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Through the roof **'Impactful and beautiful': how US homeless shelters are getting a radical redesign**

New approach focuses on how physical environment shapes people's lives, harnessing the therapeutic power of design

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When a former resident of the Path Home Family Village in [Portland](#), Oregon, called and asked if he and his partner could get married at the shelter, Brandi Tuck, the executive director, knew that the shelter's redesign had truly worked.

“Homelessness is the hardest, most power-stripping experience a family can have together,” Tuck said. “And for a family to have such a positive, dignified experience and want to come back is just a perfect example of how impactful and beautiful this place is.”

Family Village is not what many people may think of when they envision a homeless shelter: crowded, dingy, maybe dangerous. There are natural bamboo wood floors and walls painted in hues inspired by the ocean - seafoam green, gray and turquoise.

The only contrasting color is a soft terracotta, “kind of like the sunset”, said Tuck. Clients can use spacious, multipurpose rooms as they wish, and glass doors allow people to make an informed choice about whether they want to enter that space. The walls are curved, and there's a garden with vegetables and flowers.





📷 The crisp, modern design of the bathroom in Portland's Path Home Family Village. Photograph: Aaron Leitz



📷 Residents of shelters for the unhoused often want more access to outdoor spaces like this garden at the Path Home Family Village in Portland, Oregon. Photograph: Aaron Leitz

Opened in 2019, [Family Village](#) replaced three other shelters, one in a retrofitted warehouse and two in church basements. “In these other spaces, it was constant chaos,” said Tuck. “When families come here, they say this place makes me feel like you care about me.”

Family Village is one of a new kind of homeless shelter now emerging in the US, those that use trauma-informed design. It's also the first and only overnight shelter of its kind in Oregon. This emerging approach is part of a movement that recognizes that traumatized people need specialized support.

Severe stress can literally change the brain, affecting [memory](#), coping skills and abilities to regulate emotions. Aware of just how much the physical environment can shape people's lives, more architects are starting to rethink how they design homeless shelters and spaces such as [prisons](#) and [foster care centers](#).

"We are just out of the starting gate," said [Kay Sargent](#), the Washington DC-based director of the Workplace Group at HOK, a global architecture firm that has created a landmark [guidebook](#) on trauma-informed design. "An increase in research has articulated how design affects us ... Designers know now how we can make a difference."

The Mental Health Center of Denver's Sanderson Apartments, which [opened in 2017](#), is considered an early example of the approach. Its [design](#) emphasizes openness and calm; hallways are wide, there are many windows, and its few walls are painted sage and lavender. There are personal lockers and privacy walls between bunks.

Interest in trauma-informed design for shelters stems from greater public discussion about mental health and the increased incidence and visibility of homelessness. The number of chronically homeless people nationwide [jumped by 16%](#) between 2020 and 2022, according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

While unhoused people are often traumatized, a [2010 study](#) on trauma-informed care found homeless services have historically provided care without directly acknowledging or addressing the impact of trauma.

The goal of trauma-informed design is to help people quiet the part of the brain that stays in survival mode when in a traditional shelter setting. Instead of feeling fearful and on high alert, they can focus on actions like applying for jobs and getting their children to school. The shelter can be what it's suited for: a short-term stopover where people can get back on their feet.

"You can come home [to the shelter], you can do what you want, you don't feel like anyone is looking at you. There's a sense of relief, privacy and wholeness," said Jill Pable, a professor at Florida State University, who founded the influential non-profit design depository [Design Resources for Homelessness](#) in 2015.

Design choices like acoustics, color and furniture arrangement can support this mental state. A room constructed for family visits can reinforce a sense of community; a personal reading light can promote a sense of autonomy. Some of these discoveries

come from research, while others derive from people who have been residents of shelters.

Restoration House is a shelter for women and children that opened in 2021 and is operated by the Atlanta Mission in Georgia. Pable consulted on the project, and the differences between it and the day shelter it replaced go beyond providing beds. Natural light floods the building; the previous shelter had no windows. Furniture is placed in a way that people can't approach the sitter without being seen, and the sleeping spaces feel "like you're in your own little cabin where it's safe and secure", said Jennifer Hutchinson, the campus director.



📷 When Atlanta's Restoration House got a redesign, the interiors of its living spaces changed from more institutional, left, to rooms with more art, a calming color palette and more comfortable furniture. Photograph: Atlanta Mission

Hutchinson has worked for the Atlanta Mission for 18 years, and after working at Restoration House, she's convinced design can help people heal. Buildings that don't reflect the care being given "can work against you". But "often in this field, you get so used to having to make do with what you have, that you don't even know how to dream bigger," she said. The reality is that there's no funding to redo the other Atlanta Mission facilities for now.

Trauma-informed design isn't the norm yet. A [2020 report](#) by the University of Denver's Center for Housing and Homelessness Research argued for an industry-wide "formal set of best-practice guidelines in trauma-informed design". [Julie Stevens](#), an associate professor at Iowa State University who researches and creates therapeutic environments, said there's an acknowledgment that creating these spaces is worthwhile.

Yet part of the solution is for these principles to become a more significant part of design education; Stevens hopes that one day an understanding of mental health and trauma will be a part of professional licensing requirements.

Meanwhile, facilitating effective design requires bringing people who have experienced homelessness and housing instability into the design conversation. Stevens has seen the most critical design elements for a person who's experienced trauma not make the budget cut.

"The best thing that the design profession can do right now is dedicate more time and more of our hearts and souls into really, truly building relationships with people," Stevens said. It's hard because you have to take time to do it, and time in the design world has a billable hour fee associated with it.

The Path Home Family Village in Oregon was created by designers inspired by Pable's Design Resources for Homelessness. They offered 800 hours of pro bono work, which Tuck estimated would have been about \$250,000 of design services. Their proposal "felt like a miracle", she said. In five months, Path raised the \$3.3m necessary to buy an acre of land with an older church on it - the eventual site of the new building that would be Family Village.

Last year, the shelter hosted 524 families. The average length of stay is 85 days; families tell Tuck that their time spent there makes them feel hopeful for the future.

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