Refugee Camps – or – Ideal-Cities in Dust and Dirt

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Abstract

Spaces of humanitarian relief are multiplying rapidly in our globalizing world. They are products of war, catastrophes or economical plight and exist predominantly in the shape of refugee camps. Based on personal fieldwork in Chad, an in-depth study of refugee camps in southern Chad and at the border to Sudan, allows me to analyze UNHCR's strategies in setting up and planning spatial structures for refugees, how these 'urban' strategies – based upon European models of hygiene and enlightenment – lead to permanence in a situation that by definition should be temporary and, through the layout of those camps, create implications on the level of violence. It shows how, through specific elements of planning, e.g. the camp enclosure, architecture becomes entangled with questions of militarization or human rights, indicating responsibilities of planners. In a larger context this study suggests different approaches to planning methodologies involved in situations of crises and conflict.

1   Chad

The central African landlocked Chad is a compendium of problems, a country can have. Formerly a French colony, it has experienced a process of decolonization that has been described as being one of the worst in history. In size almost three times as large as its former colonial power, inhabited by only 8 million people, speaking 300 different languages, it has since gaining independence 1960 not been able to develop anything remotely reminiscent of what could be described as 'civil society.'[1] Chad as a country is virtually empty, under populated, with no state as we know it existing, hardly any infrastructure, no social system and no concept of a nation or common culture existing, and with little interest by the international community. It is because of this disinterest and for the virtual emptiness that the country becomes an ideal situation for refugee camps, which it has started to live off.

2   Planning

Even though it is a group of approximately 30 million people currently considered refugees or internally displaced people, being housed in more than 1000 refugee camps in over 60 nations[2], there is only one single chapter within one single book that describes planning strategies for refugee camps[3]. And even though the context within which these camps develop could not be more political or conflictual, the planning discourse is on a purely technical level only. It ignores the social, political and collective consequences that any planning decision has in this critical context.

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[1] In the 2002 Human Development Index (HDI) of the UNDP, Chad occupies a 167th place out of 177 nations, with low life expectancy, low level of education and low income. After oil exploitation started in 2003, the illiteracy rate has risen and the life expectancy has decreased further, with Chad now being placed 173rd on the 2005 Development Index.

[2] See Figure 1 for a map of refugee camps and global migration movements

[3] The UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies* includes one chapter of 16 pages on planning strategies for housing refugees and setting up refugee camps. The only other guidelines, published by the ICRC and the Norwegian Red Cross are literal copies of this original text by UNHCR.

When in 2003 UNHCR[4] went to Goré in southern Chad to help the refugees coming from Central African Republic[5], it was a sleepy town with a few market stalls, a single dirt road and a few thousand inhabitants. Three years later, it is still an unattractive sleepy little town. The dirt road though is travelled by numerous white Toyota Land cruisers that belong to the many humanitarian organizations that have settled in the context of UNHCR. While Goré has since then doubled in population, two much larger settlements have developed in the vicinity: the refugee camps Amboko and Gondje with approximately 15.000 refugees each.

Refugee camps are planned by architects and technical planners of UNHCR. Based on the belief of identical human needs and global human rights[6], fundamental planning approach for camps is characterized by neutrality. The standardized plan for a refugee camp starts with the tent as the smallest basic unit which is then organized in clusters (16 tents), blocks (16 clusters), camp sectors (4 blocks) and the complete camp (4 sectors) that houses 20.000 refugees in its 'ideal' case.[7] Overall, an image of an idealized city emerges, reminiscent of urban planning of the modern era in its belief in structured organization and clear separation of functions and uses. This modernistic planning approach finds its application all over the world. The pretty order, thoroughly based on western European ideals, seems like a naïve fool's planning in the dusty heat of the African desert or in direct proximity to violent combat. Regardless of whether the refugee drama is taking place in dense jungles or dry mountain regions, everywhere the same model of a European idealized city is used to house refugees. Naiveté though becomes jeopardy in the context of violence and catastrophes. It is specifically neutrality that makes this planning approach so susceptible to instrumentalization and politicalization.

UNHCR applied their standardized plan for refugee camps for the new camp of Gondje with a projected refugee population of up to 20.000 on a region that was heavily forested and had specific topographical features, making their 'neutral' plan unusable. As they were lacking the specific local knowledge of the region, the architects of UNHCR never noticed the inappropriateness of their plan.[8] The clearing of large forest areas and the settlement of approximately 15.000 people – a size of settlement that is unknown to the region otherwise – had gravest effects on the nature and water balance of the region.

3   The Camps

Of the two camps near Goré, a strategy of 'integration' was adopted by UNHCR when planning the newer camp 'Gondje'. According to UNHCR integration means the shared use of central camp facilities such as schools or medical centers by the refugee population as well as by the local population. In practice though, integration leads to a permanent settlement of refugees in Chad. This permanent settlement is problematic first of all, as the refugees, whose life's are impacted, were never asked for their own opinion. Top priority should always be put on enabling a return of the refugees into their original home region. Only when it is apparent, that such a return will not be possible for a long time, a permanent settlement in another country should be sought.

On the level of planning, the strategy of 'integration' means added space. Instead of providing allotments of 45 sqm per refugee family, as is the case in the older camp, the master plan[9] for the Gondje provides plots of 200 sqm.[10] Refugees are meant to plant vegetable gardens to achieve self-

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[4] UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR)

[5] In March 2003 a coup d´etat brought the Central African Republic (CAR) into a state of anarchy, when the former chief of staff Francois Bozize toppled Félix Patassé as head of state, throwing a whole country into turmoil and uprooting hundred thousands of people fleeing from murder and rape.

[6] The Sphere Project is one example of a UN initiative to ‚harmonize' all standards and norms relating to refugee needs all over the world, stating for example how much water is required by refugees. This definition though does not take climate or location into consideration. NGOs are under a considerable financial pressure to adopt the Sphere Project as a ‚code of conduct', even though often quite vehemently opposed to it.

[7] Each organisational unit has specific facilities, e.g. 16 latrines per block, or one school per sector. Smaller tracks and non-motorized lanes separate clusters and blocks from each other, while roads for motorized traffic access the larger camp sectors.

[8] The Chadian regional government, which has great interest in hosting refugees – and the humanitarian organizations – within their administrative boundaries, assigned UNHCR a site for the camps that lay in the midst of a large nature and water reserve area.

[9] See Figure 2 for the masterplan and siteplan of camp ‚Gondje'

[10] See Figure 3 for the extended allotments

sufficiency. What seems neutral and positive when viewed on a technical level shows grave demographic consequences when social and political aspects are taken into consideration. Many of the refugees come from villages of the northern regions of CAR and have previously practiced a craft or ran small shops. Other refugees are nomads of the tribe '*Buel*' and were raising large cattle herds. They don't like and don't eat vegetables, but are now made to grow vegetables. Through a specific act of planning and a simple design move, those village societies and nomads are being homogenized and turned into rural societies. Architecture takes on the role of the demographer, changing fundamentally the structure of the regional population.

The two camps that are becoming permanent settlements, Amboko and Gondje, each with 15.000 inhabitants, are larger than most of the Chadian towns. In spite of their large size, the structures that are emerging with the refugee camps are not of an urban character[11]. The camps occupy vast areas and are of low density, there is no concentration towards a center and they know no differentiation into individual quarters of distinct character. Because of their homogeneity and their low density, they are like suburbs – without the corresponding city. When those camps become stable with the strategy of integration, gigantic permanent suburbias are created, with all the problematic aspects of typical suburbs: Homogeneity reduces possibilities of social interaction and eases the potential for observation and control by regional government and camp gendarmerie. There is no social or cultural life, no central density, just space for containing people.

Refugee camps are indispensable and essential, as they often represent the last life-saving sanctuary of protection. Often though, it is spatial strategies and decisions on the level of planning for a temporarily intended emergency support to become a permanent 'solution.' This reduces the urgency to deal with a conflict and it's causes on a political level, as the 'human catastrophe' has been dealt with and contained. A permanent settlement, a solution with architectural means, turns into a strategy of sidestepping political settlement. Without the architect it would not be possible to turn away from politics. He becomes an accomplice of this neglect.[12]

4 Refugees and IDPs

When the village of Djawara in eastern Chad was attacked by the infamous Janjaweed on April 13th and most of the village population was butchered to death, the few survivors tried to escape to safety and made their way to the refugee camp 'Goz Amer', located in close proximity to the ambushed village which has been set up for the Sudanese refugees.[13] Djawara survivors were denied access, as within their own country, they only carry the status of 'internally displaces people' (IDP).

UNHCR defines the refugee as a person who flees and crosses an international boundary.[14] If, when fleeing, one remains within one's own country, one is 'only' classified as internally displaced; a category that the international community feels limited responsibility for. Especially in Africa, where

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[11] Michel Agier has argued in ‚Between War and City' on the urban quality of refugee camps, though not based on any specified model of urbanity. In this context I prefer to follow Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of Algerian refugee camps, which he describes and analyses in terms of suburbanity. In this context it is important to reference Giorgio Agamben, who in the last chapters of his book „Homo Sacer" describes how the camp is replacing the city as a paradigm for contemporary (biopolitical) society.

[12] The politics involving the establishment of refugee camps can reach quite bizarre levels, as can be seen in Amboko Extension, a part of Amboko refugee camp. Even though both refugee camps in the region are only two-thirds occupied, UNHCR is planning a third camp as they would then receive additional financial aid. The Chadian regional government, who are profiting from the refugees, and the ensuing presence of humanitarian workers, is also promoting a third camp. The third camp is not required due to the available capacities of the existing camps, so the necessity has to be fabricated: Refugees are housed in an extreme density, in deplorable conditions, with bad sanitary resources and in a problematic state of hygiene to serve as objects of demonstrations for UNHCR. The constructed plight serves as 'evidence' to prove western visitors the need for an additional camp. With the means of a spatial structure, and with the destiny of the camp residents, who acquire infectious diseases much quicker than in the other parts of the camp, a cynical game circling around organizational politics and questions of budgeting is played. (See Figures 4 and 5)

[13] The Sudanese refugees are fleeing similar attacks by the same Janjaweed.

[14] The exact wording of the ‚Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees' from 1951 states that „For the purposes of the present Convention, the term ‚refugee' shall apply to any person who as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." The reference to events before 1951 (i.e. World War II) were dropped in the Protocol of 1961.

the boundaries of countries go back to colonial powers and are mostly ignorant of social and tribal structures, differentiation between refugees and IDPs is very problematic. Coherent population groups are living at both sides of international borders, and can move freely within the border area, as the exact location of the boundary is often not marked or controlled. What has remained mostly irrelevant for local populations becomes the decisive factor at the time of greatest danger and precariousness.

Left without food and water, in one of the most inhospitable areas of the world, the villagers are faced with two options, one worse than the other: either to flee across the border into Sudan, in order to obtain the official status as refugees and be accepted into one of the UNHCR refugee camps. This flight meant an escape into the midst of the Sudanese civil war and into the hands of the Janjaweed who had just days before razed their homes and killed their fellows, thus into greatest danger. The convention of UNHCR, whose first maxim is the protection of refugees, drives them towards a deadly risk.

The other possibility is the attempt to get to one of the camps in the region even without enjoying the official status of refugees. Having reached those camps, the so-called IDPs then settle in the most miserable conditions just outside of the official refugee camps[15]. They squat densely packed in large numbers underneath some rags, and without protection, are directly exposed to hot desert winds and temperatures of 50 degrees. They are not provided with tents, food nor water, or any kind of support. But they can observe how their fellow tribes people from Sudan are at least provided with this basic assistance.[16] The two-class society of fleeing people, based on the differentiation into refugees and IDPs, finds its spatial equivalence in the informal structures just outside the gates of the official camps. The camps develop their own ghettoes or shantytowns, the slums of the slums for the banished of the banished, expelled out of the gates of those virtual cities.[17]

The absurd differentiation between IDPs and refugees plays into the hands of rebels and irresponsible heads of states, who instrumentalize a defenceless population for their own interests. Refugees are driven into regions of civil war and become pawns in an ideological game where holding onto old colonial borders and a bygone concept of the nation-state seems more important than the life of the refugee, those people who are supposedly protected by UNHCR.

Space becomes a medium for politics. Refugee camps are probably the most direct translation of politics into space. Any political strategy or decision has immediate consequence on a spatial dimension in the camp. And any spatial modification, at whatever scale, immediately resonates on a political and demographic level. The camp is politics having become space.

5   Organizers of Knowledge

Apart from the fundamental, life-saving functions in the context of conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes, refugee camps are performing a vital function in our globalized world: They are structuring and organizing knowledge of the 'wild and savage' for the western world. At a time, when humanitarian interventions are occurring ever more often, when local conflicts are inscribed into a global matrix of interests, refugee camps become the interface and access point for the activities of the developed world. Almost all knowledge that we possess on the Darfur conflict, comes from the refugee camps in the east of Chad, their counterparts on the other side of the boundary in Sudan, or the humanitarian organisations involved in those camps. The reporters of the various news agencies as well as the researchers of think-tanks and diplomatic missions travel to the camps, in order to get the newest information about the conflict itself and the condition of the rebels, but also information in the fields of ethnography and demography, giving proof to the fact that refugee camps have become producers and organizers of knowledge, and that we perceive the country almost exclusively through

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[15] See Figure 6

[16] As the humanitarian organizations and NGOs are usually partly funded by UNHCR, they have to subscribe to the same logic.

[17] Nevertheless, even those informal structures are incorporated into an economy of refugees that is managed by UNHCR in cynical ways. If the 'internally displaced' have suffered long enough without food in the heat and the dust, they are sometimes 'granted' an official acceptance into the refugee camp. Most of them, though, give up beforehand, and try their 'luck' outside one of the other camps in the region.

those camps. In a peculiar way mirroring Edward Said's 'Orientalism', the refugee camps become our method to comprehend the strange East, or the wild Africa.
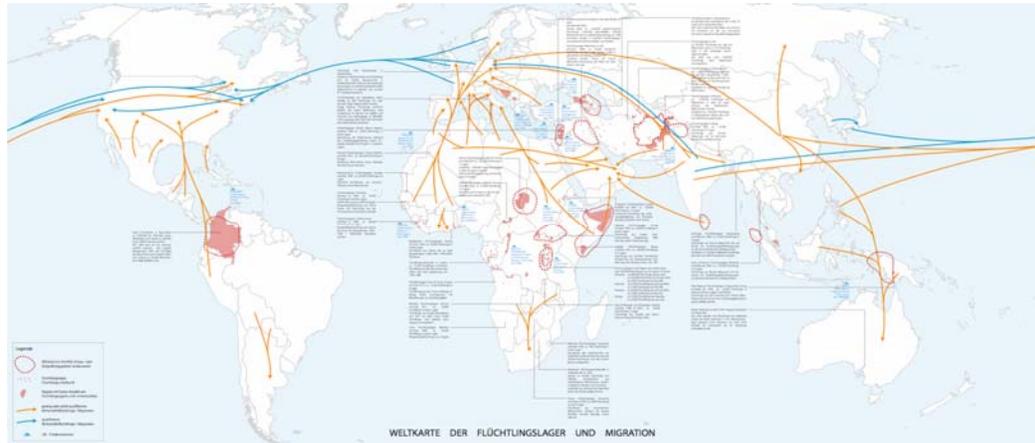

Figure 1: Global Map of Refugee Camps and International Migration Routes, map by the author, based on data by UNHCR
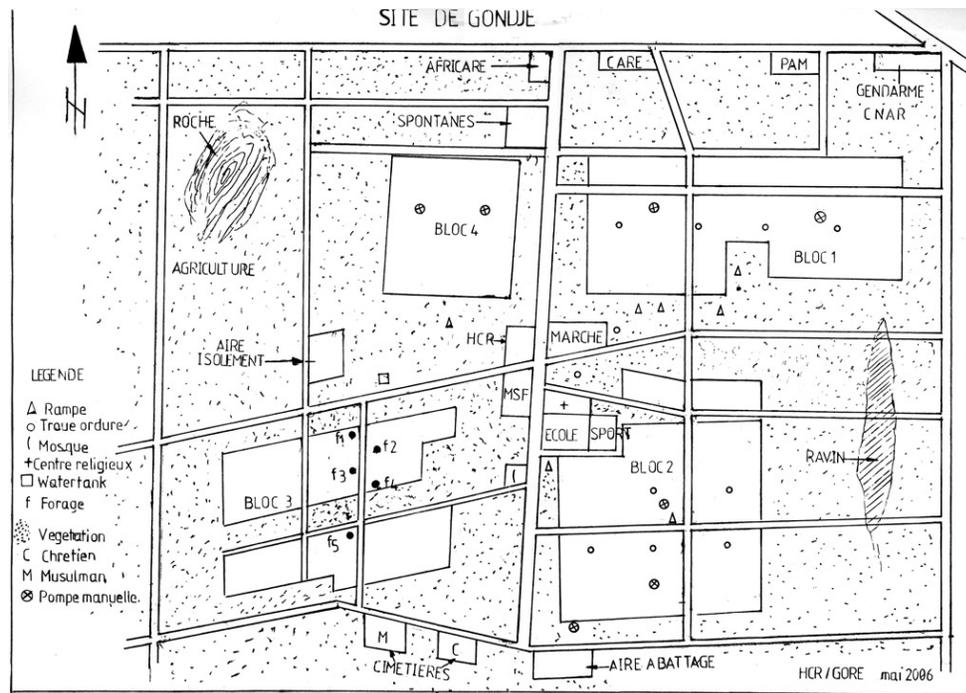

Figure 2: Plan of Refugee Camp 'Gondje', plan by UNHCR

Figure 3: Refugee Camp 'Gondje', extended camp allotments, photo by the author
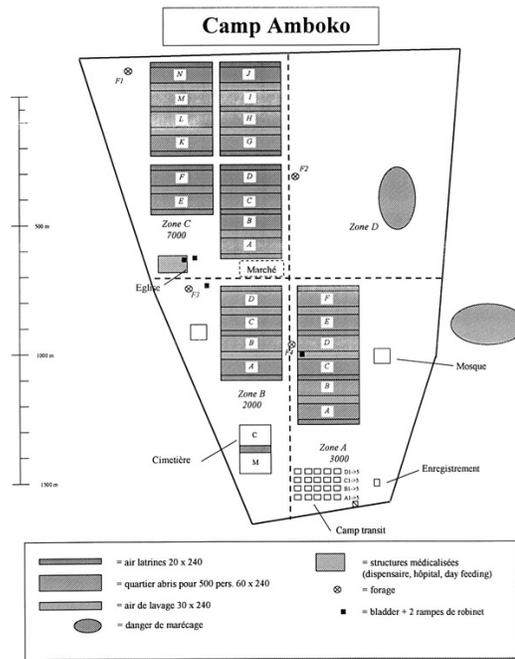

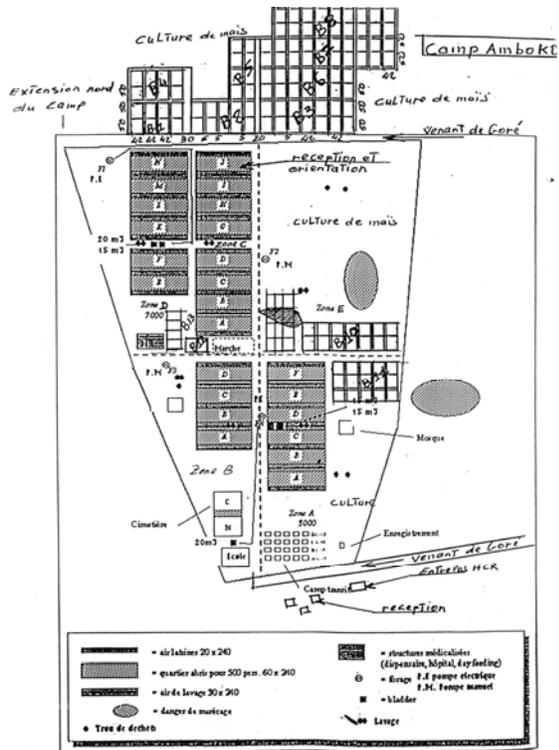Figure 4: original plan of Refugee Camp 'Amboko', plan by UNHCR

Figure 5: Plan of Refugee Camp 'Amboko' with 'Amboko Extension', by UNHCR

Figure 6: IDPs camping informally outside of refugee camp in eastern Chad, photo by the author

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