Designing Out: A Framework for Studying Hostile Design

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The rising issue of homelessness has led to the deployment of hostile design aimed at discouraging unhoused individuals from using urban and public spaces. A wholistic approach to the problem must address architecture as a cause (not as merely an innocent reflection of an entirely independent problem). This paper provides a literature review of definitions and methods of analyzing hostile design. The growing literature on hostile design mainly focuses on the design strategies and their impact on the unhoused individuals, ignoring the majority, housed population under whose name hostile design is justified. I argue for expanding the study of hostile design to account for the subtle mechanisms of disgusting the true purpose of hostile design.

INTRODUCTION

The rising issue of homelessness has led to the deployment of hostile design aimed at discouraging unhoused individuals from using urban and public spaces. Discussions on design are often on the periphery of public and scholarly discourse. However, a wholistic approach to the problem must address architecture as a cause (not as merely an innocent reflection of an entirely independent problem).

The term "hostile design" (also known with similar terms like "hostile architecture," "unpleasant architecture," "defensive architecture," and "disciplinary architecture") refers to the deliberate use of design to prevent people from utilizing a space or an object in an undesirable manner. One of the most recognizable examples is the installation of dividers on benches to discourage individuals from sleeping on them (figure 1) . Other common instances include the placement of boulders and bike racks beneath bridges, which eliminate flat surfaces that might otherwise be used for camping (figure 2).

While hostile design may target different user groups (like teenagers, skateboarders, and addicted individuals), its use against unhoused people has increasingly become more popular, turning it into a common strategy of "cleansing" cities. Free from the need for human intervention, hostile design effectively results in disciplinary actions. Unlike punitive measures, it does not explicitly punish unhoused people. Instead, it aims to move homelessness out of sight, foreclosing the possibility of an encounter and hindering the unhoused people's participation in the production of public space (Petty 2016).

The growing literature on hostile design, mainly focuses on the design strategies and their impact on the unhoused individuals, ignoring the majority, housed population under whose name hostile design is justified. However, not only is the "public" affected by hostile design measures and its resulted inert public space, but also the housed population's willful ignorance of the problem of homelessness perpetuates the existing structures.

In this paper, I propose reframing hostile design to include the housed population, and its desire to ignore homelessness while maintaining a sympathetic face. More specifically, I argue for expanding methods of analyzing hostile design in terms of its mechanisms of disguise, as the increasingly sophisticated strategies of hostile design hide their main purpose under benign or even seemingly benevolent functions and by doing so safeguard the status qua. Following a review of some functions of hostile design, I move on to discuss disguise as an important aspect of hostile design. I then provide a literature review of its definitions and methods of analyzing and argue for expanding the study of

Figure 1. A typical bench with dividers. image in poblic domain.

hostile design to account for the subtle mechanisms of disgusting the true purpose of hostile design.

FUNCTIONS OF HOSTILE DESIGN

Architecture typically occupies a peripheral position in the broader discourse on homelessness, often entirely missing in the legal battles. However, not only for a wholistic approach to the problem, architecture must be addressed as a contributing cause, but also for architecture to shape a proper public space, it must directly address the issue of homelessness.

While hostile design is in part a reflection of the prevailing social values and cultural perceptions, design plays a significant role in defining who has access to the public space, what it affords them, and how it disciplines them. Working along with other strategies, like gentrification, a clear goal of hostile design in public space is to deter the non-affluent from the city centers to out of sigh. While anti-homeless ordinances and regulations effectively erase the homeless from the public by eliminating illegalizing their needs like sleeping, hostile design uses a less explicit measure to the same effect.

By removing or limiting access to the public space, hostile design directly impacts both everyday necessities and the public life of unhoused people. As the power structure unfolds in the micro level of everyday life, even at the most basic level, the daily needs of an unhoused person depend on the public space (Amster 2008). In addition, as Crippen and Klement (2020) note under the term "political affordance," design is value-sensitive and has social implications that organize human behavior. The shared environment differentially affects people and affords different personal, social, and political potentials to them. By deliberately excluding unhoused people, contemporary public spaces often limit their potentials, effectively discriminating against them.

Don Mitchel's seminal work, Right to the City (Mitchell 2003) argues against the concept exemplified by Arnold's Culture and Anarchy (Matthew Arnold 1869) where a particular conception of order, maintained by repression as necessary targets the economic victims of capitalism. Instead, Mitchel indicates "the question is not one of order versus disorder but rather one of what sort of order is to be developed and advanced-a progressive one or a repressive and oppressive one" (2003, 30). In other words, annihilating the spaces that allow unhoused people to perform everyday functions (like sitting and sleeping) not only destroys the right of those individuals, but it also reinforces a brutal notion of public and citizenship (1997).

Figure2. Boulders under the bridge that cover the dry surface to prevent camping. image by author.

Aside from the direct impact on the everyday life of unhoused people, this removal of the unhoused people from public spaces both excludes them from what makes up the "public" and promotes a specific idea of the city and public interactions. As Michel de Certeau has argued (1984) public space is not inert but constitutes a spatial order that organizes an ensemble of possibilities and interdictions to be actualized by users. While by providing places that one can move to or preventing one from moving further, the space affords different potentialities, it is the user's practice within the space that actualizes, transforms, or abandons these potentials. In this sense, the refusal of a sector of the society from the public space impact the space that is produced.

Drawings from Henry Lefebvre's concept of "right to the city" (1996), Mitchel argues for the right of the homeless to participate in the public life as essential to the city to remain a place of encounter and competition of normalities, a place of the unpredictable and permanent disequilibrium. By policing the space and controlling what is defined as normality, the city loses its truly public space (Mitchell 2003). In other words, the housed people, too, are impacted by this prioritization of the aesthetics of the space over people's interactions within it.

Mitchell (1995) discusses the rejection of visible homelessness in the context of the relationship between capitalist growth and aesthetic norms in urban beautification projects. As the renovation projects aim to create a positive, competitive, and desirable image for the city center, often driven by neoliberal and entrepreneurial urban agendas, they involve complex economic recovery strategies, including the control of public space, in the process, making the city center exclusionary. Urban renewal strategies that are centered on creating ordered public spaces exclude certain social groups, often in the name of economic growth and security. Homeless individuals are often seen as out of place in these revitalized urban centers, which prioritize economic interests and well-being classes over the disadvantaged. In "renewing" the city, as Smith and Walters (2018) point out, "capital places both actual and social boundaries around urban neighborhoods."

While the primary target of hostile design is the homeless, it utterly changes the nature of the public furniture from an invitation for interaction. Take for instance "anti-homeless" benches. Some are divided by armrests, which can vary in height and shape, including curved or straight designs. Others have been broken into segments. Some benches have been entirely replaced by single seats or even simple inclining surfaces. Consequently, the role in social exchange is reduced into a temporary support for a physical relief. These benches strategically exclude undesirable individuals, but they also strip all city residents and tourists of the opportunity to leisurely stroll and rest and foreclosing the possibility of unexpected encounters (Bergamaschi, Castrignanò, and Rubertis 2014).

Figure3. Use of obsacles to prevent seating and sleeping. image in poblic domain.

DOUBLE ERASURE

The anti-homeless hostile architecture is certainly a design response to more fundamental issues. At one level, homelessness can be seen as a problem of housing rooted in structural issues like income inequities, regulations and policies, and the lack of affordable housing (Colburn and Aldern 2022). From a broader perspective, as Mitchell argues (1997), the criminalization of homelessness is part of contemporary political economy wherein the encroachment of the private sector into public spaces has resulted in the commercialization and privatization of areas historically considered communal. This trend signifies a changing balance between public accessibility and private interests, ultimately impacting the equitable distribution of public resources.

From an ecological framework, the local phenomena are part of a larger global trend where localization and resistance (as well as efforts to suppress resistance) are triangulated with globalization (Amster 2008). According to Coleman, Tombs, and Whyte (2005), by redefining the notions of morality under the neoliberal definition of "entrepreneurial city," the public attention has shifted away from the structural problems that causes mass homelessness to erasing the individuals out of sight. Other scholars have brought attention to the homelessness as a structural component of modern society's perception of privacy (Zack 2018).

As Smith and Walters remind us, in its attempt to discipline people and manage out the undesired encounters, hostile design effectively reduces the public life into consumption based modes of interaction (2018). The design form that establishes this image of the city, or rather the city as an image, is thus not a secondary consequent, but at the core of the commodification of the Capitalist city.

Regardless of which theory better explains the root causes of homelessness, hostile design disguises the issue. Furthermore, hostile design measures increasingly tend to hide their true purpose. Whereas explicitly hostile examples, such as spikes on sidewalks, clearly signal their function of preventing one from sleeping in public and may make the housed population feel morally uncomfortable (Petty 2016), subtler strategies do not attract public attention. For instance, the ubiquitous scene of boulders under bridges in the West-coast cities (figure 2) goes unnoticed by most residents, except for those in need of shelter from rain who are left with an uninhabitable space. In fact, the most successful examples of hostile design are hidden in plain sight.

This erasure of the unhoused from the public space, is rooted in the discomfort in seeing them in the public space and thus encountering the structural issues that would make many housed people uncomfortable. As a student noted in a practice of mapping hostile design in Eugene, many the University "that aims for an inclusive community, seen through the liberal teaching" use hostile design measure with ease (Kive 2024). Hostile design allows the housed majority to ignore the problem of homelessness while seemingly holding humanistic and liberal views. An effective analysis of hostile architecture must capture this double erasure: erasing the unhoused from the public space; and disguising the means of this erasure.

DEFINING HOSTILE DESIGN

The relatively young literature on hostile design has little developed analytical frameworks that allow criticism of its different aspects. In one of the few attempts in clarifying the term, de Fine Licht (2020) provides a technical definition of hostile architecture:

> Hostile architecture/design/environment: x should be judged as "hostile design/architecture/environment" when x by proxy of an agent or by x itself displays (explicit or implicit/openly or concealed) ill will through reactive attitudes, or relevantly similar correlates, toward y (e.g. agents/behaviors/non-human animals) and try to harm y, or not caring if y is harmed, by this display of ill will at the time the hostilities occur. (de Fine Licht 2020, 6)

There are some difficulties in using this definition. For instance, it is not easy to establish what constitutes lack of "proper care." Similarly, the attempt in "precision" and "measurably" is at odds with the emphasis on cultural context as the reference point for judging designs that "despite all displaying the same function (e.g., benches we cannot sleep on), would nevertheless lead us to only judge some of them as hostile" (6).

Nevertheless, this definition offers some useful concepts: first, it recognizes that "objects can be hostile even though the producer did not intend them to be" (6). Second, the emphasis on "what and whom they are hostile toward" is important, as it highlights the fact that one design might benefit a group of people while harming another group (9). It is particularly important as often intentional harming is ignored in the name of public safety. Finally, this definition recognizes hostile architecture as essentially a moral judgement, leaving room for contextualizing hostile architecture, for instance, in relation to neoliberalism.

De Fine Licht also differentiates "hostile architecture" from "defensive architecture," and "disciplinary architecture." In de Fine Licht's definition, disciplinary architecture, which includes many measures of CPTED, is morally ambiguous and outcome oriented. It tries to halt an outcome without displaying ill will toward other groups. However, as de Fine Licht acknowledges, this definition is morally ambiguous. Or rather, leaves a door open to close an eye on the "other" part of the society that is impacted by these measures.

The morally open term "disciplinary architecture" imposes certain behavior without necessarily excluding certain people from a place. Although as de Fine Licht acknowledges, we might judge all disciplinary measures as practically hostile, they are different especially regarding their target. For instance, many anti-skate measures can be defined as disciplinary. However, since homelessness is often perceived as the person's identity (rather than a condition), this differentiation collapses. Unlike the skaters, who are welcome as individuals despite their unwanted behavior, unhoused people are dehumanized by being forced into invisibility.

These differentiations among hostile, defensive, and disciplinary design/architecture may not be fruitful in analyzing different designs. These diverse framings of the question, however, reveal design theorists' and the public's discomfort with the explicit terms like "hostile design" while in practice utilizing such measures with ease. In addition, design intent (separate from the intention of the designer) is an important measure in contextualizing hostile design. It is important to understand hostile design as an intentional act of excluding certain group of people. Hostile architecture is not a design failure, but an intentional exclusion. However, this intent can be produced by lack of consideration, as it does in cases presented as "defensible architecture" whose hostility toward certain population is often justified on the account of its intention of supporting others. I other words, defensible architecture is hostile, whether or not explicitly intended.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

Similar to definition, the few developed typologies and methods of analyzing hostile design mainly focused on the means and outcomes. In an earlier article, de Fine Licht (2017) differentiates three common strategies of making a space unavailable: First, the existing infrastructures can be changed. For instance, instance benches may change in a way that they cannot be easily used for sleeping. Second, elements might be added to a space. For instance, placing the "anti-homeless spikes" can prevent people from standing, seating, or sleeping there. Third, removal of objects from public space can eliminate certain functions. For example, removing benches from a mall prevents people from stagnating in undesired areas. Besides these three "decidedly forceful" measures, de Fine Licht introduces some "mildly defensive measures," like creating an entirely different atmosphere. This could entail the use of uninviting color schemes or playing "anti-teen music" like classical music to discourage gatherings in certain locations.

Some scholars have focused on design mechanisms. For instance, Schindler (2014) focuses on the devices that facilitate or restrict passage through and access and differentiates among physical barriers, placement of transit stops and transportation infrastructure, and unclear wayfinding or dead-end streets and Confusing Signage.

Another typology presented in "Homelessness and social control: a typology" (Johnsen, Fitzpatrick, and Watts 2018), focuses on the modes of power: force, coercion, bargaining, influence and tolerance. Force refers to absence of choice like enforced relocation of rough sleepers; Coercion seeks to secure desirable behavior change by employing the threat of deprivation of goods, money, material resources, etc. Bargaining seeks to impact behavior via promises of an acquisition or loss, while influence is almost entirely free from force or threats of deprivation. Finally, tolerance refers to the absence of any deliberate attempt to secure behavioral change. Although not a direct translation to design, this gradation offers a framework to discuss the impact of hostile architecture and its visibility. For instance, when measures like spikes force people out of an area, softer measures, like bright spaces, allow for some types of bargaining and transformation of the space.

While the one trend of critics focuses on design strategies/mechanisms, the latter emphasizes their impact on the unhoused people. A few other sources offer similar discussions,

Figure 4. A Camdon Bench; image in poblic domain.

often mixing design measures and the impact on the unhoused or offer a different angle. Defining hostile architecture in terms of intentionally "designing out" certain identities from urban and public spaces, Petty (2016) differentiates coercive measures from explicit preventive tactics (like spikes) and implicit measures (like bench armrests). Nonetheless, the literature focuses on design tactics and their function on unhoused people.

An important missing element is the majority, housed public, at the service of whom unhoused people are erased. More specifically, while hostile design, by definition, functions as a preventive measure, it often hides in plain sight. In fact, public reactions to the punitive measures or the explicitly hostile design solutions are not indicative of accepting the homeless from the city. Rather, as Petty (2016) suggested in his analysis of London's anti-homeless spikes, the outrage ultimately reflected the discomfort with being forced to think about the explicit violence, where most people prefer to remove the homelessness out of their sights. This discomfort and the design mechanisms of avoiding it can offer a complimentary typology.

Figure 5. A bench at the University of Oregon Campus in Eugene; image by author

Aside from explicit measures like spikes that are immediately notable to the public, one may differentiate among benign objects and the ones that draw attention away by their aesthetic appeal or other functions. First, as mentioned earlier, strategies like covering the surface with boulders create a neutral appearance that barely attracts attention. Similarly, smaller objects that divide the surface, like sculptures, or and otherwise functional objects, like bike racks, are occasionally used (figure 3).

The increase in this strategy has made activists and journalists more sensitive to such irrelevant objects, resulting in more innovative approaches to hide the main function of these measures. While objects like empty bike racks under a highway bridge clearly serve no purpose beyond preventing camping and occasionally raise, others like rows of racks on the backside of an educational building might have functional reasons. This gray area, where even intentional attention is unsuccessful in determining its design intent, makes this strategy popular.

An increasingly popular strategy conceals preventative measures under socially acceptable and even desirable forms. For instance, replacement of RV encampment with protected bike lanes (Packer 2022) in the environmentally conscious city of Seatle, where cycling evokes a healthy and eco-friendly mode of commuting, can promote a positive image of the city while simultaneously deterring campers from those areas. Similarly, initiatives by the residence to create "tidy gardens" on sidewalks which were formerly occupied by rough sleepers, (Reporter 2022) eventually appear improvements to the city.

Some hostile design mix different functions. For instance, a sophisticated design like the infamous Camden Bench (figure 4) has tilted surfaces that prevent one from sleeping on it; however, its design also features widely acceptable preventive measures against vandalism and theft, thus hiding its anti-homeless features with more publicly acceptable, even desired ones.

Finally, many hostile design products are aesthetically pleasant. For example, the University of Oregon campus in Eugene uses segmented benches that deter rough sleepers from using them (figure 5). However, the strategic use of color and material presents this broken surface, which matches the building behind them, appears as a stylistic choice rather than a hostile design measure. Given that in contemporary American cities, the practice of rendering homelessness invisible is often part of a larger urban beautification project (Mitchell 2003; Speer 2019), this beautification serves the larger project by both offering visual attractions and removing unwanted "disorder."

CONCLUSION

Architecture should not be reduced to a mere reflection of an independent problem, but should be recognized as a contributing cause to the problem of homelessness. From spatial strategies that support gentrification to the intentional deterrence of the non-affluent from the city centers to out of sight, design plays a

significant role in defining who has access to the public space and what shape it takes. That designers at best avoid defensive architecture strategies against unhoused people tells us something about the city and the larger society. Yet the relatively successful precedent of "universal design," which has been codified in building standards and incorporated in architectural education, shows that when society becomes sensitive to underprivileged people, cities become accessible and available (Dolph 2021). Along with reframing hostile design to include housed public in analysis, the question of housing and access to public space must be reframed as the matter of universal design and accessibility.

NOTES

1. Following the literature, I use "hostile design" and "hostile architecture" interchangeably, although some argue for the more general connotation of the term "design." As a reviewer of this paper has pointed out, hostile design is the product very diverse processes many of which do not include architects. Accordingly, the term "hostile architecture" must not be understood as limited to the buildings designed by an architect.
2. For general discussions on hostile architecture, see Licht 2017; 2020; Chadalavada and Sanjiv 2020; Rosenberger 2020; 2017; Savicic and Savic 2016; Schindler 2014; Whiteford 2008
3. As Schindler (2014) points out, courts and lawmakers often fail to recognize the role of architecture as a form of regulation and at the same time, the current body of legal precedents and judgments is inadequate is insufficient to assess the negative impacts and consequences associated with architectural decisions.
4. In de Fine Licht's definition, "x should be judged as defensive "architecture/design/environment" when x by proxy of an agent or by x itself tries to halt an outcome O through the means M while not displaying ill will toward any y and trying to mitigate or compensate for the negative effects on y because of M" (de Fine Licht 2020, 10).
5. Disciplinary architecture is defined as "when x by proxy of an agent or by x itself x tries to mold the motivational structure of y toward specific ends E." (de Fine Licht 2020, 12)

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