

# Hostile Architecture



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For most, a public bench is used to wait for the bus or to take a break from a long walk. For the homeless, a bench, sidewalk, or platform can be a place to sleep safely or comfortably. Some cities have taken measures to prevent this by purposely changing public spaces to be uncomfortable or downright impossible to sit on, and for the homeless this practice can disrupt their way of surviving.

This problem isn't found just here in the US, there are examples of it in Canada and abroad as well. A Canadian-based Twitter account by the name of @DefensiveTO documents examples of what is referred to as hostile or defensive architecture in Toronto. The account seeks to call out this architecture and bring awareness to the discrimination and harm it causes. Many of the images are of benches with what look like arm rests but also function to deter homeless people from laying down on them. The amount of pictures uploaded to the account also provides an idea of just how common hostile architecture is in large cities.

Many other examples exist. A common one is the placement of spikes on areas of sidewalk a person can sit or sleep on and be out of the way of foot traffic. Some cities design benches that slant downward, making sitting uncomfortable for everyone - homeless or not - and sleeping out of the question. Other methods of hostile architecture are more subtle. In Seattle, bike racks were placed after police cleared out a homeless camp despite the area being located on a street not commonly frequented by bicyclists.

What cities that deploy defensive architecture fail to realize is that it is a quick solution that doesn't address the bigger problem. We all need to sleep, relax, and have a place for shelter; this includes the homeless. Driving them away will cause them to seek somewhere else for shelter, possibly somewhere less secure, or devise a way to safely continue sleeping on the hostile architecture. Either way, the problem still remains.

The other problem lies in the fact that we are prioritizing aesthetic over homeless lives and safety. Parks keep their pristine image of green lawns, walking dogs, and happy families, doing so by installing benches that tell homeless people that the park is public, just not to them. Businesses opt in for hostile architecture in order to appear nice for the potential customer. This architecture also exists to prioritize the mental comfort of those more fortunate by eliminating the sight of an impoverished person while simultaneously creating physical discomfort for the homeless. Punishing the homeless for needing to sleep is dehumanizing and may lead from physical discomfort into more serious issues: harassment, attacks, and killings.

Instead of promoting hostile architecture, cities need to focus on eliminating homelessness itself. The money that is funding these structures could be used to create awareness or given to shelters, soup kitchens, and other resources meant for helping those in need.

## References

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