

Case Study

From Refugee Camp to Resilient City: Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan

Nada Maani

The Syrian civil war began in the early spring of 2011 as part of the Arab Spring Protests in the Middle East. The war resulted in over two million Syrian refugees. To deal with the influx of refugees into Jordan, the Jordanian government and the UN built the Zaatari refugee camp 12km from the Jordan-Syria border.¹ Zaatari opened in June of 2012. The reason I find myself attracted to the camp is the commercial district the refugees have created along the primary streets. They refer to it as the Champs-Élysées. They manipulate the prefabricated housing units and transform them into shops. There are about 600 restaurants and 3,000 shops.² These businesses are more than just a way to make money; they are an attempt by refugees to fight for a better future, to find a way to occupy their days, and to feel part of a community. Despite refugee camps being designed to suppress grass-root urbanism, refugees have transformed some camps into informal cities with neighborhoods and growing economies. Camps are considered a burden on host countries, and any sense of permanence is discouraged. My vision is to create spaces that respond to existing social networks inside established refugee camps. Traditionally, emergency relief is reactionary and temporary. My goal is to challenge this notion and begin to respond with long-term resilient solutions.

During September of 2014, I visited the Zaatari camp, with the aim of doing some fieldwork along the intersection that I have identified. During my visit I realized that the Champs-Élysées was male

adult dominated. I knew then I wanted to design for the children and women of the camp. The design intervention will transform the street to symbolise a future for all refugees, not just male adults. To understand not only how to design the permanent within the temporary but also how to design for the Syrians, I began an investigation into understanding 'the physical' in pre-war Syria through the lens of 'the social' and interpreting how the relationships between the public, the private, and the in-between appear in the camp. Studying traditional courtyard housing and understanding the various spaces created and why they are created aided me in looking at this street as a courtyard; thus creating spaces for everyone. The layers that traditionally exist in Syrian courtyard housing are fundamentally created for a woman's privacy, and to give her public space in her own home. I did not just mimic that, but I learned from it and translated it according to the needs of the refugees. I designed a module that articulated different layers and when many of these modules are combined along a street they create the courtyard.

The module creates a second social level by raising the child spaces above the existing shops and restaurants. This transforms the Nadi into a landmark by introducing a visual hierarchy. The camp has spaces to house various programs that engage children, but they only meet the immediate needs such as safety and protection. My design aims to not only meet these short-term goals, but to also address and question existing social norms that

Refugee Camp to City: from reactive to resilient
 how can architecture transform a refugee camp into a child-friendly city that is designed around existing social networks?

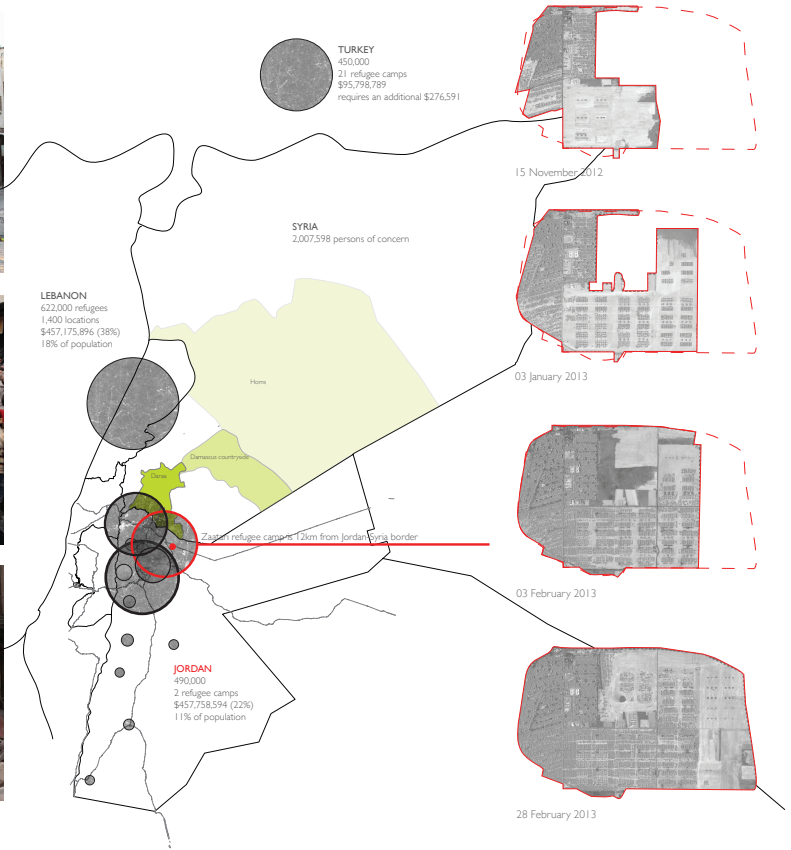


Fig. 1: The context: Zaatari refugee camp. Image: author.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2: Champs-Élysées: existing conditions. Image: author.

Fig. 3: Champs-Élysées: the courtyard. Image: author.

promote inequality. Given the socio-cultural nature of Syrian cities and their multi-public layers, I also designed spaces of interaction and customisation between publicness and privateness. Therefore, the module also includes an interstitial space on the ground level that allows the owners to market their business through signage, to customise their storefronts using the interstitial space, and allows access to each business separately, reminiscent of the souq in pre-war Syria .

My argument is not about improving the initial response to emergencies with the intervention of shelter and service. But given that the average life of a refugee camp is 17 years, the temporary infrastructure soon becomes insufficient; I do find many problems with the lack of progress and the continued support for so many years.³ Architecture needs to be integrated into refugee camps, and it should be designed around the social networks created by refugees. In Zaatari, it was obvious that those networks stemmed from the commercial district. Having livable cities instead of refugee camps does not diminish a refugee's rights, nor does it ensure their permanence in a host country. So the question that I raise is whether as human beings we should be satisfied with the perpetuation of these poor living conditions, and if not, then as architects what actions can we take?

Notes

1. Mercy Corps, 'Quick Facts: What you need to know about the Syria crisis', 13 August 2013, modified 13 October 2016, <https://www.mercycorps.org>.
2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Sharing Portal*, last modified 31 May 2015, <http://data.unhcr.org>.
3. UNHCR, 'Protracted Refugee Situations', Executive Committee of High Commissioner's Programme, Standing Committee, 30th Meeting, UN Doc.EC/54/SC/CRP.14, 10 June 2004, 2.

Biography

Nada Maani is a Master of Architecture 2015 graduate from Portland State University. She was one of the first three students to complete the Graduate Certificate in Public Interest Design, the first of its kind in the nation, offered through the School of Architecture's Center for Public Interest Design. She currently works at Opsi Architecture in Portland, Oregon. Nada's interests lie in the intersection of architecture and politics and thus design that will empower people both socially and politically.