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Designs of David Ziskind '61

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ALUMNI

Design

or Punishment

“Lots of daylight—that’s my mantra in all my buildings,” said architect David Miles Ziskind ’61. “It’s part of being humanized.”

Daylight spilled through the huge window in his corner office at STV Group Inc. in Manhattan, where he serves as the international firm’s chief architect. And it illuminates the cells at 200 correctional facilities he has designed around the world as part of his pioneering work in the field of justice architecture.

David Ziskind is changing the way we consider jails—and inmates

Ziskind, who leads and mentors STV’s 180-person architectural staff, was named to the American Institute of Architects College of Fellows in 2011. Now 74, Ziskind chuckled when acknowledging that he has cut back his work schedule to 50 to 60 hours a week. Much of that time is spent creating cutting-edge correctional facilities based on the belief that prisons and jails should work to turn around the lives of prisoners, many of whom struggle with mental-health issues. Ziskind acknowledges it has been a tough sell in some jurisdictions. But his firm continues to win design contracts.

Said Ziskind: “We create the environments where rehabilitation can happen.”

His architectural career dates back to the late 1960s, when he graduated from Pratt Institute with an architecture degree, but the ideas that have driven it date back to Colby. Ziskind said his administrative science major at Colby provided a wonderful opportunity for immersion in the liberal arts as well, and he delved into history, child psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

Ziskind turned to designing correctional facilities when his career was getting off the ground and governments were looking for ways to redesign their prisons in the wake of successful inmate lawsuits over their treatment behind bars. His designs transformed prison construction, finding ways to eliminate steel bars, bring in more light, and create environments that incorporate elements from hospital settings. In Ziskind-designed prisons, instead of sitting behind glassed-in enclosures, correction officers are behind desks so they can interact with inmates. Common areas, meanwhile, look more like gathering spots at a college dorm.

At some facilities he has eliminated the menacing razor wire that rims the prison perimeter. One county jail in downtown Syracuse, N.Y., has the look of an office building.

One of Ziskind’s latest projects is the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women, which has a dedicated wing for those with mental illness and an assisted-living section with two hospice suites for the prison’s growing elderly population. He’s also mentoring landscape architecture students from Iowa State University who have developed a master plan for the project’s grounds, which includes an outdoor classroom and amphitheater. —David McKay Wilson ’76

“We create the environments where rehabilitation can happen.”

—David Ziskind ’61