

# Who's Next?

HOMELESSNESS, ARCHITECTURE, AND CITIES

Edited by  
Daniel Talesnik and Andres Lepik

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HOMELESSNESS, ARCHITECTURE, AND CITIES

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# Unfolding Homelessness

Daniel Talesnik

Aware of the rising numbers around the world, in the fall of 2019 we started thinking about an exhibition on homelessness. Quickly questions began to stack up: Where should research efforts be directed? What should be displayed in order to address such an urgent topic? How to do it in a respectful yet critical way? Which of the many crises that homelessness reveals should be highlighted? While developing a strategy on how to break down the topic, it became clear that it would not be a “traditional” architecture exhibition celebrating this or that aspect of an architect, architectural topic, or architectural period. Although the connection to architecture is evident, what is at issue here is the lack of buildings. Developing this exhibition required not only a critical gaze, but also that we go beyond architecture as a technical field and/or academic discipline.

During the coronavirus pandemic it became evident that homelessness is a collective issue. The urgency of this crisis became even more visible, starting with the impossibility of people experiencing homelessness to respect physical distance without a dwelling. As cities attempted to “protect” their houseless by relocating them from public space, the inherent shortcomings of the situation, and at times the limited capacity for reaction, became evident. As 2020 advanced, images like that of the homeless tent encampment on gridded rectangles drawn on Fulton Street around Pioneer Monument—which is situated in front of the Civic Center Plaza and has San Francisco City Hall as a backdrop—started to appear, and headlines on how cities around the world were moving rough sleepers into hotels began to fill the newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Practically every week, if not every day, news outlets report on homelessness and the housing crisis, as well as on related topics. In London, the number of people experiencing homelessness over the last ten years has doubled; and according to the statistics of the Coalition for the Homeless, in 2020 over 120,000 different homeless men, women, and children slept in the New York City municipal shelter system.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Germany is dealing with acute housing shortages, which includes homelessness, and Chancellor Angela Merkel promised to dedicate a budget of €6.85 billion to housing solutions in 2018.<sup>3</sup> Although we are aware that numbers can be misleading, it is clear that the situation is escalating worldwide.

Street homelessness can be considered an extreme version of poverty—though not all homeless individuals sleep on the streets—and, as such, it mirrors the standards and flaws of the communal or state order where it occurs. In many ways, homelessness at large is a compendium of all the failures of a society. It is a symptom of economic crisis, and it also illustrates the extreme polarity of the distribution of wealth. Moreover, it not only involves housing, but also areas like education, health care, and justice. The reasons that someone might end up without a home are manifold: unemployment, family crises, mental health issues, and addiction are listed as some of the common causes. But when researching the topic in detail, a more nuanced picture arises, one that identifies the

# The Right to Sleep in the City

Jocelyn Froimovich

The need for humans to address their bodily functions has spurred the creation of architectural forms in the public realm. Eating and drinking have found a proliferation of public expressions, from leisurely picnics to water fountains and food carts. And although urinating and defecating have been historically relegated to the private sphere, public toilets nonetheless dot our streets and parks. However, of the three primary bodily functions—eating, defecating, and sleeping—sleeping has been the least integrated into the urban public realm. Rarely do we find public places designed for the civic display of sleeping; if anything, street furniture is more often designed to prevent it.

We have lost the right to sleep in public spaces. Those driven by indigence, desperation, or exhaustion to sleep on the street strike us as vulnerable and out of place. Sleeping in public is looked at as a symptom of economic or personal weakness.

In modern Western tradition, sleep is normally an activity that takes place on a bed within a dwelling. Nonetheless,

across our cities we still find people sleeping on street and park benches, on subways and buses, on lawns and sidewalks. However, our cities lack public places specifically designed for addressing the need for sleep.

Regardless of social class, income, or age, we all experience exhaustion and require adequate amounts of rest. From transient workers and slaves of hyperproductivity to overachieving schoolchildren and jet-lagged tourists, many of us sleep less than we biologically should.

The capitalist obsession with productivity has killed the dream of a good sleep, driving some to even feel as though time slept is time wasted. Sleep thwarts our fantasies of endless economic growth and carries economic, social, and political implications that go beyond the frontiers of pragmatism.

As a civic concern, sleeping has not been thoroughly analyzed from an urban perspective. Freed from the bed and the dwelling, how can public sleeping transform the ways in which we understand our cities?



The Japanese culture of napping (*inemuri*) allows for sleep to expand into the public domain.

## Do Not Sleep

### — Boise, Idaho, USA

The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, adopted in 1791, bars the government from imposing excessive fines or cruel and unusual punishment upon its citizens.

In 2009, Janet Bell, Robert Martin, and nine other homeless people sued the city of Boise over ordinances that banned people from sleeping in public spaces. Bell had been cited twice, once for sitting on a riverbank with her backpack and another time for lying on a sleeping mat in the woods, for which she received a thirty-day suspended sentence. Meanwhile, Martin, a man with physical disabilities, was fined \$150 for resting near a shelter. During the trial, known as *Martin v. Boise*, the plaintiffs argued that the enforcement of the ordinances violated their Eighth Amendment rights, noting that criminalizing them for carrying out the basic bodily function of sleep constituted cruel and unusual punishment.

While the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit did rule in favor of the plaintiffs in 2018, United States Circuit Judge Marsha Berzon noted that “only . . . municipal ordinances that criminalize sleeping, sitting, or lying in all public spaces, *when no alternative sleeping space is available*, violate the Eighth Amendment,” minimizing the extent to which the ruling can protect people experiencing homelessness or otherwise driven to sleep on the street. As long as cities can claim that there is space available in shelters, they can continue to clear homeless encampments and arrest or fine those who refuse to leave. Cities are left with ample power to police and punish homeless people, as well as to regulate and restrict their access to public space.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than lamenting more international examples of inhumane regulations against sleeping in public and the legal battles against them, this essay will quickly move on to more hopeful examples of public sleeping, describing present-day case studies where public sleeping in the city is framed as a basic human right. In order to do so, I will focus on episodes that make sleep a communal

# Life in Tents: From Land Occupation to Urban Reclamation

Alejandra Celedón and Nicolás Stutzin

“Encampment” refers to the construction of a field, the establishment of a territory, the act of defining and enclosing a piece of land. In Santiago, Chile, encampments (*campamentos*) have historically served as a means to conquer urban space, as a strategy through which people solved urban housing shortages on their own terms. Throughout the twentieth century, informal settlements established around the city’s periphery used tents and other forms of light construction as a first step toward gradually claiming ownership of the land, ultimately creating a pathway to formalized home ownership for those involved. The tents in the photograph from the early 1970s represent a city in which housing is the first and only element.

An image depicting two tent-like structures with wooden frames in the middle of an open field evokes this desperate claim for a house in the city. The photograph was taken on August 7, 1972, at the informal settlement of Lo Hermida in Santiago’s outskirts, during an official visit by President Salvador Allende and Housing Minister Luis Matte Valdés to the new encampment, two days after violent confrontations between police forces and the settlers left one dead and several wounded. The first land occupation in the area had taken place two years earlier, following a massive rural-to-urban migration that had been faced by Operación Sitio, a national program to regularize land occupation.<sup>1</sup> While the tents in the image may seem like simple and rudimentary forms of shelter, resembling the primitive hut in Charles Eisen’s

1755 engraving printed in *Essai sur l’Architecture*, their construction was nonetheless a feat, seeing as they were built virtually overnight out of leftover materials and scraps. In the background, we see nothing but a horizon of crops, an empty landscape on the outskirts—no city in sight.

During the coronavirus pandemic, as the streets of Santiago became lifeless and uninhabited as a result of the city’s lockdown laws, tents as dwelling units proliferated. This present-day expansion of tents, however, represents quite a different phenomenon from the encampment at Lo Hermida. While similar in form, the tents we find today in central Santiago are not trying to establish a concrete form of ownership at the periphery, but rather encroach upon the city in order to benefit from immediate access to urban amenities. The proliferation of tents in central Santiago is indicative of the city’s endless sprawl, following the suppression of urban limits in 1979 as part of the military dictatorship’s free-market initiatives. At the time, the country’s housing policy entrusted real-estate developers with the task of meeting housing shortages, while requiring of them no responsibility over the provision of public services. This resulted in a vast periphery of dormitory zones devoid of the social fabric that so defines urban life, and with limited access to basic public infrastructure for health, food, education, jobs, and transportation. The locations where tents have sprung up in the center of Santiago over the past years reveal the inherent value of these sites in the reclamation of urban





Charles Eisen, allegorical engraving of the Vitruvian primitive hut, frontispiece of Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'Architecture*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Duchesne, 1755)



# A Tale of Two Bays: San Francisco's Struggle with Inequality and Tech

Valentina Rozas-Krause and Trude Renwick



Overpasses and highways often encircle homeless encampments and make them a key part of the daily commute—a state of tension that is reflected in the foreground sign.

In February of 2021, amidst the global coronavirus pandemic, local law enforcement agents dismantled an encampment located across the street from the global Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, California. More than seventy houseless individuals had been living in a protected marshland area known as Ravenswood Triangle, separated from the 250-acre Facebook campus only by a highway.<sup>1</sup> The effects of the eviction were short-lived; *The Los Angeles Times* reported that, only a month later, thirteen people had started rebuilding the destroyed site.<sup>2</sup>

The Ravenswood encampment, like many other sites across the San Francisco Bay Area, reveals the acute housing crisis unfolding in what is currently one of the most unequal cities in the United States.<sup>3</sup> On one side of the road, people live between bushes and debris, under improvised tents and shelters with no running water, electricity, or sewage management systems. On the other side, a quarter of Facebook's 45,000 employees enjoy a paradise of never-ending superabundance: unlimited food, drinks, entertainment, lounging areas, and connectivity. While one side of the road controls the social networks of most of the world, the other side does not have access to the Internet.

The state of California is the fifth largest economy of the world, surpassing even the United Kingdom, and is celebrated as a center for counterculture and progressive politics. However, California also has the highest poverty rate in the United States.<sup>4</sup> According to a recent *Bloomberg* report, 41.6 percent of California households, representing both owners and renters, are cost-burdened, meaning that they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing.<sup>5</sup> The situation in the Bay Area is even more dire: a 2016 Metropolitan Transportation Commission report states that 89 percent of renter households earning less than \$36,000 per year are rent-burdened.<sup>6</sup> As a result, almost 900,000 Bay Area renters experience housing insecurity, making them increasingly vulnerable to displacement, overcrowding, and homelessness.

These conditions make it clear that poverty, the number-one cause for houselessness, does not result from a lack of political interest or resources.<sup>7</sup> In today's California, it seems easier to send commercial flights to space than to provide affordable housing for middle- and low-income families. How is it possible that the birthplace of tech companies like Google, Apple, Uber, Lyft, Twitter, Airbnb, Tesla, and SpaceX, to name a few, has so far failed to adequately provide its citizens with one of the most basic human needs? The answer to this question is tied to a national and regional history of houselessness.

Geography and climate, combined with the social history of the Bay Area and California, have more broadly shaped

a unique context for the unhoused as compared to the rest of the United States. The state's Mediterranean climate means that the houseless in this region do not suffer from temperatures as low as those found in the country's Northeastern and Midwestern regions. In addition to this mild climate that can make life more tenable, San Francisco's specific geography, as well as its prevalence of natural disasters, has played a major role in the settlement of the region, beginning with the city's population boom during the California Gold Rush of 1849. To this day, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and the subsequent three days of fire that raged throughout the city, remains one of the most notable events in the city's history. The earthquake, which destroyed a shocking 80 percent of the city, not only led to massive displacement but also dramatically shaped San Francisco's urban landscape through the establishment of strict building codes, the promotion of densification, and the large-scale construction of Victorian homes across the city. Temporary shelters erected after the earthquake can still be found throughout the city today.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, in recent years, the warm and dry fall months have become "fire season," during which uncontrollable, large-scale wildfires turn many of the area's residents into climate refugees. Not only do these fires destroy thousands of homes, but the smoke and ash they distribute throughout California have a serious impact on well-being, and particularly on the health of the 150,000 houseless individuals scattered across the state.

The contemporary conditions of San Francisco's homelessness crisis, however, are much deeper than these environmental factors. In her ethnography on homelessness in San Francisco, the sociologist Teresa Gowan describes how the city was impacted by Euro-American constructs of poverty based around sin, sickness, and the system.<sup>9</sup> In San Francisco's social imaginary, the causes of poverty are rooted in the notion that to be poor is to possess inherent character defects that make one predisposed to vulnerability. According to Gowan, accumulation processes that have depended on the expropriation of native lands, slave labor, and racial domination have resulted in the United States government's punishment-oriented attitude toward impoverished populations.<sup>10</sup> Settlement and vagrancy laws are early examples, dating back to the late nineteenth century, of discriminatory policies against immigrants and mobile urban populations in American cities.

After the economic crash of 1929, a major shift occurred in the government's penal approach toward the poor and the unemployed. As a result of the unprecedented rates of unemployment during the Great Depression, the conception of the poor as morally flawed could no longer be sustained. In response to the economic crisis,

## Mausoleo Dignidad

**NAME OF THE PROJECT:** Mausoleo Dignidad

**COUNTRY:** Chile

**ADDRESS:** General Cemetery of Santiago, Prof. Zañartu 951, Recoleta, Santiago

**NEIGHBORHOOD:** Recoleta

**ARCHITECTURE:** Grass+Batz+Arquitectos – Arquitectura UC

**CLIENT:** Fundación Gente de la Calle

**PROJECT AND CONSTRUCTION YEARS:** 2018–ongoing

**PROJECT TYPE:** new construction

**PROGRAM:** cemetery for homeless individuals, public space for reflection

**NUMBER OF BURIAL UNITS:** 500

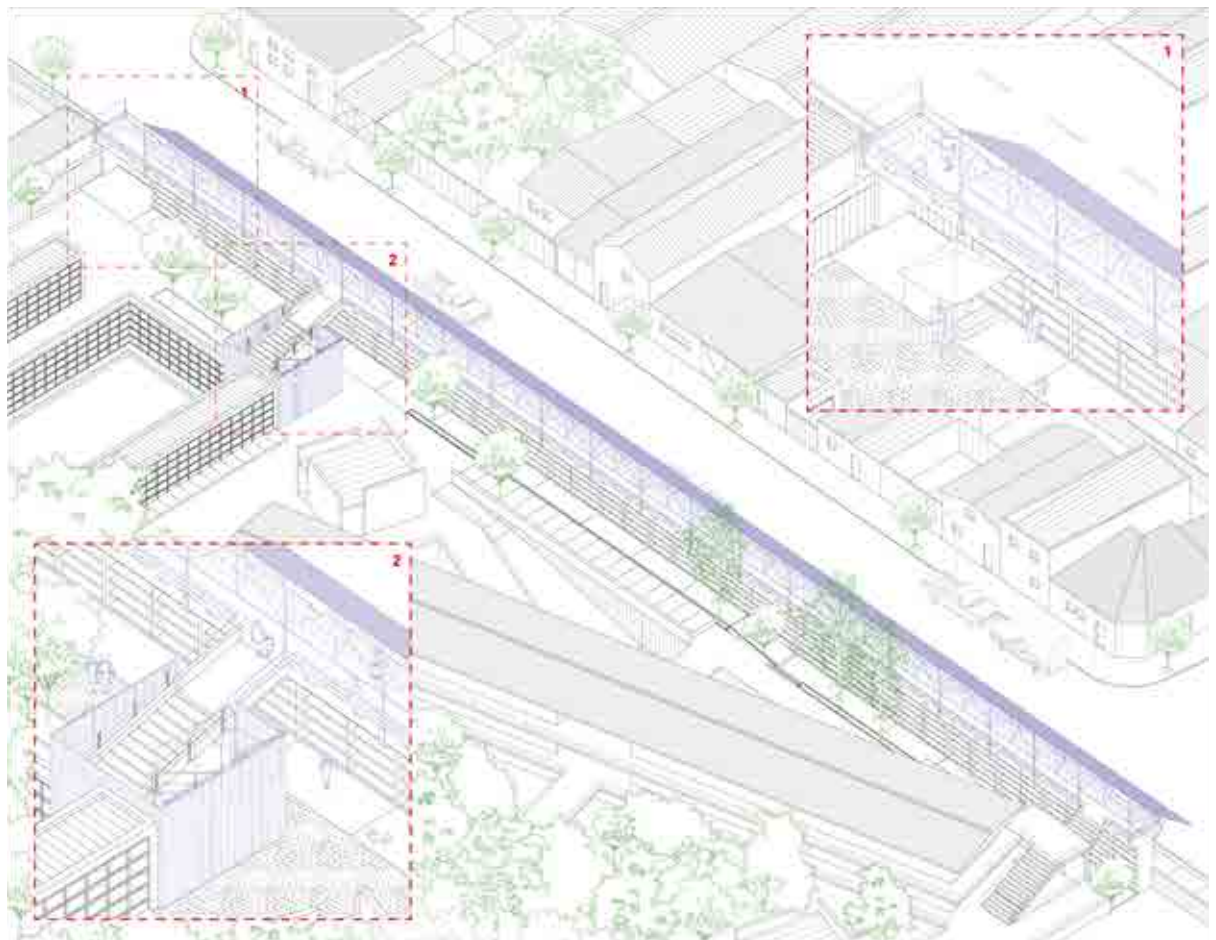
**TARGET GROUP:** individuals experiencing homelessness

In 2018, the School of Architecture at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile signed a collaboration agreement with the Fundación Gente de la Calle, a nonprofit institution dedicated to seeking solutions to the problem of street homelessness. Among the various lines of collaboration requested by the foundation was the development of a mausoleum project to provide decorous burial for people who were experiencing homelessness at the time of their death. The mausoleum was to be located in Santiago's main cemetery. Under the title Mausoleo Dignidad (Dignity Mausoleum), the structure seeks to honor the memory of people who did not live under the best conditions, providing a permanent home for them after their passing. The fundamental theme of this mausoleum is the idea that architecture can contribute, with its specific knowledge, to delivering a gracious burial to people who experienced maximum vulnerability, and this is done through the design of an architectural project. Moreover, it responds to a pending demand for the permanent burial of people who often do not have their own place of memory. In 2019, the proposal received an award in the UC Pastoral Fund Contest to finance the development of the architectural project: a funerary device with a maximum capacity of 500 burial units in a space for public use, encouraging reflection on life and death in the city. The new construction is lightweight and reversible, with readily available, low-cost materials.





Rendering of Mausoleo Dignidad's roofed corridor



Detailed drawing of the mausoleum project

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