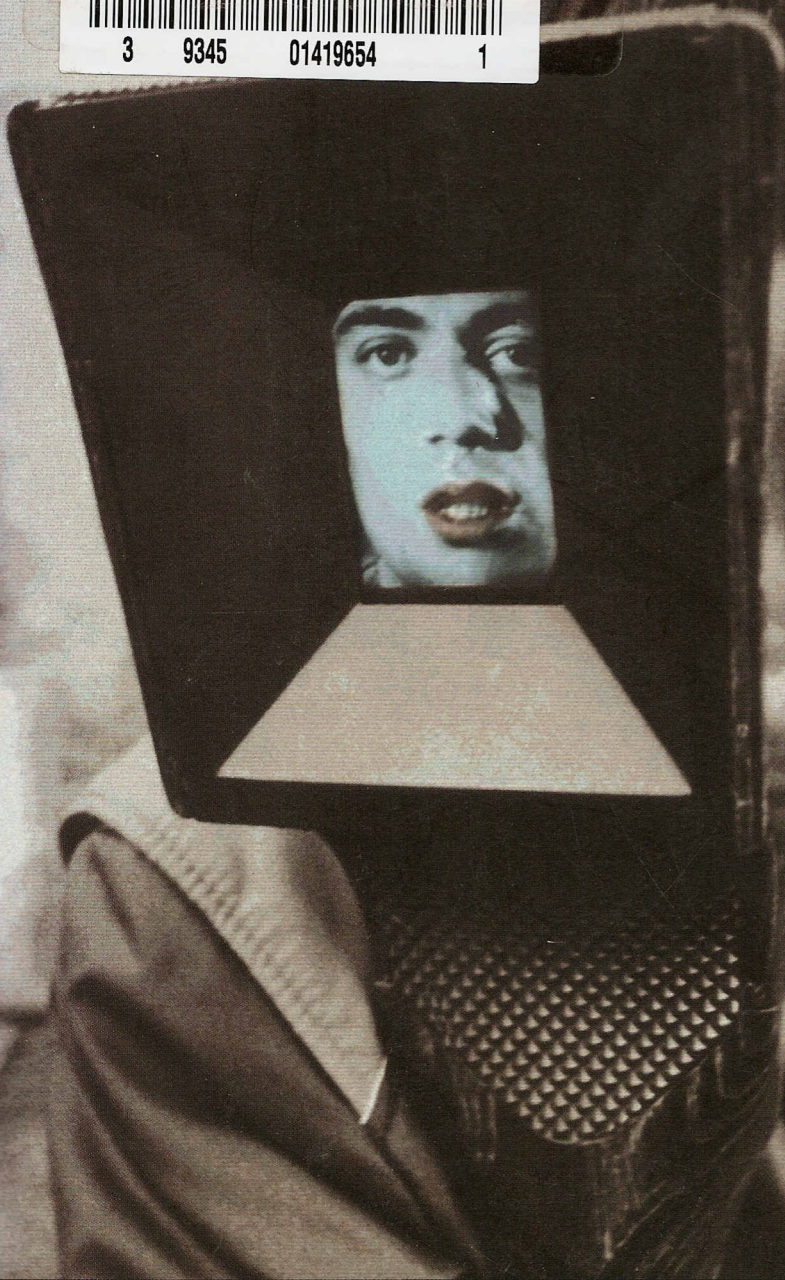


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**Critical Vehicles**

**Writings,  
Projects,  
Interviews**



**Homeless  
Vehicle Project**  
with David Lurie  
(1988–89)

*I was not insane when they picked me up, I was homeless.*

—Joyce Brown, homeless person forcibly hospitalized by the New York City government<sup>1</sup>

During the winter of 1987–88, an estimated 70,000 people were homeless in New York City.<sup>2</sup> A large portion of this population is made up of homeless individuals. Unlike families with children, homeless individuals are not given priority for placement in the city's transitional housing facilities or in welfare hotel rooms. Instead, the city government offers space to the single homeless in its growing system of dormitory shelters.

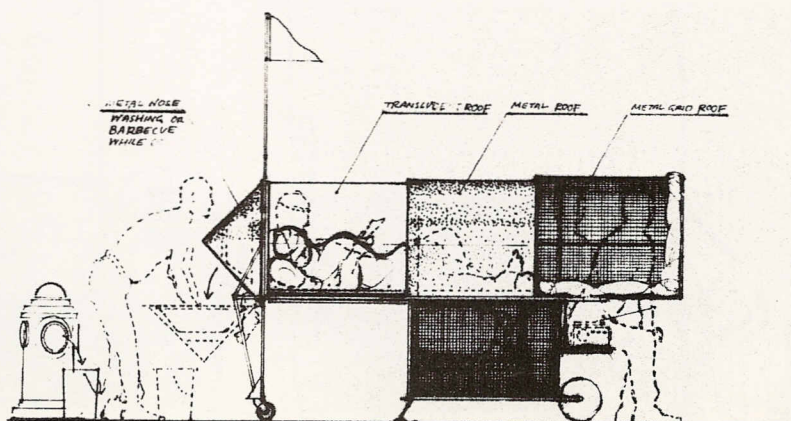
Most city-run shelters—though they provide food and respite from the elements—are dangerous and unfriendly places that impose a dehumanizing, even prisonlike, regimentation on residents. Guards routinely treat clients as inmates, allegedly denying them food for the violation of rules. Some shelter residents are bused from place to place for food, showers, and sleep. Charges of violence by shelter security guards and clients are common.

According to the mayor of New York City, a homeless person who chooses to live on the street rather than accept placement in a shelter during the cold of winter is, by definition, to be suspected of mental illness. But given the city's official response to the problem of homeless individuals, it is not surprising that many have made a rational choice to live on the streets.

Though a significant proportion of homeless individuals are the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, a growing majority of them are not. Furthermore, both the sane and insane homeless share the same immediate, life-threatening condition: they have no permanent shelter and no safe place to go.

Their alternative has been to develop a means of survival on the streets of New York City. The nomadic homeless people we all observe and encounter on the streets have been compelled to develop a series of strategies for self-sufficiency under constantly changing—and always threatening—circumstances. Problems of garnering food, keeping warm, remaining safe from personal harm and relatively undisturbed during sleep all present challenges that are never perfectly resolved.

The fact that people are compelled to live on the streets is unacceptable. But failing to recognize the reality of these people's situation or holding up the fact of their living on the streets as proof of their universal insanity is a morally and factually untenable position. Advocacy for permanent, safe, and dignified shelter for all people is essential—and is being pursued. But a recognition that all individuals need and deserve permanent housing must also lead to an



examination of the immediate needs of homeless people. Given the failure of the city's shelter system, what can we do for individuals struggling for self-sufficiency on the streets today?

Our proposed vehicle is designed to play a role in filling a dangerous gap in shelter needs. It seeks to be of use to the significant number of individuals who will, for the foreseeable future, continue to be compelled to live a nomadic life in the urban environment. Rather than an ideal shelter, the vehicle is designed with attention to the specific limitations and compromises imposed by urban nomadic existence. Though it cannot appropriately be called a home, the vehicle is a potential means for ameliorating the conditions of life for people surviving under trying circumstances.

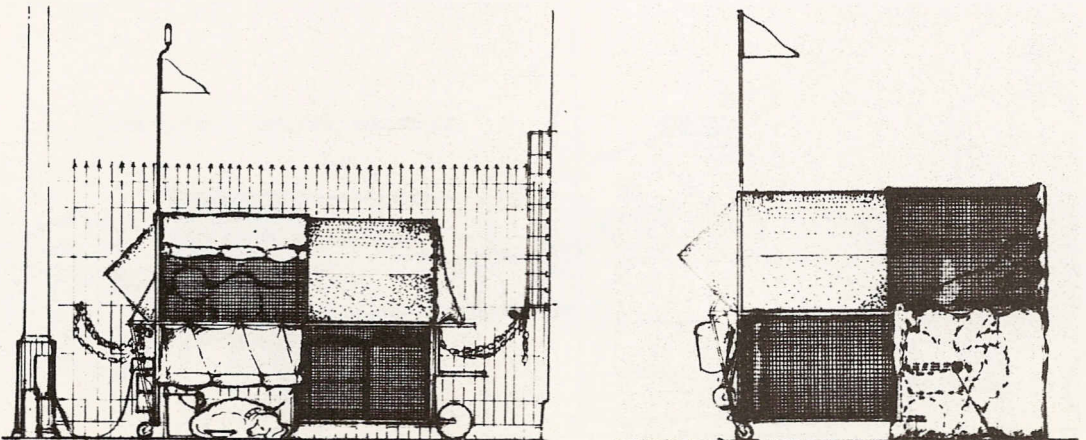
*When I came to New York I was struck by the occasional form lying on the street, with people standing over it as if it wasn't there.*

—John Bowers, *New York Times*<sup>3</sup>

Although in our daily encounters with homeless people we are aware of their status as refugees, we generally fail to recognize that they are refugees from the transformation of the city itself. The redesign of city parks to allow for better surveillance and easier removal of homeless people signifies an institutional ignorance of the fact that the destruction and renovation of entire neighborhoods has left no place for these people to go.<sup>4</sup> We are reluctant to discern the relationship between the physical transformation of the city—through real-estate development and economic displacement—and the creation of homelessness. An ABC official stated that his company is hesitant to construct a public plaza next to its midtown headquarters because it does not want to see a “tent city for the homeless here.”<sup>5</sup> But with or without a plaza, the homeless will not disappear.

Homeless people's marginalization is directly tied to the refusal of other city residents to recognize them as fellow urban citizens. The dominant notion of the homeless as mere objects largely explains why we allow people to live and die on our streets without doing much to help them.

In a television forum, columnist George Will argued that the presence of ragged masses camped out in front of midtown New York office buildings was an infringement of the legitimate rights of executives working there. In Will's view, dodging the bodies of homeless people and enduring their incessant demands for small change is an unnecessary addition to the already stressful lives



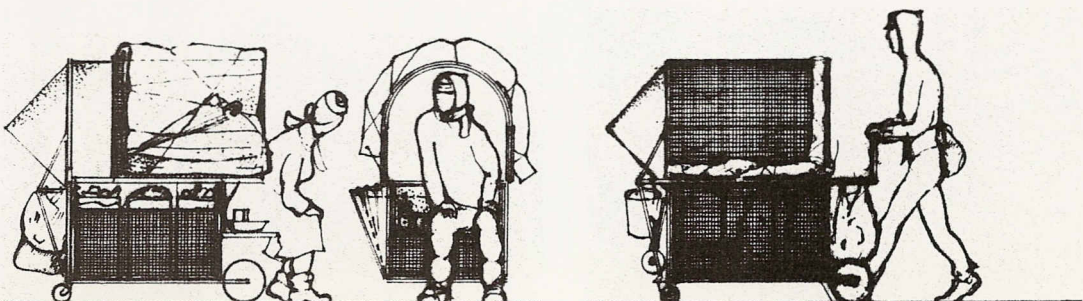


of businessmen.<sup>6</sup> In the activity of moving through the city, described by Walter Benjamin as a "series of shocks and collisions," the homeless are apprehended as immobile barriers to travel. This description, from a recent *New York Times* article, of seasoned commuters' strategies for dealing with their daily encounters with homeless people in the Port Authority bus terminal is typical: they block out recognition by "locking their eyes forward" and "striding purposefully" toward the exits. The homeless are seen as identity-free objects that must be negotiated rather than recognized. The article describes acknowledgment of the presence of the homeless as a sign of inexperience, a trap that only temporary visitors to the city fall into: "They stop and stare, eyes wide open to the unfamiliar, raw suffering."<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the dramatic image of the homeless as faceless, rag-encased bundles signifies an elision of these peoples' actual modes of survival. Though we encounter the homeless as figures anchored to a grate or bench or asleep in the subway as we rush to work, surviving on the streets of New York is actually dominated by the constant necessity for movement, often in response to the actions of authorities. In recreation areas such as Tompkins Square and Riverside Park, uniformed police officers are routinely deployed to remove homeless people. All of Grand Central Station and portions of the Port Authority bus terminal are closed to homeless residents during the night. Survival, therefore, compels mobility. Especially for those who live entirely outside of the shelter system, the ability to travel from place to place with one's personal belongings in a swift and efficient manner is a key to functioning successfully in the city.

Through the use of adapted, appropriated vehicles, some homeless individuals have managed to develop a means of economic sustenance in the city. These people, known as "scavengers," spend their days collecting, sorting, and returning cans to supermarkets in return for the five-cent deposit. Shopping and postal carts and other wheeled vehicles are used for collecting and transporting cans and bottles during the day and for storage of collected materials during the night. Crowds of homeless redeemers outside of supermarkets have become commonplace since the Bottle Bill went into effect in 1983.

In their familiar position of supplication and helplessness, homeless individuals do not stake a claim to the territory that has been taken from them. They are reduced to mere observers of the remaking of their neighborhoods for others. Their homelessness appears as a natural condition, the cause is dissociated from its consequence, and the status of the homeless as legitimate members of the urban community is unrecognized.





The activities of scavengers and the growing numbers of what one reporter described as their "gaily decorated" shopping carts have played a role in altering the public perception of homeless individuals. Their visibly purposive movement through the city gives them an identity as actors in the urban space. Since scavengers are mobile, they cannot be walked away from or easily dismissed as silent nonpersons. Where the immobile figure's status seems provisional and ambiguous, the scavenger stakes a claim to space in the city and indicates his or her membership in the urban community.

The shelter vehicle attempts to function usefully in the context of New York City street life. Therefore, its point of departure is the strategy of survival that urban nomads presently utilize. Through discussions with scavengers, we developed a proposal for a vehicle to be used both for personal shelter and can and bottle transportation and storage. An earlier design was shown to potential users and modified according to their criticisms and suggestions. Since the design developed through reference to the needs of a specific group of homeless people, all of whom are tall, male, and physically strong, it is possible that it may not be appropriate for other homeless people. As the project develops, the needs and interests of other groups of potential users must be addressed, particularly those of homeless women. We have yet to speak with any homeless women and learn of their particular strategies for survival. Though certain features of the vehicle as it is presently designed, such as a possible built-in toilet, might be of use to homeless women, discussions with them will be necessary to develop a design responsive to their needs.

An initial proposal, the project is not put forward as a finished product, ready for use on the streets. Rather, it is conceived as a starting point for further collaboration between skilled designers and potential users. Both parties will have to play roles in the design and production of future versions of the vehicle, with continued adaptations in the design made in response to the survival needs of users and additional strategies devised by designers. Though such a collaborative relationship may sound unlikely or even impossible, it is the key to the project's success. Only through such cooperation can the vehicle function usefully. Direct participation of users in the construction of the vehicle is the key to developing a vehicle that belongs to its users, rather than merely being appropriated by them.

A false notion of the homeless as individuals functioning in isolation from the urban community and from each other contributes to their current status as exiles in their own city. We hope the vehicle will aid in making visible and strengthening the modes of cooperation and interdependence that now exist in



the homeless population. The possibility of grouping, even linking, the vehicles together could be explored.

The signifying function of the vehicle is as important as its strictly utilitarian purpose. Building upon the existing image of the scavenger as an autonomous, active individual, the vehicle attempts to function as a visual analogue to everyday objects of consumption and merchandising (such as food vendor carts) and to create a bridge of empathy between homeless individuals and observers. The use of a vehicle fashioned specially for their collection activities makes visible the fact that scavengers, like other urban citizens, are working for their subsistence.

The goal of the vehicle project is, therefore, twofold: to fulfill the need of homeless people for a means of transportation and shelter, and to aid in creating a legitimized status for its users in the community of the city.

The prototype vehicle bears a resemblance to a weapon. In our view, the movements of carts through New York City are acts of resistance, opposing the continuing ruination of an urban community that excludes thousands of people from even the most meager means of life. Though the transformation of the city, which has compelled so many people to survive through collection of its detritus, is an outrage, we must all be forced to recognize the value and legitimacy of their daily work.

Since its first presentation at the Clocktower in January 1988, the Homeless Vehicle underwent preliminary tests on the streets of New York City. The working model was discussed with scavengers and passersby. Drawings and documentary material were shown to architects, artists, urban geographers, social workers, activists, and journalists. These tests and discussions resulted in many practical suggestions, critical comments, new concerns and ideas. New developments in urban politics, such as the Koch administration's construction of floating shelters for the homeless and the confiscation of homeless people's belongings and destruction of their habitat in City Hall Park, as well as resistance to the curfew and the related antigentrification riot in Tompkins Square, have intensified the gravity of the situation for which the vehicle was intended, requiring additions to and reinforcements of its functional and symbolic program. These include the following:

*Mobility:*

- A simple suspension system, larger wheels, and other adjustments to facilitate increased maneuverability over curbs, potholes, and steps.



**Safety:**

- A simple brake system both for slopes and for parking while resting or sleeping.
- An emergency escape system in case of fire or attack.
- A lock and alarm system to protect collected goods and personal property.
- Rearview mirrors and emergency signals to protect against traffic.

**Variants:**

- Versions of the vehicle responding to the needs of various users, in particular those of women scavengers.
- Transformation of the vehicle into a vendor's cart for selling found goods, such as clothing, magazines, etc.
- Assembling vehicles in groups as collective habitats or defensive encampments against police harassment.

**Notes**

1. Quoted by Josh Barbanel, *New York Times*, January 19, 1988.
2. Coalition for the Homeless estimate, reported in *New York Newsday*, January 4, 1988.
3. *New York Times*, April 4, 1987.
4. See Rosalyn Deutsche, "Krzysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Projection and the Site of 'Urban Revitalization,'" *October*, no. 38 (Fall 1986), pp. 63–99.
5. Quoted by Paul Goldberger, *New York Times*, January 17, 1988.
6. "David Brinkley Report," ABC-TV, ca. January 1986.
7. Jane Gross, *New York Times*, November 9, 1987.

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In 1988 and 1989 four variants of the *Homeless Vehicle*, differing in the materials with which they were constructed and resulting in various technical improvements, were tested, used, and publicly presented in the following places: Variant 1 in City Hall Park and the parks across from the Criminal Court and the Municipal Building (Manhattan); Variant 2 in Tompkins Square Park and the surrounding area, Wall Street, and the area around Battery Park (Manhattan); Variant 3 in Central Park, Grand Army Plaza, Fifth Avenue, across from Trump Tower, and Battery Park City (all Manhattan), and in Greenpoint Park (Brooklyn); Variant 4 in Washington Square Park and the surrounding area and the area around Broadway-Lafayette (Manhattan), and in Dilworth Plaza, Rittenhouse Square, the area around the Liberty Bell, the area around City Hall, and the National Temple Recycling Center (all in Philadelphia). Those who tested and used them include Robert of "Dinkinsville," New York; Allan Benjamin, Oscar, Victor, and Daniel of Tompkins Square Park, New York; and Vanessa Brown, John Alston, and Vernon Wilson of Philadelphia.

