

ARCHITECTURE FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE

A Testament to the Transformative Nature of Architecture

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SSA with Laura Wegl, Probation Manager,
Muriel Wright Detention Center

Sally Swanson Architects, Inc.

490 Post Street, Suite 830

San Francisco, CA 94102

Tel. 415.445.3045 Fax. 415.445.3055

ssa@swanarch.com www.swanarch.com

A Narrative

ARCHITECTURE FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE A TESTAMENT TO THE TRANSFORMATIVE NATURE OF ARCHITECTURE

Sally Swanson Architects, Inc. (SSA) has recently completed the design of a New Programs and Educational Building at Muriel Wright Residential Center (MWRC) in San Jose for the County of Santa Clara, California.

MWRC is a correctional center focusing on the needs of detained teenagers. The youth have the opportunity to attend MWRC instead of serving time at Juvenile Hall. MWRC's programs offer counseling, group self-help, educational classes and team building activities.

SSA was commissioned by the County of Santa Clara to design a new administrative and classroom facility. The project consisted of new construction as well as modernization of the existing facilities. MWRC provides a secure yet therapeutic environment. The overall theme of the facility is focused on healing, learning, hope and guidance all interwoven with security reflecting the Department of Probation guidelines.

The newly expanded and renovated structure provides sufficient space for a dozen special programs at MWRC. These special programs require both standard size classrooms and smaller break-out spaces for special educational needs. Part of the design solution involved integrating the interior and exterior spaces. The facilities park-like setting has become an integral part of the educational experience offering a basket ball court, learning garden, picnic area and lawn all maintained by the residents.

A challenge that SSA met was to meld the existing box-like structures with architecture that is open and welcomes light into the interior. The interior offices and classrooms are far more inviting and provide a well being that the residents may not have experienced before. Another challenge was to fuse the existing campus with the new facility. This was accomplished by tying the over hangs together with the massing of the new facility, reflecting the massing of the surrounding hill side. So the challenge was successfully met by tying the renovation of existing facilities with new construction. The administrative spaces are also carefully crafted with system furniture

precisely fitted into each office and lobby space.

It is apparent that the residents have developed a sense of ownership of this facility. This is perhaps best exemplified by a landscaping project that involved laying sod for a lawn. Residents who previously may have been members of rival gangs were able to come together to work cooperatively and complete the project. More importantly however, these young people have continued to work together in an on-going effort to maintain the lawn. The simple act of laying sod has served to imprint critically important lessons of teamwork and collaboration.

Sustainability is an important component of the project. Energy efficiency is incorporated into the architecture. Natural light is abundant and well placed clerestory windows provide a degree of natural air flow that mechanical ventilation is often not needed. This facility provides a healthy environment where staff and faculty are free from their allergies. Not only have these touches created a more natural environment they have served to reduce utility costs. The building also has a security system that reflects state-of-the-art technology.

SSA's CEO, Sally Swanson had a chance to talk with Laura Wegl, Probation Manager at the Center, about the changes. The following is a narrative from Laura Wegl regarding the renovated facility and experiences of its staff and residents.



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Can you describe some of the special programs at the Center and how the new facility and the remodel accommodate those programs?

Prior to the new facility, we had our support services - mental health, drug and alcohol programs housed in a portable building or in whatever area we could use. The portable was run down leaving safety and security issues unaddressed. We were bringing families in with no space and often used the recreational room to run groups. This negated the use by minors. The residents had to go outside for these activities if the rooms were being used for groups. We actually used one of the dorm rooms for a classroom and the teens had to go to the opposite side of the school. This questioned the safety and security issues.

SSA efficiently addressing this issue moved all the classrooms together which promoted safety and security. It rendered exchange of ideas, and gave the teachers a functional office space which boosted morale. With the new facility, the staff felt a sense of starting over. There was excitement about participation in creating a positive residence. The teens now had a space they felt was their own and could even hang pictures. This project made us all feel that someone cared. Sally cared enough to put an effort into being creative and wanting something nice for us versus the typical correctional facility.

What difference do you think this facility makes in the lives of these teens?

One month ago, we had a special education placement meeting with a teacher from Santa Clara High School for one of our minors. The teacher upon arriving commented that she was trying to find "the ranch", meaning the correctional facility. She did not recognize, from the outside, that the building was a correctional facility. When a person outside our system didn't even know it was a correctional facility and thought it was a private school that says something.

When the project first started and the painting was



Laura Wegl with Sally Swanson at the Open House Celebration of the Muriel Wright Center



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being done, staff remarked “have you seen the color?” Purple walls are quite different than the traditional beige correctional color. People walk in now and say “wow”! Everyone has a nice feeling. The warm and wonderful space is a nice gesture and they feel great.

Everyone on staff and the residents say they love the matching colors and floors. They are light and bright and we are thrilled with it. They also create a harmonic pattern and a tranquilizing ambiance. It is a good feeling for me to see the growing positive attitude.

All our specialists, mental health, drug and alcohol, and educational along with the probation community workers now have respective office spaces to carry out their specific daily programs. The conference and interview rooms are used daily now. We have proudly equipped them with couches, chairs and phones. This provides a warm, comforting, and healing space that is conducive to group work, family sessions and individual counseling. The space is now very homey.



How do the residents/juveniles feel about the changed design and security of the center?

We run aggression replacement training three times a week. The children can now comfortably work in the new space and can even display their work. The kids are so proud of the new space and feel at home. When we hosted the Open House, the children giving tours proudly announced “this is our art room” or “this is our meeting room”. I have to emphasize their use of “our”. Many children have shared their feeling of healthier identity. Now they do not feel as though they are being “dumped”. Many residents have now experienced a positive environment to heal and learn.



The space supports everything that we are doing for the groups, individuals and family counseling. It is comfortable, nice, clean and homey. We like that SSA provided a special space where families can meet and work without interruption in a space that certainly does not feel correctional.

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The re-configured administrative area provides a room for the staff. This is very helpful as the staff now have a special room for their work, so the conference and interview rooms can be used for meetings.

Wendy, the Probation Officer has lots of asthma issues. Ever since the space was renovated, she has far fewer asthma problems.

It is imperative that the kids have a nice and conducive classroom setting where they can learn and display their work. SSA designed and renovated it that way. Everyone feels good about it. When people feel better, they want to keep it looking nicer. The teachers are very motivated, by the nice surroundings. The kids are responsive to the new space and are also responding to the teachers' new enthusiasm.

How does the Facility house new programs?

Last year we started a new program that focused on being less correctional and more therapeutic. The new space is a perfectly natural continuation of what we have been working on. With homey features and wonderful colors, it is exactly what we would expect for the building.

The County came to Open House. They were amazed. No one has this nice a building in corrections, they claimed. The kids now have a home. They are playing basketball and volleyball and have a bigger and pleasant space. They are able to use the recreational room as of its purpose and everyone benefits. Sally has been great. She was always thinking, "I know it is a ranch, but it does not have to look and feel like a ranch." I really appreciated that.

I had only been at MWRC a couple of months before the start of the project. So I got an opportunity to watch it happening, growing and progressing. It has been a wonderful experience and we are just so happy. It is just beautiful.

It is everything we hoped for.



Sally Swanson Architects is a 20-person, award-winning architecture, planning, universal design and access consulting firm. SSA is a 100 percent Woman-owned Enterprise (WBE) and DGS-certified Small Business Enterprise (SBE).

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