

Category of Submission: Interior Design

Homeless shelter design: a psychologically recuperative approach

Persons who are homeless are often victims of life crises that can result in emotional disorientation. It follows that homeless shelters should possess an architectural design that fosters a counterbalancing sense of healing and refuge from this distress of life on the streets. Perhaps among the most impactful aspects of environments for the homeless are psychological ramifications that encompass issues of personal space, territoriality and the spatial nature of human social interaction.

Unfortunately, restricted building funds coupled with shelter organizations' minimal staffing and time often make creating a homeless shelter design that is fully functional, safe, and restorative difficult to achieve. Unintentionally, this can create environments that do not fully address social damage inflicted by street life or successfully coax homeless persons to commit to programs that can promote healing.

This creative submission proposes that assistance in planning recuperative shelter environments may be found in Abraham Maslow's self-actualization theory, a psychological construct often referenced by social scientists engaged in studies of the homeless. This humanistic personality theory may facilitate a flexible, user-centered approach to design. Maslow's self-actualization theory moves beyond his well-known 'hierarchy of needs' and provides pragmatic, detailed descriptions of optimal human psychological adjustment. These characteristics are focused and yet general in nature. A review of these characteristics brings to mind qualities many would use to describe a good friend. For example, an self-actualized person

- is realistically oriented;
- is accepting of him/herself and others;
- is focused on problems outside him/herself;
- believes in the basic good of life and approaches people without stereotype;
- is philosophical and possesses a non-hostile sense of humor; and,
- can discriminate between good and evil and maintains a personal moral code (Maslow, 1968).

Many of Maslow's concepts might be interpreted and supported through architectural form, and may be particularly applicable to facilities that serve persons in crisis. When coupled with relevant architectural concepts from Alexander's pattern theory (Alexander, et. al, 1977) and CPTED (Crime Prevention through Environmental Design) (Poyner, 1983), a theory-to-practice grid emerges that may facilitate a practical, empathetic approach to homeless shelter design. Further, because Maslow theorizes that few people ever attain full self-actualization, the grid may suit the needs of both the shelter staff members and vulnerable homeless clients. The theory-to-practice grid is envisioned as a living, changing framework that will grow and evolve to include other aspects of human experience such as universal design, sustainability, and further treatment of social justice issues. Therefore, dissemination of the grid to others for their feedback is an important aspect of its positive transformation, and this is the hope for this presentation proposal.

Designing from a psychological personality theory starting point is perhaps particularly important in the case of 'first-contact' spaces, such as an pre-admittance area of a shelter where homeless persons make application for food, shelter and rehabilitative programs. This is because first impressions may be a contributing factor in a homeless person's decision to commit or continue to reject reintegration with society (Davis, 2004). To explore this idea, this creative project theoretically applies the Maslow theory-to-practice grid to a real homeless shelter's pre-admittance area. Images of this project are provided here. If accepted for presentation, an animated walk-through movie of this solution will also be shown.