"Refugee City": Between Global Human Rights and Community Self Regulations

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Abstract

The issue of refugees in the Gaza Strip has been a long and painful story of people displaced from their land, living in temporary shelters. In addition, the systematic demolishing of shelters by IDF (Israeli Defense Force) seeking militants mostly operating in the poorest areas, typically refugee camps, during the current Intifada (popular uprising), leads to an extremely risky humanitarian crisis demanding immediate international response. UNRWA (United Agency Relief and Work Agency, the UN agency assisting the Palestinian refugees) proposed two major re-housing projects whose architectural design and planning principles seek to overcome the crisis and lay the foundations for a viable future Palestinian State. This implies essentially the design of sensible housing typologies reaching middle densities in the context of the huge scarcity of land in the Gaza Strip, still allowing extended families to live together sharing the same plot, compound and neighborhood. Previous high rise apartment schemes when applied to low income refugees had seriously affected their survival strategies, especially those in more need of assistance such as the handicapped, elderly and poor. UNRWA propose a non conventional approach to refugee problems based on architecture and urban planning principles moving from transitory to more permanent habitat empowering income generating initiatives. This paper presents the output from the two interventions, its evolution from design principles to project details, highlighting some lessons regarding the role of architecture and urbanism in the construction of a more sustainable habitat even in clearly unsustainable environments.

1   The background: Refugee camps in Palestine

The refugee camps in Palestine are living monuments of non fulfilled human rights. They are the results of refugee exodus from two wars: 1948 and 1967. In 1948 the UN (United Nations) Conciliation Commission estimated that 726'000 Palestinians had fled outside Palestine. Around 200'000 refugees moved to the Gaza Strip, where around the same number or people lived at that time: 240'300. The situation today is 969'588 refugees for the Gaza Strip, around 60% of the total population, distributed in 8 camps (figure 1) and 4'283'000 refugees in total, including persons living in the neighboring countries. The tiny area of the Gaza Strip (6.020 km^2) has one of the highest densities in the world (3'945 inhabitants per Km^2 in 1995) and the overcrowding is aggravated by the shortage of land and water resources. However, half of the refugee population manages to get accommodation outside the camps (UNRWA, 1997), which reveals their capacity to develop their own survival and development strategies when they get appropriate support. Although they come from very different background, income and education, the camps result in a melting pot of social and income groups, a micro-economy engine for production and services supply.

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[1] The project was carried out under the direction of Engineer Manfred Off, FECSO in coordination with the Environment and Health Unit of UNRWA. The urban planning team was integrated by Rami Shaat and Hattem Abu El Thaief, playing the role of consultant from Khan Younis, plus a team of draftsmen and fields surveyors (Rawan Tobil, Maher Moqbil, Ayman Hanoush,).
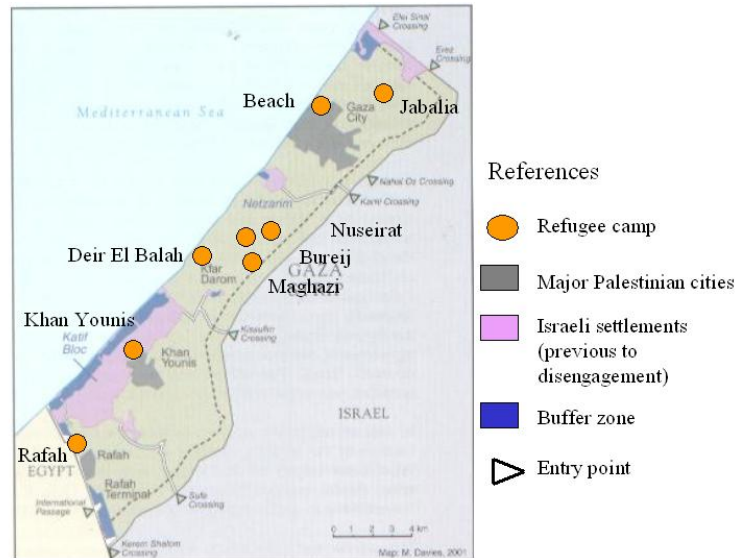
Figure 1. Gaza Strip and its refugee camps

In 50 years the camps have expanded and become more complex in their structures; from simple gridlines occupied by tents, they nowadays contain multiple story concrete buildings, mixed land uses and organic street patterns creating a great diversity of plots and buildings (figure 2). UNRWA supplied educational and health facilities, a micro-business support program, basic sanitation, housing and more recently also urban infrastructure and land management. Her role as planning authority has changed from a strict control during the first period 1948/60, when the Agency provided $80m^2$ plots for each refugee family, to a more "laissez faire" attitude between 1960/80, characterized by building extensions decided upon individually by the families without any special permission (Seren, 2004). Between 1980/00 UNRWA built major infrastructure projects, mainly water, sanitation, storm water and electricity supply. But in 2005, before the disengagement plan and due to the need to re-house families whose houses were demolished, UNRWA designed and started implementation of different major urbanization projects. Two of them, in Rafah and in Khan Younis, still under implementation have been selected as case studies in this paper because of the innovative multi-scale approach applied.

Figure 2. Khan Younis refugee camp

2   The re-housing and camp development project principles

The refugee shelters demolished during 2005 include the 8 refugee camps in Gaza Strip but particularly affect Rafah camp (figure 3), on the border with Egypt, where IDF denounce the existence of tunnels passing weapons, and Khan Younis, a highly populated area in the heart of the strip, were many resistance groups operate.

Figure 3. Demolished houses in Rafah

The international community reacted positively to the call for assistance to major re-housing projects in Rafah (1'450 housing units) and in Khan Younis (1'115) on land adjacent to the camps transferred from the Palestinian Authority (PA) to UNRWA. Such locations seek to minimize the movement of refugees from their original location in the camps avoiding traumatic relocation, as happened in previous projects such as Tall Es Sultan in Rafah, and El Amal in Khan Younis (figure 4). Although these projects succeeded in terms of re-housing and are currently urban peripheries, their high densities, uniform and rigid apartment designs do not satisfy basic needs such as extended family life style, micro-businesses and income generating activities, affecting especially handicapped people and vulnerable groups.

Figure 4. El Amal. Khan Younis

The "Refugee city" model proposes re-housing projects shaped as "new towns" on the camp borders, inviting the families whose shelters have been demolished to voluntarily move to a permanent house. The intention is double: to supply habitat in a better environment for

the affected families, and to regain control of the land use in the camps previously occupied by the demolished shelters, planning an integrative urban renewal vision.

Three major principles support the concept of "Refugee city".

First: Extended family approach. This consists of allocating up to three stories buildings in the same parcel, working on a typology that can grow up horizontally, adding bedrooms or vertically, adding new housing units, all belonging to the same family group (figure 5). The housing complex is based on a gridline system of concrete columns and beams, flexible enough to create workshops or shops on the ground floor if necessary. The system to identify beneficiaries established that those families with handicapped members or vulnerable groups had priority in receiving houses in strategic locations such as corners or ground floors.

Second: Clustering neighborhood. City blocks were designed according to family, friendship, special needs or micro-business interest expressed by the beneficiaries. Through a participatory planning process the beneficiaries choose their neighborhood units according to their interest to be near and to share spaces with relatives, friends or potential partners. The system promotes solidarity with family and neighbors supplying extra land for those sharing habitat with vulnerable groups.

Third: Integrative urban renewal. The "new town" concept proposes to attract refugee families to live in the re-housing projects, releasing areas in the camp for new purposes such as gardens, parks and shops in the central areas; micro-businesses and workshops on the peripheries. This promotes a plan for redevelopment of the camps including all the refugees and not only those whose houses were demolished, encouraging a renewal process facilitating their integration in the urban fabric rather than stigmatization in segregated areas.

Figure 5. Family approach concept applied in previous re housing project

The "Refugee City" approach (figure 6) proposes to link actors and territories to achieve a common vision. It is estimated that in the Gaza Strip between now (2006) and 2010 there will be 69'000 new married couples who will seek housing. This, in addition to the existing shortage of housing and land, will inflate the prices in the real estate market (HPCR, 2005). As a result, random development and informal settlements appear as valid survival

options but damage governance very seriously. Regulated market mechanisms to distribute the population in urban areas are master plans responsibilities, yet they are limited because of lack of authority in the camps, the most powerful demographic force, whose planning is under UNRWA authority. A strategic agreement among public, UNRWA and community structures, to empower urban planning authorities has been identified as crucial. From this perspective, the re-housing projects play the role of valid test to build such design and planning authority.
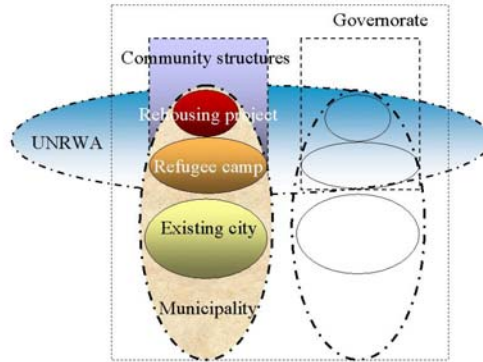

Figure 6. "Refugee city" model Institutional framework

The model, inspired by the diversity and vitality of the camps, seeks to reproduce its socio-economic clustering system. The urban pattern combines modern architectural and planning standards with the particular idiosyncrasy of the refugees, responding to the same principles in both projects but adapted to the particularities of each case, in addition to inputs from the donors.

In Rafah, a remote location from the city center with a complex topography and total destruction of the camp, a geometric urban pattern (figure 7) with full social services facilities supply was applied. The project was designed as an autonomous entity with access only through the two major regional roads and surrounded by a wall. The wall was an input from the donor, who introduced design schemes from his own national heritage (Saudi Arabia) contributing to the identity of the new town. The areas previously occupied by the demolished shelters were maintained empty for security reasons, given the proximity to the frontier wall dividing PA territory and Egypt under the custody of IDF. The urban plan includes a major avenue connecting the different neighborhoods leading to the town center.

Figure 7: UNRWA re housing project in Rafah.

In Khan Younis, as the re-housing project was attached to the remaining camp, a pattern mixing organic forms from the camp with the rigid geometry of the El Amal neighboring area was adopted.

The urban plan seeks to settle families ensuring their connection with the camp and El Amal through collector roads (figure 8). The concept integrated the new and existing areas, supplying strategic social services facilities such as mosques and schools. On the other hand, the areas previously occupied by the demolished shelters were re-planed to be used for green areas and shops in the city center and for workshop on the periphery.

Figure 8: UNRWA re housing project in Khan Younis

Such design decisions respond to a principle of social fairness in land and building distribution. The flexible "family approach" shape housing morphology (figure 9) recreates the environment of the camps but with better standards. A comparison of densities in the camps and in the new projects demonstrates that while the overcrowding shelters in the camps reach around 350 inhabitants per hectare, the re-housing project density reaches double, around 700, with far better standards of built up square meters and green areas per inhabitants. On the other hand, the idea of creating neighborhood clusters (figure 10) constitutes a key strategy to expand solidarity networks previously operating in the camps
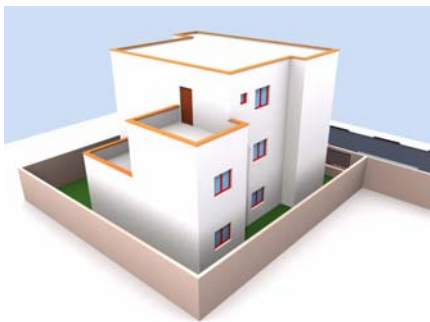

Figure 9: Family approach unit example

Figure 10. Aerial view of a neighborhood in Khan Younis.

3   From design principles to project details

The approach applied produced very different reactions. It was very welcome by governmental institutions, UNRWA officials and the majority of individual families, but was resisted by organized groups of refuges and families who originally had more land in the camps and did not want to give up their aspiration to retain the plots in their original location inside the camps.

Land was a first and major reason for controversy. In Rafah, criticism came initially because one of the typologies was a row house with a duplex design, attached on both sides with non family neighbors and small yards. The idea was to create an option for special cases, those living separately from their families, but as beneficiaries identified an advantage in this typology and pressure arose to increase the

parcel sizes, contradicting the social fairness principles in the whole system. People liked the option to have independent houses, but disliked the idea of sharing walls with their non-family related neighbors. On the other hand, people refused to share stairs, which made it necessary to supply individual stairs. This change affected the architectural design plan as well as the site lay out, creating delays and disturbance.

Khan Younis project was designed later than Rafah, proposing another design type (Figure 11) assumed by UNRWA as a "new approach" to be applied in future to any new re-housing project. It keeps the same design philosophy but removes the duplex option and relates directly to the number of families living in one parcel through its size. In this way, three families living together get a parcel proportionally bigger than a separate family, preventing the claim for more land from the separate cases and ensuring fairness in the plot and house distribution, something essential for community acceptance. However, the removal of the duplex alternative affects townscape design with regard to introducing diversity in housing, density and building image. The major conflict in Khan Younis though, was due to the resistance of the refugees to leave their land in the camps, wishing to build again in the same place, although the re-housing project was located just in front.

NEW APPROACH

FAMILY	TYPE	ARCH. DETAILS — SITE	ARCH. DETAILS — PLANS	NO. OF EXISTING ROOMS	NO. OF EXTENDABLE ROOMS	AREAS — PLOT	AREAS — BUILT UP	3D MODEL
SEPARATED FAMILIES	SEP. A2			2 ROOMS	2 FLOORS VERTICAL	153.75 m²	60.22 m²	SEP. A2
	SEP. A3			3 ROOMS	2 R. HORIZONTAL 1 FLOOR VERTICAL	153.75 m²	99.60 m²	SEP. A3
	SEP. A4			4 ROOMS	1 R. HORIZONTAL	153.75 m²	121.80 m²	SEP. A4
	SEP. A5			5 ROOMS	1 FLOOR VERTICAL	153.75 m²	141.60 m²	SEP. A5
2 EXTENDED FAMILIES	2 EXT. A4-A4			8 ROOMS	NO EXTENTION	238.00 m²	218.60 m²	2 EXT. A4-A4
	2 EXT. A4-A3			7 ROOMS	1 R. HORIZONTAL	238.00 m²	200.23 m²	2 EXT. A4-A3
	2 EXT. A4-A2			6 ROOMS	2 R. HORIZONTAL	238.00 m²	179.68 m²	2 EXT. A4-A2
3 EXTENDED FAMILIES	3 EXT. A2-A2-A2 (3 EXT. FAMILIES WITH SMALLER SIZES)			6 ROOMS	12 R. EXTENDABLE	279.75 m²	212.40 m²	3 EXT. A2-A2-A2
	3 EXT. A4-A3-A1			9 ROOMS	9 R. EXTENDABLE	279.75 m²	253.42 m²	3 EXT. A4-A3-A1
	3 EXT. A5-A5-A2			11 ROOMS	7 R. EXTENDABLE	279.75 m²	301.07 m²	3 EXT. A5-A5-A2

Figure 12. Housing typologies in Khan Younis

UNRWA response to these controversies was more flexible in Rafah, accepting to change the row house typology and to supply extra land for the plots, as opposed to the original detached housing typologies, although this implied to supply bigger parcels for the separate cases. In order to avoid any reaction from the other beneficiaries, the project also introduced an increase in their plot size leading to twice the land requirements of the area demanded originally, also increasing the infrastructure costs. In Khan Younis maintaining the idea of relocating people in front of the camp and refusing to build any new house inside the camp was dealt with strictly.

Secondly, the principle of clustering neighborhoods faces the problem of a permanently fluctuating number of beneficiaries, accepting or refusing to move out of the camp, the claim for bigger parcel sizes, and the complex and permanent change in the wish of the families to

share or not the neighborhoods, complicating the plot arrangements. In order to avoid blocking the project implementation a road network was designed, defining city block patterns with standard plots for those wishing to be neighbors, keeping empty areas for future development. Such a high complexity enormously complicated the development, adjustment and readjustment of the urban plan, matching architectural typologies and plots in both cases, Rafah and Khan Younis (figure 13). Although this affected the timing and implementation schedule, such delays give the chance to the beneficiaries to reconsider their preferences to be integrated in their family compound or to be independent in separate areas.

Figure 13: Typical plot arrangement lay out

It is interesting that the project catalyzed very deep discussions inside the Palestinian society around sensitivity issues like the family, neighbors, survival and development, producing very different and passionate reactions that would not have arisen if the design and planning scheme had not introduced such innovative alternatives. Beyond this particular conflict the process went through several reshapes before getting final approval from its different major actors: the municipalities, UNRWA technical responsible bodies and the formally or informally organized communities. Such approval implies the formal recognition of a design and planning process with accepted authorities in charge. The importance of this can be illustrated from the camps' history: with planning authority declining, the camps look more and more like any informal settlement, without order, rules, or social fairness. But as soon as an authority arises, applying principles of fairness, humanity and respect for agreements, the camp evolves to become a real effective engine for reconciliation and care for the most vulnerable groups.

Refugee camps in Palestine have the advantage, compared to any informal settlement, of being respected places, without discussion about their rights. The project seeks to contribute a fair habitat system with a responsible authority, consolidating the mystic of the camps as national symbols of resistance, solidarity, honor and community responsibility transferred from generation to generation, celebrated through iconography in public places, typically popular writings on walls, flags, monumental advertising, art pieces, etc. (figure 14).

Figure 14: Iconography in public places

Thirdly, the urban renewal or camp development proposal was not possible to implement in part because of the humanitarian assistance character of the project, responsible to supply basic needs such as shelter and food. The original proposal in the camp development strategy identified areas to be allocated to families with income generating activities, foreseeing their infrastructure needs (figure 15). However, the lack of a strong planning authority makes this goal to fail, resulting in land use and illegal occupancy with limited urban renewal process.

Figure 15: Illegal occupancy of public land

From the perspective of construction, the recurrent blockage of the Gaza Strip creates enormous difficulties to get cement to build the concrete structures (figure 16) and foundations (figure 17) creating delays that damage the project's image and credibility.

Figure 16: Concrete structure in Rafah   Figure 17: Massive construction of foundations in Khan Younis

The experience demonstrates that the mechanisms to ensure fair distribution of land, housing and income generation are far beyond the management possibilities of a transitional or non state such as Palestine. UNRWA's challenge to assume such role became particularly difficult in such a volatile political environment because of recurrent IDF military interventions and endless internal political clashes among rivaling groups. Although humble, the model application displays evidences of its potential for a successful urbanization and renewal process.

4 Final remarks

Contrary to the opinion generally assumed that in the context of humanitarian crises, architecture and urbanism are luxurious and inapplicable, the experience presented evidence of the importance to introduce good planning, even of a "transitory nature" to overcome and prevent future crises. The two projects presented show how, despite the restrictions imposed by minimum social standards and land scarcity, design and planning open a window for an opportunity to recover human dignity and hope, simply by improving daily living conditions and foreseeing future adaptability to new scenarios of family micro-businesses and social well being. Considering the scale of the crisis and the scope of the international financial aid, the possibilities to develop innovative habitat approaches overcome what is possible to achieve in "normal" conditions, the case of informal settlements around the world. It is important to remark how design and planning can make a difference, re-interpreting the essence of refugee camps, merging re-housing and camp development projects.

Secondly, the experience also highlights the importance of community participation to feed design and planning processes, taking into account its potential as facilitator or obstacle for innovative approaches. Political pressure to control the process without strong authority leads to changes and confusion that affect its results. But considering the changes introduced in both projects and the unstable context of Gaza, the participation process - even with conflicts - was able to sort out controversies through a peaceful participatory and negotiated process.

Considering the "transitory" nature of the camps, any intent to create "permanent" solutions, except the return back of the refugees to their original land currently occupied by the state of Israel, will lead to opposition. From this perspective, the "Refugee city" model faces the contradiction of trying to create better and permanent conditions and at the same time assuming its temporary nature. This creates a framework seeking positive transformation of the camps, without loosing their essence as places expressing the right and claim of the refugees. The project approach seeks to preserve their identity, but to take care of their current humanitarian conditions of homelessness and poverty, introducing a progressive, multi-dimension, multi-scale upgrading process, rather than re-shaping the camps according to formal city patterns.

Finally, the step by step approach, working in different scales and dimensions, serves to build a vision for reconstruction. Starting with the design of the basic unit, the family, to move forward to create neighborhood clusters and finally to shape a global urban renewal strategy moving people and land uses according to a public welfare criteria, although ambitious, constitutes an achievement in itself because it forces people and institutions to work together under design and planning authorities. Precisely, the major lesson from the model compared to the camp, is the presence of design and planning systems regulating habitat construction, shaped by international human rights principles harmonized with local community self regulations.

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