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Urban Narration from Arab
to European Refuge Cities

Even though immigration has been a constant phenomenon ever since man first walked on the face of the earth, the past few years have witnessed extremely high levels of immigration to Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. This influx has garnered a great deal of attention and has come to dominate the daily news, politics, and other domains.

If we look at refugees' living conditions within the countries in which they find themselves, we see that these conditions correspond to the conditions and local resources of the host countries. If we start from Syria and work our way to Germany, moving through all the countries in between, we will notice a sort of sequence, which manifests as a gradient. If we look at refugees' living conditions within Syria (the exporter of the largest number of refugees), then at a sequence of neighbouring countries, moving with the refugees and through their many camps until we finally arrive at Germany (the receiver of the largest number of refugees in 2015), we can form a clear idea about the relation of these conditions to the local resources within each country. We can investigate how the urban problems differ according to each location, and how the proposed solutions to those problems vary according to practitioners from within the field or from other fields.

Refuge Cities in Syria

After having been a host for Palestinian, Iraqi, and then Lebanese refugees fleeing wars, Syria became the world's largest exporter of refugees. Half of the country's 23 million people have been displaced since 2011.¹ 6.5 million moved within Syria itself.² Complicated dynamics constituted the displacement of people within the country. Often the movement was sudden and people fled to other neighbourhoods, villages, cities, or even refugee camps – built for them in order to keep them safe within the country and to reduce the burden on neighbouring countries. It has been reported that people even fled to some of the 'dead' cities in the north of Syria.³ One can only imagine how the situation in camps within Syria must be when neighbouring cities and villages often lack electricity and water, and when educational, shopping, and medical facilities are bombed by warplanes.

1 Cf. *Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR): Syria. Confronting Fragmentation! Impact of the Syrian Crisis Report*, February 2016; <http://scpr-syria.org/publications/confronting-fragmentation> [06.06.2017], pp. 7, 42.

2 Cf. *ibid.*

3 Cf. *The Dead Cities of Syria. Ancient Abandoned Cities Now Repopulated by Refugees*, in: *Kuriositas*, 29.01.2017; <http://www.kuriositas.com/2013/08/the-dead-cities-of-syria-ancient.html> [06.06.2017].

There are several examples of such camps. The Al-Atmeh camp in the Idlib Governorate hosts 80,000 Syrians.⁴ When it was first built in the middle of 2013, it consisted almost entirely of temporary structures and tents; but since then it has witnessed a consistent informal replacement of these structures by housing and facilities made of concrete blocks.⁵ This process gave the primitive urban structure of the camp – which consists of the main venue of shops, restaurants, institutional centres, and public facilities – a more permanent condition. The rest of the camp's urban structures are extremely dense, and there is a lack of public and semi-public spaces, green spaces, and other amenities.

It is obvious that transforming individual houses from tents into concrete structures leads to more efficient insulation and better thermal solutions when compared to the temporary materials that were used before, but we should also be aware that this development permanently fixes the temporary urban layout in place, with all its weaknesses. It seems that informal cities and massive villages that lack the basic requirements needed to one day become truly functional cities are being created, in a similar way to the Palestinian refugee camps that once spread across the region. The morphological elements of the initial temporary city – including its building structures, plot patterns, and cadastral pattern – are preserved during this process, and it will be very difficult to modify them in the future.

This process, especially in such a context, must be understood as going a step beyond the categorisation of emergency architecture; it should, naturally, be understood within the perspective of post-war recovery and construction. This is true even if the process takes place in a time of war, because that process constitutes the future city. It seems very unlikely that such large urban systems will simply be abandoned, especially when one considers similar examples across the region.

“[A] further step in understanding the reconstruction and development process is the recognition that a key dimension in protracted conflicts is that while there will always be areas where levels of conflicts are too high to engage in any developmental activity, in others, the seeds of recovery are being sown and can be nurtured by local authorities and aid agencies. As the peace process gains momentum, the experience of developing recovery strategies in these contexts can be applied to others and enable the transitions from emergency to reconstruction and development programming.”⁶

4 Cf. *Kareem Shaheen*: Bombing of Syrian Refugee Camp Could Be War Crime, Says UN Chief, in: *The Guardian*, 06.05.2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/06/syrian-refugee-camp-bombing-airstrikes-sarmada-un-msf> [06.06.2017].

5 Cf. *Robin Yassin-Kassab*: 'There's No Hope Left'. The Syrian Refugee Camp That Is Becoming a Township, in: *The Guardian*, 18.02.2014; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/18/syrian-refugee-camp-township-atmeh> [06.06.2017].

6 *Barakat, Sultan*: Seven Pillars for Post-War Reconstruction, in: *ibid.* (ed.): *After the Conflict. Reconstruction and Development in the Aftermath of War*, London/New York 2005, pp. 249-270, p. 261; quoted in *Sawsan Abou Zainedin*: *Syria in a Dynamic Stalemate. Relief or Development? Engaging with Communities' Coping Strategies as Means to Endorse Good Governance in the Pursuit of Sustainable Recovery*, dissertation, 01.09.2015; <http://www.academia.edu/16741160> [06.06.2017], p. 18 f.

Still, it could be argued that the consistent acceleration of events and aggressions against civilians as well as the growing need for urgent interventions has made it difficult for local authorities, communities, and concerned agencies to put more resources into this process, and this has left more room for informality.

Less than 20 kilometres from Al-Atmeh, Syrian or Russian warplanes bombed the Al-Kammouneh camp, leaving dozens of civilians dead and injured, and burning a large sector of shelters.⁷ In the same region, and particularly in Rif Salkeen, the difficult conditions did not prevent architects from coming up with very creative and realistic ideas. Qibaa is a group of young Syrian architects who use land materials such as mud and stone to cover people's needs for living spaces. They conducted a year of research and experimentation with convenient mixtures, then they applied compressed mud blocks, and later sandbags and stone structures. They created dome shelters made from sandbags in Qadimoun, which is a 1,000-tent refugee camp that has neither caravans nor container houses; the conditions there are difficult, with up to three families sometimes living in a single tent.

The team of architects proposed to the community and the camp's administration to fill plastic bags with mud and build domes out of them to create spaces for indoor activities. A large sector of the camp's community participated in one way or another in the project. "As it is a period of war, this was a social rather than a construction experience for them; an experience that gave them a great deal of hope,"⁸ says Amr, an architect and a member of Qibaa. The project resulted in a structure consisting of two domes and the formation of a trained team, and it led to another project wherein a seven-dome residential compound was built within Rif Sarmada.



Fig. 1: Sandbag dome shelters in Rif Sarmada, north of Syria; photo courtesy of: Qibaa.

⁷ Cf. *Shaheen*, 2016.

⁸ All verbal statements, if not stated otherwise, were collected in personal conversations by the author.

The group had worked earlier in the city of Akrobat, in the north of Syria, where Syrian locals and Syrian internal refugees lived. When participating in the project, locals showed much more knowledge of the different kinds of soils than the refugees, who stated, “If you had been in our village we would have directed you to the right resources, but here we do not know so much.” The construction work there, which was also based on local skills, resulted in mud housing units being built that “can endure without maintenance for more than 40-50 years,” the group explains.

What makes this experience unique is not only the scarcity of every resource, including peace, but also its vision in selecting land materials within such a rural context. These two reasons make their work a model for shelter and for post-war recovery construction. “We were one team before the siege. The work stopped because we could *not...*,” Amr says. He explains how such a situation prevented the work from proceeding as it should have. Even if the rest of the team is still in the country, Amr, like three million other Syrians, has made his way to Turkey. Almost five million people were forced to leave the country.⁹ The large majority of them now reside in neighbouring countries, which in some cases has led to changes in the demographic and urban structures of those countries, especially in Jordan and Lebanon, due to their relatively small populations.

Refuge Cities in the Middle East

The 660,000 Syrians in Jordan,¹⁰ for example, comprise 10% of the country’s total population. Al-Zaatari camp hosted 200,000 of them in April 2013¹¹ and formed the fourth-largest city in Jordan in mid-2013.¹² Its socio-economic rhythm is quite dynamic when compared to most emerging refugee camps in Jordan: it has, for example, a market that has come to be called the “Champs-Élysée”,¹³ a commercial venue that stretches for one mile. The camp itself has very peculiar urban characteristics because of its massive scale and homogeneousness. Still, if we look more closely at individual sectors of its social fabric, we discover how these plots, which used to be replicated tents, were modified over time and were gradually replaced with caravans or container houses.

9 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA): About the Crisis, 2016; <http://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis> [06.06.2017].

10 Cf. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): Syria Regional Refugee Response. Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal – Jordan; <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107> [06.06.2017].

11 Cf. *ibid.*: Syria Regional Refugee Response. Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal – Zaatari Refugee Camp; <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176®ion=77&country=107> [06.06.2017].

12 Cf. Ronen Steinke: Flüchtlinge als Wirtschaftsfaktor, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 24.02.2015; <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/buergerkrieg-in-syrien-fluechtlinge-als-wirtschaftsfaktor-1.2363541> [06.06.2017].

13 Cf. Sarah Garden: Welcome to the Champs-Élysée. Zaatari Refugee Camp, in: Emirates Woman, 30.08.2014; <http://emirateswoman.com/welcome-champs-elysee-zaatari-refugee-camp> [06.06.2017].



Fig. 2: Areal view of the Al-Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, 18 July 2013; source: US Department of State. The author has highlighted some of the camp's improvised courtyards in blue.

Even if this process took place informally to allow more freedom, it was constrained in that only temporary construction materials were allowed to be used. Concrete is, in fact, a red line, and cannot be used. In this way, people were allowed a certain degree of freedom in reshaping and customising their shelters according to their own financial means, but the danger of having an urbanised and thus a permanent refugee camp – along the lines of the model of Palestinian refugee camps across the region – was warded off.

Different housing typologies can be observed within Al-Zaatari. There are houses comprised of two or three caravans that contain a private courtyard in the middle, and other houses with an outdoor garden. Corrugated sheets and wood are the main materials in the camp. They are used as partitions to wall some spaces off or as a cover for parts of the house or its outdoor space, in addition to being used as fences for outdoor gardens. They are also used to construct kitchens and toilets, as people are customising their houses to avoid using communal kitchens and public toilets. “Mud is allowed, but it is not feasible because of the kind of soil in the desert,” says Manar, an activist and photographer who worked in the camp. Still, there seems to be room for experimentation within the different techniques of mud architecture.

Syrians have spread across the Jordanian cities, within their urban fabric, but there are also clusters of up to 20 tents that are scattered across agricultural lands around Irbid, Ramtha, and Mafraq, where refugees can stay on the condition that they work

in agriculture. Yet this directly contradicts the legislation of Al-Zaatari, where, according to Manar,

“Agriculture is forbidden, so people started to transport red soil in front of their houses to beautify them, but you cannot grow your vegetables there. It is illegal. Maybe because planting gives meaning to a place and a reason for staying there, and so refugees will not return home.”

Returning home is certainly an obsession for all those Syrians who live in such conditions across the region, whether in Jordan, Lebanon, or elsewhere. Home for them seems as far away as peace in Syria seems. During the war, many people decided to move to Lebanon due to Syria’s strong ties with that country, where Syrians have always gone for work, and where many already had relatives. Just like Jordan, Lebanon already had Palestinian refugee camps, which have been there ever since the Nakba (1948).

Shatila is one of many camps situated within the dense urban fabric of Beirut. It is a forest of informal concrete, improvised throughout its existence. It is a clear example of how tents were replaced by concrete houses. People often built their own houses within a few years of arriving there to improve their living conditions. But because they thought their stay in this camp and in Lebanon would be temporary, their houses were often quite weak structures, and frequently even lacked concrete foundations. According to UNRWA officials, 500 buildings currently need to have their foundations reinforced, and local community officials from the camp stated in 2009 that 50% of the camp’s buildings were in danger of collapsing.¹⁴

Since then, Shatila’s population has doubled from 20,000 to 40,000 inhabitants,¹⁵ to host the Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian arrivals. This increase in population has been accompanied by an informal increase in the height of buildings, so as to gain more space vertically, given the scarcity of horizontal space. “People kept on adding floors on top of their roofs, so that you can now see buildings seven or eight stories high; on the unfinished buildings, you can see that the support columns cannot bear such heavy loads,” says Reem, a Syrian architect who works in the camp.

The footprint of the camp and its internal network of narrow alleys describe, when combined with the former description, the spatial configuration of the camp. They imply the consistent deterioration of people’s quality of life, which was never present in the camp to begin with. In such conditions, ventilation and natural light indoors are quite impossible, which means that people are living in dark and humid spaces. The direct social and health impacts of this situation are obvious.

14 Cf. *Qassem S. Qassem: Warshat binya tahtiyya qurb manzil dun ’asasat* (An infrastructure workshop near houses without foundations), in: Al Akhbar, 04.05.2009; <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/80837> [15.03.2017].

15 Cf. *Peter Schwartzstein: Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Camp Reliant on ‘Hell Water’ That Reduces Metal to Rust*, in: The Guardian, 26.05.2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/may/26/syrian-refugees-lebanon-shatila-camp-hell-water> [06.06.2017].



Fig. 3: One of the few semi-open spaces within the Shatila camp, 21.10.2015; photo courtesy of: Reem Haswani.

There are no adequate electricity, water, or sewage infrastructures in Shatila.

“Electricity networks are applied externally on the walls, on the buildings, and above the alleys. Humidity permeates the walls, wet walls in winter could cause people to be electrocuted because of the bad wires, etc.; generally – since open wounds will increase the body’s electrical conductivity – people who are wounded will be the first ones to notice that the water is electrified. The water is salty and it stains metal quickly,”

Reem adds. She explains the Shelter Renovation programme run by Basmeh and Zeitooneh,¹⁶ an NGO that works with refugees in Lebanon and Turkey, and with whom she works in Shatila. Through skilled workers seeking refuge within the camp, the NGO provides the target apartments with the doors and windows that are lacking, in addition to providing basic work involving painting, iron, and wood. They also work on indoor electricity and sanitation networks to make the shelters habitable. Basmeh and Zeitooneh works on 12 houses a month to reach its annual target of 150, whereas the large infrastructural recovery across the camp is conducted by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East),

16 Cf. *Basmeh and Zeitooneh Relief & Development: Shelter Renovation*; <http://www.basmeh-zeitooneh.org/our-programs/shelter-renovation> [06.06.2017].

which consistently tries to cope with the situation. UNRWA's scale of work is so large that they have even renovated or reconstructed entire sections of the camp after their destruction during subsequent wars.¹⁷

The Shatila camp is one of the oldest camps in Lebanon, but in the past five years hundreds of new camps have emerged. "There are 1,200 refugee points spread across Lebanon," states Azzam, who works for Basmeh and Zeitouneh in the Bekaa Valley. He also explains the very difficult conditions of these camps, where accidents often lead to tents burning down or children freezing to death.

In 2016, a broad municipal trend spread across Lebanon: imposing curfews on Syrians within their respective areas. The country of three million inhabitants, which had been occupied for almost three decades by the Syrian army,¹⁸ is currently overwhelmed by the one million refugees on its land.¹⁹ A crisis in infrastructures and basic services had already existed there since the Lebanese Civil War, and this has resulted in even harsher conditions for its inhabitants and, specifically, for refugees. Such conditions, necessarily accompanied by insecurity, are a stigma for the whole region at the moment, and are pushing people to seek asylum through dangerous journeys to Europe.

Temporary European Refugee Cities

Refugees take different routes to Europe. They often reach one European country and plan to cross the borders into another, and so on. This is especially the case when the destination is Sweden, Germany, or the UK. This situation has caused refugee camps hosting hundreds or thousands of people to emerge with temporary structures. The formation of these camps has always been a direct result of a government closing its borders within the European Union, such as the formation of the Idomeni camp when the Macedonian border was closed, and that of the Calais camp when the UK border was tightened.

Idomeni expanded after the European-Turkish deal, receiving more and more arrivals every day. This emerging situation led to an increasingly acute lack of space and facilities. In fact, the camp already lacked adequate living quarters as well as basic water and sanitation services. Several NGOs worked to cover the gap, which was a very difficult job. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), as the main actor on site, built 12 tents, each of which fit 50 persons, and another one that fit 200 persons. With their team of over 100 staff, they worked on a network to provide water and manage the

17 Cf. *Qassem*, 2009.

18 Cf. Syrian Troops Leave Lebanon after 29-Year Occupation, in: The New York Times, 26.04.2005; <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/26/international/middleeast/syrian-troops-leave-lebanon-after-29-year-occupation.html> [06.06.2017].

19 Cf. *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*: Syria Regional Refugee Response. Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal – Lebanon, 31.12.2016; <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122> [06.06.2017].

sanitation of the camp: this network came to have 25 bathing rooms and 120 toilets for 13,000 refugees. Still, the expanding needs made it very difficult for them to address the situation with such informal infrastructure.²⁰

MSF was also a major actor in the Calais camp for refugees who intended to cross the English Channel to the UK. Their work on the infrastructural level significantly reduced the impacts of the growing numbers of refugees in the camp, especially in late 2015. They used gravel to pave parts of the main roads that had become swamps and patches of muck. They also built the Grande-Synthe camp, which some of the refugees were relocated to when the southern half of the Calais camp was bulldozed in early 2016.²¹

Due to its history and its consistent expansion, the Calais camp – which is several years older than Idomeni – had urban and social structures. A central street that had a diverse range of shops, cafes, and restaurants formed the core of the camp. This street was extremely vibrant because it had become, especially after refugees' fears that they would have to leave the camp, a very dynamic place where refugees met and spent their time, often staying out until after midnight. This street also hosted the main landmarks and public spaces of education and prayer, as well as institutional centres.²²

Social structures were very clear in the camp, with communities and sub-communities present on the ground. Some communities had very clear semi-private spaces enclosed by closely aligned tents; spaces they kept clean and elegant, and in which they would gather, wash, and cook. This form was improvised by communities that have more tribal structures, such as the Sudanese, whereas the Syrian community, even when it showed a sense of gathering while being relocated to the northern side of the camp, formed fewer communal spaces. Even though Calais refugee camp was always perceived to be temporary, as all of the refugees there aimed to reach the UK, some refugees opened businesses – a shop or a restaurant, for example – while others demonstrated, when I spoke to them, enthusiasm not only in building their own houses or shared private spaces, but also in paving the short roads that led to their homes, because of the miserable conditions of those roads.

20 Cf. Taghtiyya khasa 104. 'Ala shafir al-karitha (Special coverage 104. On the brink of disaster), audio file in Arabic language, in: Radio Souriali, 10.03.2016; <https://soundcloud.com/souriali/cov104-100316> [06.06.2017].

21 *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF): France. New Quarters for the Grande-Synthe Camp, 07.03.2016; <http://www.msf.org/en/article/france-new-quarters-grande-synthe-camp> [06.06.2017].

22 Cf. *Josh White*: How Calais' 'Jungle' Migrant Camp Has Now Become a Mini City. Complete with Restaurants, a Theatre, Book Shops and Free Wifi, in: Daily Mail, 06.12.2015; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3348594> [06.06.2017].

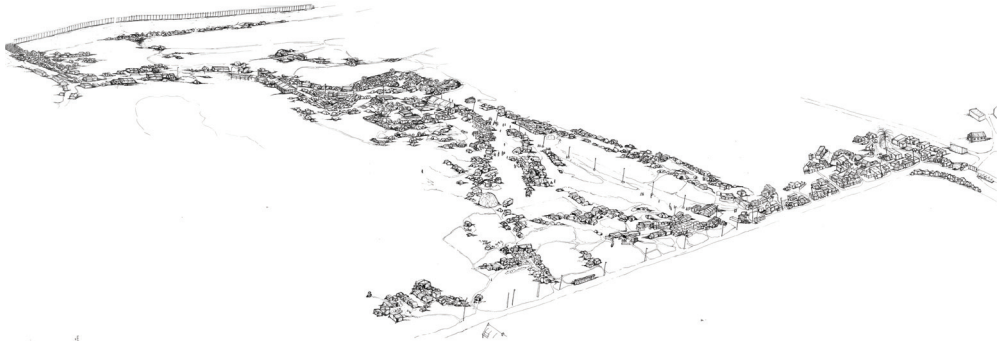


Fig. 4: La Leçon de Calais; source: *École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Belleville*, 2015.

The *École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Belleville* published a document mapping the camp and detailing the camp's land use, landmarks, urban and natural networks, ethnic and sociological features, and main axes.²³ This document formed an important reference for understanding the camp's layout at the end of 2015.

There is a parallel community to the few thousands of refugees in the camp, and this consists of hundreds of English, French, and other European volunteers, who provide the Calais camp with whatever they can organise in their warehouse. A very low-cost type of hut that could be quickly put together was being replicated in the camp by the group 'Building in Calais Jungle'²⁴ to cover the camp's increasing habitation needs, replacing the plastic tents. The story in a camp like Calais ends with refugees who do not manage to cross, and who end up on the streets, or are relocated to another camp, or maybe decide to aim for another country instead.

Reception Centres

When refugees arrive at their destination countries, they are hosted within different reception centres until they are able to move into their rented house within the city.²⁵ The process is quite complex and varies from one European country to another; and even within a single country, such as Germany, policies can vary from one state to another.²⁶

23 *École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Belleville*: La Leçon de Calais. Architectures de la Jungle, October 2015; <https://www.fichier-pdf.fr/2015/12/11/jungle-calais-releve-integral-compress/index/> [06.06.2017].

24 For further information, cf. <https://www.facebook.com/buildinginCalaisjungle> [06.06.2017].

25 Cf. *Informationsverbund Asyl und Migration*: Types of Accommodation. Germany, in: Asylum Information Database, 2017; <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/reception-conditions/housing/types-accommodation> [25.05.2017].

26 Cf. *ibid.*: Conditions in Reception Facilities. Germany, in: Asylum Information Database, 2017; <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/reception-conditions/housing/conditions-reception-facilities> [25.05.2017].

The reception centres usually take the shape of hangars, former military barracks, and vacant public venues (hotels, etc.); and ever since 2013, with the bigger influx of arrivals, container houses and emergency shelters are being built.²⁷ The locations of these centres vary according to the resources; they could be within or near capital cities, smaller cities, or even villages.²⁸

This policy seems adequate, as it spreads the arrivals within the varied urban structures of the country, but one consideration should always be kept in mind: the refugee community should not be kept too far away from the local German community, whether in large urban areas or smaller rural ones.

Parchim, a small town of around 20,000 inhabitants in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany, hosts a reception centre for about 200 refugees.²⁹ The centre resides on the westernmost edge of the town, separated from the residential neighbourhoods by company headquarters and hangars – an urban typology of large scale and big voids. The centre itself consists of two hangars, each of which hosts 65 refugees. “We live each four in a single room. There are two kitchens and four bathrooms for all 65 people; bathrooms are segregated by gender, but kitchens are not. There is no privacy, and families are complaining,” explains Hisham, a Syrian refugee who lives in the centre.



Fig. 5: Reception centre in Parchim (satellite image); source: own illustration.

27 Cf. *ibid.*

28 Cf. *ibid.*

29 Cf. Ankommen in LUP, in: Landkreis Ludwigslust Parchim; <http://www.kreis-lup.de/leben-im-land-kreis/fluechtlinge-willkommen/ankommen-in-lup> [06.06.2017].

The question of the reception centres' relation to the urban and social context and their layout was tackled by the first of the five selected finalists for 'Challenge – What Design Can Do', a competition³⁰ organised by the design platform 'What Design Can Do', the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the IKEA Foundation.

Agrishelter is a unit prototype to be applied and replicated to form either a part of a reception centre or an entire one, with the vision of fitting it into the city fabric. The whole system is designed to be built with degradable materials and requires relatively little labour. In the master plan, houses are surrounded by and foster a green network where users can cultivate plants. This layout suggests an urban farming process, an advantage to the host city as well as to the guest community. "Gardening itself helps people get over their traumas and communicate more easily with the host community," says Narges, the winning design architect. She explains how the compilation of degradable materials, which fulfils the requirement that such centres be temporary, is part of her design:

"The roof is a fabric that is made from the kenaf plant. It has relatively good water and heat performance and can be recycled into paper after its dismantling. The walls are made of bales of straw, a material that exists in most European cities. The foundations are made of wood, and the structure itself is built of wood."

This way of thinking helps municipalities bring the reception centres into the urban fabric of their cities rather than segregating them in remote corners. Such projects could be seen as an invitation to concerned institutions – which are definitely overwhelmed and pressured by the situation and by the complex regulations that constrain them – to reconsider their options.

Before the prototype is released, adjustments have to be made to it based on trial runs that the design architect carries out with Agrishelter's future inhabitants. The refugees participate in this by building a house unit and living in it, and then providing feedback about their construction and habitation experience. In emergency cases, this form of participatory design and construction tackles the concerns of costs and comfort, and circumvents the lack of services, which is a problem in other reception centres.

"I believed in it, and thought consistently about it. We architects often tend to give priority to aesthetics, but here I found myself directing my thoughts to more practical aspects, where everything was about a real future step, how to build and what to build."

If we read between the lines here, the architect seems to be suggesting that hipster architects in this field can learn certain lessons from this, such as the importance of being pragmatic. The same goes for institutions and platforms that treat the topic as a fashion; one example of this is Ideas Forward launching 24H Syria – a 24-hour

30 For further information, cf. <http://www.whatdesigncando.com/challenge/finalists> [06.06.2017].

competition to design a tower for refugees.³¹ Narges' type of solution could replace not only the reception centres but also, to a certain extent, I believe, the improvised emergency shelters in camps like Idomeni and Calais.

Some immigrants or refugees in big cities are not provided any habitation at all by the state institutions because their countries do not belong to a specific category of danger or because their case fell into a crack within the system. They often find themselves on the streets, even though many vacant spaces are scattered across the city. There are various local community efforts that contribute to covering this gap as much as possible. For example, Project Shelter, which is an initiative based in Frankfurt, coordinates spaces for activities and temporary residence within the city.³² Their team consists of locals together with immigrants managing the development of the project and organising different events. Still, the state institutions and bureaucracy are not helping such efforts to cover the gap for the large number of immigrants that are in need.

Refugees and the Host City

After these periods of instability and temporary habitation, refugees must eventually find their own place through different methods, such as Internet resources, aid institutions, and other initiatives like the Leverkusener Modell³³ and the Refugees Welcome³⁴ online platform. Depending on the situation, refugees might share a residence with friends and relatives, or with other people from their host country.

But how can they communicate with the urban and social fabric of the city? To what extent are they accepted within the host community, especially within the current political and social atmosphere of Europe as a whole?

A German man told me that he has a friendly and welcoming attitude toward refugees, but at the same time he said the following: "When I am at home to relax, I do not want to be a social worker." However, many others already share a flat with refugees and live well with them, without considering themselves social workers. A well-known fact among the Syrian refugee community is that most German landlords prefer to rent out their apartments to those who are financially self-sustaining, rather than to refugees who depend on the social benefits system provided by the Job Centre.

31 For further information, cf. <http://www.if-ideasforward.com> [06.06.2017].

32 For further information, cf. <http://projectshelterffm.tumblr.com> [06.06.2017].

33 Cf. Maximilian Popp/Sven Röbel: Flats over Shelters. Asylum Seekers Embrace Alternative Housing, in: Spiegel Online, 30.08.2013; <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/asylum-seekers-alternative-housing-approach-in-leverkusen-a-success-a-919007.html> [06.06.2017].

34 For further information, cf. <http://www.refugees-welcome.net> [06.06.2017].

But how about the refugees themselves? How do they look at the city and interact with it? And what about their relation to their host community? To understand this, I conducted a questionnaire survey in January 2016 (not published) in which nearly 400 Syrian refugees from almost every region in Germany participated.

The large majority of the participants had been living in their place for less than six months, divided almost equally between reception centres and permanent housing. 90% of the almost 400 respondents were men, less than 5% of whom were over 40 years old. These two figures reflect the sector of young males who fled military service and the battlefield. More than 90% of the respondents live in Germany, scattered across the whole country, and 75% of them had been in Germany for less than six months and had rudimentary German-language skills by the time of survey, in January 2016.

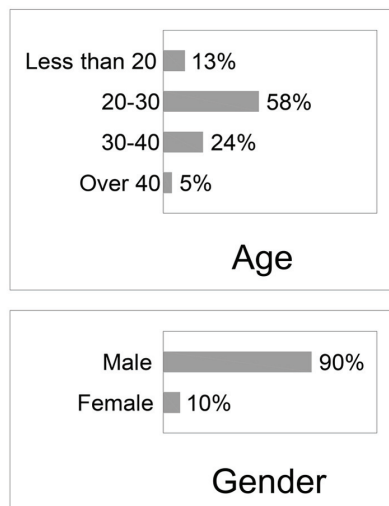


Fig. 6: Unpublished survey. Features of the participating group; source: own illustration.

Only one third of the respondents, when asked about their willingness to share accommodation with locals, preferred not to share a flat at all, mainly for family reasons and a desire for privacy. This was with regard not only to having German flatmates but also to living with other Syrians. 4% of the respondents rejected the idea of sharing housing with locals for conservative reasons related to differences of religion, gender, or culture and traditions. “I prefer to stay with my family because I am a girl. Living with strangers contradicts our culture and traditions,” one of the female respondents explained.

The other two thirds of the respondents expressed their enthusiasm for the idea of flat sharing, which expresses their tendency and potential to interact with locals in the long term. In fact, the words ‘integration’, ‘culture’, and ‘tradition’ were men-

tioned very often in people’s responses. They clearly expressed their desire to improve their German-language skills and to make contributions to their host country in the future.

“I would like to know their lifestyle, and benefit from discussions in order to learn the language and learn about dealing with children, their daily routines, their weekend activities, sex, religion, state, economy... to understand everything, integrate with them, and learn from them. I saw very bright and beautiful aspects in them, and so I wish to know the how and why!”

one of the respondents explained. Another focused on the bidirectional process of integration and interaction:

“I would like to share, to get to know the culture and traditions flawlessly, and to learn the language from official resources rather than from the street. I would like to express who we are to the host country through my flatmates. This would help reflect a beautiful picture about us and about our traditions and culture. I desire cultural interaction.”

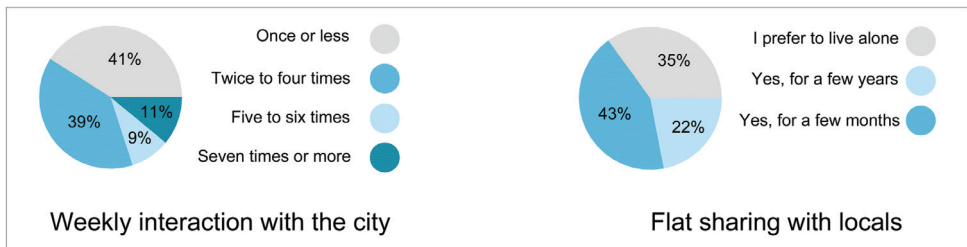


Fig. 7: Diagrams of spatial and social interaction with the city; source: own illustration.

Even though the emerging Syrian community does not tend to form habitation ghettos, at least not in Cologne, their economic activity still occurs almost entirely within markets that are primarily run by immigrants (based on my personal observations). This could be partially attributed, I believe, to their low levels of income, especially with regard to those on the benefits system, and to considerations related to the cultures of foods and goods.

Their relation to the city and its community is established not only through this economic activity, but also through their daily routines, including school, work, and other less frequent needs such as medical and financial affairs, and so on. Beyond this, other activities appear to indicate a level of comfort and interaction within the city.

The survey also investigated their relation to public spaces – promenades, parks, public squares, restaurants, and so on –, where they can experience the leisure activities of walking, cycling, sports in general, picnicking, and joining public events and street festivals; everything that could be done in a typical spring or summer day. The graph shows that 41% of the respondents go out for leisure once a week or less, whereas only 20% go out five times a week or more. 95% of the respondents are under 40,

and more than half of them are still in reception centres, which means that these people have not started working or attending language courses yet. I believe that immigrants will go out for leisure even less frequently in the future, due to the prevailing political atmosphere and fears about national security; but gradually, the confidence that comes with language and work can lead to a healthier fit for immigrants within the urban and social fabric of their host countries.

Personal Reflection

This narration followed the refugees' journey; starting in the burning camps of Syria, passing through difficult camp conditions within the surrounding countries, and continuing over Greece and the Balkans to the destination countries. How connected these camps appear to be when one person passes through all of them... by narration or by foot... as an architect, a tourist, or as an immigrant. We have seen how an image of a drowned child can open a continent up to asylum seekers, and how a terrorist attack or an instance of sexual assault can cause a European city to close its borders forever. Still, this relation will endure as long as the Mediterranean endures.

We have seen how the issues change from one city to another and from one country to another. Refugees in Europe are struggling to fit into their new surroundings, while refugees in camps in Syria are simply attempting to survive amid the bombs and shelling. We have seen how the difficulty of the issues increases steadily as the resources decrease from west to east.

This narration shows to what extent one can make a difference within the domain of urbanism and architecture when facing such a crisis, and how subtle or lurid our touch can be within the wide range of tasks that urbanists and architects can perform.

In the end, it is fair to look back at the Arab world, and particularly the Gulf countries, which have hosted no refugees whatsoever during these wars, thereby introducing a new concept of refugee-free cities to the world.

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THE CRITICAL STAGE. YOUNG VOICES ON CRUCIAL TOPICS

Ever since the outbreak of the revolutionary movements that in Europe have come to be known as the “Arab Spring”, diverse forms of protest seem to be on the increase worldwide. At their core, these protests are driven by citizens’ calls for more social participation, more democracy, and – above all – more transparency in individual states. Young people in particular are at the forefront of these protests, as has been exemplified by the Occupy movements in New York, Frankfurt, and elsewhere. A further defining feature is that most of the protesters belong to a well-educated middle class – a middle class that refuses to accept the prevailing social imbalances and the resulting lack of opportunities, most notably with regard to employment.

The international series “The Critical Stage. Young Voices on Crucial Topics” deals with these developments and poses questions such as: Can this growing level of resistance be defined as a homogeneous global phenomenon? Or are these protest movements more regional in nature, and determined by the respective state systems within which they are located? What specific demands can be identified, and how could these demands be incorporated into political decision-making processes? Does the underlying reasoning extend beyond the political sphere to other areas as well?

Designed as an ongoing online publication, “The Critical Stage” aims to bring together the various standpoints of protest movements from around the world. The series gives a voice to representatives from a wide variety of individual movements. Young journalists, film directors, artists, researchers, and members of diverse protest groups share their views on the inequities in many of the world’s political systems, and on the various modes of resistance that are being formed in response to these conditions.