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Design, Waste and Homelessness

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At the beginning of the Third Millennium we see, in the large metropolises, a spatial and urban concentration of poverty, deprivation and human suffering that has taken on astonishing proportions. Homelessness is one of the major social problems of our times. The lack of affordable housing, growing economic inequality as well as increasing unemployment all indicate that the problem will only get worse in the Third and First worlds.

Rapid forms of urbanisation and the emergence of cities as regional or global commercial centers are aspects of globalisation with an underside, with certain cities becoming magnet employment centers, often attracting more people looking for work than the labour market and the city can accommodate.

The current development model contributes to social exclusion. It produces unemployment, indebtedness and does not ensure living conditions. Gentrification, neglect and helplessness displace thousands of excluded, bringing them to the urban areas of large cities. Furthermore, this parcel of the population undergo stigmatisation and discrimination, leading to increasing marginalisation.

According to Wolch and De Verteuil, “the current landscapes of poverty emerge as non-synchronized series of cycles of time and space, on four scales (global, national, institutional and individual)”¹.

The vast literature available today about homelessness has discussed important aspects of the issue across a wide spectrum, but there has been very little reflection on homelessness, design and architecture.

This paper is a reflection on these issues and on the material aspects of the homeless’ culture: the habitat created by the homeless, its relationship with design and the reuse of salvaged materials and products to build the informal habitat of homeless people in São Paulo, Los Angeles and Tokyo. These cities have been selected because they have large numbers of highly visible homeless with spontaneous living arrangements, which allows detailed observation of the phenomenon, besides enabling cross-cultural analysis.

It is important to stress that for a long time homelessness has been associated with Third World cities, but in the latter part of the past century, cardboard and plastic cities began to appear in some of the world’s major cities.

Homeless culture in each of these three cities has its own specific political, social and cultural components. But in each locale the material culture of the homeless reveals their creativity, ingenuity and spontaneous design.

Documenting Cities of Plastic & Cardboard in São Paulo, Los Angeles and Tokyo

The data for this paper comes from field research performed in the three cities between 1995 and 2001. The research comprised observations as well as questionnaires and spontaneous conversations with homeless people. In these years I lived through major situations of great human intensity, which often challenged my capacity to understand. Despite the complete absence of articulation among the homeless communities of the three cities – Baixada do Glicério in São Paulo, Skid Row in Los Angeles, and Sanya in Tokyo – in each of them the homeless create their own spaces in which to live and to struggle.

Tokyo

Tokyo, like all other global cities, has multiple faces. Sounds, colors, lights, signs and styles mix there. It is the capital of one of the main world powers, with a vast concentration of companies and international banks, a financial, commercial, industrial center with a large information complex. Besides its images of prosperity, fantasy and gigantism, contrasting with the technology of postmodern buildings, Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines, Tokyo has another face. There is a hidden and subterranean city, occupying subway

corridors, river banks and traditional parks. The most emblematic is *Danboru Mura* (cardboard village), located west of Shinjuku station, where the homeless huddle together in cardboard condominiums.

The plastic and cardboard habitats are located mainly in Sanya, along Sumida river; Taito-ku, along Arakawa river; Ueno Park; Yoyogi park; an area close to the Ikebukuro station; a small park close to the Takadanobaba station, Toyama park and Shinjuku Central Park. Inside these condominiums can be found materials and products salvaged from the city trash: futons, radios, TV sets, heaters, calendars, umbrellas. Watches show a time without future, since the homeless' time is everyday, immediate, dominated by the urgent need to invent new ways to survive. Here is another city and another culture that lives on the leftovers of frenetic consumption and in the shadow of the overwhelming pop culture of *pachinko* parlours and the high speed of the *shinkansen* [bullet train].

Los Angeles

"The Los Angeles region is increasingly held up as a prototype (for good or ill) of our collective urban future".² This statement by geographer Michael Dear may be the most complete contemporary interpretation of the paradigmatic character of the city of Los Angeles. For a long time Los Angeles has been the favorite target of the press, TV and movies, which exaggerate the dramatically apocalyptic images of the city, deterritorializing it, transforming it into a scenario.

Certainly one of the best examples of this is the 1982 Ridley Scott movie *Blade Runner*, which picks up on the effects of the spectacular, scenographic architecture of the city. Skyscrapers, night-time lights, lights for airplanes at the top of the buildings, glass windows and a merciless saturation of advertising messages in neon lights are part of the scenario imagined by Scott for Los Angeles, 2019.

Los Angeles is the capital of fantasies, the whole world still dreams of it, about the glamour of the movies, about the multiethnic and multicultural exoticism of its inhabitants, its gigantic museums and shows, its unique architecture, such as the new Disney Concert Hall by architect Frank O. Gehry. But, alongside these spectacular visions, Los Angeles presents the highest concentration of homelessness in the United States. Its homeless people have developed nomadic behaviors, navigating the streets with their supermarket carts, excavating the city's leftovers, walking the streets of Hollywood and the freeways, from the beaches of Venice to Santa Monica. Homeless people with their supermarket carts have become an iconic feature of the urban landscape in Los Angeles, in contrast with the absolute prevalence of the car. A perfect image of the dichotomy faced by the city, that which Michael Dear called "the dystopia that is progressively polarised between the haves and the have-nots".³

São Paulo

The metropolitan region of São Paulo is the main economic, financial and cultural center of Brazil. Its growth was marked by many contradictions which gave rise to metropolitan problems in the same proportion as its gigantism. The rapid expansion of its economy was answered with the growth of a broad variety of problems which punish the city: pollution, floods, long traffic jams, crime, violence, unemployment, sub-employment, housing deficit and an intense process of socio-spatial exclusion, making many people live in precarious conditions, in *favelas* (shantytowns), in tenements and a significant number, on the streets.

In a situation of urban environmental precariousness, the homeless are at the far extreme of exclusion. They live within an informal economy created from the leftovers discarded by the city. Daily, they reinvent new forms of survival and alternatives for shelter.

While their informal habitats are spread throughout different regions of the city, the homeless prefer the central and commercial areas, because here they have more access to materials, discarded products and the odd jobs market. Also here are the *Feira do Rolo* (street market), squares and parks, and the various institutions which provide welfare services, hostels and places where they can get “chow”.

The Homeless' Reuse of Discarded Products, Materials and the Spontaneous Design

According to Ezio Manzini, postindustrial metropolises (Tokyo, Los Angeles and São Paulo all fit this description) are:

the global village extended across the planet, whose characteristics are conspicuously marked by the diffuse and profound impact of new technologies. To say that this is the world in which we must intervene does not mean accepting it as it is. It means understanding how it appears, how it is made up, and the problems that threaten it; regardless of what we want to achieve, this is the material with which we must work.⁴

In the same article he refers to the metamorphosis of matter, arguing that commercial competition leads to:

the multiplication of images and services offered and to the accelerated introduction of the new. At the same time, the lack of a design culture capable of confronting these new technological possibilities has resulted in the dissemination of worthless products. So the potential of the old technology is distributed in the banal forms of gadgets, disposable products, and ephemeral objects lacking any cultural significance.

And then further, he stresses, "(...) we tend to perceive a disposable world: a world of objects without depth that leaves no trace in our memories, but does leave a growing mountain of refuse".⁵

Today, the downtown areas of large cities have become receptacles of discarded products, industrially produced under the reign of new technologies. Here, the homeless and the collectors of recyclables are important agents of waste reutilization, creating a parallel, informal economy. But more significantly, the dispossessed, the homeless, are creating another material culture based on the transformation of refuse. Their actions promote a metamorphosis of products and materials, constituting the base of a culture of resistance, defining their place in the world and in history.

Their life on the street is marked by a situation of permanent uncertainty, and there is no guarantee about the validity and durability of their survival models. What works today may not work tomorrow. It is in this sense that the homeless develop an adaptive repertoire, whose main characteristic is the capacity to improvise, varying according to the different contexts which are the "product of the interaction between the skill at using resources and the ingenuity of the homeless and local ecological, political and organizational restrictions".⁶

Through their need to survive and their sheer numbers, homeless people in a number of large cities have developed an informal economy of recycling, thus generating a new occupation – the recyclables collector. All kinds of discarded materials are salvaged by collectors who sell them to companies that re-introduce the materials in the productive cycle. In doing so, the collectors provide highly significant environmental services. However, their activity and social utility are not recognised. A dramatic example is that of COOPAMARE (Cooperativa de catadores autonomos de papel, aparas e materiais reaproveitaveis) established in Sao Paulo in 1989, and currently employing 300 people, which was granted concessional permission to use land under a viaduct in the western part of the city, but which frequently receives notices of eviction, the most recent being in July 2005.⁷

As well as such larger scale co-operative activity, we need to acknowledge the inventive, spontaneous re-use and adaptation of 'waste' by homeless people for their own immediate purposes.

Reuse, Recycling and the Spontaneous Design

During this era of intense, abundant consumption, reuse, recycling, *bricolage* and spontaneous design using waste, have become the activity of non-designers, re-inventing and creating new and mutating products from discarded industrial products and materials.

This spontaneous design is at the center of a broad, complex problem in which the matter of refuse, waste, obsolescence is dialectically linked to the category of value. Here I use the word

spontaneous to express the nature of the constructive practice of the homeless, despite the difficulties introduced by this word. Strictly speaking, the word spontaneous implies self-generation, and therefore the absence of a project process, which, I attempt to show, does not correspond to the reality of the informal habitats created by the homeless, since even though in a very primary form, the homeless design their structures to design life.

Generally, one thinks of refuse as something that has already been worn down, used or as a product whose value has been used up. The spontaneous design of the homeless makes us acknowledge that much of what we throw away still has value.

The products of spontaneous design are visible on the streets of large urban centers, but are rarely noticed as such. Examples include the small wooden carts used by the collectors to collect paper and other discarded materials; the carts of street vendors; the plastic or cardboard habitats of the homeless constructed on sidewalks, under viaducts and in the leftover spaces of the cities.

Here, spontaneous design can be understood as a practice of creative resistance in seeking ingenious solutions to solving concrete problems in a context of a severe lack of resources. It is an anti-design driven exclusively by the vital need to survive.

Why Should Spontaneous Design by Non-Designers Be Studied?

The more general lessons include the opportunity to rethink the culture of waste in the consumer society and its relations with what Yves Deforge called “ecological catastrophe”. Deforge drew attention to the designer’s responsibility in the growth of waste, posing the question that designers may make good products “... but do they perform good actions?” For Deforge, even the design of a lighter may participate in the waste of the human labor and energy capital of Earth. According to him, it is “... an ethical question, an old question that technology has always avoided, by extricating itself from responsibility, but to which design, in its final avatar, must answer, not by the piling of technology upon technology, but by a deliberate ideology”⁸.

Spontaneous design and the material strategies of survival of people who do not have anything has had a profound impact in many urban centers, restructuring public space. This phenomenon demonstrates new way of doing design and living the city, leading to the question – can this be a new culture and society?

The study of the material culture of the homeless in urban downtown areas can offer an essential viewpoint from which to know contemporary urban metamorphoses and design culture. Certainly, It is not possible to formulate public policies to manage urban poverty homelessness without knowing these habitats, their intrinsic and extrinsic importance for the city.

The activity of constructing a home on the street is related to other spontaneous strategies to build popular housing – particularly in the context of precarious housing for the poor in Brazil and in other Third World countries. Whether it be in tenements, in shantytowns, in squats, the homeless must count exclusively on their own energies and skills, sometimes on a community basis, such as in Sanya neighborhood, Tokyo.

A Close-up View

In Sao Paulo, Los Angeles, Tokyo and many other cities, daily we can see figures that wander ceaselessly, crossing the cities, excavating the remnants of what we consume, especially in the downtown areas where they have an access to the leftovers market. Materials and products reappear in unexpected forms, forcing us to rethink our habits, to rethink the limits of our resources and the many modalities of reusing materials and products that have already been used before.

The main materials reused in spontaneous design and in informal recycling are cardboard, plastic, wooden fruit crates, foam, materials, threads, white paper, newspapers, magazines, aluminum, supermarket carts, carts, furniture, sleeping bags, carpeting, and others.

The informal habitat complexes that have been documented, express pragmatic and vital concerns mixed with creative drives. Materials are resized and worked on with many different constructive techniques including: taking apart; making holes; fitting; cutting; tying; collages – in other words *bricolage*.

Blue plastic is one of the main material resources to construct the condominiums of informal habitats in Los Angeles, São Paulo or Tokyo. Green and white plastic are also used often. Another essential resource in the homeless people's routine is cardboard. In Tokyo in the 1990s, the homeless built a “cardboard city” in the underground passages of Shinjuku station. Some of the constructions were built by artists and homeless cause activists. São Paulo and Los Angeles also present a very high concentration of cardboard use.

Textiles, blankets and sheets are also important elements of the materiality of the homeless culture. They are used as a source of heat, protection and privacy. Carpeting and sleeping bags are also regularly used to compose the habitats, to line furniture making it like beds. Various elements often appear in pairs and combinations: textiles and cardboard; plastic and textile; plastic and cardboard.

The use of textiles stretched, suspended or wrapped around boxes or other structures produces a packaging effect very similar to certain contemporary art installations, such as the work of Christo who wrapped the Reichstag in Germany, or the *parangolés* of Helio Oiticica. The visual impact of these interferences in the urban landscape is significant, and the colored surfaces of the

textiles contrast with the grey of concrete that predominates in the metropolises.

Inside these habitats, order is presided by a spirit of temporariness, by a logic of compact, vital packaging. Certain decorative elements are commonly found. Living or artificial plants; cloth animals; teddy bears, dolls and broken toys compose a “domestic” ornamentation, materialising the meaning of the imaginary home that has been lost, expressing the individuality of each homeless person. There is a certain juxtaposition of cloths and covers that generates protection and coziness. Personal hygiene items, soap to wash clothes and disinfectants are also frequently found in these interiors, denoting the homeless person’s concern (contrary to public perception) about cleanliness and maintaining their image.

All kinds of furniture salvaged from the trash are transformed into important elements to create informal urban habitats. They form places to be, to accommodate the body. Given the small size of these habitats, furniture is used mainly to sleep on, because other activities like eating, sitting, working, chatting are done in the spaces around the shelter. There is an extraordinary variety in the improvisation of beds: foam, mattresses, discarded cushions, cardboard from packaging, newspapers and printed matter are often used for sleeping, to provide some protection between the body and the sidewalk, or even as a blanket to provide a certain amount of warmth.

There is a significant variety of kitchens, stoves, portable stoves and spaces to eat. In order to cover eating needs, the homeless people not only carry out a number of strategies to obtain food, they also spontaneously design domestic equipment and utensils. Portable stoves are set up on the public streets or sidewalks, incorporating elements from the environment such as stones, bricks, even cans and industrial stove components. In some cases, communities of homeless people set up arrangements to store pots and other cooking utensils. In these arrangements one often sees products that have gone out of use in certain stratas of society and which are now re-appropriated by the homeless. Next to the kitchens, there are areas for hygiene, with containers to store water, usually plastic vessels, oil drums or paint cans.

The informal recycling practices of street vendors evidences a significant degree of improvisation and creativeness. An example is the “souped-up bike”, as it is called by Josenildo da Silva, a street coffee vendor in the city of Salvador, Bahia. This ingenious vehicle is composed of discarded industrial products: a bicycle, two sound boxes, a car tape player, a loud-speaker, a car battery, car light, mirror, hooter, siren, alarm, a piece of washing machine cabinet, a parking jack. The metal components were soldered to the back of the bicycle, supported by metal tubes, originally the legs of a chair found in the trash. The assemblage was colorfully painted, making it stand out in the urban environment.

Concerning the use of bicycles, another example is the mobile house and workplace created by a homeless street vendor in the Ochano-mizu neighborhood, Chiodaku, Tokyo. This inventive piece of equipment was made up of a bicycle, a buggy, plastic sheet and a metal structure connecting the buggy to the bicycle. It was created to be multifunctional: to store the used magazines the vendor salvaged from the train and subway stations as well as the materials he used to work as a shoeshine boy in the streets. It also sheltered the pet dog that accompanied him on his travels through the city.

Mobile-houses, bicycle-work-stations and many other types of shelter-equipment can be seen today on the streets of the main postindustrial metropolises.

Spontaneous design and informal recycling processes raises critical questions. What is the relationship between design, poverty and homeless? How can designers contribute to the development of material strategies to rethink poverty and homelessness in urban centers? The raw material used by spontaneous design can lead to a radical questioning of the productive chain, ranging from product design to discarding and waste.

Conclusion

On a quiet July morning in 1998, a homeless woman in the city of São Paulo told me: "I follow the material to the last". Very simply, she summarised the social and ecological responsibility of design and designers. They have to anticipate, at the time of conception, what the fate of the products and materials they design will be, especially in a world where everything already appears to have been created and designed. It is in this world that designers must intervene.

Spontaneous design creates the possibility of reflecting on the role of design and the culture of design in contemporary society. It also provides the opportunity of rethinking the role of objects in the present stage of industrialization, in the sense of product obsolescence, in the concepts of useful products, useless products, function and dysfunction.⁹

Spontaneous design and informal recycling bring alterity to public space, they are powerful elements that materialise an alternative, radical practice of design and cultural resistance. Above all, it is essential to consider the study of spontaneous design as part of a great effort to understand design. It is a mistake to study it alone, for itself, in itself, which might lead to a process of aesthetisation of poverty. The study of spontaneous design and informal recycling in the postindustrial metropolis needs to be structured together with other fields of research and knowledge, to contribute to a better understanding of the cultural and aesthetic dimension in the urban environment of contemporary societies.

Manzini's work dealt extensively with the transformations of material and the implications of environmental limitations in

everyday life in contemporary society. In his essay, 'Prometheus of Everyday', he incited designers, producers and consumers to rethink the life cycle of products, observing that this process requires "(...) a new aesthetics that attributes worth to materials and products that in some way are able to embody vestiges of their earlier existences".¹⁰

It is not an exaggeration to say that in the context referred by Manzini, the homeless and the dispossessed have discovered the various lives of products and materials as well as having created new ways of reusing the objects and the materials.

Finally, it is important to mention that the plastic and cardboard cities warn us that either we change the economic and political scene in which we live, or, in a very near future, we will see apocalyptic, but not at all Hollywood-like scenes, similar to those predicted by Ridley Scott in *Blade Runner*.

Postscript

COOPAMARE (Cooperativa de catadores autonomos de papel, aparas e materiais reaproveitaveis) is a recycling co-operative established in Sao Paulo on 14 May 1989. Its 300 odd workers are homeless people who salvage, sort and onsell discarded materials, providing a valuable environmental service to the city. It operates from under a viaduct in the western part of the city (the Paulo VI viaduct at the intersection of Galeno de Almeida and João Moura streets). The co-op was granted concessional permission to use this land by the city government, but not on a secure basis. There has been a long struggle between COOPAMARE and the neighborhood, as well as between it and the municipality. Without the official right of land use, the co-op receives frequent menaces of eviction and exclusion. The last one was in July 2005 and it is still on going on. The collectors are firmly determined to keep working from under the viaduct. In a very well organised manner they have been arguing for their right to use the land and the vital location of the cooperative in this exact location, which gives them best access to the discarded materials.

Yesterday I was there with at least 30 students and two visiting professors from USA, as part of a course I teach at the University of Sao Paulo Architecture and Urbanism School. We had a long conversation with some leaders of their movement. They told us that perhaps the main problem is that they and the cooperative are considered dirty and ugly. But this is not so. According to them, "we have dirty hands but clean intentions. Working here is much better then being on the streets begging money. We need help to publicise our work and our contribution to the city, and the municipality has to understand that they cannot make 300 people jobless here in this cooperative".

We are facing an impasse, we are in the middle of the battle. I hope the problem will be resolved in a proper manner and the

collectors will get the right to stay where they are. We are in urgent need of a public policy that will provide dignity and the proper recognition and visibility of the collectors work.

Notes

1. Jennifer Wolch and Geoffrey Devertueil 'New Landscapes of urban poverty management' in Nigel Thrift and John May (eds) *Time-Space* London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 149–168.
2. Michael Dear *Rethinking Los Angeles* London: Sage, 1996, p. ix.
3. Dear *op cit*.
4. Ezio Manzini, 'Prometheus of the everyday: the Ecology of the artificial and the designer's responsibility' in Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin (eds) *Discovering Design: Exploration in Design Studies* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 221.
5. Manzini *op cit* p. 222.
6. David Snow and Leo Anderson *Down on Their Luck: a study of homeless street people* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
7. See 'Postscript' at end of article for an update.
8. Yves Deforge 'Avatars of Design: design before design' in Victor Margolin & Richard Buchanan (eds) *The Idea of Design* Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press, 1996.
9. Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos and Andréa Franco Pereira 'Packaging: Function, Re-function and Malfunction: from consumer society to the homeless material culture' In. H. Yoshikawa et al (eds) *Proceedings First International Symposium on Environmentally Conscious Design and Inverse Manufacturing* Los Alamitos: Computer Society, pp. 492–496, 1999.
10. Manzini *op cit* p. 236.