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The Urban Con spiracy

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We Can't Save You, but We Can Make You More Comfortable: Aging and Humanitarian Space

Benedict Clouette and Marlisa Wise

Between a crisis and its resolution there is aging. In moments when the failures of political and economic systems become alarmingly apparent – situations variously named ‘humanitarian crises’, ‘states of emergency’, and so on – attention shifts to the biological persistence of the affected population and the mobilization of resources and organizations for its support. Until the refugees can return, until the city can be rebuilt, the waste must be trucked out, water must be trucked in, food distributed, the sick tended to. Emergency is always an interim in which the city becomes a life-support system operating on a massive scale, a technology that enables the indefinite continuation of a ‘temporary’ state. Aging, then, is the condition in which failing bodies are supported by technological solutions, often architectural. The use of architecture as a life support system on an urban scale – common to both ‘humanitarian design’ and ‘design for aging cities’ – produces situations in which techno-physiological concerns come to the forefront of civic life.

Modern architecture and town planning emerged as disciplines closely linked to discourses around medicine and hygiene. Today the confluence of medical and architectural knowledge is best represented by the design of ‘humanitarian space’, a term that commonly includes refugee camps, medical clinics, and so on, but can be extended to include any design in which care for the biological needs of a population becomes the dominant concern. Food lines and feeding tubes have much in common.¹

Insofar as crisis is conceived of as a temporary suspension of the normal order, it would seem to be immune to aging, an exceptional event outside the ordinary life-cycle of a city. But the prolongation of temporary situations inevitably involves the burden of constant maintenance, exacerbating a process of aging as any temporary situation persists, finally becoming a permanent-temporary state. Tents decay faster than the buildings they replace, dirt streets require more frequent upkeep than asphalt, and donated trailers rust in fields while waiting for customs. Even the location of refugee camps in the city can become an impediment to a coordinated reconstruction strategy as long-term planning is frustrated by the struggle to provide for immediate needs and political strategies fall victim to expediencies. Maternity clinics, free schools, and children’s health programs are palliatives, but in their purported political neutrality cannot themselves address the causes of the ills they seek to address. These forms of excessive care without hope for a cure (both for the bodies of the refugee population and the physical architecture of their environment) define the experience of an aging humanitarian crisis.

Buduburam, a camp in Ghana for Liberian refugees, has been a temporary city for more than twenty years.

To design in a place like Buduburam requires negotiating the temporal and physical expectations of a humanitarian situation. A camp-city, even one that has existed for two decades, presupposes a relationship between buildings and their inhabitants: it seeks an ameliorative effect from interventions in the built environment. As architects we can choose to support or sidestep these expectations.

Created by the UN High Commission on Refugees in 1990 during the Liberian civil war, Buduburam is the largest refugee camp in Ghana and is currently home to over 40,000 people. Following the Liberian elections of 2005 the UNHCR deemed that it was safe for the refugees to return to Liberia and began withdrawing services from the camp in 2007, ending its UN-recognized refugee status as of June 2010. Yet the buildings and the bodies remain: the city persists. Buduburam’s afterlife, as a humanitarian situation that has officially ceased to exist, places its population in limbo, unable to legally immigrate into the country they inhabit and unlikely to return to their country of origin. With no political resolution in sight, between its symbolic end and its biological death, the fact of its existence remains. Buduburam exists in a state of permanent aging.

In his essay titled, ‘What is a Camp?’, Giorgio Agamben writes, “The camp is the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule”.² In his view the camp is the permanent configuration of this suspension of the normal order where humans are stripped of their political rights and reduced to ‘bare life’. However, in many camps the struggle to articulate a political potential, a politics of the camp, confronts the attempts to accommodate the biological bodies of the populace through architecture and urban planning

strategies. After Agamben's camp, the condition of aging – the indefinite suspension – can be contested.

While Buduburam's refugees have indicated their desire to remain in place and not be repatriated, the refugees of the Dheisheh camp in the West Bank have resisted attempts to make their current circumstances more permanent, insisting instead on their temporary status and their right to return to their villages.

Dheisheh was constructed simultaneously with the notion of the refugee as defined by his or her right to return to the normal political order and is therefore necessarily different from Agamben's camp. The symbiosis between the refugee and the organization of space around this figure is the precondition for the formation of a political body. Tellingly, the Israeli submission to the International Court of Justice in defense of the barrier wall asserted that the concept of human rights was not applicable in the Occupied Territories, as it assumed a relationship between the state and its citizens.³ In short, the Palestinians were considered combatants yet were denied the protection of either Israeli or foreign citizenship, rendering them humanitarian subjects in a state of war.

In Dheisheh this dual pattern of continual maintenance of the city and the body was first developed following the 1948 war. The displaced population was housed initially in tents and new organizations were created to regulate their care and upkeep, including the UNRWA, the first permanent UN agency explicitly concerned with the support of refugees. Despite the political desires of the population to return to their former homes, the UNRWA encouraged and enforced policies of settlement.

When in 1958 the UNRWA attempted to replace their canvas tents with permanent architecture, the refugees initially resisted. Tarps erected over 10' x 10' plots of land allocated by the UN were replaced with concrete cubes occupying the same dimensions, a form of urban calcification against the wishes of the population. Their refusal to accept this architecture, as well as plumbing and electricity, was a means of insisting on their status as refugees; a protest against being settled, coinciding, perhaps ironically, with another political movement explicitly concerned with settling a population during the first years of Israeli settlers expansion in the West Bank.

Over 40 years later, children born into the Dheisheh refugee camp inherit the older generation's flight from the homeland, according to the UNRWA's designation, and also bear the inheritance of their permanently temporary city. The original tent plots have shaped the growth and subsequent densification of the urban fabric, now ossified through concrete and mortar. This unwanted permanence is a kind of aging in place, the freezing of a once temporary condition as an acknowledgment of the intransigence of the political situation.

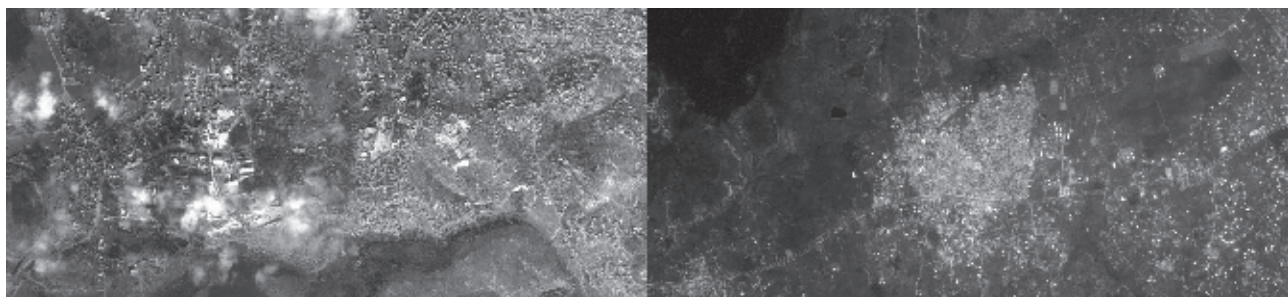
Simultaneously aiding and crippling its subjects, the architecture of aging in refugee camps entwines the physical architecture of the city and the bodies of the populace. The environmental prosthesis of care becomes a means to control a population by attempting to neutralize the political potential of their physical bodies and absorb them into routines of hygiene and health. These processes are supported by bureaucratic technologies such as registration cards that act as a gateway to services but also institute circumscribed patterns of movement. The camp-cities persist as hybridized systems of buildings and bodies, a techno-physiological apparatus, deferring hopes for cure or revolution by treating only

biological symptoms. Whether in Buduburam or Dheisheh, humanitarian space shares an affinity with the design of spaces for the elderly, as a physical infrastructure for the regulation of the bodies of its populace, monitoring and maintaining health and quality of life. We can't save you, but we can make you more comfortable.

- 1 'Humanitarian space' (espace humanitaire) is a term coined by Rony Brauman, president of Médecins Sans Frontières, to describe an operational space in which the purported neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian activities is respected, allowing agencies to carry out their duties without interference. We use the term somewhat differently, to describe the spaces, in a more commonly architectural sense, of humanitarian activity, the physical spaces of 'humanitarian space.'
- 2 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) p. 171; originally published as *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Milano: Giulio Einaudi, 1995).
- 3 As summarized by the Security Council, 'Israel denies that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both of which it has signed, are applicable to the occupied Palestinian territory. It asserts that humanitarian law is the protection granted in a conflict situation such as the one in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, whereas human rights treaties were intended for the protection of citizens from their own Government in times of peace'. From the document 'Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Summary of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, July 9, 2004'.



Aging architecture: Buduburam (left), Dheisheh (right)



Origin of camps: Buduburam (left), Dheisheh (right)



Camp sites: Buduburam (left), Dheisheh (right)