

An architectural investigation into the provision of refugee accommodation

Plácido Lizancos and Evaristo Zas

When challenged to investigate accommodation options for refugees in their city, architecture students found that there are simple and plausible architectural answers for the integration of refugees in medium-sized European cities such as A Coruña.

As teachers in a school of architecture, we challenged our students to consider how our city – A Coruña, in north-west Spain – would cope if we had to accommodate a large number of refugees. We all felt that what a school of architecture needs to contribute was not the design of yet another new type of emergency shelter. Anyway, most of the existing solutions for emergency shelter appear not to have been used for the purpose for which they were designed; in refugee camps shelters have in reality been built from a limited number of types of accommodation or are huts or shacks that have been improvised by their own residents.

An analysis of the capacity of A Coruña to host groups of people in need of shelter led us to identify a variety of hypothetical possibilities, each of which needed to be looked at from the point of view of their availability, potential for resilience, capacity and suitability for facilitating integration. While we were looking at all possible locations throughout the city, our goal was to design a methodology that could be replicated in any other city similar to ours. We identified three possible solutions:

1. Setting up a camp on a vacant plot of land: This is only possible away from the city centre, since that is where the city's large vacant spaces are. This solution would not be suitable because it would hinder the residents' local integration, particularly that of women, by distancing them from what the city has to offer. It would possibly turn the new settlement into a ghetto and the response would be slow since it would require prior preparation of the land, connecting it to public utilities and building the camp itself.

2. Using unoccupied housing stock: According to official data from 2011, there were 19,228 empty housing units in the city, scattered throughout all the neighbourhoods. This being the case, it would be difficult for social support services to provide care for the newcomers and it would prevent the formation of a critical mass of new residents and thus the creation of their own self-help networks.

3. Using an existing public building: We looked for a building of approximately 5,000 square metres, located in any area, in any state of repair and in any state of use. We excluded privately owned buildings (although the local housing crisis has left many buildings unoccupied) because of legal issues. We also rejected buildings of a type that would be difficult to adapt for permanent residential use, such as sports centres, cultural or religious centres, schools or industrial buildings. Four potential buildings were identified. One is the former provincial prison, now in disuse. Another was an old tobacco factory, currently undergoing transformation into a court building. The third was a former boarding school, now under construction to be turned into a hall of residence for university students. The fourth was a vacant part of a military barracks located in the city's historic centre.

Of these four, the former prison was rejected because it is symbolically charged – a building whose original purpose would be well-known among the city's inhabitants – and we did not consider this appropriate for use for refugees. The second and third cases were already being adapted for public

June 2017

www.fmreview.org/shelter

use. Therefore, the barracks presented the best option for re-purposing.

We visited the building in order to corroborate its potential for adaptation to the residential use we had in mind. We found that part of its facilities are dormitories, and under the same roof kitchens, dining areas and rooms of differing sizes make up a residential compound that could be ready for use at any time. (The rest of the building is still in use by the military.) In our assessment these facilities could immediately be made available for residential use, while the remaining buildings that are currently vacant – halls, warehouses and administrative buildings – could easily be re-purposed at little additional cost.

The structure of the barracks is a regular grid of substantial spans, with two large terraces. The whole compound has an unbroken surrounding wall with windows at regular intervals. These qualities allow for almost any architectural response, free of technical complications. Together with the positive urban qualities of its surroundings, this means that it would satisfy our requirement for the architecture, and its potential for the formation of an inclusive community. The members of that community would then be free to decide on its organisation and management, and how its members interact with each other and with the community that hosts them. Finally, it would allow for modifications that might be required over time.

Conclusions

We are told that there have always been refugees and that they have always suffered. But international law and the most basic ethical principles require the reception of these persons by those of us who should be hosting them. As academics and as an integral part of the general public, we used our particular capacities to identify organisations, donors and individuals related to our discipline that are addressing the refugee situation by developing a variety of architectural artefacts.¹ As a consequence of the development of this research, our students have understood the landscape of existing stakeholders and of

the solutions offered, identifying their own place as future designers (and citizens).

The objective of defining the process and the tactics to be followed in accommodating a large group of refugees in our city led us to the conclusion that the best possible option, given the urgency of the situation, was to use an existing public building located in a central area in order to facilitate the integration of the new neighbours into the existing city, and that would be sufficiently flexible to allow for the interaction of the users themselves with the building. There are simple and plausible architectural answers for the integration of refugees in medium-sized European cities such as A Coruña, provided they are supported by appropriate functional, technical and urban planning considerations.

Plácido Lizancos placido.lizancos@udc.gal

Senior Professor of Architectural Analysis, School of Architecture, A Coruña University

Evaristo Zas ezg@udc.es

Professor, School of Architecture, A Coruña University

www.udc.es/?language=en

This article is based on the experience of a modification of part of the curriculum of the School of Architecture at A Coruña University in response to the migration 'crisis' in Europe in 2015.

1. See Okwonga M (2016) '#AcrossBorders and destinations: How can we best help refugees on arrival?', Devex <http://bit.ly/Okwonga--AcrossBorders>



Could FMR support your funding bid?

FMR has on occasion been included in successful programmatic and research funding bids to the mutual benefit of all parties. If you are applying for external funding, would you consider including FMR in your proposal (and budget) to enhance the dissemination and impact of learning and results? There are various options/models for doing so. Please contact the Editors at fmr@qeh.ox.ac.uk