Opinion: Why are we really ashamed about Melbourne’s homeless crisis?

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THERE’S something that’s been missing from Melbourne’s public conversation about homelessness.

The growing number of rough sleepers at Flinders Street Station has captured national attention this week. The news coverage has been both vicious and extensive. Television cameras have been shoved in people’s faces, despite their clear and repeated refusal to participate.

Editorials have called on Melbourne authorities to “rid the city of this ugly homeless blight”. One columnist said the rough sleepers had turned Australia’s most liveable city into a “cesspit”.

We all agree that the makeshift camp is our collective shame but the exact source of that shame remains a little muddled ...

Are we ashamed because the number of people sleeping rough in the inner city has almost doubled in the past two years? Are we ashamed that while Melbourne residential developments are booming, social housing waiting lists continue to blow out? Are we ashamed because homelessness barely rated a mention at the last Federal Election?
Are we ashamed that in a country as prosperous as Australia, there are still children with no choice but to live on the streets? Are we ashamed that we often walk past someone who is homeless, averting our eyes and pretending they’re not there?

No, not really. For the most part we’re not particularly bothered by all of that. What we’re ashamed of is how it looks. We’re ashamed of the cosmetic. We’re ashamed that this iconic building, which belongs on the front of postcards doesn’t look bright and shiny and perfect.

We’d like very much for the authorities to take care of it please. We’d like them to deal with it, eliminate it, to transport it elsewhere, to take it away. That way we won’t have to feel ashamed anymore.

It seems hardly a coincidence that when the Australian Open tennis is bringing the eyes of the world and the wallets of rich tourists to Melbourne, homelessness is finally back on the political agenda.

This begs the question: Are we ashamed of ourselves or are we ashamed of ‘the problem’? Because ‘the problem’ is just people. People who’ve fallen into situations in which there but for the grace of god, go the rest of us.

When you’re living in a comfortable home and sleeping in a cosy bed each night, homelessness seems far, far away from you and your world. More often than not though, it takes just one tragic change in circumstance to leave a person without somewhere to go at the end of each day.

Family violence, the death of a loved one, a divorce, an eviction, cancelled welfare payments, credit card debt … It doesn’t take much for someone to lose their home and with it their safety and security.

Rough sleeping is the most visible aspect of the homelessness crisis but it’s only a sliver of Victoria’s total homeless population. While a few hundred people sleep rough in the inner city each night, there are more than 20,000 Victorians who don’t have a permanent roof over their heads. At any moment, their temporary accommodation might fall through and they too may be forced into living on the street.

Those who are sleeping rough aren’t doing it to cause shame or embarrassment to residents of Melbourne. The 20 or so people at Flinders Street are seeking shade from the scorching sun and finding comfort in one another’s company. The fact the area is brightly lit and police patrol regularly, makes people feel safe enough to actually fall asleep at night.

Of course it doesn’t make for a pretty picture. Drug use is rife; addiction being a major causative factor in people becoming homeless in the first place. It’s messy and dirty too. That’s because when you’re homeless, there are bigger priorities than keeping yourself and the space around you clean. Priorities like getting something to eat, keeping your pets alive … keeping yourself alive.

Homelessness isn’t a choice any more than it is a crime.

How to tackle the homelessness crisis is absolutely something Melbourne needs to be talking about. Having people make their home outside of Flinders Street is not sustainable or desirable. But at the moment we are conducting that conversation such that it is entirely devoid of empathy.

In looking for solutions to homelessness we need to always have in mind the
primary reason that those solutions are necessary. This isn’t about shielding the middle classes from the aesthetically unappealing but making sure every Victorian is safe, secure and has a roof over their heads.