Space Invaders

Sharp spikes, flashing lights, wayward sprinklers: hostile architecture restricts how public space is used by all of us. But grassroots groups are trying to make this dangerous design trend a passé relic.

by **Lilian Bernhardt**

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I n the space of 90 days, Jason Russell's life changed dramatically. The firefighter and father of three had a workplace injury, followed by mental health challenges, which led to him becoming unhoused. For 18 years he slept rough in Melbourne, squatting in abandoned factories, buildings and the surrounding streets. Jason says his priorities at that time were finding shelter, water and access to bathroom facilities – tasks made more difficult by the intentional deterrents embedded in the city's urban landscape. "It's bad enough that you're homeless," he says, "but then they're actively going out of their way to infringe on your world, putting up barriers on purpose."

Jason would often find a seemingly safe place to rest for the night, only to discover, on closer inspection, infrastructure designed for discomfort. Small, sharp spikes on the ground prevented him from sitting or lying down. Sprinklers in parks were positioned to wet benches. Loud music piped through PA systems disturbed his sleep, while armrests on public seating limited his ability to stretch out.

This is "hostile architecture", a trend that started a few decades ago but has recently been ramping up, according to Architects Without Frontiers. Its antisocial design choices hide in plain sight, with the intention to curb certain kinds of behaviour, and deter certain groups of people. "Public space works as a kind of visual legitimation of the way power influences society," says Professor Kim Dovey, chair of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of Melbourne. "Public space is not public when there are exclusions."

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> **PROFESSOR KIM DOVEY, CHAIR OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**

Council to Homeless Persons CEO Deborah Di Natale agrees. She says hostile architecture serves to "displace the visibility of extreme inequality," adding that the civic impulse to sweep evidence of homelessness from our city streets is deeply offensive. "Sleeping rough is incredibly difficult in terms of the weather we have in Melbourne – the extreme cold that people are in at the moment. It also means people have to be vigilant while they're sleeping, and that lack of sleep from always being hyper-alert has really negative impacts on your mental health," she explains.

"We know that, long term, not being able to sleep can really impact people, and hostile architecture is making it more difficult for people to find comfortable places to sleep."

Hostile architecture can also be dangerous. It pushes people experiencing homelessness into more precarious situations, out of public view, reducing safety and wellbeing. Jason sees a friend's death as the direct result of hostile architecture. "It all came to the forefront when this kid got moved along," he recalls of his mate. "He couldn't sit on a corner because of the spiky things in the architecture, so he ended up on the footpath. A cop then said he was blocking the footpath – *move along, move along* – so he ended up in the dark, under an overpass.

"He was new to the streets, and he was so generous," Jason says. "He would help others before he helped himself." One night, the young man encountered two people. "They thought it would be fun to go into the city and kick a homeless person to death," says Jason. "That's exactly what they did."

He says it makes him ill to think that people are investing time and money into these initiatives. "The money could help someone on the streets," he says, proposing the funding be redirected to drop-in centres, which helped him greatly while he experienced homelessness. Jason volunteered at Saint Mark's every day for three years, helping do dishes, receiving meals in return. It's how he found his path out of homelessness, after being offered a role as a public speaker through his work there. He finds this new position incredibly healing.

Earlier this month, a student group from Overnewton Anglican Community College took the issue of hostile architecture reform to the Parliament of Victoria. As participants in the YMCA Victoria Youth Parliament program, Lauren Grimaud, Dylan Gekas, Pippa Wiggins, Charlie Biberhofer, Elsie Holland and Scarlet Lee presented a bill calling for the modification and removal of hostile architecture in Australia, to address "the issue of public space being unsuitable for those who use it the most".

"I think that homelessness makes people uncomfortable," said Gekas, "[but] I think pushing it away, so we can no longer see it, is really unempathetic and cruel."

Grimaud called the proposed reforms "a pretty effective way to instil some short-term comfort that makes the quality of life for those experiencing homelessness just a bit better." The bill passed in Youth Parliament and will now be handed to the Minister for Youth Natalie Suleyman for consideration into policy. More than 20 Youth Parliament bills have become law throughout the program's history, meaning this bill has a real shot at creating change.

There are currently no laws in Australia that specifically ban hostile architecture. However, instances of public pressure have led to its removal. In 2019, Moreland City Council installed armrests in the middle of benches that were commonly used by people sleeping rough. Following public criticism, the council passed an amended motion to remove armrests from three of the five benches.

All forms of hostile architecture need to be removed, says Di Natale, who's calling on authorities to do so. "Local councils should prioritise a city that is welcoming – a city that does all it can to ensure that people who are sleeping rough are provided with a house and support as a matter of urgency." ∎