So the idea of the Creative Prison emerged: instead of large blocks, a village of smaller buildings, each self-contained. You have your own key to your cell - to protect you from the other inmates - but you can't get out. There are shared kitchens, workshops, allotments. Instead of a security wall or fence, the prison is ringed with equally impenetrable lower buildings that act as an interface with the outside world, a kind of halfway house. In other words, it is made clear that there is an exit strategy other than escape: learn to be useful.

What the Creative Prison reminds me of most is not so much a holiday camp as a high-security university campus. The same small cells, the same shared facilities, the same class of (you hope) stern but fair overseers. The difference being, that this is a vocational campus, inhabited by dangerous people, that you emphatically won't be able to stroll out of the gates of. It makes sense: the idea of the university evolved from that of the monastery, and what is a monk's cell if not, um, a cell?

"It would obviously cost more, but not that much more," says Alsop. "I've had a positive response from inmates and guards. Other experts in prisons have been interested. The harshest response has come from other architects. I was shocked by that."

Shocked, but not I think surprised. Alsop is an architect who has managed to stay resolutely just outside the mainstream. In all his career, he has never designed anything quite so provocative as a prison that looks interesting and might actually be useful. Because he can't help designing buildings that look like they might be fun. And we will always have a problem with the idea of prisoners having any kind of fun.

But it's worth a try. Alongside the hasty prefab barrack-block arrangements that are built these days and manage to make Victorian prisons seem close to humane, there ought to be room for one closely-monitored Creative Prison. Would Alsop's idea work? Would re-offending rates fall? There is only one way to find out. Build one. If it fails, you can always turn it over to students.

Link: www.architecturefoundation.org.uk