficient LED lighting that includes circadian technology. Cool blue tones during the day promote alertness and concentration before transitioning to warmer tones at night, which support the production of melatonin and, as a result, higher-quality sleep.

Brighter, Warmer Interiors

- Many of the elements incorporated into the housing unit can be utilized throughout the facility to create a more cohesive, therapeutic setting. Interiors should feature natural materials and soothing pastel color palettes. Rooms can be brightened not only through the intentional placement of windows supplemented by circadian lighting, but also by punches of color on accent walls and furniture.
- With walls, it's best to offer a combination of treatments to establish a more residential feel. Possibilities include burnished concrete block in natural colors, pastel paints in calming greens and blues, and murals depicting scenes from the natural world. Additional artwork, including pieces with inspirational messages, can help manage behaviors, reduce stress and anxiety, and increase self-esteem.
- Depending on security requirements, there are a number of flooring options to consider. For higher-security settings, terrazzo floors are a premium surface that is equally durable and solid, with the opportunity to incorporate colors or patterns. More traditional surfaces would include large-scale vinyl tiles that come in a variety of styles. Some carpeted areas are also recommended to help with acoustics and provide definition within larger spaces.
- For ceilings, the main rule is to use any material but concrete. The standard detention ceiling composed of suspended acoustical tile with hold-down clips and abuse-rated gypsum board works well.

Infectious Disease Control

- Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there's been heightened awareness around indoor air quality in correctional facilities due to several large outbreaks. Proper ventilation, airflow management and air purification throughout the building work together to create a healthier environment.
- Concepts that should be applied include increasing outdoor air circulation into indoor areas and providing localized exhaust systems for better airflow ventilation in high-risk areas.

Reimagining a post-carceral future won't be easy – a lot of change is required. However, the shift from a carceral model of punishment to a therapeutic model focused on rehabilitation can be accomplished through many of these new approaches to architectural design.



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