

Shelter and the Homeless

The history of homeless Americans can be traced back as far as the “settling” of foreign immigrants in the 19th century. Often forced to leave their native land as a result of poverty, many “newly-made Americans” found themselves extremely poor and without shelter from the elements. Nearly two hundred years later in the year 2004, architect Sam Davis, in his book Designing for the Homeless, estimates the number of homeless in the United States at any given night to be well over 700,000 and “the number of people who experience a period of homelessness sometime during the calendar year may well be over 2 million” (p. 14). Since the 1980’s, efforts have been made to provide shelter for low-income and homeless individuals. Emergency shelters and Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels are the most common of the proposed solutions. Interestingly enough, these environments are often regarded as a last resort for the homeless as levels of security, sanitation and humanity are seldom adequate. The design and maintenance of the warehouse-like shelters and dilapidated SRO hotels suggest that providing shelter for the homeless has been equated to solely providing a physical protection from the outdoor environment. Little attention is paid to the lack of identity provided to the homeless individual and the negative “homeless identity” projected to the public as a result of these habitats. By redefining “shelter”, can architects generate a new identity for the homeless?

In the simplest terms, a shelter could be considered a place of physical protection, a roof over someone’s head. The New American Webster Dictionary defines “shelter” as “something which affords protection or refuge, as from the rain or attack; a place of refuge or safety” (Barnhart, 1115). In the life of the homeless individual, a shelter or emergency shelter can be defined as a building that provides temporary nighttime lodging. Various philosophers; however, have brought to light other components of “shelter” that may be essential to the success of contemporary homeless habitats.

According to turn of the century French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his essay entitled *The Poetics of Space*, “the chief benefit of the house [is to shelter]

daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace”. He aims to “show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind”. Bachelard points to the daydream as the “binding principle in this integration”. “Without [a house], man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heaven and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being’s first world” (p. 88). If ever there were a place to take solace in time of rehabilitation, it would be the home. The shelter as “home” then represents a solid foundation from which the homeless may regain their dignity, their true identity. How can we design transitional shelters in light of Bachelard’s emphasis on the importance of the house? What defines a building as a home?

In German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s “Building, Dwelling, Thinking...Poetically Man Dwells...”, he speaks of human dwelling with relation to building. He asks how building belongs to dwelling and concludes, “dwelling and building are related as end and means” (p. 100). In this philosophy building is portrayed as a method through which we as human beings express our nature to dwell on Earth and in life. Through the breakdown of language he illustrates parallel meanings in the origin of the word “dwell”: “to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine” (p. 101). These verbs are depictive of what buildings can accomplish for human beings. Yet Heidegger asserts “building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing and the building that erects buildings” (p. 102). Heidegger admits that not all buildings are perceived as dwellings which gives way to the question: Do homeless shelters as buildings accomplish the sister goals of dwelling: the cherishing, the protecting, the preserving and the cultivating? If not, how can buildings built for the homeless inspire the experience of true human dwelling?

To answer these questions, we must first understand the pros and cons of current homeless shelters. The “housing continuum”, outlined by Sam Davis, is comprised of the various levels of available housing based on one’s ability to pay and ranging from the homeless shelter to the owner-occupied home (Davis, 9-11). The low-income and homeless populations frequent three of these housing types.

First on the list is the emergency shelter, generally dormitory-style wards with occupancy from weeks to months, which houses those with the inability to pay for housing. Many shelter recipients have physical or mental health problems. Congregate shelters constitute a significant subdivision of this housing type. They are large undivided, barrack-style rooms lined with beds that have served up to roughly 1,400 individuals a night, well over the typical 200 person limit. Generally, the larger the shelter, the looser the rules tend to be, and the greater crime, transmission of disease and disorder (Fantasia, Isserman, 62). Self-identity for the homeless individual is very poor considering privacy is virtually non-existent and the staff is many times unresponsive to individual needs.

Secondly, is transitional housing which takes various forms, the single room occupancy (SRO) hotel being the most common. The organization of the SRO building can vary from small independent studio units to boardinghouses. Services are usually included but not always onsite. Some residents have the ability to pay for housing mostly through disability payments or other forms of rent subsidy (Davis, 10). The rooms are intended for day-by-day, weekly and monthly rentals at low rates. Yet, with the dramatic disappearance of SRO buildings due to downtown redevelopment and gentrification, those that have survived have tended to raise their rates or formulate more long-term rental agreements making them difficult to get into for many homeless (Fantasia, Isserman, 165). Unfortunately due to the poorly located and maintained, negative homeless identity often is afforded to the residents of SRO hotels.

Lastly, public housing is created specifically for those with insufficient income to afford the market rent. They often manifest in multifamily apartment buildings designed for families or seniors. Originally developed by the federal government, this housing is now supported by nonprofit community development corporations. Those with some ability to pay are expected to spend 30 percent of their monthly income on rent.

The aforementioned building projects are prone to publicly stigmatize the homeless and low-income populations that seek shelter there. Long lines of homeless waiting their turn in “shelter beds” are a common occurrence on the streets of many major U.S cities. Many SRO buildings are visually dilapidated from the exterior and in the poorest parts of town. These are just a few examples that contribute to the “homeless

identity” as projected to the general public. In an effort to create a new identity for the homeless, we must discover the diversity of individuals that lies under the larger umbrella term of “the homeless”.

According to Sam Davis, the fastest-growing segment of the homeless is single mothers. In many cities across the U.S., 40 percent of the homeless populations are families. Roughly 22 percent of the homeless are employed. Less than 10 percent of homeless are older than 55, but this number is steadily increasing. Between 10 and 25 percent are chronically homeless. Military veterans make up almost 23 percent. Nearly 30 percent of homeless are mentally ill, including depression. Members of this segment generally mistrust authority and group living making them ultimately “shelter-resistant”. About 30 percent of homeless are substance abusers and about 10 percent live in rural areas (Davis, 14).

These statistics suggest that the homeless demographics are rich in diversity and complexity yet the “homeless identity” as perceived by housed persons is often one-dimensional: dirty, dangerous and lazy. Granted, certain homeless may not feel affect by this public misconception. The power of the designer resides in the provision of a new “homeless” identity to those who desire it. Through the provision of varied forms well-designed shelters, designers can give the homeless options of public image and self identity to choose from to replace the current amorphous categorization of “the homeless”.

Architects have the power to reprogram public perception of homelessness. According to Jean Williams in her book, A Roof Over My Head- Homeless Women and the Shelter Industry, it is the homeless shelters that formulate housed people’s understanding of the homeless.

“By making many aspects of their programs mandatory, for instance, shelters give the impression that homeless people will not take initiative on their own to look for work or housing, enroll their children in school, or keep their living spaces clean” (p. 2).

Nevertheless, it is not program reform alone that is able to reformulate the perceived identity of the homeless. Architects can design shelters that represent to the public a

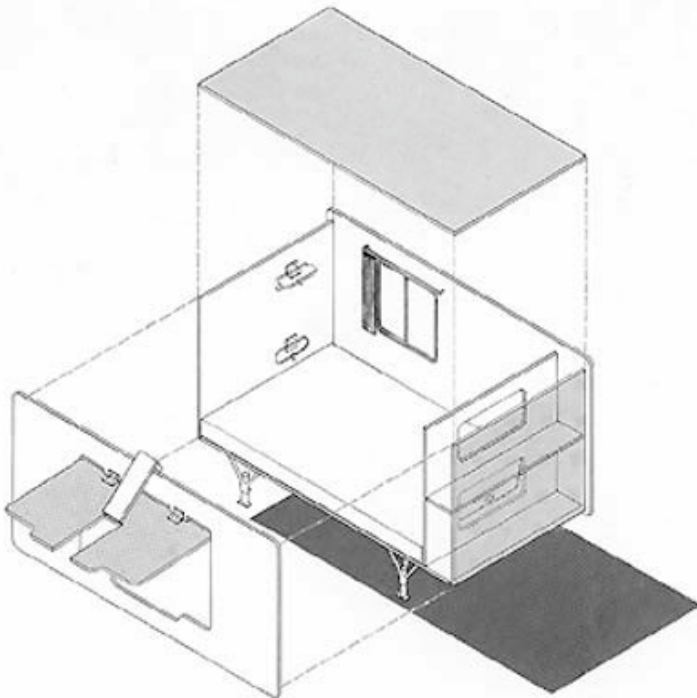
place of growth, self-reliance and self-motivation. Equally, architects can design interior spaces with layouts aimed to elicit the desired behavior changes of tenants.

“At its most basic, designing a shelter entails fitting the requisite number of beds in a given space. But my clients have moved beyond logistics to explore how design can help establish trust between the provider and the homeless and how design can create a sense of belonging for people who may have few social connections” (Davis, ix).

We as architects have the tools to create space. The created space then has the power to invoke human emotional responses such as loving attachment, a sense of security and a self-empowerment. Thus architects have the power to elicit and, to some extent, control human emotions. “At its best, architecture not only reflects but also serves society; it has a duty to provide for those with the greatest need and fewest options. Thus architecture should do more than provide homeless people with shelter: it must sustain their hope and dignity” (Davis, x). Architects can provide new solutions for the homeless because architects, as designers, are able to redefine the requirements of human “shelter”. Well-designed space is often a luxury afforded to the wealthy. Many homeless individuals have come from abusive environments, which have led them to substance abuse, prostitution, and other destructive paths. Many have not chosen to reject society so much as they have simply lost their emotional, mental and/or financial footing and been forced to make their way in the streets. Some are physically or mentally ill and have no person or place with which to seek refuge. For these types of homeless and more, a well-designed physical space could provide the physical and emotional security that is necessary in the rehabilitation process. The thoughtful design of shelters can help the homeless feel integrated with their environments, less stigmatized within the community and more apt to undergo a path towards permanent housing and independence.

A handful of contemporary designers have discovered the resourcefulness inherent in their space-making tools and have embarked on a new identity for the homeless by way of shelter design. For example, San Francisco architect Donald MacDonald designed the “city sleeper” in 1987. The shelter was boxlike, made entirely of plywood construction and raised off of the ground by inverted car jacks. It was large enough to house one homeless individual, it could be secured from the inside and it could

be fabricated for less than eight hundred dollars. Although the proposed solution was conceived with good intentions, city hall denounced the plan for the design did not account for running water nor did it meet several other building codes (Fantasia, Isserman, 57). “The Sleeper provides [the homeless] with shelter- while supporting the belief that *everyone has a right to a home*” (MacDonald). McDonald’s design emphasizes individuality at its core. The homeless individual can be self-sufficient in this solution with complete control over his or her shelter environment.



Rosanne Haggerty, founder and president of Common Ground Community, a New York based nonprofit housing and community development organization, has had first hand experience with the positive affects of good design in the lives of the homeless. In 1990, her organization began to restore and transform dilapidated SRO hotels into affordable and attractive low-income housing opportunities. For the reinvention of the Times Square Hotel, the Common Ground has secured a historic landmark, which in turn pays for much of the up-keep costs by way of historic tax credits. All tenants pay rent of some denomination and the on-site services do not come with restrictions and obligations as many federal run operations often do. Haggerty describes the tenant reactions to the power of thoughtful design as profound, uplifting and inspiring (Holtzman, 1).

Randy Gragg of Architecture Magazine wrote an article titled “Guerrilla City” about a unique shelter type originating in Portland Oregon. In 2000, Dignity Village began as a typical homeless tent campsite situated under a freeway overpass, which, over a relatively short amount of time, transformed itself into a self-governed, sustainable cottage community. Although extremely diverse, the villagers have been successful in electing officials to preside over the settlement. The land on which they currently reside is being temporarily leased by the city however a permanent place of residence for their community is a primary initiative for the Village. Gragg relays the villagers pride in their homegrown independence and identity, “The villagers share a distaste for homeless shelters and a resolve to overturn public perceptions that the homeless are dirty, dangerous, or deadbeat” (p. 1).

From the very naissance of the Village, community activist and architect Mark Lakeman offered he services to the effort. Not only did Lakeman help design the community-promoting “pod” layout of the Village, he represented an instrumental political force in the acquisition of the current camp location. In his 40-page plan titled, “Dignity Village 2001 & Beyond: Outlining Strategies for a Sustainable Future” he appealed to the city of Portland’s sentiments by modeling the Village after “Portland’s larger urban-planning pattern book, with its emphasis on connectivity, public buildings, and plazas” (p. 2). This shelter scheme exemplifies an architect’s ability to generate economically self-reliant, dignified solutions for housing the homeless.

Designers have the ability to generate a new identity for homeless because they can design a variety of shelters that promote and project individuality, self-sufficiency and dignity. Naturally, good design is not the only thing needed to help the homeless restructure their lives. The homeless can benefit from other existing amenities such as public services and social programs aimed to support the individual in his/her rehabilitation process. However, the role of the architect must no longer be overlooked. In fact, if we as a society are going to resolve the rising prevalence of poverty in our nation, we must apply all of the tools at our disposal in this effort. Transforming the identity of “the homeless” from the inside out is something that must be achieved with the help of good design.

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