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Defensive architecture – A design against humanity

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ABSTRACT

A city should give its best to all those who reside in it. They might be the rich enjoying a fantastic view of the skyline from their balconies, or the poor who settle themselves under the flyovers for a night or two. Apart from all the living classes, a city can be completely accepted as livable only when it welcomes the homeless and those in need of a small shelter. In recent years, public architecture has involved both negative and positive issues of having homeless within the city. Some cities across the globe aspiring to build 'less-ugly' public spaces introduced the concept of 'defensive architecture', but in reality, these ideas turned out to be unkind actions against the homeless. Defensive architecture involves gating off the doorways and left-over urban spaces, which provide some refuge for those who have to sleep rough in cities, yet these spaces, are made uninhabitable for them. These concepts that are considered as a step forward to a better and high standard living prove to be a blot on humanity. In this paper, defensive architecture is explained as a hostile practice that creates a devastating psychological effect on the homeless. It further argues how an intention to make the cities' investors and consumers feel safe in turn actually created hostile environments and that much more empirical research is needed on this topic.

Keywords— Defensive Architecture, Moral Considerations, Right to Public Space

1. INTRODUCTION

The architecture of our cities is a powerful guide to its behavior, both directly and in its symbolism. Hostile architecture is a subtle expression of social division through urban design, mostly associated with the homeless. These include public spaces that are constructed or altered to discourage people from using them in a way not intended by the owner. As the writer, Amanda Lee Koe has said, "A city can be designed for you just as well as it can be designed against you." It is almost an invisible way of denying support to the needy and helpless, to allow 'legitimate' users enjoy the seemingly open and inclusive urban environment. (Atkinson, While, 2015)

Defensive architecture is not a mere accident or a thoughtless idea but instead, it is a well-processed thought that has over-ridden human consideration for the sake of hygiene and standards. It is kind of heartlessness which is planned, affirmed and subsidized. The very shape of our cities, beginning from public benches to empty spaces between avenues, reflect antagonistic vibe toward the destitute, in the form of design elements that keep them from looking for asylum in these spaces. These features are unnoticed by the common public but are well spotted by the ones in need of minimum hospitality. Although this sort of defensive architecture is widely used in many countries like Sweden, the UK, and the states, it has not undergone a systematic ethical analysis. (Edin 2014)



Fig. 1: Tower Hill bench, London, Image courtesy of James Fruzer

2. METHODOLOGY

Debating their views on the chaos created by public furniture and spatial design; architects, professors and people experiencing this treatment have come forward to voice their thoughts through articles. This paper is based on a thorough study of these articles. Some already conducted case studies are also reviewed in this study to identify the different mediums used for hostile architecture. The foundation of this paper is based on the user experience against these designs collected from the articles and case studies.

2.1 Defensive Design and User Experience

Hostile design and its types

The hostile or defensive design includes architectural elements placed to make space itself considered as unlivable. Firstly, existing furniture can be modified into a defensive type. This is usually done by adding armrests between benches which would not allow people to sleep, or the benches are made 'Anti-hobo' or 'Bum-proof' making it difficult and least comfortable to lay down.

Secondly, the components are added to a space to prevent a portion of its uses. The design of such concepts involves embedding studs on flat surfaces to make sleeping uncomfortable and impractical, sloped window sills to stop people sitting, and water sprinklers that intermittently come on, etc. The common feature with the defensive measures described here is that they do not make a large area inaccessible; they simply make it difficult to conduct a particular activity in a small area (Licht.K 2017).

Thirdly, the entire furniture can be removed to avoid the function, such as removing benches in a mall to stop people from stagnating and to continue the flow of the crowd.

Other types may include the total atmosphere change to restrict a particular group from accessing the space. Two basic defensive "designs" use color and sound to maintain a strategic distance from undesirable conduct. Off-putting colors, "anti-teen music" (such as classical music), and high-frequency sounds only young people can hear are employed to discourage people from congregating at some places (Licht.K 2017). Figures below showcase a few examples of hostile design.



Fig. 2: Concrete spikes under a road bridge in Guangzhou city, Guangdong, China
Source: *Imagine China/REX*



Fig. 3: Hostile architecture on the former Coutts Bank, Fleet Street, London
Source: *Linda Nylind for the Guardian*



Fig. 4: Metal studs outside private flats on Southwark Bridge Road, London
Source: *Guy Corbishley*

2.2 User Experience

"When you're designed against, you know it, other people might not see it, but you will. The message is clear: you are not a member of the public, at least not of the public that is welcome here. The same is true of all defensive architecture. The psychological effect is devastating." says Ocean Howell, (architecture teacher at the University of Oregon).

One can understand the depth of a situation only when one has been in that place or has grasped the intensity of the experience. Alex Andreou is one such person who describes defensive architecture as harassment against the helpless. A six-digit salary holder, Alex Andreou, due to sudden hit of hardships was forced to live on the streets in 2009. The benches in the park, empty spaces beneath shop canopies did not appear the same to Alex during this phase of his life. Considering various elements of hostile design Alex says, "We see these measures all the time within our urban environments, whether in London or Tokyo, but we fail to process their true intent. I hardly noticed them before I became home-less in 2009. It was only then that I started scanning my surroundings with the distinct purpose of finding shelter and the city's barbed cruelty became clear." (Andreou A. 2015).



Fig. 5: Camden bench, London
Source: Walsh, 2019



Fig. 6: Canary Warf station bench, London
Source: Walsh, 2019

2.3 User Group

Defensive architecture is not a problem only concerning the homeless. Looking at the wider picture, while attempting to keep the homeless away, uncomfortable conditions are created for the elderly citizens and pregnant women as well. “These measures do not and cannot distinguish the “vagrant” posterior from others considered more deserving.” (Andreou. 2015). As a matter of fact, any other citizen who wishes to dispose of their weary bodies on such furniture would end up distressed. The figure beside, Fig7, shows the uncomfortable seating design which is of no better use to the regular public too.

This issue likewise reasons that by making the city less tolerating of the human frame, we make it less inviting to all people. By making our condition progressively hostile, we become increasingly hostile inside it. (Gilles,2018)



Fig. 7: A cluster of uncomfortable benches outside Freemasons Hall in Camden
Source: Gilles, 2018

2.4 Respect and rights

An entirely significant protest against defensive design is the lack of regard with which the excluded groups are treated with. Some people say that “They are treated like animals” (Lindberg 2015). However, the question is “how the notion of “respect “be spelled?” (Licht. K 2017) and whether an inexpensive definition can be implied for disrespecting few individuals is necessary, for a greater good. There are several perspectives in which we can view the term “respect”. One common perception between morals and philosophy states that people should not be objectified or instrumented.

3. CASE STUDIES

3.1 Little India, Singapore

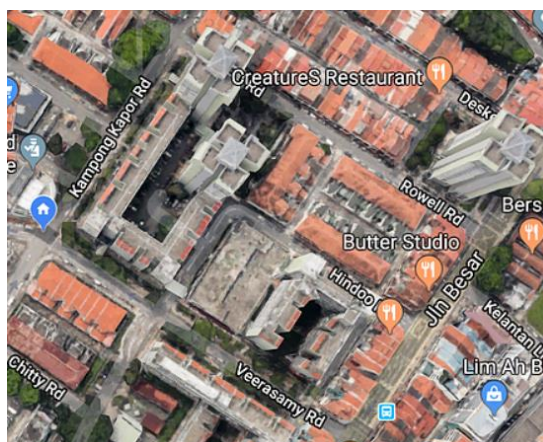


Fig. 8: Study area, Little India, Singapore
Source: <https://hostiledesign.wixsite.com/hostile>

As part of observing the instances of hostile architecture, an area that comprised of not more than 3 HDB blocks were identified. Some of the elements identified are shown in the images below.

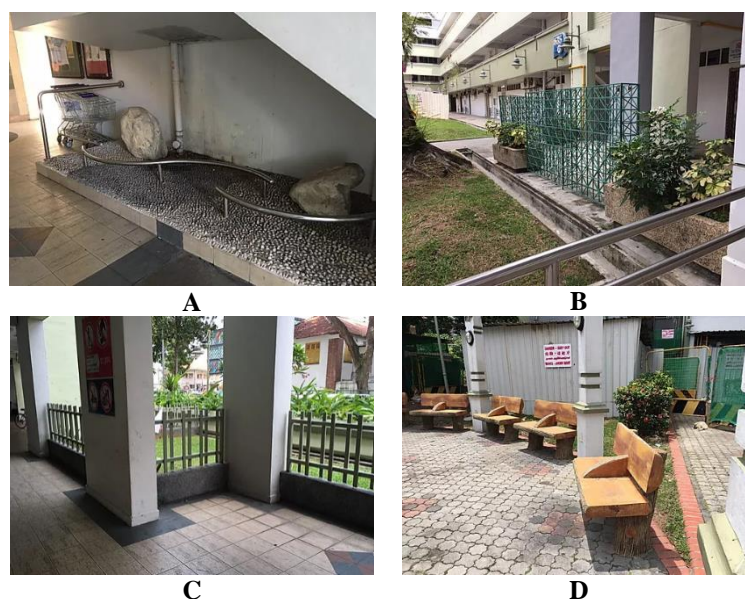


Fig. 9: Features broadcasting hostile architecture identified within the study area

Source: <https://hostiledesign.wixsite.com/hostile>

Fig 9, shows the features of the defensive architecture that were identified within the study area. As one can see the first image A, shows how the area below the stairs has been converted into a sculpted area with the help of boulders, rails, and spikes. This area is visible to a common man as a design space but through the eyes of a homeless person, this area is warded off so that he can't use it as a sleeping area at night. Image B shows a meshed screen erected within an open space as part of the landscape but in the actual sense this screen act as a divider with divides the open area in order to discourage foreign workers who tend to congregate around void decks. Sometimes hostile design makes life harder even for the average citizen. Images C and D are the most common elements that one can see in and around their surroundings, the fences that barricade the covered areas and benches with armrests in the center.

3.2 The London Spikes Controversy

Studs were introduced in the recess of a high-end high rise in South London. The controversy began on Twitter after a user known as 'Ethical Pioneer' posted a photograph of the studs.



Fig. 10: Anti-homeless' spikes installed in an apartment building entrance in South London

Source: @EthicalPioneer

Throughout the following days, the picture was re-posted a great many occasions via web-based networking media, and the alleged 'anti-homeless spikes' turned into the subject of news stories around the globe. The discussion incited vocal discussions about urban space, vagrancy and an obviously new and novel element in the urban scene: 'antagonistic design'. Within seven days, the spikes were removed by the structure's administration in spite of being introduced on private property and not overstepping any nearby arranging laws.

General society clamor against these specific spikes briefly featured two aspects of urban life that go to a great extent disregarded in a standard famous talk: vagrancy; and the deliberate 'planning out' of specific personalities, practices, and classes of individuals from urban and open spaces. This model isn't taken as illustrative of procedures of urban securitization occurring the world over nor characteristic of open dispositions towards such systems. In any case, it gives an intriguing contextual analysis through which to think about certain social, social and political measurements identifying with open space inside urban communities. (Petty, 2016)

4. DISCUSSION

Considering all the examples above, we can clearly state the Hostile or Defensive architecture is invisible. It is invisible to the common people or as quoted “privileged people” who are entitled to all the comfort available. For them, these instances are mere decorations or marvelous designed. But only an underprivileged person, who is in seeks shelter can see these as elements for what they represent.

It is important to know the need for such designs that exclude the homeless as a by-product of its implementation. All the more accurately, what we have to comprehend is whether defensive architecture works as it should, to keep certain practices, exercises and gatherings from a territory alongside fighting off the direct and indirect causes that influence people’s behavior. Clearly from what we generally observe, most of the homeless take refugees during the night and clear up by morning without causing any damage to property or street furniture. So, visible city center locations remain undisturbed during the day, hence maintaining the standards that authorities have mentioned as a result of which defensive architecture came into the picture.

On the other hand, the authorities have not attempted to provide a solution in return for hostile architecture. It is completely immoral to deny the homeless their basic comfort without providing them an alternative. It is the duty of the concerned higher officials to make life better for the homeless rather than forcing them to be more helpless and creating a feeling of being left out.

Apart from discussing defensive design as an act of immorality, there is a need to debate on the context of the design. The above examples are considered according to western culture mostly concentrating on European countries. It is necessary to think that cities in such countries with few migrating populations, and a lesser population of homeless have given a thought process about organizing public spaces, then it is valid that with almost double the size of migrating population and homeless in a country like India, it is important to consider the possibilities of such designs provided that alternate solutions are given.

5. CONCLUSION

Defensive architecture might not be considered as a thought to enhance urban standards but instead, it has become a blot on the face of the city because of its negligence to the vulnerable strata. A city is meaningless if it cannot shelter those in need, owing to the fact that the cities are considered as places where dreams come true, rather, it makes one feel unwanted. Yet, defensive architecture can be justified if the homeless are given other spaces for refuge.

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