

# Tents in concrete? Housing the internally displaced

by Hans Skotte

*Homes are in houses (of various shapes and forms). This was pointedly illustrated by a displaced Serbian professor as he showed a TV reporter his most cherished belongings, a row of worn books: "I have a home", he lamented, "but no house to put it in!"*

**M**y title is ambiguous, unexplained, contradictory, even absurd – much like what is experienced in the quest of providing shelter for IDPs.

Take the term 'house' and such related words as 'housing', 'dwelling', 'home', 'residence' and 'shelter'. They all hold different meanings but in the world of emergency relief planning they are bandied about as if they were synonyms. To define them is not an academic game. It is a necessity because the consequences of conceptual confusion may create unwelcome results, to say the least.

I am an architect, researcher and planner. The researcher's main question is "What has – or might have – happened and why?" whereas the planner asks "What will – or ought to – happen and how?" These invariably present two different perspectives. But they do overlap. There is always future application and retrospective data present in both these approaches. The tension – because these approaches cannot be reconciled – is what makes cross-disciplinary research and planning both intellectually stimulating and effective.

## Implementation taken for granted

Implementation is not an abstract process fulfilling what has otherwise been planned or decided. This needs to be stressed for, in the 'just-do-it' world of international aid and relief, implementation is thought of in almost abstract terms. But implementation is a process that in itself holds reflexive powers, powers that might change the way we understand what we do – and what we ought to do.

This leads to IDP housing or shelter interventions being handled as if they were no different from distributing blankets, medicine, food or clothing. Shelter provision is primarily acknowledged as a logistical challenge. Doctors manage the building of hospitals, teachers the building of schools and whoever is left does housing – in most cases, the IDPs themselves.

I have found strikingly inappropriate technical solutions as well as sloppy workmanship to be common in war-time building. It is as if there is a license to bypass the laws of physics just because there is a conflict. International agencies remain unaccountable and there are no sanctions to bring against contractors who cut corners. By the time the embedded problems arise, the organisations are likely to be gone and the beneficiaries have no contractual relationship with the contractors. They rarely complain to donors or NGOs for fear of being seen to be ungrateful.

When locating IDP settlements, be it emergency settlements or more permanent structures, the contest for suitable sites is loaded with prejudice and political bias. Due to the perceived urgency of the mission, NGO's lack of professional planning capacity and their need to respect local power-brokers, decisions on location are usually left to local authorities who generally do not welcome displaced people. This most often leads to sites being located 'out of sight, out of mind'. Building in isolated locations further stigmatises and marginalises displaced people, makes communication difficult, infrastructure expensive and adds little long-term value to

the environment or the local communities.

Camp planners prescribe a planning approach that takes the single shelter unit as the point of departure. Invariably this leads to highly inappropriate aggregate results. This was apparent during the height of the Rwandan refugee influx when the Ngara settlement became Tanzania's second largest population centre after Dar es Salaam. Everything from plot size to the dimensions of walkways was standardised. The social strength of the camp residents was totally disregarded as shelter was designed with little reference to the dynamics of people living together. Ngara bore the imprint of a prisoner of war camp.

Humanitarians love plastic sheeting, both as a skin and structure. The microclimate that these sheets create – no ventilation, unbearably hot during the day, without insulating properties, unable to diffuse vapour created by people inside – significantly affects the quality of life for the people in these settlements.

People displaced by war or natural disasters retain only what they are able to bring when they flee. These are indeed 'items of home' and will

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forever carry profound meaning – way beyond the items' functional qualities. But they need space, secure space. So too does all the other 'stuff' displaced people acquire, now that 'stuff' is all they have and now that they live among people whom they have no reason to trust. As minimum living space standards are being applied (typically 4.5 metres<sup>2</sup> per person) little space is left for 'stuff' – which by now makes up the very symbol of home. Under such circumstances people as well as 'stuff' are itemised, deprived of social and symbolic powers.

### Houses become homes when they are chosen

Housing as homes are personalised objects, symbols of identity. That is what makes houses legitimate targets in identity wars. Houses are 'killed' in order to expel their inhabitants. When your dwelling is destroyed and you – for reasons incomprehensible to you – have been banished from against your will, at gunpoint, your home is lost. The loss seriously erodes the very meaning of life and its continuity. Having had

directed, guided or influenced by pre-war/pre-disaster perceptions, either to recreate or make new. All post-war or post-disaster records show this tension. Some may want to go back to the 'old ways' while others will try to realise what were mere dreams during the 'old days'. The political implications are obvious. International assistance, however, tends, also for political reasons, to be biased in favour of restoring the past, perceived (or intentionally interpreted) through material means as what 'used to be'.

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that continuity severed, the most obvious way of reestablishing it, and thus bring some sense back into your life, is to renew your choice of home: the very place from which you were forced to leave. It is the lack of chance, or choice, of 'going back' that often leave IDPs focused on a home-laden return. When the option of going back is actually available, the very choice of staying put is the founding stone of your new home, as some stay, and some go back.

Houses can be reborn. Returnees in Bosnia expend most of their resources in reestablishing the former glory of their houses. Reconstructed houses stand as a signal to the 'others', the neighbours who stayed behind: "We're back! You did not succeed!" Reconstruction is the latest move in the continued conflict – now transformed into a material 'contest' between neighbouring identity groups. Thus housing is unlikely to foster reconciliation. That houses are too identity-laden and personal to carry reconciliatory powers is hardly surprising considering that these very attributes were the cause of their destruction in the first place.

### Towards recovery

For local recovery to take place, for the IDPs to shift the focus towards the future and make choices accordingly, the reflexive properties of the recovery process must be acknowledged. Recovery will be

Housing reconstruction may make a significant contribution towards economic recovery.

Traditional housing construction creates more economic dynamics, i.e. more jobs, than does for instance, manufacturing. Housing investments generate employment in construction, in production of materials, tools and transport. These basic economic lessons, so crucial in getting Europe back on its feet after WWII, are not available to the war-damaged countries of today. In a globalised economy no consideration is given to sourcing the building materials which typically comprise 60-80% of the cost of a house. Importing cheaper materials from abroad may save money in the short term but will have overall negative effects on recovering economies.

### Engaging local agency

Homes are best rebuilt by processes which are the outcome of personal choices. Doing it in an organised way, as is the case in aided self-help reconstruction, holds additional potential benefits for the recovery process. By transferring decisions to local agency, to local organisations or legitimate leaders, legitimacy and trust are strengthened. The self-confidence of success is a necessary stepping stone for further ventures along the road to recovery.

This is how the Bosniak village of Grapska in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina was reconstructed. At the end of their seven years of displacement,

the community association was given the mandate by SRSA, a Swedish NGO, to formulate the criteria by which house owners were selected to receive free building materials. In hindsight, these criteria look astonishingly similar to those set by the US Housing Agency regarding housing credit for returning soldiers after WWII but different from those set by welfare-oriented international NGOs. The house owners in Grapska were furthermore obliged to obtain all legal papers and permissions at the local (and obstructive) Serb-controlled municipality without the facilitatory presence and hand-holding of a foreign NGO.

SRSA did provide returning families with technical advice, necessary tools and transport support but it was the families who organised and executed all the work, hired artisans and made alternative designs. Almost all the owners added more materials, paid for by themselves, in order to rebuild houses similar to those destroyed. In addition to the materials for about 300 houses provided by the Swedes, an additional 100 houses have been reconstructed purely out of private funds, mostly through remittances. People believe in the place – and have trust in the people who make up its leadership and in future opportunities.

Although the houses of Grapska look like most new houses in Bosnia, what their housing has done is create a human and social platform for recovery. It is the outcome of the professional intuition on the part of the SRSA's head of office in Tuzla and the agency of the returnees. The prospects look good. What housing has done in Grapska could, and should, be replicated elsewhere.

***Hans Skotte is an architect whose PhD focused on NGO practices in housing reconstruction in Bosnia. He works at NTNU's Faculty of Architecture and is a post-doctoral research fellow with the Research Group on Forced Migration. Email: hans.skotte@ark.ntnu.no***