

Design Students' Project Mellows Prison Mood

"Anyone who would expect honesty from the movie industry would probably hire a burglar as an interior designer."

—Mike Royko, newspaper columnist

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They're not available for hire, but several Arizona prisoners have been learning about interior design.

They worked with Chet Ross and three of his students on a remodeling project at the Arizona Correctional Training Facility on Wilmot Road southeast of Tucson. Ross is an interior design teacher for the UA School of Home Economics, with strong feelings about the psychological impact of a designed environment.

The staff at the medium-security facility initiated the project and asked Ross to direct it. Two common-use rooms and three corridors of the prison's Housing Unit Five were remodeled last summer and fall. About two-thirds of the dormitory's 34 inmates at the time chose to participate, to varying degrees, in planning and carrying out the remodeling.

Ross said the purpose of the project "was to see if creating an attractive, comfortable living space would have a positive effect on the inmates' attitudes and behavior."

Residents and staff of Housing Unit Five said recently that the change away from more sterile surroundings was still affecting the mood in the unit, more than six months after the remodeling was finished.

Photograph: After students and prisoners remodeled other parts of Housing Unit Five at the Arizona Correctional Training Facility prisoner Ray Ford added some flair to the utility room and manager's office. He designed and painted large wall graphics including the curves behind him here. (Photo by Ted Bundy.)



Attitudes are a lot mellower now," said resident Gary Miller. "When you just have four white walls, it's very harsh and cold feeling."

"Now it's more like a home," said Ray Ford, another prisoner.

One of the remodeled rooms is the day room just inside the dormitory's front door. It now has large potted plants, a wide sofa upholstered in soft blue cotton, and a gray rug that helps hold down noise. New orange chairs complement a custom-made coffee table with an orange and red, geometrically patterned top. Most striking is an 8-by-14-foot color photograph of Earth taken from the surface of the moon. It is framed in wood and reaches nearly from floor to ceiling.

Colorful textile prints of birds, trees and abstract shapes hang along the three long hallways radiating from the central guard station. The wall hangings help stifle the halls' ringing acoustics. The corridors have also been painted in graded shades of gray, lighter at one end than the other, to make them look shorter. The halls go to the prisoners' individual rooms.

A "quiet room" used mainly for playing cards and reading was remodeled with carpeting, textile wall hangings and comfortable furniture.

The remodeling cost about \$6,000.

Ann Nelson has become manager of Housing Unit Five since the remodeling project. She shared another staff member's impression that, "As the environment has been softened, attitudes have become softer, too. They are more trusting. There's less of the feeling of an impersonal institution."

Upper left: Prisoners Melvin Manley, Gary Miller and Jim Albano (left to right) make use of the housing unit's "quiet room," where remodeling included new table and chairs, carpeting and the large mural of an outdoor scene. Lower left: Miller glances at one of the fabric wall hangings in the corridor outside his dormitory room. The hangings help muffle some of the noise in the long hall, as well as adding visual interest. (Photos by Ted Bundy.) Right: UA interior design student Kathy O'Donnell consults with prisoners during the planning stage of the remodeling project. (Photo by Gary Miller.)

Resident Melvin Manley said, "You always have new guys coming in, and some are going to be rowdy, but compared to what it was like here before, there's a lot less fighting." The unit now houses 43 prisoners, almost all in their 20s.

Despite a couple of boisterous "acting out" incidents by residents shortly after remodeling, the unit manager at the time said the project dramatically increased the group's cohesiveness. That manager, Sam Sublett, suggested the improvement may have resulted from the residents' involvement in the project, as much as from the actual changes made.

Ross said, "We had meetings with the inmates so they were involved with every step of the process. We were trying to stimulate an interest on their part in designing their own environment. Nothing was done for purely aesthetic reasons. The majority of the changes were made for psychological reasons, and the inmates were told this. It was imperative to me that they understood this part of the project."

Ross's three students on the project were Kathy O'Donnell, Chuck Fabbri and Theresa Schmidt. O'Donnell said, "Working with the inmates was very rewarding. . . . The guys I worked with wanted to help. They wanted something to do, and this gave them a chance to contribute something to what was going on. Our approach was, 'This is your space. You tell us what you want done with it.'"

Prisoner Miller recalled, "There were five or six of us who did much with the planning of it, but a lot of people who helped do the actual work."

Manley helped frame the Earth-photo mural. He said he would like to frame a mural for his own home sometime.

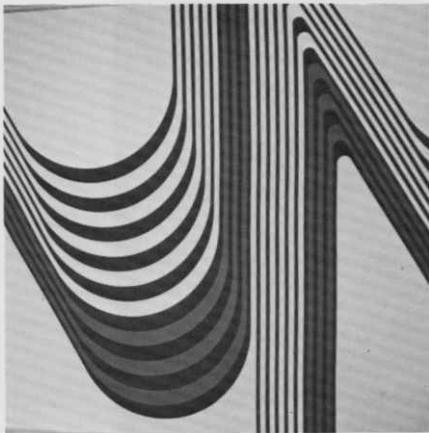
During the remodeling project, Miller made a backgammon table in shop class and gave it to the unit for the day room. If not for the project, he said, "I'd probably have started it and never finished it."

After the rest of the remodeling, Ray Ford got permission to repaint the manager's office and the utility room of the housing unit. He designed and painted curved graphic shapes to add interest to the walls.

Former unit manager Sublett said, "As we began to inject normalcy into the environment and backed off from the usual, cold living situation, residents began asking, 'Why can't we have things in our own rooms that reflect a normal living environment, too?'" Some of the room rules were loosened, and several inmates got rugs, plants or pictures for their rooms.

There is a limit, though, to remodeling in Housing Unit Five. Resident Jim Albano suggested plans for rearranging the furniture in his room, but the furniture is bolted to the floor. Also, some residents of the other seven housing units at the prison have asked to be able to remodel their units as Five has been, but funds are not available for them all.

The project has supported Ross's belief that interior design affects people's behavior. He said, "Design should be approached on a behavioral level, so it has a positive effect on people, how they act toward each other and toward their environment. . . . One of the reasons the inmates are there to begin with is because of a lack of respect for their environment."



A fabric print from the prison hallway.