

Plexiglass to the Rescue: Supplies Run Short as Covid Barriers Go Up

Ubiquitous clear plastic is pressed into service for coronavirus protection on the beach, in restaurants and at hospitals

A couple has lunch in Paris under plexiglass protection designed by Christophe Gernigon. ALAIN JOCARD/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

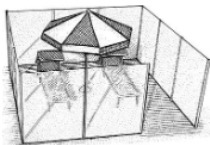
By *Pietro Lombardi and Kim Richters*

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63 RESPONSES

ROME—Stefano Antonelli has sculpted plexiglass for decades in his workshop, making bikes and furnishings and works of art. But a recent customer request stood out. A local hospital asked for a box to cover patients' heads, a barrier to prevent transmission of the coronavirus.



Corona block

It was one of many pleas for protective equipment made of the transparent acrylic that the 58-year-old artisan has received over the past months from stores, restaurants and professionals.

“It has been like a tsunami,” Mr. Antonelli said at his workshop, a stone’s throw from the Colosseum. “In 40 years I had never seen something similar.”

Plexiglass, a type of plastic, came into its own during World War II, when it was touted as a safer alternative to glass in aircraft windshields. Now the pandemic is twisting the material into some mind-bending shapes. In a world marked by social distancing and shields, designers are offering [plexiglass corrals for the beach](#), individual boxes for pupils in classrooms and a host of other new applications.



Roman plexiglass artisan Stefano Antonelli.

PHOTO: STEFANO ANTONELLI

One of them is Christophe Gernigon. The Paris designer was browsing social media one night, looking at measures used in restaurants to keep social distance such as plexiglass dividers on tables.

“It frightened me because it looked more like a jail visiting room,” Mr. Gernigon said, referring to the barriers. He aimed for something more elegant

and more aesthetically pleasing.

Mr. Gernigon came up with a transparent pod that resembles a lampshade suspended over the heads and upper bodies of restaurant guests. He [posted his design online](#). He said he receives around 50 orders a day, not only from restaurants. Other businesses like casinos, hospital waiting rooms and nail salons are also interested, he said.

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Production started in early June, with orders shipped internationally to countries like the U.S. and Japan. The cost: €155 for a single pod, or around \$173.

The 47-year-old is currently working on other versions of his Plex’Eat design, one using color and another large enough to ensconce a couple.

The dining pods even enhance food aromas, he said, having recently enjoyed a truffle risotto under a plexiglass dome.

The World Health Organization has recognized plexiglass and other plastic barriers as effective in helping to stop the spread of the virus.

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In Milan, diners at the Gaga restaurant are separated by plexiglass.

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That didn't stop critics roasting Italian architects Ilaria Bizzo and Stefano Cornacchini for their design featuring individual boxes for students returning to schools after lockdown. The two proposed the idea as a “flexible, economic and green solution” to keep schools safe.

“Plexiglass boxes seem to me more a dystopian vision of the future than possible solutions to a problem,” countered architect Stefano Cardini, who was the Italian chief academic officer at the Istituto Europeo di Design.

The country's education minister, Lucia Azzolina, and far-right politician Matteo Salvini even squabbled over its spelling—is it plexiglass or plexiglas?—as they argued over a decree for the next school year. While the material is commonly known as plexiglass in English, it is sold under various trademarks, one of them Plexiglas.

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Christophe Gernigon poses under his invention, a Plex'Eat prototype plexiglass bubble, at the H.A.N.D restaurant in Paris.

PHOTO: AURELIEN MORISSAR/XINHUA/ZUMA PRESS

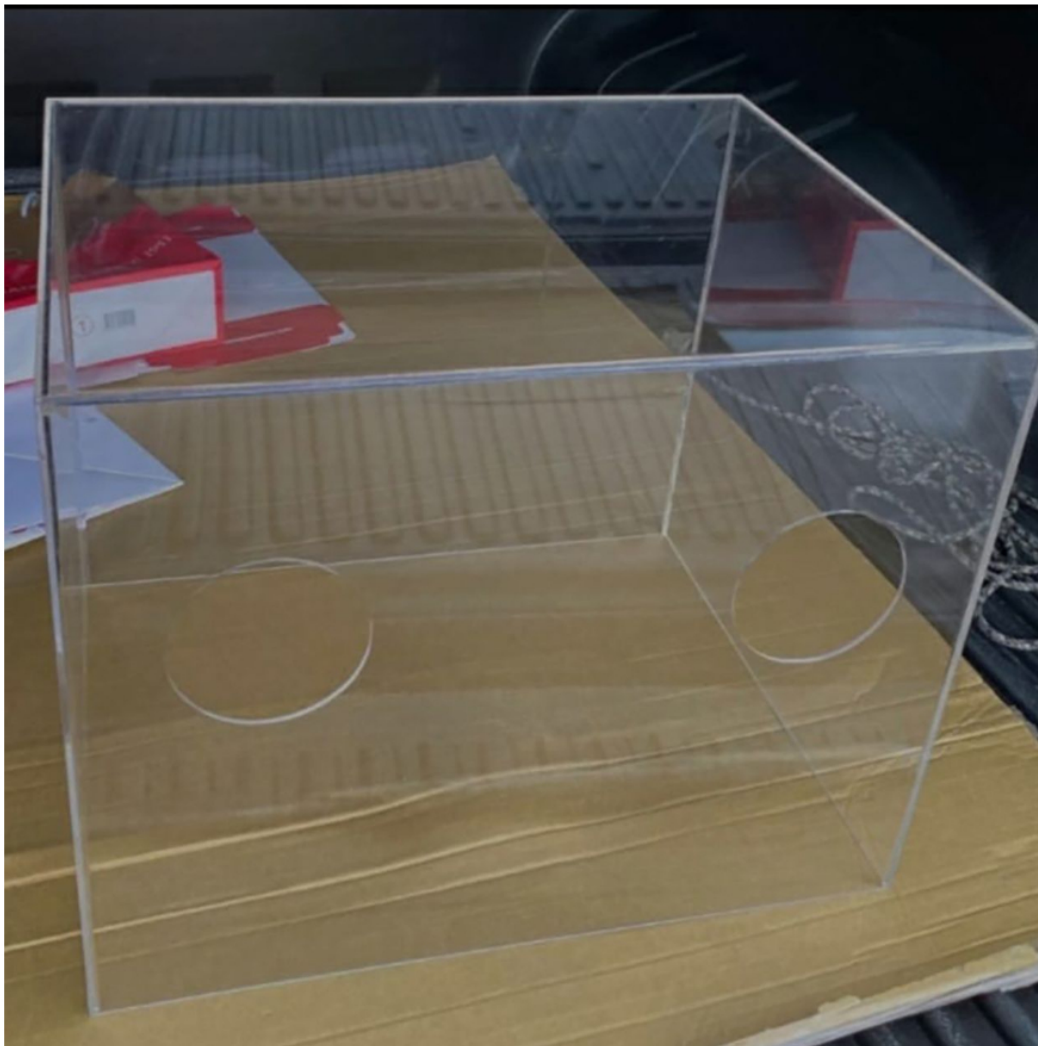
Roman artisan Mr. Antonelli, who goes by the nickname of “plastic man” or “er plasticaro” in local dialect, said the original shapes and designs he's making pose some difficulties. Some are technical, such as getting the right thickness and weight to achieve a functional design.

Mr. Gernigon, the designer from Paris, also had to adjust the thickness of his prototype dome to make its shape work. Typically, the material comes in sheets from manufacturers and then can be cut and bent to specification.

At the height of the emergency, there was a rush to get protective tools, Mr. Antonelli said. High demand, coupled with scarce supply of raw material, meant turning down some requests and longer delivery times for the others.

One customer paid a sizable deposit, pressing his request to jump the line. But “all plexiglass requests are created equal,” Mr. Antonelli replied.

Like the designers, plexiglass manufacturers and other companies that use plexiglass in Europe have been all-hands on deck to meet requests.



A hospital box designed by Mr. Antonelli.

PHOTO: STEFANO ANTONELLI

In early March, Kunststoffhandel Rexin GmbH started scouting for extra plexiglass across Europe to avoid a shortage later on. Back then, the German company, which makes products like terrace roofs and carports, got some initial requests for sneeze guards from

pharmacies. Other businesses like fuel stations followed, said chief executive Michael Schwarz.

Now it's hardly possible to find plexiglass on the market, the 40-year-old said, and he doesn't expect a change for many weeks. "Current orders will receive delivery dates, if any, from the end of the year to the beginning of 2021."

For Mr. Antonelli, the main problem has been getting his hands on enough plexiglass to meet demand. The protective box he designed for the local hospital was such a hit that he got a request for 50 more. He had to turn it down due to the lack of material.

"It's like I have a shiny Ferrari but fuel is running dry," he said.

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