



# UNLOCKING VALUE IN CIVIC AND JUSTICE DESIGN WITH THE THREE-DOOR JAIL CONCEPT

By: Ken Ricci



At NELSON Worldwide, we believe that thoughtful design choices can unlock significant value for civic and justice facilities—value that serves not only operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness but also the well-being of individuals and communities.

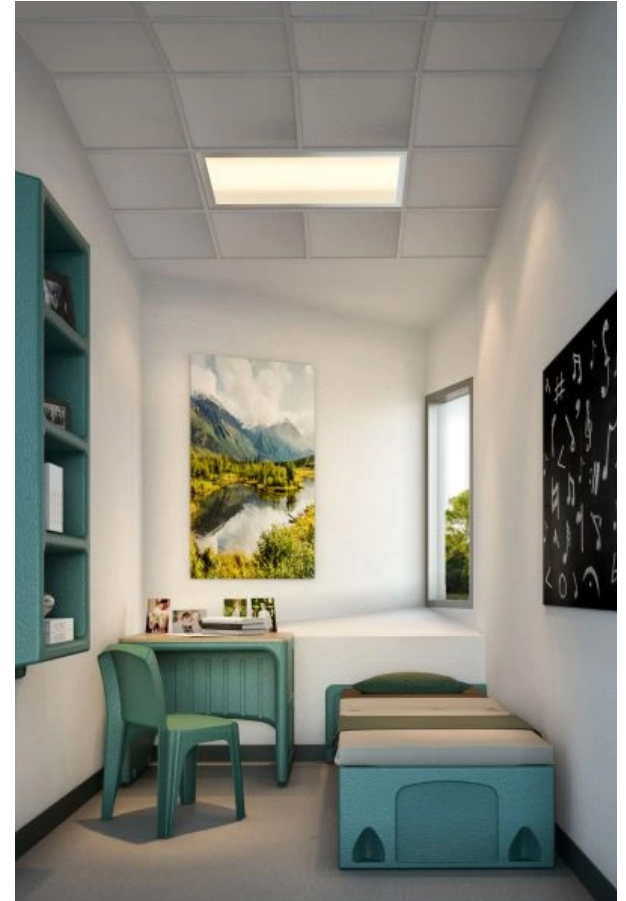
In our Civic & Justice Studio, we are committed to creating environments that address complex social issues while delivering functional, cost-effective solutions that empower local communities.

## The Issue at Hand

The mental health crisis within U.S. jails and prisons is well-documented. Studies estimate that 20% of jail inmates and 15% of state prison inmates have serious mental health conditions, making these facilities some of the largest providers of inpatient mental health care in the country. Additionally, many facilities are outdated, with the last major construction wave occurring about 30 years ago, leading to infrastructure that struggles to meet the growing needs of the inmate population.

## The Three-Door Jail: A New Model for Justice Design

To address these challenges, NELSON Worldwide has developed the “Three-Door Jail” concept, pioneered by NELSON Vice President Ken Ricci, who as an architect and advocate, has devoted his 40-year career to the programming, planning, and design of justice and correctional facilities throughout the country. This model represents a shift from traditional incarceration practices, integrating three strategies—Diversion, Deflection, and Detention—to create a more effective, compassionate, and economically beneficial system. By addressing the root causes of criminal behavior and tailoring responses to individual needs, the Three-Door Jail aims to reduce incarceration rates, alleviate overcrowding, and cut operational costs.



Newer facilities are small, youth-focused, residential-like, and include a diverse range of programs and needed social services for effective youth rehabilitation and development.

## Door 1 – Diversion

**Diversion focuses on redirecting individuals away from unnecessary time in custody.** With facilities designed to include magistrate offices and hearing rooms on-site, the process allows for immediate redirection to community services or programs as needed. This pathway not only reduces time in jail but also connects individuals with critical resources that address underlying issues, potentially preventing further encounters with the justice system.

## Door 2 – Deflection

The Deflection door prioritizes mental health intervention, creating spaces within the facility where individuals can receive evaluations and connect with mental health professionals. This strategy helps ensure that those struggling with mental health issues receive the appropriate care, rather than being funneled into the jail-to-prison pipeline. By providing targeted support, **Deflection lowers long-term incarceration rates and fosters a system that values treatment over punishment.**

## Door 3 – Detention

For those who must be held, **the Detention door reimagines traditional jail spaces with design elements that promote dignity and rehabilitation.** Using normative design principles, these spaces replace bars with secure glazing, incorporate natural light, and provide quality furniture, creating a more humane environment that respects the individual. Such settings are proven to contribute to better outcomes, supporting rehabilitation rather than perpetuating a cycle of incarceration.

## Real-World Applications of the Three-Door Model

The Three-Door Jail concept is more than an idea; it's a practical approach being implemented in facilities across the U.S.:

**Diversion** has been a cornerstone in projects like the [Montgomery County Restoration Study](#), which co-locates critical agencies such as Law Enforcement, Health and Human Services, and the Public Defender's Office to facilitate immediate redirection to support services.

**Deflection** is reflected in the Master Plan for the [Davidson County Sheriff's Office](#), which includes a mental health facility and additional resources to meet the needs of individuals requiring care beyond incarceration.

**Detention** principles were applied in the [State of Hawaii's Women's Community Correction Center](#), where the design prioritizes open spaces and family visitation areas, contributing to a more rehabilitative and supportive environment for detainees.



NELSON Worldwide is designing this New Jersey juvenile justice prototype facility to both enhance the safety of staff and youth and provide therapeutic services in a safe and developmentally appropriate environment.

## A Future Path

The Three-Door Jail is a forward-thinking approach to justice design that directly addresses the challenges facing today's facilities. By focusing on diversion, deflection, and a reimagined approach to detention, this model not only aims to reduce overcrowding and operational costs but also to foster a justice system that serves the public responsibly and humanely.

In a world where resources are limited and public scrutiny is high, the Three-Door Jail demonstrates that value-driven design can positively impact individuals and communities alike. Through thoughtful, evidence-based design, NELSON Worldwide is unlocking a new era of justice that supports both fiscal responsibility and the dignity of every person involved.



This 440,000-square-foot 1,500-bed detention facility is rated LEED Silver and was designed by OZ Architecture with Ricci-Greene Associates and Hartman-Cox Architects. Photo by Frank Ooms.

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