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COMMENTARY

Beautified Brutality: Mapping Eugene's Hostile Design

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, scholars and educators have challenged the traditional focus of architectural history on styles and formal features, placing more emphasis on user experience. This experience, however, is not common to all. Each sector of society understands, inhabits, and utilizes architecture differently, leading to divergent ways of performing one's identity within the city. For example, unhoused people are often excluded from full participation in public life. This commentary shares an experiment that complements an architectural history course with a set of assignments where students engage with sociopolitical aspects of the built environment through mapping and analyzing anti-homeless, hostile design in Eugene, Oregon.

Keywords: *hostile architecture; homelessness; digital mapping; pedagogy*

Introduction

As Michel de Certeau has argued (1984), public space is not inert but constitutes a spatial order that organizes an ensemble of possibilities and interdictions to be actualized by users. Increasingly, architectural history courses have been informed by perspectives of the built environment that center on the user's experience. However, it is important to recognize that these possibilities and interdictions vary across different sectors of society. Public spaces often afford fewer potentials to marginalized individuals, for instance, deliberately excluding unhoused people from the city's public image. In fact, the scholarship of design strategies of exclusion is expanding, and architectural pedagogy is incorporating spatial justice topics. This commentary discusses a series of assignments in a general architectural history course where students explore the design of public spaces around them in terms of the experience they provide or deny unhoused persons. While the complex problem of homelessness must be understood in the context of many structural issues that lead to income inequities, discriminatory policies, and the lack of affordable housing, it is important for students, especially future designers, to recognize the role of design in normalizing and perpetuating injustice.

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The main campus of the University of Oregon is in Eugene, a city with one of the nation's highest unhoused population ratios. Like many other cities, Eugene uses a mix of punitive and coercive policing, regulation, and criminalization of rough sleepers. However, while the city's liberal society does not favor explicit hostility toward unhoused individuals (Parafiniuk-Talesnick and Banta 2022), many subtle design features discourage or prevent them from occupying public space. Unlike explicit measures, the disguised hostile design easily evades public scrutiny. In the set of exercises discussed here, students identify, analyze, and map hostile design in Eugene. This complement to the lectures on the history of contemporary architecture and design is intended to encourage students to examine the everyday spaces around them, to increase their sensibility to design's role in the city's potentialities and affordance for its unhoused people, and to foster a more sympathetic appreciation of different sectors of society.

Hostile Design

While from a broader perspective, the criminalization of homelessness is part of contemporary political economy (Mitchell 1997), the built environment plays an important role in actualizing and perpetuating these ideas. The relatively new term "hostile architecture" (also known by similar terms like "hostile design," "unpleasant architecture," "defensive architecture," and "disciplinary architecture") refers to the use of design to prevent people from using a space or an object in an unwanted manner. Some common examples include the use of armrests on benches to prevent sleeping and metal devices on curbs and planters to prevent skateboarding. Hostile architecture, as Petty (2016) points out, intentionally "designs out" certain identities from urban and public spaces. While hostile design may target different user groups (like teenagers, skateboarders, and addicted individuals), its use against unhoused people has increasingly become more popular.[1]

Unlike punitive measures, hostile design does not explicitly punish unhoused people. Instead, it aims to move the issue of homelessness out of sight, foreclosing the possibility of an encounter and hindering unhoused people's participation in the production of public space (Petty 2016). In fact, this physical removal of unhoused people from public spaces simultaneously excludes them from what constitutes the "public" (Iveson 2008). As Mitchell (1997) reminds us, annihilating the spaces that allow unhoused people to perform everyday functions (like sitting and sleeping) not only destroys the rights of those individuals, it also reinforces a "particularly brutal notion of citizenship within the public sphere." In other words, housed people, too, are impacted by this prioritization of the aesthetics of the space over people's interactions within it.

While hostile design, by definition, functions as a preventive measure, it is often hidden in plain sight. Whereas explicitly hostile examples, such as spikes on sidewalks, clearly

[1] For general discussions on hostile architecture, see Chadalavada and Sanjiv (2020), Licht (2017; 2020), Rosenberger (2017; 2020), Savicic and Savic (2016), Schindler (2014), and Whiteford (2008).

signal their function of preventing one from sleeping in public and may make the housed population feel morally uncomfortable (Petty 2016), subtler strategies do not attract public attention. For instance, Eugene's ubiquitous scene of boulders under bridges (Figure 1) goes unnoticed by most residents, except for those in need of shelter from rain who are left with an uninhabitable space. In fact, the most successful examples of hostile design disguise their true purpose.

Figure 1. Boulders under a bridge creating uninhabitable surfaces (Photo by author)

In contemporary American cities, the practice of rendering homelessness invisible is often part of a larger urban beautification project (Speer 2019). Consequently, many hostile designs are aesthetically pleasant. For example, the University of Oregon's campus in downtown Eugene uses segmented benches that deter rough sleepers from using them (Figure 2). However, the strategic use of color and material presents this broken surface as a stylistic choice rather than a hostile design measure.

Figure 2. A bench at the University of Oregon Campus in Eugene (Photo by author)

Other examples conceal preventative measures under socially acceptable and even desirable forms. For instance, in the environmentally conscious city of Eugene, where cycling evokes a healthy and eco-friendly mode of commuting, an unnecessary excess of bike racks in certain downtown areas or under bridges can promote a positive image of the city while simultaneously deterring campers from those areas. Planters, too, are often seen in terms of their environmental impact. However, their placement under the awning of a closed store functions as a "hidden hostile design" as one student put it. Ironically examples like planters with edible vegetables may appear to benefit unhoused people by providing free food. Such seemingly benign, beautiful, or useful hostile designs are abundant in our city.

Assignment Overview

Over the past few years, as part of a lecture course on the history of contemporary interior architecture, I have used a series of weekly assignments that task students with analyzing ordinary spaces through specific lenses. The most recent version of this exercise centered on the unhoused population, an important community in Eugene. Given that most students at the University of Oregon have never experienced homelessness, this assignment encouraged them to take an unfamiliar perspective. This change in viewpoint increased future architects' and designers' sensitivity to the (unintended) consequences of

design and promoted sympathy for unhoused individuals. To avoid further othering of this population, this imaginary exploration of an unhoused person's experience was situated in the larger context of other user groups and various aspects of the built environment.

These weekly assignments began by identifying and documenting some publicly accessible buildings in the city. Over the next few weeks, students delved into various aspects of architecture, such as branding strategies and surveillance mechanisms that complicate the user's experience. Although the initial assignments did not specify the user group, the focus of the assigned topics was on issues that disproportionately affect unhoused people. For instance, surveillance, as Monahan (2017) argues, plays a significant role in the criminalization and exclusion of unhoused people. Subsequent assignments focused on specific user groups, exploring issues like sexism. We then proceeded to examine how welcoming or rejecting a building was for unhoused people. Expanding the study from public interiors to urban spaces, the class then identified examples of hostile design in the public space around these buildings. This gradual introduction of unhoused users in the context of different identity groups and other aspects of architecture situated the experience of homelessness in relation to a multitude of experiences, rather than presenting the unhoused as an isolated group.

Throughout these activities, an interactive digital map (created using Google Maps)[2] served as the primary interface for sharing their explorations among peers through a weblog (hosted on WordPress). Initially, each student marked a public building as an entry on a provided map, introducing the building through images and a basic description. Collectively, the class populated the map with approximately 40 entries (Figure 3). Subsequently, for each assignment, every student worked on a different building from this pool. As students applied their understanding of the assigned reading to a building originally introduced by another student, they engaged with diverse perspectives from their peers. After selecting a building on the map, each student read their peer's introduction, visited the building, analyzed it from the specified perspective, published the resulting short essay on the class weblog, and added a link to the original Google Maps

[2] Google Maps is perhaps unrivaled as a tool in that everyone is already familiar with it, and tutorials and training can be completed in just a few minutes in class. In addition, most students can easily access it from their phones, take photos, and document their case studies on the spot. While compared to more powerful tools like ArcGIS, Google Maps is rudimentary, its technological simplicity, ubiquity, and stability are great advantages. The simple interface of Google Maps comes at the expense of practical limitations, such as leaving us with few options for organizing and analyzing data. More critically, there are political and ethical concerns. As Zwicker (2010) points out, using Google risks exposing students' work to "a massive commercial enterprise based in a foreign country." At a more fundamental level, while digital mapping has radically increased our access to spatial and social justice, GIS is a tool originally created for military operations. As Jack Gieseking (2018) reminds us, "choosing to accept the affordances and design of GIS-as-is only replicates the militarization and corporatization for which this software was created" (642). While he argues for using free, open-source software like QGIS, OpenStreetMaps, and R, and advocates creating more accessible options, most open-source software requires a higher level of digital proficiency, often leaving problematic software like Google Maps as the only available option.

entry.[3] The accumulation of weekly analysis added new layers of understanding to each building. When viewed together, this collection of diverse building types (including restaurant, shop, market, library, museum, train station, etc.) captured the diverse potentials within Eugene's public space as a whole.

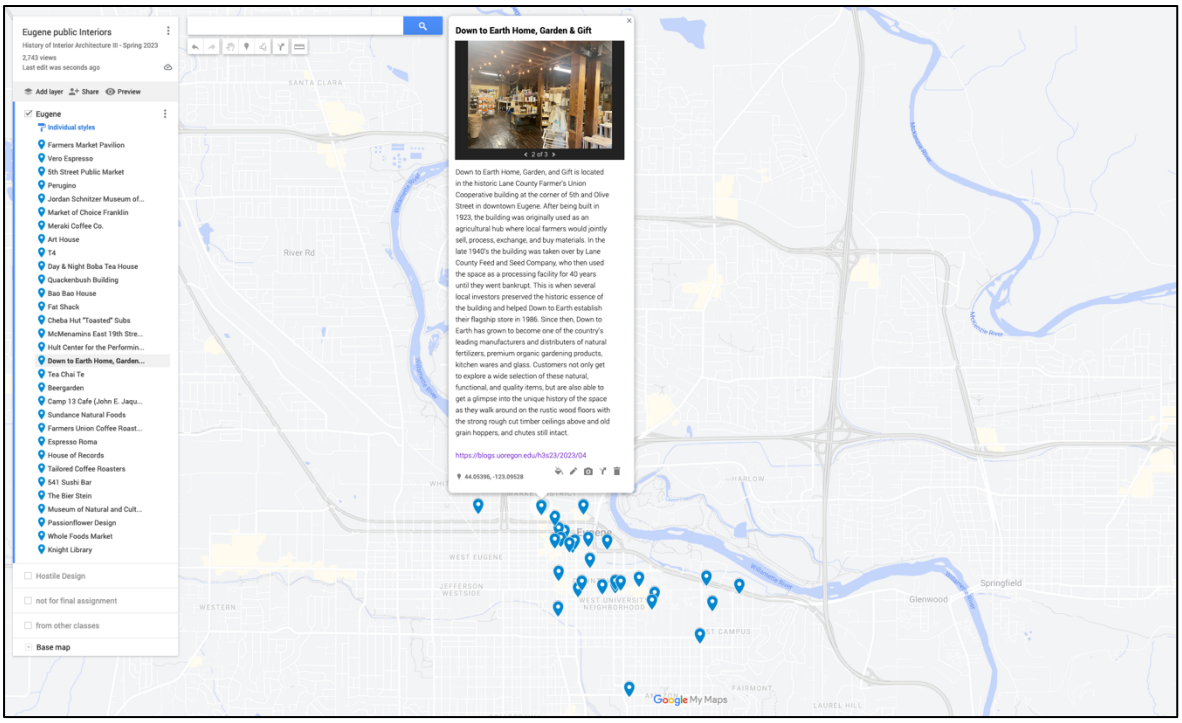

Figure 3. The editor view of the Google Map. The selected pin shows the description and images added during the first assignment.

In the last two weeks, the focus shifted from public interiors to urban furniture and elements. This time, students identified examples of hostile design in the city and shared their analyses on the class website (Figure 4).[4] They also created new entries on the map using a different color (Figure 5). The assignments culminated in a paper where each student, returning to the building they originally introduced, discussed what this building afforded to unhoused people in relation to the furniture in the surrounding public space. The final paper also utilizes the map to identify the hostile designs marked by other students. Beyond the class, the free public interface of Google Maps allows for future engagement of the larger public in the project.

[3] While students were required to visit the buildings in person, the Google Maps platform facilitated the exchange of ideas and streamlined the process of selecting a building and navigating to the site. Beyond harnessing the availability of devices and familiar tools, this navigation between digital images and the physical building, as well as between reading about a building and experiencing it firsthand, was intended to enhance understanding, especially for the many buildings in architectural history that students cannot visit in person.

[4] At the beginning of the class, students signed a FERPA consent for the use of a public blog and social media. Most students chose to share their works online. A few students chose to create private posts.

Figure 4. Examples of student works posted to the class website (Shared with permission)

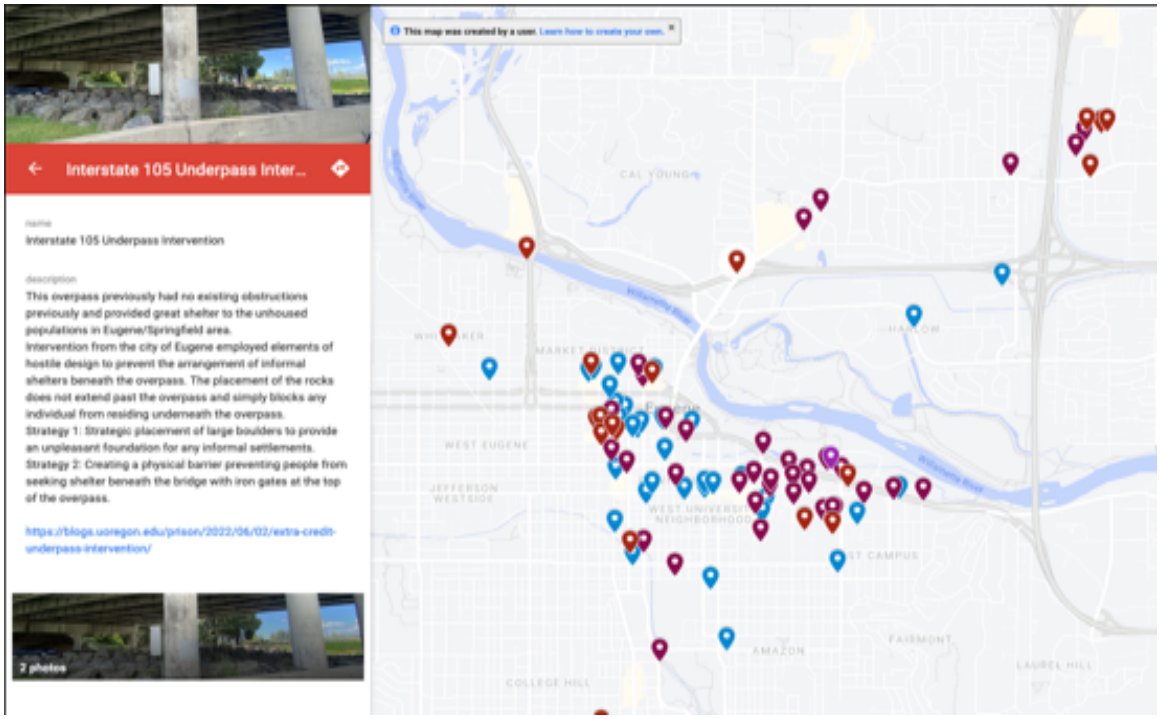

Figure 1. The public view of the Google Map. Blue pins mark the buildings; red pins mark hostile design examples.

This relatively simple set of exercises encouraged students to notice the numerous instances of hostile design in their environment and to perceive the city from a fresh perspective. Describing benches at the University of Oregon campus, a student wrote:

> The University of Oregon is a university that aims for an inclusive community, seen through the liberal teachings as well as the many issues that the university brings to light to it's [sic] students. But the university seems to maintain some hostile architecture, creating an ironic scene on campus.

Mapping these examples of hostile design in downtown Eugene near some of their favorite public spaces challenged students to recognize their ubiquity in everyday public spaces. As a whole, the density of these instances on the map reveals how little the city embraces its struggling population. Considering that the studied urban furniture included both government-funded projects and private interventions, this hostility appears to be the accepted, if not the prevailing, norm in Eugene.

Conclusion

Despite Eugene's and the University of Oregon's overall liberal atmosphere, most students are not introduced to homelessness as a structural issue. Outside academia, the media often depict people experiencing homelessness as failed individuals, either to elicit pity (and, to some extent, empathy) or to portray them as incapable and indolent (Lugo-Ocando 2019). Consequently, the city's unhoused population is often denigrated, seen as parasitic at best and dangerous at worst. In design studios, for instance, students occasionally decide (or are encouraged) to secure buildings against unhoused people.

As the course instructor, I gained valuable insights into Eugene through my students' work. Like them, I delved into the political dimension of architecture by examining different parts of the city through this lens. Throughout this practice, we debated whether different examples constituted hostile architecture. For instance, while some examples like empty bike racks under a highway bridge clearly serve no purpose beyond preventing camping, others like rows of racks on the backside of an academic building could potentially have functional reasons. These blurred lines underscore the earlier point that hostile architecture often conceals its true purpose. Another complex question was the absence of benches suitable for sleeping in parks and similar public spaces. While the removal of benches from parks after rough sleepers populated them is occasionally reported, the problem often goes unnoticed when benches are missing from the start. The fact that designers, at best, avoid implementing defensive architecture strategies against unhoused people speaks volumes about the city and the larger society.

While dedicated courses on homelessness are essential for in-depth study, incorporating shorter practices into more general courses can introduce a broader range of students to discussions about homelessness, cultural biases against those experiencing it, and the role of design in perpetuating these ideas. This series of assignments was a

response to the reality of a city where a significant homeless population is discouraged from using public space. In turn, the city's hostile design served as a case study for exploring the impact of design on everyday urban life. By identifying examples of hostile architecture, students gained a better appreciation of how design affords different users vastly different experiences of the city and shapes their identities in divergent ways.

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