Refugees as Architects

During 2018, I was invited to co-curate an exhibition showcasing the architecture of refugee camps in the Middle East. In Jordan alone, there are striking differences between newly built camps such as Zaatari and Azraq, and many of the Palestinian camps that have developed over the years. However, one similarity remains: all these camps were eventually *built* by refugees. This applies to all scales: from the internal layout of the dwellings, through the ways in which buildings and infrastructures are interlinked, and to the furnishing and use of semi-private and public spaces. The idea at stake here is that *refugees are the real architects of the camp*. Dwellers excluded from provisional housing, such as those who end up in slums and squats, produce their own built environments — and so do refugees. One of the pioneering books that comes to mind here is *Housing by People* by John F. C. Turner (1977). In that book, and inspired by the practices of self-building in slums, Turner explores the possibilities of adapting this model to the economically-driven housing market found in cities today. While his book looks at the technicalities, the main question remains and can also be extended to refugee camps: What can we learn from refugees' self-build practice?

To think of refugees as architects involves a few implications that need to be addressed. First, it gives agency to refugees – a group of people who are often portrayed abstractedly as 'victims', and who thus lack capacities or skills. In that sense, calling refugees architects, or even 'city-makers' (see Fawaz et al. 2018), is a form of empowerment. The strength here lies in the ability to show refugees as *knowers and dwellers*, whose active participation in shaping the built environment around them produces new urban spaces, vibrant markets and lively neighbourhoods. This image contrasts with the ways in which refugees are often portrayed or imagined: lost in space, and unable to find their place in cities, villages or camps. Second, considering refugees as architects can lead us to question the limitations and potential of architecture as a practice. In schools and universities, the architect is trained to find solutions and to design spaces that are not only functional and sustainable, but also aesthetically pleasing. In the context of emergencies, architects are not necessarily welcomed by relief actors. In fact, they are considered as a unnecessary 'luxury', promoting what has been leading to a 'humanitarian-architect

divide' (Scott-Smith 2017b). Nonetheless, many architects have shown interest in the current refugee crisis, trying to find suitable solutions for designing camps or shelters. In this context, the rise of the refugee as a knower, a builder, and thus an architect who is capable of designing and co-producing space, puts the profession of architecture into question. If refugees are already architects, what then is the role of those already trained in that field? Here we need to keep in mind that many people might have been trained as architects prior to or after becoming refugees. The answer to the question, therefore, is not about timing, roles or defining responsibilities, but about opening up the field of architecture so that it becomes a medium of communication and exchange, where knowledge circulates and where dwellers have a say in shaping their built environment. At times, refugees may be the most suitable for telling professional architects and planners how they want to live and dwell. Their appropriations in Zaatari camp and many others are a clear expression of that. At other times, refugees may need assistance with regard to how to technically build or enhance their dwelling structures. The need for a professional architect and planner may be pressing. In this new dialogue, refugees' knowledge of space needs to be considered seriously, and of course, architects' training and immense capacities for understanding, structuring and advancing the construction of space also need to be utilized. Architecture in that sense is *co-learnt* and *co-produced*. However, while this may be a topic worthy of its own book, let us turn again to Zaatari camp.

Claiming that refugees are architects is a provocation that hides behind it an inevitable fact: *refugees are dwellers*. No matter where they end up, all refugees and displaced populations will eventually dwell. The act of dwelling is quintessentially creative, as Heidegger (1971b) suggested. In that sense, the dwellers become the masters of their own environment, and they create a 'speech' and a 'narrative' that suit their conditions, their exile and their state of being. This is why displaced persons may dwell differently. Although they use the same 'language', their practice of dwelling differs, for it seeks to tell us about who they are, and where they are in this life after exile. To bring that close to what has been discussed so far in this book, it may be worth looking again at what the 'social dynamics' and 'material dynamics' mean, and how they are synchronized. First of all, each of these dynamics has been assigned a different chapter, but by now, it should be understood that they can overlap, or even work against each other, as illustrated by the following examples. Second, these dynamics seek to lay out the *main patterns* or *forces* that have affected the process of dwelling in Zaatari camp. Thus, they are camp specific, although they may be witnessed in other camps. They are also group specific: in this case, Arab refugees displaced mainly from villages and towns located in the south of Syria. Third, the presentation of these dynamics should not be understood as representing a certain order or fixed amounts. This is why the word 'dynamics' describes them best: they can change in their timing, importance and capacities as

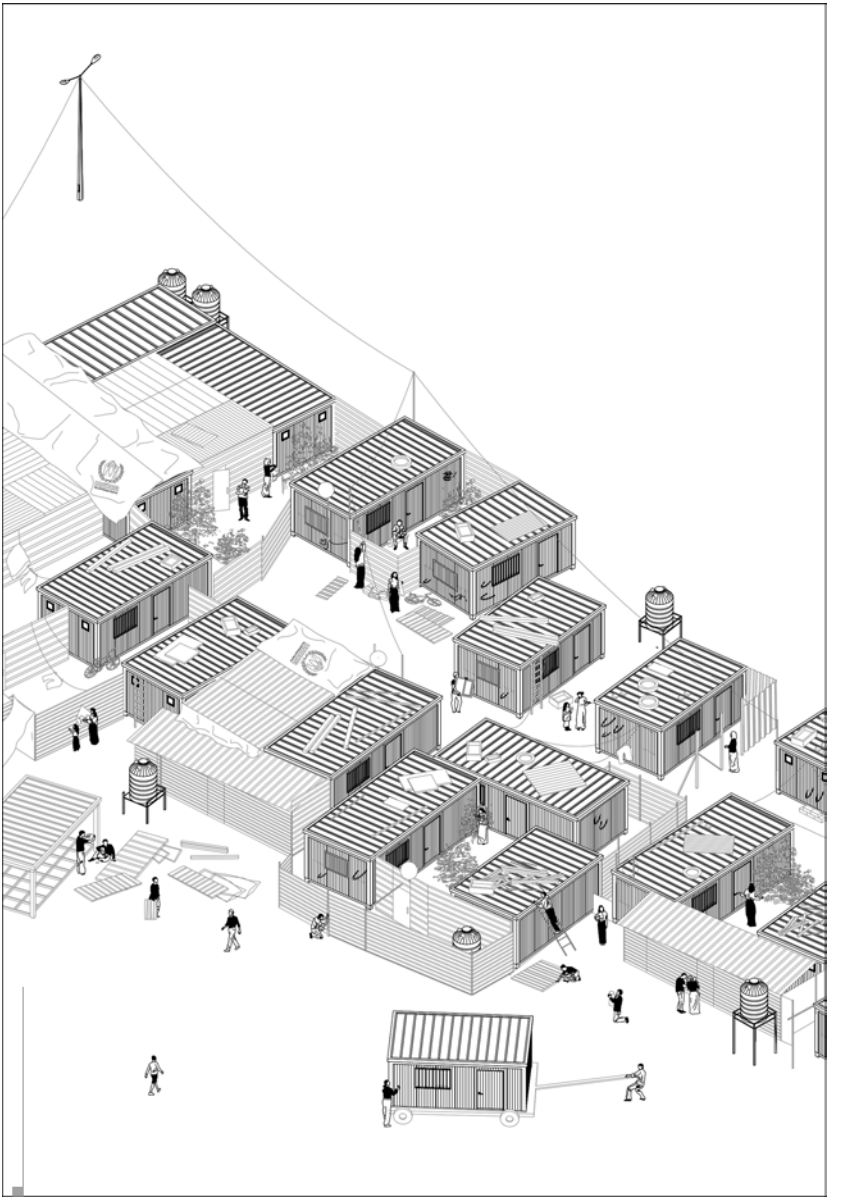
dwelling unfolds (initially vis-à-vis the available shelter). In that sense, refugees — the architects and the dwellers — become the ones who design the dwelling space as they maneuverer and coordinate between these different dynamics, which are sometimes synchronized and sometimes conflictual. The decisions are thus made by the dwellers, and this is why their role is crucial for understanding how the camp is 'dismantled and reassembled' and how the 'perilous territory of not-belonging … where in the primitive time peoples where banished, and where in the modern era immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons' (Said 2012, 177) is then inhabited and reclaimed. To highlight the important role of the refugee as an architect and to blur the lines between the dynamics presented earlier, I offer two brief examples from the field.

Hamada is a 28-year-old man who lived with his parents and three young sisters. Their dwelling consisted of three caravans, positioned around an inner courtyard, to which a kitchen, a bathing area and an entrance door had been attached. The dwelling was bought by the family for about 3000 JDs (3500 euros), as they were in dire need of somewhere that was already built and well equipped. The ground was cemented, and the courtyard, kitchen and bathing area were roofed using zinco sheets. The dwelling was very stereotypical — if we can use such terms. However, when Hamada decided to get married, the family was already deprived of financial means. As shown earlier, the formation of family units often justifies detachment and separation from the extended family for reasons of additional privacy. Although the son was given a caravan after marriage, he had to sell it to service the debt. As he said: 'I couldn't leave my parents in need of money just so that I could live together with my wife. This wasn't possible. So I sold it for 400 JDs, gave them 250, and with the remaining 150, I constructed a bathing area attached to our caravan.' This decision can be interpreted as an attempt to find a compromise, a middle ground between different forces: financial capacities, caravan prices and quality (thus material dynamics), family relations, and above all, the need for visual privacy (thus social dynamics). Evidently, the social and the material dynamics were at odds here. What needed to be prioritized? Most importantly, how could that be achieved? Hamada was able to find a suitable solution where the social and material dynamics were simultaneously considered. Eventually, he worked out the design and asked a professional to execute it. One of the caravan sheets was removed and replaced with a door, and adjacent to the caravan a small room was built using zinco sheets, with a cemented floor, a few shelves, water supply and drainage. This unusual solution is an example of the creativity of the dweller, and evidence of a certain tension between the social and material dynamics described earlier.

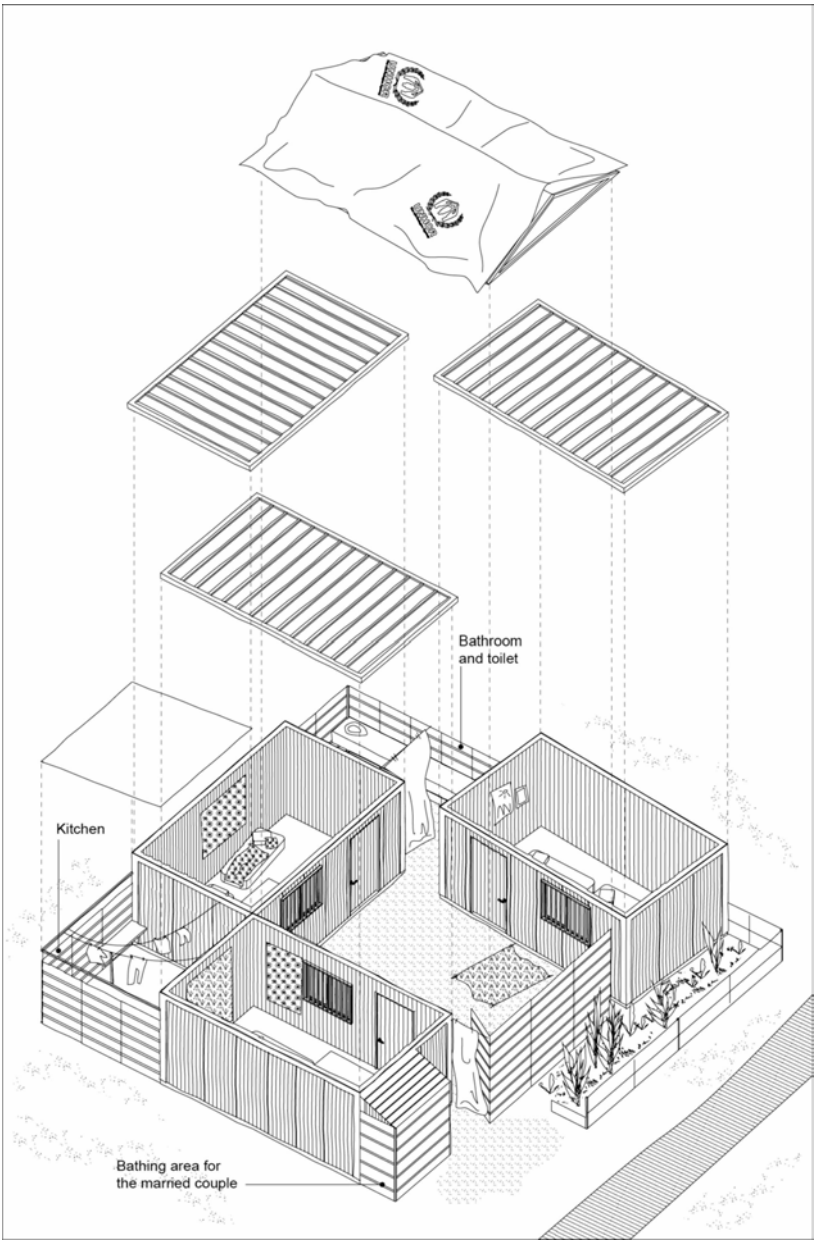
Another example is a family that consisted of a younger son (Sinan), his widowed mother, and his elder brother with his wife and young daughter. On the one hand, the design of their dwelling had to accommodate the social dynamics and

particularly their strong family relations. On the other hand, it had to navigate the absence of financial capital to purchase sufficient materials, and thus to create separate dwellings. The result was a dwelling with a unique layout. On their arrival in the camp, they were given two caravans: one for Sinan and his mother, and another for the elder brother and his family. During their first year, both families struggled to secure enough money to purchase additional caravans. Gradually, this 'material dynamic' affected the layout of the emerging structure. The family could not afford to buy zinco sheets to demarcate their dwelling in the way that others did. Therefore, they instead used the two sides of their neighbours' caravans to create 'walls' for their dwellings. This solution was also found to be socially convenient, as it incorporated the requirement for privacy. As the mother explained: 'we are not bothered by these two caravans … They belong to my sister and uncle. They are relatives, so that is no problem for us, but if they belonged to someone else [a stranger] we wouldn't allow it [placing them so close]. Eventually all the neighbours here are relatives and have done the same as us.' The absence of financial means, and the close-knit relationships, engendered this solution, which was disseminated locally as a form of emerging knowledge (building technique), producing something similar to 'terraced housing'. Eventually, the family was left with two open façades and two caravans in between. Due to the lack of finances, and the close nature of their family relations, dwelling was practiced in what could be described as follows: One shared semi-private space where the kitchen and the main entrance were located, and two private spheres. The first was for Sinan and the older mother located directly by the courtyard, and the second for his brother's family, separated from the courtyard with a partition made from textile painted like a wall. The courtyard was attached to a small bathing area with a toilet and covered by a canopy raised on wooden beams attached to Sinan's caravan. This basic layout contrasts with the brother's 'space', which was furnished to function as a separate unit including its own bathroom and toilet, adding more privacy for the wife of Sinan's brother. Although this example reminds us of the complexity of family relations (for example, Eyad's case), by contrast it illustrates the tension in the final physical layout. The inability to afford additional materials, and the quality of those available, became the basis for how dwelling is practiced, and how it is reassembled. As Sinan explained in hesitation: 'We don't have much zinco here like the others. Only a *Baṭṭanīyh* covered with plastic sheets, tied together using sewing thread … but anyway, *Al-Hamdu-li-lāh* [thank God], we are good and comfortable like this.' Further, despite the fact that the family managed to earn money later, the layout was not changed. Instead, solar panels were installed on the roof, connected to an accumulator, and knowledge about dwelling from the past was used to enhance the space: a small room was made, in which a pottery bottle was stored in the ground to store cold water. In this example, it is difficult to determine which of the 'dynamics' had the biggest influence, but it is clear that the creativity of the dweller —

the refugee, the architect — was key for resolving conflicts and finding solutions that could make dwelling possible, again.



The result of negotiating privacy, family relations and the prices of caravans (The case of Hamada)



The result of negotiating privacy, family boundaries and economic constraints within the dwelling (The case of Sinan)