

**Homeless
Vehicle Project**
with David Lurie
(1988–89)

I was not insane when they picked me up, I was homeless.

—Joyce Brown, homeless person forcibly hospitalized by the New York City government¹

During the winter of 1987–88, an estimated 70,000 people were homeless in New York City.² A large portion of this population is made up of homeless individuals. Unlike families with children, homeless individuals are not given priority for placement in the city's transitional housing facilities or in welfare hotel rooms. Instead, the city government offers space to the single homeless in its growing system of dormitory shelters.

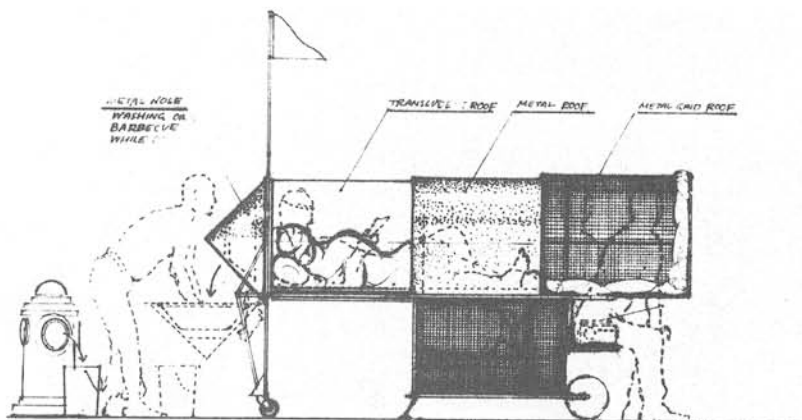
Most city-run shelters—though they provide food and respite from the elements—are dangerous and unfriendly places that impose a dehumanizing, even prisonlike, regimentation on residents. Guards routinely treat clients as inmates, allegedly denying them food for the violation of rules. Some shelter residents are bused from place to place for food, showers, and sleep. Charges of violence by shelter security guards and clients are common.

According to the mayor of New York City, a homeless person who chooses to live on the street rather than accept placement in a shelter during the cold of winter is, by definition, to be suspected of mental illness. But given the city's official response to the problem of homeless individuals, it is not surprising that many have made a rational choice to live on the streets.

Though a significant proportion of homeless individuals are the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, a growing majority of them are not. Furthermore, both the sane and insane homeless share the same immediate, life-threatening condition: they have no permanent shelter and no safe place to go.

Their alternative has been to develop a means of survival on the streets of New York City. The nomadic homeless people we all observe and encounter on the streets have been compelled to develop a series of strategies for self-sufficiency under constantly changing—and always threatening—circumstances. Problems of garnering food, keeping warm, remaining safe from personal harm and relatively undisturbed during sleep all present challenges that are never perfectly resolved.

The fact that people are compelled to live on the streets is unacceptable. But failing to recognize the reality of these people's situation or holding up the fact of their living on the streets as proof of their universal insanity is a morally and factually untenable position. Advocacy for permanent, safe, and dignified shelter for all people is essential—and is being pursued. But a recognition that all individuals need and deserve permanent housing must also lead to an



examination of the immediate needs of homeless people. Given the failure of the city's shelter system, what can we do for individuals struggling for self-sufficiency on the streets today?

Our proposed vehicle is designed to play a role in filling a dangerous gap in shelter needs. It seeks to be of use to the significant number of individuals who will, for the foreseeable future, continue to be compelled to live a nomadic life in the urban environment. Rather than an ideal shelter, the vehicle is designed with attention to the specific limitations and compromises imposed by urban nomadic existence. Though it cannot appropriately be called a home, the vehicle is a potential means for ameliorating the conditions of life for people surviving under trying circumstances.

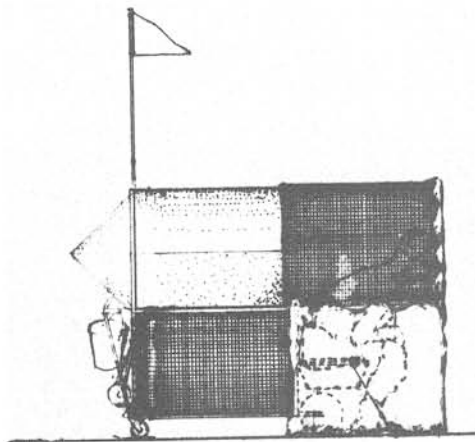
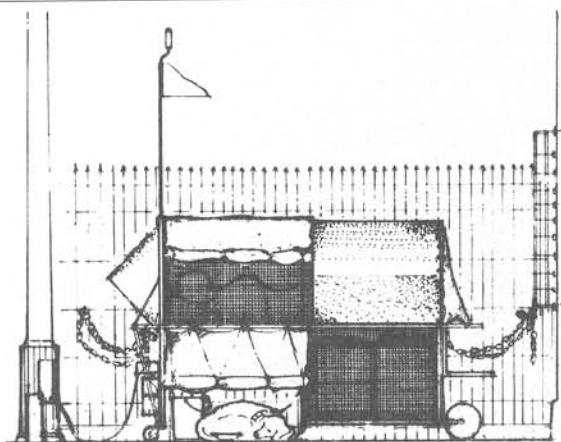
When I came to New York I was struck by the occasional form lying on the street, with people standing over it as if it wasn't there.

—John Bowers, *New York Times*³

Although in our daily encounters with homeless people we are aware of their status as refugees, we generally fail to recognize that they are refugees from the transformation of the city itself. The redesign of city parks to allow for better surveillance and easier removal of homeless people signifies an institutional ignorance of the fact that the destruction and renovation of entire neighborhoods has left no place for these people to go.⁴ We are reluctant to discern the relationship between the physical transformation of the city—through real-estate development and economic displacement—and the creation of homelessness. An ABC official stated that his company is hesitant to construct a public plaza next to its midtown headquarters because it does not want to see a “tent city for the homeless here.”⁵ But with or without a plaza, the homeless will not disappear.

Homeless people's marginalization is directly tied to the refusal of other city residents to recognize them as fellow urban citizens. The dominant notion of the homeless as mere objects largely explains why we allow people to live and die on our streets without doing much to help them.

In a television forum, columnist George Will argued that the presence of ragged masses camped out in front of midtown New York office buildings was an infringement of the legitimate rights of executives working there. In Will's view, dodging the bodies of homeless people and enduring their incessant demands for small change is an unnecessary addition to the already stressful lives

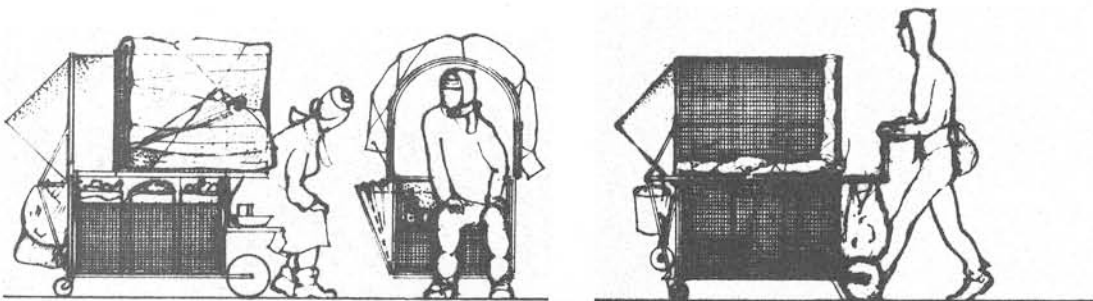


of businessmen.⁶ In the activity of moving through the city, described by Walter Benjamin as a "series of shocks and collisions," the homeless are apprehended as immobile barriers to travel. This description, from a recent *New York Times* article, of seasoned commuters' strategies for dealing with their daily encounters with homeless people in the Port Authority bus terminal is typical: they block out recognition by "locking their eyes forward" and "striding purposefully" toward the exits. The homeless are seen as identity-free objects that must be negotiated rather than recognized. The article describes acknowledgment of the presence of the homeless as a sign of inexperience, a trap that only temporary visitors to the city fall into: "They stop and stare, eyes wide open to the unfamiliar, raw suffering."⁷

Of course, the dramatic image of the homeless as faceless, rag-encased bundles signifies an elision of these peoples' actual modes of survival. Though we encounter the homeless as figures anchored to a grate or bench or asleep in the subway as we rush to work, surviving on the streets of New York is actually dominated by the constant necessity for movement, often in response to the actions of authorities. In recreation areas such as Tompkins Square and Riverside Park, uniformed police officers are routinely deployed to remove homeless people. All of Grand Central Station and portions of the Port Authority bus terminal are closed to homeless residents during the night. *Survival, therefore, compels mobility.* Especially for those who live entirely outside of the shelter system, the ability to travel from place to place with one's personal belongings in a swift and efficient manner is a key to functioning successfully in the city.

Through the use of adapted, appropriated vehicles, some homeless individuals have managed to develop a means of economic sustenance in the city. These people, known as "scavengers," spend their days collecting, sorting, and returning cans to supermarkets in return for the five-cent deposit. Shopping and postal carts and other wheeled vehicles are used for collecting and transporting cans and bottles during the day and for storage of collected materials during the night. Crowds of homeless redeemers outside of supermarkets have become commonplace since the Bottle Bill went into effect in 1983.

In their familiar position of supplication and helplessness, homeless individuals do not stake a claim to the territory that has been taken from them. They are reduced to mere observers of the remaking of their neighborhoods for others. Their homelessness appears as a natural condition, the cause is dissociated from its consequence, and the status of the homeless as legitimate members of the urban community is unrecognized.



The activities of scavengers and the growing numbers of what one reporter described as their "gaily decorated" shopping carts have played a role in altering the public perception of homeless individuals. Their visibly purposive movement through the city gives them an identity as actors in the urban space. Since scavengers are mobile, they cannot be walked away from or easily dismissed as silent nonpersons. Where the immobile figure's status seems provisional and ambiguous, the scavenger stakes a claim to space in the city and indicates his or her membership in the urban community.

The shelter vehicle attempts to function usefully in the context of New York City street life. Therefore, its point of departure is the strategy of survival that urban nomads presently utilize. Through discussions with scavengers, we developed a proposal for a vehicle to be used both for personal shelter and can and bottle transportation and storage. An earlier design was shown to potential users and modified according to their criticisms and suggestions. Since the design developed through reference to the needs of a specific group of homeless people, all of whom are tall, male, and physically strong, it is possible that it may not be appropriate for other homeless people. As the project develops, the needs and interests of other groups of potential users must be addressed, particularly those of homeless women. We have yet to speak with any homeless women and learn of their particular strategies for survival. Though certain features of the vehicle as it is presently designed, such as a possible built-in toilet, might be of use to homeless women, discussions with them will be necessary to develop a design responsive to their needs.

An initial proposal, the project is not put forward as a finished product, ready for use on the streets. Rather, it is conceived as a starting point for further collaboration between skilled designers and potential users. Both parties will have to play roles in the design and production of future versions of the vehicle, with continued adaptations in the design made in response to the survival needs of users and additional strategies devised by designers. Though such a collaborative relationship may sound unlikely or even impossible, it is the key to the project's success. Only through such cooperation can the vehicle function usefully. Direct participation of users in the construction of the vehicle is the key to developing a vehicle that belongs to its users, rather than merely being appropriated by them.

A false notion of the homeless as individuals functioning in isolation from the urban community and from each other contributes to their current status as exiles in their own city. We hope the vehicle will aid in making visible and strengthening the modes of cooperation and interdependence that now exist in



the homeless population. The possibility of grouping, even linking, the vehicles together could be explored.

The signifying function of the vehicle is as important as its strictly utilitarian purpose. Building upon the existing image of the scavenger as an autonomous, active individual, the vehicle attempts to function as a visual analogue to everyday objects of consumption and merchandising (such as food vendor carts) and to create a bridge of empathy between homeless individuals and observers. The use of a vehicle fashioned specially for their collection activities makes visible the fact that scavengers, like other urban citizens, are working for their subsistence.

The goal of the vehicle project is, therefore, twofold: to fulfill the need of homeless people for a means of transportation and shelter, and to aid in creating a legitimized status for its users in the community of the city.

The prototype vehicle bears a resemblance to a weapon. In our view, the movements of carts through New York City are acts of resistance, opposing the continuing ruination of an urban community that excludes thousands of people from even the most meager means of life. Though the transformation of the city, which has compelled so many people to survive through collection of its detritus, is an outrage, we must all be forced to recognize the value and legitimacy of their daily work.

Since its first presentation at the Clocktower in January 1988, the Homeless Vehicle underwent preliminary tests on the streets of New York City. The working model was discussed with scavengers and passersby. Drawings and documentary material were shown to architects, artists, urban geographers, social workers, activists, and journalists. These tests and discussions resulted in many practical suggestions, critical comments, new concerns and ideas. New developments in urban politics, such as the Koch administration's construction of floating shelters for the homeless and the confiscation of homeless people's belongings and destruction of their habitat in City Hall Park, as well as resistance to the curfew and the related antigentrification riot in Tompkins Square, have intensified the gravity of the situation for which the vehicle was intended, requiring additions to and reinforcements of its functional and symbolic program. These include the following:

Mobility:

- A simple suspension system, larger wheels, and other adjustments to facilitate increased maneuverability over curbs, potholes, and steps.

Safety:

- A simple brake system both for slopes and for parking while resting or sleeping.
- An emergency escape system in case of fire or attack.
- A lock and alarm system to protect collected goods and personal property.
- Rearview mirrors and emergency signals to protect against traffic.

Variants:

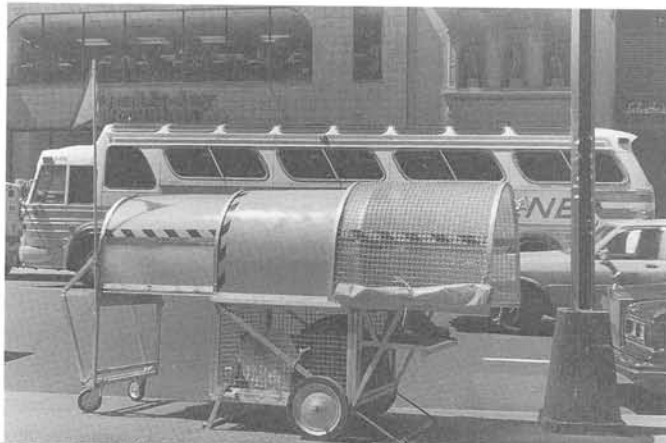
- Versions of the vehicle responding to the needs of various users, in particular those of women scavengers.
- Transformation of the vehicle into a vendor's cart for selling found goods, such as clothing, magazines, etc.
- Assembling vehicles in groups as collective habitats or defensive encampments against police harassment.

Notes

1. Quoted by Josh Barbanel, *New York Times*, January 19, 1988.
2. Coalition for the Homeless estimate, reported in *New York Newsday*, January 4, 1988.
3. *New York Times*, April 4, 1987.
4. See Rosalyn Deutsche, "Krzysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Projection and the Site of 'Urban Revitalization,'" *October*, no. 38 (Fall 1986), pp. 63–99.
5. Quoted by Paul Goldberger, *New York Times*, January 17, 1988.
6. "David Brinkley Report," ABC-TV, ca. January 1986.
7. Jane Gross, *New York Times*, November 9, 1987.

Originally published by the authors as a photocopied brochure distributed during the exhibition *Public Image: Homeless Projects by Krzysztof Wodiczko and Denis Adams* (New York: The Clocktower, 1988); reprinted as "Homeless Vehicle Project," *October* (New York), no. 47 (Winter 1988), pp. 53–67.

In 1988 and 1989 four variants of the *Homeless Vehicle*, differing in the materials with which they were constructed and resulting in various technical improvements, were tested, used, and publicly presented in the following places: Variant 1 in City Hall Park and the parks across from the Criminal Court and the Municipal Building (Manhattan); Variant 2 in Tompkins Square Park and the surrounding area, Wall Street, and the area around Battery Park (Manhattan); Variant 3 in Central Park, Grand Army Plaza, Fifth Avenue, across from Trump Tower, and Battery Park City (all Manhattan), and in Greenpoint Park (Brooklyn); Variant 4 in Washington Square Park and the surrounding area and the area around Broadway-Lafayette (Manhattan), and in Dilworth Plaza, Rittenhouse Square, the area around the Liberty Bell, the area around City Hall, and the National Temple Recycling Center (all in Philadelphia). Those who tested and used them include Robert of "Dinkinsville," New York; Allan Benjamin, Oscar, Victor, and Daniel of Tompkins Square Park, New York; and Vanessa Brown, John Alston, and Vernon Wilson of Philadelphia.





**Conversations
about a Project
for a Homeless
Vehicle** (1988)

Wodiczko: Now, don't laugh, because after what you told me last time . . . I feel that the basket part designed for collecting cans is not that good, but the rest. . . .

Oscar: It's all right, man.

Wodiczko: What you see here is the traveling position. That means that the inner shell, which you don't see, is inside of the external shell. You see, this is like a wedge of cheese, or a slice of pizza, and there is another one inside, so right now the space is half. . . .

Oscar: It's empty.

Wodiczko: No, you can use it as a locker, for personal belongings, when you travel. Also, for a mattress and maybe a sleeping bag. And . . . this is the part that should be redesigned, after what you told me.

Oscar: This would be the container where the bottles are kept?

Wodiczko: Yes, and other parts—external parts—can be designed to hold bags and attach other things to it. What you see here is a relatively large wheel, something you don't have on shopping carts. The wheels would have to be smaller if they are . . .

Oscar: . . . to be stable.

Wodiczko: Yes, and the front wheels would also have to twist. To make it cheaply, they would have to be smaller, just to keep that level.

Oscar: To keep the balance.

Wodiczko: Yes. I already rejected the additional door because it's too complicated. There would be enough space here, on this side, for a door, so you could actually enter from the side, and then it would be protected from rain and snow.

Oscar: Right. I could go for that.



Wodiczko: This is a little shorter and narrower than a standard bed, because we don't want to make it too large.

Oscar: Right, you've got to be able to keep it consumption size. If you make it too bulky, the person operating it will have a lot of problems behind it.

Wodiczko: Meaning its weight?

Oscar: Not the weight, but police, traffic, people in general.

Wodiczko: But folded, this shape is the minimum size, because the length of the bed, that is, the length of the vehicle unfolded, determines its height, but that's also a good height for sitting up.

Oscar: Right. So why did you say I would laugh at this? I think you have a very good idea. The size will be appropriate, a cabinet with a shell of itself that can hold a person's belongings, his personal items, his money, so I don't see anything so ill-informed about that. This doesn't have to be a complicated matter, because it can be cheaply made. Traffic won't be a pain in the neck, the police won't hassle you about having such a long vehicle. You can crawl inside, you can sit up, you can lie down, you can keep your personal belongings. The only complication that you might run into is that you have to make it big enough for collection. The minimum weight that people take is ten cases. You have to be able to hold, say, a least 500 bottles and cans . . .

Wodiczko: 500?

Oscar: 240 is ten cases, so you double 240, you get 480, so 500 bottles and cans. Your weight comes from the bottles, not from cans or plastics. A good time to collect is summertime, a very beautiful time, when you have festivals, parades, and so much activity. The weather's nice, there's lots of outdoor drinking—restaurants, clubs, what have you.

Wodiczko: So do you think that this will be enough space? When I look at your vehicle, I . . . Would it be necessary to design separate areas for bottles?

Oscar: That's what I do. I keep the glass away from the cans. The reason that separate compartments are good is that when I go to the grocery store, or to the distributor, whoever's going to take my bottles and cans, it's easier and faster. You want the simplest way to unload your cart, get your money, get everything processed, get out, because as soon as you turn that first corner, there's another can. I could circle this park three times and come up with shit every time. I only work specific little areas. I don't have to work too far. I can fill up one cart in one block.

Wodiczko: Where do you take the cans once you've filled up the cart? What's the nearest place from here, for instance?

Oscar: Oh, wow, it's a long way.

Wodiczko: That's why you've got to do 500 cans?

Oscar: Right, then it's worth it. You've got to take a walk, take the stuff out, box it up, then possibly stand in line. Somewhere along the line, we can talk about an idea I have. I'd like to open up a redemption center. There's a few ideas I have to make life easier for the bottle/can man.

Wodiczko: If you were to imagine yourself having this vehicle, how would you use it?

Oscar: All right, this is the front of the vehicle. This right here is the opening of the front, right? This is where I'd put my bottles; you get more bottles than anything else.

Wodiczko: And plastic bags on top of it?

Oscar: No. If possible, cans and plastics, but, you see, you have beer cans, tall and small, tall cans, little cans, soda cans, so you want to keep your soda cans with other soda cans, tall cans with tall cans, little cans with little cans, glass with glass, beer bottles with beer bottles.

Wodiczko: So plastic bags are good?



Oscar: Plastic bags are beautiful. Unless you have to travel a long way, like I've got to do tonight.

Wodiczko: What about the other part of the vehicle, about using it as a home? As a place to sleep?

Oscar: It's a good idea. It's a bad idea. My product's on top, I'm underneath. Now I've got to think about thieves.

Wodiczko: But won't you have sold those cans?

Oscar: No, man, there's no way in hell you can have an empty cart. Once you start collecting, there's a can lying on every street that you walk down. I can empty the whole cart right now, and as soon as I empty it, there'll be a can right there. So you gonna dump it? Of course, you're gonna take it.

Wodiczko: So you want to have all this above you? or below you?

Oscar: Victor had a good idea. If you could possibly come up with an idea for a sealtight.

Wodiczko: You could use a tarp.

Oscar: No, you need something to seal it.

Wodiczko: But you don't need to waterproof cans.

Oscar: Yes you do, because when you take them to the store, if they're all wet—you've got to think about the weather, too—you put them in a box, and the box will fall apart, and you can lose everything right there.

Wodiczko: Look at this drawing over here. It will give you a sense of proportion. You can sit up inside, because this is the whole length of the body when you sit up.

Victor: Why do you want to sit over here?



Wodiczko: Sit over here? No, sit inside.

Victor: And lie down?

Wodiczko: Yes, but if you're lying down, you might want to sit up, too.

Victor: Make another drawing. Like I told you before, the cart a little higher than this, two feet longer than this, have a top over here that you can open and close, and still have this space for somebody to lie down and stay out of the wind and cold. If people lie down here with this closed, ain't nobody going to steal anything or come around bothering anybody.

Wodiczko: So you think all those bottles and cans could be stored above you?

Victor: Let's say you make it high like this and this longer and this a little wider—a lot of cans will go in there. You can be out in the park and sleep in the park, and that will have a top to close it.

Wodiczko: But, you see, it won't be able to be as long as this one, because you cannot make this the length of the body or the vehicle will be too long. I already made some drawings similar to what you are saying, but I rejected them because it appeared to be too long to be maneuverable in the city, and, as Oscar said, it looked to be unacceptable for the police and the traffic.

Victor: That's nothing. I mean, we're not talking about building a car.

Wodiczko: But for him—you see, now there are two different approaches. He is interested in the collecting part, and you are interested in the sleeping part. Now we have the option of combining the part for bottles and cans with the sleeping part below. What he is saying is that it doesn't have to be the entire length of the body because you can sleep with legs bent. So that means it could be shorter, and then all the storage area could be above and closed with a plastic seal.

Oscar: Right, not only is there protection from the wind, but it's theft-proof. The most important thing is that you've got to think about when you're underneath, and somebody attacks you.

Wodiczko: I'll show you a drawing. Remember, you mentioned a vehicle . . .

Daniel: Yeah, the U.S. Postal vehicle.

Wodiczko: Do you think this is a good amount of space for collecting cans and bottles?

Daniel: Sure, but instead of carrying those bags to the supermarket, the supermarket should have a place where you could go with the postal cart, because the bottles are too heavy for the bags, so you could put them in the postal cart.

Wodiczko: I was thinking about combining the function of collecting bottles with an emergency place to sleep.

Daniel: Yeah, but that's too small for a human being to fit in, and it's also good if you sleep in there without the bottles, because it's more protected from the wind.

Wodiczko: I'm designing it in order to produce it, and to establish a workshop with interested people, like maybe you and Oscar. We could start making these vehicles in the fall or the spring, or anytime.

Daniel: Oh, whenever you're ready, man, you let me know. I'll make you all the best I can, as long as you've got the wheels.

Wodiczko: What about the temperature? What is the best material to use?

Daniel: Insulation, like cotton and wood and aluminum, insulation.

Wodiczko: All of those panels folded around the cart could form some kind of little building on top. Oscar told me that there is no need to have the full length of the body, because you can bend your legs a little bit when you sleep.

Daniel: Some people don't feel comfortable like that, so you've got to build it the full size of a person.

Wodiczko: That means that I will have to unfold it a little more to create a longer . . . So you would suggest a special insulation, using two aluminum sheets and maybe something in between?

Daniel: They call that expanded insulation, and it's very good, because it'll take the wind.

Wodiczko: So you think with this you will survive most of the winter?

Daniel: You'll survive, but you're going to have to attach yourself, you're going to have to have two empty screws here for the key chain. That way, if the wind is too strong, it won't take you away.

Wodiczko: So you attach it to a fence or something?

Daniel: Yeah, the fence or pole or something, you know, because otherwise you'll go bump bump bump, and it's no good.

Wodiczko: So I'll have to design this part to make it a little longer. I can't have this cart as long as a human body. It would be too long.

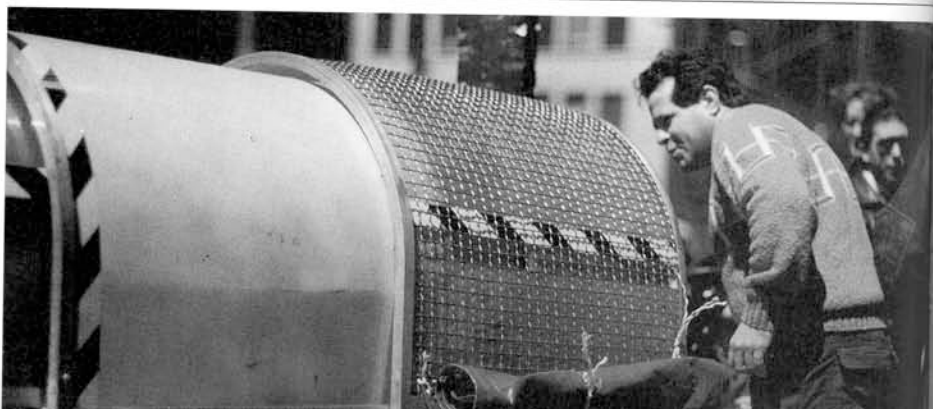
Daniel: That's what I'm trying to tell you. If you have it this size, it's okay, a person can fit in there, but, you know, it's gonna have to be on top, so they have room to stretch out.

Wodiczko: But, still, a person is longer than that, but you could bend the legs a little bit.

Daniel: Right, and fit inside, I've done it, too. But I'm saying that other people don't sleep the same way.

Wodiczko: So you have to have other parts that unfold to compensate for the difference.

Daniel: You could expand this part just a little more.



Wodiczko: I'll do that, I like the idea. What would be the best material for the bottom part?

Daniel: Plywood, because when you put in the boxes of bottles, they won't slide back and forth.

Wodiczko: But when you replace this canvas here with plywood, you'll be much heavier.

Daniel: The problem is you can't make it heavier than what it is, because if you're going to build a cart that's too heavy to push, who the hell is going to push it?

Wodiczko: You mentioned fiberglass for the top?

Daniel: You know why? Because the roof you want to see.

Wodiczko: But a small hole is good to see out of.

Daniel: That's okay for some people. How would *you* do it?

Wodiczko: But I don't live outside.

Daniel: But I *do*. I know. You ever seen those snowcone carts? They have a big thing, all glass. That way, people can see what they're buying, like chocolate or vanilla.

Wodiczko: But you're not chocolate to be purchased, you are a person. Maybe you need some privacy.

Daniel: But I'm saying that what they use on top is glass. And for *you*, for your *safety*, for you to sleep.

Wodiczko: You're saying that it's better to be visible, to show that you're there, rather than to be hidden?

Daniel: Yes, that you're there, because what if someone comes along and turns you over? At least you could see that somebody's there. You gotta think of that, too, 'cause there's a lot of crazy motherfuckers around on the street, too.

Wodiczko: What about at night, an emergency light, to show you're there, because of garbage trucks?

Daniel: Yeah, 'cause they might take you and just put you in . . .

Wodiczko: Right, okay, this is very helpful.

Daniel: See, I gave you a lot of good ideas.

Originally recorded in Tompkins Square Park, New York City, and published as "Conversations on a Homeless Vehicle Project," *October* (New York), no. 47 (Winter 1988), pp. 68-75; reprinted in *File* (Toronto), no. 29 (1989). The conversants asked that their last names not be used.

