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Hostile Architecture

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The focus of my project is centered around the concept of public spaces and architecture that is intentionally designed to prevent unhoused people from having unlimited access to the environment for survival purposes. This represents an environmental justice issue because an underprivileged population is purposely being displaced and excluded from urban green spaces, parks, benches, train stations, sidewalks, and many other aspects of the environment generally taken for granted. Hostile architecture is a concept based on exclusion of a disadvantaged population from a specific area, without the general population noticing. The unhoused population relies on the environment and access to free spaces for warmth, shelter, food, water, healthcare, and many other daily activities; thus, by limiting their access to the environment, we are also creating more hurdles for them to overcome when seeking out basic needs. The majority of society disidentifies with this population, which contributes to the increasingly dependent relationship that homeless people have with their environments. In my project I am targeting a general audience so that more awareness can be brought to this issue of environmental exclusion. By failing to see these fellow humans as victims who need help, we are in a sense equating them to environmental fixtures that can be forcefully moved in order to improve the aesthetic of a city—which is only further oppressing them.

Personally, I think that this is an interesting topic because my hometown, like many others across the nation, has banned homelessness—which made me curious as to how that could be possible. If people are unable to afford housing, but being unhoused is “illegal,” what are they supposed to do? Fines or jail time as the answer to that question would be an obvious booster for the county prisons; thus, the prison industrial complex would obtain more power over yet another vulnerable population. Luckily, many officers and state officials do not agree with or enforce these serious legal actions, but it does not prevent them from occurring for “causing a nuisance.” Rather than spend resources on helping these people, many of whom are battling addiction and mental illness, the city chose to fund police officers and “affordable” housing programs that turned out to be an act of redlining in disguise. In addition to this personal experience, I had also learned about spiked benches in a class last semester, which require a person to pay money to sit on a public bench in order to deter sleeping or resting on them. Upon my preliminary research, I found that people were addressing this issue in various ways. In Europe, public outrage has led to placing mattresses and cushions over the spikes that are meant to prevent people from loitering or sleeping in an area. The strong public opposition to and

realization of hostile architecture in England and France specifically, has led to the removal or replacement of some benches and spikes. Having found these initial articles, I wanted to examine whether defensive architecture designs were prevalent in the U.S. too. Shockingly, I found that some of the cities with the highest unhoused populations have the most occurrences of environmental exclusion practices. Last year, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) was faced with a multi-million-dollar, class act lawsuit for having disposed of the belongings of numerous homeless citizens just outside of Oakland. Across the bay in San Francisco is notorious for being one of the most unwelcoming cities for unhoused populations due to the abrasive architecture. New York City and Portland are also cities that reinforce environmental exclusion in certain areas due to privatization and aesthetics. Local movements in these cities are writing articles to spread awareness, but overall, it seems there is little action being taken against the implementation of these facilities.

How a city is designed impacts the environment, but also has the ability to influence the prevalence social justice issues. For this reason, I also think that it is important to understand the perspectives of architects and city officials who are designing and implementing these structures, to see why they think these are necessary or if they even recognize the state-sanctioned oppression which occurs as a result. Privatizing the land is an extenuating practice of settler colonialism that has perpetuated exclusion based on financial and racial identities. Regardless, I think being able to show pictures of the spaces and architecture will provide a shock factor because some of the designs are so common or “artsy” that the average person would not even think about how it prevents using the space. I thought that visual presentations via a collage, Canva infographic, and a letter to apathetic supporters would best be able to draw attention to the discreet designs and allow for educational points to be made in regard to environmental justice. These projects represent how hostile architecture is promoting a separation of people from the environment by monetizing land and resources. While this notion might seem outlandish to some, I think that an examination of privilege and your local city might be the best way to convince people that oppression can occur right under our noses.

To the supporters of hostile architecture:

When will you have enough to be content? To construct and design cities that exclude people who make you feel guilty to pass by on the street is an unmatched act of selfishness. To place aesthetics and space over the life of another human being is fundamentally devaluing their existence. I used to feel guilty or even annoyed by the presence of unhoused individuals because it made me face my privilege—something that was uncomfortable at first. However, as I've gotten older and experienced more interactions with this population, it seems that most homeless people are forced into their situation based on political, economic, and societal influences. What is the purpose of owning property that sits empty when other members of your community are sleeping in sub-zero temperatures? A city is only as rich as its poorest areas. There is no escaping the disadvantages of the economic and political systems that are highlighted by the fact that some members of society cannot even afford to meet their basic needs.

We as a society should care about this issue because it not only brings up issues of ethics regarding how we treat our fellow human beings, but it also questions how far we are willing to let settler colonialism extend into capitalism. To create an exclusive greenspace by placing spikes or a monetary value on it, we are inherently pushing ourselves further away from nature. A connection to our environment is essential to our existence and future generations because if we continue to value objects over ideas then exploitation will persist in every facet of civilization. Exclusion of people via exploitation of land is not a sustainable practice and does not contribute to solving any problems. The process of change is a slow one, but sitting on a pedestal of money doesn't make you better than the most disadvantaged member of your community. I'm writing to urge you to make a change and don't be afraid to challenge the current solutions to this problem.

Best of luck,

Hannah Sparks

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