

## Conclusion

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This book portrays a confrontation, a battle, between the refugee — presented here in contrast to the norm as a dweller — and the shelter and the camp, which are spaces that seek to inherently prevent dwelling, or at least limit it to the bare minimum. Studies on refugee camps have always addressed a ‘spatial transformation’ occurring in them. This was projected onto other ideas, such as ‘urbanization’, the ‘city’ and ‘agency’. What I strive to do in this book is to pull together a sporadic set of ideas on refugee camps that have appeared in previous literature: the refugee camp as a form of ‘temporary residence’ (Agier 2011, 118), whose ‘occupants necessarily appropriate it in order to be able to live in it’ (Agier 2011, 53), and where ‘the act of dwelling may impose the most basic features of placemaking’ (Peteet 2005, 111), leading to the emergence of different types of dwellings such as the ‘growing house’ and the like (Herz 2013; Misselwitz 2009, 222). The idea of dwelling has always been there, but it has never been paid the attention it deserves.

The aim of this book is to place dwelling at the centre of camp studies. It suggests that there is no possibility to speak of the latter without the former. The act of dwelling is an inevitable extension of the camp and the shelter. It may be that the boundaries between the three shift and merge in ways that we are yet to learn. Nonetheless, the act of dwelling will always remain the beating heart of any camp and shelter around the world. No matter how limiting these camps are, or how temporary these shelters are meant to be, or even how well-designed and good looking they are; their spaces will endure, in one way or another, a form of spatial transformation due to the dwelling practiced in them.

## Dwelling and the camp

In Zaatari camp, the social and material dynamics included a set of issues such as visual privacy, family relations, knowledge (identity and culture), the material quality of shelter, its economics (prices and trade) and eventually its politics (and how temporary or permanent a material could be). The sum of these dynamics vis-à-vis the vision of the architect — that is, the refugee-dweller — dictated the shape

of the final outcome. However, what happens when the conditions are different, for instance in regard to the refugee groups, camp design and shelter typology?

The dynamics discussed in this book should offer orientation for further research on the subject matter, but they should not be taken for granted. What remains a fact is, however, that these dynamics appear in camps as a series of appropriations. On the micro scale, they may appear to be mere attempts to beautify space or make it more functional, but on the macro scale, the sum of these practices brings us back to the main alterations of the camp: its dismantlement and reassembling.

The practice of dwelling in camps reveals their political contours. This is because dwelling in camps — which requires dismantling and reassembling — shows us the limits of this process: particularly its potential, and the challenges it faces. For instance, in some newly built camps, the disciplinary order may be strongly enforced. Appropriations are policed and the camp design is intended to ensure that refugees turn into manageable objects in space, where shelters are supervised and refugees' informal economy is constrained. In such camps, dismantling and reassembling may prevail over time — that is, requiring much longer to be fully expressed — or can remain contained and limited to certain aspects of the camp. In Zaatari, for instance, we have seen how this process was excessive to the extent that it entailed aspects of economy, camp layout, shelter, infrastructure and other fundamental elements of the camp. In other camps, such deep alterations may take a longer time to occur, but it is expected that they will eventually prevail. An example of that is the well-policed Azraq camp in Jordan that was built shortly after Zaatari was opened, and which was intended to reflect the ideal model of what a camp should be like. A 'disciplinary machine' par excellence. Yet despite attempts to control refugees and 'fix' things in space, evidence of inhabitation practices emerged all across the camp. On a small scale, it could be seen that refugees were gradually encroaching on the empty spaces surrounding the shelter; yet on a larger scale, the camp was being — and after extensive efforts — dismantled and reassembled. The truest example of this may be the empty shelters on the camp's fringes, ready to receive new arrivals. These were being literally dismantled and taken to pieces, to then be collected, formulated and reused to enhance the inhabited shelters.<sup>1</sup> In this example, the political contours of the camp hold a somewhat traditional form that fails to maintain its power as time passes, and exhausts those who govern it and try to keep it in shape. In other camps, however, these boundaries can be softly controlled and given a modern look. For instance, Berlin's Tempohomes are newly built camps that are much smaller in size, looking more 'urban'. They are integrated into the city, and the shelters resemble two units, opening to a shared bathroom and kitchen. A first look at such camps can be tricky, as it may suggest that they

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1 For a more detailed analysis of Azraq camp, see Dalal, Heber and Palomino (2021).

are so functional and good-looking that they would not be appropriated; however, this is far from true. The appropriations carried out in this camp do nevertheless take a different form. Due to the regulations and management supervision applied to shelters in this camp, the act of dwelling is limited to rearranging pieces of furniture. On a small scale, this may appear as a normal act of personalization. But on the macro scale, one could observe how the arrangement of the standardized elements (in this case furniture) is taken out of their original layout and placed differently to create dwelling spaces inside the strictly designed and controlled shelters. The most expressive example of dismantling and reassembling would be to trace how pre-given elements such as bunk beds are dismantled in one room to be reassembled in another.<sup>2</sup> In both Azraq and Tempohomes, refugees have dismantled parts of the camp and reassembled them to create a new order of space — to create the opportunity for bridging the gap between ‘the shelter’ and ‘the dwelling’. If anything, this shows not only the applicability of this concept in other camps, but also its ability to reveal the political and disciplinarian contours of these camps beyond what they may be visually conveying. Tracing the practice of ‘dismantling and reassembling’ allows us to examine how ‘the camp’ on the one hand, and ‘dwelling’ on the other, relate and interact with one another. The former being the exception, and the latter being the spatial representation of being that will prevail in every context and across all mediums.

## Dwelling and the shelter

There is a burgeoning discussion about the shortcomings of shelter, exposed by the recent and continuous refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe. The UNHCR (2016) *Shelter Design Catalogue* is only a small example of the many attempts the agency has made to diversify its shelter strategy in the hope of responding to cultural and climatic differences faced across the regions. Nevertheless, what needs to be underlined here is that shelters cannot substitute for refugees’ need to dwell, no matter how advanced these shelters may appear or how well designed they may be. A shelter is eventually a ‘cell’, an ‘abstract space’ par excellence (Lefebvre 1991). In fact, one of Berlin’s most advanced refugee shelters, termed MUF (*Modular Unterkünfte für Flüchtlinge*), resembles a form of modern and good-looking housing; buildings that, in their aesthetics, architecture and construction methods, could better many of the dwellings that refugees have left behind. However, this does not mean that they are more habitable or less restricting than the tents and caravans in Zaatari camp. ‘My friend calls this place a big prison. Even if we want to put a clock on the wall we need to ask for permission’, said a refugee who had lived in

2 For a more detailed analysis on Tempohomes, see Dalal, Fraikin and Noll (2021).

one of them for over three years. What is needed in shelters today is to make them inhabitable as much as possible. In practical terms, this means designing them in ways that can be easily appropriated and altered by their occupants.

## Dwelling and appropriations

When shelters are appropriated, new spaces emerge. Precisely, hybrid spaces that stand somewhere between 'the shelter' — its original layout and clean design — and 'the dwelling', with its personalized space and its multi-functional use. The transition 'from shelters to dwellings', should therefore not be understood as a *complete, linear* and *static* transformation. Instead, it represents a form of individualized *journey*, and a *process* in which the gap between 'the shelter' and 'the dwelling' is sought to be bridged. The result is always hybrid and fragile, making the boundaries between the shelter and the dwelling in constant flux.

Calling for the 'right to appropriate' in refugee camps and shelters is an extension to what has been already called for in cities and urban areas (Purcell 2002). It is a statement and a demand — that there is no dignified living for refugees in camps or shelters without letting them be appropriated. Further, because these spaces are more politically 'sensitive' and often heavily 'controlled', it is unlikely that those in power will accept this call and adopt it. Humanitarian agencies and governments will probably resist it under the accusation of being 'chaos-inducing', or the fear of implicitly dissolving 'temporariness' and 'normalizing' the camp. Nevertheless, at least awareness of the significance and impact of these appropriations should be raised.

Every act of appropriation is an attempt to dwell. No matter how large or how small it is. This is why the 'right to appropriate' should be granted to every dweller in camps, including all refugees and displaced persons, and even those sheltered in cities and urban areas. Here we need to be careful not to romanticize appropriation, but to articulate it on the roadmap I laid out earlier: the confrontation between the refugee-dweller, and the camp-exception. It also important to keep in mind that appropriations may differ between intensity and scarcity. Some may appropriate their space every day, while others may keep it to a minimum. Eventually, the shelter could appear overwhelmed by these appropriations, or be only minimally affected by them.

What is at stake here, however, is that every attempt to appropriate the shelter is an attempt to dwell, and consequently, to resist the disciplinary apparatus of the camp. This is what makes these appropriations very valuable and important. Each small appropriation holds the key to understanding the tension between what a camp is and what refugees' needs are. To appropriate in a refugee camp is to

practice politics in its most explicit form; to bridge the gap between 'the shelter' and 'the dwelling'.

## From Syria to the world

This book tells the story of a camp that has emerged in the desert, up in the northern part of Jordan. None of its current dwellers ever imagined being exiled from what once used to be home, and finding themselves striving to inhabit a tent or a caravan, in a 'temporary' space, and for an unforeseeable period of time. What this book does is to narrate the story of its dwellers, exposing to the world their resilience and strength. What was first an empty tent or caravan has become a vibrant space, an expression of *being* in a certain space and time; a space in which bits and pieces of the camp were put together to create remnants of what used to be, and what could be. The outcome is exactly what Lefebvre (1996) once called the city, an oeuvre, a piece of art; and the refugee-dweller is the artist.

Syrians in this camp, and many others, including those who have settled in new cities and countries around the world, struggle to overcome the trauma of loss and the hardships of displacement. It is within this book that their experience is honoured. Refugees are always, and will forever be, dwellers, and camps and shelters will consequently always dissolve. If not entirely, then at least they will be dismantled and reassembled.

