

# Living Well: health, wellbeing and the built environment

A one-day conference for student nurses and health practitioners, Middlesex University, Hendon, Monday 10th February, 2020

[Andy Guise: Homelessness and the Unhealthy City](#)

Good morning everyone, thanks for the invitation to speak today. I work at King's college London, which is just below The Shard. So my office is just below the Shard and I know that "hate" is a really problematic emotion but I really *really* hate the Shard. In the architect's words it's "a shard of glass dropped from the sky." For me that's an act of violence, it should be a criminal offence, it almost certainly is, and so I hate the Shard because it represents a lot of the problems of housing, health and wellbeing that make our city unhealthy. And my presentation is building almost directly from Anna's work, Anna's book [Anna Minton, *Big Capital*, 2017] it's here, it might be too strong a statement, but I sort of realised in my embarrassment that I forgot to reference Anna's book, it's so baked in, but it is in there, so I'd definitely go out and buy it. And today I'm going to explore this idea of homelessness and the unhealthy city, and look at how experiences of homelessness, and how we can tie this to the broader health of the city. And so I'm hoping that by the end of my talk you'll all hate the Shard as much as I do.

1.22 Now fairly obviously, being homeless is bad for your health, it's devastatingly bad. If you're homeless, you facing risks of violence, injury, the cold, infectious disease, and it goes on. And because of those multiple risks the average age of death of someone who is homeless in the UK is 43 for women and 45 for men. So I'm going to say that again, the average age of death of someone who is homeless in the UK is 43 for women and 45 for men. And I want to explore how we can tie those awful numbers to specific social determinants. And then show how homelessness reflects broader problems of the city that affects us all, again building directly on Anna's work.

2.09 And then similar work on this from Wilkinson and Pickett, from *The Spirit Level* [Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, 2010) and they showed how amongst high income countries more unequal societies have worse health and social outcomes, not just for the poor, but for everyone. So here the US perhaps predictably has terrible health and social outcomes and is very unequal, and the UK not far behind. And then we have Japan and Norway, much more equal and have far better outcomes for everybody.

So unequal societies are bad for everyone, not just the poor, and so from that and Anna's work we can explore how homelessness is not just bad for the individual who is homeless but is revealing something else about how unhealthy our cities are.

2.46 So there's lots of ways one might think about this, but the first one is as Anna said, this is Exhibit A in my case against the Shard. So showing how homelessness reveals the flaws in the supply and cost of our housing.

So briefly the Shard has lots of luxury flats many of which were empty for many years after the Shard was built. And so homelessness then is a clue and it's the tip of the iceberg to the dynamics of this housing system that builds luxury flats but not the social housing that we need and so importantly, everyone else is impacted.

3.30 I want to be careful here. I'm not saying the impact is the same for the homeless man sleeping outside of the Westminster tube station as for the family of 5 who are forced out of central London, but they're related, they're the outcomes of the same system.

There's also something else I want to focus within this system, something particular, and that's our culture, our social norms, and a particular feature of it. I want to focus on the individual, a culture of individualism, where the individual is central to our daily life, and that's sort of encoded in words of choice, and empowerment and independence. And these are things which we all sort of prize and value to varying extents, and it's hard to look at those words and think that they are necessarily bad things, which of course they aren't. In specific places and times they are potentially wonderful things, especially when we think of a global history of authoritarianism and fascism that completely opposed some of those ideas. But the problem is when we take some of them too far and when we have an individualism that is excessive, and that's what I want to talk about today.

4.39 I'm going to explore that through drawing on some research I've done on Universal Credit.

Just to help me check here, how many people here have heard of Universal Credit?

How many people here have heard good things about Universal Credit?

How many people here have heard bad things about Universal Credit?

5.03 Yeah it was cheap shot, but it tells us something important. For those of you who aren't that familiar with Universal Credit, Universal Credit is a recent reform to the welfare estate. And it had two overall aims: the first was to simplify a complicated a benefits system and the second was to encourage people into work.

So two major goals: simplification and encouraging people into work.

Yet it's become a major scandal about the impacts of austerity, partly for how Universal Credit has meant cuts in the amount of welfare people receive, but it's also a scandal for the IT system that's at the heart of it.

5.38 So if you apply for Universal Credit, you go on a website like this; you make your application and then your application is managed online through that. There are some exceptions to that, but in the main it's an online system.

Amidst rumours of the bad impact of Universal Credit, with colleagues from a charity Groundswell, which works with people who are homeless, and the London School Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, we did a study to explore how people who are homeless are experiencing Universal Credit, and the impacts this is having on their health.

6.10 And we heard stories like Fadi's: so, long-term homelessness, combined with mental and physical ill health whilst rough sleeping he needed to apply for Universal Credit.

So this is a core point: people apply and then have to wait 5 weeks, often longer, before getting anything. And this in an effort to teach people the rhythms of a monthly salary .

But this causes problems for Fadi, so as he says:

*"I didn't have nothing, literally for weeks. At that point I was still buying inhalers. I had no letter to say I was entitled to benefits, I had applied for benefits, but that doesn't mean anything."*

6.48 So he's rough sleeping, he has very little money, but still having to buy inhalers that he needs for his asthma. And then he tells us about a period when despite being ill and rough sleeping he had to attend weekly appointments at the work centre, to search for a job:

*"being forced to go to all those weekly appointments when I wasn't in a fit state to do so. I think that was one of the main things that made me deteriorate [he's talking about his mental health here]."*

*Having to worry about that appointment whilst trying to pick yourself up and put yourself together again.”*

7.17 So he's rough sleeping but still having to go to weekly meetings to explore what jobs he could do, and this as his mental health is deteriorating.

Then I interviewed a manager of a hostel, a hostel for people who are homeless, and we talked about someone they'd been working with, someone who'd been homeless for a long time and rough sleeping. And she explains what he needs to do:

*“He got moved onto Universal Credit. So he's completely illiterate, so he had no computer skills whatsoever...so the expectation of being able to manage, to be able to log-on, communicate with staff at the DWP, meet these expectations of attending meetings on time and be checking that they're happening, without any support, it's just impossible, it's just absolutely [laughs]...”*

And so I ask, was he expected to apply for jobs?:

*“Yes. So he was expected to provide proof that he was applying for positions, to hold discussions with his work coach ...he had to prove that he was spending 37 hours per week applying for various positions and uploading that to a computer... [laughs] I don't know how quite to put this without sounding, I mean, it's ridiculous.”*

8.27 This is a system that's set up to empower people, to make choices, which in this context is clearly absurd. This person clearly doesn't have those capacities, not now.

And finally, Daniel, so Daniel's experience, he has chronic back pain, and he's had a period of being unable to work, which has led him to be homeless in a hostel. And at the start he describes the pressure to work:

*“It's so difficult, it's not like going in and signing on anymore. They press you to get a job, and if you don't apply for vacancies you aren't going to get your benefits, so you have to apply. I can't apply for vacancies for jobs I would get, portering jobs, as I can't do them [because of his back pain]. And I'm penalised for that, you know. It's so difficult.”*

And then this rounds off his interview:

*“I tell the woman [at the work centre] I am homeless, she says ‘why are you homeless?’. She says ‘go to the council they will give you a home’.... she says ‘if you want to sleep on the streets, stay on the streets’.”*

9.30 So, he's under pressure to work, and then officials who might in other settings support him are seeing homelessness as matter of individual choice. And that final idea really draws out what's going on underneath Universal Credit. Yes there are specific IT problems or bad staff, but amidst all this is a deeper problem of Universal Credit being an expression of extreme individualism. So as for the woman in the Job Centre where the assumption is that homelessness is a question of individual choice and that the proper response is a system to encourage or force people like Fadi or like Daniel to get a job. And that the only barrier to getting a job, to getting out of homelessness, is people's willingness to work, and their need to make better choices. So as I said before, recognising the individual and thinking about choice and empowerment is really important. And yet we can also hold too intensely to those ideas and build systems that are completely opposed to the actual experiences of homelessness and ill health.

10.35 So the notion that homelessness is an individual choice is widely held across the UK, surveys show this. But really I guess who would choose that? And we really need to problematize this idea of choice, and what individuals do and the influence of their environments, particularly as here on the top half of that slide, we have a huge evidence base around the social determinants of homelessness. For how being homeless is linked to past experiences of abuse, violence, poverty, and people who are homeless are then usually trying to manage a vast range of injustices.

11.14 So saying that people choose homelessness is like saying they choose injustice. So it's obviously much more complicated. And all this made a lot more worse by the recent shifts under austerity, declining services and support, so making the idea that you can choose to leave homelessness almost laughable.

So for Fadi as for Dennis and the guy in the hostel, are empowerment, independence and choice really what they need? Are they really appropriate goals in the short term and are going to support health?

11.46 So perhaps in time all of those can be achieved. But perhaps right now, in the context of emergency, people don't need choice, they don't need to spend 37 hours a week looking for work, but 37 hours a week being cared for. So my core argument is that as well as empowerment and choice, or perhaps before it, we also need to recognize and allow for dependency, because many people who are homeless might need to be dependent on someone or something whilst they grapple with multiple and interlinked needs.

12.19 I want to be careful here, that I'm not saying that people who are homeless are passive and helpless. That's clearly not the case, indeed a lot of people who are homeless are very active, and are driving radical protest and action. But in the context of rough sleeping, mental health and addiction issues, sometimes people need support, compassion and someone to lean on.

Which seems like an obvious thing to have to say and yet Universal Credit and other systems often don't provide for that dependency, rendering people more likely to be homeless, and more likely to be stuck in it.

But this comes about for particular reasons, so is in our culture of individualism the idea of being dependent is hugely stigmatised, and this is clear through our media and politics. So certainly in a UK setting, ideas of dependency have been stigmatised.

13.09 To be dependent on welfare and benefits is to be marked in some ways, and from that Universal Credit and other policies deny how people who are homeless, and everyone else (which I'll come on to in a second) are dependent. And instead the individual needs to be challenged, punished, sanctioned, cajoled into work rather than supported and cared for.

So I want to think how we reclaim dependency, and not just for people who are homeless but for everyone, the whole population.

13.40 The idea that we all function as rational individuals, completely free to do and choose what we want to do is, in important senses, utter rubbish. We're all dependent on things and people.

So sociologists, especially feminists have often showed this: how the supposed free individual, the paragon of individualism, the male entrepreneur, is utterly reliant on the unpaid labour of women.

But that's just to draw on a negative example as we're all enmeshed in very positive networks of interdependence that enable us. And crucially the idea of being dependent on others is actually central to who a lot of us think, is central to a lot of ancient and spiritual thought and writing. But it barely gets mentioned in our social, public and political life and how we build our cities, and that I argue is really bad for our health, for the homeless but also for everyone.

14.35 So there's another side of denying dependency, as at the same time as seeking to deny the dependence of people who are homeless, our culture also obscures how those who benefit from the status quo are also hugely dependent on others.

So the rich, the one percent, are often lauded for their genius and for their hard work, and no doubt some of them are clever and some of them are working hard, but then so do lots of other people. And from my careful economic analysis we can see how the rich are often or almost always dependent on other people in a vast range of ways. They're not isolated individuals: their fortunes are invariably built on the labour of others, built on the assets of others, sometimes inherited, or

assets that were once publicly held and publicly built. And from this we have one of the ultimate expressions of the denial of dependency, which is the myth of meritocracy that those to have it all earned it all themselves

15.39 So as one illustration of this point and it's an easy shot in some respects because who doesn't like to bash a banker. But in 2008 when the world economy was at risk of falling apart, the financial system, the banks, desperately needed help, and they got it. 500 billion pounds of help, give or take, I am rounding off. And I see that as dependency. 500 billion pounds worth of dependency.

To give that a little bit of context, the most recent government initiative to respond to homelessness was given 30 million pounds.

16.15 But that bail out is rarely talked about in terms of dependency. Instead that economic fact of 500 billion pounds was mutated into stigma against people who were using benefits, and who were homeless, and how they are supposedly dependent on funds. Indeed I suppose the awful genius of the past 10 years has been to divert attention from this kind of dependency onto other kinds of dependency.

And this denial of dependency then has effects. It diverts attention from the public sphere: it risks eroding it, it risks erosion of the institutions that have dependency and mutuality baked into them, even if we might not always call it that, crucially perhaps with the most effects on the homeless, but ultimately everyone.

16.59 So to try to link this back to the theme of the built environment, I guess what can we do?

Before that, many of you, nurses, health care providers in training - one day soon you might be providing care to someone who is homeless. And I suppose this point about individualism is about recognising cultural competence in the care encounter, about not bringing in the baggage of individualism when you're providing care.

But for society, lots of things to do: reorienting our services, proper funding to do so, but building facilities that support people.

17.32 This is an example of a hostel that has been built in Camden from Peter Barber architects, replacing the hostels that are often terribly underfunded and neglected and not places in which you can be healthy.

But it's not just about responding to the needs of the homeless. As I've tried to show the broader parts of our city shape the experiences of the homeless but also affect everyone else. We're all enmeshed in this excessive individualism and a reluctance, officially, to acknowledge dependency.

18.04 So back to the Shard - so I hate it for how it looks, I hate it for the unsold luxury flats amidst the housing crisis, but I also hate it for how it's intended to be an icon for Southwark and Bermondsey, but is an icon that has nothing to offer for the people who live below it, not even a bench to sit on.

It does nothing to respond to the interdependencies of the people around it. So if we accept that our built environment represents our culture and powerful interests, what might we change? How might we think differently about our built environment, that could respond to dependency?

18.39 Well one clue is in the shadow of the Shard, this is a statue called *The Shared* [by artist Austin Emery]. It's built in a block of social housing nearby, and it's mocking the values of the Shard. Again it points to something about having public housing that is dignified and well-built and attentive to needs, with shared spaces that might foster different ways of thinking, that can respond to how we're all, whether homeless or not, need something to be dependent on.

So in summary of thoughts, homelessness is tied to our cities, and I focus on a culture of individualism in particular, which shapes our policies and systems in ways that deny and stigmatise dependency but then also obscures the dependencies of the powerful.

And so my conclusion is that we need to think about those dependencies, and how we provide health and social care, but also how we think about the city and the built environment around us.

So I'll finish there, thank you for listening.

This paper was presented at an event called "Living Well: health, wellbeing and the built environment." This was a one-day conference for student nurses and health practitioners, held on 10th February, 2020, organised by the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture in collaboration with the School of Health and Social Sciences at Middlesex University.

The conference touched on a variety of topics including the unhealthy city and homelessness, experiences of mental distress and housing, representations of council housing in the media, community-centred design of the built environment, and smart homes for ageing populations.

A list of further reading and resources can be found here:

<https://rl.talis.com/3/mdx/lists/E6D01DCE-B34E-845A-4BF2-282B8157BF8C.html>