

Hostile Architecture and Homelessness: The Fight To Simply Be

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“Why is simply being not enough?” This is one of the many questions V. Lane Hoy poses in their dissertation on hostile and hospitable architecture (Hoy 20). Hostile architecture is an increasingly common occurrence in urban hubs around the world such as London and New York City. Hostile architecture is a style of architecture characterized by its anti-homeless, and often anti-public as a whole, design. These designs can range from curved subway grates, to benches with unnecessary arm rests, to even spikes and barbed wire placed in public spaces (Jordan 0:54, Petty 68). Many governments which erect hostile structures often use the excuse that they somehow benefit the majority of the public. Sometimes they outright remove the previously existing design and replace it with one that may be more visually appealing, but in practice is less functional for both the general populace and the homeless. No matter the reasoning behind it, hostile architecture is a growing plague on the world’s urban environments which does nothing to actually fix the problem which it is attempting to solve. In constructing aggressively designed and uncomfortable public spaces, there are no winners. Both the public and the homeless suffer from unnecessary and frequently outright dangerous structures, preventing them from “simply being” in a space supposedly made for the benefit of the public.

A prime example of hostile architecture is the New York City rail and subway systems. The subways are a common way for the homeless and impoverished of New York to stay warm during the winter; however, the city has not only removed benches previously in place, but also limited the remaining seating to areas which require paid entry or purchase of a train ticket (Jordan 7:23). By requiring people to have a ticket or to buy food at the cafes in the train stations in order to gain access to seating, the design of New York train stations becomes actively hostile toward those who cannot afford to pay for food or a ticket. Although these design choices are meant to deter the homeless from loitering in the stations and on subway platforms, they also disrupt the quality of life for everyone else using the rail systems (Jordan 4:22). Lack of seating in public spaces is meant to keep people who are homeless from sleeping or taking refuge in the station, forcing them to find a different area to simply be. The likely unintended consequence is that people who are in the stations just waiting for their train are also exposed to the results of the lack of public seating, being forced to stand around in vast empty spaces with nowhere to sit (Jordan 6:58). As Cash Jordan puts it, the hostile environment of these stations “doesn’t do anything to make people less homeless” as homelessness still persists throughout New York and

all that hostile architecture does is decrease the quality of life for everyone else using these public spaces (5:20).

The train stations of New York are not the only public spaces which urban governments weaponize against their own communities. Cities such as New York and Salem, Virginia restrict access to parks through various methods. Both cities limit access to their parks at night in order to restrict access to people who are homeless and may be looking to stay the night (Jordan 11:44). Many of these parks have locked gates and even security cameras in place to prevent people from using these spaces, which are theoretically dedicated to public use, to sleep and have shelter. For example, both Longwood Park and Greenhill Park in Salem have cameras installed in and around their pavilions. If the cameras pick up on somebody in the parks after they close, Longwood at 10pm and Greenhill at 11pm, the police are contacted to remove the offender from the premises. Both Longwood and Greenhill are located on the far ends of Main Street in Salem, the two ends of the city in which the majority of the homeless population reside. The center of town along Main Street, although containing several open public spaces in which people who are homeless could acquire shelter and a comfortable spot to sleep, is even more intensely maintained via cameras and overly bright lamps and streetlights. The aggressive policing of public spaces does not solve the issue of homelessness. Policing and monitoring the parks and public spaces in urban environments only serves to intensify the suffering which people without homes face on a daily basis by alienating them from the rest of their community.

The policing of specifically Longwood Park greatly impacts the homeless community in Salem. Longwood Park is a short walk from Lakeside Kroger, the most prominent and publicly visible homeless hub in the city and a place where many homeless go to buy groceries or beg for change. Longwood Park is just down the street, about a ten or fifteen minute walk away. The park has four pavilions. Every one of the pavilions has several picnic benches, two have access to running water, and two have insulated restrooms. Every single pavilion has at least one camera in place to prevent people sleeping in them. Furthermore, Salem's government recently extended their territorial aggression to Lakeside Kroger itself, installing towering blue lights all over the parking lot, making it excessively difficult for the people who reside there to sleep or find some semblance of shelter and privacy. Salem, Virginia is a primary example of the exact practices which urban governments use to quietly and effectively destroy safe spaces for people who are

homeless. Salem, Virginia is a city which violates the rights of people to simply be and exist in a safe, comfortable space.

Benches are one of the most common and essential pieces of architectural infrastructure. Public parks, public train stations, and public bus stops all utilize benches to provide comfortable seating for people using public services. One of, if not the, most common forms of hostile architecture completely goes against this idea. Benches in parks are designed to keep people from sitting for long and stop people without homes from sleeping on them (Starolis). Train stations remove benches from platforms, depriving people who are elderly, pregnant, and homeless of them (Jordan 3:08). Bus stops have added non-functional arm rests to their benches to prevent people from laying down or have even completely replaced the benches with stands to lean on (Thomas 0:43). These hostile structures only serve to harm people without homes along with the general public. No actual benefit or solution comes from hostile architecture, it only serves to hide the problem from sight. As Hoy puts it, the forces which put hostile architecture in place view unhoused people as “a public imposition, one that should be ‘dealt with,’ somehow eradicated from sight” and that is exactly what these forms of hostile architecture aim to do, regardless of how they deteriorate public spaces in the process (20).

The alienation of people without homes is an issue which hostile architecture only works to further. One of the reasons hostile architecture is so widespread is because unhoused people are seen as impure and disruptive to established social standards. Rosalyn Deutsche asserts that a pre-existent perception of what a public space should be and the consequential idea that a homeless person “disrupts” the natural order of social spaces leads to the alienation of people without homes (8). Hostile architecture only further alienates unhoused people from society through the subconscious implication that only people of a certain class and social status have the right to use public spaces. Deutsche’s argument supports Hoy’s claim that there is a prevalent and shockingly widespread idea that only a handful of people “have a rightful place in the public” and therefore the homeless population is often forced out of public spaces (20). The pre-existing hostility toward people who are homeless, whether it is conscious or not, is only further encouraged through the installation of designs specifically made to keep homeless people out of public spaces.

Hoy further critiques the school of thought that an individual must earn the right to exist in public by asking a simple, yet powerful question: “why is simply being not enough” (20)?

Why do people have to justify their existence? However, not all people share that school of thought which questions the homeless population's right to use public spaces. James Petty points out the "vocal debates" sparked by calling out local forms of hostile architecture in London, namely metal studs or "spikes" installed on the pavement to keep people without homes from sitting or laying on the sidewalk in front of buildings (68). Notably, the outcry from the public got these spikes removed, but there is still the issue of why they were put there to begin with. Petty identifies the source of hostile architecture as the increasing "privatisation" of public spaces, with many cities and companies aiming to eliminate any "non-profitable" activity from the space (69). Haley Starolis backs up this hypothesis with her example of a bank which used metal beams to prevent people who were not using the bank's ATMs from sitting outside the bank and crowding the area. The consumerist transformation of public spaces has a dire implication to the answer of Hoy's question: the implication that people only have the right to be if they have material value. According to Cash Jordan's video on hostile architecture in New York, even seating has been commercialized (Jordan 7:23). The rise of hostile architecture is not a simple matter of making public spaces prettier and hiding the homeless from sight. Hostile architecture is a blatant attack on the most impoverished class, indicating to people without homes that they are without worth and alienating them from society as a whole.

Although hostile architecture is a plague which widens the divide between people who are homeless and those more privileged, there are those who are working toward a cure. In his TED Talk, Rory Thomas draws attention to the work of Michael Rakowitz on the paraSITE project. Rakowitz designs individualized heated tents which attach to buildings' exterior heat outlets and inflate to create warm places for people without homes to spend the night (Thomas 6:38). Furthermore, Thomas explains the importance of a community for homeless people. He specifically refers to a tower of buckets which the homeless community in that area rallied around and used as their own community hub (8:17). The centralization of unhoused people caused by this bucket tower, allowed for them to be a part of a community once again, not entirely, but partially reintegrating them into a form of societal structure. This reintegration works against the idea previously exposed by Deutsche on the alienation through demonization of the homeless population (Deutsche 8). The flaw with these two examples is that neither is easily widespread or reproducible, and neither of them are capable of producing the mass change required to truly resolve the issue of unhoused people present in urban environments around the

globe. Hospitable structures such as the paraSITE tents and the tower of buckets can only go so far. Mass change requires largescale reform and effort from both governmental and private organizations that control the public spaces which hostile architecture make inhospitable. Governments and businesses alike need to return the right for people to simply be.

While largescale reform is the only way to truly resolve the issue, that does not mean the measures being made to help people without homes are not worth it. Reviewing the previously given evidence, it is evident that change can be made, albeit on a smaller scale than desired. Spikes in London were removed after public backlash (Petty 68). People are receiving personalized, heated tents to protect them from the elements (Thomas 6:38). Most importantly, there are communities of unhoused people gathering around public structures, reclaiming their right to simply be (Thomas 8:17). Even on smaller levels, change is change. It may not be happening all at once, but little by little improvements are being made and hopefully, some day in the future, people will be able to go out into their local parks and train stations and exist comfortably in peace with other members of their community, capable of enjoying the space, using it as they please, and most importantly, simply being.

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