



The Chicago Compost Shelter



BY DAN PETERMAN

The Chicago Compost Shelter is a public installation of experimental architecture. The shelter is designed to stay warm throughout the entire winter by utilizing the heat produced by the decaying process of organic material.

The shelter consists of a Volkswagen van body, which has been buried in a large pile of compost. A small entranceway has been added along with skylights that allow natural light to illuminate the interior. The van itself, with seats removed, is large enough for a bed and some space-conscious furnishings. It comes equipped with ashtrays, a mirror, and armrests. If one cares to hook up a battery, there is a radio and a dome-light.

The compost used for the shelter has been collected as part of a project to recycle organic waste in Chicago by the Resource Center, a non-profit recycling organization. The leaves, grass, clippings, and horse manure will be turned into humus and sold to gardeners and commercial landscapers as a soil conditioner.

A profile of homeless in Chicago done by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless [in 1988] indicates that about 16% of Chicago's estimated 25,000 homeless generate income through the recycling of cans, glass, and paper. This dependence on recycling by the homeless has revealed itself in recent years through the construction of makeshift shelters in an abandoned lot next to the recycling center. These temporary homes in truck boxes or of scavenged lumber have emerged organically as a response to the compatible work structure which recycling provides.

A mixture of horse manure and wood shavings collected from the Chicago Police stables was used for constructing the Compost Shelter. While decomposing, this material reaches temperatures well in excess of 100 degrees Fahrenheit. It has maintained a temperature of over 75 degrees F inside the shelter through the months of January and February even while temperatures dropped below zero outside. When freshly collected, this mixture of wood shavings and manure emits an ammonia-like smell that disappears quickly after being exposed to fresh air. Visitors to the shelter have experienced no unpleasant odors.

far left top:
Exterior view of the
Compost Shelter
Photo, Dan Peterman

far left bottom:
Interior view of the
Compost Shelter
Photo collage, Dan
Peterman

Mixtures of leaves and grass with the proper moisture content produce similar results.

The Compost Shelter is located on Chicago's South Side at 71st and Dorchester. It is adjacent to a recycling yard run by the Resource Center that attracts a steady stream of customers. Twenty-five to 30 people, traveling by foot, arrive each day throughout the winter. Of these, many appear to live difficult lives on the streets or perhaps squatting in abandoned buildings.

For an example of the organic architecture of events, we have the Resource Center itself. Roads, pathways, piles, and arrangements of materials all develop as needed, in response to a plan that begins arbitrarily and evolves through a cybernetic structure.

The idea of the compost shelter evolved the same way. The buses were there, the compost pile was there, and the use of truck-bodies as winter shelter was already established nearby, as was the danger and difficulty of heating them with available materials. Composting manure generates heat. As the facts shuffle and combine, so do the materials.

With the shelter at its center, we get a sense of the compost pile as a living thing. It has a lifespan that comes to equal the winter for which it is needed. The heat it generates equals, in a sense, life. At the end of the cycle it becomes inert, and dies. This hot/cold cycle reverses the calendar of the seasons, opening up that larger cycle.

The buses at the Center form a sort of social unit of their own. There are perhaps 14 of them, of which about half work at any given time. They are in a constant process of breakdown and recycling of parts; a constant social exchange, forming a sort of social whole in defiance of the obsolescence, entropy, overload, and rust that have doomed them.

Historically these shelters have become victims of city bulldozers. Some have burned as a result of heating with open fires. The Compost Shelter is a continuation of this architectural process, with an emphasis on understanding local social patterns and resources.

Aside from its functional aspects, the Compost Shelter adds an element of irony. The same profile of homelessness goes on to state that, as to interpersonal difficulties, the street people inter-

viewed indicated that the police are one of the top causes of "hassles." The Compost Shelter, heated by manure from police horses creates a fragile network of interdependence between the police and the homeless recyclers. The manure is a city resource being applied to those most in need.

An appropriate accessory for the Compost Shelter would be the installation of a composting toilet for human wastes. A number of designs are available.

The authority of the policeman on horseback contrasts with the position of the collector/squatter. The compost shelter proposes a kind of symbiotic relationship between these two, one that is not normally perceived to exist. The shelter proposes itself as an image of the fragile network of interdependency that already and always exists between insiders and outsiders, the center and the margin. The Chicago Mounted Patrol performs mostly duties of crowd control in dense traffic situations. The horseman sits above the crowd as a symbol of order and authority. His horse is both the vehicle of that authority and a generator of useful manure. The policeman surveys the crowd. Within the crowd is the collector who surveys the ground looking for bottles and cans. The policeman is at the center, the collector at the margin. All of these relationships return and are recycled by the Compost Shelter. Center and margin are reversed and thereby disclosed.

Mounted police officer,
Chicago
Photo, Dan Peterman



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