LOSING HEART
THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE IN RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

Statement of Submission
This thesis submitted to the Miami University Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for University Honors with Distinction.

by
Allison Gayle Mouch

May 2005

Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
ABSTRACT

LOSING HEART: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE IN RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

By Allison Gayle Mouch

Homelessness is an issue pervading American society and it is increasing at an alarming pace. The right to a roof over one’s head is losing ground as affordable housing, changing urban and economic landscapes, as well as the declining value of the minimum wage continue to plague our society and wreak havoc on those less fortunate. This thesis investigates the history of homelessness, focusing on the major causes and factors contributing to a burgeoning homeless population in the United States today. By placing homelessness in an historic context, trends can be identified as certain class, race, and age groups grow and change the face of homelessness over the course of twenty-five years.

Once homelessness has been identified on an historic level, it is further examined from the perspective of theories of place and the affect of place on the human experience. While it is imperative to understand the epidemic quantitatively, a qualitative investigation of the affects a “lack of place” have on individuals without shelter is essential in determining how homelessness is dealt with on a human level. This theory is explored through critique of space in both an urban and architectural realm, furthered by a psychological component addressing the human psyche and how place affects our everyday experience. By using previous design work and research conducted by architects and professionals in various fields, a thorough analysis is presented that leads to the conclusion of the work.

As a student of architecture, I hope to synthesize the concept of place and the adverse affect of the lack of shelter with the homeless epidemic affecting our nation. Ultimately, I conclude that an architectural response to the humanitarian issue is possible. As design professionals, there must be a level of responsibility accepted in creating for those in the greatest need. While architects alone may not ‘solve’ the issue of homelessness as we would hope, by designing with place in mind and challenging our traditional sense of spatial needs, we may begin to find a manageable response to the homeless dilemma affecting us all.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Jason Ivaliotis for the generous scholarship award that made the nature of this thesis possible.

I would also like to thank Professors Tom Dutton, David Prytherch, and Ben Jacks for their insight and commitment in support of this thesis.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Part One: The History of Homelessness**

- Defining Homelessness
- Poverty and Homelessness
- How Poor Are the Homeless?
- The Demographics of Homelessness: Who Becomes Homeless, and How?
- Causes and Factors Resulting in Homelessness
- Declining Minimum Wage and Loss of Employment
- Affordable Housing and Public Assistance
- Additional Factors Contributing to Homelessness
- How Do These Causes Factor Into Homelessness?

**Part Two: The Importance of Place**

- Physical Place
- Place as Experience
- What it Means to Be Without

**Part Three: Restructuring the Importance of Place in Designing for the Homeless**

- A New Approach to Traditional Shelter
- Alternate Discourse on Housing the Homeless

**Conclusion**

**References**
PART ONE: THE HISTORY OF HOMELESSNESS

Twenty-five years ago, homelessness was not the vast and perplexing issue it has become today. While homelessness existed, it was primarily an urban quandary, isolated to inner cities and explained away for many by poor choices, human vice, and irreversible poverty. The stereotypes of the ‘wino’ sleeping it off on a bench in Central Park or the old man panhandling in Chicago’s Union Station have since become extinct; the early 1980s brought the homeless epidemic to our doorsteps. No longer the plight of the adult male, women, children, families, and the elderly are fast learning what it means to be homeless. In New York City, for example, with its constant population of destitute and unemployed, nearly 50 percent of those visiting a homeless shelter in 1984 were staying there for their first time. This statistic can be regarded as accurate nationwide.¹

But how did this happen? What caused such a great shift in the numbers and demographics of those suffering from homelessness? It could not possibly have happened over night; or could it? In the 1980s, homelessness became a national issue due to the changing economy, lack of affordable housing, and gap in earnings compared to the cost of living. Heavy industry in American cities was being slowly replaced by corporate, white-collar employment, creating a divergent path for those lacking the education or resources to compete for such employment. In Michigan, for example, the loss of jobs in heavy industry during 1982 resulted in the governor declaring a “state of

human emergency”; the push towards technology left many self-supporting individuals and families out in the cold… literally. Without jobs to support themselves or access to other employment, the homeless epidemic laid its foundation in the heart of America. The grip was solidified as affordable housing became scarce, our country’s most vulnerable citizens were deinstitutionalized, and earnings lost pace with the rising cost of living, especially in our urban core.²

**Defining Homelessness**

In order to truly grasp the historic relevance of homelessness, we must first consider the definition of homelessness itself. Homelessness can mean many things to many people, most of whom suffer from the life-altering circumstance first hand. Yet to be homeless is a lifestyle hardly understood by the majority of Americans. In most cases, we believe the homeless have done something to deserve their plight. What many of us do not understand is that the face of homelessness in the United States has changed over the course of twenty-five years. We are looking at a completely different landscape, one filled with families, children, and the elderly, many of whom are the undeserving victims of personal tragedy or economic downturn, inflicted by unfair and unforgiving circumstances out of their control. In order to better address the situation, we must be willing to understand the true meaning of homelessness in America today, from the very core of its definition to the physical and emotional characteristics that make it a

staggering dilemma all of us must face, and by facing must act against with every fiber of our being.

In accordance with *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, the term ‘homeless’ is located beneath the word ‘home’, representing a derivative of an otherwise positive identity. To be at home is to be relaxed and comfortable, in harmony with one’s surroundings, at ease and on familiar ground. We may deduce from these definitions that to be homeless is to be without any of the above. You are not at ease when you are homeless; you are not comfortable on the streets nor with your surroundings or the people who surround you. There is no harmony, no relaxation to your life. Once homeless, you lose all sense of security, and without security it becomes difficult to live a life of normalcy. With security comes confidence, wellbeing, and a feeling of control; without security, lives have the tendency to spin out of orbit, control moving from bad to worse.

But what does it mean to be homeless? Is the homeless condition simply to be without a roof over one’s head or without the comfort of knowing there is shelter and security waiting for you somewhere? Is being homeless merely a physical trait, or is it a condition responsive to other characteristics, such as social, racial, and economic issues?

According to the Stewart B. McKinney Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11301, et seq. (1994), a person is considered homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence and have a primary night time residence that is either a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations; an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be

---

institutionalized, or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings. The definition does not include any individual imprisoned or otherwise detained by state law. An addition to this definition, as made by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, includes those persons living on the streets or those who face imminent eviction (within a week) from a private dwelling or institution and that have no subsequent residence or resources to obtain housing. While this definition is most suitable for urban areas, it does not address the rural homeless, who are less likely to be living on the streets and more likely to be living amongst relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing.

While this working definition of homelessness paints a thorough portrait of what homelessness is, it fails to address who experiences the condition firsthand. Generally speaking, men are found to be homeless more often than women, comprising 40% of the urban homeless population (compared to the 14% single women comprise). While ethnicity is dependent on geographic location, current nationwide studies estimate roughly 50% of homeless are African American, 35% are Caucasian, 12% Hispanic, 2% Native American, and 1% Asian. Here in Cincinnati, nearly 70% of the homeless population is African American, while the remaining 30% are Caucasian, clearly illustrating that different trends based on race and ethnicity exist in different locations nationwide.

---

5 The National Coalition for the Homeless Website, February 23, 2005.
http://www.nationalhomeless.org/index.html
6 Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, pg. 15
Studies run by the Conference of Mayors in twenty-seven cities found children under the age of eighteen to account for roughly 25% of the urban homeless population, a figure that grows when the national average is computed, which estimates nearly 39% of the homeless population to be made up of children. Conversely, 51% of homeless were between the ages of 31 and 50. A significant nationwide increase of families living on the streets is one of the reasons the number of homeless children has increased over the past ten years.\(^7\) In 2001, families comprised approximately 40% of the homeless population, a number much greater than previous years; additionally, the Urban Institute found that families, single mothers, and children make up the largest group of rural homeless. This considerable increase in families on the streets has caused a shift in previous generalizations of the homeless; no longer the plight of middle-aged men and substance abusers, homelessness has the potential to affect any one of us at any time, no matter what our demographic characteristics.

**Poverty and Homelessness**

The cause of homelessness is often associated in some way, shape, or form to the existence of poverty. Without one, the other cannot maintain its grasp on the underclass here in the United States. However, there are certain circumstances able to render homeless those without prior cause or relation to poverty. For example, at the beginning of his book *Rachel and Her Children*, Jonathan Kozol introduces us to a family that is left homeless after a fire burned their house to the ground, taking with it the father’s

carpentry tools, their life savings, and all other possessions of value. Left with nothing but the clothes on their backs and no surviving family members to support them, the two children were eventually taken into foster care and the parents left to fend for themselves on the streets of New York City. The family in this example was not poverty-stricken; they were normal, middle-class residents of New Jersey to whom life dealt a sickening blow. It simply goes to show that these circumstances can happen to anyone, including you or I, regardless of our current situation. No one is immune to homelessness in this lifetime; however, it is most commonly those afflicted by poverty that are more susceptible to homelessness.

The US Census Bureau reported in its 2003 population report that the official rate of poverty is 12.5 percent. Nearly 35.9 million people are considered to be living below the poverty level, with the number of children less than 18 years of age reaching 12.9 million. This number remains larger than the number of adults between the ages of 18-65, as well as those 65 and over living in poverty (10.8 million and 10.2 million, respectively). Of those reported to be living in poverty, nearly 25 percent are African American/black, 23 percent are of Hispanic origin, 12 percent are Asian, and 8 percent are white alone. These statistic are telling in that race may play an economic factor in the lives of the poor.

Location also plays a role in determining levels of poverty (and thus numbers of homeless). The cost of living in the Midwest can be very different than cost of living in

---
California or New York. Poverty rates for the Northeast and West come in at 11.3 percent and 12.6 percent, respectively, while the Midwest is only 10.7 percent but the South records roughly 14 percent poverty in its midst. These numbers are attributed to the rural poverty that often strikes the Midwest and south, a situation that continues to grow due to the decreasing importance of farming in America’s heartland. While rural homelessness remains a factor in our discussion, friends and acquaintances often provide beds or shelter to the less fortunate who have lost their homes and finances, resulting in a culture of transient living rather than street dwelling. Our topic remains focused on urban poverty and the experience of homelessness therein. 

The number of people suffering below the national poverty level in metropolitan areas is roughly 12.1 percent, according to the 2003 census data. Metropolitan areas include both the central cities and suburbs, an area not typically associated with extreme poverty. While we cannot assume those suffering from poverty in the suburbs will automatically end up on the streets, it can be inferred from the data that the economics of poverty are such that homelessness is an understandable ‘next step’ for those lacking financial stability. When living from paycheck to paycheck, you are only one illness, layoff, or eviction from landing on the streets, no matter where you live.

Suburban poverty, however, is still nowhere near the level it is in the inner cities. The census data for 2003 placed poverty for those living inside the city’s central region at

---


17.5 percent, or nearly 15 million.\(^5\) Conditions specific to urban life may be to blame for the difference in poverty rates between the two areas. Lacking public transportation makes getting to places of employment a difficulty; generally, individuals living in the suburbs have access to modes of transportation other than public railways or bus lines. For those living in metropolitan areas, if employment is not held within walking distance or along a public transportation route, one’s options are limited. Coupled with a cost of living that is often higher for those in metropolitan areas (particularly where gentrification is gaining a foothold), a lack of affordable housing and access to jobs compounds the living situations of many on the brink of poverty. More often than not, severely impoverished neighborhoods have little to no access to resources or aide to help their situation; schools are not up to the standards society has set for our children, and jobs are often scarce due to urban blight and “white flight” towards the suburbs. Those lucky enough to have a steady job near their living quarters will find they are only further disadvantaged by an unlivable wage.

**How Poor Are the Homeless?**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau and their 2004 statistics, the poverty threshold for an individual under the age of 65 with no dependents is $9,827.00 a year. When considering a two-person household, the poverty level is $12,649.00 a year, and with a four-person household it reaches $19,484.00. This number varies when taking into

consideration the number of children under 18 living in the household, and it increases along with the number of household members. However, if a family of nine were to be considered below poverty level, they would have to live on less than $36,500.00 a year.\textsuperscript{11}

So how does one go from extreme poverty to homelessness? While homelessness is the result of poverty in many cases, poverty is not the sole cause of homelessness across the board. Homeless people are poor people, but the poor are not necessarily homeless.\textsuperscript{12} While it indicates a ‘one foot out the door’ rationale, it is often a combination of poverty and something else that results in an individual or family finding themselves living on the street.

**The Demographics of Homelessness: Who Becomes Homeless, and How?**

It is important to recognize that one of the defining characteristics of homelessness is the cause is almost always different for men than it is for women. According to one study done by the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, men list the loss of a job or income as the primary reason for becoming homeless, followed by loss of housing (usually due to the loss of income or insufficient funds), and substance abuse. Release from a facility is also listed as one of the reasons men in Cincinnati find themselves homeless, a cause that is echoed across the nation due to the recent legislation


regarding the mentally ill and institutionalized here in America. In fact, nearly 25 percent of men interviewed cite health-related issues as the reason for their situation.  

Women, on the other hand, cite housing as the main reason for becoming homeless. In their case, the loss of housing is often associated with the loss of resources, most often a job, spousal income, or welfare benefits. What is strikingly different between men and women is that women often become homeless in conjunction with physical abuse or domestic violence, a cause not typically associated with men. Over 12 percent of women in the Cincinnati area find themselves homeless due to abusive situations, a staggering figure. That women are forced to flee violent and dangerous situations at home only to find themselves living similarly harsh conditions on the street is unfair and despicable, especially since children are often involved. The issue of protection and security as it pertains to such a scenario will be discussed later on, as we begin to address sense of place. Needs must be further addressed and met to ensure that women do not feel inclined to choose homelessness over the safety of shelter.

Children are often rendered homeless by no fault or action of their own; while still dependent, children are at the whim of their parents, and if one or both lose their home, their income, or a combination of the two, the entire family is left out on the street. The number of homeless families with children has increased significantly over the past decade, and statistics indicate that families with children are one of the fastest growing

---


segments of the homeless population. The United States Conference of Mayors found in its 2001 survey of 27 cities that families comprised nearly 40 percent of the homeless population.\textsuperscript{15}

The dichotomy of the homeless population extends far beyond the boundaries of man, woman, and child. In addition to economic factors, race also plays a role in the homeless situation. According to a recent survey conducted by the National Coalition for the Homeless, nearly 50 percent of those suffering from homelessness are African American; 35 percent are Caucasian, 12 percent are of Hispanic ethnicity, and the remaining 3 percent are either Native American or Asian. As discussed previously, these statistics have been known to vary from city to city.\textsuperscript{16}

In John A. Powell’s study concerning racism and homelessness, he cites economic disparity, the concentration of poverty, the limits of opportunity structures and sufficient education for minorities, as well as persistent spatial segregation in our cities today as indicators of race-based homelessness. While race is not the only factor which determines homelessness, it would be irresponsible to imply that race is not a valid issue when examining who suffers most from homelessness.\textsuperscript{17}

Causes and Factors Resulting in Homelessness

As previously discussed, homelessness is not a selective quandary; it can effect anyone, anywhere, at any time. There are, however, underlying causes and conditions within the structure of our society that serve as catalysts to homelessness. A lack of affordable housing and the loss of employment or source of income are the two major causes of homelessness in the United States, while domestic abuse, substance abuse, and mental health issues are considered to be subsidiary causes of homelessness.

Because the rise in poverty can be closely linked to the rise in homelessness, it is important to understand how this relationship has evolved. Although our government tries to persuade us into believing that the unemployment rate is dwindling and our economy is growing, the simple fact is that homelessness persists due to falling incomes and the prevalence of less secure jobs that offer fewer benefits such as investment plans and health care. Additionally, employment has evolved technologically, leaving heavy industry and tradesmanship out of the picture. With little public assistance available, unemployment has a tendency to become permanent all too quickly.18

Declining Minimum Wage and Loss of Employment

The declining value of our nation’s minimum wage compounds the issue of employment even further. As the disparity between rich and poor has grown over the years, those employed in low-wage jobs find themselves caught in the midst of a backlash; even working full time, the minimum wage earned is not enough to support

even the most meager standard of living. For instance, in a report issued in 1997, the real value of the minimum wage came in at nearly 18.1% less than its value as of 1979, and we may assume this decline has persisted over the past eight years. Other factors contributing to this startling divergence include a steep drop in the number and bargaining power of the unionized workers, a decline in manufacturing jobs, globalization, and the increase in availability of nonstandard work, such as temp positions and part-time employment.19

Although job loss is often thought of as a major source of homelessness, according to the National Coalition website, approximately 42% of those experiencing homelessness are actually employed. The illusion of a livable wage is a huge problem facing the urban poor today, as the “real” value of the minimum wage set by our government has fallen by 25% since 1975. This declining minimum wage puts most housing out of reach for the workers who earn it, and oftentimes does not cover basic living expenses such as food or utilities. This information disproves the idea that all victims of homelessness are jobless; in fact, many do hold jobs but are simply unable to provide shelter, food, and proper clothing for themselves or their families based on the wage they earn.20

Yet another cause of homelessness in the United States is the lack of secure jobs available to individuals in the lower-income brackets. With our country experiencing one

of the worst hiring slumps in nearly 20 years, the employment outlook seems grim.\footnote{21}{“U.S. Economy in Worst Hiring Slump in Decades.” New York Times, 2003.} Many of the jobs available to lower-wage workers offer few benefits and are less secure than most salaried positions. This lack of stability often leads to lay-offs and wage cuts, which can lead in turn to homelessness, as the economy offers no respite in the workforce and the cost of living continues to rise.\footnote{22}{The National Coalition for the Homeless. \textit{Why Are People Homeless?} Fact Sheet #1. September 2002.} While the situation today may not be quite as evident as in years past, it is no less urgent.

**Affordable Housing and Public Assistance**

Unfortunately, individuals in need of public housing who are affected the most by this growing gap are most often the urban poor. Soaring rent and inflation have made it next to impossible for families or individuals living near, at, or below poverty level to afford payments on a house or apartment. For instance, between 1991 and 1995, the median fee paid by low-income renters rose almost 21%, according to figures provided by the National Coalition for the Homeless.\footnote{23}{Daskal, Jennifer. \textit{In Search of Shelter: The Growing Shortage of Affordable Rental Housing}. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1999.} When approximately half of a family’s anticipated income is spent on housing costs, an annual increase of over one-fifth the total cost is a large price jump to manage. Furthermore, the inflation rate in 2001 was projected at 1.6%, while the price increase for a standard two bedroom home was nearly 18%. This vast disparity solidifies the relationship between affordable housing and
homelessness; when one cannot afford the home one lives in, it is one of the first assets to be taken away, rendering those who live there homeless.\textsuperscript{24}

In conjunction with the issues of affordable housing and minimum wage value, a significant decline in public assistance is also to blame for the increase in poverty and homelessness in our country today. With the repeal of programs such as the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), aid to needy families fell 47 percent after taking into account inflation. This program and others were replaced with a block grant initiative known as TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), a highly inadequate substitute to the late AFDC. Welfare legislation and the reduction of benefits to nearly 40 percent of the families relying on its services has resulted in a direct connection between cutting aid programs and homelessness; 20 percent of those suffering from these cutbacks cite homelessness as a direct result of the action.\textsuperscript{25}

The lack of public assistance is exacerbated further by the lack of housing available for those who need it most but cannot afford it due to conditions we have previously discussed (decreasing wage value, lack of public assistance, and prevailing poverty). Public assistance does not always come in the form of monetary contributions, and the current state of national housing assistance programs leaves much to be desired in the way of help for the needy. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, the waiting list for impoverished families to receive government assistance for housing increased 50 percent over two years (between 1996 and 1998); this dramatic increase


\textsuperscript{25} Burt, Martha and Barbara Cohen. \textit{America's Homeless: Numbers, Characteristics, and Programs that Serve Them}. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1989.
caused a 22 month wait to extend up to 33 months. This wait period is a critical time in the lives of those on the verge of losing their home and sense of security. There are simply too many people who have dire housing needs and limited availability of assistance to help them stay in or find new housing.\textsuperscript{26} The scope of limitations in our public assistance sector thus begs the question; if we are hardly able to keep those already in housing safely there, how do we expect to help those living on the streets find new housing? Coupled with eroding employment levels, the decline in value and availability of public assistance can be attributed to this increased need for public housing.

It is in a lack of affordable housing that this employment crisis and wage deflation becomes most detrimental. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, a lack of affordable housing coupled with the limited scale of our current public housing assistance programs has created a disaster which ranks as the number one cause of homelessness nationwide. This housing crisis prospered as the gap between the number of affordable housing units available and the number of people in need grew exponentially. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, between 1973 and 1993, 2.2 million low-rental units disappeared from our national housing market, a figure that can be seen firsthand in Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine neighborhood.

Nearly five hundred units are currently abandoned or have been converted to other uses. Some of those uses include luxury apartments and condominiums, an example of extreme gentrification that deprives the low-income market of affordable housing to the detriment of those living in extreme poverty. Coupled with this

\textsuperscript{26} The National Coalition for the Homeless. \textit{Why Are People Homeless?} Fact Sheet #1. September 2002.
disappearing act, the median rental cost paid by those living in low-income housing rose by 21 percent between 1991 and 1995, and the number of low-income renters increased along with that figure. The result is an economically dysfunctional system where there is an imbalance of human beings without homes and no feasible way for them to solve their own predicament. If the working wage was substantial, developers understood the need for economic housing, and there was prevalent assistance for those seeking it most, perhaps we would not be in such a quandary, with a proposed shortage of 4.4 million affordable housing units needed to close the gap in homelessness.27

Additional Factors Contributing to Homelessness

A common misconception of homelessness is that it is caused by substance abuse. According to Andy Erickson of the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, it is often the other way around, with homelessness at the root of alcohol and drug abuse commonly associated with life on the streets. Addiction disorders are commonly found afflicting the homeless, but what some may see as causes can also be the effect of a situation itself.28 Plenty of people suffer from addictive disorders nationwide and do not wind up living on the streets. What is known for sure is that those who are poor and also suffer from addiction are more likely to wind up homeless; the National Coalition reports that for those in precarious housing situations, addiction increases the risk of

displacement considerably. And once displaced, there is little opportunity for obtaining health care, finding treatment, or conducting a recovery continuum from illness. Those prone to substance abuse find living on the streets an adequate trigger in the continuance of a detrimental cycle. Many see their addictions as one of the few ways to escape their existing living condition.\textsuperscript{29}

Mental illness is another factor that contributes to homelessness here in America. The US Conference of Mayors found in 2001 that approximately 22\% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of mental illness.\textsuperscript{30} A common misconception of this data resides in the assumed release of mental patients from institutions across the country, beginning in the 1950s and continuing throughout the 1980s. In the first wave around the mid-fifties, approximately 200,000 patients were released. During the 60s, in response to deteriorating conditions in mental institutions nationwide, hundreds of thousands more patients were let go. By 1985, fewer than 150,000 mentally ill patients remained institutionalized across the country, compared to nearly 550,000 in 1955. While it took almost fifty years to escalate into homelessness it wasn’t until 1980, when living conditions for the poor began to decrease and wage disparity grew, that the mentally ill were found frequenting the streets.\textsuperscript{31} The Federal Task Force on Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness finds that only 5-7 \% of those suffering from illness need to be institutionalized, and that given the proper housing and

\textsuperscript{30} U.S. Conference of Mayors. \textit{A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 2001}.
assistance, most of those released from institutions can function well on their own.32 Because they are currently unable to seek help and assistance, those suffering from mental illness remain a large population among the homeless.

Domestic violence is also a growing cause of homelessness, particularly among women and children. According to a national poll, approximately half of all women and children experiencing homelessness are fleeing domestic violence.33 The existing lack of affordable health care in our country is another contributing factor. For families and individuals already struggling to pay day-to-day living expenses, a serious illness or hospital stay can deplete an entire savings account and force a downward spiral into homelessness. According to the 1998 Census, approximately 38.7 million Americans have no health insurance to date, and nearly one third of those living in poverty have no insurance of any kind.34 In a society such as ours, these factors should not be on a list of the most common causes of the homeless epidemic; women should not be forced to decide between their home and the streets in the name of safety, and a person should not be rendered homeless due to an unforeseen illness or circumstance beyond their control.

How do these causes factor into homelessness?

After reviewing the causes most closely associated with homelessness, it is clear that poverty and homelessness are inextricably linked in a cause and effect relationship. A rise in poverty coupled with the simultaneous decrease in housing can be associated directly with the increase in homelessness over the past twenty to twenty-five years (NCH Website, 11/28/04). While it is possible for anyone to be homeless, to be removed from their current situation and placed in another less comfortable one, the factors contributing to homelessness overwhelmingly favor those coming from low-income, poverty-stricken communities. The poor are frequently unable to buy food, pay for housing or healthcare, or partake in a quality education privy to those more economically fortunate. Consequently, “being poor means being an illness, an accident, or a paycheck away from living on the streets.”35

Homelessness continues to exist today because there is such a disparity of income across the board; in 2001, over 11% of the population in the United States lived in poverty, and nearly 39% of those living in poverty had incomes of less than half the poverty level.36 Not only does this income gap serve as a cause of homelessness, but it continues to perpetuate the problem as inflation rises and the cost of living rises along with it. Once someone in the low-income bracket loses their job, there is a pretty good chance they will also lose their home, leaving very few options open to them as American citizens.

Additionally, the opportunity to save money, the security of insurance and health care, and the educational opportunities afforded to middle class citizens simply do not apply to the homeless. How often do you hear of a homeless man investing money or keeping up a savings account? It is equally unlikely that an insurance provider will support a homeless family who is more prone to sickness and mental health than a typical middle-class family. Children of homeless families are particularly susceptible to economic downturn; kids who live on the streets have little incentive to attend school when their circumstances are so remote from their peers, and they have no place to complete their homework. It is easy to see why the problem of homelessness becomes entrenched in our society based on income, class, and perpetuated by increasing poverty. Without the assurance of a living wage, adequate support for those who are temporarily unemployed (or cannot work permanently), increased affordable housing, and access to health care and treatment/recovery programs, the homeless epidemic is far from contained.

On paper, this all seems straightforward; if these issues are understood and addressed, homelessness will surely be solved in the long run. This assumption is simply not true. Homelessness is a complex issue that encompasses a great deal of public policy and personal turmoil. The experience is different for each individual involved, which is what makes ‘solving’ the ‘problem’ next to impossible. It is easy to crunch numbers and refer to data, suggesting what seems most logical for those of us who have no idea what it must be like to live without the security of a roof over one’s head. Therefore, in addition
to the history of homelessness in America, we must now investigate the more personal side of the homeless experience; the concept of place and our need for this component of individuality and ownership in our emotional lives and our built environment.
PART TWO: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Having now addressed what homelessness is, what it means in our society, who suffers most from it and how individuals and families affected by it come about their situation, it is with greater understanding that we move forward to the issue of place. How we understand place and its importance within the context of our lives here on earth is essential to understanding how best to address the situation of homelessness.

Place, in its truest sense, is a very difficult concept to grasp. It can be viewed as a structural capacity, as in “a building or area where something in particular happens or is located,” or “the house or other type of accommodation where somebody lives.” Or it can be referred to as an experience, the intangible relationship woven between a point in time and your experience within that moment. Such a definition reads “the position or location where somebody or something belongs,” in the pages of Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary. While the definition itself seems over-simplified in many ways, it refers back to a very important concern that must be addressed head on; place signifies to the human that they belong in this world, whatever their situation may be. If one feels they have a place in which to rest, retreat, retire, and feel secure, that is their guarantee that they ‘belong’. Once that form of place is lost or denied, what is left to them as means to define themselves and validate their existence?

In her book on therapeutic landscapes, Allison Williams identifies considerable relevance in how a person relates to a certain place in time. According to extensive research conducted, sense of place defines the identity, significance, meaning, intention, and felt value given to a place, often as a result of experiencing it over time. Through experience, a bond is created between person and place, often referred to as “topophilia”, or subjective experiential knowledge.39 This pragmatic theory suggests that most humans find more significance and comfort in those spaces most familiar to them, or spaces that they have spent a considerable amount of time in. The relationship formed between place and person highlights the significance felt when ownership and acquaintance are the main concern. Identified as “insidedness” by a scholar named Tuan, we find that the most comfortable and ‘authentic’ landscapes in our lives are most often our homes, endowed with a strong sense of place and ‘networks of interpersonal concern’ cultivated for long periods of time (most easily identified as the family structure). In simpler terms, we as human beings find inner peace in spaces that carry the significance of experience. The home is one of these sought-after places of value.

There is no arguing that home is a significant environment in one’s life, satisfying not only our most basic needs but eliciting complex feelings as well. Referring back to Williams,

Home, as with other environments that commonly elicit a strong sense of place, is positively associated with health, as it is ‘deeply relevant to the basic need for

internal cohesion, mental health, a sense of security and direction, and a feeling of relationship with the world around one.\textsuperscript{40}

The importance of safety and security in conjunction with the home environment is particularly intriguing in relation to the built environment. While a sense of place is derived from the emotional nature of the home structure, it is implicit that a home also protects those inhabiting it with shelter from the elements. It is here that we begin to make connections between place, homelessness, and design.

**Physical Place**

Architecturally, the experience of ‘place’ is the ultimate goal of our work as designers of space. As architects, our primary function is to satisfy the functional requirements of a building program while fundamentally expose the manifestations of architecture that accommodate human activity. In this manner, the arrangement and ordering of space and forms determine how we as humans promote endeavors, elicit responses, and communicate meaning.\textsuperscript{41} When you visit a museum or eat at a fancy restaurant, open the door to your home after a long day of work, enter a concert hall or step foot into your office on Monday morning, the sensation you feel and the emotions that overwhelm are all important aspects of design. Even buildings one would not consider well designed have a component of place to them; we feel differently wherever we go, regardless of whether it is a cinder block warehouse or the most extravagant

\textsuperscript{40} Williams, Allison. *Therapeutic Landscapes; The Dynamic Between Place & Wellness*. University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, Maryland. 1999. p. 73-74.

eatery in town. Our surroundings affect how we feel, what we do and, accordingly, who we are. The solidity of the built environment is easily associated with one having ‘place’ in our society. The tangibility of a room or structure as a whole is hard to deny; ownership of the physical space guarantees the owner a definitive haven from the world outside. It is within the physical, surrounded by shelter and protected from the elements, that most of us find our greatest sense of safety, and in many ways our greatest sense of place.

However, place is not merely restricted within the confines of the built environment. The effect of place on a human being can certainly extend to one’s experience outdoors, in the wilderness or on the streets of a big city. Recently I traveled to Columbus to visit a close friend and catch an evening performance at the theater. I was acutely aware, as I traversed High Street along the campus at Ohio State University, of how different it felt compared to when I walk up and down our High Street here in Oxford, Ohio. The energy felt different, the air more brisk near certain dank doorways or allies, the sun brighter in spots alongside buildings or out from under the trees lining the walk. At times I felt energized, while at others I felt uncomfortable or nervous. Compared to Oxford, I was much more on guard, not knowing my surroundings as well as if I had been living there for years. The people, too, were as unfamiliar as their surroundings. And yet, it was just another street in another city in Midwestern America; how could the surroundings be so drastically different and cause me to feel totally altered? It seems the physicality of place comes into play more often than we might think.
It is thus important to acknowledge the physical characteristic of the natural environment as a factor in our sense of place, especially for those rendered homeless who spend a considerable amount of their time on city streets. Streets and the landscapes that surround are not only axes for orderly circulation of vehicles or pedestrians, but they are also the hallways and dwelling places for those who are homeless. Many homeless attribute their familiarity with life on the street as an adequate ‘structural’ component to define themselves through place. The street thus becomes a significant part of the homeless identity and an expressive aspect of the built environment.42

Taking both structural and natural space into account, author Tony Hiss addresses the importance of place within the fabric of our daily life in his book, *The Experience of Place*. Hiss discusses in depth the experience of walking in cities (much like I experienced just recently) as well as the countryside, including the sites, sounds, smells, and how their varying degrees affected his reaction to the space surrounding him. Additionally, he addresses elements of planning an interactive landscape; how we might use the tools of design to refocus our efforts towards city planning in order to better engage the urban landscape provided. He explains:

> We all react, consciously and unconsciously, to the places where we live and work, in ways we scarcely notice or that are only now becoming known to us. Ever-accelerating changes in most people’s day-to-day circumstances are helping us and prodding us, sometimes forcing us, to learn that our ordinary surroundings, built and natural alike, have an immediate and continuing effect on the way we feel and act, on our health and intelligence. These places have an impact on our sense of self, our sense of safety, the kind of work we get done, the ways we interact with other people, even our ability to function as citizens (in a

democracy). In short, the places where we spend our time affect the people we are and can become.\footnote{Hiss, Tony. \textit{The Experience of Place: A New Way of looking at and Dealing With Our Recently Changing Cities and Countryside}. First Vintage Books Edition; New York, 1991. p. xi.}

It is within the depth and breadth of this passage that we begin to understand how influential our surroundings truly are, whether we immediately notice them or not. I would presume that most people understand this concept fundamentally, without ever having given it much thought; there are certain places we enjoy more than others, environments that are comforting and relaxing versus cold and unnerving. Everyone has felt this before, but have they ever considered why this distinction exists?

\textbf{Place as Experience}

The familiarity of a space has something to do with the feelings connected to the immediate environment. It is because of this association that most people feel at ease in their homes or apartments, surrounded by friendly faces and recognizable objects. Ownership plays a huge role in this comfortability factor; the items we acquire over a lifetime here on earth accumulate as testaments to our existence, and in many cultures signify a person’s identity and their importance within society. This mentality can be easily demonstrated by American culture today. You are considered ‘rich’ and ‘well-off’, in most cases, if you own a large house and have many expensive possessions. When a person is considered rich, they are usually regarded with reverence and respect, allowing
them hierarchy within our social and community status. Being rich is often seen as an identity in and of itself, as is being poor. Your worth and value in this society is often reflected by your status, and status is assigned based upon your worldly possessions. It is an evolving system established over the course of many centuries, but it remains strong. Ownership, particularly ownership of property, establishes citizenship and belonging in a certain place. Thus, ownership greatly influences who we are perceived to be through where we are from and the property you possess.44

Another factor in the logistics of ownership comes when a person’s identity is defined by geographic location. This phenomenon is referred to as “positive place identity.”45 Research has once again indicated that people do indeed use places to communicate qualities of the self to themselves or others. People commonly use geographical location to forge a sense of affiliation through attachment; for instance, I may have an emotional attachment with the neighborhood I was born into and grew up in as a child. Therefore, in conversation with another person, I may be more inclined to consistently present this affiliation with the neighborhood as proof of my identity and importance of self. Because it is so important for me to define myself by a previous location I may feel especially close to, this need for place identity is integral in demarcating who I am as a person; simply put, it provides an interesting viewpoint in how locale affects one’s sense of place from birth until death.

There are many factors that further contribute to our desire to refer our identity back to locale; for instance, we immediately associate life on the south side of Chicago as being a different living environment than life lived in one of the northern suburbs of the city. By associating ourselves with a certain geographic location, particularly ‘suburbs’, ‘downtown’, ‘lakeside’, or ‘mountain view’, we are using place to define ourselves, for better or worse (most often for the better; few people use negative connotations as defining who they are and where they are from). 46

And yet, even if we do not vocalize the area from which we originate, ignoring the locale only reaffirms its importance in defining ourselves as human beings. I recently read an article about a prominent journalist for the New York Times who made her living writing about the powerful and wealthy frolicking in New York proper; she made it her job to hide the fact that her childhood was spent in rural Appalachia and she was homeless off and on throughout most of her formative years, eating out of garbage tins and begging on empty street corners across the Virginias. The moral of this anecdote is that she eventually found it too difficult to ignore the truths of her past, owing to the influence her living conditions had on her struggle and success in the upper-echelons of New York society. Her story provides an interesting parallel through which we begin to understand the effects a person’s place of origin, primarily geographic, have on that person’s sense of being and place over the duration of their lifetime. Place has an intrinsic relevance in ours lives, whether we choose to proclaim it’s importance or try to

ignore it’s existence; in all forms, where we originate is at the very root of who we are as human beings.

Thus, the issue of place has been defined in geographic terms, stressing the importance of location in the relationship a human has with their surroundings. Ownership of those surroundings and tangible possessions are also key components in the study of the importance of place, as this ownership grounds a person to their locale and permits them to remain in one location for an extended period of time. By traditional standards, this place we are discussing is most often a home, be it a freestanding house, an apartment, a condominium, trailer, or even a tent. Four walls and a roof over one’s head constitute shelter, and Webster defines shelter similarly as “something that covers or affords protection.”47 We often take for granted the type of shelter our homes provide for us, both physically and emotionally, but it is important that we begin to examine their existence as a retreat or reprieve from the world outside their boundaries. This ability to shield and protect is one of the main reasons a home is considered a shelter; we must feel safe and secure in a space to call it a home. And according to Hiss, the value of place is that it provides a sense of protection (or lack thereof); thus a home can be considered a realm of place, associated by its acts of protection and sense of spatial ownership it provides the inhabitant.48

If we can thus draw a connection between the value of place in our lives, how it defines the life we lead and how we grow as human beings, it is not a far stretch to determine that ‘place’ defines our sense of self (the intangible element of place), while our home provides us with a tangible structure upon which to ground the meaning of place. Therefore, by drawing these loose connections, we are able to attest that our material and immaterial sense of place is intertwined with the home in which we live. Our home grounds us both physically and emotionally, through our familial relationships and the sense of belonging associated with a space innately ours. Without a home of our own or source of constant, continuous shelter, there exists a line blurred by the necessity of place to define ourselves as relevant to the world in which we live.

What it Means to Be Without

While we have discussed the importance physical and geographic location has on an individual’s emotional sense of place, I would like to address the effects attributed to being without a tangible space to call one’s own. According to Al Diludoivich, organizational manager of the Julian Street Inn in San Jose California, it is difficult for those of use who have never experienced homelessness to understand the implications of being without a roof over one’s head for an extended period of time. It may seem irrelevant, perhaps even romantic (in a ‘sleeping under the stars’ sort of way), but when
the days grow short and the nights increasingly colder, it is terrifying to have nothing but
a shrub or doorway to find solace in.\textsuperscript{49}

Living without the promise of shelter is perhaps one of the most demoralizing
ways for a human being to exist. Architect Christopher Alexander believes a lack of
shelter is directly opposing a human being’s quality of wholeness in their lives. Working
in relation to theory of place, Alexander has established that our “wholeness” as a human
being is directly connected to how we feel in context with our immediate (and often
permanent) surroundings. According to him, harmony within the space you dwell is
pertinent to the quality of life you will experience there. That is why there is an
immediate connection between architectural design and our emotions; we react to a space
based on the unity experienced within, and often are able to sense the feelings from
which the structure originally rose. Most architects’ design with an innate sense of the
feeling they wish to convey in their structure, and that feeling is transposed on those who
look upon, enter, inhabit, and leave that space. The experience of place is meant to
strengthen the original intentions of its creator, as well as feed upon the desires of its
user.\textsuperscript{50} When both these aspects are realized in harmony, one is able to experience the
meaning of place in its truest sense.\textsuperscript{51}

Because the homeless most often experience a lack of physical (and emotional)
place in our society, there is little opportunity for Alexander’s idea of wholeness to apply

\textsuperscript{49} Video. \textit{Places for the Soul: The Architecture of Christopher Alexander}. University of
\textsuperscript{50} Landy, Ruth. \textit{Places for the Soul; The Architecture of Christopher Alexander}.
University of California Extension Media Center; Berkeley, CA. Copyright 1990.
\textsuperscript{51} Video. \textit{Places for the Soul: The Architecture of Christopher Alexander}. University of
to their daily lives. Upon speaking with members of the homeless community in Traverse City, Michigan, their responses ranged from feeling sad and depressed about their situation to utter despair and even a total lack of emotion towards relief efforts or optimism. Being without a place to call their own left them jaded and disheartened, a difficult emotional affliction to emerge from without the promise of situational change.

One young lady I spoke with, who goes by the name Ann, explained:

Without my own place, I don’t feel like a real person. I don’t have an address, no one can find me or get stuff to me or help me out. It’s hard to find work; it’s harder to make friends. I don’t feel connected to anyone or anything in this town. I’m just alone, that’s it, and I feel it. I’m getting older, and it’s scary, to be alone.\(^{52}\)

Another kid in his twenties explained his situation even more poignantly. “I feel like a ghost. When I left two years ago, I thought I would become someone, live the life, live on the edge… all that. But now I don’t know. I feel like I’m not living at all.”\(^{53}\)

These stories and others like them point to the obvious relationship between sense of place and one’s surroundings. Without the physical, there can be no synthesis between place and self, no harmony between the architectural space and the emotions created within. Physical place is imperative in defining one’s sense of self, both emotionally and physically; thus, the homeless are extremely susceptible to turmoil and distress associated to being ‘without’ place.

Which brings us to the integral question; by acknowledging the importance of place and how its lack thereof can adversely affect the homeless, how can we as

\(^{52}\) Interview with Ann, March 16\(^{th}\), 2005. Traverse City, MI.

\(^{53}\) Interview with “X”, March 16\(^{th}\), 2005. Traverse City, MI.
designers attempt to solve the homeless epidemic at hand? I believe this can be done through the reintegration of sense of place in the social curriculum of architecture today.
PART THREE: RESTRUCTURING THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE IN DESIGNING FOR THE HOMELESS

While in acknowledgement there is no easy solution to homelessness, it is pertinent that steps be taken industry-wide to address the importance of knowledge, reaction, attitude, and change in the humanitarian field of architecture and design. Too often are we imposed upon by big business and corporate mindsets to think bigger, better, and more broad rather than focus on a single issue affecting our lives and the lives of those around us. By simply looking at how our home, place of employment, schools, parks, and streets affect our daily lives and our sense of place within them, we begin to question how important our surroundings actually are. In pursuing this train of thought, it becomes possible to re-examine societal norms and how effective they may or may not be in the face of such a large-scale issue as homelessness.

The issue of affordable housing is by far the most imperative response to poverty and homelessness in our nation today. But while it is vastly important to the overall solution of homelessness, its broad scope limits my ability to adequately respond to the plethora of design possibilities therein. My response, therefore, focuses less on permanent public housing (an obvious ‘final solution’ towards housing the homeless) but more on immediate housing options that begin to instill a sense of place to the homeless as soon as possible. As stated earlier, the plight of the homeless must be addressed from the ground up, so I intend to begin at the roots. The immediacy of housing for dignity,
safety, and ownership has been identified as three key concerns in addressing temporary housing for the homeless.

**A New Approach to Traditional Shelter**

A current example of temporary resolution comes in the form of the standard homeless shelter itself. For years the shelter has been the structural face of homelessness, housing the services and sanctuary that most individuals living on the streets learn (either willingly or grudgingly) to call home. From a strictly architectural standpoint, shelters serve as sufficient means of temporary housing; they satisfy the requirements of having a roof over one’s head and walls shielding one from the elements. However, the institutional nature of such construction leaves little room for individualized space or soothing features one would expect to find in the prototypical home. Meeting the basic demands of shelter may constitute “housing” in general terminology, but without an emotional component integrating sense of place within structure, such shelter can never be considered a true “home” environment. The conditions related to “home” are challenging to define, especially on an individual level, and are usually different for all involved. Thus, an architect’s job becomes considerably more difficult; to provide those in need with not only physical shelter but also the means for emotional connection to the space in which they live.  

According to Sam Davis, author of *Designing for the Homeless; Architecture That Works*, the buildings we design for the homeless (and everyone, for that matter),

---

should accurately and poignantly reflect the values and culture of the society we live in. Our architecture is a roadmap of our history; lest we be the generation that forgets this. As architects, planners, designers and human beings, we must do MORE than simply provide shelter; home may constitute shelter, but shelter does not necessarily make a home. We must instill our structures with hope and dignity so that those feelings of optimism and worthiness are conveyed to a population most in need; the homeless.\(^{55}\)

In Davis’ case, his work focuses primarily on how the stereotypical homeless shelter (often revered as dangerous and unhealthy) can be reintegrated into our culture and urban fabric. The stereotypical shelter-house was one of filth and hazard; Jonathan Kozol describes the Martinique Hotel in New York City as follows.

People passing by the hotel have no sense of the tragic dimensions of life inside. Upon entering the hotel, one is greeted by a rush of noise, made in large part by the many small children living there. These children share accommodations with a considerable cockroach and rodent population. The nearly 400 families housed here (at the Martinique) are assisted by just seven HRA caseworkers, whose efforts to keep in touch with each family- at least once a month- often amount to no more than a note slipped under a door.\(^{56}\)

The shelter acts as the most common and accepted of solutions, as shelters for the homeless have existed in some capacity or another since the 1980s. Such shelters can come in an array of styles and encompass a broad range of services. It is imperative that shelters of the past, such as the Martinique, do not continue to serve as examples for the temporary shelters of the future. The Martinique was never designed with place in mind;

\(^{55}\) Davis, Sam. *Designing for the Homeless; Architecture That Works.*

The future of the homeless shelter must own up to the importance place has in creating dignified housing for those in need.

For instance, Davis & Joyce Architects designed the nation’s first assisted care and after care facility for homeless youth suffering from HIV/AIDS in San Francisco, California. This innovative temporary living facility was designed much differently than the firm’s Contra Coast Adult Shelter based in Concord, California. While the adult shelter was designed on the basis of utility and order coupled with beauty and flexibility, the feel of the old warehouse is innately different than the renovated Larkin Street Youth Services, designed expressly for those suffering from a deadly disease. This difference in feeling and place is a product of the differing facility functions; one is meant to help homeless adults gain the confidence and skills needed to regain their footing in today’s society; the other is geared towards making a difficult and painful experience more like home. When Davis discussed with his clients their needs and wants for Larkin Street, what he found was a population assured of one thing and one thing only; they had no desire to live in an institution. The antithesis of an institution (as defined by Davis) is a home; and while it would be impractical to design an entire shelter facility after a single-family module, the concept of place remained true to form. Those in need of shelter have no desire to be institutionalized; they crave a nurturing environment just as you or I would wish for if afflicted by disease or destitution.57

The purpose of such shelters must not be looked at as merely a roof and four walls protecting those residing within; while this function is no less relevant to the cause, we

---

57 Davis, Sam. *Designing for the Homeless; Architecture that Works.* 112-123
must not forget that sense of place plays an important role in the validity of such temporary housing. Father Joe Carroll, director and executor of the St. Vincent de Paul Village in San Diego, California, spoke the truth when he explained his reasoning for constructing such a radical response to the typical shelter found in America today. He felt in order to be a force within the homeless community, the homeless shelter must be an appealing place to turn to; rather than a mother and child asking if they have to stay there, his goal was to create a space where that same mother and child would ask if they could stay there.58

The design of such innovative, positive spaces and shelter to address the issue of homelessness seems like a no-brainer, temporary housing solution that all communities should be looking towards implementing immediately. However, this is not as easy a task as it may seem, for community resentment towards temporary housing for the homeless grows deeper with each passing day. David Brown gives it context when he states, “As a people, Americans generously support the broad goal of helping our less fortunate acquire their own homes- but we don’t want those homes to be constructed in our own neighborhoods.”59 The “not in my backyard” syndrome affects even the most benevolent of us all, posing a most difficult question… if not here, then where?

The most basic forms of housing for the homeless, a spectrum of emergency and transitional shelter that leads to support systems and affordable housing is viewed as socialist by our government and feared throughout the communities we live in. Although

58 Davis, Sam. *Designing for the Homeless; Architecture that Works*. P. 7-8
it seems residents would prefer housing the homeless and keeping them off the open streets and out of public spaces, many pose the argument that by housing the homeless in ‘comfortable’ shelters, we merely encourage the homeless to remain dependent on the free shelter we provide.

The majority of shelters being designed today are done so with an institutional flare, and for this very reason. Sure, they offer a roof over one’s head for a few nights, possibly even a few months, but such spaces do not encourage the homeless to ‘grow roots’ and become interdependent on the system. The Drop Inn Center of Cincinnati is one such shelter; having been implemented within an existing structure, there was not much opportunity for creative design. Subsequently, the shelter is somewhat cold and overcrowded, inflicting a warehouse-like feel onto its inhabitants. In it’s defense, there is little money or support within the local government to renovate or improve this structure (an aspect of the housing situation which is increasingly frustrating). The Drop Inn Center does have certain programs set up for long terms residents where the participants are housed in single and double rooms above the dormitory reserved for nightly visitors. However, the scope of these rehabilitation programs is nothing substantial, and the atmosphere remains communal at best. It is hardly a place in which a sense of comfort, security, and structure can be conveyed to its residents very clearly, if at all.60

Creating desirable shelter leading into a system of semi-permanent, transitional housing for the homeless should not be looked upon as a negative use of public resources. We need to refrain from looking at quality shelter as encouraging dependent behavior

---

60 Interview with Andy Erickson, The Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless. Friday, October 22, 2004, Over-the-Rhine.
from the homeless. For those who feel encouraging the homeless to live among us is a poor idea, I have very little sympathy; the homeless will remain in our midst whether they live in an abandoned building or in the safety, security, and positive environment of a shelter house. The right to live a dignified existence is imperative; the homeless will exist, whether we like it or not, if we continue to deny support through housing.

One way in which to ensure temporary shelter will not be abused is to provide more than just a roof and four walls for those in need of assistance. For many homeless, a reintegration into society is the first step in rising out of distress and gaining control of their situation. There must be a support system within the greater shelter system in order to begin the recovery process. By implementing educational programs and support systems within the realm of homeless shelters, the mentality that destitute citizens merely go there to ‘sit around’ can be quelled. Supporting the homeless and providing a route for them to emerge from their situation bolsters the community as a whole, one individual at a time. At St. Vincent de Paul Village, Father Joe maintains “you can treat the entire person only if you have all the needed personnel and facilities.”61 Since our sense of place is intertwined in both the emotional and physical environment, so is our concept of homelessness. For most, being homeless is not just a physical situation; it is a way of life and a characterization of self. Therefore, by offering programs that better the lives and prospects of the homeless, we do more than temporarily solve a physical circumstance. This is an integral aspect of understanding and meeting the needs of the homeless in an effort to solve the epidemic in its entirely. In meeting the needs of the homeless through

support within an environment, we provide the groundwork for worth and value in their lives. And once again, a sense of belonging is imperative in the re-establishment of sense of place in an individual’s life.

It is important, however, that we do not look to temporary shelters as permanent solutions to the plight of the homeless. This relationship is no doubt the source of disengagement within communities. There are many ways in which the transition from shelter to temporary and permanent housing can take place; the main factor is that it does take place. Urban communities should be unafraid of building shelters in their midst, as long as their purpose is a transitional space for the homeless to regain their sense of place within the community that surrounds them. If designed effectively, keeping in mind the physical and emotional needs of the homeless, this transition can be accomplished quite efficiently.

In much of Sam Davis’s work, the shelter and transitional housing facilities were designed with a sense of home in mind. Alternatively, Rae Bridgman takes an approach that incorporates the homeless’ relationship with the street in design solutions for both temporary shelter and transitional housing. This approach is a segway into discussing what can be done to support those who make the choice to live without the constraints of a roof and four walls.

According to Bridgman, his work emerges from the knowledge that, for many homeless, the street is a significant part of their identity and therefore, sense of place. In designing housing for the homeless client, the architect must understand and respect that some chronically homeless men and women relate physically and emotionally to their
surroundings in the urban environment, more so than they might respond to a standard home or apartment complex. In taking this into consideration, the therapeutic relationship between structure and surroundings is imperative. According to a study done by M. Breton in 1984, the potential of the physical environment to nurture and support a sense of competence or control for homeless women is key in the design of drop-in facilities (and accordingly transitional and permanent housing for the homeless). It is within the urban context that homeless men and women establish relationships, structure, and community based on their circumstance; removing them from this established sense of place can often be negative, especially for the chronically homeless who have known little else.62

Breton and Bridgeman both agree that design for the homeless must be focused around two key questions; “What are the qualities of the street that people appreciated most and wanted to have incorporated in the building?” and “What would help people feel safe?” A hierarchy of spaces that move from most public to most private, a strong community based program and activities centered around continuing relationships and support, as well as clear sight lines and the elimination of dominant control by any person in any public space (such as a kitchen or bath area) are just a few suggestions emerging from the homeless community in response to these questions. In addressing these two queries, a sensitive and therapeutic attempt to convey familiar place may be established

in which the chronically homeless are able to transition from the streets to a safer existence.\textsuperscript{63}

\textbf{Alternate Discourse on Housing the Homeless}

Bridgeman’s critique on designing with the urban streetscape in mind brings to light an aspect of place and homelessness not yet discussed. What happens if an individual prefers street life to that of shelter, housing, or public assistance? Albeit rare, there are cases of such individual preference. According to Davis, these individuals may be labeled as eccentric, maladjusted, or just plan peculiar, but their choice to live out-of-doors is just as relevant as the choice to own a home. As discussed previously, exterior spaces, corridors, and landscapes can offer similar presence and sense of place as interior structure can. If a person decides their sense of place is best determined by nature, and they are neither dangerous nor infringing on the rights of others to use a space, Davis suggests we respect their right to live how they choose and simply provide a dignified and hygienic way in which for them to exist.\textsuperscript{64}

Numerous architects and designers have offered resolutions for this neo-traditional response towards homelessness. In 1987 Donald MacDonald designed a module called the “City Sleeper” for a group of homeless men living near his office. A well-crafted piece of outdoor furniture, the module is large enough for a grown man to enter into and recline, but in-obtrusive and thoughtfully built to include adequate


\textsuperscript{64} Davis, Sam. \textit{Designing for the Homeless; Architecture that Works}. University of California Press, Berkeley. 2004 p. 47.
protection from driving wind and rain along with openings for ventilation and security. While the inception of such mini-structures was not greeted with enthusiasm from city officials or community residents, the concept offers numerous possibilities for further iterations.65

Another innovative solution for those choosing to live on the streets is a design that incorporates the purpose of the shopping cart for the homeless in conjunction with an option for emergency shelter. The Homeless Vehicle Project, designed by David Lurie and Krzysztof Wodiczko, synthesizes the needs of a particular homeless grouping- evicts- with temporary and emergency shelter. The oversized metal container on wheels provides both storage for personal belongings as well as the option for emergency shelter. Its designers hoped that the look and feel of the vehicle would recognize and address the claim of the homeless to citizenship in the urban community. The frightening shape and angular characteristics were described as being further elements to defend the homeless and their situation within the urban context. Rather than seeming passive aggressive, those suffering from homelessness might use the vehicle as a status symbol or exhibit of strength. It is a very different commentary on the physical sense of place for the homeless, and one not to be taken lightly.66

The Mad Housers’ are another design group intent on providing adequate shelter for the homeless as quickly and effectively as possible. Their self-proclaimed directive is a statement of desire for a dignified life, release from alienation, and re-entry into society.

Their hut-like shelter is easily deconstructed and rebuilt by the user, and each is unique to its owner. The Mad Housers’ use their design to renew the client’s ability to effect change in their own environment, as directly relates to sense of place and order within a life lived on the street. While this response is not meant to be permanent, one might look at its inception as a temporary transition from street life to shelter house. By providing the homeless with an immediate sense of physical shelter and security, the process of restoring purpose and value to their life starts instantaneously.

---

CONCLUSION

Homelessness is not a problem easily solved. While its history is not particularly lengthy, the homeless epidemic has been influenced by a great number of social, economic, and political affiliations over the years. The most influential of these is a general lack in affordable housing across the nation as a whole. We simply have too many people in need of shelter that is either un-built or unfit to live in; in the past twenty-five years, the supply has merely succumbed to demand.

The changing economic landscape is also to blame for the increase in homelessness. Blue-collar jobs are decreasing as the national minimum wage loses value with each passing day. A culture of poverty is emerging, and this growing population is ever more likely to fall victim to homelessness. These factors, coupled with mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, and lack of assistance are all contributing to the growing and changing face of homelessness. No longer is the epidemic reserved for grown men; women, children, families, and the elderly are all susceptible to the plight of the homeless in today’s changing world.

Our understanding of homelessness spans not only the historical but also a theoretic framework of place and its relationship to the homeless. The importance of place in our daily lives is a direct reflection on what the homeless are lacking due to their situation. Through a thorough examination of place on both a physical and emotional level, the problem of homelessness can be addressed in its entirety and better dealt with by integrating a sense of place and dignity within our design solutions for the homeless.
It is imperative that we also investigate alternate resolutions for the immediate population; the sooner the homeless are given a space of their own, the faster the effects of place will take hold. This is true in both temporary shelter as well as unique solutions to emergency shelter for those living on the streets.

By understanding how the homeless epidemic reached the magnitude it is currently at today, we are better equipped to begin dealing with the issue, one individual at a time. Through respectful and informed creativity, the architecture community may begin to respond to the plight of the homeless by incorporating a sense of place and value within their design.
REFERENCES

Architectural References


Gray, Geoffrey. “Shelter Games (For-Profit Homeless Shelters, New York City).” *City Limits*, 2003 Apr., v. 28, n.4, p.16-19, 44.


Homelessness/Historical Context


Case Studies/Factual Information


**Interviews**


Websites:
The Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless
http://homeless.cincy.com/pages/content/home.html

The National Coalition for the Homeless
http://www.nationalhomeless.org/index.html

United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
http://www.hud.gov/