

We Belong Here

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Homelessness, or the state of being unsheltered, does not have a simple solution, but instead is representative of a state that requires many, thoughtfully designed responses at different scales that encompass the sensitive nature of the human spirit. This group of individuals are often underestimated and underrepresented in the decisions that rule their lives, and because of this, it is through personal engagement and conversation that perhaps a step forward may be found. Students in the second year studio develop their voice as fledgling designers advocating for their unsheltered clients. While change can and does exist in a variety of forms and gestures, the student-designed Guerrilla Coffee Unit (GCU) roams the streets of San Francisco offering opportunities for the unsheltered community to be served and heard. This involves the act of sharing a cup of coffee, a simple gesture that sparks conversation, the sharing of time, and a sense of community. The GCU is rolled out on any public space sidewalk that is bound by the sit/lie ordinance (section 168 San Francisco Police Code) which forbids sitting or lying down on the sidewalk, an ordinance specifically designed against the homeless/unsheltered community. The goal is that through the GCU, students are engaged to act and design a homeless shelter with empathy and purpose. The response to homelessness is not resolved through a single act, but rather through a continuous series of empathetic and sensitive gestures that take the challenge on in a multivalent manner. And while a shelter represents a first step, humanity is not one note, but rather a symphony, and it is through the GCU interactions that this symphony is given a voice and audience.

INTRO

Homelessness is an ever present reality for many living in America, and has come to represent income inequality, the lack of affordable and supportive housing, rising medical costs and the reality that without a safety-net, we are living within the fragile balance of becoming unsheltered ourselves, should our situation worsen.

In the last month, we have undoubtedly walked by someone who looked to be experiencing homelessness. The questions we ask our 2nd year undergraduate studio students on the first day of term relates to this interaction. Did you make eye contact with this person? If so, did you speak with them?

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Specifically, did our students say anything other than “I’m sorry I don’t have money,” “no thank you,” “I cannot”, etc.? Did you greet them differently than someone you might meet on the street who you expect to be sheltered?

100% of participants raised their hands acknowledging that they saw someone experiencing homelessness, but each subsequent question finds a 50% drop-off of raised hands. This makes sense, we lead busy lives and move quickly through our day. A result of our current world is that while we see people, sometimes we get used to not seeing them, rather we see through them. Homeless encampments are a constant neighbor in many parts of San Francisco, and when our students and faculty traverse the mile-long sidewalks from Powell BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station on Market St. to the Academy of Art University School of Architecture building, they move through a constantly shifting landscape of tents, from one side of the street to the other, pushing up and down the blocks. The expanding tent landscape has pedestrians walking in traffic lanes to avoid walking through a tent and over someone’s belongings. Encampments are swept regularly but reappear hours later a few feet away, as there is no place else to go.

The answer, on the part of the city has been more enforcement over the public domain. The San Francisco Police Department identifies 36 “quality of life laws” that are being enforced currently, and run the range from sitting on the public sidewalk to building illegal encampments.¹

Chief among these is the infamous Sit-Lie Law, passed in 2010 and Proposition Q, approved by the voters in 2016. The Sit Lie Law, or the Civil Sidewalk Ordinance (Section 168 of the San Francisco Police Code), makes it illegal to sit or lie on the public sidewalk, specifically between 7am and 11pm. Proposition Q (Section 169 of the San Francisco Police Code), allows sweeps and confiscations of tent encampments on the public sidewalk.²

San Francisco’s frequent large city-wide festivals, events and conferences regularly sweep the city’s homeless population out of sight. At Superbowl 50, hosted in San Francisco, but played 45 miles away in Santa Clara, CA, the mayor’s office negotiated temporary alternative shelters, lined with barbed wire and police sweeps to make sure that visitors to San



Figure 1. Students serving coffee to one of the SOMA encampments in San Francisco.

Francisco wouldn't be bothered by seeing the un-sheltered population of San Francisco.³ Salesforce's annual Dreamforce Conference has tried to help their attendees navigate housing issues by bringing in a cruise ship (2015) and converting their new Salesforce tower from offices to temporary housing (2017). It came as no surprise to our students that the result of Dreamforce attendees, marked by their teal badges, unexpectedly walking through encampments brought on a police presence the following morning to disperse those same encampments, thus ridding the city's visitors of the uncomfortable sights, smells, and interactions, as if to wipe clean its sins by hiding them from sight.

As this battle plays out on the sidewalks and public spaces, cafes and parklets occupying the same domain are thriving and cited as instances of progressive spatial development. The city's parklet program, "establishes guidelines for temporary sidewalk extensions for use by the general public in keeping with the city's general goal of "Making San Francisco a beautiful, livable, vibrant, and sustainable city."⁴ When a new Apple product is released, crowds queue up on the sidewalks, in a carnival-like atmosphere in front of stores, whose design

intent is to shift into providing physical and social spaces for people, effectively creating privatized public space that is not open to the homeless.⁵ Even local non-profits, like the SPCA are affected; having deployed a robot K-9 to scare away homeless encampments in its neighborhood.⁶

This strategy may be at the core of why San Francisco continues to be one of the cities with the highest rates of income inequality. The California Budget center, in 2016, noted that the top 1% of households in SF average 44 times the average income of the bottom 99%.⁷ This rate has almost doubled since 1989.⁸ The Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing for San Francisco's 2019 census found between 9,784 people experiencing homelessness.⁹ Advocates, including Del Seymour, co-chair of the SF Local Homeless Coordinating Board,¹⁰ the Coalition on Homelessness, San Francisco, and even The San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing estimates that the number of people who experience homelessness over the course of a year is as high as 21,315, when considering alternative housing environments (subleasing floorspace in Single Room Occupancies, exiting San Francisco jails in the middle of the night, couch surfing, etc.).¹¹

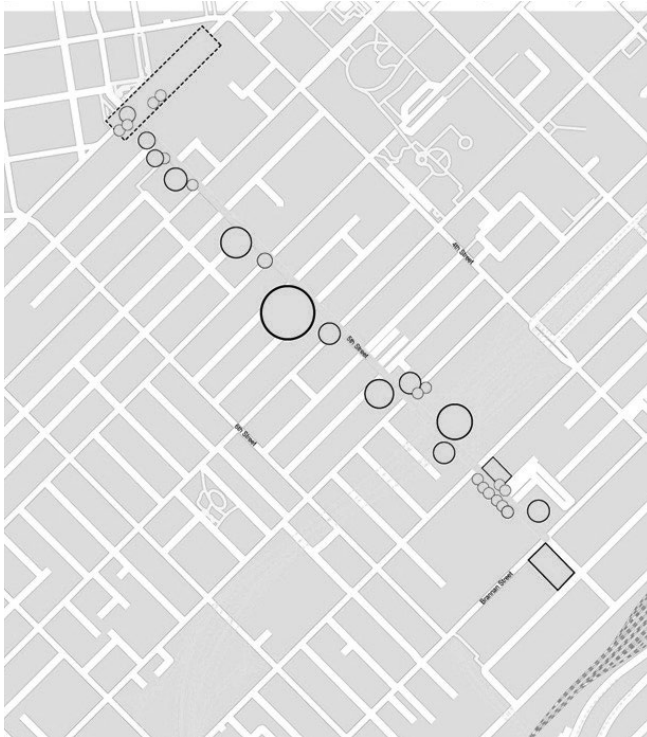


Figure 2: Mapping of homeless encounters along 5th St between Powell BART station and 601 Brannan St.

The city simply cannot cope with the number of people in need of help. 1000 people are on the waitlist for a single adult shelter every night, and the average wait time for a family to get shelter is more than 300 days.¹²

When considering our role as educators and architects, the call of Less Talk | More Action, presented by ACSA in 2019 galvanized the responsibility we have to address our reality. The question then becomes, how do we address the reality within the context of our studio? and how do we engage the students in designing for, and learning from, the unsheltered community to ensure empathetic and thoughtful design. In considering this, it became apparent that to initiate, we had to return to the reality that we are all living and sharing in this world, and that the human response and emotional responsibility for one another, needed to be reintegrated in how we view the challenge of homelessness. The act of sharing a cup of coffee and a moment of conversation became the fulcrum for both the studio and the experience; preparing the students to address their demographic with empathy and a responsive ear.

The Guerilla Coffee Unit (GCU) became the vehicle by which a connection was created, in hopes of bringing back some of the humanity that people experiencing homeless are denied, particularly in San Francisco. Walking down any street in the South of Market, one sees the efforts people will go to to ignore or avoid an interaction with someone they perceive to be homeless.

While we may think that because we may not have money or food to share, we must ignore, the simple acknowledgement of someone's presence - a hello, nod, good morning, etc. - can restore an element of humanity to a person living in what may feel to be a dehumanizing reality.

The social act of sharing a space, a moment of conversation, and of something warm to drink becomes the galvanizing moment for both the students and the unsheltered individual, marking a common moment of shared connection.

At its heart, the aim of the studio and the GCU is to restore the humanity and empathy to how we view design, and to invigorate the next generation of architects and designers with the tools and view that they can and should tackle the realities of the world around them, building bridges to connect themselves with a part of the population who has lost their sense of place.

STUDENTS AND HOMELESSNESS

In teaching a studio centered around homelessness, the first conversation is focused on dispelling the myth of what a stereotypical homeless person is, and how we might define this condition, to include the tangible (clothing, hygiene, possessions) and activities (laziness, substance abuse, etc). U.S. Code § 11302 defines homelessness as, "an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence."¹³ Beyond this, an individual or family is considered legally homeless if they cannot reside in a consistent nighttime residence for more than 14 continuous days. And the same code classifies an unsafe current housing situation as a result of domestic violence. Applying the premise of this definition, regarding a safe, regular, and consistent "civilized" nighttime residence, the reality is that many will be found to have experienced bouts of homelessness at various points in their lives. In our studio, students have experienced a variety of homeless situations, either during the semester or preceding. The following are just some of the experiences our 2nd year students have shared with us and their classmates: living in an RV during the semester; staying in a shelter for a few nights; sleeping on a friend's couch while waiting for a lease to start; moving out after a conflict with a roommate and having no place to go; living in a single-room occupancy (SRO) while keeping luggage at studio; being given an eviction notice and being unable to find a new place to live; having parents terminate all support, or living in one's car and showering in the gym.

In every one of these scenarios, the students expressed a sense of shame, or feeling 'less than' and were determined to hide their situation, keeping the true nature of their unsheltered state a secret from friends, family, and faculty. While their experiences were evidence of the precarious nature associated with living in our everyday reality, where having a home becomes an ideal rather than a reality when something quickly changes in our lives, the experience shared by Cristo Staedler, a student in the 2018 studio, was slightly different.



Figure 3: The Guerilla Coffee Unit in its mobile and coffee-table configurations

A few years prior to being a student, Cristo was one of the homeless on the streets. He lived daily with the fear of not knowing whether he would have enough to feed himself and Aubree, his dog, or whether he'd have to go hungry to make sure she could eat. He was afraid of being able to find safe shelter for the two of them, worried that one day they'd awaken to an unsafe situation, or if either of them would awaken at all. Cristo's emotional account of living on the streets was visceral, and his empathy to the homeless community encountered during the GCU trips was born from a shared experience. Cristo's experience humanized and brought to light how quickly any one of us could fall into a state of homelessness. As a student in the studio, and part of the team presenting at the Less Talk | More Action conference, Cristo's own experience with being unsheltered and living on the street is a first-hand account of what it is like to not have a home, and the need for every one of us to engage with, and respond to, the challenge of homelessness.

We need to be able to step into other people's shoes and visualize their life; feel their pain and discomfort, so that we may make empathetic design solutions. Being able to use the GCU as a vehicle and a conduit to the homeless community has been an invaluable experience.

The GCU exercise led to an obvious but uncomfortable statement: any one of us could end up homeless. We don't really know the situations our friends, colleagues, students and teachers are going through. We developed a scenario diagram for this situation: What scenarios could cause you to end up homeless? Is it lack of affordable housing? Bankruptcy? Immigration status? Health issues? Medical bills? Job loss? Escaping violence? Racial inequality? Being cut off from family finances? Unexpected costs? Unpaid parking tickets? Bills? Arguments with family? Traumatic events? Or even credit card debt?

Identifying any or multiple related issues that you might experience, we ask what is the safety net that you have in place? Is it your parent's/siblings/children's home? Job prospects? 401k? High-limit credit cards? Savings?

Lastly, what happens if that safety net fails? If you move in with your parents, what if you get into a fight with them and are asked to move out? What if something happens to the house? What if your new domicile has issues with your pets?

As part of the 2019 ACSA talk, we ran an exercise asking the attendees what issues they might experience that would lead to homelessness. What resulted was a familiar and well-trodden pattern of answers; the inability to pay medical costs should an emergency arise, the loss of a job, and domestic challenges resulting in the fissure of the home. While many were able to identify safety nets; in the form of family members, 401K funds, or the plan to find another job, everyone concluded that if those safety nets failed, or ran their course, the result would be homelessness, an unsheltered reality.

CONCLUSION

Approaching a stranger, offering them a cup of coffee and the opportunity to share, or stopping at the corner and acknowledging the homeless man sitting with his dog, or the veteran in the wheelchair, takes but a moment, and can transform that person's day. A single gesture can be just that, or it can flourish into a way of being and designing. As members of a community, it is really up to us to consider how we can better serve it, how we can break free from our own worries of stigma and societal trends to walk by and ignore. The GCU served as an ideal introduction, that single gesture, that flourished into a studio dependent upon, and truly powered by the need to engage in a meaningful way. The GCU is not trying to solve homelessness, and we are not sure that architecture and design can do so either, but what has been concluded, both

through the GCU experience, and the resulting designs from the studio, is that perhaps the goal should not be to solve, but instead to address, in really any way that we can. Our goal was to use architectural tools as a vehicle to make honest connections, and the GCU provided that moment to share and be heard. At the end of it all, we must look to each other, and the tools available to us, to better the world around us, and if we can leave it better off than when we found it.

ENDNOTES

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