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## The humanitarian-architect divide

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**Humanitarians and architects can fail to find a common language, characterising each other in schematic terms. It is time to bridge the divide and encourage greater collaboration between these professions. By learning from each other's way of thinking they may also become more relevant to displaced people seeking shelter.**

Media coverage of forced migration tends to repeat the old, tired imagery of tents and camps, ignoring how often displaced people end up living in a much wider range of shelters. Many forced migrants live in ordinary rented apartment blocks or stay with friends and relatives. Others find a roof by looking to their personal networks, or seek shelter in a church or mosque. Some move into informal settlements such as the Calais 'Jungle', constructing their own shelter from wood and tarpaulin. Others stay in the natural environment living in caves, sleeping under trees or hiding in hedgerows. In large cities many migrants find refuge in the urban environment: living under bridges and underpasses in Paris, or in tents in a central train station such as Keleti in Budapest. Others may be housed in government facilities, such as detention centres, underground bunkers in Switzerland, or airports such as Tempelhof in Berlin. Some refugees squat in abandoned buildings, such as in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia in Athens.

The lesson of this diversity is clear: forced migrants are likely to find accommodation without the assistance of professional aid workers or architectural expertise. Indeed, the importance of improvisation and personal initiative has been a striking feature of the recent 'crisis' in Europe. Both humanitarians and architects have been more irrelevant to the problem of shelter and displacement than they would care to admit. On the one hand, large aid agencies have been slow to respond and have ended up being overtaken by amateur humanitarians and solidarity groups. On the other hand, forced migrants have rarely lived in spaces designed by architects, despite the attention placed on 'innovative' prefabricated shelter in design media and on

the architectural conference circuit. These two professions, which at least ostensibly have the most to contribute to addressing the problem of shelter, have a tendency to misunderstand and disagree with each other, only exacerbating their irrelevance. This enduring tension stands as a real obstacle both to collaborative working and fresh thinking on this important contemporary topic. The first step is to understand the stereotypes in this 'humanitarian-architect' divide.

### The pragmatic humanitarian's view

Humanitarians are minded to see architects as utopian dreamers, completely out of touch with the realities of the field and the needs of beneficiaries. They read enthusiastic media reports of the latest emergency shelter designs, sighing in despair at the expression of certainty that a universal solution can be found. Humanitarians may also have been bombarded by well-meaning but ultimately unworkable suggestions in their workplace email inboxes, or may have heard about the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale exhibition with its combination of impenetrable jargon and over-ambitious aims. As a result many aid professionals have concluded that architects completely misunderstand the nature of the problem and lack the necessary pragmatism to tackle it. Employing an architect may be all very well, they think, but only if you have lots of money and want to build something pretty; most architectural thinking, however, is ultimately irrelevant in emergencies, when the need to provide simple shelter with limited resources and limited time is the most significant concern.

Some humanitarians, especially in the shelter sector, do have an architectural training or some familiarity with the profession. They may understand that a

thoughtful and well-informed architectural intervention is possible, and that there are some productive conversations taking place. Yet they still tend to argue that there is not the time. After iterating designs, having endless meetings with stakeholders, sourcing materials and responding to bids, they fear that architects will still be pondering as the ground moves beneath their feet.

### The professional architect's view

For their part, professional architects often wonder why aid agencies never reach out to them. They too read the media and lament the restrictive, unimaginative, mean-looking designs that so often characterise refugee camps. As professionals trained for years to think about how to build shelter in complex situations, they wonder why their specialist expertise is not being sought, and after observing the grid-like layouts of camps and the relentlessly uniform housing, they see how little design there is in the world of aid. This may lead them to the conclusion that the sector may claim to be humanitarian but rarely appears humane. They also notice that humanitarians are preoccupied with spreadsheets, metrics and minimum standards, and that humanitarians seem more concerned with ticking boxes and counting costs than thinking creatively about how people live.

Some architects, if they are more familiar with the world of aid, will understand the severe financial and temporal constraints aid agencies are under. They may recognise that doing more is impossible. Yet they may still regret that housing has become an issue of engineering, and they may conclude that humanitarians are too preoccupied with efficiency to find the necessary holistic solutions. Architects understand that any attempt to find shelter should take into account everything from the formation of community to the utilisation of the latest materials, from considerations about the environment to attention to forms of construction, from making a building aesthetically beautiful to making it practical for daily life. Humanitarians rarely think this expansively.

### Bridging the divide

Given the persistence of this divide, which is based more on misunderstanding than genuine animosity, we need to promote some mediation between these cultural worlds. Humanitarianism is a mode of thinking that is based on a careful calculation of cost, time and lives saved. Architecture, however, is a mode of thinking that is centred on a balance of aesthetics and utility, solidity and suitability. Both sides can assist with the shelter needs of displaced people in a variety of circumstances, but in different ways. The task now is bring the two together.

One of the aims of the Refugee Studies Centre's Architectures of Displacement research project is to widen public understanding of refugee shelter and to inform the design of successful policies on shelter and displacement.<sup>1</sup> We are studying interventions by both architects and humanitarians in detail, exploring their advantages and limitations. We are starting to facilitate dialogue, getting the main players together to talk about their constraints. We believe that by learning from each other's way of thinking, both architects and humanitarians can become more relevant to displaced people seeking shelter. Get in touch and join the debate.

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1. Launched in late 2016  
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