

Temporary Cities: Urban Emergency Planning and the Right to a City

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Abstract:

Refugee camps, even if they were established 75 years ago, are still considered temporary settlements. What if these camps were planned as permanent cities, designed to meet the needs of displaced populations? *War Victims and the Right to a City: From Damascus to Zaatari* by Hind Al-Shoubaki is an attempt to approach this question by applying the concepts of “temporary cities,” “urbiside,” and “urban emergency integrated planning” to a cross-case synthesis. The book uses interviews and historical analysis in Syria and Jordan to reflect on the camp-city relationship in a variety of spheres.

Temporäre Städte: Städtische Notfallplanung und das Recht auf eine Stadt

German Abstract:

Flüchtlingslager, auch wenn sie vor 75 Jahren errichtet wurden, gelten immer noch als temporäre Siedlungen. Was wäre, wenn diese Lager von Stadtplanungsexperten als dauerhafte Städte geplant würden, die den Bedürfnissen der geflüchteten Bevölkerung entsprechen? *War Victims and the Right to a City: It From Damascus to Zaatari* von Hind Al-Shoubaki versucht, sich diesem Szenario zu nähern, indem es die Konzepte „temporäre Städte“, „urbiside“ und „integrierte städtische Notfallplanung“ auf eine fallübergreifende Synthese anwendet. Das Buch nutzt Interviews und historische Analysen in Syrien und Jordanien, um über die Beziehung zwischen Lager und Stadt in verschiedenen Bereichen zu reflektieren.

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What is a city? Is it ever temporary? Do we have a right to it? How does it come to life? And if so, what can kill it? Hind Al-Shoubaki puts these questions forward in *War Victims and the Right to a City: From Damascus to Zaatari*. As an architect and urban planner, Al-Shoubaki uses concepts such as “temporary cities,” “direct and indirect urbicide,” and “urban emergency integrated planning” with a post-conflict lens.

In this relatively short 120-page book, the author explores the relationship between the role of urban planning and the resilience of the city in the face of both man-made and natural emergencies, focusing on the large and sudden influx of refugees as a war-induced emergency. It promises the reader, as the author states in the preface, an insider’s perspective on the post-conflict environment, since the author refers to her work in the preface as “coming from a different reality where cities confront complex challenges as a result of wars and conflicts.

To achieve this, Al-Shoubaki focuses on the refugee/internal displacee camp-city relationship in two case studies from the Arab world, Damascus city in Syria and Al-Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan. According to Al-Shoubaki, this cross-case synthesis aims to explain how camps turn from temporary solutions to permanent structures that can ‘kill’ the nearby cities by putting pressure on their resources or hindering their growth, which the author refers to as “urbicide.” In addition, the author devotes a subchapter to presenting two models of how cities in Italy and Greece have dealt with an abrupt influx of people in need of urban housing. The book explores the intersection of legal, organizational, social, and cultural issues that play a role in achieving more human-centered emergency management and pre- and post-conflict planning.

The book presents a well-structured investigation. The author is committed to using accessible language that allows readers from different disciplines to understand the conceptual

framework. In addition, Al-Shoubaki ends each chapter with conclusions that build up to the final discussion of the book, which is helpful for readers whose interest is limited to one of the case studies and not the other. Another aspect that enhances the value of this book is Al-Shoubaki's choice of research methods. She conducted several interviews with both experts and refugees in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey, using a participatory approach to support the arguments presented in the book. The author argues that the prolonged existence of camps, for example in Jordan, has "a profound impact on the urban tissue around them" (p. 34), especially since these camps were designed as temporary solutions. This, along with the fact that generations of refugees have been born and lived their lives in these camps, is why Al-Shoubaki refers to them as "temporary cities" (p. 34).

Another key point in the book is the need for the current integrated urban planning theory to be "adjusted and further integrated to be usable in post-emergency situations" (p. 108). According to Al-Shoubaki, this adjustment in preparation for future emergencies should take into consideration three main spheres: spatial, construction laws and technical standards, and the diagnostic and assessment sphere. Al-Shoubaki also emphasizes "the need to create conditions that favor the return of the population" and that "the new parts of the city that need to be re-created should not be left to the free market" (p. 118). She also repeatedly states that "[t]he master plan must consider all the aspects of the built environment and it should also organize the transport system, the distribution of the schools, the distribution of the health system, security and so on" (p. 119). But exactly how?

Throughout the book, examples of spatial planning and construction flaws that make camps into temporary cities and result in hindering the development of cities are given. Nevertheless, an effective analysis of the causes is mostly not provided, not in a way specific to Syria and Jordan. The author criticizes the "one size fits all" approach, but what exactly are the alternatives in the case of Syria as opposed to Jordan or Greece or Italy? What financial, geopolitical, societal, and ideological factors play a role in the design and implementation of the plans in the selected case studies? And in light of these questions, how relevant are the chosen models from L'Aquila and Thessaloniki? In fact, even in the concluding discussion, Al-Shoubaki suggests resorting to "urban emergency integrated planning" as a method of transforming camps from temporary solutions into cities, but does not sufficiently elaborate on the limitations specific to the Syrian or the Jordanian contexts. The author mentions what was

not done right in the design of the camps, but does not offer a critical reflection on the factors that lead to these structural flaws. The author does give examples of what changes should be made, but no specific or technical recommendations on how to make these changes, either for existing or future camps.

Another point of criticism is that the first two chapters, which make up 50 percent of the book, are plagued by repetition. The reader encounters semi-identical sentences and reads through them hoping to find more concrete reflections or detailed explanations of the referenced concepts, which can only be found in later chapters. At various points, the reader stumbles over run-on sentences. Similarly, dangling modifiers, demonstratives, and parentheses recur throughout the text, confusing the reader and detracting from the clarity of the argument.

In summary, *War Victims and the Right to a City* offers the reader a structured look at the role of urban planning in the camp-city relationship from a relevant and unique perspective. By examining specific case studies, Al-Shoubaki provides the reader with a more detailed explanation of how urban planning can be improved in these specific cases. As a reader from Jordan who is familiar with the discourse on refugee camps, I believe that it would have been a valuable addition to the literature if the author had devoted more space to explaining, in concrete and technical terms, how these considerations can be met. Nonetheless, the book, which could benefit from sharper editing, provides valuable insights into the camp-city relationship in Jordan and Syria and the role of urban planning in emergency response.