Instant City: Humanitarian Settlement as a New Urban Form

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ABSTRACT

A new lens of perception is urgently needed to shape strategic interventions in the aftermath of major disasters. Today there are over 50 million displaced persons worldwide, and the average lifetime of a refugee camp is approximately 17 years. The increasing scale of human displacement, combined with the persistence of long-term humanitarian settlements necessitates a shift from seeing these settlements as temporary camps to understanding them as a new urban form, the Instant City. Currently, refugee camps are planned with the assumption that the provision of a structured, low-density, clearly zoned space will establish a neutral territory that is acceptable and functional in any context where a displaced population requires shelter and protection. However, when the spaces created for refugees are bounded by both physical and economic barriers, the persistence of these settlements leads to the creation of new slums rather than new cities. To change this, humanitarian and relief organizations must approach their work as investment in city-building for uprooted populations and a model of intervention must be created that encourages
equity-building, moves away from homogenous plans that rely on a continuous supply of external resources, and avoids the ghettoization of refugees. Examples of activities and management structures that exemplify elements of an *Instant City* in Jordan, Haiti, and the Philippines lead to the conclusion that giving agency to the displaced to improve their surrounding environment and engage in productive activities that use their skills will increase safety and security both within the settlement and in the surrounding regions.

**KEYWORDS** refugees, equity-building, integrated urban development, incremental housing, humanitarian shelter

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**Introduction**

A new lens of perception is urgently needed to shape strategic interventions in the aftermath of major disasters. Today there are over 50 million displaced persons worldwide, and the average lifetime of a refugee camp is approximately 17 years. The increasing scale of human displacement, combined with the persistence of long-term humanitarian settlements necessitates a shift in approach from seeing these settlements as temporary camps to understanding them as a new urban form, the *Instant City*.

Doing so recognizes three key transformational ideas:

- Displacement is a continuum of time, agency, and capital, rather than a temporary state.
- The displaced – rather than being relegated to mere ‘beneficiaries’ or actors without agency – represent untapped potential and resources, which can be leveraged in activities across the spectrum of response-recovery-reconstruction, even in contexts different from those in which they were created.
- Immigrants, many of whom were once refugees, have historically assimilated into being productive contributors to the economic, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions of societies.

**Instant Cities, a few elements**

As Manuel Herz writes, refugee camps are instances where politics become visible in physical space and the physical space provided influences politics. (Herz 2008) Currently, refugee camps, similar to other forms of humanitarian aid, are planned with the assumption that basic human needs are universal and that the provision of a structured, low-density, clearly zoned space will establish a neutral territory that is acceptable and functional in any context where a displaced population requires shelter and protection. It is also assumed that these neutrally and technically planned spaces will provide greater hygiene and stability for the population, in part because they allow for similarly planned interventions and support from the international humanitarian organizations. For contexts in which the displacement is truly temporary – perhaps a matter of months or a single year – this may be true, though even in those contexts attention to environmental factors and the shape of refugee’s social networks is critical to stability. However, as crises become protracted, and refugees become long-term residents of these spaces, the underlying structure of the camp reinforces it as a place of segregation and limitation. In effect they go from being planned as a kind
The idea of the refugee camp as a heterotopia has previously been put forth by Michel Agier, and seems particularly appropriate in discussion of how long-term refugee camps bring together in one place many types of spaces that are seen as incompatible – communal ways of life among refugees, strictly technical plans for deployment of services by institutional actors, different tribal or religious groups, and others – and that formal refugee camps have strictly controlled access, in Foucault’s words “a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.” (Foucault 1984/1967) This exclusion in turn has economic, social and political consequences locally and globally. As Michel Agier writes, “no matter who the actual administrators are (humanitarian, administrative, or community organizations), the spaces put into heterotopia have the shared trait of removing, delaying, or suspending any recognition of political equality between the occupants of these other spaces and ordinary citizens. … The state of abandonment of these places confirms and intensifies the absence of territorial citizenship among those living there: Neither their country of national origin nor the one they are exiled in guarantees them the local exercise of citizenship in these marginal spaces.” (Agier 2011, 279-280)

Individuals are shaped by the spaces and environments that they inhabit, whether or not those environments are chosen voluntarily. However, when the spaces created for refugees are bounded by both physical and economic barriers the refugees are stripped of their agency and further impoverished by the invalidation of their pre-crisis assets and achievements. In most cases refugees are not even allowed to formally work within, and certainly not outside of, the camp in which they reside. In such cases the persistence of these settlements over time leads to the creation of new slums rather than new cities. To change this, humanitarian and relief organizations must approach their work as investment in city-building for uprooted populations and a model of intervention must be created that encourages equity-building, moves away from standardized, homogenous plans that rely on continuous external provision of goods and resources, and avoids the ghettoization of refugees.

Certainly, there are numerous political elements to be considered in transforming the image of a refugee camp from one of a temporary space to that of an Instant City, questions of citizenship, territoriality, and administration, to name a few. But ultimately these are places in which millions of people are making their lives, raising children, seeing the birth of new generations, and creating communities and economies that have very real effects on the local and global context. The following examples of activities and management structures exemplify the beginning of an Instant City and show the emergence of the humanitarian settlement as a new urban form in Jordan, Haiti, and the Philippines.

Jordan: spatial flexibility and regional economy

The Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps in Jordan were opened in 2012 and 2014 respectively. According to the UNHCR they are currently home to over 120,000 Syrian refugees (approximately 79,000 in Zaatari and 47,000 in Azraq). Though these camps were planned according to the standard UNHCR handbook, there have been numerous articles speaking of these camps in the language of cities and there appears to be increasing attention to the need for flexibility in families’ living arrangements, and economic opportunities even if they aren’t fully sanctioned. For instance, Daliana Zapata-Arroyo shows in her thesis, Escape: A Playful Oasis in Chaos, how families in Zaatari have reorganized their standard issue caravans into clusters that reflect the courtyard houses and urban patterns of cities in Syria. (Zapata-Arroyo 2016)
At the end of 2013, when the Zaatari camp was home to approximately 120,000 residents, the economic turnover – mostly informal – was estimated at $11.3 million per month. (Al-Makhadi 2013) This economic activity expands beyond the camp boundaries, though refugees are technically restricted from engaging in the local economy, and begins to integrate with the broader social and economic dynamics of towns nearby, just as an adjacent city inhabited by permanent residents might do.

**Haiti: accessing finance, facilitating permanence**

From 2013-2015 the Affordable Housing Institute worked with two humanitarian relief organizations – Cordaid and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) – and USAID to design a model of intervention that would support a displaced community to transform their IDP camp into a permanent neighborhood and settlement. Following the earthquake in 2010, CRS built a formally authorized IDP camp on undeveloped government property. Named the Carradeux Camp, approximately 1500 households from a nearby neighborhood were placed in the transitional shelters with the expectation that they would be able to move back over the hill to their original neighborhood within a few years. Most of the residents were very low-income and informally employed, yet the longer that they lived in the transitional shelters the more modifications they made to them and the streetscape, to create a stable and familiar environment in which they could continue living and building their lives.
Following a request from the community leadership, the three-entity team developed a proposal for – and was subsequently granted the funds to pursue – the Carradeux Community Revitalization Initiative. The intention for permanence was made apparent in the title of the project through its acknowledgement of the community that had grown in the camp. The resulting plans leveraged the community ties to create a co-operative governance structure that would allow the pooling of individual household’s savings into a financial mechanism that would give the community the resources it needed to access formal bank financing for nearly fifty-percent of the home construction costs. The households would then pay down the loan collectively, through monthly payments that would be managed by the co-operative, and once the loan was fully paid the individual households would own title to their unit. Unfortunately, this project was ultimately cancelled due to a land tenure dispute between the Government of Haiti and a private party, but the successful implementation of the program would have led to increased community ties, productive employment of residents through both the construction process and the provision of small retail spaces within many of the units, and building of household assets through savings schemes and ultimately homeownership. All of these were elements which residents of Carradeux cited as important, and the lack of which have frequently been cited as reasons for unrest and instability in other post-earthquake humanitarian settlements in Haiti.

Philippines: planning for permanence

In early 2014 Catholic Relief Services (CRS) began exploring the possibility of incorporating a longer-term view into the post-typhoon Haiyan efforts in the Philippines. As part of their relief efforts in Tacloban, one of the hardest hit areas of the country, they were working with the community of Anibong to find adequate and appropriate resettlement options. Located along the water’s edge, the community of Anibong needed both immediate relief attention and support in relocating to a less precarious site. Several innovative approaches that suggest a turn toward Instant City were built into this project including the consultation with the community regarding the selection of a site for relocation, the design – with the help of the Affordable Housing Institute – of a financial mechanism that would allow households within the community to purchase individual plots of land in the new community on an installment basis, and the integration of both economic activities and community development efforts in the physical plans for the new community. The project has not yet been
implemented as negotiations for purchase of the selected site are ongoing at this time, but the design of such a project indicates a willingness on the part of relief organizations to start thinking in a different way, and the response of the community throughout the planning process was positive.

The evaluation of these and other examples studied suggests that giving agency to the displaced to improve their surrounding environment and engage in productive activities that use their skills, will increase safety and security both within the settlement and in the surrounding regions.

**Conclusion**

Far from being helpless, the modern displaced person is often well educated, highly skilled, and motivated to improve their environment given even the simplest of foundational support. Therefore, the creation of humanitarian settlements that are intended to function as cities, with the infrastructure, economics, and social conditions that are inherent to a dense and relatively permanent settlement, will allow residents to build equity and regain a sense of normalcy. Approaching the establishment of humanitarian settlements in this way will provide opportunities to leverage the resources and assets of the displaced – financial, material, and intellectual – to create a better quality of life during displacement, stronger communities, and more sustainable solutions.

Today’s refugee is tomorrow’s citizen. As planners, architects, and humanitarians we must work to create the conditions for the growth of *Instant Cities* rather than instant slums.

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**References**


