



## Homelessness: A Global Perspective

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# Homelessness

## A Global Perspective

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From January 9 to 13, 2006 the India Habitat Center hosted a conference on **HOMELESSNESS: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**. Over five days, scholars, professors, UN representatives, NGO members and students got together to present perspectives on the homeless situation in 13 countries.

The conference was organized by the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, University of Newcastle, UK. The issues discussed ranged from: definitions of homelessness, regulation, causes, survival strategies, the role of NGOs, the changing of public perceptions of the homeless. Delegates presented the results of their research and there were some field trips to homeless encampments, which introduced delegates to the range and dimension of urban poverty, homelessness, squatting, slums and inadequate housing in Delhi.

These fieldtrips were supported by Indian NGOs, especially AAA (Actionaid India Programme), a shelter rights campaign working with homeless people in Delhi since 2000. Although the majority of delegates did not speak hindi, the communication with the homeless was very deep and via translators, we gained some sense

of the employment situation of the homeless and their contribution to India's informal economy.

Much of the homeless in Delhi are migrants from rural areas, who went to the nearest cities, in order to earn a living. Many men are engaged as day labourers, pulling carts, rickshaws, and doing other informal jobs. They are paid below the minimum wages and their life situation is inhuman, despite their significant contribution to the growth of the city (as discussed in Ranjana Mital's paper in DPP 3/2005 – ed.)

What can be done? What is the role of design in this context?

The conference testified to the increasing interest and participation of architecture schools in Asia in homelessness issues; this includes critically examining the role of design, urban planning and architecture in (re)constructing urban space and the inherent conflicts in contemporary urban settings regarding the use of public space by the homeless.

Another significant topic addressed by the conference was the way in which contemporary media constructs and re-constructs an endless spectacle, a set of symbols and misconceptions of the homeless. The spectacle is not a set of facts and real images but an interpretation, reflecting the diverse social attitudes towards the homeless. Thus, the prominent image of the homeless is as: outlaws, as parasites, troublemakers, people who are breaking the tacit rules of use and behavior in the public space. Much of the visual material on the homeless continues to be inflected by voyeurism, despite the fact that “the aesthetisation of misery” and the use of poverty images has been a significant question since the 1960s, raised, for example, by Brazilian film maker Glauber Rocha in his article ‘Uma Estética da Fome’ (Aesthetics of Hunger, 1965), which questioned *miserabilismo* (preoccupation with the poor aspects of Brazilian society).

It is time again to go beyond picturesque and exploitative ways, to consider the political implications of such imagery and make a serious effort to carry out an extensive research on the issue, which could lead to a re-examination of existing power inequalities. There is no better place than India to provide a proper atmosphere for starting the dialogue, illuminated by the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

“I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control of his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?”