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Homelessness : a cross-cultural perspective

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This special issue on homelessness is unique because it is one among the few journals on the built environment that is exploring possibilities of integrating the issue of homelessness with that of concerns for space and place and the social responsibility of built environment professionals. It is also timely because of the current critical debates on the future of affordable housing and of changing perceptions of the homeless in general. This issue then attempts to bring together cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives on homelessness and its influence on spatial perceptions and experiences, both at global, local, and individual levels.

In the "Call for Papers" we outlined themes of an exploratory nature. We asked how homelessness is represented both spatially and socially; who enters these spaces of representation and why; how do gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class and culture intersect with the homelessness discourse; how gender, power, and space are related to homelessness and how is it possible to design for an inclusive society? We argued against polarising claims and stressed on the importance of taking into account varieties of local practice by abandoning North/South polarities, and acquiring an interdisciplinary approach. For this issue, we sought manuscripts that would offer new perspectives and insights, explore alternative theoretical models, and offer practical applications. Our goal was to contribute to a new articulation of theory, practice, and ethics that would help us better understand the condition of "homelessness".

The overwhelming response to the call for papers highlighted the growing importance of the homelessness discourse as an interdisciplinary concern. The submissions were from diverse fields such as architecture, planning, environmental psychology, sociology, public policy, cultural studies, behavioural sciences, social work and so on. The breadth of material covered was immensely rich and spanned theoretical, methodical, and practical approaches to

understanding homelessness. Since all the papers were valuable in generating discussions and creating new knowledge in this field, we have decided to publish an anthology of the essays on Homelessness later this year that will include both the papers in this special issue and those that could not be accommodated here.

The papers selected for this issue offer a diverse range of topics that address the intersections between homelessness and the production and consumption of spaces. They start with questioning the accepted definitions of homelessness and stress on the social construction of homelessness through discourse and representation. They highlight research gaps and concerns that have not normally been addressed in other homelessness literature. Most importantly, they challenge normative discourses on the categories of homelessness and bring the multiplicity of homeless experiences to the forefront.

Recently various authors have questioned the narrative of a homogenous homeless population. Authors such as Takahashi (1997) has identified the NIMBY syndrome associated specifically with HIV positive homeless adults and Passaro (1996) has identified the differential experiences of homeless single men and women. Along with them, others have highlighted the exclusionary mechanism of the homelessness discourse that only defines families with children and single mothers within its remit. There is a need then to critically reflect and evaluate the existing research and literature on homelessness and identify valid research gaps and concerns that are rendered invisible in the popular homelessness narrative.

In this issue, Boucher extends the scope of homelessness research to alternative sexualities. Arguing for an examination of the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, she identifies their institutional marginalisation in housing provision and support. The range of literature reviewed looks at both internal and external issues contributing to the hegemony of heterosexuality in housing studies. Through her paper she develops a conceptualisation of

sexuality in housing studies by highlighting that sexuality is a valid and valuable, socio-spatial issue, intricately bound up in homelessness discourse and research.

There has been significant progress in the study of homelessness in the past decade and the steadily increasing literature on its connections with spatial concerns highlights the importance of space and place within homeless narratives. Authors such as May (2000) suggests that the notion of homelessness is increasingly being defined as placelessness, both institutionally and among the homeless population. Yet, home is also understood not as an absolute condition, but as a social construct. For the homeless then, home can be a place with "home-like" qualities (VENESS, 1992).

This connection between home and place-making is reflected in this issue by papers from Rabinovich et al and Moore. Both authors offer ways to think of alternative definitions of what *is* a home and what *makes* a home. Rabinovich et al look at what they call the urban nomads- those who prefer to, or are forced to live on the streets of Sao Paolo in their handcarts. Through interviews of single adults and families who live in this way, and photographs of their handcarts which are their mobile homes, the authors break down the binaries between home and homeless and create a hybrid space where home as a place becomes a fluid concept. They find that within these handcarts, their owners define home-like qualities through personalisation, territorialisation, and creation of memories and individual identities, which offer subjective interpretations of home as a place. Moore's paper set in a different culture, within the streets and hostels of London, offer similar insights into homelessness as a process, constructed socially, as much by the homeless as by institutions. Through an environmental psychological approach, she highlights the multiplicity of meanings of home among young adults in non-home-like places. Both these papers then suggest the breakdown of boundaries in the definition of home and homelessness and in the disciplinary approaches that examine homelessness.

The papers chosen in this issue thus represent the wide range of methodologies that can be applied to research on homelessness. They range from discourse analysis, ethnography, survey research, to theoretical critiques. Most of the papers in this issue present some form of interview data either as a survey approach (such as Moore) or as more detailed ethnographic data (Rabinovich et al, Sahlin, Lofstrand et al, Bridgman). In both cases the commentaries are closely entwined with the textual material and highlight the growing prevalence of using first hand bottom-up approaches as part of research enquiry and reporting. This is also true for those papers engaging with a discourse analysis of policy such as those by Sahlin and Lofstrand et al. Both authors use a variety of sources of evidence that include the homeless, social workers, police, as well as policy documents. In the paper by Jenson, much of the argument is organised around discourses and critiques of theoretical concepts, while the paper by Bridgman highlights the importance of collaborative research in order to produce innovative spaces for the homeless. These papers suggest the importance of multiple viewpoints and methods as published in the initial call for papers and hence deliberately resist privileging any one approach.

One of the important purposes of this issue was to try to integrate theoretical and methodological approaches with practical applications towards making places for the homeless. Both Jenson and Bridgman offer innovative ways of rethinking the spaces of homelessness. Jenson suggests that homelessness and the unutilised spaces of derelict buildings are both the products of a capitalist economy. He uses them as analogies to the immense loss of resources that are overlooked and underutilised. Using Marxist theory, Jenson identifies possible ways of applying architectural knowledge to rethink the use of such spaces for the homeless population. On the other hand, Bridgman gives a fascinating insight into the process of building a village for homeless youth. From the initial stages of the project which involved a housing design charette, she highlights how the homeless youth were

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themselves involved in a participatory process of designing their spaces. Her paper provides insight into the practical issues in designing for the young homeless, and shows the need to be imaginative. Her exploration of the process maps out the multiple layers of negotiations by the homeless youth, architects, and organisations in order to produce a design that was flexible and reflected the different needs of a seemingly homogenous population.

Until recently, the homeless population was understood to be the perfect ground where the codes of a "middle-class lifestyle" could be inscribed upon. The normative ideologies that constructed the homeless as deviant and in need of "guidance" towards achieving a "home," reflected an image of the homeless as passive and their condition as pathological that could be "doctored" to mould them into "responsible" citizens. In this issue, Sahlin exposes the dark-side of the zero-tolerance policies of urban public spaces, and of enclosure in homeless shelters, thus complementing the findings of others authors (STARK, 1994) who have labelled homeless shelters as "total" institutions. Sahlin thus evokes the irony of exclusion where those with capital construct the enclosures and policies for the homeless which effectively segregate them from the rest of society. On the other hand, Bridgman and Rabinovich et all illustrate that despite many restrictions, it is possible for homeless adults to be involved in active and often contentious processes of home-making.

Until recently, there had been little research that interrogated the intersection of globalisation processes with space, place, and homelessness. Contemporary literature on homelessness reveals that the condition of homelessness is part of a wider global phenomenon that needs to be examined along with its local variations. Haney (2000) and Gowan (2000) elucidate these connections by their multiple positions in research that examine the mutual shaping of global dynamics and local struggles. In this issue, all the papers reinforce these connections to varying degrees. While Jenson articulates the effect of globalisation on the notion of a community that provides for the homeless, Lofstrand et all

suggest how the construction of gender by powerful groups within society changes homelessness policies at an institutional level. Finally, Rabinovich et al suggest how the lure of global consumer culture permeates through the spaces of homelessness and expresses itself through the individual possessions of the handcart dwellers.

A poststructuralist theme resonates through all the papers presented in this issue. The papers presented here deal with multiple positions of gender, sexuality, age, family structures, race, ethnicity, and culture. They reiterate the power of discursive practices, hegemonic structures, and normative ideologies. They stress on the changing nature of meanings and on the social constructiveness of any subject position. They break down binaries of home and homeless, boundaries of disciplines, and highlight the pitfalls of uncritically accepting the homeless as a homogenous population. Above all else, they elucidate the power of human agency. While the aim of the issue was not to give sole precedence to this particular theoretical standpoint, the immense number of poststructuralist research currently being undertaken was reflected in all the abstracts we received and hence in the dominance of this theoretical position in the papers. In contemplating not only on the spatialised, globalised and localised connections of homelessness, this issue raises important questions on the meanings of being "at home" and "out of home", and stresses the importance of taking space and place into account in homelessness research. It thus elaborates on progress already made in cultural and social geography and situates homelessness in the realm of architecture and the built environment. Taken together, this collection of papers underlines an interdisciplinary agenda and demonstrates the ongoing commitment to the multifaceted modes of space, place, and identities in homelessness.

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