Hostile architecture is a term used by architects to refer to a form of social control consisting of design features that are intended to limit or reduce certain unwanted behaviours or demographics of people in public spaces[[1]](#footnote--1). Two well-known examples include metal lugs on benches to prevent skate boarders from grinding and protrusions from doorsteps to prevent the homeless from sleeping in these locations. The question I have chosen for my essay, *‘In what ways does hostile architecture designed to exclude rough sleepers influence the thoughts on valid uses of public spaces by the people using these spaces?’* addresses the subconscious influence that this type of social control can have on behaviour, aside from its original purpose, particularly the ways in which the general public thinks and feels about the presence of rough sleepers in public spaces which may contain hostile architecture.

While hostile architecture has a broad history of discouraging a wide range of behaviours, such as spikes on fences from hundreds of years ago to deter climbing[[2]](#footnote-0), or the use of ultraviolet light in public bathrooms to prevent intravenous drug users from injecting within them[[3]](#footnote-1), the forms of hostile architecture I have chosen to focus on within this essay consist of those commonly found in cities, used to deter rough sleepers. This is because they are often to most well known by the general public, and in the words of Bauman, ‘routine, repetitive and monotonous coercion has little chance to draw attention, raise alarm and resentment’[[4]](#footnote-2). As well as this, they are the most common form found in cities such as Adelaide, where my primary sources were gathered. The purpose of this is to gather information that is as consistent as possible by using recognisable features of the city within my survey, and examining sources addressing well-known cases of hostile architecture with publicly broadcasted backlash, such as the London spikes controversy.

The key findings resulting from this research show that hostile architecture can influence the ways in which public spaces are not only used, but also the ways in which users of the public spaces are judged and perceived by other users. The ways in which this happens range from encouragement of consumerist and neo-liberal ideologies, exclusion of certain groups of people, such as the homeless or teenagers (intentionally or unintentionally), and more surprisingly, an uptick in awareness for social justice issues, even reaching public and social media outrage.Richard G. Jones, Jr and Christina R. Foust address the issue of ‘Staging and Enforcing Consumerism in the City: The Performance of Othering on the 16th Street Mall’, a popular shopping district located in Denver, Colarado. They argue that the development of the mall in order to ‘revitalise’ the tourist destination ‘accommodates a diverse array of consumer performances, while the presence of non-consumer others—who threaten the liberal capitalist ideologies which sustain gentrified, tourist spaces—is outlawed or more subtly policed’[[5]](#footnote-3), referring to techniques such as anti-panhandling signs. However, this statement can also be applied to implementation of techniques such as hostile architecture in the Adelaide CBD.

The liberal, or neo-liberal, capitalist ideology is important to understand within the context of hostile architecture. Neo-liberalism has been described as an ideology which ‘seeks to transfer control of economic factors to the private sector from the public sector’[[6]](#footnote-4). This means that it supports free-market capitalism and private ownership systems and emphasises sustained economic growth. The indirect implications of an environment that plays into this ideology is that infrastructure will be designed with an emphasis on profits for privately owned businesses, rather than the pleasantness of the public domain or accessibility for all demographics. James Petty states ‘The ‘new’ city that emerges from the nexus of late‐modern capitalism …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’[[7]](#footnote-5)- the only demographic the environment has to be accessible or appealing to is that which holds the most profits for the surrounding companies. This is supported by Jonathan Sri, who claims “[Design decisions] are being made by big developers or big corporations who fundamentally want to encourage uses of public space that align with their profit motive’.[[8]](#footnote-6) For this reason, hostile architecture that targets less profitable groups of people, such as teenagers, or the homeless, reinforces stereotypes surrounding these groups of people as unable to contribute to society.

Jones recounts an experience at a Starbuck’s along the 16th Street Mall, stating ‘the space itself invites consumption of products…consuming products legitimates my presence here’[[9]](#footnote-7), implying that those who are not able to consume, are not welcome in the space. Once an environment such as this has been propagated, therein opens a window in which other mechanisms of social control, such as hostile architecture, can be placed unnoticed by the majority of people in a public space and subtly reinforcing these ideologies. This then leads to what Jones and Foust refer to as ‘structural othering’- the exclusion of certain groups of people from public spaces. ‘Here,’ they state, ‘it is easier to cleanse revitalized spaces of others’ presence, reinforcing neo-liberal ideologies and identities.’[[10]](#footnote-8)

This mentality can be seen reflected in the survey results. 76.12% of respondents believed that hostile architecture was capable of excluding certain groups of people from public spaces. They were then asked if they saw this as good or bad, and while the majority (30.53%) of respondents stated that this was bad, when asked to justify their responses, a common sentiment is represented by this response: ‘I get why they want the “image” to look good - tourists and businesses who are looking to invest here. But it isn't helping the problem it's simply pushing these people aside as if they're animals’[[11]](#footnote-9). The first part of the comment shows how many people already view the image through a neo-liberal lens- one through which the needs of businesses come above the needs of actually human beings. Safety concerns were also frequently used to justify the use of hostile architecture in public spaces, however once again these were often related to safety in acts of consumption, for example a desire for comfort and safety when browsing stores. In the words of Jones and Foust, ‘the very public nature of homelessness is translated as a threat to the “pleasurable experiences” of the middle class who drive urban revitalization, and to society at large’.[[12]](#footnote-10)

However, the second part of the comment was even more prevalent- many respondents simply wrote something along the lines of ‘everyone should be able to use public space’ and ‘I believe it is not the right way to address the problem of homelessness’[[13]](#footnote-11).

David Farrugia and Jessica Gerrard state in their journal article, ‘The ‘Lamentable Sight’ of Homelessness and the Society of the Spectacle’, ‘visible homelessness could be viewed as a “disturbance” of “normal” everyday life on the street [by the public]’[[14]](#footnote-12), and hostile architecture is employed to remove this negatives stimulus from the public eye. However, as the general population of Adelaide made clear through their survey results, once we become aware that this is what is happening, we also become aware that this is just a temporary solution, treating the ‘symptom’, rather than the ‘disease’. In fact, despite the rise in popularity of hostile architecture with the prevalence of neo-liberalism in modern society, homelessness rates in Australia have risen by 14% since 2011[[15]](#footnote-13), showing the need for greater action in terms of helping the homeless, rather than merely shifting them around.

Respondents to the survey who were aware of hostile architecture stated things such as ‘Adelaide is a fine city with a reputable image, if more people became [aware of] fact that the councils are implementing this architecture, our cities image may very well be diminished’ and ‘I think it actually detracts from a city experience since it makes me feel guilty and outraged whenever I see it. The money spent building these could have been spent on helping homeless people get off the street instead’. These responses clearly show how hostile architecture fails to have a subconscious impact leading to bias against the rough sleepers as ‘a contested figure in the city, evoking crime, disorder and poverty’[[16]](#footnote-14) once the public becomes aware of its purpose, and that other methods of reducing visible homelessness may be more effective in making public spaces safer or supporting business, especially as responses such as ‘I hate [hostile architecture] and will actively avoid businesses that are using it’ became evident, and while 39.37% of respondents claimed the presence of hostile architecture in the city made them uncomfortable, only 3.41% responded with secure, and 3.15% with reassured.[[17]](#footnote-15)

Furthermore, this mentality has been reflected through a number of social media controversies surrounding hostile architecture in prominent locations such as London and Camden in the past few years. When a number of short metal spikes were noticed in the entrance of an apartment building in South London in 2014, social media outrage quickly ensued, originating from a simple Twitter post featuring an image of the spikes and the caption ‘Anti-homeless studs. So much for community spirit :(‘[[18]](#footnote-16). For many people, this was their first time encountering this form of social control, and in the words of James Petty, ‘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’[[19]](#footnote-17). Although ‘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’[[20]](#footnote-18), it is a step towards social change. This outcry caused the spikes to be removed within a week, and while this particular example of hostile architecture was no longer visible, other forms were quickly being identified.

Closer to home, in Brisbane, the Queen’s Warf controversy of 2018 also raised the issue of hostile architecture and exclusion of the homeless to the public eye. The casino development, which recommended that ‘the design of public space infrastructure includes elements to discourage anti-social behaviour’[[21]](#footnote-19), lead to the publication of the article ‘Queen’s Wharf and the spectre of ‘hostile architecture’ in Architecture AU, endorsed by the Australian institute of architects. Episode 219 of the 99% podcast, titled ‘Unpleasant Design and Hostile Urban Architecture’ also addresses the issue, discussing examples from the infamous Camden benches to the use of lighting as a form of social control, bringing awareness into popular culture. It is clear that awareness of hostile architecture is entering the public domain, and people are eager to learn more, with one commenter stating ‘This was a great episode. Design is a far greater influence on people’s behaviour than most people realize…I’d love for you to examine this topic some more’[[22]](#footnote-20).

The conclusions drawn from my research demonstrate that hostile architecture can have a limiting impact on the thoughts on valid uses of public spaces by the people using these spaces. This is the case when users of the area are not aware of hostile architecture and their behaviour becomes narrowed and controlled in support of neo-liberal or consumerist ideologies, rather than the humanistic and compassionate responses to homelessness and rough sleeping that most people naturally tend towards. However, awareness of hostile architecture has also helped raise awareness for issues such as social control and exclusion or ‘othering’ of marginalised groups of people, such as the homeless, leading to a positive response and social demonstrations against acts by councils that are perceived as ‘heartless’. Hostile architecture may not be a modern invention, but within the modern social and political context, it helps to raise a number of important issues and can be considered an important and influential tool of social control.

1989 words

1. *Unpleasant Design and Hostile Urban Architecture* 2016, radio program, Roman Mars, Https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/unpleasant-design-hostile-urban-architecture/, 7 May. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Harvey, D 2017, *The debate: Is hostile architecture designing people -- and nature -- out of cities?*, CNN, accessed 1 March 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/new-dean-harvey-james-furzer-hostile-architecture-debate/index.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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