

# Urban planning for refugee housing: responding to urgent needs

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**Hamburg's urban planning model, developed in response to the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers in 2015, offers a number of lessons for refugee housing policy.**

Between January 2015 and December 2019 more than 82,000 refugees arrived in Hamburg in northern Germany, a city of 1.77 million people. Refugees in Germany are assigned to the country's 16 federal states according to a distribution system based on population and tax revenue, so densely populated cities receive a high number of refugees relative to the developable land area. Under the distribution system, approximately 46,000 refugees have been assigned to stay in Hamburg. The rapid population increase in Hamburg exacerbated an already limited social housing stock (which in December 2014 stood at just 79 housing facilities with a capacity of approximately 11,000 places<sup>1</sup>) and the city had insufficient locations for new development to accommodate arriving refugees.

To enable accelerated housing development, the Mayor of Hamburg proposed an amendment to the Federal Building Code in order to allow the construction of temporary refugee accommodation in non-residential areas, including industrial areas, car parks and commercial sites, for a period of three to five years.<sup>2</sup> This policy was intended both to enable the construction of temporary accommodation and to offset the existing social housing shortage. The policy was approved by the federal government in 2014 for use by city governments nationally and expanded in 2015. The government in Hamburg made full use of the new policy; more than 50 new sites have opened since the end of 2014.

Urban planning approaches in Hamburg offer an alternative to mainstream refugee housing policies by: 1) developing short-term temporary accommodation and 2) facilitating a transition between the

historically divided phases of emergency housing and long-term development by increasing social housing stock, benefiting both refugees and host country citizens. However, even given the city's noteworthy approach, it is not without challenges.

## Location and integration

Given the urgency for additional construction, and facilitated by the new National Building Code section which permitted the construction of refugee housing in non-residential areas, Hamburg's city government increasingly established housing sites in more remote locations across the city. For example, one container housing site for 712 people, Kirchenpauerstrasse, was built in the HafenCity neighbourhood, situated twenty minutes away from a transit stop and in the middle of an urban construction site with no other residential neighbours. Another site for 700 people, Am Ashenland II, was built in an agricultural area, physically divided from the nearby residential neighbourhood by impassable railroad tracks.

From conversations with refugees it was clear that they would prefer to live in larger urban areas due to a greater availability of housing and jobs, proximity to a greater diversity of people, and existing social connections with friends or family. Opportunities for integration are limited by locating new housing sites quite far from other residential neighbourhoods and by site design. Many sites are not connected to existing streets and are intentionally designed to appear temporary. Proximity facilitates interactions, both among refugees and between refugees and local residents and when housing is located further away from local residential areas and amenities, the integration experience for refugees

is more difficult. Furthermore, the time limit on these sites means that they will eventually be returned to their original use and residents will have to find alternative housing.

### Resident discontent

There has been widespread pushback in Hamburg regarding the development of the housing sites for two main reasons: firstly, local residents do not want a large development for refugees constructed in their neighbourhoods ('large' defined by residents' organisations as more than 300 people per site) and, secondly, the selection of these sites did not include customary public engagement processes. Many neighbourhoods created new residents' organisations or mobilised existing groups to mount legal challenges against the city. In many cases, local antipathy to plans was disguised as legal cases defending obscure nature reserve policies and endangered tree species. While the city won nearly all of the 40 cases, legal proceedings delayed construction at many sites for between six and 18 months. Given that new refugees were arriving on a daily basis, the local government could not afford further delays. Interviews with city planners suggested that, as a result, they intentionally started to locate more refugee housing sites in poorer neighbourhoods, with the expectation that local residents either could not or would not be willing to pursue a legal objection. Other local city planners felt that, as a result, the location of new refugee housing sites in poorer neighbourhoods was disproportionate.

In October 2015, as pressures on refugee housing grew, the local government announced its intention to construct a large permanent housing unit in each of Hamburg's seven districts, each of which would house



approximately 3,000 people. These sites were to be built to federal social housing standards and be reserved exclusively for refugees for 15 years, after which time they would become part of the city's social housing pool; after 30 years the developer would be allowed to sell the apartments. In response, a collection of 13 residents' neighbourhood organisations mobilised to create a group called 'Hamburg für gute Integration' (Hamburg for Better Integration) that petitioned the government to limit the number of refugees living in any one location. Leaders of the group assert that their pushback against the housing plan was not an objection to welcoming refugees; rather, it was a community initiative in support of integration. In July 2016, the local government entered into agreements with 13 residents' groups that no more than 300 refugees would be housed on any given site.

### Lessons for urban housing policy

In comparison with other urban refugee housing programmes that offer rental subsidies or incentives for incremental development, Hamburg's use of urban planning regulations to provide temporary and long-term housing is noteworthy. Lessons from the city's unprecedented approach to embedding refugee housing into national and neighbourhood planning



Temporary container housing for asylum seekers, located in an urban construction site (see aerial view opposite) in Hafencity, Hamburg, with no urban amenities or services, or residential neighbours, nearby.

processes demonstrate new, transferable methods of bridging the divide between historically segregated phases of relief and reconstruction. The progressive nature and innovation of Hamburg's recent refugee housing policies can serve as examples of best practice both for humanitarian organisations providing shelter and for municipal governments seeking to expand housing provision for marginalised communities.

Housing nearly 38,000 refugees in less than two years is a substantial achievement, although conversations with refugees, local residents and city planners alike suggest that improvements can be made. The application of this kind of new land use planning needs forethought, buy-in at local and federal levels, and continued monitoring. Bypassing customary community engagement processes to facilitate rapid development may cause delays later on. Segregating refugee housing from residential areas and neighbourhood amenities raises additional challenges for refugees seeking to establish their lives in a new city.

In a system where a majority of refugees rely on government-provided housing, as in Hamburg, urban planners can have a positive impact on the integration experience by influencing the spatial distribution of housing.

For integration and self-sufficiency, place matters. An individual's experience and exposure to a new culture, and their ability to access existing support systems and educational or economic opportunities, are closely linked to their location. Urban planners' point of influence lies at the site selection phase. It is critical to include additional spatial indicators

that relate to the integration experience – such as proximity to residential areas and neighbourhood demographics – which could further improve the site selection process as well as local community engagement, and enable city planners to prioritise sites that will allow refugees to integrate more easily.

It is important to note that Hamburg is a particularly wealthy city that was able to fund new development through a budget surplus, with support from the federal government. While many other municipalities welcoming refugees may not have the same financial resources, the outcomes of Hamburg's policy offers lessons for countries that are seeking creative ways to initiate construction of new affordable housing units for marginalised populations in land-constrained urban areas.

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1. Data on monthly arrivals and new housing construction in Hamburg available at: [www.hamburg.de/sfa-lagebild/](http://www.hamburg.de/sfa-lagebild/)

2. This article is based on Wolff JS (2018) *Land Use Planning Innovations in the Midst of a 'Migration Crisis': Developing a Spatial Definition of Refugee Integration*  
<https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/118228>