

How the homeless create homes

June 29 2017, by Susan Fraiman



Margaret Morton's photographs of the homeless highlighted their makeshift dwellings as symbols of creativity and resourcefulness. Credit: Margaret Morton

The number of people facing housing insecurity, already on the rise, [began to climb more steeply](#) as a result of the Great Recession. This upward trend will likely be exacerbated if President Trump's [proposed](#)

[cuts](#) to food stamps, Medicaid and housing subsidies are enacted, which will force even more to make a choice between food on the table and a roof above their heads.

To those who are safely housed, a homeless person is apt to inspire feelings ranging from fear and disgust to pity and guilt.

Such negative responses are rooted in longstanding myths about "hobos," "Bowery bums," and "bag ladies." Some may believe that homeless people are free spirits who simply prefer to live outside. More likely, they're viewed as misfits – dysfunctional, threatening, potentially criminal.

Above all, they are not like us.

In my new book, "[Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins](#)," I examine ethnographies, journalistic accounts and memoirs that have been written about homeless people and communities.

While the accounts describe individuals living in different decades, cities and circumstances, the homeless people portrayed all possess an impressive degree of agency and resourcefulness, even though they can't take the comforts of home for granted.

Homemakers once, they are homemakers still: however challenging, their efforts to satisfy basic domestic needs resemble those of people everywhere.

Changing the narrative

The guy on a median, working the cars with his scrawled sign. The woman camped on a sidewalk with her bundles. The sleeping figure curled under a roof of cardboard.

These are only the most visible cases of homelessness. But many rotate among friends, stay in emergency shelters or live in their cars. Most are previously employed, and some still are.

The majority aren't consistently homeless. Instead, high rents, low wages and insufficient federal aid combine to produce recurrent bouts of homelessness – a cycle of instability. As Harvard sociologist Matthew Desmond noted in his recent book "[Evicted](#)," millions of families are forced from their homes each year.

A large number are children. In 2016, youth under 25 [accounted for 31 percent of the overall homeless population](#). In addition to LGBT teens and those aging out of foster care, [a recent study](#) identified a more surprising subgroup of unhoused kids: community college students. Many lack sufficient financial aid and are earning poverty wages. A full 13 percent leave class with nowhere to go.

Dealing with daily needs

We tend to equate the absence of secure shelter with the absence of a domestic life. Is it even possible to make a home without one?

But for people coping with homelessness, everyday domestic concerns become all the more urgent and all-consuming.

Is this a safe, dry place to sleep? Does my kid have cereal for breakfast? Where can I take a shower? When does the soup kitchen open? Where can I store my medication, papers and photos? How can I create some privacy and coziness in a public place?

The sources I survey in my book suggest that answers to these problems are as diverse as the people experiencing homelessness. In "[Travels with Lizbeth](#)," writer Lars Eighner recalls his years spent sleeping in

makeshift camps and eating out of dumpsters, accompanied by his beloved dog. At one point, he nests for weeks in a stand of bamboo, reading and writing by the light of an improvised oil lamp.

Jonathan Kozol, in the book "[Rachel and Her Children](#)," tells the story of Annie, a woman who dreams of a sparkling house full of books and plants. In the meantime, she and her family of four make do with a room in the Martinique Hotel, a decaying building in midtown Manhattan serving as a [homeless shelter](#). Braving squalid conditions, Annie cooks dinner on a hotplate and serves it on the bed, while still making sure the kids' homework is done.

[Documented by anthropologist Jackson Underwood](#), the "bridge people" live under Los Angeles' freeways, camping together, divvying up labor, fighting with and caring for one another. Like any extended family, they share food, drink, cigarettes, clothing and cash. When Jerry and Suzi are sick, Mack brings them breakfast every morning: scrambled eggs, ravioli or grilled cheese.

No home is just given. Every home is the product of someone's daily labor and creativity. In this sense, the so-called homeless – under duress but carrying on with familiar routines of cooking, cleaning and caring – aren't so different from the rest of society.

Creating something from nothing

The 2000 documentary "[Dark Days](#)" introduces us to life in a shantytown located in a railway tunnel beneath the streets of Manhattan. It's no paradise, as the rats, garbage, arson and violent backstories make clear.

Yet against all odds, the men and women we meet in the film have managed to domesticate their underground wilderness. Hardworking and

innovative, they cobble together the necessities and even a few small luxuries: a dartboard, toaster oven, dogs, cats and a gerbil named Peaches.

Along abandoned railroad tracks, residents live in rigged up wooden houses, furnished with items dragged in from the street. A man named Henry was able to tap into the power grid, so there's a ready supply of electricity for cooking, shaving and watching TV. Sanitation is poor, but sometimes there's running water from city pipes.

People fuss over meals concocted on hotplates. Noting the merits of buttermilk in cornbread, a woman named Dee explains, "We're homeless people, but if you know how to cook, cook right." Others are shown sweeping, brushing teeth, preparing for a day's work collecting cans or reselling found goods.

Supplies are stacked on tables and shelves. Someone has painted a Daliesque mural on rough tunnel walls. The film itself is a creative act that emerged from the community: It was first proposed by one resident and executed by a crew of tunnel dwellers.

Mobilizing to take action

David Wagner's "[Checkerboard Square: Culture and Resistance in a Homeless Community](#)" is a 1993 study of street people in a midsized New England city. Like "Dark Days," it shows that being homeless doesn't necessarily mean being isolated. Wagner challenges the view that [homeless people](#) are "socially disorganized, disaffiliated and disempowered," finding that many of the women and men he studied not only retain ties to mainstream society but also participate in well-defined subgroups, from what he calls the "Politicos" to the "Social Club."

The Politicos, for example, erected a tent city to protest policies

detrimental to the poor and insecurely housed. Working alongside community organizers, interacting with journalists and city officials, these homeless activists succeeded in bettering conditions and gaining a voice for people living outside.

Wagner describes, too, how members of the Social Club gathered at the Friendly Center, an innovative community space for those with mental health issues. Staffed as well as frequented by the people it served, the Center challenged mainstream views of this population as broken and needing to be fixed. Most Social Club members were women who defied the stereotype of the hapless bag lady: they were eloquent advocates for alternative mental health care. They helped to lead the tent city, and spoke out forcefully on behalf of homeless women and the mentally ill.

[Being without reliable shelter is traumatic](#). But it's only dehumanizing if you're regarded as less than human. In fact, being homeless brings out the very things that make us human: our creation of domestic rituals, care for others, ingenuity in shaping our environment.

It may even inspire efforts to change the society that leaves some out in the cold.

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