EXHIBITION

The Creative Prison

Daily Mail readers will balk at Will Alsop’s designs for a “creative” prison, but, says Beatrice Galilee, it’s an enlightened vision.

It’s not absolutely clear what the giant white hand made of stacked books is intended to represent, but in the small dark room of the Architecture Foundation’s exhibition space in London, among a peculiar arrangement of hand drawn notes, an interactive light box and a scale model of one of the most radical prison designs in recent years, it looks somewhat out of place.

The Creative Prison showcases the proposal for a single prison, HMS Paterson, designed in collaboration with Will Alsop and arts group Rideout after consultations and workshops with prisoners. Resisting the temptation to fill the room with Venice Biennale-style statistics about the bleak predicament of prisoners in England and Wales (80,000 prisoners with over 60 per cent of inmates reconvicted within two years) and stick to the ideas was a great move.

Instead of physical or psychological retribution, the prison is focused on reducing re-offending and rehabilitation by addressing the responsibility of contemporary society. The house blocks hold 12 to 13 prisoners and are similar in scale to student residences. The idea is to reduce re-offending to just 15 per cent by developing relationships and skills from cooking to socialising, with an infrastructure that allows some autonomy within the block.

The project began in September 2005, when Alsop visited a prison for lifers and asked for their opinions on the way to reform the prison service. Workshops ensued and, though Alsop’s radical utopian prison forms the backbone of the exhibition, there are also prisoners’ own ideas of what they think a prison should be, in the form of watercolour sketches, drawings, along with this peculiarly large hand sculpture, built during the workshop. One poignant painting suggested the provision of scenic backdrops so that relatives could take pictures of inmates in surroundings other than the bare walls of the waiting room.

A large light box has a simple ground plan of the prison, which is generous, spacious and contains specific and useful activities for prisoners. Pressing buttons lights up parts of the scheme and gives succinct explanations such as a public restaurant on the perimeter of the site where food from the farm, tended to by the inmates, is cooked. The way that inmates spend their hours becomes relevant rather than menial. Areas include a post office, a debate centre, workshops, and visitors’ centres with low-rent accommodation. The cells are generous in size and contain private showers – one of the strongest ideas that came out of the consultation was the unhygienic conditions of prisons today – and a balcony giving fresh air and light that is secured with metal bars.

According to the Daily Mail reader argument, by engaging with emotions instead of focusing on retribution and punishment, the prison system will become a façade. But the HMS Paterson is specifically for category C prisoners – prisoners that have already been deemed worthy and well-behaved enough to reach this haven of “creative prison”. It is not a holistic proposal for prison reform in the UK – it is a carrot not a stick.

Alsop’s design doesn’t offer an antidote to the bitter incarceration. It’s not a proposal for a new utopian prison but, and neither is it a sticking plaster. A combination of genuine research and investigation has produced a thoughtful and imaginative scheme. It’s no utopia – Alsop and Rideout call it “aspirational” – but the prevailing thought scribbled in the exhibition’s visitors’ book is “let’s do it”. It all seems so logical and fair minded that it’s difficult to find a reason why not.

The Creative Prison was at the Architecture Foundation, London, 19 January – 19 February. www.architecturefoundation.org.uk