



## Homelessness

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## EDITORIAL

# Homelessness

**Anne-Marie Willis**

Welcome to this special, larger issue of *Design Philosophy Papers*. It marks our new approach, which is to publish less issues per year (four, rather than six), but with more papers per issue. Across the year, the number of papers published will remain the same.

The idea of an issue on homelessness was inspired by Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos's work with and about homeless people's communities in Sao Paulo. When first signalled as a DPP theme, we knew it was a concern that would become increasingly significant, but not quite as rapidly as has transpired, with the Tsunami in South East Asia, and now, nine months later, Hurricane Katrina devastating New Orleans – in both cases with massive death tolls and even larger numbers rendered homeless.

Of course, large losses of life, destruction of homes and infrastructure are regular features of floods and hurricanes in many parts of the less developed world – underlining the fact that these are not *natural* disasters, but the outcome of risky forms of settlement by large numbers of people whose choices are limited by history and economic circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

When such destruction happens in a wealthy nation which should have the capacity to design and build to withstand extreme weather events, we know something is up. The reason for the intensity of Hurricane Katrina was the higher than normal ocean temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico where it formed. While there is disagreement whether this particular hurricane is an unambiguous symptom of human-induced climate change, it is worth bearing in mind that the thousand plus scientists of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) directly attribute the global warming that has occurred over the last fifty years to human activity (mainly, the burning of fossil fuels), and that some of consequences they expect are cyclones and hurricanes with higher wind speeds and more intense rain, as well as greater frequency of other extreme weather events.<sup>2</sup>

So, from now on, expect to see a lot more people, in different parts of the world, made homeless by cyclones, hurricanes, hailstorms, floods, forest fires and droughts. As pointed out in Tony Fry's paper, already more people are being made refugees as a result of changing environmental circumstances than by war or political conflict.<sup>3</sup> With this evolving situation, might also disappear the privileged's perception of homeless people as an aberrant few (or many, depending on where) who clutter up downtown areas – bums, hobos, winos, tramps, junkies, nutters, beggars, street kids, bag ladies, tramps with trolleys, winos sleeping rough on park benches. In the extreme situations to come, the survival skills of the despised may become highly valued.

What has this all got to do with design and designers?

Everything.

The paper by **Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos** invites us to consider the shelter and survival techniques of the homeless as a counter design practice, demonstrating innovation and resourcefulness in material conditions of extreme limitation. As they construct shelters and create hybrid forms of habitation, storage and transport from discarded materials and components, the practice of homeless people undoes the finitude of waste, and shows up the wastefulness of the affluent. Cecilia's essay is amplified by **Ken Straiton**'s photo-documentation of homeless people's carefully considered shelters in Tokyo that have accumulated to form micro-communities. Some of these ultra-compact, neat dwelling capsules wedged into the city's left-over spaces were built by homeless people themselves, others, with the assistance of groups of artists.

The flipside of this is the use of design against the homeless. Urban designers, in many parts of the world, have developed a whole 'architecture of exclusion' to discourage homeless people from sleeping or loitering in public spaces: grilles across entrances; freeway underpasses fenced off; armrests and protrusions on park benches; stone pucks on window ledges; and bright lights shining

into recesses where someone might otherwise bed down for the night.<sup>4</sup>

Such design against homeless people, brings into stark focus the much lauded idea of designers as service providers: the question is, just who are they serving, and for what ends? **Tiiu Poldma** takes this idea, along with that of user-centred design, and turns it around, setting a project for design students to engage with homeless people as 'clients'. Her account of this project emphasises the necessity for designers to gain a sense of the day-to-day lived experience of those for whom they design, as well as the value of confronting students with lifeworlds very distant from their own.

What emerges collectively from all the papers, as well as from some brief research undertaken for this issue, is that rather than being objects of pity or of charity, many homeless people have a good deal to teach those of us comfortably housed and seemingly secure in our lifeworlds – including designers.

There is much to be learnt from the solidarity of homeless people. Cecilia's paper tells of a Sao Paulo recycling co-operative, successfully operated by homeless people for the last sixteen years. There are many other examples, such as the Homeless World Cup soccer competition, a spin-off of the International Network of Street Papers, held in Graz in 2003, Gothenberg in 2004 and Edinburgh in 2005 (relocated there after New York had to be abandoned because "restrictive and inflexible US visa conditions meant that up to one-third of the players would have been denied entry"<sup>5</sup>).

More substantially, there are the "highly disciplined land invasions in Mexico City and Lima" by homeless people of which Mike Davis writes in his important essay 'Planet of Slums'.<sup>6</sup> Another example is the Homeless Peoples Alliance, established in post-Apartheid South Africa as a means of mobilising residents of informal settlements, backyard shacks and hostels to form local self-managed co-operatives to plan and construct their own housing. It has been remarkably successful, and responsible for designing and building housing of better quality than that of the construction companies contracted by the government. A recent assessment notes that this is because:

members provide unskilled labour free of charge for construction and overall management, including financial management. Materials are bought collectively, securing discounts from wholesale building suppliers. Materials from shacks are re-used, such as window and doorframes. Skilled labour is provided at low cost, as members negotiate with local artisans, or find skilled family members or friends to assist.<sup>7</sup>

A key issue addressed by some of our contributors is how to define homelessness.

**Anne Edwards'** essay explores contradictory and conflicting constructions of homelessness used by politicians, government agencies and welfare providers, in which the needs of homeless people are frequently displaced by agendas of seeking to manage homelessness so as to reduce its visibility to affluent electors. She considers the extent to which policy on homelessness can be considered as designed, taking the example of how the issue has been dealt with recently in Queensland, Australia.

Homelessness could be thought of as different points along an axis (or several axes), ranging from people sleeping rough in streets to those who may have a roof over their head (of a kind) but no security of tenure or those permanently dwelling in premises that threaten their health or safety. Then, of a different order, is the condition of refugees, forced from their *homelands* by political, economic or environmental circumstances. Among these are also those internal refugees evicted from their homes by the state, such as thousands shifted out of Beijing to make way for the city's reconfiguration for the 2008 Olympics or President Robert Mugabe's 'clean-up' of parts of Harare that has rendered 700,000 homeless.

A recent United Nations report, *The Challenge of the Slums* encompasses this first axis of homelessness, highlighting the vast and increasing millions dwelling in "informal settlements".<sup>8</sup> Slum residents now constitute a third of the world's urban population; and 85 per cent of urban residents of the developing world occupy property illegally. Inequality of economic exchange between, and within, rich and poor nations, manifested in terms of trade liberalisation, currency devaluation, industrialisation of agriculture, a gutted public sector, as well as civil war and drought are propelling millions throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America into the "informal economy" as well as into informal settlements.<sup>9</sup>

As Mike Davis argues, it is these populations of the dispossessed ("marginalised labourers, redundant civil servants and ex-peasants") that are driving the trend of global urbanisation, with the world's population now split 50/50 between urban and rural, and virtually all future growth projected to be in cities. Davis concludes: "... at the end of the day, a majority of urban slum-dwellers are truly and radically homeless in the contemporary international economy."

Undeniably, millions in the world live in appalling, makeshift conditions. Forms of temporary accommodation, like refugee camps and shanty towns become permanent settlements housing several generations of people struggling for a better life. But are these people always homeless?

Across cultures and their difference, the many designations of 'home' always name something larger and more significant than just a place of shelter. **Ranjana Mital** considers the homeless of New Delhi, revealing a variety of situations from pavement dwellers to cooks and servants living with their employers, to construction

workers occupying temporary shacks on building sites to tent-dwelling taxi drivers permanently on call. Many of these people are migrants from the countryside willing to endure such conditions because they regard their real homes as their villages, to which they periodically return. What she uncovers suggests a more complex picture of rural-urban connections than the one-way drift projected by Mike Davis and the UN demographic studies. Furthermore, the existential condition revealed – almost that of an internal guest worker – suggests different possibilities for creating better urban accommodation, possibilities that could alter the direction of urban development.

Extending the idea that ‘home’ cannot be reduced to place of physical dwelling, **Tony Fry** wonders whether homelessness might not be the ontological condition of contemporary humanity, a destination inevitable since we ceased to be hunter-gatherers at home in the world-at-large. Did the building of permanent settlements create a radical break: shelter/security/home on one side of a literal and figural wall, and a ‘hostile world of natural forces’ on the other? From that moment forward, could we only dwell in homes of our own making? And what of now, when the ‘natural’ that we have damaged with the historical accumulation of our efforts to ward it off, turns against us, and wild forces of flood and fire cast us out of our homes?

Anne-Marie Willis

## Notes

1. American historian, David Herbert Donald commented on Hurricane Katrina’s chaotic aftermath, “It really makes us look very much like Bangladesh or Baghdad. I’m 84 years old ... but I’ve never seen anything like this” (*NY Times* 2 Sept 2005).
2. The IPCC’s Third Assessment Report states that “there is new and stronger evidence that most of the global warming over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities.” It concluded that these trends will continue for the foreseeable future due to continued emissions of fossil fuels and other greenhouse gases. The predictions are for an increase in global average temperatures of 1.5 – 6°C by the end of this century. The wide range of these projections is due mainly to uncertainty about the future rates of greenhouse gas emissions from human activities. It is likely there will be higher maximum temperatures and heat indices over many land areas, and reduced frequency of low temperatures and frosts. More intense precipitation events are likely over many mid to high latitude land areas. Increased risk of drought is likely in mid latitude continents. Tropical cyclones are projected to become more intense with higher peak winds and rainfall intensities. IPCC *Climate Change 2001: The Scientific Basis. Contribution of Working Group 1 to*

*the Third Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2001 and *IPCC Climate Change 2001: Impacts, Adaptation & Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Third Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

3. The category of 'environmental refugee' is challenged in some quarters, this paralleling the denial of human-induced climate change that also lingers in corridors of power.
4. Christopher Hume writes an interesting account of this process in action in downtown Toronto, including one architect's anecdote that a colleague recommend she design so as to "make sure the canopy (of an outdoor stage) leaked just enough to keep the homeless from gathering beneath it". *The Toronto Star* Feb. 5, 2005.
5. Reported on the website of the International Network of Street Papers.
6. Mike Davis 'Planet of Slums: urban involution and the informal proletariat' *New Left Review* 26, Mar/Apr 2004.
7. Firoz Khan and Edgar Pieterse 'The Homeless People's Alliance: Purposive Creation and Ambiguated Realities' published by School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa, 2004.
8. UN-Habitat *The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*. London 2003.
9. Davis *op cit*.