

Humanizing Correctional Facilities White Paper

*Trend Hopes to Normalize Environments, Lower Recidivism
and Create Safer Spaces*



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THE CHALLENGES FACING CORRECTIONS AND A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

The following white paper is an in-depth resource regarding the relatively new concept of humanizing or normalizing correctional facilities. This approach aims to make these environments more residential in nature, opposed to the historically stark prison spaces we have come to know.

In doing so, research shows that correctional facilities may decrease inmate violence, reduce stress among staff, reduce recidivism, help the incarcerated re-enter society with a higher success rate, among other positive benefits.

There is a debate that is now quietly occurring in the United States regarding the construction and design of correctional facilities, prisons, jails and other environments where the incarcerated are housed. Historically speaking, minimal effort has been made to make these environments comfortable places, where convicted criminals or those awaiting trial may live in settings that are residential in any way shape or form. Frankly, in fact, the opposite is true. As part of their punishment – aside from the loss of their freedom – prisoners most often live in institutional environments that lack any of the normalization that you would find in the outside world. While some progress has been made through the the direct supervision model, those efforts have been compromised by historically high levels of incarceration and overcrowding, forcing corrections officials to search for ways to combat these challenges.



And they may have found part of the solution. An emerging trend in design is ushering in a radical change in the way that architects, designers and prison officials look at the way correctional facilities are built from the ground up. This new trend aims to create a more humanized environment in an attempt to reduce recidivism and inmate violence, while contributing to the mental well being of both the incarcerated and – just as important – the staff in the facilities.

While these models are not appropriate for high risk inmates, research indicates success with non-violent offenders and offers promising support for approaches that may prevent offenders from becoming career criminals. Some of the most encouraging approaches shift the focus from punishment to rehabilitation. High rates of recidivism seem to indicate that a system based on punishment may do less to deter criminals than it does to perpetuate illicit behavior. A system based on rehabilitation may better prepare the inmate for reintegration once their debt to society is paid. Additionally, it is well documented that a significant percentage of inmates throughout the country suffer from mental illness, and that less violence and more stabilization in their environment can lead to better results while they are incarcerated and after they are released. It's also worth noting that juvenile offenders may see the greatest results from the humanizing of correctional facilities. If the facilities they are housed in become more normalized and enforce rehabilitation, then it might be possible to turn would-be life criminals into functioning members of society at an early age – preventing what might be an endless cycle of crime and incarceration for some individuals.

So what is the role of the physical environment in normalization and rehabilitation? This new trend of humanization uses color and furniture that are residential in appearance, replacing steel and metal beds and chairs that have usually come in stark grays and are highly institutional. Artwork appears on the walls as a way to provide an interesting visual distraction, opposed to a slab of concrete. Landscaping has, in some cases, become an important visual element on the grounds outside of the facility and presents an opportunity for the therapeutic experience of gardening. And last, but definitely not least, technology – video visitation, mp3 players and computers – is increasingly becoming an integral part of some inmates’ daily lives, giving them access to information and a connection to the outside world.

Many European correctional facilities have adopted this approach and offer some of the most dramatic examples of humanization. These facilities favor green space, normalized furnishings and natural light as well as more striking differences like limited supervision, no barriers such as fences between the inmate and the outside world and inmate activities that would mirror those of the average citizen. Again, these approaches are not appropriate for all security levels, but there are promising results emerging from systems that more narrowly define their population and customize the environments to manage those segments with the intention of producing results to the mutual benefit of the inmate, staff and even society as whole.

While most of this sounds like a mammoth remaking of our entire correctional system, there are incremental steps that can be taken without extraordinary costs, which this white paper will document.

It must be noted, however, that this new trend is not yet widespread and welcomed with open arms in the United States by all of those with an interest in correctional facilities and how they operate. In fact, there has been some outcry that the humanization of correctional facilities undermines the very reason that inmates are there: Punishment.

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These anti-normalization voices say that the stark reality of a prison facility should serve as part of the punishment, and that “softening” these environments would make would-be criminals less fearful of becoming incarcerated or, in many cases, returning to prison if they are less likely to face the realities of the harsh day-to-day living in a correctional facility.

Others say that tax money could be better spent elsewhere, and that prisoners shouldn’t be awarded normalized living conditions because, after all, the crimes they committed landed them there in the first place.

Regardless, as mentioned before, the humanization of correctional facilities is becoming common in Europe and is even slowly becoming more prevalent on this side of the Atlantic. However, big questions still remain. Why? Where? And maybe most importantly, how?

RATES OF INCARCERATION, RECIDIVISM AND INMATE VIOLENCE IN THE

Advocates for prison normalization say that lower rates of recidivism and less inmate violence likely can be two of the positive outcomes when this shift is put into action. They point to the fact that high incarceration rates are proving too costly on American society. Correctional facility operating budgets are in some cases in the tens of millions of dollars and society continues to pay long after inmates serve their sentence through social services and other programming. Additionally, inmates that are released ill-equipped for reintegration often do harm in the community and often find themselves back in jail in what seems to be an endless cycle. Lastly, prisons are often violent places and inmates are often released as damaged – or even more damaged – than before they entered the facility. All of this creates a sizeable subculture of broken people.

So before trying to understand how and where correctional humanization has been implemented, it is important to understand the enormous challenge the United States faces in terms of recidivism and incarceration rates and how this challenge is creating a heavy financial burden on our society as a whole.

In 2013, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) – an arm of the Justice Department – released a report that showed a decrease in the United States’ correctional population (on probation, parole, in prison or jail) for the fourth consecutive year in 2012. Explicitly, researched showed that at the end of 2012 about 6.94 million Americans – equating to 1 in 35 adults – were under the jurisdiction of our correctional systems.



The decrease, obviously, is positive in the sense that it shows a decline in criminal behavior. However, correctional facilities still had about 2.3 million inmates within their walls at the end of 2012 – 744,500 located in local jails, 217,800 in federal facilities and roughly 1.35 million in state prisons, the report says. That’s more than 2 million inmates to watch, feed, clothe, transport, provide medical care for, among the many other services our correctional facilities provide. And when put into historical context, the number is even more alarming. According to a 2013 article by The New York Times, “Imprisonment rates in the United States have been on an upward march since the early 1970s. From 1978, when there were 307,276 inmates in state and federal prisons, the population increased annually, reaching a peak of 1,615,487 inmates in 2009.” And consider this: Many of those in custody are repeat offenders. In 2014, the Bureau of Justice Statistics released a study titled “Recidivism of State Prisoners Released in 2005.” The report tracked a sample of state prison inmates who were released in 2005 and investigated whether or not they committed crimes again through 2010. The report found:

- Within three years, 67.8 percent of those released were arrested for a new crime
- Within five years, 76.6 percent were arrested for a new crime
- 36.8 percent of those released were arrested within six months after being released
- 16.1 percent of released prisoners accounted for 48.4 percent of the nearly 1.2 million arrests that occurred during the examined five-year period.

That's a lot of recidivism and lends anecdotal evidence that our correctional system either is not giving enough resources for the incarcerated to re-enter society or, maybe more importantly, does not have the tools to do so. Either way, it has government officials on the state and federal level looking at numerous ways to reduce these rates. Understandably, there isn't a one-step solution.

And although there are no in-depth statistics on the rates of inmate violence across the United States, a report by the Southern Center for Human Rights released in 2014 looked at the rates in Georgia jails since 2010. During that period, 33 Georgia prisoners and one correctional officer were killed. According to the report, "The United States Supreme Court has held that 'being violently assaulted in prison is simply not part of the penalty that criminal offenders pay for their offenses against society.' *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 834 (1994). Yet many Georgia prisoners live in constant fear of being injured or killed by other prisoners, and the rampant violence places correctional officers at risk as well."

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And while it may come as no surprise that these environments can in fact be dangerous places, Georgia's rates of killings serve as just one example of just how perilous United States correctional facilities can be and lends evidence that prisons and jails across the country have their work cut out for them if they want to make their environments safer for both inmates and staff.

So is normalization and humanizing the answer? It's probably not the end all, but let's look to the East for a moment.

THE OLD WORLD'S NEW WORLD APPROACH TO CORRECTIONS

So what does a normalized correctional facility look like? And how does it operate? There are facilities in the United States that have made this transition. But to truly understand the extent to which correctional facilities can soften their environments, let's first look to Europe where some prisons and jails appear and operate in high contrast to what we think of as a traditional correctional facility.

The Vera Institute of Justice is an organization that "combines expertise in research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety," according to its website. In 2013, it released a report titled "Sentencing and Prison Practices in Germany and the Netherlands: Implications for the United States" which detailed a project where U.S. corrections officials visited the two European countries in an attempt "to expose project participants through firsthand experience to radically different correctional systems and practices in order to advance an international dialogue around effective corrections and to stimulate reform efforts in the United States."

The report says that states in this country often look to each other for best practices in dealing with problems that often occur within correctional environments, but little has been done to look abroad and investigate what is working at the international level. That was the intent of the trip, and what they found might astonish many in the United States.

The project concentrated on select facilities in Germany and The Netherlands, countries where correctional efforts focus on rehabilitation and resocialization first – concepts that are still secondary implementations in the United States, if they are implemented at all. In fact, the report says, “According to Germany’s Prison Act, the sole aim of incarceration is to enable prisoners to lead a life of social responsibility free of crime upon release, requiring that prison life be as similar as possible to life in the community (sometimes referred to as ‘the principle of normalization’) and organized in such a way as to facilitate reintegration into society.”

Additionally, according to the report, the Netherlands 1998 Penitentiary Principles Act’s aim “is the re-socialization of prisoners in which incarceration is carried out with as few restrictions as possible through the principle of association (both within prison and between prisoners and the community), and not separation.”

But what does this look like and what processes are used to carry out rehabilitation and resocialization as the fundamental intent of incarceration? The project participants visited multiple correctional environments and, again, what they discovered is a far cry from what Americans are used to seeing in a correctional facility. Highlights from some of the facilities that were visited include:

- “... on the physical level, German and Dutch prison facilities are designed with features that are conducive to rehabilitation, such as moderate temperatures, lots of windows and light, and wide hallways. The physical plant of one of the Dutch facilities stunned one U.S. participant who remarked: the facility screamed ‘therapeutic milieu.’”
- “A unit that allows mothers to parent their children up to the age of three within a special housing that includes access to mother and child health care, parenting classes, and babysitting services.”
- “In their relationships with prisoners, German corrections staff are trained to rely on the use of incentives and rewards, with an emphasis on positive reinforcement; disciplinary measures—such as solitary confinement—are used sparingly.”
- “Prisoners wear their own clothes, decorate their own cells, and keep their personal belongings.”
- “Prisoners have freedom of movement within the unit or facility, access to self-catering facilities, and assist in organizing daily life in prison.”
- “Cell houses are often subdivided into small living groups with communal features such as a kitchen, a common area, and other shared leisure features.”
- “Guards knock before entering cells, and prisoners have keys to their own cells and separate, walled toilets.”

Baby units. Nice climate. Natural light. Prisoners have their own keys to their cells. Sound like a few isolated facilities that are the exception to the rule? Think again.

BASTØY PRISON, NORWAY

Located on Bastøy Island in Norway, Bastøy Prison – not one of the facilities visited during the Vera project – is the country’s largest low-security prison and has roads, beach zones, landscaping, forest areas and athletic facilities such as a football field. And according to media reports, there are no armed guards or barbed wire fences. Inmates play sports, have jobs, cook and participate in educational courses. They stay in wooden cottages on grounds where horses roam. And there is fishing and sunbathing, too.

All of this for 115 criminals who are in custody for crimes such as murder, rape and drug trafficking. And this is just one more example. There are many other facilities across Europe – with some reports indicating that Norway is leading the way – that are taking the approach that a normalized physical environment and the humanistic treatment of prisoners is the paved way to reducing crime and recidivism.

But comparing the recidivism rates between the United States and Norway might lend some credibility to the softened approach of incarceration. As mentioned earlier, a BJS report found recidivism rates of nearly 68 percent among the group of offenders they studied.

WHAT WOULD AMERICANS THINK?

So, do these facilities sound more like country clubs than jails and prisons? To some, perhaps. And what would this mean to very idea of American justice if such facilities were constructed and implemented here? It could be debated in many different ways, to say the least. Put a prison reformist and a murder victim’s loved one in the same room and you would probably get sharply different responses to normalization.

But comparing the recidivism rates between the United States and Norway might lend some credibility to the softened approach of incarceration. As mentioned earlier, a BJS report found recidivism rates of nearly 68 percent among the group of offenders they studied. If that research is indicative of the United States’ entire inmate population, then that puts the country’s rates at more than three times as high as those in Norway. Granted, the United States imprisons far more of its citizens than Norway. According to the International Centre for Prison Studies, 716 per 100,000 people in the U.S. are in custody, which is the highest rate in the world. Norway, on the other hand incarcerates 72 per 100,000, putting it at 176 on the list. However, as mentioned in the Vera report, the “definitions of crimes, specific punishments, and recidivism vary across jurisdictions.” Therefore, comparing numbers from country to country can be interpretive and sometimes difficult.

But are these European countries on to something that can be applied here? Because, after all, doesn’t it make sense that an emphasis on normalization in correctional facilities, resocialization and re-entry into society – instead of a punishment first approach – would only help inmates find their way back into communities and keep them away from the urge to re-offend? And if recidivism rates dropped, wouldn’t that 716-per-100,000 person incarceration ratio drop as well, therefore saving this country unknown amounts of tax money, not to mention the positive effects that would be injected into communities and households who would otherwise have loved ones locked behind bars?

It's an interesting argument, and one that's highly debatable given the cultural differences and the laws that govern the United States compared to those in Europe. As we know, hot-button and controversial legal issues in the United States – gay marriage, legalized marijuana, immigration policy – can take decades before they are widely accepted, if they are accepted at all.

So will America and its politicians and correctional officials embrace this change in mass sometime in the future? Only time will tell. But let's stop for a moment and consider a quote from the Vera report that may resonate with some more than any of the other findings or research that was conducted. It was stated by one participant after visiting a German correctional facility: "If you treat inmates like humans, they will act like humans."

SAN DIEGO COUNTY WOMEN'S DETENTION FACILITY



As previously mentioned, the concept of normalization is not wide-spread here in the United States. However, there are some officials and architects that are torchbearers and have embraced the idea whole-heartedly.

The San Diego County Women's Detention Facility (SDCWDF, photo above) is a \$221 million project that is currently being constructed on a 45-acre site in Santee, CA. This new facility will replace the Las Colinas Detention Facility (LCDF), which has served as the county's adult women detention facility since 1979. When complete, SDCWDF will include 25 buildings, 1,216 beds and more than 500,000 square feet of building floor space including housing units, administration facilities, medical facilities, food service areas, a visitation center, a learning resource center and accommodations for employment programs and other services.

Norix Furniture provided much of the furnishings in this new facility.

The design, aesthetics and experience of SDCWDF falls in line with this emerging trend in corrections where facilities depart from the sterile and institutional feeling that has historically been found in these environments.

“Our design team researched this premise and studied facilities in Europe that have found success through the approach of humanizing correctional facilities,” said Pam Maynard, Director of Interior Architecture for HMC Architects, a firm that is part of the team designing and building the facility. “This research confirms that the environments in which people live, learn, heal and are governed in, can affect us both psychologically and physiologically in both negative and positive ways depending on various environmental qualities.”

The team involved in the design and construction of the facility was tasked with creating an environment that was more humanized and conducive to rehabilitation. This included the use of multiple soothing colors, furniture with less institutional design, incorporation of increased natural daylight and large-scale photographs of natural outdoor settings throughout the facility. This also included the design of outdoor environments with attractive landscaping and furniture that will help inmates feel connected to the outside world.

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“I am very pleased with the outcome so far. The environmental qualities of the spaces lend themselves to a more humanistic approach to detention,” Maynard said. “But it’s all about the people. We can talk about a chair or a light fixture or a wall color. But it all comes down to the people and the affect that this cohesive environment can have on the future of these women’s lives. And if it can contribute to a positive effect, that’s what I am most excited about.”

THE BLUE ROOM OREGON

It’s not often that the mainstream media praises correctional facilities or awards them for innovation within their walls. However, last year Time magazine recognized the Snake River Correctional Institution in its “25 Best Inventions of 2014.”

Opened in 1991, the multi-security facility is the largest prison in Oregon, with 3,000 beds and 900 correctional professionals and an operating budget of more than \$100 million. Specifically, Time praised the facility’s “Blue Room,” a space where streaming waterfalls, open deserts and other nature imagery is played on the walls by a projector.

The idea blossomed when a Snake Creek corrections officer saw a TED Talk given by Nalinie Nadarni, who at the time was a professor at The Evergreen State College.

In the talk, according to an article in *The Oregonian*, “Photos appeared behind her that showed a stark cell inside a solitary unit, then three cage-like enclosures that isolated inmates stand in to converse with mental health staffers. A third photo showed bare walls of an indoor recreation yard, the only sign of the outside world a grated port in the ceiling.” Later in the talk, according to the article, “Nadkarni clicked a new slide, superimposing a photo of a forest on the walls, the sun glancing over the shoulder of a mature tree. She talked about how she brought nature photos to prisons, asking supermax inmates which ones were calming.”

Nadkarni proposed the concept of placing images of nature in recreation yards and solitary confinement cells in a maximum-security prison in Shelton, Wash. Administrators there liked the idea, but correctional officers didn’t, and the idea was dropped. But Snake Creek officials were intrigued, and the idea was picked up again.

“I’ve seen over the years how an inmate will come into the facility, and they’ll almost appear to be completely normal,” Capt. Randy Gilbertson, who oversees the Intensive Management Unit at Snake Creek, said in the article. “After a phase of isolation, those guys – especially those guys with mental health issues – tend to decompensate. They break down and go a different route. And it brings out a whole different person in them.”

Now, prisoners who spend more than 23 hours a day in a confined cell get the opportunity to view soothing images, which, according to some inmates, has had a positive and immediate effect on them.

“The environment had an instant and immediate calming effect on me,” an inmate wrote, according to *The Oregonian* article. “The dim lighting, the sound of waves crashing, the sight of the beach video with waves repetitively going in and out with palm trees swaying ... all provided an effective distraction, an ‘escape’ from my immediate situation, in a manner that didn’t ‘pump me up.’”

FEDERAL PRISON CAMP AT ALDERSON, W.VA.

Located in West Virginia, the Federal Prison Camp at Alderson is a minimum security, female-only facility that may be best known as the place where Martha Stewart served her time. But it is also known for its progressive programming and processes that help inmates once they are released.

The prison is one of the facilities that participate in paws4prisons, a program in the paws4people organization which is a non-profit that aims to “enhance the lives of those living with serious illnesses or disabilities by utilizing highly trained assistance dogs,” according to the paws4people website. Approved inmates are responsible for training a dog for six to eight weeks, the normal duration of the course, before the puppy goes back to paws4people for final training.

“This program has served as an inmate rehabilitation program and has considerable success in aiding inmates with PTSD/C-PTSD to recover, or at the very least, better cope with, their PTSD/C-PTSD and its symptoms by utilizing the therapeutic benefits of ‘Special K-9 Powers’ possessed by the dogs they train,” according to the pawsforpeople website.

Additional opportunities at Alderson include access to email, horticulture and cosmetology programs, and the chance to take on-site rehab as a way to reduce sentencing. Additionally, inmates can purchase commissary items such as cosmetics, hair rollers, hair products, crochet materials and equipment, and multiple choices of toothpaste brands.

TOOLS FOR HUMANIZING

Correctional facilities in the U.S. haven't been completely barren of opportunities for prisoners to improve their lives while they are incarcerated and once they are released. Opportunities to get GEDs, job skills and mental health services are common place in many facilities. However, the normalization of the actual environment is a relatively new concept and one that is slowly being explored in this country.

"One of the things you learn very quickly in design is that people do respond to their environment. In the corrections environment, the more relaxed we can make the inmate, the more comfortable the inmate becomes, or the more conducive the environment becomes to their responsiveness to the systems, the better it is for staff as well," Paul T. Chastant II, AIA, Senior Project Manager at HDR Architecture said. "And environment is a big key. Staff has to be comfortable. A lot of times they will be locked into a room with 64 people that have had histories of doing a crime. They have to feel comfortable. And environment drives that comfort. If an inmate is relaxed and able to communicate with staff, then staff relaxes and helps facilitate and give to the inmate."

Below, architects, interior designers, correctional officials and others who are involved in the construction of jails and prisons can find a few of the ways in which they can make their environments more humanized.

Color

Stark gray has been the color of choice for years in correctional facilities. Part of that mentality was to create uninviting places that were, in fact, part of the punishment. After all, what could be more unsettling about your environment than spending every day in a facility that was void of color?

At the San Diego Women's Detention Center, color has made the environment more inviting and residential in appearance, while The Blue Room at Snake Creek has given refuge to prisoners through the use of nature images.

And as mentioned, prisoners there have said that the room has provided them a positive experience they would not otherwise have.

So why is color so important?

"The majority of us experience our worlds – and many of our dreams as well – in full spectrum color. Therefore, I'm very confident that your physiological response in a 100 percent, monochromatic grey room within a 100 percent grey world would be a diminished one," Tara Rae Hill, founder of LittleFISH Think Tank, said.

Color plays a role on all surfaces and elements, Hill said. This includes floors, walls, ceilings, furniture, cabinetry, privacy panels and other areas.

“However, this does not mean that every element must be an expressive hue, which actually should not be the case,” Hill said. “It does mean, however, that all items should be given conscious thought and consideration regarding their design and color.”



The Remand Center in Edmonton, Canada

Chastant adds:

“Color is part of the environment. You can read study after study after study that says environment has little effect on the outcome. But most of us believe, especially those of us in the design world, that color and harmony have a very strong effect on how people react or act within an area. Harmonizing or bringing all those colors into an organized palette seems to relax everyone.”

Natural Lighting

If you have to be inside, nothing can connect you to the outside world as much windows and the illuminating natural light that pours through them. And aside from feeling connected, there are health benefits to natural lighting, too.

The Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine in 2014 published the “Impact of Windows and Daylight Exposure on Overall Health and Sleep Quality of Office Workers: A Case-Control Pilot Study” which found that office workers who worked within higher levels of light exposure sleep better, participated in more physical activity and had an overall better quality of life than those with a smaller amount of exposure to natural light.

According to the study's authors, "We suggest that architectural design of office environments should place more emphasis on sufficient daylight exposure of the workers in order to promote office workers' health and well-being."

Although not a corrections-related research, the study clearer indicates that natural light has a direct impact on wellness. Therefore, logic tells us that it only makes sense that the same conclusion probably would be found in prisons and jails. Remember the quote from earlier in this document: "If you treat inmates like humans, they will act like humans."

Furniture

Furniture sometimes can be a secondary consideration in the design of correctional facilities. Architects and correctional officials have always been more concerned about the size of cells, the safety of common areas and the monitoring systems that keep these environments secure.

"In the past, it appeared that the furniture was its own thing in correctional facilities. It had its own form. Its own color. We would design an environment and the furniture was just something we had to make do with," Maynard said.



San Diego County Women's Detention Facility

Fast forward to today and there is a noticeable trend in making furniture more residential and aesthetically pleasing in corrections environments. Chair arms and backs have curved corners. Proper height leads to easier egress. Tables have high-impact laminate tops which, aside from being attractive, are much quieter than metal tables and can help create a calmer and controlled environment, while soothing colors from nature are slowly replacing the stark grays.

That doesn't mean that the furniture is becoming softer, too. It may just seem that way at first. When properly manufactured, this kind of correctional furniture can have the extreme durability, safety and security needed for these sometimes tough environments.

Many pieces allow for ballasting to ensure the product isn't moved or used as a weapon, while other proper corrections furniture is designed with suicide prevention in mind and is built with no ligature points. Additionally, beds and tables that appear residential in nature can be floor-anchored and made of highly durable polymer that is tested for maximum durability.

All of this has the obvious intention of reducing stress in environments that often are filled with tension and violence.

Images of nature

Pam Maynard, Director of Interior Architecture for HMC Architects, said research shows that images of nature have a positive effect on those who view them. In fact, she points to studies that show that patients who have surgeries in healthcare settings have faster recovery times and less need for pain medication if they see an image of nature after their procedure, opposed to a blank, white wall.

She said that she and colleagues are taking this research – along with the research from Europe that shows that artwork is a positive influence in prisons and jails – and are implementing artwork to help create relaxed and therapeutic environments in correctional facilities. It also helps inmates imagine themselves outside of where they currently are.

“When you talk about views of nature, you talk about being able to look outside of your current condition,” Maynard said. “You might have a scene of an ocean, or you might have a scene of the forest. And you're able to sit and kind of daydream about ‘what can my life be?’ I'm not just within four walls. What can I imagine my life to be when I am somewhere else?” she said.

Landscaping and Gardens

Much like images of nature, aesthetically pleasing landscaping can provide a mental escape and residential appeal on the grounds outside of a correctional facility. This is especially true when the landscaping mirrors the natural habitat of the surrounding region where the facility is located.

While walking in the yard or on pathways, inmates can be exposed to flowers, bushes, applicable stones (which cannot be moved) – opposed to stark concrete walls. These therapeutic views can provide them with experiences that can help them relax, which as previously mentioned, can translate into better relationships with staff and help create a better facility in general.



Outside at the San Diego County Women's Detention Facility

Additionally, in some correctional facilities, inmates can take part in the planting and maintenance of the landscaping, or in some cases, a garden.

For example, since 1993 the Cook County Sheriff's Department has maintained a vegetable garden where inmates work during the summer months.

"Over those same 17 years, we have shipped more than 50 tons of fresh produce to homeless shelters and other deserving non-profit organizations; involved more than 400 inmates in hands on learning in horticulture, from planting to harvesting; and, since the year 2000, officially certified more than 200 of those inmates as Master Gardeners following classroom instruction and on site testing," according to the office's website.

Technology – Video Visitation, Internet, MP3 players

With the technology and security protocols that are available today, technology is yet another way to keep inmates connected to the outside world. Additionally, keeping up with trends in technology while incarcerated will make the learning curve a little less steep once they are released into a world of tablets, smart phones, online banking, social media and other advances that we have made during the past 20 years.

Although not widely accepted yet, some prisons and jails across the country allow inmates to have supervised use of the internet. This access allows inmates to educate themselves, have a voice in the world that they would not otherwise have and, again, provides them real world technology skills that so many more jobs require today than they did 15-20 years ago.

Another technology that has made its way into correctional facilities is mp3 players. According to a 2013 article by Spin Magazine, those little devices that turned the music industry upside down and killed off CDs are slowly making their way into correctional facilities and into the hands of inmates. In fact, the article reported that between 15-30 percent of those incarcerated at the Idaho Correctional Institution in Orofino have the devices. The players are "electronically imprinted with the name of the inmate who bought it" to deter theft, and songs are stored in centralized systems called "Music Wardens," according to the article. The article points out that mp3 players keep inmates occupied and cut down on contraband since cassettes and CDs become obsolete.



Video visitation stations in a correctional facility

And although not necessarily a new technology, another way to enhance inmate life is video visitation. These systems use technology that allows inmates and their family/friends to see and communicate with each other through monitors and/or other electronic devices while each party is at a different location or facility.

Proponents say the benefits of video visitation include reduction in costs for facilities; online registration and scheduling improve ease and accessibility for visitors; more visits can be conducted and visitation hours expanded without additional staff; there is a decrease in contraband transfer between visitor and inmate since each party is at a different location; law enforcement officials can monitor conversations and gather evidence regarding criminal behavior.

It should be noted, however, that video visitation is often best used as a compliment to in-person visits and not as a replacement. In-person visits allow inmates and loved ones to connect with each other in a way they couldn't through a screen. However, many families whose loved ones are incarcerated far away may not have the means to travel great distances. In cases such as this, especially when young children would otherwise go long periods without seeing a parent, video visitation is a viable visitation option.

Conclusion

So is the normalization of prisons, jails and other facilities the future of corrections? This trend may or may not grow and find widespread acceptance. But what would happen if reduced recidivism rates, less inmate violence and better results of resocialization could be traced back to the humanization of the space that inmates spent time in?

In the years to come, research will tell us much about how important environment is in these spaces. And if normalization does produce positive outcomes, it will be interesting to see how quickly the face of American corrections will change in the future. Obviously, positive outcomes would change the minds of many non-believers, while others with a more hard line perspective will still contend that jail is for punishment and an inmate's comfort shouldn't necessarily be a primary objective of a correctional facility.

Regardless, the trend is slowly spreading and the United States is at a pivotal point in its history where officials can either take what we know from Europe and potentially transform our corrections industry or stay the course and hope for another solution to our incarceration dilemma. This is particularly relevant since everyone along the chain of command has to buy in to concept of humanization. And there is a real opportunity to start early. Creating positive environments in juvenile facilities may influence an inmate early on in their life and deter their choice to re-offend.

It is important to note that not all of the solutions mentioned in this white paper are applicable to every security level you will find in correctional environments. Providing technology, an abundance of windows and additional freedoms may not be the best choice for more critical, high risk populations.

However, working with reputable architects, planners and designers who have experience in the corrections field will help ensure that you are not putting anyone at risk while trying to humanize your spaces. And to recap, humanizing correctional facilities makes sense for the following reasons:

- Research points to a reduction in recidivism
- Humanized facilities have a positive effect on the mentally ill
- Facilities may see a decrease in inmate violence
- Both inmates and staff will feel more relaxed, leading to a decrease in tension
- Inmates feel a broader connection to the outside world instead of a limited environment
- They will be more prepared to re-enter society as mentally healthy and adjusted individuals
- Facilities may be able to retain correctional officers and keep them more relaxed and secure

RESOURCES

[San Diego County Women's Detention Facility](#)

[Bureau of Justice Statistics: Recidivism Study](#)

[Southern Center for Human Rights: The Crisis of Violence in Georgia Prisons](#)

[Vera Institute of Justice: Sentencing and Prison Practices in Germany and the Netherlands: Implications for the United States](#)

[Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine: Impact of Windows and Daylight Exposure on Overall Health and Sleep Quality of Office Workers: A Case-Control Pilot Study](#)

[Snake River Correctional Institution: The Blue Room](#)

[Spin Magazine: The Music Business in America's Prisons](#)

[Tara Rae Hill: Founder of LittleFISH Think Tank](#)

[HMC Architects](#)

[HDR, Inc.](#)

ABOUT NORIX

Norix designs innovative, robust furniture that meets the real-world need for humanizing challenging environments. For more than 30 years, the company has served the behavioral healthcare, corrections, fire/rescue, military, shelter, public safety and variety of commercial industries by providing uniquely reliable furnishings for every application. All furniture is designed for safety, security and extreme durability. Norix furniture is extraordinary by design, surpassing industry standards for strength, safety and long-term performance. Aside from its durability, Norix products also come in aesthetically pleasing designs and colors and are made especially for facilities that require furniture that can humanize their environments.

The privately held company is headquartered in West Chicago, IL with consultative sales representatives and dealers throughout the U.S. In 2012, Norix launched Safe Environments, a news and information blog serving architects, designers, administrators and facility managers involved in the design, construction, and operation of challenging environments. For more information, call 800-234-4900 or visit www.norix.com.



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