

The Temporary City: the Transformation of Refugee Camps from fields of Tents to Permanent Cities

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Abstract

Refugee camps are a widespread urban phenomenon in 21st century. The emergency settlements are urbanizing since the demographic explosion and the hazardous expansion over long period of time play an essential role in transforming their temporary character into a permanent one, which generates deep modifications on the city's territorial structure shaping a new identity and creating a contingent change in the city's form and history. This study deeply reviews different refugee camps discussing their transformation into urban areas and how the implemented urban policies of designing and planning refugee camps impacted the territorial structure. Therefore, it is quite important to recognize the emergency settlement from the start as cities and to shift the refugee camps planning policies from the temporary solutions to more sustainable one and to apply long-term strategies in which architects, urban planners, emergency managers, refugees and host communities are sharing the responsibility to better cope with emergency.

Keywords: Refugees camp, temporary city, territorial transformation, long-term strategies.

1. Introduction

The world now is witnessing a great acceleration in the numbers of uprooted people because of -local, regional, national and international-armed conflicts or natural disasters like earthquakes, volcanos, hurricanes, tornados. This kind of events leads the cities to be confronted with an urban phenomenon, the refugees' camps, which is not a new phenomenon but it has gradually taken a great attention from individuals, organizations and governments, because of the negative consequences of perceiving refugee camps as a temporary solution to provide lodging for those who are seeking a safe haven using very light structures and temporary materials, as mentioned by Jahre et al (2018) places where refugees receive humanitarian relief until durable solution can be found to their situation (Ramadan, 2013, p.65). In fact, there are no quick fixes for the refuge causes, therefore, the destiny of these zones is to be a new part of the urban fabric of the neighboring cities. As well, the camps' residents take roots in the land thus giving birth to troublesome slums. It is essential to mention that the average duration of major refugee situations has increased from nine years in 1993 to seventeen years in 2003 (UNHCR, 2004).

Refugees' camps are mostly established in "Extemporaneous manner" which means that they are designed without appropriate preparation, focusing on the emergency situation and keeps fastened to it. The top-down design approach applied on planning refugee camps deeply impacted the receiving states urban identity, form the site selection which isolates the refugees' community from the host communities up to the "military like" grid planning and residential units design and materials (Jahre et al, 2018). This traditional approach is pointing towards helping refugees to get their basic needs onmarginalized lands granted by hosting countries which are usually impoverished, underprivileged and environmentally fragile where basic social services and economic infrastructure are missing or incompetently developed (Vemuru & Raina, 2016). Refugees then find themselves in a strange and an unexpected situation, as Italo Calvino (1972) said "The traveler stops and comes back full of doubt: he cannot distinguish between the different places of the city; his own mental categories get mixed up". Refugees in the initial stages of emergency are looking for safe zones. They receive tents as a kind of sheltering which provide them with a minimum level of safety, security and protection from harsh weather conditions. In time, refugees look beyond survival and temporary solutions and fields of tents transform into hard-structured places.

From a historical point of view, accommodations similar to those in modern refugee camps were used in the ancient Rome to accommodate the inhabitants from unexpected Tiber river's floods in "Campus Martius" (Hailey, 2009). Refugee camp was defined in UNHCR policy as special zones with specific characteristics to provide secure and safe environments where refugees can live (UNHCR, 2015). Refugee camps are short term living solution for massive numbers of people who are fleeing and gathering in one

place to feel safe and secure, (Gale, 2008) providing them with lodging units, health and hygiene facilities, infrastructure and educational service by host government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These units come in different shapes and light structures. Agamben described the quintessence of refugee camps as the “materialization of the state of exception” (Agamben, 2008).

The emergence of refugee camps was coupled with the Second World War and became much more notable after the Cold War (Gale, 2008). The greatest number of refugees was 60 million during the Second World War (1939-1945). The second largest number of refugees is a result of the Syrian civil war (2011-now) when 11.6 million people are forced to leave their homes; 6.5 million were internally displaced and the rest has fled to their neighboring countries like Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. The third largest number of displaced persons was in 1948 according to Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are around 5.1 million registered Palestinian refugees in 60 camps in the middle east (Zampano, Moloney and Juan, 2015). Accordingly, the world is always examined different internal conflicts or/and wars which increase the number of refugees. Therefore, the numbers of refugees' camps and provisional cities has increased more and more. In fact, by 2015, the global refugee population reached 65.3 million (UNHCR, 2015). Clearly, Syrian crisis is considered as one of the most prolonged crises since the Second World War and one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes in our times (SBS, 2013).

Currently, there are more than 31 major active conflicts that have an impact on the increase in number of refugee camps (Magrina, 2006). This means that people are always suffering from being refugees or internally displaced (IDP) because of unceasing conflicts. The camps vary according to their size, shape and life span. Some camps have been constructed to lodge around 50 people like the settlements for the Sri Lankan refugees in India, other camps accommodated more than 150.000 people such as Burundi refugees in Tanzania (Magrina, 2006). Refugee camps also have different life span, as an example the Palestinians refugee camps that are lasting after more than 65 years.

As (Bauman, 2001) said that “If common consent and history books establish the seventeenth century as the age of reason, the eighteenth century as the age of enlightenment and the nineteenth century as the age of revolutions, the best name to describe the twentieth century is the age of camps”.

2. Like a “temporary city”

Refugee camps have the state of “accidental cities”. The response to catastrophic events has been the same since the Second World War: to construct refugee camps under the arc of short-term solutions, focusing on emergency strategies in order to cope with refugee crises quickly and with low-cost. The provisional character of those settlements has transformed into permanent environment with poor living conditions, lack of access

to clean water, inadequate water supplies and sanitation, poor housing and home conditions, inadequate personal hygiene, crowded spaces.

Even though no one (whether the United Nations, host communities or even the refugees themselves) wants a permanent character for refugee camps, they last for years, sometimes for generations (Dunn, 2015). For example, the Palestinians are now getting in their 70 years in exile, the Somalians are entering their 27 years of displacement and the Syrians have been suffering since 2012. No one knows the time of return.

It is clearly notable that those provisional settlements are expanding, and they are not freezing to the status of their inception. The Zataari refugee camp in Jordan, opened on July 28, 2012 after the Syrian civil war, has developed rapidly to accommodate more than 79,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2017). The camp that was instituted as a temporary shelter, it is now considered the fourth largest city in Jordan (McGhee, 2017). The camp covers 5.3km² with 24,000 pre-fabricated caravans, 29 schools (14 facilities) where 21,587 school-aged children are enrolled, 27 community centers providing psychosocial support and recreational activities, 2 hospitals with 55 beds and 9 health care centers, and 1 delivery unit. (UNHCR, 2017).

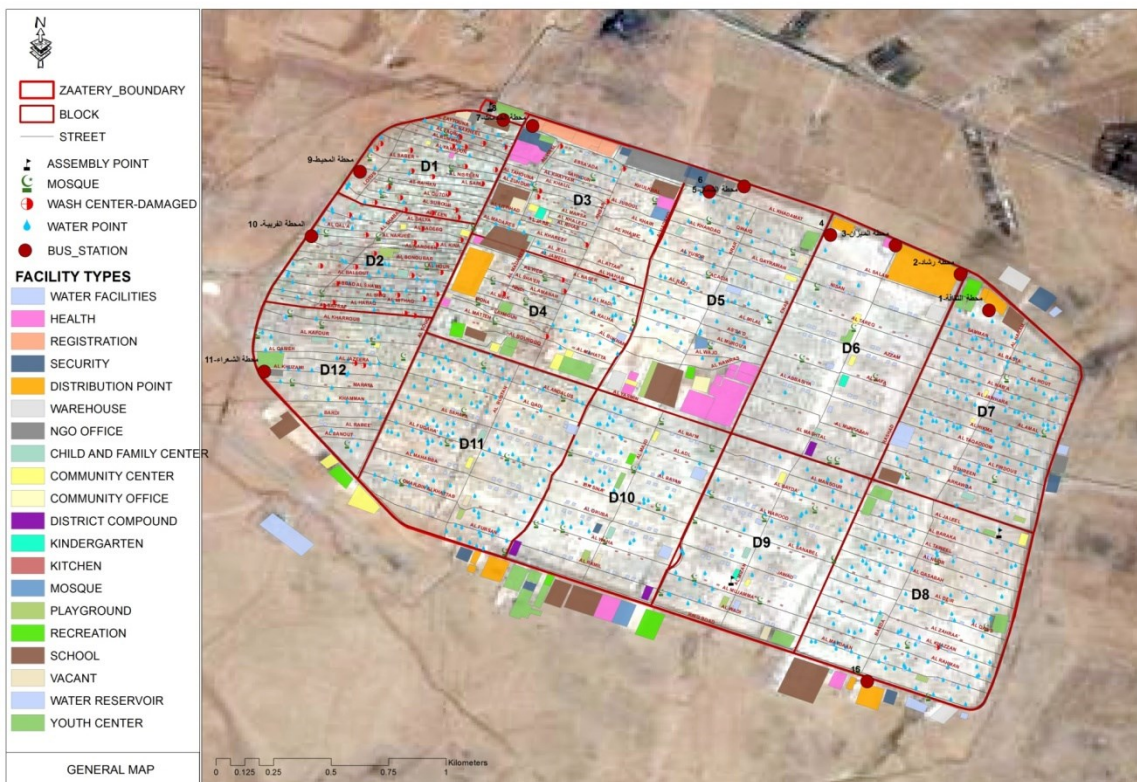


Fig 1: Services distribution inside Za'atri refugee camp.
Ref: Alshoubaki, 2016 data source : UNHCR, 2016

The desert is transforming from bare land to city; what started as temporary sheltering is now having a definite character of permanent city. The establishment of Zataari refugee camp has been impacting the whole region around. According to Zataari Municipality,

the built-up area of Zataari Region has increased by 60% since 2013. Despite the fact that the area of the camp is not extendable anymore, the camp is solidifying and integrating with the current spatial configuration.

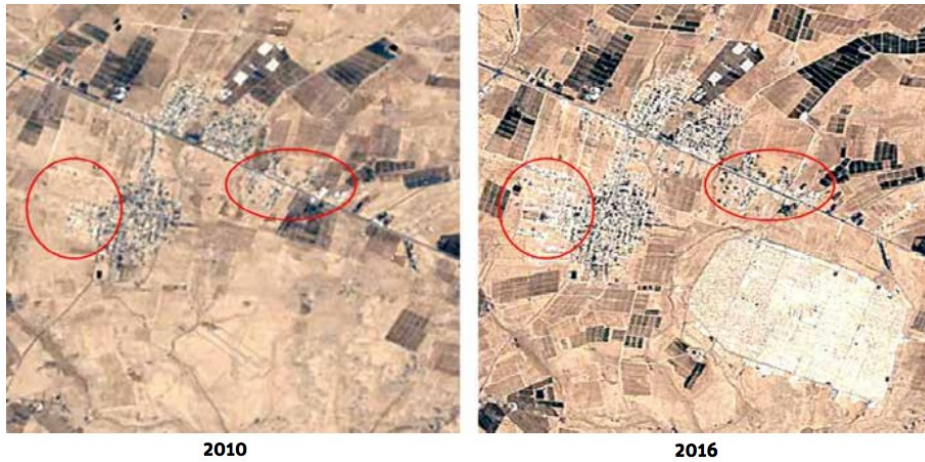


Fig.2: The transformation in Zaatari village and Zataari refugee camp.
Ref: Map created by World Bank Group Staff. Satellite image and data from Google Timelapse.

Taking a glance into Dadaab refugee camp in Garissa county in Kenya, it is divided into five sections (Dagahaley, Ifo, Ifo2, Hagadera and Kambioos) constructed between 1990 and 2011. By January 2017, the complex is considered the largest refugee camp in the world (UNHCR, 2014) with 19 primary schools and 6 secondary schools to serve 156.000 school-aged children and one referral center with 100-beds offering special and secondary services, most of refugees inside Dadaab complex participate in different activities such as: farming, fishing and trading (UNHCR, 2014).

Due to the fact that refugee camps are cities of tomorrow, where the average lodging is around seventeen years, (Kleinschmidt, 2015) Kleinschmidt (2015) expressed that camps are designed as facilities storages for people, but refugees were building their city.

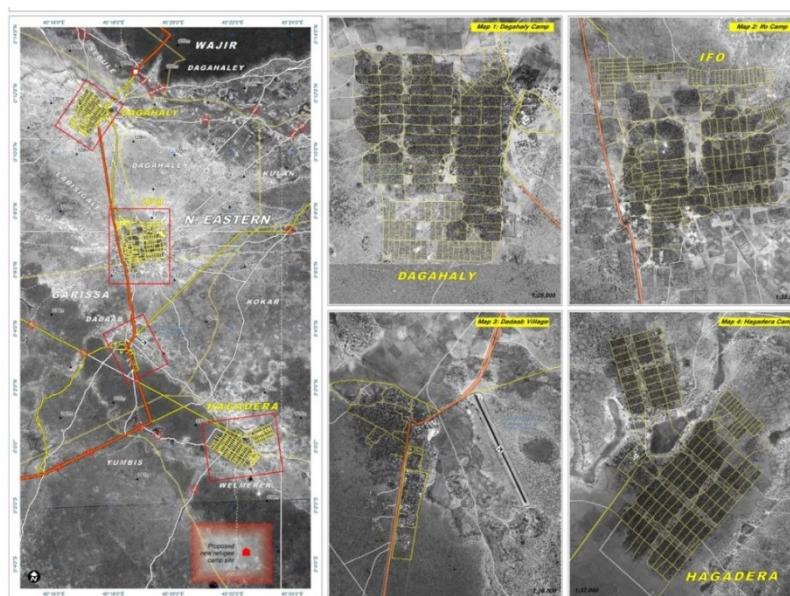


Figure 3: Dadaab Refugee camp in Kenya. Ref: UNOSAT, 2009

3. The transformation of refugee camps into urban areas

It is clearly notable that refugee camps are urbanizing and trying to become cities and part of the urban fabric or themselves evolve into urban centers according to refugees' demographic structures, socio-economic activities and cultural background (Dorai, 2010). Urbanization is a complex process generating enormous and notable changes on the environment, economy, socio-cultural relationships (UNFPA, 2017). As Joseph (1998) stated "The city is never simply the spatial organization of the mosaic of territories: territories of second settlements upset sooner or later this organization, to produce more confused moral, composed of cultural hybrids themselves produced by successive migrant population belonging to the same community or to different ones".

The question to be raised now is how does urbanization take a place in refugee camps? Considering the urbanization measure, one can notice that refugee camps tend to be urban zones in terms of gradual growth in population density and consequent modifications implemented by the refugees themselves. The first factor is the density of population inside refugee camps that not only depends on the birth and death ratios but also on the continuous decampment of those who are seeking safety far from disastrous events. For example, Zaatari camp was officially opened on July 2012 to accommodate around 30,000 Syrian refugees, the camp has received 1500 refugees every night who crossed the borders seeking safety (UNHCR, 2016). At the same time, 13-15 babies are born every day (Ibrahim, 2013), now the camp population increased to 78,994 persons (UNHCR, 2018). In the same vein, the population density in Al-Baqa'a camp in Jordan is extremely high, with more than 100,000 persons living over an area of 1.4 km² (Ammannet, 2015). It seems to have higher density rates than Mumbai and Kalkota, where the density is less than 30,000 persons per km². This is because, due to Government regulations to maintain its temporal character, the area of the camp is not extendable (UNRWA, 2017). It seems that in terms of population density, those provisional settlements are cities.

The second factor is the physical transformation, occurred through implementation of more durable and hard structures. A representative example is the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan where in Baqa'a camp, the refugees refused, in the beginning, any kind of infrastructural development as they believe that they will soon return, and they rejected the idea of an alternative homeland. Since, they have gradually accepted the fact that their dream of returning not only is very far, but also it is unknown when it will happen and, in the meantime, their needs as humans have increased. Consequently, they replaced the tents with more durable structures and materials such as mud, concrete, stone, iron, zinc and asbestos (UNRWA, 2017) with hazardous expansions over the land creating narrow pathways, congested areas without public zones, spaces without natural light or ventilation. The result was a vertically and horizontally exhausted environment with visible irregular order in the city urban fabric.



Fig 4: The evolution of Baqa'a camp.

It is not only a matter of demographic explosion or hazardous growth, but the decisive factor is time and a light can light up the ancient Greek mythology of “Kairos and Kronos”. Refugees roots are in the distant past, but they have gradually detached themselves from it while they are growing into a new life. Since refugees reside in camps, it is not only an issue of chronological sequence of days, months and years but an issue of catching their Kairos moment, of having the best of “here and now”. When refugees start recovering from the trauma of displacement, they construct a new life within new spaces and new relationships thus an accumulation of both Kronos and Kairos moments to create a new history not only for themselves but also for the hosting city. As in the Palestinian case, at the beginning they did not have the courage of change for a fear of bursting the soap bubble of their distant history and roots, the Palestinians refugees refused any kind of resettlement by UN because they strongly believe in their “right of return” to their homeland but time passed and they realised that their dream of quick return has faded (Hattar & Benhaida, 2017) and their needs required more than what the initial camp plan provides. This means that refugees must not be abandoned in their Kairos but helped to be much more into Kronos where they could learn to adapt and to take the advantage from change and accidental circumstances.

It is clearly remarkable that, a primordial form of city is born when the fields of canvas are begin to be replaced by more durable structures. It is not only a matter of materials, but rather of the beginning of a historical process representing the time and the sedimentation of the habitat: the history of the city. History as a continuous change is the most important dimension of a city; it is the measure of its greatness, of its culture and absolutely of its identity.

4. Shanty towns or pre-planned cities

The provisional settlements start sprawling in hazardous manner shaping maze-like cities with no proper order, inadequate sanitation, overcrowdings and bad housing conditions. Due to the high-density population inside camps and the lack of infrastructures, refugee camps are mostly unhygienic zones shaping unhealthy environments with different kinds of infectious diseases. When the standards of camp

planning are below the minimum and definitely by time they are deteriorating. This will absolutely create what so-called “shanty towns” and this will lead to increase crime rates, suicide, drug use and diseases.

Hasty decisions in bringing relief to refugees with temporary solutions and short-living conditions will increase the risk of those provisional settlements. Humanitarian aid has managed, designed and planned refugee camps in terms of numbers where it released list of minimum standards of living conditions according to cost and budget (Scavino, 2014). The familiar language to deal with displacement is sewing a bare land with canvas tents in rows as a very quick response to provide a temporary lodging for those who will return to their homeland soon, but they are hanging in this emergency phase for years and years. They are not only losing their civic rights and human rights but also residing in a temporary station waiting for the unknown to happen.

To provide emergency settlements within short period does not mean temporary material, provisional character or “makeshift cities”.

5. Conclusion

The sprawling camps in Jordan, Kenya, Uganda, South-Sudan and other countries are ringing urgent alarms to change the conception of refugee camps as temporary cities since they last long periods of time and because of their prolonged existence takes a permanent character in terms of material, expansion, urban economic and spatial layout resulting in a deep impact on the urban tissue around them. The shift occurring on those provisional settlements must be reflected with an urban lens in shifting the policies of dealing with such kind of phenomena because, as Agier said (2002), “Due to their very heterogeneity, camps may become the genesis of unexpected cities, new social environment, relationships and identification”.

Thinking and dealing with refugee camps in a “Three-Dimensional” way is not a solution anymore since the time, which is the fourth dimension, plays an important role in reforming those provisional settlements into more permanent cities.

Refugee crisis is turned into an urban crisis because the refugees who are living in provisional cities over a long period of time are reformulating an urban mark on the city image annihilating its infrastructure, services and economy (Baeumler, Shah&Biau, 2017). While refugee camps have all the characteristics which shape a city, they are, until this moment, planned in temporary manner.

The issue of refugee camps planning required from planners, architects and emergency managers to think from the beginning and in the preliminary stages of emergency in the organization and the expansion of those temporary settlements. The ultimate aim is to reimagine and to rethink these provisional cities since their inception as probable permanent cities able to get in deep transformation and development towards more creative, flexible and dynamic cities. It is important to focus on their co-existence

within the surrounding neighbourhoods because their destiny is to be sooner or later part of this urban tissue and that was proved by experience and history. As United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said: “Inclusion is the name of the game” (Katz, 2017). Those “temporary cities” must be highly integrated within the urban tissue and that requires, again, to plan camps as cities from the beginning.

The enrolment of architects and urban planners is essential in the preliminary stages of emergency in order to prepare comprehensive studies to the “New-born” cities, their location and design, analysing the context with a vision of their definite expansion to the surrounding urban fabric. They must think in a sustainable way not only in terms of materials but also in planning rules, methods and techniques which must be, as well, sustainable. Shifting the emergency policies from temporary stand-alone solutions to proposals for future scenarios to provide safety, security and protection in the new emergency settlements and long-term policies. Because the temporary “canvas cities” keep people alive but without proper living conditions.

Promoting new strategic plans for those new spaces, able to develop new economies, would be of great benefit for hosting countries. According to the World Bank, Zataari refugee camp, for example, costs around \$500,000 per day to run but what is the maximum end value? Refugees are still passive aid receivers even though they have skills, abilities and qualifications: an important source of economic growth for hosting countries if provided with a proper environment.

Outlining a comprehensive urban planning theme will produce a balance between refugees needs and host communities’ potentials, following a bottom-up approach seeking to highly involve the displaced persons during the whole stages of emergency from preliminary assessment of their needs and aspiration to their active participation in building their new cities, taking in consideration the local context opportunities, threat, strengths and weaknesses with a clear vision to future developments

Refugees need: permanent settlements not just shelter; to live in homes not in incubators; to have cities not prisons; to be integrated not marginalized and to become self-sufficient not dependents. Also host communities need to: plan cities not slums; to have a peaceful environment not to bring conflict; to have clean and clear environment not to generate pollution and diseases; to live in well-planned cities far from any hazardous expansion to their city urban fabric.

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