A trip to the library: homelessness and social inclusion

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This article explores homeless men’s visits to a public library. It shows how homeless men identified the library as a space for safety and social participation, at a time when the regional newspaper published an item questioning the appropriateness of their presence in the library. The news report promotes universal narratives that would exclude homeless people, showing the intimate relationship between the symbolic space of news, the material space of the local library, and the lifeworlds of homeless men. We report fieldwork in which we interviewed homeless men, library staff and patrons. In addition, we worked with journalists on follow-up articles foregrounding the positive function of the library in homeless men’s lives, and to challenge existing news narratives that advocate the exclusion of ‘the homeless’ from prime public spaces.

Key words: homelessness, public spaces, libraries, social participation, everyday life.

Introduction

Civic responses to the occupancy of public space by homeless bodies include the introduction of CCTV systems that make housed citizens feel safer whilst displacing ‘winos and beggars’, and the hiring of security guards to remove homeless people from shopping districts and public libraries. In these settings, the claims of homeless people to belong and their rights to participate are increasingly questioned publicly and consequently they face barriers to social participation and support (Laurenson and Collins 2007; Mitchell 2003). Practices that exclude homeless people from public places ultimately contribute to increased material hardship, distrust, disrespect, stigma, and risk of illness (Hodgetts, Chamberlain and Radley 2007).

Our understanding of discriminatory practices directed at homeless people is informed by critical discussions of place, centred on the concept of social exclusion and processes of ‘othering’ in urban spaces (Sibley 1995). Urban spaces are often seen as increasingly divided and exclusionary, especially for reviled characters such as ‘hobos’, ‘gypsies’ or ‘the homeless’. We can witness the function of binary oppositions between exclusion and inclusion, homeless and housed, dirty and clean. However, it is important to view urban spaces and such binaries as negotiable and mutable, rather than
fixed and determinative of rights and identities (Sibley 2001). Contemporary cities comprise an uneven patchwork of ‘marginal’ (under bridges) and ‘prime’ (shopping districts) spaces where the urban landscape reflects the arrangements and contestations of social power to include and exclude (Lees 1997). Although such distinctions between spaces can be experienced in tangible ways, the distinctions are not fixed and can vary over time as particular urban spaces fall in or out of favour with investors or local authorities. Prime urban spaces can also become marginal according to the season, time of day, or who is there. Reflecting the complexities of space and the politics of inclusion, homeless people can resist exclusionary practices, for example, by appropriating marginal spaces, journeying across prime spaces, or occupying prime spaces at marginal times (Mitchell 2003).

In considering exclusionary practices that haunt the lives of homeless people, we need to consider that, as citizens, they have rights to participate in prime places where civic life occurs. Mitchell (2003) discusses how the transgression of homeless peoples’ rights functions to ensure the aesthetic sensibilities of domiciled citizens to not see or smell ‘vagrants’. He notes that, to be a citizen, one requires access to somewhere.

By claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public. Only in public space, for example, can homeless people represent themselves as a legitimate part of ‘the public’. (Mitchell 2003: 129)

A sense of belonging to a citizenry is a sentiment cultivated through everyday activities, including the use of prime public spaces such as a public library (de Certeau 1984; Newman 2007). Homeless people’s participation in civic life and their right to inhabit prime public places are important because this allows them to be, to experience belonging, and to move out from marginal spaces.

Hodgetts, Radley and Cullen (2006) have shown how homeless people seek participation in local domiciled communities through casual engagements with local residents in cafés and shops. One man in their study reported structuring his day so that he could interact with domiciled acquaintances and engage in traditional neighbourhood conversations about ‘events of the day’. Such approaches constitute strategies for challenging binary distinctions between ‘us’, the domiciled, and ‘those’ homeless people, through claims to status as local residents who belong. However, this can be a precarious and fragile practice for homeless people whose efforts for inclusion can be dismissed or rejected by housed people. For example, Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen (2006) describe a homeless woman approaching a local businessman with whom she had cultivated an acquaintance, and who had expressed an interest in her paintings. She offered to sell him a painting, but in front of a work colleague the man dismissed her approach as an ‘annoying old bag lady’. This incident disrupted her sense of belonging and identity as a legitimate community member. It invoked for her a heightened ‘sense of difference’ (Sibley 1995).

The importance of interactions with the domiciled, and of supportive environments for homeless people, has been discussed in relation to the notion of ‘spaces of care’ (Johnsen, Cloke and May 2005). These spaces comprise semi-private domains, such as hostels and day centres, where people can gain access to basic material resources including food, clothing and medical care. These spaces also provide respite from material deprivation and loneliness. We propose that public places where emphasis is placed on inclusion—where homeless people
can gain a sense of belonging—also qualify as spaces of care. For instance, a public library can provide a place to gain sanctuary from the strain and adversity of homelessness. Libraries are also more common than day centres, are open for longer, are accessible to all citizens, and are not stigmatized spaces (such as day centres). Libraries are public places, and this status can be used to mitigate against marginalization.

Libraries can function as enriched day centres for homeless people, offering opportunities for homeless people to spend the day unnoticed by other citizens, legitimating their presence in prime rather than marginal space. Library access is also associated with the cultivation of social capital (Goulding 2004); it provides opportunities for fostering relations between diverse community members, civic participation and engagement (Alstad and Curry 2007). As Goulding notes:

The recent interest in public space as a key neighborhood and community resource is partly the result of the perception that we live in an increasingly divided society where public facilities are no longer automatically accessible ... Public space where people from all walks of life can meet and interact is arguably more important than ever, therefore, for social exchange and the strengthening of community bonds and thus the building of social capital, but it is clearly under siege in many places. (2004: 4)

Despite the positive potential of libraries for homeless people, tensions around their inclusion and exclusion remain. Cronin (2002) proposes that homeless people represent a ‘disruptive minority’ and that the library is not a refuge. He asserts that homeless people encroach on the rights of ‘bona fide library patrons’ and therefore efforts to exclude them are warranted. In contrast, Black and Crann (2002) and Hersberger (2005) invoke the traditional purpose of public libraries as supporting self-education, enhancing social participation, and providing for experiences of inclusion. From this perspective, the library is a civic space allowing for meetings between people from diverse backgrounds and the cultivation of a shared sense of belonging. In this context, calls for the inclusion of homeless patrons are based on the construction of the public library as a contemporary version of the commons, where people can engage and intermingle (Alstad and Curry 2007). Efforts to regulate access are seen as reducing opportunities for intergroup mingling in a shared public space that all citizens have a right to occupy (Newman 2007).

These ideas inform the present study of homeless men’s patronage of a public library in New Zealand. Local librarians have conflicting perspectives about the presence of homeless people in libraries. A poll1 canvassing librarians asked ‘Media lament the use of libraries as just a warm place by homeless people/disaffected—your opinion?’ Librarians responded to one of three options: (1) ‘Libraries are for researchers and borrowers only’; (2) ‘They [the homeless] have a right, but should be watched’; (3) ‘Libraries are for all, we do not judge’. Results from 346 respondents were 37 per cent for option 1, 9.5 per cent for option 2 and 53.5 per cent for option 3. The assumption underlying option 1 is that homeless people are not appropriate patrons because they are not using the library for research and borrowing purposes. We challenge this assumption.

Homelessness, news and the texturing of a public library

In this paper, we draw a case study around a public library in a provincial New Zealand
city. The case was inductively derived in response to a media controversy surrounding homeless men’s library patronage. This controversy occurred locally in newspaper stories and reverberated nationally through the online poll (mentioned above). Issues surrounding the inclusion or exclusion of homeless people in a public library were raised in the media and require scholarly attention because news outlets comprise symbolic sites for warranting or challenging the presence of ‘the homeless’ in public spaces² (Hodgetts, Cullen and Radley 2005).

Increased public concern regarding homelessness in New Zealand over the last decade has become the subject of media reports (Laurenson and Collins 2007). These reports resemble trends evident in other countries, which often focus on rates of homelessness, aspects of rough sleeping and shelter life, support services, locations frequented by homeless people (predominantly city streets, parks and hostels), and the implications of policies and practices for addressing homelessness (Hodgetts, Cullen and Radley 2005). In such reports, ‘bad’, disruptive, dangerous and lazy homeless people are subjects of ridicule and punitive control, and are often juxtaposed with portrayals of ‘good’ homeless people, who tend to abide by community rules of behaviour, and are subject to sympathy and support (Bunis, Yancik and Snow 1996; May 2003). This combination of positive and negative characterisations of homeless people is not new. Mayhew (1861) documented how Victorian literature framed several notorious vagabonds as folk heroes, while simultaneously stigmatising the majority of vagrants as lazy and inherently defective ‘wretches’.

We examine the links between the representational space offered by a local newspaper and the texturing of the material space of a public library. We demonstrate that there are possibilities to promote the inclusion of homeless people in prime spaces through media advocacy work, and opportunities to challenge attempts to banish them to marginal spaces. This work illustrates how public spaces are subject to both ‘local’ and ‘general’ narratives, which may be sometimes in tune and sometimes in conflict. Our attention to homeless people’s everyday practices is consistent with the arguments of Smith (1987) about the importance of revealing the ‘relations of ruling’ in social research. Smith’s work is grounded in a feminist critique that addresses the silencing of women through extra-local modes of ruling framed by gender relations. We extend her ideas in this research by pointing up both local and extra-local narratives and practices in a relation of ruling that translates homeless men’s situation into the concerns of civic organizations and powers. Wright (2000), considering differences between the local and the extra-local in public deliberations about homelessness, has argued that ‘city (specific) narratives are often in conflict with larger urban (universal) narratives that may talk of disorder and danger’ (2000: 51).

Extra-local media spaces can penetrate local material settings, often invoking universal narratives that promote links between the presence of homeless men and danger and disruption. These universal narratives can set the stage for local relationships and the activities of homeless people. However, the local extends beyond the universal and spatially located practices can manifest alternative ways of being and doing homelessness that are unanticipated by universal narratives. There are complex interwoven links and influences across physical and media-based realms. How issues of homelessness are framed in the media can influence
homeless people’s access to public spaces (May 2003). This link between representational and material spaces raises the importance of symbolic power and the ability of certain groups to access media and influence the framing of homelessness and associated interventions. Homeless people are often displaced from their own stories, being talked about rather than talked to (Hodgetts, Cullen and Radley 2005; Wright 2000).

Although there are discrepancies in symbolic power, we do not wish to conceptualize news production as a totally closed system solely dominated by powerful groups. This stance has contributed to a situation where academics and representatives of marginalized communities often see news media and journalists as ‘the enemy’ to be avoided unless one wants ‘to get burnt’. It can lead to pessimism and inaction. As Cottle and Rai (2006: 164) note, ‘Simply put, there is more going on in the communication of news than the manipulation of news agendas by powerful strategic interests or the circulation of powerful semiotic codes and agendas’. In this paper, we consider an instance of media-based controversy surrounding homeless men’s access to a local public library and show how exclusionary narratives can be challenged.

Methodology

This study is part of a three-year ethnographic project investigating relationships between homeless and housed people, seeking to understand how the living situations and possibilities for homeless people are grounded in material, symbolic, spatial and relational contexts. The project uses observational, visual and verbal qualitative methods to provide a close focus on the lifeworlds associated with homelessness. It involves fieldwork, including site visits, engagements with participants in their various locations and with their objects, and observations of domiciled people’s reactions to homeless people in public spaces. Central to the project are homeless people recruited from four service agencies in three 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 central to the project.

The initial prompts for the library case study were statements made by a city councillor concerning homeless men as a threat to others in the library that were reported in a newspaper article (‘Guards sought to police library’, Waikato Times, 19 May 2007). After being alerted to the article by two homeless participants, the decision was made to engage with news media to intervene in the production of negative representations of homeless men. The first author made contact with the library manager and discovered that she was concerned to ensure homeless men’s continued access to the library. We agreed to co-operate towards this end. The local newspaper contacted the library manager who referred the journalist to the first author who then worked with the journalist on two articles for the weekend edition.

Given the tendency of journalists to talk about rather than to homeless people, the first author decided to broker links between the journalists, local charities and clients in order to ensure that homeless people’s voices were included in subsequent coverage. As a controversial story builds momentum, journalists typically become interested in establishing further depth, and consequently opportunities emerge for extending a story through the introduction of alternative views. Those involved promoted three key messages; first, that including the voices of homeless men can reveal positive aspects of their library use;
second, many library staff and housed clients do not feel threatened or offended by the presence of homeless men in the library; third, homeless men are citizens and have rights to public spaces. When multiple sources communicate the same key messages, there is an increased likelihood that these are reproduced in news reports. Incorporating responsive media advocacy work reflects an approach to research where the emphasis is on adapting to events as they arise—and adjusting to the messiness of social life during the research process.

This case study also builds on the accounts of four single homeless men who have all experienced rough sleeping for at least two years. Roger is a 31-year-old Maori man diagnosed with schizophrenia, who maintains contact with his mother and another homeless man the same age. Phil is a 39-year-old Maori man with a history of gang involvement, who has recently reconnected with his family. Nic is a 41-year-old Pakeha man who has had extensive gang involvement. Luke is a 49-year-old Pakeha man who has experienced chronic depression and has recently been re-housed. These men talked about the local library without prompting during unstructured interviews conducted in May 2007. These interviews focused on their homeless biographies, social networks and the places they frequent. At the completion of the interviews, the men were given disposable cameras and asked to picture their lives and homelessness, their social relationships, and their use of public spaces. Photo-production interviews were then conducted where participants were asked to reflect on and talk about the images they had produced. The images and associated accounts provide insights into the practices through which homeless people construct themselves as social beings within specific locales. Through talking about the photographs, participants bring to life links between public narratives of homelessness, their material circumstances, their spatial locations, social positioning, and intergroup relations (Hodgetts, Chamberlain and Radley 2007).

The library was invoked, as a pivotal and contested public space, through images and talk by homeless participants, and by the media story linking the library with homeless men. Consequently, the researchers spent time in the library over a two-week period making direct observations and talking to staff and both domiciled and homeless patrons. We spoke informally to various librarians, and formally interviewed two. We also chatted to people in the library who were not homeless and conducted formal interviews with five such library patrons. In all these interviews the focus was on understandings of homelessness, interactions with homeless people, and issues relating to the presence of homeless men in the library. We were mindful of criticisms of ethnographic studies of homeless people adopting a naïve ethnography that serves to perpetuate assumptions of homeless people as ‘other’ (Hodgetts, Radley and Chamberlain 2007). Our interpretations were presented to staff and patrons in the library, and we received positive feedback that informed the subsequent refinement of this paper.

The representational and material spaces of homelessness

We present our analysis in four sections. The first section explores a newspaper-based call to exclude homeless men from the library, and considers the associated texturing of library spaces and the politics of inclusion associated with media deliberations. The second section goes beyond the news report to focus on the general views of homeless men, librarians and housed library patrons regarding the presence
of homeless people in the public library. We
consider social practices surrounding library
use, within the context of other spaces
frequented by homeless people. The third
section pays particular attention to homeless
men’s efforts at cultivating a sense of belong-
ing, support and self through their library use
that can transcend their present circumstances
and enables the imagining of possible housed
futures. The last section documents our efforts
to challenge news narratives that seek to
exclude homeless people from the library and
to promote more inclusive stories based on the
lived experiences of people involved in the
local setting.

News coverage: a challenge to library
patronage by homeless men

During our research, the presence of homeless
men in the library was publicised by a
newspaper story ‘Guards sought to police
library’ (Waikato Times, 19 May 2007). This
item was initiated by a local city councillor
and accompanied by a photograph of a
man with his head on his arms sleeping at a
library table. The opening paragraph reads:
‘Hamilton Public Library needs a full-time
security guard to protect staff and library users
from men using the facility as a hangout, says
one city councillor’. This need was said to
stem from reports from ‘several residents’
concerned about their safety in the library.
According to the councillor, these complaints
involved a regular group of men using the
library as ‘an impromptu drop-in centre’ and
intimidating ‘legitimate users’. These state-
ments made by the councillor are followed by
the unspecified claim that a recent stabbing
outside the library is associated with this
group of men. Invoking concerns for staff
safety, the councillor states: ‘I feel sorry for our
staff. They have the right to not be under any
form of threat’. The approach advocated by
the councillor proposes displacing homeless
men from the library rather than resolving
homelessness. The views of the councillor are
tempered by the inclusion of comments from
the City Council’s Community Services Man-
ger, who said she was aware of the issues, but
did not think they were on the rise. Her
account generalizes the issue of potentially
problematic interactions between people in
public spaces: ‘Very occasionally, in any of our
public facilities, we have to call the police for a
variety of reasons and the library is no
different. We are a growing city and as a city
grows, some of the social issues grow too,
unfortunately’. She also proposed that library
staff are trained to identify and respond to
potentially problematic patrons, ‘there are
protocols in place’.

This news report presents an accusatory
account of the presence of homeless people in
public spaces, positioning homeless men as
disruptive threats. The appeal to public
fear about safety in public places is an
example of political expediency and reflects
tensions around appropriate responses to
homelessness in contemporary New Zealand
cities (Laurenson and Collins 2007). This
occurs, even though there are few studies
linking homelessness and criminality. The
news report illustrates Feldman’s (2004)
notion of the misrecognition of homeless
people as inferior, dirty and disruptive non-
persons who are to be separated out from the
public. Such misrecognition neglects person-
hood, citizenship and the heterogeneity of
homeless people. Lees (1997) discusses the
presence of security guards in a Vancouver
public library and how this blurs boundaries
between private and public space, shifting the
library towards a more closed and authoritar-
ian space. Calls for a security guard carry the
threat of transforming the library into a semi-private space. The legitimacy of this shift is reliant on convincing people that the library is an unsafe place.

This news item should be seen within the context of broader news reports through which homeless people are subject to scrutiny, stigma and punitive control (Hodgetts, Cullen and Radley 2005). Such coverage is highly selective, confirming if not establishing oppositions between ‘those’ homeless people, and ‘us’ the domiciled public. It illustrates the creation of an extra-local narrative that deliberately determines relationships between the library space and a sense of belonging among homeless men. It designates the library as prime space for citizens with rights over private property, whose safe existence is threatened by the intrusions of homeless people. On the one hand, the article takes the stance of an authoritative narrative that speaks for all citizens, yet it simultaneously negates the legitimate practices of homeless people.

The library as a public space for care

This section explores how the library serves a range of functions for homeless people. Many of these are absent from extra-local news narratives. The library provides access to reference materials and information seeking (Goulding 2004), recreation, physical shelter, and a space for meeting others and care (Alstad and Curry 2007). Attention is given to the views of homeless men, librarians, and domiciled patrons regarding the presence and possible exclusion of homeless men from the library.

Homeless men often exist between places as men in ‘walking exile’ (de Certeau 1984). The library is an important place in the daily travels of these men as they weave their lives together across prime and marginal spaces (Knowles 2000). The significance of the library as a place to go can be considered in the context of other places, such as a park or the shelter that they are pushed out from in the morning. In terms of daily routine, the men’s night shelter closes at 8.00am and the trip to the library is a stabilizing event central to several men’s daily schedules. There is no official day centre in the city or a place of employment to go to, so options for spending one’s day include drinking in the park, sleeping by the river, wandering the Central Business District or visiting the library. These men treat the library differently to the park or river bank, as they do not drink or defecate in the library. They are willing to comply with norms of domiciled behaviour central to this space by remaining quiet, not disrupting other patrons, and reading. At the end of a day, the men walk about 500 metres from the library to have dinner at a charity and then around the corner to the night shelter.

Two of homeless men took almost identical photographs of the library entrance as they approached in the morning (see Figure 1).

When discussing this photograph Roger states:

It’s where I spend my day. It’s really cool. I learn a bit of history and read a few books there … There’s a video and TV upstairs right where the archive is and I watched a few documentaries up there … It’s good to be off the street for a while to relax and do what everyone is doing. I can get to know people who go to the library without annoying them … It’s not a big deal, but it’s good to be able to go in there sometimes and just be somewhere.

The library provides a place where these men have the right to spend the day in a life of movement. The main area where the men
congregate is on the third floor, which provides New Zealand materials, including documentaries, reference books, newspapers and internet access (see Figure 2). This floor offers a space for reading, conversing and researching, where patrons can sit alone or in groups and catch up with past and current events in New Zealand, thus reaffirming their identities as citizens and library patrons. Phil goes further to position himself as a member of the public when frequenting the library, simply doing what everyone else is doing. In the process, he contrasts the socially sanctioned use of the library with homeless men’s use of other public spaces, including a local park as a site for drinking and offending domiciled citizens:

Phil: We’re just reading books and doing what everybody else uses the library for to read and have time out ... I’d rather go to the library, you know, than being outside and all that being ... mischief, and all that drinking in the park and pissing off other people ... It’s [library] where you ... have time out and read books on whakapapa (genealogy) or anything cos it’s open to the public.

Here the library is associated with respite from homelessness and as a place to simply be and do what other citizens are doing.

The presence of these men often goes unnoticed because, as Roger notes, they attempt to be unobtrusive and comply with library policies. The fabric underlying the space is a set of middle-class expectations.
about how someone should be (washed and sober) and behave (not disrupt others) in public (Veness 1994). Invisibility through compliance with these norms is the price of using the library. These men work to sustain the accepted aesthetics of this space as ‘good’ homeless men who blend into the environment, and in return they are able to be there without being moved along. Feldman (2004) notes how homeless men are more often construed as threats while homeless women are rendered invisible. Our research participants take care not to ‘appear’ as threats in the library. In the process, their stories contradict the narrative of disruption and threat promoted by the city councillor in the newspaper item.

The library was presented by all participants as operating on a basis of acceptance of all patrons regardless of background, provided that codes of behaviour are met. The librarians who were interviewed emphasized similar social functions of the library to those raised by the homeless men. For instance, Librarian 1 discussed the social function of the library as providing a space for people from diverse backgrounds:

We get a regular cliental and there are different groups, which homeless ones are only a part of that . . . They know each other very well. They will come in, meet and often have a talk, sit down, look over the same newspapers . . . For people who maybe don’t have anybody else in their life . . . , they can come in whether that social interaction is actually with us or with other people that are there . . . [It’s] just a communal place really . . . We make that assumption that they’re homeless, but it’s not easy to tell.
Further contradicting the city councillor’s account, emphasis is placed on the fact that not all homeless people pose problems for libraries. It is only when norms are transgressed (e.g. when a person is drunk and disruptive) that such people become visible to other patrons in the library. Libraries provide common ground where it is often not clear who is homeless, and where, for the most part, all people are treated as patrons who belong. The librarians’ accounts reflect how acceptance of homeless men is cultivated over time through social interactions in which these men demonstrate an ability to comply with library expectations for behaviour. Librarian 2 states:

There’s certainly the regulars who greet each other and … talk with other people and the staff. You know, we’re on a first name basis with a lot of our regulars … We certainly wouldn’t bring it up [a person’s housing status]. You know, it doesn’t really matter to us if somebody is homeless. It’s how they behave in the library basically is the only issue, you know. Rich people can be as obnoxious as or even more obnoxious than, you know, homeless people.

Such extracts present the idea that the behaviour of all patrons needs to be restrained to make the library work for all as a public space. They reflect common library policies that emphasize social inclusion and the removal of barriers to access (Hersberger 2005). This story textures the library as a space that homeless men can move into, moving out from marginal public spaces and coming into contact with other citizens on a more even footing. The success of this spatial cohabitation, albeit reliant on mutual compliance with behavioural norms, is supported by the difficulties that regular patrons have in detecting homeless people, an issue considered by Hersberger (2005: 199):

Evaluating the economic status of a library patron using direct observation might result in correct estimates in some instances, but very wrong guesses in others. There is no material relevance to whether the library user who requests information concerning who won the World Series in 1961, for example, is homeless or housed…

The storying of the library as an inclusive space articulated by homeless men and librarians was also in accord with the views of the housed patrons interviewed. For instance, Ivan [housed, 50-year-old Pakeha] poses pertinent questions regarding the exclusion of homeless men from the library:

So what do they do about homeless people in here? Do they just chuck them out on the street? You’ve got homeless. Where do they go? What do they do during the day? What does a guy do? Perhaps they should put him on medication so he can stop in la la land.

In contrast to the image promoted by the city councillor in the newspaper item, the housed library patrons who spoke with us did not perceive homeless men as nuisances, as threats, or as disruptive. Homeless men were presented as citizens who share the right to go to the library and use its resources like everybody else. This is exemplified in an account from Mary (housed, 40-year-old female, Pakeha), reflecting on a personal experience:

I had been spending time in hospital when I was pregnant and I had to go home, had to catch a bus. And I walked from the hospital into town and the bus wasn’t until the evening … I was tired so I thought I’d have a bit of a nap down there … I got moved. I got woken up and told you’re not allowed to sleep there. When I got up and they realised I was pregnant, I can’t remember whether it was a traffic warden or police man or security guard or what, I
said look ‘I’m tired, I have a four-hour wait and I didn’t sleep very well last night in hospital’. They went away. I wasn’t homeless, but anyone can get tired or feel unwell and want to lay down somewhere and you can’t do that out there in winter so you come into the library. They can get drinks of water in here. There are toilets and they can wash themselves if they want to cos there’s warm water. They’re dry, relatively warm. I can understand the attraction … They might come in here and want to read and if they want to do that what the hell is the problem?

Mary relates to the experiences of exclusion faced by homeless people and refrains from constructing ‘them’ as different from ‘us’. In the process, she personalizes her support for the inclusion of homeless men in the library and invokes the functionality of the library as a resource for basic human needs. Such accounts invoke notions of the library as a space of care (cf. Johnsen, Cloke and May 2005) where homeless men are included as citizens who can use library facilities and experience a sense of belonging. In many respects, homeless men can leave their status as ‘streeties’ at the door, passing as just another library patron and thus gaining respite for a while at least.

These accounts demonstrate that the study of libraries can expand beyond geographies of reading and information use (Lees 1997). They illustrate processes of cohabitation between homeless and housed citizens. In her work on ‘designer shelters’, Veness (1994) notes that the very structure of such institutions and associated policies and practices tell homeless people how to behave and live according to ‘middle-class norms’. Such settings are associated with the ‘remodelling’ of poor people. A similar process appears to occur for homeless men in this library. Despite obvious issues of power regarding who regulates the library space, this is not solely a negative process for our participants. As we will show in the next section, there can be positive outcomes as homeless people gain access to emotional and intellectual resources that allow them to gain a sense of place and imagine a move towards a self-modelled and domiciled future (cf. Veness 1994).

**Library resources, self-preservation and imagining different futures**

This section documents how the library can provide a site for social participation and the preservation and development of self. Homeless men can seek companionship and interest there, and exercise their social skills, or escape into a book to contemplate changes in their circumstance. A trip to the library provides access to resources that homeless men can literally take with them on their journeys and use as personal anchor points for considering their current lives and possible housed futures.

Libraries have been identified by domiciled patrons as cozy, trouble free, communal, pleasant and safe spaces, rather than as simply formal, isolating and cold environments for information exchange. Black and Crann (2002) report that domiciled respondents experience libraries as ‘havens of tranquillity’ in which one can linger, savour, and engage in self-development, including using reference and archive materials for personal study. These dimensions are also reflected in our homeless participant’s accounts. For instance, Luke talked about the sense of security and peace of mind a trip to the library offered. He presented the library as a place to be safe for a while and to engage in conversations from a life predominantly lived alone in marginal spaces, such as under the bush in a park where he slept. He could also engage in academic
pursuits that he had enjoyed throughout his life. This facilitated the preservation of his sense of self. Continued visits to the library were presented as providing continuity between his domiciled and homeless existence. When talking about places he felt safe, Luke (49-year-old Pakeha) stated:

Only in the library. Not only because I’ve been a constant reader and studier throughout my life, but also because I know about four or five people who work in the library ... I always have someone to chat with ... I gave myself a personal meaning, a social significance, a personal value by not allowing my situation to dominate my desire to carry on certain areas of my life unchanged. Like my constant desire to learn. And to research and to communicate. That’s always been important to me throughout my life. So it was important that when I became homeless I didn’t lose those. They were intrinsic to my core nature. And a lot of homeless people run the risk of losing that core.

In his photo-based interview Luke expands on the function of the library. He photographed the exterior of the library showing ‘the place and the person’. Luke discussed the photograph as depicting someone important to him, one of the librarians:

That’s a friend of mine at the library. We weren’t allowed to take a photograph in the library unfortunately. And she’s been like a backbone for me ... I see her in there and we sit down and chat for a while and she checks on how I am and we talk about all sorts of nothingness. It’s just a lovely sense of someone who has their eye on me and who thinks positively about me. There’s a really good caring streak to her and they’re the type of things we underestimate a huge amount in life. And sometimes the most important people are those who speak kindly to us from time-to-time.

Luke invokes the library as a site for the maintenance of self through simple activities such as chatting. His comments raise the importance of relationships and interactions with library staff in supporting a sense of belonging, respite and refuge among homeless men (Black and Crann 2002). This identity work reflects how homeless people often attempt to hold on to core aspects of their being that are placed at risk due to the adversity of street life and the potential to lose oneself to the street (Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen 2006).

The account of a Maori homeless man, Phil, raises further complexities of self and place. This occurs because the use of things from the library spills over into other spaces inhabited by homeless men. After all, things such as library books are portable, and their use extends over time and space when taken along on journeys. These are also resources for imagining a different life somewhere beyond one’s present homelessness. Phil uses library resources to cultivate an understanding of his history and sense of place back in his tribal homeland, exemplifying that the significance of accessing the library is not restricted to the building and its opening hours.

Phil has been homeless since 14 years of age. During the initial interview he uses a history of his iwi (tribe), in the form of a library book, to introduce himself in a culturally patterned manner. Phil leafs through the book and literally talks to, and of, the people in the pages:

This book is me, that’s who we are ... That’s my great grandmother and that’s my Marae6 ... that’s my dad’s side ... This was all bush up through our valley ... See go across this little bridge and then go way up the bush. This is who we are and these are our chiefs ... These are our saw mills and that’s the Wanganui river right there ... And when we used to go hunting we used to come across the old forestry
rail tracks. ‘Hey that was those train tracks’. It’s clear like a walking track, hey.

Phil recognizes himself in and through the book. He takes us on a tour of his homeland, pointing out where his grandfather lived and where the school was located. His tour provides a means of exploring the place and relationships he hopes to return to in a future where he is no longer homeless. The book is used as a map (de Certeau 1984) to lay out a representation of Phil’s past and potential future back home. This reflects how library books can be used to invoke the presence of other people and physically distant places in a manner that exceeds the materiality of the object. The book is charged with memories, emotions and reflections that are extended into consideration of his current circumstance, and how his life could be changed by accessing the library to learn more about his culture and history:

I can’t face them down there until I do all this stuff first ... Young people should be on the Marae learning. You know, I should have done this stuff a long time ago ... I go to the library and I read, you know, about different religions or whatever. Something to do during the day time, read about different nationalities and how they go through life. And how I’m living and how are they living. And in some countries it’s pretty hard. We’ve got it pretty easy here. I can’t believe why we have to be homeless when there’s places for us to go to. And that’s what I said, ask your family first and ask them where you’re from and what’s your heritage, where you’re from, who you are, what’s the meaning of your whare (home), your Marae, how does that connect to your tribe. I do that research.

Noble (2004) proposes that the accumulation of being is linked to the accumulation of material objects in the home. Objects such as photo-albums are often treasured personal artefacts that people share with others in telling their stories. We propose that borrowing books from a public library can serve similar functions for homeless men. Such objects are particularly significant when seen in the context of the scarcity of personal possessions among homeless men. For men living transient lives or lives in transit these items can provide personal anchorage points that foster a sense of self and belonging. Likewise, Connor (2002) proposes that objects, or our things, remind us of who we are and who we hope to be. We would add that they can also remind us of where we belong and where we hope to be.

For Phil, the iwi book offers ontological proof of his being and dimensionality to his life because it contains a record of how he came into being, and documents his existence and place in the world. The book is more than a simple extension or manifestation of his cultural identity as a Maori man; it is a vehicle for constructing himself in a manner that situates him within a web of relationships, experiences and places that spans time and space. It provides Phil with a form of connective tissue linking him to others and invoking a sense of belonging and home at a distance from our present locale. Discussing the use of library resources, Lees (1997: 342) notes that ‘Knowledge passes through space and is not contained by it. As a result, Vancouver’s new public library has an open-ended geometry of power’. The intellectual space of the library extends to wherever one is reading or reflecting on a book read. To exclude homeless men from the library and its resources would be to restrict their journeys and their ability to engage in significant social practices.

Despite staff and housed patron support, the inclusion of homeless men in the library is fragile and constantly under threat from attempts to
displace them (Wright 2000). These threats promote the retexturing of the library as a more closed space (Lees 1997), which can be facilitated from the outside through news coverage (Silverstone 2007). The final analysis section documents how the shift from inclusion to exclusion promoted in some news reports is not a foregone conclusion, as opportunities to question and challenge still exist.

**Challenging news narratives**

News media rarely take a single stance on an issue (Cottle and Rai 2006). Two of our homeless participants (Nic and Phil) alerted the first author to the existence of another newspaper column written in response to the article featuring the city councillor. This column, ‘Taking a stab at library loitering’ (*Waikato Times*, 19 May 2007) was pinned up in the men’s night shelter alongside the first story:

Nic: Did you see the write-up the lady did on it [the councillor’s newspaper article]?

Interviewer: No.

Nic: The lady’s got a commentary piece and it relates directly to it. I’ll get it for you before you go cos she’s just taking the piss out of this councillor ... And she’s like ‘Oh I went to the library and I have to confess that I was lurking without a permit or using any services’ ... In the same paper, just a couple of pages on.

Interviewer: So what do you reckon about this?

Nic: Well it’s just like are there elections coming soon! ‘I care about the people of the city’. You usually hear that from councillors when elections are due ... The account reflects how homeless men engage with media, often questioning depictions of ‘homeless people’ as different from, or as threats to, housed citizens (Hodgetts, Radley and Cullen 2006). News items become common reference points for questioning narrow characterizations of homeless people. Nic’s account also shows how supportive coverage, such as the column (written in response to the article), can become an object of pride and aid the dismissal of prejudicial views, such as that offered by the city councillor. The ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinction central to the first story is undermined by the ensuing column presenting library loitering as normal behaviour.

Nic’s response raises the point that the city councillor appears to be appealing to a concerned community that he imagines might vote for him in the upcoming mayoral elections. By raising the issue of the timing of the first story, alongside the impending elections, Nic points up two things. First, that the authority of this mediated urban narrative is in conflict with the local story he can tell. Second, that the media narrative involves a simultaneous re-working of the identity of homeless people alongside a conscious re-working of the spaces and places involved. At different times, such as before a large civic event or election, there might be attempts by the authorities to clean up the city or to show their commitment to doing so. This shows how the designation of a space as being more or less prime, more or less exclusive, is contextually dependent on other, place- or time-specific, matters. This implies that homeless people will at some time find themselves subject to the vicissitudes of discourses and interests over which they have little or no control.

The sardonic follow-up column provides an example of the capacity of print news media to pause and reflect on the ways in which events have been covered or people have been characterized. Cottle and
Rai (2006) associate journalistic reflections on earlier news reports with the practice of going behind and beyond typical stories on topics such as homelessness to provide ‘thick’ descriptions. They refer to the ‘reportage’ news frame where journalists attempt to generate deeper insights into news events by providing audiences with context and detailed background information, including first-hand testimony on events. Further, the stories discussed here exemplify reportage, and an ‘invitational’ form of news media reflexivity, where the readership is invited to reflect on the first story and their own expectations regarding the presence of homeless men in the library. These stories close the gap between journalists and ‘us’, the audience, where ‘we’ are encouraged to step back and make sense of news images within a larger frame of reference. Such items also exemplify how the texturing of the library as a public space can occur through public deliberations occurring in other places, including the news media.

Two weeks later, a two-page feature article ‘Shelf Life: Shelter for the Day’ (Waikato Times, 2 June 2007)7 emerged from our engagements with a journalist. This contained a series of photographs: the Director of Libraries surrounded by books in the library; three librarians among the library shelves with a caption stating that they ‘do not feel threatened by homeless people’; Sanson, a homeless man reading a book; and the first author. The opening text is revealing of the orientation of the story. ‘You’re down on your luck, living rough, and with the long daylight hours to fill in. Where do you go? For many the answer is the library, where as well as books to browse there will be warmth, company and shelter’. After setting the scene, the item raises the issue of determining who is homeless:

Among the customers are homeless people, although you wouldn’t know to look at them. It is only later when library staff point them out—browsers who are here most days, all day—that homeless people materialize from among the general borrower population.

Thus, the item provides a space for considering the plight of homeless men, who are presented as citizens just like ‘us’.

The feature focuses on a homeless patron, Sanson, who is described as cleanly dressed and busy reading an aviation magazine. This is an attempt to transcend the politics of misrecognition (Feldman 2004) evident in the first story. This man is introduced as a person who is a resident of the men’s night shelter and a computer studies student waiting for an afternoon lecture. The library is described as a place where he can come and ‘chill out’ because the men’s shelter is closed during the day. It is proposed that:

He’s only got into trouble once. Exhausted after several days working and sleeping in a tent, he pushed three soft chairs together, and lay down for a snooze, hidden among the travel books. ‘I must have been snoring. One of the ladies came and tapped me on the shoulder’.

The tone here is of a reasonable use of the library given Sanson’s life circumstances. Sanson asserts that ‘homeless men are not lazy … A lot of them are intelligent, clever and fully capable, and others, luck gets down on them and then they go down further and further’. Invoking the depth of awareness among homeless men about their relations with housed people, the journalist writes: ‘He knows he’s on the margins of society, and not everyone wants to see or empathise with homeless people, much less share a public space such as a library’.
The item moves further into the theme of homeless and housed relations and the importance of the library as a civic space:

DESPITE the brouhaha over homeless people loitering around the library, most of the librarians feel a mix of affection and protectiveness for those so-called vagrants in their midst … ‘The library is more than a library, it’s a community centre’ … ‘Over the years we have helped them, made coffee for them, and contacted [service agencies]’ says O’Connor.

The Director of Libraries is cited asserting that the library is a place for social inclusion and all library patrons have equal rights to use the library. In this context, the item draws on interviews with the first author and service providers to emphasis the need for ‘building social connections and networks’ to address homelessness. The final paragraph states:

‘The responsibility and sign of a good city is how we take care of the most vulnerable people in our society,’ says Karen Morrison-Hume, director of Anglican Action. ‘What do we do with our misfits? Some of the rhetoric from council suggests we don’t appreciate what it means to be truly inclusive. We demolish ugly buildings, so what should we do with ugly people? Everything has to be beautiful and wonderful and economically viable, but the truth is that is not what society is about. The measure of a robust society is how we care for every citizen.’

Items such as this demonstrate the potential for news media to represent homeless men in ways that emphasize citizenship and the need for social inclusion. Across news items we can also detect the working through of tension around the library as a ‘closed’ or an ‘open’ space (Lees 1997). In the first item the city councillor is advocating restricted access and functions for the library, while in the feature article the researchers, librarians and social agency representatives are invoking broader civic functions beyond reading and researching. The resulting coverage exemplifies how news stories often constitute instances of manufactured exchange between stakeholders, where each contribution forms the context and condition for the next contribution. Any particular point in the evolving story is contingent on previous instalments that can be referred back to in a reflexive manner when contemplating new insights and directions for a story. Coverage also reflects the goals of public libraries in increasing citizen education, access to information and social inclusion (Newman 2007).

This analysis reveals the potential for news media to function as a symbolic site for negotiating the use of public spaces by homeless people. Mitchell (2003) is rather dismissive of media as a public forum for such deliberations. He rightly points to disparities in access to media for homeless voices, and the media history of emphasizing conflict and tensions between groups. In contrast, Silverstone (2007) considers the political functions of media more generally, and while acknowledging common concerns, he presents a more positive perspective on the potential for news media as a public forum. He develops a concept, the mediapolis, which attempts to combine notions of mediation with the ancient Greek concept of polis, the shared civic space in a society for face-to-face communications, and a place where relations between social groups are often negotiated:

Contemporary media enable a face-to-faceness which … involves the coming together of speech and action and albeit in the symbolic realm of mediated representation, they reproduce, though of course in an intensely technologically mediated form, the discursive and judgmental space of the polis. Like
the polis this mediated space is often, indeed mostly, elitist and exclusive. Like the polis it depends on visibility and appearance in the media. (2007: 29–31)

The mediapolis emerges through interpersonal interactions no longer anchored solely in specific material spaces, such as the town square. In considering the mediapolis as a public forum, Silverstone invokes a notion of citizens engaging via media in a regulated, but pluralistic symbolic space, inherently interwoven with the material world. For instance, newspaper readers are offered glimpses, interpretations, commentary and assertions warranting the exclusion or inclusion of homeless men, which they can take with them into the library and beyond. Such coverage also extends library-based interactions both within and beyond the time and space constraints of the building, and the specific interactions between homeless and housed patrons and staff occurring there.

Conclusions

Central to this article is the premise that research into social relations surrounding homelessness must consider links between symbolic and representational spaces. Material and media-located experiences remind homeless people of who they are, who they want to be, whether they belong, and how they are connected or dislocated from others. This is particularly relevant for unpacking the regulation and frequent dismissal of homeless bodies from public life. Our task has been to tease out the complexities of processes surrounding homeless men’s trips to the library, and consider the implications for the presence of homeless people in public spaces and their participation in public life. In the process, we have demonstrated that libraries can be spaces of care where homeless people can be included. This particular public space has advantages over semi-private sites, such as traditional day centres and shelters, because the library can facilitate interactions between homeless and housed citizens. In a day centre or hostel, these men are located specifically as homeless people. Conversely, when in the library, homeless people can be present as regular library patrons.

Homeless and housed people can and do cohabitate in the library. This cohabitation exists within a broader symbolic and political context and is textured by tensions around appropriate behaviour, inclusion, and understanding. In considering these tensions, we have highlighted links between an analysis of print news constructions of homelessness and the concrete spaces of homelessness and lived politics. This has involved linking the imagined library in news media reports with the library experienced by staff and homeless and housed patrons. Consequently, we draw attention to the validity of spaces where homeless and housed lifeworlds overlap and at times collide, given that people are co-located in representational spaces such as newspaper reports, and in physical locations such as the public library. Homeless and housed lifeworlds are linked by representational and material spaces in which people meet. These are not, however, self-contained domains for local action. Rather, they are interwoven into complex constellations and are often crystallized in prime public spaces. We have documented how scrutiny of homeless people’s right to be somewhere and their status as citizens is not simply located in the library building, it extends to more distant forums, including media deliberations. For homeless people to inhabit prime public places successfully, even when they go largely unnoticed, is to become citizens. To be denied
access to such places is to be denied citizenship and to be positioned as non-members of the public (cf. Mitchell 2003). A central concern in this context is the stigma that can arise for homeless people when their presence is questioned, as occurred in the first newspaper item. This incident demonstrates that even when a welcoming and inclusive library environment is achieved, it is fragile and subject to disruption due to the tradition of excluding homeless people from public places and social life (Feldman 2004). Nonetheless, challenges to homeless people's patronage of public spaces in news coverage should not be seen solely as a negative process. Such controversy can profile the plight of homeless people and open a space for critiquing exclusionary practices and building coalitions to support the inclusion of homeless citizens.

In drawing attention to the difference between the local and the extra-local in public deliberations about homelessness, Wright (2000: 51) notes how local narratives and practices can contradict the universal narratives that characterize homeless men as disruptive and dangerous. The media deliberations discussed above aligned precisely upon the ground of ‘disorder and danger’ when arguing for the exclusion of homeless people from libraries. We have shown here that the local is not solely the preserve of homeless people, nor the universal the preserve of domiciled people or institutions. In the library, a homeless person who engages with others, and especially with librarians, constructs a place that not only has particular meanings for space, but also for identity. Librarians who intercede on behalf of homeless people traverse spaces that the universal narrative would separate; they also transgress the identity to which authorities would have them adhere. Space comes alive through everyday practice, and is legitimized, along with its actors, through breaching the universal narrative that attempts to circumscribe it. The benefits of this extend beyond the physical setting of the library.

Finally, geographers have noted that popular (mis)conceptions of the press comprise a public forum for debate and explanations of social issues for readers who may not be experiencing things first hand (May 2003). Print-based public deliberations are often politically limited. In this article we have shown that, despite the often narrow and reactionary focus of news, there are opportunities to extend and add depth to news-based public discussions on homelessness. Journalists can be receptive to suggestions from scholars for expanding coverage of controversial issues (Cottle and Rai 2006). The aim of such work is to develop a mediapolis in which a broader range of citizen groups are represented in public deliberations that influence their lives (Silverstone 2007). This can help to ensure the continued access of homeless people to public spaces, such as the library, because representational spaces forged by media are linked to actual material places. This does not involve telling journalists what they should do and how they should do it; it involves supplying information that meets journalists’ needs while staying faithful to the hopes and aspirations of homeless people. In this way, universal narratives of homelessness can be rearticulated through local stories, and in time these local narratives can contribute to the revision of universal narratives.

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Notes

2. It is worth noting that exclusionary practices (with reference to the US and UK literatures) are less entrenched in New Zealand and are often combined with efforts to improve the quality of life for homeless people. As Laurenson and Collins (2007: 649) point out, the extent of emphasis placed on exclusion and persecution or inclusion and support in New Zealand is subject to ‘political whim’. Nonetheless, the increasing visibility of homelessness in New Zealand cities, and moves towards conservative policies at local and national levels, suggest that an increase in punitive approaches is likely.
3. Indigenous people of New Zealand.
4. Descendants of the early settler group from Europe.
5. The library site is a converted department store with a large loft interior in the heart of the city, adjacent to office buildings, shopping centres and cafés. The main entrance opens on to a large and well-manicured square that has been designed as a recreational space in which citizens can congregate. Some tensions are evident in the locating of services for homeless people within walking distance of the library and square because this brings homeless people into these prime public spaces and into contact with domiciled citizens.
6. A Marae is communally owned land and buildings that serve as a central meeting place for tribal members.
7. A fourth story accompanied the two-page feature, profiling a particular homeless man and his daily routine as a student, hostel resident, and library user. We have not included an analysis of this item here because its core themes are covered in our analysis of the feature story.

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Abstract translations

Une visite à la bibliothèque: l’itinérance et l’inclusion sociale

L’étude présentée dans cet article s’intéresse aux hommes sans-abri qui fréquentent une bibliothèque publique. Il s’agit de savoir dans quelle mesure les hommes sans-abri ont assimilé la bibliothèque à un espace de sécurité et de participation sociale, à une époque où le quotidien de la région faisait paraître un billet mettant en cause leur droit d’accès à la bibliothèque. On reconnaît dans ce reportage les récits universels par lesquels les personnes itinérantes seraient exclues, ainsi que les liens intimes qui existent entre l’espace symbolique des nouvelles, l’espace matériel de la bibliothèque locale, et les mondes vécus des hommes sans-abri. L’article présente les résultats d’une enquête basée sur des entrevues auprès d’hommes sans-abri, des employés et des usagers de la bibliothèque. De plus, nous nous sommes engagés dans un travail en collaboration avec des journalistes pour publier des articles qui mettent en évidence la fonction positive que joue la bibliothèque dans la vie des hommes sans-abri, et pour aller à l’encontre des récits d’information qui renforcent l’exclusion «des itinérants» des espaces publics de premier plan.

Mots-clefs: itinérance, espaces publics, bibliothèques, participation sociale, vie quotidienne.

Una visita a la biblioteca: el problema de la falta de vivienda y la inclusión social

Este artículo examina las visitas de los hombres sin hogar a una biblioteca pública. Destaca como los hombres sin hogar identificaban la biblioteca como un espacio para la seguridad y participación social, en un momento en que el periódico regional publicó un artículo que ponía en duda si su presencia en la biblioteca era apropiado. El reportaje promueve narrativas universales que excluyen a las personas sin hogar, señalando la relación estrecha entre el espacio simbólico del periodismo, el espacio material de la biblioteca pública y los mundos de la vida de los hombres sin hogar. Incluimos trabajo de campo en el que entrevistamos a hombres sin hogar, personal de la biblioteca y clientes. Además, colaboramos con periodistas en elaborar artículos complementarios, destacando el papel positivo jugado por la biblioteca en las vidas de los hombres sin hogar y también para cuestionar las narrativas periodísticas existentes que abogan por la exclusión de los ‘sin techo’ de los principales espacios públicos.

Palabras claves: el problema de la falta de vivienda, espacios públicos, bibliotecas, participación social, la vida cotidiana.