



NELSON

**DESIGN THAT
UNLOCKS
VALUE**

**Insights into Today's Behavioral
Healthcare Environments**

A New Era of JUSTICE

Historically, justice facilities were envisioned as places of care; monuments to civic pride designed to heal, rehabilitate, and serve the public good. Over time, many drifted toward an emphasis on containment alone. Today, research reaffirms what early designers understood: the built environment shapes behavior, safety, and outcomes.

As expectations for care evolve, so must the facilities that support it. Trauma-informed design can dismantle stigma, reduce stress, and foster restorative spaces that prioritize patient dignity and staff efficiency.

At NELSON, we believe evidence-based design helps healthcare systems move beyond institutional minimums to deliver lasting value—creating secure, empathetic environments that empower staff and patients while building resilient communities.



Hawaii Women's Correctional Center

01

The Theoretical FOUNDATION

Behavioral health recovery is grounded in clinical theories that utilize learning and conditioning to modify criminal behaviors, often employing positive reinforcement where healthy coping mechanisms are encouraged and supported through therapeutic incentives. This foundation supports evidence based practices like Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which aims to reshape the thought patterns contributing to maladaptive behaviors by teaching problem-solving and moral reasoning.

Furthermore, social learning theories highlight that individuals adopt values and attitudes by observing those around them, underscoring the importance of the therapeutic environment; by promoting positive social networks and interactions within the facility, these pro-grams can significantly reduce relapse and foster long-term wellness.

▶ BEHAVIORAL & SOCIAL LEARNING



MODIFYING BEHAVIOUR THROUGH ENVIRONMENT



SOCIAL LEARNING

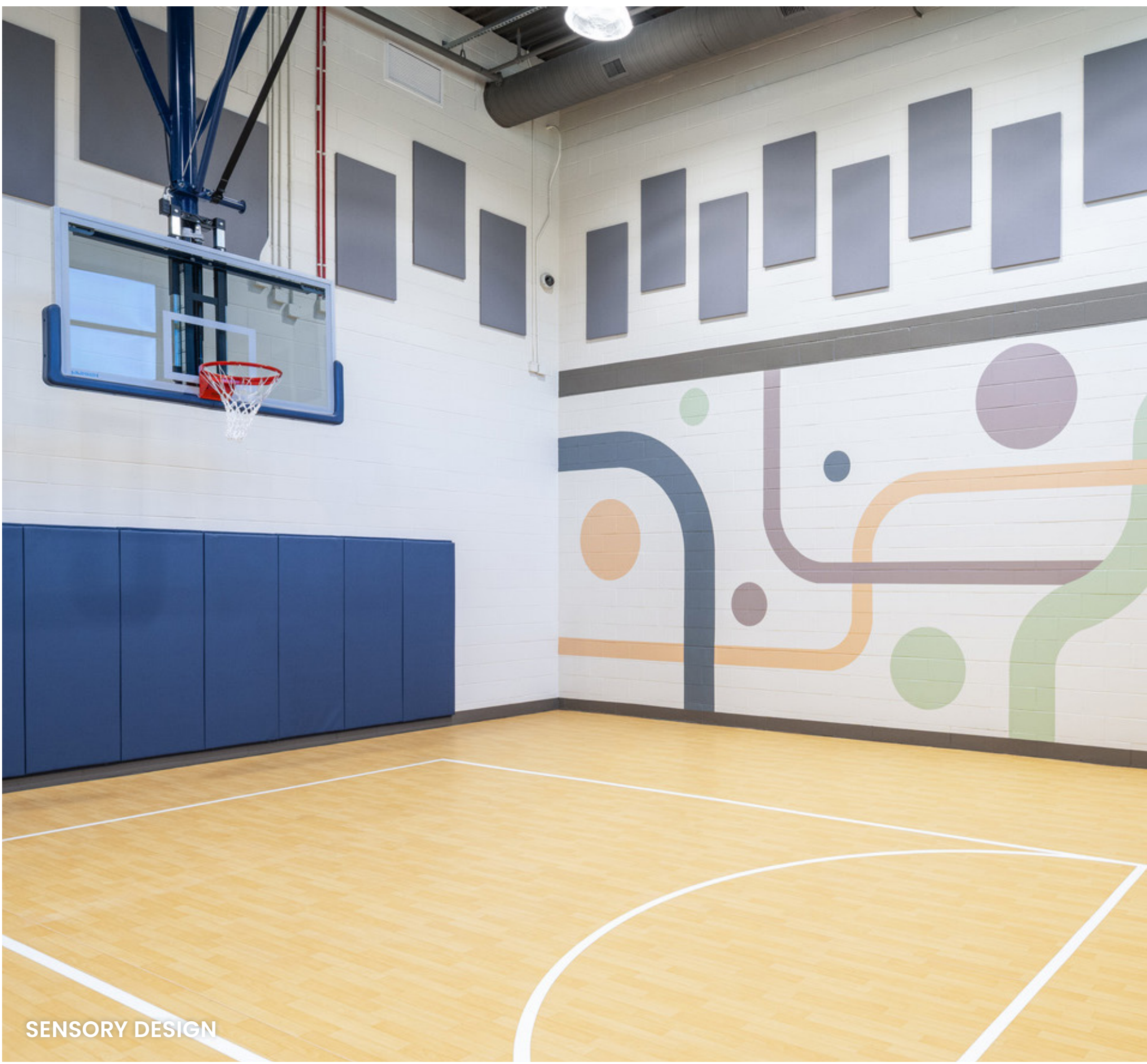
02

Architecture as THERAPY

Behavior and environmental cues are intricately linked, as signals from our surroundings directly influence thoughts, emotions, and actions in ways that can either hinder or support rehabilitation. Visual cues such as color palettes and spatial layouts can evoke specific emotional responses; blue tones promote calmness while bright colors energize a space, while auditory cues like background music or nature sounds positively affect mood and focus. Even olfactory cues can serve as powerful triggers for memory and emotion, evoking feelings of comfort if leveraged correctly.

By consciously designing these sensory inputs, the physical environment becomes an active participant in the therapeutic process rather than a passive backdrop.

ARCHITECTURE AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL



03

Biophilic DESIGN

Biophilic design in behavioral health facilities extends beyond environmental benefits to influence staff well-being, operational efficiency, and positive outcomes for residents. Thoughtful biophilic design strategies, such as incorporating natural light and access to outdoor views, not only improve patient mood and cognitive function but also reduce staff absenteeism and improve retention, which is critical for safety and continuity of care.

By prioritizing clear sightlines, climate control, and acoustic dampening, facilities can create environments that support human performance while achieving long-term rehabilitation goals.

BIOPHILIC DESIGN



04

Safety Through DESIGN

A secure and orderly environment is essential for both staff and residents, achieved best through direct supervision models that position staff within housing units rather than in isolated control rooms. This approach allows for continuous, proactive observation of inmate behavior, encouraging positive interactions and enabling rapid response to incidents before they escalate.

Facility layouts must prioritize unobstructed visibility to minimize blind spots, as clear sightlines improve situational awareness and reduce risk for everyone. Ultimately, thoughtful design facilitates meaningful, structured interactions between staff and residents, maintaining order through engagement rather than just physical barriers.

SAFETY THROUGH DESIGN



UNOBSTRUCTED SIGHTLINES



DIRECT SUPERVISION



PROACTIVE MANAGEMENT

05

Specialized CARE

Effective rehabilitation requires specialized environments that address the specific needs of diverse populations, particularly regarding trauma and gender. Trauma-informed approaches recognize the pervasive impact of past experiences, emphasizing safety, trustworthiness, and choice to reduce re-traumatization and support emotional regulation.

Similarly, gender-responsive programs address the distinct challenges women face, such as abuse histories and childcare responsibilities, by providing supportive environments that include parenting skills development and gender-specific counseling.

Additionally, integrating mental health treatment with spaces for individual counseling and crisis intervention is crucial to stabilize conditions and equip individuals with coping strategies for release.



▼ SPECIALIZED CARE



Rehabilitation for a **SAFER FUTURE**

Over 40% of the correctionally housed population has a diagnosed mental disorder. Research confirms that well-designed, evidence-based environments significantly improve clinical outcomes and support lower reoffending rates.

By upholding human dignity and focusing on holistic healing, we contribute to safer communities and positive social outcomes. Designing these correctional facilities is both a responsibility and an opportunity to improve every touchpoint in the justice system.

Working collaboratively across our specialized practices, we help clients deliver high-quality medical, mental health, behavioral health, and addiction treatment services. Drawing on our national bench of over 60 healthcare design professionals with deep cross-sector expertise, we design behavioral health environments that set a higher standard of care, even for the most complex patient populations.



Center for Sexually Exploited Children | Gwinnett County GA

NELSON

We look forward to unlocking value for
your organization together!



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