

Designing Exclusion: The Hidden Impact of Hostile Architecture

Public spaces are often designed to welcome some while excluding others. Hostile architecture remains largely unnoticed and misunderstood in cities worldwide.

“Hostile what? No, I don’t think I’ve heard of it. Is it new?” This is a typical response when people are asked about hostile architecture, showing how little people know about it, even though it is becoming more common in cities worldwide. According to the *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, hostile architecture refers to the intentional shaping of public spaces to prevent certain behaviours, often targeting vulnerable groups such as the homeless or youth. Examples of such design include benches that prevent lying down or architectural features that discourage skateboarding. Although hostile architecture is not a new concept, it has gained increasing attention and sparked debate in recent years. This is not just an issue in Madrid, cities everywhere are struggling to balance safety and practicality with the goal of making public spaces inclusive. This feature explores insights from architects in Switzerland, Milan, and Austria, who discuss the social and psychological impacts of these designs, alongside real-world examples in Madrid that show how this global trend is affecting urban environments today.

Although discussions about hostile architecture are becoming more common, many people in Madrid still do not understand what it is or why it exists, as shown by street interviews. When asked about the term “hostile architecture,” several people expressed confusion. A 34-year-old office worker said, “*It sounds familiar, but I don’t really know what that means,*” reflecting the lack of



understanding. Even when shown examples, such as a bench divided into two sections, a delivery driver in his 40s commented, *“I thought it was just a weird design choice.”* Features like benches that prevent lying down or spikes placed on ledges are often so integrated into the city that people don’t notice them. A university student, when shown the downward-sloping wall next to a Starbucks, admitted, *“I go there almost every day and never realized it was designed to stop people from sitting.”* While some individuals begin to recognize these designs, others question their effectiveness.



A teacher remarked, *“It’s not a solution to the real problems, just a way to push them out of sight.”* These interviews reveal that people rarely notice hostile architecture, even though it shapes how public spaces are used and often makes them less accessible to marginalized groups.

While the general public remains unaware, experts raised concerns about the social and psychological harm caused by these designs, particularly to vulnerable groups such as the homeless and young people. M. Natter, Head of Homeless Support at Caritas, explains that in Austrian cities like Feldkirch and Dornbirn, hostile architecture act as strong symbols of social exclusion. According to Natter, *“These designs don’t solve homelessness, they just push it out of sight.”* He emphasizes that such measures create frustration and resistance among the affected groups, while failing to address main issues like the lack of affordable housing or social support. This type of design worsens social divisions and makes it even harder for vulnerable groups to access public spaces, further isolating them. Rappitsch B., a clinical and health psychologist, explains the serious psychological harm caused by hostile architecture. She explains that these

designs worsen the lives of homeless individuals by making it even harder to find safe places to sleep or maintain basic hygiene. *“Instead of helping, hostile architecture creates new barriers and worsens mental health,”* she states. For instance, using blue lights in public toilets to prevent drug use forces people to engage in these activities in riskier locations, increasing health risks. These actions do not address the main issues, they just move them around, making things even harder for marginalized groups. The impact on young people is also significant.

Rappitsch points out that restricting or removing public spaces where young people gather leaves them without areas to socialize.



This often happens because of design

choices meant to control behavior. Instead of using hostile architecture, Rappitsch suggests cities should focus on creating inclusive spaces that welcome people of all ages and backgrounds. Creating welcoming environments could provide better solutions to urban challenges while reducing social division. This is not just a local issue. Hostile architecture is common in Europe, the U.S., and other regions, showing a widespread issue that needs more discussion about making urban design inclusive. Rappitsch points out that many of these strategies have roots in the 1960s, framed as crime prevention, but they often end up discriminating against marginalized groups. The long history of hostile architecture still shapes cities today, creating barriers instead of connections.

While the social impacts of hostile architecture are clear, architects also face challenges in designing inclusive public spaces. This challenge is particularly evident in places like train stations, which prioritize efficiency and high traffic flow. Böhler A., an Architectural master student in Milan, explains, *“Train stations are designed to keep*

people moving, not to create spaces where people can sit comfortably for long periods.”

She argues that while these spaces need to function well, their designs often sacrifice inclusivity for practicality. Wüst C., an architect from Switzerland, agrees that public spaces should accommodate everyone - from families and skaters to homeless individuals. She explains that hostile design features, like benches that stop people from sleeping or skateboarding, often don't fix deeper problems. *“People don't just disappear when they are excluded from public spaces; they move somewhere else,”* she says, highlighting the need for urban planning to be more inclusive and to solve problems without simply moving marginalized groups.

Architects also face limits because of client demands. Böhler notes that planners are often limited by what clients envision for a space, which can make it difficult to address broader social needs. This view is shared by M. Natter, who worked on the redesign of the train station in Feldkirch, Austria. He explains that investors initially ignored the social needs of the station, assuming these issues could be dealt with later.

“The lack of early consultation with social institutions led to designs that excluded vulnerable groups, turning the station into a

symbol of exclusion,” Natter recalls. Actions like dividing benches to stop people from sleeping caused resistance and public criticism, showing what happens when these issues aren't handled properly from the start.



Architects' awareness of the social impacts of hostile design can vary. Natter describes how the architects in Feldkirch initially overlooked how important public spaces are for marginalized groups, like the homeless, who use these areas as their "living rooms." However, by involving local institutions and stakeholders in the design process, the project eventually developed more inclusive solutions. This example shows that working together can lead to better results, even when initial design fail to consider social needs. Ideas for more inclusive urban spaces have also been suggested. Christin suggests that public spaces need to be clearly defined, accessible, and safe, with features like proper lighting, emergency call stations, and green areas. Böhler emphasizes the importance of understanding the activities intended for a space.

"Designs should reflect how people will actually use the area - whether it's relaxing on benches, playing in playgrounds, or skating," she explains. These ideas show how careful, inclusive design can solve urban problems without relying on hostile architecture.



From Madrid to cities worldwide, the impact is clear: marginalized groups are pushed out of public spaces, and underlying social issues, like homelessness, are ignored. The first step to creating more inclusive urban spaces is to raise awareness about these design choices. Public spaces should be for everyone, not just the privileged ones. As Wüst C., an architect from Switzerland, rightly states, *"Design should reflect how people will actually use the area."* When urban spaces are designed with the needs of all users in mind, whether they are homeless individuals, youth, or the elderly, they become places that foster connection rather than division (involving architects, local

governments, and communities). As Wüst C. from Switzerland emphasizes, “*Design should reflect how people will actually use the area.*”