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Designer Quits over Prison Work National Prison Design Boycott Gains Momentum

November 19, 2004— This was Matthew Smith's last day of work at DLR group, a national architectural firm that designs many of the nation's prisons. Increasingly troubled by the work he was assigned in the firm's Seattle justice design studio, Smith tendered his resignation to avoid contributing to the nation's plague of prison expansion, and in protest of what he sees as an ethical lapse on behalf of the whole profession. Smith took this action while joining National Prison Design Boycott called by Architects / Designers / Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR).

"While there are many fine individuals here, the firm's 'bottom line' has fed my worst fears about a profession that sells itself out to the highest bidder without regard to social consequences," Smith wrote in an open letter to ADPSR. "The whole company eagerly embraces new prison jobs, as the fees eclipse all other design fees—especially those for schools."

"We at ADPSR are all deeply touched by Matthew's personal commitment to ethical action," responded ADPSR president Raphael Sperry. "In the current economy, it's not a small thing to sacrifice a secure job at a well-paying firm like DLR group, and Matthew has a baby to support."

Designing prisons also requires designers to dissociate themselves from their work, according to Smith. "I have been increasingly depressed listening to conversations about suicide-resistant materials, mechanical systems that can handle pepper-spraying (gassing!), and the all-new razor-fencing... The psychological hold on the office staff as to the 'correctness' of our job is dubious. I have been told stories of prison walk-throughs where, for instance, architects were locked in the cell of the 'Green River Killer', the infamous NW serial killer, for 10 minutes to 'see what it's like on the inside.' I am left

wondering how these otherwise intelligent people are duped into viewing each prisoner as a Green River Killer—effectively rationalizing the work they do.”

San-Francisco based ADPSR launched the Prison Design Boycott in September of 2004. The campaign’s comprehensive website, www.adpsr.org/prisons, highlights disturbing facts about prison expansion: the U.S. has the highest per-capita incarceration rate in the world and, over 2 million prisoners, and holds one in four prisoners world-wide. While the U.S. prison population has increased over six-fold since 1970, the crime rate now is roughly the same as it was then. It also calls for the reform of draconian drug laws and three-strikes laws, the implementation of alternatives to imprisonment such as community service programs, and a nationwide reinvestment in community-building measures.

“Matthew really understands what the boycott is about,” says Sperry. “It’s not just saying “no” to prisons, but recognizing that our reliance on mass incarceration to respond to social problems makes things worse, not better.” Smith’s letter concurs: “Imagine if the enormous capital that is invested in prisons annually—which ultimately has a negative sum social and economic value—was diverted instead into...education...health...jobs...[and] housing. Then maybe we could talk about a democratic revolution in architecture!”

More information about ADPSR

Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility is a national non-profit founded in 1983 dedicated to the involvement of architects, designers, and planners in issues of peace and social justice.

For more information see www.adpsr.org/prisons, or contact Raphael Sperry, Prison Campaign Director, at (415) 546-0450 or raphael@450architects.com.