From expected reoffender to trusted neighbour—why we should rethink our prisons

August 22 2016, by Rohan Lulham And Lucy Klippan

Communal area and classrooms of the Intensive Learning Centre facility, Mid North Coast Correctional Centre, NSW.

There were 26,163 people serving sentences in Australian prisons in 2015. Around 90% of these people will return to the community within ten years. But will they return to the community equipped with the skills, capabilities and motivation they need to avoid re-offending?

Not likely, according to current data. Close to half (44.3%) of those released will return to prison [within two years](#). These statistics reinforce the [research](#): that prison has at best a negligible – and at worst a damaging – impact on the likelihood a person will re-offend.

Prisoner numbers in Australia are soaring. In New South Wales alone, at least [A$3.8 billion](#) will be spent over the next four years on thousands of new beds.

It seems timely to question, then, how we can better support the transition from "prisoner" to "community member". What happens to prisoners once they leave the prison walls and become someone's next-door neighbour? Could we design prisons to better reflect the fact that we are all part of one broader community?

With a [few exceptions](#), typical Australian prisons are harsh, restrictive institutions, designed to enable maximum control over inmates' behaviour at any time. Their scale and appearance instil mistrust and anonymity.

The ability to personalise space, have ownership and have personal control over one's situation is [intentionally absent](#). Mostly, these are overtly punitive environments, unlike any other.

What effect do we expect this typically "cold" prison environment to have on the [people](#) inside them?

Research suggests we assume the environment has little effect on people's behaviour. Called the "fundamental attribution error", this common finding is that when attributing causes to behaviour, people [over-emphasise](#) inmates' personal characteristics and significantly under-emphasise the environment.

The upshot is that we as a community should more closely scrutinise the environment in relation to the way prisoners behave. The infamous [Stanford Prison experiment](#) atrocities uncovered at [Abu Ghraib](#) serve as powerful examples of how environment can encourage extreme levels of abuse in the prison context.

Yarning circle at the Intensive Learning Centre facility, Mid North Coast Correctional Centre.

In his book [Situational Prison Control](#), former NSW prison psychologist Richard Wortley articulates strategies to reduce negative behaviour in prison contexts, including through physical design:

- setting positive expectations through domestic furnishings that confer trust;
- reducing anonymity through small prison size;
- personalising victims through humane conditions;
- enabling a positive sense of community through ownership and personalisation of the space; and
- reducing provocation and stress by designing in the capacity for inmates to enact control over environmental conditions and personal space.

The current model of Australian correctional facilities is the antithesis of each of these strategies. When we create environments that fuel the negative behaviours we naturally associate with criminals, we are caught in a vicious cycle: harsh community and political attitudes towards prisons and prisoners are perpetuated, and overtly punitive prisons continue to be built.

Pockets of innovative prison design suggest another approach is possible. Prisons such as Halden Prison in Norway, Leoben in Austria, and Enner Mark in Denmark are purposely designed to support eschewing crime. They do this by providing positive opportunities for inmates and building a greater sense of optimism for their future.

These spaces are designed to more closely reflect environments in the outside community. The design treats these people not solely as "prisoners" but also as community members – with all the social, vocational and emotional responsibilities that this entails.

A local example is the Intensive Learning Centre (ILC) facility in the Mid North Coast Correctional Centre – a typical medium-security prison near Kempsey, NSW.

Recently recognised as a best-practice facility by the OECD Centre for

[Effective Learning Environments](link), the ILC is a prison space purposely designed for full-time intensive education with a distinctively productive, community aesthetic. Upon entering the learning program, participants become "learners", temporarily leaving their "prisoner" identity behind.

Though these less conventional prison environments feature much "softer" forms of security, there has not been a correlating increase in security incidents [within them](link). Most investigations of these places indicate fewer incidents and more positive interactions between staff and prisoners. This contradicts the idea that "hard" prison design is necessary for behaviour control.

There are important lessons we can take from these examples before we spend billions of dollars extending prisons or building new ones.

Reconsidering the influence of the environment on behaviour leads to questioning of our hardline approach to [prison](link) design. Innovative design could challenge prisoners to positively reimagine their futures. It could also challenge us to reimagine the purpose of prisons and help bridge the divide between the communities on either side of the walls.

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