The Anatomy of Fear 1:5

Facial Distress

Facial Distress II

Frown

GOLD

CANADA GOLD

Functional

Warm

Comfortable

Anti-Homeless Architecture:
The Unethical Cover-Up for Toronto's Housing Crisis

Alicia Sanchez Gonzalez
1008203677
University of Toronto

VIC187 LEC5101
Professor Kathleen Wynne
November 15, 2021

Introduction

Hostile architecture often goes unnoticed by the non-targeted. The designs are often small, subtle structures that attempt to disguise a bigger problem. Hostile architecture, defensive designs, and homeless-deterrent technologies are present in urban cities all around the world, but their purpose of social exclusion is common to every city they are found in.

Defensive designs are often placed around highly-visited public spaces such as parks, prominent city districts, and metro stations. Their appearance is not particularly malign, nor always intended to specifically deter the homeless, but the way these technologies affect people's interaction with public spaces suggests that the technologies aid in tailoring the use of the space to a select few.

Toronto's control and regulation of the people interacting with public spaces can be attributed to a common teaching in urban studies, regarding the identity of public spaces. That being, "Public spaces are 'made' into something by those who occupy, move through, and use them." (Petty, 2016) By regulating the interactions and socio-economic status of those interacting with a so-called 'public' space, our policies and implementation of hostile architecture are creating a physical environment tailored to and inclusive of only the government's idealized version of the public. This excludes skateboarders, panhandlers, and other groups that politicians and the media view as, "highly visible symbols of street crime and urban decay" (O'Grady et al., 2013) — including Toronto's homeless population. These mechanisms are disguised as being in the best-interest of the non-targeted public. However, the political and social context in which they are implemented, fails to concur with making public spaces inclusive of all.

Anti-homeless architecture is an unethical practice, and along with other non-inclusive policies, it only perpetuates hostility towards unhoused individuals in Toronto

and represents the attempt of the government to diminish the visibility of our homeless population without direct action to reduce homelessness.

Hostile Architecture

Hostile architecture can be defined as, "[using] the built environment to guide or restrict behaviour in urban space as a tool for preventing crime or maintaining order." (Chellew, 2020) Examples of hostile architecture can be seen everywhere in our city, but are particularly saturated around the downtown core — where the majority of Toronto's homeless population is found. These designs include benches with an extra arm-rest and small metal barriers on ledges to deter skateboarding and sitting.

After public response to these technologies, the City of Toronto expressed that their designs, particularly the additional armrests on benches, provide those with mobility issues greater accessibility to said benches (Chellew, 2020). What is particularly questionable about this claim is the quality of help they provide.

Figure A

Figure B

For example, Figure A and B are both benches in publicly accessible spaces with hostile designs that could be justified as having accessibility features. However, in the case of Figure A, which is located outside of Sidney Smith Hall at the University of Toronto, the armrest is far too low to be used as an aid to sit down; as the optimal height for armrests for those requiring assistance is 150-130mm (Chellew, 2020). Thus, the "armrest" only serves as a disturbance to the use of the bench, particularly for the function of laying down. Figure B in

Grange Park features a higher armrest, but the benches are not easily accessible by wheelchair users as the benches are surrounded by grass.

Design in Context

The concept of anti-homeless architecture cannot be considered as a standalone issue. It must be contextualized with other efforts from its respective cities to socially exclude the homeless population and criminalize their activities. By considering the laws that affect how Toronto's homeless population is treated, we are able to better understand how the homeless are criminalized under these policies. However, they remain unhoused without access to private spaces, and the combination of hostile architecture with classist treatment from law enforcement deprives them of engaging with any public space at all.

In 1999, activities such as panhandling and squeegee cleaning became illegal in many cities across North America, including Toronto. Around this time, Toronto's homeless population began to grow increasingly more visible around the downtown core. Street youth and older unhoused citizens were perceived by media outlets as, "a public nuisance that threatened public safety and the livelihood of downtown businesses and tourism." (O'Grady et al., 2013) The Mayor of Toronto at the time, Mel Lastman, noted in 1998, "The moment the provincial government gives us the legislation to get rid of them [street youth and the homeless], we're going to get rid of them. We are going to get them out of the City of Toronto because they are a disaster." (O'Grady et al., 2013)

On January 31, 2000, Ontario's government enacted the Ontario Safe Streets Act (OSSA) (O'Grady et al., 2013). The OSSA is a very brief legislation that focuses on prohibiting panhandling, solicitation in a public setting, and unsafe disposal of potentially

hazardous objects — such as broken glass and needles (Safe Streets Act, 1999). While it does not mention the term 'homeless' specifically, actions such as panhandling can be common sources of income for the uhoused.

In 2011, a study analyzing the effectiveness of the OSSA was published by the Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth, and the Law. The study focuses on the OSSA's effect on law enforcement interactions with homeless youth. It defines the criminalization of homelessness as, "the use of laws and practices to restrict the activities and movements of people who are homeless," this includes, "the use of security to enforce city/provincial regulation of public space and activities that go beyond the realm of the criminal justice system." (O'Grady et al., 2011) The study found that the criminalization of homelessness, and the increased interactions of homeless youth and law-enforcement, can be attributed to the extra attention being brought on the youth as a result of their lack of private space and visible poverty.

While the data available on OSSA infractions issued on behalf of the Toronto Police Services (TPS) does not depict who the ticket is given to, the growth in ticket increases and its correlation with the age of the recipients can provide us some information on who the fines correspond to. Between 2005 and 2009, TPS issued tickets relating to OSSA primarily to recipients aged 40-45 (O'Grady et al., 2013). This corresponds to the makeup of Toronto's homeless population — of which the majority are adults. As well, when homeless deaths are reported and highlighted by the media, it is not uncommon to find that they owed large amounts of money in OSSA infractions at the time of their death. For example, in 2012, a 66-year-old homeless man died with records showing that he owed $34,833 in OSSA infractions (O'Grady et al., 2013).

In Toronto, hostile architectural practices work in conjunction with bylaws, as well as the Ontario Safe Streets Act, to prevent the interactions with public spaces from specific members of the public. This includes Section 608-13 and 608-14 of the Toronto Municipal Code, which state, "Unless authorized by permit, no person shall dwell, camp or lodge in a park," (Section 608-13, 2001) and "no person shall place, install, attach or erect a temporary or permanent tent, structure or shelter, at, in or to a park." (Section 608-14, 2001)

While the policies allowing hostile architecture to be built may not explicitly state their purpose as a mechanism to drive the homeless population away from urban areas, the context in which these designs are implemented is in no way coincidental with other policies acting as Toronto's response to homelessness. The policies currently in place, like the Ontario Safe Streets Act, only criminalize homelessness by placing the responsibility on law enforcement to act as an emergency response to the increase in the homeless population, rising from lack of funding into affordable housing, as they become increasingly visible.

Public Response to Hostile Architecture

International awareness of anti-homeless architecture has seen a significant increase as a result of social media. In Toronto, researcher and advocate for equitable public space, Cara Chellew, launched the online movement '#defensiveTO' in 2019 (Pelley, 2019). It focuses on documenting the use of hostile architecture in various public spaces around the Greater Toronto Area through public uploads of images.

The mapping from #defensiveTO has prompted Canadian architects to speak out about the practice of hostile architecture. Reza Nik, whose architectural practice, SHEEP, works on equitable design, stated,

"No one wants to sleep on a bench — but by introducing barriers for those who don't have a choice, we're not really helping the situation; we're further stigmatizing them instead of focusing our energy on addressing the deeper questions here." (Chellew, 2020)

DefensiveTO has caused municipalities within Oakville and Vancouver to consider enacting restrictions to prevent hostile architectural practices, something we have yet to see in Toronto (Chellew, 2020). It has also prompted the architectural community to think deeply about the ethics of their practice, and how their continued compliance with such practices in design will only further the existence of hostile technologies.

Ethical Alternatives

The increased reliance on law enforcement and hostile designs to address homelessness are an inefficient use of Toronto's resources. Investing the funds and human capital we put towards policing and restricting the activities of the homeless to instead improve and provide affordable housing, through government subsidy or inclusive zoning, is a better use of our resources.

A study done by the School of Cities at the University of Toronto connected with over 25,000 families in low-income areas of Toronto. They analyzed the risk of homelessness they face based on the sustainability of their current housing conditions in aging buildings. They found that almost all families in their focus groups who are at risk of homelessness, would technically qualify for subsidized housing provided by the government based on their low

income. However, due to the waiting list of over 23,000 families in 2013, they are unable to receive this housing — while others are prevented from applying in the first place based on their immigration status (Paradis et al., 2014).

The waiting list forces families to search for housing through the private rental market, which holds units at prices beyond the families' income, and are often maintained in poor conditions by their owners as a side-effect of rent control policy. Families often turn to shelters or move in with another family. Shelters often refuse families if the option to double-up with another household exists, depriving families of services they would have access to at shelters to find permanent housing.

The current Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB), which helps families pay rent prices in the private market, has provided assistance to 5,000 households since its launch in April 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2021). While COHB aids in freeing-up the waitlist for subsidized housing, COHB continues to hold an extensive waitlist, and no money is allocated in Ontario's 2021 budget to expand it. This comes as a result of Ontario's share of federal funding from the National Housing Strategy being $490 million short of what is needed to expand affordable housing initiatives in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2021).

On November 9, 2021, Toronto City Council finalized its adoption of Inclusionary Zoning (IZ) to provide affordable housing. This will ensure that five to ten percent of new condominiums are designated as affordable housing; increasing this number from eight to 22 percent before 2030. By 2030, the IZ policy will provide households in the income ranges of $32,486 to $91,611 with 40,000 units of affordable rental properties and 4,000 units of affordably-owned homes in accordance with Toronto's HousingTO Action Plan (Toronto City Council, 2021).

Reducing waitlists for families looking for permanent or transitory housing and following through with Toronto's investments in inclusionary zoning, is an ethical and direct response to homelessness. The adequate approach to addressing homelessness is not to remove the homeless population by dehumanizing them and preventing their use of public spaces. Instead, we must invest our resources, time, and care to provide permanent, safe, accessible, and affordable housing.

Conclusion

Robert Rosenberger, a public policy researcher and specialist in hostile design at Georgia Institute of Technology, stated, "Anti-homeless design and law not only represent a failure to solve the problem of homelessness, but they also compound the problem further by making it less obvious." (Rosenberger, 2020)

Diminishing the visibility of the homeless population does nothing to address homelessness. Toronto's attempt to make it invisible only perpetuates the exclusion of the city's citizens based on their socio-economic status, and highlights the greater problem of lack of investment into affordable housing and other forms of homelessness prevention. Our current bylaws and provincial policies criminalize homelessness by placing the responsibility on law enforcement to act as an emergency response to the increased visibility of the homeless population.

The implementation of anti-homeless architecture aims to tackle the political issue prevailing to the presence of the homeless in central areas of Toronto. It fails to address the greater causes of homelessness, and does not align with Toronto's plans to create, "inclusive communities, and remain vibrant and strong", as noted by Mayor John Tory (Toronto City Council, 2021). These designs and non inclusive policies perpetuate hostility towards

unhoused individuals in cities. They mask attempts of social exclusion as actions towards inclusivity for non-targeted individuals in public spaces. The presence of such hostile design attest to the lack of direct action from the City of Toronto, the province of Ontario, and Canada as a whole to invest in affordable housing for Canadians across the country.

References

Chellew, C. (2020, Jul 29). Accessibility Measure or Exclusive Architecture? *Azure.*
http://www.azuremagazine.com/article/accessibility-measure-or-exclusive-architecture/

O'Grady, B., Gaetz, S., & Buccieri, K. (2011). *Can I see your ID?: The Policing of Youth Homelessness in Toronto*. Canadian Foundation for Children & Justice for Children and Youth, 6-9.
https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/CanISeeYourID_execsummary.pdf

O'Grady, B., Gaetz, S., & Buccieri, K. (2013). Tickets… and More Tickets: A Case Study of the Enforcement of the Ontario Safe Streets Act. Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques, 39(4), 541-558. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23594731

Paradis, E., Wilson, R. M. & Logan, J. (2014). *Nowhere Else to Go: Inadequate Housing & Risk of Homelessness Among Families in Toronto's Aging Rental Buildings.* Cities Center at the University of Toronto. 7-28.
https://books-scholarsportal-info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/uri/ebooks/ebooks0/gibson_cppc/2014-11-25/1/10943180

Pelley, L. (2019, July 02). *How 'defensive design' leads to rigid benches, metal spikes, and 'visual violence' in modern cities.* CBC News.
https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/how-defensive-design-leads-to-rigid-benches-metal-spikes-and-visual-violence-in-modern-cities-1.5192333

Ontario Ministry of Finance. (2021). *Increasing Access to Safe and Affordable Housing.* Ontario's Action Plan: Protecting People's Health and Our Economy, 2021 Ontario Budget. Retrieved from the Ministry of Finance Website.
https://budget.ontario.ca/2021/pdf/2021-ontario-budget-en.pdf

Rosenberger, R. (2014, June 19). How Cities Use Design to Drive Homeless People Away. *The Atlantic.*
https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/how-cities-use-design-to-drive-homeless-people-away/373067/

Rosenberger, R. (2020). On Hostile Design: Theoretical and Empirical Prospects. *Urban Studies Journal, 57*(4), 883-889. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098019853778

Safe Streets Act. (1999). *Ontario E-Laws.* Retrieved from the e-Laws Ontario website:
https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/99s08

Section 608-13: Camping and Lodging. (2001). *Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 608: Parks*. Retrieved from City of Toronto Website: https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/municode/1184_608.pdf

Section 608-14: Tents and Structures. (2001). *Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 608: Parks*. Retrieved from City of Toronto Website: https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/municode/1184_608.pdf

Toronto City Council. (2021). *Toronto City Council adopts new Inclusionary Zoning policy to get more affordable housing built*. City of Toronto Media Relations. https://www.toronto.ca/news/toronto-city-council-adopts-new-inclusionary-zoning-policy-to-get-more-affordable-housing-built/