

No Place Like Home?

In Medieval England it was against the law to be at large without patronage of some kind, or any visible means of support – one had to belong, whether to the village, to the Church, or to the Lord of the Manor, and freedom to roam was simply not an option. In stark contrast, in the second part of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, George Orwell describes travelling around England in the company of tramps and down-and-outs, obliged under the vagrancy laws of the time to keep walking from place to place (actually, from one 'spike', or casual ward, to another). Different circumstances to fundamentally the same principle; the necessity always to have purpose, or to give the impression that one has somewhere to be.

Similar sentiments certainly exist today. Periodically, and usually in the build-up to some sporting or other international event, a city will try and disperse its less picturesque citizens to the edges, out of sight of those it is trying to impress. The Australian Satirical TV show *The Chasers* memorably dealt with Melbourne's preparations for the Commonwealth games by approaching suburban residents and asking them to take in homeless people for the duration of the games¹. Occasionally too, one encounters a politician, usually to the right of the political spectrum and generally low-ranking, who will make some controversial call to chase 'homeless' people off the streets. For the most part such characters recede into the background, rather more quickly than the homeless people they so object to. In these examples too you will notice that the 'homeless' are treated as a generic group, defined by their lack of a postal address, the sins of one conferrable to all.

There is a long tradition of artists occupying unwanted or redundant spaces, sometimes alongside, but often in direct competition and as a deterrent to vagrants and squatters. Maybe artists are the lesser evil in the eyes of speculators and landlords. The curatorial group Cuckoo has, for the last few years, staged shows in 'gap' spaces, spaces either between uses or within established art venues, between shows. Move in, set up, stay awhile, and then clear out. And recession economies in particular seem to favour a culture based around short-let spaces. Renew Newcastle, a scheme started by Marcus Westbury in Newcastle, NSW, works on this very principle, aiming to establish artists and art venues in derelict buildings as a means to generate activity in the city centre.

Sleepinginairports.com is a website devoted to those attempting to save money on their travels by, as the title suggests, staying in various airport terminals overnight (but not always successfully sleeping). This activity is widespread enough to have spawned the website and a small but dedicated community of 'airport sleepers' who share jokes, anecdotes and photographs. On the whole it presents a sanitized, middle class approach to sleeping rough (airports are graded on the quality of their facilities and amenability to those crashing-out there, and the presence of 'homeless people' is certainly a demerit in the eyes of the contributors).

Nonetheless the concerns the site raises about staving off over-zealous security staff or intrusive cleaners are not so different to those whose nights in the open are a more substantial part of their lives, and whose foes more dangerous: Should one stay in view or be concealed? Both leave one vulnerable to different nuisances and dangers. What's the best way to sleep on a bench with armrests? Dozens of solutions. Where's the warmest/ driest/ best lit corner? Ditto. The key issues that emerge throughout, it seems, are not to be seen or to remain in the same place for long. Staying one step ahead and deflecting attention, because being *outside*, literally and metaphorically, leaves one open to abuse from

¹ The Chaser's War on Everything, Season 1, episode 5.

both sides of the law.