

Built for comfort

Freedom and flexibility are top features in latest cow cubicle designs

We take a timely look at some of the latest innovative cubicle designs that will be of interest to producers planning to spruce up their unit's cow housing this summer. And the good news is that they should be as easy on your pocket as they are on your cows.

Some of the latest cubicle designs to hit the market don't look like cubicles at all – abstract art installations perhaps, or maybe laundry airing devices.

But add some cows to them and the picture changes to one of comfort – possibly some of the most contented cubicle housed cows that producers could hope to see.

And producers can be content with their investment too – the cost of these cubicles appears to be comparable with those of a more traditional construction. So they can be easy on the pocket – as well as the eye.

The Freedom cubicle's 'flexible' design caught the eye of Dutch brothers Ruben and Yehuda Sprecher. Yehuda saw them on a US dairy unit and he says he simply had to install some at the Israeli unit where he was working at the time. Today the brothers are selling the cubicles in The Netherlands and Israel,

as well as in Norway and Italy. They cost out at about £88 per cow place.

"It's a US patented design that uses flexible fibreglass rods instead of the more traditional rigid steel partitions," explains Mr Sprecher. "These rods are installed diagonally, which makes it much easier for the cow to lie down and to stand up.

Lunge forward

"And when she's lying in the cubicle there's nothing to hinder her. She has the freedom to lunge forward or from side-to-side. There are no obstructions and no 'loops' to become caught or wedged in, which can cause injuries. And, with no more 'banging' into steel structures, cow houses with these cubicles are surprisingly quiet – and so are the cows."

Mr Sprecher believes that these cubicles are as close to 'loose house' comfort as cubicles can get. "I've never seen a

Chewing the cud: contented cows with plenty of room to stand up and lie down

cow refuse one of these cubicles – not even a nervous cow that has had a bad experience in a more traditional cubicle.

"And I think that these cubicles take producers a step closer to providing the

cow with a stress-free and comfortable environment where she can produce a 20,000-litre average. That's certainly what the design of future dairy units should aim for."

The narrow diameter of the rods used to

construct the cubicles means that there's more space available for the cow. Dutch producers reduced the width of the cubicles they installed to just 102cm. The cows responded well and the producers were able to provide more

cubicles for the cow within the same area.

Flexible materials have also been used to replace the traditionally rigid head rail, which is a flexible strap like those used on trucks. And a flexible plastic pipe forms the brisket board

Each partition, or fibreglass rod, is bolted to the floor separately. "And installation is easy, so simple in fact that producers can do it themselves," adds Mr Sprecher.

Small price

That said, he says that a degree of flexibility is also required from producers if they're going to install these cubicles. "A change of mindset may be required since not all cows leave their cubicle as you'd hope or expect. Some choose to turn around and others make their exit via the neighbouring cubicle – if it's empty.

"That's safe for the cow – she can't get stuck. The cubicle may be a little dirtier than it would in a more traditional cubicle. But it's about compromise and balance and producers who have these cubicles agree that it's a small price to pay for the huge amount of additional cow comfort."

Another cubicle design, the ANCOTEC Greenstall, is designed along similar

Comfortable cows: an open-fronted design means that Jeremy Platt has never seen a cow 'refuse' to lie in a Cosmos cubicle



The flexible partitions used by the Freedom (left) and Greenstall (right) cubicles ensure that the cow can move around in comfort

lines to the Freedom cubicle, but with one special feature – a tiltable neckrail. This has a ‘steering’ function for the cow, to direct her as she lies down but to also give her all the freedom she needs when standing up.

This rail is individually hinged for each cubicle. In its resting position it is positioned slightly downwards and serves to ‘position’ the cow lengthwise before she lays down.

“And when the cow wants to stand up the neckrail can be easily pushed up and out of the way by the cow – she won’t bang her head or hurt her neck,” says the company’s Martin Groffen. “She can even leave the cubicle through the front if she chooses to.

“This is good news for weak or lame cows – it gives them the same freedom of movement to that that they’d have out at pasture.”

The tubes that form the structure of the cubicle are sturdy, but also ‘soft’: “Stiff enough to guide the cow to lie down in the correct spot, but not so tough that she can get stuck or lay against the divider and hurt herself,” adds Mr Groffen. He points out that the tubes are also easy to lift, which aids cleaning and maintaining the beds.

Another Dutch designed cubicle that offers ‘freedom’ – the Cosmos – is already proving popular in the UK.

Distributed in the UK by Cheshire-based housing specialist David Beech, the cubicle has an open front design with a high neck rail. And Middlewich-based producer Jeremy Platt is, so far, very impressed with it.

Half of his 400-cow herd is housed using these cubicles, which were installed in spring 2008.



Open view: the absence of a head rail makes the cubicles more inviting

“I saw them first of all in a catalogue and then David took me over to see some on a couple of Dutch dairy units. I was very impressed – the cows looked so relaxed and comfortable and were able to get up and down very easily.”

No refusals

Back home and 12 months on, Mr Platt says that he’s never seen a cow refuse to go into one of these cubicles, which he chose to bed with latex mats with rubber covers. “The design is so open that even cows that may have had a bad experience with getting stuck in a cubicle are not fazed. They feel safe and secure and are happy to get in and lie down because they know that they can easily stand up and get back out again.”

Mr Platt adds that he’d definitely recommend this design of cubicle to other producers. “And the cost – about £55 per cow space – is favourable too.

That was another selling point for me and I’m sure it will be for others.

“There’s much less steel work because there’s nothing at the front end and this means that the cost of buying and installing the cubicles is very competitive and, once you’ve factored in labour, possibly cheaper than putting up more traditional cubicles.”

He’s had many producers visit his unit during the past year to look at his cow house. “And they all comment that cows are either lying down and cudding or up at the feed barrier – there’s very little in between. “And I think that’s partly due to the fact that the cubicles are so inviting and there’s plenty of space at the front and no obstruction for them to bash their heads against when they lung forward as they stand up. The cow’s not impeded, she’s happy and relaxed.”

David Beech adds that this design really is the answer for producers looking for loose housed ‘comfort’ without the problems that can be associated with straw yards.

“This cubicle allows you to make the most efficient use of space without compromising on udder health of cow comfort. There’s more space for the cow to lie down and stand up – vital with today’s larger cows – than in many other more conventional cubicles. And although cows may get a little dirtier than they would without so much freedom to move, they’re still considerably ‘cleaner’ than they would be in a straw yard.

“It’s all about finding a balance between comfort, welfare and hygiene and I think we’ve struck it about right.”

Rachael Porter

Out with the old: the cubicles on the left are a far cry from the more traditional, rigid design on the right

