

## Cradle for Change: Finding the Space Between Home and Homelessness

The homeless dwell in a space between Nomadism and Modern Living. They dwell a space of experience, linked to a certain place of active engagement and forced solitude. Their struggle viewed as a nuisance to polite society, they grasp for a foothold where there is none.

Homelessness is an issue in many of the cities in the modern world as it was in past times. However, until very recently, society has looked upon this issue as one merely pertaining to the lack of food and shelter. In the past, homeless have been herded into cramped spaces filled with beds or lofts, afforded no privacy and no security, and many have chosen sleeping on the streets over these conditions. However, in projects such as the Spring Gardens in Lewisham, south of London, UK homelessness has started being conceived more as a matter to the individual needs of those who have fallen into homelessness rather than as a nuisance needing to be hidden away. In this design homeless are given a “hostel” to live in with their own private rooms, and are given chances to be educated, engage with others through social spaces and eventually reintegrate with society if they so choose. Other projects such as The Bridge in Dallas, Texas, work to correct the mental health issues and addiction issues of the homeless.

However, despite San Francisco’s reputation for being an accepting city, there has been no such revision of the homeless shelter paradigm in the city. The homeless line Market Street as passersby go about frivolous spending on items such as solid gold pen. This lack of care for the homeless can be made extremely clear in the difference in treatment of the pristinely maintained gravestones of the veterans who lost their lives in battle and those who had the misfortune of remaining alive only to be unable to reintegrate into society. This discrepancy became the motivation for me to attempt my own revision of the homeless center, one centered upon reintegration rather than displacement.

Through home’s close proximity to one’s emotional, physical, and social well-beings, my main goal for my design is to promote these well-beings for the homeless through designing a dwelling in which they actively engage, rather than the normative passive engagement in modern society through social networking sites and veg’ing out in front of the television, waiting for tonight’s entertainment. Through this re-conception of home and homelessness in the current era, I will be trying to answer the question, “How does one stimulate not just physical, but also emotional and social well-being within a design for the homeless?”

The answer to this question, in my opinion, lies in the space between the terms home and dwelling. Heidegger, a German philosopher well-known for his existential and phenomenological discussions on “Being,” states, “In today’s housing shortage even this much is reassuring and to the good; residential buildings do indeed provide shelter; today’s houses may even be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light and sun, but-do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that *dwelling* occurs?” Much like Heidegger, in my view of these concepts, one *must* have a sense of dwelling in order to truly be “at home” but one whom owns a “home” is *not* necessarily dwelling.

Heidegger states in his essay, Being and Time that humans must ever learn to dwell, to search for the nature of dwelling. So what is this nature of dwelling he speaks of? Is it not true that spaces are

bound by experience? One could look at it as Vilem Flusser, a Czech philosopher, writer and journalist, as the experience linked to the concept of home, and how one interacts with home. Flusser, a refugee during World War II, found many different homes after being removed from his first, and through engagement with the different cultures, and different homes, he felt less pain with each separation and each new home *modified* his concept of home.

In any design, one must always be mindful of the experiences they create. Every space has its own predetermined experiences based upon thought, perception and physical interaction. Initially, how these experiences are bound to the spaces are dependent upon the body, primarily the body in motion. In this sense, the process of building is as much a process of dwelling as the processes of painting, drawing, welding. However, Heidegger also brings up the concept of "being" as a concept of dwelling through the linguistic analysis of the High German word *bauen* and the Old English concept of dwelling. If *bauen*(building) is dwelling and "to dwell" originally meant "to be," are we truly looking for what it means to be in our search for the nature of dwelling? Does how we move the world around us define who we are?

I believe that only through encouraging active engagement in the design, as well as the community, can one truly affect the well-being of the occupant. In this effect, I wish to give the homeless a sense of control over their lives through offering workshops to teach trade crafts such as welding and woodworking, but doing so in a way as to allow the homeless a chance, once in the program, to decide if the program is right for them. This will hopefully strengthen their emotional well-being by helping them find themselves through the choices they make and by finding out what it is they want to be. In addition, this will also bring their sense of dwelling closer to the Heideggerian sense of dwelling through the engagement of the mind within the interactions between architecture and occupant by allowing the occupants to reflect upon what it is they want for themselves. This idea can be strengthened by the way the water reacts with my artefact. As the water dwells within the beds of the filters, it is given time to reflect upon what is above, what came before this moment, and upon sweating through the filter, it becomes active, falling to the next filter, creating a ripple as it becomes part of this new body of water reflecting on the time it had just spent in the previous bed, the ripple temporarily altering the perception of the body it joins.

Having addressed the problems of physical and emotional well-beings, one must ask themselves, how do I best stimulate the social well-being of a group of people? I feel that this question may be answered through the altering the perception of their culture to those who may look upon them without understanding. As culture changes, they change how they are bound to the world, they change what it is to dwell, at least to them. This can be seen in the many different ways cultures have developed or adapted over time and in the way that these new experiences shape the way they dwell. These changes occur in art, architecture, and other processes caused through the body's participation with the space.

Take, for instance, the aboriginals of Australia, there are some tribes who, rather than travel based upon resources, have moved based upon the ritual of song-lines, these song-lines are so central to their way of life that they had believed that if these songs or chants were to be interrupted, all things

would cease to be. This idea of continuity and rhythm became so engrained in their culture through the weaving of shelters, art and baskets.

In addition, the ancient Greeks reflect this through their attention to how architecture relates to the human body and the site it dwelled upon. From brick to building, houses typically were based upon the scale of the individual who dwelled within.<sup>1</sup> The process of building itself was based upon whether a site was suitable for a certain type of design. In addition, they paid great attention to how the human eye perceived architecture, visible in the way they distorted column in temples to make it look right to the human eye from ground level.

However, the modern era brought to the forefront the questions of efficiency and cost effectiveness. Through many practices found created in the modern era, spaces were homogenized. All spaces were treated as equal and a site could be modified however one pleased. In Flusser's words, "Philosophy abandoned the Ding an Sich<sup>2</sup>, and thus the search to discover the way things really are, and limited itself to formal statements of pure logic, pure mathematics and pure grammar or to discussion about Existence, to the exclusion of Being as such." In addition, Heidegger suggests through his discussion of meditative and calculative thought that people have forgotten how to live in the moment, to meditate on their present in their need to calculate, to plan for their futures. This lack of meditative thought, of thinking to the truth of being, is dangerous in the perspective of Heidegger. "The risk for man is to be uprooted not only from his reality, from his world, but also from himself. If we think meditatively, however, we allow ourselves to be aware of the risk implied in the technological age and its usefulness, and we can hence act upon it." This being so, does modern society's need for efficiency and longing to be entertained; without need for active engagement and without thought actually remove the essence of dwelling from modern society? And does this lack of dwelling mean that modern society is truly "taking up residence in homelessness" through our disregard for active participation within the design?

My site is located on Harrison Street at Berwick Place, about four blocks South of Market Street on 8<sup>th</sup> street. It is currently occupied by the German Motors Collision Center, a prime example of modern efficient, homogenous architecture, its heavy concrete form standing resolute in the harsh grid of the city. Its only engaging feature is the graffiti wall on its southwest side, ever changing by the hands of the local graffiti artists, their ideas dwelling upon the wall for a short time before being removed by the tenant. This site makes sense to me due to the proximity to the homeless population as during my visits to San Francisco, this area seemed to be close to the heart of the area most affected by homelessness. But how does one turn such an imposing structure into a place where one feels comfortable to call home, but allow for some people to feel compelled to make a new home elsewhere when they are ready to move forward with their lives.

In the post-modern world, street art such as Banksy's call attention to social injustices through its presence in the social realm, forcing engagement through the art. In a way, my architecture must do the same thing for the homeless in the San Francisco area by calling attention to the problem of homelessness, not as a means to further criminalize the homeless as modern society tends to, but as a means to further understanding the homeless. Nomadism was once the primary method of living for

the human population, whether it be pastoral, hunter-gatherer, or trade-based nomadic cultures. In all these cultures, including homelessness, movement is based upon the cyclical or regional movement based upon availability of resources, jobs or other ritual involvement. However, modern society has moved to marginalize the lifestyles of nomadic cultures, including the homeless. Gregory Cowan states in *Nomadology in Architecture*, "The alignment of 'settlement' with 'civilization' has been developed historically and settled is regarded as more advanced or evolved than nomadic life." However, the true differences between nomadic and settled cultures are how they conceive the concept of home and time. Home in nomadic cultures, as with the example from Flusser's writings, is more about the experience gained from the travels than the place itself. In addition, rather than the linear perspective of time that settled cultures have, nomadic cultures tend to have a more cyclical view upon time. In this sense, the homeless are quite similar to other nomadic (whether forced or voluntary) cultures. Much as the rippling in the water "bodies" changes the reflection of the body before it, the architecture must make ripples in the society with each homeless person revitalized by it to change the societal perceptions of the homeless as burdens to society and to open up lines of communication between the occupants and their society. In essence, I wish for my building to square the circle<sup>3</sup> between the nomadic and settled cultures, the homeless and the society.

This concept of squaring the circle, or finding the space between, is an important perspective upon the situation in which the homeless find themselves. They do not truly dwell in the nomadic sense, nor in the settled sense, rather, they are what could be referred to as a Heideggerian bridge between Nomadism and Modern Living. Much like Heidegger's bridge gives definition to the banks of the river, creating a new experience between and around this connection, the homeless have defined dwelling in a new way, separate but connected to both ways of life. They remain bound to place, but separate from the monotonous daily routines of the modern man, they experience life in the moment, redefining life every day in a nomadic sense of life.

The design must therefore engage both the ephemerality of nomadism and the monumentality of settled cultures whilst engaging the occupants physically, mentally, and socially in order to achieve a holistic sense of well-being. I will do this through using the concept of cradle in 3 main ways; first, cradle as a source, both for inspiration and understanding, secondly, cradle as a tool for refining as the cradle used for filtering gold ore, and third, cradle as support, as rest. The design will serve to change the public opinion of homeless as people who lack the motivation to work, and simultaneously serve to inspire the homeless by having studios of escalating difficulties as the homeless progress through it. These will be housed in the main tower of the building and will be open to not only look out and be inspired by the world around it, but also to allow people outside to look in and see the homeless at work, learning new skills. Cantilevered out from the main tower, the residences, each floor having its own cradle offset from the floor plates of the tower will have ramped paths down to the workspaces to facilitate the active engagement with the workspaces, the back and forth motion in the space between the workspaces and residences rocking the occupants to sleep, but not before catching a glimpse through openings pointing towards the previous workspace, allowing for a moment of reflection upon what they have learned about their skill, and themselves. This back and forth motion serves also to bring attention to the balance of the ephemeral and static ways of life through the construction of a circular experience constructed within the timeline of the experience through the building as a linear transition from top to bottom. I also seek to address the space between through the analysis and creation of interaction with interstitial spaces, I wish to create an environment where the

occupants dwell more within meditative thought, more within the moment. Therefore, I designed the building in such a manner as to never create a straight-forward path which one “must” take. This allows for occupants to interact more fully within their environment rather than within a preconceived plan. This also invites the occupants to linger, to interact within their environment more fully rather than feeling pushed into a space. This, I feel, gives them opportunity to define the way they dwell these interstitial spaces.

It is through this creation of thought and of linking interaction with experience with which I will create a holistic sense of dwelling within the homeless community. And through their interaction within society, they will cause ripples in perception towards them and towards the way we live in today’s world, serving to revive the link between dwelling and home within our post-modern world.

<sup>1</sup> *According to Vitruvius in his Ten Books of Architecture, the primary bricks used in residences were one palm and two palm bricks, based upon the palm size of the occupant, or occasionally, the architect.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ding an Sich or Thing-in-Itself is a term relating to the experience of an object in reality through the act of not knowing, by not sensing the object, but by relating to the experience of the object within space and time. In other words, the object itself, not known by senses, becomes a different object through how it is experienced differently depending on its situation within reality.*

<sup>3</sup> *Squaring the circle, in the philosophical sense, is the Jungian concept of distancing yourself from to opposites enough to gain balance between them and allow open communication between the opposites within your mind.*

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