

# THE RISK OF 'A COLD CONSERVATISM' IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITY DESIGN: THE CASE FOR DESIGN INNOVATION

**Dr. Rohan Lulham<sup>1</sup>**  
**University of Technology Sydney, Australia**

**Douglas Tomkin<sup>2</sup>**  
**University of Technology Sydney, Australia**

**Luke Grant<sup>3</sup>**  
**Corrective Services NSW**

**Professor Yvonne Jewkes<sup>4</sup>**  
**University of Brighton, UK**

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## Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between physical design and risk within modern correctional practice. It seeks to identify the potential risks and paradoxes of the current emphasis on considering correctional design primarily as a means of reducing security risks. We suggest that innovation in correctional design is required that embeds meanings that both support the goals of security risk management, but also the goals of reducing reoffending risk and promoting desistance. Drawing on a case study of the design and evaluation of a correctional education facility, we contend that innovative correctional design more broadly can be a stronger force for managing risk to promote desistance in corrections.

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1 *Designing Out Crime research centre, University of Technology Sydney, UTS Building 15, Level 2, 622-632 Harris St, Ultimo NSW 2007 Australia; rohan.lulham@uts.edu.au*

2 *Designing Out Crime research centre, University of Technology Sydney UTS Building 15, Level 2, 622-632 Harris St, Ultimo NSW 2007 Australia douglas.tomkin@uts.edu.au*

3 *Corrective Services NSW, Department of Justice 20 Lee Street Sydney 2000 Australia; Luke.grant@dcs.nsw.gov.au*

4 *Research Professor in Criminology School of Applied Social Science, University of Brighton, Mayfield House, Falmer, Brighton UK BN1 9PH; Y.Jewkes@brighton.ac.uk*

## Introduction

In an article on risk and correctional practice Clear and Cadora (2001) state a 'cold conservatism' permeates the approach to risk management in modern corrections. This is no more clearly evident than in the physical design of modern correctional facilities. Typical modern correctional facilities such as those shown in Figures 1 and 2, present a cold, clinical, nearly anesthetizing aesthetic (Jewkes, 2012; Jewkes & Johnston, 2007). Their design is dominated by the restrictive opportunity reduction approaches of target hardening, access control and surveillance (Wortley, 2002). The design literally dictates that static security measures are the primary means of managing behavior - diminishing the requirement for the establishment of social relationships and responsibility to guide more positive behavior. Notions of human rights can be seemingly absent from the design, lost in a particular ideological approach to managing security risks.



Figure 1-2: Typical accommodation units in a modern correctional facility

Within the correctional literature, however, there is increasing recognition that the design of correctional facilities communicates meanings related to social impressions (Wener, 2012; Wortley, 2002) and behavioral expectations (Fairweather, 2000; Lulham, 2007; Fairweather, 2000; Lulham, 2007), both positive and negative. Wener (2012, p. 252) states that in correctional settings: "The impact of the appearance of the setting is immediate and global in nature. When people enter a new place, they pull from it an immediate sense of the situation, provided by physical cues but interpreted through their own cultural history". The effects are not just limited to the behavior of inmates but also (just as importantly) the impressions and behavior of staff (Lulham, 2007; Zimbardo, 2007). Evidence is mounting both within correctional facilities (Beijersbergen, Dirkzwager, van der Laan, & Nieuwbeerta, 2014; Grant & Jewkes, 2015; Wener, 2012) and in other institutional settings (Thompson, Robinson, Dietrich, Farris, & Sinclair, 1996a, 1996b; Thompson, Robinson, Graff, & Ingenmey, 1990) that physical design that is residential, as opposed to institutional, is associated with more positive (and less anti-social) behavior.

The modern, conservative correctional facility, while designed around a premise of reducing opportunities for negative behavior, may through other means actually be creating conditions that support negative behavior. Wortley's (2002, p. 58) situational prison control framework outlines a range of 'precipitating' strategies that seek to minimize negative behavior with those specifically related to physical design including:

- controlling prompts and setting positive expectations through domestic quality furnishing that confer trust
- reducing anonymity through small prison size
- personalizing victims through humane conditions

- enabling a positive sense of community through ownership and personalization of the space
- reducing provocation and stress by designing the capacity to enact control over environmental conditions and personal space

The typical modern correctional facility, described previously, in many respects represents the antithesis to each of the above strategies. Design is institutional, confers mistrust, depersonalizes and promotes anonymity through scale and appearance. The ability to personalize space, have ownership and enact personal control is purposefully absent. As such, if Wortley's framework is to be followed, there are clearly negative ramifications of this conservation design approach for managing difficult behavior. Further, it is also evident that it creates a space antithetical to notions of rehabilitation and desistance. It defines prisoners as the 'dangerous offender' (McGregor, 2014) and offers few opportunities for developing or occupying identities inconsistent with a criminal future (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). We contend there are risks associated with continuing the cold conservatism approach to correctional design – it is embedding particular practices and meanings that may be seriously limiting correctional administrators' capacity to achieve the objective of safety, security and desistance. There is a need to consider alternative approaches to correctional design and practice that better enable administrators to manage risks (Awofeso, 2011; Davis et al., 2014; Grant & Jewkes, 2015; Jackson et al., 2015; O'Brien, 2010). We suggest there is a need for innovation – the development of new perspectives to guide practice and design in correctional centres.

### **Transformative innovation – the creation of new meaning**

Quite separate, but resonating with this research on correctional design and meaning (Wener, 2012) is the emerging body of literature in organizational studies, business and design on the nature of innovation (Dorst, 2015; Thurgood & Lulham, Forthcoming; Verganti, 2009). In this literature innovation is often considered as either incremental or transformative. Put simply incremental innovation is doing what is presently done better, while transformative innovation is doing things differently so what is achieved, or the purpose, also changes. This literature suggests that fundamental to *transformative* innovation is the creation of new meanings or frames that transform opportunities (Verganti, 2009; Dorst, 2015). Rather than new technology or resources per se, it is the creation of new meanings that is the source of the innovation. New technology or resources may make a particular innovation possible, but without the creation of new meanings the technology itself will not result in transformative innovation.

Verganti (2009) often explains this using the example of the iPod. When the iPod was released it was not the first or best example of music player technology on the market – other products had better hardware and more options. But through embedding new meaning into the product and integrating it with the iTunes music libraries, the iPod was not just a music player, it was a new type of personal consumer device: your personal music collection, accessible anywhere and instantly through iTunes. The innovation was in creating and embedding new meaning into the design of the product, not in the technology of the music player itself.

We contend the situation is similar with innovation in correctional design. What is required for transformative innovation is the consideration of what new meanings and frames we want embedded within the correctional environment. As such, there are real risks in equating technology with innovation. New technology, while it will undoubtedly have large impacts on correctional practice

in the years ahead, is not in itself going to lead to transformative change in correctional design and practice. Any new correctional technology can just as easily be used to maintain the status quo (doing what we do slightly better) as it can be used for innovation. We suggest what is needed for innovation in correctional design is the creation of new frames that transform how people relate and how the security, safety and desistance objectives of corrections are achieved.

### **Exploring meaning in innovative correctional design – a methodology & outline**

In the next section we explicitly explore this proposition by examining a correctional design project that is presented as innovative in terms of its physical design, and how it intends to achieve the objectives of security, safety and desistance. The project is a new Intensive Learning Centre (ILC) in a maximum-security correctional facility in NSW, Australia. Three of the authors (Lulham, Tomkin, Grant) were involved in both the concept design and subsequent post occupancy evaluation of this facility. In support of its innovative design is its selection as a featured project on the OECD 'Database of Best Practices in Educational Facilities Investment', its nomination for an International Corrections and Prison Association award in 2014, and it being the subject of a number of media reports (see <http://designingoutcrime.com/project/csi-intensive-learning-centres/>).

Our examination of the project is based primarily on information from the Intensive Learning Centre concept report (Bradley, Munro, Lulham, Tomkin, & Klippan, 2012) and the Intensive Learning Centre building evaluation report (Lulham, Munro, Bradley, & Tomkin, 2015), with versions approved for public release available online (<http://designingoutcrime.com/project/csi-intensive-learning-centres/>). The Intensive Learning Centre building evaluation was undertaken in February 2015, approximately one year after the facility was opened and is a comprehensive study of the functional performance of the Intensive Learning Centre facility. In brief, the study involved conducting surveys with 33 inmate learners and 6 educators, semi-structured interviews with ten learners, all the educators, correctional staff and management, and separate learner and educator focus groups. The formal survey instrument was an adapted version of a post-occupancy evaluation tool for assessing user experiences of innovative educational buildings (OECD Centre for Effective Learning Environments, 2009), with additional items added to assess correctional specific issues. In addition to this survey, inmate learners also completed the ESSEN social climate survey that assesses perceptions of safety, inmate cohesion and staff hold (therapeutic support) (Day & Casey, Forthcoming; Day, Casey, Vess, & Huisy, 2012).

This project examination is structured around three sub-sections. The first provides some background and a brief description of the Intensive Learning Centre and its design. In the second section we identify the new frame and associated new meanings around which the facility was designed. In this discussion a 'frame' is conceptualized as a more overarching concept or perspective of how the situation is viewed, while 'meanings' are more specific purposes or themes relating to the frame (Dorst, 2015; Goffman, 1974). In the last subsection, we first recap the argument presented in this paper, and then examine how the ILC is performing with regard to the management of risk and the objectives of safety, security and desistance. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential implications and opportunities of considering correctional design in terms beyond security risk management.

## Intensive Learning Centre, Mid North Coast Correctional Centre, NSW Australia

### Background and description

The Intensive Learning Centre is a recent design and construction project at Mid North Coast Correctional Centre in NSW, Australia. In partnership with Corrective Services NSW, the University of Technology Sydney design team utilized a collaborative Codesign approach to work closely with educators, correctional officers, management and inmates. The facility is a purpose-designed prototype facility that seeks to support an intensive 21st century education program in a maximum-security prison. It is a correctional design project where, in addition to safety and security considerations, one of the explicit intentions in the design and operation of the facility was to support inmate learners' desisting from crime.

The Intensive Learning Centre program operates with cohorts of up to 40 inmate learners who participate in fulltime, intensive education for six to nine months. The program targets young, high-risk inmates with all learners working towards graduating with a nationally recognized certificate in general education (literacy and numeracy). To engage inmate learners (many who have had poor previous education experiences in and out of custody), the ILC educators utilize modern, collaborative teaching techniques that leverage new technology. Drawing on the literature on education, recidivism and desistance (MacKenzie, 2009; McGregor, 2015; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), the ultimate goal of the intensive education program is to open up opportunities for the young men in the program to reconsider themselves and a non-offending future in the community.



Figure 3: Architectural plan of the Intensive Learning Centre

Opened in April 2014, the Intensive Learning Centre prototype facility is situated between two typical modern correctional accommodation pods within the maximum-security prison (see Figure 3). The facility consists of four classrooms, a kitchen/amenity block, educator office, a library and landscaped

outdoor areas. Timber hardwood decking creates a central communal area linking the classrooms, amenities block and educators' office. Between the central area and the library is a cultural 'yarning circle' and gardens with native plantings (see Figure 4). Running around the perimeter of the facility is a walking track. The buildings are all constructed from prefabricated modules made by inmates in Correctional Service Industries in other NSW prisons and transported to the Mid North Coast correctional facility. Similarly, Correctional Service Industries made 80 per cent of the cabinetry and furnishings. At a total project cost of 1.6 million Australian dollars (US \$1.13 million) the facility is not expensive in comparison to other correctional education facilities in NSW prisons. Further information about the ILC design project can be found online <http://designingoutcrime.com/project/csi-intensive-learning-centres/>

Fig 4a



Fig 4b



Fig 4c



Figure 4a, b, c: Main communal area, classroom and yarning circle

### Frame and meaning analysis

The key overarching frame for the design of the intensive learning centre was 'creating supportive therapeutic learning communities'. The fundamental elements of this *frame* were specified in the original design brief (McGregor, 2012) and then further developed and articulated in the design process and associated report. Tasman Munro, an industrial designer on the project, conceptualized the different communities as concentric circles with the boundaries as opportunities rather than barriers for creating connections between communities (and individuals) at different levels (Bradley et al., 2012). Using this framing device shown in Figure 5, the design challenge was then conceived as "how can design both enable the creation of supportive learning communities and the vital connections between these communities?"

For education within a maximum-security prison, the frame of 'creating supportive therapeutic learning communities' was innovative because it evoked new meanings about what, how and why education is being provided in the Intensive Learning Centres. In so doing it provided a basis for an innovative design approach. Four of these new meanings are now briefly discussed.

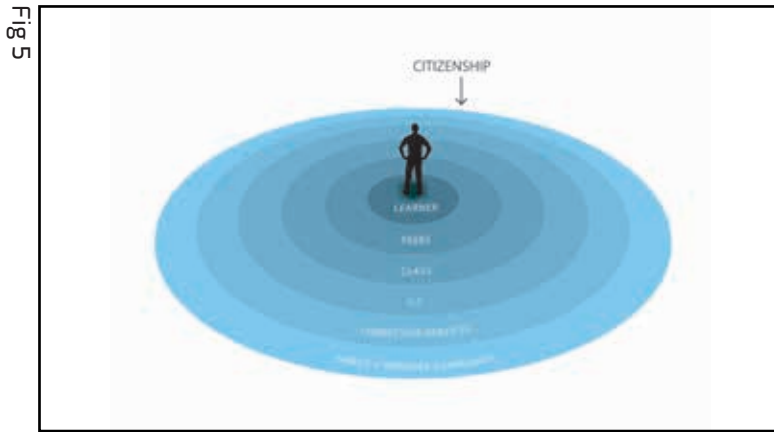


Figure 5: Creating supportive therapeutic learning communities at multiple scales

**'a different place where inmates feel and are safe to learn'**

Framing the Intensive Learning Centre as a supportive therapeutic learning community suggested a place that was different to other educational facilities within the prison system. Indeed, it was inferring a program and environment different to the typical education facility in the community. There was an emphasis on the therapeutic element and the associated need to feel safe. For prisoners, as for most people, the prison aesthetic of hard surfaces, prominent access control and minimalist fixtures is associated with feeling unsafe (Wener, 2012). As shown in the finishes pallet in Figure 6 and the images of the ILC facility in Figure 4, one of the design approaches here was to use materials, scale and finishes that contrasted with the broader prison environment, being more familiar, optimistic and respectful. In support of the communication of this meaning, an ILC educator stated in the evaluation; "it is a safe, supportive learning environment. And I think that's the most important environment we can create for them".

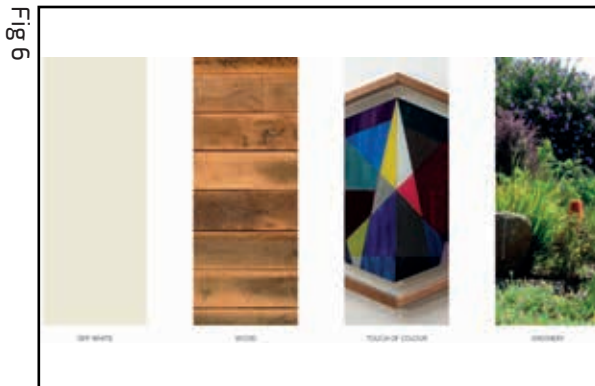


Figure 6: Conceptual theme board to guide selection of materials and finishes

**'situate inmates in the role of adult learner'**

A clear intention for the Intensive Learning Centre was to provide inmates with the opportunity to occupy and embrace the non-offending identity of 'adult learner'. Important to providing this opportunity was both the language and behaviors of staff, but also the meanings afforded by



the design of the Intensive Learning Centre. The ILC facility is purposefully an adult, educational space in terms of amenity and appearance. Typically education facilities in prisons look more like a 1980's primary school. In the ILC the desks are large providing a generous personal working space for learners. The design also offers and requests respect through the use of a variety of finishes, residential fixtures and outdoor spaces that are places to enjoy and reflect. As adult learners in the ILC, the behavioral expectations, work ethic and social interactions expected of inmates in the space are quite different and beyond those of most other spaces within the prison. Many inmate learners in the evaluation expressed that the ILC didn't feel like school but "*I feel like I am at TAFE (tertiary education institution) or university or something. Its good*".

### ***'engagement in learning 21st century skills'***

While a catch phrase, the emphasis around learning '21st century skills' signaled the ILC as a place where the social, collaborative, problem solving skills and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy required by today's employers was integral to the learning program. This was a major shift in what, how and why education was being delivered. It enabled Architect Kevin Bradley to explore Stephen Heppell's work on the creative classroom, embedding flexibility, technology and multiple points of focus (see [www.heppell.net](http://www.heppell.net)). The furnishing provided opportunities for learners to create groups at multiple scales, moving desks together or occupying quiet areas. Inmates overwhelmingly liked the desks that were an unusual shape with a curved front edge. One learner commented, "*They're weird, but they work. It's not like a plain old table*". The Smartboards with access to the Internet for educators created additional modes on learning with one learner stating, "*Smart boards are great, googling ideas for truths of subjects, research or interests.*"



Figure 7. Learners collaborating with an educator around some math problems using the interactive smart board

### ***'empower learners to reconsider themselves, their opportunities and futures in the community'***

Supporting the desistance process is a fundamental aspect of the ILC program. Through the intensive development of knowledge and skills in a supportive environment the program seeks to provoke and empower learners to reconsider who they are and who they could be. In this way the design of the ILC facility needed to promote reflection about life beyond the prison walls. The landscaped gardens with natural plantings, views to the tree line beyond the walls, the metaphor of the curved roof and the creation of quiet places such as the 'yarning circle' were all ways to support reflection. One of the most common remarks by learners was that '*it does not feel like you're in prison*' – with a possible inference being '*I don't feel like a criminal*' when in the ILC. While they are all very much in prison, the capacity of the designed environment to promote learners to imagine not being in prison, and occupying non-offending identities, potentially underlies a powerful desistance process.



## Managing risks - safety, security and promoting desistance

The physical design of the Intensive Learning Centre is clearly different and innovative for an education facility in a maximum-security prison. We have demonstrated that underlying this



Figure 8. View from the classroom to the tree line beyond the perimeter fence

innovation in design was a new perspective and meanings associated with the frame of 'creating supportive therapeutic learning communities'. At the start of this paper we also discussed the growing body of research that suggests the meanings imbued in the physical design of a correctional facility impacts on people's experiences and expectations in prison, supporting negative and positive behavior. It is evident that the ILC facility incorporates many of Wortley's (2002) previously discussed precipitating strategies for promoting positive and controlling negative behavior in prisons (see page 3[will need to change once pagination sorted]). We also suggested that taking a different, innovative approach to the framing of practice and the physical design of correctional facilities may better enable the management of safety, security and re-offending risks. As such, we conclude this analysis by briefly reflecting on how the ILC is performing with regard to safety, security and the promotion of desistance, drawing on the findings from the building evaluation.

**Safety:** A number of measures were used to assess performance related to safety in the ILC. In terms of official recorded incidents, there were no recorded reports of physical violence between inmates, or between inmates and staff, in the first year of operation. For comparison, anecdotally it was estimated there would be 1-2 incidents of physical violence per month in the accommodation unit where the learners all reside. Sixty-nine percent of learners agreed with a survey question regarding feeling safe in the ILC (22% disagreed), while 75% of staff agreed with the statement regarding feeling safe and no staff disagreed. Safety was also assessed through the ESSEN social climate scale where for the ILC inmate sample the average score on the safety dimension (ranging from 1-safest to 20-unsafe) was 6.03, indicating high levels of perceived safety. For comparison, the authors had previously used the scale in a number of vocational industries in NSW prisons where the averages were 12.7, 13.4 and 10.3. Using unofficial Australian normative data based on a sample of 132 prisoners collected by the Australian researchers involved in the development of the scales (Day & Casey, Forthcoming), the ILC mean score is equivalent to the top 10% (safest) inmate respondents.

**Security:** There were no reported incidents of escape, or attempted escape, related to the ILC facility. In interviewing the range of staff involved in the ILC, no incidents were identified where weapons, or materials associated with making weapons, had been found on inmate learners or within the ILC grounds. Incidents relating to the transfer or use of drugs were reported in the ILC, with a two-month period being particularly problematic. Security staff indicated they found it relatively easy within the



ILC environment to identify the main inmate learners behind the drug issues and ultimately resolve the issue by removing them from the ILC. It was noted that the drug transfer issue could in part be due to the positioning of the ILC between two accommodation pods. When the correctional centre managers were asked in interviews about security in the ILC, none of the four managers identified the facility or its design as a security issue. One manager stated in response to a question relating to security; "Overall, I've got no issue with the design or the layout .... It's a positive place - architecturally there's a good vibe out in there". It is also relevant that one of the ILC correctional officers whose role is essentially around security and movements in the ILC stated that the best way for them to maintain security was "to manage inmates so we keep them in a frame of mind where they can learn". This is a major departure from how security staff would typically see their role in a correctional educational environment.

**Desistence:** The objective of promoting desistence was assessed by examining whether inmate learners exhibited changes known to be associated with desistance including skill development (MacKenzie, 2009), changes in attitude and social skills (MacKenzie, 2009), and changes in identity and how they view themselves (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). In terms of skills development, the supportive and intense ILC program did appear related to high achievement. One educator stated that when working in general prison education for six months, typically two or three inmates would gain certificates. In the ILC each six months at least seven out of the ten inmate learners in a class will obtain a nationally recognized certificate. Another educator stated a view that ninety per cent of inmates changed substantially in their attitude and how they related socially while in the program. The educator attributed it to the quality of relationships educators can form with inmates in an intensive six-month program, and also that inmates (often with limited prior education), "*find knowledge empowering*". In terms of the design of the facility, 72% of learners agreed that the design of the ILC facility made learning easier, while 80% of teachers agreed the design made it easier to be an effective teacher and engage inmates. Finally, in Table 1 we provide the written responses of the twelve learners in the first ILC class to the question "how I think I have changed in the ILC". While responses differ substantially, underlying each response appears to be a sense of achievement and a fundamental change in how they view their own capabilities.



Figure 9. A learner at the third ILC graduation ceremony with their certificate of attainment

**Table 1: Written responses of the twelve learners in the first ILC cohort to the question "how I think I have changed in the ILC"**

- *Well I think I have made some achievable goals. Set my mind on things for the future. Has changed my headspace very positive. L1*
- *I know a few things now. My mind feels fresh. Want to tackle new goals. L2*

- *I am interested more in education and learning with whatever I can and I now have some sort of sense of achievement. I'm more positive as a person instead of negative yards or slave labor workshops. L3*
- *Better educated and more of a thinker. PS. And to have everyone in the class on the same level. L4*
- *Use of handwriting for the first time in a very long time. Improved art skills. Refocussed and enjoying simple things, and maths etc. Enjoy some homework to keep active. I AM READING LOTS OF BOOKS! L5*
- *I've got a better understanding of how to use a computer witch is good. L6*
- *I learnt how to be good and spell better and my times tables. L7*
- *Well this place is improving my life heaps and it makes me feel like I'm not in here. I feel like I'm at Tafe or something. L8*
- *It has helped me become a bit more patient with things. L9*
- *I have lert to think and more it is a good program. L10*
- *I'm in a better mood each morning. And I look forward to learn more. L11*
- *My reading and writing is a lot better and now I write more letters home. Were as before I didn't write letter at all. L12*

### Summary

The ILC building evaluation data provides initial evidence to support that the ILC program is effectively managing risk, and meeting its objectives around safety, security and desistance. It does, however, need to be acknowledged that most of the data are self-report measures and the research design did not involve comparisons with other similar 'control' facilities. Other programmatic, design or contextual elements not described in this paper could also be leading to the positive outcomes. To substantiate these findings there is a need for studies with a greater range of measures that use experimental or quasi-experimental research strategies. Withstanding these shortcomings, we contend the evidence presented here and available in the associated report suggests the ILC is doing as well, if not substantially better, than most educational programs in maximum-security correctional facilities.

### Conclusions

Underlying the majority of modern correctional design is a cold conservatism where physical design is increasingly being used to try and mitigate or reduce security risks in new prisons, and manage emerging risks in existing prisons. We argue, however, that this focus on reducing security risks through physical design measures invariably results in a stark, minimalist and paradoxically problematic prison environments (Wener, 2012). While there is a seductive logic for using restrictive physical measures to solve complex security problems, the evidence for their effectiveness is less than compelling (Wortley, 2002). We argue there is a need for innovation in correction design and we suggest administrators looking for such innovation first need to consider the framing of their practice.

The Intensive Learning Centre project at Mid North Coast Correctional facility provides a compelling case for this approach where a new framing of practice is embedded in the design of the facility. Although the ILC is an educational facility, we contend a design innovation approach can and does underlie innovative correctional design for an entire prison. In the ICPA conference presentation related to this paper, we examined some of the literature on Norway's Halden prison and sought to

demonstrate that underlying its widely recognized innovative design is a new framing of correctional practice (Adams, 2010; Benko, 2015; Gentleman, 2012). Based on this literature we suggested that underlying the Halden facility is a clear articulation that a common humanity must exist within, as is beyond, the prison wall (Benko, 2015). There is recognition that all prisoners will eventually be someone's neighbors in the community. As such, driving many aspects of the physical design of Halden prison is that the prison needs to enable inmates to be good neighbors and this is best achieved in an environment closely resembling the community (Adams, 2010; Gentleman, 2012). We contend that there is a close relationship between the framing of Halden prison, its physical design and performance with regard to safety, security and desistance objectives. Additional research investigating these relationships in Halden prison, Tarragon in Spain, Leoben prison in Austria and other prisons regarded as innovative, and also in typical conservative modern prisons, could be valuable to the correctional design field and to furthering the propositions in this paper.

Fundamental to the correctional design approach advocated in this paper is bringing to the foreground considerations relating to supporting inmate desistance and reducing risks of reoffending. In the last two decades in many jurisdictions internationally significant rethinking and substantial investment has occurred in programming (i.e., psychosocial interventions) and supervision practices to reduce re-offending risk. By and large, however, there has not been a corresponding rethinking or investment in how prisons are designed. We think this is a major oversight that may be limiting correctional organizations in meeting their objectives. Hillary Cottom's 2005 views on the shortcoming of public sector design resonate with this situation "*The failure to compute the emotional, social and therefore economic benefits that accrue from good design has led to procurement processes which exclude the real experiences and needs of the people who will use the buildings, objects and experiences that are designed.*"

Finally, in this paper we contend that administrators looking for innovations in correctional design first need to consider the framing of their practice. It is through the reframing of practices that opportunities for innovative correctional design are created where new meaning can be embedded into the facility. Utilizing the leadership and knowledge of correctional administrators and their staff, we contend there is real value in explicitly incorporating a process of reconsidering practice in the design process for any new prison. In this regard we concur with Wener (2012, pg. 7),

*"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".*

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