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Issue

In parks across the world, hostile public space design ostracizes people experiencing homelessness. Hostile design not only excludes unhoused people from public spaces, but it also makes these environments more exclusive and less accessible for all. In contrast, intentional and inclusive design strategies can combat defensive architecture and build parks that are more equitable and inclusive. Planners and designers can restore unhoused individuals’ spatial rights to public parks by including them in the engagement and planning process, through programming parks with their needs in mind, and by designing park facilities to support this population.

Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) partnered with graduate students in UCLA’s urban planning program to create a comprehensive toolkit to guide the future of inclusive park design. The toolkit is organized by sections that address inclusive park design for specific populations, including one focused specifically on inclusive park design for unhoused individuals. The toolkit is intended to advise public agency staff, urban planning and design practitioners, advocacy organizations, and community members when planning and designing parks that include the communities often excluded from public space design. This report provides guidance for three different stages of the park planning lifecycle: planning and engagement, programming, and design.

Study Approach

The researcher first completed a literature review of relevant scholarly articles, news articles, and existing design toolkits. This research provided critical background on the rise

of hostile architecture in response to increasing housing insecurity in the United States, spatial rights and who they are afforded to in the public realm, how those rights are enforced, and tactics for restoring unhoused people as stakeholders in public space. Next, the researcher completed case studies of three parks that were designed with and for unhoused park users, specifically. Within these case studies, the researcher investigated the history of the park, the engagement process used during periods of park renovations, park programming, and the design strategies that planners used to create a space that serves as a better resource for all community members, regardless of their housing status.

The researcher validated and built on the engagement, programming, and design recommendations that she garnered from her literature review and case studies by conducting interviews with several urban designers and an advocate from the ACLU, Southern California who is working to eliminate laws criminalizing unhoused people and advance affordable housing access.

Recommendations

While cities continue to work to address the systemic causes of widespread homelessness, urban planners and designers can simultaneously work to restore parks as safe and inclusive spaces for people experiencing housing insecurity. This toolkit asserts that designing parks to embrace the needs of unhoused people can make parks better, more inclusive spaces for all visitors. Park planners and urban designers should consider the following recommendations as they work to restore unhoused individuals’ rights to public parks:

- Implement engagement and programming strategies that foster solidarity between housed and unhoused neighbors. Co-design park rules during this engagement process to ensure that rules target behaviors and not individuals.
- Consider using participatory methods that allow for small, informal group meetings with currently or formerly unhoused people.
- Program and design parks for place-based outreach by providing necessary resources and social services. Employing a resident social worker in high needs parks may be highly beneficial.
- Provide recreational opportunities for all by designing flexible spaces throughout the park.
- Enact a maintenance and operations plan that keeps the park functional and safe for all users. Explore creative design strategies that respond to site-specific needs such as zone lighting, contemplative spaces, and inviting park edges.

For More Information

French, M. (2023). Inclusive Park Design for People of All Housing Statuses: Tools for Restoring Unhoused Individuals' Rights in Public Parks (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1f1619sk>