

Refugee Camps of the Western Sahara

Perched in the Saharan desert of southern Algeria, close to the border zone with the Western Sahara, the Sahrawi refugee camps certainly contain some of the most extreme refugee conditions in the world today. Located in one of the most inhospitable areas of the planet, with approximately 160,000 refugees, many of whom have been living in tents for the last thirty-five years, these camps seem to embody all of the dilemmas and contradictions that plague the condition of refugee and humanitarian action in general. They can also be seen as a paradigmatic example of the spatial manifestation of a state of exception that has become permanent. Alongside a technical conception of the camp as a “machinery” designed to protect victims, which one finds in the documents of the United Nations and its various agencies, notions of “dilemmas” and the “state of exception” dominate the debate about refugee camps among both practitioners and critical theorists. On closer scrutiny, however, the Sahrawi case may provide the basis for a different understanding of the refugee camp and thereby help us to reconceptualize what we mean when we use this notion.

This essay presents the findings of an urban research project on the Sahrawi refugee camps in southern Algeria. Before going into the specific conditions characterizing these refugee camps and the history of the underlying conflict, it is important to be aware of the contexts in which refugee camps are discussed and of the nature of these discussions. Even though they often feature in news reports, are home to several millions of people distributed in many regions of the world, and have gained a certain popularity in critical theory as the preferred paradigm for heterotopias, there is surprisingly little understanding and knowledge of refugee camps among the general public, and especially among architects, urbanists, and spatial planners. From an architectural perspective, what, exactly, are refugee camps? For whom are they constructed, and who has an interest in them? How are they planned? What kinds of spaces exist within the camps, and how do the refugees themselves use and shape them? Last but not least, what is their relationship to the underlying conflicts that led to their creation in the first place? In short, this project has tried to use architecture both as a discipline and as a method from which the conflicts and the dilemmas associated with the refugee condition can be deciphered and assessed.

In recent years, the concept of the camp has enjoyed a certain prominence and even something of a vogue in the field of spatial studies and the social sciences in general. It seems appropriate to emphasize the word “concept,” since most of the time the multiplication of references to the “camp” in the contemporary discourse of critical theory has not shed much light on the specific, empirical spaces to which this term is referring. There are a number of different notions of what a refugee camp is



Figure 1. West Africa, with Western Sahara in gray and locations of refugee camps. (All images courtesy Manuel Herz unless otherwise noted.)

or is not, and it is tempting to play with the polysemic nature of the term. This is what Giorgio Agamben, who may be the most prominent exponent of this renewed interest in camps, does: “Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.”¹ He goes on: “The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into the *zones d’attentes* of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities.”² The same rules and logics of the camp are thus supposed to run from the holding areas of our airports to the *banlieues* of our cities. Agamben here comes dangerously close to a generalization through which the problems specific to each of those spaces, and the particular cause that led to their emergence in the first place, seem to disappear. Even if we admit that a common biopolitical logic governs the power relationships in refugee camps, as well as in slums or detention centers, the specific issues that arise in each case remain unacknowledged. What distinguishes a refugee camp from other forms of spatial confinement is more opaque than ever.

An Ambiguous Space

Among the different ways of positioning refugee camps in contemporary discourse, there are three understandings that predominate. Camps are seen as humanitarian spaces in which lives are saved, as spaces of control in which all aspects of the refugees’

lives are placed under institutional supervision, and last as spaces of destitution and misery. Of course, these ways of representing and describing refugee camps do not exclude one another, and they often coexist alongside or complement one another.

The Camp as a Humanitarian Space

The most obvious and maybe most conventional reading of a refugee camp is that of a *humanitarian* space: refugee camps are constructed to protect and save lives. On March 17, 2003, Ange-Félix Patassé, then the incumbent president of the Central African Republic, was overthrown by his former army chief of staff, François Bozizé. The timing for this coup could not have been more unfortunate, since on the following day the United States began its invasion of Iraq. It was destined to be one of those many coups in Africa that almost no one in the Western world took notice of, with any news report being relegated to the last pages of the papers, provided they were published at all. The violence that flared in its wake led to tens of thousands of Central Africans fleeing over the northern border into neighboring Chad.

Within a few days, UNHCR, the UN body responsible for refugees, was nonetheless able to move into the densely forested area of southern Chad, locate where the refugees had gathered after crossing the border, and identify two potential locations for building refugee camps. After negotiating with the local and national Chadian authorities and liaising with a few non-governmental organizations such as MSF and Oxfam, UNHCR cleared the area, laid out the perimeter of the camp and its internal sectors, distributed tents, dug wells, and set up medical facilities. With unquestionable efficiency and swiftness, the UNHCR and its implementation partners are able to operate in remote locations. They provide accommodation, water, food, healthcare, and basic education to the refugee population. It is this efficiency that establishes refugee camps as humanitarian spaces, able to protect refugees and save lives (see fig. 2).

Camps and the State of Exception

The care of others can easily turn into the government of others. Refugees are given water, food, and healthcare, but they are also kept in one place, without the freedom to move or settle elsewhere: the notion of care thus exhibits its double-edgedness. Not allowed to express themselves politically and without the right to take on work or employment outside the camps, refugees are often reduced to mere recipients of welfare, condemned to a life of waiting, dependent on the action of others. Refugees have sometimes spent decades living in the same camps, located in remote places, removed from most economic, cultural, or social exchanges. This condition of exile within humanitarian enclaves, in which the refugee is reduced to a given number of liters of water and calories per day and to her biological existence, is said to have become the norm and to serve specific interests in a globalized world. The refugee camp then becomes the spatial manifestation of the state of exception, which is, in turn, the defining characteristic of our times. Agamben has probably offered the most articulate rendition of this view of the camp as a machinery for disempowering refugees.



Figure 2. A clinic run by Médecins sans frontières in the Gondje refugee camp in southern Chad, 2006.



Figure 3. A historical image of the foundation of the refugee camps (© Polisario, image by permission).



Figure 4. View of large residential compound, camp El Aaiun, 2011.



Figure 5. Overview of built fabric of camp Smara, 2011.

When we look at the images of refugee camps that pervade the media, a third reading of refugee camps emerges. We see people in the blazing heat, queuing for water, sitting motionless in the heat, their emaciated and naked bodies covered with flies. The tents are mere rags, hardly providing shade from the merciless sun. Neither as a humanitarian space nor as a space of control, these images represent the camp as a place of desperation. Sebastião Salgado is a prominent voice among those photographers representing the refugee as a suffering being. His photographs combine a cunning, maybe uncanny, sense of aesthetics with a powerful sense of misery. The refugee is always the victim. The victim is always unnamed. She does not have a history, nor are we to believe that she has a future. She has no biography and represents only pure suffering. In fact, such photographs do not give us any information beyond the mere fact of suffering. They do not help us understand; they do not elucidate the underlying causes of the disaster. Refugee camps are seen as places of misery where refugees are reduced to wretched beings without identity or individuality.

A Counter-Model: The Western Sahara Camps

What remains beyond the reading of refugee camps as either humanitarian spaces, spaces of control, or spaces of desperation? Can we understand camps in a different way? A closer look at the refugee camps of the Western Sahara makes it possible to develop a counter-model based upon a different understanding of what camps are, one that incorporates ideas of emancipation and agency.

History of the Western Sahara

A map of the world in 1945 drawn by the United Nations shows the global political landscape at the end of the Second World War. While independent countries and founding members of the UN are represented in light blue and other independent countries in orange, nations that have the status of dependencies are marked in red, green, or purple. The resulting map is a patchwork of colors, a confetti of multiple dependencies that makes visible the colonial world order that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. Africa and Southeast Asia, in particular, are colored in red and green, as colonial entities of Western powers. In the same map of today's world, also issued by the UN, only a single red patch remains visible: the Western Sahara, Africa's last colony.

This disputed territory is located at the western edge of the African continent, where the Sahara meets the Atlantic Ocean. Traditionally an area populated by nomadic tribes related to the wider Berber culture, the area was colonized by Spain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Initially, it was of little economic significance for colonial Spain, and the Spaniards limited their presence to a few trading posts and military bases. The situation changed when large deposits of phosphate were discovered in the middle of the twentieth century. Exploitation began in the 1960s and resulted in considerable economic growth, while it also triggered trends toward urbanization. These developments coincided with increasing pressure exercised on Spain by the international community, and by the UN in particular, in order to lead

the “Spanish Sahara” toward independence. The Sahrawi population organized itself into a liberation movement and added further pressure on Spain. Toward the end of 1975, just before the end of Franco’s rule, Spain started to pull out of its colony, although it had previously negotiated with neighboring Morocco and Mauritania to ensure that these countries would fill its place. Morocco invaded the Western Sahara, first through a civilian occupation, later followed by a military campaign. The Sahrawi population was forced to seek refuge in temporary camps located in the eastern parts of the territory, but it was only a short time before Moroccan attacks displaced them again. During spring and summer 1976, the Sahrawis crossed the border and fled into southwestern Algeria, where they settled in a camp near the Algerian town of Tindouf. During the guerilla war that ensued, the Sahrawi fighters forced Mauritania to withdraw from the territory in 1979. Yet the areas they liberated were eventually reoccupied by the advancing Moroccan troops, who had embarked upon one of the most extreme and absurd construction endeavors in history: the building of a 2500-kilometer sand wall (“The Berm”) running through the desert and meant to separate the territory occupied by Morocco—which eventually amounted to almost three quarters of the entire Western Sahara—from the territories held by the Sahrawi, or the “liberated territories.”³

History of the Camps

The camps started off as a collection of tents, pitched on the dry and rocky desert sand and organized in rows and clusters (see fig. 3). As most of the men were fighting against the Moroccans, the women took on a leading role in the establishment of the camps and in the organization of the daily activities. With little help from the international community and no significant involvement of the UN, the refugee community set up schools and established medical stations as well as hospitals. Later, the tents were supplemented by small clay huts, which eventually grew in number and developed into the small residential compounds in which the refugees live today.

After initially settling in a single camp, “Rabouni,” the Sahrawi refugees soon started opening two other camps, “Smara” and “El Aaiun.” They ended up living in five camps once “Dakhla” and “Awserd” were later founded. Moreover, the women’s school, “27 February” (commemorating the inauguration of the Sahrawi Republic), eventually grew into a settlement, while Rabouni was transformed into an administrative center.

Already during the Spanish colonial period, the Sahrawi independence movement Polisario had sketched out a vision for a social order that departed from many of the historical and traditional features of Sahrawi society. Originally, this vision was obviously meant to be implemented in an independent Western Sahara, but when independence failed to arrive, it instead took shape in the refugee camps. In the crucible of the camps, a social revolution was forced upon Sahrawi society within the briefest of time spans: the tribal system that had previously structured the life and shaped the identity of the Sahrawis was rejected in favor of a national identity. The emancipation of women took place almost automatically because of the central role they played in the camps, and much of the nomadic culture disappeared, as life in the camps did not lend itself to the maintenance of large herds of camels. Over time,



Figure 6. Overview of built fabric of camp Smara, 2011.



Figure 7. Residential compound with tent, camp El Aaiun, southwestern Algeria, 2011.



Figure 8. Interior decoration in a residential hut, “27 February” camp, 2011.

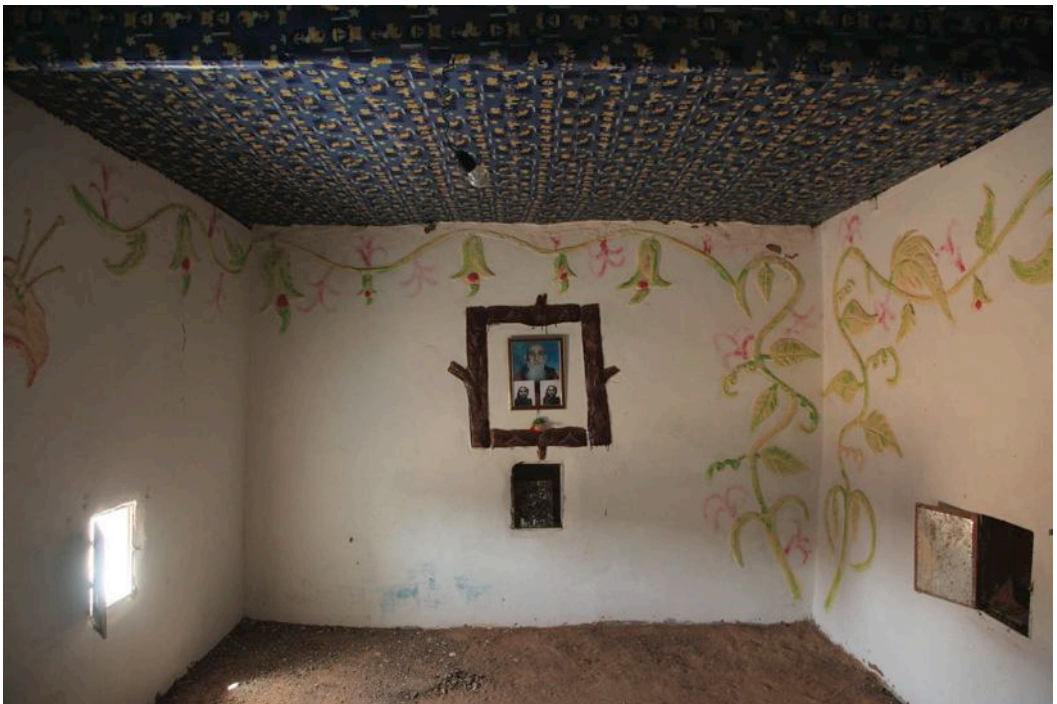


Figure 9. Interior decoration in a residential hut, “27 February” camp, 2011.



Figure 10. Private house, El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 11. Sahrawi checkpoint between Tindouf and El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 12. Ministry of Construction and Infrastructure, Rabunie camp, 2011.



Figure 13. Derelict car bodies, El Aaiun camp, 2011.

within the exceptional situation created by the fact of being a nation of refugees, a normality of everyday life emerged. A number of activities related to the necessities of life, circulation, or recreation shaped the physical spaces within the refugee camps. These activities are an important lens through which it is possible to look differently at the camp, its relationship to the underlying conflict, and the potentials that it offers.

Spaces of Everyday Life: Living

Within the camps they inhabit today, Sahrawi families usually occupy more than one structure, and they often split their time between the tent and one or more clay huts (see figs. 4–6). Besides harking back to their nomadic tradition, the tent offers climatic benefits in the scorching heat of the Saharan summer. But it also signifies that the Sahrawi intend their stay in the Algerian camps to be temporary. It bears witness to their will to return to the homeland and is meant to give evidence that the camps are not permanent settlements; the tent, in that sense, has become an important political signifier (see fig. 7). Nevertheless, refugees have started to decorate their huts and tents. Even though these decorations sometimes take the shape of moveable carpets or curtains (in line with the logic of the temporary), they also belong to the sphere of the stable or the permanent. The walls of clay huts are plastered and painted, the roofs are decorated with wallpaper or wooden planks, the windows feature pronounced reveals or more elaborate frames. Most recently huts have become more like houses, and they express a conscious effort in terms of their design, to the extent that they sometimes include such architectural elements as columns and arches. Different styles also emerge, sometimes reminiscent of the postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s (see figs. 8–10). Inscribed into many of these elements are expressions of national identity, first and foremost the Sahrawi flag. Thus the population finds itself caught in a tension between the desire for individual expression and a certain level of comfort and beauty on the one hand, and the demonstration of the temporary nature of its presence in the camps as well as the determination to return. Residential architecture in the camps is the central medium in which this tension is expressed.

Spaces of Everyday Life: Work and Administration

When accessing a refugee camp, whether in Kenya, Chad, Pakistan, or elsewhere, one usually needs to pass through checkpoints where the UNHCR—or more often the host country with its police force—controls access to the camp. The case of the Sahrawi camps is similar, with one major difference: the checkpoints leading to the camps are not manned by Algerian policemen or military personnel but by the Sahrawis themselves (see fig. 11). The camps are located twenty to thirty kilometers from the Algerian city of Tindouf (with the exception of Dakhla, which is farther away), and they constitute a matrix of settlements in the Algerian Sahara home to approximately 160,000 refugees. At first glance, this arrangement seems similar to other refugee settlements in Africa, whether the twelve camps in eastern Chad, where 260,000 refugees from Darfur live, or the three camps near Dadaab, in eastern Kenya, inhabited by 400,000 Somalis. In contrast to what happens in Chad or in Kenya, however, and probably unparalleled in the global realm of refugee settlements, the

Sahrawis live in a territory where Algeria has ceded most of its control, allowing the refugees to enjoy a relative degree of autonomy.

This partial autonomy has led to the development of an extensive administrative structure with its dedicated spaces, most of it located in Rabouni, which operates as the administrative center for the entire network of camps. As one walks through Rabouni, one passes by the ministries of international affairs, health, defense, planning, and various other administrations (see fig. 12). Rabouni also houses the main “national hospital,” the national museum, and the national archive. A large central market is located at the main transport hub, where every day hundreds if not thousands of Sahrawis transit on their way to work in one of these institutions. What emerges is a unique landscape for refugee settlements: a seat of government for a refugee nation where refugees govern themselves instead of being governed by a host nation or by the international humanitarian regime. What also emerges is a certain kind of normality: people going to work, coming in the morning, having lunch in the canteen of their ministry or in some sandwich shop, and going home in the evening. It is the kind of normality that is associated with the capacity to govern and shape one’s own life.

Spaces of Everyday Life: Circulation and Communication

It should come as no surprise that activities related to circulation, transport, and communication occupy a central place in the life of the camps. To some extent this can be traced back to a nomadic tradition that attached a great importance to movement, and to the participation in the trans-Saharan trading networks. Hence trading and the transport of goods to and from the camps seem to be activities inscribed in a customary practice. But there is more to it than meets the eye: references to movement in all its dimensions are pervasive in the spaces of the camps. Whether it is the constant flow of cars, mostly aging Land Rovers or Mercedes 190s; carcasses of perhaps formerly functioning vehicles left to rot in the desert sand or reused as fences or demarcation devices (see fig. 13); endless rows of car repair shops, used-parts dealers, or petrol stations (see fig. 14); or what is probably the one and only carwash in the Sahara Desert (see fig. 15), cars, trucks, and the paraphernalia of mobility are ubiquitous. For a population living in the most remote corners of the world’s largest desert, mobility becomes more than just an issue of utility (see fig. 16). It is a way (and a promise) of connecting with one’s surroundings, with the regional and national territory, and with the world at large. Similarly, communication plays an important role, although at a more basic level. Most refugee families are equipped with at least one mobile phone and a radio, as well as a television set. Even though bringing telephone communication into the middle of the desert, and without any centralized electricity supply to serve 160,000 people, represents an extraordinary challenge, the phone becomes a tool to connect with friends and relatives abroad, to conduct business, and to receive vital news and information. It becomes the extension of the car or the truck, it is mobile, and it seems perfectly fitting with the national agenda of a population in waiting, only settled temporarily, always ready to get up and be on the move again (see fig. 17).



Figure 14. Garages and car mechanic shops, El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 15. Carwash in Smara camp, southwestern Algeria, 2007.



Figure 16. Driving school, El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 17. Mobile phone antennas, “27 February” camp, 2011.



Figure 18. Shops in main market of El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 19. Shopping street in central market of Smara, 2011.



Figure 20. Independent language school, El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 21. Newly built clinic, El Aaiun camp, 2011.

The refugee camps were founded with a vision of an economy that would not be based on money but on exchanges in kind. The Algerian state and the World Food Program (WFP) donated the basic foodstuffs needed for survival, while extra goods and services were bartered among the refugees. Working in the administration or in an institution such as a school or a hospital was a task carried out without financial compensation but for the service of the general public, though it would sometimes be rewarded with extra portions of vegetables or other goods. Social and economic differences were minute among the refugees, and money hardly circulated, as a result of which there were virtually no shops or even a market in the camps until the early 1990s.

This changed with the signing of a cease-fire agreement between the Polisario and Morocco in 1991, after which a referendum over the future of the Western Sahara was to take place (though it has been consistently delayed by Morocco). A Polisario congress in June 1991 called for a free-market economy at a moment when the men were returning from the war zone. The resident population within the camps grew substantially, and since the men were no longer engaged in combat operations, they had much time on their hands. In a simultaneous although unrelated development, Spain started paying pensions to its former Sahrawi employees who had previously worked in the colonial administration or in the phosphate mines of Bou Craa. This led to an influx of money into the camps, and for the first time noticeable differences of economic status emerged among the camp population. Gradually, an economy primarily based upon exchanges in kind gave way to one based upon money. In addition to receiving pensions, a considerable number of Sahrawis started working in Algeria or in Spain, thus regularly sending money back to their families in the camps. These remittances made it possible for their families to invest in shops and other businesses such as car repair shops, or in a small service economy made of barber shops, photography labs, or video game stalls. A certain degree of “luxury” and the notion of consumer society slowly percolated into the camps and shaped their internal space. Today these stores and markets are prevalent in the camps (see figs. 18–19). It is revealing to see how different market structures have emerged in the different camps. Whereas in El Aaiun every *daira* (the major subdivision within every camp, i.e., “quarter”) has one central market with twenty or thirty shops, in addition to a central market serving the whole camp located on its western perimeter, Smara features two central markets, west and east of its central administrative zone, with basically no additional shops located in the individual *dairas*. This has to do with the higher density characteristic of Smara, the location of its *dairas*, and the presence of a higher number of international visitors, which has encouraged a centralization of its service functions. It is striking to observe that in an overall environment that could scarcely be more homogeneous—with the same ethnic group, no cultural or religious distinctions, no geographic or climatic differences, and only limited differences of economic status—each camp has nonetheless developed its own specific features and characteristics.

Beyond securing the bare survival of the refugees by providing accommodation, water, and food, humanitarian organizations also concentrate their activities on education and medical services in refugee camps. The Sahrawi camps are no exception, and from the very outset their construction went hand in hand with the establishment of schools and hospitals. The main difference, however, was that these schools and hospitals were not established by an international organization such as Médecins sans frontières or Oxfam but by the Sahrawis themselves. Starting with a few central schools, such as the women's boarding school 27 February, every camp and every *daira* within each camp soon featured its own school. In a similar fashion, clinics, hospitals, and dispensaries for medications were established to serve the refugee population. Teachers were trained, a national curriculum was defined; doctors and nurses were often sent abroad to perfect their skills, and they brought back valuable knowledge that was invested in these new institutions.

Even a superficial analysis of health and education services in the camps illustrates the central dilemma that confronts Sahrawi refugees: when they were living under Spanish colonial occupation in the Spanish Sahara and leading a much more nomadic or traditional lifestyle, the level of education and health services was very basic, if only for the fact that setting up a decent education and health system for a relatively small population spread throughout a vast territory was a daunting task. Given the resources and technologies that were available at the time, the country just seemed too big to allow for the establishment of such systems capable of serving the whole Sahrawi population. It was precisely the loss of their homeland and the transformation of the Sahrawis into a refugee nation that enabled them to create a national system of schools and medical institutions. The relatively high density of the population in the camps, the geographic concentration of activities, the accessibility of these new institutions, and the mobility and communication services that they made available—all of these elements allowed for the creation of an extensive system of schools and clinics. The flight from the Western Sahara amounted in fact to a fast-track urbanization process, in which the “proto-urban” environment of the camps also offered the benefits usually associated with an urban, high-density way of life. Today, the Sahrawis have reached a level of education (measured by literacy and schooling rate) and a level of health (measured by life expectancy) that surpass those of most countries of the Maghreb (see figs. 20–21). Paradoxically, in the case of the Sahrawis, it seems that the loss of the homeland has led to a system bringing emancipation to a refugee nation. One can thus envisage the camps as a sort of training ground, where Sahrawi society can develop educational ideas and concepts, discuss the kind of education system it wants to establish, and learn about public health and the provision of medical services. The camps become a space in which nation-building can be learned and performed, in the expectation of its possible transfer to a sovereign homeland, should one become available again in the future. The open question is whether the Sahrawis will one day be able to project onto the vast territory of the Western Sahara the benefits of the centralized and quasi-urban lifestyle they are enacting in the camps.



Figure 22. Nightlife in Smara camp, 2011.



Figure 23. Children playing football in between huts of El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 24. Vegetable garden, El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 25. Mayor of El Aaiun camp, 2011.

While health and education are at the core of humanitarian action, recreation and leisure are hardly ever discussed in the context of refugee camps. Spaces of emergency just seem too extreme to accommodate something seemingly as mundane and inessential as recreation. When human life is reduced to bare life, and hence to its pure biological expression—to the provision of food and medications—recreational activities and enjoyment are disregarded, or even shunned for being almost disrespectful in a situation of conflict. The “official” planning strategy of refugee camps, as it is defined for instance in the UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies*, does not mention any aspects of recreation or leisure.⁴ What we see, though, when we look at the Sahrawi camps is a wide range of de facto spaces in which these activities take place: private spaces with their tea ceremonies; celebratory practices, such as the erection of tents for weddings; the function of food distribution centers in every *daira* that double as spaces for lingering, talking, meeting, and playing; or even “nightlife” areas around snack bars and cafes equipped with TV sets or videogame consoles (see fig. 22). Sports activities, especially soccer, take place almost everywhere, from the empty spaces between the houses to the official football field in the camp center (see fig. 23). Also, a number of cultural activities are undertaken, such as youth theater or painting. In most cases these activities are not neutral or “innocent” but rather imbued with a political message. The theatrical plays are about the (supposedly) lush landscape of the lost homeland, in contrast to the barren desert of the refugee camps. Every painting is a call to reconquer the homeland or commemorate the crushed independence movement and the martyrs of the guerilla war against Morocco. The football teams are organized into a “national football organization” and a “national team,” even though that team has never played in an international tournament. On the one hand, these recreational activities contribute to establishing a level of normality and an everyday-life quality within a space of extreme conditions. On the other hand, they serve to construct the image or preserve the shared memory of a homeland, and they act as a national unifier, imbued with a strategic and political dimension.

It comes as no surprise that green spaces are extremely rare in the camps. Being located in one of the most desiccated zones of the planet means that extracting produce or greenery from the dry and salty desert sand is an arduous and often frustrating undertaking. Nevertheless, some vegetable gardens have been planted in El Aaiun (which is blessed by a large aquifer situated underneath the camp), and some inhabitants have started raising their own tomatoes, onions, or lettuce (see fig. 24). Also in Smara, one finds a large agricultural garden. El Aaiun once even had something like a “central park,” when an area located in the center of the camp was planted with palm trees and some greenery. Due to the salty nature of the soil, however, the plants and most of the trees have dried up and died. In their everyday use, it is true that these gardens are almost exclusively treated as utilitarian and market-oriented. The Sahrawis have maintained them for their capacity to generate produce, not to enjoy them as recreational gardens. Only rarely does one see residents sitting under the shade of a tree, or a family preparing tea or having a picnic in one of the gardens. Unlike in the cities of the Maghreb and the Middle East, where gardens and parks are

often used as important spaces to organize and structure the urban fabric as well as public life (such as in Marrakech and Damascus, to name just two examples), the gardens do not play a prominent role in the formation of the urban social spaces of the refugee camps.

Between the Temporary and the Permanent

What these observations suggest is that the activities of everyday life shape the spaces of the Sahrawi camps. In contrast to the prevailing idea of the camp as a space of exception, dominated by misery, control, and destitution, it is rather this notion of “normality” within an abnormal situation that seems ubiquitous and shapes the physical space.

Maybe more so than any other contemporary refugee situation, the Sahrawi camps expose the dilemmas and tensions between the original notion of the camp, intended as a temporary setup, and the reality on the ground, which has developed into a quasi-permanent situation. Suspended in a condition that is neither here nor there, inhabiting one of the harshest places in the world, and still living in tents after thirty-five years, the Sahrawi refugees illustrate the contradictions that encumber the concept of the refugee camp. But it is important to emphasize that permanence is not merely the unfortunate outcome of a humanitarian development gone awry: it is inscribed in the very existence of refugee camps. We have observed how the Sahrawi camps are creating a normality within the abnormal situation of “refugee-ness.” The Sahrawis have set up an elaborate infrastructure in order to manage and organize their daily lives; they have secured sufficient levels of food and water procurement; and their levels of education and life expectancy are above average. With the help of the camps, a humanitarian emergency has been averted. But as the guerilla war has ended, as there are no more war casualties, and as the camps provide a safe shelter for the Sahrawis, the political pressure to resolve the underlying conflict has also faded. Instead of finding a political solution in the Western Sahara, the predicament of the Sahrawis is unfolding through the social and material development of the camps. Architecture and planning have become a substitute for a political solution.

Just as permanence is not merely an unfortunate or unintended consequence, temporariness is not simply a technical dimension. In view of the political stalemate between the Sahrawis and Morocco, the symbolic provisionality of Sahrawi life in the camps takes on a strategic and political aspect. Here again, architecture is the field in which temporariness is played out: tents are not merely used for utilitarian purposes, as already suggested, but to proclaim in a visible manner the demand to return to the homeland. Only a tiny portion of the infrastructure—such as roads, electricity, or water supply—is permanent. The Sahrawis prefer a more mobile system. Desert sand, not paved roads, is the surface on which four-wheel-drive vehicles travel. Solar cells and car batteries, not an electricity grid, supply each living unit with power. Trucks, not water pipes, bring drinkable water to each house. Of course, these architectural choices also have to do with the lack of resources and money, but the temporary and “cellular” solution to the provision of services and infrastructure is preferred because it signifies the wish to return to the homeland.



Figure 26. Overview of built fabric of El Aaiun camp, 2011.



Figure 27. Overlooking Smara camp, at its periphery, 2011.

The Camp as a Catalyst, the Camp as a Project

Whereas refugee camps are most often seen as places of desperation, spaces of total control, or territories of a humanitarian regime, the Sahrawi refugee camps enact an environment of mostly self-administered daily life. The Sahrawis use the camps to develop institutions that will allow them to administer their own country once a solution (that is, independence) is found to the unresolved Western Sahara conflict. The camps thus serve as a training ground in which the Sahrawi state is “pre-figured.”⁵ The refugees have used their time in the camps to enact a major cultural and social shift from their tribal traditions and to encourage the development of a quasi-urban, emancipated society.

The Camp as a City?

When asked whether he would use the term “city” to describe the camp, the mayor of El Aaiun vehemently rejects this word (see fig. 25). “Nothing,” he says, “would fit the description of the camp as a city. The houses are not permanent, the streets not paved, and no water pipes are installed.” Understandably, the use of the word “city” to describe the camp is banned, as it would imply that the settlement is permanent. Instead, the mayor recurs to a slightly clichéd notion of paved streets and stone houses as the main ingredients of a city. Yet if we look at the camp through the eyes of its inhabitants; if we take notice of the way they relate to their environment; if we observe how they conduct their daily lives in the spaces of the camp; if we see how these spaces become a medium allowing the refugees to play out their desires and aspirations, and how a unique local culture has developed within these spaces, we certainly see all the qualities that define the “urban.” We can observe a process of gradual differentiation, as individual neighborhoods develop their own specificities over time, and as specific fashions and urban cultures manifest themselves in the built environment and influence it. The camps are not only a space where political aspirations are formulated: their physical makeup becomes the very medium through which these political aspirations are expressed. In that sense, if we follow David Harvey’s take on the city, the camps can be seen as expressing the essence of urbanity.⁶ But—and this is truly a remarkable strategy—they are designed in such a way that they are always ready to be abandoned should the political opportunity arise to return to the Western Sahara. In that sense, the Sahrawi camps offer an impressive model for refugee camps on a global scale.

Urban Research on Refugee Camps

Is it legitimate, we may ask, to conduct an urban research project on refugee camps? A number of related questions spring to mind: On such a premise, isn’t it a foregone conclusion that camps are akin to urban environments? Is it not almost irreverent—or at least irrelevant—to look at “urban qualities” when in fact the absolute priority should be saving lives? And even if it were relevant to refugee camps, would such research have any implications for the wider field of urbanism? Is it not such a liminal case that there would be no significance for the profession at large?

The assumption underlying this research project is that it is important to look at refugee camps through the eyes of an urbanist in order to see whether these camps

manifest the qualities of the urban, and if so, to what extent and of what kind. It is precisely the tools of urbanism that allow us to assess the ways in which these settlements differ from cities, as well as the ways in which they can be said to be similar. To take an extreme example, if we used the tools of urbanism to describe a prison camp, it would quickly become clear that such camps are in fact very different from refugee camps—that is, very remote from anything resembling urbanity. So far, however, it is precisely the predominant focus on the bare necessities of survival in the context of refugee camps that has prevented some of the qualities of urbanity from developing there, and also, as a result, the use of the camps as places of emancipation and autonomy. One of the objectives of this research project has been to shift the vocabulary used to discuss refugee camps from one that revolves around technicalities to one that understands these settlements as environments that have some, or many, of the qualities of the urban(e).

Of the approximately thirty-five million refugees and displaced people in the world today, approximately half are living in refugee camps or in camp-like conditions. What we are talking about, in other words, is not a fringe condition but one in which millions of people are spending often decades, if not entire lives. And for millions of people, these refugee camps are their first contact with something akin to an urban environment. Especially in Africa, with its still relatively large rural population, these camps act as “urban transformers” that change the lifestyles of the refugees from rural to urban ones. Refugee camps can be seen as engines of urbanization, since many refugees do not return to their rural villages when they come back to their home countries after the conflicts they fled have abated but choose instead to resettle in cities. The camps prepare the refugees for an urban life after the camps. In that sense, any serious analysis and discussion of refugee camps must be aware of their urban dimension, even when—or especially when—it is lacking, and must pay attention to the ways in which camps prepare a given population for life after the camps.

Last but not least, camps make it possible to observe *in vitro*, so to speak, the origination of city conditions: one can observe how a congregation of tents on a sandy patch of the Sahara gradually evolves into an assemblage of clay huts; differentiated neighborhoods with their markets, their local styles, and their forms of cultural expression; and, finally, a proto-city. We can also observe the materialization of difference: despite the fact that the initial geographic, demographic, cultural, ethnic, and economic conditions under which they were established were identical, Smara and El Aaiun have followed different developmental trajectories, and they exhibit today different kinds of urban cultures, atmospheres, and ranges of habitat. Under the blazing sun of the Sahara, we can observe the birth of the urban condition with a clarity and crispness that obtain nowhere else in the world.

NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181.
2. *Ibid.*, 175.
3. For a thorough history of the conflict, see Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western*

Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

4. UNHCR, *Handbook for Emergencies* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2007), esp. chap. 12, "Site Selection, Planning and Shelter."

5. Jacob Mundy, "Performing the Nation, Pre-Figuring the State: The Western Saharan Refugees, Thirty Years Later," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 2 (2007): 275–97.

6. David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (September/October 2008): 23–40.