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# A Shelter is a Shelter is a Shelter

Response to “Zero Flat. The Design of a New Type of Apartment for Chronically Homeless People”

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The article on a “new type of apartment for chronically homeless people” describes some interesting innovations in creating shelter spaces for homeless people. The result is a shelter that is smaller than many other shelters (with space for only ten homeless people), has obviously less rules, and you can bring your pets and drinks.

There are a number of positive aspects of this “innovation”. Especially the plan is to create a welcoming atmosphere in a place which is centrally located and to take on board the needs and preferences of homeless people when designing the interior part.

However, the presentation of this kind of shelter also raises a number of questions.

- Is this really a feasible alternative to the larger shelters heavily criticized in the article, given the fact, that you would need around a hundred of these shelters (and 200 volunteers “keeping company”) to provide temporary accommodation for the more than a thousand people counted on the streets of Barcelona? It is obvious that even with much less reflections about design and the memories of former rough sleepers, almost every kind of provision which would be of such small size would be better equipped to provide a more accepting atmosphere than a large shelter. But you would need many of them to replace the larger shelters.
- The target group is described as “chronically homeless persons with difficulties adapting to any other housing resource due to the high degree of their social exclusion”. Who are these persons and how are they selected? It is not explained how this group is chosen out of the more than a thousand people living in public, outdoor spaces of Barcelona on any night. But there are a number of assumptions made about this group. Obviously they prefer benches to normal beds (which are only provided for the two volunteers). Obviously, they want some intimacy and privacy though “they would never choose to live in a ‘normal’ home

even if they had access to one". And obviously they are in need to climb a staircase preparing them for the transition toward a "mainstream life" before they can accept to move to a "real" apartment. The authors seem to ignore completely the critical literature about the shortcomings of the so-called "staircase of transition", but – putting it a bit more cynically – rather plea for making the lower step of it more cosy.

- It might also be asked, if a shelter for ten rough sleepers in one room really distances itself profoundly from "the ritual of queuing, noises, smells and anonymous encounters" which is criticised as characterising other types of support for homeless people. Again, the sheer size of it will make it easier to know each other and instead of queuing users may wait in a kind of lobby (the "agora") before they enter the sleeping area. But one might have some doubts about the absence of noise and smell in that area.

The article, with all its enthusiasm for this "new type of housing" and its capacity "to instil the emotional and cultural aspects of a home" fails to mark the differences between this small shelter and a real home. A real home is a place where you can stay not only at night between 9pm and 7am, but 24/7, where you don't have to share your sleeping room with nine other people you have not chosen, where you have a real bed and not a bench with a mattress, where you can store your belongings, where you have the key and decide who enters it; and where you don't have to speak to a volunteer every night, before you can go to bed and get some sleep.

Some of the praising of the quality of this shelter is questionable, such as if it would create "conditions favourable to spatial appropriation and the possibility of intimacy", just because the first few people entering the room can choose their preferred bench (and the rest has to accept what is left for them) and you can lower a roller blind in front of your bench.

The "zero flat" remains a shelter, probably a cosier one than many others, but it is and remains a shelter and is far away from what constitutes a real home. In admiring the qualities of this shelter, the article at the same time accepts the notion of long-term homeless people being unable to live in real homes without being "prepared" for it in different types of temporary provisions. It would be interesting to explore the proportion of people having to live on the streets of Barcelona, who would really prefer this type of shelter to a real home, if they would ever have the choice.