

June 2017

www.fmreview.org/shelter

Appropriating buildings to house refugees: Berlin Tempelhof

Toby Parsloe

As European cities continue to co-opt existing buildings to use as refugee shelters, the inherent spatial characteristics of these structures present significant challenges to the authorities that select the sites and to those who must reside in them.

Tempelhof airport, built by the Nazis in the 1930s, is a protected monument in the centre of the German capital, Berlin. Its history, size and context have established it as a controversial and high-profile space for refugees. And for the residents there is a price to pay for living in such an iconic and politically charged structure. Questions around their inhabitation have become entangled with impassioned public debates concerning public space, urban development and heritage.

It was a bold decision to house refugees in Tempelhof's former aircraft hangars. Since the airport's closure in 2008, the terminal buildings have been used for a variety of events, and the airfield was transformed into Berlin's largest public park. This has since become a cherished space, ingrained in everyday city life. Plans to build on the Tempelhof site were emphatically blocked in a 2014 referendum, which led to protective legislation against future construction. The outcome was considered emblematic of Berlin, where the right to public space triumphed over profit-focused development.

The establishment of what is in essence a camp in Tempelhof in 2015, however, appeared to threaten all this. International private and public events were cancelled, and a former piece of infrastructure was prevented from being reintegrated into the city's wider urban fabric. More alarmingly, the protective legislation was overturned. This aroused public suspicion that the camp was being used as a political tool to open up the site for investors to construct luxury apartments. In a city that is gripped by a housing crisis, the need for affordable housing remains a highly contentious issue. The construction of the camp would inevitably

implicate the refugee situation in prominent contemporary conflicts over public space and housing. Placing refugees at the heart of these debates makes gaining acceptance by the host population far more difficult and complicated. Sites that are already highly politicised and contentious clearly are not the best candidates for refugee shelter. But at Tempelhof, the problems run deeper.

Tempelhof was originally designed to act as a cornerstone for Hitler's 'world capital', which sought to crystallise claims of racial supremacy and world domination through architecture. Yet its subsequent history, including the pivotal role it played in the life-saving 1948 Berlin airlift, have imbued it with multifarious associations. The decision to use the airport as a camp merely intensified the complexity of its associations. It now simultaneously acts as an international symbol of totalitarian megalomania and trauma, humanitarian intervention, and cold war propaganda, and is a cinematic icon. While the international media predominantly either juxtapose the current space of refuge with Tempelhof's associations with Nazism, or establish continuities between it and the resilience associated with the Berlin airlift, the critical questions and implications of hospitality are eclipsed.

History, politics and living space

Tempelhof's heritage also imposes physical limitations. The building is a legally protected historic monument, which means that strict regulations dictate the physical forms of the interior camp spaces. No alterations can be made that will permanently affect the building, leaving the entire camp to exist in a permanently ephemeral state. Nothing can be stuck to the walls. In camps in other

places there are ingenious shelters cobbled together from available materials, or street-like thoroughfares lined with makeshift huts wherein unofficial local economies have developed. At Tempelhof, little more can exist beyond the regimentally arranged living cubicles, with their pristine white walls.

Nevertheless, some residents have tried to reshape the spaces to make their temporary home slightly more liveable. They rearrange the beds and benches in their cubicles, and use blankets or sheets to section off small areas for themselves. Others wrap sheets around their bed, offering a fleeting sense of privacy. To bring a modicum of colour to the black-and-white camp alleyways, some drape brightly covered sheets over the black cloth 'doors', creating something reminiscent of a streetscape. Each action attempts to create a sense of domesticity within a vast hangar originally intended for large machines. However, the residents are stuck in the paradox of Tempelhof: the need for the building to remain a historically preserved airport, while simultaneously acting as a habitable space for refugees.

For a short period of time, one practice demonstrated the most striking resident influence over camp spaces. This took the form of graffiti strewn across the cubicle wall panels – colourful markings ranging from children's drawings to religious symbols, national flags and names of hometowns written in different mother tongues. Other scribbles affirmed gratitude to Germany for offering safety and refuge to thousands. The most compelling and aesthetic markings were the elaborate murals exhibiting high levels of artistic skill and intricate detail. The very walls became canvases upon which refugees could express their frustrations, hopes and enduring cultural identities.

Yet, as of April 2016, the practice of graffiti has been banned. Controversial and offensive markings were discovered, as the cultural and political tensions of the residents' countries of origin were also rendered visible on the wall panels. The camp's high-profile status provoked fears over both interior conflicts and an exterior press scandal. These fears were justifiable. A minor scuffle

in November 2015 became internationally sensationalised, and camp authorities were keen to avoid further exaggerated reports. In a heavily scrutinised site as controversial and iconic as Tempelhof, it is understandable that the authorities would wish to avoid any aggravation of an already precarious situation. However, this has ultimately deprived the residents of one of the few ways they could shape their spaces to a significant extent. In place of the graffiti, stencilled prints of famous Berlin landmarks have been put up by the camp organisers. While they offer elements of colour to the sanitised white walls, they do not provide the same self-made cultural familiarity. In this sense, the prominence of Tempelhof has exacerbated very tangible restrictions imposed on the ways that residents inhabit the camp spaces.

Using buildings

There is potential to take advantage of the opportunities that certain sites present, either to better integrate refugees in host cities or to encourage positive interactions between refugees and the host city. In such sites, architecture can become another tool to tackle the conflicts caused by the current refugee situation. Famous historical monuments, however, clearly present significant barriers to conversion into liveable spaces for refugees. Tempelhof may seem a unique case but it should rather be seen as part of an emerging type of camp, established in re-appropriated structures in the centre of European cities. In Paris there is the Humanitarian Centre situated in a former train depot in the 18th arrondissement, while in Athens the Eleonas camp was erected in a former industrial estate. Although these perhaps avoid the heritage issues that are present at Tempelhof, each structure nonetheless presents specific socio-political and physical characteristics that will shape the potential for residents to inhabit the camp, and influence the relationships between the camp residents and the citizens of the host city.

Toby Parsloe toby.parsloe@cantab.net
PhD candidate, Centre for Urban Conflicts
Research, Department of Architecture, University
of Cambridge www.arct.cam.ac.uk