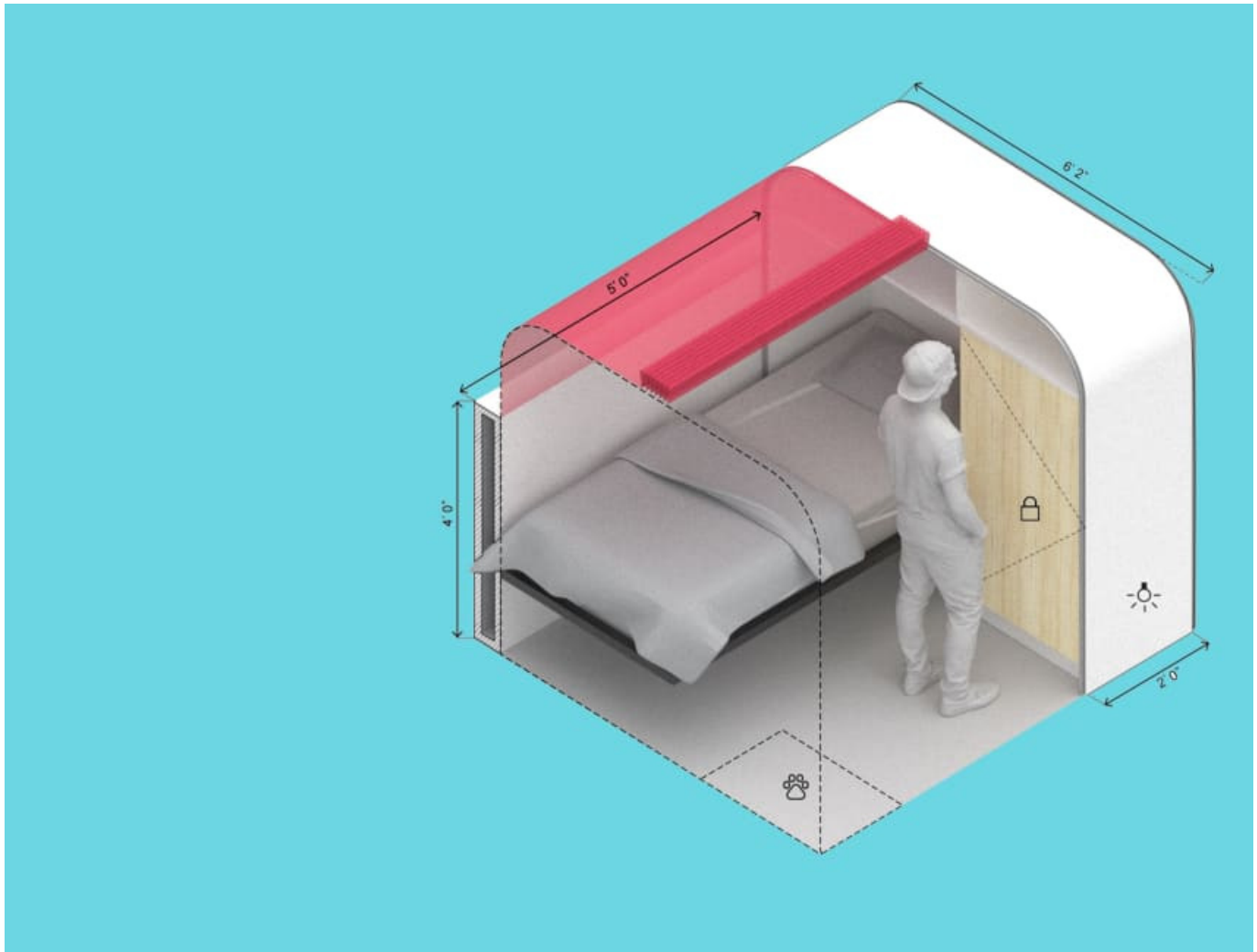


## These modular units are designed to make homeless shelters a little more livable

Many people living on the streets avoid shelters because of how unpleasant and undignified the conditions are. A new design would give people more privacy and a space of their own while they wait to find permanent housing.



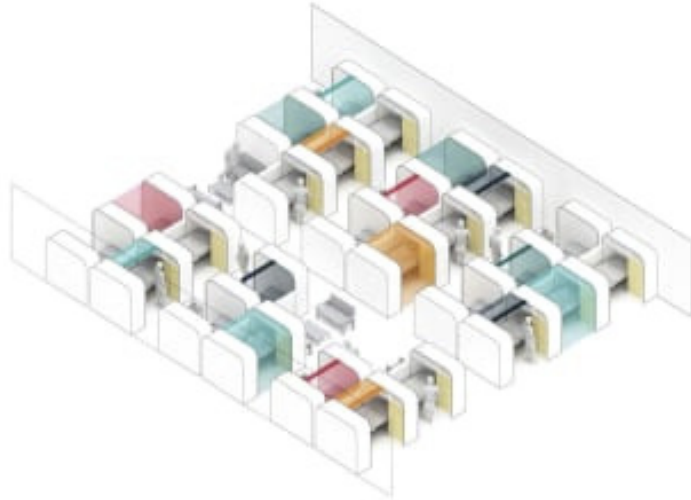
[Image: Perkins and Will]

**BY ADELE PETERS**

3 MINUTE READ

Inside a typical transitional homeless shelter where people stay while waiting to get a spot in permanent housing, 20 or 30 beds might be clustered together in a single room. Privacy doesn't exist. But a new design for shelter furniture called [Dome](#)—a little like cubicles in an office—could help.

“There are all these kinds of barriers that stop people from taking advantage of the resources that are available to them at these facilities, and one of those things is personal space and privacy,” says Yan Krymsky, design director at the L.A. studio of the architecture firm [Perkins and Will](#), which created the new design.



[Image: Perkins and Will]

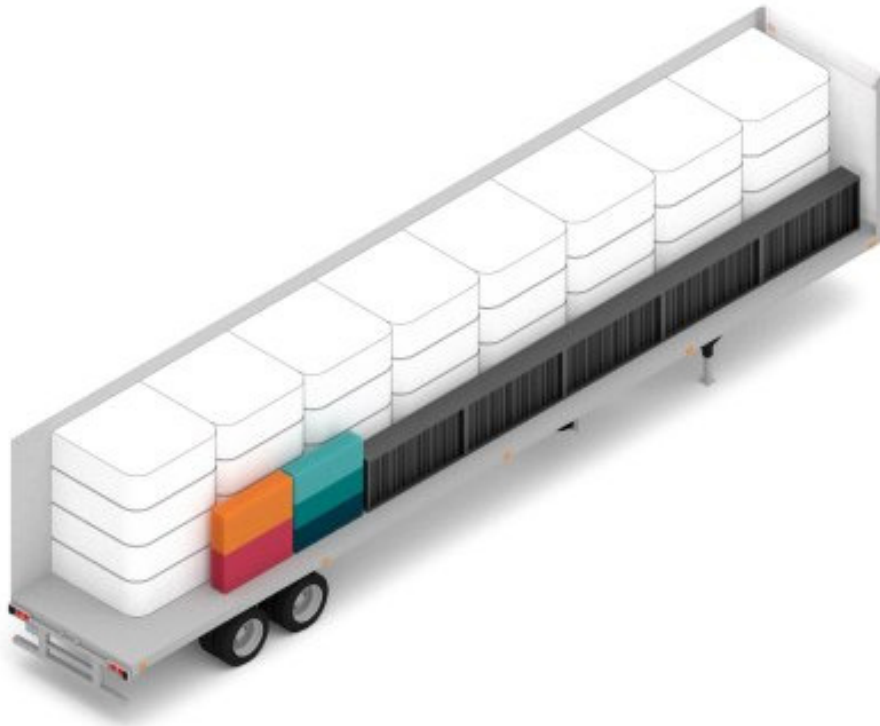
The architects began working on the project after touring shelters as part of research for a city program called [A Bridge Home](#), which is building new emergency housing throughout Los Angeles. The designers will help the city roll out some of those new shelters but realized through their research that there was also a need for new furniture that could be used anywhere.

“We wanted to create something because we saw that there just wasn’t anything out there,” says Krymsky. At shelters, they saw everything from the type of furniture that is used in prisons to custom furniture that wasn’t durable enough for heavy use. The architects reached out to several companies that make specialized furniture and did some early brainstorming with a team from Steelcase on possible directions before beginning to work on details with [Shield](#), a company that typically makes furniture for healthcare.



[Image: Perkins and Will]

The modular design is simple: A 6-foot-tall cabinet has storage, a built-in nightstand, a power outlet, and space for a bed. Arranged together, the cabinets create partitions and privacy in an open space. An optional fabric shade can be pulled down over the opening to each “bedroom” to give even more privacy. Inside, there’s enough room to sit, stand, and house a medium-sized kennel for a pet. Recessed lights built into the outside make the passages between units safe at night without requiring harsh overhead lights. When it’s shipped from the manufacturer, each unit can be broken down so 32 can fit on one truck.



[Image: Perkins and Will]

In Los Angeles, someone living in an interim housing facility might be there for six months or as long as two years; the designers wanted to create a space that offered more dignity and felt a little more like a home. The cabinet is made from “solid surface” material, a very durable material that is sometimes used in hospital furniture. Using a different material might have saved some cost, but that’s not the only goal, Krymsky says. “We’re trying to achieve attention to detail and quality that make people feel like they matter, and that’s a really important part of what we’re trying to do. It’s not about just getting as many people in beds as fast as possible. It’s about the quality of the thing that we’re making.”

A prototype recently completed by Shield will soon be on display at the [A+D Museum](#) in Los Angeles, where the architects want the public and potential users to have a chance to see it in person. The firm is now in talks with several shelters about deploying the new design. If other cities are interested, it may be manufactured at a larger scale. But the team is also interested in just getting other designers to consider a problem that has been overlooked.

“I think the bigger goal is to really shine a light on the fact that there isn’t a lot of attention from the design world and manufacturing world being paid towards these facilities,” says Krymsky. “It’s a place where people live for extended periods of time, and we should be paying attention to that. So if someone comes around and knocks it off, or does a similar type of thing, I would look at that as an accomplishment. I think that’s an achievement because it’s something that desperately needs innovation and attention and energy.”

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adele Peters is a staff writer at Fast Company who focuses on solutions to some of the world's largest problems, from climate change to homelessness. Previously, she worked with GOOD, BioLite, and the Sustainable Products and Solutions program at UC Berkeley, and contributed to the second edition of the bestselling book "Worldchanging: A User's Guide for the 21st Century." [More](#)

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