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Light at the End of the Tunnel

Color: a concept we learn as children, a concept you need not be a design professional to recognize its impact on space. People can buy a gallon of paint at the local home improvement store for no more than \$40 and paint an entire wall. No need for construction, an architect, or any special skill set to completely transform any room in your home. Yet even this simplest design technique is overlooked in prisons. The choice not to consider color design or theory is made clear by the bleak achromatic walls, floors, ceilings and furniture, or worse yet, the use of highly saturated colors which enhance emotional reactions.¹ These apathetic design choices read to the incarcerated and non-incarcerated community alike that this facility is inconsequential and ultimately unimportant. Designers and outside community members often don't recognize the impact color design has in carceral facilities because they have never spent time in this environment and therefore have never experienced adverse effects of this thoughtlessness. However, don't we all have achromatic paint colors in our homes?

I observed photos of the prison cells in the Oklahoma County Jail. Why are the achromatic color schemes here so much more traumatizing than the ones in most people's houses? After browsing through a couple of photos and different camera

angles, I came to two conclusions. First, the lack of décor and personalization; this brings comfort where color lacks. Secondly, the lighting. The discrepancies across the photos were owed to their tone; one had a yellow hue, one was completely stark, another shaded and dark, and one...almost pleasant. I noticed the mirage of pleasantness was owed to the natural light showing through a sliver of window in the cell on that day, at that particular time. This moment was when I became cognizant to the fact that color cannot exist exclusively from lighting. Well-designed lighting solutions, natural lighting in particular, have the power to give even the melancholiest of spaces a sense of life and comfort. In contrast, inadequate lighting and absence of sufficient natural light can make a perfectly curated color palette muted and valueless.

When exploring how to employ color and lighting in design, you must put yourself in the shoes of the occupant. I put myself in the shoes

of a prisoner and thought about how I would feel if I spent all day, every day in one of the dark and restricted Oklahoma City Jail cells. I put myself in the shoes of a prison guard and thought about how color and lighting could help me to better monitor the activities in the prison and improve my mood during the workday. I put myself in the shoes of the taxpayer, who does not want to provide luxury prisons, but does want to see effectiveness in the facilities their tax dollars are directed toward. We must put forth effort, time and research into prison designs because if not, what is the point of people investing their time and tax dollars into ineffectual spaces intended for rehabilitation?

The possibilities are endless to re-imagine spaces in prisons to better serve the community and fulfil a meaningful purpose. There is not always opportunity, budget, or interest from stakeholders to rebuild or renovate entire prison facilities. However, even with restricted resources there is opportunity to contribute educated investments that will improve the efficacy of these facilities and not let the financial and emotional investments of the community go to waste.

"The future will be in the hands of those of you who belong to the 21st century. You have the opportunity and responsibility to build a better humanity. This means developing warm-heartedness in this very life, here and now. So, do whatever work you do, but ask yourselves now and then, 'How can I contribute to human beings being happier and more peaceful?'

- Dalai Lama

Endnotes

- 1 *The Psychological Impact of Light and Color*. PDF File (2017). Aurora, Colorado: TCP Lighting.

