

New jail projects create more humane spaces

By Frank Jossi

Light-filled common areas. Calming colors on walls and ceilings. Waiting areas with comfortable chairs, pleasantly patterned tiles and natural wood accents. Building designs that do not readily disclose interior activities.

The modern jail or detention center in Minnesota no longer tries to look like a gulag or a place devoted to punishment and not restoration. As detention facilities have begun to house more inmates charged with crimes related to their mental illnesses, correctional officials and counties have sought detention centers that, in their design, seek to treat them with dignity.

Scott W. Fettig, president of Klein McCarthy Architects, said that younger correction officials and county commissioners desired more humane jail designs as they housed more female, elderly and mentally challenged populations.

Mental illness “has been a huge deal and I think as people get more educated in the corrections field, they’re talking about it more,” he said. “As the jail administrators have gotten younger, they’re definitely open to trying something different versus warehousing.”

Tim Clark, vice president and director of operations for Adolfsen & Peterson Construction, said newer jails have become more akin to secure hospitals rather than detention facilities. Many inmates may receive medical care during their stays. “It’s not always about locking them up; it’s about recovery,” he said. “There’s a big focus on recovery versus incarceration.”

Newer jails have softer designs with controlled lighting that matches the day’s progression, colors that provide warmth, materials that dampen sound and daylighting that appeal to prisoners and corrections staff that must monitor them. Clark said that the facilities do not have sharp edges and employ anti-ligature systems that do not allow inmates to harm themselves.

One of Adolfsen & Peterson’s more significant proj-



Carlton County is in the process of building a 117,000 square-foot justice center that will include courts, the sheriff’s department and the offices of the Guardian Ad Litim, attorney, public defender and the “Justice-Involved Females Unit.” (Submitted rendering: Klein McCarthy Architects)

ects involved the \$126 million renovation of a 40-year-old building at the Minnesota Security Hospital in St. Peter. The psychiatric rehabilitation facility treats mentally ill patients assigned to it by the courts because they pose a danger to themselves and others.

Interior of the Minnesota Security Hospital in St. Peter that features wider hallways, clear glass, tiles and more comfortable furniture

Designed by BWBR, the seven-year project created more than 40 patient transitional rooms and replaced an 80-bed, multi-floor area with a single-floor wing. The design added wider hallways, replaced cinderblock with clear glass, removed the carpet in favor of tiles, and placed more comfortable furniture in common areas, including kitchens and lounges.

Clark said the design breaks housing areas into the severity of a patient’s illness. Before their release, they stay in a dorm-style situation. The goal of architecture and choice of materials came down to making patients more comfortable, and it worked, he said. Aggressive behavior among patients declined 46% and staff saw a 34% decline in injuries.



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Clark and Fettig, whose firm concentrates on civic building and detention projects, often work together. A project now under construction for Carlton County involving both is a 117,000 square-foot “justice center” that will include courts, the sheriff’s department and the offices of the Guardian Ad Litim, attorney, public defender and the “Justice-Involved Females (JIF) Unit.” The JIF unit focuses programming on reintegration and rehabilitation.

Little details can make a difference. Fettig said jail officials working in Carlton and Itasca counties told him to use blue on walls and ceilings in their new facilities because they found the color “did make a difference” in relaxing patients. Pastel greens and blues, for example, work better than primary colors, he said, and red and orange are generally not considered candidates for walls.

Paul Coughlin, the jail administrator in the Carlton County Sheriff’s Office, said the new \$75 million justice center replaces a 1970s-era jail and 1922 courthouse while bringing together all departments in one place who can work together to give people charged with crimes the needed services.

The new justice center, half completed, abides by the state’s prison construction codes. Inmates have larger spaces instead of one long room of detention cells. Those jailed are split into various cell areas depending on the charges they face and whether mental illness may play a role in their incarceration, Coughlin said.

The facility has 80 units for inmates and a 16-bed area for women who often are the primary caregivers in their families and suffer co-dependency issues, he said.

Minnesota has few options for people charged with crimes and suffering mental health issues outside of having them stay in jails, he said. Often, they may have extended stays in detention centers even after the courts find they need mental health services.

Natural light, quieting colors and sound reduction all play a role in making the jail not only more pleasant for the incarcerated but for those who have to work in the facility. “For some folks, it’s a lifetime of work and trying to improve the process and systems,” he said.

Coughlin said the justice system will be the most expensive public investment ever made in Carlton County. “We’re just trying to make it as efficient and effective as possible for all involved, including the taxpayers, who ultimately pay for these projects,” he said.

Fettig said Carlton and other projects incorporate the best practices in the industry. Rather than having many cells in one place, jails now break them into pods where inmates stay alone in single rooms to avoid potential conflicts with roommates. Fettig said that two-level detention areas raise desks so guards are at eye level with inmates on the first floor and can monitor the second level with the help of video cameras displaying activities on computer monitors.

State prison construction regulations call for more natural light, which also helps reduce inmate stress, a positive consequence for staff. It also helps assist with employee retention, he said.

Jails with better materials, lighting and design might cost slightly more, but total budgets in the millions of dollars mute the impact. County commissioners and jail officials have a growing amount of data showing that civilized facilities positively influence those incarcerated and the staff that must monitor them.

Still, it requires educating elected officials that “we’re not busting the bank” to construct a better jail,” he said. “We’re talking pennies on the dollar to get this stuff done.”