Sleeping on Homelessness

Many urban areas have implemented hostile architecture to their cities.[1] Hostile architecture are architectural designs that prevent certain uses of those spaces--like spikes under overhangs (to prevent sitting or sleeping on the ground), studs on flat surfaces (to prevent skateboarding), benches that are segmented or sloped (to prevent sleeping on the bench), or subtle high pitched noises (to prevent young people from loitering).[2]

Some private business owners use hostile architecture to prevent homeless individuals from sleeping in front of their storefront so as to promote order and cleanliness around the store. Private business owners may worry that having a homeless individual in their storefront may discourage business, as shoppers feel uncomfortable or unsafe around them. Because homeless populations are often associated with crime, they may also implement hostile architecture to protect their property values. Additionally, having individuals live outside in public places takes a toll on the upkeep of these public places. By implementing hostile architecture, cities may cut back on costs needed to address the consequences from individuals living outside.

Hostile architecture is often criticized for being a "quick fix" to a problem that does not have any quick fixes. Homeless individuals need safe housing. As such, cities cannot rely on hostile architecture for managing homelessness because it does not solve the underlying problem. Instead, it reduces access to places for sleep that are covered or elevated. Critics of hostile architecture argue that it decreases the welfare of the homeless and distracts from other necessary policies (like increased funding to homeless shelters). In addition, critics argue that cities and businesses that use hostile architecture do not treat homeless individuals with dignity. For example, benches in public parks are an important tool for some homeless individuals to get comfortable sleep at night. By unnecessarily adding a slope to the bench, the city reduces the usefulness of the bench for everyone (who wants to sit on an uncomfortable bench?) solely to be sure that this public bench cannot be used by the homeless.

Many people have found ways to make hostile architecture less hostile. For example by placing mattresses or cushions over spikes. Additionally, there have been social media movements seeking to spread awareness about hostile architecture. Some uses of social media are benign, such as petitions. But some uses are more questionable. For example, there are Youtube videos that teach people how to remove skateboard studs from concrete.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in homelessness. Does the moral permissibility of hostile architecture change in circumstances like these?

2. Hostile architecture can be used to prevent homeless individuals from sleeping in certain places or to prevent skateboarding. Is the moral permissibility of hostile architecture different when it is used for different purposes?

3. Is it ever morally permissible to illegally destroy hostile architecture (e.g., removing studs)?

4. Is there a difference in the moral permissibility of using hostile architecture in public spaces and private spaces?

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/nyregion/hostile-architecture-nyc.html
[2] https://www.vice.com/en/article/kzm53n/photos-of-the-most-egregious-anti-homeless-architecture

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