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A camp redefined as part of the city

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Was what was built at La Linière in Grand-Synthe in northern France a traditional refugee camp or a new kind of urban district?

The La Linière settlement described here was over-crowded and made of wooden cabins. It was destroyed by a fire in April 2017 but remains a cause of controversy between the supportive mayor of the town and the central political authorities.

The presence of migrants in the La Linière camp in the town of Grande-Synthe on the north coast of France was officially accepted by all public stakeholders in May 2016. This followed the provision of mains services to the site and the construction of 300 wooden cabins by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the town council, against the national government's wishes. After several months of indecision, it was agreed that the camp would be jointly managed by the town hall, central government and a para-governmental organisation, AFEJL.

The site was no more isolated from the town than other local developments, it was close to the largest shopping centre in the town, and the town hall announced its desire to redirect bus routes near it and add new bus stops. The mayor consistently expressed his desire for its inhabitants to have access to and use the town's numerous public services.

It is a pattern for cities, rather than the state, to find that they are the real key players in welcoming refugees. "States grant asylum, but it is the cities that provide shelter," said a joint statement by the mayors of Barcelona, Paris and Lesbos in a blog on 13th September 2015.¹

British and French organisations installed collective kitchens and dining rooms in the camp, along with a school, an information centre, a language learning centre and a play area. In addition to handing out meals and clothes, they also offered a wide range of services, ranging from tennis lessons to cookery classes and raising awareness about permaculture. As well as the MSF dispensary and a Red Cross station in the camp, the exiles had access to all the public health services provided by the local council.

According to researcher Michel Agier, a 'camp' has three main characteristics: extraterritoriality – the camp is not part of the surrounding area; exception – the camp is not subject to the same laws as the state in which it is located; and exclusion – the camp is a marker of the difference between its inhabitants and inhabitants or visitors from outside.² These conditions were only to some degree fulfilled in Grande-Synthe.



La Linière camp in Grande-Synthe near Dunkirk, April 2016.

The site of the camp is not extraterritorial but stands in the heart of the metropolitan area, close to a landscaped park and lake, and it is served by public transport. The exceptional nature of the camp was a reality if only because of the way it came about. But a letter, signed by the mayor and MSF and on display in the camp, noted the rights of its residents: access to shelter, protection, hygiene, food, care, education, culture, and neutral and impartial legal information, for an indefinite period. Finally, the mayor consistently stated that the residents were not excluded from but had access to all municipal public services, even though this does not give them the rights of European citizens.

Officially, no new people were supposed to come to the camp once it had opened; in practice, no-one was turned away, at least until late June 2016. In any case, the number of occupants had dropped steadily from 3,000 when it opened at the end of 2015 to 700 in mid-2016. However, the destruction of the 'Jungle' camp in Calais reversed the trend and the camp's population rose to 1,700, far exceeding its capacity of 700.

The camp's future

Thinking through future scenarios involved a number of principles for the camp. The first was that it was a place that was open to those arriving and also allowed people to leave it easily. It could not be closed but could either expand outwards or become more densely occupied. In either case, this goes hand-in-hand with more flexible, less rigid land laws, where dynamic usage rights replace static spatial rights.

The architecture that goes with this type of openness needs to adapt to the size of the human units (families or temporary groups of people) who live there. This means architecture that can provide a technical service, which ranges from shelter from the vagaries of the weather to kitchens and toilets, and which includes heating and ventilation systems. But apart from the technical capabilities that everyone is entitled to expect, and apart from the general layout and the design of amenities, spaces and public furniture, the individual architecture should express the customs and

culture of the people who live in it: this is about creating a place whose architecture is ergonomic, intelligent, useful and social.

Such a place must also be able to become a place of economic production. We may therefore want a right that would allow the emergence of micro-economic initiatives or at least places where things can be produced and people can work. In an article entitled 'The perfect refugee camp', American journalist Mac McClelland reflected on the persistent tension between the two poor choices generally offered to refugees: the camp, or a precarious life in the city as terrible a solution as living in a camp.³ Even though the city may seem to allow better integration, it subjects exiles to violence and tension. At one point, numerous exiles in France had a third choice: the Calais Jungle; this was a hybrid solution, between camp and precariousness, until it was demolished in October 2016.⁴

Nonetheless, what was being built at La Linière was being done with local actors who were uniformly and consistently engaged. La Linière was more and better than a refugee camp: it could have been a place of welcome and integration, as the mayor, Damien Carême, wrote in a book published a few days before the destruction: "it is a new neighbourhood of my city and I will take care of it in that way. (...) its closure will happen only when the Kurdish situation improves. Or when the migratory route does not pass here anymore. The refugees are in charge of the agenda."⁵

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