

Makeright—Bags of Connection: Teaching Design Thinking and Making in Prison to Help Build Empathic and Resilient Communities

Abstract This paper argues that designers have a future role to play in redesigning prison systems. It describes the Makeright anti-theft bag action research project that first ran at HMP Thameside, London (UK) in 2015, and later at Sabarmati Central Jail, Ahmedabad (India) in 2016. It offers an account of the strengths and limitations of utilizing co-design methods to deliver transformational learning for prison inmates, and build resilience and entrepreneurship skills. Between 2015–17 we delivered seven iterations of the Makeright design course. A total of eighty-five UK inmates and twenty-five Indian inmates participated; we also performed twenty-six interviews with inmate participants, which we report on here. This article reflects on our practice, including our engagement with prison staff to iteratively improve our approach. We conclude that whilst inmates can strongly engage with design thinking and collaborative design practices – and benefit from the skills and competencies this fosters – for design education to be meaningful to their lives as returning citizens, opportunities for collaboration and learning through making need to continue beyond prison gates linked to resettlement programs. We suggest that prisons need to redesign their systems both inside prison walls and beyond to better connect inmates to reflexive relational networks that can facilitate social integration and, ultimately, abstinence from crime.

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1 Editorial note: while the body text conforms to U.S. English, all project titles and institution names adopt British English where appropriate.

2 Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, published under the Superintendence of his Executor, John Bowring, vol. 10 (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838–1843), accessed February 25, 2018, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2085>.

3 “About Maggie’s,” accessed February 25, 2018, <https://www.maggiescentres.org/about-maggies/>.

4 Yvonne Jewkes, “Designs on Punishment: The Architecture of Incarceration and the Architecture of Hope” (lecture, John Barry Memorial Lecture in Criminology, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, Nov 24, 2016).

5 Yvonne Jewkes and Dominique Moran, “Should Prison Architecture be Brutal, Bland or Beautiful?,” *Scottish Justice Matters* 2, no. 1 (2014): 8.

6 David Canter, *Criminal Psychology: Topics in Applied Psychology* (London: Routledge, 2008), 229.

7 Lorraine Gamman and Adam Thorpe, “Could Design Help to Promote and Build Empathic Processes in Prison? Understanding the Role of Empathy and Design in Catalysing Social Change and Transformation,” in *Transformation Design: Perspectives on a New Design Attitude*, ed. Wolfgang Jonas, Sarah Zerwas, and Kristof von Anshelm (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2015), 83–100.

8 Ben Crewe, Jason Warr, Peter Bennett, and Alan Smith, “The Emotional Geography of Prison Life,” *Theoretical Criminology* 18, no. 1 (2014): 56–74, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480613497778>.

9 Fergus McNeill, “Inspiring Desistance: What Role for the Arts?,” *Iriss* (blog), last modified October 12, 2011, <http://blogs.iriss.org.uk/discoveringdesistance/2011/10/12/inspiring-desistance-what-role-for-the-arts/>.

10 Shaplan, Farrall, and Bottoms suggest, “in criminology, ‘desistance’ has become the shorthand term to describe the process by which someone who was committing crimes on a frequent basis ceases to offend. Accordingly, criminologists do not normally

Preamble: The Problems of Prison Design and Culture

Prison designs often appear inspired by medieval dungeons or Victorian workhouses.¹ The ethos of a prison is one of domination and attrition, as exemplified by Jeremy Bentham’s Panoptical mill aimed at “grinding rogues honest.”² The prison as a space – with a few Scandinavian and other exceptions – is rarely designed to promote rehabilitation, community values, or well being in the way that other rehabilitation centers are. Consider Maggie’s Centres,³ whose architects use spatial design that often integrates engagement with nature to aid the healing, self-understanding, and re-socialization of people living with or recovering from cancer. Yvonne Jewkes and Dominique Moran suggest that today’s prison design is linked to the architecture of despair rather than the architecture of hope.⁴ Contemporary, twenty-first century municipal “large bland warehouse style prisons,” as Jewkes and Moran point out, define a kind of “boundary between prisoners and communities ... offering a visual metaphor for the loss of public empathy for the excluded offender.”⁵

Prison design and the punishment culture that prevails in these institutions often exemplify closed systems. Housed in austere physical contexts, many accounts of prison life describe a culture where mutual mistrust, fear, aggression, and violence are constant, and where “prisoners typically are given no alternative culture to which to ascribe or in which to participate.”⁶ Unsurprisingly, many inmates repress their feelings and their compassion for themselves and empathy for others behind what is known as the prison mask.⁷ In many of the prison’s geographical spaces, inmates find themselves not in control and recognize that it is unwise to show vulnerability.⁸ They suppress their emotions or hide their feelings in order to avoid upset or conflict, often by putting up a front and playing the role they perceive to be ascribed to them – that of a criminal and prisoner. This masking of emotion and negative role play appears to block empathy and self-development. Fergus McNeill observes that prison appears to stunt inmates’ abilities to build prosocial capacities by “limiting agency and responsibility, delaying maturation, damaging social ties (and sometimes building anti-social ones) and cementing criminalized identities.”⁹ This conditioning militates against the reintegration of offenders within the wider community as returning citizens after their release. In our view, such experiential conditioning also works to prevent empathic concern for others and instead appears to promote the sort of self-absorption that is a barrier to desistance.¹⁰

New inmates arriving in prison often want to keep out of trouble. They appear to do their best to shut down their senses and desire to connect with others in order to survive difficult and sometimes violent situations. The prison experience itself seems to create serious interpersonal difficulties for inmates, and brings what Richard Wortley defines as situational precipitators into play that adversely impact on the inmate’s life in prison.¹¹ Instead of offering rehabilitation, the narrowly defined and overly determined gender codes associated with hyper masculinity in male prisons, and the way staff and inmates treat each other, may operate to compromise inmate learning about how to relate to and care for others in socially constructive ways.¹² This lack of preparation for emotional life in the outside world, as well as a lack of gainful employment, may be why so many inmates go on to reoffend. Globally, prison has a poor record for reducing recidivism; in the UK, forty-four percent of adults are reconvicted within one year of release. For those serving sentences of less than twelve months this increases to fifty-nine percent. Worse, over two thirds of under-eighteens (sixty-nine percent) are reconvicted within a year of release.¹³

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