



Lessons Learned from Refugee Camps: From Fetishizing Design to Researching, Drawing, and Co-Producing

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In April 2021, I received an email from a student seeking help and advice to complete his bachelor's degree in architecture at a German university. He asked, "In your opinion, and as an expert, how does one design a better refugee camp?" He shared an extensive table where he broke down the various dimensions of a camp into categories (security, participation, fences, shelter, etc.)—an approach that is widely common in architectural schools and used to unpack the complexities of an urban space. I could not think of a good answer. I was trying to be diplomatic and careful, but eventually I could not. I asked him, "Why do you want to design a better camp? Camps are like prisons where people are contained and trapped for an unknown period of time. Where people are managed like objects and squeezed into small spaces. It is like a prison where people are controlled. Do you want to design a prison?" I was aware of my exaggerated tone, but I saw it as necessary to challenge the assumption that designing is always the correct solution, no matter the problem.

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The notion of power is often addressed in universities, but is seldom an area of focus within architectural curricula. This is because architects are expected to excel in providing creative and aesthetically pleasing solutions to customers. We are so focused on the solutions that sometimes we forget to ask: For whom is this being built, and for what purpose? How do our designs affect society and empower or disempower certain groups within it? The focus is the design—this is what the architect sells. The issues with this design-based approach become more apparent when architects aim to tackle the refugee “problem.” The questions that are rarely asked are: Do we always need to build? And if we are not wielding our pens and papers to design, what can architects and planners do?

In this chapter I show how a design-oriented approach can be harmful for shifting the attention from refugees’ needs and complex realities toward producing “successful” and “innovative” solutions as determined by the expectations of the field of architecture. To illustrate this point, I will give several examples from workshops and seminars tackling urban and spatial issues regarding refugees. As a successful model and counterpoint, I will show how a successful process includes the active involvement of refugees, and a collaborative approach toward fulfilling their needs. Additionally, I will illustrate how a research-oriented approach to architectural design can be very powerful and has the capacity to raise awareness about the complex spatial realities that refugees face in exile. To do so, examples from studios and design workshops conducted in refugee camps in Jordan and Berlin will be presented. Finally, I will re-emphasize the last point, by giving further examples from a seminar I taught to students in the Urban Studies program at Vassar College.

ARCHITECTURE AND REFUGEES

Historically speaking, the involvement of architects with refugee issues was limited to their role in spatial practice and design around issues of shelter. Ian Davis, at Oxford University, for instance, engaged his students in the 1970s in the challenges of shelter design. One of his main suggestions was the need to shift from designing shelter as a product to thinking about the process of *sheltering* where local materials and labor markets need to be deployed (Davis 1977). Although Davis continued to be involved in matters of shelter design with humanitarian actors and relief agencies (Davis 2011), in general, architects were frequently pushed to the margin in humanitarian circles. “People laugh at me here. I sometimes

question the validity of what we learned in university,” confessed a site planner in a refugee camp, working at United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). “Our knowledge seems invalid,” he continued. This prevailing sentiment has been explored in the work of Tom Scott-Smith (2017, 67), who points out the “humanitarian-architect” division where “humanitarians are minded to see architects as utopian dreamers, completely out of touch with the realities of the field and the needs of beneficiaries.” This explains why the words “architecture” and “architectural” are mentioned only once or twice in humanitarian catalogs like *Shelter After Disaster* or the *Sphere Handbook* (see Breeze 2020).

However, architecture and urban studies can play important roles in understanding refugees’ multifaceted experiences. The movement of populations across the globe due to wars, conflicts, lack of resources, environmental hardship, or what can be described as a “massive loss of habitat” (Sassen 2016) results in the production of new types of urban spaces by refugees. Displaced populations contribute to the production of cities, the urbanization of camps, and the appropriation of neighborhoods in which they live. They bring different types of spatial knowledge into the new environment in which they find themselves. Yet a nuanced understanding of refugee spaces is still lacking. According to Romola Sanyal, “refugee spaces are emerging as quintessential geographies of the modern, yet their intimate and everyday spatialities remain under-explored.” Architecture as a discipline can play an important role in this process (2014, 558). To highlight this point, I will illustrate case studies in which a design-oriented approach to refugee space proves problematic, and others where an architecturally and politically informed research-oriented approach seems to harness better results and empower refugees in their context. I will begin with the design-oriented approach.

A DESIGN-ORIENTED APPROACH IN AL-HUSN REFUGEE CAMP IN JORDAN

In 2016, while I was working with the Department of International Urbanism and Design (Habitat Unit) at the Technische Universität (TU) in Berlin, Germany, my colleagues and I were invited to conduct a workshop in Al-Husn camp in Jordan, where 25,000 Palestinian refugees have lived since 1967. The prolongation of exile has gradually transformed the camp from a set of temporary shelters into an urban environment. The

hosting institution was the GIZ (the German Agency for International Cooperation), which was then collaborating with UNRWA (The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) on a project concerning the Greening of Refugee Camps. The need for greening camps came out of the CIP (Camp Improvement Program), a pilot project introduced in refugee camps for the first time, aiming to upgrade their urban structures (Hanafi and Misselwitz 2010). The design studio we put together consisted of about fifteen master's students enrolled in the Department of Architecture at the TU Berlin and about fifteen undergraduate students from the University of Petra in Jordan, who participated during the workshop only. During the workshop, the students were first welcomed by GIZ, who funded the project, and were introduced to four initiatives that were run by different CBOs (Community Based Organizations), and which received funding to implement greening projects in the camp.

In that context, and as architects, we were asked to suggest how these urban initiatives can be developed and expanded further. In other words, the design studio was meant to function as a “think tank” for GIZ and the funded initiatives. This design-oriented approach prevented us from fully understanding the context and, instead, stuck us in the middle of an established web of power relations, where our position was the “provider of solutions.” Although we were introduced earlier to the camp and the CBOs, we knew little about the internal politics of these CBOs and the motivations for their initiatives. The short schedule of the workshop (10 days) made the design-oriented approach very challenging. Groups of students were meant to support the CBOs in their initiatives, but, in effect, they hindered CBOs' efforts because they were seen as support that no one had asked for. As we came to understand later, none of the CBOs was actually interested in “greening,” the main focus of our project. As one refugee woman on the periphery of the camp explained: “Who are these people [CBOs], I never heard of them, and no, they haven't done anything for us here.”

Trapped between GIZ, who invited us, and the CBO leaders, who played along but had very little interest in design, we were expected to “produce” and to serve an already established agreement between GIZ and the local CBOs. We also felt the urge to “design something” for refugees and thus accomplish something positive. Moreover, many of the areas of intervention and project development were selected earlier and imposed on the camp. The area around a girls' school was to be “greened,” and an

empty area on the periphery of the camp was also to be improved by planting a garden. When attempting to do a quick workshop with girls at the school, their first objection was: “but we don’t want to have a garden here. The boys will come from outside and destroy it.” Similarly, while sitting with one of the committee members in the camp management, the students were frustrated; he looked at the plans with suspicion. “We can’t open the park at night,” he commented. “This park should stay closed, as the neighbors wouldn’t like it to be a place for unwanted naughtiness at night.” The fetishization of architects as doers, solution-finders, and beautifiers clashed with the reality of the space. Surely, this is not the first experience within the context of architectural education where designing fails, but it is important to ask: When should architects refrain from interfering and let go? When is it better not to engage their architectural capacities? It even urges us to ask: Can we really believe that architectural design can provide “universal solutions” that could be parachuted everywhere and anytime? Would architecture really work amid a set of hidden power relations that might be prevalent in a certain place (see Al-Nammari 2013)?

My argument here is not to avoid designing. Rather, my aim is to always be aware of the political contours and powers through which design operates, and to ensure that the architectural imagination can be helpful and offer creative solutions to communities in need. In another workshop in Jerash camp, the results were exactly the opposite. The CBOs needed support, and the designs were implemented as first steps toward anticipated funding. Both the CBO and the community in the camp saw the designs as a source of empowerment. Many of the conducted projects within that context were embraced by the community and developed further. Thus, a design-oriented approach can be useful when it seeks to empower refugees and fulfill their daily needs and expectations. It works when refugees express their need for support, rather than outsiders assuming what their needs are. Also, in contrast to Al-Husn camp, which is more urbanized, Jerash camp is more impoverished. The inhabitants there are ex-Gazan refugees who have limited rights in Jordan (Al-Husseini 2010). Because of that, the government enforced restrictions on the built environment; use of concrete slabs was limited (to avoid permanence), and zinc roofs are very common.

Some of the suggested projects were designed to deal with these obstacles. For instance, the students developed a low-budget water heating system and insulation system that were applauded and praised by the refugee community in the camp (see Fig. 1). This shows that a design-oriented



Fig. 1 A simple system for heating water and insulating the zinc roofs developed specifically for and with refugees in Jerash camp (Source: Students of TU Berlin, 2016)

approach within the refugee context can be indeed beneficial and powerful, but *only* when it responds to urgent issues and demands coming from within the refugee community itself, and when the approach is not imposed on them by external institutions or actors. At times, these impositions can come from architectural schools, or from architects who want to “prove” that their ideas can serve the community.

An example of that is an “innovative” tent that a local architect designed for refugees. The design was for a weaving technique that would allow rainwater to be stored on the outer surface of the tent, while also preserving solar energy. As “innovative” as this design might appear, it overlooks the main challenge: a refugee tent is a suspension of the individual’s “right to dwell” (see Dalal 2022; Dalal et al. 2021a, b), putting them in a state of permanent temporariness (instead of just providing shelter for a few days). It gradually oppresses people’s everyday need for privacy and forces families to live together in one single space for an unknown period of time.



Fig. 2 Workshop between the students and the refugee community in Jerash camp (Source: Author, 2015)

In contrast to a design-oriented approach that tends to overlook refugees' needs and demands, I suggest that a research-oriented and politically informed practice is much more powerful when working in a refugee context, as shown by an example from a research-based studio conducted in Berlin (Fig. 2).

A RESEARCH-ORIENTED APPROACH IN TEMPOHOMES (BERLIN)

Architects do not always prioritize social or cultural knowledge of a particular space, because architecture is perceived as an artistic practice. As more and more architects become engaged with this kind of research, however, it is worth shedding light on the importance of this understanding within the context of refugee housing.

In 2018, LAF (the State Office for Refugee Affairs in Berlin) approached us, asking for feedback regarding their design of “Tempohomes,” new types of refugee camps built specifically for Berlin. For students to sign up for the research-oriented studio, they had to provide drawings and sketches that illustrated their analytical skills. Many of their initial design ideas and drawings revealed “stereotypical” judgments of refugees or homeless people. These early drawings reflected superficial observations and knowledge of people who appeared very “different” or were living under “precarious conditions.”

The research-based seminar began by teaching students about research methods developed in the social sciences, such as semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and walk-along interviews. During the study, the students applied these methods to understand better how refugees “live” in the containers of the Tempohomes, which are similar to the containers used on construction sites. “We are always asked to make drawings, but not usually asked to explain them in writing,” I said, while showing the students slides of how they can structure an argument by writing—something architecture students might never learn in a class. We were able to produce an elaborate report about Tempohomes: their spatial structure, how they are used and experienced by refugees, and how refugees appropriated the space. “This is the first time I have done something like that,” commented one of the students. “Research allowed me to understand better what refugees endure in these containers. Things I would have never imagined.”

In contrast to a design-oriented approach, a research-oriented approach for architects in the refugee context allows them to use their spatial analytical skills to understand what can be a complex setting. They can then recognize the powers at play and the impact of the design, before suggesting a design of their own. As one student commented, “refugees suffer from the materiality of this container, they are too hot in summer and very cold at night!” A research-oriented approach to the refugee issue allows architectural students to empathize with refugees, to make connections to their own experiences and struggles instead of making uninformed judgments. It also contextualizes their skills and knowledge and leads them to make politically informed decisions. Students’ sharpened insights became apparent during their discussions with the State Office for Refugee Affairs. “They don’t like to hear that their design is not good,” one student noticed. The students became aware not only of the power of their observations and analytical drawings, but also of their impact on the politics of

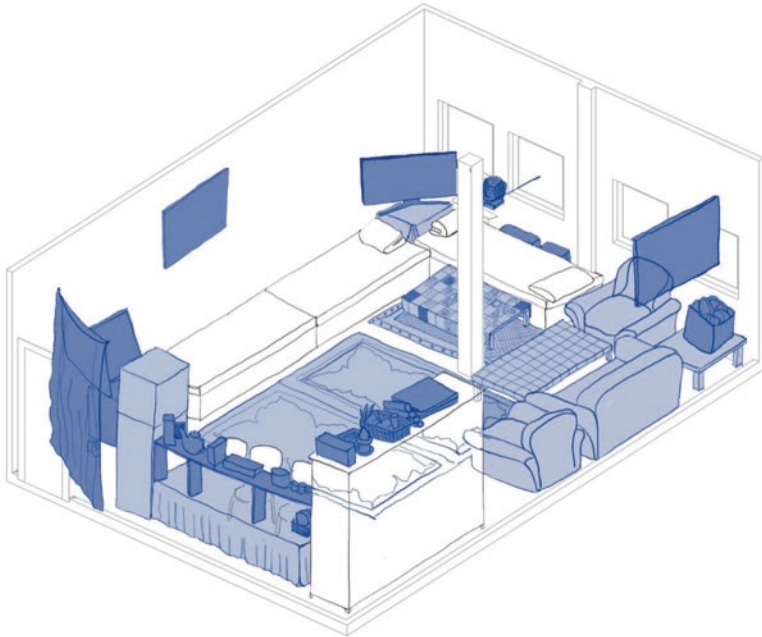


Fig. 3 A visual documentation of how a refugee family utilizes space in a Tempohome container (Source: Antonia Noll and Christina Hartl, 2018)

refugee accommodation at large. “When is our report going to be published?” many of the students demanded, even as debates with the LAF continued, delaying publication (Fig. 3).¹

CONCLUSION

Finally, I would like to emphasize that these conversations need not wait until students reach graduate school. Critical, informed conversations about the role of design and designers can, and must, happen in the undergraduate classroom as well. In a Spring 2021 seminar on Refugees and

¹Eventually, the report was published as a book under the title *Tempohomes: Untersuchung sozial-räumlicher Aneignungspraktiken von Geflüchteten in ausgewählten Berliner Gemeinschaftsunterkünften* by the Berlin University Press in 2022.

Urban Space taught digitally to a dozen students at Vassar College, I took advantage of the remote format imposed on us by the pandemic to bring a much wider variety of speakers to class than would normally be possible. The course asked students to explore how refugees contribute to urbanization processes and can reshape the ways neighborhoods are built. Temporary shelter and camp spaces host clashes between the different visions and needs of local officials, humanitarian agencies, and newly arrived residents looking to establish a sense of home in an often-permanent but always precarious space. One student, reflecting on the experience of hearing speakers' insights on collaborations with refugees and camp officials, noted that she was able to understand, and hold in tension, the clean lines of designs and diagrams with the "messiness of human cooperation." Given that refugees, camp officials, and designers may arrive with very different experiences, expectations, and ways of talking and working, it is important that students and burgeoning designers and researchers be prepared to challenge their assumptions and explore new perspectives in the undergraduate classroom.

Another student commented that this class was an important one, unlike any other he had taken at Vassar:

Ayham once spoke about how the course, which gathered students across several disciplines at Vassar, required that he and the students meet in the middle in terms of the media we used. Accustomed to working with TU Berlin students who had a firm grasp on architectural visualization, Ayham had to continually adapt the syllabus to engage liberal arts students, many of whom had far more experience writing than drawing. He never surrendered the value of thinking about the spatial-technical arenas of displacement through visuals and graphics, but he encouraged deliverables that put texts in conversation with other tools and media (e.g. architectural practices, mapping, archival work) to make use of our strengths. A thorough and exact syllabus Ayham had offered at the start of the semester gave way to a course that we had created collectively and iteratively. I got the sense from Ayham that it would be a shame for camp studies to be consumed by the technical, or become the domain solely of architects and planners, and the shape of our class resisted just that possibility.

Returning to the anecdote that opened this chapter, the experience of taking a research-oriented, multidisciplinary approach to refugee shelter and housing might have prevented the student from asking, "how to design a better camp," and might have prompted him to instead wonder,

“what can we architects do to make refugees’ lives better in these camps?” While the first question is a provocation that revolves around a naïve attempt to “fix problems” out there through designs, the second one is informed by the political and existential struggles of refugees in camps and urban areas. This second framing prompts a much larger challenge: “How can architectural education and practice contribute to redressing the spatial injustices and inequalities we witness around us?”

We need design. The world cannot go without it. Imagination, creativity, and fantasy are needed to make the world enjoyable. Yet we also need to think about the impact of such provocations and designs, especially on people who struggle to meet daily needs and secure basic human rights. Research, although not common among architects, is a way to bring the students closer to complex realities. We must encourage future practitioners to unpack, question, and understand complex matters, and make their designs well-informed about the entangled web of relations, hardships, and opportunities in which refugees and other marginalized and colonized populations find themselves.

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