Review

Callous objects: Designs against the homeless

Robert Rosenberger
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In, *Callous Objects*, Robert Rosenberger brings attention to how the built form of cities contributes to the exclusion of its most vulnerable inhabitants: the homeless. Examining park benches with high armrests, trashcans with narrow lids, and stretches of sidewalk layered with pointed spikes, Rosenberger considers how law and design converge at times to close off key public spaces from being used in unintended ways by homeless people. Rather than describing particular cases in detail, the text is organized around short, theoretical reflections about the ethics of people, things, and the practices that bind them together. For those familiar with the ethnographic literature on homelessness, the end-result of this book will not uncover novel tactics or emergent logics for regulating the poor. The important contribution of the book lies elsewhere: *Callous Objects* provides an incredibly clear and concise introduction to the key ideas in Science and Technology Studies that animate much of the current literature on homelessness and the built form. It simultaneously raises timely questions about the responsibility of designers, users, and technology itself for furthering (rather than alleviating) the dynamics of exclusion. *Callous Objects* is an essential reading for academics, both undergraduate and advanced scholars, and practitioners of policy, planning, and law.

The opening section, 'Multistability,' considers the unexpected uses of things. Responding to debates about technological determinism and instrumentalism, Rosenberger notes the dynamism of technology. While designers create objects with intended users and a dominant use in mind, Rosenberger develops the language of multistability to describe the secondary, and often unexpected, ways technology can be taken up and deployed in everyday life. A classic case in point is the way homeless persons use park benches for sleeping rather than sitting. The next section turns to actor–network theory to examine the way park benches, for example, can be 'scripted' with high arm rests or certain slants of the seating to encourage the dominant use of sitting and to discourage (if not render impossible) alternative uses of the bench, such as sleeping. The material dimensions of things are shown, here, not to be value-neutral but rather designed to effect certain outcomes that impair the homeless' ability to occupy public space and make certain

claims to their right to the city. The third section, 'Closing Off,' considers how public spaces are designed and managed to undermine the livability of public space for homeless persons. This includes designing trashcans to prevent foraging for recyclables, uncomfortable seats to curb loitering, or removing seating altogether. The fourth section pivots from design to law to consider how the scripting of public space intersects with anti-homelessness legislation to remove the poor from the public square and the problem of homelessness out of middle class professionals' sight. The section points to how mundane objects get implicated in broad social networks and political projects that are invested in sustaining hierarchy. Section five, 'Occlusion,' turns to the politics of visibility. Building on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the section considers how public spaces come to be embodied by dominant users in ways that inhibit their ability to see the restrictions scripted in to public space, and in turn, the exclusionary politics scripted in to the built environment. Section six, 'Opening Up,' raises the possibility that the urban environment might be designed to include rather than exclude marginal people and diverse practices. Section seven, 'Commendable Closure,' considers the positive reasons for restrictive design, particularly to safeguard populations from reckless or self-destructive behavior. The final section, 'Values,' ends with a reflection about the ethics of anti-homeless design and legislation that implicate society and its institutions.

Accessibly written and infinitely teachable, *Callous Objects*, will make for an important addition to the syllabi of a wide range of undergraduate courses focusing upon inequality, contemporary urbanism, Science and Technology Studies, and ethics (among others), as well as essential reading for advanced scholars in the social sciences and social work interested in these issues. *Callous Objects* should also be mandatory reading for practitioners in planning and design to help structure conversations about the ethics of the built form and to encourage careful consideration as to how the spaces we build fit into wider politics and practices of inclusion and exclusion.

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