A 90 point thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design Innovation

The Culture of Couch Surfing Amongst Students:

An investigation that reflects on the experiences of homelessness for tertiary students within a contemporary and challenging lifestyle.

By Denzel De Ruysscher

Victoria University of Wellington
2018
Writing this thesis was one of the most challenging obstacles I've had to overcome so far and if it wasn't for the following people I don't think I would've made it over the finish line.

First and foremost, the biggest thank you to my supervisor Nan O'Sullivan for keeping me in line and keeping me sane when I was starting to turn insane, without the weekly meetings and your wisdom I don’t think I would’ve gotten anything done.

Going to throw in the classic thank you to mum and dad for the constant support and love and asking how the thesis going and me giving the same old answer “it’s going alright”.

Massive thanks to all the participants that chose to participate in the research, from the students that answered the survey, to the lovely people that showed up to the workshop and uttermost to the student couch surfers themselves as without all of you there wouldn’t be much of a thesis to begin with.

Now for the more informal acknowledgements:

Massive love to my homie Will for keeping me company through all the coffee missions, lunch takeouts and most recently dinner takeouts, don’t even want to think how much money we spent on food throughout the thesis.

Same goes to Katie, Ethan, Ashleigh, Issy, Sophia and the rest of the design clique, wouldn’t have gotten far without the constant rants, critiques, nights outs and most recently the late nights at uni, wouldn’t have asked for any other design team to go through the thesis struggle with.

Much love to all my other friends and workmates outside of university for making sure I just got the right amount of procrastination each week so this thesis would be finished in the final hours of the deadline.

Last but not least, to the family dog Matu who sadly passed away during the duration of this thesis, this ones for you.

Thank you all and Love you all

Denzel.
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores ‘couch surfing’ as it becomes more prevalent within the tertiary student experience. In recent years, there has been a significant decline in the availability of housing in all major cities in New Zealand. Rental accommodations been particularly hard hit with the number of properties available for occupation under increasing demand. Despite this shortage universities have continued to expand, offering an increased number of positions to students. This dichotomy has impacted university students looking for ‘affordable accommodation.’ This has led to a recent surge in students undertaking studies without fixed abodes for either short time periods or in some cases for the duration of the university trimesters or year, commonly referred to as ‘student homelessness.’ The students are faced with a new reality; a reality of relying on short term peer support for accommodation, known as couch-surfing. This research considers the impact of accommodation uncertainty within the tertiary student experience and specifically asks what impact the current global phenomenon of couch surfing is having on either alleviation or amplification of the physical and/or emotional stresses and strains associated with attending university. This study interviews students who have experienced uncertainty around their accommodation arrangements and as a result have engaged in couch surfing practices. The aim of this study is to gain a holistic overview of the impact this experience of uncertainty and temporary accommodation has on a student’s life and uses photography as a tool within human-centred and participatory design approaches to assist in the expression and interpretation of the couch surfing experience during university study.

At the outset, more portrait photography approaches such as model headshots are used to illustrate the student couch surfer and their accommodation experience and surroundings with the purpose of capturing the couch surfers in the moment in mind. Following on from this the study introduces the ethnographic method of Photovoice and asks the couch surfing student to record their own accommodation experience through the taking of more self-focused photos that include their surroundings and expressions of the experience. As a final experience, a workshop was designed and facilitated to synergise the student voice on the experiences of couch surfing. This experience was also documented through photography.

The culmination of these research approaches is a visual output in the form of a photobook that will showcase the overall narrative of the thesis. The main objective of the thesis and visual output is to explore the lifestyle and experiences of student couch surfers and to visually amplify a collective student voice that speaks to the emergent and unique phenomenon of couch surfing, that has had an impact on their university experience.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures // 9

What Motivated this Investigation // 11

0. Introduction // 13

1. Definitions of Homelessness // 21

2. Literature Review // 27
   2.1 Introduction // 29
   2.2 Relevance of Couch Surfing in Today’s Society // 30
   2.3 Couch Surfing Culture Amongst Travelers // 31
   2.4 Couch Surfing Amongst Students // 32
   2.5 Students as a Marginalized Class // 33
   2.6 What Role can Design Play in this Discussion // 34
   2.7 Chapter Summary // 35

3. Research Methodologies // 37
   3.1 Introduction // 39
   3.2 Semi-Formal Interviews // 41
   3.3 Human-Centred Research – Participatory Methods // 42
   3.4 Workshop // 43
   3.5 Chapter Summary // 44

4. Perceptions of Couch Surfing // 45
   4.1 The Background of Couch Surfing // 47
   4.2 The Benefits of Couch Surfing // 48
   4.3 The Impact of Couch Surfing on Temporary Accommodation and the Media // 49
   4.4 The Impact Overseas // 52
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Couch surfers in a one room Brooklyn apartment (Malte Jaeger, 2015) / / 15

Figure 2. Homeless people at Flinders Station (Paul Burston. 2017) / / 15

Figure 3. Homepage of couchsurfing.com / / 48

Figure 4. Cover of Salient Magazine Volume 81 (2018) / / 49

Figure 5. Evil Empire article page 1 (Salient, 2018) / / 50

Figure 6. Evil Empire article page 2 (Salient, 2018) / / 50

Figure 7. Post on Vic Deals about students struggling to find flats (Facebook, 2018) / / 51

Figure 8. Article about student homelessness (Salient, 2016) / / 51

All other figures not mentioned in list were either taken by author or participants
WHAT MOTIVATED THIS INVESTIGATION

This thesis challenges me to not only “talk the talk’ but also ‘walk the walk.’ Engaging theory, methodology and practice this work addresses the emergent social issue of tertiary student accommodation. By combining my passion for narrative and photography with design research, this investigation aims to bring real stories, real voices and real connections to the forefront. Important to this thesis is an appreciation that designers should no longer design for others but with others. The design methodologies used expand on this approach by encouraging the inclusive and collective voices of others to be formative of the process and informative to the process.

Within my undergraduate studies, it became evident that the role and responsibilities of both design and designers was changing within society. Design, has significant capabilities to engage with communities to enable positive social impacts. Couch surfing is a relatively new, but growing in prevalence, cultural phenomenon that although initiated as an alternative to traditional tourist accommodation has become embedded in other areas of accommodation. This study looks at the practice of couch surfing amongst the student cohort of Victoria University. Couch surfing has become somewhat of a phenomenon over the last few years and with the rate of affordable housing declining, the research suggests it will only become more common for students to couch surf while looking for flats or possibly as an alternative to flatting. Couch surfing is a reality for myself and a number of my peers leading me to investigate couch surfing as a social issue and prompt for my thesis. Whilst there have already been studies about that have focussed on couch surfing in other countries, none have approached their studies with a student focused narrative and with a visual output in mind.

Throughout the investigation, Photovoice and portrait photography are used to produce a series of images that visually express the story of students living the daily struggle of uncertainty around accommodation and as a result, couch surf. The methods used such as human – centred participatory and workshop design, analyse, gather insight and ascertain knowledge of the couch surfing culture and experience and as earlier noted, offers capacity and capability to amplifies the student’s voice on this issue. The ultimate goals of the thesis are to bring light to the social issue of student accommodation, to showcase the experience of the tertiary students’ struggles to find lodgings, and to share the solutions to this phenomenon offered by the workshop participants.
INTRODUCTION
To begin, let me offer some clarity around one word that society knows well but remains rather awkward around and another which is more of a new-age phrase than it is a word. It is one of those 21st century terms like trillionaire, sperm-bank or alternative-truth, that has emerged from or into a social phenomenon or issue. These words are homelessness and couch surfing. Related perhaps, yet very different on so many levels. A quick search on google will give you these two definitions;

**Couch surf** – *No fixed abode: to stay temporarily in a series of other people’s homes, typically making use of improvised sleeping arrangements.* (see Figure 1)

**Homelessness** – *The state of not having a home.* (see Figure 2)

Neither of these definitions places any context or cause around the terms, but this research endeavours to both discover the similarities and differences between a homeless person and a couch surfer and then look at the instances of these words in the tertiary education in order to both understand their place in that community and to enable a voice for those students experiencing this. This research aims to gain a clearer understanding of the state of homeless in tertiary education and focuses on those students who partake in the couch surfing phenomenon. Ultimately the research is about discovering an approach and a series of outcomes that both offer volume, visibility and validity to a growing cohort of tertiary students.
Introduction

“What I wouldn’t want to see is a widespread acceptance that students should be couch surfing. I wouldn’t want to see an attitude like “oh sure they don’t have flats but they have friends they can rely on” that’s an attitude I would hate to see spring up anywhere.” (Joseph Habgood)

Homelessness is not a new phenomenon. In 1930, the numbers of homeless in The United States rose dramatically as a result of the Great Depression. This established an acute awareness of homelessness and poverty and has resulted in homelessness becoming considered an everyday phenomenon (Orwell, 1949). No matter what city you are in, the homeless; sometimes obvious, many times invisible, exist in most post codes. Common perceptions, many of them unkind, unjust or just ignorant of social discriminations and shortfalls lay the blame for homelessness at the feet of the homeless themselves, judging them to be drug addicts, drunks and of low moral standing. This may be true for some but these flaws in character are not confined to those in poverty, or without an address to call home. The term homelessness means ‘the state of having no home’ and several ‘pathways’ have been identified as contributing to an individual being deemed homeless. These pathways include scenarios such as family breakdown, substance abuse, mental health issues and repeated behaviours.

Of particular interest to this study is the impact of housing crises on homelessness. Shortfalls in housing and accommodation have amplified the social impact of ‘being without a home’ and this study will focus on a new group of homeless and the creation of a new phenomenon, couch surfing. In particular this research investigates the lives of university students who having left home to attend university find themselves without accommodation for varied lengths of time.

This thesis uses human-centred and participatory research to develop insights into the effects and impacts of the couch surfing culture among university students and asks itself: “Using design thinking, research, creative practice and photography how can this study illustrate the physical and emotional impacts of the couch surfing experience on the university student?”
Victoria University students form the bulk of the participants in this study and while this is a limited cohort for a study, the diversity within the group does offer a broad discussion. These students represent what this investigation sees as a datum group that perhaps other major centre universities, due to extraordinary scenarios like the earthquake in Christchurch, and Auckland’s infrastructure and transport issues are not able to currently offer. One student population which the research would suggest have felt the weight of this scenario and the impact of rising rent prices, is the Wellington student population, the numbers tell a candid and desperate tale of having to deal with rent prices increasing whilst having to settle for a lower standard of housing that in no way reflects how much they are actually paying for the flat. It has become a very relevant issue that it is reported that the average Wellington rent price has increased from $533 a week to $576, that’s an increase of $43 a week. (Cann & Swinnen, 2017)

Fundamental to this study is the development of both capability and capacity for collaboration between more strategic levels of administration and this emergent cohort of students. To do this, this research seeks to establish visibility for this emergent group of students and considers what assistance they may or may not need within the education environment. The investigation uses ethnographic research and human centred design methods to inform and articulate the discourse around the phenomenon of couch surfing. By identifying research methods that enable empathetic and participant stakeholder engagement, this study aims to frame possible design solutions that can help bring visibility to these scenarios. Accompanying the thesis component of this study, and as a final output, two compilation photographs will be produced that highlight this new social phenomenon.

“Wellington students are struggling to find flats, especially if their criteria include quality and affordability.” (Yule, 2015)
Chamberlain and Johnson, two professors from RMIT University Melbourne Australia, identified a list of pathways to homelessness which this study unwraps in Chapter One. But in addition to the pathways, Laurenson and Collins from the University of Otago and the University of Auckland, have broken down the term ‘homelessness’ into three categories. These categories are Rough sleepers, Hidden Homeless and Street Dwellers (Laurenson & Collins, 2007). Using these categories this thesis will focus on couch surfers or those that stay temporarily in a series of other people’s homes and as an even closer focus, those couch surfers who are currently attending university.

There is a common perception that couch surfing should not be considered the same as homelessness due to the underlying fact that with couch surfing you do have a ‘home’ to stay at. Whilst this is true, as even if you are staying at a friends or strangers place you still technically have a roof over your head, but the argument can be made that you don’t have a sense of privacy or even a personal space when it comes to couch surfing. Add the prior knowledge of the brackets of homelessness and you’ll find that certain aspects of each bracket become easier to find, certain aspects such as couch surfing, which would fall underneath the “Hidden homeless” bracket. This is because couch surfing is considered as “marginal or unsuitable accommodation” (Laurenson & Collins, 2007; Terui & Hsieh, 2016)

This research presents evidence that couch surfing has become prevalent over the last few years due to increasing rent prices and a decreasing market of affordable housing for students. This study proposes that this new pressure has led to students facing a more demanding and competitive task of seeking accommodation for the duration of their studies. This pressure can also occur in a repeated cycle if the student has left their accommodation to undertake work, possibly seasonal, in their home town or more rural communities during university breaks. Finding themselves in this scenario, the thesis argues, leads the student to rely on peer support. This support could include staying at a friend or associate’s accommodation otherwise known as couch surfing.
Chapter One: The introduction at the outset of this thesis will offer an abridged history of homelessness, followed by a more in-depth description of Chamberlain and Johnson's list of homeless pathways. Building on this information, Laurenson and Collins' categories of homelessness will also give the reader a more in-depth appreciation of homelessness and how couch surfing relates to, or does not relate to it.

Chapter Two: This chapter contains the literature review which features an analysis of previous works that have been divided into four sections: 'Couch Surfing Culture amongst Travelers', 'Couch Surfing amongst Students', 'Students as a Marginalized Class' and 'What Role Can Design Play in this Discussion'. The aim of this review is to provide a comprehensive overview of the status quo, the current discussions and identify where this research may position itself in the discourse. The authors in this chapter include; Paula Bialska, Rory Bradbury, Paulo Freire and Caroline Wang but throughout the research many others are considered to broaden, challenge and support the discussion and findings.

Chapter Three: Having established the main voices in this study in Chapter Two, the challenge for Chapter Three is to define processes and methods to establish stakeholder voices. To do this a number of methodologies have been identified that can enable the research to define, examine, demonstrate and reflect on both questions and findings undertaken in this study. The research methods chosen are semi-formal interviews and human-centred participatory design such as Lego Serious Play. Of particular importance to this study is the inclusion of the more emergent approach of Photovoice. As a precedent for this are projects by Henri Pallard and Caroline Wang. The second part of the chapter inspects how the use of the Lego Serious Play method can be combined with participatory workshopping to enable an expression of the student voice.

Chapter Four: This chapter, The Perceptions of Couch Surfing examines the social perceptions of couch surfing. This chapter analyses and overviews commentary and opinions in mainstream and social media to gain an appreciation for the wider opinions on couch surfing and the students who partake or find themselves needing to partake in couch surfing. At this stage of the investigation the study includes examples from media publications such as The Salient, New Zealand Herald, Facebook, etc. The chapter also analyses interviews held with VUWSA (Victoria University of Wellington Students’ Association) about the student accommodation crisis in Wellington and their perception as student advocates, of couch surfing. The conclusion of the chapter delves into the anonymous survey sent to the student community on how their accommodation experience in Wellington has been and if they ever considered the couch surfing lifestyle.

Chapter Five: The Reality of Couch Surfing breaks down the findings from the research methods performed in the thesis, the chapter will adopt a photobook layout to display the results from the participants interviews and Photovoice activity, both results will be overlayed with each other to portray the student voice on their experience of couch surfing, the second section of the chapter will maintain the photobook layout and exhibit the results from the workshop with these results portraying the student voice on the flatting crisis in Wellington.

Chapter Six: The Voice and Visibility chapter compares both the perception and reality of couch surfing and analyses the differences between them and how these differences are formed and then examines how it can maintain the overall narrative of the thesis and represent it through a visual output. Taking inspiration from artworks by David Hockney and Jeremy Tourville, the visual output is then examined on how it will portray the same voice that the participants showcased in their Photovoice images and Workshop results, with the chapter closing on a review of the findings and outputs with the whole couch surfing experience being summed up into one sentence.
Conclusion: The thesis will then conclude with a Conclusion chapter where it will discuss what the thesis set out to do and what it learnt over the process of gathering researching and gaining it insights to culminate the overall findings of the investigation, the chapter will consider improvements, limitations and extensions of the research.

Chapter Summary:
This chapter introduces the reader to the thesis’ topic, breaks down the focus group of the research and explains what the investigation will set out to achieve, as well as give a brief rundown of what to expect in the ensuing chapters as the reader progresses through the thesis, starting with the next chapter: Definitions of Homelessness.
DEFINITIONS OF HOMELESSNESS
As stated in the introduction, homelessness is not a new phenomenon and has been around us since the 1930’s, when it first became acknowledged as a phenomenon, and with this acute awareness of homelessness, researchers have started investigating the causes of this everyday phenomenon. The thesis will analyse Chamberlain and Johnson’s list of identified pathways that, they have deemed, can lead to homelessness. The following chapter will then breakdown these “pathways” and compare Chamberlain and Johnson’s earlier list to Laurenson and Collins’ more recent descriptions.

The first pathway in Chamberlain and Johnson’s list is Housing Crisis. This pathway is generally considered to caused by the loss of a job or the collapse of a small business in which the individual, now homeless, invested money into. The loss of income causes the individual to start having trouble paying bills.

The second pathway is described as Family Breakdown. This pathway is generally considered to be caused by the loss of a job or the collapse of a small business in which the individual, now homeless, invested money into. The loss of income causes the individual to start having trouble paying bills.

The third pathway established by Chamberlain and Johnson is Substance Abuse, Chamberlain and Johnson consider this pathway as the more common pathway encountered by individuals that leads them to homelessness. This pathway can occur due to a number of reasons. The pathway starts with an individual already having an underlying addiction to some sort of substance and when that addiction reaches a certain impasse the next fix takes priority over trying to pay bills and looking after themselves. Once the money is gone, probably on drugs, there is no longer funds to pay rent or utilities. According to Chamberlain and Johnson this results in a downward spiral and more often than not leads to eviction or for-closure of properties. The telling factor within this pathway is that it does not stop once the person has no home.

The addiction remains and instead of begging for money to get back on track, they beg to get enough money to buy the next fix.

The fourth pathway Mental Health is one of the rarer pathways to homelessness. This is mainly because it does not affect a huge portion of the homeless community yet a common misconception with this pathway by the general public is that it tends to put it under the same bracket as “Substance Abuse”. This is not the case. The case with this pathway is that these individuals who suffer from mental health issues most likely end up on the street because either their supervisor or family member who is aware of their issues and acts as a guardian to them passes away, leaving them with no one who is really capable to look after them so they end up on the street.

The fifth and final pathway is called Youth to adult. This pathway examines the individuals that were homeless from a younger age, individuals that became homeless due to several reasons, whether it was traumatic family experiences, sexual and physical abuse, drug addiction or family violence, they left home because it was not a safe place for them anymore and instead sought out refuge at the homes of their peers and when that did not work out they ended up sleeping on the street. Yet instead of trying to get off the street and out of their homeless state they ended up embracing it by finding some sort of community and companionship amongst the other homeless people. (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2013; Rosenthal, Mallett, & Myers, 2006)
Now besides the five entry level pathways to homelessness described by Chamberlain and Johnson, there are also three different brackets that homelessness gets divided into. These three brackets are identified as “Rough Sleepers, Hidden Homeless and Street Dwellers” (Laurenson & Collins, 2007) “Rough sleepers” are individuals who quite literally live and sleep on the street and are more commonly known as Literal Homeless. The Hidden Homeless are people who live in marginal unsuitable accommodation such as boarding houses, caravan parks, overcrowded houses, garages and couch surfing. Whereas the “Street Dwellers” are people who typically have a form of accommodation but would rather spend more of their time on the streets and frequently engage in anti-social behavior such as public drinking and street tagging. (Terui & Hsieh, 2016)

It is with this prior knowledge of some of the causes of being deemed homeless and the understanding of the brackets of homelessness that it is easier to find certain types of homelessness that some of the public might not deem homeless, couch surfing for example. As stated in the introduction there is a common perception that couch surfing should not be considered the same as homelessness due to the underlying fact that with couch surfing you do have a ‘home’ to stay at, yet after analyzing these lists of ‘pathways’ and brackets of homelessness you can easily see that couch surfing falls underneath the “hidden homeless” bracket as couch surfing is considered as “marginal or unsuitable accommodation.” (Laurenson & Collins, 2007; Terui & Hsieh, 2016)
Chapter Summary:

There are many ways homelessness can be defined and these pathways give a clear understanding that there is more to homelessness than meets the eye. Thanks to insightful breakdowns of homelessness by Chamberlain and Johnson and Laurenson and Collins, the research could properly conclude on where couch surfing fit within the homeless community and for the benefit of the researcher, and the reader, could correctly approach the research with the accurate background data on homelessness.
LITERATURE REVIEW
Introduction

The analysis of current literature has been essential to this project as it has verified the scope and development of this research project. This literature review evaluates precedent projects and guides the overall scope and methodologies of this research.

The first section of this literature review, Couch Surfing Culture amongst Travelers, looks at the couch surfing culture as a whole and how it is commonly used amongst travelers and backpackers as a way to cut costs on traveling. The second section Couch Surfing amongst Students, examines how the culture has been adapted by students in New Zealand and other countries and how these students have adapted with the impact of it. The third section, Students as a Marginalized Class, reviews with a philosophical approach to analyse students as a marginalized human class and how their voice can be heard in this social issue. Which will lead into the final section, What Role Can Design Play in this Discussion, that assesses how design thinking and methods of design have been successful with similar projects. The main authors analyzed in this chapter include; Paula Bialski, Rory Bradbury, Paulo Freire and Caroline Wang. This will aid the generation of the methodology section in the later stage of this research.
Relevance of Couch Surfing in Today’s Society

Even though there has been a lot of literature on the struggles of homelessness, couch surfing (as stated in the first chapter, a branch of homelessness) is not quite as highlighted or covered as its predecessor. Mainly because in many circles it does not relate to or is considered as homelessness, it does not hold the main characteristics that homelessness has. These characteristics include having no roof over your head and no one to rely on (People, 1988), which evidently are the main aspects of couch surfing: that the person has a roof over their head and more often than not they are ‘staying at a friend’s place and relying on them to help them through this stage of having no home. The reason why couch surfing is still relevant to homelessness is that it still influences the person participating it, sleeping on a couch, not having your own space to call home. This situation is not ideal for stability both physically and emotionally. Add a situation where students are stressed looking for a flat amid an overwhelming housing scene (New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations, 2015; Yule, 2015) adding an academic toll on the student due to the instability of couch surfing. Students are the main demographic of the couch surfing culture and in cities where housing and flatting are of high demand and low supply and the markets are hitting a standstill (Cann & Swinnen, 2017), it is easy to see why couch surfing is their last resort, but that does not mean that it is a walk in the park and students are not the only demographic that use couch surfing as an alternative to accommodation, others that have been part of the couch surfing culture participate for different circumstances than students.
Couch Surfing Culture Amongst Travelers

Couch surfing as a culture has only recently started to gain traction, especially amongst travelers. This culture is seen as an alternative to backpacking or staying at hotels or motels as couch surfing is considered a much cheaper alternative (Couchsurfing.com, 2018). Some reports go as far as saying that it is establishing the base of a new form of tourism, known as ‘Intimate Tourism’ (Bialski, 2008).

Because of this new category of tourism, hospitality exchange networks such as www.couchsurfing.com were established. This website prides itself on providing travelers a network that relies on trust and safety, with all applicants having profiles that users can review and reference. It does state that in the end it all falls back on you and that to insure your own safety you must sometimes “trust your own instincts” (Couchsurfing.com, 2018). This honest approach has helped it become the biggest couch surfing website on the web. Many applicants have rarely had any trouble with hosts or felt uncomfortable during their stay. if they did have issues, they had the liberty to leave when they wanted. The website does state that it is always helpful to have a backup plan if things go awry and have a place you can stay at if you have to leave the initial couch surfing place.

There are many negative perceptions of couch surfing that include couch surfing being ‘scary or dangerous’ however Many travelers stated that they never experienced these common negative perceptions of couch surfing and instead spoke of positive experiences, that they found it ‘fun and adventurous’ (Bradbury, 2013, p.45). Many travelers did say that they were reluctant in mentioning that they were couch surfing, even towards their own family, as it had this negative imagery and would not want to initiate any backlash or conflict, that may lead to friends and family asking them to not do it again. Many stated that these concerns were not enough to stop them continuing to practice the couch surfing life style while traveling (Bradbury, 2013, p.71).

The community is the main attraction of the couch surfing culture. This community is built upon meeting new people and being able to see the world from a less of a tourist point of view. This community allows travelers to delve into a new culture by staying with local people. Many travelers claimed that this is the reason they continued to couch surf as a method of traveling. The sense of community and being welcomed into a group of likeminded people while visiting a foreign country was something that a lot of travelers valued and made the general myth that couch surfing is scary and dangerous experience seem absurd to them (Bradbury, 2013, p.71).
Couch Surfing Amongst Students

The other main demographic that participate in the couch surfing culture is students. There are several reasons on why students have started to resort to couch surfing. The first being the most significant one, that couch surfing saves students’ money, that would otherwise be spent on rent. An example of this is Tiana Frittelli or otherwise known as “The Flat Hopper” who studies at Otago University. She gave up flatting for a semester and chose to couch surf and donate her weekly rent payments to a scholarly fund (Hill, 2017). The other reason is that due to a lack of suitable housing, students are forced to resort to couch surfing. Alex Goldman, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Florida chose to start couch surfing because it was starting to develop as an exchange network, even quoting that “you get a true, unadulterated experience of people in a particular place” and that “It's all about the connections between people.” (Smith, 2007) That emphasizes the authenticity and experience of the community that couch surfers rave about.

(Yet this thesis will be focusing on the lack of housing reason on why students chose to couch surf and the evidence is there on why they have to resort to couch surfing.) In recent years, the rent in Wellington has just kept increasing with it being reported that the average rent price increased one year with 9% (Yule, 2015). It is not just happening in Wellington, but in other cities such as Auckland. In the last five years, average rent prices in Auckland have increased by $50 per week, from $175 to $225 for a room in a three-bedroom house (New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations, 2015). With the average student receiving a loan of around $180 average per week from Studylink (Studylink, 2018). This is not sufficient to purchase other necessities like food, toiletries, bills and rent. One of the major obstacles for students to find housing is the cost of rent, “We want Government help to remove one of the largest barriers that stands in the way of real equality of opportunity; the unaffordable cost of housing.” (New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations, 2015)

Rent prices push students to couch surf overseas such as the student population of Kelowna, British Columbia, where students are increasingly resorting to couch surfing due to the high housing cost of living in Kelowna. Over 60 percent of students there said that “had taken to couch surfing or had lived in their vehicles until it became too cold outside.” (McEwan & Teixeira, 2012)
Students as a Marginalized Class

Marginalization is when a class or a demographic is relegated to the fringes of society due to a lack of access to rights, resources, and opportunities (Silver, 1994). The book ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ by Paulo Freire discusses how the marginalized classes of humanity struggle alongside the upper classes. It also touches on how lower classes can gain a voice of their own. Freire states that one of the many reasons why there is such a huge gap between the classes is because the upper class do not understand how the lower-class struggle and how they live in certain conditions “Since the Mr. Giddy’s of all epochs, as an oppressor class, cannot think with the people, neither can they let the people think for themselves.” (Freire, 1993)

Even though students are not the most marginalized class, they are still setback by disadvantages when having to compete against other classes for resources such as housing. Disadvantages such as lack of income and perceptions as being bad and dirty tenants by landlords. It is when these disadvantages are present that we find ourselves facing obstacles that we might not be able to overcome such as lack of affordable housing.

The quote of Freire above relates to a large population of the student cohort that lack housing resources and having to incur increased rent prices. As the market is continuously rising when it comes to rent prices (Edmunds, 2017) landlords have little sympathy for students with flat viewings, where students come prepared with working CV’s, competing with professional couples that offer up to $100 above the rental price to get properties, which is a struggle for students to compete with due to limited funding by Studylink and preference by landlords (Cann & Swinnen, 2017).
What Role Can Design Play in this Discussion

An appreciation of social issues such as student housing and alternative or culturally appropriate models of housing were core to my undergraduate degree in Design for Social Innovation. I consider the wider social context, an area in great need and believe that design has much to offer and learn from engaging in these issues. To that end, this thesis addresses an issue close to my heart but also of significant concern to the larger networks within the University and city communities.

Precedent researchers that have contributed to successful design processes for enabling the voice of ‘others’ or identifying less obvious stakeholders in social issues include Caroline Wang (a Professor at the University of Michigan and one the original developers of Photovoice). Wang uses a method known as Photovoice to approach marginalized stakeholders to give them a voice. Wang states that Freire was at the forefront of giving marginalized a voice in the world, “Photovoice’s theoretical foundation is grounded in Freire’s” (Freire, 1993) approach to education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and a community-based approach to documentary photography and health promotion principles” (Baker & Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1994). As noted in Chapter Three, Photovoice enables the participants a voice and offers a chance to express their point of view on the topic.

This research suggest that the reasons for the student voice to be heard amongst the masses are aplenty, yet the biggest one is that they are the future of the nation. With a new law being implemented that next year students will get their first year of university free (Labour, 2017) the number of first year students is more than likely to rise and with halls of residence already having trouble housing enough students as it is (Edwards, 2016). This is going to be an issue that needs to be addressed in the following years, to house students in an already dwindling housing market. Photovoice will help the student voice be heard and gain an insight on how couch surfing will or will not positively or negatively impact students experience in the couch surfing culture.
Chapter Summary

Through analysing precedent couch surfing reports, the research shows that there are various sources that contribute on the topic of couch surfing amongst a traveling culture but rarely anything on the couch surfing culture amongst students, especially the impact it has on their young lives. As suggested in the aims of the literature review, this is the ‘gap’ that this thesis will be addressing, the gap between the vagueness of student homelessness and the couch surfing lifestyle by using the method of Photovoice. This method mixed with a portrait photography approach and human – centred participatory design methods by the researcher will work towards a photo series focused output to shine light on the couch surfing culture amongst the students and what sort of impact this culture has on the cohort.
METHODOLOGY
RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES
Introduction

The methodologies adopted in this research were selected for their capacity to enable the participants, namely couch surfing tertiary students, a voice. The methodologies chosen would as a result offer the couch surfers plight some visibility. To do this, traditional approaches of interviewing and data collection were paralleled with participatory methods undertaken by the couch surfing community and accommodation providers as both individuals and then as a collective in workshop scenarios.

An initial challenge for this research was to define the particulars of the couch surfing experience as experienced by tertiary students. Globally there is evidence of a growth in couch surfing amongst the students. The rationales include rising student numbers and declining housing options or affordable housing propositions for that matter (New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations, 2015), combine these issues with limited amount of government funding for students and rent prices that are rising due to this increase in funding (Yule, 2015). Suddenly the reasons for the continued growth of this phenomenon are quite clear (McEwan & Teixeira, 2012). While these studies offer insight into the provocations for couch surfing and current issues that continue to feed the phenomenon, they deliver an outsiders perspective of the scenario. In contrast this research will give readers an insiders perspective by giving the couch surfers a voice in this research.

To do this, participatory research methods were engaged. As participatory design process aims to enable ways or facilitate activities that allow better responses to the needs of the users. It could be considered as an approach that is more focused on processes and procedures of design and not the design result itself. This is an important consideration for this particular research project as the problem or scenario is emergent. With little data to mine or interpret, the user voice is paramount to obtaining tangible narratives to inform other stakeholders whose experience of this phenomenon is, not as a couch surfer, but as another invested party.

This research recognized the importance of considering who to put in the room, who to offer the voice to in the first instance. In much of the design thinking process participants and contributors are considered as either representing the issue or as participating in the shift towards change. Having all stakeholders in the room could, although in principle, suggest a broad discussion that may well lead to some understanding or even movement towards resolution, this according to Freire is unlikely. In this first instance, an initial conversation between all stakeholders that could include; couch surfing students, their friends, university support and student advocate groups, academic staff, faculty and university representatives, could be counter-productive as agendas were likely to be diverse possibly divergent even.

Following this guide, the first group to contribute to this study are students facing a new and growing phenomenon within the student experience. These participants are both invested in the practice of and/or are practicing couch surfers. This group are known in participatory design as the innovators and the early adopters.
The current cohort of students at Victoria University who have identified themselves as couch surfers or a part of the active support groups that assist this group were invited to partake in this research, (The Couchsurfing Culture Amongst Students: An investigation that reflects on the experiences of homelessness for tertiary students within a contemporary and challenging lifestyle) The research process involved reaching out to the couch surfing community via Facebook, student advocacy groups, VUWSA (Victoria University of Wellington Student Association) and word-of-mouth through friends, family and colleagues. Having obtained a number of participants the research process was enabled.

The first research activity came as a semi-formal interview between the researcher (the innovator) and the couch surfer (early adopter of a new approach to solving a problem)

The second approach remains participatory, but also adopts a very human centered approach, using ethnography. Photovoice was employed to enable a deeper expression and analysis of the couch surfing experience, but also to establish visibility through photography. Photovoice is a form of research that enables the voice of the marginalized to be heard and “has the potential to empower the participants, to be a mechanism for community change and to promote social justice.” (Pallard, Kauppi, & Hein, 2015)

The third approach undertaken, again participatory but now evolved beyond an expression of individuality to one of the couch surfers as a community. A group workshop was designed using the principles of “Serious Play” as devised by Lego. This activity enabled a group voice/consensus to be established on common issues and experiences of flatting in Wellington. Also, this has unearthed any biases towards the common perceptions of both a couch surfer as a person or couch surfing as a practice.
Semi-Formal Interviews

As stated above the first method this research used was the method of semi-formal interviews (Creswell, 2014) This was done through an array of Facebook posts and reaching out to friends and family. The aim was to find students who were currently couch surfing while enrolled in tertiary studies at Victoria University and attempting to find accommodation. The questions for the interviews were framed so that the participants were able to give detailed insights into their experience, with the overall interview questions being divided into three subsections:

“Context, Experience and Impact” with each subsection focused on different parts of their experience. ‘Context’ asked for the circumstances, scenarios and contexts that led them to their couch surfing experience, ‘Experience’ illustrated their personal experience of couch surfing and ‘Impact’ demonstrated the impacts that couch surfing could have on them.

It is my opinion that holding the interviews in person, not as a more broad reaching Facebook survey, or email questionnaire enabled genuine and heartfelt personal conversations with the participants. This approach produced a depth of respect and authenticity and allowed the couch surfer to not experience ceiled judgements from those reading the results.
Human-Centred Research – Participatory methods

The second approach of this investigation involved using human-centred and participatory design methodology inspired by the works of Henri Pallard (a professor at Laurentian university) and Caroline Wang (a Professor at the University of Michigan and one the original developers of Photovoice) I adopted the Photovoice approach. This method explores the voices of marginalized communities in an unobtrusive way. Henri Pallard (who used Photovoice as a method to explore homelessness in subarctic urban communities) argues that Photovoice is “a valuable method in research with homeless or insecurely housed people who usually remain marginalized, hidden and vulnerable… By enabling marginalized members of the community to make their realities visible to the community at large.” (Pallard et al., 2015) Other example of Photovoice research that was influential to this work, is Caroline Wang, who used the method of Photovoice to approach a social issue and give a voice to communities that are disadvantaged a voice “The goal of Photovoice is to use people’s photographic documentation of their everyday lives as an educational tool to record and to reflect their needs.” (Wang & Burris, 1994)

Photovoice gave the participants the chance to express themselves that they could not do through the interview or through conversation, they had the opportunity to showcase a certain aspect or view that an outsider would not be able to see, they could portray a certain mood that conveyed couch surfing for them through the simple task of taking photos. When the researcher asked about the participants experience with Photovoice most participants said they felt comfortable with it, with a few saying it made it easier to convey their feelings about the culture.
Workshop

As a follow-up from the interviews and Photovoice, the participants along with members of the public were invited to attend a workshop that would focus on the participants flatting experiences in Wellington and question them about the future of the student couch surfing lifestyle. At the workshop the participants were supplied with a workshop booklet (see appendix A) that broke down every activity the workshop consisted of, it would also simultaneously act as a visual aid for the first activity: ‘Connect’, which asked the participants to have an open conversation amongst each other about the experiences and issues about flatting in Wellington.

The second activity: ‘Identify’ challenged the participants to create their own couch surfing persona by using the persona guidelines in the workshop booklet, then replicating this couch surfing person in the form of a Lego character.

The third and final activity of the workshop: ‘Communicate’ inquired the participants to think outside the box and create their own solution to the couch surfing phenomenon by building their solution in Lego form.

Both the final two activities used the Lego Serious Play method. This method is a facilitated meeting, communication and problem-solving process in which participants are led through a series of questions, probing deeper and deeper into the subject. Developed by Lego as an innovative, experimental process designed to enhance innovation performance, each participant builds his or her own Lego model in response to the facilitator’s questions using specially selected Lego elements (Lego, 2018). This method was employed as a research tool and as a part of the participatory workshop. In this research, the Serious Play method acts as a development to the Photovoice methodology as it further enables the research participants to demonstrate and voice their knowledge and experiences as individuals and as a community.
Chapter Summary

This thesis aims to unlock the student voice on the issue of couch surfing and the lack of accommodation options available to students and uses the Victoria University of Wellington student cohort to do this. Using the methods mentioned above, the study is able to obtain findings that will give the research a more realistic understanding of the perception of the lifestyle and gain a more genuine and authentic insight of the students.
PERCEPTION
PERCEPTIONS OF COUCH SURFING
The Background of Couch Surfing

Unlike homelessness which started gaining awareness in the 1930’s, couch surfing took a longer time to gain visibility when it emerged into existence in 1999. It was at this time that Casey Fenton, the founder of couchsuring.com, found himself with a cheap flight from Boston to Iceland all booked and paid for, but no board or lodgings organised.

Fenton, grew up in a small town in Maine, USA. He had, like many his age, started to think about this entire world that existed beyond the borders of his hometown, an all the experiences he had yet to have. One thing he knew for sure was that his small hometown was not going to be offering any of the new experiences he was looking for. This lead him to start buying cheap flights to anywhere in the world and it was on the Iceland flight where he would come up with the idea that would change his life and the world forever.(Chan, 2016)

So, it was when he was on his way to Iceland that Fenton, a twenty-one-year-old computer programmer, hacked into the database of the University of Iceland and randomly emailed over one and a half thousand students asking for homestay accommodation. After getting multiple offers he chose what he deemed to be a suitable place to stay. He ended up staying with an Icelandic Rhythm and Blues singer and the accommodation consisted of a raggedy old mattress in the persons’ lounge (Camillo, 2015, p.294)
The Benefits of Couch Surfing

As a result of this experience, on the flight back home Casey conceived the idea for a web based platform that would help people find places to stay. First up, in 1999 Casey registered the domain name ‘couch surf’, eventually launching the website couchsurfing.com (see Figure 3) in 2004 (Camillo, 2015, p.295). Couchsurfing.com grew both continuously and significantly from the outset. Travelers immediately saw the upside and the benefits of engaging in couch surfing as both a cheaper way of getting around and a pathway to learning about the culture and everyday lifestyles within different cultures and communities that were not provided within the existing tourist or accommodation markets. Couch surfing never breached the constructs of mainstream media as there was nothing ‘controversial’ surrounding it, it was just seen as an alternative way of traveling.
The Impact of Couch Surfing on Temporary Accommodation and the Media

Couch surfing has been described and undertaken as a way of peer support for travelers but in more recent times has been adopted into different social structures to alleviate accommodation pressures for incoming and returning university students. The pressures for these couch surfers are not solely economic based but one of availability of suitable and affordable accommodation during their tertiary studies. Again peer support, the act of offering to help those in a difficult, most likely temporary situation, and to support your fellow student by providing temporary accommodation has enabled the birth of a new branch of couch surfing. The practice has gone from being an alternative way of traveling to becoming an alternative solution to shared accommodation during the university semester. The time frame in the student/student couch surfing experience is more fluid perhaps than the traveler/ host experience. In fact, the students needing accommodation are often categorized as homeless. The increase in both the desire and the need for the couch surfing practice and ideology of sharing your home with the homeless student has gained substantial traction in recent years, which has led to media outlets such as The Salient, New Zealand Herald and Facebook to start covering the phenomenon. (see Figures 4-9)
Evil Empire
WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON WITH WELLINGTON’S RENTAL CRISIS
By Daniel Smith

There are a lot of mysteries that accompany the name Nagibhah Niel Gheebhah Patel. Mysteries including, but not limited to; that he got his money through winning the lotto, that he is frequently seen dancing in the early hours of the Canvasay Place morning in a cowboy hat, that he has achieved such a state of whitewashing that he no longer needs to sleep or eat. These mysteries are clouded in rumour, but one story attached to his name seems to be certain: Niel Patel is not a very good landlord.

The wispy-bearded, abseil-eyed man has a whole raft of allegations against him, from dodgy bond manoeuvring, unexpected rental increases, failing to comply with housing regulations, power siphoning, wilful damage to tenancy buildings, underpaying employees, unlawful entry of tenant’s homes, and neglecting human decency when dealing with his tenants. A google of his name turns up an entire Reddit thread dedicated to dealing with him as your landlord, alongside a slew of articles from Stuff, Hawke’s Bay Today, and Stuff, all about shady acts committed by the man. He has over 10 active companies attributed to his name, one of which, Challenge Rentals Property Management Ltd., has been involved in over 450 cases heard before the tenancy tribunal over the past two years. His name is synonymous with terrible landlord in Wellington.

Neil Patel
/n/eel/p@t/le

1. A person/thing that utilizes their position of power to exact financial harm to others.

“Six thousand buck a year! This education racket is a total Neil Patel!”

2. An action which causes the detriment to another, usually property related.

“Man, can you quit showing up here wanting to redo the carpet! You are totally Neil pane ling me!”

But no man is an island, and this wily renter is startlingly closer to the general rule of landlords in Wellington, rather than an exception to it. The market has become an environment in which renters have had to fight for their rights to be acknowledged, if they can manage to find a place at all.

Speaking to students currently searching for accommodation, it is clear that a harsh reality is bubbling underneath the media hype. Third year student Oliver Clifton has said that: “the demand for flats has reached a critical point this year [...]. Obviously, this makes it easier for landlords to cut how they like and people don’t have much of an option other than to deal with it.” WMSA President Martin Drakey has spoken to a group of tenants who were given less than 24 hours to sign a contract.
Perceptions of Couch Surfing

Figure 7. Post on Vic Deals about students struggling to find flats (Facebook, 2018)

Has everyone decided where they are going to setup the first homeless student camp yet? Kelburn is pretty close to uni and has a lot of space. I think Te Aro @ courtney is too small (and it will be hard to get any sleep).

Figure 8. Article about student homelessness (Salient, 2016)

Student homelessness

Recent research has confirmed the prevalence of homelessness amongst students and the wider population.

Statistical analysis undertaken by Dr Kate Amore of the University of Otago (Wellington) has revealed that homelessness has grown by 15 per cent across the country between the 2006 and 2013 censuses.

The general increase is largely due to increasing living costs in combination with non-responsive incomes.

Dr Amore says that "in 2013, more than half (62 per cent) of homeless adults were working, studying, or both, up from 49 per cent in 2006."

Statistics New Zealand considers homelessness as a state of having no permanent shelter or safe haven, and this definition excludes severely inadequate living situations.

Student homelessness is not an unknown issue, and has affected many different demographics, however the housing market’s prohibitory state against students is only just being formally recognised.

The New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations (NZUSA) are urging for an expanded definition of homelessness, as the one currently held by Statistics New Zealand “has exclusions that punish students unfairly,” while they suffer poor housing quality and living situations.

In agreement, Dr Amore and NZUSA would prefer a more inclusive approach to reduce levels of homelessness, as affected people are slipping through the cracks of a failing welfare system and are denied the opportunity to increase their quality of life.

The employment opportunities afforded to university graduates tend to allow a greater potential to escape homelessness, however the wider, and growing, trend will not be resolved without recognition of the structural barriers that prohibit access to safe and affordable accommodation for a large number of New Zealanders.

Dr Amore says that people shouldn’t have to live on the streets for the government to show concern and take substantive action.

“Students are living in impossible situations,” NZUSA President Linsey Higgins

Figure 7. Post on Vic Deals about students struggling to find flats (Facebook, 2018)

Figure 8. Article about student homelessness (Salient, 2016)
The Impact Overseas

Couch surfing’s impact overseas has been relied on heavily by the traveling culture, with over fifteen million users signed up to couchsurfing.com (Brugen, 2018) to use the lifestyle as an alternative way to travel the world, yet that does not mean that it is not having the same impact as it is having over here in New Zealand.

Students all over the world face the same obstacles when it comes to searching for affordable accommodation and when they do it is usually riddled with your poor-quality housing characteristics such as water damages, pest infestation’s, poor-quality appliances and lack of insulation or heating in the home (Johnson, Cole, & Merrill, 2009). These poor characteristics can lead to frustration for students searching for homes and can force them to start approaching alternatives, alternatives such as couch surfing.

In particular, the students of a small town of Kelowna, British Columbia, have resorted to these alternatives. Fed up with lack of affordable housing, over sixty percent of the student population in Kelowna reached out to their social networks and implored the options of couch surfing with their peers, if couch surfing options were exhausted, the cohort would use hotels or motels to at least have somewhere to able to sleep. (McEwan & Teixeira, 2012, p.134)

Grammy award winning artist Frank Ocean reflects on his couch surfing past during his university life at the University of New Orleans, in his latest critically acclaimed album “Blond”, Ocean states lyrics such as “Tyler slept on my sofa...” and “Staying with you when I didn’t have an address.” Ocean expresses through his lyrics the importance that peer support had on him when his dorm got struck by Hurricane Katrina and he had to move out and find accommodation while still studying and figuring out how to make ends meet (Genius, 2016b, 2016a). Showcasing to a wider audience that the impact of couch surfing does not just happen to students struggling to find housing, but to those affected by natural disasters who are forced to evacuate to safer locations whilst being homeless for the time. These occurrences lead to nationwide campaigns to help each other and ask strangers to open their homes to the people affected by the natural disaster and ask the affected to couch surf until it is safe to go back to their respective homes. Examples of these campaign are found in Iceland when the eruption of Eyjafjallajokull forced over eight hundred people to evacuate and ask people in safer areas to take in the affected (Gunnarsson, 2010) and in Christchurch when the 2011 earthquake struck leaving hundreds of people homeless, the government took notice of the Icelandic campaign and asked the same of New Zealand residents. (Binning, 2011)

With these examples of couch surfing making its appearance in the overseas and New Zealand media, it is easier for the general public to gain a common perception of couch surfing or couch surfers in that matter. Just like the common perception of homelessness (see Chapter One) it could be very wrong compared to what the reality of couch surfing actually is. To reach the conclusion of what the perception of couch surfing is amongst the student body, the investigation will interview two VUWSA executives who deal first hand with students and send out an anonymous survey to the student cohort about their flat hunting experience in Wellington.
Insight interview

The first interview was with Joseph Habgood, the association secretary of VUWSA, who was available to have a talk about his previous couch surfing experiences and the perceptions he dealt with before hand, while the majority of the conversation was about his couch surfing experience, he did touch on some perceptions he had before heading into his couch surfing experience and this report would use both his answers on his perception versus the reality of his couch surfing experience as a foundation for constructing the questions for the survey and for the interviews of the student couch surfers. Joseph stated that before he started couch surfing his perception was that he could treat it like an “adventure” that he “never really had that home feeling apart from this place in Nelson and once we moved away from there, years ago, I was like ‘that’s fine, anywhere I can sort of put my feet up is fine, I can deal with what comes my way’”. It was due to the positive feedback it got from the traveling culture that he had this perception that it would not affect him as he thought it would and that the ‘adventure’ aspect would get him through the two months he couch surfed for, yet two weeks into his experience and he realised that it had worn off “I didn’t realize till about two weeks in that living on a couch and basically carrying your belongings around with you, it is ok for a while, but when you have got exams, tests, university and just life to do, it stops being an adventure, and it stops being a camping trip quite quickly.” It was adamant that Joseph’s perception of it changed over the course of his couch surfing experience and it was thanks to him sharing his story for this thesis that this investigation was able to expand on focusing at how couch surfing was perceived by the student cohort that did not practice it.

“Would I recommend couch surfing? Ultimately yes but it’s not an alternative to housing, for me, in my experience, it’s a stop gate measure to basically make sure you have somewhere to live and not be homeless for that space of time, I couldn’t have imagined doing it while not having an end date on it, like ‘I’m just going to couch surf till I find a place’ because that could take months.”

“I was excited to be honest, the whole situation was not great, but there were other positive things happening in my life too and yeah I was able to bring a sort of sense of adventure to it. Walking up the hill to the first place with all my stuff, I can do this, this is gonna be a cool game. But then you wake up the next morning and have to go to lectures and it’s like UUGGHHH”.
Survey Findings

An anonymous survey was sent out the student cohort of Victoria University of Wellington, asking how students perceived their flat hunting experience in Wellington (See Appendix B). Twenty-two student responded to the survey and gave their opinion on how it feels to search for flats in the Wellington housing market. The survey consisted of twenty questions all centred around giving this research a detailed insight. Of the twenty questions, there were a few specific questions that gave some great details, the first being the ninth question which asked, “Did you become concerned at any point that you were not going to find a flat?” to which twenty-one respondents (95.5%) answered with ‘yes, they were getting worried’. The eleventh question asked, “Would you consider couch surfing as an alternative option if you could not find a flat?” Eight Respondents said ‘yes’ (36.4%), nine said ‘maybe’ (40.9%) and five said ‘no’ (22.7%). They were then asked if they wanted to give a reason on why they answered that way a few responded with ‘seems adventurous’, ‘have friends I can fall back on’, ‘uncomfortable and a hassle’ and ‘a cheaper way to live while I find a flat’. After analysing the results of the survey, the research interviewed one more person to round up the perception of couch surfing before it could investigate the reality of couch surfing.
Student Accommodation Issues

The second interview was with Erica Schouten, the Advocate of VUWSA, who deals mostly with complaints from students about flatting issues and landlord issues. Throughout the interview, she sheds light on the common issues she gets contacted with and explains that there is huge power unbalance between students and landlords, this results to landlords taking advantage over a lot of students by increasing rents without notice, coming around for visits without notice, not fixing things around the house or blaming the tenants about the state of the house when it was like that when they moved in, not receiving bonds back, etc. This leaves a lot of students feeling stressed and helpless, especially if they cannot find a flat as well, with Erica stating that she “had one student the other day who was seeing me about a problem with university but he had two suitcases with him, I asked “what’s happening” and he said, “I can’t find anywhere to live so I am staying at a backpackers on a one night basis each time.” VUWSA are trying to do something about this by looking to add a fort nightly column in the Salient about tenancy issues. The thought is that if students are more aware of their rights by writing in questions and reading each other’s responses that that might create a culture in Wellington where students are actually challenging landlords on things and encourage people to think more about tenancy.

“Last year I had a student who was living in a tent, but aside from that rare one students have been mostly staying with friends and family, backpackers, especially international students. Staying at a mates place but we’ve heard some ridiculous stories like last year someone was staying in a wardrobe, like had a mattress laid out in the wardrobe which is just bizarre, but there is a lot of that going on in student flats I believe.”

“I think the University needs to look at doing something about it now actually, I think it’s a big problem that the price to live in a catered hall is about $375 a week and unless you have very wealthy parents I can not understand how normal families can afford that. Maybe the university should start investing in a student village or something like that.”
Chapter Summary

Both Joseph and Erica closing statements of the interviews expressed similar intentions towards the couch surfing culture, with Joseph stating “What I wouldn’t want to see is a widespread acceptance that students should be couch surfing. I wouldn’t want to see an attitude like “oh sure they don’t have flats but they have friends they can rely on” that’s an attitude I would hate to see spring up anywhere.” And Erica following this up by saying “I had one student say that he wanted an extension because he wasn’t able to do the course work because he had nowhere to live but they didn’t grant it to him because he’d need a doctor note or something like that, which is just absurd that students are struggling out there but no one is recognising it.”

Before the thesis set out to find the perception of couch surfing amongst the student body it relied on the adventure perception that it gained from researching overseas literature and media. Joseph backed this up with his adventure perception of it and the survey results relate the same info back to the investigation. With the rising evidence that more students are struggling to find housing, couch surfing does seem like the better alternative option, while Joseph stated that his experience did change his perception maybe it was just his experience and not a consensus of the student cohort. There was only one way to find out what the student voice was on the topic of couch surfing and that was to find the students who couch surf, interview them and get them to document their experience so their voice could be heard.
THE STUDENT VOICE - THE REALITY OF COUCH SURFING
As mentioned in the previous chapters there is always a difference between a perception of a certain activity versus the reality of that activity, this statement is especially true for homelessness as the common perception for the general public is that homelessness happens due to addiction problems but there are more detailed pathways that can lead to being deemed homelessness. In the previous chapter the research focused on the perception of flat hunting and couch surfing, to provide a foundation on how the perception of the couch surfing experience will compare to the reality of it, which will be explored in this chapter.

To explore the reality of the couch surfing experience amongst the Victoria student cohort, the thesis exercised the following methods: ‘Semi-formal interviews’, ‘Human-centred participatory’ design mainly through ‘Photovoice’ and ‘Workshop design’ (see methodology for full detailed explanation of methods). These methods acted as three stages for the participants to fully express their experience of the couch surfing lifestyle and give this research the best chance to portray this reality and make sure the student voice is showcased properly.

The process will start by recruitment of the participants which in this case will be the couch surfing students. The recruitment will be done through Facebook posts, reaching out to friends and family and word-of-mouth. This led to five student participants. All participants were presented with the same tasks for the three stages and had the opportunity to opt out at any time.
The Interviews

The first stage was an interview at a neutral location between the researcher and the couch surfer. The body of the interview was dealt up in three sections: Context, Experience and Impact, with each section focusing on a different aspect of the participants couch surfing experience. ‘Context’ addressed the circumstances, scenarios and contexts that led the participant to their couch surfing experience. ‘Experience’ focused to establish their personal experience of couch surfing and ‘Impact’ looked at the impacts couch surfing could have had on the participant asking whether they found it had any physical, emotional, academic and social impacts on them while they were experiencing couch surfing. After the researcher and the participant had completed these three sections the participant was then asked by the researcher if they had any advice for people wanting to think about couch surfing and if they could sum up their whole couch surfing experience in one or two words. The researcher then asked if the participant would be comfortable with a portrait photo being taken at their respectable abodes where they were couch surfing at the time, assuring that their faces would be blocked or blurred to keep their identity hidden. All five participants agreed, with the researcher seeking second confirmation from the household’s head tenant to make sure no image would get the tenants in trouble seeing they were housing an extra person and could be in breach of their tenancy agreement. Once the portrait photo was taken, the participants were then asked by the researcher if they would like to participate in the next stage of the research methods: Photovoice.
Photovoice

The participants who agreed to continue to assist with the research were asked after the interview if they could document a twenty-four hour or one day journal of their couch surfing experience by them taking photos of their surroundings and experience with a photo device of their choice. Four of the five participants agreed to continue helping with the research. There was no pressure for the participants to capture anything specific or have a certain number of photos to showcase the lifestyle, they had complete freedom on what and how they wanted to document their experience, this was decided to give the participant complete control on how they wanted their voice to be heard.

The following pages will showcase the participants' portrait photo overlaid with their one or two word sum up of the experience, photos from the participants Photovoice journal and quotes from the interview with the researcher.
Profile:
Age: 19

What year at University are you?
2nd year

Is this your first experience of living away from home?
No

If no, have you lived a student hostel situation?
Yes, I was in the first year halls last year, Cumberland

If no, have you lived in a flatting situation?
No this is my first year flatting

If your university is not in your home city, do you stay at university and therefore need accommodation during the mid-year and end of year trimester breaks?
Yes as I need to work to earn money

What has prompted you to start couch surfing?
I needed to couch surf because my lease ran out and had no new place to go to

What was your relationship with the person(s) you were staying with?
I am staying with a high school friend, but she’s also living with a random, but it’s her flat

How long do you plan to couch surf for?
I have been couch surfing for the past week and tomorrow I will be moving into my new flat so one day

Have you been staying at one particular place or have you been alternating between different places?
I have alternated between two places, because my mum came down so I stayed in her hotel room and now I’m crashing at my mates place

What are some of the pros and cons of couch surfing? Any you want to specifically highlight?
Pros – I get to see my friends and live with them, seeing we are really close friends so this is a nice part of it
Cons – You kind of feel like a nuisance, kind of in the way, you don’t really know what their routines are and how they tackle their day and you’re just kinda there, if that makes sense.

What’s been your overall mindset towards it so far?
I think it’s ok, I don’t mind it and I’m very grateful that I have a place to stay at but ideally if I could just go from flat to flat, I’d rather do that than getting in someone’s way, but I’d do it again if I would have to.

Left: Figure 9. Portrait photo of Participant 1
Figure 10. Participant 1's bed while she was couch surfing (Taken by participant)
What physical impacts has couch surfing had on you?

So tired, because you have to move all your stuff and then move it again somewhere else the next day and then go to work and do that. My mum was down in Wellington as well so I had to go catch up with them and then go to work again and move more stuff again; it’s just tiring and a hassle seeing you don’t have a place to be yourself at.
What emotional impacts has couch surfing had on you?
So stressful, so many times I’ve found myself on the brink of crying cause of the stress and tiredness, now I’m at a point though where I know that it’s going to get better soon, like I’m over feeling shit about it, so I’m now kind of like oh fuck it I’ll go with the flow, it will sort itself out soon enough, which is probably a real bad mind set to have.

Figure 12: The room where participant one was staying (Taken by participant)
What academic impacts has couch surfing had on you?

Not really anything seeing I sorted that out last year and I’m not studying at the moment, but I couldn’t even imagine how much more stressful that would be.
What social impacts has couch surfing had on you?
I get to see my friends which is cool, but I can’t really bring anybody over or anything seeing it’s not my place and all.
Any final advice you want to leave? Would you recommend it to other people?
Yeah it’s not bad, like it’s definitely an experience, but it is what you make of it.
If you could sum up this whole experience in one or two words, what would you sum it up as?
Spontaneous
Figure 16. Participant 1’s dinner for most nights (Taken by participant)
Profile:
Age: 21
What year at University are you?
3rd year
Is this your first experience of living away from home?
No
If no, have you lived a student hostel situation?
Yes I lived in Katherine Jones Hall for first year of University
If no, have you lived in a flatting situation?
Yes this is my 2nd year flatting
If your university is not in your home city, do you stay at university and therefore need accommodation during the mid-year and end of year trimester breaks?
Yes I needed to stay here both for work and study
What has prompted you to start couch surfing?
I needed to, I just finished my summer papers and job and my lease ended at that time as well so it all happened at the same time, out of a job and out of a flat and leading up to that everything was so busy so it felt like I had no time to suss my shit out.
What was your relationship with the person(s) you were staying with?
I am staying with University mates, I met them in my first year, at the hall
How long do you plan to couch surf for?
I've been couch surfing for 2 weeks and now I've got more 1 more week left, hopefully, I am waiting to hear back from this flat so if we don't get it I'll have to keep couch surfing till we find one.
Have you been staying at one particular place or have you been alternating between different places?
I've just been staying at the one place, I couldn't imagine alternating between places with all my stuff.
What are some of the pros and cons of couch surfing? Any you want to specifically highlight?
Pros – It's quite a lot cheaper, I offered to pay rent but they've been real chill with me about it and have let me stay here for free.
Cons – Living on a couch isn't the best place to sleep, having no privacy and having that feeling of being in limbo.
What's been your overall mindset towards it so far? Do you think you'll continue to have this mindset?
Towards couch surfing? Definitely for traveling, but for studying and working I'd rather have my own place or flat to have that sense of security but for traveling it's definitely the way to go.
Left: Figure 17. Portrait photo of Participant 2
Figure 18: Participant 2's bed while couch surfing (taken by participant)
Figure 19: Where participant 2 could store his stuff while couch surfing (Taken by participant)
Figure 20. Participants' clothes (taken by the participant)
Figure 21. Participants food (Taken by the participant)
Figure 22. More of participant 2’s stuff (Taken by participant)
Figure 23. Participant’s bike and where he could store it (Taken by participant)
Figure 24: Another shot of participant 2’s stuff stored in the lounge in the corner (Taken by participant)
What physical impacts has couch surfing had on you?
I'm quite tired of couch surfing and from couch surfing it's very uncomfortable, like one night I got quite cold so have been feeling a bit sick as well because of that.

What emotional impacts has couch surfing had on you?
To be honest, I'm actually quite relaxed about it all, most of the times you're happy being there with friends but there is definitely that thought always in the back of your mind "I need to sort my life out" so a little bit of stress as well.

What academical impacts has couch surfing had on you?
I was quite lucky that my studies finished just as I was about to start couch surfing, I couldn't imagine trying to suss a flat and do study while couch surfing that'd be hell.

What social impacts has couch surfing had on you?
Quite good actually, especially when couch surfing with your friends, it's always social.

Any final advice you want to leave? Would you recommend it to other people?
It's a good way to transition between accommodation, I prefer it over chucking my stuff in storage or staying in a hostel, it's probably not for everyone but I enjoyed it.

Sum up your experience of this whole situation in one or two words:
Crucial, the reason behind this is that if I didn't couch surf I would be back home which for me would be bad as I love Wellington so much that I'd miss it.
EXHAUSTINGLY AWESOME
Profile:
Age: 20

What year at University are you?  
Graduating, finished 3rd year

Is this your first experience of living away from home?  
No

If no, have you lived a student hostel situation?  
Yes I was in Katherine Jermaine in first year

If no, have you lived in a flatting situation?  
Yes, 3rd year flatting

If your university is not in your home city, do you stay at university and therefore need accommodation during the mid-year and end of year trimester breaks?  
Yes because I need money so I work here in Wellington

What has prompted you to start couch surfing?  
A bit of curiosity and need. We are without a flat at the moment but part of me wanted to see what couch surfing would be like.

What was your relationship with the person(s) you were staying with?  
I'm staying with some friends that I met at university

How long do you plan to couch surf for?  
I've been couch surfing for the past two weeks and we finally secured a flat but the move in date is next week, so I'll be couch surfing for another week.

Have you been staying at one particular place or have you been alternating between different places?  
I've been alternating between two places, so I don't over stay my welcome, but both places have been friend places.

What are some of the pros and cons of couch surfing? Any you want to specifically highlight?  
Pros – It shows who your real friends are, the ones who really care and want to help you out. It's always something different not staying in the same place which is kinda cool.

Cons – No privacy, living out of a backpack which isn't that great, harder to cook meals.

What's been your overall mindset towards it so far? Do you think you'll continue to have this mindset?  
The more I do it, the more I'm getting used to it, at the beginning I was a bit iffy about it but now I'm kind of enjoying it a bit.
Figure 27. All of participant 3’s stuff stored in the corner of a room (Taken by participant)
Figure 28: Where participant 3 would eat more frequent during his couch surfing spell (Taken by participant)
Figure 29: Participant 3’s food while he was couch surfing (Taken by participant)
Figure 30. Another shot of all of participant 3's stuff (Taken by participant)
What physical impacts has couch surfing had on you?
I felt really tired but that was mixed with coming back from a holiday so a mix of jetlag and that, I think I lost a bit of weight due to not eating properly, I think, I don’t really want to weigh myself.

What emotional impacts has couch surfing had on you?
Sometimes you do feel like a nuisance which sucks like I don’t want to get in the way of my friends, but I’ve never really felt stressed about the whole situation.

What academic impacts has couch surfing had on you?
I have fortunately graduated from university, which means I didn’t have to deal with this while studying but I couldn’t even think of doing this while studying, the stress levels would be through the roof.

What social impacts has couch surfing had on you?
You definitely become more sociable, you meet so many new people, make new friends which is really cool side of couch surfing, one that I didn’t expect.
Any final advice you want to leave? Would you recommend it to other people?
Probably no, cause you are homeless, but it is cool to crash at your mates and have a good
time with them.
If you could sum up this whole experience in one or two words how would you sum it up?
Exhaustingly awesome
EMOTIONALLY DRAINING
Profile:

Age: 21

What year at University are you?
3rd year

Is this your first experience of living away from home?
No

If no, have you lived a student hostel situation?
Yes I was in Willis street hall

If no, have you lived in a flatting situation?
Yes This is my 2nd year flatting

If your university is not in your home city, do you stay at university and therefore need accommodation during the mid-year and end of year trimester breaks?
I'm at university at the moment, so can't go home while I have to search for a flat as I have to attend lectures and do assignments

What has prompted you to start couch surfing?
I'm couch surfing at the moment because I moved out of my flat because I hated my flatmates and the whole flat was just drama so I wanted to get away from that

What was your relationship with the person(s) you were staying with?
I'm staying with a hometown friend

How long do you plan to couch surf for?
I've been couch surfing for about a week now and I still haven't found a flat, so I don't really have a clue, as short as possible if I can be honest

Have you been staying at one particular place or have you been alternating between different places?
One place

What are some of the pros and cons of couch surfing? Any you want to specifically highlight?
Not really any pros, but cons are living out of a bag and it actually being very expensive seeing I have to eat out every night.

What's been your overall mindset towards it so far? Do you think you'll continue to have this mindset?
I have been really hating it, all I want is just to find a flat.
What physical impacts has couch surfing had on you?
The only physical toll I’ve had is not really getting any sleep because there is so much going at the moment.

What emotional impacts has couch surfing had on you?
It’s been really disheartening to have nowhere to go and just annoying being in someone else’s house feeling a bit like a nuisance.

What academic impacts has couch surfing had on you?
I just had an assignment due and it was the last thing on my mind, it’s so hard to be focused on an assignment when your priority is trying to find a place, just so stressful.

What social impacts has couch surfing had on you?
Not really anything, like I do go out every weekend so it hasn’t stopped me from doing that.
What academic impacts has couch surfing had on you?
I just had an assignment due and it was the last thing on my mind, it’s so hard to be focused on an assignment when your priority is trying to find a place, just sooo stressful

What social impacts has couch surfing had on you?
Not really anything, like I do go out every weekend so it hasn’t stopped me from doing that

Any final advice you want to leave? Would you recommend it to other people?
No, it sucks

If you could sum up this whole experience in one or two words how would you sum it up?
Emotionally draining
Figure 36. Participant would frequent spend her time in the lounge as she had no where else to go.
The Workshop

Following up from the Photovoice activity, the participants and other members of the student cohort were invited to attend a workshop which acted as a follow up conversation about the future of couch surfing and flatting in Wellington. The workshop took the same layout as the interview and was divided also into three sections: Connect, Identify and Communicate.

The workshop was also accompanied by a workshop booklet (See Appendix A) which would act as a visual guide and notepad for the participants. The first activity “Connect” acted as an ice breaker activity which used an open discussion between the participants about their experiences of flatting in Wellington and their experiences with landlords and their perceptions/experiences of couch surfing. The conversation was a great way to introduce the participants to the overall topic of the thesis and the workshop and give the participants the feeling that whatever their opinions were on the topic it was welcomed. The second activity “Identify” prompted the participants to question their biases towards couch surfers and create their own couch surfing persona by following the persona guidelines in the workshop booklet, then building a replica of this persona in Lego form and presenting their result to the rest of the participants explaining why they chose this type of persona. The third activity “Communicate” sought to bring closure to the workshop by challenging the participants to think and create their own solution to the couch surfing phenomenon with the availability of the “Lego Serious Play” (see methodology for explanation) when they were finished with their model the participants had to once again present their results to the rest of the participants and explain their solution and why they chose this as a solution.
The following pages will showcase images and results of the participants of the workshop.
THE COUCH SURFING CULTURE STUDENT WORKSHOP
Figure 38. Participants in the workshop
Figure 39. Participants in action during the workshop
Name: Josiah  
Age: 21 - 25  
Ethnicity: NZ Pakeha  
Personality: Lazy and Scruffy  
University Experience: Third year University  
Accommodation options: Flatting and Backpackers  
Funding: Government and Part time work  
Transport: Gets around on his longboard  
Other: Just got dumped by his girlfriend due to his lazyness and his addiction to weed (smokes everyday)  

University starts in one week for Josiah  
Has applied to about 10 flats but hasn’t heard anything back  
Is looking for a flat with 3 other people but does nothing and expects the group to do everything  
Doesn’t really care if the flat is with a tenancy agency or private landlord  
Stress level low because he smokes weed everyday to relief the stress  
Josiah hasn’t been able to get a flat and is close to getting kicked out of his group because he smells like weed and sweat because he doesn’t shower and is making the group look bad to landlords  
His back up option to not getting a flat is staying on his mate Jonno’s couch.
The Student Voice - The Reality of Couch Surfing

Fish 41: Participant 2’s persona creation ‘Matt’

Name: Matt
Age: 18 - 20
Ethnicity: NZ Pakeha
Personality: Lazy, Scruffy, unorganised but very lucky
University Experience: second year
Accommodation options: Flatting
Funding: Government and Parents
Transport: Skateboard
Other: Has a really rich family, so will probably end up with a flat without trying to get one; drinks a lot

University starts in one week for Matt
Has applied to about 5 flats but hasn’t heard anything back
Is looking for a flat with 6 other people but so far hasn’t done anything to help and lets the other flatmates look for a place
Wants a flat with a private landlord
Stress level is low because he knows when it comes down to it his parents will help him out
If he doesn’t find a flat in time, he can stay at his friends place on the couch or his girlfriend
Name: Toby
Age: 18 - 20
Ethnicity: NZ Pakeha
Personality: Unorganised
University Experience: Second year
Accommodation options: Flatting
Funding: Government and Parents
Transport: doesn’t have any mode of transport so just walks everywhere
Other: has a pet cat

University starts in one week for Toby
Has applied to about 7 flats but hasn’t heard anything back
Is looking for a flat with 4 other boys which could be the reason they haven’t got a flat yet
Doesn’t really care if the flat is with a tenancy agency or private landlord so long as they let him keep his cat
Stress level high because he wants to find a flat before university starts
Toby and his group haven’t been able to get a flat because they are unorganised and don’t show up to flat viewings or hand in forms too late
His back up option is to go back home but wants to stay in Wellington so will opt to stay on a mates couch
Name: Darrell  
Age: 21 - 25  
Ethnicity: NZ Pakeha  
Personality: Lazy, Scruffy, unorganised and a bit of a dick, from gizzy, uses the word sick a lot  
University Experience: Fourth year  
Accomodation options: Flatting  
Funding: Works full time  
Transport: Skateboard  
Other: Is having a rocky relationship with his girlfriend and smokes a lot of weed

University has started for Darrell and hasn't found a flat yet  
Has applied for no flats and is going to jump into a group of people that have a flat  
Wants a flat with a private landlord  
Stress level is low because he knows the boys will have his back and let him stay at theirs  
Groups are hesitant to include Darrell in their group because of his asshole demeanor
Name: Nick  
Age: 21 - 25  
Ethnicity: NZ Pakeha  
Personallity: Well dressed and efficient  
University Experience: Fourth year  
Accomodation options: Flatting and home  
Funding: Part time work and occasional side jobs  
Transport: Has a car and a skateboard  
Other: Doesn’t have a whole lot of friends and doesn’t want to pay rent.

University starts in three weeks for Nick  
Has applied for no flats and isn’t really looking at the moment for a flat either  
Stress level medium because he is happy he is saving money but still worried about not finding a flat  
Living with strangers worries him and none of his friends have a flat so he is happy to stay in his car.
Name: Chris  
Age: 18 - 20  
Ethnicity: NZ Pakeha, Maori  
Personality: Lazy and scruffy  
University Experience: Second year  
Accommodation options: Flatting and backpackers  
Funding: Government  
Transport: Skateboard  
Other: Smokes weed everyday

University has starts in about 5 weeks  
Has applied for 8 flats and hasn’t heard anything back yet but is not worried  
Wants a flat with a private landlord and is now looking to move in with a group  
Stress level is medium because he does want to find a place but smokes so much that he ends up being chill about it  
Groups are hesitant to include Chris in their group because of the amount of weed he smokes  
His back up option is that he can stay at his mates place on the couch if he needs to
Name: Craig
Age: 26 - 30
Ethnicity: Dutch
Personallity: Unorganised
University Experience: Post grad
Accomodation options: Backpackers or stays with his hospo friends
Funding: Full time work
Transport: Has a bike to get around with his surfboard
Other: Is a free spirit and doesn't believe in staying in one place for a long amount of time

University starts in two weeks for Chris
Has applied for no flats as the surf has been too good so hasn't had time
He never stresses, its bad for his vibes
He doesn't care where he ends up living
If the universe doesn't offer anything he will stay with a mate
Figure 47. Participant 8’s persona creation ‘Wolfgang’

Name: Wolfgang
Age: 26 - 30
Ethnicity: European
Personality: Unorganised and scruffy hippy dude
University Experience: First year but dropped out
Accommodation options: Backpackers
Funding: Woofing
Transport: Owns a car
Other: Comes from a troubled home

Wolfgang doesn’t care when university starts because he dropped out to live a more care free life. He hasn’t applied for any flats as he is happy to bludge of his friends and stay at a backpackers when they are sick of him. He has the back up option of staying in his car if he needs to.
Name: Fletch  
Age: 21 - 25  
Ethnicity: NZ Pakeha  
Personality: Efficient, chill and relaxed  
University Experience: Third year  
Accommodation options: Flatting  
Funding: Full time work and the government  
Transport: Skates around  
Other: Redoes paper's but is lazy and doesn't show up, works on his own projects and sleeps in the workshop.

University started six days ago for Fletch  
Has applied for no flats as he just tags along with his friends that are looking  
Really chill and not stressed about flatting seeing he thinks the boys will have his back  
Is really stingy and doesn't want to pay expensive rent  
Is staying with his friend at the moment on the couch, doesn't go to flat viewings only looks on Vic Deals.
Design represents an area at campus where students can chill, hang and sleep. Sort of like the Hub but liveable, it will have hammocks or bunks, facilities and a communal kitchen. It would be at university campuses so students could live here for a certain period, the area would also have a notice board about flats.

The design would be at each campus (Kelburn, Te Aro, Pipitea and Karori), if design becomes a success, look to incorporate the same idea at Massey, Whitireia and other universities.

Workshop reflection comment:

It’s crazy that we as student are having so much trouble with flats, I thought I had a hard time but after hearing all the participants experiences, it seems like it’s a very common issue and one that needs to be addressed immediately.
Design takes an architectural approach and looks at the following points:

Medium density housing.

Co-housing.

Increase in public transport options.

CBD expands.

Cheaper public transport.

*Workshop reflection comment:*

We are in a housing crisis and need to expand housing zones/transport to mitigate couch surfing.
Design prompts to use existing buildings and making houses in better conditions but capping price/ not charging more because they can.

No point in building big fancy waterfront apartments for $350 per week when its unfeasable.

Long term Air BnB.

People help the people.

Workshop reflection comment:

Good to hear others opinions and experiences, to know you aren’t alone - It is easy to think your world is crashing and forget other people are affected by this issue too.
The Student Voice - The Reality of Couch Surfing
Design symbolizes that there should be more rules on landlords in terms of rent cost in relation to the quality of the house/flat.

Studio apartments in town for emergency housing where you can stay up to a month and treat it as a month lease.

Workshop reflection comment:

Something needs to be done about this issue now rather than later, its only going to get worse.
Design has two parts:
First part looks at students and younger people who are feeling the struggles of the housing crisis. To exercise their democratic right and protest and advocate for better, more affordable living.

Second part looks at eco pods. Investing in sustainable, small living options that are cheap easy to set up and move. To create communities for those who are in need of extra help, support in finding somewhere to live, these pods are a cheap option to help those in times of need, not necessarily for a long time.

Workshop reflection comment:
Couch surfing is associated with males who can’t be bothered finding accommodation. However, there is a serious housing problem and homeless problem in New Zealand.

Landlords suck!
Design reflects the idea of extending a help system.

A backpackers kinda vibe where people can enlist in very short term leases while they try to find a permanent lease in a flat.

Doesn’t necessarily have to be students as couch surfing affects lots of people. However priority given to those who cannot afford work full time to afford more expensive flats.

Also within the area maybe some self contained units where people who are really struggling.

Also someone in charge who can offer tenancy information.

Workshop reflection comment:

Interesting to think that everyone’s ideas are kinda along the same lines, that everyone wants the issue to be fixed and are more concerned about others and the future of housing shortages.
Design represents the idea of house building factory

I think the problem is more housing/couch surfing as a necessity should not exist.

Workshop reflection comment:

There's a strong stereotype of what we see couch surfing to be.

I was surprised that a lot of the girls had not only struggled with flats but also had to couch surf
Design wants to showcase that Wolfgang is a bad example of couch surfing because he takes it for granted, but sharing space is fine. Create social expectations such as contributing effort and time and be clear when to leave.

**Workshop reflection comment:**

Couch surfers are predominantly male and have drug addictions as perceived by the group. Generally seen as individual people who tend to take advantage of others.
Design showcases an area of accommodation where students can come and go.

Over the duration of the year, it’s a pay it forward system.

Workshop reflection comment:

It is good to have a different perspective, all generalisations have focused on the “lazy smoke weed student” without focussing on different circumstances, such as travelling, family, disownment, addiction, etc.

Would be great to have a community effort and use couch surfing as a way to connect people together.
Chapter Summary

By analysing the results of the interview and Photovoice images this research was able to draw a conclusion on what the reality of the couch surfing lifestyle is for a student compared to the perception of couch surfing by the general student cohort which was outlined in the previous chapter. The reality of it is that for the students living the couch surfing lifestyle it is extremely stressful and has many physical and emotional impacts on them as mentioned in the chapter, compare this to the perception of it being “an adventure” and you can start to see why so many students head into it with positivity and come out of it stressed and emotionally drained. The workshop results showed the research that there is still a biased towards the common perception of a couch surfer with all the participants choosing to create a male persona, yet the third activity showed the investigation that by letting participants think outside the box and use their respective degree backgrounds (architecture, design, communications, etc.) that there are some definite solutions that can be approached to help the struggling students of Wellington. Overall the outcome of the three research methods gave the thesis great results, results which it will use to produce visual outputs portraying the voice of the couch surfers.
THE VOICE AND VISIBILITY
As outlined in the previous two chapters, the perception and the reality of couch surfing are two opposite aspects of the lifestyle, yet while opposites they both are at the centre and the focus of this thesis, as both play an integral role in how a student experiences the couch surfing lifestyle.

**Finding the Voice**

Perception gives the student a glimpse into the lifestyle, it relies heavily on different accounts of the lifestyle experienced by different culture (the traveling culture) experiencing the lifestyle in a different way, hounded by countless articles about rents rising and affordable housing diminishing (see literature review) students feel the pressure of finding a flat and start questioning the option of couch surfing, heading into it with a mindset of “this will be an adventure, I can easily do this and keep living life and still try to find a flat”. It was through research and interviews that this research could find a common perception, the perception that even though it might be a challenge, it might be fun, it might be an adventure. But it was the reality that this investigation needed to find to complete the research and be able to create an output that would portray the students voice on the experience.

To find the reality of the couch surfing lifestyle this study needed to find the voice of the students who practice the lifestyle and give them a platform where they could have the opportunity to express their voice correctly and portray their experiences the way they would want them to be portrayed and use this portrayal as a visual output. This would all be achieved through the method of Photovoice, which was on display in the previous chapter, but this would also be accompanied by a designed photo output by the researcher.

As explained in the reality chapter, the couch surfing students who chose to participate in the Photovoice journal had the opportunity to complete this activity with their own choice of photo device, two of them chose to take all the Photovoice images on their phone while the other two choose to use their cameras they had as a device to capture their experience through Photovoice, with one of them stating that “it is going to help me capture this experience the way I want it to, it will make me think about what photos I want to take for this, instead of just lazily snapping with my phone.”
Finding the Output

Accompanied with the interviews, the researcher also took portrait photographs of the participants to create a visual output, the photos were taken on a Pentax KM with 35mm film. The researcher came to the decision of shooting the portraits on film to add to the narrative of the visual output. Film photography, compared to digital photography, has always focused on trying to capture that moment in time as Henri Cartier-Bresson once said, “Film Photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event” (Cartier-Bresson, 2014), like the activity of Photovoice (which asks the participants to capture their couch surfing lifestyle in the moment) the research wanted to capture the students the same way, caught in the moment of their interview. Walter Benjamin once spoke about this narrative within film photography “The procedure itself taught the models to live inside the moment, rather than outside the moment” (Benjamin, 1972) With the portrait photographs expressing this narrative of capturing the participants in the moment, it would now be coupled with the narrative of the visual output to express the overall narrative of the thesis.

The visual output took inspiration from David Hockney and Jeremy Tourvieille as both artists looked to use composition and overlay of multiple images to tell a story within in their artworks. Hockney said that “it created a narrative, as if the viewer was moving through the room.” (Jones, 2004) this exact quote is what the investigation wanted to achieve with the visual output, just like the Photovoice images and the portrait images, it wants to create a narrative or a story within the images themselves and through the inspiration of Hockney’s and Tourvieille’s work this research found a way to create a visual output that portrayed the following narrative.
Explaining the output

The visual output focused on this technique of composition and overlaying images to portray the student voice (which in this image is represented through the students faces) and how this voice is portrayed mainly in our current society as a mere fragment of society, a voice that is under appreciated, divided and considered less important yet when it becomes combined and acts as a collective it becomes unique, a voice that should be heard upon a number of issues, issues like the ones described throughout this thesis. Whereas the face represents the voice of the student, the backdrop of the photos, represent the space of the couch surfers and how that even though they might not have a “home” their surroundings still resemble that off a home and are off somewhat a comfort to the couch surfers.

The overall narrative that the output of the thesis is capturing is the student voice, collectively, on its views on current issues that could threaten their university experience, issues such as struggling to pay rent or even in that matter struggling to find a flat, through capturing images that reflect in the moment perspectives, it echoes the reality aspect of the couch surfing lifestyle, a lifestyle that when practiced will test physical, emotional, social and even academically aspects of the couch surfing students life. It is a culture that gets praised as a traveler and a culture that gets doubted as a student so the true question that this thesis should leave the reader with it is.
Do we want to CURE IT, ELIMINATE IT or GROW IT?
CONCLUSION
This aim of this thesis was to explore the lifestyle and experiences of student couch surfers and portray the student voice as a collective so it could be heard about how this unique phenomenon has had an impact on their university experience.

To achieve this aim, the researcher analysed his passion for narrative and photography with design research, wanting to bring real stories, real voices and real connections to the forefront, which led the thesis to form the main question it wanted to answer, which was: “Using design thinking, research, creative practice and photography how can this study illustrate the physical and emotional impact of the couch surfing experience on the university student?”

To set the research in motion, the thesis had to first identify where couch surfing came from? The answers to this question was revealed by an analysis of literature and research, by breaking down Chamberlain and Johnson’s list of ‘Pathways’ that can deem a person homeless and comparing that list with Laurenson and Collins’ list of ‘Brackets of Homelessness’ it revealed that couch surfing was a branch of homelessness or otherwise termed as “Hidden Homeless”, this revelation gave the investigation a new lane of literature to analyze and find what design methods were common when dealing with the homeless.

This examination led the investigation to discover the design method of Photovoice, a method used to give the participants a voice and give them a chance to express their point of view on the topic in an unobtrusive way. This method worked perfect with the goal of the thesis, to portray the student voice, and after being coupled with other human centered participatory design methods, the thesis had an array of research methods that could explore the student voice and get a genuine and in-depth insight into the couch surfing culture.

Before going in the field to recruit the couch surfers, the research held interviews with several VUWSA executives and send an anonymous survey to the cohort to gain knowledge of how severe the housing crisis was amongst the student cohort, the results of these findings, coupled with an analysis of New Zealand and overseas articles on student couch surfing, gave the thesis the knowledge of what the perception of couch surfing was amongst the student body that didn’t practice the lifestyle. Using this information, it created the foundation of how to find the reality of couch surfing and how to relate the perception to the reality.

After gaining ethics approval the thesis started the recruitment process of the student couch surfers and start the process of finding the reality of couch surfing by using the thesis’ established research methods. The recruitment process resulted in gaining five couch surfing students who were willing to participate in the research, and while this can be seen as a limitation, having such a small sample size it can also be seen as an improvement for the research as the increase of participants would infer the voice of the student cohort and make the data be a population result rather than a sample size result, with this improvement being available if the focus group of couch surfers was extended outside of the Victoria University cohort and extended the focus group to students of other cities and comparing the data to other universities.

The data gained from the five participants was then compiled and laid out in a photobook style to showcase how the results portray the student couch surfing lifestyle and make sure the participants voice is expressed correctly on their experience, with the thesis then using this data to create a visual output of its own.
Inspired by the works of Hockney and Tourvieille, the research set out to create a visual output that would reflect the narrative that the thesis captured through its research methods, which was to capture the student voice and portray it as a collective and unique voice, a voice that should be heard on the issues described throughout the thesis and by combining aspects of the precedents and data collected from the thesis it was able to create such an output.

The thesis set out to find the student voice on the ongoing issues that a student would have to deal with while flatting in Wellington, issues such as huge power unbalances between tenants and landlords, a decreasing amount of affordable accommodation for an increasing population of tertiary students, questionable standards of what is considered affordable accommodation for students. The thesis wanted to make sure that this voice got heard throughout the research, as mentioned before it is a voice that is unique and needs to be heard amongst today’s society, if we are the future of this country, how are we going to succeed if we are struggling to find the basic human right that is supposed to help us get through university, a place to live and feel safe, a place to study and sleep, a place to eat and drink and hang out with friends, a place to call home. How are we supposed to be the future of this country when today’s generation is not even giving us the opportunities to express our voice and giving us the chance to challenge the issues mentioned before.

This thesis set out to answer its own established thesis question: “Using design thinking, research, creative practice and photography how can this study illustrate the physical and emotional impact of the couch surfing experience on the university student?” and through the use of interviews, Photovoice, portrait photography and design workshops, this thesis was able to find that coveted student voice and illustrate the experience of a couch surfing student.
EINDE.
REFERENCES
References


Bialski, P. (2008). Friendships in a state of mobility - The case of the online hospitality network, 89.


APPENDICES
### Relevant Definitions

**Photo voice**: a research method that explores the voices of marginalized communities in an unobtrusive way.

**Couch surfing**: stay temporarily in a series of other people's homes, typically making use of improvised sleeping arrangements.

**Homelessness**: the state of having no home.
Connect Conversations

Activity 1 explanation

For the first activity of the workshop we are going to have an open discussion about how the couch surfing culture has started appearing in mainstream media outlets such as Salient and Facebook, look at photovoice images from the couch surfing participants and talk about past experiences that involved couch surfing or experiences with accommodation issues.

The following pages will have some of the photovoice photos and evidence of pieces of media surrounding the couch surfing culture & flatting crisis in Wellington, these images will act as visual aid for this activity.
Appendix A

Salient Cover, Feb 2018

Salient article, Feb 2018

Evil Empire
WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON WITH WELLINGTON'S RENTAL CRISIS
by David Smith

There are a lot of mysteries that accompany the name "Hail, a godhead!" and "Hail, a godhead!" Myths include: but not limited to: that he got his money through winning the bets, that he is frequently seen dancing in the early hours of the Courtenay Place morning, or is a coward that he has achieved such a state of enlightenment that he no longer needs to sleep, or even that he is unaware of his own death. In fact, to be certain, Hail-Patel is not a very good landlord.

The way he is always second-hand, never at all new, has a whole lot of allegorical reams, from dodgy brand maintenance, dented metal remains, forming cramps, into fancy, refined, refined changes to heritage buildings, undermining employees, unlawful entry of owners' homes, and reporting tenants' Demise when dealing with his tenants. A google of his name turns up an entire Reddit thread dedicated to dealing with him as your landlord, alongside a view of articles from Stuff, RNZ, Stuff, Stuff, Stuff, all about shady acts committed by the man.

He has over 10 active complaints attributed to his name, one of which, Challenge Rentals Property Management Ltd., has been involved in over 40 cases heard before the tenancy tribunal over the past two years. He is synonymous with terrible landlord, in Wellington.

HAIL-PATEL

1. A person/thing that utilizes their position of power to enact improper harm to others.
2. The most popular "pork". This education rebel is a "pork".
3. An action which causes the detriment to another, usually property related.

"More, more, more. Never enough money to redo the carpet. You can totally fix anything if you just don't go on an island, and the only way is to scarily close to the general rule of landlords in Wellington, other than as an exception to it. The landlord has become an environment in which tenants have to fight for their rights to be acknowledged, if they can manage to find a place at all.

Speaking to students currently searching for accommodation, it is evident that a house market is bubbling underneath the media hype. Third year student Oliver Collins has said that "the demand for houses has reached a critical point this year..." He is making the radical call to landlords to act now or face the consequences. "I have heard stories of landlords demanding 24 hours notice to sign a contract without a tenant. "KAPSA President Mark Winkler has spoken of a group of tenants who were given less than 24 hours to sign a contract..."
Salient graphic, Feb 2018

Photovoice photo by participant.
Identify

Personas
Activity 2 explanation

In the second activity of the workshop we will split up into groups and examine some examples of personas that might partake in the couch surfing culture. A persona in the case for this activity is a person that might represent a segment of our target audience and in this activity, will be used to explore narratives that might occur in their everyday.

The following pages will envision personas and define scenarios.
Scenario Creation

Communicate

Outcomes
Activity 3 explanation

To draw the workshop towards closure, in the final activity of this workshop we will look at what outcomes for couch surfing are feasible, desirable perhaps even necessary.

Do you want to cure it, eliminate it or grow it?

What outcomes for couch surfing do you think are feasible, desirable perhaps even necessary?

Camping grounds? More halls? a billeting system?

Sketch or write your preferred designed outcome below
Appendix B

The accommodation experience of a tertiary student
A survey about the flat hunting experience of a tertiary student

Email address *
- Valid email address
- This form is collecting email addresses. Change settings

Name:
- Short answer text

Year level at University:
- 1st year
- 2nd year
- 3rd year
- 4th year

How many flats did you apply for in 2016?
- Short answer text

How many flats did you apply for in 2017?
- Short answer text

How many flats did you get rejected for in 2016?
- Short answer text

How many flats did you get rejected for in 2017?
- Short answer text

When you went to view flats were you aware that any other groups were applying for the flat?
- Yes
- No

How did you react to this knowledge?
- Long answer text

How did this make you feel?
- Long answer text

Did you become concerned at any point that you weren't going to find a flat?
- Yes
- No

Did you have some sort of back-up plan/alternative arrangement or plan if you were unable to secure a flat?
- Long answer text

Would you have considered couch surfing as one of your alternative solutions?
- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Have you found that flat hunting has become easier or harder during your time at university?
- Easier
- Harder
If easier, what has made it easier?
Long answer text

If harder, what has made it harder
Long answer text

Has your rent cost gone up or down each year?
- [ ] Rent has gone up
- [ ] Rent has gone down

What have been the contributing factors to your rent increasing/decreasing? (e.g., my rent has gone up because I live closer in town, my rent has gone down because I moved away from the city, moved in with my partner, etc)
Long answer text

How has the change in rent affected the costs of your other necessities such as bills, food, travel etc?
Long answer text

Do you feel that any current increase to rent that you have encountered are justified?
Long answer text

Describe your past flat hunting experience in one or two words?
Short answer text

Describe your current flat hunting experience in one or two words?
Short answer text
Image Credits

Figure 1. Couch surfers in a one room Brooklyn apartment (Malte Jaeger, 2015) // 15

Figure 2. Homeless people at Flinders Station (Paul Burston. 2017) // 15

Figure 3. Homepage of couchsurfing.com // 48

Figure 4. Cover of Salient Magazine Volume 81 (2018) // 49
Salient. (2018). Volume 81, Cover

Figure 5. Evil Empire article page 1 (Salient, 2018) // 50

Figure 6. Evil Empire article page 2 (Salient, 2018) // 50
Salient. (2018). Volume 81, pg.28

Figure 7. Post on Vic Deals about students struggling to find flats (Facebook, 2018) // 51

Figure 8. Article about student homelessness (Salient, 2016) // 51

All other figures not mentioned in list were either taken by author or participants.