The mobile hermit and the city: Considering links between places, objects, and identities in social psychological research on homelessness

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This article explores aspects of a homeless man’s everyday life and his use of material objects to maintain a sense of place in the city. We are interested in the complex functions of walking, listening and reading as social practices central to how this man forges a life as a mobile hermit across physical and imagined locales. This highlights connections between physical place, use of material objects, imagination, and sense of self. Our analysis illustrates the value of paying attention to geographical locations and objects in social psychological research on homelessness.

Walking around the city, we can witness everyday life in all its banal and mundane forms; eating, drinking, conversing, looking, working, arguing, and laughing. As well as seeing these things, we might also hear the clunking of bottles, the chatter of people, the roar of cars, and the clanking of trains. These sounds convey the motion of a chaotic landscape. By listening and looking we can witness people going about their lives in a range of settings, and how their social contexts and relations influence the meanings associated with particular places. We can see how the meaning of the city can differ according to one’s relationship to the environment, and how the presence of some people can change these environmental meanings for others. For example, an executive strolling back to her car after dinner would likely experience the sights, sounds, and smells of the city differently from a homeless man. Further, the presence of the homeless man can change the meaning of the evening for the executive (and vice versa).

In social psychological research into street homelessness participants commonly refer to their walks through the city (Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2006). They often mention being trapped on the street and being at risk of losing themselves (cf., Snow & Anderson, 1993). One way to deal with this situation is to engage in fantasy, distraction,
or escapism through simple acts such as listening to radios whilst walking, or by bedding down for the night with a good book (Hodgetts, Radley, & Cullen, 2006). It has been argued that such activities allow homeless people to be, and to experience a sense of belonging, in public places even when officials attempt to remove them from prime public locations (Hodgetts et al., 2008). Many homeless people also seek participation in local communities through casual engagements with residents in parks, pubs, cafés, grocery stores, railway stations, and betting shops. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all homeless people seek interactions with others. In this paper, we explore what happens for a homeless person who tries to avoid others.

This article examines how a homeless man constitutes an identity as a mobile hermit through his use of places and things, and the emphasis he places on mundane practices such as walking and listening. The article stems from our interest in what homeless people do to make their lives habitable and presents a case for examining social practices and links between objects, places, and enacted identities within psychology. We present a broader conceptualization of the self than is typically evident in contemporary social psychology. This conceptualization extends previous theoretical and empirical (largely quantitative) work on place-based identities. The relevance of this approach is evident in the ways that a person’s sense of self both leaks into and out from the places they inhabit and the things they use in everyday life. In considering this, we discuss: the social psychological concept of place-based identities, which allows us to explore both the material and social basis of the self; the ways in which daily practices such as walking and listening to music are important, and enable someone to make a home in the city; and how the present study contributes to research in social psychology on homelessness.

The importance of psychologists attending to processes through which people mould and texture the physical world is exemplified in interdisciplinary research emerging in the field of environmental psychology (Hernandez, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007; Manzo, 2003; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Research into place often involves an exploration of the ways in which people invest aesthetic, moral, and personal meanings in different settings and, in the process, weave themselves into place. Place-based identities are a core concept here, as Cuba and Hummon (1993, p. 112) argue:

> From a social psychological perspective, place identities are thought to arise because places, as bounded locales imbued with personal, social, and cultural meanings, provide a significant framework in which identity is constructed, maintained, and transformed. Like people, things, and activities, places are an integral part of the social world of everyday life, as such, they become important mechanisms through which identity is defined and situated.

Place-based identities are evident in how people often tell others where they are from when telling them who they are. Such identities take shape over time through social practices and intimate understandings of settings that are cultivated through bodily placement and social interactions (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). People often develop ‘a sense of place’ where memories are associated with particular locations, providing a sense of connection, belonging, and history (Hernandez et al., 2007).

The concept of place-based identities is compatible with the proposition that human selves are much more than fixed personality-based entities residing within individuals. Since the work of early psychologists such as Cooley (1902), James (1892/1984),
and Mead (1934), people have been conceptualized as selves fundamentally interwoven with their physical and social environments (Manzo, 2005). These theorists proposed that the self is multiple and an ongoing project located in the world physically, psychologically, and socially. Self and world are co-constructed within everyday life. These ideas of a malleable, rather than fixed, self are re-appearing in contemporary social psychology texts (e.g., Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2008). The self theorized by these early psychologists includes material and social aspects, ranging over one’s internal voice, body, clothing and possessions, to habits, friends and family, and physical environment (Musolf, 2003). James (1892/1984) notes that ‘Mental facts cannot be properly studied apart from the physical environment of which they take cognizance. Mind and world in short have been evolved together, and in consequence are something of a mutual fit’ (p. 11, italics in original). Likewise, de Certeau (1984) talks of ‘spatial practices’ to invoke the notion that psychological (mental) and psychological (material) dimensions are interwoven and conflated in the doing of our daily lives in urban settings. Through daily life, people occupy the world as embodied beings whose social practices give meaning to places and situations (Lefebvre, 2000). Gleeson and Frith (2006) propose that our sense of self as embodied beings is socially and interpersonally inflected in contextually specific ways through expressions, gesture, clothing, interaction, and location. The places people move through, dwell in, and come to call their own crystallize aspects of who they are, want to be, and show to others (Hurdley, 2006). In short, human beings are always located somewhere, and this locatedness is central to understanding the social practices through which we inhabit our worlds. This insight is important because homeless bodies are often deemed to be out of place and, as a result, are denied legitimate identities as people who belongs, producing instead ‘vagrants’, ‘beggars’, and ‘bums’ (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, & Radley, 2007; Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Radley, & Hodgetts, 2007).

Further, recent developments in the use of visual methods in social psychology have brought daily life, places, and things back into view (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, & Radley, 2007; Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2005; Radley & Taylor, 2003). Research demonstrates renewed interest in the ways in which lives are played out in material environments, often through mundane acts, including the use of objects to make a home, the frequenting of beaches and libraries, and evening listening to the radio (Bull, 2000; Dixon, Levine, & McAuley, 2006; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Hurdley, 2006; Musolf, 2003; Noble, 2004). Such work reveals how it is important to approach geographical spaces as more than simply backdrops to social psychological processes.

While we advocate a focus on the spaces within which daily life is conducted, we agree with Dixon et al. (2006) that it is important not to adopt a view that fixes people in particular places. Mobility is central to understanding the role of place, particularly in the lives of homeless people who are often moved along and displaced by the authorities (Hodgetts et al., 2008), thus living their lives between sites such as parks, public toilets, and libraries. Transient lives, or lives in transit, are woven together across locales into a kind of ‘walking exile’ (de Certeau, 1984). This is why, especially in situations of homelessness, portable possessions become particularly significant in building links between self and place. For instance, social psychologists have noted that the use of communications technologies and media devices has contributed to dissolving the separation between public and private spaces (Garcia-Montes, Caballero-Muñoz, & Pérez-Álvarez, 2006). This spanning of the separation of public and private spaces requires the user to negotiate the intersection or fusion of these spaces smoothly and skilfully (Livingstone, 2007). Further, media devices, such as an MP3 player, can be
used to construct a sound bubble that spans different physical settings and helps people smooth their transitions across locales, while providing a space for fantasy and self development (Bull, 2000). Thidaud (2003) showed how domiciled people extend their private reflections and sense of being at home into public spaces by continuing to listen to portable radios beyond domestic dwellings, into their journeys through the streets to work, in workplaces, and back to domestic dwellings again. Such devices provided a soundbridge through which they could experience privacy and a sense of place whilst in public, thus extending the boundaries of the home.

Insights from such social psychological research are crucial in understanding how homeless people might make a place for themselves and experience some form of at-homeness when dwelling on the streets, walking, and listening. Contemporary studies raise the complexities surrounding notions of home as more than a static domestic dwelling (Manzo, 2003). For example, Thidaud's (2003) research on people's use of personal stereos demonstrates how the construction of home does not automatically imply a domestic setting. Mallett (2004) illustrates how a home provides a space within which everyday practices relating to the self and self-care are enacted, and where a sense of routine, privacy, safety, and familiarity is gained. Homeless people, excluded from domestic dwellings, also engage in such practices of self-care but cultivate a sense of routine, familiarity, and belonging somewhere else. For such people home may be conceptualized phenomenologically as an existential state, where ‘at-homeness’ denotes a taken-for-granted experience of familiarity, routine, comfort, belonging, and everydayness within which one conducts a life (Seaman, 1979). As Massey (1992) has observed, homes can be constructed out of communication and movement.

In considering the ways in which people inhabit and traverse the city, and inscribe a sense of belonging and being in place, de Certeau (1984) proposed that walking can be approached as a mode of reconstructing and speaking the city. Through walking, people can, if they so desire, impose their own perspectives, and customs on the urban environment. Walking involves the articulation of spaces and experiences through movement, escapist, and (dis)attention. Over the previous three decades social psychologists have spent considerable time illustrating how speakers can play with language and in the process produce new meanings and identities. But they have not attended so closely to more concrete examples of human meaning construction such as how, with a stumble, shuffle, or stagger, walkers convey a different meaning to a place and how it might be understood by others. Walking can constitute a physical grammar that stitches places in the city together. Journeys provide opportunities for experiencing particular spaces differently, and the use of a portable personal stereo while walking can enhance the weaving together of different places and experiences (cf., Thidaud, 2003) into an inhabited life. Listening to a somber tune on one’s MP3 player whilst walking along a particular street can set a subdued mood that is different to the exuberance experienced when the walker listens to a more upbeat track.

This article applies these ideas about links between places, objects, and selves to a specific case study of a homeless man, and in doing so, seeks to inform and extend psychological research on homelessness. There is an extensive body of research into homelessness in psychology, exploring the extent of homelessness, trends in homelessness across countries, pathways into and out of homelessness, risk factors, substance misuse, service provisions, policy development, and negative social and health outcomes. These topics are evident in recent special issues on homelessness in the Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology (Christian, 2003), the Journal of Health Psychology (Flick, 2007), and the Journal of Social Issues.
(Toro, 2007). Generally, this work relies either on service use data or cross-sectional qualitative and quantitative surveys. Work using more ethnographic methods to explore daily processes of survival over time and identity are more sporadic (Kidd & Davidson, 2007), and psychologists are only beginning to consider issues of place and material culture in identity construction (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Radley, & Hodgetts, 2007).

**Engaging a homeless man methodologically**

Our engagements with Brett [a pseudonym] are part of a 3-year project investigating how the living situations and possibilities for homeless people are grounded in material, symbolic, spatial, and relational contexts (see Hodgetts et al., 2008). The project engages with homeless people recruited from three service agencies in two cities. Staff from these agencies facilitate the recruitment of participants and enable us to conduct the study in a manner sensitive to the situations and needs of the participants involved. Staff and clients also form an advisory group that is central to the project.

At the time of this research Brett was 44 years old and had experienced repeated periods of homelessness over the past 6 years. Due to experiences of child abuse, Brett learned to retreat from other people. He speaks of the importance of ‘spending time alone’ and of being ‘close to the forests and uncrowded beaches’ during his childhood. A difficult relationship breakup in 2000 led to Brett’s first period of homelessness. His former partner and their daughter moved to a small town 130 km north of Auckland. Brett moved to Auckland to stay in contact with his daughter, but this became impossible because he had no money for transport. From then on, Brett lived through intermittent periods when he was on or off the streets, struggling with addictions and serving time in prison for theft. Brett disassociates himself from most other homeless people, particularly those engaged in panhandling. In Brett’s view, begging or receiving charity are extremely humiliating and consequently Brett prefers to rely on his wits to survive. When we first met Brett in 2007 he was attempting to leave street life by participating in a ‘detox’ programme. Subsequently, he has exited the street through the support of one of our service agency research partners and is currently living with his mother.

In this article, we document how materially and spatially located experiences and everyday mundane practices enable Brett to make a place of his own on the streets and construct an associated sense of self as a mobile hermit. Examining this topic required a research strategy and methodology that can capture the material and spatial dimensions of homelessness. Our approach is informed by Miller’s (1997, p. 12) observation that:

> Ethnography tends to lead to a much deeper involvement in people’s lives than just what they say about themselves. Ethnography used in material culture also tends to emphasize careful observations of what people actually do and in particular do with things.

In adopting an ethnographic case study approach, we left the selection of things, places, and activities to Brett. His selections comprise the raw materials of a case which we construct to exemplify links between his homelessness, identity, and use of places and objects. This research strategy reflects recent calls for more ethnographic research in

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1 This is a risk factor for homelessness later in life (Kidd & Davidson, 2007).

2 A sense of humiliation is often evident in the accounts of working class homeless men who avoid panhandling because asking for charity advertises one’s status as a stigmatized other (Lankenau, 1999a, 1999b).
social psychology (Griffin & Bengry-Howell, 2008) and for research on place, objects, and identity in sociology (Hurdley, 2006).

Data collection began with ethnographic fieldwork at the Auckland City Mission, a social service agency where we were introduced to Brett by staff working with us on the larger investigation. Brett took part in several casual chats and an initial biographical interview. He was given a disposable camera on two occasions (4 months apart) and asked to produce images of homelessness and his life. In subsequent photo-elicitation interviews, his photographs were discussed along with his life on the street. One of us also went on a tour of the city with Brett during which we visited various places central to his experiences of homelessness. Detailed field notes were kept throughout these interactions. This combination of methods is particularly suited where respondents are spatially mobile, and where the research requires a narrative that retains a strong sense of context. It is useful to note that still photographs created by Brett are anything but still, and consequently provide insights into the practices through which he constructs himself as a socio-geographically located and mobile human being across time and space (cf., Hodgetts et al., 2006). It was through our engagements with Brett that we became interested in his walks and his use of books and an MP3 player.

Our task was to encourage Brett to communicate how he conducts his life by showing and telling us about places and things of importance to him. We moved out from the images and accounts provided by Brett in order to develop our own account of his use of places and things, and how this relates to his identity as a mobile hermit. Throughout this process we informed the analysis with relevant concepts from social science research and insights we have gained from doing ethnographic work in the very places homeless people go, and having considered their daily practices and use of material objects (see Hodgetts et al., 2008). We discussed our analysis openly with Brett and he was happy with the story we have constructed about him. A particular challenge for the analysis was to facilitate an interpretation that communicates what Brett considers trivial (Sheringham, 2006). Making the taken-for-granted noticeable involves being attentive to banal events such as his walks, personal stereo use, and reading. This reflects Simmel’s (1903/1997) approach of focusing on incidental events or accumulated moments that make up everyday life in order to understand the broader patterning of social life. According to this approach, the specific resembles the general but is not reducible to it. Local events reflect ongoing social psychological processes that have significance beyond specific moments (cf., de Certeau, 1984). In other words, our analysis was orientated to understanding how specific places, objects, and actions constitute Brett as a mobile hermit living on the streets of Auckland.

Place, self, materiality, and mobility: Being on the street
We present our analysis in two sections. The first focuses on the places Brett goes and how these relate to his experiences of self. We document the importance of issues of safety and refuge for a hermit living in a disused gun emplacement, a drug user frequenting a public toilet, and a citizen accessing the public library. We also attend to the tensions between physical place, sense of self, and material objects such as books, needles, and an MP3 player. As the analysis develops, we focus more on Brett’s use of the MP3 player for reasons of space. We have discussed homeless men’s use of books and libraries elsewhere (Hodgetts et al., 2008). The second section of analysis explores issues of mobility and Brett’s life between specific places. A key focus here is on the
ways in which Brett smoothes his transitions between spaces by listening to music and in the process creates a personal vantage point from which to construct his life on the move. We explore Brett’s use of music to fabricate a mobile home that he can dwell in and control, whilst gaining a sense of routine, familiarity, privacy, and safety.

**Being somewhere**

Brett worked with us to create a map of his daily journeys through the city (see Figure 1). His street life was anchored around two scenic coastal bays and the central business district (CBD) of Auckland. In exploring specific locales important to Brett, we contrast these places and the sense of self he constructs in each. By focusing on these locations, we show that Brett lives a kind of ‘bare life’ (cf., Thrift, 2004) associated with the classical hermit or solitary male recluse. This is a physically basic existence predominantly separated from contact with other people. During the project Brett took a total of 39 photographs, but only one features a person (his social worker); most are of locations that he frequents alone. Brett is a self confessed ‘loner’ who finds shelter in music as much as in a disused gun emplacement. He retreats from the world to reflect on his life.

Over the last 3 years, Brett has lived at Judges Bay and Mission Bay, coastal suburbs in Auckland. Brett took one of us to Judges Bay, stating ‘The best part of being homeless is Judges Bay’. He made several photographs of Judges Bay, including his sleeping spot under a large Pohutukawa tree (see Figure 2), and the adjoining park that has free gas barbecues and an ablution block with a cold shower for public use.

Brett stated:

There’s a photo of Judges Bay which was during periods on the street my summer spot. The reason I like Judges Bay is it’s safe . . . In summer it’s a lovely spot. I find it relaxing, it’s isolated and I just enjoy being outside. I never really enjoyed the enclosed concrete of the city. The noise of the city and the smell . . . The barbeque I use quite regularly. Buy steaks and stuff like that to cook on there with a few vegetables . . . I always spend money keeping

![Figure 1. Map of Brett's regular commute.](image-url)
Brett contrasts the open air of his coastal retreat with the filthy smells of the CBD. He presents himself here as the holidaymaker who is enjoying a barbeque at the beach and looking after himself by eating well, keeping clean and taking time out to enjoy the summer lifestyle. This is an isolated retreat in that Brett does not socialize with others. He invokes the strategy of hiding in sight through his discussion of efforts at appearing ‘normal’, clean and tidy. This aspect of his account raises social psychological processes of passing and differentiation. Homeless people often attempt to pass as domiciled citizens or go unnoticed (Hodgetts et al., 2006). They keep themselves clean and act ‘normal’ in order to hide their shame at being homeless. As Brett states, ‘It just sucks when people look at you as nothing but a bum. That’s why I tidy myself up to hide my situation . . . ’ Passing allows Brett to avoid being disturbed by others and maintain a reclusive existence. Brett attempts to appear normal because he does not want to be deemed out of place or as not belonging to such a nice place as Judges Bay. To be deemed out of place is to be deemed a non-citizen (Hodgetts et al., 2008) and often involves the removal of homeless people from the nicer parts of town (Cresswell, 1996). References to respectable appearance are common statements of self-reliance and respect among homeless men (Lankenau, 1999a, 1999b).

Brett discusses why he prefers the coastal life and being alone. In the process he raises issues regarding safety, self-preservation, personal reflection, and his isolationist strategy. He talks about moving out from the CBD to avoid risks associated with homelessness and in the process engages in an adaptive practice of self-isolation that he learned in childhood:

Even after a short period of time you find it hard being around other people because you’re not used to the social things and I spend a lot of time reading and separate from the people.
Brett spoke at length about the dangers of the street and need to keep to himself. He was concerned about violence and bears scars from being beaten and stabbed on several occasions. His walks take him on a kind of experiential cartography that includes detours around unsafe places (see Figure 1). In the extract above, Brett also raises the struggle many homeless people recount to preserve the self and avoid becoming ‘psychologically unhinged’ or loosing oneself to the street (Snow & Anderson, 1993). We will discuss this issue further in the following section. Safety thus takes on two forms for Brett, the need to avoid the violence of others and the risk of loosing himself to the street (cf., Kidd & Davidson, 2007).

During more inclement weather, Brett moves further out from the CBD to Mission Bay. When describing this location he again refers to the issue of personal safety and being a recluse (see Figure 3):

... The bunker, I chose that site not only because it’s out of town and you don’t get street people out there cos there’s nothing there for them. It’s a safe spot, as you can see it’s hard to get into and it’s warm, it’s dry..., and the view. It’s really peaceful and it’s a beautiful view at dawn... especially when the sea is calm.
Brett described the gun emplacement as ‘the cave’ in which he can be alone and safe. He can see and hear people approaching. It is dry and warm because it faces the sun and the view is ‘spectacular’ (see Figure 4).

For Brett, places of importance extend beyond his retreat from the city to the Bays. One needs to see his coastal sanctuaries in the context of other places in the city in order to understand the complexities of Brett’s life and links between self and place. For instance, during the first photo-elicitation interview Brett said he had ‘... different sides to his life’. He then located these aspects of himself in specific places. One side is reflected in the photographs of the Bays and his solitary life as a hermit. Another is reflected in his photographs of the Pitt Street public toilets (see Figure 5) and the needle exchange where he sees himself as a ‘druggie’. Returning to these places to make the photographs was an ordeal as Brett felt the physical urge to use drugs again. This incident reflects the depth of emotional connection between the location and a sense of self as a druggie (cf., Manzo, 2003). This identification threatened to engulf Brett through simply being in a place that was normalized for him as a site for drug use. He stated, ‘... just being there triggers my addictive side. The place has a strong pull on me and I’m better off away from there...’

A different self was reflected in his photographs of quiet places within the CBD, including a public library, a bookstore and the church beside the Auckland City Mission. In these places, Brett experiences life as a ‘normal person’ who has interest in books and reading, or simply escaping the city to sit and reflect. In our first tour of the city with Brett our field-notes included the following:

He said the church is a place he loves to go... ‘The church is so quiet when you are inside and it allows you to escape the noise and madness of the city. The quietness means these are good places to just sit, be still, think and pray’. Brett spends time in the library because he reads widely and allows him to use his brain. He thinks he is lucky because he has ‘a good brain, despite all his hard living’.

Figure 4. Photograph of the view from Brett’s cave.
Brett’s account reveals processes through which the identity of a place can be shaped by the practices that occur there (cf., Dixon et al., 2006). For example, drug use textures a public toilet as a place for drug addicts, whilst being normal and escaping into a good book is associated with the quiet and ‘normalizing’ space of a library. In visiting different places, Brett literally places himself there. Different places exemplify different facets of his life and being, and render tangible the different practices of escapism that are enacted through things such as needles and books. There are also further contrasts to be made here between dirty and clean spaces, and their associated identities. A public toilet is a dirty space often associated with socially unsanctioned activities and persons. A public toilet is a tainted space and the tarnish from this association with dirt and deviancy can rub off on a homeless man (cf., Lankenau, 1999a, 1999b). Conversely, a library is a more hygienic environment associated with citizenship and inclusion. In this context, Brett’s repeated references to ‘normal’ actions can also be read as reflecting his efforts to transgress the borders between homeless and domiciled lifeworlds. Although homeless, Brett still engages in domiciled practices across spaces by presenting himself in a passable manner.

Places and things crystallize aspects of who Brett is and wants to be. His identity manifests in the places he goes, the practices he engages in, and the things he uses. His re-telling the significance of a place or object invokes a nexus of meanings and practices that exceed the materiality of the specific locale or thing. For instance, Brett deliberately displayed and photographed objects of importance to him. During the second photo-elicitation interview he spoke to the photograph in Figure 6:

The Golden Serpent is about terrorist things. It’s about the Bali Bombings. . . We’ll go with the things important to me. Books are important to me and we’ve got one here along with the shades [sunglasses] and the sounds [MP3 player] and that’s my escapism. Because since my childhood I get really insecure and don’t have much confidence. . . And I can hide in a different world. Nobody sees my eyes, and I can escape into the music. And the same with
books; I can escape and not be me. Cos sometimes I don’t like me . . . Try and hide as much as I can and that’s how I do it. I’d die without music. I’d go mental.

The MP3 player, the sunglasses and the book displayed in Figure 6 are particularly important when seen in the context of the scarcity of personal possessions among homeless men. For men living transient lives material objects have particular significance, providing personal anchorage points that foster a sense of self (Hodgetts et al., 2008). There is a real sense of physicality that comes in Brett’s accounts of his things and how he uses them to make his life on the street more habitable. Connor (2002) proposes that the propensity to collect and carry things around is a unique feature of human existence. People feel out of sorts without their things because objects provide memories and remind them of who they are and hope to be; the accumulation of objects involves the accumulation of being (Noble, 2004). Extending this emphasis on links between things, places, actions, and the self, the next section explores the role of habitual activities such as walking and listening to an MP3 player that enable Brett to forge a semblance of home on the street.
Journeys beyond the local

Like his coastal retreats, Brett’s MP3 player and books allow him to escape aspects of the adversity of homelessness and the threat of losing himself to the street. In this section, we illustrate how sound from his radio can create a sense of comfort, familiarity, and routine that is crucial to Brett forging a more habitable life. At one level, listening to the radio while walking provides this man with a means of escaping the sounds of the city and makes the world a more habitable place for him. He can fill the void often experienced when alone at night on the street, and he can drown out the noises of domiciled life by listening to George FM or by retreating into a book. The MP3 player helps him construct a reflexive perspective from which to weave different locales together and comprise a geographically located life. At another level, having an MP3 player brings the city to life and creates a sense of journey, purpose, and belonging. Brett creates a mobile home out of sound, which he uses to transit and write the city.

Brett’s use of technology resembles aspects of such media use by domiciled participants evident in recent studies (Bull, 2000; Thidaud, 2003), while also revealing variations that are specific to his homeless circumstances. Thidaud (2003) proposes that a sonic bridge created by listening to personal stereos enables domiciled listeners to move seamlessly from the domestic realm to the street and workplaces. Domiciled listeners often talk about never leaving home and taking home with them through their personal stereos (Bull, 2000). For Brett, the MP3 player enables him to go further in constructing a home in the music that is mobile and extends across the locales he traverses on a daily basis:

It [listening to radio] allows me to not attend to the world and takes me away from the city. I’ve got a sound bubble around me and I can wander through the streets without paying attention to what’s going on around me and that doesn’t worry me cos I’m off somewhere else away from the city while I’m in the city if that makes sense. It’s like my own place where I can relax, get away from my worries and the shit around me and be joyful. It’s escapism really and getting away from reality to my own place. I’ve got my own place to go to when I’ve got my radio or a book. I have to be careful sometimes cos I’m still in the city and have almost been run over a few times. . . . I get away too by walking down to the beach and then reading when I’m there. . . . The reading’s good cos you can go into someone else’s world and see characters who you could be for a while. It’s all about withdrawing for me and having my own place. . . . I’m like one of those old guys [hermits] who hides in a place away from everyone else. Just doesn’t want to be with other people. Mine’s not a cave, it’s radio and sometimes books. With radio other people are part of it too. They’re listening, but it’s like you can listen with them in a private way so you’re not having to be with them if that makes sense. . . .

As he walks, Brett is engulfed within a sound cave which allows him to transcend the immediate physical environment and to cultivate a sense of distance, security, and privacy. It is access to this familiar space and the routine of listening that provides him with a sense of home on the move. Statements regarding ‘getting away’ in his ‘own place’ reflect an effort to gain time for himself and to access a place for self-care that functionally resembles a home (Mallett, 2004). In this way, the MP3 player is used to render the streets more homely and habitable. The familiarity of the journey and predictability of the experience provide a sense of certainty and place that has significance beyond the various locations stitched into Brett’s journeys. As Binnie, Edensor, Holloway, Millington, and Young (2007 p. 167) state, the realm of the mundane ‘offers conditional possibilities for certainty and security, allowing us to order our everyday life-worlds with a necessary degree of predictability and comfort’. Through the
The simple act of listening to music invoked in such extracts can also be read as a form of social participation, even when used to block others out from one's physical location. In the previous extract, Brett speaks of listening to George FM with other listeners at a distance. 'Other people are part of it'. By listening, Brett becomes more than a vagrant. He is a fan of dance music, music that, like other media forms (Livingstone, 2007), opens up his lifeworld to other places and imaginary spaces. Brett is part of the imagined radio audience as he walks through crowded streets alone. This may seem to contradict what we have already said in relation to Brett’s isolationist approach to life and sense of self as a ‘loner’. Yet, the very act of listening to George FM functions as a substitute for face-to-face interactions that he is less comfortable with, providing a fleeting sense of companionship and ‘we-ness’ as one among other fans (Adorno, 1974). Brett can be together with other fans whilst alone and at a safe distance from those in physical proximity. In this way, Brett’s use of the MP3 player is more than a simple tool to block out the world he inhabits. He uses the sensory possibilities of music in order to feel more, not less. This can be considered a reversal of the ‘shock defence’ that Benjamin (1992) saw as a consequence of living in a technological world, one which announces itself in the city through noise. The MP3 player is one example of technology that, while helping maintain social distance, also extends our senses in ways that encourage further reflection and awareness, and a sense of journey, belonging, and participation.

Continuing his discussion of the photograph of his possessions (Figure 6), Brett describes walking along listening to music, observing, and thinking:

I really get lost in the music, you know, I look at people. I have the music up really loud and I can’t hear anything. People have yelled out to me and I've just kept walking... I observe things like people might have animosity towards me and I notice them... but it doesn’t bother me because I can’t hear it. It’s just life, you know. Auckland’s quite a strange place cos you can just walk and walk the streets and you see very few people smiling... No, I just like going into my own world and walking around places, it’s just good escapism for me. Cos I listen to one station; pretty much the only station I listen to, George FM. They run gigs and stuff in the clubs I used to go to. And yeah, dance music I love it. Never depressing stuff. It always keeps you up hey... The MP3 player allows Brett to create a more orderly private environment by shutting out some of the chaos and violence of the outside world. He can reconstruct his relationship with the physical environment, rendering the view merely as a background to be gazed upon through a window. Brett states ‘I’m not really part of what’s going on around me. I’m like an observer who only watches from time-to-time and can’t get involved cos the music helps keep things away...’. Although Brett has limited control over his socio-economic situation, he can exert some control over his experience of the street.

As a walker, Brett produces his urban environments through processes of escapism, selective attention and reframing (cf., de Certeau, 1984). He is not totally detached from the street where he walks, but there is a balance between the external spaces traversed, and his use of music to internally transform his experiences of these spaces.

In some respects, comments from Brett reflect Simmel’s (1903/1997) notion of the blasé posture as a common response to the hectic and over-stimulating atmosphere of the city. According to Simmel, modern life requires the construction of ‘inner barriers’ to gain psychological distance from others and a sense of reserve. Getting ‘lost in the music’ reflects how Brett’s sense of the external world is narrowed through his use of an
MP3 player. He becomes indifferent to other city dwellers, who he experiences as
dreamlike figures to be passed by and given little attention. Some readers of this article
may recognize the practice of donning a pair of sunglasses and an iPod in order to avoid
contact with others when transiting the city. A key difference between Brett and such
readers is that they are often simply moving through the street from one private location
to another. The blasé posture is more crucial for Brett; a homeless person is at
considerable risk of what Simmel described as the threat of city life to engulf us both
physically and psychologically if we do not adopt a blasé posture (Radley et al., 2006).
When considering this point, Snow and Anderson (1993) propose that homeless people
often attempt to ‘salvage the self’, or hold on to core aspects of their being that are
placed at risk due to the adversity of street life. As Brett comments:

You can’t be there [psychologically present in the street] all the time because homelessness
gets to you after a while. Having space for yourself’s really important and the music is about
that. If I didn’t have somewhere else to tune out to I’d loose it . . .

Brett is blasé because being homeless hurts. Homelessness leaves wounds and can
turn too much to bear. Transiting the street and hearing the sounds of domesticity
confronts Brett with his homelessness. Going off into his own world enables Brett to
avoid the auditory domination of the city and the noises of the domiciled:

I walk around with my head held high and that’s how I keep people away from me . . . I
ended up getting really antisocial cos I hated myself and the lifestyle I was leading and
anyone else walking around me. Seeing people with the cars, houses and shit. Just get really
jealous in a way . . .

Brett shields himself from the pain of seeing others with the trappings of a domiciled
existence that he lacks. By tuning out of the physical environment Brett gains
psychological respite from his homelessness. However, this is a fragile escape and he
can be wrenched back. When talking about what brings him out of his private space and
back to the city, Brett states:

The smell of piss and the world comes gushing back in. It’s like a hard landing, fuck that
smells bad. And then I remember all my shit and the joyfulness is gone. I hate the sound of
people with houses going about their lives. I’m not part of that and it’s hard to see it, and if I
turn up the volume I can do my own thing and ignore it. Doesn’t go away but I don’t have to
have it.

Brett is still anchored in the street and can be pulled back from his listening into the
physical space being navigated. This is also a pulling back from imagined alternatives
into being a homeless man. His imaginary world can be punctured by the smells and the
sounds of the city. Raising the volume and moving on is one response to such intrusions.
This analysis illustrates, some of the ways in which Brett imputes social meanings
and functions into material objects and places. It is only when we consider the functions
of his MP3 player within the context of Brett’s life that we discover the richness and
social significance of such things. Listening to his player provides Brett with a sense of
routine and place and resembles aspects of other homeless peoples’ attempts to escape
the streets into imaginary worlds (Radley et al., 2006). Raban (1974, p. 159) has noted
that when faced with the relentless stimulation, fragmentation, and incoherence of the
city anyone might slip . . . into magical habits of mind’. Brett slips away from the street
and adopts a blasé posture. As a result, he achieves more than escape from the street;
he finds a more habitable place to be.
Discussion

At first glance, Brett may not appear to be a typical hermit. We actually debated whether or not the concept of the hermit would be retained as this paper took shape. Brett is not merely leading a solitary existence in a cave and shunning contact with civilization. His life is also conducted in the midst of a busy city and across a range of settings. On closer inspection, almost all of Brett’s activities and trajectories are carefully constructed to reduce his interactions with other people and to allow him to operate as an aloof observer. This is a continuation of a self-preserving strategy initiated in childhood. Practices such as listening to an MP3 player and reading books serve to shield Brett from people while also allowing him to maintain some sense of ‘normalness’ and human contact. Brett has succeeded in connecting the city spaces he inhabits to the persona of a mobile hermit who gains solitude through sound, even when physically present in a crowd.

Our task has been to tease out the ways in which Brett constructs a life on the street as a mobile hermit by focusing on the places he goes, and what he does with his things in these different settings. This focus provides insights into how homeless people can inhabit, survive, and rewrite the city from their own perspectives (cf., de Certeau, 1984). It opens up a range of psychological processes including meaning making, self constructions, passing, and the significance of material and geographically located practices in daily life. We have shown that the meaning of places and objects are never definitive. Objects such as an MP3 player do not simply enter everyday life, they are created there; their meaning arises from the social practices through which they are engaged (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2008). Brett’s MP3 player becomes an habitual aspect of his everyday life, used to construct a sense of place and home on the move. Such objects extend the places he can go beyond his physical environments to the imaginary. The player provides an audio cave within which Brett can seek refuge, dwell, and experience some privacy and at-homeness. As Bull (2000) notes: ‘...personal stereos become a critical tool for users in their management of space and time, in their construction of boundaries around the self, and as the site for fantasy and memory’ (p. 2).

Brett’s sense of self is deeply intertwined with the places across which he lives his life. He is profoundly emplaced (Manzo, 2003). Herein resides the usefulness of the concept of place-based identities in explaining aspects of the fundamental locatedness of homeless people. Brett’s lifeworld is not separated into his private mind and the outside world. Both penetrate and grow out of each other. Our findings support the assertion that people are materially and socially located beings who take form through ‘interobjective relations’ (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Brett’s case also illustrates how human action can bind people to objects and physical environments (Cuba & Hummon, 1993). It illustrates how people come to know themselves through engagements in the world and with objects (Cooley, 1902). An MP3 player actually feels like part of us. It sounds as if the music is inside our heads.

The domestic home has been used to illustrate the intimate relations between self, place, and objects, and the cultivation of a sense of belonging, familiarity and comfort (Mallett, 2004). Researchers such as Hurdley (2006) have shown that the self is often manifest in the displays of objects that texture a dwelling, transforming it into a home. Hurdley demonstrates the possibility of reading the identity of an occupant from the objects displayed on domestic mantelpieces. The retelling of the significance of these objects invokes a nexus of meanings, places, and relationships which interweave
people’s lives and exceed the materiality of the objects and places invoked (cf., Noble, 2004). These processes were evident in Brett’s accounts of his things and the places he lives. Earlier, we noted that research on home has tended to focus on domestic settings. This article takes this further to explore mobility and the ways in which a homeless man can construct a home out of communication and movement that transects a range of settings. This also raises issues about whether or not such a man is actually ‘houseless’ rather than ‘homeless’, a point which requires further research and analysis.

In closing, as Brett’s account of violence and safety attests, sleeping rough can be unpleasant and dangerous. However, Brett uses an isolationist strategy that allows him to transcend some of the physical hardships of homelessness. Although his internal experiences could be considered irrelevant day-dreaming, it is clear that these imagined spaces have created possibilities for Brett to be somewhere other than simply on the street. Manzo (2003) has noted that people’s relationships with places are dynamic and often evolve through journey, habit, and experiences of rootedness and alienation.

We have illustrated, how Brett’s sense of self as mobile hermit – at once hidden away and dwelling in a sound cave whilst moving through the city – transgresses the dialectic of journey and dwelling often evident in place-based research (Manzo, 2003). Brett can dwell in music while journeying through the streets of Auckland. In laying the trail of his daily life to a soundtrack, Brett does not simply collate experiences of different parts of the city, he weaves these places together and reconstructs the urban landscape as a home he can inhabit through his physical immersion in the city and the imagined spaces provided by the MP3 player. He has never completely ‘lost himself’ to the streets of Auckland; his memories, imagination, and daily practices, including his use of space, provide anchorage to an adaptive sense of self and belonging.

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