TRANSFORMABLE PERSONAL SPACE WITHIN A COMMUNAL SETTING

Housing for the Homeless

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Abstract. The growing homeless population of Toronto is a complex problem that needs to be addressed in new ways. The escalating crisis of homelessness coupled with the shortage of funding for social programs has forced non-profit organizations to look for alternatives for the under-housed groups. Many attempts have been made at addressing the special issues of 'sheltering' a number of vulnerable groups such as the homeless, battered women, psychiatric patients, as well as the physically disabled. Strachan House is one innovative prototype of communal living that provides long and short-term shelter for seventy chronically homeless men and women in a renovated, three-story 19th-century warehouse in Toronto. Residents of Strachan House have formed a small community that is largely self-governing, reflecting this project's vision of the homeless as people we can organize, design and build with, rather than people we organize and design for.

1. Introduction

The condition of the ever-increasing homeless population in the urban core of Toronto provides an opportunity with which to discuss the issue of transportable architectural design. The situation of more or less permanent displacement from a fixed living condition raises questions about conventional assumptions and approaches to housing in architecture and interior design. Issues of private and public space, individual and community, shelter and home, gender and personal space, personal security, relative stability and mobility, all must be reinterpreted when the perspective of the forced mobility of homelessness becomes the basis of design.

This paper addresses these issues using a design case study. Strachan House is a special needs housing project where the city's chronically homeless were actively involved in the planning and construction of their 'home'. This involvement led to the re-examination of conventional design assumptions about housing in the making of an alternative communal structure that accommodates the conditions of a transient culture.

2. Home-less-ness

Essential to the fulfillment of our life experiences, to having a sense of self and well being, is having a place that one can call 'home'. A home means many things to all of us. It means having choice and control over one's personal environment. It gives us a sense of identity, a sense of place (Gerda R. Wekerle, 1991). It provides a base for privacy, safety, and a place for regeneration. It provides a place to nurture one's own being and identity within the society. It provides a physical (geographical) location and an address in the world.

A home is part of a larger context of urban spaces where a sense of community sets the stage and fosters a sense of belonging for the individuals who make up a society. Ideally, the complex network of public and private spaces constitutes a healthy urban environment for individuals to live in. Yet, it is evident that many members of our societies cannot make themselves at home within their homes or cities. For many homeless people 'home' or 'city' is not a safe, happy place. These spaces have become a place of (personal) degeneration and humiliation rather than a place of regeneration for increasing numbers of women, children and men.

Social, cultural, economic, as well as personal issues are all contributing factors to homelessness. Through increased research and social interest into the phenomenon of homelessness it is evident that no one definition defines this phenomenon or describes the people who are called homeless. There is increased awareness and recognition of the complex nature of the problems and personal situations of the homeless people.

What does it mean to be homeless? Who are homeless people? The general public impression is that homeless people do not fit or belong within the existing public and private spaces of our urban environment. They are quite often stigmatized as vagabonds, addicts or mentally disabled, and perceived as undeserving, disturbing or even threatening, and not needed in the society (Susan Ruddick, 1996). The phenomenon of homelessness is mostly attributed to large cities. However, if we leave these widespread myths behind, there appears to be no specific characteristics that distinguish the 'homeless' from other people.

It is known that to be 'on the streets' or without 'shelter' is to be without means and for the majority, to be poor. Yet, the diversity of the homeless population ranges through different age and gender groups, from very young children to the elderly, and exists in large cities to small towns. (Danielle Laberge, March 5/2001) Physical and mental health problems associated with homelessness can be the cause or the consequences of being homeless. The visibly homeless represent only five to seven percent of all homeless people. Ninety percent are 'invisible', an indication that not all homeless people are recognizable within the commonly accepted myths about the homeless. Approximately seventy percent of all homeless people are male and thirty percent are female. Twenty-five percent of homeless people are children who are sixteen and under (Joseph Springer, March 5/2001).

In the Toronto Report Card on Homelessness 2001, the condition of homelessness is described in the following terms: people who live outside (on the streets, ravines or parks); who stay in emergency shelters; spend most of their income on rent; live in overcrowded, substandard conditions and are therefore at serious risk of becoming homeless.

In this report card, factors contributing to homelessness are summarized as follows: low-income levels do not keep pace with the rising cost of basic necessities, such as rent and utilities; the supply of new rental housing is not keeping pace with the demand; vacancy rates continue to drop; rental housing is less affordable due to changes in rent legislation that leaves low-income tenants at risk of eviction; the supply of affordable rental housing continues to decline; more people are applying for subsidized social housing; eviction applications continue to rise; not enough supportive housing is being built.

3. Transition/ Shelter

Assistance to the homeless quite often constitutes an immediate attempt to satisfy the basic necessities of life by providing 'shelter' and/or 'services'. However, the desire to ensure the relative well being of homeless people often results in providing assistance with constraints; line ups for food, blankets, and the use of washroom facilities, rationing of necessities, regulating hours of operation and personal activities to name a few. In a quest to be egalitarian, this form of so-called 'assistance' appears rather to be a 'form of control'. This situation creates difficulties for many of the homeless, who may avoid seeking assistance and may not accept to go into facilities where conflicts and confrontations are common.

Hostel systems or 'Out of the Cold' shelters in Toronto are found to be insufficient in numbers and inefficient in helping homeless people re-gain their independence. Regardless of the diversity of personal situations, needs and requirements, hostel systems put everyone under the same conditions making this form of shelter unattractive to many homeless people and encouraging them to return to streets. When the environment that one is supposed to take refuge in, is cold, oppressive and impersonal, where desolation and desperation take precedent, many people prefer to avoid these situations. Many others who cannot avoid these oppressive environments may suffer from somatic disorders, anxiety and irritation resulting in feelings of anger, hostility, and withdrawal from or numbness to one's surroundings. (Robert Sommer: 1974)

Therefore one may view homogeneous facilities created 'for' the homeless having in turn a further negative impact on the phenomenon of homelessness. If the form of assistance is to play an important role in how the homeless adapt to the conditions of their life and in helping them develop a choice over their survival strategies, then alternatives in shelters are required to respond to the specific issues that homelessness brings.

The idea of having a 'place' of one's own, whether a cardboard box, a bed or a nook, is not a neutral one for people who live on the streets or who use shelters. If the intention behind provision of services is to reintegrate the homeless back to the society and help their transition to independence, homeless people require spaces to meet, socialize, relax and make themselves at home along with spaces to eat, sleep and store their personal belongings. Personal appropriation and transformation of public and private spaces becomes a key issue. The act of appropriation/transformation and having control and choice over one's personal space are essential in shaping an individuals sense of identity and belonging. In turn, having control results in taking charge; taking responsibility to protect and feel protected in one's own environment. Personalization, the ability to put one's imprint on one's environment, is a prime ingredient in forming a self-governing community.

4. Strachan House (Levitt Goodman Architects, 1999)

The Homes First Society, a non-profit housing provider that manages 17 facilities in Metro Toronto including Strachan House and Street City, took on an ambitious challenge in late 80's and early 90's to provide shelter for people who live on the streets as well as those in the 'hardest to house' category (so called due to their extreme emotional or violent behavior in shelters). An enlightened municipal government at the time provided funds for initiatives that helped find routes to permanent housing, income, and needed services more so than for temporary shelter or food. Further, the City provided space in a city-owned warehouse for Strachan House and also its predecessor Street City, a self-help transitional housing project built by and for the homeless. (Gerda R. Wekerle, 1991) (The original Street City location, intended to be a temporary solution, is still in operation although it was scheduled to close down when the permanent location in Strachan House was opened in 1996.)

The purpose of Strachan House is to provide short and long term shelter to chronically homeless people. Significant in the design and construction process was the consultation and active involvement of the future residents of the house, the majority of whom came from the original Street City. This process of consultation helped define the social and political framework within which a group of men and women, living solitary lives excluded from the society, could imagine how to come inside and live together in a communal setting. The clients' only precondition for the architectural design was that it should work for the residents. This requirement posed a challenge for the designers-Levitt Goodman Architects- to come up with a solution that in itself questioned and expanded the architectural conventions of 'home' and 'community'.

The program for this unique community addresses the special needs of people who have come directly from the streets, as well as provisions of specific houses for longer term shelter, and health houses for short-term care to homeless residents just released from the hospital. An autonomous unit is targeted for "hardest to house" women who have difficulty finding tenure at other shelters. Further support facilities include a community kitchen, town hall, bank, reception and staff areas.

Through the involvement of the tenants of Strachan House, an architectural and spatial concept was developed that incorporated the experiences and perceptions of street life. Specifically, the design strategy was based on city streets where the homeless have been most accustomed to living. An interior street structure with transitional spaces, analogous to city streets, provides a gradation of public, semi-public and private spaces as an architectural solution to the needs of a transient group of users. These streets provide many alternatives for navigation, social interaction and provide vantage points for comfort and security. In this way, the project addresses the needs of many of its user's who stated that they were fearful of conventional living situations and may feel more secure, even comfortable, sleeping in a protected corner beside their packed belongings rather than sleeping in an enclosed room. The interior streets, defined by colored concrete paths, provide an organic streetscape meandering among the little plazas, gathering spots, living and dining rooms, balconies, nooks and cul-de-sacs.

In this community model, personal living space is not a fixed architectural or spatial structure but is highly transformable to each individual's sense of being and security in relation with the communal setting. Although the

architectural plans may seem chaotic at first glance, they are intentionally fragmented to reflect the non-hierarchical (in the traditional sense) placement of public spaces without an administration zone.
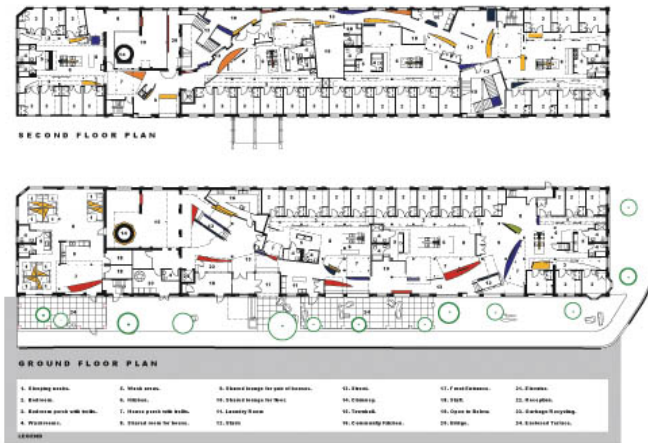

Figure 1. Strachan House, Plans

Transitional/ unplanned spaces are located along the neighborhood streets that give the community the opportunity to individualize that space. The process of carving out the voids of public and transitional spaces contrasts the dense patterning of the housing fabric. The building is organized as a number of 'houses'- four to a street- linked horizontally by a neighboring street or public corridor. A suspended trellis that marks the threshold from the public street to common spaces defines the front porch of each house.

Each house is organized in a manner that encourages the tenants to watch for each other and their house. Thus a sense of social awareness, identity and belonging is encouraged. The house kitchen, a common place of conflict and confrontations, is intentionally left open to encourage participation in cooking activities but also to discourage people from activities such as vandalism, or theft, that might be encouraged more by tight or confined spaces.

Figure 2. Kitchen

Porches in front of bedrooms mark the transition from the collective house to each private bedroom, allowing the tenants to privatize, appropriate and claim that part of semi-public space as their own and also to discourage others from trespassing. Bedrooms have both a full conventional door and a half door looking out towards the shared spaces, providing the tenants with the option of complete privacy or the possibility of controlled social contact to avoid isolation while in their room. The importance of natural light on one's well being is recognized with the provision of a window for each bedroom and ample natural light for shared spaces, further reminiscent of sunny outdoors or streets. This was seen as a key element contributing to the de-institutionalization of the residence and to the breakdown of the hierarchy created by window spaces. Having a window became a right for everyone rather than a privilege.

Figure 3. Bedroom with full and half door.

Vertical connections between each floor are established by two, three story high atriums that contain the stairs. These two vertical spaces anchor the ends of the building and provide the ability to move continuously through the various public rooms sited along the way. The organizing principle for the program is made evident with a hierarchy of spaces ranging from the most private to the most public: the bedroom and the porch each resident calls their own, to the collective house, to the neighborhood streets and finally to the Town Hall- a space large enough to accommodate the entire community. Proportionately, the largest area of Strachan House is given over to public and semi-public uses. This is a startling contrast to conventional apartment living in which private space is privileged over shared common space.

Figure 4. Atrium

The masonry chimney, a landmark of the building's industrial heritage, is retained as part of the Town Hall. The main staircase connects all three levels of public space, weaving its way up alongside of the chimney, through and around an existing three-story masonry wall. During bi-weekly Town Hall meetings the stair is transformed into part theatre, part observatory, as residents participate in the discussions from various levels, perches and vantage points. Strachan house has an elected mayor. Decisions effecting tenants and issues related to the day to day running of this community are taken collectively (including the staff) during the Town Hall meetings.

Figure 5. View towards the Town Hall

The use of timber columns and beams, rough cut lumber and peeled logs, and oversized steel light fixtures are some of the ways that the design further references the larger conceptual and narrative thread of the "outside coming in" (Levitt Goodman, 1999). These structures are not viewed as precious, allowing the residents to leave their imprints. Further, the architects worked collaboratively with a number of artists on the project to extend art based methods into the architectural process. The artists' early involvement in the process, allowed the architects to stretch the conceptual and aesthetic assumptions and limitations of the project to achieve an enhanced expression of the public and private realms that make up Strachan House.

This unique project received international attention for its success in developing a new housing prototype that creates a highly sensitive response to both the physical context and the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of the client group, chronically homeless adults. In 1999, it received a Governor General's Award of Excellence in Architecture that cited its innovative approach to public spaces, supporting a healthy collective life offering both transformable private enclaves and shared spaces (Essy Baniassad, 2000)

Conclusion

Strachan House, conceived and built with the direct participation of the homeless, substitutes a richly developed public space for the conventional form of architectural and administrative control as experienced in typical shelters. This is a radical shift in emphasis that provides the means for attaining autonomy and encouraging integration of the homeless back into the society, above and beyond the conditional provision of basic needs.

The lessons of Strachan House regarding the transformation of public and private spaces go far beyond the specific issues of homelessness, suggesting the possibility of many other forms of dwelling alternatives for diverse residents of the city. Further, the process by which this project came about also presents a challenge to teaching and learning in design studio environments. Design inquiry into the transformable personal space and community can be inspired by collaboration, budget restrictions, and hope.

This project can serve as a provocation, both for those who are established in their profession and for emerging designers to consider the importance of this type of transformable architectural vision.

Project Credits
Architect Team: Dean Goodman (partner-in-charge), Wyn Bielaska, Filiz Klassen, Greg Latimer, Marko Lavrisa, Stephen Leblanc, Janna Levitt, Richard Milgrom, David Stavros.
Artists: Scott Childs, Steven Marshall, David Warne, Paul Raff, Rae Bridgman, Robert Burley, and Debra Friedman
Structural: Balke Engineering Inc.
Mechanical and Electrical: Lam and Associates Ltd.
Restoration: E.R.A. Architects Inc.
Fire and Life Safety: Arencon Inc.
Environmental: Holocene Consultants
Construction Management: JAC-Anderson
Photography: Robert Burley/ Design Archive

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