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Safe as houses

SAMANTHA DONNELLY
July 23rd, 2021

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Can architecture make a difference to the experience of those seeking safety from violence in refuge accommodation? Samantha Donnelly outlines the findings of her research, which culminates in a Design Guide for Refuge Accommodation.



I have reached the conclusion that the creation of shelters [refuges] designed specifically for battered women is the only direct, immediate and satisfactory solution to the problem of wife abuse. Women and their children need refuge from further abuse; any other consideration, such as...counselling or legal advice – is of secondary importance.— Del Martin, US activist, *Battered Wives*, 1976¹

Can architecture make a difference to the experience of those seeking safety from violence in refuge accommodation? This article is a summary of a larger PhD research project, which aims to understand the existing Australian context, the unmet needs of women and children in refuge accommodation, ways that architecture might address the post-trauma experience, and how retrofitting or building fit-for-purpose housing might address all of these issues. My PhD research culminates in a [Design Guide for Refuge Accommodation](#), focusing on New South Wales, and this article offers an introduction to the Design Guide – how it came about, what evidence it is based upon, and architectural and policy recommendations.

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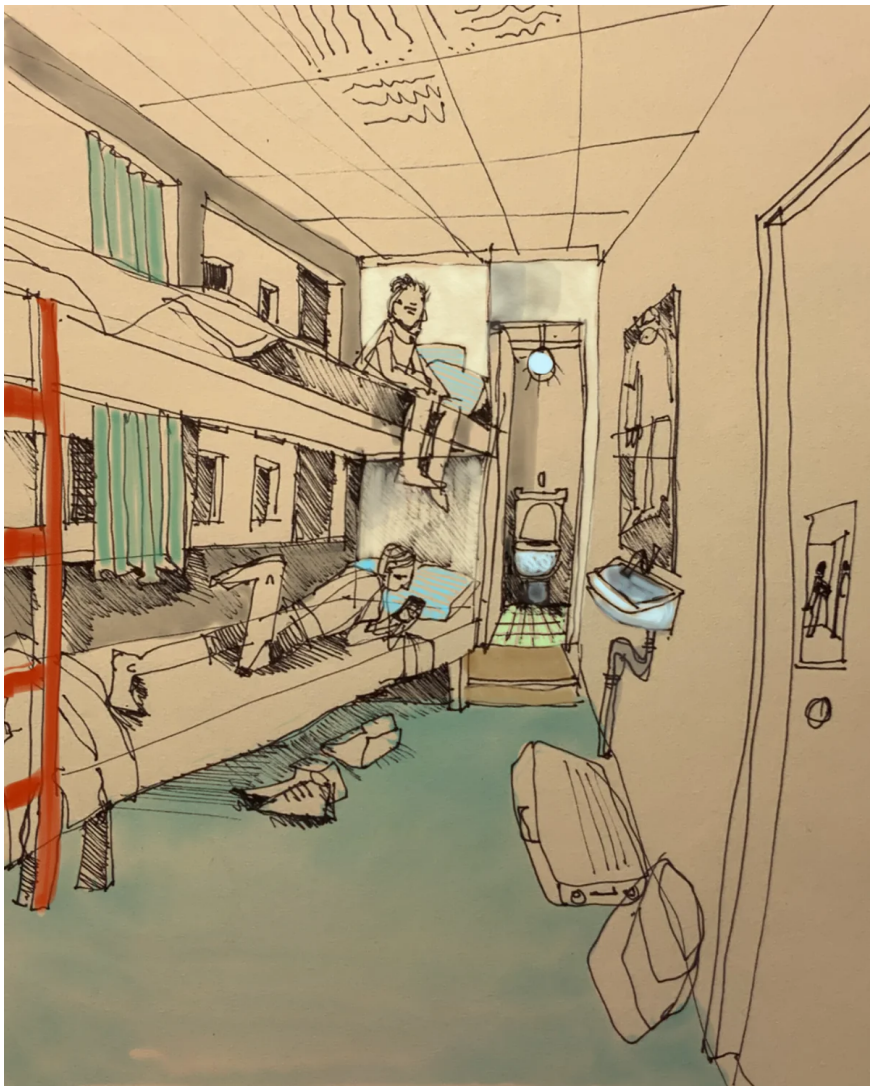
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What do refuges do?

The impact of violence on the health of women and children is profound. Statistics show that intimate partner violence contributes to more death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 than any other preventable risk factor². Most women leaving a violent relationship will move out of their own home.³ Women's refuges provide temporary protection and support for women and children escaping domestic and family violence, responding practically to violence by providing safety and security through defensible space, and a place to access a wide range of support and services.

Refuges are often situated in existing housing stock retrofitted to house multiple families in a 'group home' arrangement. Besides basic shelter, refuges provide an intersection of home, hotel, clinic, welfare, and play space. The refuge is a transition, not a destination. However, the experience of living in a refuge may impact the wellbeing and sense of hope for women and children who come through the doors.

This research project argues the provision of safety is fundamentally a spatial question, and the types and qualities of space that might best address women's needs when escaping family violence, are not clearly understood. Spatial components may resemble a shared domestic environment; however, users have heightened needs for security, safety, stability, privacy and comfort – aspects that relate to safety. The question of why refuges for women are typically not specifically designed for purpose, is also critical and central to this research project.

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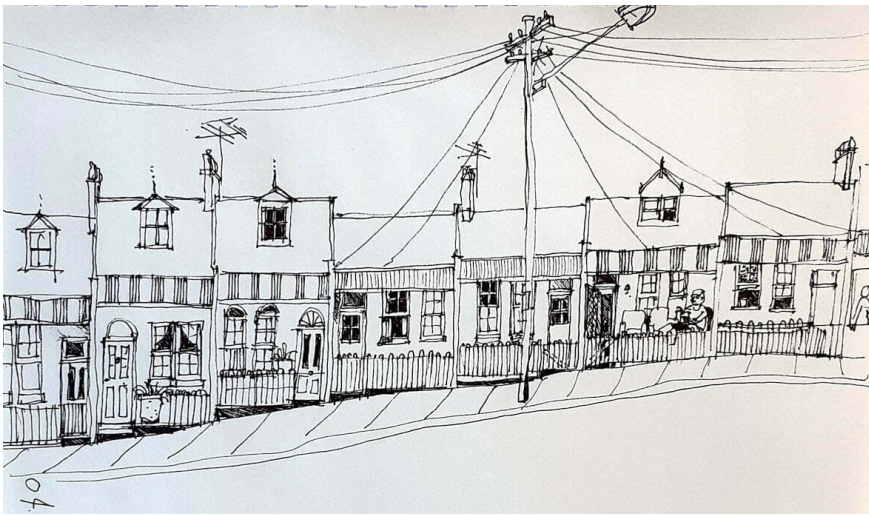
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What do refuges look like?

Refuges are traditionally located in existing, large suburban houses, with little to distinguish them from the surrounding dwellings. The entry is well-protected, with layered doors or gates and usually controlled by a reception area or office attended by staff during the day, and by CCTV at all times. Beyond this, providers generally try to make the atmosphere within most refuges as close to an ordinary home as possible.⁴ Women and children usually have one bedroom to themselves while other areas of the house are shared with other women or families, including the kitchen, dining, living and laundry spaces. Most refuges have backyards with play areas for young children. School-aged children are encouraged to attend the local school. Women are free to come and go as they please. Visitors and men are generally not allowed in the refuge.

Even though a refuge may look like a 'normal' residential dwelling, it is an architectural type unlike any other. It is required to hide in plain sight. It must protect, rehabilitate and provide comfort to a series of unrelated inhabitants who have not chosen to come together, who have differing needs, differing numbers of children, and often different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds.

Common perceptions of refuges include the need for fortress-type walls to protect tenants from angry men; that they are over-crowded and unattractive halfway houses for destitute women; and that teenage boys and pets are banned. These beliefs mean that many women and children may not access the appropriate safety, support, and housing assistance they need, believing that conditions at a shelter may be worse than staying home with a perpetrator. For women and children escaping violence, the refuge is often seen as a last resort. However, while a refuge's primary focus may be safety, they aim to provide a feeling of homeliness, not an atmosphere of fortress or prison-like security. All of the refuges studied for this research worked hard to provide a sense of comfort, safety and stability, and defined moments of luxury.

Refuges differ from homes in terms of length of occupation. A stay in a refuge service might be as little as three to six weeks for some women and children. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the average length of stay in a refuge is eight weeks.⁵ For others, like women on short-term visas or with complex issues, the duration of time might be six or more months. It is a space of transition, rather than a destination, but the transition may occur at varying speeds. As a liminal space between an unstable past and a hopeful future, there is even more pressure on refuge design to provide both psychological comfort and physical amenity.



Is there an Australian context?

The first refuge in Australia was established in a couple of abandoned workers' cottages in Glebe, Sydney, in 1974. Elsie's Women's Refuge Night Shelter was created out of an urgent need for protection for women and children by a group of feminists who were frustrated by the lack of support for women and children experiencing violence. Within a week, Elsie's was filled to capacity. Within a year, there were 11 more refuges in Australia, but none were publicly funded until 1975, thanks to the tenacity of refuge managers who maintained pressure on government ministers while protecting the refuges from arson attacks, bad press, and perpetrators. Simultaneously, similar refuge services were established in the UK and the US. The need for safe, private accommodation paired with women-centred services was recognised to provide the real and immediate change that women and children needed to survive.²

There are currently 82 women's refuges in NSW, providing 1550 beds on any night. However, only 13 provide services exclusively for women and children fleeing domestic violence. Another 32 refuges offer a mix of homelessness and domestic violence services for women and women suffering from addiction. Only seven of the 82 refuges reported a vacancy within any week. In 2017–2018, there were, on average, 236 requests made every day where assistance was not provided. Two-thirds of these requests (66%) came from women. On average, 156 requests for assistance per day made by women were unmet. Four out of every five unassisted requests from an adult with children were from women (78%), most aged between 25 and 44 years. Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children.

A major stumbling block has always been prevailing political attitudes towards the protection of women from violence. For example, Lori Brown states:

This inversion of something so personal and private being debated within the realm of the public is a strange and troubling paradox. In the sense that through the making of publicness the issues

around each are ultimately manipulated and changed into something no longer about women's bodies, women's choice, or women's safety but are used to benefit the different political parties' own agendas.⁷

As in other western cultures, gender discrimination, lack of funding, and a need for more housing stock for women impact the provision of refuge in Australia. The more apparent differences occur due to climatic conditions and building materials, in line with residential types in different locations.

Crisis accommodation does not feature in State planning policies for affordable housing, nor does it benefit from secure and adequate government funding. Refuge managers address financial, social, healthcare, and physical environment strains daily. Their job description is complex, and the conditions they work in are often far from ideal. A large part of their daily battle is accommodation: maintaining and managing the refuge property and finding affordable long-term housing for women post refuge.



Design guide

This research aims to produce an activist document positioned between design research, participatory design, and social activism. It aims to document the spatial needs of refuge users accurately, suggest practical design strategies for spaces to meet these needs, and advocate for policy changes to provide new/more refuge accommodation. I do not aim to make refuges better, but rather to enable those who use the refuge "to capitalise on this potential to reorganise or subvert existing power structures and the spaces that reinforce them" by including the in-depth knowledge of refuge service providers and managers – and the lived experiences of those who have suffered violence.⁸

I visited 12 refuges in Sydney and the surrounding suburbs to interview refuge managers and experience refuge buildings firsthand. To maintain anonymity of the women, I drew layouts and sketches to illustrate my observations. As a result, nine fundamental design principles emerged: safety, privacy, dignity, flexibility, accessibility, child-focused, sustainability, therapeutic space, and sense of home. These principles were common themes extracted from the preliminary interviews and from a review of literature that directly addressed the needs of refuge tenants and workers.

The order of principles reflected the prevalence of these themes in the interviews. The need for a greater volume of designed, quality space was paramount, but more elusive needs, like dignity, safety, and a sense of home, spoke of the impact of built environments on people who use them. Safety and privacy logically work together, whereas other principles like child-focused and therapeutic space required specific focus. The next stage for this guide includes regional and rural needs and design considerations, examples of global best practice in crisis accommodation, and a focus on designing for older women and women from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Principle 1: Safety

Physical protection from external danger is vital for refuge users. A layered entry is the most logical way to ensure safety. Options include quality fencing, controlled access points through the careful location of protected doors and windows, digital surveillance, and good exterior lighting. Refuge managers rely on solid entry doors – security screens paired with solid doors and quality fittings for safe movement to and from the site. A more complex sense of safety is achieved through clear sightlines, location of support, and access to daylight to increase safety and wellbeing for women and children. The aim is to achieve maximum protection without creating a prison-like atmosphere but also hiding in plain sight.



A layered entry sequence with security gates, entry gate and front door screen to enable controlled access of visitors/strangers. Secure screens to doors and windows for actual and perceived safety.

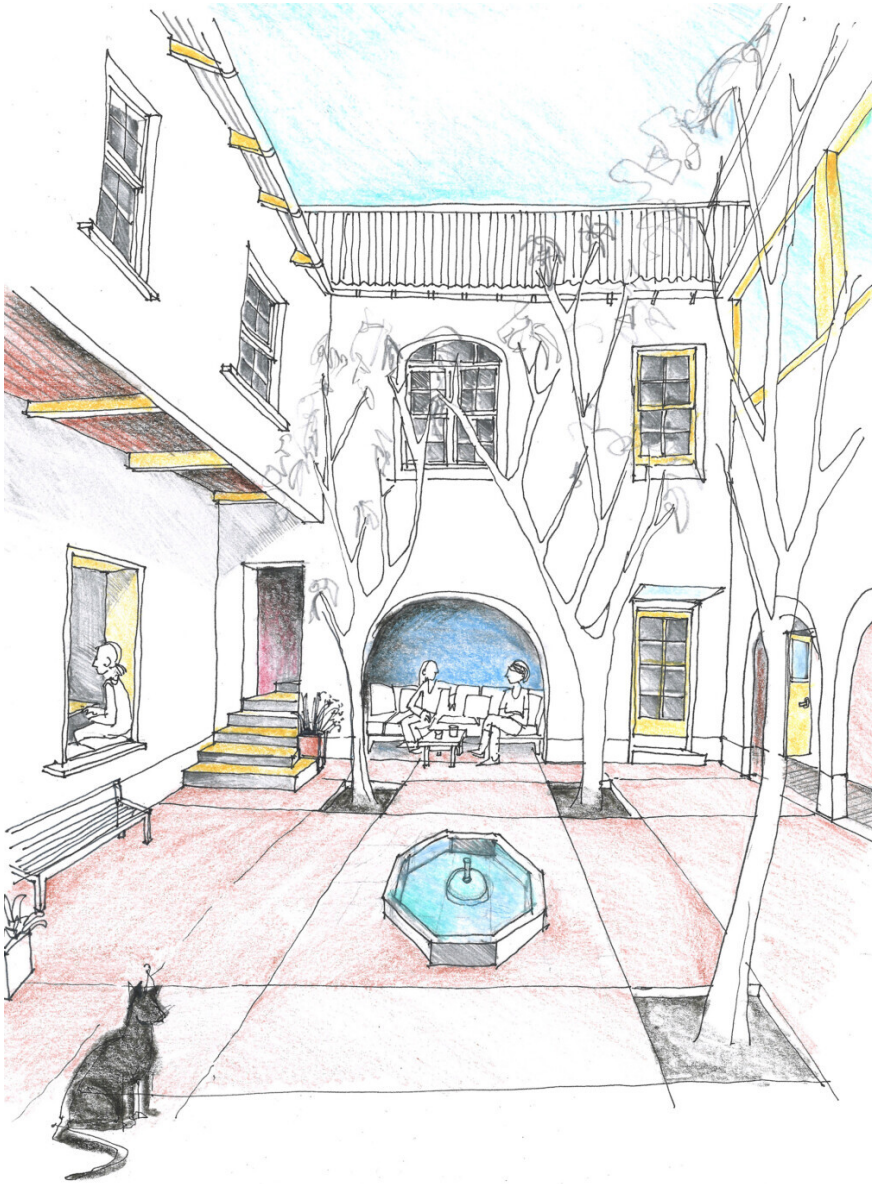
Principle 2: Privacy

For women leaving violence, privacy is one of the most abused aspects of their daily lives. Personal space, the ability to think quietly, rest and parent effectively are often violated as a method of control. Providing respite and sanctuary for residents is integral

to healing from trauma, regaining autonomy, and caring for children. Privacy also helps alleviate friction between residents and increases comfort and wellbeing levels – independent living units are preferred over communal living. Address scales of privacy (group, family, individual) and types of privacy (visual, acoustic and physical) during the design phase. Privacy can be as simple as an alcove or window seat.

Principle 3: Dignity

Dignity refers to the fundamental right of a person to be valued, respected, and treated ethically. Dignity is not the same as respect – it is our inherent worth as a human. Respect, on the other hand, is earned through one's actions. In terms of space, dignity is an experiential quality rather than something that is built. Dignified spaces allow residents and workers to feel valued – interior spaces can be elevated by connecting to beautiful courtyards or gardens and integrating a sense of order and touches of luxury like quality materials.



A sense of luxury can be provided through landscaped spaces, well-designed links between interior and exterior zones and use of quality materials and furnishings rather than ad-hoc fit-outs.

Principle 4: Flexibility

Refuges need flexible living arrangements that can be simply altered to suit families from diverse backgrounds and of various sizes without compromising comfort and a sense of dignity. Sliding panels and movable furniture can reconfigure spaces to suit family arrangements. Dining areas, sleeping areas and storage are key sites for flexible layout.

Principle 5: Accessibility

The refuge environment should be equally accessible to users with diverse and complex needs, including mental health issues, disabilities, physical health issues, substance addiction history and trauma-induced stress disorders. Inclusion of users who have

mobility, sight, hearing, or psychological needs requires care during the design phase. For example, high use areas like kitchens can integrate mobile bench units, and bathrooms should include hob-less showers and good lighting. Access can also refer to connection to medical, financial and legal services.

Principle 6: Child-focused

Children often outnumber adults in refuge accommodation, yet their diverse ages, needs and abilities pose a complex spatial puzzle requiring an understanding of developmental psychology. A supportive, healthy environment for children's healing and rehabilitation may reduce the cycle of children seeking violent relationships as adults. Nurturing the relationship between mothers and children is essential to recovery – and can be integrated through play area alcoves built next to living areas to help communication, dedicated homework zones, areas for teenagers to retreat, and child-friendly furniture. Children's play areas occur at different scales – a communal space or private play spaces within the living areas.



Academic achievement is tied to resilience in children. In an individual unit, children can find a quiet spot to do homework and check in with their parent as needed.

Principle 7: Sustainability

Sustainability here refers to environmental, social, and financial aspects. Well-built environments can foster a sense of belonging that builds confidence and contributes to a resident's ability to be happy and productive in the wider community long term. Good thermal design, with access to natural daylight and ventilation, directly affects the physical and psychological need for comfort and promotes more efficient recovery and rehabilitation. Gardens should be easy to maintain as transitioning refuge users might not be in a state to participate in their upkeep, despite the common belief that a

vegetable garden is good for everyone's mental health. Sustainable landscaped areas ensure longevity and improve the overall impression of the refuge.



Good thermal design provides a high level of human comfort, directly addressing a physical and psychological need for support and protection for refuge users.

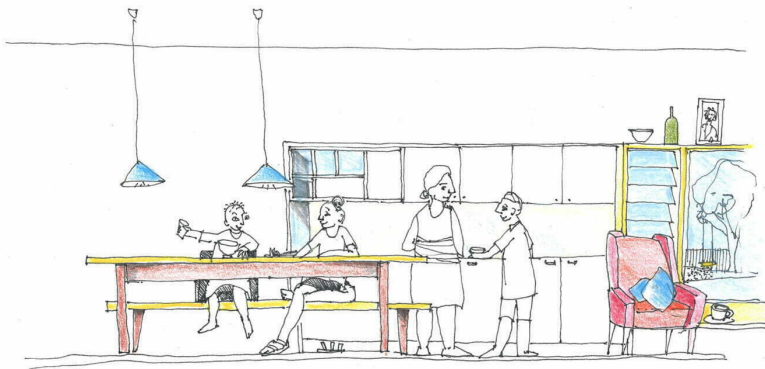
Principle 8: Therapeutic space

Violence affects people differently: physiological responses include hyper-vigilance, depression and exhaustion; physical impacts include chronic pain, mobility issues and autoimmune disorders. Violence also affects reactions to environmental factors. For example, people suffering from depression are often cold because their blood pressure drops. Alternatively, people suffering from anxiety disorders tend to experience overheating. Reducing visual stimuli and environmental stressors like noise, flickering lights, strong smells, or haptics creates a calm space. Providing choice and independence can be achieved with window seats in communal areas and sensory rooms for children and adults. Safe, quiet zones for individuals in distress are essential. They should be separate from others and promote connectedness to the landscape and natural light. Well-designed therapeutic environments emphasise consistency, predictability and personal control, and facilitate social connection, community building, and healthy relationships.

Principle 9: Sense of home

A positive atmosphere and sense of 'home' can substantially affect users' health and wellbeing who have fled violence. The upheaval and dislocation experienced by women and children forced to seek shelter in an unknown environment are difficult to imagine. Home is a locus for everyday life; for others, it is a repository for precious objects and

memories. A calm, welcoming entry zone and places to retreat are critical. Refuges need more robust internal finishes than a typical home without creating an institutional atmosphere. Mealtimes and sleep routines are essential to establish wellbeing and a sense of belonging.



A positive atmosphere and sense of 'home' can have a strong effect on the health and wellbeing of users who have fled violence. The refuge space can provide a sense of belonging through making the idea of home possible.

Summary

The relevance of architecture and design for social impact is essential in this project. The quality of space matters enormously for those working with and those experiencing trauma, particularly for the long-term goal of rehabilitation and healing. Tailored spatial design can address user needs and complex safety, dignity and flexibility issues beyond the practical needs of a temporary place to stay. Attention to aesthetics and a nuanced approach to furnishing, lighting, acoustics and fitting out spaces can make a difference to time spent in the refuge.

Implementation of these design principles depends on the individual buy-in of refuge workers and managers, and the investments in time and money that a service can make. Changes don't necessarily need to be big to be effective – anything that improves the experience of women and children leaving violence should be celebrated. Such improvements could range from making minor changes to furniture layouts, installing new storage for toys and modifying lighting, to renovating spaces more comprehensively or even building anew.

***Samantha Donnelly** is a PhD candidate at the Monash University XYX Lab. Her research focuses on the importance of safe, affordable accommodation for women and children leaving domestic violence. As part of an emerging design guide for women's refuge accommodation, this research explores the benefits of bespoke architectural design in an Australian context as well as tailored design for women over 45. As a lecturer in the school of Architecture at UTS, her teaching focuses on social impact and sustainable projects.*

Paintings & drawings: Samantha Donnelly

Footnotes

1. Del Martin, *Battered Wives* (Volcano, CA: Volcano Press, 1976). ↵
2. *The health costs of violence. Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence*, Department of Human Services, State Government of Victoria. Retrieved from: <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/PVAW/IPV-BOD-web-version.pdf?1a=en&hash=9965632AF1FC7E4C92EFB50705AFADD5A9CF6139> ↵
3. *Personal Safety, Survey 2016*, Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017), ABS cat. no. 4906.0. Canberra: ABS. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/1OgLEWS>. ↵
4. Andrew Hopkins and Heather McGregor, *Working for change: the movement against domestic violence* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), 12–13. ↵
5. Women's Refuge Movement Responses, NSW Parliament, Legislative Council Committee external documents, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/other/9712/Womens%20Refuge%20Movement%20responses.pdf> ↵
6. Anne Summers, *Ducks on the Pond* (Sydney: Viking, 1999), 319. ↵
7. Lori A. Brown, *Contested Spaces: Abortion Clinics, Women's Shelters and Hospitals: Politicizing the Female Body* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 24. ↵
8. Brown, *Contested Spaces: Abortion Clinics, Women's Shelters and Hospitals*, 24. ↵

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