Alan Johnson challenges the development and justification of the new prison being built in South Auckland.

The movie Field of Dreams tells a story of a mid-western U.S. farmer (played by Kevin Costner) who has an epiphany to build a baseball diamond in his cornfields because he is certain that legendary but dead baseball stars will come to play on it. His explanation for his purpose is the revelation he received in his dreams: ‘build it and they will come’. He builds the baseball diamond as an act of faith based on this revelation.

The ‘build it and they will come’ justification is behind much of what counts for public sector planning in New Zealand today. Witness the white elephant, or more accurately the white cocoon, on Auckland’s Princess Wharf which has been built as so-called ‘party central’ for Rugby World Cup fans.

The ‘build it and they will come’ justification is a testimony both to the hopefulness of planners and the hopelessness of planning in this neoliberal world. Planning is never an easy task because it is about guessing the future, and while there are a number of theories about the future, none have proved very dependable in hindsight. This has meant that planning has often tended to be about creating a certain future rather than providing for an uncertain future. We can readily see this from the continuing mad rush to build more roads for a future that most likely will be dominated by rising energy costs and climate change. Planners implicitly express a hopefulness that their world view and ambitions are right as they create infrastructure and other public assets to serve the needs of future generations. That planning should be based on such flimsy and perhaps unsound justifications is reason for a sense of hopelessness about the whole enterprise—at least in its present incarnation.

The ‘build it and they will come’ justification has gained another victory in the plans of the Department of Corrections to build a third prison in the South Auckland suburb of Wiri—this time for 1000 male inmates. These plans were endorsed by a Government-appointed board of inquiry in July, despite broad opposition from local people. The Salvation Army’s Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit also expressed its opposition to the proposal. (Evidence it offered at the inquiry is available under the ‘Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit’ section at www.salvationarmy.org).

The Salvation Army’s opposition to the plans for a new prison was based on its consistent opposition to the approaches to law and order issues taken by this and previous governments. These approaches see increasingly punitive responses to criminal offending which, in The Army’s view, are not only unjustified on the basis of current trends in crime statistics, but also are unsuccessful in reducing re-offending. Furthermore, the current approaches fail to address the underlying causes of this offending and re-offending, such as youth unemployment and the easy availability of alcohol.

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Opposition to the South Auckland prison proposal had a sense of futility about it—not because the commissioners considering the matter had already made up their minds, but because of the restricted terms of references for the so-called inquiry.  

The 1000-bed prison proposal was considered under the Resource Management Act, which, as many will know, is a statute intended to promote the sustainable management of New Zealand’s natural and physical resources. Regrettably, this Act is not a vehicle for considering the social or economic value of government spending, or even the social impacts on a community of a particular project. There are few, if any, opportunities for citizens or communities to debate or influence such matters. It was more or less assumed from the start of the inquiry that the project had value because the Department of Corrections said it did. It was also assumed that social issues and social policy matters are outside the mandate of the Resource Management Act and so weren’t really matters of interest to the commissioners.

The Salvation Army’s submission questioned the justification for a prison of the size contemplated, given the number of existing prison beds, current prison population trends and recent prisoner forecasts.

In 2008, these prisoner forecasts predicted a prisoner population of just under 10,800 inmates by 2016. Two years later, the same government agencies had lowered this forecast to just under 9,900 a difference almost equivalent to the size of the $370 million prison planned for South Auckland.

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Planning for the South Auckland prison began back in 2009, with announcements by the Ministers of Corrections and Finance that New Zealand faced a crisis in prison capacity unless something was done urgently. Prior to this, in its advice to the Minister of Corrections following the 2008 forecast, the Department of Corrections warned that ‘current prison capacity is expected to be utilized by mid 2010’. Of course, that crisis has not materialised and now officials are advising that the recent growth in prisoner numbers may, thankfully, slow down to almost a trickle.

However, such a forecast is no barrier to the prison building plans of the Department of Corrections. Armed with advice from recently hired prison consultants from Britain, the Department has simply shifted its argument to one of needing the new prison to balance local demand for prison places and to close small outdated prisons.

The local demand argument was refuted by The Salvation Army in its evidence on the basis of statistical data about where prisons currently are and where prisoners tend to come from.

The real justification for the South Auckland men’s prison may simply be a financial one. It is a lot cheaper to build a multi-storey prison on a cramped site in an industrial suburb, where the views of locals don’t matter a lot, than it is to run a small number of community-based prisons that might be better integrated into local communities. It may also be a lot cheaper to run the prison if you bring in a private operator on the basis of contracts and deals that can never be made public because of commercial sensitivity. We will have what John Irwin, in his analysis of the U.S. prison system, calls ‘the warehouse prison’.

The final result of the Board of Inquiry’s efforts is a set of 126 conditions, mainly dealing with relatively trivial matters such as the provision of a cycle stand for visitors or the completion of a ‘visual mitigation strategy’. Perhaps many of these conditions will, in turn, be ignored by the Department of Corrections—just as it has done with the conditions set for the adjacent women’s prison.

The prison will be built and they will come. It will be filled with mainly poor young men from South Auckland and will be run by a multi-national corporation which earns a handsome profit from providing this public service. This is the brave new world of the warehouse prison.

1 The proposed male prison is to be located between an existing youth prison for 52 youth inmates known as the Korowai Maanaki youth justice facility and the 460 inmate Auckland Region Women’s Correction Facility.  
2 To see the evidence given by the Unit go to http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-media/social-research/social-policy-and-parliamentary-unit/  
3 For evidence of New Zealand’s stubbornly high recidivism rates see The Salvation Army’s 2011 State of the Nation report entitled Stalled, Table 10 p.26  
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