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SERVED BUT UNSETTLED

The Contentious Side of Services for the Homeless

Massimo Bricocoli and Simon Güntner

Homeless Services and Their Spaces

Caring for the poor and providing services and benefits often implies keeping the recipients at distance from mainstream society (Simmel 1908; Paugam 1996). In the case of homeless people, the way in which accommodation and support are provided is particularly revealing of a contentious component of welfare policies. Shelters, for instance, can be crucial for survival, but for various reasons, they don't allow for settling. Access may be restricted to certain times (day or night), house rules and spatial arrangements may limit the possibilities to effectively find rest and peace. Hence, while homelessness is a dramatically unsettled condition, contentious situations arise related to the ways the services are provided and experienced, and there is an ambiguous relation between help, stigmatization and exclusion. In this chapter, we examine this relation conceptually and empirically. We draw on current studies on the '(re-)shelterization' of homeless services in the EU and on our own empirical research on shelters in Hamburg and Milan. Our observations are based on exploratory and ongoing interviews and site visits. In both cities, homelessness has changed drastically in the 21st century. Rising figures and an increasing diversity of persons and families who are crowded out of the ever denser housing markets pose complex challenges to the local welfare systems.

To understand the ambiguities around homeless services, an appreciation of the experience of being homeless is essential. It is one of the most vulnerable and precarious situations and most severe forms of poverty. In 2020, there were about four million people homeless in the EU, a figure that has increased by 70% within the last ten years (FEANTSA and Fondation Abbé Pierre 2020). Homelessness does not have a universal meaning, and may include, but not be

limited by: sleeping rough, using night shelters, ‘couch surfing’ at the homes of acquaintances, or living in insecure or inadequate housing (FEANTSA 2005). This diversity is reflected in the range and complexity of services for the homeless. As stated in an overview report by the European Observatory on homelessness (EOH), an attempt to grasp the breadth of services in the field proves difficult:

[It] must encompass housing-led, choice orientated, comprehensive and flexible services that recognise housing as a human right, including housing-led, Housing First and CTI (Critical Time Intervention, MB/SG) services, alongside trauma informed approaches that use co-production. It must, realistically, also include emergency shelters that offer a bed, a meal and nothing else, or volunteers handing out soup and bread to people living on the street, because that is an important part of European responses to homelessness. (EOH 2018: 21)

EOH produced a useful classification of such services (2018: 8–10) and identified four categories:

- Emergency and temporary accommodation,
- Non-housing support: day centers and services such as food distribution, practical support, street work, medical treatment and advise, education and training,
- Housing-focused support: housing-led or ‘housing first’ services that aim at “securing and sustaining an independent home” (ibid.: 9),
- Prevention: services mediation that aim at preventing evictions, such as debt advice or mediation, or rapid rehousing.

While there is a trend toward housing-led and housing-first schemes in some countries, shelters and day centers are still a crucial feature of the service landscape. Even in advanced and well-structured systems, FEANTSA finds basic support to survive and get by appears to be necessary:

It is [...] the case that countries with the cutting edge of homelessness services and integrated strategies also have people handing out sleeping bags, bread and soup or providing spaces in churches or other buildings where people can sleep relatively safely, but which offer no real support. (ibid.: 2)

Some studies even suggest that in the context of austerity policies, the use of shelters has increased rather than declined. These places are characterized by the ambiguities and tensions that will be explored in the following sections of this chapter (for a historic account see Hopper 1990).

The Spatial Dimension of Local Welfare

Just as with all forms of agency, welfare interventions have a spatial dimension. Services are carried out in sites designed for a specific purpose, such as care homes or service centers, or, increasingly, in the everyday environments of users. Space can be regarded as a visible and material dimension of public action, of forms of government, and of organizations (Weick 1995). Interior and exterior design, the house rules, furniture and decoration, in use and interplay with staff, volunteers and users, create an atmosphere that impacts the practice and effect of servicing (Bifulco 2003; Güntner and Seukwa 2018).

The aesthetic and materiality of services is decisive to what we refer to here as ‘welfare spaces’. Welfare spaces are socially produced and reflect societal structures and conditions. They literally display the position of those in need of welfare services in society. In Western Europe, many welfare spaces that are in use today have a long history and were designed with particular ideas of welfare and social order that were paternalistic or progressive, religious or secular. Social change as well as welfare reforms had their effect on services but also on the places where they are carried out and led to diversification, de-institutionalization and de-standardization. Changing regulatory frameworks (e.g. state aid regulations) also often led to a diversification of public and private service providers and complex contractual and financial relations (Güntner and Maucher 2018).

Moreover, welfare spaces are also experienced and constructed by service users, staff and volunteers, by-passers and others who ascribe meaning to them (Diebäcker and Reutlinger 2018). By entering a place, and even before (e.g. when queuing outside), service users are assigned a particular role and position that is crucial to produce the respective service. The same holds for staff (e.g. managers, social workers and officers) and volunteers: they all play a particular role with a specific set of skills and decision-making power. These positions come with a particular reputation, expressed in the service itself, in working conditions, job security, wages, etc., and are mirrored in the way the space of the service is organized. The site where a service is delivered, however, has not necessarily been designed for that purpose. It might have been adapted to changing rationales of welfare policies—very visibly in current attempts to de-institutionalize care services and to replace ‘care homes’ by ‘caring communities’, increases or decreases in budgets, or external factors that may have nothing to do with the service (building regulations and other). Under certain circumstances, there might be a sense of improvisation and compromise, when a service and a place have to be adjusted to each.

Welfare Spaces and the Poor

In the early 20th century, Georg Simmel elaborated on the position of the poor in society. As much as welfare services helped the poor survive and find a place in society, he also found, the use of services distanced them

from mainstream society and reduced them into objects of administration (Simmel 1908). Simmel argued that historically, services and alms for the poor were less concerned about the subject's well-being but rather about keeping order and averting potential threats of vagrancy. Over centuries, this ambivalence has found manifold manifestations in space. Infamous examples are the workhouses that had first been introduced by the Poor Law Act in 1388 in England. When they were expanded in the 18th and 19th centuries, their disciplinary function was emphasized (Foucault 1975). After the Poor Law and the workhouses were abolished in 1948, some continued to be used as retirement homes or homeless shelters (Longmate 2003). Another example are food banks and soup kitchens (Glasser 2004). As essential as they can be for survival, they do not represent a structural solution to tackling poverty, and, while providing food and goods that are urgently needed, may even trigger shaming of the people they serve and the areas where they are served (Garthwaite 2016).

As they manifest difference and distance, the sites where the poor and needy are served function as 'heterotopias of deviation', where "individuals are placed whose behavior is deviant in relation to the mean or required norm" (Foucault 2008[1967]: 18). The relevance of spatial qualities in the organization of welfare services has been a major focus in some recent experimental policies and reform programs. A notable example is the project *WEMI-Welfare for all* that was promoted by the City of Milan in the years 2015–2017 as part of a wider reform of the local welfare system. A general objective of the project was to ease access to welfare services for a wide range of people, including those who may be well-off (and therefore not entitled to social assistance) but still bear difficulties and needs. Together with an online platform (wemi.milano.it), a set of 12 new front-office spaces was opened. The rationale of the project was that a new approach as well as better accessibility to welfare services would need symbolic and concrete artifacts if the relation between welfare services and people was to be improved (Bricocoli and Sabatinelli 2017). Assuming that socio-cultural and architectural features characterize a place and are intertwined in defining its identity as well as the people's experiences of a specific environment, the project developed an integrated strategy aiming at providing a distinguishable visual identity and comfortable and welcoming spaces (see Figure 21.1). Support in terms of communication design and of spatial configuration of the offices was provided by experts of the Department of Design and of the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano. The development of a visual identity for the *WeMi* spaces symbolized a marked difference as the existing sites of municipal social services typically lack signage at the point of access. Without providing a fixed or rigid model, for each *WeMi* Space, specific care was put in the definition of spatial and organizational features in terms of *context* (i.e. welfare services localization), *setting* (i.e. architectural and interior design arrangements) and *artifacts* (i.e. objects, lights and colors).



FIGURE 21.1 WEMI San Gottardo. Welfare services and mixed-use space.
Source: Giovanni Hänninen, 2019.

(Re-)Shelterization and Reconfiguration of Homeless Services in Times of Austerity Policies and Immigration

To emphasize the power of the environment to influence behavior, Grunberg and Eagle (1990: 522) used the term ‘shelterization’ and referred to a “process of acculturation endemic to shelter living”, expressed by phenomena such as “a decrease in interpersonal responsiveness, a neglect of personal hygiene, increasing passivity, and increasing dependency on others” (Matousek 2018: 99). This concept has stirred controversy and criticism, mainly in the US context (Marcus 2003). A more structural use of the concept emphasizes the conditions in shelters rather than individual behavior (Gounis 1992; Glumbikova and Nedelnikova 2017). In their study on homelessness in Athens, Arapoglou et al. (2015) propose a version that goes beyond the shelters as such and involves wider policy considerations. They also apply the concept not to the relation between a person and a shelter but elevate it to a systemic level: “shelterisation is a principal component of an ‘emergency model’ of managing the social consequences of the financial crisis” (ibid.: 152). They argue that three factors lead to a gradual favoring of shelters compared to alternative approaches to social support (ibid.: 141). These are:

- an emergency-oriented system of limited, inadequate and/or inappropriate resources that homeless have to compete for,
- a ‘homeless industry’, that either “endlessly prepares people for re-integration [...] or [...] stores them away”, and
- an “emergency-minded orientation of institutional responses” (ibid.: 140–141).

A version of this trend has shaped the homeless service landscape in many European cities and contributed to inconsistent and contradictory structures (EOH 2018).

In Hamburg, for instance, the system of homeless services appears to be ambivalent and split. On the one hand, the city has, since 2005, developed an approach to prevent evictions and homelessness through improved coordination between various services, individual support in dealing with rent arrears and counseling, and more recently strengthened support services to help people experiencing homelessness find, rent and maintain a dwelling. On the other hand, and related to the limited capacities of this approach, a key part of its response to homelessness are accommodations under public law and the *Winternotprogramm*, an emergency shelter system, which is open from November to March, to prevent people from freezing. Similar emergency programs have been installed in other German cities, which often appear as improvised through the use of shipping containers (see Figure 21.2), opening underground stations at night or tolerating temporary tent camps (Haak and Strauß 2019; Strauß 2019).

According to a recent count, the number of people living on the street in Hamburg nearly doubled during the past ten years to a current estimate of 1910 persons and the city expanded the service from 100 beds in 2007 (when it was launched) to 804 beds in winter 2018/2019 and, due to increased demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, to 1020 beds in 2020/2021 (Wagner 2016; FHH 2020). It consists of two large structures with 400 and 250 beds (with a reserve of 100 beds), which are run by a public agency. Further beds are provided in smaller, decentralized arrangements by welfare organizations and the University of Applied Sciences, mainly in shipping containers. The facilities are open from



FIGURE 21.2 Containers as part of the *Winternotprogramm* Hamburg.

Source: Simon Güntner, 2018.

5 p.m. in the evening to 9.30 a.m. in the morning. During the day, there are some centers that homeless can visit to warm up; one of which is a temporarily transformed concert hall that is not used due to the COVID-19 pandemic and provides space for 200 persons.

To manage and limit the demand, Hamburg introduced an eligibility system that allows access to a bed only to those who cannot help themselves otherwise. Those “who could end their homelessness in Hamburg with a return home” are not eligible (Sozialbehörde Hamburg 2020). This effectively and purposefully crowds out immigrants who make up an increasing proportion of the homeless. For these, so-called *Wärmestuben* [‘warm parlours’] are provided, where they can get tea and a seat, but no bed (Füllner 2017). To fill gaps and help those who can’t find or don’t seek shelter, volunteer initiatives such as a *Kältebus* [‘Chillness Bus’] have been started, which distributes sleeping bags, gloves, chocolate or tissues (Bosch 2019; Deckner 2019). Campaigns and demonstrations, such as a ‘Wintermove’ called for an extension of the emergency program to be open throughout the day and throughout the year, which is refused by the local authority. Despite their well-meant intentions, however, some of the spontaneous private initiatives to provide food, clothes, and in some instances also medication, were seen as ambiguous and problematic by established service providers for their lack of professional knowledge and standards.

An assessment of the 2018/2019 program proved controversial. The Senator for Social Affairs presented that not all places had actually been used every night and declared this as a success (Sozialbehörde Hamburg 2019). Opposition parties and welfare organizations interpreted the data differently. They read the decline in numbers in relation to the increasingly restricted access and saw it as a sign of exclusion and discrimination against most needy groups, such as eastern European immigrants and deferred asylum seekers (Deckner 2019; Trautwein 2019). Indeed, there are frequent reports in local and national media of rough sleepers who try to avoid the shelters (Kempkens 2019). Those who avoid shelters commonly included the following as their reasoning: overcrowding, strict rules to leave early in the morning, but also violence.

These reasons for avoiding services resemble the findings of a study on emotional geographies of homeless people in Copenhagen (Fahnoe 2018). Emphasizing the “interplay between emotions and the spatial dynamics of places” (ibid.: 28), it finds that because of fear and disgust, some homeless do not make use of shelters and services. Fahnoe argues that avoidance should not be read as “self-exclusion”, but rather “be understood as driven by the spatial dynamics of certain places which prompt negative emotions” (ibid.: 29). It shows that the very design of a place, purposefully or not, can effectively exclude people from its use: “spatial dynamics shape policies” whilst “the spatial dynamics related to materiality, symbolic dimensions and practices are shaped by policies” (ibid.: 28). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically tightened and worsened the situation in homeless shelters, with large structures such as those used in the Hamburg emergency services turning into hot-spots for infections.

When people avoid or don't have access to services and places such as shelters, they turn to public space. Hence, public space is a crucial infrastructure of the 'homeless city' and homeless people's strategies and tactics to survive and get by (Cloke et al. 2010: 63ff). Public spaces, however, are rarely welcoming and comforting, but often rather, and increasingly, designed and controlled to push homeless persons away. A personal account of a person experiencing homelessness in Hamburg is telling: "You can only choose between being displaced and entering a conflict" (Kempkens 2019).

De-institutionalization and De-standardization: Ambitious and Ambiguous Approaches to Service Innovation

Across Europe, large and specialized institutions are important and visible pillars of welfare policies. This also holds for homeless services, which have, throughout the 20th century, been linked to large-scale facilities that function as emergency shelters or temporary accommodation. However, criticism against negative effects of institutionalization in the context of wider social change has led to paradigmatic shifts in many (Western) European countries since the mid-1970s (Eurich et al. 2019). For homelessness services, the most radical and pronounced model to emerge from this criticism is 'housing first', which was first developed in the US and has become the benchmark in the EU as well: the provision of direct access to independent and permanent housing, as an alternative to a sequence of supported and assisted forms of provisional accommodation (Pleace 2016). Whilst this model has inspired much conceptual development in homeless services across the EU, large-scale shelters are still in use and still present a key component of the service landscape. Adapting and redesigning these buildings poses a challenge for providers, as their very design often reflects an exclusionary and paternalistic version of welfare and that is at odds with progressive and emancipatory concepts and policies.

A place that illustrates this well is *Casa Jannacci*, a large historical institution for the homeless in Milano (Breckner and Bricocoli 2012; Fabbri 2019). The institution was opened in 1956, consisting of six large pavilions which would serve as dormitories for 1,000 people, plus one main administrative building and a canteen. Homeless people would be admitted only for the night and kept out during the day. In 2014, the institution was renamed after Enzo Jannacci, a popular singer, to mark a programmatic reconfiguration (see Figures 21.3 and 21.4).

The organization was partly turned into a network of services providing access to different forms of accommodation: mobile units around the city were set up while underused parts of the building were transformed to host some social housing dwellings. Other programs aim at more effectively enhancing capabilities by way of fostering processes of job insertion and secured housing provision. Services were incrementally de-standardized; answers and solutions have been more tailored to the needs and capabilities of individuals. Within the pavilions, a differentiated set of arrangements was offered (short- and



FIGURE 21.3 Casa Jannacci: Incremental transformation of a large historical institution.
Source: Massimo Bricocoli, 2019.



FIGURE 21.4 Casa Jannacci: The entrance.
Source: Massimo Bricocoli, 2019.

medium-term up to one year—for a total of 484 beds). While the general rule of the Casa Jannacci allows access to the services either to Italian citizens or holders of regular permits of stay, over the years much has been done to lower the threshold for access. Several services and activities were developed that can be accessed also by people who are not overnight guests (Fabri 2019). These changes respond to an increasing diversification of Milan's homeless population. In 2018, 79% of the guests were men and 21% women; 51% of the guests were

North Africans (a vast majority of which are single men) and less than a quarter were of Italian nationality (24%).

The process of de-standardizing spaces and social service approaches with reference to the variety of individual profiles and needs entails the unsettling of a very consolidated and homogeneous approach to homelessness. It requires a lot of energy and the creation of partnerships with a number of third-party actors that may provide integrative environment and possibilities (i.e. social enterprises supporting job insertion). In the face of scant public funding, the transformation of the old complex is still very much incremental and minimal because it represents a series of minor reconfigurations to adapt to longitudinal (e.g. housing costs) and emerging (e.g. COVID-19) emergency issues. A more radical approach to confronting the scale of scope of homelessness would require that such a large complex undergo an overall spatial reconfiguration and become a terrain for experimenting on the frontline of welfare services and architectural design. The process of de-institutionalization and the overcoming of the dormitory as a 'specialized container' makes explicit the need to address the manifold dimensions that impact the life of the homeless. Consequently, the respective services and providers have to be transformed and aligned to pave the way from mobile social work to permanent housing (Tosi 2018). In the case of the *Casa Jannacci*, the incremental evolution of welfare services demonstrated the capacity to adapt to a rapid change of social needs and handle a very dynamic situation and to provide more adequate and differentiated services, supporting homeless through enhancing a cooperation between public sector and third-party actors—despite an overall increasingly hostile and adverse environment. Yet, the Milanese case remains also a very emblematic example of how broader housing policies are currently failing to enable welfare policies to respond to the most severe housing needs, while the provision of housing is increasingly commodified and financialized.

Unsettling Services

The (re-)emerging 'emergency model' of homeless services in the context of a rise of homelessness is a complex and ambivalent manifestation of urban contestation. Paradoxically, it appears at a time when the traditional service landscape is criticized for and challenged by new paradigms such as 'housing first'. But a dramatic rise in demand for basic survival support such as soup kitchens and shelters across Europe indicates their limits and the dramatic effects of the underlying housing crisis. For users, but also for staff members, these services—positioned between control and care (Whiteford 2010; Watts et al. 2018)—are unsettling. Denying or deferring access to services to some groups, particularly those who are not citizens or native-born, presents not only as disrespectful and even life-threatening to those who are denied these services, but also as demanding and overwhelming for those who exert that denial. It can effectively turn a place that was designed as a sanctuary into sites of 'bordering, ordering and othering' (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002; see also Güntner et al. 2016). The spatial dimension of it is

obvious when a door is closed to some people despite them demonstrating an existential need, but it can also be more subtle, such as when people turn away from assistance or support they are entitled to.

In the winter emergency services in Hamburg, providers have responded in different ways to the order that denies access for non-eligible persons. Some have followed the order meticulously whilst others tried to use their discretion in support of non-eligible persons and/or organized public protest. For a profession that regards “principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities” (IFSW and IASSW 2014) as central, protest against these conditions appears as a reasonable strategy, but also subversion and resistance at the point of service, or the search for alternative forms of help that can evade municipal and state regulations. Clearly, for a social worker, balancing professional mandates and ethics with counter instructions by their organization and a subjective assessment of the respective situation, is challenging. But even more and for all parties involved, it appears that situations like this test and unsettle their belief in the purpose of public welfare and, more generally, in public institutions. Evidently, conflicts around shelters and ‘shelterization’ are just one site in a wider landscape of urban contestations, reflecting underlying dynamics of societal transformation that go far beyond welfare services, yet do find a particularly nuanced expression in them. This broader context is addressed by recent urban movements and protest against bordering and exclusion in many cities, often also relating to refugees and housing struggles (Agustin and Jorgensen 2019). The practices and expressions of solidarity that emerge out of these movements not only make public the adverse and precarious living conditions of many, but generate new, post-national and post-traditional imaginaries of community and belonging, questioning and unsettling hegemonic ideas of social order.

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