EVICTION TO PLACEMENT

Rethinking the current supportive housing systems for hidden homeless families

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Master of Design

Interior Architecture in Adaptive Reuse
EVICTION TO PLACEMENT
Rethinking the current supportive housing systems for hidden homeless families

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Design in Interior Studies [Adaptive Reuse] in the Department of Interior Architecture of the Rhode Island School of Design

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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a long-term and serious issue in the U.S., and the situation has become even worse due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the economic downturn and increasing unemployment rates, even individuals with jobs are finding it challenging to afford basic housing expenses, resulting in a rise in transitional homelessness and evictions. It is disheartening to note that over half a million people experience homelessness on any given night in the United States (U.S. HUD, 2020).

To assist individuals facing temporary homelessness and improve the urban environment, this intervention focuses on restructuring systems across three typologies to address economic and health needs. Firstly, spaces will be adapted to ensure privacy, providing residents with a dignified and positive experience that prepares them for independent housing. Secondly, reliable transportation and tailored educational programs will be incorporated to meet the specific requirements of families and children. Lastly, housing solutions will be integrated into existing communities, accompanied by enhancements to the surrounding public spaces. These designs not only exemplify the values of adaptive reuse by repurposing existing infrastructure but also strive to tackle social inequality, emphasizing the belief that everyone deserves a basic standard of living and should feel embraced by their city.

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on repurposing unoccupied office space into affordable housing systems tailored to meet the unique needs of homeless families. Families with children make up 36 percent of the homeless population overall and children’s homelessness status is almost always “hidden.” Architecture and design can play a vital role in addressing social inequity by creating improved living environments for the houseless community through adaptive reuse of underutilized space situated within dense urban areas with the greatest access to resources to support these families, evoke feelings of comfort, security, and hope.

The following thesis accommodates three basic needs of homeless families: community, residential, and workplace for onsite support systems. Open-plan building layouts are designed to foster social interaction, while communal spaces and onsite support systems within the building promote a sense of vertical micro-community, empowering homeless families to take their crucial first steps towards societal integration, elicit a feeling of comfort and tranquility. By modifications to the building facade and slabs, balconies and atriums offer ventilation, glimpses of nature, and connections to the vibrant streetscape. More than just architectural enhancements, this aims to tangibly transform these spaces into havens that exude warmth and belonging.

The underlying strategy aims to seize current economic and development challenges, such as office vacancies, and utilize them to benefit those most in need, the homeless families. This multifaceted approach addresses the urgent housing crisis, urban development, and health issues simultaneously – respecting existing infrastructure and retooling it for future life.
RESEARCH
Eviction refers to a pattern in which U.S. landlords evict residents. Landlords can initiate evictions for various reasons, such as non-payment of rent, lease violations, or when leases expire, following federal, state, and local regulations. Throughout history, eviction rates have shown a significant increase during periods of major social, political, or economic disruptions, including the Great Depression, the 2008 financial crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Every year, millions of people are evicted in the United States. Rising housing costs and a shortage of affordable housing have sparked a nationwide housing insecurity crisis, making it increasingly difficult for people to access affordable housing. Taking the recent situation as an example, due to the health and safety impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the expected further increase in homelessness by the concomitant economic downturn, it is critical to research and address the needs of these evicted people becoming homeless.

5 Richard Duckworth et al., “Corporate Landlords.”
The passage of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act helped create emergency shelters and other support services in communities across the country. However, homelessness rates remain high. The Housing Act of 1937 (Wagner-Steagall Act) created the United States Housing Authority, a commission that helps implement slum clearance programs and build affordable housing. The book centers around the lives of eight families in Milwaukee, WI, a financially distressed city in the United States, as they struggle to pay rent and avoid eviction during the 2008 financial crisis. Within the months of living with the poor, Desmond saw people encountering despair and poverty and coexisting with violence; simultaneously, he also experienced the warmth, hope and hard work of people at the bottom of society - though unfortunately these were only faint rays of light against a backdrop of bleakness.

After reading the book, I came to realize that the wave of mass evictions following the economic crash was not merely a consequence but rather a contributing factor to the cycle of poverty. Having a stable and permanent place to call home is a fundamental prerequisite for a secure and fulfilled life. Without sustainable and permanent housing, supporting education, maintaining good health, pursuing employment, nurturing hope, and pursuing dreams become nearly impossible. Ultimately, no one desires to live without a home, and individuals facing poverty deserve to be free from stigma and treated with equal dignity.

For decades, Northeastern America, particularly New York City, has been facing persistent issues of homelessness and housing insecurity.

What sets homelessness in New York City apart from other regions is the substantial presence of homeless families. This highlights the importance of implementing focused interventions and support systems that are specifically designed to address the unique circumstances faced by homeless families. Such interventions should aim to tackle challenges related to affordable housing, limited access to support services, and the well-being of children, among other pressing concerns.
Families experiencing homelessness are similar to other families that are also poor, but who have a home to live in. Both groups may face the challenge of insufficient income to cover housing expenses. In fact, it is often a sudden event or circumstance that destabilizes their already precarious situation—such as job loss, reduced work hours, conflicts with family members they are residing with, unexpected bills, or domestic violence—that drives them to seek assistance from homeless service programs. Homeless families are usually headed by a single woman with limited education, are typically young, and have young children.8

In the aftermath of the First World War, the urgent need for affordable housing prompted architects to explore innovative ways to establish housing standards that would fulfill people's basic living needs while maintaining affordability and avoiding a sense of confinement.

Although the analysis may be somewhat outdated, this research provides us with a foundational comprehension of how space can be effectively utilized within minimum standards. This journal delves into the intricate issues surrounding human habitation and even explores how external living conditions can influence human psychology. The reference points in this study revolve around subjective human needs rather than objective hygiene parameters.

**QUESTION** – How much space does a person need?


“How Much Living Space Do You Need to Be Happy? Japan Survey Results.”

In 2014, Japan’s Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) published detailed guidelines (in Japanese) on the minimum and recommended (ideal) amounts of living space a person should have in order to live a “healthy and culturally fulfilling life.”

According to the guidelines, a single person living alone in a city center or suburb should have at least 25 square meters (269 square feet) of residential space. The ideal space for a single person living in the city is much larger: 40 sqm (430.55 sq ft). If you live in the countryside, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism has increased its guidance to 55 square meters (592 sq ft), more than double the minimum recommended size for urban residents.

According to this calculation method, a two-person family living in the city must have a living area of at least 30 square meters (322.9 sq ft), and the ideal is 55 square meters (592 sq ft). Ideally, a two-person family in the countryside has 75 square meters (807.2 sq ft).

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Clément Bellet, "Keeping up with the Joneses: Superstar houses and the US mortgage frenzy"

The space required for happiness and well-being in the 21st century can vary depending on several factors, including personal preferences, cultural norms, and lifestyle choices. While the previous article focused on Japanese/Asian specifications, this chapter primarily centers on research conducted in Western countries. After consulting with an external advisor, it became evident that the research conducted in the United States in this area is insufficient. Therefore, I turned to the research conducted in Great Britain as a reference.

Reflecting on Maslow’s Hierarchy of human needs, a suitable living environment stands as one of the fundamental physiological necessities. We cannot progress to fulfill higher-level psychological needs until we are adequately housed and nourished.

Clément Bellet’s research provides valuable insights on wealth inequality and its visible manifestation in home size, which ultimately contributed to the mortgage boom leading up to the 2008 financial crisis. Bellet highlights that while the size of homes in the US has increased since the 1940s, the relative level of happiness in housing has remained stagnant. Further analysis by Bellet reveals that smaller families tend to experience lower housing satisfaction when larger houses are built in close proximity to smaller ones.

In recent years, social scientists and urban planners have established minimum floor area standards across various contexts. For instance, the 2012 International Residential Code (IRC) stipulates that any dwelling should have at least one room measuring 120 square feet or larger, with other rooms being 70 square feet. However, it is worth noting that this minimum was revised in the 2015 version of the IRC, partly in response to advocacy from proponents of small houses. Additionally, the 2011 London Plan has developed an index of recommended minimum floor areas based on housing type and household size.

Image (Left): Pyramid representation of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Image (Right): An index of suggested minimum floor space based on housing type and family size.
FORM OF HOUSING
Housing supportive systems as architecture type
Initially, the housing support system consisted of three steps. However, the government is now actively promoting the Housing First approach, which prioritizes the concept of “living through healing.” This approach recognizes the vital importance of providing stable housing as a fundamental basis for both the healing process and overall well-being. By offering individuals experiencing homelessness a safe and secure place to live, the Housing First approach acknowledges that they are more likely to overcome challenges and address their diverse needs effectively.

The Housing First approach is rooted in the understanding that having a stable home serves as a solid foundation for individuals to begin their journey towards healing and self-improvement. It acknowledges the crucial role of housing stability in enabling individuals to access essential resources and support services. By ensuring a secure living environment, individuals are better equipped to address issues such as healthcare, mental health, substance abuse, and more.

The Housing Continuum - Living Programs Examples

Analysis based on three case studies
PRECEDENTS
Stepping Stones, a house for all
by Morris+Company

Morris + Company has transformed the abandoned York Road Metro station in north London into a multifunctional space that includes supportive housing for the homeless, co-working areas, and a hotel.

Named “Stepping Stone,” the design concept combines temporary accommodation for individuals experiencing poverty with co-living and co-working spaces, catering specifically to young people who are starting their journey in the city. The ground floor features a charity shop that generates income for the program, showcasing the innovative and practical approach taken in this challenging project. By providing a visible and supportive environment, the hidden homeless will no longer remain unseen, instead finding support and integration within a thriving community full of opportunities.
EVICTION TO PLACEMENT

Stepping Stones by Morris+Company

SITE CONSTRAINTS & OPPORTUNITIES

Design
Stepping Stones by Morris+Company
Case Study 2

Transitional Housing for the Homeless 1989, New York
By Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

In response to a significant increase in homelessness during the mid-1980s, the city of New York implemented an innovative program involving prototype buildings. The city commissioned two types of facilities, one for single adults and the other for families with children. This analysis will focus on the prototype developed for families with children.

The design of this prototype involved either selecting specific sites or adapting existing buildings, resulting in unique structures consisting of four or six stories. The architectural approach employed by SOM (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) aimed to create a series of individual "houses," each comprising eight bedrooms arranged in pairs that share a toilet and shower room. These pairs are then clustered around a shared kitchen/dining room and a double-height living room.

By organizing residents into groups of eight, the social dynamics within the living space remain manageable and avoid the institutional feel commonly associated with assisted living environments. In terms of the building’s layout, the house units are stacked with the double-height living spaces alternating “front to back.” This arrangement allows the upper portion of each living room to slide up behind the kitchen on the floor above, benefiting from borrowed light through a band of glass blocks integrated into the kitchen.

Image
Left - transitional housing for the homeless, New York City, NY. By Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1989
Right - facade of the transitional housing for the homeless, New York City, NY. By Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1989

The prototype design developed for family transitional housing consists of two types of units: studios and double units. The double units feature a shared kitchen and dining space, accommodating two families. The intention behind this design is to facilitate single-parent families in sharing household responsibilities, including childcare, and fostering a strong sense of community.
Case Study 3

La Casa Permanent Supportive Housing
by Studio 27 Architecture and Leo A Daly

This project is a government-operated permanent supportive housing facility specifically designed for the District of Columbia. Named “La Casa,” it represents the first permanent supportive housing project initiated by the District’s Department of Human Services. The facility comprises 40 single-occupancy units, covering a total area of 24,946 square feet, along with dedicated community and support spaces.

La Casa communal spaces are interspersed with offices where residents can seek substance abuse counseling, case management, and employment and housing placement assistance, among other services.

Image (Left)
Model photographs, La Casa Permanent Supportive Housing, 2013 image credit: Studio Twenty Seven Architecture

Image (Right)
Lobby as lantern, La Casa Permanent Supportive Housing, 2014, Anice Hoachlander, Hoachlander Davis Photography

EVICTION TO PLACEMENT

ONE BEDROOM PROGRAM
Elva’s House, 8 Elva Village

The design of the Eviction to Placement space is a key component of the larger Whole House concept. The space is designed to accommodate a single bedroom apartment building. The interior space is a minimum of 12.5m², with a minimum height of 2.6m. The space includes a kitchenette, bathroom, and two rooms for sleeping, with a centralized heating system within the unit.

EFFICIENCY UNIT PROGRAM
La Casa

La Casa was designed as a prototype for a budget-conscious, efficient apartment building. The design features a compact layout that maximizes space, with a focus on sustainability and energy efficiency. The units include a kitchenette, bathroom, and a bedroom, with all necessary amenities within a single room.

SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY PROGRAM
La Casa

La Casa was originally designed as a single room occupancy project, with the idea of creating affordable housing for individuals in need. The design focuses on minimizing space and resources, with a focus on creating a comfortable and safe environment for occupants.
The shelter serves as the initial stage within the current supportive housing system, often being the first point of contact for individuals facing economic hardships and in need of various services. Typically, people stay in these shelters for a short duration, usually less than a few months. However, the process requires individuals to line up daily in order to secure a bed for the night, with the arrangement only being valid for a single day.

The primary objective of the shelter is to accommodate a significant number of residents using minimal space, which commonly results in the utilization of bunk beds as the prevailing living arrangement. Alongside providing a place to sleep, these facilities often offer social worker guidance and basic healthcare services to address fundamental needs. However, shelters frequently face criticism due to issues such as overcrowding, a lack of privacy, increased crime rates, health concerns, and negative effects on community property values. Furthermore, without effective access to alternative housing options, homeless individuals may find themselves trapped in the cycle of relying on shelter beds for an extended period.
Transitional housing programs are supportive housing programs that are temporary but designed to be an intermediate step between emergency shelter and permanent housing. Eligibility requirements and programming vary by program, but most programs offer structure, supervision, support, and life skills. Individuals may only be connected to Transitional Housing through the Coordinated Assessment and Housing Placement (CAHP). Transitional housing often comes with larger shared spaces or more private areas than the shelters. People at this stage usually have more time for job training, and get further physical or psychological treatment. Transitional housing typically allows evicted people to stay in for a few months to as long as two years before being vetted to move into the next stage.

In recent years, the "housing first" model has been aggressively promoted in the latest HUD policy, meaning that many existing transitional housing proposals have little chance of success. However, if people skip transitional housing and go directly to the permanent housing system, whether people can actively and effectively rehabilitate from eviction and homelessness is an issue that needs to be discussed.
Permanent housing encompasses housing arrangements intended to offer long-term or permanent residency for individuals or families. Its primary goal is to provide a stable and secure living environment, fostering the expectation that residents will remain in the housing for an extended duration.

The government has actively promoted the “housing first” model in recent years, with permanent housing serving as a central component. This model can take various forms, including rental apartments, cooperative housing, condominiums, or single-family homes. Often, it is accompanied by supportive services and on-site amenities such as cafeterias, community events, and regular check-ins by case managers. The emphasis is on cultivating a sense of home rather than an institutional environment, which is crucial for the success of supportive housing facilities.

Studies have shown that supportive housing not only addresses homelessness and increases housing stability, but also improves mental and physical health. It also reduces public costs by reducing the use of publicly funded crisis services, such as shelters, psychiatric centers, and prisons.

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Image Up - A permanent supportive housing unit at Roadway Apartments, developed and operated by Father Bill’s & MainSpring in a former hotel in Brockton.
Image Down - A permanent supportive housing unit at Rebecca Johnson Apartments, East Garfield Park, Chicago, IL
Image - La Casa Permanent Supportive Housing, Washington D.C., by Studio 27 Architecture and Leo A Daly
THE SITE
Location & Site Analysis
Site Plan
Location & Site Analysis

Converting underperforming office buildings for affordable housing use.

Researchers categorized each office property into five archetypes: wedge, cube, L-shaped, blinder, and slab. Once each office building was assigned to a specific archetype, the analysis proceeded to map the extent to which each prototype was suitable for residential conversion.

The findings indicate that wedge buildings and cube buildings are more conducive to conversion compared to other types. Cube buildings, with their square floor plates, offer relative ease of conversion based on plan depth and window arrangement. Wedge buildings, characterized by triangular floor plates shaped by the city’s infrastructure, street layout, and boundaries, also exhibit a favorable configuration for conversion.

Image
During the COVID-19 pandemic, office vacancy rates experienced a significant increase, peaking at 17.2% in the third quarter of 2021. Although companies are gradually calling employees back to the office, achieving full occupancy is unlikely.20

Office buildings are typically classified into three categories: Class A, Class B, and Class C. The standards for these classifications vary based on the market, and each category is defined in relation to the others. Building classification serves as a means to differentiate buildings and provide a framework for analyzing market data.21 Class A buildings represent the newest and highest quality buildings in their market. Class B buildings are generally a little older, but still have good quality management and tenants. On the other hand, Class C buildings, the lowest classification, are older structures situated in less desirable areas. These buildings often require extensive renovations, have outdated architectural designs, and outdated infrastructure and technology. Class B and C buildings are often targeted for redevelopment opportunities.

20 Angie Basiouny and Joseph Gyourko, “What’s Going to Happen to All Those Empty Office Buildings?,” Knowledge at Wharton (Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, February 28, 2022)
21 Troy Golden, “Primer: Differentiating Class A, B, and C Office Space,” Area Development (Golden Group Real Estate, October 13, 2016)
After careful consideration, I have chosen Building 6, situated at 333 W 52nd St, NY, between 8th and 9th Avenue, as the ideal host structure. This building is classified as an office building and was constructed in 1929. It stands at a height of 16 stories, with each typical floor spanning approximately 7,505 square feet in size. Also, most importantly, it is close to public transportation system.
Year Built: 1929
Building Height: 16 Stories
Building Size: 111,000 SF
Typical Floor Size: 7,505 SF
Concept – Towards Inclusivity

Intervention Framework / Abstract Models
Intervention Framework

At the single site, the 60/40 separation between general residence and placement residence goes beyond mere integration; it embraces the concept of community inclusion. Additionally, there will be an additional 4% staff to support the residents.

The residents will be fully immersed in society, with the agency to choose how and with whom they interact. They will have opportunities to engage with mentors, peers, and the community at large, enabling them to develop independence on their own terms.

Strategy and Demolitions

The building’s facade and slab were strategically cut to create inserted balconies and atriums, serving multiple purposes such as enhancing ventilation, providing access to green spaces, offering expansive sky views, and creating a vibrant streetscape ambiance.

These interventions not only enhance the aesthetic appeal but also play a crucial role in attracting new residents and fostering vibrant neighborhoods.
Building Narrative – Timeline
Illustrating the rhythms of people’s lives
The residential units within the building were designed in accordance with the guidelines of the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). We considered the concept of "How much space does a person need to be healthy and happy?" and developed three types of units: 2-bedroom, 1-bathroom apartments, 1-bedroom, 1-bathroom apartments, and 2-bedroom, 1-bathroom apartments. These units can accommodate additional bedrooms in the future, allowing for flexibility as families grow through the possibility of expansion or subdivision of a bedroom.
Abstract Models
The ground floor of the building is dedicated to the Charity Marketplace, an vibrant space that serves as a platform for community engagement and economic empowerment. It features a diverse range of stalls and vendors offering a variety of goods and services. The Charity Marketplace is designed to provide opportunities for residents to showcase and sell their products, while also attracting community members, fostering social interaction, and facilitating the integration of residents into the broader community.

The layout and design of the ground floor have been carefully curated to create a welcoming and inclusive environment, encouraging visitors to explore the offerings and contribute to the cause of ending homelessness.
The building offers an array of additional amenities designed to enhance the living experience for its residents. Among these amenities is a fully equipped gym, providing ample opportunities for physical fitness and overall well-being. In addition to the gym, the building features dedicated reading rooms. These peaceful spaces offer residents a serene environment to indulge in their love for books, engage in quiet relaxation, or focus on their studies. The reading rooms will be thoughtfully designed to provide comfort and tranquility, with cozy seating arrangements and well-stocked shelves filled with a variety of reading materials.

By providing these amenities, the building aims to promote a balanced and enriching lifestyle for its residents. Whether they choose to engage in physical exercise or immerse themselves in the world of literature, these amenities contribute to fostering a sense of well-being and fulfillment within the community.
From the 3rd floor to the 8th floor, there will be a total of four residential units on each level. This layout ensures a manageable number of units while optimizing the efficient utilization of space in the building. In order to promote a strong sense of community and facilitate social interaction among residents, each floor will include a shared common open space. This area will serve as a gathering spot where residents can come together, engage in conversations, and build meaningful connections with their neighbors.
Workplace – Rooftop Farm

The 9th and 10th floors of the building will house a rooftop farm, serving as a sustainable agricultural space specifically designed for cultivating vegetables. By utilizing the rooftop for agriculture, residents will have the opportunity to access nutritious, homegrown vegetables, enabling them to meet their dietary needs in a sustainable and affordable way.

The rooftop farm not only addresses the issue of limited access to fresh produce but also provides residents with a therapeutic and fulfilling activity. Engaging in farming on the rooftop fosters a connection with nature and offers a sense of accomplishment, further enhancing the well-being of the residents.
The 11th to 13th floors are dedicated to the onsite support system, which includes a workplace and healing clinic. These spaces play a crucial role in providing essential resources and a wide range of services for individuals in need.

The layout of the Healing Clinic differs from the residential areas within the building. Unlike the residential units that are stacked around the building with a shared space in the center core, the Healing Clinic is strategically designed with private cubicle conference rooms and clinic rooms positioned in the center. Open workspaces, on the other hand, are situated next to the windows. This intentional design allows for the maximum utilization of natural daylight, ensuring that the clinic area is well-lit and reducing the need for excessive energy consumption.
Section
Central Core / Atrium
Atrium – Detailing
Physical Model
This proposal addresses the pressing need for affordable housing while embracing the sustainable practice of adaptive reuse for office buildings. By repurposing existing structures and integrating vital amenities, communal spaces, and onsite services, we can establish vibrant vertical micro-communities and cultivate a sense of belonging for homeless families. Adaptive reuse not only celebrates existing infrastructure but also engages the public, ensuring that spaces are allocated to those who truly need them.

This project extends beyond a single building; it serves as a blueprint for future adaptive reuse initiatives throughout the city. Through the transformation of office buildings into secure and inviting homes, we can offer homeless families the stability and support required to rebuild their lives and flourish. This proposal calls upon stakeholders, government entities, and communities to come together and create a city where safe and affordable housing is accessible to all.
Specialist Advisor

Carin Clary
Director of Homelessness and Housing for the Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Carin is the Director of Homelessness and Housing for the Government Performance Lab’s national housing work. Prior to joining the GPL, Carin was the Assistant Deputy Commissioner for New York City’s Human Resources Administration’s (HRA) Office of Supportive and Affordable Housing. There, Carin directed NYC’s largest referral and placement system for homeless households into a continuum of publicly supported housing, coordinating over 20,000 referrals annually. Carin also served on the NYC Continuum of Care Steering Committee for Coordinated Entry and Placement Services. She led the pilot and subsequent expansion of NYC’s master leased housing program, expanding the City’s stock of permanent affordable housing through new contracting mechanisms totaling over $20M annually. Prior to HRA, Carin served as a Senior Advisor for the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services in the Bloomberg and de Blasio Administrations, serving as chief agency and policy liaison for the NYC Dept. of Homeless Services and Human Resources Administration, with a combined annual budget of over $14B, serving over 3M New Yorkers per year. Outside of housing, Carin has also served in leadership capacities for criminal justice reform non-profits such as the Fortune Society and the Center for Court Innovation where she led workforce development operations.

Carin’s dedicated her career to disrupting systems that are inequitable and is passionate about the power local government can have to lead innovation. She is currently based in New York, where she earned her BA in Individualized Study from New York University.
Bibliography


