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Have you ever sat on a bench in public that was so narrow you could barely fit? Or that had bars every couple of feet or so? These are instances of hostile architecture, which is to say they are instances of design in built environments which purposefully restrict the use of spaces. In activist spaces, hostile architecture is commonly seen as an affront to people experiencing homelessness. This past summer I embarked on a project to identify and record the instances of hostile architecture across the island of Manhattan. I started this project to see just how pervasive these design practices are in urban areas and to see where hostile architecture has the largest presence in the city.

Over the course of the summer, I developed a routine and a system to document the hostile architecture in Manhattan.

Continued



New York City, NY

A City Divided: My Study of Hostile Architecture in New York City

For six days a week, I'd grab a coffee and say good morning to my neighborhood bodega cat. Then, I'd walk 9 miles through different neighborhoods in the city. With the help of my phone's built-in GPS, I marked the geographical location of bars on benches, spikes on stoops, and fences around public parks. To determine what constitutes hostile architecture, I used Karl de Fine Licht's definition of hostile architecture; that it is design based in the desire to exclude "unwanted" behaviors or people. This can be



subjective, and I tended to be liberal in my markings as I feel strongly that public spaces should be open and available for use. I documented my walks using the Under Armour walking app that tracked where I'd been. Upon arriving home, I'd add the day's walk to a Google map which marked my total journey that summer. Every Sunday I'd comb through Excel sheets, documenting my data. Finally, I compiled all this data into an ArcMap to represent every instance of hostile architecture I'd seen on the streets I walked.

The results of the aggregate data were astounding. The instances of hostile design features were so densely populated that a general heat map couldn't be generated. The city itself is saying it is okay

to work and sit upright on a park bench, but it's not okay to sleep on a park bench because those most likely to be sleeping there are people experiencing homelessness. What hostile



architecture essentially represents is that cities do not welcome people. What hostile architecture essentially represents is that cities do not welcome people experiencing housing insecurity.

I came out of this experience with a contradictory perspective on the way spaces can impact people. That seems to be a common symptom of systemic issues: apparent hypocrisy. The data I collected was telling me that we don't care about the people around us; people experiencing homelessness are, by and large, kept out of spaces

that are supposed to be accessible to everyone. And yet, my neighbors that summer had proven to me that we do care about one another. Howie, the neighborhood socialite, made sure to keep up with what was going on in my life and shared tidbits of wisdom with me. Earl, my next-door neighbor, took his son to the Georgia Aquarium and they couldn't wait to compare their experience there with mine. It would be easy to look at the data I collected and be cynical. I choose to believe that the little moments I had in my short time in New York amount to something greater. That we do care for others, which is why I hope that making my data available and circulating it will spark at least one more person's interest in public accessibility, and that we can recognize the larger barriers in our cities to people experiencing homelessness. Because we have the capacity to start caring for one another, I've seen it. We just need to find a place to start.

