

Breaking Boundaries of Prison Design for Architectural Design Studio

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Abstract

In collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ), design tasks for a prison design are carried out within a second-year studio course of a Bachelor's program in architecture to improve the students socially oriented design skills and train their critical understanding towards solving designs problems via an open, integrative approach to learning. The tasks aim to offer creative solutions that improve human living conditions and inspire inmates to improve their social behavior and attitude towards life. The mixture of learning experiences in direct contact with experts, specialists, and those affected are intended to strengthen the knowledge base, empathy, and sincerity in the decision-making process to address and improve social issues in connection with the design. In a stepwise approach, studio learning is intensified by the students' collaboration with stakeholders and existing design-related social issues. According to the students' design results, the proposed designs imply greater awareness of social issues and an understanding of human-centered needs, documenting the student's aim to improve the current situation of prisoners. In addition, the disseminated public results, conflicting with the widespread public opposition towards improving prison conditions, helped students develop their critical thinking and reasoning skills towards others. Future improvements in teaching will include exploring a wider range of relevant, critical, and socially-oriented aspects of architectural design tasks and expanding collaboration and engagement with the respective individuals and groups.

Keywords: Architectural Design Education, Social Design Aspects, Design Teaching Collaboration, Creativity in Design

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Introduction

Becoming "social change agents" is one of King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi's (KMUTT) key missions in producing successful university graduates (KMUTT, 2017). Such competency describes how the learned subjects form the basis on which graduates contribute to solving existing societal challenges, thus leading to the mutual success of the individual graduate and society itself. In university-level teaching, the methods of strengthening such competency of social change leadership are manifold, yet they depend on the course content themselves. For instance, looking at the universities' School of Architecture and Design (SoA+D) and their design courses, one way to highlight social aspects is to create assignments that address and conflict with such issues. For encouraging social engagement, another approach is to have students work with realistic scenarios and expose them to the respective stakeholders to experience the given situation.

Prisons are suitable examples for exploring prevalent social facets, thus suggesting themselves as an architectural design task. In Thailand, prisons currently face the challenge of overcrowding (Kittayarak, 2010), with recidivism of drug-related offenses recognized as a significant cause (O'Connor, 2019). With a 266% occupancy rate in 2015, in some situations, up to 40 detainees share a cell accounting for less than 1.2 sqm for males and 1.1 sqm for female inmates (FDIH, 2017). In contrast, the standard minimum requirement for individuals suggests at least 3.4 sqm for an inmate (Nuttall & Jurisic, 2016). Given overcrowding, in many situations, global guidelines for managing prisons with minimum requirements for safeguarding humanitarian rights or health and hygiene standards are not achieved (UN, 2016). However, they can also lack development as sufficient funds are required to correct the clean-up to improve the current, undesirable circumstances. These include poor conditions due to the tropical climate, such as adequate ventilation and protection from overheating (FDIH, 2017). In addition, public opinion also limits efforts to improve prison design, especially when proposals focus on fair or humanized treatment. Prison quality is often of little concern to the unaffected public, and it is unlikely they would consider supporting improvements. Accordingly, when planning new prisons or renovating existing facilities, it appears necessary to take international guidelines into account, learn from innovative case studies (Ireland, 2017), and understand the local context.

In collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ), SoA+D established an education-based alliance to design prisons to propose and discuss possible solutions and develop future design strategies between 2018-2020. It was decided to employ the architecture program's second-year studio design course and create project assignments that have students explore social-oriented and human-centered methods into prison designs, gain a critical perspective, and practice sharing that understanding with others by creating alternative examples for prison design in Thailand. As part of the assignments, it was suggested that students consider a guide to prison design provided by the ICRC, which also agreed to share its universal knowledge of prison management and design with students in a lecture class and provide advice and feedback on student design via its experts. Representatives from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the Thai Institute of Justice (TIJ), and the Ministry of Justice (DOC) also provided expertise and suggestions. In addition, they assisted with the work on actual prison design tasks for existing prison facilities, such as Nakhon Nayok Prison, a women's prison in Ratchaburi Province, Thailand, and refurbishing an existing prison Thonburi.

Accordingly, this research seeks to investigate educational methods for teaching architectural design concerning socially-oriented issues to encourage students to develop a critical understanding of existing contemporary societal issues and discover their relevance in architectural design. In addition, a collaborative approach is tested by inviting all experts to participate in the teaching schedule to encourage students to learn current societal problems and their circumstances and discuss possible solutions with relevant stakeholders. In such a setting, students are expected to learn to address these in their designs by employing a social-oriented design approach and communicating their suggestions appropriately, thus, enhancing the social issue awareness and creatively integrating it in the design process.

Body

With the realization of studio design tasks following certain teaching/learning activities sequences, instructors gradually introduced social aspects relating to prison design. Usually, students follow a procedure to solve fundamental problems of a project by answering related aspects in interconnected subgroups, such as respective spatial planning requirements. In conversation with their lecturer, the students then reacted by synthesizing a reflection of the problem description through the creative design process and visualizing a design proposal. To introduce social design aspects, establish their significance and relevance to the design task, and allow collaborators to participate in the design process, additional interference steps were integrated as teaching/learning activities. They included the visit of an existing operating prison facility in Thailand with interviews of detainees and correctional officers. The visit was followed by lectures on prisons' current situation and condition in Thailand, introductions on international standards, and guidelines from architects and engineers with expertise in prison design. In addition, ICRC presented safety and hygiene-oriented guidelines by a water & habitat coordinator and a legal advisor. In later charette sessions, the students' design schematics were then presented and discussed with the prison's architect and engineers to advise and consult on safety measure issues. Final design proposals were showcased to the entire team of instructors and guests such as the prison's director from the department of correctional facility (DOC), the representative from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The students presented their work to discuss their ideas and received final comments and suggestions from experts that joined and followed the design process. Their work was publicly exhibited as part of the school's year-end of year exhibition and reported on in newspapers and magazines and via social media channels, including interviews and screening on public television channels (Chanel 3 and IPTV) and publication via print (Art4d, Aday, Bangkok Biz News, and Way) and their social media channels. Selected students and instructors also received a scholarship to attend and present to "ACCFA: Asian Conference of Correctional Facilities Architects and Planners in Sri Lanka (2018) and Tokyo (2019).

At the end of the course, a project exhibition and a final evaluation with guests from cooperating institutions took place; Representatives spent a day with students, attending design presentations, and discussing ideas and feedback on the projects. The final project proposals highlighted various study results, such as improving the gathering areas or meeting relatives. Much of the work was also aimed at disrupting the characteristic appearance, for example, by covering steel bars or walls with shading elements or stimulating pattern designs or by alluding to green elements. In addition, lighting, natural climate elements, and materials symbolize acceptance, optimism, and the desire to soften the overall picture and soften the overwhelming institutional appearance. Several factors for social circumstances and enhancements for human detainees were identified. Examples include student efforts to

improve the convicts' situation, such as common places for social contact or green spaces to reduce stress and anxiety. Another unique acknowledgment of the students' interest in the social design component was the assessment of prisoners' human rights, which are expressed, for example, in consideration of enough space needs per prisoner or the necessity to keep personal things. Finally, students investigated and questioned the existing practice of rigorous incarceration versus a more positive approach to supporting prisoners in achieving acceptance, social inclusion, and behavioral transformation. However, a central observation is that the students' proposed solutions do not always correspond to prisons' conventional, primarily security-oriented planning criteria. Instead, they highlight conceptual efforts to improve prisons' human and social situation, which eventually evolved into inspiring design solutions. The analysis of the results has revealed many methods for taking greater account of human-centered social design. The student work seemed less function-oriented but emphasized more social aspects in the design. The most striking difference between traditional designs and student ideas was that many proposed focused very little on relevant functional aspects.

Conclusion

According to the instructors' comments, school conduct changed, exhibiting interest in guest opinions and subject knowledge. Furthermore, the student's understanding and perspective of prison design evolved with learning and expressing interest in the topic participating in discussions, and willingness to express their thoughts. According to the instructors, the primary events that prompted new perspectives were the real visit to a prison facility and the interviews with detainees and correctional personnel. In addition, lectures from specialists and other professionals piqued the students' interest in human needs. The students alluded to the Mandela Rules and the Bangkok Rules when presenting their concepts and goals during the final presentations. The instructors also saw a shift in the students' perceptions about design. Many students viewed inmates as 'users,' consequently incorporating their requirements into the design, thus showing empathy and commitment to improving the inmates conditions. This contrasts with how prisons are often designed when prison wards' imprisonment characteristics and safety are prioritized.

The invited guests were impressed by the students' work, design development, active participation, and enthusiasm for the subject. While the ICRC representatives generally welcomed the proposed solutions and suggestions to improve detention conditions, they accepted them as a valid starting point for future discussions. Representatives from the TIJ and DOC also praised the presented designs as intriguing ideas for people looking to improve their lives. They were also excited by students' willingness to show large interest in the otherwise stigmatized subject, to work on it sincerely and maturely, and discuss possible improvements openly.

In addition to the cooperation partners, the public media were invited to follow and report on the event: Aside from the final presentation, TV stations (Channel_3, 2019; ThaiPBS, 2019) digital and print magazines (ADay, 2019; ICRC, 2019; Kerdsup, 2019) showcased selected works and interviews with lecturers, guests, and students. As their broadcasts and publications drew widespread public attention, discussions, and debates erupted on social media, primarily over whether Thai society should pay attention to prisons and their conditions and whether they should be used for punishment or rehabilitation. The public's reactions to the presented student projects were also positive; however, opposing comments were made (ADay, 2018).

Integrating social issues into architectural training is an important part of architectural design tasks in training. A prison design task was assigned to bachelor students to improve their socially-oriented design and thinking skills and integrate an open approach to learning and public engagement. Furthermore, the task aims to provide architectural solutions that improve the human conditions of prisons and inspire inmates to develop their social behavior and attitude toward life to strengthen the students' knowledge base and clarity in decision-making. In collaboration with ICRC and TIJ representatives, a stepwise approach was developed to gradually provide students with different sources of information and learning experiences through contact with professionals, experts, and affected individuals during the design development process. The analysis of the results was based on instructor feedback on the evaluation of design proposals, their presentation, discussions with stakeholders, and the students' self-reflection. The conducted teaching methodology engaged the design studio in existing, design-relevant social issues, with proposed designs implying greater awareness and understanding of people-centered needs.

Instructors agreed that students' designs successfully improved the prisoners' current situation. They were able to address relevant debates and discuss them critically and in the context of their proposals with others. The contentious topic and collaboration with relevant partners encouraged students to think critically, discuss human-centered problems, and design alternatives to functional fulfillment. The commitment and cooperation with international and local expertise also turned out to be an essential component. Experts and guests also supported the result positively. In addition, the presentation of the students' work showed a positive attitude, an increase in the analytical attitude towards the design problem. Furthermore, students' positive attitudes demonstrated their interest in deliberating and discussing such issues and their willingness to change their position and attitude in response to social media. The results' public accessibility, combined with the prevalent public stigma against improving the conditions of convicted offenders, aided the students in developing their reasoning skills toward others.

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