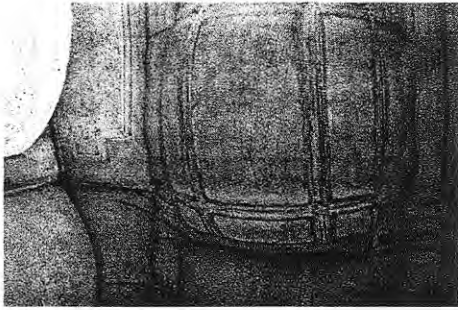




negotiating | homelessness

shawn van sluys

The story of Ana Rewakowicz and her inflatable room in downtown Lethbridge's Galt Gardens offers an alternative, conceptual approach to housing while addressing social issues.

Ana Rewakowicz addresses homelessness not only by bringing a nomadic or alternative form of housing into spaces associated with homelessness, but by opening a dialogue around architectural imprints, pliable skins, and enigmatic structures as they occupy a negotiated space.



All images: Ana Rewakowicz, Travelling with my inflatable room, 2001, Performance at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Galt Gardens; October 5, 2004. Digital stills from a video-recording by Ana Rewakowicz and Vivian Hodgson.

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against terrorism; from interventionist foreign policy to disaster response in third world countries; from the AIDS crisis in Africa to that in China. In this larger context, homelessness is merely one more issue caused by (and, perhaps, attempted to be corrected by) macro-level social trends, compounded by the personal characteristics of the homeless individual (financial distress, mental illness, drug abuse). It is the constant negotiation between these factors that is at the heart of the Galt Gardens as a negotiated space between macro-urban visions and micro-lives on the park bench.

Except in deepest winter, Galt Gardens in downtown Lethbridge is 'home' to several homeless men and women. Photographs of the park when it was built in the 1910s show an idyllic setting with mothers pushing lacy prams and fathers in black suits, walking erect, waving jovially at families across the way. In the post-war 50s, the western *flâneur* gave way to utopian, modern, nuclear families filling the suburbs and only occasionally shopping downtown. The park became a desolate wind-blown space with a few lone strollers by day, and a cruising ground by night. Homelessness has become a concern in Lethbridge as the city moves to revitalize the downtown and Galt Gardens. This has threatened to displace the homeless people until a new homeless shelter is built. Now routed as the heart of the city, Galt Gardens has become a negotiated space between the homeless people and the downtown revitalization initiative as, once again, urban living becomes an alternative to sprawling suburbia.

The night of Tuesday, October 5, 2004 Ana Rewakowicz set up her inflatable room beside the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Galt Gardens. In 2001, Rewakowicz took a rubber latex mold of a small room in her Montreal apartment, and constructed an external support system to inflate the entire piece. Her cross-Canada performance piece titled 'Travelling with my inflatable room' took her to different urban settings – local parks, plazas, parking lots – where she camped in her latex room. Moving and travelling from place to place, she became aware of empty rooms as spaces that resonate with stories and feelings and recall a fleeting sense of being located somewhere, but not belonging.

As Tuesday night progressed, it became apparent that the room was more than a sleeping chamber. It formed a catalyst for much larger discussions of world issues between Ana, her travel companion Vivian, and myself – from North American obesity to the war

Homelessness implies the lack of an interior architectural imprint. Not necessarily desolate and poverty-stricken, a homeless person maintains a relationship with exteriors — walls, surfaces, and façades. As a literal architectural imprint, Ana Rewakowicz's inflatable room upset the negotiated space of Galt Gardens. The imprint of the walls with their wood moldings, the ornamental detailing of the light fixture, and the grain of the hardwood floors formed a pliable skin, both revealing and distorting the imprint of a solid, urban interior space. The architectural imprint is both utopian modernism and Victorian romanticism; both elegant chandelier and shaded lamp; it is nauseous yellow wallpaper and painted hardwood floor; claustrophobic, enticing, even erotic. Metaphorically and literally distorted, the structure becomes enigmatic – it is both a home and a signifier of a house. It forms an interior space, but inevitably will deflate. It is the imprint of an urban apartment and a tent for a nomadic woman. It is pliable, flexible, and easily transported, but would one call it home?

Pliability, flexibility, elasticity — constantly rearranging to form an enigmatic space — might save us when negotiation fails. □

