The Creative Prison posits a system in which re-education replaces recidivism and prisoners make something more satisfying than socks, writes Peter Kelly.

Refusing to design prisons has become a badge of pride to some architects. Richard Rogers has stated that he would refuse any such work, while in America there is an American organisation called Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility which is asking architects and designers not to participate in the design, construction, or renovation of prisons. The argument is that by getting involved they will become complicit in a detrimental system.

If ever there was a time, however, for architects and designers to enter into the debate on prisons it is now. As of November 2006 there were 79,705 prisoners in the UK and only 230 places left in the entire prison system. Unless there are some radical changes in criminal justice, it is quite obvious that more prisons are going to have to be built.

To stave off more innovative thinking, Rideout – a charitable organisation that promotes and stages artistic events in prisons – decided to come up with a proposal for future prison design. It invited Will Alsop to join workshops with prisoners from HMP Gatieve, a high-security Category B prison populated by lifers, and address the major problems of the current system.

The result is a concept model called HMP Paterson, named after Alexander Paterson, a little-known prison reformer of the early 20th century, to be shown at the Creative Prison exhibition at the Architecture Foundation in January. The bright colours, bold patterns and bulbous shapes make it recognisable as an Alsop project, but it is based on making the relationships between prisoners and staff easier, and on engaging prisoners in creative and educational activities.

These are not new ideas—they have been the aim of prison reform for at least 150 years—but arguments for improving prison conditions have fallen silent in recent years. Hilary Cottam tried to promote the notion of prisons as secure university campuses in 2005, but now that high-security is a central issue in politics, the idea of spending public money on improving the lot of criminals receives little attention or support. The Point of The Creative Prison, however, is that improving prisons and promoting self-sufficiency could reduce the number of prisoners who reoffend, which is currently around 66 per cent. It is still unlikely to gain approval from the likes of the Daily Mail, but the time has come to rethink the argument.

The two main innovations in the scheme are to do with the size of the cell blocks and the redeployment of prison walls. HMP Paterson is divided into small 12-room towers in order to make controlling the prisoners easier and to promote social relations in the prison. You can’t learn to live with 100 people, but you can learn to live with 12,” says Alsop. The idea is that prisoners could—to a limited extent—manage and organise themselves within these smaller units. According to John Aitken of Sacks Kays and Lockwood, which builds prisons, it is a workable proposal: “In terms of buildability, even at this stage the mini-house block is a viable design.”

The prison wall has been remodelled as a usable space that incorporates community centres and facilities for people visiting those on the inside. Alsop argues that: “While you can’t bring prisoners into society, you can bring a bit of society into prisons.” The overall impression is of an attractively striking university campus—the cells are even equipped with computers to allow prisoners to continue their studies in their own time.

In terms of the scheme’s philosophy, it seems that art has replicated religion as the new humanising force. This double-edged proposal appears to be the result of a wider discourse some points of wisdom on how to be jolly nice to the environment this festive season. Wondering what to do about that great evil, the Christmas tree? Vicki Hird, senior campaigner at Friends of the Earth, had a great idea. She advised us to make our own trees. Hird cuts her tree out of cardboard and gets her children to paint it green. She concedes that this is ‘not for everyone’ but insists that ‘it’s quite good fun for the children’. Blass them! If they get jealous of their friends inhaling the magical smell of real pine, they can console themselves with edible decorations. Then you can eat them or put them out for the squirrels,” says Hird. And then, no doubt, you can sit and cry hot bitter tears because you’ve been born to weird parents.

It is left to Edemarce to suggest a great gift idea. She tells us that we use enough gift-wrap in the UK each year to cover Guernsey, which prompts the question: why don’t we? Give it to the French. I’m sure they would find a use for it.

This Guardian article reads like an elaborate spoof. Indeed much of the new Ethical Living section verges on self-parody, packed as it is with articles along the lines of: ‘Is it OK to buy goose-down pillows? Then there was the free bumper-sticker, which read: ‘This Journey is Absolutely Necessary’. Did The Guardian have spare adhesive material left over from the Dinosaur and Wild Animals sticker sets? Or was it a flippant remark from the sub benches, which someone in editorial took seriously?

The distinct impression is that Ethical Living is for people with too much money to know how to dispense with it sensibly. In The Times, Nick Hume compared the current preoccupation with green issues to the Church of England. “The eco-religion has as many rituals as the old faithfuls, only much more fashionably look-at-me. Not for the green faithful the privacy of the confessional box or the pew: we are supposed to show off our piety in the recycling box or the organic produce aisle’ Amen to that.