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Architects Say “NO” to Prisons Group Launches National Prison Design Boycott

San Francisco, September 22 — Architects / Designers / Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR) today launches a National Prison Design Boycott campaign calling on architects and other design professionals to pledge not to design more prisons. The campaign aims to raise awareness in the profession and the community at large about the depth of America’s prison crisis and increase discussion of alternatives to the country’s prison construction boom.

“This campaign is about architects doing our part to end the abuses of the prison system. It’s a statement that we are taking responsibility for the parts of the institutions that we design,” says Raphael Sperry, an ADPSR national board member and director of the San Francisco-based campaign.

With more than 2 million prisoners, the U.S. has the highest per-capita incarceration rate in the world and holds one in four prisoners world-wide. Architects have designed over 5,000 prisons and jails to house this captive population, which has increased over six-fold since 1970, although the crime rate now is roughly the same as then.

“Current spending levels on prison construction— \$2.7 billion per year—and operations – over \$46 billion per year—are unsustainable,” notes ADPSR President David Arkin. “That kind of money is desperately needed for under-funded priorities like education and community building. I’d say that almost all design professionals would rather work on schools or community centers than prisons, so we’re expecting strong support for this campaign.”

“Won’t we get prison overcrowding then?” is one of the most common questions Sperry says he responds to. His reply: “This boycott is about more than just making the prison buildings, which is the part architects are responsible for. It’s also about raising awareness. Our prison system is deeply troubled by institutionalized violence, corruption, and racism. Communities have developed lots of successful alternatives to prison –from education and gardening to restorative justice– that haven’t gotten the wide-spread implementation needed to heal our society. “

Kinya-Nicole Jones, a volunteer on the campaign, is struck by the depth of the issue. “Prisons are so connected to so many social injustices,” she points out. “Today’s prison-industrial complex is moving economic production into jails where workers can be legally coerced. It’s taking in more women than ever before, and it’s locating prisons in depressed rural areas where they devastate local services and focus whole towns on dead-end jobs. They’re like a creeping cancer that has to be stopped.”

ADPSR’s plans for its boycott campaign include a comprehensive website (www.adpsr.org/prisons), community education, and a drive to collect thousands of commitments from design professionals nationwide. Supporters are encouraged to sign up on-line. The group also plans to partner with other grassroots organizations to change prison funding at all levels of government.

“Not many architects, or other Americans, are aware of the huge scale and problems of our prison system,” says Sperry. “But as design professionals we are trained to envision alternatives to problems like this. If each architect who found out about this would take a small step and tell a few others, and the bigger firms take an ethical stand on this, our profession could really be in the lead of shaping public debate about the design of our country’s institutions. Isn’t that where we belong?”

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.

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