

# Mobilong Independent Living Units: New Innovations in Australian Prison Architecture

By Elizabeth Grant

The recently commissioned independent living units at Mobilong Prison on the outskirts of Murray Bridge in South Australia represent new innovations in Australian prison architecture. For the first time, medium-security inmates will be housed in self-contained duplex accommodations, a stark contrast to traditional cellblocks used under typical medium-security systems.

Mobilong Prison is one of nine prisons operated by the Department for Correctional Services, South Australia, located throughout the region and housing a total average population of 1,500 inmates. South Australia's Department for Correctional Services provides a graduated prison system, with inmates progressing from high- to medium- to low-security prisons upon the completion of incentive-based programs targeting offending behavior.

The new development site is about four miles from the city of Murray Bridge, which has a population of 17,000 and is located about 50 miles from Adelaide, the capital of South Australia. Mobilong Prison took its name from the original township name derived from the Aboriginal term for the area Moop-pol-tha-wong, meaning "haven for birds."

## Making More Space

The original prison opened in 1987 as the first campus-style facility in Australia. Mobilong's new development consists of four L-shaped living units separated from opera-

tional support and training and industry buildings by village space. The prison is located on 124 acres, with an external perimeter enclosing 37 acres. Inmates in the medium-security system have access to most of the site. Each living unit was originally designed to accommodate 40 inmates. In 1996, because of the growing prison population, 20 cells were added to the living units, and double bunks were installed in 60 other cells, bringing the total population to 240 inmates.

In 2004, the Department for Correctional Services again needed to increase the capacity of the prison, but this time decided on a radical and innovative approach set to a new standard, operating within a limited budget and providing "top end" accommodation for inmates moving through the graduated system.

The resulting independent living units house an additional 50 inmates. The development comprises 10 duplex units arranged in pairs around a common space, with each unit containing five separate bedrooms, a shared living area, kitchen, bathroom and securable veranda area. These independent living units provide inmates in the later stages of their sentences greater autonomy and control over their lives, and encourage the development of social and living skills in a prison setting. Inmates living in the units assume responsibility for "normal" domestic duties such as meal preparation, ordering supplies, laundry and cleaning.

## Design Specifics

The design is domestic in nature. Research has shown that “hard” architecture and inflexible environments may result in displays of noncompliant and aggressive behavior among inmates.<sup>1</sup> The development has a human scale, with each duplex having subtle aesthetic variations through the use of color to enable 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 grills were eliminated from the design. Siting of the buildings uses principles from residential planning. They are arranged in groups of two, facing inward to a central court area, which has a garden and public telephones.



Photos by Sarah Long

Ten duplex independent living units at Mobilong provide accommodation under a medium-security system for 50 inmates.

The architects, Thomson Rossi, attempted to minimize conflict within the group setting through the internal planning. The design avoids the use of long, continuous corridors typical in correctional facilities. Bedrooms (rather than cells) were placed at either side of the living area to minimize transitional spaces. Bedrooms are lockable to allow inmates personal space and privacy. The occupancy for each unit was set at five to allow group-voting processes to occur with minimal 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 decreases disorientation through the increased ability to visualize the entire environment. Vertical windows allow a line of sight from ground to horizon to enable the occupant to observe and connect with the external environment. To further increase this connection, the vertical windows were repeated at intervals in the living areas, thus presenting the perception of a continuous view. Occupants also can continually access a small, enclosed external veranda area, allowing continued contact with the external environment during lockdown periods. This is expected to help inmates be more aware of climatic variations and surrounding nature and prison environments and events.

Efficient sustainable environmental development solutions and passive environmental principles were integral

to the design. The buildings were orientated along the east-west axis for solar radiation. The building is constructed using reverse block veneer, where the block work is externally covered with insulated lightweight cladding, thus reversing the traditional construction methods. 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 in all units, and materials and finishes with low CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were chosen.

## Ensuring Safety and Security

The project used recent Australian developments in safe cell design to reduce opportunities of death by hanging or fire, implementing design recommendations from the Victorian Building Design Review Project.<sup>2</sup> Obvious hanging points have been removed from bedrooms and bathrooms, all edges are rounded, all knobs and water 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 and alarms, additional exhaust equipment for smoke extraction and air circulation; and fire-rated walls, floors and ceilings. These provisions represent the first South Australian prison that meets the safety recommendations of the South Australian coroner.



The Mobilong independent living units were designed using reverse veneer and solar power to reduce long-term operating costs.

Security measures for a medium-security system were an important factor of the design, and the units needed to have a capacity for inmates to be locked down without risk of escape. Outer walls of the units are designed to a medium-security standard, using corrugated pre-treated color finished steel sheeting and steel-reinforced concrete block work to provide a secure internal building envelope for the containment of inmates during lockdowns. Vertical windows with openings of approximately 5 inches were used to preclude escape. However, the development provides a key humane advancement to the typical medium-security system. Generally, inmates are locked down in individual cells within larger units. In this development, occupants will be confined in the individual units rather than a restrictive cell, allowing continued social contact and some

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degree of normal living. The lockdowns may be less intrusive on the inmates, but safety and security issues have been addressed. Correctional staff can continue to conduct normal night safety and security checks without entering the units. External hatches are used in lieu of traditional cell door traps to provide visual access to the bedroom areas with little or no disruption to the inmates.

### Putting the Pieces Together

The project relied on an intensive consultation process that provided documentation. A working group, comprising local Mobilong and Department for Correctional Services staff, worked with architects, an interior designer and a project manager. The design team used two- and three-dimensional imaging and modelling to initiate a participatory process within the working group and to inform the group of the design process.

Operating a construction site in a fully occupied and functioning prison presents considerable logistical, operational and security issues for both management and construction. Providing vehicular access through the main sallyport would have resulted in restricted access, continual security checks and extra staffing, with delays and added construction costs. This problem was resolved by isolating the work site from the rest of the prison with security fencing containing detection and deterrence capacities and the erection of a second security gate. The new entrance allowed construction workers unencumbered access, and prison operations proceeded normally. Upon completion, the new development was integrated into the prison campus, and the second gate was retained to provide emergency egress.

### Accomplishing Goals

Commissioning new prison facilities generally presents considerable challenges for staff and inmates. 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 behaviors from inmates. The construction of the new facility adjacent to Mobilong was under the continuous gaze of its staff and inmates, allowing them to become accustomed to the new development and even providing considerable diversion from normal prison life. Inmates displayed considerable interest, prompting a series of meetings during the construction phase to discuss the allocation and oper-



Architects employed “safe cell” technology, removing obvious hanging points, rounding all edges and sloping all knobs. Safety screws are used throughout, joints are sealed and lighting is recessed.

ation of the new facility. The extended participatory consultation process with architects allowed Mobilong correctional staff to contribute to the finished design, increasing “ownership” and knowledge about 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 of the independent living units will be closely considered as a possible precedent to alleviate disruption of staff and inmates in the building of new facilities.

The independent living units at Mobilong represent a new alternative to the traditional cell facility and demonstrate the Department for Correctional Services' aims to create safe, secure, humane and respectful environments that meet the needs of inmates. The new facility 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 facility options, both interstate and overseas.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> American Correctional Association. 1990. Causes, preventive measures and methods of controlling riots and disturbances in correctional institutions. Laurel, Md.: American Correctional Association.

Sommer, R. 1974. Tight spaces, hard architecture and how to humanize it. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Justice. 2003. Cell and fire safety guidelines. Melbourne, Australia: ARUP, Australasia.

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