DOMESTIC HOMELESSNESS

by Lluís Alexandre Casanovas Blanco

New York's shelter system, to the letter of the law.

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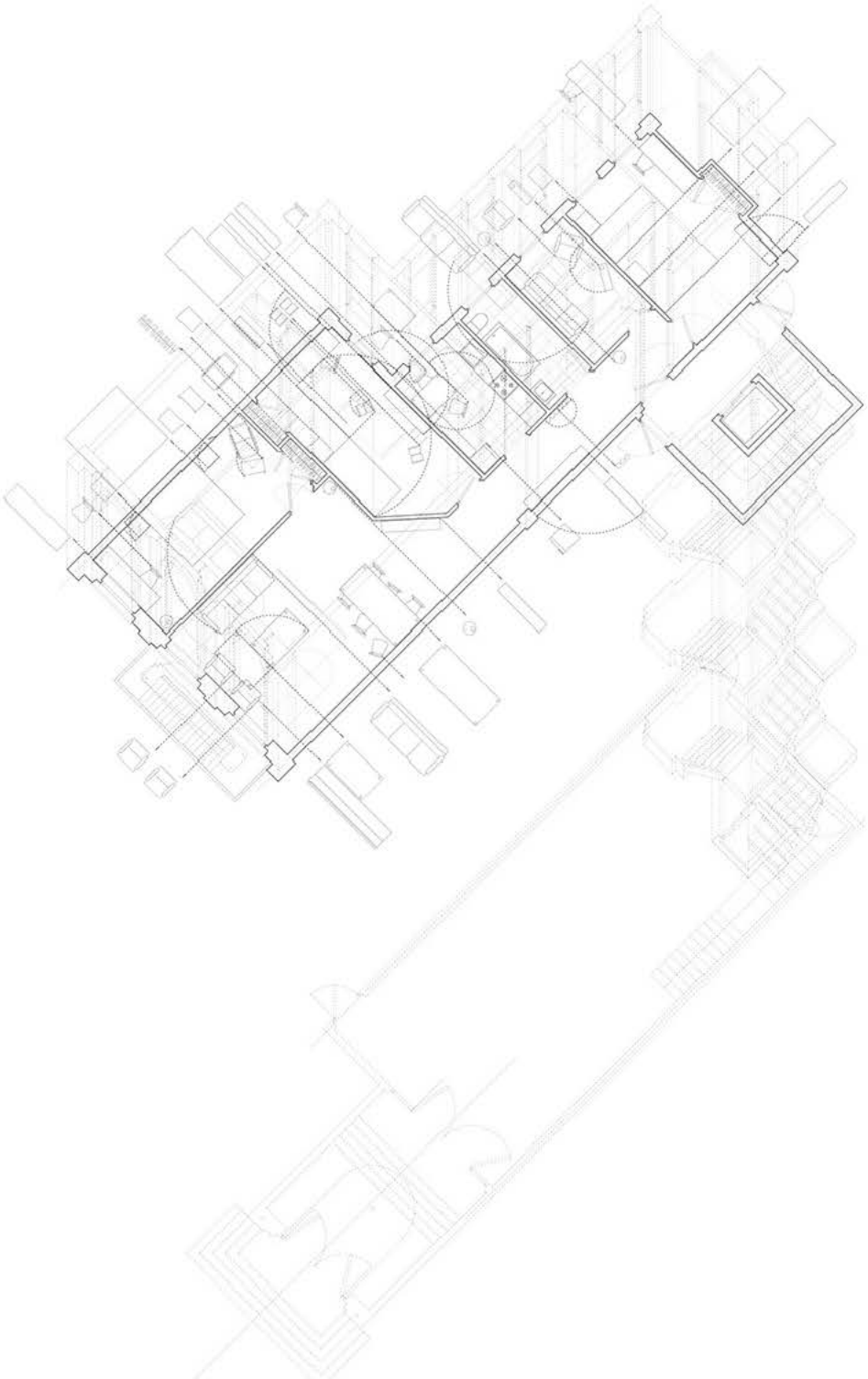
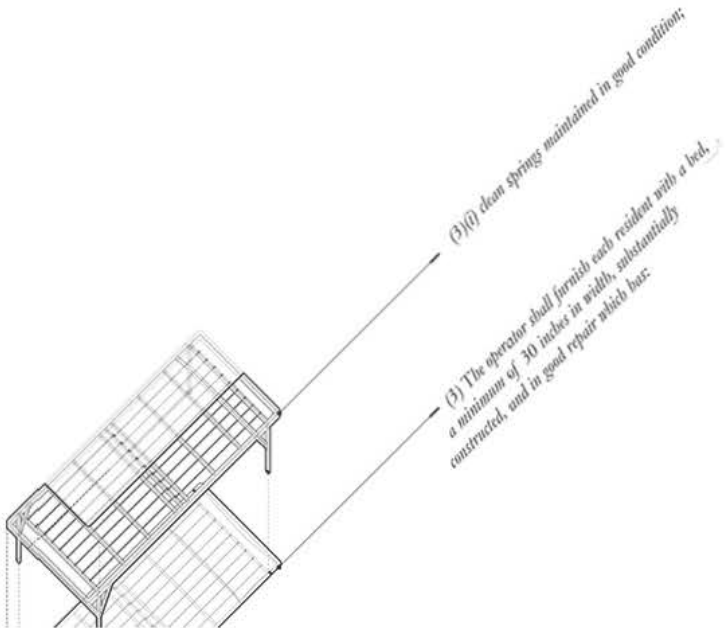


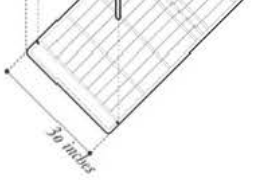
The reabsorption of homeless individuals into the architectural interior, as argued here, disturb the contemporary notion of all domestic space. All images courtesy of Lluis Alexandre Casanovas Blanco.

According to data released by the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS), the total number of individuals accommodated in the municipal shelter system reached its peak by the end of January 2015. The number significantly surpassed the number of unsheltered citizens living on city streets.[1] Resulting from expulsions of homeless individuals from domestic spaces through administration cuts in social subsidies, nationwide cutbacks in jobs, and speculative real estate policies since the 1970s, this difference between sheltered and unsheltered subjects signals the reabsorption of homelessness back into the architectural interior. Fostered by the articulation of a state and municipal legal framework, collective understanding of homelessness has shifted from one inextricably associated with public space to one constructed by a new domestic architecture.[2] With homeless people in permanent transit through a network of 236 municipal shelters throughout New York City, these subjects' dissociation from visibility on the streets and subsequent inscription within the architectural interior veiled the intensification of this social crisis.[3]

In 1979, after repeatedly denied accommodation in municipal facilities, Robert Callahan brought a lawsuit against the City of New York to force its Department of Social Services to guarantee shelter to any individual in need. That same year, the New York State Supreme Court pronounced the first decision requiring the City to alleviate the shelter crisis situation, then primarily affecting the Bowery.[4] In 1981, the court finally consolidated a consent decree stating, "City defendants shall provide shelter and board to each homeless man who applies for it provided that (a) the man meets the need standard to qualify for the home relief program established in New York State; or (b) the man by reason of physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of contemporary shelter."[5] This litigation initiated the development of a series of laws that, in the following decades, would encode the spatial relations of homelessness in New York City, and thus determine a role for architecture even in a social crisis seemingly defined by its very dispossession.

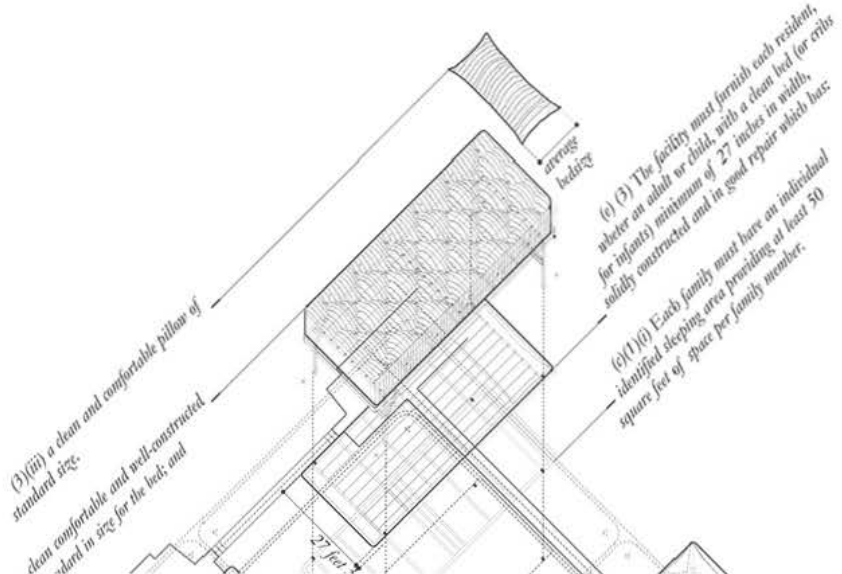
This project aims to unpack how the legal definition of shelter space built and normalized the ideological construct of the homeless subject;[6] and helps to unveil the mechanisms through which architecture was imbricated within municipal and state institutional policies. The drawings shown here offer a spatial interpretation of the limits determined by law. These constraints constitute the prescription of minimum standards for shelter interiors. Ultimately, if the presence of homeless individuals on the streets in the 70s and 80s was widely theorized as a transgression of the social construct of public space,[7] the reabsorption of these individuals into the architectural interior demands an interrogation of the impact of homelessness on the contemporary notion of all domestic space. [8]

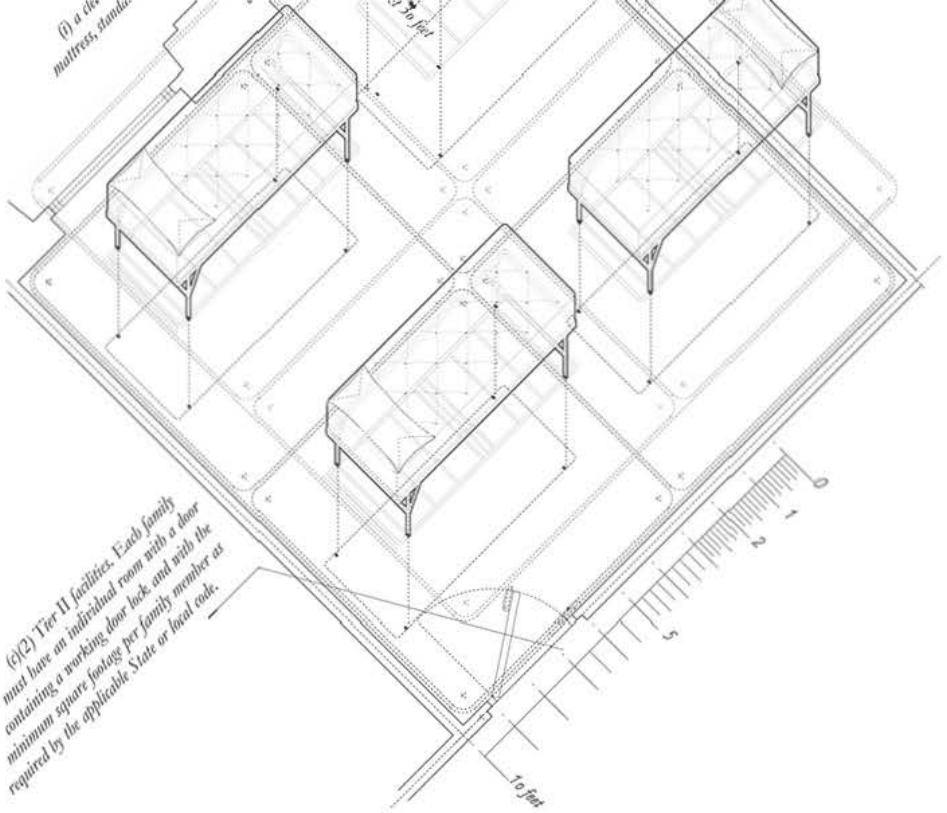




The State of New York, 18 New York Codes, Rules and Regulations. Chapter II. Regulations of the Department of Social Services. Part 491: Shelters for Adults. Section 900.12: "(j) Furnishings and Equipment, (c) Sleeping areas, (1) Tier I Facilities, (2) Tier II Facilities. Section 900.12: Environmental Standards. Part 900: Shelters for Families" and "(o) Space Requirements for Shelters for Adults, (9) Bedrooms. Environmental Standards." 18 New York Codes, Rules and Regulations. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. 485.1. The State of New York, January 15, 2009.

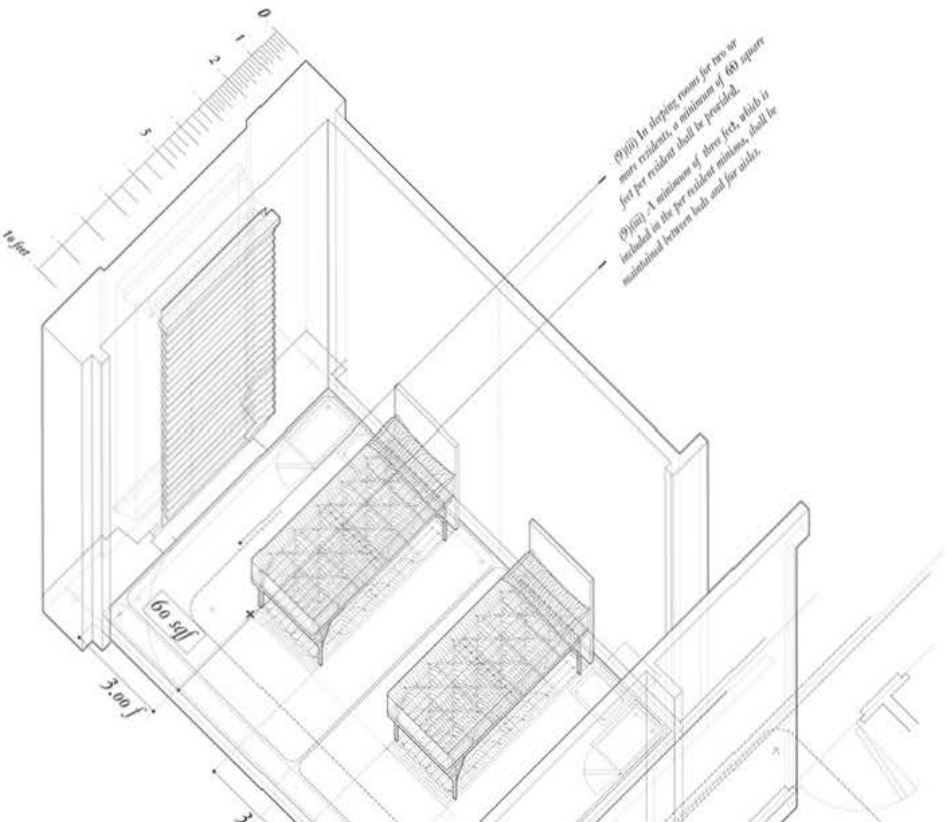
The bed has becomes the key conceptual and material element around which the shelter is legally regulated and described. By stating that "the operator shall furnish each resident" with this piece of furniture, the 18NYCRR substitutes the figure of the sheltered subject with the bed provided to him or her. In a single-occupancy room, where the minimum area per resident is eighty square feet, the bed comprises 20 percent of the total space. In a shared room, the bed occupies a third of the sixty square feet required. The bed—which should include "springs maintained in good condition," "a well-constructed mattress" and "a comfortable pillow of standard size"—constitutes the minimum unit for spatial and programmatic conditions offered to each sheltered subject.

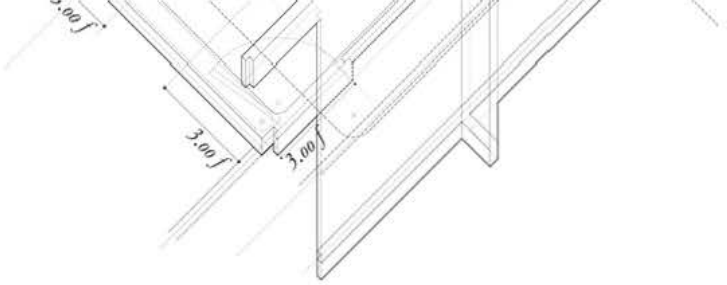




Part 900: Shelters for Families: "(j) Furnishings and Equipment; (c) Sleeping areas, (1) Tier I Facilities, (2) Tier II Facilities. Environmental Standards."

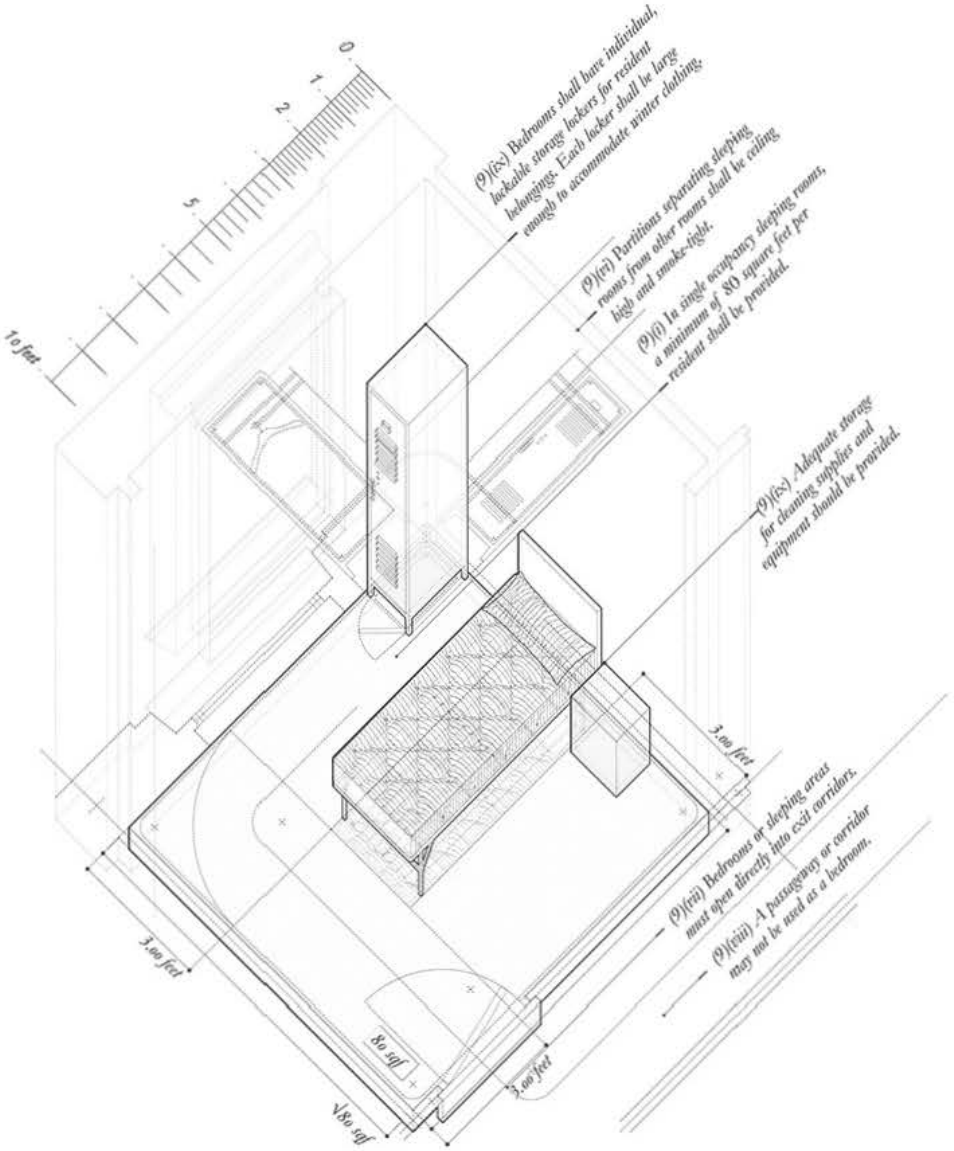
In the case of family shelters, fifty square feet is allotted per resident. This is also defined around the bed unit, as the law stipulates that this piece of furniture needs to be at least twenty-seven inches wide—three inches less than required for a single individual. Thus, the size of the body of a resident in a family shelter is legally reduced to 10 percent of homeless single adults. This three-inch threshold—which we could infer responds to an averaging of heights and weights of different-age family members—reveals how the body of the homeless subject is negotiated as abstract matter, anatomically modifiable depending on its family status.





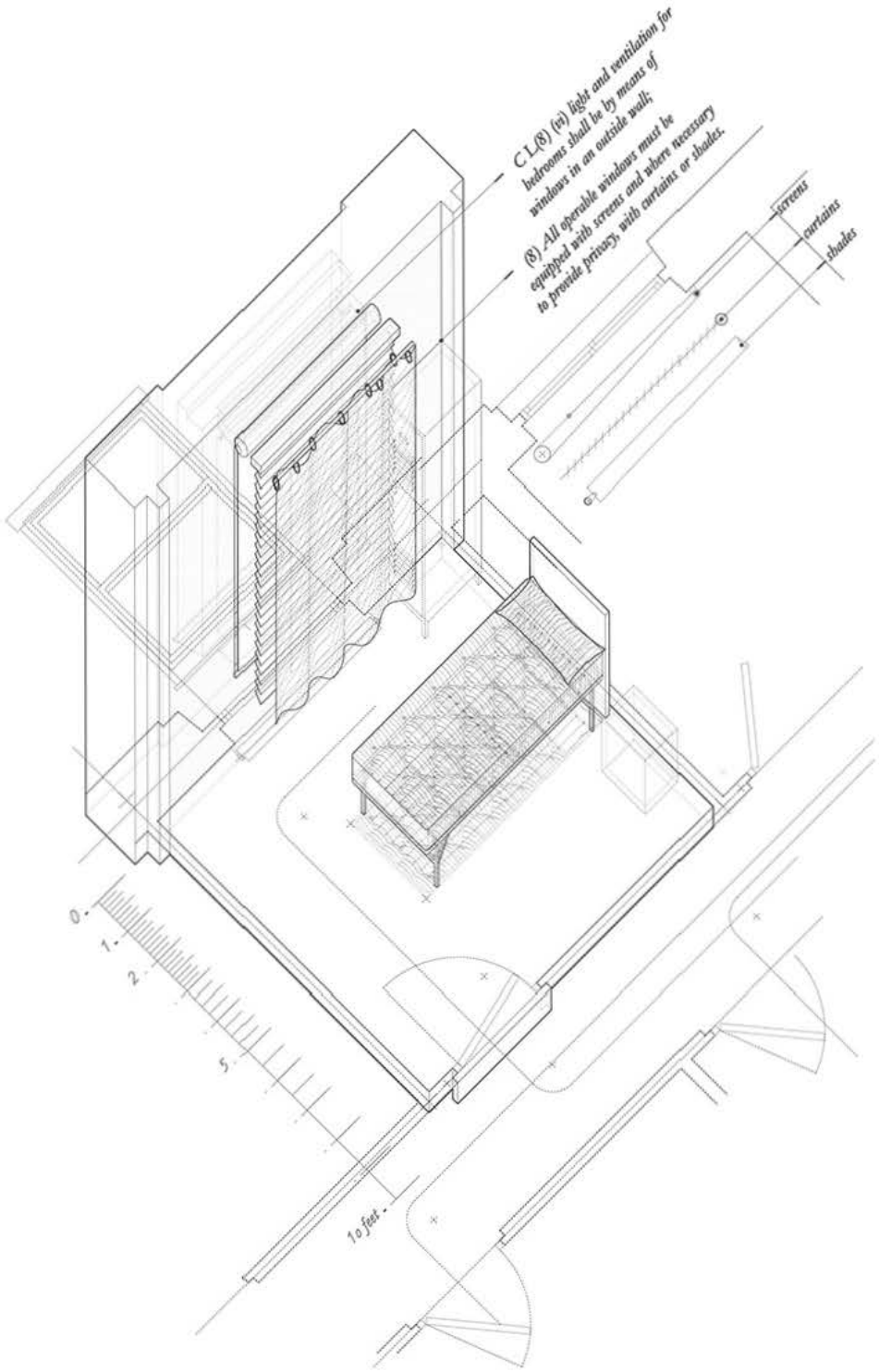
Part 491: Shelters for Adults: "(o) Space Requirements for Shelters for Adults, (9) Bedrooms. Environmental Standards."

The law stipulates that any privacy partitions in shared bedrooms have a height of at least "approximately four feet." Considering the average American height of five feet ten inches, the minimum partition height only obstructs other occupants' vision when they lie in or sit on the bed. In order to guarantee visual privacy—aural privacy is not even considered—the law privileges the bed as the locus from which subjects develop his or her activity when sheltered, preordaining them to a prone, unproductive position.



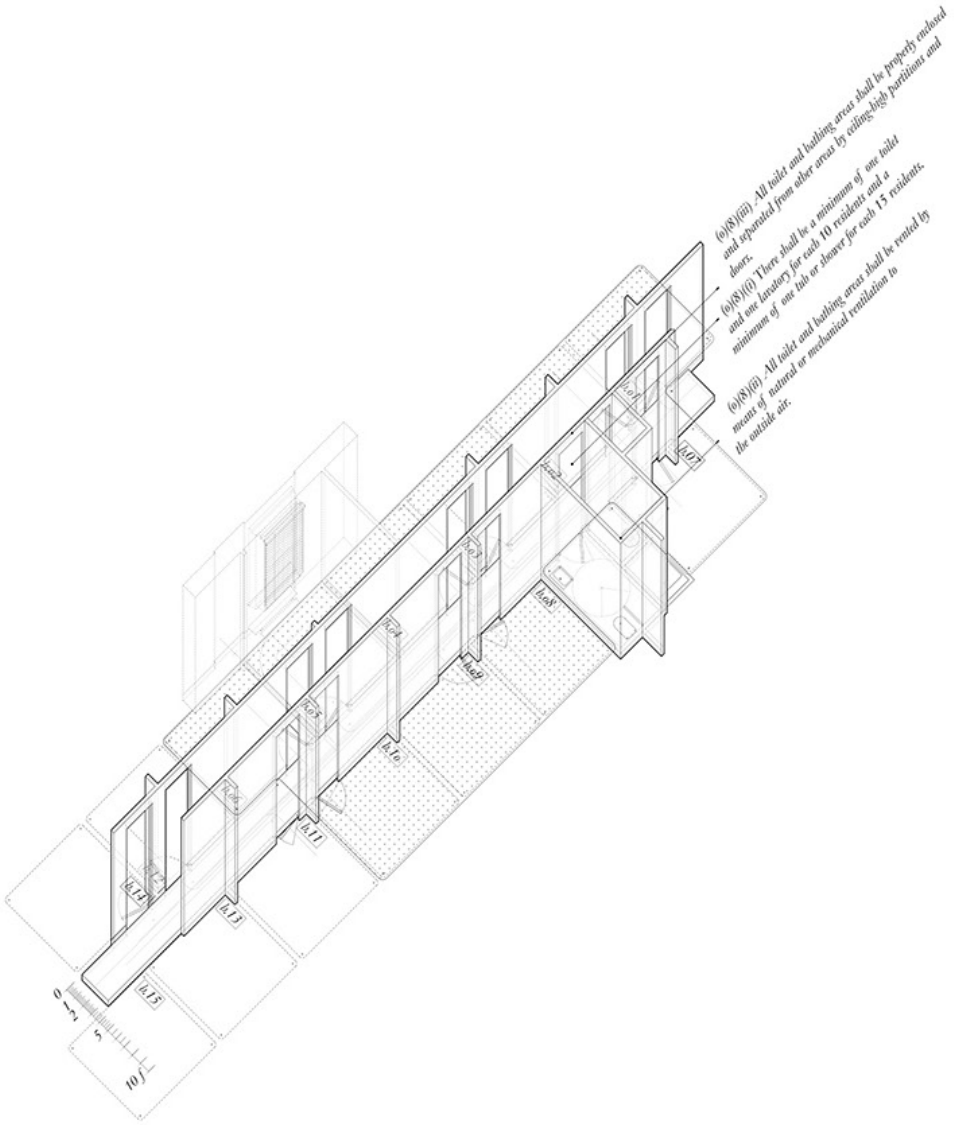
Part 491: Shelters for Adults: "(o) Space Requirements for Shelters for Adults; (j) Furnishings and Equipment; Environmental Standards."

Each resident must be supplied sheets, a pillowcase, a blanket, towels, soap and toilet issue. In order to store these objects, he or she must be provided a locker and a small additional storage space. According to the law, the homeless subject does not only sleep. He or she also collects.



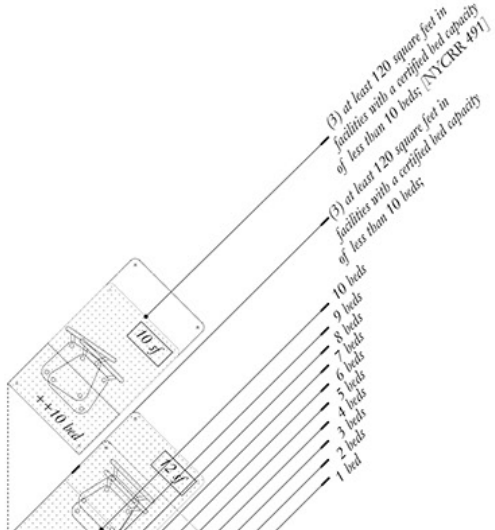
Part 491: Shelters for Adults: "(o) Space Requirements for Shelters for Adults, (9) Bedrooms. Environmental Standards." Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of New York: August 1981. Index No.42582/79. August 1981: "(c) Sleeping areas" in *Final Judgment by Consent: Robert Callahan et al, on their own behalves and on behalf of all others similarly situated, Plaintiffs—against—Hugh L. Carey, as Governor of the State of New York et al, Defendants. Final Judgment by Consent: Robert Callahan et al, on their own behalves and on behalf of all others similarly situated, Plaintiffs—against—Hugh L. Carey, as Governor of the State of New York et al, Defendants.* Index No.42582/79. Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of New York, August 1981.

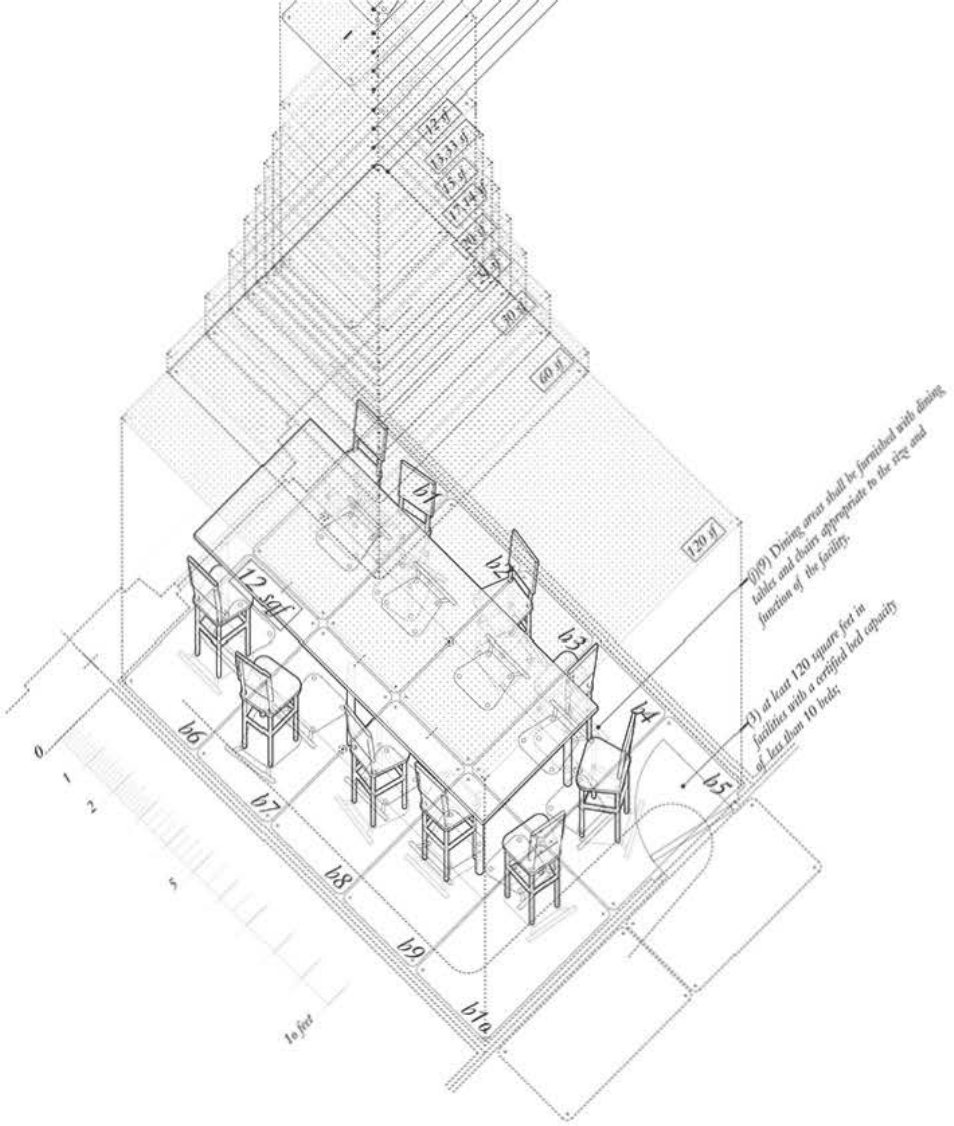
Both state and the municipal legal standards reinforce the privacy of shelter residents from adjacent exterior spaces by determining that "all operable windows must be provided with screens and when necessary to provide privacy, with curtains or shades." This layered protection has a twofold effect: The law not only secures a certain degree of intimacy for the occupant, but it also secludes him or her from the urban fabric of the facility.



Part 491: Shelters for Adults **environmental standards: "(o) Space Requirements for Shelters for Adults, (8) Bath and Toilet Facilities."**

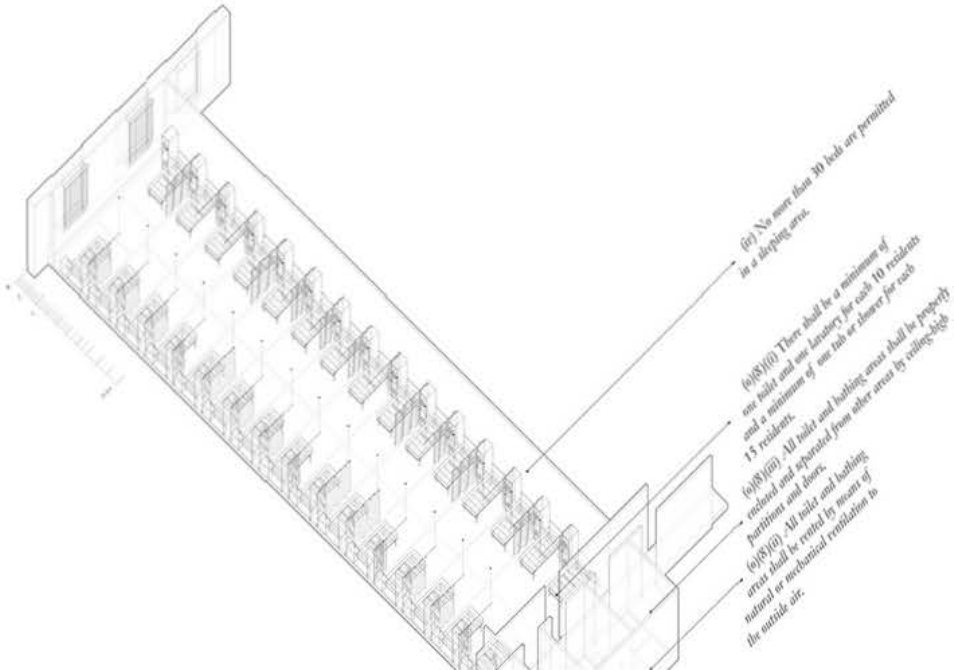
The law prescribes a minimum of one toilet and lavatory for every ten residents, and a tub or shower for every fifteen. This five-person threshold renders bathing as a secondary activity, less imperative than urinating. However these ratios might be assessed, this programmatic regulation sets efficient hygienic standards for homeless subjects distinct from that of the rest of the population.





Part 491: Shelters for Adults environmental standards: "(o) Space Requirements for Shelters for Adults; (j) Furnishings and Equipment."

For up to fifteen residents, at least twelve square feet of dining and leisure space is required. This sets a self-defeating situation: The more residents there are, the less space there is for each resident.



Part 491: Shelters for Adults environmental standards: "(o) Space Requirements for Shelters for Adults, (9) Bedrooms."

The law specifies that "no more than 30 beds are permitted in a sleeping area." It is precisely the abstract unit of the bed and the spatial constructs around it that allows the law to frame domesticity, even through abstract spatial terms. This detaches architecture from any direct consideration of the body this piece of furniture accounts for.

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1. The total number of sheltered individuals in 2015 was 60,670. The number of unsheltered individuals was 3,262. Data from NYC Department of Homeless Services and Human Resources Administration and NYCStat shelter, and Census Reports. ^
2. The image that the *New York Times* chose to illustrate the dramatic rise in the number of homeless in New York City in August 2012 was the doorway and security checkpoint of an Upper West Side property turned into a municipal shelter. Aaron Edwards, "Homelessness Rises Sharply; City Acts Fast," the *New York Times* (August 11, 2012), A1. ^
3. Ian Frazier has already asserted that lack of awareness of this crisis is a consequence of the invisibility of current homelessness, internalized within the shelter's architecture: "[Most New Yorkers] say they thought there were fewer homeless people than before, because they see fewer of them." Ian Frazier, "Hidden City." *The New Yorker* (October 28, 2013), 39. ^
4. "First Court Decision: Robert Callahan et al, on their own behalves and on behalf of all others similarly situated, Plaintiffs—against—Hugh L. Carey, as Governor of the State of New York et al, Defendants." Index No.42582/79. August 1981. Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of New York. December 5, 1979. ^
5. "Final Judgment by Consent: Robert Callahan et al, on their own behalves and on behalf of all others similarly situated, Plaintiffs—against—Hugh L. Carey, as Governor of the State of New York et al, Defendants." Index No. 42582/79. August 1981. Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of New York. August 1981. ^
6. As Peter Marcuse has asserted, to directly confront the problem of homelessness would suppose a "repudiation" of free market precepts. To ignore it legitimizes the process through which the system expels those who transgress it. Thus, the homeless crisis entangles an "ideological and practical dilemma" for those committed within a free capitalist economy. Peter Marcuse, "Neutralizing homelessness," *Socialist Review* 18, no. 1 (January/March 1988). ^
7. In this regard, see "Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Projection* and the Site of Urban "Revitalization" and "Agoraphobia" Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 3–48 and 269–328. ^
8. I would like to thank Mabel O. Wilson and Ginger Nolan for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this work, and for their overall observations during my research. This research was completed as part of the Advanced Architectural Research initiative (later renamed Applied Research Practices in Architecture) at the Columbia GSAPP. ^

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