



# AUSTIN RESOURCE CENTER FOR THE HOMELESS

*Austin, Texas*



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# AT A GLANCE

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## Managing Organization

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### Murray Legge, Architect

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## Interior Designer

### Bethany Ramey, Architect

## Clients

Single men and women adults (day services)

Single men (residential)

## Facility Type and Capacity

Emergency shelter. Capacity (as built) 300 adults (day services) and 100 men (residential). Currently: 600 (day services) and 230 men (residential).

## Approximate Square Footage

26,800

## Admission

Low demand: Any state of dependency is permissible for admittance.

## Year of Construction / Renovation and Approximate Cost

2004, \$5.1 million.

## Number of Floors

3

## Site

Urban

## On-site Services and Amenities

Computer lab, Laundry, medical clinic, External porch/deck, Client mail distribution, Conference rooms; Administration offices; Case manager offices; Dining room with chef plus volunteer support; Locker storage.

# GOALS

In 2004, the Austin Resource Center for Homelessness (ARCH) opened its doors, adhering to a mission and offering services in contrast to others around it, such as The Salvation Army facility next door. A secular-oriented city-sponsored facility, ARCH's mission was to offer a space of refuge for homeless adults during the day in addition to overnight stays, housing a variety of services including a clinic, technology training, and case management assistance. In 2004, there were few precedents of this multi-service model to follow, and the notion of sustainable architecture was just getting off the ground. Nonetheless, the architectural team and client committee realized a series of green initiatives in the project, including a 13,000 gallon rainwater collection system for landscape irrigation and flushing of toilets and urinals (as at that time the project was not on the storm water city system), as well as intentions for a program engaging residents in creating and selling compost from the Center's discarded kitchen scraps. By 2015, connection to city utilities made the water system unnecessary, and the vermiculture compost system has been discarded because it was difficult for the transient population to manage it well. What remains, however, is a sturdy facility with an enduring architectural presence—one of transparency through significant fenestration, chosen for its honesty and figurative open-handed invitation extended to its intended citizens-- even if they arrive in a state of chemical dependency. Notes project

architect Herman Thun, empathy with these individuals is key: "If someone is frustrated, weary and tense, I think they see more than what you think they see. They really sense and can appreciate the feeling that somebody cares, somebody is concerned." Accordingly, Thun insists that the Center's clientele should be regarded and referred to as citizens, as deserving of respect as any other residents of Austin. There is no sense of darkness or of crowding at ARCH, and daylight penetration is of obvious high priority here through not only tall, extensive windows but also a light well that bifurcates the structure through nearly all floors, bringing exterior connection to conference rooms and administrative offices. Ceilings are high, particularly in the lobby space that gives the building presence. As a result, a sense of the bright mood of the interior space is visible far before one encounters the main entrance doors. Executive Director Mitchell Gibbs notes that the name of the Front Steps organization that runs the Center also contributes to its architectural concept, evoking a southern tradition of sitting, resting, and sharing on the open front porch—a sense that the Center's open sight lines, visible day rooms and extensive glazing references well. From these positive associations and connections, can come the first steps out of homelessness, Gibbs feels.

# FEATURES

The Center's third floor sleeps 100 men in bunk beds. Staff and residents alike identify that the placement of these beds in groups of 20 within four discrete rooms and an open end-of-corridor area works quite well. Residents note that this allows residents of similar characteristics such as older men, those with mental issues, and younger men to be grouped separately. This tends to reduce the number of conflicts over noise and disturbance—after all, it is easier to manage the concerns of 20 than 60, were an open room concept to have been used instead. For example, older men are quieter and keep their bed areas more clean and orderly than other groups. Trey Nichols, Shelter Director notes that people tend to look after each other more due to the community these sleeping arrangements help foster. David\*, a former resident of ARCH agrees that these separations are important for peace of mind, explained, "you already have enough on your plate [without worrying about who is sleeping nearby]. You've got guy who has a family that made a mistake. He's got kids. He knows he's got to focus. But you got this other guy that doesn't care, and he's going to take the others with him. One bad apple can spoil the whole deal." The contained, small size and straightforward corridor layout of the narrow, windowless dorm rooms allow residents to come and go with minimal disturbance to others nearby. Large windows in the adjacent corridors permit light in while keeping the dorm rooms themselves dark even during the day.

The Center also features decks for resident use on all three levels at different times of the day. The second level small deck permit the organization GreenCorn to grow vegetables for the kitchen with resident assistance, and the top floor's extensive covered exterior deck provides residents who have signed up for case management assistance a 'third place' refuge for conversation and relaxation in addition to the day use lobby on the ground floor. Options for residents of where to go and what to do are an empowering element in the Center.

The pressing needs of increased resident demand have moved ARCH policies toward a system of prioritized sleeping spaces and amenities. While 100 men sleep each night in third floor bunk beds, as many as 130 more sleep on mats in the Center's lobby, two 2nd floor conference rooms and the dining room. Bunk beds go to those that are working with ARCH case managers on a recovery plan. A lottery system determines not only who receives a mat that night, but also who receives one of the 125 hot dinners that day. While this system is frustrating to some, generally there is an incentivized desire to achieve one of the top floor bunk beds, which is seen as the most successful way to eventually exit homelessness. In this way architecture facilitates policy and resident progress toward goals.

It can be easy for those that are not underprivileged to underestimate the impact the availability of dedicated day spaces and night sleeping spaces can have on the daily experience of a person who is homeless. Charles is a resident who had been sleeping at ARCH nearly every night for six months, which is long enough to establish a routine of predictable and reassuring activity that takes advantage of ARCH's offerings. His explanation of his nightly habits reveals how important and reassuring affordances are in an emergency shelter that one calls a temporary home: "I'm going to take care of my business, I'm not going to go to the library, I'm not going to go to the parks, I'm not going to feed the pigeons. I'm going to come back to the shelter, sit there two to three hours, watch a little television, go smoke a cigarette, say hello to my grandson and get ready for bed." Like everyone, people who are formerly homeless take refuge in a positive and predictable habit of movement and activity through their day.

\*Name changed to preserve anonymity.



# LESSONS LEARNED

1

The story of ARCH is one deeply influenced by time. Eleven years has elapsed since the facility's opening, and the nature of its current need could not have been anticipated—the original intent to serve 300 adults with day services has evolved to 600 men, women and at times, children, and sleeping 100 men at night has now changed to sleeping 230 men, and a smaller number of women during the day. HUD guidelines have moved the selection process toward those with greatest need, which has heightened the prevalence of mental issues in residents. There are more amputees, more patients with cancer, and more prisoners dropped off at the corner. Generally, residents are now older, more frail and more medically vulnerable. GED learners start their studies at a kindergarten or first grade competency level.

2

These changes in population makeup and governmental policy have understandably prompted architectural evolution here. For example, a metal detector and weapons check-in space became necessary after the Center opened, and new HIPPA privacy requirements made necessary several cubicles near the entrance for confidential information disclosure in intake interviews. Such needs have altered the original flow of the lobby and rendered the dramatic focal point angled stairway a reduced feature from what it once was. This evolution of expanding and changing need points out the difficulty of accommodating a dynamic, living program and population. Flexibility in architecture—its ability to expand, change, recirculate in a different way—may in the long run be a wise priority for such facilities. The ARCH's once-adequate entrance area plaza can no longer contain the number of those waiting for entry, making it necessary that groups wait on the nearby sidewalks and prompting staff to convert a part of the bottom level garage into a pre-intake area. The project's small urban site also does not lend itself to easy expansion.



# LESSONS LEARNED

3

The project's longevity also serves as a case study for architectural material durability. The Center's preponderance of concrete floors, concrete columns, and extensive glass surfaces have worn well for eleven years of unceasing service, and has endured daily cleanings and tremendous traffic in an admirable way. On the other side of this coin, however, is the heightened level of sound produced by lobby visitors interacting with these impervious surfaces, which stands in the way of a sense of calm. These hard-wearing materials can tend to suppress a sense of a homelike environment, even evoking for some a memory of prison, notes Executive Director Mitchell Gibbs. Such advantages and tradeoffs on quality of experience are difficult to solve, given all the programming parameters of budget, public funds use, and durability challenges shelter facilities present.

4

Transparency, visibility and friendliness characterize not only the architecture of ARCH, but also its staff's demeanor. A part of this outreach story is imparted through the architecture and its concept, but another part of it is other services that ARCH provides inside its walls. David\*, a former resident of ARCH, now returns there to voluntarily sweep and mop, feeling a need to give back to a place that gave him a chance for the future. "I went to prison with a mask on. I came here with a mask on. This place was here for me. For me, the solution is to be of service." It is these services, supported by the physical facility, that also figure so heavily into residents' peace of mind and very perception of themselves. Remarks Charles, a seasoned resident of ARCH, "There are appearances and the look and the self esteem you can lose because of the way others treat you. I don't know what it is, but once you're labeled 'Oh, he's homeless', we catch ourselves acting that way. We ask each other 'Do I look OK today?' What we're really asking is 'Do I look homeless?', 'Hey, how's my haircut today?' I'll say, 'They're giving free haircuts upstairs, you need to go right now'. So we talk secretly amongst ourselves so we have that look."

\*Name changed to preserve anonymity.

# FACILITY TOUR

## Attendance to Human Needs

Use this key on the following pages of the facility tour to learn how the design of the building and its spaces contributes to the well-being of its residents.



Dignity and Self Esteem



Empowerment and Personal Control



Security, Privacy and Personal Space



Stress Management



Sense of Community



Beauty and Meaning



## Exterior Building

The facility emphasizes transparency and by extension, honesty for residents that can be cautious of programs designed to help. A protected pre-admittance plaza was designed to provide a refuge from the street, despite the small size of the site.



## Lobby from within the Main Entry Doors

Clear sightlines and structural honesty in architectural elements characterizes the lobby. Window film and proportionate lighting fixtures provide detail and color. The lighting fixtures have proven cumbersome to relamp.



## Lobby from Second Floor Mail Room Windows

Lockers formerly in the lobby were relocated to the garage area both for expansion of their numbers and to better sequester pests within client belongings. Residents report this is among the most important amenities of ARCH.



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## Outdoor Roof Terrace (2nd Floor)

The roof terrace is home to vegetable and flower gardens used in the facility's kitchen.



## Computer Room

The computer space provides technology training through an on-site non-profit partner. Recreational use is encouraged (with no-pornography rules in place).



## Mail Room

The second floor mailroom provides residents with an address that assists with job applications as well as correspondence connection to the community. The mail room doubles as the 'soap room' for disbursement of toiletries and similar items.





## Cafeteria Seating Area

Furnishings are highly flexible so that the cafeteria can be used as overflow sleeping quarters each night. Service is buffet line style.



## Cafeteria Kitchen

The kitchen crafts its recipes from scratch with chefs trained in high-end restaurants. 125 meals are cooked each night for a portion of residents that are staying the night.





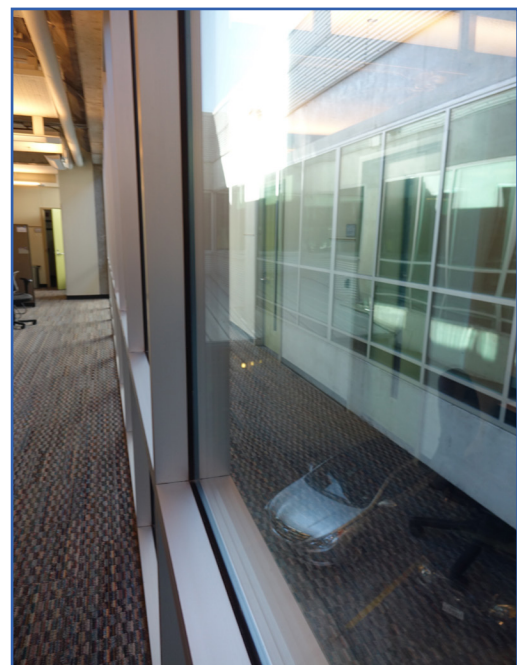
## Conference Room

Like the dining room, two conference rooms double as sleeping rooms each night, making moveable furnishings necessary.



## Light Well

A light well intercedes in the center of each level's floor plan, injecting daylight and visual release into the space.







## Outdoor Roof Terrace (3rd Floor)

A covered, exterior resident desk is reserved for those staying overnight in the facility, providing protected access to the sights and sounds of the city. Nearby South by Southwest music concerts are sometimes audible.



## Sleeping Rooms for 20

Four rooms of bunk beds each sleep 20 men. This arrangement provides a sense of community and permits residents with health or behavioral needs to be sequestered to minimize disruption. ARCH makes combination locks available to residents for securing their possessions underneath the bunk mattresses.



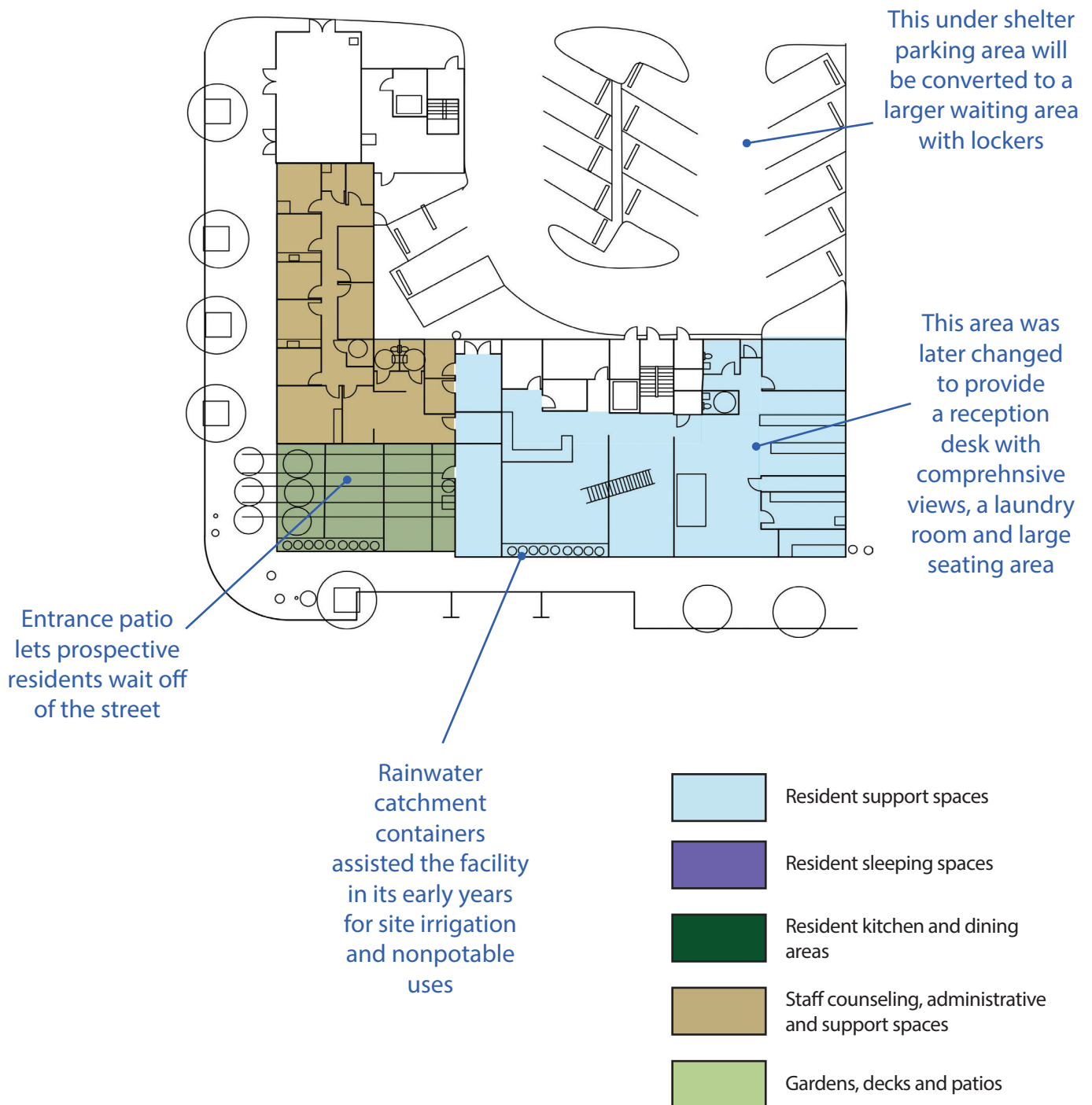


## Corridor Behind Sleeping Rooms

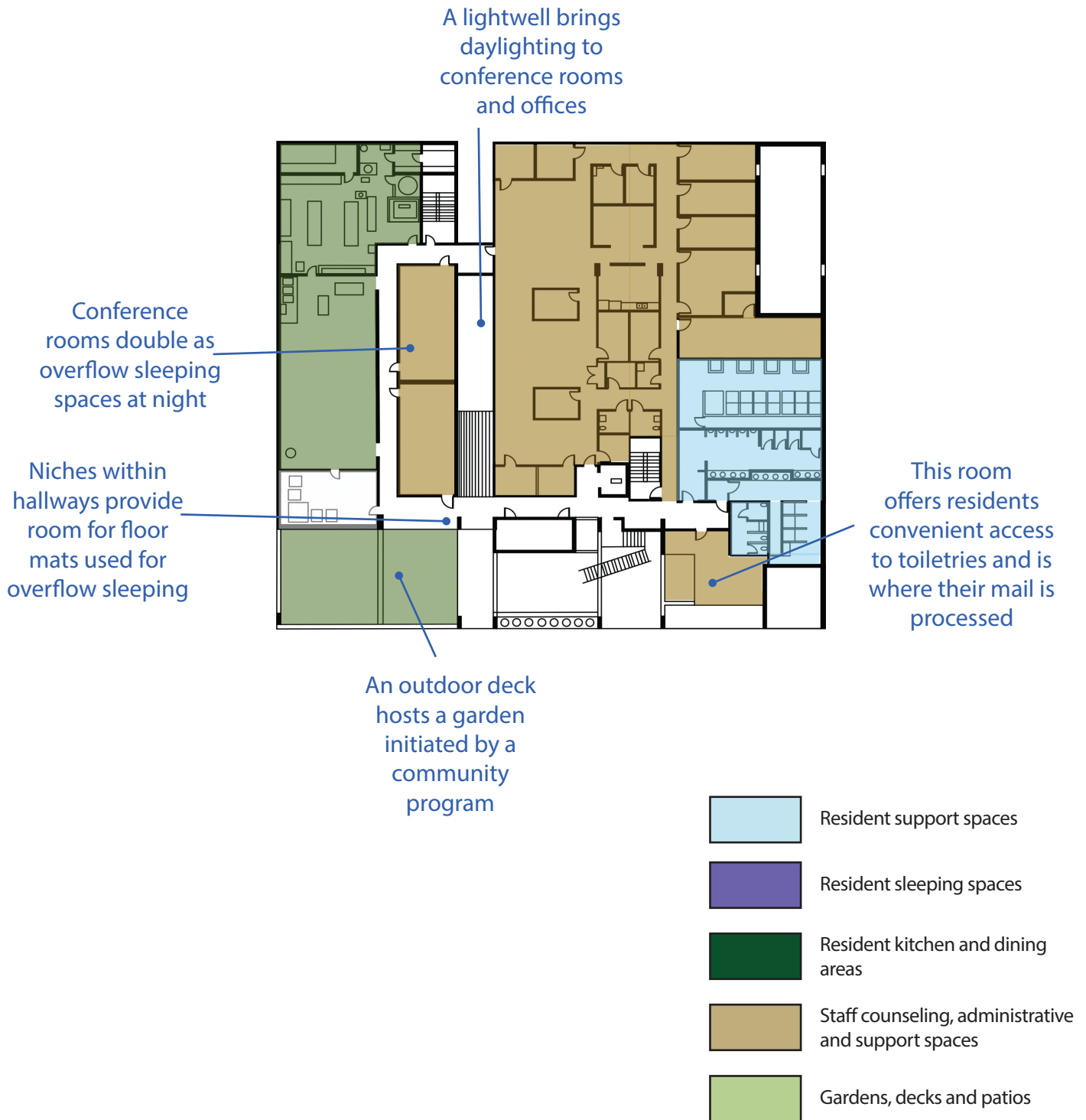
Even on the third floor, a daylight-accessible corridor leads beside the 4 sleeping room areas, providing visual relief and connection beyond the building itself.



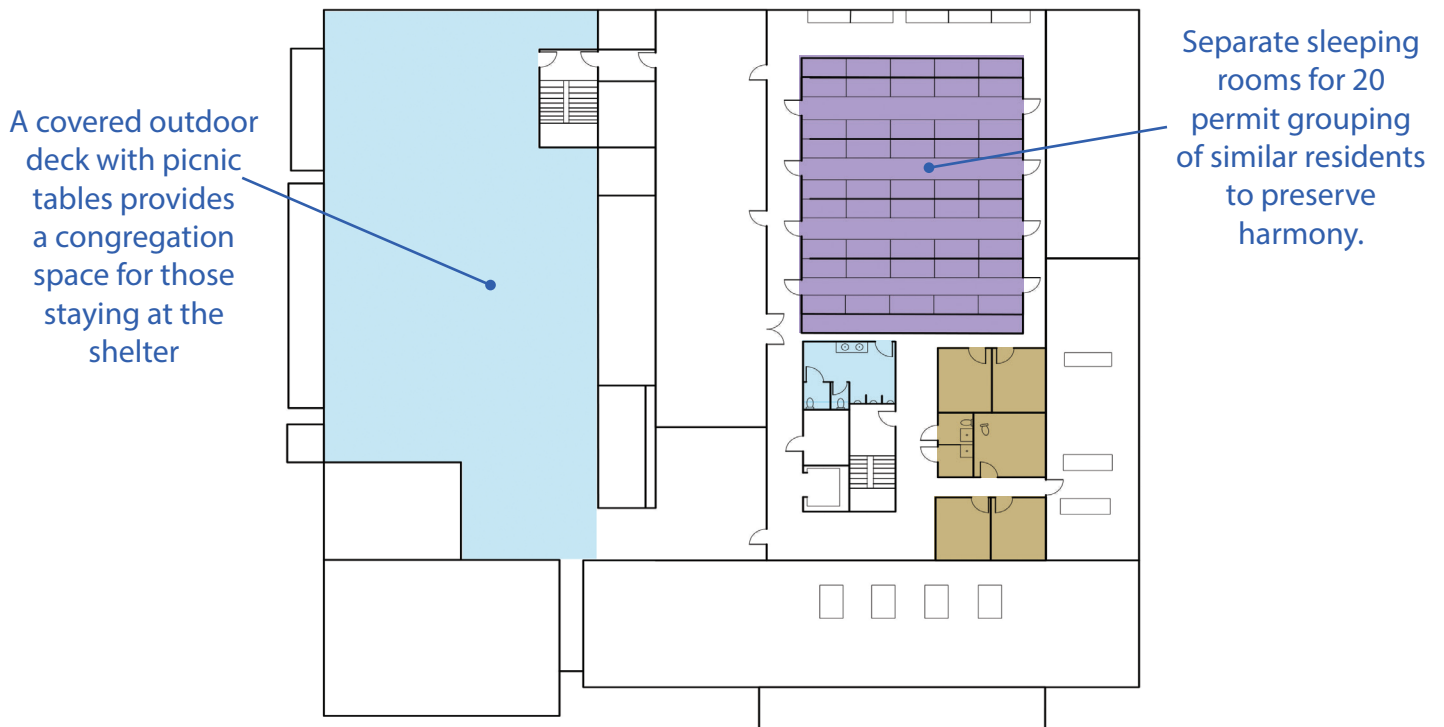
## Floor Plan: First Floor








## Floor Plan: Second Floor



## Floor Plan: Third Floor



-  Resident support spaces
-  Resident sleeping spaces
-  Resident kitchen and dining areas
-  Staff counseling, administrative and support spaces
-  Gardens, decks and patios

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## We thank these individuals for their contributions to this case study:

**Mitchell Gibbs, Executive Director, Front Steps**

**Trey Nichols, Director, Austin Resource Center for the Homeless**

**Hannah Ford, Facilitator, Austin Resource Center for the Homeless**

**Herman Thun, PLACE designers, Inc., Architect**

**[anonymous], resident**

**[anonymous], resident**



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