



## The London Spikes Controversy: Homelessness, Urban Securitisation and the Question of 'Hostile Architecture'

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### Abstract

This article examines an ostensibly new feature of the securitised urban landscape: 'hostile architecture'. Following controversy in 2014 London over 'anti-homeless spikes' – metal studs implanted at ground level designed to discourage the homeless from sleeping in otherwise unrestricted spaces – certain visible methods of environmental social control were temporarily subject to intense public scrutiny and debate. While contests over public and urban spaces are not new, the spikes controversy emerged in the context of broader socio-political and governmental shifts toward neoliberal arrangements. Using the spikes issue as a case study, I contextualise hostile architecture within these broader processes and in wider patterns of urban securitisation. The article then offers an explanatory framework for understanding the controversy itself. Ultimately the article questions whether the public backlash against the use of spikes indicates genuine resistance to patterns of urban securitisation or, counterintuitively, a broader public distaste for both the homeless and the mechanisms that regulate them.

### Keywords

Hostile architecture; London; urban securitisation; public space; neoliberalism; homelessness.

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## Introduction

In June 2014 controversy erupted on social media about intermittently spaced, inch-high metal studs installed in an alcove of a high-end apartment building in South London. The controversy originated on Twitter after a user known as 'EthicalPioneer' posted a photo of the studs (see Figure 1) along with the text:

Anti-homeless studs. So much for community spirit :(

Over the next few days, the image was reposted thousands of times on social media, and the so-called 'anti-homeless spikes' became the subject of news stories around the world.<sup>1</sup> The controversy prompted vocal debates about urban space, homelessness and an apparently new and novel feature in the urban landscape: 'hostile architecture'. Within a week, the spikes were removed by the building's management despite being installed on private property and not breaking any local planning laws. The public outcry against these particular spikes temporarily highlighted two facets of urban life that go largely ignored in mainstream popular discourse: homelessness; and the intentional 'designing out' of certain identities, behaviours and categories of people from urban and public spaces.<sup>2</sup> This example is not taken as representative of processes of urban securitisation happening around the world nor indicative of public attitudes towards such regimes. Nonetheless, it provides an interesting case study through which to consider certain social, cultural and political dimensions relating to public space within cities.



**Figure 1: 'Anti-homeless' spikes installed in an apartment building entrance in South London**

Source: @EthicalPioneer

'Hostile architecture', also known as 'defensive' or 'disciplinary' architecture, is a relatively recent term. It loosely describes various structures that are attached to or installed in spaces of public use in order to render them unusable in certain ways or by certain groups. Along with metal studs such as those in London, the most common and conspicuous examples are benches and seating that are unusable for any purpose other than sitting, by virtue of their design (metal dividers, undulant or gradated surfaces); and anti-skateboarding devices such as 'pigs ears', protruding metal deterrents installed on ledges to prevent skaters from practicing tricks.<sup>3</sup>

Various other forms of environmental social control exist and have longer histories of use: for example, use of ultraviolet lights in public toilets which prevent intravenous drug users from sighting veins and thus 'shooting up'; installation of CCTV cameras in public spaces; and even urban planning and design models aimed at orchestrating or limiting the size of crowds (see Fussey et al. 2012). All such measures are aimed at exerting some form of disciplinary control over users of public and urban spaces. The precise line that divides hostile architecture from other forms of environmental social control is ill-defined, though there can be little doubt that new techniques and mechanisms of spatialised social control continue to emerge in the contested spaces of the city.

Over several decades, various researchers and theorists have identified and tracked the increasing securitisation of urban and public space in contemporary cities (Deukmedjian 2013; Hayward 2004; Lippert and Walby 2013; Sorkin 1992). Davis for example, identifies the 'militarisation' of the urban spaces of cities – in his case, Los Angeles – through explicit fortification (barbed wire, spiked fences, and 'bumproof' benches) of urban space, which he describes as the 'strategic armouring of the city against the poor' (Davis 1992: 160). Other researchers have claimed that public space is becoming increasingly privatised (Blomley 2004; Mitchell 2005; White 2012). This can occur officially by city councils excluding certain groups from spaces owned by the city, as well as through the selling or leasing of public land to private entities (see Wright 1997). It can also occur unofficially through implementation of construction methods and regulations that selectively sanction certain ways of using public space, while precluding unsanctioned or undesirable (that is, non-profitable) activities and uses (Blomley 2010: 332). Such shifts highlight contemporary changes in the social construction of urban public spaces that reveal the overt influence of a series of interrelated developments: 'the rise of consumerism, the mass privatisation of public space, and the intensification of social regulation' (White 2012: 33).

This article is concerned with the identification of certain forms of urban securitisation as hostile architecture, a pejorative term usually used to signify opposition to the structure identified. Discussion of the explicit fortification of urban spaces through hostile architecture arguably ignores the myriad ways urban and public spaces are routinely controlled, such as through the application of coercive and exclusionary logics. The topic of homelessness is often central to debates about hostile architecture, with urban rough sleepers – the most conspicuous and emblematic figures of homelessness – framed as being unjustly targeted by these environmental mechanisms of social control.

Kramer and Lee (1999: 136) state that '[t]he existence of the "homeless" tells us very much about the society that gave birth to such a designation'. With this in mind, this article examines how public responses to the London spikes were informed by specific understandings of urban space and homelessness. The article questions whether public responses to the spikes, which were mostly in opposition to them, can be understood as demonstrating genuine resistance against projects of urban securitisation or, perhaps counterintuitively, whether the spikes installations are actually attributable to these same processes of urban control.

This article commences by situating the spikes issue within relevant social, political and governmental change over recent decades. Contextualising the spikes controversy in relation to historically recent shifts in welfare, penology, criminal justice, urban geography and governance – policing and regulations – assists in providing a more nuanced understanding of the issue. Having established this, the article then offers a modest explanatory framework for better understanding the spikes issue and the responses it elicited.

### The punitive turn

While practices of securing public spaces and private property against the threats posed by persons (ab)using streets are neither new nor unique, both the technologies and discursive justifications being utilised to achieve these goals have changed over recent decades (Coleman, Tombs and Whyte 2005: 2513). Homelessness and transient lifestyles have long been signifiers of 'Otherness', and those living in such ways have long histories of exclusion, stigmatisation and punitive treatment (see Scott 1998). More recently, a shift has been identified in which modern Western societies have moved toward more exclusionary arrangements of the social sphere: what Jock Young terms, an 'exclusive society' (1999). Central to Young's diagnosis is the advent of late-modernity, characterised by shifts from anthropophagic (absorbing) to anthropoemic (emitting) state and social responses to difference and deviance. Take, for example, the retraction of the welfare state; increasing inequality of the distribution of resources; the commodification of the social world and the correlative rise of the new individualism; and the essentialising of the Other (who becomes understood on the basis of individual pathology and fault, rather than the product of various social factors such as poverty, education and opportunity).

David Garland's authoritative work (1985, see also 2001) charts recent shifts in Western penology which are characterised by a movement away from the penal welfare model toward more punitive and individually-focused understandings of and responses to crime and deviance. Within this broader field, he identifies 'a more general movement away from the traditional laying down of *laws* towards an increasing ... mobilisation of *norms*' as vehicles for state intervention and regulation (Garland 1985: 235). He continues:

Intervention can now be premised upon a 'condition', a 'character' or a 'mode of life', which dictates a failure to meet one's social obligations or else an inability to do so ... What was once a hierarchy of severity has now become a much more differentiated and diverse grid of dispositions. (Garland 1985: 235)

Garland (2001: 75) subsequently connects this broadening of the socio-legal category of deviance to synchronous shifts in society more generally: social and governmental attitudes, public and economic policy and the pairing back of welfare and support structures, which reflect the new penal arrangement. While modes of existence such as poverty and homelessness have long been sites of regulation and coercion by the state, the shift described by Garland underscores emerging understandings of the individual and its relation to the neoliberal state. Wacquant (2009: 13) claims that these socio-political shifts are anything but coincidental, being the perfect accompaniments to the new punitive model, what he terms the '*rapprochement*' of social and penal policy.

The UK and, more specifically, London – a notoriously highly securitised and surveilled urban environment – has been a central site of many of these shifts (Greene 2014). The UK, like most Western developed countries has undergone a broad-scale abandonment of the welfare state and the retraction of its functions (Garland 2001; Hancock and Mooney 2013; Young 1999). This is matched by similar institutional shifts in responses to crime, deviance and disorder (Young 1999: 122). The policing and regulation of homelessness, for example, has become increasingly punitive and coercive, with some jurisdictions introducing fines for rough sleeping and UK-based charities moving toward models of 'aggressive outreach' (see Adams 2014; Gander 2015).<sup>4</sup> Hostile architecture has been framed in media and public discourse as an apparently new phenomenon. I argue, however, that this is misleading. Indeed the social, political and regulatory milieu in which the spikes controversy existed is more broad, diffuse and longstanding.

### **Poverty in the revanchist city**

The city has been a central and explicit site of these socio-political and economic shifts (Hayward 2004). The 'new' city that emerges from the nexus of late-modern capitalism and the shifts described in the last section has been termed the 'punitive' or 'revanchist city' (Smith 1996). This city seeks to recast the urban ghettos and degraded neighbourhoods with their images of poverty, social decay and disorder into what Harvey (1990: 295) terms a 'politics of image', aimed at attracting people and capital 'of the right sort'. The most famous example of this shift was in New York City (US) under Mayor Giuliani, which saw a shift from policies that sought to alleviate the conditions of homelessness, poverty and systemic vulnerability, to more punitive approaches premised on the ideological and regulatory frameworks discussed above (Feldman 2004).<sup>5</sup>

Such shifts are not restricted to New York, and have been identified in many Western cities (see Bridge and Watson 2011). But the successful rollout of features of the revanchist city has been made possible through an intentional coincidence of public and private regulatory and economic interests, what Coleman et al. (2005: 2512) describe as the 'ascendancy of capital' in city-building and order maintenance processes. This, they claim, involves a relaxation of scrutiny on the activities of business (enacted through broad-scale economic deregulation) coupled with 'overscrutinising the appropriateness of individuals and activities on the city's streets', through expanded and intensified networks of surveillance and control (Coleman et al. 2005: 2512). Structures such as the spikes and other forms of hostile architecture are but one aspect of these broader networks aimed at initiating a tamed urban environment organised according to the exigencies of capital and consumerism.

In the example of the London spikes, those governing the city have vested interests in promoting a certain commodified aesthetic and social image of the city. Luxury apartment buildings and the modes of living associated with them are part of that projected imagery, whereas visible homelessness, poverty and indigence are not. Gerrard and Farrugia (2015: 3) claim that encounters with visible homelessness sit 'out of joint' with the 'broader social relations of consumer capitalism' that orchestrate urban space. Visible poverty and homelessness are understood as disruptive not only to the spectacle and performance of capital, but also to the spaces designed to facilitate this. Mitchell (1997: 320) maintains that homelessness threatens the 'proper meaning' of public spaces by inhabiting or using these spaces in a way contrary to their intended use: for example, by conducting private behaviours (sleeping, urinating, and so on) in public. The regulatory responses that result thus aim to prevent that disruption of meaning by displacing its source, often by rendering such spaces unusable or uninhabitable for the homeless. This is achieved through a range of regulatory and coercive tactics and mechanisms, from laws against sitting on the sidewalk in the US, the criminalisation of begging in Melbourne, and environmental structures such as hostile architecture (Adams 2014; Lynch 2002).

Coleman et al. (2005: 2512) have described these changes in urban space as the rise of an 'entrepreneurial city', in which notions of morality and acceptability are redefined in neoliberal terms. The focus of regulation and policing is shifted down the socio-political hierarchy, redirecting attention away from the systemic causes or structural drivers of hardship and socio-economic marginalisation, towards signifiers of disorder at street-level. This reinvigorates the idea that the aesthetics and atmosphere of the streets are a reliable litmus test for the overall health and 'quality' of a city and the lifestyles it supports (Sandercock 1997). It ossifies a concern with surface over substance, clean appearance over informed or effective policy, and aligns the state's concerns with those of investors and propertied consumers (Valverde 2012: 273). What results is a re-imagination of urban public space from these perspectives, relinquishing other social, cultural and political meanings and uses; for example, the right to



gather and protest (see Iveson 2009). As White comments: 'public space is being defined by consumption activities and uses, rather than other values' (2012: 33).

Of course such shifts do not manifest uniformly. They interact with various extant socio-cultural, political and economic features of specific contexts, at the national scale, in individual cities, and in specific neighbourhoods within them. The breadth and intensity of such processes varies dramatically, and these patterns should not be seen as being comprehensive in their reach: urban securitisation in London or New York is going to be very different from Shanghai, Melbourne or Rio de Janeiro. However this is not necessarily evidence of such processes being limited; rather, it evidences the adaptability and mobility of these processes.

### **Urban and public space**

The changes described above have significant consequences for urban spaces, and particularly for urban public spaces. The shifts in the socio-political and regulatory arrangements of the city give rise to material and immaterial changes often broadly described as the 'death' of public space (Sorkin 1992; Sennet 1974). While such claims are sound, it is also important to note, as both Iveson and Mitchell do, that a public that is truly open to all has never existed (Iveson 2009; Mitchell 2005). The recognition that public space has always been contested should not lead to the acceptance of exclusionary and coercive tactics being deployed within public space. However, it can help to contextualise such contests, as well as allowing for a consideration of the ways in which our own understandings of public space may be influenced by notions of exclusivity, legitimacy and property.

White (2012) claims that habitation of public spaces and interactions within them become a means of asserting social identity: in his words, public spaces 'are "made" into something by those who occupy, move through and use them. We make spaces into something specific by doing' (White 2012: 34; see also Lefebvre 1991). It is for this reason that public spaces continue to be highly contested. While it has been noted that public spaces are being increasingly constructed according to consumerist meanings and uses, often to the neglect or detriment of others, public spaces remain important sites for various other social and political functions.<sup>6</sup> As Iveson (2009) notes, public spaces are key requisites for public address, which both engages and produces the public and its spaces. Given the diversity of the public, this necessitates encounters between different and conflicting modes of address, engagement and production. So any activity, whether it is perceived as appropriate or not, contributes to this constant process of producing public space. Homelessness, particularly visible homelessness, participates in this process and thus gives meaning to public spaces and the city. Policies and regulatory tactics that seek to remove certain people from public spaces constitute attempts to foreclose upon the participation of those people in these processes.

This is significant because it is in the name of 'the public' that access to public spaces is limited; that public spaces become hostile and fortified against certain groups; that public spaces are increasingly structured to facilitate certain identities and behaviours; and to discipline or remove others. Public spaces are thus constructed according to an imagined, idealised 'public' who fear crime, find homelessness distasteful, are threatened by begging, and so forth. Exclusionary mechanisms are thus introduced on behalf of the public and are framed as necessary to combat disorder, deviant behaviours and the potential for crime (Iveson 2009: 5; see also Valverde 2012). Herein lies the tension at the heart of the controversy surrounding the use of these spikes: they were installed on private land but were visible to the public and appeared to disrupt the meaning of that space. The visibility of the spikes appears to have, at least momentarily, revealed the extent to which urban spaces are constructed specifically to favour certain identities and modes of being, often to the expense or detriment of others.

### **Homelessness and rough sleeping**

Homelessness as a category is deceptively complex and the term, as such, offers little analytical precision (Hopper and Baumohl 1996; Jahiel 1992; Kawash 1998; Murphy and Tobin 2011). It is more useful to engage with homelessness as a complex set of phenomena, rather than a singular material condition. Given that the controversy focused on in this discussion centred on the structural exclusion of rough sleepers from urban space, this is the 'type' of homelessness to which this article refers. It is important to note, however, that, while urban rough sleepers may be the most conspicuous figures of homelessness, they are in fact a very small contingent of the broader population of people who experience homelessness (Arnold 2004). Included within this conspicuousness are various practices and behaviours stereotypically associated with homelessness: – begging, sleeping rough, occupying public space with no apparent purpose, to name a few. Such practices are not necessarily indicative of or reducible to the material condition of being homeless, though they are nonetheless practices that are targeted by structures such as the spikes, and thus are included within the ambit of analysis.

The urban rough sleeper is a contested figure in the city, evoking crime, disorder and poverty and thus disrupting the projects of aestheticisation and securitisation of the revanchist city. As such crimino-legal and institutional responses to homelessness reflect this contestedness. On-the-street homelessness sits at 'the borderline proposed to divide the proper (that is, the unpunishable) from the improper (that is, punishable)' (Bauman 2002: 52). Homelessness as a condition is not formally criminalised; however, many practices associated with it are subject to policing, regulation, fines and other forms of state sanctioned coercion. On-the-street homelessness remains an unsanctioned form of difference, and it is perhaps this ambivalent relation that animates the use of structural mechanisms of control and removal. The use of spikes seeks neither to resolve the problem of homelessness nor to punish it (at least not in a formal sense), but instead seeks to remove it from sight, foreclosing upon the possibility of encounter and attempting to prevent homelessness from participating in the production of urban and public space. So while homelessness within the spaces of the city is not formally criminal, it is nonetheless unwelcome, and the use of hostile architecture is a means to express this.

### **Hostile architecture**

This section briefly outlines hostile architecture and offers a workable though by no means comprehensive definition of what is described by the term. Fortified architecture and environmental discipline mechanisms have a long history, both in the UK and in other Western and industrialised nations. Barriers, walls and spiked fences have long been used to divide and protect the private from the risks and dangers posed by the spontaneity of the public: keeping out unwanted or undesirable individuals and enclosing the poor and desperate within certain sections of the city (Donald 1992). Hostile architecture participates in these same long-standing dynamics and yet, in instances such as the spikes in London, is perceived to be novel. Here it is understood as explicitly coercive, violent and unjustly aimed at those towards the bottom of the socio-political spectrum, while other forms of social control and division remain largely invisible (normative) and therefore not the target of vociferous public outrage.

For the purposes of this article, my definition of hostile architecture encompasses both structures that exist within public spaces and on the margins between private and public spaces. Here, I am using the concept of public space topographically – delineating the public common from the privately owned (see Iveson 2009). However, even this definition is contested, with publicly accessible space not necessarily being publicly owned, and entry to these spaces often being conditional. For example, some shopping centres in the UK and elsewhere have banned people wearing hoodies and install deterrent devices to prevent the homeless, youths and other vagrants from using such spaces (BBC 2009; Bell 2013). Various forms of hostile architecture have been identified in popular and media discourse: 'mosquitoes'

that emit an irritating noise that only teenagers can hear; automated water sprinklers in parks and other spaces homeless or indigent people are known to inhabit; designer seating that prevents an individual from lying down; and even fluorescent pink lighting designed to highlight the pimples of teenagers, forcing them to move on to avoid embarrassment (BBC 2009). While such technologies obviously vary in their severity, and likely also in their effectiveness, the logic and motivation remains the same: the environmental corralling of certain groups out of certain spaces by rendering them uninhabitable, often selectively.

The structures described as hostile architecture, however, form only one part of a broader spatialised network of environmental control mechanisms. City planning and urban design strategies enact similar influences and pressures upon bodies on a broader scale, through myriad urban features such as footpaths, pedestrian crossings, bus and tram stops that corral and orchestrate individuals and groups through the spaces of a city (Palmer and Warren 2013; see also de Certeau 1984). I contend, however, that for something to be considered 'hostile', it must enact its coercive function both selectively (in whom it targets) and directly to bodies, rather than indirectly or at a macro scale. In their account of the security and surveillance apparatus operating at Disneyworld, Shearing and Stenning (1983: 345) describe the 'coercive edge' of the disciplinary apparatus operating at the theme park. If the 'Disney-visitor consensus' breaks down – when the behaviour of the visitor contradicts the order defined by the governing body – the coercive edge emerges to rectify this, either by re-establishing consensus through a more direct application of discipline, or by removing the disobedient visitor (Shearing and Stenning 1983: 345). In the case of Disneyworld, this function is reactive, switching from latent to overt when certain conditions are met. Hostile architecture can be better understood as structures in which the coercive edge is not conditionally emergent but instead is always palpably present. The spikes, in their protrusion into the space of the alcove and their pre-emption of a body that might seek shelter there, meet the requisites of this definition.

### **A mediated controversy**

There are several features of the spikes controversy that assist in understanding why this issue in London was considered by the public to be so objectionable while other similar structures in both London and other cities are largely accepted socio-physical features in the urban landscape. To examine these, this section first outlines the reaction to the spikes, including media representation of the issue, before turning to the urban and aesthetic context in which the spikes were installed. The structure of the spikes is then examined as an important factor in explaining the social responses, and the social and symbolic location of the spikes – situated at the boundary between the public and private sphere, a fortification of the boundary that delineates the homed from the homeless – is considered. While not an all-encompassing explanatory framework, what is offered here is a consideration of various important factors that can assist in situating both the spikes and the controversy in broader socio-political, ideological and regulatory contexts.

Kleinig writes that 'even if we sometimes aspire to a somewhat "photographic" ... representation of the world, we ought not to forget the importance of a camera angle to the representation' (Kleinig 2004: 370). In other words, perspective is important. In any constructed image, the spectator is intentionally positioned in relation to it, and this fundamentally influences how that image is perceived and understood (Young 2010: 85). In the case of the spikes, the spectator was positioned within the normative bounds of the public, – as a homed individual, rather than from the perspective of those who find themselves targeted by the spikes. Several interviews were conducted by the media with onlookers and passers-by as well as with residents of the building itself. One resident stated 'I feel really uncomfortable having these spikes in front of my home' (Firth 2014). Others supported the installation of the spikes, reporting threats and intimidation by homeless people (Gander 2015).<sup>7</sup> While there was some support for the spikes,



this was largely drowned out by overwhelming public opposition, with many comparing the spikes to mechanisms used in London to deter pigeons from landing on the ledges of buildings.

While the vociferous public resistance to the spikes may be heartening to those of us critical of increasing urban securitisation and the continuing expansion of the 'punitive city of late-modernity', it should not be uncritically accepted as evidence of genuine public resistance to broader neoliberal regimes of socio-spatial ordering (Cohen 1979; Lea and Hallsworth 2013: 78). The controversy obscures long-standing public ambivalence towards the issue of homelessness, which is just as likely to be interrupted by outright hostility and violence as it is by gestures of generosity and engagement (Newburn and Rock 2005).

### **Urban aesthetics**

Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, was also questioned about the use of spikes during an interview. He was quoted as saying the spikes were 'ugly, stupid and self-defeating' and that they were 'not a good look' (ITN Source 2015). Johnson's comments emphasise the primacy of aesthetics to the issue, situating the spikes in direct opposition to the constructed image of the city of London: they were unattractive, a blemish on London's urban aesthetic. Johnson's statement sits at odds with the prevalence of similar structures throughout London's spaces. The tension here is that, while he rejects these particular spikes on aesthetic grounds, the visibly homeless and rough sleepers are also outside of this constructed aesthetic of the city. In this sense, the spikes become the visual and aesthetic equivalent of the homeless they are designed to remove: the visible tip of a much broader population or network.

As both Sandercock (1997) and White (2012) note, aesthetics have become an increasingly central concern in the construction of urban and public space. In particular, Sandercock describes how recent developments in the conceptualisation of public urban space are premised upon providing an idealised public with a clean, sanitised, attractive and safe version of urban life: 'one that denies the real diversity of the urban environment' (Sandercock 1997: 30). This idealised urban environment is highly controlled and regulated, yet, importantly, the mechanisms of control remain largely hidden.<sup>8</sup> The explicit and overt fortification of urban and public spaces would likely undermine this aesthetic vision just as much as prevalent images of poverty and disorder. As a conspicuous fortification, the spikes arguably disrupted the intended meanings of the space, causing discomfort to those who viewed them. This is demonstrated by one resident in particular who, during an interview, stated that she initially thought the spikes were a new design feature of the building but, when she realised their true purpose, said 'it's like they are treating people like animals' (Marsden and Chorley 2014).

Significantly, that Johnson's first response is to label the spikes 'ugly' indicates the position of homelessness on a hierarchy of socio-political importance. The rights and welfare of the homeless are positioned underneath the maintenance of the aesthetic neutrality or inoffensiveness of the city itself (Valverde 2012: 65). The media's focus on the opinions of residents highlights the positioning of the propertied consumer as central within the political economy of the public realm. Here, the homed inhabit the authoritative and privileged perspective on issues of urban securitisation: how they feel about it and how the spikes affect their experience of the space. The perspective from which they speak is that of persons whose opinions are supposedly informed and legitimate and who have inarguable entitlements to the public spaces of their neighbourhoods. The perspectives and voices of the homeless are left largely absent from the debate, and are thus absented from this conception of who legitimately inhabits the city and its (aesthetic) spaces.

## **The spikes**

The spikes – one-inch metal studs protruding from the ground – are a particularly visible and confronting method of environmental coercion. Other control features that are common in urban environments – like ultraviolet lighting in public toilets, 'bum-proof' benches and automated sprinkler systems – are less visually palpable and explicit in their intent. Their coercive functions remain hidden within other, more socially palatable ones: 'bum-proof' benches still provide seating, sprinklers water parklands or only operate at night, and ultraviolet lighting still provides illumination.

The problem posed by the conspicuousness of the spikes is that they appear to commit a visible act of violence against a vulnerable and marginalised population. Shearing and Stenning (1983: 344) describe the benefits of embedding control systems within space, a critical consequence of this being that control becomes consensual. In other words, we consent to the effects of the control mechanisms – in this case, the absence of rough sleepers from the entry of one's apartment building – sub-consciously. Bauman writes that:

Routine, repetitive and monotonous coercion has little chance to draw attention, raise alarm and resentment – it is when routine is broken that the coercion ... hits the eye. It is then that coercion begins to be seen as violence, an unjustified use of force and assault against personal safety, integrity and dignity. (Bauman 2002: 55)

In this case, the spikes broke through the barrier of perception under which mechanisms of social control so often function, and in doing so became intelligible as a form of violence.

As such, the spikes function as an encounter with homelessness, yet one that is simultaneously a non-encounter: an encounter with the enforced absence of homelessness. Here the function of the spikes fails: their purpose is to remove homelessness and its imagery and yet, with the presence of the spikes, homelessness is never truly absent. The spikes, as a protrusive and always visible spectacle of coercion, mean that homelessness remains within that space as a residue, haunting it and destabilising its constructed meaning (Desjarlais 1997: 2).

## **Social-physical space**

Wright uses the concept of 'social-physical space' to describe the relation between space and the people that inhabit it (1997). He defines social-physical space as the interaction of the networks of status and meaning (both self-determined and those imposed by others), and the physical spaces in which these are embedded. Thus, '[f]ar from being separate from one's identity, social-physical space is intimately bound up with the constitution of our identities, homeless or otherwise' (Wright 1997: 4). Wright reveals that contests over space are fundamentally contests over identity. For the purposes of this article, this view has two main implications: that space is constructed as a producer of identity; and that changes to social and physical qualities of the spaces through which we move have the capacity to challenge or disrupt identity.

In considering the specific location of these particular spikes at various scales, one can discern part of what gave them such social and political force. At a macro scale, the spikes are located in the UK and its capital, London – the birthplace of Western liberal-capitalism and the core principles that underpin a liberal-capitalist order: democracy, freedom and equality. At a mid-scale, the spikes are attached to a block of luxury apartments – a prominent symbol of urban capitalism and the privileges of the urban consumer lifestyle. At a micro level, the spikes are located at the threshold between the public and private realm, at the very site of the movement that distinguishes the homed from the homeless: the doorway. It is this portal through which one crosses from the (potential) dangers of the public arena into the safety of the private. The homeless are understood as stuck forever on one side of this couplet, always and involuntarily

public, constantly open to judgemental gazes, public indignity, coercion and violence (Mitchell 1997: 321). It is perhaps the compounding of these various levels of locational symbolism that lent these particular spikes such force, propelling them from just another feature in the urban landscape into a symbolically powerful gesture of the systematic and environmental exclusion and coercion of the vulnerable and disadvantaged. The visible presence of the spikes thus challenged the meaning of that space, at least for a moment, threatening to cast that space – the doorway, the building, the city of London – and anyone within it, in a thoroughly illiberal light. The challenge to the social order posed by the spikes was, at least for a moment, far greater than that posed by the familiar image of a rough sleeper seeking shelter.

In this article, my goal has been to offer a workable criminological account of the spikes and their temporary social salience as an unjustified form of violence against an already vulnerable population. However, there are various other social, cultural and political dimensions worth considering, such as the specific capacities and dynamics of social media, as well as broader trends in city building, order maintenance and securitisation. Further, there are social, political and cultural factors specific to this example that are beyond the scope of this article, such as the specific characteristics of social organisation and class division within the UK, and various other features of the urban landscape of London. Such variables are characteristics of the complexity both of the issue of homelessness and the longstanding contestedness of both public space and cities. If the myriad of ways that the homeless, the indigent, the poor and the desperate are systemically marginalised and excluded are considered, the fact that it took the installation of metal spikes that target the homeless to precipitate public outrage is disappointing. The spikes give Mitchell's claim that the methods used to regulate the homeless often resemble the methods used by torturers unsettling prescience (1997: 321). Public outrage over the daily injustices experienced by the homeless, particularly urban rough sleepers should have been engaged long before the image of the spikes emerged. What the spikes reveal, I contend, is a need to shift our social understanding of homelessness as located 'outside', and instead include them legitimately *within* our conceptions of the city, of the public, and of the Self.

## Conclusion

The spikes issue in London does not constitute an exceptional form of violence against the vulnerable, or even a previously unseen extension into new forms of exclusion and coercion of those who do not fit the socially and legally coded norms of contemporary capitalist society. Rather, the London spikes signify an instance of rupture, in which the routine and mundane coercion of the homeless suddenly broke the normative surface of the urban landscape, and thus appeared violent. The public reaction against the spikes should not, I argue, be understood as exemplifying humanitarian concern; nor should it be framed too cynically. Rather, the response of the public reveals an embedded and longstanding humanitarian ambivalence towards everyday images of hardship and vulnerability. In this instance, that ambivalence was temporarily ruptured: compassion for the body denied shelter by these spikes momentarily outweighed the apathy, futility and resentment that often characterises encounters with, and understandings of, homelessness in urban landscapes.

In being so visible, these spikes revealed to the public the extent to which cities are constructed for the benefit of those who are able to adhere to dominant socio-cultural norms and politico-legal codes, often to the detriment of those who cannot. Thus a feeling of implication in such normative regimes of violence and exclusion is understandable, albeit uncomfortable. Bauman (2002: 64) claims that public or communal anger is often a powerful, albeit temporary act of 'exorcising inner demons of ambivalence' that functions to purify the community. The response to the spikes can be understood in this sense as a disavowal of guilt, a rejection of the uncomfortable implication of complicity. Here, the vociferous public rejection of the spikes can be better understood as the product of a double distaste: for images of homelessness, as well as for the (visible) technologies and mechanisms used to regulate and remove them. In this way,

the controversy obscures the socio-political, governmental, ideological and socio-economic conditions that make both homelessness and structures like the spikes possible in the first place. As processes of urban securitisation continue and public space is constructed according to increasingly narrow definition of acceptability, the more 'out of place' homelessness and anything that makes reference to it will appear.

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<sup>1</sup> See Aljazeera (2014); Logan (2014); Quinn (2014).

<sup>2</sup> While homelessness is discussed in the media, the intense focus on homelessness urban rough sleepers precipitated by the spikes, especially in being framed as victims of spatialized violence, is less common.

<sup>3</sup> London-based photographer Nils Norman has documented various forms of hostile and disciplinary architecture from various cities around the world, especially in the UK, Europe and the US. Examples of his work can be accessed on the following website: [http://www.dismalgarden.com/archives/defensive\\_architecture](http://www.dismalgarden.com/archives/defensive_architecture)

<sup>4</sup> Adams describes 'aggressive outreach' as 'tough love' regulatory approaches to homelessness that often involve collaboration between police, housing services and/or drug and alcohol services, that are designed to coerce people experiencing homelessness into compliance with homelessness support services, see Operation Poncho in the UK (Adams 2014: 20).

<sup>5</sup> These new exclusionary policies focused on enforcement-based approaches to homelessness (among other phenomena) and included the introduction of 'quality of life' offences and nuisance provisions that banned behaviours such as loitering and begging, the introduction of 'move on' and 'stop and frisk' powers for police, and collaboration between enforcement agencies and homeless services such as the Homeless Encampment Initiative (Adams 2012: 20, 32; Feldman 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Iveson (2009: 9) also notes that the traditional understandings of the divide between public and private are inadequate and are unable to recognise the complexity and nuance of 'publicity', for example, private spaces are often visible from the public sphere and can thus be used as spaces of public address. See also Warner 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Various authors have described the 'perceived aggression' of people experiencing homelessness. The everyday street practices and behaviours of on-the-street- homeless, while necessary for their survival, are often perceived as fundamentally antithetical to the normative social codes that order public space. See Adams 2014, Cresswell 1996, Rodger 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Exceptions here are certain security and surveillance apparatuses that are designed to be visible in order to provide a sense of safety and security (as well as to deter criminal or deviant behaviour), such as 'safe zones' at train stations and highly conspicuous cluster of CCTV cameras (Hayward 2012; Manley and Silk 2014; Victorian Law Reform Commission 2010).

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