

Designing for offenders with disabilities: An architectural perspective

Correctional institutions have evolved in response to the social need to remove certain individuals from the community and restrict their freedom. Yet, from a humane perspective, a major problem with these institutions is that their architecture has (not without reason) evolved around the requirements of custodial care, instead of focusing on inmate characteristics and needs.

If institutional services are not easily accessible to an individual with some type of physical disability, then progress toward rehabilitation of that individual will be restricted. It is, therefore, crucial that correctional institutions be built in such a way that disabled offenders can receive the maximum benefit of prison services. Obviously, the correctional services offered have to be accessible before all inmates can use them for personal improvement. Disability, accessibility and building codes Many of us have the ability to adapt to our environments. However, persons with physical disabilities may have a limited ability to adapt to architectural design. Therefore, Canada has laws specifying design criteria to ensure accessibility to new and existing facilities.

The degree to which a person with a physical disability can function independently in an environment determines accessibility. It is now federal government policy that all new and existing facilities are to be made accessible.⁽²⁾

The *Canadian Human Rights Act* defines physical disability as

A physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury; birth defect or illness and... includes epilepsy, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical co-ordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment.⁽³⁾

This definition must be taken into account by architects, whose challenge is to resolve the design problems arising from the inability of persons with disabilities to participate fully in a so-called normal life (or in this case, normal prison life). The issues of accessibility can become rather complex. Many life situations must be anticipated and provided for through the design of the space in which they occur.

Apart from questions concerning accessibility, most design problems are fairly common. Most building types have evolved over time, adapting to suit the activities they house. This allows many new buildings to be built from a basic plan without having to repeatedly research basic problems.⁽⁴⁾ Unfortunately, this ready availability of plans does not always promote creative solutions to "new" problems, such as the need for full accessibility.

Further, the codes and legislation governing architectural accessibility (such as the National Building Code of Canada, various provincial building codes, and the *Canadian Human Rights Act*) have been applied as if they are state-of-the-art standards for building design, when they were in fact intended simply to provide a minimum legal requirement. For example, the codes primarily address the problems of people in wheelchairs who have good use of their arms.⁽⁵⁾

Fortunately (in some ways), the building codes are sometimes relatively vague about some specifications for existing buildings. This necessitates, and provides room for, discretion on the part of designers in obtaining adequate accessibility through minimal building modification (for example, in the addition of wider doors and elevators - although new ramps must strictly conform to the code).⁽⁶⁾ This does not devalue the problem of accessibility, but sometimes leeway in the application of building codes makes finding solutions to many problems a little bit easier and faster. Some typical problems Far more issues arise in the design of a correctional institution than can be described in this short article, but the following examples illustrate the complexity of the issues.

Consider, for instance, that the aims of accessibility and security requirements may occasionally conflict. Grills, grates and manhole covers can impede mobility for person's with disabilities⁽⁷⁾ and should, therefore, not be located in walkways or courtyards where heavy traffic is routed. However, moving these impediments may reduce their visibility, so security (such as locking mechanisms) must then be provided for these potential escape routes. As well, "open" stairs that have no risers at the back are marvellous for security but hazardous for the blind, who may misjudge a step at any time.

Space allocation is also an issue. Since persons with physical disabilities may need more room to move, their cells should be larger than average. There may then be psychological issues to consider: correctional officers must be prepared for the friction among inmates that jealousy over additional space could cause.

The everyday use of design features is also critical. The fittings around toilets must be very strong, easy to grip, and installed securely enough to hold a person's weight, if need be. Other fixtures, such as sinks, "hanger bars" in closets and perhaps even beds, may need modification if they are too high to be accessible.

The conflict between accessibility and security is not the only conflict that might arise when a building is being redesigned for ease of access. Different persons with disabilities may require conflicting designs. For example, a person who is blind requires an environment that reflects sound easily, while a person who is hard of hearing needs a "dead sound" area to muffle confusing background noise. Finding solutions Today's improvements are tomorrow's basic features. Designers should, therefore, see the task of modifying existing institutions as an opportunity to find creative solutions to the sometimes conflicting demands of accessibility and security. Most importantly, whether modifying an existing institution or creating a new one, the designer has an opportunity to genuinely improve the building so that it is more comfortable for everyone.⁽⁸⁾

Design issues can be clarified through an institutional statement of needs, functions, aims, policy and methodology. A design team, consisting of architects, correctional staff, and both able-bodied inmates and inmates with disabilities could draft this statement. With a clear set of goals, designers are better able to create a functional, safe and convenient environment that facilitates rehabilitation.

Special features required for accessibility should be viewed not as concessions to a minority population, but as useful design features that help satisfy the overall needs of the group.

Offender participation in daily life is a primary correctional goal, and if we can help achieve this by ensuring that all offenders are included in as much of prison life as possible, then everyone will benefit.

(1) Travis Gee, Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 4B-340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

(2) G. Haber and T.O. Blank, eds., *Building Design for Handicapped and Aged Persons* (Tall Buildings and Environment Series) (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992): 50.

(3) Haber and Blank, *Building Design for Handicapped and Aged Persons*: 51.

(4) K. Bayes, *Designing for the Handicapped* (London: George Godwin Ltd., 1971): 12.

(5) Haber and Blank, *Building Design for Handicapped and Aged Persons*: 52.

(6) Public Works Canada, *Barrier free Design: Access to and Use of Buildings by Physically Disabled People* (Ottawa: Public Relations and Information Services, 1985): 3.

(7) R. Sorensen, *Design for Accessibility* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979): 20.

(8) I. Hefferlin and M. Redden, *New Directions for Higher Education: Assuring Access for the Handicapped* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1979): 62.