

Shopping Cart Shelter

Examinations of homeless living

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Homelessness in our society today is becoming an increasingly apparent issue. To design a shelter out of a cart poses an interesting challenge – a cart is a homeless person's only container for all of their possessions. They are often the main instrument for providing the homeless with income, as the carts are used to transport and collect materials. Right now, the most popular and easily accessible cart used by the homeless is obviously a shopping cart. However, because shopping carts belong to private organizations, they will eventually be confiscated by the police and the homeless user will lose all of their belongings. The attitude towards homelessness today is one that tries to hide the issue and one of indifference. Therefore it was important to our design that the shelter itself would not only accommodate the homeless individual, but would act as a symbol for the homeless in a city that would force the public to notice them.

The shopping cart shelter was designed to accommodate homeless people in an urban environment in the most affordable, efficient and secure way. It was based around many factors:

1. It had to be easily transportable and compact, because being homeless in a city means that might not be able to stay in the same place every night.
2. It had to be made of inexpensive materials that were easy to maintain and use.
3. The belongings in the cart must not be disturbed when the cart is being used as a shelter.
4. The system had to be lightweight and easily adaptable.
5. The shelter itself would make a visual impact on the city, making the issue of homelessness obvious and impossible to ignore.

In order to design such a shelter, it was essential to critically examine other solutions to urban homeless living in order to gain insight and understanding of the real problems that face the homeless today. Two specific projects mainly influenced the design of the shopping cart shelter – these being Krzysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Vehicle and Electroland's Urban Nomad Shelter.

In an interview with Pataphysics Magazine in 1991, Krzysztof Wodiczko described his intentions for the original design of the Homeless Vehicle. He said, "somehow it was not very clear to people that the homeless are products of the same transformation of the city which were also contributing to the so-called revitalization, beautification or re-development of different parts of downtown. Something needed to be done to make the situation clear - to say this was a legitimate problem. Those who are doing better, who are not homeless, see the homeless situation as being something that can be avoided, a waste."

This design intentionally addressed the issue of homelessness in New York City and was based around the design of a shopping cart that folded out into a unit that held recycling, personal belongings and even allowed for bathing while remaining a shelter when unfilled. It was created for homeless workers who collect cans and bottles as their means of income. It was intended to be a tool that was designed specifically for this use only and would become a visual symbol associated with this homeless lifestyle/profession, rather than being associated with stolen objects (i.e. ordinary shopping carts). The ones that were actually used were confiscated by the city because they brought so much attention to the issue of homelessness. According to the Detroit Free Press, a law was passed in New York City in 1999-2000 stating that any structure standing in excess of 3.5 feet above the ground that is capable of housing someone inside is considered a tent, and the use of this on city property is considered illegal camping.



Images from Sculpture Magazine, May 1999

Examining the Homeless Vehicle was very useful when designing our shelter cart. We realized that the shopping cart itself has become the most identifiable accessory to the homeless lifestyle and that subverting it rather than creating a new distinctive cart would have two benefits. One is that the resulting product would be more efficient and cost effective, as it would make new use of objects already integrated into the lives of homeless individuals. Secondly, it would become a symbol of the attitude towards homelessness today, like the Homeless Vehicle. The fact that the shopping cart typology is prominent in the designs makes the point that this housing is not permanent and is only transitional.

However, the Homeless Vehicle was designed specifically for those who collect, and only when the cart is not being used as a collector can it be used as a shelter. Therefore, we decided that it was important to create an independent system that would attach to a shopping cart in order to allow it to be a shelter without hindering the basket portion of it. As a result, shopping carts could then be given or donated to homeless people and they would no longer be considered stolen objects, but would be identified as temporary housing because of the system attached to it.

The second project that largely influenced the design of our shopping cart shelter was the Urban Nomad Shelter, designed by Cameron McNall and Damon Seeley of Electroland.



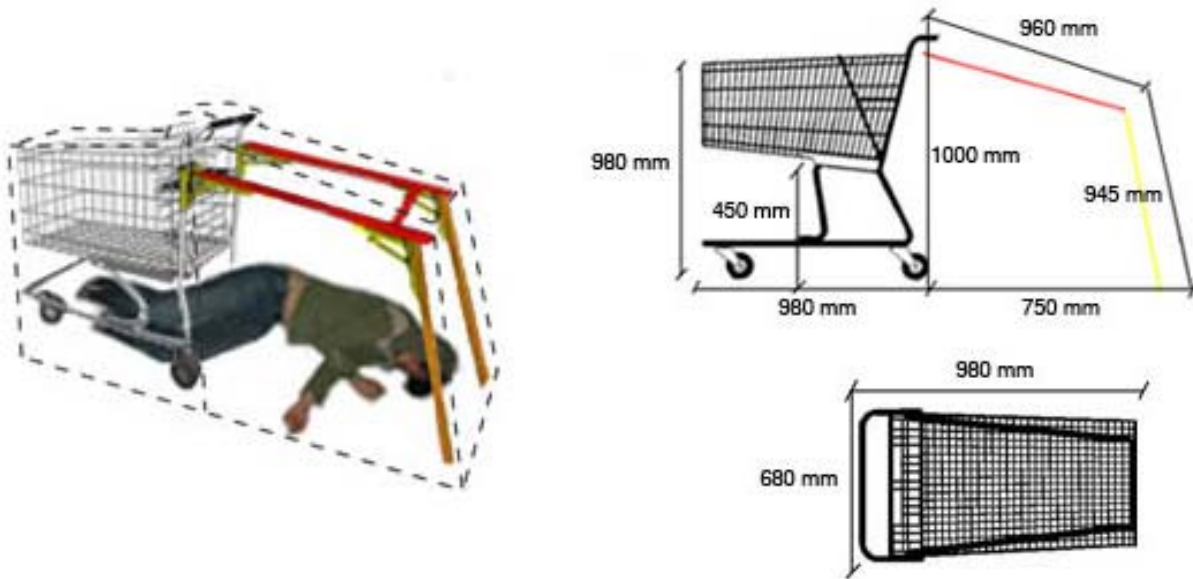
The Urban Nomad Shelter is an inflatable shelter made out of welded PVC plastic with an inflation neck and valve. In order to inflate, the shelter must be attached to the outtake ducts of a building's HVAC system. The air from the building both inflates and warms up the shelter, as the air that is trapped between the double membrane of the plastic provides heat.



Electroland identified the problem with most temporary shelters is the fact that they are so makeshift that every morning, city cleaning crews sweep them up and destroy them. Their intentions were to create a shelter that would protect from the rain, hard ground and from being destroyed by morning. In an interview from I.D. Magazine, McNall and Seeley commented on this situation, saying "The Urban Nomad Shelter is designed to re-brand the homeless. We decided that our shelter had to be extremely cool, enough to attract significant attention and to make the cleanup crews hesitate before destroying them [...] 'Homeless people' are invisible, but 'Urban Nomads' are real people who can distinguish well-designed objects from trash. [...] In our research we found that invisibility is bad for Urban Nomads. When you are out of view of the police or other people, bad things happen to you."

By creating a shelter that is brightly coloured and aesthetically attractive, the issue of homelessness is made impossible to ignore in an urban environment. These coloured pods provide a shockingly visual understanding of how much of any city's population faces the problem of being homeless. Additionally, the shelters themselves are so publicly appealing that they don't make homeless living something to look down upon. This product could also be marketed, suggested by I.D. Magazine, as "tents for space-age scout troops or hot-ticket items for the backyard sleepover set." The materials used are lightweight and inexpensive – its estimated retail cost is \$24.

Looking at this project, it became clear that it was important to make a compact, portable, lightweight design that had an obvious presence in its environment. These factors definitely influenced our design of the shopping cart shelter. We realized the most compact way to use the shopping cart would be to take advantage of the space beneath the basket and convert it into a place suitable for sleeping.



We also realized it was important to allow the cart to still be easily moved from place to place by designing a system that attached onto an existing cart without interfering with its primary use and way of moving. Also, the brightly coloured canvas cover of the shopping cart shelter is meant to emulate the colourful pods by making the shelter an attractive and obvious symbol of homeless living. By making these homeless shelters so apparent, that would hopefully provide the homeless user with more security and safety than they might normally get. However, one of the intentions behind the Urban Nomad Shelter according to I.D. Magazine is that they are so transitional that they do not allow for any kind of individualization: "These walls would collapse if you tried to pin anything on them." However, with this shopping cart shelter, the canvas coverings can even be used as a space for communication – in terms of art or advertising or a variety of other things.

Examining the approach and attitude of these designers towards homeless living and lifestyles allowed us to gain as much insight as looking at the individual projects. While understanding that it was important to create a portable, temporary, compact, lightweight, cost effective, easily maintained shelter, it was equally important to understand the attitude that, according to architect Sean Godsell, designs the homeless into the city, rather than pushing them out of it. He gives examples how in London and Paris, the cities have installed studs and armrests on public seating in order to discourage homeless people using them to sleep on. Instead of ignoring the problem of homelessness, we felt that the shelter we designed should be an important tool that helped to communicate the realities and unacceptable conditions of homeless life in an urban environment.

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