

SECTION ONE

OVERVIEW

*History of Correctional Design, Development, and  
Implementation of Direct Supervision as an Innovation*

## 1

## Introduction

It is often a curious experience for me to lecture about design and behavior in correctional settings because of the different groups of people with different kinds of expertise who may be in the audience. When I am speaking to criminal justice and corrections professionals, some of the concepts I discuss are well known (such as the history of prisons, the direct supervision system of design and management, the nature of prison crowding and isolation) but much of the psychology, especially environmental psychology – including research methodology, stress, post occupancy evaluation, personal space and territoriality, and psychology of crowding – is not. If I speak to psychologists just the opposite is true, and a meeting of architects presents a different set of competencies entirely. So it is with this book. Some topics will be well known to corrections people, others to psychologists, and still different ones to designers. The hard part is always in figuring out which elements of familiarity can be assumed and which need deeper background. I hope that parts of this book will be of interest to all of those groups – as well as others such as policy makers.

Put another way, I hope that criminal justice and corrections professionals will find the research on how correctional design affects staff and inmate behavior interesting. In particular, I think the perspective here on the nature of violence in institutions may be different from that usually encountered, as is the explanation of how and why direct supervision actually works. I hope psychologists can come away with a sense of these institutions as magnifiers of environmental impacts and, as such, as laboratories that can tell us things about human response to stress difficult to discern in other places. The message for architects is more value laden – correctional types and models are not the same and choosing one over another has significant and long-term consequences. It cannot be the role of the professional designer to simply build

whatever the client requests (“and you want that torture chamber where?”), certainly not without exploring options and impacts. Most of the architects I know and with whom I have worked come to their clients with a strong set of values and ethics and have undoubtedly given up lucrative projects along the way because of their values. I hope the work herein can serve to support their discussions with clients. In the same way, I would hope this work would support correctional professionals, from administrators to unit officers, who, in my experience and contrary to media stereotypes, care deeply about doing a competent, ethical and humane job.

#### A JAIL OR PRISON BY ANY OTHER NAME

The names we use to label jails and prisons tell much about what those in charge are trying to do with them, or at least the image they want to portray. Prisons were called penitentiaries when the intent was to provide for solitary reflection and opportunities for penitence. Detention facilities are often called correctional centers, suggesting – at least at some point in time, or in some planner’s mind – a goal to create change in behavior, correcting personality and behavioral problems. They may be simply called detention centers, jail (from the Latin for cave or hollow), or prison (from the Latin for to seize or arrest) when there is no overriding philosophic or ideological model other than detaining people, that is, keeping them off the streets.

Most, maybe all of these institutions are unpleasant places to spend a night, or many nights, even under the best conditions. That airplane coach seat that is tolerable for a 1-hour flight becomes claustrophobically tight when delayed on the tarmac for many uncertain hours. The jail tier or pod starts out measurably worse than the airplane, or than the institution itself looks in drawings or photos, and becomes even more so once the door slams closed for what may be an indeterminate amount of time.

The best of conditions are rare enough. I have been fortunate to observe and help document many jails that rate among the best environments of their kind, but I have never seen one that I wanted to study so closely as to stay overnight. Even where the inmates are unthreatening, the staff professional, and when designers have strived for “normalization” of the setting, the noise levels; odors; lack of access to light, air, and nature; the uncertain temperature control; and lack of privacy – for sleeping, sitting, using the toilet or shower – make these the kind of settings that few go to willingly. In 1974, during my first study of the brand-new Metropolitan Correctional Center in Chicago, Illinois, then clearly the top of the line in innovative, safe, and clean jails, an inmate said to me “sure this place looks nice, maybe like a motel, but how

would you like to be locked inside a Holiday Inn room for three months?" I wouldn't, and the truth is that the place could never have been mistaken for a Holiday Inn (or even a much more budget-oriented hotel) then or now.

Prisons and jails are unique and extreme environments. They are what Goffman (1961) called "total institutions" – 24-hour settings where residents have no control over egress and are infantilized by the fact that they must depend on the staff for almost everything that is vital to their existence, including food, clothing, shelter, and contact with the outside. These are among the few places in our society where people are forcibly placed with no regard to their desire. Moreover, they are long-term environments. In psychology labs where crowding and isolation have often been studied, subjects (voluntarily) come and go in the space of an hour. By contrast, inmates may remain in crowded or isolated conditions, in small confined areas with little movement, all day, for days, weeks, months, and years. In jails they may stay on the small living unit all the time. In prisons, there is usually more variation of spaces – a yard, a work or class area – but there is still not much variety of place or behavior by noninstitutional standards. Where else do we invest so much time and money in a place for which the welfare and improvement of those housed there is often not the main, or often even a nominal goal?

For these reasons jails and prisons are bad places to live, and often not much better places to work. It is not uncommon to hear correctional officers grimly joke that although inmates get to go home eventually, officers are essentially sentenced for life. Over the decades some have argued that these institutions are so expensive, so inefficient, so irredeemably and irretrievably harmful, or so mistaken in approach that they should be closed, shut down, torn down, and replaced with a different, more effective, and more humane system (Ambrosio & Schiraldi, 1997; Elias, 1994; Nagel, 1977; Sommer, 1976; Warren, 2004; Witte, 1977). This is ironic given the beginnings of the American prison system (see Chapter 2) as a reform from more cruel options. In any case, there is no reason to think that the end of imprisonment is as imminent as some had hoped (Sommer, 1976). Nor does this book argue that point. That is a discussion for another time and place; here I will address issues of how the places that do exist impact those within them.

I should also note that as prisons and jails are difficult settings for living or working, they are also very difficult places in which to conduct research. This is important to point out because it helps explain the dearth of useful research in many areas, detailed in the chapters that follow. Many institutional administrations are acutely aware of the potential downside of research – real or imagined criticism of how well they do their job – and hence are often reluctant to provide access and support. Under the best circumstances access

and security procedures make research in these places more time consuming and difficult than almost any other place. Without committed help, it is almost impossible.

Much of the research discussed in this book was only possible because of support from a committed high-level administrator (such as at the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP), or the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice), or sometimes because of a court order to gather evidence in support of a legal action. Other studies were conducted by research offices of criminal justice agencies, such as the excellent research staff of the BOP, which seeks data to improve operations and to respond to congressional mandates for oversight.

This analysis is not remote and detached enough to pretend it is value free. My perspective is that some settings are better than others, and it is possible to build and run institutions that are safe, secure, and economically efficient without being tortuous or inhumane or eschewing human betterment as a goal. The values herein are simple: for those who have been declared by legitimate criminal justice and court systems to need forced detention, we should and can create places that are not toxic to the detainees or those who work there. There should be, at the very least, a kind of Correctional Hippocratic Oath to do no further harm. It is not inconceivable that well-planned, well-designed, and well-run institutions can leave people better off, less dangerous, and more likely to succeed than when they arrived. This is surely neither a radical nor an unreasonable goal.

The usefulness and ethics of doing research in jails and prisons should also be openly discussed and made clear. It is not ethical for the purposes of research to manipulate or extend conditions that may be presumed to be harmful. It is not ethical to use inmates or staff in experiments that test conditions without their informed consent. It should also be recognized that getting true informed consent from inmates is especially tricky, given the pressures and control over rewards and punishment that may be presumed to be connected to the research (Rachel Wener, 2007).

Our research<sup>1</sup> has always had the goal of increasing understanding of environment-behavior relationships in ways that would aid the system and support the people within it, including improving living conditions and reducing stress. We have studied conditions as they are and have occasionally conducted “natural experiments” in which we tried to measure the outcome of changes we did not and could not control. For example, in 1977, after we collected data in several living units of the New York Metropolitan Correctional Center, a court decision changed the way the institution dealt with overcrowding.<sup>2</sup> We went back and restudied the units that were affected, providing a

useful assessment of the impacts of changes in population density (Wener & Keys, 1988; see Chapter 7, “Prison Crowding” for more information).

It is important at this point to restate what may be obvious: the conditions that make these settings special and that make them such useful platforms from which to observe the impact of environment on behavior also make them harsh and potentially damaging. In such extreme and total environments, every effect is magnified. Noise levels that one could tolerate for a brief exposure, such as on a street corner, in a subway car, or in a stadium, can be very stressful in a prison. The same is true for lighting, view, privacy, crowding, and isolation, as discussed in later chapters. People often work long hours without access to sun and nature, but to be involuntary shut away from these benefits for extensive periods is especially unpleasant, if not harmful for health.

The premise of this book is that the settings of these places, jails and prisons, represent more than just warehouses of bed space for arrested or convicted men and women. They are more complicated environments than just good or bad, comfortable or not. The design of a jail or prison is critically related to the philosophy of the institution, maybe even of the entire criminal justice system. It is the physical manifestation of a society’s goals and approaches for dealing with arrested and/or convicted men and women, and it is a stage for acting out plans and programs for addressing their future. The bricks and mortar, glass and steel, cameras and screens of the institution may be the embodiment of a philosophy of corrections, and the design process can be the wedge that forces the system to think through its approach and review, restate, or redevelop its philosophy of criminal justice.

The setting of the jail or prison is part of an overt agenda that includes the kinds of spaces that are provided, the number of beds, the quality of space and programs for education, therapy, and training. But the setting is also part of a covert agenda. It is a manifestation of what or who inmates are in the minds of planners and designers, and what the designers imagine to be the job of correctional officers and other staff members.

In this book I review what is known about these settings from an environment-behavior perspective. The findings discussed herein are based on research, although the research, in many cases, is far from conclusive. The nature of research in institutions makes it very hard to make use of the kinds of controls and random selection that allow for rigor in methodology and certainty in findings.

The investment in the physical infrastructure of corrections over the past 30 years is vast, and new beds continue to be added to the inventory at astounding rates and frightening costs. It would be no less foolish to continue to build

these institutions without a careful review of past practice (security, safety, programmatic success) as a guide to future construction than for a franchise to add new sites without looking at how well the last ones worked to sell product and satisfy customers. Yet that is what is most often done. Most jails in the United States, for instance, are “one-off” events – lone facilities built at the county level because most counties need one and only one. New jails often replace older ones that are closed because they are out of date, court-ordered to be closed, or just too small to support the inmate population and requisite programs. Each of the more than 3000 counties in the United States operates somewhat like an independent fiefdom, able to make significant decisions on its own. They often go forward with relatively little consideration given to experience in other jails, in spite of the best efforts of groups like the National Institute of Corrections Jail Center, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

There are many important questions related to corrections that are not addressed in this book: Should there be jails and prisons? Do they do more harm than good? What are the alternatives? What is their role in the overall criminal justice system – should it be to detain, to punish, to treat, to reeducate? Instead, in this book I use the perspective of environmental psychology to see how behavior and operations are affected by the environment, as broadly defined or in specific issues and features. This discussion is largely based on empirical studies that are usually conducted in the field, such as with post occupancy evaluations (POE). POEs have the stated intention of looking at buildings after they have been occupied, usually based on the responses of user groups, to see how well they work and what lessons can be learned. This approach sees design as a process of inquiry (Zeisel, 2006) and new buildings as, in essence, a complex of assumptions, estimates, and hypotheses for POEs to assess. Occasionally, instead of doing a POE as a one-off case study, large-scale surveys or quasi-experimental studies are possible, comparing facilities at one point in time or before and after change. These studies are part of a process that has recently become known as evidence-based design (Ulrich et al., 2008).

Environmental psychology takes a broad, holistic, and contextual view. It looks at the physical setting and the social and organization context, as well as economic and political aspects of the setting. No reasonable architect can begin to approach the design of a jail or prison without thoroughly understanding the management and operational system it is intended to support. Often the questions that arise in a good design process force planners and administrators to make implicit assumptions explicit, and this may cause clients to rethink strategies and approaches. The design process can be an

opportunity for unfreezing organizational processes and assumptions. The design and operation – the physical, organizational and social environment – are experienced as a unity of place by the inmates. I discuss these connections throughout the book but make them most explicit in the chapter on violence and the conceptual model presented therein (Chapter 11).

This book does not present a deterministic view of the effect of design upon behavior. However powerful or striking the physical place may be, its impact is rarely felt directly and independently of other factors. Rather, the perspective is largely probabilistic; physical structures enable, influence, and change the likelihood of behaviors. The correctional model of direct supervision as discussed throughout the book and in detail in Chapters 3 and 4 is a great example of how and why this is true, but not the only example. The physical setting for this style of correctional design and management is important, but only to the degree it supports and fits within a larger approach to management.

#### THE ROLE OF DIRECT SUPERVISION IN THIS BOOK

One might reasonably read this book and wonder if it is a review of corrections in general or a paean to one specific model – direct supervision – in particular. Because one can find many recent and important books on prisons and jails that barely mention direct supervision, it is not unreasonable to ask why discussion of it should be dominant in a book that purports to be about broader concerns. The simplest answer is that direct supervision is what I know; it is the approach that represented my entrée into the study of correctional settings and a large part of my research conducted since. More importantly though, as I try to make clear in these pages, is what the operation and success of direct supervision systems say about the nature of incarceration, about institutional operations and living, and about environment-behavior impacts in general. It is for those reasons that we often refer to direct supervision in providing examples and descriptions of ways things can and have worked in institutions.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The first section, Chapters 1 through 5, presents an overview of correctional design and related issues. Chapter 2 provides an overview of several hundred years of history of prison and jail design. One chapter on this mammoth subject could not possibly be exhaustive. Rather this chapter tries to capture key trends and, more importantly, review them from the special perspective of environment and behavior. Chapters 3 and 4 are focused on specific elements



of that history. Chapter 3 describes the development of the direct supervision model of correctional design and management, arguably one of the most important innovations in jail and prison design to evolve in the late twentieth century. In Chapter 4, I discuss our post occupancy evaluations of these first direct supervision jails. That is the most personal discussion, because it reviews my own early experiences in these sites when they were newly formed. Chapter 5 takes a longer view, reviewing literature on the impact and effectiveness of direct supervision across numerous studies and 30 years of history.

The next section, Chapters 6 through 10, addresses basic environmental psychology issues of interpersonal and group functioning in jails and prisons. Chapter 6 reviews privacy, territoriality, and personal space as they are viewed in these settings – how individual needs to claim and control space and for interpersonal interactions affect design and experience. Chapters 7 and 8 look at two common and critical conditions that represent opposite extremes of discrepancies between desired and achieved privacy: crowding and isolation. In them we review the literature and conceptual models that explain the impact of these conditions.

Chapters 9 and 10 extend this discussion to environmental conditions in general, and review issues relating to environmental stresses including noise, lighting (artificial and daylight), and views of nature. Issues of daylight and access to nature are garnering special attention in environmental psychology and are bolstered by work in neurology and the cognitive sciences. In some cases, relevant research has been done in correctional settings, but most often we must extrapolate from other settings to corrections.

The final section attempts to organize, conceptualize, and sum up the information previously presented. Chapter 11 ties much of this work together by focusing on the issue that in many ways drives much else of what happens in jails and prisons – violence and fear of it. In Chapter 11 I review perspectives on violent behavior and present my own environmentally based model addressing factors that influence violent acts and that may be used to reduce their frequency. Chapter 12 presents a conclusion and review, including suggestions for the directions of future work.

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