



Design FOR Living

**Does your new facility
need to be the Taj Mahal?**

BY JAMES HETTINGER / ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID POHL

Today's animal shelters must meet a variety of needs: They're expected to look like a shopping center and perform like a hospital, all while remaining a secure facility. They need to be functional, but also welcoming. They need to be welcoming, but not seem so extravagant they'll make donors or taxpayers wonder where their money is going. They need to showcase adoptable pets in a friendly and appealing way, but also provide safe, secure space for animals who may be quarantined for health or behavior reasons. They need to serve the surrounding community and its current realities, but with an eye to the ways in which those human and animal demographics may shift over time.

As you strive to create a state-of-the-art shelter, it's possible to go too far with the bells and whistles. Will that indoor waterfall and marble façade really help you fulfill your mission? How will those runs be retrofitted if, two years from now, you start taking in fewer dogs and more cats? Is your form serving your function? Can you afford to staff and maintain the facility you're creating?

The line between your dreams and what your organization really needs and can realistically operate is sometimes difficult to draw.

Building decisions should include an assessment of your community's growth rate as well as your shelter's animal data and programs to help determine your future needs. You'll get an idea of how large your facility needs to be and how much it might cost—which is useful whether you're a nonprofit raising the money or a municipal shelter convincing local government leaders to fund the project.

If your shelter is more than 30 years old, it likely started out as a "pound," notes Heather Lewis, a principal at Animal Arts, an architectural firm in Boulder, Colo. Naturally, it's got you contemplating an upgrade or a replacement—but when you propose that idea to your board of directors or county council, you'll likely hear comments like, "We don't need the Taj Mahal."

It's hard to argue with that, but striking precisely the right balance between pretty and purposeful can be a tall task. You probably *don't* need something that looks like the Taj Mahal—but you don't want something that looks like Alcatraz, either.

All Dressed Up

"Shelters which are built to be aesthetically pleasing sometimes fail in the functional," says Mark Kumpf, director of the Montgomery County Animal Resource Center (ARC) in Dayton, Ohio. Your architect may conceive of a Hilton for pets, but those cathedral ceilings some shelters end up with? They look amazing, but will kill your utility bills. "The facility looks great, but managing all that extra air that's moving around is a real chore, and it's an expensive chore."

Basic shelter functions—such as making sure that incoming and outgoing animals don't cross paths, or keeping animals of unknown health status away from healthy ones—sometimes get ignored in the design, he says.

Good architects will work with shelter staff to create buildings that are both attractive and functional. Shelly Moore, president and CEO of the Humane Society of Charlotte in North Carolina, which is planning a new building, recommends performing a needs assessment with an architect who understands animal shelters. "The learning curve is huge when it comes to this building type," she says, so it's helpful to have an architect with some experience in animal flow and shelters' specialized plumbing and HVAC systems.

"It's not a monument to me, the architect," says Richard Bacon, president of the Bacon Group Inc. in Clearwater, Fla., which has designed about 150 shelters over 24 years. "It's really more a building that serves their function."

And yet, "Any architect you ask is going to resist tooth and nail the effort to build a concrete box," says Kumpf. "They want it to be aesthetically pleasing, and there's a good reason for that, too, because the public doesn't want to go to a dungeon. ... There's a fine line between 'Yes, it's acceptable' to 'Wow, you've gone overboard.'"

Kumpf—whose building experience ranges from helping a fellow ACO convert a vehicle-maintenance building into a new city shelter on a shoestring to inheriting a well-equipped, new facility when he started working for ARC in 2006—says his test boils down to "Is it functional?" and, "Is it good for the animals?" And if you can answer both those questions yes, then it's reasonable to include that in the shelter."

Heather Cammisa, a former economist who became president of St. Hubert's Animal Welfare Center in New Jersey in 2010, says she was hired in part to bring a more businesslike approach to an organization that had operating deficits as it was planning a new building. She cautions organizations against building "unsustainable architectural showcases."

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Old, New, What to Do?

Deciding whether to rehab an existing building or build a new one

Shelly Moore knows she needs to do *something*.

The Humane Society of Charlotte, which she heads, leases the city's former animal control building for the sweetheart price of \$1 a year. But to ensure the humane society's sustainability, Moore would like it to be an owner rather than a renter.

The current shelter, built in 1973, no longer meets the group's needs.

The concrete is so old that it's tough to seal properly—making for disease risk. Some staff members are housed in temporary office trailers, and storage sheds also dot the property.

"I lovingly refer to it as shantytown," Moore says with a laugh, adding that you know it's time to act when you walk adopters, donors and other stakeholders through the building, and they constantly remark that you could use a new space.

Sound familiar? So what's your next move—build a new facility, or renovate an existing one?

There's no one-size-fits-all solution. Key factors in the decision include your budget, the condition of your current building, your organization's needs and priorities, the available land and the location that will best serve your community.

A good first step, Moore says, is to discuss your organization's plans and goals with key staff and board members. Do you want to add programs? Expand one that you're already doing? What's your community's growth rate, and how might that affect intake and program needs?

In metropolitan areas, land for a new facility is often costly or unavail-

able, says Richard Bacon, president of the Bacon Group Inc. Budget-conscious organizations sometimes consider buying and retrofitting an existing building that already has a solid shell, but Bacon warns that you can never simply plunk down dog kennels in any old building—it will need to meet current codes and have shelter-worthy plumbing and mechanical systems.

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HEATHER LEWIS, PRINCIPAL, ANIMAL ARTS, BOULDER, COLO.

Some shelters are on such tight sites that there may not be room to expand, says Martha Seng, a principal at Jackson & Ryan Architects in Houston. And if a building has "bad bones"—such as cracked slabs and rusted drains—it might not be worth renovating. Depending on the building's condition, a renovation can be more expensive than building a new shelter.

Renovations work best when they're targeted to specific areas of the building, says Heather Lewis, a principal at Animal Arts in Boulder, Colo. "When renovation gets out of hand is when *everything's wrong*," she adds. If you're simultaneously overhauling all your systems and trying to keep your shelter open, "I can tell you, that's a nightmare, and it's not gonna be less expensive than building a new building."

The Maryland SPCA in Baltimore considered building a new shelter on its property a few years ago, but scaled back to a renovation and expansion when the economy tanked. The refurbishing—which included removing

doublewide trailers that housed the SPCA's admissions and adoptions departments, installing a new floor, redoing the HVAC system and expanding the cat room—definitely disrupted the shelter's daily operations, but the facility remained open during the roughly six months of work, says director of operations Cheryl Bernard Smith.

Management had to get creative, adding temporary trailers, sending some animals to foster care and bringing them back to the shelter on weekends to meet potential adopters.

While the proposed new building would have cost about \$12 million, the renovation came in at \$2.2 million. "We got a big bang for our buck," Smith says.

In North Carolina, Moore recently contracted with Bacon and began a needs assessment. Fixing up her current building is off the table because the humane society doesn't own the property. She'd like to build a new facility, but not just any property will do: The humane society recently sold a piece of land that had been donated in the 1980s because it was too far from the city's population center. She'd look at renovating a building as long as the location is convenient for the public, there's plenty of land and the price is right.

Moore has been through three other shelter construction projects—"and every time I say I'm never doing it again," she laughs. Her advice to organizations contemplating construction is "to really have a plan" and to realize it might take several years to begin construction. "Just understand that it's not an easy process," she says. "It's not quick, either."

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A larger building will require additional staff and more expensive heating, air conditioning and water treatment systems. If your organization wasn't a "fund-raising machine" before it acquired the extra expenses, she adds, it won't magically become one afterward. "There are so many groups that are building these buildings and then struggling hugely to pay for them."

Cammisa says she understands the pull of building a beautiful facility: When you work at a shelter, you see the

"If you don't invest the time before you build, you'll never have enough time after you build to fix all the things that you didn't think about beforehand."

MARK KUMPF, DIRECTOR, MONTGOMERY COUNTY ANIMAL RESOURCE CENTER, DAYTON, OHIO

faces of many animals and want to do all that you can for them. Since potential adopters may think shelters are sad places, you want to build a cheerful facility that will become an inviting public destination.

What organizations sometimes overlook, Cammisa says, is that you can do a lot to spruce up a building with less-expensive alternatives, such as a fresh coat of paint and some colorful fiberglass-reinforced plastic. "We don't have to build these castles."

It's easier to save money than it is to raise it, Cammisa notes. Instead of building additional space, for example, shelters can decrease their animals' length of stay by implementing friendlier adoption approaches and other policy shifts. "If you can cut your length of stay in half, you've just doubled your capacity."

Organizations can also take advantage of infrastructure that already exists in the community—renting space in malls, holding offsite adoption events or even getting

Ongoing Evolution

What will the shelter of tomorrow look like?

The decade that brought us Watergate, disco and pet rocks also brought new trends in animal shelter design. In their case, change was a good thing.

Back in the 1950s and '60s, says Mark Kumpf, director of Montgomery County Animal Resource Center, "if you had cinder-block walls and a concrete floor and a hose, you were good." Shelters tended to be warehouses that held animals from the time officers picked them up until euthanasia, Kumpf says.

With the professionalization of the field and the huge move toward saving more lives, the aesthetic of shelters shifted with the ethic. Today, it's not unusual for shelters to be as welcoming as shopping malls or hotels, with contemporary designs, brightly colored walls, play yards and rooms where

would-be adopters can interact with potential pets.

As euthanasia numbers continue to drop around the country, approaches to sheltering and the buildings themselves will likely continue to evolve. How will the shelters of the future look and function?

"I certainly see the shelter of the future being more of a resource center than an adoption center," says Shelly Moore, president and CEO of the Humane Society of Charlotte. "And the animals that are there for adoption are probably staying with you longer, and not the same kind of population that we saw 10 or 20 years ago."

Decades ago, shelters housed mostly dogs, she explains. Now they have a lot more cats, and the dog population tends to be harder-to-place pooches

rather than puppies and small, cute dogs. Given such changes, organizations would be wise to design flexible space into their future shelters, so that if they develop an overpopulation of a certain species or type of animal, they can utilize different areas as needed.



the local bicycle shop or veterinary hospital to serve as foster homes.

Cammissa encourages shelters to think about “opportunity costs”—the benefits you give up by spending money on one initiative rather than another. By spending excessively on a construction project, for example, you might have to nix community outreach positions. “People don’t think of the opportunity costs, because they accept that a building’s gonna cost millions,” Cammissa says. “Well, why aren’t we putting those millions into program?”

Striking a Balance

Shelter architects say people in their line of work shouldn’t be designing more than what’s needed or requested. Rather, they’re out to help organizations discover what they need.

Martha Seng, a principal at Jackson & Ryan Architects in Houston, says designers are always balancing what’s

“What I typically find, particularly with nonprofits, is that they are passionate about what they do, and they usually do it very well, but they don’t have a clue about how to select an architect, go through the design process, make sure they get the right contractor on board, and make sure the project is a success.”

ROBERT PROUTT, OWNER AND FOUNDER,
PROUTT CONSULTING, WHITE HALL, MD.

modern and attractive against what’s affordable and maintainable. On one hand, “People do expect their animal shelters to be good buildings, and not just a metal shed that’s constructed in a field somewhere,” Seng says.

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As they move away from being “animal control” facilities, shelters are devoting more space to community outreach programs such as summer camps and obedience training classes, as well as veterinary services and even boarding and day care, and those trends will likely continue, says Richard Bacon, president of the Bacon Group Inc. He also foresees organizations reaching out to shelter veterinarians for help with building designs.

“I think we’re on the right track of improving animal habitats, and I see that getting even better,” says Martha Seng, a principal at Jackson & Ryan Architects. Shelters, she notes, have gotten away from tiny, stainless steel cages for cats and huge rooms that housed 40 or 50 dogs. Ideally, the number of homeless animals will decrease in the future, enabling shelters to be built smaller.

Tomorrow’s shelters will be “much more electronically enhanced,” Kumpf

says. Today’s kitten and puppy cams, which often spotlight a featured animal, could evolve into kennel cams that let viewers see all the animals up for adoption on a live feed.

Shelters will also be greener, Kumpf says, as the trend toward becoming more energy-efficient, using alternative energy sources and acquiring LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) certification continues.

The benefits they’ll realize include saving money on utilities and doing a better job of air handling and disease control, and using green building materials can help a nonprofit attract donors, says Cheryl Bernard Smith, director of operations for the Maryland SPCA. She notes that a donor paid for the environmentally friendly roof on the SPCA’s refurbished building in Baltimore.

The public views shelters more favorably than it did years ago, and wants to spend more time in them—an attitude

Kumpf thinks will carry forward. Parents bring their kids to his shelter on Saturday mornings just to play with the animals, and his training room hosts baby showers and birthday parties.

“In 1989 when I started [in the field], if you asked me if I wanted to have a birthday party at the animal shelter, I’d have looked at you like you had two heads.”

Noting the popularity of retail stores selling pet supplies in shelters, Kumpf can even foresee a day when Starbucks will set up shop in high-traffic shelters.

Shelter officials talk about putting themselves out of business, but Smith says that’s unlikely for the foreseeable future. A more feasible scenario, she says, is that shelters will stick around but put greater emphasis on preventing unwanted births, keeping pets in homes and saving treatable animals. “We’re not gonna disappear anytime soon.”

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On the other, she adds, “We’ve never had a client that said, ‘I have an unlimited budget. Build me the best thing possible.’ Architecturally, I’d love to get a client like that, but the reality is that animal shelters do have very strict budgets, and you do need to recognize that.”

Architects may show a creative flair in the lobby or areas where people view animals, Seng says, but they’re “very selective about where we embellish architectural features.”

Some organizations fall in love with the idea of building a shiny new shelter, Bacon notes, but the architect’s role is to help educate them that a bigger building will require a larger staff and increase their utility bills. Shelter officials usually grasp that when it’s explained to them, he adds, but “The hardest thing to do is to get them to think about not what they do now, but what they *can* do.” Current shelter practices might be necessary because the building is 30 years old, but Bacon tries to get organizations to think about

how they’d prefer to clean kennels or handle incoming animals in a new facility.

Seng has observed that clients sometimes ask for a shelter design without first going through the process of “really thinking about who they are or what they need or what they want.”

One upside of the ongoing recession, adds Lewis, is that it’s caused shelter officials to focus on their goals and making the best use of their dollars. Stories circulate about organizations that have overbuilt and then can’t operate their new facility, she notes, “and I think people are very, very concerned about doing that, and that’s good.”

The designer’s first goal, she adds, is to understand the organization’s mission. When she meets with organization officials to plan a project, they talk about getting people to adopt cats, promoting responsible pet ownership, keeping animals healthy and reducing stress—all

Lo-CAT-ion, Lo-CAT-ion, Lo-CAT-ion

Cat housing has improved, but the need to house them may decrease

Addressing an Animal Care Expo audience last spring, veterinarian Sandra Newbury of UC Davis said she doesn’t know who first had the idea to put shelter cats in stainless steel boxes, but it definitely wasn’t a cat.

Clearly, living in a tiny box isn’t great for kitties, and these days, sheltering experts are looking at a bigger question, one that goes beyond the best kinds of cages. Many are considering whether they should be taking in cats at all. If the trend continues for organizations to find other ways to help cats they can’t place, that reduction in feline intake will come to bear on any plans shelters make for their new facilities.

Within the shelter, one of the biggest trends in housing in recent years has been the move away from

those 2-foot steel cubes, says Martha Seng, a principal at Jackson & Ryan Architects. Cat cages today are often bigger and double-sided, with portals so they can be connected to provide more space. They tend to have a place for eating that’s separate from the place for eliminating, which makes for a healthier environment.

Meanwhile, colony housing for cats has become more popular as our understanding of how best to keep cats healthy has evolved. Shelters have developed a better grasp of how to properly manage colony housing, says Inga Fricke, director of shelter and rescue group services for The HSUS.

Colony rooms pose certain challenges—it can be difficult to see who’s eating and who isn’t, for example—and aren’t ideal for every cat. While some

cats prefer the communal setting, for others the idea of not being able to escape from their fellow cats is worse than being alone in a small cage. And shelter staff need to remember that even large communal rooms can become overcrowded, Fricke says. By adding too many cats, you amp up the stress and undermine the whole point of colony housing.

Ideally, Fricke says, shelters should offer a mix: colony housing for healthy, well-adjusted cats who do well in a communal space, and individual cages for those who need to be held independently or just don’t get along with other animals.

Fricke says the next trend will likely be a growing recognition that cats really don’t belong in shelters. “We can do everything in our power to make

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INGA FRICKE, DIRECTOR OF SHELTER AND RESCUE GROUP SERVICES FOR THE HSUS

goals more important for her team to focus on than a shelter’s aesthetic elements.

Many Animal Arts clients are seeing their annual animal intakes decrease, so designers need to focus on building a “right-size” shelter, Lewis says. Building too much animal capacity can work against a shelter’s mission, because without the pressure of limited space there may not

be as great a sense of urgency about moving animals out of the shelter quickly. “We want the shelter to be a tool that helps people get the job done.” Ideally, a building project takes the organization’s capacity requirements into account and creates a shelter that’s no bigger or smaller than it needs to be—for now, and for some time into the future.

Lewis encourages organizations to get in touch the moment they start considering a building project, to explore such basic questions as whether an addition will fit on their site, and how much a new building might cost. A common problem, she says, is that people don’t understand that “these shelter buildings are expensive, almost no matter what. ... You can’t build a shelter for half the cost of a typical shelter, for example.”

The process can be long and tedious. “It’s a little overwhelming,” Seng says. “We like to think of ourselves as people who can help shelter directors get through this without too many scars.” ■



it as happy a place for them as possible, and enriched and comfortable and homelike ... but the fact is that we know from all of the research ... that cats just don’t thrive typically in a shelter setting,” she says.

People interested in maximizing the quality of life for cats will be looking to bolster alternatives such as dedicated foster care providers and return-to-field

programs for healthy stray and community cats.

There will always be some truly needy cats who have to be sheltered, Fricke says, but she’d like to see shelters focus on providing them with as much space as possible, which in turn should lead to healthier cats who have shorter stays. When their cat populations are low in the winter, for example, shelters could connect the cages to

give each cat four or five condo spaces. (If the population suddenly rises—in the event of a hoarding case, say—the cages can be divided again.)

Historically, shelters were founded to contain dangerous or rabid dogs, not to house homeless cats. Many shelters weren’t designed with cats’ physiological and psychological needs in mind, and despite modern improvements in

shelter housing, cats generally still don’t get as much consideration as dogs, Fricke says.

Studies show that people tend to adopt cats when they feel a personal connection, and that can be influenced by shelter design. A cage with a glass front that prevents a cat from reaching out to touch a potential adopter can spoil the interaction, she notes, and so can a colony room with perching places that people can’t access. Fricke says shelters need to consider, “Is your design preventing people from interacting with that animal and having that kind of ‘aha’ moment?”

For more on new initiatives on community cats, see Kate Hurley’s “For Community Cats, A Change is Gonna Come” at animalsheltering.org/change The article was recently awarded a 2014 certificate of excellence from the Cat Writers’ Association.