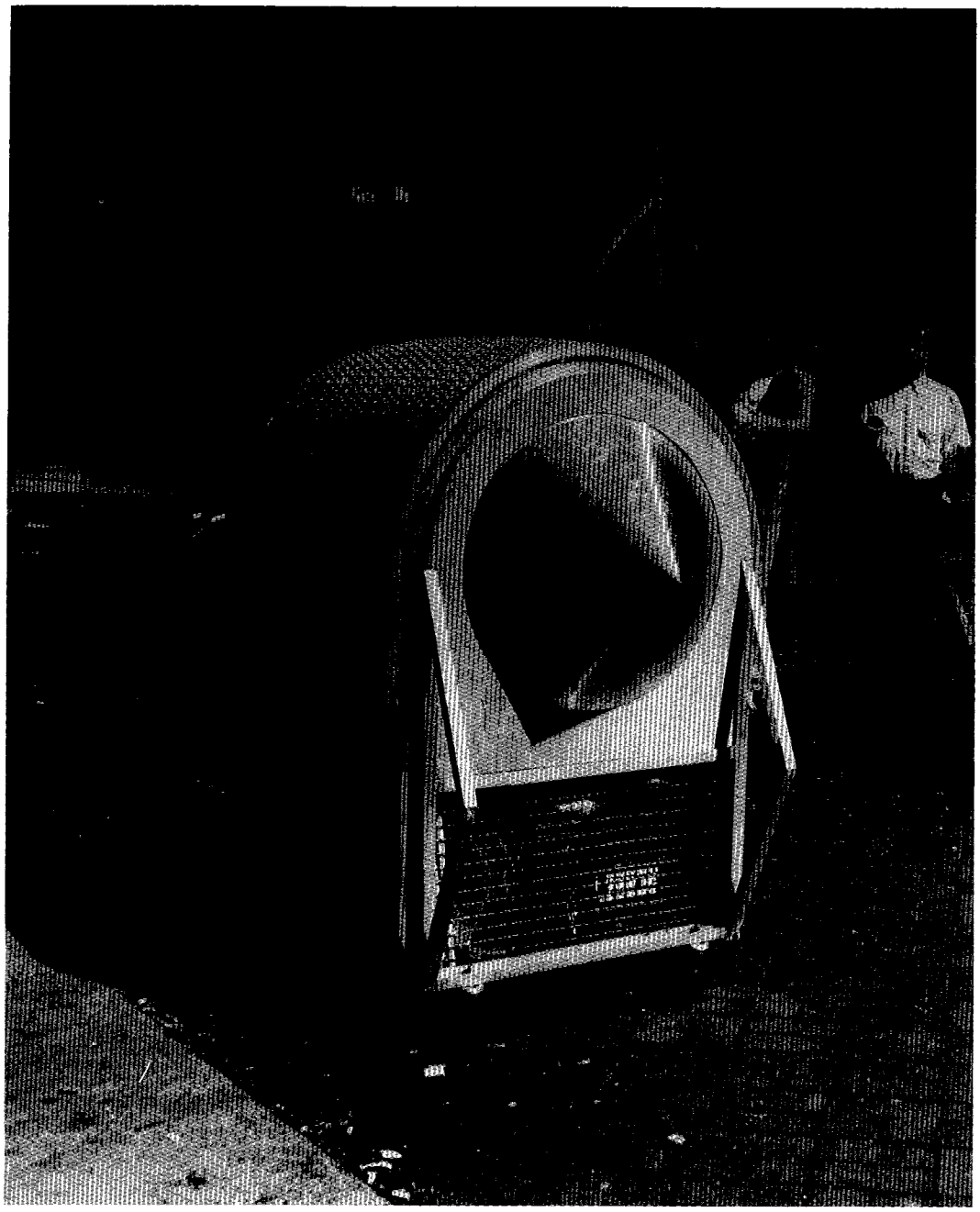

# A VEHICLE FOR THE URBAN NOMADS

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In *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx describes the home of the factory wage labourer as a "return to a cave dwelling...now contaminated with the pestilence of civilization." If labour power exemplifies the sophisticated development of human needs, it simultaneously reduces the factory worker to a condition of bestiality - poverty is, for Marx, the "putrefaction of man."

Factory labour in the 19th century exists within buildings - the factory and the tenement where the labourer returns each night - that have reduced the necessary means of living; "light, air, space, etc. - the simplest *animal* cleanliness - ceases to be a need for man." In other words, the worker has no right to a habitat or job nor has he (sic) a right to expect any minimal conditions of either. He occupies these places "only precariously" as both home and means of support can be withdrawn from him at anytime.

The contemporary situation, in which unskilled labourers are all but un-needed, signifies a fundamental shift in the situation described by Marx. For many, shelter and other means of subsistence are no longer available through the exchange of labour. In New York City, for instance, while factory labour remains an important segment of the economy, it is subject to a continual erosion. Concurrently, low income housing, which since the 19th century has been fairly readily available, is now rapidly disappearing.

In Marx's terms, the movement of estrangement has reached its epiphany. The capital produced through workers' own power has been deployed in such a way that the workers are no longer needed. A whole segment of the urban population is becoming, in economic terms, entirely superfluous. Now while the city may have removed the traces of the individuals who originally lived and worked in its buildings, the physical transformation has failed to remove the poor persons themselves. Homeless and jobless, they have nowhere to go, nowhere, that is, where they might literally disappear.

If, according to Marx, wage labour reduces individuals to the very condition of beasts, what are we to make of those who have even been excised from the work economy: without shelter or home, these people remain unrecognized as minimal citizens within civil society, even as they stubbornly refuse to remove themselves from our sight.

Borne of the desperate need for food and shelter, a new economy of exchange has developed within this new community of the homeless. With the passage of the bottle bill in New York in 1983, the collection and redemption of cans and bottles has now become a means of subsistence for a growing population of New Yorkers. The activity of redemption is demanding: the daily collection, sorting and returning of 500 cans and bottles (an extraordinary feat for all but the strongest and most fit individuals) yields just $25.

The re-cycling activity of the homeless follows from the insight that even if an object has been consigned to the garbage, it does not necessarily mean that its exchange value has been exhausted. Indeed, many homeless scavengers have extended their redemptive activities to include the collection and marketing of almost any type of found object (books, magazines, shoes, trinkets, etc.).

The incredible demands of their collection activities combined with the constant peril of attack and intimidation by the police and other authorities, have compelled homeless persons to adopt a highly mobile, nomadic form of survival. To wit, homeless persons have developed their own highly idiosyncratic types of vehicle - shopping and postal carts have proved to be the most reliable vehicles for modification - with which to transport their personal property and collect material for redemption.

The Homeless people in New York have today laid a stake in the way that the city is organised publically. Though locked out of the general wage labour economy, their visibility and engagement in the everyday life of the city is of obvious political significance: they make a public claim to the right to engage in work and repudiate any attempts to deny their legitimate claim to membership of the community of the city.

## II

The goal of the Homeless Vehicle Project is to develop strategies for ameliorating the conditions of homeless people. In this way it seeks to play a role in the atmosphere of crisis in the city, exposing the community's lack of and urgent need for permanent housing. If members of the urban community have now developed powerful and circuitous ways to avoid having to apprehend the daily lives of the city's homeless residents, then one of the strategies of the Homeless Vehicle Project is confrontation: to bring the plight of the homeless, their everyday existence, into the everyday lives of the 'non-homeless'. It is only perhaps when the homeless

are confrontationally recontexualised within the operational field of the 'recognised' residents and workers of the city, that the cognitive armour which enables us to resist apprehension of the condition of the homeless may be punctured.

The vehicle, as it is designed, is a skeleton. During use, collected objects may be attached to its metal frame to change the vehicles's appearance substantially. However, the vehicle is designed to be always recognisable - both by users and viewers - as a mechanism for persons and one that is appropriate to their everyday activities. Through the use of this machine, which will be identifiably their own, homeless scavengers will challenge the failure of the urban community at large to recognise their role in the city's network of exchange.

Carrying with increased speed and efficiency their scavenged detritus, the homeless will display to the city their conditions of survival openly and confrontationally. No longer relegated to the world of abused objects, the vehicles' users will claim a right for their work as well as an articulation of that right within the public space.

Vehicles will be configurated in a variety of different ways, some in reclining positions, others in travelling or resting positions. Sleeping, cooking, eating and even vending will be some of the essential activities that the vehicle will be used for. By linking together groups of vehicles in one particular place, the social character of homeless person's survival strategies will be exemplified. Together, vehicles will create a visible, cohesive community of homeless persons on the streets of the city. In addition, the linking together of vehicles will provide a line of armoured protection - much like the wagon formations of an earlier generation of american nomads - from the often dangerous encounters with authority and so called 'angry citizens'.

The missile-like form of the prototype illustrated here signifies the aggression implicit in the activities of homeless scavengers. The movement of the carts through the ever transforming city (a site of real estate speculation) with their attendant found materials (no longer garbage but representing a viable exchange value) is the sign of the homeless' refusal to be reduced to mere passive observers.

The vehicle was designed through discussions with a group of homeless persons and has been produced and tested in co-operation with its future users. It is not conceived of as a solution to the failure of the government to produce homes for the tens of thousands of persons who live and work on the streets of New York. Neither is this prototype likely to be useful to the majority of homeless individuals in the city. Rather the vehicle attempts to address the immediate, specific needs of a particular group of homeless people. One of the most pressing needs for some of them is to confront the city and its 'non-homeless' residents with the operational strategies that the former employ in order to survive.

*The following took part in the homeless vehicle project:*
*Francois Alacoque, Janusz Bakowski, Tom Finkelpearl, Jay Johnson, Kyong Park, Jagoda Przybylak, Heidi Schlatter, Rikkit Tirevanija, David Lurie and Leslie Sharpe.*

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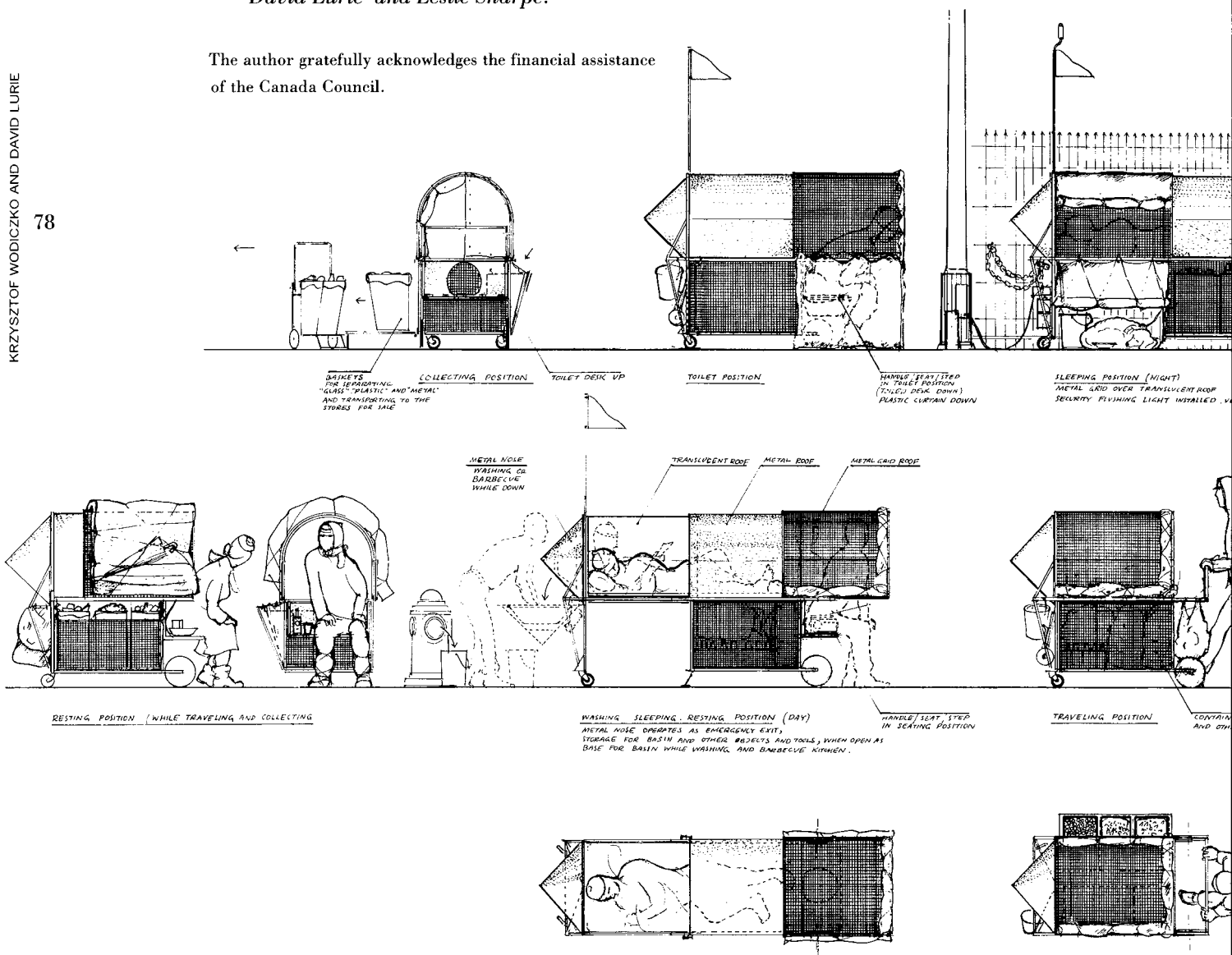

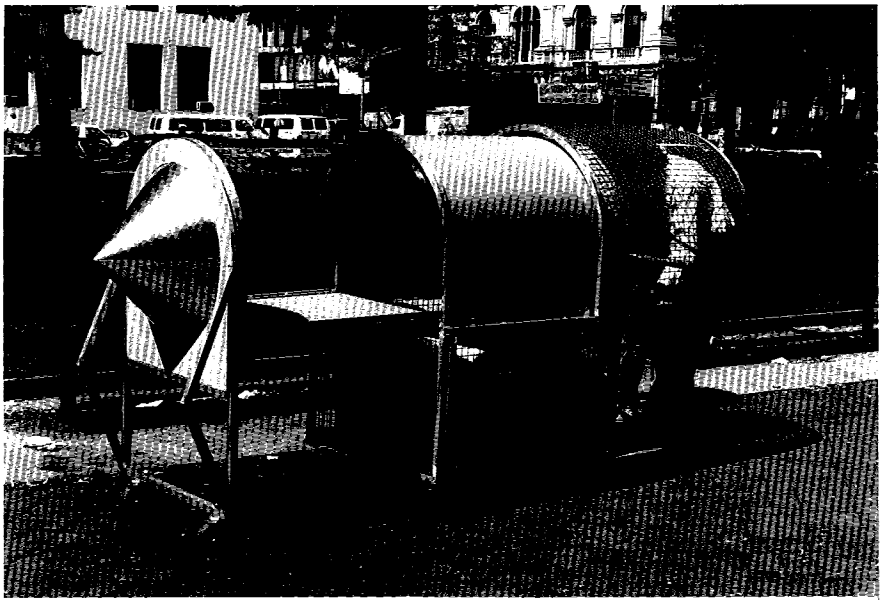

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