

Hostile Streets

Designing for inclusive public space

This paper is an intervention in the dehumanization of unhoused persons. I examine the intersection of urban design, public space, and homelessness through the lens of infrahumanization. Informed by a literature review and media scan, this paper questions whether unhoused people are considered valued human members of the public in urban design decision-making processes in the city of Toronto, Canada. This study raises new questions about the possibilities of human-centred design that might address the exclusionary consequences of hostile design practices and disrupt the infrahumanization of unhoused persons as devalued outcasts of the city.

Keywords: Toronto, homelessness, infrahumanization, public space, hostile design, human-centred design

HOSTILE STREETS: DESIGNING FOR INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACE

The idea for this paper was sparked by a moment that happened in Toronto, Canada, one day as I was walking out of Union Station just after the afternoon rush hour. While waiting on the street for the pedestrian signal to change, I saw a skateboarder jumping over something on the ground. When my eyes turned toward the object, I was shocked to see he was jumping over a human being wrapped in a sleeping bag. Horrified, I tried to blink this disturbing image away but, as the light changed and I walked closer to the skateboarder, I saw the tell-tale cardboard sign, the coffee cup containing a few coins, the duffle bag, and, most disturbing, a video camera—proving that the jump over the unconscious person was not accidental. This indeed was real and happening in the heart of the Financial District. This memory encapsulates the most heart-wrenching moment of human poverty I have ever witnessed and one that I cannot seem to erase. A human body was seen as a piece of the city—more human than object, but less than a full person. This paper is an intervention in that moment and memory, allowing me to, perhaps, understand how a human body could be so devalued and so enmeshed in the mundane urban landscape that another citizen had no emotional attachment to this being.

Hostile Streets

Unhoused persons break essential social conventions of capitalist societies by living outside of the economy in a visible way. The homeless lack walls and property rights, and homelessness places an individual's private life under the gaze of the public. Homelessness provokes a moral controversy over who is to blame and who is responsible. Attempts to answer this question typically fall into one of two camps: it's an issue either of personal meritocracy (failing on behalf of an individual) or of systems failure (failing to care for an individual). While it is undoubtedly useful to consider the origins of problems as big and complex as homelessness, blame is unproductive.

Unhoused people are subject to inhumanization—a term introduced by Leyens, et al. (2000), referring to a tendency for people to perceive individuals in other groups as less human. The purpose of this article is to investigate the intersection of urban design, public space, and homelessness through the lens of inhumanization. Informed by a literature review and media scan, one of the questions this paper will address is whether unhoused people are considered valued human members of “the public” in urban design decision-making processes in the City of Toronto.

This paper has three main sections. In the first, I discuss homelessness in Canada, with a particular focus on the homelessness crisis in Toronto. The second section focuses on an empirical case study of hostile urban design in Toronto and sheds light on how the concept of inhumanization normalizes the day-to-day invisibility of unhoused persons on city streets. In the third, I draw attention to human-centred design and new questions raised by this research, asking, for example, how design can be used as a tool of repair to create more inclusionary public spaces.

BETWEEN VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY: HOMELESSNESS, DEHUMANIZATION, AND PUBLIC SPACE

In this paper, the term homeless will refer to the issue itself and the term unhoused persons will refer to people who are in a current state of being homeless. This distinction was brought to my attention by American philosopher Robert Rosenberger in his book *Callous Objects* (2017, p. 60), where he argues that, for some, “the term homeless has become weighed down with negative connotations” and, I would add, these negative connotations are frequently and specifically criminal. Living outside is often conflated with living outside the law.

According to Johnstone, Eunjung, and Connelly (2017), the diminution of the Canadian welfare state through neo-liberal policies is associated with an increase in housing precarity and homelessness in the country. Their research shows how the responsibility for housing was passed down through different levels of government and is directly correlated to the rise in homelessness seen in Toronto. The authors argue:

Hostile Streets

In 1993, the federal provision of social housing was withdrawn and sole responsibility was passed to the provincial governments. In Ontario, the election of the Conservatives in 1995 saw further downloading of public responsibilities to the municipal level. In 2001 and onward, Ontario was reported as having the highest rate of homelessness present in Canada, and Toronto as in crisis. (p. 1444)

Research conducted by York University's Stephen Gaetz shows us how focusing on short-term solutions (such as emergency shelters) costs more than implementing long-term solutions for homelessness. Gaetz explains that, by "providing [unhoused persons] with housing and the supports they need, we lower the costs associated with hospital admissions, emergency outpatient services, incarceration, and other emergency services" (2012, p. 14). Citing Gordon Laird in a report from 2007, Gaetz points out that, "between 1993 and 2004, Canadian taxpayers spent an estimated \$49.5 billion maintaining the status quo on the homeless problem in Canada" (p. 3). In a fact sheet compiled by the City of Toronto, the primary causes of homelessness are listed as the economy and the housing market—specifically, the "increasing costs of rental housing in Toronto over the past ten years" (Anderson, 2018). Social Planning Toronto's 2020 report, *Toronto After a Decade of Austerity*, offers a snapshot of how underfunding in the past decade has compounded the crises in homelessness, public transit, and childcare. This report highlights similar trends to Gaetz's nationwide study of homelessness in Canadian cities.

According to the most recent Street Needs Assessment conducted in 2018 by the City of Toronto, there are over 8700 unhoused persons in Toronto. Writing for *PressProgress*, Mitchell Thompson (2019) quotes Cathy Crowe—a Street Nurse and Distinguished Visiting Practitioner at Ryerson University—who claims that Toronto's shelter system has, for years, surpassed its 90 percent limit, exacerbating dangerous and overcrowded conditions. A snapshot of Toronto's daily shelter census in March 2019 demonstrated that co-ed, men's, women's, and youth shelters had reached a 96–99 percent occupancy rate, while family shelters were at 100 percent capacity (City of Toronto, "Daily shelter & overnight service usage"). More than just a cold weather snap, these numbers reflect a chronic homelessness crisis that is worsening. Gaetz argues that "when we as citizens say we cannot afford an 'affordable housing strategy,' we are missing an important point: the lack of such a strategy in fact costs us a substantial amount of money" (2012, p. 14) and, I would add, our shared humanity. Pushing homelessness out of the public eye is a short-sighted reaction to a long-term and complex problem. Hostile designs encourage further dehumanization because there are no long-term solutions that seek to invite unhoused persons into the Toronto community, and yet there are designs to deter their presence in the public sphere.

Hostile Streets

In a 1999 paper on public spaces and crime prevention, criminologist Rob White details how “strategic urban planning” can prevent crime, writing that “the message is that public places are for the ‘people.’ However, some people are made more welcome than others in the public domain” (p. 11). White argues that the street as a multi-functional space has been transformed, both architecturally and socially, into a more regulated and managed space with the advent of consumer-oriented capitalism. Public and commercial architecture reflect a neo-liberal economic shift that has become more focused on individual consumers and shopping as a leisure activity. The privatization of public space is an important factor in the development of hostile design as it points to how and why hostile design came to be used. As public spaces are privatized, the use of hostile design increases and unhoused persons are pushed out.

When unhoused persons are ejected from public spaces, they are viewed as separate from the group that is allowed and encouraged to take up space publicly. Social psychologist Herbert Kelman writes that “extreme dehumanization... becomes possible when the target group can readily be identified as a separate category of people who have historically been stigmatized for one or another reason” (1973, p. 50). Due to widespread homelessness in Toronto, seeing humans in poverty has become routine. Kelman explains that routinization “reduces the necessity of making decisions, thus minimizing occasions in which moral questions arise” (p. 46). Thus, actions such as stepping over unhoused persons on the street or looking away when we catch a glimpse of them because it is uncomfortable becomes normalized through repetition. When design is used to force behavioural adaptation without addressing the underlying causes of homelessness such as unaffordable housing and the reduction of rooming houses, it is expensive, unproductive and cruel. Funding is allocated to minimizing the appearance of homelessness by shifting unhoused persons around the city without addressing underlying policy and financial deficits for additional shelters, additional subsidized housing, increased wages, and other monetary factors which would help reduce homelessness.

A CASE STUDY OF HOSTILE DESIGN AND INFRAHUMANIZATION IN TORONTO

Hostile design and its various conceptualizations—anti-homeless design, defensive design, hostile architecture—refer to urban design practices that intentionally discriminate against or deter people from using public space as their private space. As British artist Stuart Semple explains, hostile design is where “public spaces are modified to deter certain activities such as rough sleeping and skateboarding,” adding that it is “a stealthy way of policing public space.” These designs “legitimize the point of view that homeless people are the enemy” (quoted in Shaw, 2018). The simplest example of hostile design is the public bench. A bench is intended to serve a purpose—providing a place to sit. But the design of a public bench is frequently broken up by arm rests or bucket seats or small details that separate a long rectangle

Hostile Streets

into smaller compartments. These armrests are sometimes referred to as anti-loitering or anti-sleep features (Semple, quoted in Shaw, 2018). Thus, objects have what Rosenberger terms *multistability*, meaning that the bench can fulfill uses beyond its intended design (2017, p. 7). The plausible deniability of hostile design is one reason why it is both pervasive and effective as a means of asserting social control over public space. Once design becomes overtly anti-homeless, it's more likely that individuals will call attention to its inhumanity.

A recent example of hostile design can be seen on Toronto's new subway platforms, including those at York University. Aesthetically, the platform seating keeps with the style of each station, yet the seating at all stations includes anti-sleep features. Likewise, Toronto's University Health Network (UHN) installed metal bars atop a warm-air grate outside the Toronto General Hospital, allegedly to "deter homeless people" (Doherty, 2018). Sleeping on heating vents is a common way for unhoused persons to stay warm and keep from freezing to death in Toronto winters. According to Dr. Charlie Chan, then interim president of UHN, the reason for installing the bars was to improve the safety of the public's access to the emergency room entrance by reducing foot traffic and hazardous objects such as discarded needles (Doherty, 2018). However, UHN did not consider that the heating grate possessed a multi-stable function: while the need to improve safety was met, no thought was given to where the persons who used the heating grate for warmth would go. After backlash online and in the media, the bars were removed. Although the overall increase of hostile design has not been measured, it cannot be considered a deterrent to homelessness given the increase both in shelter use and in the number of unhoused individuals—from 5253 in 2013 to 8715 in 2018, a 40 percent increase (Street Needs Assessments, 2013 and 2018).

The City of Toronto is responsible for the designs of its public furniture, including the previously mentioned benches. According to its official website, the City entered into a twenty-year agreement with Astral Media for the "supply, manufacturing, installation and maintenance of 25,000 street furniture elements" (City of Toronto, "About the Street Furniture Program"). The agreement benefits both parties by providing Astral with "advertising exclusivity" and the city with "free installation and maintenance of furniture, [and] revenue sharing from advertising." The downside of this agreement is that the people who use street furniture the most are not considered. The chosen design dehumanizes unhoused persons by pushing them out of public space in a failed attempt to make them invisible.

What this sequence of events shows is that, if there is no resistance, hostile designs become tacitly approved and incorporated into the fabric of the city. Design communicates value. Tacit approval sends the message that homeless persons should not be seen and, to this end, city officials will continue to design environments that range from somewhat uncomfortable to completely inhospitable. The public bench with anti-sleep features and the metal bars blocking hospital heating grates shape

Hostile Streets

behaviour and limit the ways space can be used and who can have access to these spaces.

HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN: TOWARD AN INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACE

Urban design is a tool capable of harm and repair. Critical geographer Don Mitchell frames this idea as being informed by “two opposed, and perhaps irreconcilable, ideological visions of the nature and purpose of public space” (1995, p. 115). However, the empathic philosophy of human-centred design provides a bridge between these ideological visions. This approach is embraced by Danish architect Jan Gehl, who states that “the rationalist design of cities was detrimental to civic health and vitality, as the urban landscape often prioritized machines over people” (quoted in Goldsmith, 2019). In 2021, the Gehl Institute (an American non-profit organization promoting people-friendly urban design) and SPUR (an American non-profit public policy organization) produced a key report entitled *Coexistence in Public Space: Engagement Tools for Creating Shared Spaces in Places with Homelessness* (Huttenhoff, 2021, pp. 13–17). The report outlines creative and inclusive strategies such as place stewards, zoned lighting, spaces designed to facilitate meaningful dialogue, rules co-designed by the community instead of “management” through enforcement, and a dedicated social worker in public parks. The goal of the report, and the tools highlighted within it, is to “shift the narrative from: ‘the park will only be great if there are no homeless people in it’ to: ‘the park will only be great if we design for coexistence’” (Huttenhoff, 2021, p. 12). Similarly, architect Jan Gehl points out that “we now know that first, we form the cities, but then the cities form us” (Louisiana Channel, 2017). Environment can be changed through thought, and environment can also change thought. Human-centred design takes many forms, from the simplest of infrastructures to augmented reality (Archdaily, 2020; Bousquet & Goldsmith, 2018). Success is measured by how effectively design interacts with life. In his 2005 book *Designing for the Homeless: Architecture That Works*, Sam Davis, architect and professor emeritus at UC Berkeley, provides blueprints and explains how homeless shelters can function to support and transition homeless persons into the Toronto community.

Space may be engineered for one community without the explicit intention of excluding another. This acknowledgement does not detract from the fact that the design of space can be harmful and can dehumanize or punish those it was not designed to include. What my research has shown is that it is more often lack of thought, consideration, consultation, or even compassion that results in hostile design rather than pure malice. A lack of resources does not make a person criminal. Living in a community and a nation—which proudly claim to value equality—entitles all persons to public space and to fundamental human rights such as safe housing.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to build knowledge and compassion. Rather than offering a prescribed solution from my own perspective, I ask that readers think with me about the processes of inhumanization and our daily interactions with unhoused individuals. How do these encounters make you feel? How do you think unhoused people feel in their daily interactions on the streets? What can be done to humanize these interactions? Responses to these questions challenge the normalization of homeless bodies on the streets as invisible objects. When we *do* see them, when we make the choice to *not* look away, the funding will follow, inclusive design will follow, and we will see that the budgetary and design problems we are trying to solve have more to do with human value than is comfortable to admit.

I contend that, moving forward, it is integral that we recognize the cycle of influence in how we think about homelessness and unhoused persons, how we choose to structure and spend budgets allocated to resolving homelessness, and how we build environments, both physical and communal. These factors are inextricably linked to one another. By articulating how specific designs impact unhoused persons, this paper is a call to city planners, urban designers, architects, and citizens to reimagine and modify urban visions to include unhoused persons, not just as objects to be managed in the city fabric, but as a part of urban communities.

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Hostile Streets

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Hostile Streets

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