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Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023

Designing For Human Dignity: New approaches to the inclusivity of homeless and vulnerably housed communities

Queenie Clarke

This presentation is an exploration of my doctoral research, *Designing for Human Dignity: New approaches to the inclusivity of homeless and vulnerably housed communities*. The research addresses questions regarding the inclusivity of the homeless and vulnerably housed community within urban design, focusing on the regeneration of the town centre of Eastbourne, UK. The research aim is to reframe and re-characterise how homeless communities are systemically positioned in urban design through the lens of human dignity. Currently, elements of these themes have been taken into consideration by the Design Council CAGE (Fletcher, 2006) and in the Localism Act (Clarke, 2011). However, surveys and consultation periods predominantly offered to certain groups with fixed addresses and access to modern technology breed a gap where considerations of people without access to these are included.

This work-in-progress presentation will share the findings of the research completed to date. The research grew from both my fascination and curiosity with changes made in public spaces. Experiencing the regeneration of my hometown, Eastbourne, I witnessed on a micro-scale how the built environment changed in response to issues surrounding anti-social behaviour. On a macro-scale, there is a common thread in changes made in public spaces within the United Kingdom. The systemic response tends to be removing planters, benches, and sheltered doorways to decrease criminal activity in the hope of providing safer streets (Cosgrave, 2023).

Two prominent themes that have been revealed so far are language and perception. In the presentation I will be focusing on how these themes are entangled within urban design and planning systems. Specifically, it examines how language and perception play a role in both perpetuating and disrupting the current discourse surrounding the inclusivity of people experiencing homelessness.

KEYWORDS: human dignity, homelessness, urban design, planning, co-design, ethnographic walks, mapping, learning levels, inclusivity, language, hostile architecture, case study, systemic design

RSD TOPIC: Architecture & Planning, Cases & Practice, Policy & Governance

Presentation description

Research context

This presentation is an exploration of my doctoral research titled *Designing for Human Dignity: new approaches to the inclusivity of vulnerably housed communities*. The research grew from both my fascination and curiosity with changes made in public spaces. Experiencing the regeneration of my hometown, Eastbourne, I witnessed on a micro-scale how the built environment changed in response to issues surrounding anti-social behaviour. On a macro-scale, there is a common thread in changes made in public spaces within the United Kingdom. The systemic response tends to be removing planters, benches, and sheltered doorways to decrease criminal activity in the hope of providing safer streets (Cosgrave, 2023).



Figure 1: Low-rise grey cubes. Photo by author.

The spaces that were designed and built in Eastbourne as part of the regeneration scheme adopted this type of response. Ongoing issues of anti-social behaviour led to limited spaces for dwelling. Conflict from these design decisions came to light in January 2020 when low-rise grey cubes intended as roadblocks, as well as individual seating, were installed (Figure 1). In response, Eastbourne Access Group¹ expressed dismay as they believed East Sussex County Council breached their duty of care to provide safe and sustainable access for all as outlined in the Equality Act 2010 (Macleod, 2020).

¹ "The Eastbourne Access Group is a voluntary organisation comprising of volunteers, some living with an impairment or disability, with a passion to promote equality and inclusion for all." (East Sussex Community Information Service, 2023)

The response highlights that design decisions that exclude certain groups of people do not remain within the boundaries of that one community. Consequently, grappling between how to create a safe space for one group while deterring another produces a site of conflict. The goal of deterring through design is an approach found in Hostile Architecture, a phenomenon that presents itself in multiple urban landscapes across the world (Licht, 2017; Petty, 2016; Semple, 2020). Homelessness is often paired with Hostile Architecture as the design outcome, such as filling doorways with spikes or barred seating, prevents sleeping. The situation is made more complex by motives that are neither wrong nor right. For example, designing comfortable spaces for people to dwell in creates viable spaces to sleep rough, which can be problematic. As is removing everything that allows a public space to feel welcoming and accessible, revealing itself as a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Methodological approach

There are many ways that this research could have been framed, each one generating a different type of learning. I decided to frame the research through human dignity as the initial changes made in Eastbourne and the principles of Hostile Architecture raised questions relating to dignity. Whose dignity was considered in these design decisions? How was it considered? Furthermore, human dignity is understood as “an inherent or unearned worth or status, which all human beings share equally” (Debes 2018) it provides flexibility in who can derive meaning from this theme. Within the context of urban design and planning, the discourse surrounding human dignity is arguably limited; however, there is growing interest within the field (Davy, 2017, 2019, 2020; P.Rodi, 2020; Sabokkhiz, 2020; Institute for Human Rights and Business, 2019).

Although adopting human dignity as a research theme creates possibilities, it also bears implicit limitations. The abstract nature of human dignity in the context of urban design and planning systems can produce a challenging balance between applicability and ambiguity. However, frameworks, such as Human Dignity in the Built Environment, published by the Institute of Human Rights and Business (2019), offer ways to engage with the theoretical roots of human dignity through practical approaches.

I am integrating this framework into my methodological approach by introducing it to participants and gaining their perspective on it. It has been useful in providing different

possibilities for conversations in research sessions as we had the framework to reflect on. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to understand how frameworks like this apply to human dignity.²

Methods

The research methods I am practising:

- Semi-structured ethnographic walks with members of Eastbourne Council, individuals connected to the regeneration of the Terminus Road, Eastbourne, and homeless/vulnerably housed service providers. The second part of this stage was mapping the walk with participants.
- Co-designing community tools with the same participants as above, plus guests of providers.
- The following stage will be informed through co-designing community tools with participants, so at this time, there are no fixed methods being proposed. However, methods such as model-making are being considered.

Research questions

I have framed my research questions as three layers (Figure 2), with each layer offering a different type of learning. This approach was developed from Gregory Bateson's framing of 'learning levels' (Bateson 1972). This will be discussed further in the presentation as it plays an important role in how data created in this research is positioned and, therefore, understood.

² For example, it poses questions such as: are there risks for dignity becoming a shallow-meaning buzzword referred to in planning reports and policies? If so, how would that be managed?



Layer 1: context

Layer 1 is grounded in the context of the regeneration of Terminus Road, Eastbourne. This comprises exploring the applicability of human dignity in the process of urban design with participants. It incorporates questions such as: how are homeless and vulnerably housed communities included in the planning process? What insight is created when exploring the relationship between human dignity and urban design and planning with participants? How is it created? How can this insight be disseminated or applicable in Eastbourne's planning system?³

³ Learning about Eastbourne is not applicable to different towns or contexts; however, it provides wider learning about the higher-order levels of human dignity, wicked problems (Rittel and Webber 1973) and the methods (walks, mapping, co-design etc) I have practiced.

Layer 2: context of the context

Layer 2 is concerned with the use, and therefore development, of frameworks and methods.⁴

Layer 3: context of the context of the context

Layer 3 is more reflexive, personal, and general in character and explores the consequences of asking the questions within Layer 1 and 2.⁵ This layer involves critically reflecting on my own experiences as the designer and researcher to understand the tensions that exist in Layer 1 and 2. As a result, this may have consequences for the way I design the research.

Summary

This presentation presents the insight revealed from the research so far. There is a focus on language and perception as these two themes have become prominent in discussions with participants. To understand these themes, I explore how language and perception are entangled within urban design and planning systems. Completed stages of the research are the ethnographic walks and mapping and co-designing community toolkits.

⁴ For instance, I am practicing modes of co-design, what is revealed about co-designing as a method when using it in the context of this research? How is this different to how it has been practiced before? By including a framework such as 'Human Dignity in the Built Environment', what is learnt about the framework?

⁵ For example, through doing this research, has the way in which I perceive vulnerability or homelessness changed? If my perceptions change, does this change the way I learn from the well-established methods I am practicing, does it change the way I understand the knowledge that this research is contributing? If so, how?

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