Home is where the Car Was: Solutions for Housing the Urban Homeless

By

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Abstract

One of the most under used spaces within the urban fabric is the parking lot. In most cases a parking lot is primarily used during the day light hours of the business week as it accommodates the suburban commuter. For this reason the following thesis will explore the possibility of transforming a parking lot in New York City into a structure that can facilitate the needs of both the homeless population and the daily commuter. The proposed project will attempt to create a space within the city where a homeless individual can feel a sense of belonging and thus begin to formulate the structure necessary for the creation of a home. In this way the thesis will outline the creation of a working model for the future of urban dwelling that addresses the dilemma of participatory urban space and the need for vehicular storage.

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Introduction

Government involvement in the prevention of homelessness in New York City has been inconsistent at best. Well formulated programs for the treatment and prevention of homelessness often lapse into disuse, as focus is redirected elsewhere, leaving the emergency shelter system to fill the gaps left by their discontinuation. In 1990, the Mayor of New York City, David Dinkins, and Governor Mario Cuomo signed the New York/New York Agreement that proclaimed a city-state commitment to provide nearly five thousand housing units with on site assistance and health services for people living with mental illness and AIDS.¹ This agreement led to the first major reduction in homelessness since the seventies. By 1994, the emergency shelter population had dropped by nearly 40 percent. But, unfortunately, like many other assistance programs, the agreement was allowed to lapse when Mayor Dinkins relinquished office to Rudolph Giuliani, in 1993. In the late 1990s, under Mayor Giuliani's order, the police department oriented itself toward zero tolerance enforcement, which ultimately led to the destruction of homeless encampments in New York City. Margaret Morton wrote:

“When city police razed the Rail Yard encampment on February 26, 1997,

they demolished the last shantytown in Manhattan. Since then, the numbers of homeless poor have not diminished, but they have become less visible. Fearful of police, the dispossessed journey the streets alone, urban nomads forever on the move: riding subways throughout the night; sleeping on dark, silent streets; hiding in the shadows of construction sites; tucking themselves into decaying structures along the waterfront; disappearing before dawn.”²

New York City, like many other cities, is in dire need of affordable housing and a fresh new look at the structure of the emergency shelter system. This thesis project positions itself as a counter project to current trends in urban planning, namely gentrification and segregation of public housing, in response to the dismantling of social programs. Furthermore, the project acts as a kind of stepping stone for individuals who find themselves without a home. It creates a temporary place of belonging for such individuals as they attempt to deal with other difficulties in their lives. This proposal attempts to fill the middle ground between the emergency shelter system and private housing by serving both those individuals who are working to re-integrate into main-stream society, as well as those who are not yet ready to assume the responsibility of permanent housing, but feel disinclined to enter the emergency shelter system. This thesis presents a speculative housing typology for an integrated community where dwellers rebuild their units on a daily basis and thus allowing each individual to create for themselves a home based upon their daily rituals.

This thesis recognizes the dilemma pertaining to available urban spaces in North American cities, and the inherent conflict between the need for liveable urban space and its corollary vehicle storage space. It is interesting to note that in the downtown district of Chelsea, open-air parking lots consisting of nothing more than a slab of asphalt can be some of the most lucrative sites in New York and other North American cities.³ Once a modest and open-ended terrain of loft-buildings and warehouses, where dwellers of limited

income flocked, Chelsea has started to transform into a desirable district for the New York affluent. Is it not the dilemma of every major city in the West that the car of the commuter competes with the urban dwelling for valuable space within the City? Cities, once full of ambiguous space and open for interpretation and appropriation by all members of society, including the dispossessed, have all but disappeared in the infrastructure of our gentrified capitalist society. Yet, perhaps the City's participatory spaces still exist, buried somewhere within the landscape, only to be revealed by a designers thoughtful intervention upon the city. What is to be done with the sometimes endless fields of open asphalt when all uncertainty and spontaneity have been programmed out of them? Is it possible to fulfil the conflicting needs of both the daily commuter and the urban dweller while private developments remain the major occupants of urban space? Finally, can those without shelter dwell and make their homes within the harsh, landscape of the parking lot? This thesis, then, speculates and reflects upon the contemporary gentrified dilemmas and contradictions of the city, in particular, regarding access to public space, participation in the shaping of urban space, and entitlement to the City. The project recognizes the current state of the City as a product of capitalist development, but at the same time, attempts to creatively harness and strategically make the best of a very real and sometimes harsh reality.

Interweaving a text with an architectural proposition, this thesis examines the possibility of creating a working model for an integrated system of urban dwelling. As a mode of conceptual speculation, it takes into account the current trends of urban development and gentrification, critically assessing them and using them as a basis for the development of a more socially responsible urban fabric. The text will begin to discuss the implication of dwelling in its greatest sense as well as the effect of gentrification on the built environment, at all levels of society. In turn, the architectural proposal will attempt to resolve the dilemmas of mass gentrification, the dislocation of low-income individuals, and the loss of the city's participatory spaces.

Fig. 1.1 Richard Plunz, A History of Housing in New York City (New York, 1990)
Drawing of Manhattan, NY

THE CITY AS TERRITORY OF POTENTIAL

The Effects of Gentrification on the City

ONE.ONE

Gentrification is premised upon the recuperation and upgrading of deteriorated urban property and artefacts by middle or affluent classes, resulting in the displacement of lower-income people. In fact, gentrification is commonly utilized as a remedy for abandoned, slum districts, or other “undesirable,” areas. As a cure for abandonment, however, gentrification only aggravates the condition in the long term in that it perpetuates the cycle of displacement of low-income individuals. It has become clear that gentrification is not a condition that acts uniformly throughout the city. Instead, the gentrifying of an area of the city contributes to an increase in the polarization of residential neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods throughout New York City are becoming increasingly segregated into classes according to income, education, household composition, and race. As one area of the city is gentrified, the value of other areas drops slowly with the decrease in demand, leaving landowners with property that has too low a land value to make investment a profitable venture. As land values drop the tendency for abandonment increases. The decrease in land value can lead to a reduction in available amenities as well as the possibility of a forced displacement.⁴

In New York City public funding of amenities in areas threatened by abandonment is being reduced, while the funding for those same amenities is being increased in major areas of gentrification. The resulting effect of gentrification is the reduction and closure of hospitals, fire and police stations, schools, and the reduction of public services in lower-income neighbourhoods. These losses make it difficult for the poor to continue living in the district. The displacement of families from gentrified areas can also put increased pressure on mid-range areas, as displaced individuals move to them in search of new accommodations. Figures suggest that, in New York City, anywhere from 77,500 to 150,000 people are being displaced annually in some fashion, due to the abandonment of city neighbourhoods.⁵ In essence, gentrification creates a vicious cycle, when low-income individuals are in constant threat of losing their homes to urban rehabilitation programs, and developers look to exploit them. Today, in New York City, residents may find themselves without a home for one of two major reasons: direct eviction due to the abandonment of rental housing units by the owner, because they are no longer profitable, or indirect displacement of residents because of inadequate availability of everyday amenities such as public transportation systems, garbage disposal, schools, and usable public spaces.⁶

Urban rehabilitation programs focus on providing developers with benefits that encourage the transformation of undesirable neighbourhoods into upscale facilities. These new developments cater to a more affluent clientele, and are rarely accessible to the original residents. The individuals displaced from a gentrified district are usually low to mid-income working-class people lacking the resources to resist the powers that drive urban rehabilitation.⁷ The foremost reason these neighbourhoods are susceptible to gentrification is because they are often located in city centres, close to the business core, libraries, universities, public transportation and numerous other amenities. In addition, rents in these central areas are often below market values, and this attracts the attention of developers, real estate brokers, and speculators looking to turn a profit.⁸

Gentrification can be a difficult phenomenon to predict, as there are many factors that must come into play for it to begin. The devaluation of a neighbourhood doesn't guarantee that it will be gentrified, for rather than being rehabilitated and occupied by the wealthy it could also fall into disrepair. However, the end result often leads to the displacement, either directly or indirectly, of the neighbourhood's original residents. Property devaluation of an area can begin by the simple redirection of city funds to an area of the city that has begun to gentrify. Vulnerable neighbourhoods may range from working class housing for middle-income families to mixed-use structures with residential housing interspersed throughout.⁹ In any given neighbourhood, when the value of the land falls below its potential earning capacity, investors see the potential for profit. On the other hand, if the cost of rehabilitation exceeds potential profits, the neighbourhood tends to degrade, sometimes even to the status of a slum, because the cost of rehabilitation exceeds potential profits. The goal of any neighbourhood is to remain at a stable level, with the potential land value equal to that of the current value. Maintaining neighbourhoods' economic stability is easier said than done of course. One way of ensuring the stability of a neighbourhood is to create an integrated community where all social groups have a meaningful place and role within the neighbourhood. In this way, even public housing may exist in an otherwise gentrified area, if it can be positioned as a contributing entity within the City.

Before World War II, Manhattan's city centre was dominated by a strong manufacturing sector that provided semi-skilled jobs for a majority of the low and mid-income families throughout the city.¹⁰ Employment in manufacturing also promised some possibility of advancement for the workers. The manufacturing sector has since been replaced by service, administrative, professional, retail, and governmental activities. This trend has created a polarization of the economy as well as within the structure of residential neighbourhoods: retail employment is generally low-wage with very little job security and limited opportunity for advancement, while professional and governmental positions pro-

vide high-wage career opportunities. As a result of the shift, within the city centre, away from manufacturing an increasing number of employment opportunities for professionals and managers have become available to young educated individuals just entering the work force. At the same time, the cost of owning a suburban home and the price of transportation remains out of reach of young professionals who have not yet accumulated significant savings.¹¹ For these individuals, urban dwelling is inviting. The inner city offers young professionals an opportunity to live in close proximity to amenities that suit their lifestyle, with financially viable housing and easy access to transportation and the business district. These young professionals are known as “gentrifiers.”¹² Their presence stimulates the circulation of money in areas that are operating at levels below their potential land value. As private money increases in a district being gentrified, money for publicly funded amenities is redirected to the area as a way of promoting growth. As a result, prices increase according to what the market can bear. A more serious consequence of this transfer of wealth is how it affects market prices for both consumption items as well as for housing, throughout the area being gentrified. Influenced by the economic pressures associated with gentrification, housing costs, particularly rental markets, inflate rapidly, making it difficult for low-income residents to remain in a neighbourhood they or their families may have lived in for generations. In many cities, urban dwellers are increasingly being priced out of their own homes and neighbourhoods. Urban displacement is the result. The idea of a versatile architecture that is able to absorb the constantly fluctuating trends of gentrification must be considered if the lower income families are to remain residents of the city. An architecture must be devised that can begin to fill a void in the governmental support structure that has been largely overlooked since mass homelessness became evident in the 1970s.

Fig. 1.2 Margaret Morton, *Fragile Dwelling* (Etobicoke, Canada, 2000) BK and his dog, East River, NY. Photograph taken in 1994.

The Urban Landscape's Lost Potential

ONE.TWO

By the mid 1930's, under the direction of Robert Moses, the New York area saw the construction of a vast network of highways and bridges that supported both the development of the suburban home as well as the use of the automobile.¹³ During this same period, General Motors was beginning to purchase municipal electric railway systems for the purpose of replacing them with diesel buses and the personal car.¹⁴ Vehicles now play a major part in Western society and, as a consequence, our cities have been designed to revolve around their transportation and storage. French architect, Francois Seigneur has recognized that the car, especially in Western society, has become something more than a mere device for transportation; instead, it has become a habitat in its own right, with numerous uses and meanings.¹⁵ The vehicle has become a place of work, a place to eat, sleep, listen to music, make phone calls, protect oneself, and to express one's personality. It represents a mobile, private piece of our homes that facilitates, for the owner, a sense of privacy and security during the commuting process. In his description of his project "Auto-logement," (2001) Seigneur states that the vehicle has become "a technological prosthesis, cabin dwelling and mobile outdoor extension of the home."¹⁶

Fig. 1.3 Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York, 1990) Aerial view of New York City showing the network of highways planned by the Department of new Highways under supervision of Robert Moses. 1937.

As more people are utilizing the vehicle for daily activities, more area is being required to store them. In very obvious ways, the automobile governs the city planning. Its presence manipulates human spatial requirements to the extent that the urban fabric is no longer at the scale of the individual, but rather, at that of the automobile. Numerous paved fields and steel structures dot the urban landscape. For a monthly fee of approximately US\$200, one is awarded the right to store his or her vehicle, while at work. This practice yields, in essence, temporary addresses for those who commute to the city every day. The space becomes an ephemeral home in the sense that it is available each day. The space is not defined until a car is parked in it. This is similar to purchasing a plot of land where the plot's location would differ from day to day. The vehicle, as well as providing a means of transportation, provides the owner with a mobile piece of private space. It has become apparent that the endless fields of parked cars in the urban context resemble a kind

of ephemeral neighbourhood of private space. The site's potential is greatly undermined by the fact that it remains largely unused for half of its quotidian cycle. During the evening hours a parking lot resembles a barren urban landscape of wasted premium real estate. How is it that multitudes of people spend each night without a place to acquire a proper night's sleep, while large areas of the urban fabric go virtually undeveloped? As a further contradiction of the city, in many cases urban landowners will benefit by not developing land but, instead, by leaving it to be used as a car park or vacant lot.¹⁷ This is because the city determines the tax rate from the buildings on each plot of land rather than from the land value of the property. Landowners can then run a parking lot in the downtown area and make a large profit by charging hefty prices for prime land, while at the same time paying very little back to the city in taxes. This works out to the advantage of landowners, but is detrimental to those who are renting a home in the same area. For the renter, the underdeveloped paved surface means less available housing and, in turn, drives the cost of living up to levels beyond the reach of many low-income families. In a sense, the requirements of both, the homeless and the commuter, are not so far removed from each other, because each group requires the temporary appropriation of space during alternating periods of the day. A compromise could conceivably be made between the commuter, needing vehicle storage space and the renter, requiring for low income housing in New York City.

History of Public Housing in New York City

ONE.THREE

The number of Single Room Occupancy units (SRO) has been drastically reduced over the last few decades due to urban rehabilitation programs in New York City, such as the J-51 program that is currently offered. The J-51 program provides an exemption from increases in real estate taxes, for a 34-year or 14-year period, for the conversion of lofts and non-residential buildings into multiple dwellings; it also provides these exemptions for the gut rehabilitation of multiple dwellings.¹⁸ The rehabilitation of single room occupancy hotels, along with other multiple dwelling buildings, generally means that the conversion will yield fewer units costing more to rent than previously. Further SRO units in New York are not being replaced because development of the single-room occupancy hotel is currently prohibited. The program also provides the landowner with an abatement of existing real estate taxes by up to 8 1/3% or 12 1/2% for a period of up to twenty years.¹⁹ Affordable housing is not an unheard of outcome of the J-51 program; in fact, greater tax exemptions are often granted to those planning to rehabilitate affordable housing. The fact that there are, as of yet, no restrictions on rents for the new units, means that low-income houses are

often rehabilitated as expensive high-end apartments. Evidence of this is apparent from the rapid reduction of SRO units throughout New York. In 1970, the number of SRO units equalled 127,000, while, just eleven years later, that number had dropped by an average of 9,700 units per year, to reach a low of 20,309 in 1981.²⁰ Because many veterans living off pensions, and other low income workers depend on these units as affordable shelters, the destruction or conversion of SRO hotels has left many individuals with no place to go. Simply put, the reduction of SRO units has resulted in an increase in homelessness among low income individuals. Without a radical change in the approach to urban housing, no change in this trend toward increased homelessness is foreseeable.

At present, the choice for many homeless New Yorkers is limited to an emergency shelter or the street. Many urban nomads avoid emergency shelters because, inside them, they are vulnerable to violence and theft from others in a similar situation as themselves. In some emergency shelters, the guests feel vulnerable even in relation to the workers, yet, the greatest threat to the homeless, real or perceived, is arguably not from those within their social group, but rather from those from without.²¹ The homeless poor are kept at arms length by an often undeserved misconception that they are "a threat to be contained."²² This misconception can become one of the contributing factors that keeps an individual from once again joining main-stream society. As Richard Plunz has pointed out in his important work on housing in New York City, since the late nineteenth century, there is evidence of class segregation in most major public housing initiatives.²³ Public housing programs in New York have historically been large scale construction projects. One major downfall of these projects is that they concentrate vast numbers of people within the same income bracket into one area and, in essence, cut them off from the rest of the city. Although the housing projects provide shelter for low-income families, they fail in many cases to provide a comfort level conducive to a cohesive community. In the past, New York public housing projects have created large areas of un-programmed and poorly landscaped open spaces.

As a consequence, the residents do not develop a sense of ownership and are left with spaces that cannot be made their own. At worst these spaces become havens for criminal activity and deterioration. The very projects meant to heal the city become candidates for slum clearance.

In New York City the first slum clearance project on a modern scale took effect in 1894. Mulberry Bend, located adjacent to the Five Points, had been taken from the Irish by the Italians, by 1884 they made a number of surface changes to the neighbourhood but failed to transform its previous deficiencies. It wasn't until 1894 that the city finally gained possession

of Mulberry Bend and began demolition of the neighbourhood.²⁴ By 1896, Columbus Park covered the entire site. What the City failed to realize, and often fails to realize to this day, was that without a replacement for the housing that had been torn down, the former occupants had no choice but to move to an adjacent area, which in turn intensified the poverty of the new neighbourhood. The 20th century saw marked improvement in the approach of housing the poor. But even though the housing programs started with philanthropic intentions, they often fell short of their potential due to misuse.²⁵

After each of the World Wars the federal government began to take measures to increase the number of public housing projects by making available a number of grants for developers and landowners. In 1941, the National Housing Act added Title VI, which authorized liberal mortgage insurance to builders who provided new dwellings in criti-

Fig. 1.4 Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York, 1990) Mulberry Bend, known throughout the nineteenth century to be the worst slum in New York City.

cal areas. The FHA (Federal Housing Administration) with the intention of increasing suburban home development, also advertised a number of mortgage guarantees for new home owners.²⁶ Unfortunately, Public housing in New York City benefited little from the activities of the World War II National housing Agency. Only three new projects were undergone under either the FHA or the USHA (United States Housing Authority), after World War II, and families of middle-income defence workers occupied all three. In fact, by 1943, more than six hundred public housing apartments, formerly occupied by low-income families, were turned over to U.S. servicemen and their families. Although low-income families were obviously in greater need of accommodation, the government had allowed the Housing Authority to waive the requirement that applicants for subsidized housing demonstrate need based on proof that they were living in substandard conditions.²⁷ With this requirement removed, the families of middle-class servicemen found it easy to obtain subsidized housing at the expense of families truly in need. The Priority that was given to housing the veterans, in addition to the post WWII boom in suburban single family housing construction, almost completely destroyed the government housing programs for the poor. With the return of the veterans, the federal government focused its attention on providing an abundance of mortgage insurance programs, in an attempt to ease the strain of the housing shortage, but this action was only beneficial to the middle class who were moving into single-family houses in the suburbs. Public housing, on the other hand, did not receive the same kind of attention, and all efforts to renew public housing programs for the poor, in 1944, resulted in failure.²⁸ New York City's government funding for housing the poor has fluctuated precariously throughout the 20th century. History shows that government initiatives in housing tend to disregard those citizens who need it most: the poor. In fact, recently the most innovative developments for housing New York's poor have been initiated not by the federal or state governments, but rather by non-profit organizations that are concerned about the welfare of the city. The non-profit organization "Common Ground," for example, has recently completed a project in New York's Times Square that attempts

to build the urban fabric from the ground up, in a way that opposes the traditional mass development urban plan. The proposal appropriates a forgotten space within the city and rehabilitates it in a way that is beneficial to the original occupants.²⁹ In this way the architectural proposal can begin to integrate the members of the homeless community, seamlessly, into the context of the gentrified neighbourhood.

Fig. 1.5 Margaret Morton, *Fragile Dwelling* (Etobicoke, Canada, 2000) A view from a "Fragile Dwelling" on the Lower East Side of Manhattan Island.

New York's Privatization of Public Housing in the Early 20th Century

In 1938 life insurance companies were permitted to directly invest in moderate range rental housing projects as a result of a temporary amendment of the New York State Insurance Code.³⁰ As with the 1922 legislation, upon which the new amendment was based, the 1938 legislation was passed following advanced negotiations with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Both laws were intended to increase production of low-income housing, but the definition of this housing differed greatly between the 1922 and 1938 document. The original law defined low-income housing by stating a maximum allowable rent per room: \$12.50 for apartments within Manhattan and \$11.00 for apartments elsewhere in the city. The amendment placed no specific limits on room rents, but emphasized instead that they should be “low-cost.” The amendment merely implied that all money saved from the reduction of construction costs would be passed along to the tenants in the form of reduced rents. This imprecise language resulted in a loophole that was exploited heavily by large companies, such as the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, whereby developers were able to construct low-cost apartment structures without a specified rent cap. It was the beginning of a new phenomenon of construction whereby large up-scale developments profited from grant money meant for public housing. In 1943, Metropolitan Life succeeded in passing a large development proposal for Stuyvesant Town, on the Lower East Side, with the assistance of Robert Moses, who became widely known for his “bulldozer approach” to urban renewal.³¹ The construction of Stuyvesant Town meant the clearance of an 18-block area for a “tower in the park” style development intended for middle to high-income white families.³² The creation of the development also meant that Metropolitan Life received tax waivers for a period of twenty-five years and the entire 16.9 acres of land without charge, all of which had previously been publicly owned land.³³ A year later, in response to allegations of racism, Metropolitan Life began construction of Riverton, in Harlem. Riverton was a much smaller development that borrowed the build-

ing design of six Stuyvesant Town apartments and was intended for African American's only. Much like other urban renewal projects, the construction of Riverton meant the destruction of numerous low-income housing for less affordable high-rise apartments.³⁴

The high-rise apartment, over five storeys, tended to allow increased circulation of lighting and ventilation for each unit, but the open space was not accountable, especially in public housing. Developers often neglected to spend any effort or money on landscaping for the surrounding "park" space. Many public housing projects ended up being surrounded by un-usable and ill-defined public spaces, primarily because the "park" consisted of a flat ambiguous plot of land surrounding the high-rise tower that did not facilitate clear modes of participation and ownership for neighbourhood residents. A study, conducted in 1969, even attributed an increased crime rate to "tower in the park" style developments, as opposed to adjacent low-rise developments of equal occupancy.³⁵ However, by the 1940s, the "tower in the park" approach to housing had become the preferred mode of design, but this design strategy meant vastly different things to low-income tenants as opposed to middle-income tenants. For the middle class residents of Stuyvesant Town, the surrounding park had been well thought through and reinforced the concept of the tower as a symbol of a secure fortress, in much the same way as the fortress towers of New York's affluent since the beginning of the 19th century. On the other hand, the occupants of public housing also saw the park as a reinforcement of the tower's impenetrability, but the tower came to symbolize the containment rather than the protection of the tenant. In this way "tower in park" developments became "emblematic of a new era of radical and economic disparity, isolating the differences rather than similarities in society."³⁶ As if the segregation of public housing projects was not enough, by 1952, even commercial space had been completely removed from the developments, leaving tenants truly isolated in their towers.³⁷ Furthermore, recent cutbacks and policy revisions by the New York city government, affecting the development and maintenance of public housing recalls a long tradition of contradic-

tory attitudes regarding New York's poor. As early as 1894, New York City has treated its poor with disregard and at times with outright hostility.³⁸ The poor have the right to equal claim to the city and the architecture of both public housing and emergency shelters must facilitate this before any real significant changes in the City's social structure can be made. As a solution to housing the poor, a housing complex alone is not the answer. Indeed, the architecture in conjunction with a socially responsible urban strategy must facilitate the individual's interaction with the City and create a genuine sense of belonging within the community.

Throughout the history of public housing in New York City, the poor have been segregated, isolated and generally excluded from funding meant for public use. Even when affordable housing was provided, it often came in one of two closely related forms: the "bulldozer" slum clearance approach or the super-block developments situated far from the city and its amenities. Slum clearance projects often destroy as many apartments as they end up providing. The result is sometimes a gentrified neighbourhood occupied by the middle-class and affluent who seek the "tower in the park" security provided by such developments. On the other hand, large isolated developments often provide many more housing units than they destroy, but the developments are frequently far from amenities enjoyed by residents in the city. In fact, these projects usually only succeed in clustering large groups of low-income families into poorly constructed, under-funded developments that end up being targeted for slum clearance projects years down the road. As Richard Plunz has demonstrated in his thorough examination of the history of public housing in New York City, the city government has a longstanding tendency to ignore the needs of its poor until they present a noticeable problem, at which point the City applies a "clear cutting" style of approach to the problem. Those who advocate the approach of clearing vast areas of the city to make room for a "cleaner, nicer" development fail to see that the displaced occupants of renewal lands are likely to re-inhabit the new development or to be

forced to seek accommodation elsewhere in the city. Never does the idea of smaller long-term investments enter the picture, largely due to the fact that short-term mass rehabilitation yields visual results immediately.

Shanty Towns and the Question of Order

Documented reference to New York's "shanty towns" dates back to the 19th century. Whole shanty communities lined Central Park until the area began to transform, during the late 1800s.³⁹ The makeshift dwelling, known as the shanty, is the manifestation of the individual's desire to create a home and remain self-sufficient even when affordable housing is not available. To wealthier New Yorkers, the shanty town represents the epitome of disorder and crime. In 1864, the New York Times editorial complained bitterly about the presence of a lingering shanty town on the Upper West Side.⁴⁰ Despite the common conception that the life of a street or shanty town dweller is an anarchic environment, devoid of any kind of order, research has shown that even on the street there exists a distinctive set of rules and routines that dwellers abide by.⁴¹ The issue of personal space and respect for individual territory among the homeless poor is demonstrated in subtle ways. Spatial practices can range in complexity, from the simple gesture of not stepping on another's bed of carefully laid strips of cardboard to the more familiar ritual of knocking before entering another's makeshift "shanty." The homeless know and categorize areas of the City: certain spots are known as areas where a good night's sleep can be had, or drugs and alcohol can be obtained and consumed, while other areas are known as places that are more secure. Newly homeless individuals quickly become aware, either through experience or by word of mouth, of characteristics of various locations around the city.⁴² They quickly learn of areas where the City's urban fabric is pliable enough to allow them to remain un-noticed or un-perturbed for an extended period of time. Despite the function of these areas as settlements for the homeless, eventually every shanty town in New York was targeted for

rehabilitation.⁴³ The goal of an architecture for the homeless is to maintain the versatility of an ambiguous space where each individual is free to make her/his own home without it being seen by the community as a site of disorder.

Large groups of New Yorkers are overlooked each year by the official surveys conducted for the purpose of estimating the City's homeless population. In fact, research revealed by Anna Lou Dehavenon, a medical anthropologist who has conducted research at the Bronx Emergency Assistance Unit, suggests that a majority of the homeless in New York City never show up in the official counts.⁴⁴ The idea of "home" is an elusive concept that in large part remains fully undefined. Each survey conducted in New York City has its own definition for the homeless, and, in most cases, encompasses only the individuals found sleeping on the street at night. In this way, all individuals who are in a position of dependency, either from family or friends, are excluded from the count. Another large group of New Yorkers who are excluded from the surveys are the individuals who spend a majority of their income on sub-par accommodations. These individuals walk the line that separates the homeless from the housed, and as each year of neglected social support passes, that line grows thinner. In her book of photography, *Fragile Dwellings*, Margaret Morton documents and discusses the

Fig. 1.6 Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York, 1990) View of the Williamsburg public housing development, in New York City.

lives and dwellings of individuals who have attempted to remain self sufficient, even in light of increasing living costs and reduced job positions. Morton describes an elderly man found living in a well-established shanty town located in a New York vacant lot. The man recalls his previous dwelling:

“I was living in a room at First Street and First Avenue. The rent was too high, seventy dollars a week. The bathroom was outside. I had to wash the sink before I used it. It stunk. They peed all over the seat. You could barely walk into the place – there was a line on the stairs to buy drugs. Every day it was raining there. Once the place was on fire. It wore me out. The city don’t want to fix it up, so I don’t pay rent. I don’t pay rent, I had to go.”⁴⁵

Although this man is now officially considered homeless, he has found a greater sense of home among the occupants of the shanty town than he did in his previous dwelling. Morton’s narrative description again calls into question the idea of home. When the paradigm of public housing fails to provide more than just shelter, the model must be rethought. A new paradigm must be devised that accounts for an individuals desire to “dwell.”

Double-up Dwellings

In New York, state law requires the city to provide emergency shelter for all families in need.⁴⁶ When the number of families without homes swelled in the 1980s, the government attempted to discourage families from asking for assistance such as sub-standard emergency shelter facilities and public housing programs.⁴⁷ Instead, families were encouraged to seek accommodations known as “double-ups.” A “double-up” occurs when a guest dwells within the host family’s home, without paying rent directly to the host’s landlord. A majority of homeless families are successful in acquiring a doubled-up accommodation with either family or friends. These crowded conditions are, however, often stressful and difficult to sustain -- the guest sometimes does not even have access to a telephone, mailing address, kitchen or private room -- though they are preferable to the alternative: homelessness. One study revealed that 77 percent of double-up occupants had access to mail, but only 38 percent had access to a phone within the household. In the same study, only 40 percent of the surveyed families had their own room and 80 percent had access to storage and cooking facilities.⁴⁸ This can make it very difficult to maintain a healthy family environment. This environment can also greatly hinder the ability for an individual to either keep or acquire a job. Although the “double-up” plays an important role as a temporary solution to a housing shortage that has existed in New York since World War I, the “double up” generates dwellings by borrowing space from families that are already balanced and calibrated for the original occupants. What if “double-ups” borrowed from dwellings that are not already occupied? Can the homeless shelter “double-up” with the City itself, and its “spaces of potential occupancy,” rather than with pre-established dwellings?

Supportive Housing

In 1997, "Common Ground," a New York based non-profit organization that purchases old buildings and rehabilitates them as supportive housing units for the homeless, went to the streets to interview a number of chronically homeless adults throughout New York City.⁴⁹ The goal of the interviews was to determine the best approach for enticing these individuals off the streets. Many different housing options were discussed but the idea of the old flophouse received the most enthusiastic response.⁵⁰ The flophouse in New York has traditionally been a single occupancy room hotel that provides low-cost private rooms on a nightly basis. Supportive housing borrows from this idea with the intention of providing private, clean, safe, and low cost dwellings for its occupants, as a first step back to permanent housing. This housing strategy combines the traditional low cost, no-questions-asked, no obligation to participate in social services, flophouse with professional building management and easy access to medical facilities, job training and placement, and life skills classes. Where shelters and soup kitchens are only equipped to provide a superficial solution for homelessness, "supportive housing" has the ability to provide services that can help integrate individuals back into mainstream society, and help them become productive members of society. Surprisingly supportive housing, according to Common Ground, cost substantially less than the construction and maintenance of a shelter, hostel, or hospital.⁵¹ The push towards supportive housing was also in part due to the fact that many individuals were hesitant to access the city's shelters and soup kitchens for reasons of fear or pride, or because of the strictness of the rules set out by the shelters.⁵² As well, for many of these individuals the very idea of signing a lease and paying monthly rent can seem beyond their capacities. According to two separate studies done by the US government, more than 83 percent of the individuals going through this type of program successfully integrate back into mainstream society.⁵³ The homeless life is lived on a day-to-day basis, thus it is not always best to build a system that requires long-term commitments. Instead, an individual

may best be served by providing a support structure that can be accessed at a rate that is comfortable for each individual.

The Andrews Hotel at 197 Bowery is one of the last single room occupancy flophouses left in New York City. Seventy-eight men live in the four-by-six-foot cubicles that make up the hotel. Many of them have been residents at the Andrews for more than 30 years, most of them veterans living off their pensions. During the day, some earn extra money doing odd jobs or working as “runners,” delivering cigarettes or food for a dollar.⁵⁴ The first such lodging house was opened in 1874 with the intention of creating a cheap, transient place to stay for the homeless Civil War veterans living in New York City. At that time a small room, large enough for a bed and a locker, cost the patron a quarter, while only a bed in a large room cost a dime. By the early 1900s the area was filled with flophouses and their accompanying low cost bars, restaurants and entertainment, earning such areas the unflattering label of “slum.” By the 1930s an estimated 75,000 people would call one of these flophouse home each night. In 1959, half of these lodging houses were closed down as a part of the “Slum Clearance Project.” By 1955, urban renewal programs in New York outlawed the creation of new cubicle hotels since they were deemed to yield “substandard living conditions.”⁵⁵ Government funded incentives to convert single-room-occupancy (SRO) hotels and cubicle flophouses played a major part in the decrease of low cost housing for homeless people over the following two decades. During the 1980s funding for shelters and support for the homeless was cut drastically, leading to the infamous “high visibility” of the homeless throughout New York City and other cities in the United States and Canada. Currently only three flophouses remain in the area. Common Ground purchased the Andrews Hotel, in 1997, and leased two floors of The Prince, situated across the street, for the purpose of restoring the building and saving it and its tenants from developers. The renovated Andrews Hotel will soon accommodate 146 cubicles that boast twice the space per room as the original.⁵⁶ The goal of supportive housing is to provide safe,

clean and private temporary dwellings for individuals looking to get off the street, and, in this way, better equip them to begin reintegrating into society.

Fig. 1.7 Margaret Morton, Fragile Dwelling (Etobicoke, Canada, 2000) The destruction of Bushville, a shantytown located on East Fourth Street, NY. 1993.

Section I Endnotes

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Fig. 2.1 Margaret Morton, Fragile Dwelling (Etobicoke, Canada, 2000) Sign found on the wall of a shanty in New York City.

HOME AS A REALM OF IMAGINATION

Home as a Construct of the Mind

TWO.ONE

“Home is an appropriated space; it does not exist objectively in reality. The notion of ‘home’ is a fiction we create out of a need to belong. Home is a place most people have never been to.”⁵⁷ This quote captures the idea of home as an elusive entity and a construct of each individual’s mind: its author, Santu Mofokeng, is suggesting that home is not a place but rather a state of mind that is obtained through the act of appropriation. These ideas are contradictory to the common conception that home is directly linked to an architectural form, and reflect the experiences of a number of homeless individuals in England. Dr. Jon May, a Senior professor in the Department of Psychology, at the University of Sheffield, has studied the mobility of homeless men throughout Britain. In a study conducted in 1997, May revealed that one long-term homeless man described home as an emotional state of being. In his words, “At home... the physical side is not important... Whether I have a roof over my head or I’m sleeping on the grass, it’s immaterial. It’s actually whether you feel at home.”⁵⁸ An individual will often become mobile in the attempt to access “home” in the form of a network of family and friends that may be able to provide some support. Due

to the increasing trend of polarization within the class structure, homeless individuals may find that the people in their support network are in a similar situation to themselves and are unable to provide support for an extended period. With little or no support structure available, an individual will begin the “journey without destination,” commonly known as the “hostel circuit.”⁵⁹ The “hostel Circuit” is a series of low-cost housing units such as hostels and emergency shelters that are apart of a rigorous daily, weekly, and/or monthly ritual of rotation from one safe-house or shelter to another. The individual may remain in motion for any number of years in search of a place they feel is home. In fact, some long-term homeless individuals can begin to see this circuit as the space in which they feel most at home. For these individuals, permanent housing is in contradiction of their lifestyle. May describes how these urban nomads have come to depend on their mobility and freedom to feel truly at home. Sometimes even the thought of a static residency can be intimidating for such individuals, thus all that is necessary to feel at home is the temporary appropriation of a flophouse room. Is it, then, feasible for one to develop an architecture that, indeed, truly celebrates and emphasizes the act of appropriation that contributes to the wider spectrum of urban and social equalization?

Nicos Papastergiades writes:

“Our mode of being in this world is like the practice of renting an apartment. The space is borrowed, the structure given, and the possibility of dwelling is not infinite. However, the practice of living is neither closed nor predetermined by the architecture of the building. We enter the apartment with our baggage, furnish it with our memories and hopes, and make changes that give form to our needs and desires. The order with which our belongings are arranged is like the fingerprint of our social identity.”⁶⁰

The act of making oneself at home, in most cases, involves putting things in their place, unpacking, and laying things out in an orderly fashion as seen by the occupant. The ritual

of surrounding oneself with familiar objects, seemingly in their correct place within an unfamiliar environment, provides security and a sense of belonging that would otherwise be replaced with uncertainty and isolation. The simple act of unpacking one's luggage during a stay in a hotel or another's home reinforces this idea. In much the same way as the location of a bridge is determined by its distance from a city, an individual's idea of home is determined by the proximity and placement of the things that have become familiar. This idea calls into question the notion that "dwelling" and "residing" are equated. To merely reside is not to have dwelled.

For humans the sense of belonging is paramount. We go to great lengths to create a home for ourselves. In everyday life, we depend on everything being in its place; it's the way we have become accustomed to things and it helps us to maintain our sense of place within the world. "We count on things to keep their place because we have lived our lives with them in this fashion... in their fidelity to us they function as extensions of ourselves."⁶¹ We construct our idea of home around the things that have become familiar to us. Rapport and Dawson, professors of anthropology and philosophical studies and co-authors of *Migrants of Identity*, believe that: "one is at home when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one's identity best mediated - and homeless when such a cognitive environment is eskewed."⁶² These tangible items that keep us grounded to a sense of place are not always manifested as physical entities that remain fixed in our surroundings. In some cases the tangible elements may be invisible or virtual, existing only in the individual mind. Memories and daily rituals can become the basis upon which the ephemeral home of a mobile individual may be built. The sense of belonging is to be created through the daily routines or rituals in which one partakes. These rituals have the power to place the individual in a mind-set that allows them to feel a level of comfort in different environments.

In the past, “to be at home in an environment, in short, was to situate the world around oneself at the unmoving centre, with contour lines of relevance in the form of symbolic categories emanating from a magisterial point of perception.”⁶³ This quote, from *Migrants of Identity*, illustrates how “home,” prior to the 20th century, was thought of as a physical location in space around which all elements of life revolved. As the world becomes more mobile, the concept of “being at home” must be re-evaluated. Advancements in technology and international travel have increased our accessibility of movement around the world, eliminating boundaries that have restricted such travel. In our current world, the idea of “home” becomes a much more abstract and mobile concept, one that can no longer be defined by an unmoving centre. Instead, the modern view of “home” is sometimes regarded as a “state of being” rather than as a place to inhabit. For some, the concept of home manifests itself more conventionally, as in the case of a suburban house or apartment that one appropriates and invests in actively first when moving in, then leaves relatively unchanged afterwards. Other times, an individual will find her/himself in a state of appropriation/re-appropriation that occurs on a daily basis. In cases such as this, “home” is achieved each time the individual moves, through the same acts of appropriation: surrounding oneself with belongs, in what seems to be their proper place, or surrounding oneself with family and friends. The difference between the permanent resident and the urban nomad becomes evident when looked on a larger scale. For the nomadic individual the concept of home exists in the daily act of appropriation of a dwelling site and then the re-dedication of the site to its original “official” purpose. The nomadic individual does not have a permanent setting in which to orient her/himself within the community. This is not to say that they are not members of a community. It is for this kind of urban nomad that a new kind of architecture can most meaningfully be speculated.

In the case of individuals who have no immediate shelter and who therefore take advantage of public or otherwise vacant property each night for a place to rest, the ritual of

making oneself at home becomes a daily way of life. For the homeless individual the act of cleaning up after oneself and the relinquishing their abode to the city each morning to give way for the alternative daytime use of a space, and then the re-appropriation of that space for each night becomes a daily ritual.⁶⁴ This phenomenon is not restricted to an individual scale. Small communities of homeless individuals appropriate public space around New York on a nightly basis to create little ephemeral settlements that appear and disappear at hours contrary to the usage of mainstream society. In many homeless settlements, areas are clearly demarcated by regular occupants, for personal hygiene or for sleeping. Offenders of these rules are loudly advised to use the designated areas.⁶⁵ Even those lacking the right to call a piece of land their own have found ways to do so, individually and collectively, as they dwell within the city. In this way then, home is no longer a structure but, rather, the untold story of a life being lived.⁶⁶ To understand this is to recognize that a new kind of architecture and a new way of dwelling within the city is possible.

Fig. 2.2 Margaret Morton, *Fragile Dwelling* (Etobicoke, Canada, 2000) Bushville located on the Lower East Side, NY. 1993.

Shelter Vs. Home

TWO.TWO

In his book *Reckoning with Homelessness*, Kim Hopper, a medical anthropologist, who has conducted ethnographic and historical research on homelessness in New York City, recently identifies that:

“the opposite of homelessness is not shelter but home. Understood culturally, home must entail some claim to inclusion. The principle question underlying homelessness policy, then, is not, what does charity demand? But, rather, what does solidarity require? And so it no longer suffices to ask what it is about the homeless poor that accounts for their dispossession. One must also ask what it is about ‘the rest of us’ that has learned to ignore, then tolerate, only to grow weary of, and now seeks to banish from sight the ugly evidence of social order gone badly awry.”⁶⁷

Hopper identifies a number of very important points in this quote. The most important point is that, indeed, shelter does not equate to home. Remedial emergency shelters and poorly thought out mass housing projects do not replace the need for a home. Unfortunately, solutions that are quick, but, in the long term expensive are often implemented as

remedies for the “homeless problem,” because immediate results are noticeable to the voting public. As a result the homeless are swept from view, but the problem is not solved; instead the housing problem merely intensifies in other areas of the city, creating slums and beginning the cycle once again. The question that should be asked is: how can the advantages of the rich somehow be modified to benefit the poor as well?

Individuals may find that the same home is perceived differently depending on their position in society. Any time an attempt to is made publicly and collectively impose home on individuals as a social fact, some individuals will inevitably belong while others will be excluded. As an example, low-income individuals often find their role within public housing compromised because they lack the ownership, privileges and a presence within the community. The homeless identity becomes recognizable through its lack of identity or lack of citizenship within the community. For the homeless, identity, as well as the notion of home has become, as Dawson and Rapport have outlined, one of mobility. Even within the boundaries of the city, homeless individuals are constantly forced to remain mobile for the purpose of remaining invisible to mainstream society.

Emergency Shelters

Home is often equated with the concept of belonging, of safety, security, independence, and control over one’s interactions with others, in relation to their varying forms of shelter. In his numerous interview with homeless men, Jon May, discovered that many homeless individuals who have been without a permanent residence for an extended period of time often describe hostels and other such shelters as maintaining a sense of home for them.⁶⁸ In these cases the homeless individuals are well known (by physical appearance at the very least) to the employees of the various hostels and emergency shelters, as well

as to their fellow occupants who frequent the same circuit, affording the individual a sense of comfort and ease of movement. For these people, the sense of identity and home is reminiscent of a nomadic lifestyle where their home is identified not through the movement between places or the lingering within one location but rather through a series of way-stations or rest-points that shape their identity.⁶⁹

Emergency relief has its merits, but, at most, shelters are a necessary stopgap measure: shelters neither stop homelessness nor prevent further displacement.⁷⁰ Emergency shelters can never replace the need for a home and a place of belonging. In 1990, the Coalition for the Homeless, and researchers from the Nathan Kline Institute conducted a joint street survey that found that a majority of street dwellers who had at one point or another spent time in a city shelter, had found them to be overly structured and dangerous, and vowed never to return.⁷¹ As a result, homeless individuals often opt for the less structured accommodation of flophouses, hostels, and shanties. The homeless occupy the city in a way that is contradictory to most urban planning tactics. They appropriate the spaces within the city that go largely un-noticed by most citizens, namely parking lots, alleys, and abandoned sites.⁷² For an architecture to fully accommodate the urban nomad, it must recognize that, to the homeless individual, the urban fabric is a place of ambiguity, rather than a strict layout of programmed, definite locations on the city's grid. This new architecture of urban homelessness must offer the freedom to adapt to the needs of the specific occupant in very immediate ways.

Section II Endnotes

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- I like to acknowledge my advisor, Janine Debanne, for bring this exhibit to my attention.
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- ⁶⁸ May, Jon. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space. "Of Nomads and Vagrants: Single homelessness and Narratives of Home as Place". Vol. 18. 2000. 739.
- ⁶⁹ May, Jon. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space. "Of Nomads and Vagrants: Single homelessness and Narratives of Home as Place". Vol. 18. 2000. 739.
- ⁷⁰ Hopper, Kim. Reckoning with Homelessness. Cornell University Press. London, England; 2003. 183.
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- ⁷² Hopper, Kim. Reckoning with Homelessness. Cornell University Press; London, England; 2003. 191.

Fig. 3.1 <http://firstview.com/WRTWfall2000/HUSSEIN_CHALAYAN/index.html> (2000) Design by Hussein Chalayan. Table transforming into a dress. Inspired by disaster relief programs in Kosovo.

PRECEDENTS AND CASE STUDIES

With the inclusion of a new category of people recognized by the UN as internally displaced persons (IDP), those who are forced from home but not region or country, the number of people subject to some form of displacement equals 1 in every 297 persons on earth.⁷³ Vast numbers of people are displaced each year and yet solutions for housing these individuals seem to be largely ignored. Solutions for housing the urban nomad consist primarily of emergency shelters, whereas in cases of mass displacement, the common blue tarp tent is the preferred medium. Fortunately there are a few organizations that are seeking to produce innovative alternatives to the status quo. Common Ground is one of these organizations that concentrates on housing urban nomads in ways that allow them to insert an element of control in their lives.

Fig. 3.2 Deborah Gans and Matt Jelacic, *Perspecta*, "Displacement: The Realpolitik of Utopia" (vol.34, 2003) Sections of the Kosovo relief project making up one possible design configuration.

Alternative Housing: A Design Question

THREE.ONE

The question of alternative dwelling has made its way into architecture schools and private practices in a more provocative manner in the past decade, in part because of numerous competitions initiated by non-profit organizations such as Common Ground in New York. Deborah Gans and Matthew Jelacic are New York architects and professors at Pratt Institute school of architecture that set out in 1999-2000 to devise a cheap light-weight alternative to blue tarp tents, for a competition on disaster relief housing for Kosovo. Their proposal was to use the remnants of the war-damaged cities as the foundation for disaster-relief housing in Kosovo. In order to avoid the problems inherent with refugee camps, Gans and Jelacic decided that the reuse of the city provided the best opportunity for innovation. In their words: "The challenge was to develop a physical device that could reconstitute an urban fabric without the support of a civic scale of infrastructure and that could, as an auxiliary consequence, retool a refugee camp as if it were a city."⁷⁴ The project itself uses a condensed infrastructure equipped with a hearth-heat source, and a toilet and cistern-shower housed in load-bearing, demountable enclosures. The structure facilitates a flexibility that can accommodate the needs of various lifestyles and aesthetic preferences.

To complete the dwelling, a photovoltaic blanket and its accompanying battery store, heat and light, and provide power for supplemental appliances. The versatility of the project means that it may be employed in various different situations and perhaps even modified to function within the urban context.

Fig. 3.3 Deborah Gans and Matt Jelacic, Perspecta, "Displacement: The Realpolitik of Utopia" (vol. 34, 2003) Kosovo relief project.

Within the same year as the Kosovo disaster relief project (2000), the architectural firm, Gans & Jelacic, was asked by Marguerite McGoldrick of Common Ground to expand upon their previous disaster relief project for the purpose of adapting it for the New York nomad. As described by the project outline, "Common Ground described the intended users as the mobile homeless, who would occupy this shelter and its related social programs as a 'first-step' on the way to a more stable existence."⁷⁵ As well, the project must take into account that the homeless individual shares the general population's desires for a home that provides: light, air, space, cleanliness, order, comfort, privacy, security, and a sense of place and beauty.

The resulting housing units stemmed from the ideology of the Kosovo project, previously mentioned. The structure is lightweight, self-supporting, transportable and partially customizable. The occupant has control over the degree of privacy through sliding panels of wood, screen, and Kalwall. Provided within each unit is an electrical plug, a lock, a closet and a built-in wall hanger. As well, the units provide a range of different colours and finishes to suit the occupants taste. The structure is manifest in an aluminium extrusion that can be used as either column or beam and cut to any length desired. It can be easily drilled on-site and assembled with the various panels in all four directions. The units are designed to be assembled within existing building structures, partitioning them into a cheap and efficient apartment complex reminiscent of the once numerous flophouses.

Fig. 3.4 Deborah Gans and Matt Jelacic, Perspecta, "Displacement: The Realpolitik of Utopia" (vol. 34, 2003) View of two attached units as they were displayed at the Van Alen Institute gallery in the Fall of 2000.

Dressed for Home

The decline of many governments' commitment to affordable housing has prompted artists, and architects to take it upon themselves to devise innovative ways to confront the problem. As a further development of the ephemeral homeless environs, the homeless shelter has also been considered in the form of clothing, by fashion designers and artists alike. Most noticeably among them are artist, Lucy Orta, and fashion designer, Hussein Chalayan. Hussein Chalayan is a London-based fashion designer who approaches the design of clothing from a tectonic point of view. Born in 1970, on the British colony of Cyprus, Chalayan was present during the conflict that divided the island between the Turkish north and the Greek south. He has naturally been drawn to confront issues dealing with how cultural space is defined and how an environment in fluctuation affects the way in which one dwells.⁷⁶ Chalayan's collections have included garments constructed from unrippable paper and that can be folded into their own envelopes to send in the mail, a chiffon dress suspended from balloons filled with helium, and dresses sculpted from either sugar glass or tulle. Rather than the typical catwalk, Chalayan's shows usually involve specially constructed sets and a show that plays out in a narrative. There is always more to a Chalayan show than the clothing. During his autumn/winter show of 2000, in London, Chalayan introduced what would become his most well-known work, one which involved a set of furniture, including chairs and a coffee table that transformed into dresses and suitcase.⁷⁷ The entire show was designed as a response to the dispossessed refugees of Kosovo, as a way for the mobile to take a piece of home with them. It goes on to explore the idea of home for a person who is forced to remain mobile. The show begins with a set of furniture set out on

stage in a way that is reminiscent of a typical living room. As the show progresses, the living room is slowly transformed into a group of women clothed and with a suitcase packed for a journey about to take place. The show consists of two major types of design - the first dress begins as a chair and the second as a coffee table. The cover for the chair can be slipped off the frame of the chair, unfolded, and refolded into a number of different dress styles. The frame of the chair is constructed of wood and can be packed into itself to become a suitcase for carrying luggage. The table is constructed of rings of wood and, once the center section is removed, a woman may stand in the center and raise the table to create a pyramid-shaped dress. The legs of the table may then be folded into the interior of the dress. If one's clothing can be transformed into the familiar makings of a home, can the home also be transformed - in essence, creating a multi-faceted construct that has both the comfort of home and the versatility to facilitate ulterior requirements when an occupant is not in immediate need of the dwelling? The increased mobility of everyday life has drastically modified the concept of home and a number of artists, architects, and even fashion designers are exploring the possibilities of dwellings that no longer required a permanent location in space. It then becomes the responsibility of the architect to combine these new ideas of dwelling, with architectural space.

Fig. 3.5 <http://firstview.com/WRT-Wfall2000/HUSSEIN_CHALAYAN/index.html> (2000) Design by Hussein Chalayan. Series of images showing the transformation of a chair into a dress.

Section III Endnotes

⁷³ Gans, Deborah and Matt Jelacic. Perspecta. "Displacement: The Realpolitik of Utopia". Vol. 34. 2003. 119.

⁷⁴ Gans, Deborah and Matt Jelacic. Perspecta. "Displacement: The Realpolitik of Utopia". Vol. 34. 2003. 122.

⁷⁵ Gans, Deborah and Matt Jelacic. Perspecta. "Displacement: The Realpolitik of Utopia". Vol. 34. 2003. 123.

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Fig. 4.1 Aerial view of the finished building at the intersection of 10th Ave. and 18th St.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Speculation of Belonging in Chelsea, NY

FOUR.ONE

"Home is Where the Car Was," proposes a transformable parking lot structure on the East Side of Manhattan beneath the Highline in the district of Chelsea whereby the structure could allow parking by day and housing at night. The basis of the project is a critical response to the notion that two conflicting groups of people, the daily commuters with the need for vehicle storage and the urban nomads with the essential requirement of shelter, are vying for use of the same urban fabric. This project stems from the idea that both groups have valid claims to the same sites and that there are ways in which the design of the site may provide for both. In order to explore this idea, I began by selecting an existing parking lot in an area that will, if current trends continue, begin to gentrify at an increasing rate in the years to come. The purpose of my selection was to insure that the polarization of the community structure could be broken down to the extent that both groups of occupant would maintain their sense of place. Running directly through the site is the raised platform of the unused Highline Railway. The conversion of the Highline to an elevated walkway that will cut through the lower west side of Manhattan is currently being proposed. This will allow the proposed building to become a gateway to the neigh-

bourhood of Chelsea, New York.

In a city such as New York where available space is at a premium, and the option to expand horizontally is out of the question, the only available relief for the high demand on available housing is to make use of the land to its fullest extent within the city. Often, this means that the land must be developed vertically. My thesis proposes that, in a situation where sufficient parking is currently required and used, is that a site may be designed for use as both a parking lot and dwelling, at alternating periods of time. The proposed project responds to a need, for low-cost housing units in New York City, but at the same time recognizes the need for downtown amenities such as car parks. My proposition is for an ephemeral dwelling that positions itself within the community as a transitional space and bridges the gap between the urban nomadic community and mainstream society. This proposition attempts to create a common ground between the two communities by creating a space that each group has equal right to claim as its own. This thesis begins by questioning the efficiency of a Chelsea parking lot in conjunction with the availability of affordable housing in New York as a whole. The parking lot, as well as many others throughout the Chelsea area, was utilized to its fullest extent for no more than half of a twenty-four hour cycle. The opposing schedules of the speculative tenants presents the possibility of constructing a parking facility that accommodates the needs of the homeless throughout the evening hours, while providing much needed parking space for individuals commuting from the suburbs on a daily basis. "Home is where the car was" describes the creation of a surrogate home for the homeless, in the sense that this home is not available for use at all hours of the day and therefore must exist only in the mind of the occupant the rest of the time. In this way, home is created through a complex combination of personal ritual and ownership, that in turn posits a sense of belonging to a community. This design proposition explores the fundamental concept of home as a "sense of belonging."

“Humans perceive the world in one of two ways: as a foreign land or as home.”⁷⁸

One’s existence within the world is validated and given meaning through belonging to something greater. The sense of belonging creates a network for which personal ritual and comfort can be based. In New York City, neighbourhoods shift and transform at an incredible rate. The neighbourhood of Chelsea, on Manhattan Island, is one of the districts that is in the beginning stages of gentrification. As the area becomes more gentrified, low-income individuals that once called Chelsea home, find that they are no longer welcome. My proposal is two-fold. First, the building will supply much needed low-cost temporary accommodation for individuals who find themselves without a home. During business hours, when sleeping quarters are generally not needed, the building will provide parking for individuals who commute to the area each morning. Second, my proposal will confront current practices of local government by creating a multipurpose space, within a gentrifying area such as Chelsea, that provides services for both streams of the community. I speculate that, as a result of this proposal the polarization of such neighbourhoods’ economic and social structures can begin to break down, and in turn, create a more stable community as a whole. The proposed building program can also help to accommodate those who are not conventionally considered homeless, people who find themselves in a period of transition, whether it be from the loss of a job, a change in family status, or a personal life crisis. Although primarily intended for individuals lacking access to a permanent home, the possibility to accommodate a low budget traveller is not out of the question.

This project attempts to create a space within the city where the homeless can begin to feel a sense of belonging by allowing each individual to determine his or her own level of ownership within the facility. On the one hand, the dweller can view this settlement as a stable place where a cohesive community can be formed and where one can begin to belong. On the other hand, the occupant may feel reassurance in a fluid space that retains the sense of freedom that comes with the knowledge that they are not necessarily tied down

to one particular lodging spot for any length of time. The program recognizes that many long-term homeless individuals are not yet prepared for permanent housing solutions.⁷⁹ In this way the project operates much like a hostel or flophouse, where everyday amenities are provided around the clock as well as access to non-obligatory job training, positioning, counselling and general life-skills support. Personal use of the building can involve merely tending to personal hygiene and the storage of belongings or making full use of all amenities. The building, as proposed, has facilities and staff to provide training, counselling, and shelter for extended periods of time. By providing a system that is based upon a permanent support structure for such individuals, rather than a system based on a temporary emergency shelter, not only can long-term homeless individuals be helped at a rate that is comfortable for them, but, also, further homelessness can be at least partially prevented.

Discovering the Site

I was initially drawn to the nearly 60m by 40m fenced-off parking lot that sat between 10th Avenue and the Highline Railway because I felt the Highline, in a way, symbolized the life of the urban nomad. The Highline is an abandoned rail line that cuts through most of the Lower West Side almost completely un-noticed. Currently a majority of the space beneath the rail line is either fenced off and not used or with parked vehicles during the day. The only sections of the railway that are visible are where it runs perpendicular to a street, but even at these points it is well camouflaged by large billboards. In fact, the only time that the rail line is continuously visible is when it is viewed from an aerial vantage point. Much like the dispossessed who roam the city, the Highline exists as a major entity within the City that goes predominately un-noticed on a daily basis. I saw the proposed building as both a literal and symbolic entranceway through which the dispossessed of New York could begin to re-emerge into mainstream society. In this way, the building acts as nothing more than a transitional space, connecting the proposed rail trail to

the City.

The far west side of Chelsea is an area of Manhattan where it is not uncommon to see meat packers, young artists, art directors, business people, and young children going to school, and none of them seem out of place. On the exterior, the buildings are old industrial warehouses and loft buildings, made mostly of brick. On the interior, there could be anything from the original meat packing plants to unmarked international art galleries and designer boutiques. The area is in constant transformation, but the transformation veiled because the buildings' exteriors are left almost untouched. None of the galleries and boutiques have any distinguishing elements, such as signage, outside the front door. Instead, the sounds of renovations, inside, advertise that a new occupant is moving in.

One block to the west are the piers where a majority of the new immigrants entering Manhattan first landed during the beginning of the century. A few blocks to the east is "Ladies Mile," a district that has been known, throughout the late 19th century and 20th century, as a premiere fashion spot in New York City. Bisecting the two polar opposite regions of New York is the Highline, the latter cuts through city blocks and buildings like an inaccessible park suspended 29 feet above the street. Constructed between 1930 and 1934, the Highline Railway was built to deliver freight to factories and warehouses along the west side of New York City's industrial district. It was once part of an infrastructure improvement project that ultimately eliminated 105 dangerous street-level rail crossings throughout Manhattan. The Rail line originally ran from the Hudson Rail Yards down to Spring Street. The southern most blocks of the rail line were demolished in the 1960s but the remaining 1.45 miles, extending up to the Hudson Rail Yards, remained in use, until 1980, when it was no longer needed for its intended purpose. Since then its fate has remained uncertain. A local non-profit group, including residents, business owners, and design professionals, have banded together to form "Friends of the Highline," whose purpose

is to transform the length of the line, from the railyards down to Gansevoort Street, into an elevated rail-trail. The Highline travels through two buildings and above 13 more and it crosses streets 25 times along 22 city blocks. The line is constructed of steel and topped with a reinforced concrete deck, gravel ballast, metal tracks and handrails. At the moment the deck is covered with small trees, grass, and wild flowers. The High Line runs through three neighbourhoods that were formerly centres for transportation and industrial uses: The Hudson Rail Yards area, Far West Chelsea, and the Gansevoort Meat Packing District.

Fig. 4.2 <<http://www.mapquest.com/maps/>> (2003) Aerial view of proposed building site in Chelsea, NY.

Building a Dwelling

FOUR.TWO

From the onset of the project, my goal has been to preserve the existing structure and program of the site; I feel that it is best to integrate my proposal into the urban fabric with as much ease as possible. The preservation of the site includes everything from the graffitied brick wall that lines the eastern flank of the site, to the visible structure of the Highline and the space for approximately eighty vehicles. Even the exterior façade of the proposal is meant to preserve the existing presence of the site, and helping the proposal fit unobtrusively into the neighbourhood. The rough structure of the Highline is not only left unspoiled but is also used as a partial support structure for the eastern wing. The new rooftop is flush with the concrete deck of the Highline, creating a perpendicular extension of the rail line that can be used as a rest stop or gathering space for either the occupants of the building or those passing through. In this respect the building's rooftop acts as a vertical extrusion of the typical corner park found throughout Manhattan. One descends from the deck of the Highline into the heart of the new structure. At this point in space the transition from the existing structure of the Highline and adjacent buildings into the new

construction of the proposed intervention becomes melded. The repeating columns of the elevated parking structure are interrupted by the inclusion of the worn steel structure of a rail line that has been standing for decades. The graffitied existing back wall that lines the east side of the site would house a number of public showers and washrooms that could be used by both the evening occupants and the general public. The east “parking/dwelling wing” is a definite mixture of existing brick and steel structure and the new proposed dwelling units. As one moves through to the west “parking/dwelling wing” the combination of the existing structure and the new dwelling units begins to fade into a structure that is only reminiscent of the old parking lot. During the day the proposal is intended to be used as a parking structure that caters to the needs of the commuters that work various boutiques, government buildings and packing plants in the vicinity. For this purpose the majority of the proposal remains almost completely open and accessible from the street as well as the deck of the Highline during the day. In the evening hours the entire structure transforms into a more internalized dwelling space without becoming completely opaque. Spaces that had previously been open fold onto themselves to become public only to those who have reason to make use of them, acting in much the same way as the lobby of a hostel would.

The structure is made up of two main elements. The major element is the parking/dwelling unit wing, which consist of two steel structures that run parallel to the Highline rail line and 10th Avenue. Each parking structure is capable of housing approximately 30 vehicles during the day and 60 people in privately compartmentalized units during the night. Running the length of the west side are public washrooms and showers that are open to anyone 24-hours a day and are accessible from the Highline deck as well as from the ground level. Running the length of the east side of the structure are lockers where occupants may store their belongings at any time. The entire structure, with the exception of a few office spaces, is accessible to the public. Accompanying the lockers are also smaller

cubby holes that may operate much like a public lost-and-found drop box, where lost or discarded goods could be placed for others to find. The lockers themselves are semi-transparent at both ends, firstly to allow a soft ambient light to filter into the space and secondly to allow the façade facing 10th Avenue to become an ephemeral record of the occupants on the interior. Colour and form from the goods being stored within the lockers will create a constantly shifting surface that defines the facade. The cubby holes are also aligned along the 10th Avenue streetscape, but remain more transparent so that they may act as windows onto the street when not being used to store objects. The ceiling of this space is constructed of a metal grid that separates the living space from the utility space, while, at the same time, allowing a visual connection that expands the concept of the room. The ceiling grid is re-enforced, allowing it to function as a support for anything from supplementary lighting fixtures to drying laundry.

The second element that makes up the building is the support facility that runs perpendicularly to the parking/dwelling wings on both 17th Street and 18th Street. The “support wings” are constructed as a permanent structure that is elevated one storey above the ground to allow the ephemeral activities of everyday life to flow beneath unhindered. The support wing, located along 17th Street, houses kitchen facilities and small lounges on each floor, whereas the support wing, located along 18th Street, houses staff offices and class and meeting space. Two stairwell cores are located at the ends of each support wing. The support wings are constructed primarily of a poured-in-place concrete, whereas the structure for the housing units is constructed as a semi-transparent ephemeral surface that exists as a temporary record of the lives within. This is in part accomplished by providing a series of semitransparent lockers and communal shelves along the façade of the building facing 10th Avenue, where the daily cycle and the constantly revolving occupation of the building is recorded through the use of the facilities. Both the kitchen and the offices are suspended above the vehicular entrance, enclosing the courtyard by providing an unobstructed path

between the “parking/dwelling wings,” for the evening occupants. The ceiling space of each room consists of a stretched translucent cloth that allows light to be dispersed above light fixtures, creating, in essence, a surface of light, suspended overhead, that and casts a soft glow on the surrounding finished concrete structure. The kitchen is a designed as a transitional space between the two parallel housing structures, as a kind of congregating area where support staff, occupants, and, possibly, even car owners can mingle, in a space that is familiar in every home. With the general exception of the kitchen, all parts of the building are designed in a way that facilitates and encourages the modification of program and structure. The building allows each group the freedom to appropriate and transform the space to facilitate their own needs and, subsequently, be appropriated by a different individual as the daily cycle evolves.

Fig. 4.3 Drawing of proposed building from above the intersection of 10th avenue and 18th Street, Chelsea, NY

The Dwelling Unit

Because these units exist architecturally in relative autonomy from an enveloping structure, dwellers may feel a stronger claim to their units, even though they are not entirely accessible during the day. In essence the intimacy of each unit is comparable to that of a tent on a campsite, where the unit is versatile enough to allow for varying degrees of privacy via removable walls and translucent screens. The dwelling units are constructed in groups of four, allowing for the possibility of two, three, or four to be connected to produce one larger unit. In this manner, the building can accommodate a single dispossessed occupant, a mother with children, or an entire family. It is even conceivable that an occupant of these units could be in a position to offer shelter to another, acting as a reverse “double-up” condition. Each unit also allows for the accommodation of a single adult and child, as it is equipped with an upper shelf that, if required, can be transformed into a kind of bunk-bed for a small child. The top bunk’s access ladder, in cases where it is not needed, doubles as a condensed closet space, allowing the occupant to unpack clothing onto the provided hangers, all the while limiting required space usage to a flush section of wall. The bottom bed, is also flush with the wall and meant for the primary occupant of the unit, folds down to be supported by a dual steel shelving unit, stored below the bed frame when the

area becomes a parking lot during business hours. Supplemental shelving for each unit is provided in the form of folded steel boxes that slide from the wall. To provide varying degrees of privacy, the walls to adjoining units on two sides can be moved and locked. The wall facing the exterior is also equipped with a lock and can be fully opened if desired. The floor of the unit is a polished wood surface that pivots down into place each night in order to cover any residue left behind from the daytime occupancy of the vehicles. Each morning, as the commuters begin to enter the city, the unit can be packed up into the permanent concrete wall that is at every second unit. The daily cycle of packing and unpacking creates the opportunity for members of each group to engage in a kind of dialogue, where the current occupant temporarily relinquishes claim on the space to another. This exchange presents the possibility of a mutual understanding of the other's urban condition.

Certainly, with a proposal such as this, logistical questions need to be addressed. The most obvious question for commuters would be regarding the safety of their vehicle if it were left in the lot over night. In fact, this would be a frequent occurrence at the beginning of weekends. As for the actual physical space required for a vehicle to remain overnight, this design can facilitate up to approximately thirty cars without compromising available

Fig. 4.4 Series of images showing the cycle of the proposed building from one of the units.

space for dwelling occupants. Although, like any other parking lot within the city, there is no absolute guarantee of the vehicle's safety. Common sense dictates that every parking lot of this sort must be insured for just such an occurrence. On the other hand the fact that the site is occupied twenty-four hours a day does give vehicle owners a certain sense of safety. The inverse is also true. The central courtyard acts as a transitional space that could allow night occupants to retain their unit even as earlier morning commuters are parking their cars. As well, the possibility, does exist, of reserving the upper level of the parking/dwelling wing for the homeless during cold winter days and at the same time still provide numerous spaces for daytime commuters. Because the structure is divided into autonomous compartments, any number of dweller/car combinations could be devised. Of course, the nature of this ephemeral dwelling would suggest that the project would not, merely, be limited to housing the homeless. It could quite easily provide shelter for everyone from student backpackers to an individuals who need a place to sleep during a transitional period.

Section IV Endnotes

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⁸¹ Gueze, Adriaan. West 8: Landscape Architecture. Uitgeverij 010 Publishers; Rotterdam. 1995. 12.

Conclusion

In the past hundred years, the way in which we dwell within the city has changed immensely. Space has come to be known by motion and time and, in this regard, dictates the way in which we dwell.⁸⁰ The medium of this mobility is the car. The car has enabled the individual to become more mobile than ever before, and, thus, the idea of “home” must evolve accordingly. The Dutch landscape architect, and winner of the Rotterdam-Maaskant Prize for Young Architects, Adriaan Gueze, has suggested that the 20th century urbanite, in fact, has many addresses that he or she may call home. “Yet one of his addresses is preeminent, the one around which all the others are organized. This is his home base, but not necessarily the ‘complete house’ supplying him with everything he needs. This home base gives explicit status and expression to his individuality.”⁸¹ Indeed, this thesis creates one such home. For some, the project will act as a supplemental address while for others, it will act as a primary dwelling around which their concept of home revolves. In this way, the project fills the void that exists between the emergency shelter system and permanent housing. This proposal allows an individual the freedom to remain a mobile urban dweller, but it also acts as a steppingstone for those wishing to integrate back into per-

manent housing. As a social intervention upon the urban fabric, this project has proposed a kind of speculative utopia based on the recognition of certain urban conditions, namely the continued gentrification of low-income areas and the decline of funding for social programs. With the recognition of conditions that enable phenomenon such as gentrification, the proposed project can begin to use the resources of the rich – the place they store their cars -- to revitalize projects that help prevent further homelessness. Currently, these conditions tend to create a barrier that promotes the segregation of the community into categories based upon social standing and delineate a definite hierarchy among neighbourhoods. This project uses the existing conditions of the city to initiate the production of a new way of dwelling within the City and at the same time break down the effects of gentrification on the low-income families that often originate in the area. It attempts to maintain a kind of balance within the community, and to offer to all members the opportunity to build a home for themselves, even if only an ephemeral one. In this way, “Home is Where the Car Was,” identifies the idea of home as something greater than the possession of land. Instead, “home” stems from the much deeper need for inclusion within a community.

Fig. 5.1 Sign at one corner of the proposed site advertising space for rent.

REPRESENTATION OF AN IDEAL REALITY

Representation of Reality

FIVE.ONE

The photographs in this section are of the area around Chelsea, New York and include elements of everyday life that struck me at the moment in which I encountered them, and that inspired the development of my project. At the onset of this thesis, I had in mind a series of conditions that I felt were required for the location and purpose of the design. These photographs, in part, document the search for my project, and also serve to record the conditions that currently exist, acting as templates upon which to speculate on the outcome of this proposition. They are, as well, used as a background for the representation of the project.

Fig. 5.2 Elevated parking structure at 10th Ave. and 20th St. with Highline rail line in the background.

Fig. 5.3 Government building on 10th Ave. one block south of the proposed site

Fig. 5.4 Intersection in the Highline where it connects three buildings 30ft. above the street. Located one block south of the proposed site.

Fig. 5.5 Existing parking lot immediately adjacent to the site.

Fig. 5.6 View from the site looking south.

Fig. 5.7 View from directly under the Highline where the proposed building will stand, looking toward the existing back wall.

Fig. 5.8 View of site from the corner of 17th St. and 10th Ave.

Fig. 5.9 View of site from the corner of 18th St. and 10th Ave.

Speculation for the Future

FIVE.TWO

This section is a graphic representation of the ideas discussed in this thesis. The section portrays the use of architecture and its representation as a speculative tool for the integration of socially responsible reasoning in urban design and in the development of public housing in New York City. Furthermore, the 3-D modelling program, Maya, allowed me to work within the element of time and level of detail that facilitated the development of an architecture that could capture the speculative nature of this project.

Fig. 5.10 View of proposed building at 10th Ave. and 17th St. Day

Fig. 5.11 View of proposed building at 10th Ave. and 17th St. Night.

Fig. 5.12 View of buiding from entrance to courtyard. Day.

Fig. 5.13 View of building from entrance to courtyard. Night.

Fig. 5.14 View of south side of building from the deck of the Highline. Day.

Fig. 5.15 View of south side of building from the deck of the Highline. Night.

Fig. 5.16 View of interior courtyard from the deck of the Highline. Day.

Fig. 5.17 View of interior courtyard from the deck of the Highline. Night.

Fig. 5.18 View of the Kitchen looking east. Day.

Fig. 5.19 View of the interior courtyard from the unit access walkway, looking north. Day.

Fig. 5.20 View of interior from dwelling unit. Day.

Fig. 5.21 View from interior of dwelling unit. Night.

Fig. 6.1 Drawing of folding out serving unit. May also fold out further to provide a bed for children.

THE MANIFESTATION OF AN IDEA

Fig. 6.2 Ground Floor Plan

Fig. 6.3 Second Floor Plan

Fig. 6.4 18th St. Elevation

Fig. 6.5 Section running parallel to 18th St.

Fig. 6.6 Drawing of dwelling unit from the exterior.

Fig. 6.7 Drawing of folding down bed system.

Fig. 6.8 Drawing of bed support. Closed.

Fig. 6.9 Drawing of bed support. Open.

Fig. 6.10 Drawing of sliding out shelving unit. Open.

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