Top-Down, Middle-Out, Bottom-Up: A Design Approach to Transforming Prison

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Abstract : Over the past decade, the authors have undertaken applied research aimed at enabling transformation within the prison service to improve conditions and outcomes for those living, working and visiting in prisons in the UK and the communities they serve. The research has taken place against a context of reducing resources and public discontent at increasing levels of violence, deteriorating conditions and persistently high levels of re-offending. Top-down governmental policies have mainly been ineffectual and in some cases counter-productive. The prison service is characterised by hierarchical organisation, and the research has applied design thinking at multiple levels to challenge and precipitate change: top-down, middle-out and bottom-up. The research employs three distinct but related approaches, system design (top-down): working at the national policy level to analyse the changing policy context, identifying opportunities and challenges; engaging with the Ministry of Justice commissioners and sector organisations to facilitate debate, introducing new evidence and provoking creative thinking, place-based design (middle-out): working with individual prison establishments as pilots to illustrate and test the potential for local empowerment, creative change, and improved architecture within place-specific contexts and organisational hierarchies, everyday design (bottom-up): working with individuals in the system to explore the potential for localised, significant, demonstrator changes; including collaborative design, capacity building and empowerment in skills, employment, communication, training, and other activities. The research spans a series of projects, through which the methodological approach has developed responsively. The projects include a place-based model for the re-purposing of Ministry of Justice land assets for the purposes of rehabilitation; an evidence-based guide to improve prison design for health and well-being; capacity-based employment, skills and self-build project as a template for future open prisons. The overarching research has enabled knowledge to be developed and disseminated through policy and academic networks. Whilst the research remains live and continuing; key findings are emerging as a basis for a new methodological approach to effecting change in the UK prison service. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary to overcome the barriers between distinct areas of the prison service. Sometimes referred to as total environments, prisons encompass entire social and physical environments which themselves are orchestrated by institutional arms of government, resulting in complex systems that cannot be meaningfully engaged through narrow disciplinary lenses. A scalar approach is necessary to connect strategic policies with individual experiences and potential, through the medium of individual prison establishments, operating as discrete entities within the system. A reflexive process is necessary to connect research with action in a responsive mode, learning to adapt as the system itself is changing. The role of individuals in the system, their latent knowledge and experience and their ability to engage and become agents of change are essential. Whilst the specific characteristics of the UK prison system are unique, the approach is internationally applicable.

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