What is double compartment (double sided) housing and why is it so important for housing cats and dogs?

Housing plays a key role in animal health. For pet animals, the housing we use in our clinics, hospitals and animal shelters can promote their well-being and reduce stress if it meets the animal’s basic housing needs.

Double compartment housing is simply housing that has two separate housing areas connected by a door, pass through or portal that provides adequate space for the animal and allows the animal to have access to both sides of the housing. Generally during daily care and cleaning the animal is not handled and remains in the housing unit on the side not being cleaned while the other side is spot cleaned.

Double compartment housing meets several basic animal housing needs:
1. Meets an animal’s natural desire to defecate and urinate away from where it sleeps and eats.
2. Helps to insure animals are provided adequate housing space.
3. Minimizes the need for handling
   b. Minimizes disease and disease transmission risks.
   c. Helps insure staff safety and efficiency of care.

Dogs and cats’ natural behavior is to eliminate away from where they sleep and eat. The two compartments meet this need by providing animals with an area for their bed, food and water and a separate area for elimination. Double compartment housing also tends to more adequately provide animals with room to move around- "adequate space". It’s difficult to say exactly where the cut off
is for housing space size but too little is often the norm when animals are housed in single compartment housing. For cats, we recommend about 8-9 ft$^2$ or greater of cage floor space. This turns out to be at minimum a 4’ long by 24-28” deep divided cage housing unit. Most older cage housing is retrofittable using a portal between two 2’ cages (2‘ wide and 2‘ high x 24-28” deep). A 5’ long unit (two 30” long x 28-30” high x 28” deep units with a pass-through portal) works very well and is what is recommended if building new. For dog housing the size needed is variable but some common kennel sizes are 4-5’ wide by 10-12’ long for med-large dogs and 6’ wide by 10-12’ long for giant breeds each being divided in the middle by a transfer door (guillotine door).

**No matter the size, cages and kennels are housing that imposes restrictions on a pets’ movement and natural behaviors.** Our research has shown significant behavioral differences in cats housed in single vs larger double compartment cages as early as the first 24 hours of stay. The more restrictive the housing the shorter the time that that space will meet an animal needs. More adequate space provided by double compartment housing can help support most animals physical and mental well-being. Keeping an animal’s length of stay as short as possible is key to keeping them healthy and happy in restrictive housing. Animals that need to stay longer need longer-term housing and care needs met to maintain health and wellbeing. There are always some individual animals where cage and kennel housing simply does not meet their needs. Providing adequate care for these animals means finding alternative housing as soon as possible.

**Prevention of disease and disease transmission is a high priority when caring for a population of animals - yet few understand the critical role housing plays.** Disease has more opportunity to occur in animals that are stressed. Restrictive housing inherently causes stress in animals and when this housing is such that it doesn’t meet the animals needs it can cause further stress. Some animals carry diseases that can be activated by stress- ex: many cats carry a virus (herpes virus) that awaits a stressful event or situation and subsequently results in illness: upper respiratory infection (URI) or a kitty cold. For a cat in a home, a cold is not often a big deal- most cats will recover in a week or two, but in a shelter - sick cats can get very sick and be at risk for euthanasia. Disease transmission risks occur when an infective organism gets passed from one animal to another. Vaccination at intake can help reduce risks by preventing and controlling some diseases. Limiting contact between animals also reduces disease risks. Limiting contact between animals can be achieved by housing animals individually and this is a common practice in most clinics, hospitals and shelters. The risk arises when individually housed animals are handled to provide routine daily care – which is what generally needs to happen when animals are housed in single compartment housing units. Single compartment kennels cannot be properly cleaned without moving the dog out of its kennel and most single cages that house cats are too small to efficiently clean (ideally spot clean) with the cat inside. When animals are handled two things happen. First it can be a stressful time for the animal especially when they haven’t established a relationship with the care provider and second, the likelihood of passing an infectious organism from one animal to the next simply becomes a part of the daily care process. Handling animals one after another during the daily routine of
cleaning and feeding heightens disease transmission risks. Wearing gloves and changing between each animal may help to reduce contaminants on one’s hands but it takes time and can be a hassle – so it often isn’t done properly - and it doesn’t address the risks associated with contaminated clothing or shoes.

**With double compartment housing, much of the animal handling surrounding daily care (feeding and cleaning) can be reduced, thus a significant decrease in animal stress and disease risk can occur without anyone really having to think about – it just works - its part of the design.**

Many animals entering shelters, clinics or hospitals are timid until they get to know their new environment and the people that are caring for them. Some may show signs of fear or aggression. Animals that must be handled because their housing is single compartment can experience tremendous stress. Some animals express fear and stress simply due to a person approaching their housing space especially when no place for retreat is provided. Staff safety and humane animal care are both better provided when all animal housing is double compartment. With most double compartment housing the animal has a place to retreat within its housing environment and limited to no handling needs to occur to provide the basics of daily care. The animal can be located safely on one side of the housing unit (via use of a pass through with the door closed) while the staff member safely tends to the daily care needs on the other side.

**Efficiency of care.** Daily cleaning and feeding is done every single day. It is often the first task of the day and the time available for other tasks depends on how long the morning routine of cleaning and care takes. Double compartment housing is the most efficient (and safest) housing for staff to provide the daily routine of cleaning and feeding care and in many facilities, can help reduce cleaning time so there is more time to do other important tasks.

**Providing animals with double compartment housing not only meets their needs and helps reduce stress but also provides staff with the safest, most efficient and humane way to care for pet animals when they are short term housed in animal shelters, boarding facilities, veterinary hospitals and veterinary clinics, etc., wherever kennel or cage housing is used.**

*Double compartment housing for pets is win/win-meeting the needs of the pets and those who care for them.*