From Tent to Makeshift Housing
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From Tent to Makeshift: A Case Study of a Syrian Refugee in Zaatari Camp (Jordan)

Zaatari refugee camp, a makeshift city built by refugees

Strict regulations have been imposed in the Syrian refugee camps in order to avoid any form of permanent settlement. Despite these constraints, a city has emerged out of the dynamism of its inhabitants. As soon as the camp opened, an informal economy developed throughout the different neighbourhoods of the camp. From the main entry gate, a shopping street developed (Fig. 1), with many shops of all kinds: mobile phone shops, clothing and wedding dress stores, groceries, bakeries, small restaurants, hairdressers and so on. Street vendors stroll around the camp selling all kinds of products or sandwiches. Close to many facilities established by NGOs, this shopping street is frequented by a large number of refugees. It has become a central living space symbolizing their economic dynamism.

The refugees have partly gathered by family and village of origin. Prefabricated structures and tents have been progressively reorganised to create living areas that, although precarious, have enabled people to have their own private living space. Today, five years after the opening of the camp, there are almost no tents left, except as an extension to prefabricated living structures or to cover the inner courtyard of the housing. The materials distributed by the humanitarian agencies are reused and transformed by residents. The camp is not anymore a juxtaposition of standardised settlements. Instead, some of the refugees recreate traditional forms of housing that are fairly similar to those in Southern Syria or in the informal neighbourhoods in the outskirts of large Syrian cities. In these makeshift and freestanding shelters, two spaces have a special status and play an important social role: the room where guests are received (madhafeh in Arabic) and the courtyard, as an outdoor living area and a lock between the street and the home. People from outside the family can gather in the madhafeh, where mattresses are arranged on the floor, thus serving as a meeting room for men. The women, meanwhile, gather in the courtyard to cook together, or in adjoining rooms where they talk.
Case study - Faysal’s family in Zaatari camp

During regular visits in Zaatari camp between 2012 and 2017, we interviewed several refugee families and conducted housing surveys. This revealed some aspects of refugees’ daily life, the problems they face and the coping strategies they developed to circumvent restrictions and economic difficulties.

Faysal, his wife and four children left Bosra in October 2012. At this time, informal crossing point were still open between Syria and Jordan. Similar to all the refugees who entered Jordan after July 2012, the family was directed towards the Zaatari refugee camp. In May 2017, they were resettled in France and left the camp.

In Syria, Faysal lived with his parents, brothers and family in a small house in the ancient and medieval town centre of Bosra. Each family had a room set around a small courtyard. A large garden next to all the refugees who entered Jordan after July 2012, 2012 and 2017, we interviewed several refugee families around a small courtyard.

one of these tents - almost 6m long and 4m wide, 24 m². At that time, the kitchens and the sanitary blocks (showers, toilets, laundry) were collective and built in concrete. Because of the lack of space inside the tents, families used to spend a significant part of their daily life in the only space available, the streets; the tent was used for eating meals, as a bedroom and a madhafé. A few months later, refugees began to transform their tents by themselves, adding a wood-
en structure, used as a store room, with walls and its housing. One served as a bedroom; the other as a kitchen and bathroom. The corrugated iron contro-

roof in corrugated iron (zinc) (Fig. 2, n°9). In March 2015, Faysal acquired a second tent that he connected to the first (Fig. 2, n°9) and doubled the surface of the building. A small informal shop was set up next to the tents, where Faysal started selling second-hand clothing from the refugee camp.


10. May 2017

hand clothes. A year later, Faysal received from the
camp administration a prefabricated housing unit,
called caravan (Fig. 2, n°4) used as a bedroom and
madhaféh. He then began to reorganize his housing
unit, building in wood and zinco around his caravan
a kitchen and a bathroom, with a private courtyard in
the centre, surrounded by a wall in zinco, while keep-
ing his economic activity. According to a traditional
model in the Middle East, the entrance is through the
courtyard, establishing a clear distinction between
the public space of the camp, and the private space of
the house. During the winter 2013, another group of
families from Bosra gathered tents around a private
courtyard. The main entrance porch way, opening
into the small courtyard, stands as a limit between
private and public space where the families can gath-
er, and is used by a safe playing area for the kids.

In September 2014, Faysal’s house had undergone
significant changes, linked to the settlement of his
sister next to him (Fig. 2, n°5). Beginning 2015, he
managed to buy a second caravan enlarging his house
up to 80 m2 (Fig. 2, n°6). One caravan was used as
a madhaféh (or an accommodation for members of
his family in need of assistance) and the other as a
bedroom. The courtyard was enlarged, as well as
his shop, always on the eastern street. The house was
equipped with an individual water tank outside, on
the street side. Tents were reused to cover the cour-
yard, protecting it from the sun or rain (Fig. 2, n°7).

But a year later, his impoverishment forced him to
sell one of his caravans and to close and dismantle
his shop. The total surface of his plot reached almost
130 m2, but his family by then had only one room.
He still had a small kitchen, a small bathroom and a
small garden where he grew vegetable (Fig. 2, n°8).
Six months later, just before winter, he removed the
tents to cover a part of the courtyard with a wooden
structure covered by corrugated iron (Fig. 2, n°9).
Between December 2016 and the resettlement of
the family to France in May 2017, Faysal was able to work
for a Japanese humanitarian organization and earn
money. He received from the UNHCR a second carava
for which he waited over a year. (Fig. 2, n°10). The
former location of the shop became a closed courtyard
serving as a store room. The northern caravan was
used as a madhaféh and bedroom for Faysal and his
wife, the southern caravan as a bedroom for the kids.

Despite a context where humanitarian assistance
impose its rules and legal constraints are strict, refu-
gee like Faysal transform their housing according to
two main parameters: (1) to adapt to their day to day
changing economic situation, (2) to recreate a private
and personalized space, sometimes using traditional
patterns, sometimes using new patterns, in a con-
text where legal constraints are extremely strict. The
many transformations and the constant evolution of
housing, highlighted by the surveys, reflect the vul-
nerability of the refugees despite the humanitarian
assistance they receive. It also reflects the agency of
refugees who use, transform and adapt humanitarian
assistance to recreate spaces better adapted to their
social life and to protect the privacy of the family.