Doing and undoing women homelessness

Call for papers
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The invisibility of homeless women

Recent research on homelessness from a gender perspective underlines the invisibility of homeless women in the urban space, as well as in public discourses (Lelubre, 2012; Wagener, 2014; Liagre et al., 2015; Maurin, 2017; Pleace, 2016; Reeve, 2018). Indeed, in dominant representations - media, press, and collective imaginaries - "the homeless" refers to a unique and masculine category, to which the image of the tramp, alienated and psychotic, is often associated. Little attention is paid to the feminine dimension, which is reflected in public policies as well as in the provision of aid and assistance services, that are conceived for a predominantly male audience. Academic research also contributes to this invisibility. Studies of homelessness rarely focus on women, with most of the production on this topic remaining centered on men's experiences (Reeve, 2018).

What also emerges from the studies that have looked at the relationship between homelessness and gender is that women's conditions combine different vulnerabilities that can cumulate or confront each other in their lived experience: being a woman and being homeless. As Reeve (2018) explains, housing production and distribution mechanisms, the role of gender, the socio-economic position of women (domestic work, part-time, underpaid work, etc.) - all these factors have an impact on access to housing and, therefore, on the vulnerability associated with housing loss. Moreover, women are more exposed to this type of risk because of domestic violence, situations of abandonment, maternal trauma, and bereavement.

At the same time, life on the streets is also strongly gendered. Women are less safe and are more exposed to violence (rape, assault) (Maurin, 2017). This is partly a consequence of the social norms of recognition and the imaginaries they produce: women living in the public space are seen as deviant due to their distance/absence from the home and the roles associated with it. These elements strongly affect their practice of the urban space, and they try to make themselves invisible by avoiding sleeping rough as much as possible. They may find refuge in fortune shelters (squats, cellars, shacks, caravans) or stay with relatives or friends. However, these forms of dwelling remain precarious and temporary and offer no guarantee of security or stability.

As for emergency shelters (of the Samu Social type), they remain mixed, although places are reserved for women. But for many women, these spaces "are worse than prison" (as we heard repeatedly during our respective field surveys), due to the lack of hygiene, privacy, and the frequent assaults.

On the other hand, the public responses that specifically address women take on a fairly strong spatial characterization and materialize in the configuration of places dedicated to them (women's shelters), whose impact on their lives remains to be questioned. Indeed, access to women's shelters and length of stay are subject to restrictive conditions: hosting fees, regulation of behaviours, strict schedules, limited visits.

While it should be noted that these conditions stem from a pedagogical and protective intention towards women, the fact remains that these structures are often described by women as spaces of subjugation and lack of freedom. Moreover, if the creation of dedicated spaces prevents women from living on the streets, it contributes at the same time to their invisibility and consequently to the reproduction of representations of homelessness as a masculine phenomenon. Women thus find themselves excluded from public discourses and social radars (including child care and protection).

Rethinking women's homelessness

How do homeless women inhabit the city? What physical and emotional relationships to the urban space do they develop and perform? How do their practices question the habitability of the city and the project(s) that underlie it?

Focusing our attention on homeless women and their living within the city aims, on the one hand, to account for a reality that often lies unseen (the *hidden or concealed homelessness* referred to by Pleace, 2016). On the other hand, it also questions categories that are ineffective in guiding the formulation of acceptable proposals (by the women themselves) and therefore reproduce or even reinforce the existing processes of marginalisation (Dietrich-Ragon, 2011). Thus, rethinking women's homelessness through the prism of inhabiting becomes an opportunity to rethink the production/creation of inhabitable spaces for them, and for other vulnerable individuals.

Inhabiting as a pragmatic and affective relationship to space

Following a pragmatic approach, "inhabiting" means for us "doing with space" (Lussault and Stock, 2010). This choice allows us to consider dwelling from a perspective that includes proximity and rootedness, but also mobility and displacement; and then habit, the ordinary, the everyday but also the unusual, the dis-ordinary and everything that results from crises (social, political, environmental, personal). Such an approach implies focusing on the practices that people (homeless women in our case) develop in their daily life and through which they create their "home". How do homeless women interact with the urban space? How do they qualify it and make it their own? Where, when, and how do they feel 'in their place'?

These questions can be explored in greater depth if we take into consideration the relationship between practices and the emotional and sensitive dimensions of their relationship to space (Bochet and Racine, 2002). In doing so, we can grasp the multiplicity of reasons that underlie anchoring, rupture, attachment, rejection, and estrangement. How are these dimensions (practices, emotions, sensitivity) related to the inhabitability of a place? By inhabitability we mean the process by which a place, at a given moment, becomes meaningful, emotionally appropriate, and transformed into an inhabited space. It also involves asking how the practices, emotions and sensitivity of homeless women, can be taken into account in the design of living spaces, to make them (more) inhabitable.

Homeless women. Personal space, intimate space and the intersections with shared spaces

How far does a homeless woman's space extend to and how? One would probably say that it coincides with the limits of her bodily space: for lack of private space, the home becomes the body. This inhabited space is linked to the *personal space* Sommer (1959; 2007) refers to, the space immediately surrounding a person's

body, a kind of extension of the body but in strict relation to the inner space contained by the skin. As this author explains, personal space can also be thought of in terms of *portable territory*, since each person takes it with him/her wherever he/she goes. It is an emotionally charged space, through which everyone negotiates proximity and distance, the spacing that allows or prevents relationships with others. The limits of personal space are invisible. This space may be under threat, for example in crowded public spaces, where intrusions may occur. It works for both protection and interaction, and its boundaries are determined by both the public and private spheres. It is the constantly changing result of the combination of personal and interpersonal dimensions. How does the condition of "homeless women" affect personal space and its limits? How do the latter change according to the spaces women inhabit, go through, share?

From a certain point of view, every person manages or arranges his or her own living space, if only with a gesture, a body posture. Sleeping with one's head in the crook of one's arm is an "act of architecture" (Goetz, 2018) since this gesture creates a distinction between an inside and an outside. But is this enough to make one feel at home? On the other hand, the furnishings of a house are signs that mark the presence of its inhabitants and their self-representation. If 'things are marks before they are goods' (Goetz, 2011: 46), and the relationship to things reveals the way a person inhabits a space, what happens when the home *is* the public space? Or a squat, a cellar, a shared living room? Or other forms of precarious and temporary housing? It then becomes important to ask how inhabiting changes from the crook of the arm, to the dislocation of objects (suitcases, a mattress, a blanket), to the setting up of a tent or a cardboard structure, and how relationships with others and the outside space are mediated.

Un/inhabitable spaces. Design issues at stake

The characteristics of a place do not condition its degree of habitability; this rather and above all depends on the relationship that is created between people and space (Simmel, 2004 [1984]; Vandenberghe, 2009 [2001]). The same place may be inhabitable for some and uninhabitable for others; it may be inhabited yet defined as uninhabitable. The subtle line that separates these two conditions changes according to the observer. But what does it mean to make a space (more or better) inhabitable? To address this question in its multiple facets, this publication draws on contributions from architecture, urban planning, anthropology, sociology, human geography, and social design, in order to compose a transdisciplinary reflection on what makes/could make a space inhabitable for homeless women.

"Homeless inhabiting" cannot be understood without taking into account the sensitive and emotional dimensions of the relationship to space - comfort, discomfort, hatred, fear, desire - and how these dimensions are performed through practices, gestures, speeches, bodily postures. The spaces where homeless women eat, sleep, wash, meet others, become meaningful spaces only through the embodied and emotional interactions that are enacted between people and spaces (Cloke et al., 2008). It is then a question of understanding how practices and emotional and sensitive dimensions are articulated in relation to the inhabitability of a place, to the possibility of making it one's own and feeling at home there. It also involves asking how practices, emotional and sensitive dimensions can be taken into account in the design of living spaces, in order to make them (more) inhabitable.

To this end, our approach is inspired by social design (Sommer, 1983), which aims to build bridges between those who design space (architects, town planners, designers) and those who use them. The particularity of social design lies in the fact that it focuses on the "micro" dimension of inhabiting (each person's practices and the emotional and sensitive dimensions of their relationship to space), based on an approach that is attentive to the human and political dimensions of design.

In doing so, our purpose is to reflect on how solutions can be put forward, ones that take into account the needs, but also the desires and aspirations of each one. This is not a trivial matter. Indeed, it is usually on the basis of needs that policies and services for homeless people are designed. And these needs are assumed

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to be the same for everyone (eating, sleeping, washing, urinating, defecating, socialising). Homeless people, whether women or men, are, so to speak, "reduced" to their needs, those that are considered common to all people and indispensable for self-maintenance (for example, that can be thought of in terms of self-care. (Tronto, 2008; Orem, 1991). However, the production of spaces aimed at meeting those needs reveals a gendered character. The presence of urinals (which are not suitable for women) in public spaces is a significant example of this. The generalisation of needs allows policies and projects to provide "one size fits all" solutions imagined as acceptable for everyone, but this is not always the case, which is what the gender approach allows us to highlight. But then, what to make of desires and aspirations? How can we grasp them? Are they generalizable? And how can design take them into account?

Articulation

This publication is the result of a three-day intensive workshop organised in February 2020 by Elisabetta Rosa, Noémie Emmanuel and Martin Wagener, in collaboration with Chloé Salembier and Gérald Ledent (LOCI-UCLouvain). During this workshop, entitled "In/habitable spaces. Doing and undoing women homelessness", we experimented with a co-creation approach between researchers, students, collectives of young architects, and associations working with homeless women. Our aim was to work on the elaboration of devices that could make the space more or better habitable for these people. The work carried out was presented on the fourth day in the form of a public exhibition. This moment was coupled with a one-day seminar whose aim was to put the results and reflections developed during the workshop into perspective and to further explore the question of homeless women's dwelling issues from an interdisciplinary point of view.

For this publication, we expect various contributions from different disciplines and approaches, including (but not limited to):

- homelessness and intersectionality
- gender and public policies concerning access to housing
- gender and accommodation facilities/shelters
- affectivity, intimacy, socio-familial relations and women's homelessness
- which projects for which women?
- co-creation as a housing inclusion device?
- different contexts, different cities, different women - a crossroads of views
- how to study women's experiences of homelessness: methodological issues

The creation of a portfolio presenting the work carried out during the workshop is also planned.

Terms of submission

Proposals for contributions (max. 3000 signs, including spaces) are expected by 15th November. They are to be sent to both Noémie Emmanuel: noemie.emmanuel@uclouvain.be and Elisabetta Rosa: elisabetta.rosa@uclouvain.be

The length of the articles will be between 25,000 and 30,000 signs (spaces included).

All texts can be written in French or English.

Schedule

25 September 2020: opening call for contributions

15 November 2020: deadline for abstract submission

15 December 2020: response to the authors

30 March 2021: first submission of articles

30 April 2021: return to authors

30 June 2021: final version of the articles

Publication expected in Autumn 2021.

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