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Citation for published version (APA):

Document status and date:
Published: 01/01/2018

Document Version:
Publisher’s PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:

• A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher’s website.
• The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
• The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

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Download date: 26. Jan. 2020
Public space, the displaced and the camp

by Juliette Bekkering and Michiel Riedijk

Summer 2015

In the midsummer of 2015, Europe was confronted with a large influx of refugees who mainly reached Europe through the Greek islands. Television, newspapers and internet showed groups of people who had left their homes and their belongings and were making their way to Northern Europe. Rows of men, women, young children and the elderly marched through sun-drenched cornfields in the Balkans or walked over the scorching hot highways between Hungary and Austria. A major humanitarian crisis unfolded in one of the most prosperous parts of the world, whereby the refugee problem suddenly came very close to home: images of people who had led lives such as our own, with mobile phones, internet and modern clothing, reached us through the media, making it very clear that the fate of suddenly becoming a refugee can fall on anyone. The fact that more than sixty million people in the world must live in refugee camps for long periods of time, sometimes even for generations, has been brought, due to this crisis, painfully close to those in sitting rooms throughout Europe.

Hundreds of thousands of people had to be taken in and offered a chance for a dignified existence in a new European context1. Public spaces were temporarily taken over, whereby groups of people were forced to stay overnight in the halls of train stations, and charming parks were transformed into campgrounds. In addition, this influx of displaced people puts the living conditions in larger refugee camps, in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and the Israeli West Bank, on the agenda. The European public opinion was taken aback by the improvised camps in the desert of North Jordan, the periphery of Beirut and the suburbs of Istanbul; their sheer scale and deplorable living conditions made them incomparable to people camping in Northwest Europe: an endless sea of flimsy tents in the desert.

sand with no protection from the sun or endless rows of containers on the plains of Turkey or whole city districts filled with five-storey-high shanties without running water and inhabitants dealing with traumas, no prospects and boredom. Camps set up for temporary reception were often in use for decades. But what was perhaps most confrontational was the scale of these camps, which grew into cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants in merely months, the size of a substantial Dutch provincial city: a prelude to undeniable new forms of settlements that dismiss the applicable laws of urbanisation and urban planning in one fell swoop.

When watching the images of these new cities, a feeling of alienation emerges: it takes a while before one fully understands what he is seeing and can grasp what was eluding him. When that becomes clear, it turns out that what one does not see is more important than what one does see: no public spaces, no streets, no distinct buildings, no landmarks, no places to gather and, clearly, an absence of any form of Architecture.

Assignment

On 31 August 2015, the German chancellor Angela Merkel made her famous and often cited statement: ‘Wir schaffen das’ (We can do this). She took a stand by saying that Europe had the moral obligation and the funds to manage the influx of people. However, the question of how this should be done and which means should be employed, besides money and logistical services, remained unanswered. The cause of this large migration stream, namely war, unemployment and drought and famine by climate change, was not brought into the, often emotional, debate that followed.

The large influx of refugees prompted us to further examine the point of departure towards Northern Europe: the large camps in the Middle East, on the southern border of Turkey with Syria or in North Jordan, Lebanon and the Greek islands. The following statements were selected and researched:

1. In this day and age, the spatial consolidation of camps has become an irreversible process and it is therefore necessary to design camps that can function as high-quality components of the city instead of an appendage of other urban or rural areas.

2. The architecture of the public buildings in refugee camps can provide a vital contribution to the creation of a dignified living environment by generating activities, economic or otherwise, and an urban programme.

3. High-quality public space and well-designed architecture gives the consolidated camp the possibility of becoming a place that bears on the identity of its inhabitants and with which they can regain a sense of pride and dignity.

Analysis

The analysis of relevant literature and field-related literature, and the current practice of design and construction of refugee camps shows that the significance and necessity of the public domain and, by extension, the
public building receive little or no attention. What is more, when searching for the ‘state of the art’ of public buildings for refugee camps or reservations for public space in camps, research stagnates quickly. The issue of whether or not to provide additional public services and a public infrastructure that support a full public life is strongly politically influenced. Providing services that go beyond relieving the most primary needs implicitly accepts that these people will stay regardless of the nature and the status of their stay and that the urbanisation process of the camp has become a reality. This often raises political opposition and opposition from local authorities, from landowners and in the public opinion. In short, providing public services acknowledges that the refugees will become a permanent feature of the community.

The emergency aid organisation of the United Nations, the UNHCR, issues the Handbook for Emergencies in which literally almost everything for emergency aid seems to be regulated, from the quantities of water and food needed per person to the procedures for communication by radio or telephone. Beside it giving a comprehensive impression, the handbook is also a detached and procedural document. The time frame that the handbook uses seems to be based on months instead of years; the third part of the book, ‘Operations’, closes with the procedures for the voluntary repatriation of displaced people.

Naturally, the UNHCR first focuses on facilitating the primary physical requirements from the pyramid of Maslow: safety and a roof over your head. All public facilities such as lavatories, food distribution points and medical facilities are redesigned from this perspective. In most camps, the facilities are often positioned on the outside of the camp, for logistical reasons. This provides for straightforward provisioning and monitoring of the facilities. This phenomenon occurs in both temporary and permanent urbanised camps, such as Shuafat, just outside of Jerusalem. Here, due to continual densification and urbanisation, the facilities have been literally pushed to the edge of the settlement. In addition, the original structure of rows of tents in Shuafat, originating from the camp setup in 1965 by the UNRWA, is still recognisable after decades of occupation. In Za’atari, the large refugee camp in North Jordan, one can clearly see how public facilities are located at the edges of the residential areas. In the case of further growth of the settlement, the facilities can come to lie in the heart of the area by mirroring the urban growth. This process is evident in Oncupinar, in the south of Turkey on the Syrian northern border. In summary, the medical facilities or schools are not situated in such a location that they will be able to fulfil important public functions in the future. A number of camps are situated on plots with an irregular main form, such as Shuafat and Oncupinar on the Turkish-Syrian border. This causes the location of the facilities outside the residential area to be even more off-centre.

As a rule, the camps are not situated along a through road. They are situated literally next to them and are only connected to the public road via the access road, which also leads to the entrance of the camp. Therefore, the camp is not part of an existing network of roads, connecting routes or trade routes.

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3 Abraham Harold Maslow (1908-1970), was an American psychologist who, in 1943, defined a pyramid of ascending human needs, from physiological needs, the basis, to self-actualisation.
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in the immediate vicinity. This is often articulated further by the fences or concrete walls that shield most of the standard camps from adjacent areas. The walls and the entrance gate make it possible for the camp administrators to distribute food and goods solely to registered camp residents. This differs greatly from informal or illegal camps, like the former Jungle in Calais or the Kapise camp in the Mwanza District in which the proximity of the public road was sought out in both cases to increase the chance of small-scale trade, gaining the necessities of existence and continuing the refugees' journey. In the Jungle, a main pedestrian path with facilities led through the heart of the camp. The informal camps are not closed off by fences or walls.4

The UNHCR handbook does not mention anything about a possible consolidation of the camp due to a much longer-lasting stay of the displaced people. No attention is given to the higher levels of the pyramid of Maslow, such as recognition or self-actualisation. Facilities for work, public buildings such as libraries or other constructions that combat boredom and the feeling of being lost, are not considered in the perspective taken by the UNHCR. The community building and self-organisation that they provide exist at the level of clusters of various tents.5 In the handbook, no attention is paid to the spatial (urban and architectural) components that play a role in the building of a community; comprehensive procedures are outlined for things such as regulating the participation of women and children when food and goods are distributed under the inhabitants of the camp.

In general, it is notable that a significant number of the initiatives for the displaced tend to take place at the level of the private domain: countless proposals have been made for single living units, from intelligent sleeping bags to IKEA prefab houses.6 Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the displaced are perceived as strange outsiders; only when thinking of the single living units of the displaced can one need

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4 When the world’s largest camp, Dadaab in Kenya, opened in 1991, it housed more than 250,000 registered refugees (some argue that it was more than 450,000), and it housed a generation which grew up without being able to put feet outside the camp. http://data.unhcr.org/horn-of-africa/region.php?id=3

5 See: Handbook for Emergencies page 214

6 For example, see: Cameron Sinclair et al, Design like you give a damn, architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006, reprint 2011) page 99 ff.
In order to obtain more insight into the structure of refugee camps, it is advisable to consider camps in general and to go in search of the collective urban structures that organise camps. With this information, design strategies can be developed to enable the addition of a collective and public domain, allowing a social structure and community spirit to develop in the camps so that the camp transcends being just a camp.

The majority of the camps are characterised by the primacy of living in all its forms, from temporary, recreational and military to strongly thematic, such as summer camps. It is essential that the camp is characterised by a dominant common theme, such as music, school or summer camps, and that all other parts of the program in the camp are secondary to this theme. Unlike in a city, the community facilities in a camp, such as the restaurant and the health care, are always secondary: they deliver services to maintain communal living, themed or otherwise, and can never gain economic autonomy. Per definition, the camp is dependent on something outside itself: it is never economically or socially autonomous. This is often augmented because the facilities are not accessible to outsiders; the economic viability of the restaurant is by definition under pressure because it is located behind the camp barrier.

The archetype of the modern camp is perhaps the Roman army camp. A notable feature of the structure of these camps is that the facilities are located in the middle of the camp. The temple and other community facilities are laid out around the intersection of the Cardo and the Decumanus. In addition, the Roman army camp had four ports, each directly leading to routes, such as trade routes and routes connecting to the immediate surroundings. This

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probably made the urbanisation of former Roman camps like Turin (Castra Taurinorum) and Como (Novo Comum) easier. The Roman army camp usually had a distinctive square layout. If the camp had an elongated layout, the ratio of the short side of the outer contour to the long side was 2:3. Such layouts ensure that the community facilities are easily accessible from all corners of the camp.

**Homogeneity**

The temporary status of staying in a camp results in camps being essentially non-urban. In most cases, people even try to achieve the opposite: the camp as a closed retreat far removed from reality and far from what one is trying to flee. What one is trying to flee can vary from war or disaster to the frenzy of everyday life. The camp is an enclave of like-minded people who live together for an extended period of time at a specific location. That sometimes happens on a voluntary basis, such as holiday camps, but sometimes it is forced due to circumstances such as caused by compulsory military service. The people in camps must focus on common goals, homogenising their wishes and desires; this eliminates or restricts individual choice. For example, one can only select attractions provided by the holiday camp. This homogenisation is in stark contrast to the diversity of a city. One of the most striking features of the city is that people of different backgrounds and characteristics live together permanently without the selection of common goals such as compulsory military service or a holiday. The heterogeneity of the city is at odds with one of the essential characteristics of a camp, social homogenisation. In this way, the camp can be defined as the opposite of the city: a select collection of people who must live together, by choice or by force, without experiencing the diversity and surprises of actual urban life. Public life in a camp is not truly public due to the isolated and exclusive nature of camps, just as the private life in a camp is not actually private due to the temporary nature of the stay and the thematic selection of a camp’s inhabitants. In addition, the permanent monitoring and supervision over the lives of the camp residents, which is clearly necessary for vulnerable groups, also hinders self-development and self-actualisation, which are two essential characteristics of urban life. Lastly, the economic dependence of the camp clearly shapes the public space. Despite the large collection of people that must live together in camps, a camp in this form can never develop into a real city or urban entity.

**Public domain**

In his book ‘The Fall of Public Man’[8], the American sociologist and thinker Richard Sennett examined the relationship between what is public and what is private and how that is reflected in the public space of the city. His research focused on London and Paris in the middle of the 18th century, around 1750, until the present time. Firstly, he made the distinction between the stranger and the unknown, arguing that the stranger was per definition an outsider to social contact while the unknown was capable of determining his place within the social domain, or having it bedetermined. In his book, the relationship between theatricality and openness in the 18th century is explored further. Sennett demonstrates how the theatricality of clothing with exuberant additions that make reference to work, status or...
something else, such as a play, makes the 18th-century citizens themselves capable of conversing in coffee houses and theatres without violating the private domain or the actual inner world of the speaker. Public life was a Theatre Mundi, the world as a theatre, in which people of different ranks and status could live alongside and speak with one another without knowing one another; the stranger was actually always an unknown. Having masks of clothing allowed people to approach each other in the public domain. He argues that in the 20th century the public domain of the city will end up no longer being a place of speech or a space in which the unknown can be approached but as become a space in which everything is based on circulation and movement. The apparent transparency of modern buildings, whereby Sennett refers to the Lever House designed by Gordon Bunshaft of S.O.M., determines that we can see each other without emphasising the actual act of meeting. According to Sennett, the city forms the space in which citizenship can develop, considering that, in the public domain of the city, we must approach the stranger, the possibly exotic, terrifying other. Our citizenship, our dignity and, by extension, the fabric of civil society is directly linked to the way in which we learn to relate to the unknown in the public space of the city.

However, any space for public life is lacking in refugee camps: the camps are constructed as endless repetitions of dwellings in whatever form. The entry and the exit are both attentively regulated. In that sense, the large refugee camp is a symbol of the 21st-century anti-urban dystopia, a gated community, a space where thousands of people live together without the quality, the possibility of self-actualisation or the dignity that city life can offer since no space is provided for it. What is distressing about this observation is twofold: firstly, this does not allow for the development of citizenship as Sennett has described, and secondly, the citizens of the hosting country shall never learn how to relate to the newly introduced stranger because there is no place where they can cross paths, let alone can meet. Elaborating on this, one could say that each camp with displaced people must first contain a public space that is part of the public domain of the host country, in order to create the spatial conditions for the possibility of dignified, if not full, citizenship. To prevent ghettos and alienation, each camp should be developed in such a way that it ultimately will be enveloped by its surroundings. This ultimate disappearance is diametrically opposed to the temporary purpose of offering displaced people a safe haven by means of a camp. This tension between the temporary nature of the initial reception and the future situation, in which the camp may become a permanent part of the city, should be considered in each camp proposal.

Emptiness

In the following section, a start has been made by providing how the above-mentioned conditions of refugees could possibly be translated into designs for future camps and the design of public buildings in camps in particular.

When designing public facilities for the displaced, the first action that must be undertaken is probably the reservation of space for the future. The design and reservation of the emptiness ensures that open areas and space for extra facilities remain present during densification and that they can be filled in at a
later date if a camp is developing into a consolidated city. Emptiness plays a crucial role in the possible consolidation of a camp. Since we do not know the future, we also do not know which questions we will need to face. Reserving emptiness makes it possible to accommodate change and quality naturally.

Each camp has a number of important public services, such as bus stops, registration areas, cash machines, currency exchange offices and water, food and clothing distribution points. The areas for these public services remain visible in the structure of the camp, often even long after the actual first use of that place has disappeared. It is an obvious design step to reserve space around the bus stops, telephone shops, currency exchange offices or food distribution points for other, future activities. The large Palestinian refugee camps Shabra and Chatila, which lie within the urban agglomeration of Beirut, illustrate this phenomenon painfully clearly: the only moderately large public spaces present in the districts follow the contours of the spaces where blankets were distributed decades ago. This space was only reserved out of necessity and was not a planned, conscious design decision.

The unspecified emptiness, space not laden with a programme, can be given meaning by the addition of such simple things as benches, playing fields, sand boxes or goal posts and thereby more or less taking the space into possession. This first occupation is required to ultimately attain a robust future-proof design, in which people can meet each other, in which economic activities can be developed, in which creation happen and in which cultural and educational activities take place. Public space is also the primary designated place where infrastructure such as water, electricity and sewage can be constructed. The public services and buildings often form bottlenecks in the consolidation of camps because there is no longer any room left in the existing urban tissue when they need to be added, necessitating the dismantling of large parts of the camp.

**Scenarios**

Designs for public buildings must allow buildings to easily accommodate new
functions over time. Buildings can be either temporary or semi-permanent, but they must have a powerful presence so that they can provide identity to the place. In this way, architectural quality can add significance to specific locations in the camp, letting them rise above a strictly utilitarian function and thereby symbolising the quality and dignity of the lives of the camp residents, in the broadest sense of the word. The public buildings form beacons in the developing urban structure. People are able to identify with the buildings and the surrounding public space, building a sense of community. By developing different scenarios over time, the dilemma of a public building built for just one target group can be addressed; in essence, such buildings are not public at all and, in the long term, will stand in the way of a proper integration of refugees in the host country. By considering future changes, the dilemma can be overcome. Buildings and functions that specifically focus on refugees can also facilitate the integration in the host country considering that they do not use the existing facilities in the host country. For example, the influx of schoolchildren in a regular school who do not speak the local language does not help the integration process. Therefore, specialised facilities will remain necessary to ensure the proper schooling and reception of displaced people. In time, the programme for these temporary public buildings for refugees will change: if everyone speaks the language of the host country, separate schools will no longer be necessary, whereby other functions can take their place. Despite possible changes in function over time, the public building will always be a powerful and dignified beacon in the sea of tents, fulfilling a crucial role in the development and consolidation of the camp.

Positions

Besides the anticipation of the consolidation of the camps, it is important to consider the following positions and approaches when designing more dignified environments for displaced people:

1. Construction technology: From temporary to permanent
2. Expression: Icons between Beacons and Tents
3. Programme: The changing palette of functions

These positions form a scale used to aid in finding a unique balance per location and assignment. The terms are closely related to each other, but each pair has its own focus and approach.

1. Construction technology: From temporary to permanent

How can public buildings in camps encourage the creation of a dignified living environment by taking into account the technical feasibility, construction speed and construction method? Should the temporary public building be ready-made and flown in or can it be self-built with local materials and techniques? Or will it be a mix of these two options? The pop-up, or ready-made, public building embodies a strategy that is ideally suited to application in emergency humanitarian aid. The pop-up building is a temporary architectural invention that can be built up and taken into use quickly so that public life in the camp can get underway again. In this case, it is necessary to ensure that the public buildings are both part of the first, or emergency, aid as well as being suitable in nature and design to develop along with the growing camp and, if desired, able to transform into the backbones of the spatial structure and the daily life of the consolidated camp. For example, such a backbone can be formed by the kitchen-dining hall combination - often called the canteen or the mess hall. In each military camp, they start by building this backbone. This feature forms the heart of the camp and is the place where the troops prepare food, eat and relax. The importance of this function is recognised because in refugee camps it is one of the first basic amenities to be realised. The canteen should be able to transform into something else because in the long term a central dining facility will stand in the way of the integration and socialisation in the hosting country. Once there are personal kitchens improving the living conditions, the central dining facility is unnecessary, and can be replaced with another function.

Of course, another suitable function for pop-up or ready-made buildings is schools, such as elementary schools: the faster education can be started up again, the faster this vulnerable group of children can return to a normalised environment. The principle of the pop-up or ready-made building makes it possible to include advanced facilities for learning and playing in the architecture, such as objects for playing, plumbing, electrical systems, lighting, computer equipment, blackboards and furniture, as well as to offer a high level of amenities. The only requirement is that everything must be able to be transported easily.

2. Expression: Icons between Beacons and Tents

How can the appearance of public buildings serve as anchors or beacons of change within the urban structure of camps? By simply giving a permanent, or even a temporary, public building two or three
storeys, by the nature of its height, it will become a beacon within the sea of tents.

The construction method of the buildings can also be important in how the building relates to the context of the camp. On the one hand, buildings that can be built easily and quickly or be flown in efficiently and inexpensively are preferred. On the other hand, the use of local techniques makes it possible for people to self-build, stimulating involvement and ensuring an investment in the public building because it is built by the community itself. This gives it social relevance and cultural significance. By providing a building system that is to be completed by self-building the large amount of cheap labour present in the camps is optimally used and there is a win-win situation: the refugees find employment and the building costs are reduced. It is important to find a balance between what is dictated by the design and what can be determined locally. In addition, this makes it possible to use local materials. On the one hand, the system must be flexible and, on the other hand, it must offer a variety of possibilities. The finer the grain of the design, the more flexible it is and the greater the possibilities are to produce true architecture. By developing a building system with different options for construction, the temporary character of the building can vary, depending on the local conditions, materials and the availability of money and resources.

3. Programme: The changing palette of functions

Almost by definition, the programmes and functions of public buildings deliver a positive contribution to the transformation and consolidation of refugee camps. Within the extremely complex context of a camp for displaced people, the use of architectural tools to create expressive interventions and robust programming can make a difference that may form the first step towards a more dignified life. Nevertheless, any design ultimately relies on a spatial-political context, which may stand between the dream and the deed. The intrinsic slowness of architecture - there is always a long time span between the inception of an idea and the actual implementation and use thereof - makes it difficult to test the above strategies and standpoints thoroughly in advance. Ultimately, every assumption remains a test and the constructed design a prototype. Nonetheless, a great deal of the professional community does not consider camps as belonging to the field of architecture due to their utilitarian nature. The humanitarian considerations alone substantiate the need for this to change: it is of paramount importance that the design of camps and of buildings in camps becomes an architectural task.

Silicon Valley

An important feature of refugee camps is the almost complete social-economic dependence on aid organisations, the host country and local authorities. However, public buildings can play a vital role in the building
of greater economic independence and a more self-sufficient economic camp structure. By simply building workplaces and places of education, the population of the camp can become more self-sufficient. In addition, internet makes it possible to begin a company or even set up a university anywhere in the world, even in the heart of the Jordanian desert.

Furthermore, the architecture and urban planning of the camps should support the production of goods such as food. Even the UNHCR handbook recognises this and reluctantly provides room for it. This can herald the trade of goods and services so that people can resume practicing their former professions. Besides producing food themselves, purifying water and recycling of waste are activities that can be done by the inhabitants themselves to satisfy a necessity and generate income, and they can be supported by the construction of buildings. The camp is a place where one makes a virtue out of necessity: the potential latent in the close proximity of many people with a lot of time and various capabilities and skills can be exploited to its full potential.

The programming of buildings and zones can be used to develop specific areas in camps into workplaces or educational or cultural centres. By offering, or allowing, buildings for education, studios and workplaces, sports facilities, markets or shops, people can develop, children can receive an education and people can learn and work. This gives significance to the public space and public buildings, forming landmarks and beacons within the homogenous sea of residences.

Obviously, other activities that are crucial for community spirit can also be accommodated in these buildings, such as religious services, meetings or debates. A striking example of such a beacon was the self-built church in Calais, which became a meaningful centre in a field of temporary shacks. This can combat even the most harmful feelings, namely resignation and futility, that camp inhabitants may have. Perhaps camps will eventually become more than mere pools of boredom but become the Silicon Valleys of the future.

Catalogue
This catalogue has been produced in an attempt to put the need to design camps as an urban and architectural task on the agenda. The humanitarian considerations alone substantiate the need for the design of both camps as well as public buildings to be more than purely an interpretation of a utilitarian and technical-pragmatic issue. This is based on the premise that the semi-permanent nature of the camp also offers opportunities: this especially exceptional situation prompts the need for a new architecture that can improve the living conditions for many, such as by responding to possibilities offered by the high-speed construction and development that is inherent to large camps. The temporary buildings of Shigeru Ban, who designed not only houses but also churches, amongst other things, with cardboard tubes, and the Super-Adobe by Nader Khalili show that this is certainly possible architecturally. The urbanisation of camps demands a great deal of imagination from the architectural discipline because in time most of the major camps in the Middle East and Africa conjure up chilling images of metropolises of the 21st century. The ‘hit-and-run’ urbanisation of the camps increasingly resembles the shantytowns surrounding the so-called ‘global south’: endless districts, without basic amenities such as water, sewage and other public infrastructure. In his book Planet of Slums, Mike Davis outlines a dark future of this urbanisation in which, in the 21st century, a large part of the human race must live and work in such circumstances. In that sense, the camp probably is a prototype, although more often also a litmus test, for the quality of life and the development of the major cities on our planet.

Life continues

This study of the importance of the public domain and public buildings (temporary or permanent) in refugee camps is hopefully a starting point for a more dignified and more humane development of life in camps for both the individual residents as well as the urban or rural community. It is arrogant to assume that architecture alone can improve the life in camps, but it is a matter

10 ibidem p. 104-113
of great importance that good architecture and urban planning can contribute to a more dignified life because it is an investment in the future for both the inhabitants and the built environment. Considering what camps undergo over time and by including this in the design of public buildings may indeed give rise to a better future for displaced people without falling into arrogance.

When designing for the future, scenarios that lie outside the predictable should be sought by combining functions or by offering functions that do not relieve the primary needs, but rather anticipate with respect to the long-term needs of a camp developing into a urban agglomeration: besides education, healthcare and food, also employment, parties, weddings and death, bathing or drinking tea and all that we cannot yet for see. Life must go on.