



Mobilong Prison has a history as a place for architectural precedents. The prison outside Murray Bridge opened as the first campus-style facility in Australia in 1987. The original development comprised four L-shaped living units, each housing up to 60 prisoners and separated

by village space from operational support and industry buildings within the 50-hectare site. The 240 prisoners, once inducted into the medium-security regime, have access around the majority of the site.

The newly commissioned Ross Independent Living Units, named after South Australian explorer John Ross, will provide accommodation for an additional 50 prisoners. The development consists of 10 duplex units, each containing individual bedrooms, shared living, kitchen and ablutions areas, and a securable veranda area. The Independent Living Units have been designed to provide prisoners in the later stages of their sentences greater autonomy and control over their lives and to encourage the development of social and living skills within a prison setting. Prisoners within the units will be responsible for 'normal' domestic duties such as meal preparation, ordering, laundry and cleaning.

The aim of the design by Adelaide architects Thomson Rossi was to be domestic in nature. Research has shown that 'hard' architecture and inflexible environments may result in displays of non-compliant and aggressive behaviour among prisoners. The development has a human scale, with each duplex having subtle aesthetic variations through the use of colour for easy identification by the new occupants. The security elements are contained in the fabric of the building rather than displayed externally, and bars and security grilles were eliminated from the design. Siting of the buildings uses principles used in residential planning: the buildings are in groups of two, inward-looking to a central court area.

Architect Simon Thomson attempted to minimise conflict within the group setting through the internal planning. The design avoids the use of long continuous corridors typical of correctional facilities. Bedrooms (rather than cells) were placed at either side of the living area to minimise transitional spaces. Bedrooms are lockable to allow prisoners personal space and privacy, and the occupancy for each unit was set at five as optimum to allow group-voting processes to occur with minimum conflict.

Allowing occupants connection to the external environment was important to the design. Visual connection to external events in prison environments is essential to feelings of safety, control and well-being and to decrease disorientation through increased imageability. The vertical windows provide a line of sight from ground to horizon to enable occupants to see and connect with the outside. To further increase this connection, the vertical windows have been repeated at intervals in the living areas, thus providing a perception of a continuous view. Occupants can also continually access a small-enclosed external veranda area to allow continued contact with the external environment during lockdown periods. In this way, it is anticipated occupants will be aware of climatic variations, surrounding natural and prison environments, and events.

The project paid attention to recent developments in safe cell design to reduce the chances of death by hanging or



The Thomson Rossi-designed Independent Living Units at Mobilong Prison raise Australian prison architecture to an innovative new level

BY ELIZABETH M. GRANT

» continued page 14



DUPLEX JAIL

PICTURES SARAH LONG

Duplex jail

» from previous page

fire, and implemented design recommendations from the Victorian Building Design Review Project. In bedrooms and bathrooms, obvious hanging points have been removed: all edges are rounded, all knobs and taps are sloped, safety screws are used throughout, joints are sealed and lighting is recessed. The units are designed to reduce fire hazards through the provision of smoke detection sensors, alarms, exhaust boost for smoke extraction, air circulation, fire rated walls, floors and ceilings. The result is the first South Australian prison accommodation meeting the recommendations of the South Australian Coroner.

Security measures for a medium-security regime were an important factor of the design brief and the units needed to have a capacity for prisoners to be 'locked down' without risk of escape. Outer walls are designed to medium-security standard using colorbond sheeting and steel-reinforced concrete blockwork, and provide a secure internal building envelope for the containment of prisoners during lockdowns. Vertical windows with openings of 120mm preclude escape. However, the development provides a key humane advancement to the typical medium-security regime. Generally, prisoners are locked down in individual cells within larger units. In the Independent Living Units occupants will be confined within the individual units rather than a constrictive cell, allowing continued social contact and some degree of normal living. The lockdowns may be less intrusive on the occupants but the issues of safety and security have been addressed. Correctional staff can continue to conduct normal night safety and security checks without entering the units. External hatches provide visual access to the bedroom areas with little or no disruption to the occupants.

Efficient environmentally sustainable design solutions and passive environmental principles were integral to the design. The buildings were orientated along an east-west axis for solar radiation; the reverse block veneer allows the massing of thermal radiation internally, reducing the need for heating and cooling options; solar hot water systems were installed into all units; and low-emission materials and finishes were chosen.

The project employed an intensive consultation process that extended through to documentation. A working group consisting of Mobilong staff and Department for Correctional Services expertise worked with architects Simon Thomson and Alfred Fox (Thomson Rossi), interior designer Debra Longin (Thomson Rossi) and project manager John Grinter (DAIS). The design team made extensive use of 2D and 3D imaging and modelling to initiate the participatory process within the working group and inform the design process.

Operating a construction site within a fully occupied and functioning prison presents considerable logistical, operational and security issues for both management and construction. Using the main entrance for vehicle access would have resulted in restricted access, continual security checks, extra staffing and delays and added costs to construction. This was averted at Mobilong by isolating the site from the rest of the prison with security fencing with detection and deterrence capacities, and the erection of a second security gate. This allowed for unencumbered access for the construction team, while maintaining normal prison. On completion, the new development was integrated into the Mobilong campus and the second gate retained to provide emergency access.



Commissioning new prison facilities generally presents considerable challenges for staff and prisoners. Unfamiliar operational procedures, opposition to change and new environments often make the commissioning periods difficult. These periods may be subject to staff opposition, industrial disputes and displays of resistance behaviours from prisoners. The construction of the Independent Living Units next to the operating prison at Mobilong was under the continuous gaze of staff and prisoners, allowing them to become accustomed to the new development as well as providing a diversion from normal prison life. Prisoners showed considerable interest in the process, as well as in a series of meetings held during the construction phase to discuss the allocation and operation of the new accommodation. The extended participatory consultation process with the architects allowed Mobilong correctional staff to contribute to the finished design, increasing 'ownership' and knowledge of the Independent Living Units. The process also allowed staff and management to review and modify existing operational procedures pragmatically during the construction phase. The commissioning process will be observed closely as a

possible precedent for alleviating the disruption to staff and prisoners typically caused by the introduction of new facilities.

The Ross Independent Living Units at Mobilong present an alternative to traditional cell accommodation and demonstrate the aim of the Department for Correctional Services to create safe, secure, humane and respectful environments that meet the needs of prisoners. It has the capacity to ameliorate the prison experience and support positive change, and is likely to be taken up as a cost-effective alternative to traditional prison accommodation options both interstate and overseas. © PLACE

Project: Independent Living Units, Mobilong Prison, Murray Bridge

Client: Department for Correctional Services, South Australia

Architects: Thomson Rossi, Adelaide

Project Managers: DAIS

Budget: \$3.8m

Elizabeth M. Grant lectures at the University of Adelaide School of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design, and is currently undertaking doctoral research determining occupant needs and preference in prison design



|| The extended participatory consultation process with the architects allowed Mobilong correctional staff to contribute to the finished design, increasing 'ownership' and knowledge of the Independent Living Units



Introducing Laminex® DIAMONDGLOSS™ Surfaces, a new range of high gloss laminates of unrivalled quality, strength and beauty. The lustre and brilliance of DIAMONDGLOSS™ Surfaces are not only appealing visually, but are far superior to traditional laminates as they are highly mark and scuff resistant – durability and beauty in perfect harmony. The range is available in a stunning palette of 24 contemporary designs and colours, all with a 7 year warranty. To see DIAMONDGLOSS™ Surfaces on display call into The Laminex Group Showroom at 163 Currie Street, Adelaide. Open Mon-Fri 8.30am to 5.00pm & Sat 9am to 2pm. Free parking on site. www.laminex.com.au For enquiries call 8112 8444.

 **Laminex®**
Inspire your space®