Design Response to Homelessness
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Introduction
In a recent panel discussion at NeoCon World’s Trade Fair, Ken Wilson of Envision, recipient of Contract magazine’s 2006 Designer of the Year Award, noted a “shift in the value equation toward a social responsibility that is fully integrated with design.” While his comments were offered in the context of a competition chiefly concerned with sustainable design, the breadth of his statement also speaks to a rise in collective consciousness within the design profession concerning issues of social justice in general. His comments echo other societal observers such as Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson, whose recent book, The Cultural Creatives (2000), describes a 50-million and growing population segment—fully 25% of the US population, as ‘tempered radicals’ bent, among other things, on progressive social improvement.

Within concerns of social justice, homelessness is persistent and destructive, characterized by a lifestyle fraught with danger and discomfort. This condition offers design professionals fertile ground for contributing to social betterment.

This issue will begin by explaining homelessness and presenting specialized programming considerations for designing shelter environments. Finally, it will discuss designers’ current responses to homelessness and how these responses might expand and evolve.

Homelessness in America
Statistics suggest that homelessness is escalating rapidly in scope and severity in the United States. While causes are many, a scarcity of low-cost housing is a main reason for homelessness in the US. In a typical region in the US, a minimum-wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at the recommended 30% of their income level. Though renting with others or commuting long distances to work represent strategies for dealing with the lack of low-cost housing, some live in their cars or on the streets to make ends meet.

Data on homelessness illuminate other contributing factors to homelessness. The poverty attendant on most of the homeless is often accompanied by a lack of job skills, alcohol and drug dependencies, and domestic violence—a factor that causes half of all homeless women and children to leave their home in the first place. The new composite portrait of a homeless person is evolving from the single older male of the 1970s toward a person who is...
younger, better educated, and often accompanied by family. At 39%, children were the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in a national survey conducted in 2003.

Researchers find it is difficult to quantify the number of homeless Americans, especially because the problem is often a temporary condition. Yet, there is strong evidence that homelessness has dramatically increased within the US over the past two decades. A 2004 shelter count study conducted by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty suggested that 3.5 million Americans (including 1.35 million children) experienced homelessness in a given year; the actual number is likely higher as the study did not count those who did not seek help. The National Coalition for the Homeless describes the increase in shelter beds as another indicator of demand. Several studies suggest that bed quantities tripled between 1981 and 1989 in 182 American cities, and certain regions’ capacity doubled or tripled again in 1987 to 1997.

Most homeless persons profess a great desire to obtain the social and health resources that will resolve their homelessness status. Seriously reduced social welfare and educational programs for homeless individuals have compounded the problem, resulting in more need than can be accommodated. In a survey conducted by the mayors of 24 major American cities in 2005, an astounding 32% of homeless families were denied emergency shelter due to lack of resources. Hypothermia and death from freezing are not uncommon among the street homeless in the US.

Shelter Facilities and the Continuum of Care

Because most homelessness facilities are funded all or in part by government entities, they are often required to offer a comprehensive progression of services. This collection of programs and physical facilities are designed to address the root causes of homelessness. Emergency shelters are the first point of outreach in this ‘continuum of care.’ Transitional housing is the next step, which provides clients with skills needed for permanent housing. Permanent housing provides a final long term sustainable living opportunity, often with rent no more than 30% of income as formerly homeless persons move toward permanent societal reintegration and market rate housing.

While all aspects of the continuum of care are important, the emergency shelter facility often stands as a homeless person’s first contact with an organized societal response to their situation. As such, it is important as sources of ‘first impressions,’ outreach, and support. Physical facility design plays a crucial role in a person’s acceptance or rejection of this help.

Shelters are difficult to characterize in part due to the diversity of homeless populations served, but also due to differences among sponsoring agencies. Many homeless facilities are located in buildings that formerly served other purposes such as warehouses, office buildings, and schools. Quality runs the gamut from a safe, orderly refuge to squalid, overcrowded

Due to lack of funding, shelter facilities may offer only the most basic of amenities; such poor environments may complicate recuperation.
Implications

flophouses. The number of beds can range from five to over 300; some are affiliated with religious-based organizations while others are sponsored through public funds. Shelters often respond to the specific needs of their clientele and may cater specifically to niche populations such as runaway adolescents, women, families, or those with AIDS. This specialization can have certain advantages, as facilities offering refuge to children keep them separate from individuals who could harm them.

Programming Considerations

Like any project, undertaking the design of a facility to serve the homeless population requires deep understanding of the issues that are reflected in the programming document. Questions about users, budget, schedule, and site typical to all projects are accompanied by additional issues and pressures.

• A typical client organization is a non-profit agency that may be understaffed. The regulatory structure imposed on these agencies makes their decision-making potentially slow and donor stakeholders numerous. Government grants, which often serve as the primary funding source, require extensive paperwork; an organization may juggle a dozen or more grant sources, each with separate reporting requirements. Budget restrictions often cause agencies to rely on donated materials and furnishings that can result in potentially chaotic, piece-meal results.

• The public may be hostile to the project (the not-in-my-backyard mentality). Consequently, designers may be called in to allay worries regarding neighborhood interface and other potentially deleterious impacts.

• Especially if the shelter is to serve a general homeless population, it may be challenging to accommodate the diversity of needs. It may be necessary to provide separate entrances or divide space by gender or ability.

• Hygiene regimens for homeless shelter facilities are paramount, and some facilities are cleaned three times a day to prevent infestations and the spread of disease. Finishes, furnishings, and equipment must be up to these durability demands plus the rigors of 24/7 facility operation.

• Many organizations have the desire and means to expand their service offerings beyond a bed and hot meal. For example, the Institute for Child Poverty advocates the Residential Educational Training approach, which makes available services including social worker counseling, health care, nursery care, literacy programs, and job readiness training. Other shelters contain services such as courtrooms, barber shops, and even kennels into their facilities. This brings a pronounced public-private dichotomy into many shelters.

Empathy and User-centered Design

For the designer, perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of shelter programming is fully understanding a homeless person’s point of view. The typical homeless shelter resident is undergoing a crisis that has resulted in a change of lifestyle and the loss of familiar surroundings. This experience can effect a dramatic change in a person’s world view, impacting their needs and priorities.

The homeless often keep pets for companionship and protection. Shelters that offer solutions for dogs and cats may more easily convince a homeless person to leave the streets.
Implications

Tips for shelter design offered by homeless persons and shelter staff:

• Waiting in line can be central to attaining scarce services that it is often worth fighting for one’s place. Offer an ironclad way of keeping one’s place in line that does not necessarily require physically standing in it.

• As many homeless persons have been abused or attacked, they are sensitive to seating locations that expose their backs and places that prompt feelings of vulnerability. Strategically orient seating so users are facing out from sheltering walls. Think carefully about spatial volumes that may be overwhelming. Provide ‘retreat’ spaces.

• Homelessness results in fragile personal identity. Using name tags, not numbers, that assign temporary ownership to beds or living spaces can help preserve a sense of self and individuality.

• One of the largest mental challenges of homelessness is boredom. Out of sync with the schedule of work and family, idleness can exacerbate feelings of worthlessness and disconnection. Provide reading materials, newspapers and, as appropriate, gatherings or games.

• Balconies can be an aesthetic addition to a building, but they may also invite suicide attempts.

• Separate restrooms for staff should be provided to shield them from getting lice or scabies, and increase their length of service.

• Bedroom furniture should not be constructed of wood as bedbugs can burrow into the wood grain and become impossible to eradicate.

The Design Response Thus Far

Design professionals demonstrate enduring involvement in facilities design for the homeless. Architectural organizations including the American Institute of Architects (AIA), Design Corps, and Architecture for Humanity have all undertaken social programs, competitions, and other initiatives, and many design schools consistently engage their students in permanent and emergency shelter projects. Like its architectural sibling, interior design organizations also demonstrate engagement through professional organizations such as American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) and International Interior Design Association (IIDA). Non-profit interior design entities including Philanthropy by Design, Furnish a Future, Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS (DIFFA), and Design Response each make significant, thoughtful improvements to charitable organizations’ facilities or otherwise advocate for their causes. Similarly, an Internet search returns thousands of hits suggesting that designers frequently engage in pro bono work for homeless or related organizations. There is also a growing body of researchers who are investigating the social construct of the shelter and its many human implications for regaining a sense of home, self-identity, and a place in society.
The Next Step: Collaboratively Developed Guidelines

Despite the significant impact that design can have upon homelessness facilities, there needs to be more recognition of the broad potential that design research as a whole, and interior design specifically, can offer to the homelessness issue. More can be done at the macro level that could offer holistic guidance that taps the potential of reasoned research and the knowledge capital of professional designers. Solid research deserves to see actual application.

Furthermore, there currently exists a gap between knowledge/theory and employment of the strongest ideas in the field. Generating a series of written and drawn guidelines grounded in research might help bridge this knowledge-application disconnect.

These guidelines could offer shelter operators and designers clear, practical strategies for shelter design and maintenance, describing solutions and best practices for lighting and color psychology, place attachment, proxemics, defensible space, material specification, sustainability, and many other aspects of built space and could arise from the contributions of researchers, practitioners, and shelter operators who each bring a unique perspective and experience to the table. Additionally, homeless persons themselves would have much to add to the dialogue given that some experiences must be lived to be fully understood.

The homelessness problem is undeniable; yet, the extent of designers’ involvement is reason for optimism. There is much more to learn and collectively share about techniques to successfully confront and eradicate homelessness within this new century. Design professionals are well placed to add significant expertise and guidance to the physical facilities aspect of this issue.

References

Web References
—Architecture for Humanity www.architectureforhumanity.org
—Design Corps www.designcorps.org
—Design Response http://designresponse.org
—Philanthropy by Design www.pbd.org
—National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty http://www.nlchp.org/

A preliminary plan for a shelter’s pre-admittance patio that incorporates principles of proxemics, defensible space, lighting psychology, and sustainability.
Additional Resources

About the Author
Jill Pable, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Interior Design at Florida State University and an National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ) certificate holder. Her educational background includes B.S. and M.F.A. degrees in interior design and a Ph.D. in instructional technology with a specialization in architecture. Her educational papers have been awarded “Best Presentation” three times at international and regional Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC) Conferences. *Sketching Interiors at the Speed of Thought*, her CD-ROM-based exercise workbook, is now available through Fairchild Books.

Related Research Summaries
InformeDesign has many Research Summaries about issues of social justice and other, pertinent, related topics. This knowledge will be valuable to you as you consider your next design solution and is worth sharing with your clients and collaborators.

“Homeless Shelters Affect Children”
—*Journal of Pediatric Nursing*

“Relationship Between Fear of Crime and Supportive Housing”—*Journal of Urban Affairs*

“Crowded Residential Conditions Have Negative Effects”—*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*

“Housing Solutions for the Chronically Mentally Ill”
—*Housing and Society*

“Space and Color Affects Cooperation Among Children”—*Environment and Behavior*

“Factors Affecting Fear in Public Spaces”—*Environment and Behavior*

“Moveable Panels Offer Benefits to Assisted Living Residents”—*Housing and Society*

“Dual Diagnosis Treatment and Psychosocial Functioning”—*Addictive Behaviors*

“Environmental Design Can Lower Crime”
—*American Journal of Public Health*

“Impact of Age, Ethnicity, and Poverty on Children’s Home Experience”—*Child Development*

“Improving Working Women’s Hostels”
—*Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*

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