finding home
making a place for the homeless in the urban landscape

by Marissa A. Cheng
B.S., Urban Studies + Planning (2005)
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies + Planning
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master in City Planning
at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
February 2007

© 2007 Massachusetts Institute of Technology. All rights reserved.
The author hereby grants to MIT the permission to reproduce and to distribute
publicly paper and electronic copies of the thesis document in whole or in part.

Author
Department of Urban Studies + Planning
18 December 2006

Certified by
Professor John de Monchaux
Department of Architecture + Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by
Professor Langley Keyes
Chair, MCP Committee
Department of Urban Studies + Planning
ABSTRACT

Is homelessness a problem? What if you considered homelessness to be a state, rather than a problem, and provided for it accordingly in the urban landscape? As roads and water and sewer lines are one type of infrastructure, a diverse mix of dwelling types is another kind of infrastructure - the infrastructure in which we live. This thesis looks at the way the homeless have sheltered themselves in the past, and comes to several conclusions about how they might be sheltered in the future such that homelessness becomes a natural part of the urban landscape. Through this process of changing societal attitudes through the design of physical space, homelessness loses its label of "problem" and becomes more accepted as a way of life.

thesis supervisor: john de monchaux
title: professor of urban studies and planning
Marissa Cheng has studied both urban studies + planning and architecture for the past five years. Having explored a wide range of topics, from land use regulation to French city form, she now seeks to find a way to combine two fields that deal with the built environment in disparate ways. She continues her studies in the M.Arch program at MIT.

I would be truly remiss if I neglected to mention the many people who have helped me with my thesis, providing invaluable support. Firstly, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, John de Monchaux, for his support and advice throughout an unorthodox thesis project. Secondly, my reader, Jan Wampler, gave me a different point of view, pushing me to think harder. I would also like to thank all of those who agreed to talk to me about homeless shelters: Liz Souffront and Anne Berg at Saint Francis House; Meghan Goughan at CASPAR; John MacDonald at Pine Street Inn; Adam Campbell and Wayne Nato at Haley House; and Andrea Maher and Amy Pasternack at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their tolerance of my rather winding path through academia, Chris' furniture-making
# Table of Contents

- **Introduction** ................................................................. 9
- **Theoretical Approaches to Shelter** .................................... 13
- **A Historical Critique of Shelter** ....................................... 29
- **Interviews with the Homeless** ........................................... 43
- **Conclusions** ................................................................. 53
- **Endnote** ................................................................. 57
- **Bibliography** .......................................................... 59
In the fall of 2005, I began a project in my architecture studio that would lead to this thesis. The project was to design and build a one-person shelter for a homeless person. It should shelter its inhabitant from wind, rain and snow, be portable in some way, and be made from reused or recycled materials. In the style of architecture studios, we designed away without a thought to feasibility on scale other than the individual, small scale. We designed a shelter for one person. But what if a homeless shelter wanted to use our design for a hundred people—what are the implications of that quandary? Where would the individual shelter units go? What regulations permit or do not permit this kind of shelter? What are the other barriers facing homeless shelters? This thesis considers these questions.

* * *

Researchers, politicians, and activists have been trying to solve the “problem of homelessness” for the past few decades. Since the increase in the visibility of the homeless during the 1980s, millions of dollars have been poured into research and programs for the homeless as the government and society have struggled to find the roots of what they perceive to be the problem of homelessness.

Is homelessness really a problem, or has it been labeled as a problem because it makes it easier for society to ignore homelessness? Society stereotypes the homeless as undeserving people who are too lazy to get a job, have drug or alcohol problems, or mental illnesses. Society also stereotypes the homeless as a dangerous population, whereas this is not actually the case. For example, residents living next to the Hyde Park Arms, a single-room-occupancy hotel on E 53rd Street in South Side of Chicago—a neighborhood with more than its fair share of violence—felt safer living near the SRO, knowing that it had a security guard 24 hours a day.

These stereotypes enable society and the government to continue to label homelessness as a problem; when one has a problem, there is always someone who must be blamed. In the case of homelessness, researchers and government are split between the individualist explanation, blaming the homeless for their homelessness, and the structuralist explanation, blaming social institutions and constructs for homelessness. Regardless of which explanation one accepts, the fact of the matter is that the homeless are still treated like a lower class—help for the homeless operates on the basis of charity, rather than fulfillment of a social need. Furthermore, because the homeless are not seen as a valuable constituent, they are pushed into different parts of a city at the city government’s will, with their options for shelter being pushed out of downtowns because of rising taxes or redevelopment.

What do your eyes see? We subconsciously judge and create our value system in part through what we see. One way that you could change the way people see, then,
is through some sort of physical change in what they see every day. In the case of the homeless, making a place for them in cities that isn’t confined to the typical spaces that shelters occupy – the outskirts of the city – could validate the homeless as a part of the city, and reinforce their right to access to the city. The homeless are a part of the urban landscape, just as everyone is a part of the urban landscape. They have no less of a right to occupying space and time in the urban landscape.

What if homeless were not viewed as a problem, but as a state that exists within every city? Revaluation of homelessness would enable society break out of its stereotypes and to stop trying to explicitly prevent homelessness. It could then effectively provide for this subset of the population. This thesis considers the possibility of making this revaluation can be made through physical intervention in the city that makes homelessness an accepted part of the urban landscape, an area of research that has been neglected for more traditional methods of research on the homeless. Traditional housing, cultural institutions, libraries, banks, even benches and trees are considered to be normal components of the urban landscape. Through regulation, physical elements of ADA compliance like ramps are at once a normal component of the landscape, but also evidence of the city and its residents giving support to those in need – disabilities are viewed as a characteristic of society, not a blight or a problem, that requires an alternate form of transport. The disabled do not choose to be disabled; the majority of the homeless do not choose to be homeless. Physical intervention could bring homelessness to the same status: homelessness as a characteristic of society, rather than a problem.

Specifically, this physical intervention would seek to broaden the idea of the homeless shelter – what it is, what it looks like, how it functions, whom it serves, and where it’s located. By broadening the types of shelter that exist in the urban landscape, the homeless can expand the space that is “acceptable” for them. Shelter for the homeless would not only revalue their status in society, but also provide them with the support they need to transition out of homelessness. Rather than social services, a neglected form of support is the way in which homeless shelters has enabled the formation of social networks. Anthropologists’ ethnographic studies suggest that the homeless in the United States create social networks amongst themselves that help them transition out of homelessness and into permanent housing. These studies also suggest that shelter with less staff pressure to get out of the shelter lead to better social networks, in comparison to shelters with more regimented and structured programs. While the best practices model of the shelter has changed over the past few decades, they can often be a hostile environment for those who need shelter.

In addressing these issues, homeless shelters could be sensitive both to the needs of the homeless and the needs of the larger community. What are the types of shelter that the homeless have and have had in the city? What needs do those options serve, and which ones are neglected? In order to determine how to create new space within the
urban landscape for the homeless, it is necessary to look at the way in which they occupy, and have occupied, space within the city. This study also forms a foundation of context within which homelessness can be explored. Furthermore, it is essential to identify the homeless, to determine what kinds of shelter might be needed for different subsets of the homeless. A homeless person who has lost their housing due to financial problems has entirely different needs than a homeless person who has left their housing voluntarily, seeing their home as a place of fear, and homelessness as a way to escape that fear. How might this new type of shelter, or range of types of shelter, be categorized or characterized, in order to serve diverse needs?

This thesis does not concentrate on why people are homeless, per se. Some part of the population will always be homeless. Instead, this thesis aims to provide a physical place in society for those who are homeless and transform negative stereotypes of the homeless into positive stereotypes. As institutions and programs such as soup kitchens and food banks focus on help, rather than prevention of a problem, so does this thesis. This physical intervention would have both a design program that fulfills needs not currently met by existing types of shelter, and a design that balances the desire for aesthetic attractiveness and the desire not to camouflage or trivialize homelessness. Interventions could be as simple as a storage place for belongings during the day, or of a larger scale, such as a system of temporary shelter that sets up in empty parking lots at night when traditional shelters are full.

The product of this thesis is a set of conclusions for the physical design of homeless shelters. These conclusions are both quantitative and qualitative, and provide a point of departure for further research that advocates both commonality and differentiation in physical design. This thesis is thus a tool to help cities redefine homelessness as a state/phase, rather than a problem.
Homelessness is not a new phenomenon; it has existed for centuries. For as long as people have been homeless, society has long dictated its response — a “solution” — to homelessness. In the 19th century, it was vagrancy laws and almshouses; in recent decades, it has been emergency shelters and soup kitchens. As homelessness has become a more visible phenomenon, or “problem,” as it is considered by most, research on the subject has increased accordingly. Throughout the past few decades, numerous approaches have been taken towards helping the homeless, in an attempt to determine what is successful and what is unsuccessful. Most of these approaches are based on what is believed to be the cause of homelessness, a point of dispute made clear by researchers’ varying conclusions. For example, sociologists and historians point out structural causes for homelessness. Gregg Barak, a historian, places the blame on the government for pursuing policy that has shut the homeless out of health services and promoted inequities that have resulted in homelessness. Others, like Martha Burt at the Urban Institute, point to the lack of affordable housing. Sociologists James D. Wright and Beth A. Rubin affirm Burt’s conclusion as one cause of homelessness, but hesitate to name it as the main cause. In contrast, anthropologists look at homelessness on a smaller scale, contributing to the research literature with descriptive studies that seek to better understand the homeless population itself, rather than why it is homeless. More recently, planners and geographers such as Talmadge Wright have studied homelessness in conjunction with physical space, describing it as a phenomenon that has to do with different kinds of physical space that is shaped by societal attitudes, and the people placed in those spaces. Architects have also joined the fray, adding the aspect of social justice through design to the research literature.

Early research
Since the increase in the homeless population in the 1980s, there has been a spike in research regarding the cause of homelessness, and how to help the homeless successfully. The increased visibility of the homeless in the 1980s resulted in emergency government funding appropriated for FEMA to use in providing services, which included emergency shelter and supportive housing programs through HUD, mental health and substance abuse services through the Department of Health and Human Services, education and youth services through the Department of Education, and job training through the Department of Labor. These emergency funds became a permanent part of the budget through the McKinney Act. However, though funds used through the McKinney Act can be used for programs to help those who are already homeless, it specifically bars the use of those funds for theoretical approaches to homelessness.
prevention of homelessness. According to Martha Burt, a researcher at the Urban Institute, this was because Congress was “afraid that including the much larger ‘almost homeless’ population would stretch available funding too thin to be effective.”

In addition to the immediate action of the McKinney Act, the government and various other non-profit agencies began to commission research on homelessness. Though the increase in research activity was welcome, the results of the research revealed a distressing lack of understanding of the homeless population. The vast majority of this early body of research focuses on finding the culprit for the cause of homelessness and then formulating a solution or cure for homelessness, targeted at the presumed culprit. In his critique of 1950s- and 1960s-era research on homelessness, historian Gregg Barak says research was driven by the dominant ideology of society, focusing on the “alienated, disaffiliated, and Caucasian male.”

Society’s attitude towards the homeless was that they were proof that the system can break; society targeted the individual, blaming the homeless for their deviance from the norm. Conservative research of this period labeled the homeless as “crazies or freeloaders,” and put them into four categories: deranged street dwellers; disordered families (children out of wedlock); subcultural homeless (the chronically homeless); or counterfeit beggars. In these cases, naming a culprit made it easier to recommend a solution where aid could be compartmentalized and neatly defined, or denied to the undeserving poor. However, these solutions were often inflexible in their definitions, and because they dealt only with a specific culprit, captured only one angle of homelessness.

Because these studies did not address the diversity of the homeless, and because they blamed the homeless for their situation, they lacked any staying power to change homelessness. For example, to say that homelessness is the result of a lack of affordable housing without discussing what causes the housing shortage is simplistic. Whereas in earlier times, there was simply a finite supply of housing, today, there is not only a finite supply of housing but also a complex set of factors governing access to that supply of housing. To say that homelessness is caused by people who want to take advantage of the welfare system is also incorrect. Although it does happen, people rarely want to be homeless.

The structuralist approach to homelessness

Other research has focused on structural problems, such as the government’s shortfalls in providing services to the homeless. Gregg Barak, in *Gimme Shelter*, his social history of homelessness, argues that the cause of homelessness is more directly tied to its history. He makes a distinction between the homelessness of the period before the 1980s, which he believes was caused by a depressed economy, and the homelessness of the 1980s, which he believes was caused by the transition from an industrial-based capitalist economy to a postindustrial capitalist service economy. Barak then concludes that the problem with the current programs and services for the homeless is that they target the “old” homeless of the
the "new" homeless of the 1980s and onwards.

Barak also offers a critique of research on the homeless before and after the 1980s. In the 1980s, as homelessness became increasingly visible, most researchers took a more liberal stance and shifted towards homelessness as a condition, rather than focusing on homeless individuals. The research of the 1980s, Barak observes, was "characterized by outrage, sharp social criticism, and a faith in power of language to prod people out of their indifference."6 Despite this shift, conservative thinkers remained unmoved, still taking the position that "even if the problem did exist, acknowledging it and providing services like day shelters was a bad idea because this would only attract more homeless people."7 However, by the end of the decade, the conservative thinking had retreated to the extent that society viewed that the homeless were part of the deserving poor, replacing their former inclusion with the undeserving poor.

With respect to the government, Barak reports that government research of the 1980s reflected the Regan administration’s desire to reassure the public that Reagan’s trickle-down economic theory was working.8 The Reagan administration thus dismissed homelessness. Privately-funded studies, on the other hand, located the cause of homelessness in institutions and the political, economic, and social relations that affected the homeless, thus emphasizing the process by which people wound up homeless.9 In keeping with these studies, Barak believes that homelessness is an “expression or manifestation of poverty amid a society of affluence, rather than merely the expression of some form of individual pathology.”10

The main flaw of 1980s-era research is same one that plagued earlier research: most studies were primarily descriptive, rather than analytical. In addition, the different groups that were conducting studies – the government, universities, charities, and advocacy groups – had not come to any consensus regarding definitions of homelessness. The lack of a common metric made it difficult to make sense of what research was useful and what was not. Although researchers began to treat homelessness as a condition during this period, they did not present workable solutions to homelessness beyond explaining that homelessness was the result of structural, governmental forces.

Barak takes a more extreme position with his opinion that only the “[democratization of] the entire process of social investment for purposes of satisfying basic needs of life”11 – essentially, he advocates a complete overhaul of all social structural forces at work within the government. He considers shelters to be a band-aid for the problem of homelessness, describing shelters as a “way in which homelessness can become an institutionalized way of existence.”12 For Barak, the institutionalization caused by the shelter lifestyle – having to lottery for a bed, leave early in the morning, and while away the morning until the process starts all over again – leads to an unacceptable “reorganization of one’s attitudes and values” that changes
one’s identity involuntarily. However, though he believes that the only way that homelessness can be prevented is by nothing short of a revolution, he concedes the event’s slim chances. The United States, he says, is “not yet willing to reexamine and redefine its notions of justice and equity as they relate to the homeless in particular and to the average person in general.” Thus Barak falls prey to the same critique that he offered of the studies of the 1980s – that the solutions offered do not accurately assess the forces at work, and are not realistic. It is true that there are structural forces that influence homelessness, such as the lack of low-cost housing. However, this is a problem that has only a long-term solution, and the fact remains that there are still people on the street. Accordingly, there is a need for both a short-term and a long-term approach towards homelessness. Barak addresses a long-term approach, but fails to identify any short-term initiative.

In contrast to Barak’s claim that the root cause of homelessness is structural, policy analysts Alice S. Baum and Donald W. Burnes, writing in 1993, believe that the root cause is the personal problems that the homeless are facing. They consider social, economic and political forces to have an important effect on homelessness – for example, decreasing social benefits, government cutbacks – but believer that the homeless “suffer from more immediate problems that prevent them from maintaining themselves in stable housing, from working, and from utilizing social benefits.” Baum and Burnes contend that the gentrification of services such as substance abuse rehab have resulted in the cessation of treatment to the homeless, which isolates them further from mainstream society.

The truth, as is often the case, is that the causes for homelessness are both structural and personal – that is, there are macro and micro forces at work. In recent years, Burt has moved more towards this view. However, unlike Baum and Burnes, she leans towards the macro forces as being the important ones, citing that “once structural factors have created the conditions for homelessness, personal factors can increase a person’s vulnerability to losing his or her home...without the presence of structural fault lines, these personal vulnerabilities could not produce today’s high level of homelessness.” Because Burt believes that the structural forces are more important with respect to homelessness, she affirms that high housing costs is the root cause of homelessness.

**Descriptive research in the 1980s**

In addition to the research that focuses on structural causes of homelessness, social scientists have completed a significant body of descriptive research. As mentioned above, descriptive studies are an important but incomplete part of the social science literature on homelessness. It is essential to know intimately who is homeless, and what it is like to be homeless. However, these studies generally are just descriptive – they fail to do anything with the information they have collected. Descriptive studies were more important at the emergence of the homeless movement, when they served as an awareness tool. As the movement has progressed and become more
Because of the presence of the social imaginary, urban spaces cannot be neutral to the actions of the people in them. Rather, they are “socially produced disciplinary spaces within which one is expected to act according to a status defined by others, a status communicated by specific appearances and locations.” The idea that social practices and attitudes define space is not new – Peter Marcuse writes about it in his book, Of Space and Cities: The Partitioning of Urban Space, and indeed, Wright mentions the Marcuse’s work in his book. However, Wright is the first to study the homeless through this lens. Wright observes in his analysis that the homeless are “out of place” – city policies seek to contain them physically, pushing them into “refuse” spaces. Homeless persons are thus kept at both an ideological distance and a physical distance.

With respect to the homeless and the social imaginary, Wright says that meaning is fixed through the social imaginary – that is, attitudes towards the homeless are reinforced through the policies the social imaginary has created to exclude them. In keeping with this idea, the policies that shelters use have taught us to think that shelters are a “natural” place for the homeless. The homeless are aware of the space into which society has put them, and have learned to manipulate space in order to be perceived in a certain way, as opposed to what they might actually be using it for. Wright describes this phenomenon as “front and back regions,” where front regions are public space and back regions are private space, and there are social expectations for what one

Because of the presence of the social imaginary, urban spaces cannot be neutral to the actions of the people in them. Rather, they are “socially produced disciplinary spaces within which one is expected to act according to a status defined by others, a status communicated by specific appearances and locations.” The idea that social practices and attitudes define space is not new – Peter Marcuse writes about it in his book, Of Space and Cities: The Partitioning of Urban Space, and indeed, Wright mentions the Marcuse’s work in his book. However, Wright is the first to study the homeless through this lens. Wright observes in his analysis that the homeless are “out of place” – city policies seek to contain them physically, pushing them into “refuse” spaces. Homeless persons are thus kept at both an ideological distance and a physical distance.

With respect to the homeless and the social imaginary, Wright says that meaning is fixed through the social imaginary – that is, attitudes towards the homeless are reinforced through the policies the social imaginary has created to exclude them. In keeping with this idea, the policies that shelters use have taught us to think that shelters are a “natural” place for the homeless. The homeless are aware of the space into which society has put them, and have learned to manipulate space in order to be perceived in a certain way, as opposed to what they might actually be using it for. Wright describes this phenomenon as “front and back regions,” where front regions are public space and back regions are private space, and there are social expectations for what one
does in each kind of space. For the typical person with a home, private space is the home (the back region) and public space is everywhere else – in other words, front and back regions are defined by the people one is surrounded by and one’s level of intimacy with them.

Philosopher Robert Ginsberg adds that “we make our homes ... we build the intimate shell of our lives by the organization and furnishing of the space in which we live. How we function as persons is linked to how we make ourselves at home... Inescapably, humans are homemakers.” According to Ginsberg, home is a source of person’s identity. However, for a homeless person, all space is a front region, in which they are always on display, and no space is home. Thus, they are robbed of their ability to make their identity. Patricia Anne Murphy, also a philosopher, echoes the idea that place enables the development of identity, saying that “placelessness forces upon its victims a linguistic and psychological disenfranchisement. This diminishment bleeds into the social and psychological fabric of life.”

There are according stresses and implications of this condition of not having a place to call home. One example is emergency shelters. Although shelters exist to help the homeless, they require front-region behavior even inside the shelter; so while a shelter might be perceived as offering relief from public space, the social imaginary actually makes it public space. In reality, this is an example of how the homeless are forced into the “homeless identity” created by the social imaginary, stripped of freedom of identity. One of the benefits of informal encampments is the reclaiming of freedom of identity. Wright champions these informal encampments, saying that “placemaking, in the form of autonomous collective street encampments, allows for the possibility of breaking the public gaze with attached authoritative judgments.” However, this view makes encampments and shelters places of activism, treating them as a call to action. A call to action is not home, and if home is what gives the homeless the ability to develop identity, informal encampments raise awareness for the homeless as a group, but do nothing for the homeless individual.

Even a place like the Pike Place Market in Seattle, which has sought to help the poor and retain its non-gentrified aura, is watched by the specter of the social imaginary. Besides its market space, Pike Place Market contains three hundred subsidized units, and rental rates for the market space are kept low to retain independent businesses. Accordingly, a wider cross-section of people is observed at the market, and the market has been lauded as “un-touristy.” Graffiti, typically a no-no in the opinion of society at large, is “encouraged, but only in certain locations, all carefully monitored by a committee of local artists.” It’s clear that despite its appearances, the Pike Place Market retains a fair modicum of control – it’s just another instance of the social imaginary rearing its head. Wright correctly uses this example to illustrate a place of containment, rather than the more typical occurrence of places of exclusion (such as a gated community).
David E Schrader, a philosopher, looks at the concept of space and home through the legal context, but comes to the same conclusion as Wright, Ginsberg, and Murphy. He looks at the legal system as reflecting the values of the time when they written. Thus English property law, since it belongs to common law and not parliamentary law, reflects the sanctity of private property and of the home.\(^{30}\) In the same vein, the existence of eminent domain in the United States speaks to the importance of home for Americans. That the American Constitution affords the level of deference that it does to the right to privacy further illustrates the importance of home. Schrader’s point that “the home is a private place that contains private activities... [it] provides a concrete buffer between the private world of the householders and the public world of society at large” is in accordance with Wright’s concept of front and back region behavior.\(^{31}\) He also ties home to autonomy. Since the American society so values the home, the home is the “central bastion of autonomy.”\(^{32}\) He is careful to point out that the homeless do not, by corollary, lack autonomy itself, but a place of autonomy: “there is no place that the homeless can occupy without at least the tacit permission of someone else.”\(^{33}\)

Despite Wright’s apparent pessimism about the current state of homelessness, he reminds us that according to Henri Lefebvre, “space is active,” and creates and recreates social relationships. This gives rise to the hope that although currently, the homeless are marginalized with respect to urban space, this situation can change. Because the social imaginary is a visual ideology – it is manifested through physical space that we see (or do not see), changing the visual urban landscape has the power to change the social imaginary.

**Combining space and social relationships**

Like planners and philosophers, anthropologists are concerned with the homeless experience (social relationships) and how that experience relates to space. Anthropologists differ from planners and philosophers in that their lens takes a primarily micro-level view of the homeless, and thus they deal less with the structural forces on homelessness and more on immediate aspects of homelessness. Rae Bridgman, a Canadian anthropologist, says that there is little research documenting the processes of developing housing or programs for the homeless. She criticizes those studies that write of solutions to homelessness, without a plan of action for implementing these solutions.\(^{34}\) Bridgman favors a research method of participant observation and interviews to collect qualitative information at a micro level, leaning towards ethnographic research rather than statistical research.

Another group of anthropologists who work primarily at the micro level are Kathleen M MacQueen, Eleanor McLellan, David S Metzger et al, at the National Center for Disease Control. MacQueen et al, who conducted a qualitative study that focused on whether different types of American communities defined community in similar or different ways. MacQueen and her fellow researchers interviewed four different demographics: African American, gay, drug
users, and HIV vaccine researchers. Together, the groups' responses identified five elements of community: locus, sharing, joint action, social ties, and diversity.

- **Locus** was defined as a physical place, whether it was mentioned as a neighborhood, group of stores, or general area.

- **Sharing** was defined as common interests and perspectives – values.

- **Joint action** was identified as the “source of community cohesion and identity” – that is, group actions such as working together or doing a recreational activity together builds community.

- **Social ties** were the interpersonal relationships between members of the community, which bound the members together – ie, trust, regard, etc.

- **Interviewees** referred to **diversity** as “social complexity within communities,” which included the different levels of interactions between different members of the community as well as ethnic and class differences.

MacQueen et al noted that these elements echo the body of literature preceding the study; however, what the study did find was that each group gave differing amounts of weight to each of the element. Because of the different ways in which the elements of community combined to form each community, MacQueen et al concluded that a “cookbook approach” to participatory programs is impossible.

Like anthropologists, geographers acknowledge the importance of social relationships, but view them through the lens of space and physical locations. For example, Gill Valentine, in *Social Geographies*, defines the elements of community differently than MacQueen et al. For Valentine, community is comprised of proximity, territory, social homogeneity, and time. In contrast to MacQueen et al, Valentine’s elements focus more on geography as it relates to community. For example, proximity is the idea that community develops out of the proximity of social networks to each other, and territory develops into community when individuals discover common understandings, from which they derive security. Still, the essential meaning of community remains the same between the geographer and the anthropologists: community is still comprised of space, the people who inhabit it, and the relationships contained therein.

Like the planners and philosophers, Valentine also writes about the concept of home, and what makes it home. Valentine broadens the definition of home from its mere physical form, designating it as “a matrix of social relationships...[with] wider symbolic and ideological meanings.” Like Wright, Valentine considers home to be a private place, but he defines the public place to be one’s workplace. He traces the “privatization of family life” – where work was separated physically from the home – to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the beginning of industrialized society. He divides the urban environment into the suburbs, centers of reproduction, and the centers of cities, centers of production.

As Valentine further explains his idea of home, it becomes clear that his definition of home correctly includes the
relationships within the space, as well as the space itself. Valentine considers home to be a sanctuary comprised of relationships and identity, but also notes that the actual experience of home may not accord with this idealized meaning, depending on the relationships contained within the home. The meaning of home could change, for example, if one’s home was a site of domestic violence. In that case, it would have negative connotations because of the interpersonal relationships contained within the space. Home could also be a site of resistance; for example, for black women, home meant a safe place where “black people could affirm their identity, a space where they could be free from white racism and a site for organizing resistance.”

With respect to community and the homeless, the communities that “produce homelessness are often not those that end up caring for homeless people” – the communities that the homeless came from have negative connotations. Valentine also observes that for the homeless, home is comprised more of relationships and social networks, rather than any physical structure. He cites a 1990 study by geographers Stacy Rowe and Jennifer Wolch, who studied the development of informal communities based on social relationships in Skid Row: “[they] had names, such as Justiceville and Love Camp, and were used as places where possessions and messages could be left and as social gathering points where news and information could be passed on.”

The role of design in homelessness
Is there a place for architectural design in homelessness? Certainly, architectural design is a preoccupation of those designing shelters. For the most part, design concerns associated with early emergency shelters included safety, monitoring guests who were using the shelters, and maintaining an exterior façade that masked the interior's activities. Only recently have modern shelters moved towards providing a better quality of life for those inside and outside shelter walls, paying more attention to what “looks institutional” and balancing that with available funds. Like public housing, more of an attempt has been made in the past decade with respect to the stigma of public housing, and the ease with which passersby may identify housing for socially unacceptable populations.

Many architects and architecture students have participated in exercises of design for the homeless, through design competitions and design studios. For most, the exercise is just that – few have actually gone back to look at the ways in which architects may design intelligently for the homeless. Design studios tend to deal with the micro-level, concentrating on design for one person without considering the macro-level reality of the design's consequences on the urban environment. They may consider the macro-level, in some cases, but the balance between the intellectual arena and the reality of real life is often tipped towards shelter as an intellectual exercise. The fact that many of these exercises are completely hypothetical makes it easier to ignore the realities of implementation. Because these studios produce hypothetical work, the most common pitfall it is easier to forget the people they are designing for, in the name of innovation – they design for the sake of designing,
rather than for the people who will use their design. The complexity of homelessness makes it impossible for design to be the driving force of help.

There is little literature on homelessness in the realm of architecture, save for documentation of design studios and contests. The only literature that tackles how we might actually implement design for the homeless is *Designing for the Homeless* by Sam Davis, a professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley. Davis takes a first step that most social scientists are loath to admit: that homelessness, at least in the United States, is unlikely to go away “anytime soon.” Davis contends that architecture can help preserve the dignity of the homeless, and encourage more to use shelters and their accompanying services. He champions architecture that blends in with nearby housing, to avoid stigma, and that attempts to build community between the homeless and the surrounding community. However, he is so convinced of the potential of architecture that he misstates the reality of shelters. While Davis believes that many homeless do not use the shelters because they distrust them, the reality is that most homeless people use shelters. Despite the counting problem that plagues researchers who want to know how many people are homeless, the fact that every shelter in the Boston and Cambridge area, at least, is full to capacity, points to a majority of homeless individuals who choose to use the shelters, rather than stay on the streets. However, Davis is right to believe that architecture can have a role in shelter for the homeless – like the anthropologists, sociologists, historians, planners, and geographers, he sees solutions to homelessness in his given field of expertise. He emphasizes that shelter should be a place that “makes people feel welcome, comfortable, and safe...[signaling] that someone cares about them and that they are worthy of this concern.”46 He further defines dignity by introducing the elements that comprise it: choice and self-determination.47

In his book, Davis highlights several aspects of design that have improved homeless shelters, from physical design that is welcoming to shelter policies that upgrade clients to increasingly private and independent living quarters as they progress in shelter programs.48 However, his book works within the shelter system, making suggestions for the existing system, rather than proposing alternatives to it. After presenting a survey of shelter designs, Davis takes the step most architectural forays into homelessness have not – he provides ideas for balancing design and cost. His ideas deal primarily with relatively large-scale buildings, and how their layout can be given variety and how one might reuse existing materials (for renovated buildings). He also advocates spending more money on a few more important elements – such as shared space – thus spending more efficiently on less-important spaces such as storage.

Of the architecture-related literature on homelessness, there are few well-thought-out mentions of program. The program requirements for a design competition in Grand Rapids, Michigan, includes both qualitative and quantitative requirements:
Architecture program for an emergency family shelter in Grand Rapids, MI (1989)

Qualitative requirements:
- Normal user expectation of security, dignity, privacy and comfort
- Temporary usage ranging from one night to a maximum of 60 days
- Case management for resident families by community social agencies not housed in the shelter
- Social interaction taking place naturally and spontaneously, with respect to common space and private space
- Flexibility and efficiency in the dwelling units responsive to the variety of types of families in contemporary society
- A facility in context with existing neighborhood surroundings

Quantitative requirements:
- Dwelling units for five families: two units for 2-4 person families and three units for 4-6 person families
- Standard sleeping, toilet, bathing, food preparation, dining, activity and storage space
- A common laundry area
- A modest common exterior play area
- An office area for one person to manage the shelter.
- Construction techniques and materials selected to be economical, durable, easily assembled and easily maintained

(Source: Homelessness: a case study in the creation of an emergency family shelter. AIA, Grand Valley, 1989)

Davis goes into far more detail in his program requirements, going into detail about the logic and reasons behind each element of the program. His list of program elements is more general, acting more as a guide of issues to consider for each element he considers to be important. For example, when discussing public areas, he says "one of the worst aspects of emergency shelters is waiting – for admission, food, a bed, or a shower. Most shelters have a day room, which serves as an alternative to sitting in a lobby or standing in line." However, both of these architectural programs work within the existing idea of the emergency shelter as a large-scale building with traditional services like free meals, showers, beds, and day programming. They seek ways to improve that idea of shelter through design, rather than seeking to change the idea of shelter through design.

A multi-disciplinary approach towards shelter
What is the right approach towards providing shelter for the homeless? The variety of approaches which researchers have taken seems to imply that it is necessary to combine some of them in order to address the questions at hand. The most appropriate way to do this is to combine the theoretical approaches taken by social scientists with the place-related, design-related approaches taken by urban planners, anthropologists, and architects. It is also important to make sure that a combined approach addresses homelessness at both micro and macro scales.

Social scientists' structural and descriptive research fails to present solutions that are ready to be implemented. This flaw makes their body of research more of an advocacy
tool than an action plan. Social scientists discuss what homelessness means, and what homelessness is, but not what homelessness could be. For example, Barak’s conclusion that the only true solution to homelessness is a complete reform of the country’s social policies is wishful thinking – it is the ultimate solution for which he offers no wisdom with respect to implementation. While they no longer describe the homeless as the undeserving poor, social scientists’ research still tends to describe the homeless as an abstract population with problems, distancing them from mainstream society and unintentionally perpetuating the stigma of homelessness. Also, descriptive studies of the homeless continue to be useful in providing qualitative information about the homeless, but they lack staying power because they stop short of presenting any analysis. This part of the research literature will continue to be useful, however, as it documents the changes in the homeless population over time that statistical information cannot capture.

Anthropologists, urban planners, and geographers also seek to define and explain causes of homelessness, how the homeless form communities, and the history of homelessness. The important difference between their research and that of the social scientists’ is that the former are looking at the homeless on a more individual, micro scale, while the social scientists’, with their theories of structural causes of homelessness, are looking at homelessness on a macro scale. The former are concerned with ideas of home and community (necessarily explored on the micro scale), whereas the latter are more concerned with government structure and policies. Because they deal with macro-scale change and address the homeless as an entire entity without acknowledging subgroups, social scientists’ research has more currency in situations where policies and agendas regarding the homeless are decided. Social science research also tends to have a strong statistical basis – one can always cast doubt on qualitative research, no matter how comprehensive it is. Furthermore, the anthropologists, urban planners, and geographers tend to theorize about and study the processes of homelessness – how one becomes homeless, what comprises community, etc – without presenting a plan of action. However, if the intent is to help the homeless, immediately, the qualitative studies are much more relevant than the macro-scale structural studies.

Of the available literature on homelessness, the only researchers who address steps towards implementation are those who are not researchers – the architects. When their task is to design and build, their plans must have a higher level of connection to reality than any researcher’s analysis. These plans are not always adequately focused on their users, and in this sense, the qualitative and theoretical information that comprises the micro-scale research is very important. This information establishes in detail who the user is, how they interact with people and space, and what their needs are; thus architects can better tailor their design ideas. A critique of architects’ plans is that they generally deal only with this micro-scale information, and that the architects do not always know how the homeless really live in their daily life. In this respect, it
would be useful for the architects to consider slightly more macro-level impacts of their ideas — local consequences of a design for an individual. It is unlikely that the macro-scale view need ever be as far-sighted as the national scale, but it is important to look beyond the person to the community, and beyond the community to the region.

Most importantly, though the literature considers homelessness to be a condition, and a temporary one at that, it still treats this as a problem that can be prevented or gotten rid of. This is a false hope. A first step towards changing the way people view homelessness is to create safe environments where the homeless can build their own communities. The homeless are a marginalized part of society, and their appropriation and transformation of space has the potential to change this situation if there is a clear set of ideas to guide them in action.
Endnotes


[22] Ibid: pp. 43.
[23] Ibid: pp. 49.


[27] Ibid: pp. 75.
[29] Ibid: pp. 103.

[31] Ibid: pp. 70.
[33] Ibid: pp. 72.


[38] Ibid: pp. 63.


[40] Ibid: pp. 76.


Beginning in the early twentieth century, society at large began to house the homeless in municipal buildings, reflecting its belief that it was its social responsibility. Society at large still holds this belief, but the way in which it views the homeless has changed. Accordingly, the way in which it shelters the homeless has changed. In the recent past, as the problems of traditional emergency shelters have emerged, efforts to provide housing have become increasingly diverse and creative.

**Early emergency shelter**

In the early to mid-twentieth century, homelessness was still an emerging crisis. Housing for the homeless was emergency housing in a very literal sense — provided in unexpected places, and for indeterminate periods of time. A more common method of housing was with the police, who would take the homeless into their stations, where they would sleep on the floor, in chairs, or on desks in relative shelter. In contrast to the way that the police have criminalized homelessness in the past few decades, the spirit in which the police took the homeless into their stations during this time period was that of caretaking rather than punishing. However, space soon ran out in police station houses, and in the case of New York City, the homeless were housed on a barge. In Chicago, municipal officials used to open up floors of City Hall for the homeless, taking up to 2000 people on a given night. All of these forms of shelter emphasized the nature of emergency shelter — all were extremely temporary and were simply a place to sleep, lacking privacy and sanitary facilities. Some municipal lodging houses offered showers, shelter and food — but in return, the homeless had to agree to light labor and good behavior.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, station houses were no longer considered to be a viable way to house the homeless. Municipal government ceased...
to take responsibility for the homeless, leaving shelter to charitable organizations like the Salvation Army. It was at this point that the homeless shelter emerged as a building type. These shelters, based in warehouses located in skid row areas, are the basis for the method of shelter that is commonly called "warehousing," in which as many homeless individuals are packed into a shelter as is possible, without a concern for comfort, design, or the effect of institutionalization. Some shelters had a capacity of over four thousand – in comparison, the second-largest shelter in Boston, Pine Street Inn, houses about five hundred. In most cases, the need for design is obviated by inadequate funding and the way in which shelters have chosen to deal with security. The typical shelter has a guard on each floor; the guard monitors the inhabitants of the floor for health and behavioral problems. The simplest and cheapest way to make this function easy is to have large, open spaces that do not obscure sight lines. This form of housing is the type that many of the homeless would attempt to avoid unless absolutely necessary, given its problems. The lack of private space meant that the security of personal belongings was compromised, and shelters often did not have adequate secure storage space, if at all. The configuration of sleeping areas – entire floors of beds with a security guard – homeless found demeaning. That all of the beds were out in the open air increased fears of airborne diseases, and made it difficult to sleep due to snoring and people talking in their sleep.

According to Sam Davis, this type of homeless shelter persisted for a hundred years, until recently. He describes this kind of homeless shelter as "the equivalent, transformed into interiors, of the endless rows of 1950s public-housing blocks. The larger the shelter, the more crushing is the impression of exposure and vulnerability that it conveys." He also likens homeless shelters to army barracks in their intention to "diminish the sense of self in order to encourage...collective identity." The shelters, however, lack the reward system that army barracks have built into them, where higher rank connotes increased privacy. In a shelter, the current level of privacy is likely the only level of privacy.

Informal housing – shelter on the outside
Before shelters became widespread in the United States, and despite their existence, some of the homeless have lived "on the outside" – outside the shelters. They may take part in shelter services like day programs and free meals, but they maintain their homes on the street, taking shelter under overpasses, in doorways, and in bus and train stations. While in the United States, the visible homeless are encouraged to move by the police (as opposed to the less visible homeless who live under overpasses), the homeless in Japan appear to be ignored by society. In Japan, the existence of homelessness has not been widely acknowledged, resulting in its being ignored – people neither help nor hinder. This has given rise to cardboard box villages in rail stations in the Tokyo area. These informal shelters, built with salvaged cardboard boxes, provide a very basic form of shelter, and in doing so, demonstrate what is most important to the homeless with respect to shelter – privacy, safety, and a
sense of home. Informal shelter is not without its own set of problems, for all that it provides the ability to create a home within shelter. While the homeless always find ways to adapt their shelters to their needs, personal or weather related, they are often poorly ventilated, and are frequently fire risks. One of the rooftop village slums in Phnom Penh, built out of wood and clustered together closely without regard for fire safety precautions, burned to the ground in 2001 from a propane gas explosion. Despite these risks, as well as the possibility of police sweeps that cause their shelter to be discarded, the homeless continue to live on the outside, preferring to have autonomy rather than more traditional shelter.

SROs and Flophouses - the minimum of shelter
In addition to emergency shelters and informal shelter, the homeless might find lodging at single-room occupancy hotels or flophouses, if they had some kind of disposable income like disability checks. As of 1990, there were between 1 and 2 million Americans living in residential hotels – more than were living in public housing. In 1980, San Francisco hotel residents numbered three times more than public housing residents. Residential hotels could be differentiated by the type of rooms they provided: private rooms, semi-private cubicles (single-room occupancy hotels, SROs), or dry space on an open floor (flophouses). The homeless were most likely to use SROs or flophouses for their cheap rates.

Most SROs, also called "cubicle hotels," were built in temporary buildings or warehouses, and were operated by those intending to generate as much profit as possible before selling the building for redevelopment. Many owners would build attractive facades, leaving the rest of it unadorned, to increase the building's resale value, and presumably, to camouflage the building's interior from passersby. Inside, the SRO was characterized by tiny rooms and poor maintenance. Rooms were as small as 5'x7' for a single and 7'x7' for a double, because the maximum number of rooms were crammed into a given floor of a warehouse building. Patrons often called rooms in early SROs "cages" or "cribs" because the cubicles, instead of a roof, had chicken wire stretched over their tops. The function of the chicken wire was twofold – it kept residents from fishing for valuables in other residents' cubicles while they were asleep, and it eliminated a need for ventilation in each individual "room." However, ventilation was poor because there were usually only windows at the ends of a floor of cubicles, and this condition only magnified the existing smells among residents. Showers, bathtubs, and heat were generally only occasional features of these hotels.

Flophouses were a step below SROs and cubicle hotels, providing shelter but not privacy. There were no permanent installations – no beds or lockers. Flophouses were generally not open until the winter but were better than
in many instances. Though they provide shelter for a segment of the population for whom it is one of only a few viable options – for immigrant day laborers, for example, in addition to the homeless – municipal governments have used zoning regulations and redevelopment projects to push SROs and flophouses out of central business districts and downtowns, out to the periphery.

**Combining shelter and services**

In the past decade, modern traditional shelters have paid more attention to design, and the effect that it has on the homeless who use the shelters. However, design still must make a compromise with funding. Many shelters, such as Saint Francis House and Pine Street Inn in Boston, have adapted the interiors of buildings that formerly had other uses – for example, Pine Street Inn used to be a watchtower. Other shelters start from scratch, such as the accommodations provided to workers at road excavations, mines, and lumber camps.16

The municipal government controlled the conditions of flophouses and SROs using building codes and zoning laws. Light wells in SROs, for example, became common only after they were required by building codes. Flophouses are no longer the dry floor they used to consist of, but are closer to rundown SROs. Unsurprisingly, owners continue to run SROs and flophouses at minimum requirements.
Los Angeles Mission. However, what all of these shelters have in common is that they acknowledge needs such as open space, space to run programs, and facilities such as laundry rooms. Despite this general attempt to make shelters feel less institutional, they have not changed their rules, which are a key component to the institutional atmosphere. These shelters also assume that programs are necessary to getting out of homelessness. This may be true some of the time, but the alternate case, where shelter is separated from programs, is a movement that is just beginning to emerge, and is thus not well-documented. The most current mainstream development in homeless shelters is the Housing First concept, which provides shelter without requiring enrollment in programs and services.

**Alternative and innovative projects**

In recent years, as those who have gotten involved in shelter for the homeless have become increasingly diverse, their proposals for shelter have also become diverse. Though they are generally proposals and limited experiments, they take an important step towards diversifying the way the homeless are viewed by society. The majority of these projects are privately funded and managed; municipal governments that have responded to the projects are either progressive, like Seattle, or out of options, like New York City and Los Angeles. These projects feature policy initiatives, a growing awareness of the importance of design, and legislative changes.

**A reversal of the traditional shelter model**

The Housing First model is a recent model that is second only to the traditional, entrenched shelter model. It marks a policy change from the traditional emergency shelter and transitional housing models in that it stresses long-term housing above all. In a traditional shelter, caseworkers provide support while the individual works towards gaining long-term housing, and shelter and services are inseparable. However, Housing First advocates believe that staying housed is the most important aspect of homelessness, and that if housing is provided, the homeless can learn to stay housed. Emergency shelters and transitional housing provide time-limited shelter, anywhere from one night to a few months, and the Housing First model seeks to provide long-term stability through housing. The model provides housing, and then offers services as needed to aid the transition from homelessness to being housed, for a period of six months to a year. The Housing First model is also an affordable housing advocacy vehicle, and attempts to work with municipal government to create more affordable housing using tools like zoning and tax incentives.

The argument that staying housed is a problem for the homeless is a valid one. Beyond the fact that there simply is not enough affordable housing, those who are homeless face other barriers. Those with criminal records are subject to scrutiny in Massachusetts via the CORI system, which employers and landlords can access to see an individual’s record. Many employers do not want to employ individuals with criminal records; without employment, it is impossible to secure housing. Other homeless individuals face the task of finding housing despite a poor credit history, or
a previous eviction, both situations that render them less likely to find housing.

For those who do find housing, the next step is to keep that housing. The number of chronic homeless individuals has increased steadily in the past several years, to the point where the homeless simply move from shelter to shelter. This situation suggests a number of problems: that services are not working, that housing is the most important barrier to getting off the streets, and that it is difficult to stay housed.

Critics of the Housing First model contend that it underemphasizes services, which are already in danger of funding cuts. If services are considered to be less important, it will only become easier to continue to cut funding for them. This critique comes from proponents of the traditional shelter models, where services are on a par with shelter. However, it isn’t clear whether services are helpful or detrimental. The rules that traditional shelters set are often the reason why the homeless stay on the streets, and for those who come into the shelters, their dislike of the shelter regimen can retard progress towards transitioning out of homelessness. While some homeless individuals will benefit from having someone check in on them, to avoid lapses into previous habits such as substance abuse, others simply need shelter.

Housing First is currently the most progressive model of shelter that exists. However, it is aimed at homeless families, rather than homeless individuals. This model thus helps the homeless, but only a specific subgroup; it still ignores homeless individuals who might have more trouble finding housing because of criminal records or substance abuse problems. Housing First also assumes that the homeless should and want to be integrated into mainstream society, and accordingly imposes the values and systems of mainstream society without providing a real transition from the lifestyle of homelessness to the desired lifestyle. In short, the model does not allow for the homeless individual to craft the lifestyle that they would like to have.

Combining shelter and design

Homelessness has been a preoccupation of academic
design studios – for example, RISD students designed and made furniture for a local homeless shelter. Professional architecture studios have also engaged in this debate, in the form of design competitions and art exhibits. Although not explicitly for the homeless, Lucy Orta, an architect, designed a module of housing that could be arranged in a network that could be reconfigured by its users. While Orta’s project focuses on the more ephemeral sense of community, architect Donald McDonald’s City Sleeper focuses on the everyday needs of a homeless individual. The City Sleeper is a free-standing sleeping module that can be locked.

Artists such as Michael Rakowitz have made proposals such as the paraSITE shelter and P(LOT) imitation car structure. However, most artists’ work is generally more of a statement, intended to trigger dialogue, rather than being a viable way to live.

One project that is particularly noteworthy is a recent competition organized by Common Ground Community, a national non-profit organization that develops supportive housing, and the Architectural League of New York. In 2002, Common Ground bought the Andrews Hotel, a former SRO, intending to renovate it. Housing would be provided at a rate of $7/night for three weeks, after which residents would have to agree to counseling and other

Figure 6. Lucy Orta of Studio Orta designed Life Nexus Village as a community-building structure that can be used for local festivals.

Figure 7. A built module of Donald McDonald’s City Sleeper.
Figure 8. paraSITE is a cheap, inflatable, shelter that attaches to an existing building’s air vent.

Figure 9. The P(LOT) project is a frame of a car that uses a parking spot as shelter.

Figure 10. The interior of the Andrews Hotel prior to its renovation.

to be furniture since they would simply be added to the building, and accordingly, the building’s structure could not be altered. All entries had to follow building codes, and in combination with users’ preferences and the design process, this stipulation caused some friction. For example, since the units would be built within the existing building, their walls wouldn’t extend up to the ceiling. However, users wanted the units to be roofed for security; at the same time, building codes stipulated that the units could not be roofed because of the need for ventilation, light, and sprinklers (in case of fire).

One drawback of the competition is that although entries concentrated on individual units and the ways in which they might work in the aggregate, they are all intended for use inside of an existing building—they require a building. In this respect, the costs are much higher than would be outdoor shelter, or shelter that comprised a “building,” because a building must be bought to hold the units (The Andrews Hotel cost Common Ground $2.3 million, after the organization had been outbid for another property a few years earlier.17) The project reimagines the interior of the building, but fails to change the expectations one services. Common Ground was looking for a cost-efficient and creative way to house its occupants, and thus teamed up with the Architectural League of New York to organize the design competition, which received 189 entries (five of which won). The competition design program called for units of 175 to 300 square feet. Designs were considered
has about the exterior of the building — the innovation is contained within the building, and is not evident by passersby. In this respect, Common Ground is simply containing homelessness, rather than changing what it means to be homeless; the Andrews Hotel is essentially high-class warehousing.

A more worthy example of renovating the interior of a warehouse is the Street City shelter in Toronto. Street City began as a partnership between the city and Homes First Services, a non-profit organization that operates several shelters throughout the city. A city-owned warehouse was renovated in 1990 to create 70 units of transitional housing and 30 emergency beds. The shelter provided a unique twist on renovation — the prospective tenants helped build their homes. The shelter's layout featured housing on upper floors, the emergency beds on the first floor, and common spaces on the first floor along a "main street." Though the shelter itself was run by Homes First Services, the community living in Street City was self-governed, with an elected mayor and town meetings. Unfortunately, in 2000, Street City succumbed to the pressures of redevelopment. Because it was on the edge of the city's $12 billion waterfront development plan, the city decided to close the shelter.

Another interesting idea put forth by architect Teddy Cruz, as well as Ed Melet and Eric Vreedenburgh, authors of *Rooftop Architecture*, posits the viability of building on rooftops. Cruz has been studying Tijuana shantytowns for over a decade, where buildings built on the roofs of one-story buildings is a widespread practice. Cruz has translated this style of development, where buildings are cobbled together incrementally over time, to a 12-unit residential development in one of San Diego's immigrant communities. Rooftop architecture is also fairly widespread in Europe, where the lack of horizontal space has resulted in creative use of unused vertical space. Rather than the typical development where a skyscraper represents the most efficient use of vertical space, Melet and Vreedenburgh focus on examples of architecture that build density but are neither ostentatious nor invisible — for example, a vertical gap between two rowhouses.
A legislative basis for temporary encampments

Tent City is a project that was set up by Seattle Housing and Resource Efforts (SHARE) and the Women's Housing, Equality, and Enhancement League (WHEEL) in 2000. The first community, located in Seattle, was called Tent City 3. Tent City 4 was established in 2004 in King County. SHARE/WHEEL finds hosts, usually churches, who provide parking lots or lawns on which homeless encampments are set up for a maximum of 90 days. The organization also works with local governments to work out logistics and permitting. As the Tent City project developed further, local governments set up standard responses to it, in the form of special use permits. The special use permits are generally existing ordinances that have been amended to include homeless encampments, thus requiring them to follow a certain set of regulations. The permits generally require SHARE/WHEEL to work with the surrounding community to educate them about the project and take care of any concerns they might have.

Notably, though SHARE/WHEEL must work with the community, the community does not have any say in the decision of where the project will be hosted. In a survey conducted by the City of Shoreline after Tent City 3 had been hosted there, 62% of the community said they didn't know that the encampment was coming to Shoreline, although the church hosted an informational meeting about it. This underlines the fact that the arrangement regarding site is primarily between SHARE/WHEEL and the host. The city council has to approve the permit, but as long as the project adheres to the temporary use permit regulations, the city council does not discriminate. The cities in which Tent City was hosted have been fairly progressive, and believe in their social responsibility towards housing the homeless, which has made it easier to secure the permits than if they were sought elsewhere in the country. Neither project has had significant trouble finding hosts. Tent City 3 found hosts in Seattle (at Seattle University), Shoreline, Tukwila, and Burien, while Tent City 4 found sites in Bothell, Eastside, Kirkland, and Woodinville.
Communities that have hosted Tent City projects have generally had positive or neutral reactions. In the Shoreline survey mentioned above, the majority (66%) of the community said that the encampment had no significant effects on public health and safety, although the increased pedestrian traffic made some residents uncomfortable. The most significant complaint that residents had was the visual appearance of the encampments. Most Tent City encampments consist of camping tents set up on wooden pallets, surrounded by some sort of fencing (often of the orange construction variety). Approximately one-third of Shoreline residents did not like the overall appearance of the encampment, citing the fencing material and the feeling that it looked like a slum. From the comments, some of which say that the encampment did not fit in visually, but that it wasn’t an issue because it was hidden or screened from view, it seems that SHARE/WHEEL and its hosts do a good job siting the encampments so that they are neither obvious nor completely hidden. More importantly, the majority of residents (64%) said that the encampment was an appropriate use of the church’s land on a temporary basis.

Although the communities that coexist with the Tent City encampments appear to do so peaceably, an important caveat is that the encampments are temporary and thus residents know that they will eventually depart. For those residents who suffer from NIMBYism, the temporary nature of Tent City very likely makes it easier to stomach. The project is admirable for its establishment of a legal basis for homeless encampments. However, in terms of community-building, the wisdom of moving the encampment every month to three months is dubious. A month of fixed residence is certainly better than one night of fixed residence, which is what a homeless individual might have at an emergency shelter, but having to move every few months is still disruptive and detrimental. Instead, municipal governments might work with organizations like SHARE and WHEEL to set up encampments in vacant lots and other underutilized spaces, where the encampment is physically permanent, but the encampment community is not. For example, the City of Chicago used to have a vacant land program where it would provide subsidies to those who would develop affordable housing on vacant land. Working within this kind of arrangement, a municipal government could fill in gaps in the urban landscape while fulfilling its social responsibility.

An alternative mode of shelter

Dome Village is a homeless community established in
1993 by Ted Hayes, a homeless activist. Intended to be an alternative kind of housing for homeless individuals who avoid both shelters and mainstream housing, the community is run by Hayes and a few managers. The physical community consists of 22 dome-shaped fiberglass housing units set up on a parking lot near the Staples Center, in Los Angeles, California. Hayes chose the domes both for their suitability as a living space as well as for their visual shock value, to raise awareness about homelessness. The domes are Omni-Spheres designed by Craig Chamberlain. Constructed from 21 fiberglass panels fitted together with teflon bolts, they create a 300 square foot space that is 20 feet in diameter and 12 feet high. The domes are low-maintenance and can be put together quickly. Eight domes are communal for functions such as cooking and laundry facilities. Unlike most shelters, women and men are not segregated at Dome Village. The community also runs numerous optional programs, from job training to art classes, and takes on some of its residents as maintenance workers for the village.

Dome Village has not been without problems. The community has a code of behavior that includes no illegal activities, and seeks to promote self-governance, productivity, and volunteerism. Past residents have been evicted for drug use and violence, and nobody with mental illnesses is allowed to live in the community. Funded by federal and state grants, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and private donations, the community pays $2,500/month plus annual property taxes to the property’s owner, Milton Sidley. In December 2005, when Sidley decided to increase the rent to its market value of about $18,000/month, Hayes claimed that the rent hike was in response to his declaration that he was a Republican (Sidley is a Democrat). The site of Dome Village at that time was a parking lot in a rundown area of LA that the Associated Press described in 1998 as being “on the edge of downtown’s worst ugliness” (23). That the best site that could be found for Dome Village is one near a highway overpass is a testament to the difference between the local community beliefs of Los Angeles and Seattle, where the Tent City project was much more accepted, if not exactly welcomed with open arms. The experience of Dome Village illustrates that it is difficult to create and sustain an engaged, active community without rules, but that it can be worked out. Like Dome Village, a self-governed community needs guidance and leadership, from an individual or an organization that understands and buys into the lifestyle the community wishes to have,
and is willing to supervise without imposing a different set of beliefs. The Dome Village community also shows that there is a need for an alternative form of shelter for the homeless that is currently unfulfilled.

**Endnotes**


[9] Ibid 27.


[12] Ibid 166.


[14] Ibid 143.


[16] Ibid 147.


[21] Ibid 3.

[22] Ibid 4.

During the months of March and April, I interviewed shelter staff and clients at five shelters in the Boston area: Saint Francis House, Haley House and Pine Street Inn in Boston, and CASPAR and the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter in Cambridge. The interviews covered the demographics of each shelter’s homeless population, as well as services offered, the shelter’s facilities, and the ways in which the shelters have changed over time.

**Demographics of Boston’s homeless**

The population at Boston’s emergency shelters tends towards single, chronic homeless. At Saint Francis House, about 40% of the clients are immigrants; despite the location, Liz Souffront, Director of Counseling, says that few Asians can be found among the shelter’s clients. The emergency shelters tend not to have young people, who are generally taken in by age-specific shelters like BRIDGE and On the Rise. This part of the population – teenagers – needs more protection since they are often victimized by older substance abusers. In addition, families generally go to shelters designed specifically for families.

Women are a minority compared to the men. At Pine Street Inn, on a given night, there are 500 men in the Men’s Inn, as opposed to 100 women in the Women’s Inn. Women are generally dressed well and pay more attention to their personal appearance than the men. In addition to it being more socially acceptable for the men to look homeless, homeless women are especially vulnerable to violence and victimization, so they attempt to blend into the mainstream population. Many women go to the Garment District to buy clothing, since they can’t look vulnerable. Similarly, gay, lesbian, and transsexual homeless are also a very vulnerable population; transsexuals are generally sheltered with the women, according to Adam Campbell at Haley House. Shelters have barred lists for clients they’ve thrown out for violence or substance abuse, but they rarely actually check one’s name. When Campbell went to intake at one of the shelters he used, shelter staff asked for his name to check it on the barred list, but neglected to ask for ID – thus he could have been on the barred list and simply lied about his name.

The homeless become homeless for any number of reasons. About half suffer from substance abuse and half are mentally ill; of these two groups combined, about half suffer from both problems. Some are victims of economics, unable to pay the high rents in the Boston area with low-paying jobs. Some also have immigration problems, and an increasing number are ex-offenders. For the shelters, substance abuse is the most difficult problem to deal with, and the number of homeless with
substance abuse problems has increased over the past few years. The increase, according to John MacDonald, has been among the younger homeless who have a cocaine or heroin addiction. Not only is their addiction easier to hide – alcoholics are limited by the size of a bottle to contain the alcohol – their addiction renders them more aggressive and violent than other kinds of substance abusers. MacDonald noted that these younger substance abusers prey on the older clients, and that Pine Street Inn has seen a spike in barrings (sanctions for behavior that is against the rules) following the shift in the demographics of the homeless population. At the same time, MacDonald says, the younger drug addicts have more complex needs and their behavior is more destructive because of their addiction. Many of the shelters, despite the increase in substance abusers within the homeless population, have experienced funding cuts in substance abuse programs that were formerly funded by the Department of Health. MacDonald says that whereas the Department of Health used to take about a hundred men into its substance abuse program, it now only takes thirty to forty. In addition, Campbell noted that addictions and depression (which go hand in hand) are difficult to deal with because substance abusers’ primary interest is their addiction, so services “don’t get them where they want to be.”

According to Souffront, Boston is known for its services, which have a reputation for being comprehensive and reliable. However, she and other shelter directors agree that the quality of the services is then disproportionately done injustice by the housing situation, which is poor and has been getting worse in recent years. In addition to the shelter system being stretched thin – many shelters are operating at winter capacities, year-round – there is not enough subsidized housing in the Boston area, and the waiting lists are long. Currently, the waiting list for Section 8 vouchers numbers over 40,000.

Exacerbating the problem of housing is the fact that many of the homeless have criminal records. According to the law, criminal records need to be disclosed to both employers and potential landlords, making it nearly impossible to get a job, let alone housing. For those with criminal records who seek subsidized housing, there is an appeal process, but very few are approved (Liz Souffront). Shelters like Saint Francis House try to help the homeless work the system and act as an advocate for them in these situations.

Despite the well-established fact that many homeless shun the shelters because of the lack of autonomy, shelter directors say that the vast majority of the homeless in the Boston area stay inside the shelters. This is probably in part due to the shelter’s services, but largely due to the weather. John MacDonald, the director of the Men’s Inn at Pine Street Inn, estimated that 400 to 500 stay on the streets during the good weather, while only 100 stay on the streets in the winter. During the cold weather, many of the homeless are forced to confront the reality of the weather and enter the shelters whether or not they like them – for example, arthritis brought on by the weather might prevent a homeless individual from putting together their shelter. Meghan Goughan, assistant director at CASPAR, says
that in Boston, it is fairly accepted for the police to leave
the homeless alone unless there is significant substance
abuse activity, or if they receive complaints from businesses
and residents. She cited an example where the homeless
wanted to shelter themselves in Big Dig construction areas
that had been cleared, but not yet used for construction
– the Big Dig workers actually gave the homeless
construction materials and helped them build their houses.
However, when the workers needed to use the space for
construction, they asked the homeless to leave, to no avail.
The workers ended up having to call the police.

All of the shelter directors concurred that the homeless are
generally good people who “never had a shot” (Goughan)
and lack the support network to work out their problems. In
the past five years, the proportion of the homeless that is
moving from shelter to shelter has increased significantly.
60 to 70% of the clients at CASPAR are regulars.

If they can’t take them at CASPAR, they’ll take them
elsewhere – ie Pine Street, Long Island (a city-run shelter
with a 45-minute bus ride). Goughan thought people who
go to Long Island are “higher-functioning” because they
need to be able to get themselves together to get on the
bus. CASPAR is not funded for case management, and
the staff to client ratio is 1:25 makes them less flexible.

Everyday routines

The shelter routine begins at 2:30 in the afternoon, when
you start thinking about securing your bed for the night.
Lotteries are generally at 4:30PM, but the lines are always
so long that it’s best to get there early. Everyone definitely
prefers smaller shelters, and consider the larger shelters
– where the homeless are basically “warehoused” – to be
louder, more crowded, dirtier, and more dangerous.
You might also go where your friends go, for safety and
companionship (at Pine Street Inn, John MacDonald
estimates that there are about twenty to thirty men who
have been at the shelter for over twenty years). After the
lottery is over, if you have a bed, you can enter the shelter
and wait until dinner. If you didn’t get a bed, you might
head over to another shelter – the shelters will refer you
to another shelter, and either provide transportation or a
T token – or wait around until 9PM, the deadline for those
with beds to show up. During this time you’ll probably also
get dinner at a shelter, which is still free and offered to you
regardless of whether or not you have a bed. Dinner is
leisurely at some shelters, and crammed into an hour and
a half for all of the hundreds of diners at other shelters.
At meals, you make sure that you ask for things you can’t
reach – if you reach over somebody’s food, you could get
stabbed because everybody is so paranoid of what others
could have. Some shelters issue tickets for the time you’re
supposed to go get dinner, but the tickets aren’t enforced,
so nobody pays attention to them. After dinner, you might
return to the issue of a bed for the night, knowing that
there is always at least floor space at the Long Island
shelter in Quincy (commonly called “the Island”); buses
leave from intake until 11:30PM. In the shelter, it’s lights
out at 9 (and sometimes as early as 7:30 or 8), although
there are sometimes areas that are still lit so that you can
read. Some shelters, like Pine Street Inn, also have UV
blacklights that provide dim light that is also supposed to kill airborne diseases and bacteria like tuberculosis. Sleeping is often difficult because of the snoring, people mumbling in their sleep, and the smell.

The wakeup call in the morning is either at 4:30 or 5:30. Breakfast is served, and then if you’re in a shelter without day programs, you must leave for the day. You might go to a library – the Boston Public Library is popular, but the library has started to deploy sleep patrols and will throw you out if you are caught sleeping. Other options to spend your day include a shelter with day programs, public parks, bus stations, and malls. When it’s cold, you might also get a brief reprieve in an enclosed ATM, or if you have a quarter, you could make some copies at a copy shop. Some soup kitchens have breakfast from 7 to 8 in the morning, like Haley House, and you might get a second breakfast at one of these places. Or, you might have a job – some shelters will even wake you up earlier than the wake-up call if you need the extra time to get to work (about 40% of the homeless are employed). If you do have a job, luckily, your shelter will generally reserve a bed for you. You might also take advantage of various welfare programs like food stamps or unemployment. Then, at 2:30PM, it’s time to start thinking about your bed for the night.

Services
All shelters offer the basic services (sometimes called “survival services”): meals, clothing, and shelter. Clothing comes either from donations (ie, Saint Francis House) or through a partnership with an agency such as Goodwill, and is then distributed according to need. Pine Street Inn, one of the largest shelters, used to have its own clothing warehouse, but due to funding cuts, it has partnered with Goodwill. Another common service in the shelters is showers, which are mandatory at some shelters (ie, Pine Street Inn) and voluntary at others. Most emergency shelters, because of a lack of adequate funding, do not offer day programs – in Boston, Saint Francis House is the most prominent day shelter. Most shelters are closed on Sundays, rendering Sunday the busiest day at Pine Street Inn and Saint Francis House. Those who are at Pine Street Inn tend to stay there during the day on Sundays, since they don’t want to go back and forth.

Medical services have improved greatly in the past several years. At Saint Francis House, the medical clinic started as a simple foot soak service, and then developed into primary care, dental care, and health education. All shelters have medical clinics run by Health Care for the Homeless, so that a patient’s records can be on hand regardless of which shelter he or she is at.

In addition to the basic services, all shelters offer a mail service so the homeless can have a permanent address, which is required for welfare services such as disability checks or social security. Most shelters also offer free phone service to local area codes, as well as computers; these are two services that are extremely popular – so much so that at Saint Francis House, phone calls are limited to 10 minutes each. Depending on the demographics of the general population, a shelter might also have additional
services like Spanish language services. Most shelters also have substance abuse programs, and programs that teach life skills and job skills have become more common in the past decade. As an incentive for entering the programs, the shelters will often offer a permanent bed in either the emergency shelter or another more private part of the shelter.

New programs are always welcome to the shelters, but they are dependent on the available funding and space. At CASPAR, a volunteer came in wanting to set up an art program in the day, but the shelter does not have any real space in which to run day programs, so the program couldn’t be implemented. On the other hand, funding is a problem at Saint Francis House. If someone has an idea for a program, and it doesn’t cost any money, the shelter will try it right away. However, if it requires funding, the shelter will apply for funding from private companies like CVS or private foundations, as the state is unable and unwilling to fund most programs beyond the very basic ones.

At some of the smaller shelters, or shelters like Saint Francis House that are day shelters, programs can be more flexible and varied than at the larger shelters, where the basic services are the most important thing. Saint Francis House recently received a grant for a weaving group, which runs three times a week. The shelter also has a full-time art room, which is staffed with art therapists, for expressive therapy.

Haley House runs various programs targeted at alternative ways of helping the homeless, many of which are exploratory. Haley House currently runs a soup kitchen at its South End location, with other programs in various locations. The bakery, which used to be located in the South End, recently moved to Dudley Square; it hires the homeless and teaches them the skills required to work in the bakery. The intent of the program is to teach life skills and job skills to the homeless people who get involved in the program, but also to serve as an “anti-gentrification force” to the surrounding community. In keeping with this intent, the pay scale is such that the manager cannot earn more than 1.5 times the salary of the general staff. Haley House also runs an organic farm in Winchendon Springs as a part of the “green revolution,” and runs a magazine of the arts and social justice called What’s Up. The magazine has four editors, and has partnered with the McKinley School in the South End, whose students are those who have been expelled from other Boston public schools. The organization also runs culinary classes for the McKinley School students to teach nutrition and self-preservation.

Haley House began as a shelter and soup kitchen for the homeless, but has moved towards the alternative programs it now runs like the bakery. Haley House was established in the 1960s as a part of the Catholic Worker’s Movement, but has since become an open faith organization. The soup kitchen is run by a live-in community, which receives free room and board for the soup kitchen responsibilities, and also takes on volunteers, mostly from Boston College. In the 1990s, the live-in community took in homeless
individuals, but the responsibilities, especially for those who had addictions, proved to be too heavy a burden. The live-in community is now based on an application process; people generally stay a few years. Members of the live-in community say that soup kitchens elsewhere are more advanced, but that their goal is to address the question of what to provide for the homeless besides the necessities, in order to counter the often-detrimental power dynamics of the typical shelter where the homeless are stripped of their autonomy.

For shelter staff, shelter and services go hand-in-hand – that is, shelter cannot be separated from services. However, most staff also cite the basic services – food, clothing, and shelter – as the most popular services. At the same time, John MacDonald, director of the Men’s Inn at Pine Street Inn, says that the majority of those who come to the shelter need services – they need someone checking in on them.

Funding
All shelters are partially funded by private donations and grants, and partially funded by the state. At Pine Street Inn, about 70% of the funding comes from the state; at Saint Francis House, the figure is about 50%. State funding comes from the Department of Transitional Assistance, Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Public Health, and the Department of Mental Health. Funding cuts four years ago – Pine Street Inn’s funding was cut by 17% - caused many programs to be cut. With respect to private funding, some grants are earmarked for specific services, and others are general, allowing more flexibility. Liz Souffront, Director of Counseling at Saint Francis House, says that the fact that funding comes from multiple sources means that the programs can be more flexible because the shelter is not restricted by the demands of a large donor.

Physical elements of the shelter
Most shelters have a room to sit in, a dining room and kitchen, beds, showers, and storage space. In shelters that are pressed for space, the dining room can double as the room to sit in. All shelters separate women from men with regards to sleeping quarters, and some, like Saint Francis House, might also provide separate space for women, apart from the men.

With respect to location, the shelters are generally out of the way to the general public, but known to the homeless. Saint Francis House has the most central location, between Boston Common, Chinatown, and Downtown Crossing, in a building that was bought several decades ago by the Franciscan church (the church no longer plays a large role in the shelter). Shelters like Pine Street Inn and Haley House were once on the periphery of development, but have found themselves in the midst of gentrification. CASPAR is still relatively unknown in the area between MIT’s campus and Cambridgeport, but has become more visible with new MIT’s new graduate dorms and the University Park development – both signs that development is starting to awaken around the shelter.

Of the shelters studied, two have multiple floors – Saint
Francis House and Pine Street Inn. Both shelters are located within older buildings that have been renovated on the interior. At Saint Francis House, the day programs are run on the first and most accessible floor, and counseling, women-only space, the clothing operation, and job skills programs are run on upper floors of the building. The top two floors of the building are an SRO for Next Step, the shelter’s sober and working program. The shelter has taken a piecemeal development for the physical design of the shelter, renovating floors as funding is available and space is needed. At Pine Street Inn, the dining room and some sitting space (benches with lockers) are on the first floor, with beds and showers on the upper floors. In the Men’s Inn, the showers were recently renovated and the clothing operation moved next to the shower area. The showers at Pine Street Inn are communal, to cut down on the waiting time to take a shower, and outside the showers are rows of lockers and benches. Rather than hand out keys to the lockers, the shelter staff unlock and lock the lockers at designated times.

Because the shelters in Boston are older, their physical design is at a minimum, though atmosphere of the shelter is generally better if the shelter is at least located within a historic building. Newer shelters are more sensitive to the psychological effects of design. For example, one client at the Long Island shelter described the waiting area as a “metal cage,” which had the effect of making him feel like he was “lined up on parade.” The day room at Saint Francis House is literally a huge room with tables and a TV at the front. All shelters also have to deal with the reality of intake and checking clients for dangerous items like knives, either with a standing metal detector or with a handheld metal detector. To see the metal detector as you enter the shelter, though, is somewhat like acknowledging that one is entering an institutional environment like a prison or an asylum.

CASPAR, a newer shelter built in the past decade, is one floor, to allow for easy handicapped access and mobility. Meghan Goughan, the shelter’s assistant director, cited the long, “spidery” hallways as a flaw in the design of the shelter, since they are more difficult to monitor – someone could be doing drugs, or someone could have fallen with nobody to see and help them.

Though there is storage space at some of the shelters – Pine Street Inn and CASPAR, but not Saint Francis House – each individual is limited to a set amount of space. CASPAR has no lockers, and instead has cubbies within a locked room. However, the locked cubby area is in a hallway that connects to the medical clinic, so it is not as secure as actual lockers. Goughan commented that people’s possessions always get stolen, whether they are locked in a separate room, in the cubbies, or in a staff member’s office.

Goughan also brought up a few issues about shelters in general. She says that “people need space away from other people,” and that the proximity in the shelters gives rise to dependent relationships. Other shelter staff noted the proximity problem, citing loudness, crowdedness,
the safety problems of large groups of people, and the fact that people's problems are often amplified in the shelters because of proximithy. Goughan also wondered whether combining all of the services for the homeless is detrimental, marginalizing them further through isolation. Another issue that MacDonald brought up was size, admitting that “smaller is better” for the shelters. As an example he cited the program Pine Street Inn runs out of the basement of a church. The program houses 65 people, and half transition out of the shelter – the proportion at Pine Street Inn’s emergency shelter is much lower. At the smaller shelters, there is more one-on-one attention, and programs can be more tailored to different groups.

With respect to beds, most shelters are dorm-style and institutional – lots of beds in a large room. Blankets and sheets are provided, and beds vary in quality from shelter to shelter, from real mattresses to cots that are too shorter than average height. Dining areas are also often institutional. Pine Street Inn used to have tables and chairs that were one unit – the chairs weren't detachable so that people couldn't use the chairs to hit other people. However, because the units looked so institutional, the shelter replaced them with regular chairs and tables, providing more freedom; MacDonald says he can count the number of times someone has gotten hit with a chair on one hand.

In the past several years, there has been a trend towards “housing first” – providing permanent housing or transitional housing, with no questions asked, minimal rules, and voluntary participation in services. Though this can eliminate problems like staff being overburdened, burned out, or uncaring, all problem that cause people to avoid shelters, Goughan’s critique of the idea is that nobody will want to pay for services. In fact, MacDonald cited an example at Pine Street Inn where HUD used to fund a supportive services program; with the progress of the “housing first” movement, though, HUD recently retracted its financial support for the program, which will be ending.
These conclusions focus on creating physical and psychological community. The hope is that they will not produce an easily-identifiable urban element, in the way that the ease in identifying public housing has stigmatized it. Their goal is to promote experimentation that can be implemented. Too often, shelter design focuses on the interior of the building and the way designers believe it “should be.” Too often, these designs ignore the way that the homeless live outside of shelters. In a paper about Savard’s, a homeless shelter in Toronto, Rae Bridgman recounts one woman’s story:

One of the elderly women...sat with cardboard arranged around about her inside the shelter. From this story, we may understand that those survival skills needed to be acknowledged, needed to be honored. This woman could come inside and begin the processes of healing only on condition that her ways of living outside be respected.¹

Clearly, the lesson to be learned from this story is that it is the individual that needs to be respected, but in a larger context. In addition, it is necessary to be sensitive to the needs of an individual who has lived on the streets, and the fact that, in a shelter, they are “[relearning] the skills needed to live within sheltered walls in close proximity with many others”². These conclusions aim to produce physical shelter that does not force the homeless into the negative stereotypes that society prescribes for them, but to produce an environment where a homeless individual may navigate and lead their own transition out of homelessness.

The size of the community should reflect the site and the size of a viable community.
The ideal community has enough individuals to provide support, but not so many that a given individual cannot engage in community life. Depending on the size of the site, this number might be anywhere between 5 and 30.

Sites should reclaim and transform unused land.
The site should generate a unique response with respect to the layout of a community and affect its physical appearance. The most appropriate and available sites are vacant parcels of land and parking lots in residential areas, mixed-use areas, and light industrial areas. A second possibility is the rooftops of municipally owned buildings. If the land is municipally owned, there is an opportunity to create a mutually beneficial partnership between community and government. Creatively using these sites creates a more diverse urban landscape, and reclaims land that lacks a meaningful function.
The layout of the community should create a range of public and private spaces. In general, the physical community will consist of individual units that are arranged on the site, with appropriately marked boundaries (for example, a fence for security and privacy). The individual units should provide the basic functions of sleeping and storage, and should lock for safety and security. On a community-wide scale, the units should be arranged such that they create a diverse set of exterior community spaces, with varying levels of visibility. The units should have the flexibility to be rearranged, depending on the preferences of the community. Above all, the design and layout of the units should create a sense of community and security.

The design of the units and the larger community should be efficient.
These communities are not intended to have all of the functions of home or shelters, but instead provide space for sleeping, storage, and mail service. The reason is two-fold: first, the shelters provide valuable services like free meals, phones and showers, which are funded through the government; and two, the cost of the units should be low, as balanced by the needs of the design. They would likely be more expensive than, for example, Michael Rakowitz’s paraSITE project ($5), but a maximum of a few hundred dollars. Funding for homeless shelters is not likely to increase, so it is in both government’s and community’s best interests to keep costs low. Units must also follow applicable building codes. Maintenance would probably be a responsibility of the community, but sanitation could be arranged with the municipal government.

Communities should be self-governed to the highest degree possible.
The community should be self-governed and allow varying levels of engagement. The community would also set a general code of conduct in order to keep the community safe and supportive. Because it is difficult for a homeless individual to take on a large amount of responsibility during a period of transition, the best arrangement is for a non-profit organization to help run the community in an oversight capacity.

Endnotes

[2] Ibid 76.
I came into this project expecting to change the face of homelessness. As I have delved deeper into the subject, I’ve come to learn exactly how complex it is. Addressing homelessness effectively requires both a short-term and long-term solution. Here, I have tried to address a short-term, small-scale solution, discovering that one of the reasons why research on homelessness is not often multidisciplinary is because it’s truly difficult to add complexity to an already complex problem.

All the same, those who are homeless would benefit greatly from a change in the way society views homelessness. This is also an opportunity for cities to develop and diversify the urban landscape in a way that adds depth and culture and avoids homogenous development. Above all, this project has become an exploration of what physical and intangible elements will build community among the homeless in the immediate and larger contexts, while simultaneously battling social stereotypes.

It would be impossible to answer all of the questions that arose during the course of my research. Some of the remaining questions are qualitative, and some are quantitative. One challenge is finding federal, municipal, and private funding for this kind of development, and defining a legal basis for accessing the sites identified for communities. Building codes, and the enforcement of them, would likely have interesting effects on the design of the communities. Another more qualitative challenge is a further study of self-governed communities, and of community leadership on the small scale. I had always assumed that it would be possible to simply create the physical means for community, and that it could just be implemented through people moving in and out, anonymously if they want. However, the reality of this ideal is that human nature would not automatically create thriving communities. If the culture of homelessness already promotes victimization by those competing for limited resources, these problems will still follow the homeless to any new community they create. Those with addictions, for example, are first and foremost concerned with their addictions, and cannot engage in community at the same time. Self-governed communities seem to need strong leadership, from an individual or an organization.

The nature of this world and this society is such that there will always be individuals forced into homelessness by economics and social relationships. This does not mean that homelessness should thus be ignored, but that it should be viewed as a transitory stage. If we provide a physical means for this perspective, it will be that much easier to make it a psychological reality.


*Homelessness: a case study in the creation of an emergency family shelter*. AIA, Grand Valley Chapter, 1989.


Figure 2: Groth 101.

Figure 3: Groth 166.

Figure 4: Groth 146.


Figure 6: Melhuish, Clare. "Lucy Orta." *Home Cultures* 2(2): pp. 221-228. 2005.

Figure 7: Davis, Sam. *Designing for the homeless: architecture that works.* University of California Press: Berkeley, CA. 2004: pp. 48.


Figure 14: Seattle University Tent City 3 Retrospective. http://www.seattleu.edu/tentcity/photogallery.asp.
