

ATLAS SAFETY & SECURITY DESIGN, INC.

USING STAFF INPUT IN JAIL DESIGN

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"The discriminating will see the social significance eloquent in the forms of this new architecture. Under the old system of exploitation, the most useful social elements - the workers - were never permitted to realize their importance; their practical functions were kept hidden and disguised; thus a master had his servants dressed up in fancy braided livery. This was reflected in the architecture of the period; the functional elements of the building - its doors, windows, stairways - were hidden under the scrolls of pointless ornamentation. But in a modern building, it is precisely these useful elements - symbols of toil - that come starkly in the open. Do we not hear in this the voice of a new world where the worker shall come into his own?" (Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 1943: 475-6).

Architecture has in many instances been the brunt of many a correctional officer's or administrator's cursing. Often you can hear, as a new jail or prison is opened, "Why didn't the architect talk to us; these spaces or equipment will never work as intended!" The trend towards modern architecture has led to an increase in the use of technology to solve problems. Flashing lights, buzzers and bells have given us a false sense of security implying that technology can overcome all problems.

One example is the mid-seventies Arab embargo oil crisis, when it was said that

technology would solve the problem of our electricity shortage by harnessing solar energy in the near future. Eleven years later, solar energy has only made a small dent in supplementing electricity, and still at a considerably higher cost. Traditional security metal crank doors have been replaced by computer operated pneumatic door systems, which have been known to jam up or crush people. Use of CCTV has been overutilized in an effort to replace humans for observation.

The inappropriate use of technology inhibits inmate supervision and effective correctional management at many jails and prisons throughout the country. Video cameras are often used to replace a staff position, only to have a security officer mesmerized at the control center, observing a bank of 10-15 monitors flashing a new scene every 3 seconds. Humans, when overstimulated, just withdraw and filter out stimulation. As a result, the video technology is not being utilized properly. In high security environments for the private sector, a new motion activated video system is being utilized. This system turns on a monitor when there is movement on the perimeter and traces the movement on the monitor with a white line. This can be further attenuated with a flashing light or buzzer to indicate that motion has been detected.

Control rooms are notoriously poorly designed spaces. Often, the officer has neck or back strain as a result of observing hundreds of lights and switches in various and bizarre positions. In one control room observed by the author, the officer used roller skates to turn around and operate all of the equipment. Heights of counters are often not carefully planned. Housing units are still designed with blind spots that jeopardize safety and security. Recent escapes from Mecklenburg Prison (Virginia), the Chicago MCC, and Dade County (Florida) resulted from blind spots where inmates had sufficient time to compromise windows and break out.

A U.S. District Court in Texas responded to a suit brought by inmates in the Houston jail alleging violations of their rights because of conditions resulting in extremely high levels of violence and sexual assault. Due to the compartmentalized physical design of the jail, blind spots made it difficult for officers to effectively supervise the inmates on a continuing basis. Because officers had to physically go into the cell areas to properly observe conditions, the inmates could predict with some certainty that the guard would not return for a significant span of time after he had once visited their particular cell." (**Corrections Compendium**, June 1985, p. 1).

Many jails and prisons have poorly designed features that include slippery floors in wet areas and door systems that are inappropriate for the level of security. (In a recent visit to a west Florida jail, heavy metal security doors with polycarbonate windows were observed on the classification offices, a janitor's closet, and every hallway door.) Medical areas in many jails and prisons have elevators, hallways, and rooms designed whose layout does not permit access with a stretcher or gurney. Medical areas often do not have floor drains for hosing areas down, sufficient examination rooms, or nurse

observation of the waiting area.

In these examples, architecture is serving as a barrier if the design is not coordinated with staff. Post occupancy evaluations have revealed positive and negative design features of jails and prisons throughout the country. Hopefully information gained by these evaluations will lead to stronger interaction between the architect and staff during future programming and design processes.

As part of the preparation for the design and programming of a new 1,000 man pretrial facility for Dade County, Florida, the author worked in the downtown jail for a month as a volunteer corrections officer. Work included participation in the operation and function of every part of the jail during all three shifts. As a result of that experience, the officers pointed out all of the problems they encountered with design and technology that hindered them in their jobs. These problems included control panels that were dysfunctional, lack of floor drains, poor visibility, bad acoustics, ineffective door and window systems, poorly designed work areas and counter tops, ineffective communication equipment, and more. Ideas that were generated for the new facility were reviewed with the staff for feedback. Their input resulted in several important design changes, including the relocation of the weapons locker in the sallyport area. Upon working in the intake area, it became apparent that inmate trustees clean and service the sallyport area and could compromise the lockers to get access to loaded guns. Thus, the weapons lockers were relocated to a secure control room pass through.

Another example was the addition of floor drains and sinks in the booking area. There was also the need for a sink where officers could scrub their hands to prevent risk of infection and spread of lice after frisking and searching people during the booking process. These small examples were easy to plan for in the design stages, but would have been nearly impossible to correct after construction.

As an architect, several important things were learned while working as an officer. Among these enlightenments was that technology doesn't supply the security, people do. Unsupervised high tech security windows can be compromised quickly with jeweler's wire. Real security is in the people who are trained, have common sense, and are committed to excellence. Architecture can aid human performance, but not substitute for it. If a jurisdiction is planning a new correctional facility, it is important to have the architect make the commitment to know the local correctional practices and procedures and interact with the staff for their input. This knowledge will aid the architect and design professionals to design a facility that will function as intended and improve the work performance of the staff, as well as improve the safety and security of the entire institution.