Design-Build: Personal Identity for the Homeless

The housing problem can be, and often is, solved in a manner that creates homelessness. - Kim Dovey; "Home and Homelessness: Introduction." [1]

Clearly, when we discuss the people, their behavior, and their purposes as they relate to the built environment, we are bound to engage in conflicts, which is the very stuff of design decisions. - Henry Sanoff; Methods of Architectural Programming [2]

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PERSONAL IDENTITY ANDHOMELESSNESS

A primary component of personal identity is a home. It is a place of stability, security, privacy, and a platform for the daily routines which define us. For Kim Dovey, "We not only give a sense of identity to a place we call home, but we also draw our identity from that of the place." [3] But what if one has no home?

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This paper presents a homeless shelter dorm station design-build project and research completed by Philadelphia University architecture majors. Fourteen students in a socio-political + design-build studio programmed, designed, and prototyped stations for the Women of Change "Safe Haven" homeless shelter managed by Project H.O.M.E. in Philadelphia. The facility houses twenty-five chronically homeless women with varying degrees of mental illness. After completing

Figure 1: Installed Dorm Stations, *Women of Change Safe Haven Homeless Shelter.*

the design and prototyping, the agency fabricated the stations which were then assembled and installed by a team of students, faculty, and volunteers. Founded on the belief that architecture can provide for need, effect behavior and support social change, the studio required the students to complete research on the homeless condition, the social agency and the political context for public services. Initial understandings of "house" and "home" co-developed by the studio, the client, and the users will be summarized as part of this discussion.

With Project H.O.M.E.'s goal of breaking the cycle of chronic homelessness, the team focused on providing a foundation for residents to establish personal identity. Central to this charge was the importance of privacy which quickly became the guiding issue of the project.

This paper will not only touch upon the design-build pedagogy employed in the course and the process of "consensus building," but will expand upon the role privacy played in agency's goal of re-establishing personal identity within its residents as the cornerstone of breaking the cycle of homelessness. Some basic findings of a post-occupancy evaluation conducted on the finished stations will also be presented.

The final fabricated solution is a system comprised of three components which can be disassembled and reconfigured in a variety of modular arrangements – a head board, a side privacy panel and a circular privacy end unit. All three components offer space for storage and have varying degrees of translucency offering a balance of visibility and privacy. Sheets of differing plastic types are woven and attached to painted steel tube frames which result in lightweight, durable, and easily moved living environments.

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Figure 2: Existing Dorm Room At Start of Project and Final PhilaU Student Design Rendering.

DESIGN-BUILD CLIENT & SITE

Project H.O.M.E. is the largest private homeless/ housing service agency in Philadelphia. The founders believe the primary determining factor creating homelessness is poverty. [4] They prefer a more general working definition of homeless as "a person who does not have a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. This person may be sleeping on the streets, with friends or family, in cars or abandoned buildings or in shelters."[5] Project H.O.M.E.'s mission is "to empower people to break the cycle of homelessness, address the structural causes of poverty, and attain their fullest potential as members of society." Their central core value is "dignity," whether it is in how they provide services or reinforcing that character within their residents.

Project H.O.M.E. provides three levels of housing; entry level "safe havens," transitional housing and permanent housing. Most socials service agencies struggle with "treatment first" or "housing first" philosophies.[6] With treatment first, agencies require residents to undergo treatment as a condition of the housing. In cases of addiction, residents are not permitted to partake in their vices and failure to do so can result in expulsion. Project H.O.M.E. primarily utilizes the housing first model where residents have few conditions required of them other than vices are not permitted on site. Residents can arrive drunk or high, but they cannot partake while in the buildings. These are considered "wet facilities" and this model focuses on building trust with residents. It is the belief that many will leave if required to be "dry" or participate in formal treatment. Project H.O.M.E. prefers to get the homeless into stable environments prior to initiating treatment. This is an important distinction as the design and performance of the dorm stations is directly affected by the condition of the residents – resulting in this case with construction that needed to be extremely durable from abuse, cleanable, and easy to rid of insects.

The entry-level safe haven shelters are "low rung" facilities and are the first step off the street. The Women of Change Safe Haven homeless shelter, the site for this project, is a small scale female environment for the most vulnerable homeless population many of whom are older, physically frail and suffer from mental illness, addiction and health issues. The chronically homeless women range in age from 21 to 60 and are housed in a single dormitory room with adjacent community, health and dining rooms. Due to repeated bed bug infestations, the panel privacy partitions were removed. Shelters world-wide suffer from a lack of appropriate partition systems often relying on fabric or wood office systems which are not durable and create suitable environments for insects. As such, the women shared one open room.

Without partitions to create even the most basic levels of privacy, the residential environment had become unsafe and unhealthy. Residents would spend as little time as possible in the facility preferring the streets which made consistent care difficult to administer. With the lack of personal separation, short tempers agitated social relations resulting in numerous emotional and physical incidents. The pervasive presence of mental illness further exacerbated the conflicts and episodes. Safety had become a primary concern, for both residents and staff. The heavy monitoring by caregivers was also alienating many of the residents. When asked during initial programming what they wanted from the project, both ladies and staff unanimously requested privacy first and foremost It became clear that to restore personal identity, the design must provide some level of personal separation and privacy for the residents before all else.

HOUSE, HOME AND HOMELESSNESS
Initial student design proposals for the dorm stations offered familiar homelike environments based on the premise that shelter residents would prefer housing similar to the student's own. It was quickly discovered that the causes of homelessness are extremely complex and extend beyond the simple provision of shelter. Well described in *The Soloist,* it is a typical reaction when working with the homeless to assume they simply want what "we" have.[7] In most cases, this is far from the actual reality. In dealing with the homeless, one must reframe an understanding of "house" and "home."

Provision of shelter can solve "houselessness" - an episodic temporary loss of shelter. The more difficult problem is with chronic homelessness. HUD's

definition of chronic is, "someone who has experienced homelessness for a year or longer, or who has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years and usually has a disability." [8]   Generally, 16% of the homeless population is considered chronic. The women of this specific shelter suffer serious mental illness compounded by addictions and behavioral afflictions. The majority exhibit a deep distrust and irritation with authority and their homeless peers, undoubtedly developed by their previous experiences in the "institutional circuit of shelters and the streets." Summarized by Deborah Padget, there are three dimensions of the relationships between housing, health and psychological well-being: 1) the material benefits of housing as shelter, 2) the health threats associated with substandard housing and neighborhoods, and 3) the psychosocial benefits of housing as 'home.'[9]   While the provision of shelter and the addressing of health threats can be more easily achieved, the psychosocial issues of home are especially complex in the case of the mentally ill.

For Joseph Rykwert , a house is a physical condition – the "fabric" of shelter. Home, though, is inherently metaphysical and does not necessarily require a "building."[10] For Kim Dovey, a home is "a kind of relationship between people and their environment."[11] Rykwert continues with home as a "communal and neighborly manner of dwelling," and that "a house, whether it is rural or urban, can be a true home only in such neighborly circumstances." What makes a house a home here are the communal relationships surrounding the physical shelter which create places of meaning and personal attachment. The first issue to evaluate in designing the homeless environment was whether the solution provided the basic conditions of house, first, and home, second. In this instance, the mental capacity of the residents was a governing factor.

The term "ontological security" and the lack thereof has been used to describe the experience of those with serious mental illness and refers to a persons stable mental state gained from a sense of continuity in daily life.[12]   The "subjective sense of being at home" is the "feeling of well-being that arises from a sense of constancy in one's social and material environment which, in turn, provides a secure platform for identity development and self-actualization."[13] For Dupuis and Thorns, ontological security is a sense of confidence and trust in the world as it appears to be. It is a security of being.[14] For Deborah Padgett, "It is ironic that those people whose ontological security is most threatened due to mental illness are also those least likely to be in housing circumstances that would promote ontological security." [15]

In expanding the discussion, for Dupuis and Thorns "the home can provide a locale in which people can work at attaining a sense of ontological security in a world that at times is experienced as threatening and uncontrollable." Ontological security can be assessed, and strengthened, through four primary conditions: 1) Home as the site of constancy in the social and material environment; 2) Home as a spatial context in which the day to day routines of human existence are performed; 3) Home as site free from the surveillance that is part of the contemporary world which allows for a sense of control that is missing in other locals (*privacy – authors's note*); and 4) Home as a secure base around which identities can be constructed.[16]

While on the surface simply a privacy partition project, the central charge for this design-build project was to re-establish ontological security for the residents of this shelter. To truly make a difference in the resident's lives, it was necessary

to consider the basic tenets of home as a secure platform for personal identity development and self-actualization utilizing the four primary conditions above as form determinates, and evaluation tools.

DESIGN-BUILD PEDAGOGY AS A PROCESS OF CONSENSUS BUILDING

The design-build course is an extremely vital component of the architectural curriculum.   The translational process of formalizing designs into real material conditions to be utilized by actual clients introduces the student to the empirical world of craft and workmanship. For David Pye, "design proposes, workmanship disposes."[17]   Design is simply a proposition conveyed through drawing and model while workmanship defines the true haptic and visceral qualities of an artifact. In order to become absorbed in the expanding context of craft, it is imperative that students generate "designs" for proposed work quickly and move directly to the material translations. This is difficult for students as most have been academically trained to control the design process and be clear about their intentions prior to initiating further solutions. The world of craft, though, is inherently messy and by nature expansive. The "realness" of the materials, the processes of making, and budgetary/ scheduling limits all unite to create a dynamic context of inquiry. The true learning, and teaching, begins when the work fails the design intentions whether it is from structural, aesthetic or programmatic standpoints. Getting the work to fail as quickly as possible is paramount to success and is best achieved through a "sketch-mode" format of quick successive assignments where students must assess a situation, propose a design strategy and materialize a response with little time to over think the issues. Review, reflectance and evaluation occur after each round and preface the next moves. In this manner, projects successively build as the material language develops.

Obviously, such a process is easier to manage with single designers than large groups. In this case, fourteen students had to work together to complete one modular design in a short period of time. With a large student team, a real (and difficult) client, complicated users, a tight budget and short schedule, the studio had to become a process of quick consensus building and compromise. For Henry Sanoff, "problem solving can be described in terms of a set of strategies,

Figure 3: On Site Prototype Programming Session with Safe Haven Staff and Residents.

which can increase an individual's ability to solve problems. A problem is perceived as a state of conflict that needs to be resolved."[18] One must search out the true problem and conflicts in order to quickly resolutions. For the academic design-build project, which does not benefit from the "boss" who can make the final call, sets of tools to clarify and mediate student disagreements must be utilized. Executive decisions made by faculty can erode the commitment of the students. In this case the real client, the budget and the schedule became the best agents to force compromise. Project H.O.M.E's patience in initially developing with the team the design goals (what do we want to accomplish here?), project goals (what do we want our work to achieve when completed) and project issues (a prioritized running list) provided the limits necessary to control the consensus deliberations throughout the development of the stations.

The primary tool for collaborative consensus building was the interactive workshop where the client, users and student teams wrestled with the issues and solution strategies in an open, and often emotional, format. The client team included the Vice-President for Property Management, the Director of Facilities, the Director of the Safe Haven, and a social case worker – all with differing agendas. Select users were also involved but given their mental states were difficult to engage in anything other than informal interviews. Occupational therapy graduate students and faculty participated in a series of evaluation programming workshops separate from the clients and were instrumental in infusing the project with emphasis on the nature of the shelter environments and relationships to the movements of our bodies and health. The final prototype developed through alternative optioning, evaluation and re-optioning all in consideration of the stated goals and issues. Specific tools for evaluation included surveys, interviews, group discussions, matrices, research presentations and taxonomies of prospective alternatives – all tempered by budget, schedule and fabrication methodologies.[19]

PROGRAMMING THROUGH PROTOTYPING

Through initial workshops, the following goals were identified. The dorm station design was:

> To improve the resident's living conditions.
> To provide a safe environment for residents and caregivers.
> To provide a degree of personal privacy.
> To provide a comfortable, stress free environment.
> To provide durable stations that can be disassembled, cleaned and easily moved.
> To provide cost effective and easily repairable stations.

Through development of the goals alongside the mission of Project H.O.M.E. - dignity as a foundation for self-esteem and personal identity - it was decided that individual stations would be provided for each resident regardless of how tight the space was. This was a critical decision. The quantitative program for each station was to provide a twin-sized bed, storage space, circulation space, and a privacy element all within 55 square feet.

Given the small size of the stations, the fabrication process and detailing required the prototype became the guiding medium for the design deliberations. Development proceeded from spatial ergonomic sketches with string and paper to cardboard mockups to material shop prototypes to a final working model constructed of the actual materials. An interactive workshop was conducted at each prototype stage involving testing, observations, evaluation gaming and

consensus of the successes and failures of the prototype. The prototypes were moved to the site for interaction with shelter staff and residents as well as steel fabricators and Project H.O.M.E administrators. The program was finalized as the prototypes developed. Privacy, again, became the central point of discussion.
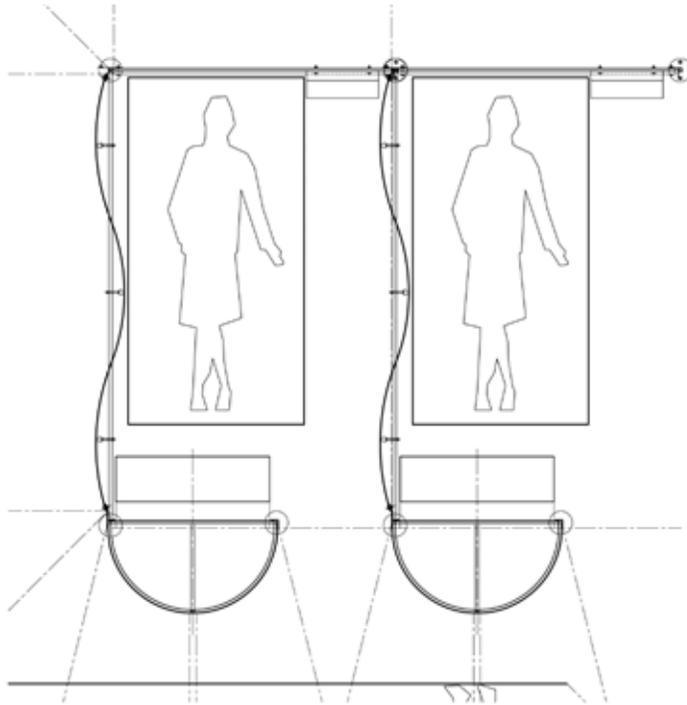
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PRIVACY, SAFETY AND OWNERSHIP

For Leon Pastalan, "Life in society generates such tensions for the individual that both physical health and psychological health demand periods of privacy for various types of emotional release."[20] Privacy was desired and needed for this project. Contrary to the conditions of privacy, though, run the issues of safety and security which are founded in visibility. In comparison of Oscar Newman's Defensible Space[21] and Timothy Crowe's Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, [22] a set of five safe design criteria emerge. People feel safer in spaces that are: 1) bright and well lit; 2) are colorful; 3) are clean; 4) are visible (one can see into them and be seen from them); and 5) are claimed and owned. Claimed and owned spaces result from the striking of territory and the responsibility for order that results. Ownership is by nature a defensible condition and safe areas are bounded by adjoining territories that offer surveillance and visual protection. It was the belief of the entire team that resident ownership of their stations would establish a "home" base for personal identity. With the lack of dorm partitions and the clashing zones of privacy, it became obvious that the shelter had lost its resident territories and as such was besieged with social duress, vandalism and an overall lowered sense of safety and comfort. Residents wanted a place in the shelter that had some degree of personal privacy and that was "theirs" – a place they could be responsible for. For Crowe, it is "axiomatic that people will take care of spaces and assets in which they have a proprietary concern."[23] The ability to create opportunities of privacy while allowing sightlines and visibility for safety created a dilemma. Material responses to this dichotomy included lowering the top of the partitions so one can stand and look over for visibility while sitting can gain privacy, employing translucent material on

Figure 4: Final PhilaU Student Dorm Station Design Schematic.

the privacy elements to allow partial visibility/ privacy, and not providing a door to the stations. The lower portion of the partitions was raised to allow views along the floor. Residents can find opportunities within the station for momentary privacy while staff and peers can see the majority of the station for safety of both the caregivers and residents.

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ENDNOTES

1. Dovey, Kim; "Home and Homelessness: An Introduction." From Altman, Irwin and Werner, Editors.; *Home Environments. Human Behavior and Environment: Advances in Theory and Research. Vol.8.* (New York: Plenum Press. 1985) 1.

2. Sanoff, Henry; *Methods of Architectural Programming.* (Stroudsburg, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross. 1977.) 4.

3. Dovey; "Home and Homelessness," 10.

4. http://www.ProjectH.O.M.E.org. All quotes in this paragraph are from this website.

5. http://projecthome.org/advocacy/facts.php

6. Padgett, Deborah; "There's No Place Like (a) Home: Ontological Security Among Persons with Serious Mental Illness in the United States." *Social Science & Medicine. May 2007; 64(9): (*pgs. 1925-1936.) 5.

Figure 5: "Personalized" Dorm Station.

INITIAL POE FINDINGS

A post occupancy evaluation revealed a number of interesting results. Surveys, observations and informal interviews with the residents, caregivers and administration revealed the following:

Station Layout: The dorm stations have lowered the number of aggressive incidents dramatically – some staff believing 75 – 80%. The layout was originally based on a resident observation that it was disconcerting to wake up and see someone watching you - resulting in an organization where no resident could see another's head while laying down. The layout created differing arrangements for the two sides of the room, though, creating unequal stations. The inequality created much angst especially in those with greater degrees of mental illness. It was paramount that all have equal stations, any deviation resulted in emotional episodes. The stations were re-arrainged to provide the greatest equality possible even though this created what most would equate with an institutional "cattle stall" layout.

Personalization and Ownership: While the station materials of durable plastic and painted steel were selected for cleanability, the team was concerned that residents would find them too alienating. In response, a clear distinction was purposely expressed between the structural steel and plastic sheeting offering platforms for personalization. The side plastic panels are woven with the structural steel creating undulating spaces for hanging clothes and storage. The spaces between the steel and plastic allow opportunities for the displaying of pictures, magazines, cards and personal mementos. For Werner, Altman & Oxley,

the ability to personalize a space "creates links with the places when residents fill them with meaning. In this way, the place as a physical space is converted into a psycho-social space."[24] The dwelling becomes a home, territory is marked and ownership established through the act of personalization.

Privacy and Security: At the onset of the project both staff and residents felt unsafe in the shelter. Social incidents were extensive and the overall quality of environment had deteriorated. Staff was nervous about providing privacy while the residents were demanding it. After six months of inhabitation, the balance of privacy and security has been so successful that the administration is considering adding doors to the stations. The resident's behavior has improved to the point that survey results found little to no concern about safety. Greater trust seems to be building and while the ladies mental illness will constantly be a battle, the privacy has resulted in a marked improvement in behavior. Beyond the issues pertaining to inequality, the overall balance of privacy and visibility was extremely successful.

Ontological Security: The stations were designed with ample storage for small personal items, clothing, books and "stuff." Storage at the headboard has become the most defensible and secure for the residents while the circular storage unit has become ideal for the ladies toiletries and personal effects. The circular unit provides an adequate screen for changing clothes which was not originally allowed in the dorm. With ample layers of privacy and storage, the stations provide a good foundation for daily routines and activities. Interestingly, when asked what was missing, the unanimous response was for a phone charger and reading light. The cell phone has become the most important possession of the residents and it is common to see groups huddled around outlets protecting their devices as they charge. A design project for a station charger/ light combo is currently in development.

CONCLUSION
The majority of the Women of Change Homeless Shelter population is quick to convey that their presence in the shelter is a temporary condition. They spend large amounts of time out in the city and only a few "hang out" for any considerable amount of time in the dorm or community spaces. Most have a distrust of public housing and shelters - likening them to institutional straightjackets. In the attempt to strike a balance between personal identity, privacy and security, the students inadvertently created an abstract enclosure system not rooted in any typical cultural experiences of house or home. The anonymity of the individual stations creates a "blank slate" condition which residents can easily claim in establishment of a territory and home base – a base for reconstructing their own personal identities and the promotion of ontological security. While the final solution does not create an environment most would equate with a home-like "good place", for a person with "no place", the stations offer residents "some place" to occupy on their way towards permanent housing.[25]

7. Lopez, Steve; *The Soloist.* (New York: Berkeley Books. 2008).

8. http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/chronic_homelessness

9. Padgett; "There's No Place," p. 2.

10. Rykwert, Joseph; "House and Home." *Social Research, Vol. 58, No. 1* (Spring 1991) 56-57.

11. Dovey; "Home and Homelessness," 1.

12. Laing, RD; *The Divided Self: An existential Study in Sanity and Madness.* (London: Pelican Press. 1965)

13. Giddens, A; *The Consequences of Modernity.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 1990).

14. Dupuis, A & Thorns, D; "Home, Home Ownership and the Search for Ontological Security." From *The Editorial Board of the Sociological Review 1998.* (Madlen, MA: Blackwell Publishers. 1998).

15. Padgett; "There's No Place," 2.

16. Dupuis; "Home, Home Ownership," 29.

17. Pey, David; *The Nature of Art and Workmanship.* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold. 1971).

18. Sanoff; Methods of Architectural Programming, 6.

19. Project Team: Project HOME Client Team: Paul Sassani, (Past) Vice-president of Property and Assessment Management, Chris Rivera, (Past) Director of Facilities; Sue Smith, Vice President Operations; Robin Bonfield, Director, Women of Change Safe Haven; Alex Shaw, (Past) Social Case Worker; and select residents of Women of Change. PhilaU Team: David Kratzer, Associate Professor of Architecture; Justine Tarrant, Matthew Link, Matthew Marcarelli; Christopher Class, Elliott Schwartz, Tom Lee, Jeff Delaquilla, Tyler DiRenzo, Kimberly Smeltzer, Lauren Printz, Nick Germani, Veronica Keefer, Nicky Petrozzo, Adrienne Williams. Additional Workshop Participants: Wendy Krupnick, Director, Occupational Therapy Program, Philadelphia University and twenty-six Occupational Graduate Students. Industry Partners: Cavo Design-Build, Philadelphia; Curbell Plastics, Moorestown, NJ; Metal Stock, Philadelphia, PA; Northeast Plastics, Philadelphia, PA; Rodon Signs, Jenkintown PA; Tom's Automotive, Philadelphia; Corian Division, Dupont Corp.; Trespa Meteon Panels.

20. Pastalan, Leon; *"Privacy as a Behavioral Concept."* Social Science, April 1970, 93-97, 93.

21. Newman, Oscar; *Defensible Space - Crime Prevention Through Urban Design.* (NY: McMillan Co. 1972) Paraphrased.

22. Crowe, Timothy; *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design.* (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann. 1991) Paraphrased.

23. Crowe; *Crime Prevention*, 103.

24. Werner, CM, Altman, I & Oaxley, D; "Temporal Aspects of Home: A Transactional Perspective." In I. Altman & CM Werner, Editors; *Home Environments: Human Behavior and the Environment.* (New York: Plenum Press. 1985) 1-32.

25. Final sentence is a play on the etymological enigma of utopia as "no place" and eutopia as "good place." The studio returned often to this discussion of utopia and its subjective frames of reference in the design of architecture for the "public good."