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Spatial "mutual altruism" as a relationship of care for homeless people. How design impacts social re-integration.

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Abstract

The paper reports on the potential effects of spatial "mutual altruism" on the social reintegration of homeless people and the key role played by design in establishing this kind of relationship. Nowadays, temporary reception offered by homeless dormitories is still considered strategic, given the prevalence of people who, according to the data, only need accommodation temporarily. On the other side, these places are frequently viewed as containers of discomfort, abandonment, and unwelcomeness. One of the main research objectives is to make third-sector organizations and service providers aware that spatial quality is a fundamental factor that influences the process of social reintegration; "beauty brings beauty." Participatory Design is seen as the driver of the research, which was conducted using quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Using the quantitative method, which included data and book references, a general background has been set up. A deeper understanding of the study's issue has been gained through the qualitative method, which includes participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires, with the involvement of social and public actors engaged in the fight against homelessness. Due to the complexity of the housing exclusion problem and the consequently complicated design solutions, one of the outputs of the research is a framework used to analyze the efficacy of existing homeless facilities, creating a paradigm that can be traced across all hospitality models. The framework refers to the categories of needs for usability, well-being, safety, management, and sustainability. Inside the category of well-being, "domesticity" in temporary housing has been a key concept explored. Domesticity is defined as the ability of guests to directly and independently change the space. It stresses how important it is to give guests the chance to create a place where they can feel safe, considering both their physical and emotional needs. The main expected result is to create, design, and offer a sense of belonging for people who may have few social connections. Activating one's resources and forming new connections require favorable conditions, which design can help to achieve.

Author keywords

Spatial "Mutual Altruism"; Homeless Dormitories; Spatial Design; Social Design; Participatory Design.

Introduction: social bond and extreme poverty

Homelessness is a social phenomenon that comes from the structure of our globalized society, a society of excess and surplus that produces waste and marginalization (Bauman, 2013). Experts agree that extreme poverty increases proportionally with the weakening of social networks (Gnocchi, 2009; Landuzzi & Pieretti, 2003). Hence the importance of analyzing the homeless' condition not only in terms of material deprivation but also in terms of loss of capacity; moreover, we know that the relational capacities of people living on the street deteriorate steadily (Meo, 2000). Thus, relationship support is the primary tool enabling people in a state of severe marginalization to recover. Mastropasqua (2004) explains how social problems are generated by social relations and how the quality of those relations determines the possibility of problem solving. The individual expresses himself only within a system of belonging. The methodological and logistical problems in surveying this phenomenon, combined with scientific community disinterest (Fazzini, 2015), have led to a knowledge vacuum. The current study aims to evaluate the homeless receptive system by developing an evaluation framework. The study begins with an examination of the system's current state of the art and then focuses on the relationship of care between the individual and the space within homeless shelters, emphasizing the significance of spatial quality for social reintegration. The paper is a result of the author's master's thesis for the Interior and Spatial Design course at Politecnico di Milano. In terms of participatory design, the primary purpose of the research is to promote a means of developing beneficial interactions between people and within physical space. Places and how people experience them influence human actions and relationships.

State of the art of contemporary homeless receptive facilities

In the current social services landscape, factual evidence demonstrates that the majority of homeless individuals are *houseless*, defined by Ethos classification as "guests of homeless shelters" (Amore et al., 2011). Therefore, a major portion of the population resides in a dormitory, which was specifically created to handle this demographic (Grigis, 2015). The primary function of the first shelters, formed in the United States (U.S.) in the aftermath of the American Civil War, was to contain and govern the homeless. They were

emergency facilities put up in the basements and hallways of public buildings, sometimes at the local police station (Davis, 2004). Even today, they are typically situated in buildings that were originally intended for another function.

Hospitality approaches

Nowadays, the scenario is more complex. There is a wide range of specialized services available, each with its own set of goals and functionalities. Peculiarities that also differ from country to country. The most significant distinction is between the two main internationally recognized approaches: *the Staircase Approach* and the *Housing First Approach*. The *Staircase Approach* has been the base of the entire receptive system since the 1960s in the U.S. and later in other countries. This *Staircase* was created to gradually prepare someone for living independently in their own home. Similar in morphology but different in logic, there is another approach named *Holistic or Multidimensional*. The fundamental difference with the *Staircase Approach* is that the path each person takes is not determined by a progressive logic established in advance in a standard educational process but is adapted to the individual within an individualized relationship with a social worker (fio. PSD, 2015). The *Housing First* is a more recent revolutionary concept that places housing as the first step in the process of social reintegration. It focuses on helping people live in their own homes as members of a community, aiding them in the administration of their houses and on the road to rehabilitation (Pleace, 2016).

Hospitality facilities

In the *Multidimensional* and *Staircase Approaches*, a variety of structures cover the diverse needs of homeless people. From the lowest to the highest step, the services typologies included are:

- Emergency shelter: open only at night and often only at specific times of the year (in winter). It is a service with a low threshold, meaning it satisfies minimal basic demands. In general, it is suitable for all. Typically, the period of stay ranges from a few days to a few months.
- Transitory shelter, with social care: in these shelters, social assistance is provided in addition to accommodation. It houses people according to specific categories: gender, geographical origin, and age. The requirements for staying are stringent. Generally, the period of stay ranges from a few months to a couple of years.
- Supportive housing, with medical care: this kind of housing is uncommon, resembling a hostel yet functioning as a hospital. It houses individuals who have been discharged from health care facilities but still require care. The length of the stay corresponds to the hospitalization (usually a few weeks).
- Micro-community: typically, has both individual rooms and communal amenities, such as a kitchen, that are conducive to socializing. Similar to a multi-room apartment, it accommodates a limited number of individuals (according to certain categories). It provides avenues for social and occupational reintegration. The average length of stay is between one and two years.
- Temporary housing: for single or family occupancy. Access is typically granted through a public call for applications or social worker notification. There is a very small monthly contribution to the rent. The duration of stay ranges between one and two years.
- Housing Led accommodation: combination of residential accommodation and care, nursing, and social support services. It consists of "assisted" co-housing, with the presence of operators and volunteers at particular times of the day. It is a sustainable housing autonomy experience, both from the perspective of relationship dynamics and the economic perspective. The length of stay varies greatly.
- Public housing: generally located in entirely dedicated buildings or neighborhoods. The governmental administration owns the property. Provides housing for those who cannot afford rent on the private market. Access is granted through public notice, and lodging is typically not assigned on a short-term basis. There is no end to permanence.

The difficulty of guiding the homeless through the many stages of the rehabilitation process of the *Staircase Approach* generates a block in the system and is one of the most pressing concerns. Due to a lack of facilities suitable for more sophisticated types of housing (fio.PSD, 2015), the large number of people taken into care and placed in emergency facilities almost never progress to the subsequent type of reception. Because of this problem, people stay longer than they need to in emergency rooms and other places that aren't meant for long stays.

Social design as a method of research

The word "design" has become so commonly used that some critics question its significance, as it is often paired with any other noun or verb. Alison J. Clarke (2015) argues that the overuse of the term may lead to its loss of power or be the outcome of its humanist, inclusive, and plural vision. However, by linking the term "social" with the term "design", the process of promoting positive social transformation is being referred to. In 1980, Swiss sociologist and urban planner Lucius Burckhardt spoke of a *socially oriented* design capable of altering the quality of social relations (Moretti, 2019).

A document from the European Commission (2013) defined "social design" as a term "used to describe particular approaches to social innovation. [It is] meant to empower people at local level to invent together solutions to economic and social problems" (p. 8). A report by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the University of Brighton (Armstrong et al., 2014) describes social design in terms of a number of essential factors: the term "social design" highlights the concepts and activities implemented within participatory approaches to researching, generating and realizing new ways of achieving collective and social change. Participatory research methods appear to be the tipping point, as they increasingly build a practice that is considerate of people, their relationships, and their beliefs.

Participatory activities for qualitative research

In the current research, participatory design activities were required to address and understand the complexity of the system. Research was undertaken in two main phases that frequently overlapped and interlaced. One phase systematized the phenomenon by studying data and literature from

the fields of design and sociology. The other phase was founded on an observational activity that generated an interpretive process. This has been accomplished using a variety of methods, including participant observation, interviews, and site visits.

The methodology applied to this research was based on the researcher's long-term, direct experience in the context of the inquiry. This supported nonintrusive ethnographic fieldwork (Pieretti, 2003). Observing daily routines and conducting empathic discussions form the project's initial baseline (Meroni et al., 2018). As the subject of this research is complex and characterized by stereotypes, informal interviews with numerous actors were essential for collecting data, notions, and ideas. Municipal policymakers, designers specialized in housing deprivation, sociologists, and various social actors from the third sector operating in the city of Milan, from managers to volunteers, were involved. During these meetings, it was possible to outline an overall picture of the city context, in terms of quantitative capacities and of the welfare system's approach and its gaps. Visiting receiving facilities and interacting with the operators and guests were key to the research, as was seeing the practices and dynamics that happened in the space.

Time based responses

The complexity of the problem of housing exclusion and the correspondingly complex answers that might be presented to the problem introduce almost limitless variables into the definition of design solutions. Assuming that the variable represented by the length of stay on the street is the one that influences a person's lifestyle and identity traits more than any other factor (Meo, 2000), it can be argued that the temporal dimension might play a strategic role in contrasting responses. Case studies were then selected focusing on the duration of their interventions: permanent, temporary, and mobile solutions. The mobile response buffers the highest risks of street life by protecting individuals from the cold. Temporary solutions are the most developed and diverse, with diverse goals based on shelter type, while permanent solutions are the most rare and complex to pursue (Cinelli & Mastrantoni, 2022). The selection of case studies was conducted on a global basis, with the most significant findings occurring in Europe and the United States.

The framework

The instrument used for the analysis was a framework to measure the effectiveness of existing homeless facilities in terms of physical-environmental factors and services. The definition of the framework is to be interpreted as the result of bibliographic study, particularly the studies conducted by architects and lecturers Cristian Campagnaro and Roberto Giordano, as well as the results of interviews and site visits. The framework refers to the categories of needs for usability, well-being, safety, management, (Campagnaro & Giordano, 2017), and sustainability (Fig. 1). The framework evaluates these components of a project and, by extension, hospitality models on a scale ranging from 0 to 100.

Usability includes spatial, functional, and perceptual elements. *Well-being* means that the physical, functional, relational, and emotional needs of homeless people must be met. *Safety* is

Figure 1. Needs categories framework.

fundamental in terms of theft-prone items, human safety, and health. *Management* is concerned with the services provided, which vary according to the type of reception. *Sustainability* factor needs to consider technological, economic, and sociocultural plausibility throughout the design process.

Findings

A comparison of the selected case studies according to the needs categories framework, suggests that permanent housing models are more effective than mobile and temporary responses in meeting the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness. This is likely due to the stability and security provided by permanent housing, which enables individuals to access support services and work towards achieving long-term social and economic stability. This also underlines the need to adopt a "widespread reception" model that promotes a territorial network ever closer to the Housing First and Housing Led models. However, it is important to note that mobile and temporary responses still play an important role in providing immediate assistance to those in need, responding to emergency situations. These responses can help mitigate the risks associated with living on the streets and provide individuals with access to basic services and support.

Investigating people's perceptions of places is challenging. In fact, a huge amount of information is needed to build an articulated and dynamic set of stimuli (Del Nord & Peretti, 2012). According to Del Nord and Peretti, the contexts' ability to conform to users' needs must be analyzed, as well as how much the environment shape users' experience and behavior. When someone who had previously lived on the street enters a dorm or a house, all the dynamics of residing in a private, or semi-private, space and the ensuing relationships with the space are at play. Designing spaces properly and rethinking them in terms of their function, type of activity, and users can help improve the relationships that happen inside the receptive structures. People who have a bad image of themselves are thrown off by a beautiful place that seems to be "designed" for their happiness. People are more likely to take care of themselves, their own spaces, and other people when they see beauty (Porcellana, 2019; Porcellana & Campagnaro, 2013). In this case, the beauty of a space is not only about visual aesthetics, issues that must be investigated, but also about how it is cared for and maintained. It is essential to provide the guests with the opportunity to cultivate an environment with which they may identify. Identification involves personalizing places in accordance with requirements that are not only practical but also emotional. From the adaptabil-

ity of the furnishings to accommodate the various practical needs of the guests to the incorporation of personal objects that can be associated with personal memories or interests. Making a "domestic space" means having decision-making authority over space events. This is the basis for establishing an emotional connection with the environment: a sort of "mutual altruism" (Haines-Gadd et al., 2018) relationship by forming an emotional bond with the space and subsequently caring for it. A way to foster a sense of mutual altruism is to involve the homeless community in the design process through co-design activities and tools (Campagnaro, 2019). This would empower them to have a say in how their living space is configured and what amenities it includes, increasing their sense of security and belonging.

Conclusion: Design impacts

Social phenomena are not always perceptible. One of the most important functions of social science and statistics, together with the design discipline, is to reveal patterns that are otherwise unseen to those living in or managing societies (Murray et al., 2010). Involving people, including third sector organizations, service providers, policymakers, social workers and homeless people, into participatory design, serves as the institutional framework for the establishment and maintenance of cooperative relationships predicated on dialogue and mutuality (Sennett, 2012).

As a result of the research, two correlated levels of design impact emerged. The first level is the interpersonal relationship dimension. The need for care and wellbeing can only be met if the encounter with the other is guaranteed. This requires the establishment of a third sector comprised of relational procedures and processes made up of listening, closeness, competence, difference, and singularity (Mastropasqua, 2004). The second level is the link between people and space. The spatial quality is a feature that influences the social reintegration process, highlighting the significance of a design that takes into account the needs categories framework.

Today, as social inequality, housing crises, and the lack of basic amenities continue to increase, the interplay between design and the social dimension is once again a fundamental concern. The designer assumes social responsibility with the understanding that design actions are change agents. By advocating co-design and non-professional design models inspired by anthropology, Victor Papanek encouraged designers to adopt a responsible production role and make tangible changes to improve the lives and living environment of people (Kries et al., 2018). The social repercussions of design are intrinsic; hence it cannot be peripheral. Design has always played a social and political function (Manzini, 2015) and the more complex society becomes, the more design decisions will have environmental, ethical, social, and economic consequences.

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C3

This book contains academic papers and posters of the Cumulus Antwerp conference, held in Antwerp on 12-15 April 2023. The Cumulus community, designers, artists, and educators were invited to submit contributions on how culture and creative industry can offer resilience, consolation, and innovation models on human scale, in line with the conference theme 'Connectivity and Creativity in times of Conflict'.

The contributions were double blind reviewed in the tracks

1) Nature positive/Design for transformation,
2) Digital futures/Hybrid reality,
3) Handle with care/Inclusivity, and
4) PhD network.

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