Dear Ms. Dreiling,

We write to support the Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility’s proposed amendment to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. The proposed rule states: “Members shall not design spaces intended for execution or for torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, including prolonged solitary confinement.”

As a non-profit, independent organization and the largest international human rights organization based in the United States, Human Rights Watch has investigated and exposed human rights violations and challenged governments, including US state and federal governments, to protect the human rights of all persons for over 30 years. A primary focus of our work in the United States has been to secure increased respect for persons in the criminal justice system. We have long opposed the death penalty as well as prolonged solitary confinement, believing both violate fundamental human rights principles.

The proposed amendment, if adopted, will help architects uphold human rights as called for in AIA’s ethics standard 1.4. The amendment should result in members not participating in designing execution chambers and spaces specifically intended for prolonged solitary confinement, such as super maximum security (“supermax”) prisons. It should also help members to decline to design confinement spaces that may by their nature fail to respect human rights – for example, a prison without outdoor recreational space, a cell without windows permitting natural light, or a prison without a sufficient number of private rooms for health screenings.

We also hope such an amendment would be a first step in a broader effort by architects and their professional organization to ensure that their services further the human rights of all persons deprived of their liberty to be treated with respect for their human dignity, to not be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and – for those in prison – to have rehabilitation be the primary goal of incarceration. Designing buildings with these rights in mind is essential if the rights are to be respected in practice.
The proposed amendment to the AIA code of ethics would send a statement to correctional officials, policymakers, and the public that the AIA does not condone – and will not help facilitate – cruel and inhumane treatment. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Antonio Ginatta
Advocacy Director, US Program