

**Main Identity**

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**This Week's Corrections Connection**

Thursday | February 7, 2008

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There's not a corrections practitioner in the world who wants to be faced with any unknowns in their facility. To be safe they need to know, and see, just about everything that's going on at all times. That was the inspiration behind this week's subject about a facility design that eliminates blind spots. If it can be built, it might be the next great idea whose time has come.

Jim  
 Editor, Corrections.com

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**FEATURED STORY****Out, out blind spot**

By Ann Coppola

*Eliminating the unknown*

Somewhere along the way, the word "inventor" lost its cutting edge. What once implied someone imagining futuristic new ideas now brings to mind Thomas Edison hunched over his desk by light of a single burning candle. Inventing these days might seem like nothing more than a romantic notion, but all it really takes is seeing a need for change and having the guts to do something about it.

"People think that in most jails, inmates are constantly supervised, either by an

officer or security camera, but that's just not the case," says Sonny Emerson, a modern American inventor and corrections veteran.

The reason for this, he explains, are "blind spots," or places where inmate activity can take place outside the view of a security camera or officer. Blind spots can allow suicide attempts, rapes, and other attacks to go unwitnessed and undocumented. But Emerson's OmniView jail design, which allows for the filming and archiving of every movement and square inch inside a facility, could be the first invention to eliminate these structural hideaways.

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## Out, out blind spot

By *Ann Coppola*, News Reporter

Published: 01/22/2008



Somewhere along the way, the word “inventor” lost its cutting edge. What once implied someone imagining futuristic new ideas now brings to mind Thomas Edison hunched over his desk by light of a single burning candle. Inventing these days might seem like nothing more than a romantic notion, but all it really takes is seeing a need for change and having the guts to do something about it.

“People think that in most jails, inmates are constantly supervised, either by an officer or security camera, but that’s just not the case,” says Sonny Emerson, a modern American inventor and corrections veteran.

The reason for this, he explains, are “blind spots,” or places where inmate activity can take place outside the view of a security camera or officer. Blind spots can allow suicide attempts, rapes, and other attacks to go unwitnessed and undocumented. Emerson’s new

**OmniView** incarceration design, a jail where every movement and square inch is filmed and archived on camera, could be the first invention to eliminate these structural hideaways.

“I’ve invented the only jail that has zero blind spots and constant monitoring of staff and the inmate,” Emerson says. “It is literally 100 percent. For the first time, it allows a continuous record on closed-captioned TV and DVD of what happens to the inmate from the day they arrive until the day they leave. I believe it’s the safest design ever made.”

The origin of the OmniView goes back two decades, when Emerson was running Emerson House in Denver, Colorado, the first minimum security private prison in the United States. That’s when what he calls his “lifelong mission” began.

“Twenty years ago I lost an inmate to suicide,” he explains. “It just crushed me. He was an 18-year old Sioux person that was about to head back to live on the reservation. In his suicide note to me he wrote, ‘I know what life is going to be like when I go back and I can’t face it.’ That just ruined me. I knew a jail with even one blind spot was not a safe jail.”

To completely eliminate blind spots, Emerson started with a simple concept: a circle. Instead of a labyrinth of hallways with turns and corners you can’t see around, the OmniView is a circular jail. If you imagine yourself standing at the center of a circle and turning 360 degrees, you’d be able to see everything around you. That’s where the jail’s “100 percent surveillance” claim begins.

“There is a single control room placed in the center that provides the panoramic “360 degree views” of the entire interior,” Emerson adds. “Six fixed CCTV cameras record the 100 percent surveillance and everything is permanently DVD archived.”



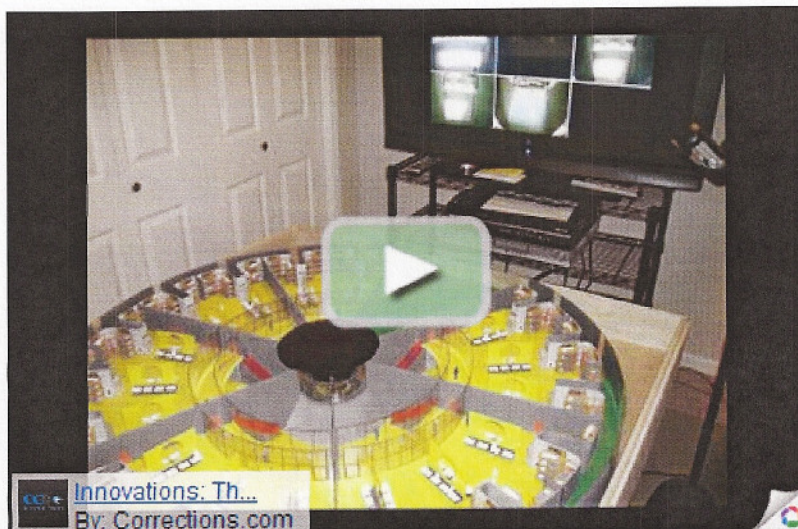
*An overview of the OmniView*

Circular jails have been built before and exist today, but that is not where Emerson's claim begins and ends. Looking out from the control center, the officer would see a circular row of cells surrounding him, each one facing the center. In traditional jails, an officer typically has to walk up to the cell and peer into it to see the inmate. In Emerson's jail, the cells have transparent, glass walls facing the control center, allowing the cameras to capture every move inside.

"All of the walls facing the control center are made from commercial grade glass and are transparent," he explains. "They get their required security level strength by being fortified by embedded stainless steel aircraft cable."

Inside the cells there are no blind spots created by furniture or other objects. The beds are vertically arranged in columns of one, two, three, or four, and face the cameras so that even an inmate attempting to hide under his bed will be filmed. The OmniView can hold up to 256 beds for a medium custody facility and 68 beds for maximum custody.

The remainder of the jail's interior is divided into multipurpose, exercise, dining, and visitation rooms. They are divided by opaque, concrete and steel walls. However, the walls are aligned to the control center in such a way that security camera views into the cells or other rooms are unobstructed. The walls are not seen by the security cameras.



*Click on the screen for the slide show or the bottom right corner for the photo album*

“With all the blind spots gone, if someone tried to commit suicide or harm themselves, what you’d have is an instant response in less than ten or twenty seconds,” Emerson says. “I think this design will make it thunderingly clear that in any other facility, people are at risk for a large number of harmful situations.”

Emerson debuted the model at the [American Correctional Association](#) 2008 Winter Conference, and the presentation was a resounding success.

“The working prototype performed flawlessly and was quite a show and tell, with onlookers up to five-deep sometimes,” Emerson says. “We had to borrow some Windex window cleaner to clear the fingerprints off the prototype as visitors were getting so up close and personal.”

Among the interested parties were the [National Institute of Corrections \(NIC\)](#), the [Federal Bureau of Prisons](#), and representatives from a Mexico construction firm. The [American Jail Association](#) has asked Emerson to bring his model to its May conference in Sacramento. Emerson says the twenty years of blueprints, models, and computer drawings will all be worthwhile if he can see his lifelong dream come true.

“If the day is here when we can actually put an inmate in a facility and know in our hearts he’s not going to be raped or commit suicide,” Emerson says, “that will be a life’s work that’s worth it.”

Similar to what Edison did in his time with the light bulb, Emerson hopes his OmniView will bring the dark, hidden corners of today’s prisons into the light.

*Photography credit: Joshua Tapia*

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