

Crossing the Line

Many migrant-detention centers were not designed for their current use—and architects should stand up and say stop.

Beginning in late June, a series of news reports detailed once again the horrendous conditions in certain migrant-detention centers along the southern border. Immigration lawyers, doctors, Congressional representatives, journalists, and the Department of Homeland Security's own Office of Inspector General described what they saw or heard inside some of these facilities: deplorable overcrowding; lack of good nutrition and sometimes even clean drinking water; poor access to basic sanitation and medical care. While the government sought to enforce new rules for asylum seekers, the state of these centers remains a testament to an intense humanitarian crisis.

What does this have to do with architecture? Architects are charged with ensuring the health, welfare, and safety of those who inhabit the structures they design. If local building codes were applied to the worst of these centers, they would be closed down today. But local officials seem to have no jurisdiction over federal facilities. Take the now-notorious Border Patrol center outside El Paso, in Clint, Texas, designed largely to house vehicles and equipment, albeit with space to briefly hold 104 adult detainees. But when a team of lawyers and doctors visited in June, they found instead 350 children, most of whom were likely separated from the adult who brought them over the border. The team also learned of an adjacent windowless warehouse that allegedly held hundreds more, according to an article in *The New Yorker*. Though the law mandates that children be moved out of detention within 72 hours, some children told lawyers they had been there for three weeks. They were “filthy,” said one lawyer; they had not had access to showers, and some slept on concrete floors. Overwhelmed guards charged older kids with looking after babies and toddlers, including changing their diapers.

But none of these facts can begin to convey the emotional misery and fear these children suffer.

A joint investigation, by the *El Paso Times* and *The New York Times*, of the Clint facility in early July said, “Architects designed the Clint station as a type of forward base . . . from which agents could go on forays along the border . . . [and] migrants would be detained for only a few hours of processing before being transferred to other locations.” The architects are uncredited, but shouldn't all architects protest when a structure designed as a giant garage becomes a squalid prison for hundreds of children?

Last year, the Architecture Lobby and Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR) called for professionals to refuse work on immigrant-detention centers. Several AIA chapters, including Boston and Austin, similarly called for rejecting work that violates basic human rights.

Now Rosa Sheng, FAIA, well-known for her activism on behalf of women and diversity in the field, has reached out to the College of Fellows and the Board of the AIA to ask architects “not to look away or



remain complicit” in the face of the inhumane conditions at detention centers. She believes the AIA should denounce “injustices and misuse of building types not meant for human habitation” and should “call for building inspections to have these facilities shut down.” As Sheng points out, “The AIA Code of Ethics clearly states that we shall uphold human rights.” So far, she has received a positive reaction from many Fellows but has yet to receive an official response from the AIA board.

Two years ago, the American Medical Association (AMA) voted to adopt policies to protect the health of immigrants and refugees. The AMA opposed all family immigration detention, the separation of children from parents, and any plans to expand detention centers, “given the negative health consequences that detention has on both children and their parents.”

This June, the American Bar Association (ABA) declared that the organization was “appalled by credible reports of hundreds of children being held in unsafe and unhealthy conditions in violation of federal and state law, court settlements, and common decency.”

It is time for the AIA to join doctors and lawyers in taking a stand. According to Robert A. Ivy, the organization's EVP/CEO, the board is “actively discussing its position on this issue.” Ivy told *RECORD* just before the magazine went to press that the AIA is distressed “at the living conditions in overcrowded detention facilities, and stands by its ethical standards.” Let's hope the AIA will soon take action.

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