The undesirable public:

A study of the postmodern cities attempt to curate a public presence
The concept of public space has evolved as cities transition from industrialised modernist spaces to knowledge and finance based postmodern societies. Postmodern societies guarantee an increase in private ownership of public space, public spaces have become less about facilitating community interaction and more focused on fostering an environment of consumption. The public-private space is a curated environment, where ‘undesirables’ are excluded either directly or indirectly through design. The traditional notion of a public space as a reflection of society is degraded, the undesirable elements of society; youth, skateboarders and the homeless are moved on. Through a comprehensive study of the practical techniques used to curate postmodern public-private space rather than detached theories the psychological and physical toll of hostile postmodern design starts to become clear. Through understanding of the strategies that organizations utilize to exclude members of the public, we are better placed to comment on the culminate of postmodern practices.
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The essay only employs main headings to avoid congestion, explanations are indicative only
“Public space is very difficult to define, not least because very few spaces and places are, or ever have been, truly public.”\(^1\) The earliest example of a public space may have been the ancient Greek Agora, it translates to an ‘open place of assembly’.\(^2\) Even from the beginning public spaces were not completely inclusive; the Agora was exclusively for Greek males.\(^3\) Contemporary public spaces are not as severely segregated as Ancient Greek marketplaces, they are however much more complex. The complexity has led to many public places being deferred to the efficiency and market regulations of the private sector.\(^4\) Innumerable western cities have transformed, or begun to transform from industrialized modern societies to globalised postmodernist communities that are aligned to knowledge and technology markets rather than physical production.\(^5\) Tindall offers three defining characteristics of a postmodern city; despatialization, fragmentation and privatisation.\(^6\) In this sense, despatialization refers to a city that transcends place; replacing local producers with international conglomerates. Fragmentation denotes the ethnic, monetary and lifestyle diversity in postmodern cities. Privatisation is the consequence of cities adopting a global rather than local economy, as consumption increases so too does the incentive for corporations to influence and control the space that people occupy.\(^7\)

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3 Minton, Anna. What kind of world are we building? The privatisation of public space. 9.
5 Minton, Anna. What kind of world are we building? The privatisation of public space. 5
6 David Tindall, “VANCOUVER: A POSTMODERN CITY?” (handout, University of British Columbia.)
Public-private space is curated to facilitate consumption, as such the commercial opportunities of a space dictates the private-public environment. Designs are optimised to enhance the commercial and financial viability of a private-public space, where the desired consumptive practices are encouraged and the ‘undesirable’ public is deterred, resulting in planning for public spaces that seeks to serve strategic agendas rather than the whole community. Exclusive public-privatisation subverts the principles of democratic society, public spaces were intended to be ‘arenas of the collective’, all citizens are equal in a truly public space.


In order to segregate the desirable public (business people and consumers) from the undesirable public, practitioners of the built environment employ disciplinary architecture. Disciplinary architecture is an all-encompassing term for the design of buildings and the urban environment that dissuades certain users from engaging with the space. In the case of postmodern cities the most prominent subjects of disciplinary architecture are youth, skateboarders and the homeless. The treatment of the undesirable public might be better surmised as hostile architecture or an architecture of exclusion where groups are designed out of public spaces. Hostile architecture is present in almost every postmodern city, yet examples of the strategic design are seldom evident to the wider public, Howell framed it perfectly when he stated:

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.”  

Exclusive design is often championed in the name of security and civic order, the general public are somewhat aware of the general practice however it exists somewhere between conscious recognition and plausible deniability so long as it is ‘done in marble and terrazzo with nice lights.. we accept it.’ Whyte’s seminal study of public plazas in the 1980’s came to the conspicuous conclusion that people will sit, where there is a place to sit; if we extend this premise it becomes clear that people will occupy a space in a manner that suits them providing the space affords them the opportunity to do so. With this in mind, proponents of disciplinary architecture seek to design against an undesired activity; the problem with this, in addition to the often inhumane consequences of discriminatory design, is that you cannot always isolate a single activity. The same solution that is designed to prevent the homeless from sleeping on a bench also inhibits the elderly, disabled and young.


12 Malcolm Mackay interviewed by Jonathan Green, Anti-homeless Architecture: The Conversation, ABC 3 September 3, 2013

13 William H. Whyte. The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces. (1988; Santa Monica, CA; Direct Cinema LTD), VHS 58 min


YOUTH

Young people are often accused of anti-social behaviour, with concerns ranging from over zealous youthful exuberance to supplying drugs and alcohol. The perceived inability of young people to contribute to the financial marketplace and the negative impact on consumption that their presence has been adjudged to create makes them an ideal target for hostile architecture.

The majority of hostile strategies employed against youths aim to discourage them from congregating in particular public places. The most high profile example of hostile architecture focused towards young people is the Mosquito anti-teenager sound device. The device came to prominence in 2005, it works by dispersing a high frequency sound that can only be heard by young people. The strategy involves placing the Mosquito in areas where youth anti-social behaviour is prevalent, the noise irritates the youth and eventually they disperse.

The frequency of the Mosquito predominantly targets people under the age of 25, however, young people and the select older public who can hear the device are targeted indiscriminately. The device is not only hostile but also discriminatory, it presumes all young people to be anti-social and publicly undesirable. The Mosquito has also been denounced as a violation of young people’s Human Rights; a campaign in the United Kingdom is attempting to ban the device, likening it to a ‘sonic weapon directed against children and young people’. Post modernist cities are already polarised by financial and power based institutions, and such blatant affronts to young people as a whole runs the risk of ‘creating a dangerous and widening divide’ between young and old.


A rather tawdry attempt to prevent young people from congregating in particular areas involves placing pink fluorescent lights to deter the youth and curb antisocial behaviour. The pink fluorescents attempt to expel youth by casting them in an unflattering light that emphasises pimples and blemishes. David Hey, a manager of the Safer Neighbourhood Partnership has stated that ‘we are trying to embarrass young people out of the area.’ Peta Halls of the National Youth Agency points out that the problem is not dealt with by pink fluorescents, they only divert the problem elsewhere. The pink fluorescents do not discriminate between troublesome youth and their well behaved counterparts, furthermore it does not discriminate between youth and adults imperfect skin. When community groups and organisations decide that it is appropriate to bully young people for having blemishes we may need to reconsider whether these groups accurately portray desirable morals and ethics.

Another perceived advantage of the pink fluorescent lights is that they are ‘uncool’ and don’t appeal to macho youth. The implication that being uncool and unattractive is detrimental to manliness or that machismo should control where young people congregate is a dangerous message to send to young people. The absence of sensitivity from the instigators of the pink fluorescent project is thoughtless, they risk doing serious damage to young peoples mental health. Regardless of the financial or cultural undesirability of young people, the organisations that regulate public-private space need to act responsibly and target the source of the problem, rather than exacerbate it.


23 Lockton, Dan, “Anti-teenager ‘pink lights to show up acne,’”(blog).


Hostile architecture targets young people indiscriminately as problem youth. Many regulators of public/private space are content to expel all non consuming young people until they are able to contribute and consume in such a way as they become desirable. I agree with Lockton when he wrote:

*I don’t understand why Britain hates its young people so much. But I can see it storing up a great deal of problems for the future.*\(^{24}\)

The hostility of these anti-youth schemes reflect on the designers themselves, speaking to a postmodern society that would rather defer the root of problem-youth to the financial behemoth of the city.

\(^{24}\) ibid.
SKATEBOARDERS

There are approximately 11 million skateboarders worldwide, the majority of skateboarders are young people, with 45% of skaters between the age of 12 and 17.²⁵ Skateboarding is a counterculture, ironically it challenges the postmodern methodology of public-privatisation and concurrently flees them.²⁶ Hostile architecture and urban design was not born out of disagreement with the politics of skateboarding, rather it is a result of dissatisfaction with skateboarders as clients of public-private space. Skateboarding interacts with architecture in a way that is completely foreign to most of the public, skaters engage the built environment with ‘joyful manipulation.'²⁷ Skateboarders do not fit within a postmodern framework for a desirable public, they operate outside of the commercial scheme for public-private spaces and are consequently subject to hostile and exclusionary architecture.

In the Social Life of Small Urban Places Whyte laments the inclusion of aesthetic benches in a New York Plaza, stating that ‘this is a design object, the purpose of which is to punctuate architectural photos’.²⁸ The benches are scarcely laid out and abandoned; they are not utilised because the design is unsympathetic to the user. Howell notes that the benches are attractive to skateboarders because they are free of public obstructions.²⁹ Parallels can be drawn between skateboarders freely re-imagined interaction with the built environment and the Situationist’s idea of drifting, which is the concept of moving throughout a city without any guiding rules.³⁰ Skateboarders generally acknowledge that their interaction with the built environment is destructive, this is often met with little concern as skaters feel as though the built environment is curated to the desired public (office workers, consumers, tourists) whilst skaters are relegated to small parks often in the outskirts of a city.³¹ Hostile urban environments for skateboarders attempt to limit a skater’s ability to transverse a public space. Business institutions that operate public-private space employ rough materials that limit a skaters ability to cross a surface, they also manipulate existing infrastructure like rails and benches by retrofitting anti-skating devices.³²

²⁸ William H. Whyte. The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces. (1988; Santa Monica, CA; Direct Cinema LTD), VHS 58 min
³¹ Agnew, Johnny, “Skateboarding VS Architecture: A Study of Public Space and Materiality in Auckland City.”
The unrestricted nature of skateboarding means that skaters are often able to reinterpret the built environment even after it has been injected with hostile architecture. A good example of this is the redesigned Philip Burton Federal Building plaza, the plaza needed to be redesigned to increase the safety and security of the public-private space. One tenet of the brief was to restrict skateboarders from utilising and subsequently destroying the plaza. The design included a number of expulsive and hostile designs targeting skaters and other undesirables. The solution was ultimately unsuccessful, skaters continued to circumvent the hostile architecture, eventually a police presence was inserted to remove skaters from engaging with the plaza in an undesirable way. The corporal ostracisation of skaters contradicted the original intent of increasing the public presence in the plaza.

33 The plaza redesign came about as a consequence of the 1995 Oklahoma terrorist attack, there was a need to limit the vehicular accessibility of the plaza. The desire to increase surveillance was also prominent, there was a desire to facilitate a public presence in the plaza.


Another example of skateboarders being relegated to the leagues of the undesirable public occurred at the Promenade Ribbon, a 2.5 mile long public artwork in San Francisco designed by Saitowitz, Acconci and Solomon.\textsuperscript{36} The Ribbon is located in a former industrial area on a council owned boulevard where it intersects a vibrant area to skate, naturally skaters adopted the ribbon and began to reinterpret it.\textsuperscript{37}


Prior to redevelopment the boulevard was primed to be a freeway; community opposition resulted in are being rezoned as a ‘grand urban boulevard’. The Promenade Ribbon was commissioned and championed by the San Francisco Art Commission as a work that integrated into and revitalised the environment. The ribbon began to deteriorate as skateboarders began to skate on it, this prompted complaints from the individuals and institutions that bestowed financial support for the artwork. Saitowitz also condemned the skaters treatment of the Ribbon;

“I try to talk to these people. I say, ‘Can’t you understand you’re ruining something that belongs to you, the people?’ But they don’t seem to care.”

Saitowitz’s and the San Francisco Art Commission’s refusal to legitimise the action of skateboarders in a public place, highlights the disparity between the desirable and undesirable public.

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39 Gerald D. Adams, “Skateboarders barred for art’s sake.”

40 ibid.

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Despite Saitowitz’s claims that the Promenade Ribbon is in part owned by skateboarders and the approval of skaters interaction with the Ribbon from Acconci and Solomon, eight years after the Ribbons inception it was appended with anti-skating ‘pigs ears’.\textsuperscript{41}

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\textsuperscript{41} Solomon stated that the Ribbon is “..part of the world”, Solomon and Acconi believed that the work should allow people to connect with it and the space in whatever way they desired.

The hostile adaption of the Ribbon Promenade has been met with comparable distain to the original deterioration of the artwork. In a letter to the editor a San Francisco local Carol Finucane laments that the pig ears “are far uglier and distracting than the skateboard marks”. Finucane rightly points out that the Ribbon is under utilised without skateboarders as the concrete is often too cold to sit on. The final iteration of the pursuit to exclude skateboarders has involved leveling the Ribbon by removing all raised podiums. This emphasises the extent to which corporations will go to to dispel an undesirable public.

The postmodern obsession with curating a corporate or consumptive public is realised when an absence of urban environment is favourable to a built environment that fosters interaction with an undesirable public.


43 Ibid., Carol Finucane goes on to make the point that she is a middle aged woman, not a teenager or skater but nonetheless the notion of skateboarders enjoying themselves on and around the Ribbon pleases her.


HOMELESS

The homeless are arguably the most pervasive group of undesirable public in the postmodern sphere. They are often labelled as a blight on public spaces, homeless people serve as the ‘litmus test’ for whether an area is genuinely public.45 Strategies to displace homeless people are usually championed in the name of cleaning up and reclaiming public spaces.46 The homeless are the antithesis of the welcome public in profit driven postmodern public-private spaces. The gap between the corporate curated public and the homeless is evident in David Martin’s statement that ‘the corporate edifice and the very expensive building facades … intimidate homeless’.47

Architectural hostility towards homeless people goes beyond the daunting imagery of post modern society, incisions into the built environment are employed to physically impose restrictions on the places the homeless seek refuge. A high profile case of architectural hostility towards the homeless was the erection of metal spikes outside a department store in Manchester, considerable public and political condemnation resulted in their removal in a matter of days.48 Sporadic and short lived public campaigns that zealously defend the rights of homeless have done little to curb the prevalence of hostile and disciplinary architecture. Nils Norman has created a running archive of defensive architecture techniques, the schemes range from overt measures like spiked heating vents to prevent sleeping to inconspicuous steps that are too low to perch on.49 Once you are aware that hostile architecture exists it becomes much easier to spot it, still the postmodern financially driven public-private space reiterates that the measures are aimed at cleaning up and reducing vandalisation. Michael Shea put the debate in perspective when he challenged the postmodern treatment of the homeless by remarking that ‘as if sheltering in a doorway was an act of vandalism rather than necessity.’450

45 Minton, Anna. What kind of world are we building? The privatisation of public space. 10.
46 ibid. 10, 11

Another prominent piece of anti-homeless architecture is hostile seating designs, the strategy can take numerous forms such as benches with arm rests to prohibit the homeless sleeping on them and sloped benches that prohibit people resting for long periods of time. Alex Andreou experienced the hostility of anti-homeless designs whilst he was homeless in 2009, the park bench on which he regularly sought refuge was gone one morning it had been replaced by a metal bench with arm rests that prevented sleeping. The alteration of the bench would appear a rather innocuous to anyone who didn’t depend on it, understandably Andreou felt considerable loss that day. The disparity in reaction from an un-invested observer and homeless person exemplifies an earlier quote from Howell ‘When you’re designed against, you know it…’.


53 ibid.

54 Maryam Omidi, “Anti-homeless spikes are just the latest in ‘defensive urban architecture’,” The Guardian, May 13, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/cities, Full quote is, ‘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’
ANTI ARCHITECTURE

The natural evolution of disciplinary architecture’s fixation on removing undesirable users and interactions is the Camden Bench.
The Camden Bench was designed for Camden Council as a bench that deterred anti social behaviour and criminal behaviour. The bench is finished in anti graffiti coating to prevent vandalism, the large singular mass means there are no places for drug dealers to secretly hide their product, the angled sides repel skateboarders and the homeless cannot sleep on the slanted surface. The Camden Bench was designed to exist solely as a bench, it is a physical embodiment of the desired public in a postmodern city it infers that property rights and not civil rights dictates permissible behaviour.


CONCLUSION

The financial might of institutions in postmodern society threatens to instate an economic apartheid in our cities, where the production and consumption are the tenets of our communities. As individual expression and freedom is eroded by the will of the market the scope of hostile architecture expands to further align the community with the ideals of the postmodern city. Nils Norman has documented the process for over 20 years and warns that as

‘Benches become bum-free, which in turn become perches, which are in turn removed. As city spaces become cleaner and more symbolically safe, defensive design becomes more abundant and paranoid.’\(^{58}\)

Whyte suggested that the undesirable public should be retained to ‘reassure us of our own normality’.\(^{59}\) Conversely if public-private enterprises continues to design against undesirables the scope for desirability will be tapered as postmodern enterprise seeks to further increase the economic efficiency or public-private space.

The postmodern reductionist approach to ostracising undesirable users and interactions is countered by the egalitarian notion of an inclusive architecture. Inclusive architecture is the practice of supplementing the built environment to encourage a true sense of community rather than a curated one.\(^{60}\) Ultimately the future of public space in cities will be determined by the extent to which designers of the built environment engage or disengage with profit driven spaces.

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\(^{59}\) William H. Whyte. The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces. (1988; Santa Monica, CA; Direct Cinema LTD), VHS 58 min

\(^{60}\) Unfortunately the notion of inclusive architecture could not be discussed further in the essay due to word constraints. It had to be mentioned, however briefly to illustrate the counter balance to postmodernism.


Mackay, Malcolm interviewed by Jonathan Green, Anti-homeless Architecture: The Conversation, ABC 3 September 3, 2013


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