

WHEN PLACE MOVES: CASE STUDY OF A HOMELESS SHELTER

Shirley M. Niemeyer

Abstract

Few investigations have focused on the homeless person's understanding of what home and place mean. Most of the research has considered home as a residence and the meaning of home or place to homeowners. The goal of this case study was to explore the meaning of home, house, and place among homeless persons frequenting a daytime shelter before and after a move of the shelter to another location. Most clients and staff appeared to quickly adjust to the new space and location, although acceptance of the new homeless shelter as a home varied among clients.

Introduction

When homeless shelters move the moving experience, adjustment, and acceptance of the new location by the clientele, staff, and community may be positive or negative. As people move from location to location, they create and recreate a place and a home as part of their identity (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). The relationships with the environment or location include a cognitive orientation, an emotional affiliation, and a vicarious involvement (Cooper Marcus, 1995; Rubinstein & Parmalee, 1992; Sixsmith, 1986; Zingmark, Norberg, & Sandman, 1995 as cited in Rowles, 2003). However, the literature on the meaning of place and home by those who are homeless is somewhat limited. According to May (2000), most investigations focusing on home have been concerned with "home as residence" and far less attention has been paid to homeless persons' understandings of what might be termed "home as place."

The process and impact of recreating place and home by those who are homeless is not well understood. The purposes of this case study were to identify and analyze (a) factors involved in moving a shelter for homeless persons, (b) what happens in the transition period, (c) resulting impacts on the homeless clientele, staff, and community, and (d) the meanings of *home* and *place* to persons who are homeless.

Shirley M. Niemeyer is an Extension Specialist/Research, Housing and Environment, Department of Textiles, Clothing and Design, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.

Background

How people behave in and respond to an environment depends on their perceptions and interpretations of environmental symbols (Chicone, 2003). One important expression of being in a place involves our relationship with home. There are various definitions of home; however, these definitions may or may not apply to those who are homeless.

“Home” is a place of safety and security...a place of centering that may become the core of our being and location from which we venture forth into a potentially hostile world...and return to for shelter. Home is a place of freedom, a location where we can let go and be ourselves. Home is a repository of the items we have accumulated that catalog our history and define who we are. Home may come to be viewed as a sacred place and seat of a person’s very being and identity. (Eliade, 1959 as cited in Rowles, 2003, p. 116)

Rowles (1984) and Boschetti (1990), in studies of older persons, concluded that a relationship between place attachment and personal history exists. According to Rowles (2003), abandoning one’s home is similar to a severance from self. When people move, they recreate a sense of place as part of their personal identity. People carry parts of the past with them and mix these parts with new experiences and a new environment. This helps to create a new sense of being in a place. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) contended that this process of transfer helps us to maintain a continuity of self and identity through the evolving relationships with several places. Berger, Berger, and Keller (1973) suggested that “we live in a framework of symbols” and it is the symbols and their patterns that convey meaning.

Of the 44% of homeless individuals reporting having moved while homeless, 61% moved within the same state and 37% moved to a different state (with 2% unknown)(U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1999). However, little investigation of sense of place, home, attachment, and personal history has occurred in relation to the homeless as they move from one home, location, or place in the environment to another.

When emergency shelter is provided, the question arises as to whether the homeless view a temporary day or night shelter as their place or home and if or how attached they become to a place, location, or home? Does a similar sense of place and home as part of self identity characterize the homeless population? Does a sense of place and home develop, and if so how quickly? What happens when a shelter that may be viewed as a sense of place or home moves to a new location? These questions were explored in a case study of one homeless shelter and its relocation.

This exploratory case study occurred in a Midwest city with a population of approximately 95,000 during 2000 to 2003. The day shelter in the city had been the only facility where men, women, and children who were homeless had access to a place for shelter, laundry, showers, breakfast and snacks, lockers to safely store their few belongings, and other services. The facility itself provided a safe, welcoming atmosphere where homeless persons could access some of the services available to meet their needs. Those who regularly frequented the shelter had a network of acquaintances and interacted socially at the shelter.

Multiple challenges faced the day shelter. More facility space was needed. Monthly rent had increased in one year from \$300 to \$1,000 per month and the outside courtyard and one entrance were lost. In addition, a planned project for revitalizing the area and widening the highway would come within a few yards of the existing building.

The existing facility consisted of one small office for three staff members, restrooms, showers, a very small kitchen area, and a closet used for a part time staff member. With 40 to 60 people accessing services each day, crowding was a problem in the 900 square foot facility. Additional challenges included the difficulty of obtaining funding for operations, neighborhood resistance to location of the facility, and the lack of affordable and available rental units in the vicinity.

Process

Initially, a space and facility needs committee was formed in 2000 to look at space needs in the existing shelter. The investigator and the shelter director conducted a survey assessment involving the four staff members, the chair of the client organization, and the board of directors. The results indicated several needs that included additional space, three more private offices for staff conducting clientele intakes and counseling, increased storage and square footage for clientele to accommodate growing numbers of homeless persons, an outdoor area for safety and protection, an area for health and foot clinics, and more lockers.

Criteria for a new shelter were determined in part from the survey. Attempts to find a location nearby had to address the need for additional space and proximity to mass transportation, health services, the existing soup kitchen, and locations to meet basic needs such as food and clothing. The rent needed to be affordable and the location one that would not be in conflict with the surrounding neighborhood. Some available rentals were ruled out due to their cost, size, nearness of a daycare facility, and/or building condition. Eventually a new location was selected. The new site provided increased space but needed extensive remodeling to add bathrooms, showers, offices, windows, and air conditioning in the clientele area; however the rent was over \$1,000 per month. Multiple committees were created including a moving committee, fund raising committee, and facility committee.

During and after the move (January and February, 2003), the clients, volunteers, and board members painted the walls of the office, bathroom, and shower; cleaned the lot; and organized and rearranged furnishings and equipment. A donation of installation time and the appliances and cabinets allowed a small kitchen to be created in the space for the clientele. Habitat for Humanity volunteers helped to secure storage cabinets on the walls. Local businesses donated plantings and other materials.

A board member volunteered to provide media to the neighborhood and the director attended a neighborhood association meeting to provide information about the new shelter. Some board members suggested canvassing the surrounding neighborhood door to door with informational materials and placing information in a nearby convenience store. However, the board did not carry through with these plans directed at the media and communication with the neighborhood due to the time constraints involved and the amount of work to be accomplished in the new facility.

Methods

Before, during, and after the move qualitative observation data were obtained noting the reactions of clientele. Staff members were asked about their observations related to clientele reactions such as agitation, fear, apprehension, and excitement. One week after the move, a questionnaire was provided to the staff to record their observations of clientele and their own reactions. Scales used in the questionnaire provided indices to assess attitudes about the move, the process, the facility, and observed behaviors. These indices included measures such as degree of calmness/excitement, relaxed/tense, negative/positive reactions toward the new location, organized/confused, and asking/not asking questions. The same questionnaire items were used to measure the staff's attitudes about the move, transition, process, and result.

New clients and those who regularly frequented the facility before and after the move were interviewed five months after the move to assess their reactions over time to the move and new location, their satisfaction with the new facility, and the facility's meaning to them. To analyze what happened in the transition period, clients were asked for their current assessment using the same scale with additional indices, and to identify their interpretations of home, shelter, place, and homeless. They were also asked questions such as if they felt the new facility was home or their place, why or why not, and if viewed as a home or their place, how they went about making the facility a place that they felt at home. Quantitative data that were collected will be released at a later date. Client observations were made at multiple days and times of the day. It was observed that clientele interacted in small groups more frequently which may have been due in part to the addition of more tables and five smaller tables allowing for more face to face conversations.

Results

Planning and communicating with the clientele, staff, and landlord as well as with the community were critical elements in the transition. Measuring attitudes about the moving process and observing client behavior revealed differences related to degree of calmness or agitation among clients. The investigator observed some agitation by clients, particularly during the move. However, several clients quickly volunteered to help move desks, tables, and file cabinets. Staff felt that the move disrupted the clients and their routines and that the move should have taken place completely outside of regular hours. Most clients appeared to quickly adjust to the new space and location, but acceptance of the new homeless shelter as a home or place varied among clients. The homeless clients did not or could not distinguish between “home” and “place” and used the terms “my home” or “my place” interchangeably. About half of the homeless interviewed indicated that the day shelter was their home. The remainder indicated that home was in another town or state, or that they had no home. Some indicated that they have not had a home since their childhood or since they had moved from another city, lost a job, got divorced, etc. Comments included:

- *“This is my home. DayWatch has been my home for ten years.”*
- *“I don’t have a home – unless it would be the Reservation. I could go there.”*
- *“I’m homeless – I don’t have a home.”*
- *“I guess my home is in _____, where I grew up.”*

Staff surveys indicated that all of the staff felt that the community could have done more. Comments included: “the community could have been more positive,” “stop protesting,” and to “fix our place, so people wouldn’t complain.” Staff also commented that a more organized plan was needed prior to the move. When asked what items were needed to maintain the facility and help in doing their job, staff said that the air conditioning, fence, windows, and walls for the offices were high priorities. Staff members were concerned about their own space and area needs, particularly after previously working in offices under extremely crowded conditions. Staff also stated the need for more board involvement.

The new facility is in a lower economic neighborhood next to a large university. Single-family homes are mixed with multi-family rental units, some service businesses, and churches. The neighborhood responded somewhat negatively during interviews by the media citing statistics incorrectly and attributing neighborhood incidents to the clients at the homeless shelter such as “walking on their property” and “sleeping in trees.” A letter to the board from the neighborhood association demanded that the board “keep the people on the site” and “out of the neighborhood” both during and after the shelter’s hours of operation. Neighbors reported having

a hard time with shelter guests “hanging out in front of the facility.” Lack of follow through on plans to hold neighborhood meetings prior to the move may have led to greater resistance by some community members.

Clients, agencies, and the public were invited to an open house in February, 2003. The community open house was deemed successful and clients, board members, and volunteers expressed positive comments about the event and program through evaluations. The investigator heard comments and perceived a sense of positiveness and celebration during the open house, and these observations were confirmed by the director and other board members. However, later that week an article published by the largest city daily newspaper expressed concerns and noted negative feelings of the nearby community. The negative impact on staff members was observed and reported to the board by the director. After initial landscaping efforts by volunteers, clients, and board members, the director reported that he had received a number of compliments from “both the shelter guests and neighbors regarding the landscaping and general cleanliness of the facility and the yard.”

About half of the board members became more involved in meeting and interacting with clients and staff before, during, and after the move. This increased the board members’ awareness of the clients’ and shelter’s needs as well as the difficulties and challenges faced by clientele and staff. The board became aware of the need for more structure and plans needed by a growing agency. During this time period a strategic plan was assembled and adopted, the mission revisited, and retreats held. A reduction in donations and increased moving and remodeling expenses created budget deficits for operations. Board meetings had more active discussion and participation. At the same time, differences in opinions and conflict about the budget, direction for the shelter, and policies were more likely to be expressed.

Conclusions and Implications

This exploratory case study illustrated both processes to facilitate the ease of the transition of moving a homeless shelter and barriers that inhibit acceptance of “place” at a new location. However, this case study identified more questions about the impact of relocation of place and how the homeless view place linked with their own identity. The process of moving shelter services appeared to create additional stress for clients, staff, and the board. It created some conflict between the shelter and the neighborhood and some disagreement within the board. Previously identified barriers to access to shelter by the homeless were supported in this case study.

Community opposition (NIMBY—not in my back yard) to housing programs affects many housing developments and may stall increasing the supply of housing and services needed (Fosburg & Dennis, 1999). Community opposition to siting housing for the homeless creates barriers in efforts to increase affordable housing and housing services such as emergency homeless shelters. Lack of neighborhood

acceptance of the place for homeless persons may or may not impact the very acceptance of the clients of the shelter as their own place. Efforts at community outreach before and throughout the development process are critical to averting NIMBY opposition (Fosburg & Dennis, 1999). Opposition from the community may or may not be linked to lack of clienteles' acceptance of a sense of place.

In addition, the multiple moves that occur from nighttime organized shelters to shelter in abandoned buildings, under bridges, or porches may create a completely different sense of how place is viewed. This sense of many locations of place may interfere with the established sense of identity. It is possible that identity with or sense of place may come to be the very location at which the person is with little emotional attachment to that location, or it may reside solely in their own physical being.

More research is needed to correctly identify how people who are homeless view sense of place and home and how their views may impact their own self identify and perceptions of who they are. Follow-up focus groups and individual interviews along with longitudinal data would provide more information about how the homeless view their sense of home and place and the similarities or differences in the application to their defining self. This case study was a preliminary investigation for possible future research to further understand the interpretations and meanings of place and home to those who are homeless and how this impacts their abilities to exist.

References

- Berger, L., Berger, B., & Keller, H. (1973). *The homeless mind: Modernization and consciousness*. New York: Random House.
- Boschetti, M. (1990). Reflections on home: Implications for housing design for elderly persons. *Housing and Society*, 17(3), 57-65.
- Chicone, J. (2003, March). *Dress as an expression of Islamic culture and as a factor in physical and psychological sense of place*. Unpublished paper, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.
- Cooper Marcus, C. (1995). *House as mirror of self: Exploring the deeper meaning of home*. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *The sacred and the profane*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Fosburg, L. B., & Dennis, D. L. (Eds.). (1999, August). *Practical lessons: The 1998 national symposium on homeless research*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

- May, J. (2000). Of nomads and vagrants: Single homelessness and narratives of home as place. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2000, 18(6), 737-759.
- Rowles, G. D. (1984). Aging in rural environments. In I. Altman, P. Lawton, & J. Wohlwill (Eds.), *Elderly people and the environment* (pp. 129-157). New York: Plenum Press.
- Rowles, G. D. (2003). The meaning of place as a component of self. In E. B. Crepeau, E.S. Cohn, & B.A.B. Schell (Eds.), *Willard and Spackman's occupational therapy* (10th ed.) (pp. 11-119). Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins.
- Rubinstein, R., & Parmelee, P. (1992). Attachment to place and the representations of the life course by the elderly. In I. Altman & S. Low (Eds.), *Place attachment* (pp. 139-163). New York: Plenum.
- Sixsmith, J. (1986). The meaning of home: An exploratory study of environmental experience. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 6, 281-292.
- Twigger-Ross, C., & Uzzell, D. (1996). Place identity and place attachment. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 16(2), 205-220.
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (1999, December). *Homelessness: Programs and the people they serve*. Washington, DC: HUD Office of Policy Development and Research.
- Zingmark, K., Norberg, A., & Sandman, P. O. (1995). The experience of being at home throughout the life span: Investigation of persons aged from 2 to 102. *Journal of Aging & Human Development*, 41(1), 47-62.