Project Proposal: Social Justice

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2) Description of the project

The adolescent brain is configured such that they have a higher likelihood of acting on instinct. They have difficulty making well-thought-out decisions while in contexts they find exciting and stimulating. The media depicts the adolescent functioning like a car with no brakes - the drive to act is there but without the ability to stop behaviors once in action. While this depiction is a caricature, evolution has indeed rendered the adolescent susceptible to short-sighted and risky decisions. Specifically, there is an adolescent-specific increase in the functioning of the incentive processing system - including the ventral striatum. This system underlies the processing of rewards and also provides the motivational charge that propels us towards stimuli that seem novel and rewarding. The cognitive control system, however, involving the most recently developed part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, as well as others, is not yet fully developed during adolescence. This part of the brain allows the individual to inhibit an initial push to go towards a potential reward and to stop and think about what they're about to do, providing the machinery for deliberative decision-making. The configuration of these systems does not reach maturity until well into the 20s.

Due to their continued development, we believe adolescents are often not criminally culpable for their crimes. In line with this, adolescent punishment should be less severe than that of adults committing the same crime. Furthermore, due to the continued development of the adolescent, both psycho-socially and biologically, the prison experience of an adolescent committed to prison to provide justice to the victim of their crime should place a large emphasis on rehabilitation and continued development as their behavior is the result of a transient immaturity, not due to an ingrained and difficult to change criminal character.

To provide a summary of our conception of the adolescent:

- adolescents are at a developmental stage that renders them more susceptible to losing control of their behaviors in the heat of the moment - situations in which affective states are triggered which often is the case when crimes are committed
- adolescents are less culpable of the crimes they commit under affectively charged circumstances than adults
- adolescents require the appropriate inputs and experiences to encourage development through this period into adulthood to allow an alignment of the incentive processing and cognitive control systems that will render future criminal behavior less likely
- adolescents have many positive aspects that can and should be cultivated to allow them to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

Consistent with these beliefs about adolescence, we place a strong focus on rehabilitation and continued development during this period. In doing so, our project objective is to:
create a juvenile detention system that avoids dehumanizing the adolescent and introducing them into a community from the beginning. This requires a change of schema, away from the idea of juvenile detention as a punishment and towards rehabilitation as an investment in our youth.

We believe that we can achieve the following objectives:

- adolescents entering the prison system will experience minimal disruption to their developmental trajectory
- adolescents leaving the prison system upon completion of their full term will be less likely to commit crime and be rearrested than adolescents leaving the current system
- conflict management and reconciliation between victims and the community

We propose to do this by creating principles for a prison design which creates a framework which can then be adapted to suit more specific aims and objectives of a community. This would involve:

**Making changes to the system:**

- avoid labeling as criminal. Recognizing the potential for growth, overcoming a criminal past, and positive economic contributions post-incarceration.
- Challenging a criminal justice system of profiling, policing, and punishment that exacerbates issues of poverty and racism
- reframing the idea of who is a guard. Based on family-centered orphanages in which the traditional, orphanage building consisting of large rooms with many children for which no single staff member is replaced by recreating family homes, the guards will take on the role of mentors, living amongst the adolescents and acting as role models.

**Making changes to the plan of a prison space:**

- The design of the prison will be based on a set of concentric circles. The middle circle will be the most restrictive in terms of freedoms etc. As the adolescent gains skills and trust, they move from the inner circle to the outer circles. The outer circles allow for more freedom and trust, physically demonstrated through the opening out of the prison space into individual houses. With this increased trust and freedom, adolescents will also take on more responsibilities and become effective members of the prison community - working in the community garden, etc.
- At the very outer circle, adolescents live as family in regular-style houses. They will also have even more responsibility, working in businesses that connect the prison to the community. Some examples include coffeeshops, food markets, etc. Having such businesses will have many positive consequences: it allows the ability for adolescents who have worked their way through the system to interface with the community
- The visual form of this design is very much a metaphor for the process of adolescents in this facility: they are making a journey from the confines of the prison back into society, and gaining skills to more easily integrate back into their communities as effective members.
- A bucket of spatial considerations - colors, adjacencies, the right to private spaces, green spaces, natural light and windows, access to technology, sightlines and views, material quality, process of security, amenities for non-prisoners,

3) What dynamics and/or skills are missing from this team to achieve the project as envisioned?

**Issues of site placement connecting to local political landscape:**

- The site would ideally be more closely aligned and located in a populated or urban area to foster partnerships with communities and ease the transition back into society. This would undoubtedly be met with community opposition similar to “Not In My Backyard” Syndrome. So we would need to navigate policy making, local government, and marketing landscapes to promote and justify this
decision. This will allow us to negotiate the issues of boundaries and rebuilding social trust.

Background in justice system, corrections, psychology, and social work:
- What systems internally are in place and are unchangeable due to laws in place. How can we confirm and challenge these systems? How can we negotiate gang culture, immigrants, and noncompliance? What are the best methods to speak to noncompliant groups and appeal to them to get them to grow?

4) What resources and physical space(s) would be required to actualize the project as envisioned?
- Funding: potential sources for funding include grants, community sponsorships
- Physical space: space large enough to accommodate the structural design. This is a site-specific consideration based on location, existing regional conditions, etc.
- Human resources: staff to serve as “mentors” within the family units, as the community liaisons between the “reintegration” circle and the community

5) Given what you’ve learned at this conference, what would be your next steps for actualizing this project?

Consulting and empathizing with stakeholders - including current adolescent offenders, the parents of offenders, guards in juvenile detention centers, etc. - in order to form a design that will be deemed appropriate and appealing to the communities involved in the current system.

Researching current ways of prison confinement, ideas of reform, and what organizations are working towards prison reform. Understanding demographics, gang culture, local culture, how much travel.

Focus on details - benchmarks of moving through the system. Disciplinary actions when breaking rules. What rules will be established.
Confinement
Limiting choices
Trust-Building
Reestablishing social contact
Reintegration
Skillbuilding
Social equality
Community
Existing
Neighborhood

Reintegration
Skillbuilding
Social equality

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Confinement
Limiting choices