Shelter as a place of wellbeing and dignity

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Is a shelter just somewhere to sleep or can it be a place of wellbeing of people who live in it? Is beauty something superfluous for homeless people, almost disrespectful to those who can only meet their primary needs?

These are two of the questions which the action research "Living in the dorm" was set up to address. Since 2009, an interdisciplinary research-group, composed of designers from Politecnico di Torino and anthropologists from Università di Torino have been working in the field of homelessness in several Italian cities, in cooperation with the local bodies and with the patronage and support of fio.PSD (Italian Federation of Organization for Homeless people).[1]

From housing support to employment, from training to food and health, the aim of the research is to experiment with new strategies to tackle homelessness. Even though several topics have been investigated, improvements to shelter is a permanent focus and it relates to the majority of the actions in the research framework.

These actions investigate how the services shelters host are delivered to homeless people and how places have the power to define the wellbeing of people that inhabit them. They look at the way spaces and objects interact with users and with social operators. They also aim to understand how, successfully or not, individuals interact with places and products in there. The discussion is about the purpose of housing for homeless people not only in terms of cost reduction, but also in terms of dignity, service quality, psycho-emotional wellbeing, citizenship, and welfare. It will lead to the development of design concepts to solve the issues detected during a multidimensional and multidisciplinary inquiry phase that outlines needs referring to classes of privacy, usability, safety, health and management.

The overall objectives of interventions are:

- Re-thinking and re-design the existing buildings and their inner spaces (Campagnaro, Porcellana, 2016),
- To furnish those spaces with equipment that is (both in quality and quantity) suitable for the needs of people (Campagnaro, Porcellana, 2013).
- To involve operators and users in the actions, giving value to people's skills and aspirations (Campagnaro, 2018).
- To establish a shared and co-designed reference framework to be used in the future design of shelters (Campagnaro, Giordano, 2017)

1. A PLACE THAT INHIBIT

We decided to implement our design anthropology interventions in shelters as these places have never been designed for their purpose and they seem to overlook the basic needs of homeless people and social operators.

This happens despite the fact that about 75% of Italian homeless people seems to be hosted in shelters (fio.PSD, 2016, p. 23). This data represents the importance of shelters even today, despite new people-oriented, community-based housing services and support models taking a lead in Italy, *"drawing a long-term plan and building a model of policies [...] in order to address any situation of need with appropriate tools to resolve it in a stable and durable manner"* (ibid.).

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1   The research "Living in the dorm" is managed by professor Cristian Campagnaro (Department of Architecture and Design, Politecnico di Torino) and anthropologist Valentina Porcellana (Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, Università di Torino) in the cities of Torino, Verona, Agrigento e Milano.

Shelters are the physical interface of the service system for homelessness. They refer to an organisational and interventional model called the «staircase approach», which envisages *"a succession of preparatory interventions, from initial reception to social reintegration"* (ibid. p. 26). The person accesses housing solutions through a progressive emancipation from these services. Therefore, the shelter appears to be the place where the work of social services must come into play, before the adaptation to the new status of fragility becomes complete and every medium, or long-term, recovery plan becomes too difficult to achieve.

Despite this key role, most dormitories we visited in our research reflect an image of exclusion and instability (Porcellana, 2011). The buildings are often run down. They are often facilities designed for other functions. They are equipped with low quality and second-hand furniture. They are lacking in space for socialising and privacy. Accommodation provided to people envisages cohabitation among strangers and rarely guarantees space for storing personal belongings safely while being protected against theft.

2. A PARTICIPANT TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

a) Participant
From the beginning we have chosen not to be only observers of this situation of discomfort but also to be agents of change, according to the idea that the best way to understand something is trying to change it, and vice-versa. In this sense, for us, entering the system for homeless people with concrete design actions means understanding the functionality of the institutions from within, to stimulate them, and to work with all stakeholders to fully meet people's needs. Therefore, the change we experienced is the result of an incremental and participatory approach that fosters a transformational outlook. While this approach may be imperfect, it remains undeniably proactive, recalling the 'concrete utopias' discussed by Franco Basaglia. The research interlinks analysis with concrete actions that could have tangible effects on the spaces for the guests and those working therein. Concrete actions are useful analytical tools in reaching more in-depth understanding of the institutional policies and the mechanisms that regulate housing services, as well as enabling an immediate improvement within the context of study.

b) Transformative
Shelters, and in particular spaces and equipment, have been investigated and designed as devices of the educational and support work carried out therein. Particular attention has been paid to the way spaces and objects interact with the lives of the users and the operators and how these can qualify and facilitate the service delivered.

The design concepts come from a situated inquiry into the relationships between people and the objects, spaces, environments, and services around them. The project's outcomes are linked to the needs concerning workers' tasks and guests' time in the shelters: sleeping, eating, taking care of personal hygiene, spending time with others or seeking privacy, inhabiting the spaces safely, receiving and delivering information, accessing welfare services, testing one's abilities, and experiencing new aspiration.

The projects deal with architectural solutions, interior design, wall painting interventions, signposting and communication devices, bed systems, collective sitting, cell phone charging stations, and other furnishing items. The conceived solutions outline an idea of beauty that goes beyond the contemplative dimension and tends towards functionality and usability, facilitating the reduction of the conflict, of the psychological and ergonomic load, and facilitating the use of a service and the promotion of individual.

c) Participatory
The projects are of a variety of types and sizes, some highly complex, others extremely simple. The project team always includes both beneficiaries and other stakeholders. This ensures that every project is meaningful for the group who conceives and realises it. The projects come out of a collective and creative process, based on an exchange of knowledge among members of the community of practice gathered around the specific project requests. By moving from the individual to the design group, we encourage a bottom-up design instead of a top-down intervention. Homeless people and care-givers are involved as expert user assigning them a significant role in the inquiry and in the interventions. This promotes their skills within a rich, relational system. From consultation to customer involvement, from person-centred design to co-design, and even co-production, the person is given a "voice". This approach reverses the

mechanism of exclusion suffered by people in a life lived on the streets, inviting them to express themselves, make choices, work together and take care of each other. Likewise, these forms of involvement are also important triggers for the empowerment of the operators of these services.

4. BEAUTY AS EXPERIENCE

The processes of the research-action promote an idea of beauty that is a concrete experience that can benefit everyone. The design solutions speak in a hopeful language of transformation. Furthermore, in our experience, beauty is also found in the participative process itself. The project becomes validated because everyone has personally contributed to. It is the assumption of a role, without delegation, credit, or debt. It is the ambition to achieve something that somebody thinks they are not entitled to. It is the request for an opinion. It is a space, an opportunity to discuss and meet someone who wants *"to do something with you, instead of for you"*.

5. PERSPECTIVES FOR CHANGE

Coherently with the «Guidelines for tackling homelessness» (fio.PSD, 2016), which define the *"minimum essential levels"* to be reached by services to fight homelessness, our research aims to stimulate a discussion on buildings, on their improvement, and their new design, according to the psycho-emotional and social needs of homeless people through an inclusive method.

The findings of our research are open to evaluation, verification, and improvement shared with all the stakeholders. At a local level, for example in the City of Turin, this topic it is now part of the re-design process of the reception services in the framework of the activities funded by the 2014 – 2020 National Operational Plan (PON). At a national level, the discus-sion of the results will take place within forthcoming national cooperative research that the two universities are going to develop in collaboration with the Italian Federation of Organisations for Homeless People.

6. REFERENCES

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