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Refugee camps in Chad: planning strategies and the architect's involvement in the humanitarian dilemma

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Prologue

11 April 2006. A column of 80 white, brand new Toyota pickup trucks are driving at high speed through the desert of the central African country of Chad, in a westerly direction. More than a dozen men are standing on the open loading platforms of each truck, fully draped in white cloth, leaving only a narrow slit for their eyes, watching the unmarked track fly by. The young men, mostly between 16 and 20 years old, have AK 47 machineguns strapped on their backs, and are tired and exhausted from the long and bumpy drive in the scorching heat. They have been on the road for hours. They don't know precisely where they are driving at the moment. Never before have they ventured so far west.

Two days later, after continuous driving and with only short breaks during the night, the landscape changes and the dirt tracks improve slightly. The column of cars starts coming across people, inhabitants of the settlements along the dirt track, first only a few, then more and more. Some of them, dropping whatever they're carrying, run away in sheer panic; others remain standing in awe and sometimes even wave. Rarely, if ever before, have the villagers of the small settlement seen such a large number of cars passing through.

In the early hours of 13 April, the column of cars has reached its destination: the suburbs of the Chadian capital N'Djamena. As they approach from the northeast, they pass buildings that – coming from the sparsely populated desert regions between Sudan and Chad – seem large and sophisticated. In reality, they are small wayside buildings made of brick, where bicycles are being repaired, or petrol is sold in plastic bottles: one of the many informal settlement areas and roadside housing in the surroundings of N'djamena. Nobody in the group has ever been to the Chadian capital before. Their actual goal, though, is the president's palace: they have come to town to topple Idriss Deby, the president of Chad.

In the meantime, their column of cars has split into two groups, to approach the palace from two separate directions. The location of the palace is unknown both to the men with their AK 47s on the back of the pickup trucks, as well as to their drivers. After getting completely lost, the group of pickup trucks comes to a halt, and the fearsome looking young men somehow uncomfortably ask the people along the roadside for the way to the president's palace. After getting brief instructions, they continue their approach, quickly reaching one of the few paved roads of the city. Indeed, after a few minutes two large five-storey buildings with glazed facades that tower over the pitiful shacks, come into their view. They have reached their goal!

With screaming tyres, they came to a stop in front of buildings which are cordoned off from the dusty street with a black metal fence, and are set back by almost 50 metres. The young rebels jump from the trucks, take cover, aim with their machine guns towards the building and shoot fiercely. Windows start breaking, but, almost disappointed, they notice the lack of expected resistance or counterattacks. To complete their assault, a first group of rebels starts to approach the building and runs towards the large entrance door. If the young rebels had not belonged to the vast majority of illiterates in the country, the large sign spelling out "Libya Hotel Kempinski" on top of the building, would have made them withhold their assault.

Being unable to read, they were not aware of the fact that they were just trying to take over a recently opened hotel which, still unfinished and just barely past raw construction, was completely empty. Coming from the refugee camps in the east, any large building could have been a president's palace. Shortly thereafter, troops of the Chadian president drive up, a fierce battle ensues with many victims, whereupon the rebels are captured.

The report of these events is based on information from humanitarian workers in Chad, and on reports of Reuters AlertNet, the news information for humanitarian services¹. The unsuccessful attempt of a coup d'état shows a failure of signification, a false deciphering of signifiers, with tragic consequences. .

Chad

Arriving at the airport of N'djamena two months later, I was picked up by Bolivar, the head of the local mission of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and driven through areas similar to those surrounding airports in any other part of the world, a no man's land made up of shacks and warehouses. We stopped just after a few hundred metres at one of those shacks, went inside, into what turned out to be an improvised bar. After a few warm beers and after the mosquitoes had had their feast on me in the relentless evening heat, I asked Bolivar, whether we could now finally continue to the city centre and to my hotel. He looked at me with a slightly surprised face and said that we were in fact right in the middle of the city centre of N'djamena, the capital of Chad with its 800,000 inhabitants. This shows a different – though much less dramatic – failure of signification, a false deciphering of the urban fabric.

Through its representation in statistics and in the media, Chad appears to be a country as a compendium of problems that a nation can have. Being one of the poorest countries in the world, covering an area three times the size of Germany and with a population of just eight million inhabitants, speaking 300 different languages, severely underpopulated and fragmented, Chad, a central African, landlocked country, formerly a French colony, has probably experienced one of the worst processes of decolonization in history.

Since gaining independence in 1960, it has not been able to develop anything remotely reminiscent of what is usually described as a 'civil society.' The whole country has 400km of paved roads, seven dentists, no bookshops, and newspapers that are printed on a few A4 sheets and are published twice a week. It is a country where half the population does not reach the age of 40² and where only 9 per cent of the inhabitants have access to sanitary facilities³. No city, not even the capital, has a functioning water system or a functioning electricity network. Just as craft, tourism and cultural facilities hardly exist, there is no public infrastructure system to make the

¹ Sources: personal reports from humanitarian workers in N'djamena; news reports: Reuters AlertNet: Darfur's men vanish from refugee camp, 14 Apr 2006; Reuters AlertNet: N'Djamena - a city on the edge, 13 April 2006, amongst others.

² UNDP: Human Development Report 2006, p 294.

³ Ibid, p 308.

country accessible and, according to UN-Habitat, 99 per cent of urban settlements in Chad can be classified as slums⁴.

When Morris Foster, then president of ExxonMobile, opened the oil excavation and pipeline project in October 2003, he stated in his opening speech that he was very proud to be part of laying the foundation for a better future for the country and its population⁵. In those last three years, since exporting oil, the education level has worsened, the rate of illiteracy has risen and the life expectancy has decreased even further. In the Human Development Index (HDI) assembled by the UN Development Programme, Chad has fallen from 167th place to 171th out of 177 countries⁶.

Exactly because of the very low level of development, and – apart from the oil – the general disinvestment of the international community, exactly because of the fact that the country is seen as a white spot on the map, Chad has become an ideal situation for refugee camps. Apart from the oil, it is the refugees, the camps and the humanitarian organizations, which enable the country to embed itself within the international economical networks.

When three years ago George Menze came to the little town of Goré in southern Chad to head the local section of the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) and help the refugees coming from the Central African Republic, Goré was a sleepy town with a few shacks selling food, a single dirt road and a few thousand inhabitants. Up until then, virtually no foreigner had set foot in that remote village close to the border with the Central African Republic.

Three years later, Goré is still an unattractive sleepy little town. The dirt road though, is now travelled by a host of white Toyota Landcruisers, which belong to the many humanitarian organizations that have settled in the context of UNHCR. While Goré has maybe doubled in population within this timeframe, two much larger settlements have developed in the near vicinity: the refugee camps Amboko and Gondje with approximately 15,000 refugees each.

It was a case of unhappy coincidences and sheer ‘bad luck’ when on 16 March 2003 the then former chief of staff Francois Bozize toppled Félix Patassé as head of state in the Central African Republic. It was the same day that the world stood by to watch American and British troops enter Iraq, relegating any other international event to the back pages of next day’s newspapers, if being mentioned at all. Despite throwing a whole country deep into turmoil and uprooting more than two hundred thousand people that were trying to escape from ensuing murder and rape, it was a coup d’etat that no one in the western world ever took notice of. Since then tens of thousands of people have fled across its northern border into Chad. When the news of people crossing into southern Chad reached Geneva, UNHCR, as probably one of the only elements within the international community, reacted quickly, sent exploration teams, and within a very short time was able to provide first emergency shelter to those refugees, fleeing from the Central African Republic. This shelter provided a safe haven to the people fleeing from murder and rape. It saved lives.

⁴ UN-Habitat Website: Chad country information, latest available year: 2001.

⁵ ExxonMobile Corporation: Chad-Cameroon Oil Project Celebrates Official Project Inauguration, October 10, 2003.

⁶ UNDP, Human Development Report 2006, p 286.

Planning method

Even though it is a group of approximately 30 million people that are currently considered refugees or internally displaced people⁷ and even though there are currently close to a thousand of refugee camps in more than forty countries⁸, there are only eleven pages in one single book that describes planning strategies for refugee camps. And even though the setting within which these camps develop could not be more political and conflictual, the engagement with the theme is on a purely technical level only. It often ignores the social, political and collective consequences that every planning decision has in this critical context.

The workers of the humanitarian organizations sighed when they came to speak of the camp planning methods: “Not a single time did the architects look at the area when they were drawing their plans. They didn’t even know that the region was forested.” In their usual manner George Menze’s planners had 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 close to unusable.

As they were lacking the specific local knowledge of the region, the architects of UNHCR never noticed the inappropriateness of their plan. On top of that, the Chadian regional government, which has interest in settling the refugees – and the humanitarian organizations which come in their wake – within their administrative boundaries assigned UNHCR a site for the camp that lay in the midst of a large nature and water reserve area. The clearing of large forest areas and the settlement of approximately 20,000 people – a size of settlement that is otherwise unknown to this area of Chad – had gravest effects on the nature and water balance of the region.

Refugee camps are usually planned by the architects and technical planners of UNHCR. The standard model for a refugee camp is described in the “UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies.” Based on the belief that human rights and human needs are valid and identical all over the world, the fundamental planning approach for camps is characterized by neutrality. After discussing criteria for site selection that take issues such as accessibility, climate and health risks into consideration, the handbook introduces the planning of the physical organization of the refugee camp through the tool of the ‘masterplan.’⁹ The standardized plan for such a refugee camp starts with the tent or the refugee family as the smallest basic unit. The handbook then goes on to describe a ‘modular planning’ approach. This unit of the family is organized into camp clusters (16 tents), camp blocks (16 clusters), camp sectors (4 blocks) and finally the complete camp (4 sectors), which in its “ideal” case houses 20,000 refugees.¹⁰

These camp units are organized hierarchically, and are numbered and equipped with specific services, that are indicative of the planning approach based on hygiene and

⁷ In its Statistical Yearbook 2006, UNHCR lists approximately 25 million refugees, internally displaces people, asylum seekers and other people at risk. the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is responsible for approximately 4.5 million refugees, of which 1.3 million are living in refugee camps.

⁸ Data taken from the country information pages of the UNHCR website.

⁹ UNHCR: Handbook for Emergencies, Second Edition, 1999, Geneva, p 139.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 140.

order: latrines, feeding centres, distribution points, health centres and referral hospital. Every camp cluster has a specific number of latrines and refuse drums, every camp block a central place with water taps and every camp sector has a school. The units of the camp are most often designed as orthogonal areas, creating a hierarchical matrix of spaces from the smallest unit of the tent, to the camp as a whole. Smaller paths and non-motorized lanes separate clusters and blocks from one another, while roads for motorized traffic access the larger camp sectors.

Overall, an image starts to emerge from this agglomeration, one that, in its belief in structured organization, low density, and clear separation of functions and uses, suggests an idealized city reminiscent of those of early modernist urban planning of the 1920s¹¹. It is marked by a notion of modernist optimism and trust in order and hygiene. The concept of hygiene shapes the refugee camp on a direct level, as much attention is given in the planning and management of the camp in terms of health conditions, sanitation, transmittable diseases, and vector control. Minimum distances between refugee families and the densities of refugee populations are defined according to their impact on health conditions. Camps usually include a quarantine area, in the case that cholera should break out, a disease of which the magnitude of impact is directly related to density of living conditions, and the quality and availability of sanitation facilities.

These aspects are referenced throughout the chapter of the handbook. But hygiene also marks the design of a camp on an indirect or symbolic level. Different ethnic groups are usually housed in separate camp blocks. Block and sector representatives of the refugees are divided along religious and tribal lines. Refugees are kept at a spatial distance from humanitarian workers and their bases of operation, which are often located at the perimeter of the camp, to make for an easy escape, in case the refugees should start an unrest. The organization of the refugee camp strives towards reducing the mixing of different refugee groups and towards a homogeneity of the different camp units. For fear of mistrust and violence between different refugee communities, and other people in the camp, the refugee camp moves towards a place of segregation.

This modernistic planning approach, inscribed in ideas of hygiene, order, and hierarchy, which has hardly changed since the 1920s when various committees for refugees, such as the Dutch “Comité voor Joodsche Vluchtelingen” devised strategies and architectural plans for a modern, humane and healthy housing of refugee populations¹², finds its application all over the world. Whether the humanitarian disaster is taking place in the Saharan desert, within a tropical jungle, the dry highlands between Iran and Afghanistan, or near urbanized areas in Kosovo, an identical model for the camp as an idealized city is applied.

¹¹ For further information on ideal city planning of the modern movement see for example: Schwagenscheidt, Walter: *Die Raumstadt*, 1949. This urban planning methodology, developed in the 1920s exhibits striking similarity to the contemporary planning strategies of refugee camps.

¹² van Pelt, Robert Jan: *Eine kurze Geschichte des Flüchtlingslagers Westerbork* (A brief history of the refugee camp Westerbork), in: *Stadtbauwelt* 48, 2006, p 58; Obviously it is possible to sketch out a genealogy of the refugee camp which traces its planning principle via the concentration camps back to roman military camps, but in the context of this discussion a focus on the specific typology of the refugee camp seems more appropriate.

Everywhere the same naïve model is used to project a camp-city of European understanding onto regions that could not be more different. The same eleven pages of the “Handbook for Emergencies” are projected onto catastrophes all over the world. In the context of violence and catastrophes it is exactly its neutrality that makes this planning approach so susceptible to instrumentalization and politicization. Once applied to the specificities of local situations, the disjunctions and incompatibilities of the neutral planning approach become apparent.

George Menze was explaining the change of strategy towards ‘integration’ that he had introduced and was pursuing with the new camp Gondje. Integration, according to this explanation, means the shared use of central and vital institutions such as schools or medical centres by the refugee population as well as by the local population from the surrounding villages. This shared use of schools or medical centres gives the local population from the Chadian villages vital access to education and basic medical facilities, sometimes even for their very first time.

Consequently, the Chadian population profits from the presence of the refugees, and the international community which comes in their wake, having a measurable impact on life expectancy and education level. As those schools and medical facilities are founded and run by humanitarian organizations, they often have a standard, which is not reached by comparable Chadian institutions. Thus, emergency aid, aimed at saving lives, becomes part of developmental aid for the host country. On the other hand, the Chadian regional administration is allowed to have ever fewer obligations towards its own population, as it can rely on the presence of NGOs and the international community.

The incentives are high for the local Chadian government, to let the facilities sustain, which have been set up in the wake of refugee situations. In practice then, this integration can lead to a more permanent settlement of refugees in Chad. This permanent settlement is problematic first of all, as the refugees were never asked for their own opinion, and this strategy, having a fundamental impact on their lives, was decided without much consideration of their position and interests. Top priority should be towards enabling a return of the refugees into their original home region, if the political and safety conditions allow. Only when it is apparent, that such a return will not be possible for an extensive period of time, a permanent settlement in another country should be sought for.

On the level of architecture and planning, the strategy of ‘integration’ means added space. Instead of providing allotments of approximately only 45 sqm. per refugee family, as is the case in the older camp Amboko, the masterplan for the camp Gondje provides plots of 200 sqm. per family¹³. The refugees are supposed to plant their own vegetables on that additional area, thereby achieving larger independence and self-sufficiency. What seems ‘neutral’ and purely positive when viewed on a technical level, shows crucial demographic consequences when social and political aspects are taken into consideration.

¹³ The allotment size of 45 sqm is consistent with the recommendations stated in the Handbook for Emergencies. All data and measurements were taken from site visits and from corresponding UNHCR planning documents for the refugee camps of Gondje and Amboko.

Many of the refugees come from the villages of the northern regions of the Central African Republic and have previously practiced a craft or ran small shops. Other refugees are nomads of the tribe of the 'Buel' and have been raising large cattle herds. They don't like vegetables they don't want to grow vegetables, and don't want to eat vegetables. Through a specific act of planning and a simple design move, those nomadic and village societies are being made into vegetable farmers. The architect takes on the role of the demographer, altering fundamentally the structure of the regional population and helping to change a culture of craft, or a nomadic way of life.

When walking through the camp, one moves through an endless collection of tents, strewn in a seemingly haphazard way underneath the trees, with their latrines, their cooking platforms and their vegetable gardens. The two camps, Amboko and Gondje, that are becoming permanent settlements, each with 15,000 inhabitants, are larger than most of the Chadian towns and cities. However, in spite of their large size, the structures that are emerging with the refugee camps are not of an urban character. The camps occupy a vast area and are of low density, there is no concentration towards a centre and they know no differentiation into individual quarters with diverse and distinct characteristics.

Because of their homogeneity and their low density, they seem like suburbs – without the corresponding city.¹⁴ When those camps become stable with the strategy of integration, gigantic permanent suburbias are created, with all of the problematic aspects of a typical suburb. The homogeneity reduces the possibilities of social interaction and eases the potential for observation and control by the regional government and the camp gendarmerie. There is no social or cultural life, no central density with corresponding activities, just a space for keeping and containing people.

Refugee camps are indispensable and essential, as they often represent the last life-saving sanctuary of protection, and as the refugees, often in destitute condition, are well looked after by the international community and humanitarian organizations like UNHCR, MSF or OXFAM. Often though, it is spatial strategies and decisions on the level of planning that change an emergency support, intended as temporary, into becoming a permanent 'solution.' This reduces the urgency to deal with a conflict and its causes on a political level, as the 'human catastrophe' has been dealt with and contained. The permanent settlement, a solution with architectural means, turns into a strategy of sidestepping a political settlement. The architect becomes an accomplice of this turning away from politics.

Eastern Chad

Some 250,000 refugees from bordering Sudan are housed in 12 refugee camps in eastern Chad, which have been set up by UNHCR. The refugees have fled from the civil war in the Darfur region of the Sudan into neighboring Chad. The Darfur conflict, a war between various ethnic groups in the western region of Sudan, among

¹⁴ It is interesting to note in this respect that the sociologist Paul Bourdieu noticed this relationship between the structure of the refugee camp and the suburban typologies already in the 1950s in his fieldwork and research on Algeria and its struggle for independence. On a further point, his studies show how little the planning of refugee camps has changed, as the plans that he uses to illustrate his work are virtually identical to a contemporary camp design. See Bourdieu, Pierre, *In Algeria – Testimonies of Uprooting*, Edition Camera Austria, Graz.

them the infamous Janjaweed militia, which is being supported by the Sudanese government, broke out in the middle of 2003. According to various estimates, approximately 250,000 people have been killed in this war, and between two and three million people have been displaced. Besides the hundred or more camps of various sizes that have been erected within Sudan for the displaced people, the twelve camps in Chad represent a safe-haven and a last resort for survival, for the mostly civilian victims of the war.

The camps themselves consist of an almost endless collection of tents that have taken on a uniform brownish colour from the sand of the desert, becoming virtually indistinguishable from the identical brown of the ground, all merging into a vast brown mass. The individual tents are usually set up in a kind of allotment, that also includes an open fireplace for preparing food, storage space for firewood, sometimes a resting place for a goat, and being surrounded by a makeshift fence, made of twigs, weeds, or various collected building material.

According to the planning, these allotments are organized into camp blocks and sectors that are separated by wide, open corridors, also used as dirt roads. Apart from the central facilities, such as the medical centre, the distribution point for the food rations, the schools and other community services, which are managed by humanitarian organizations such as MSF, OXFAM or CORD, every refugee camp has a market, where the refugees can buy or sell goods. They sell vegetables, meat of goats slaughtered nearby, or self-tailored clothing, underneath simple tents. Many of those shops are set up with the help of the humanitarian organizations, providing the sewing machines, or other equipment necessary for setting up a small business enterprise.

Of tents and huts

On 24 May 2006, the monthly food rations are being distributed in the Treguine refugee camp. Already early in the morning, thousands of colourfully-clothed women are waiting at the central distribution point for the large WFP (World Food Programme) trucks to bring the heavy packages from the huge, and well protected supply depots that are located just outside of the camps perimeter. Every month, upon showing their camp registration card, the women are provided with a food ration, consisting of flour, vegetable oil, some cereal, sugar and salt. And as every month, the disorder and confusion is great, the waiting is strenuous, and other tasks such as washing clothes or collecting firewood has to be postponed. At this day however, something else, something new is in the air: rain!

In a certain way, it is still too early for the beginning of the wet season. During midday the first clouds are visible, that cover the dusty blue sky, and a steady wind picks up, blowing the hot desert sand into the faces of the waiting women. After waiting for long hours, after all food rations have been distributed and the usual problems of lost registration cards and double rations have been cleared up, calm returns to the camp. Completing their tasks, the humanitarian workers leave at 5 pm in the afternoon, in order to reach their own compounds before the start of their curfew time one hour later. In the distance, a faint tremor can be heard, coming closer within the next hours. At midnight, a gigantic heavy rainstorm showers down onto the camp.

Treguine was one of the first refugee camps that UNHCR opened in Chad, located approximately 60km from the border to Sudan. It also became home to some of the first refugees that had until then camped independently in the desert area of the border region, or had been hosted as 'guests' in the few villages in the region. Being one of the largest camps in the beginning, many of its residents had been moved to other camps in the following months as they were being opened.

The current inhabitants have been mostly living in Treguine since their escape from Sudan. When setting up the camp, after the provisional water wells have been drilled, and the land has been organized into camp sectors and blocks, the refugees are assigned a piece of land and are handed a 'starter pack': a shovel, a blanket and mattress, some cooking utensils and a tent. Self-sufficiently they then erect their tent and create their own 'domestic' space.

The tent is the central element in the structure and the organization that UNHCR developed for refugee camps, and it stands as the smallest, 'atomic' element in this hierarchical chain. Beyond its task as an urbanistic building unit, the tent is being assigned some very fundamental functions.

According to the 'UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies' the tent has to protect the refugee from the weather and the climate, should create a moderate internal temperature – which is often impossible in view of daily temperatures far above 50 degrees in the open sun, and a fairly dark tent cloth – should provide for personal, emotional and physical security and safety as well as privacy, and facilitate the storage of personal belongings and food supplies.¹⁵ The tent becomes the object, which arranges and organizes the daily life of the refugees, but which also gives structure to the camp, and hence assumes most central functions and significance. Depending on climate and usage, those tents last approximately three years.

Owing to the very dry heat in the east of Chad, the tents in the camp Treguine had become very frail after three years. The cloth had torn in places and was often full of holes, and the steady wind with desert sand had taken its toll and made it paper-thin. The tents could not withstand the heavy rain that poured down on the refugee camp in the night between 24 and 25 May. Rainwater oozed through the thin cloth, dripped through the cuts and holes, soaked the beds and mattresses and destroyed the food rations that had been distributed just hours before. The flour that was to secure the livelihood of the refugee families had become unusable.

The refugees had pointed out the bad condition of the tents to the administration in the camp. Most tents, the refugees said, would not survive another rainy season without serious problems or damages. UNHCR though, had not been able to provide the refugees with new tents, due to their financial limitations. Only very few refugee families had built more durable shelter in the form of huts made of dried clay bricks.

Next morning, the fear and frustration of the refugees turned into anger towards the workers of the humanitarian organizations. A revolt and some fighting ensued in which residents and workers were injured and some NGO staff were taken as hostages. Only after an agreement over the replacement of the destroyed food rations and the improvement or repair of the tents was found, were the hostages released.

¹⁵ UNHCR: Handbook for Emergencies, Second Edition, 1999, Geneva, p 145.

These events show the dilemma that the spatial activities of humanitarian aid, of UNHCR and the various NGOs are facing. If the refugees had had the chance to erect more sturdy buildings instead of the tents in the refugee camps, the food provisions would have probably been not destroyed through the rain. Indeed, in a few refugee camps especially in the south of Chad, refugees are given 'home-buildings-kits', consisting of a shovel, a bucket and a wooden mold for casting clay bricks.

By building clay huts, the transitory nature of the refugee camp, though changes to a more durable facility with a stable infrastructure, that is able to host refugees permanently. This permanent settlement is often not in the interest of the refugees. If the spatial strategy of UNHCR limits itself to setting up tents as a means for habitation, it will always remain obvious and be visible that the situation is one of an emergency situation, which has to be solved not with architecture, but through politics.

As tents are, by definition and out of necessity, always pushed to their limits in terms of what they should perform and what tasks are laid upon them, accidents or mishap are bound to happen. This dilemma then offers the choice between a permanent camp, with stable buildings, helping to 'normalize' the state of refugees, which thereby persist in their plight, or a camp that expresses its temporary circumstances by the tents, but thereby exposing the refugees to additional dangers. An ideal 'architectural' choice in this dilemma cannot be taken.

Humanitarian aid differentiates between activities of reconstruction or improvement, and emergency. While activities of reconstruction, as for example the reconstruction after natural disasters, or the developmental aid in various projects such as slum upgrading, creates solutions that preferably should be permanent and improve a low level of development, emergency aid, as performed in refugee camps, has a different aim: It should supply people with the absolute necessary, serve as a safe-haven, and save the lives of refugees and the displaced. Emergency aid should not be permanent, as the solution for the problems should be sought on a political level.

Thus, put in a simplified way, the difference between emergency aid and developmental aid can be read from their spatial component: emergency aid builds tents and developmental aid builds houses. If emergency aid starts building houses, or vice-versa, things become problematic. If emergency aid starts building hospitals and operating them for the general population, it runs into the danger of becoming a pawn in the game of corrupt politicians or lawless militias. On the other hand – and exhibiting the ambiguities of operating in these highly charged contexts – on what terms should one dare to reject help to local a population, when they come to refugee camps in conditions of need. It is these dilemmas, which have been thoroughly described in recent writings, that architecture becomes a witness and a register.

In the past, emergency aid has been termed as a very 'conservative' way of acting, as it keeps a distance from politics and the causes of conflict. Emergency aid that is performed by humanitarian organizations in situations of conflict, intentionally refrains from dealing with the causes of conflict and 'only' aims at alleviating the symptoms. What seems insufficient on first view, is though characterized by a solid logic: During a humanitarian catastrophe people have to be saved from death and injury, no matter from where those people come and how they are implicated in the conflict. If emergency aid starts taking sides, and getting involved politically,

humanitarian organizations run into the danger of not being able anymore to serve the people in distress.

This space, that has to exist to be able to perform emergency aid, to have access to the areas of conflict, to judge independently the levels of need, without being pulled into the conflict, has been termed 'humanitarian space' by Rony Brauman, one of the founding members of Medecins Sans Frontieres. The actual 'solution' has to be developed within the political sphere, not through humanitarian means. As doctors as bad politicians, and politicians are bad doctors, political, military and humanitarian interventions should be strongly distinguished from each other. Political conflicts have to be solved on a political level, not through humanitarian or architectural means. If those two levels are enmeshed, as was practiced in Afghanistan most explicitly, humanitarian actors are the biggest losers.¹⁶ Their work is being instrumentalized for other means.

Militarization

The proximity between humanitarian actors and the military is hard to avoid. On the one hand, armies try hard to 'humanize' their wars and military interventions by linking or coupling them with emergency missions and reconstruction aid. That is, for a western audience wars are being rationalized by formulating plans of reconstruction at the time when destruction is still taking place, and by not only dropping bombs but also food rations, first-aid kits and artificial limbs.

On the other hand, the humanitarian organizations are seeking the proximity of the military as well, though. The need to help people in distress exposes the humanitarian workers to danger. Organizations like MSF or OXFAM often operate in the midst of violence, displacement and armed conflict, and hence close to military units. They, at times, pride themselves with being the last to leave, or the first to enter, a region of conflict. This contact has direct implications for humanitarian organizations on three different levels: their language, their modes of action and their perception of the environment.

Humanitarian workers, who travel to Chad from western countries to work in the context of humanitarian aid speak of going on a '*mission*'. Arriving in Chad, they quickly get acquainted with communicating over radio or walkie-talkies with '*Alpha Base*', the base station in the country. Whenever they are driving in one of the cars, they give reports every fifteen minutes that the situation is '*Oscar Kilo*' (= OK) and also give a report on the passengers in the vehicle, listing the '*Expats*' separately from the '*Inpats*'.

Communicating their current location, they announce the time of the next '*radio contact*' at '*fourteen hundred hours*'. No one leaves the base without radios or walkie-talkies, and vehicular traffic happens mostly in columns of two or three white Toyota Landcruisers. Often, a self-entailed curfew prohibits any movement after

¹⁶ This 'mélange' of humanitarian aid and military action has recently been described and analyzed in a number of texts: David Rieff, *A Bed for a Night*; and Sarah Kenyon Lischer, *Dangerous Sanctuaries*, amongst others. Recognizing the importance of these works, the author's interest lies less with the simple proximity of the two areas of activity, but rather with the spatial consequences and impact on planning strategies, that this sharing of a common 'vocabulary' results in.

dawn. Visits by spouses or partners in the compounds of the humanitarian organizations are as strictly prohibited as intimate relationships between any of the workers. This militarization of language and modes of behavior also has impacts on their perception of the environment.

From the twelve refugee camps in Eastern Chad, with their total population of 250,000 refugees from the Darfur region, the camp Bredjing enjoys one of the best reputations amongst the workers of the humanitarian organizations. Walking through the camp, the difference between Bredjing and other camps in the region is hardly noticeable. Maybe the roads accessing the individual sectors are more clearly arranged; maybe the camp blocks are better structured.

The tents are identical to those in other camps; refugees come from the same areas and are in similar physical conditions. The difference though lies in the fact that the camp was fully set up before the first refugees arrived, and that the facilities of the humanitarian organizations are not located within the centre of the camp, as usual, but at their fringes, having a certain distance to the areas where the refugees are living.

Even though less convenient for the refugees, who have to walk longer distances to reach the community facilities and the medical stations, the humanitarian workers can profit from an increased security: Refugees, whose behavior and activities can change course unexpectedly, are seen as a potential threat. Having a spatial distance to the refugees, who are required to walk down a long road towards the facilities of the humanitarian organizations, they cannot launch a surprise attack. On the contrary, being located at the camp's perimeter, a quick escape is always possible. The military reasoning, which views the refugee as a potential source of danger, finds its spatial expression in an ordered camp structure and the preferred distribution of functions in terms of overview and retreat.

Boundaries

In the matrix set up by nations, refugees and conflicts, the notion of boundaries plays a central role on various levels. When the infamous Janjaweed attacked the village of Djawara in eastern Chad on 13 April and most of the village population was butchered to death, Abdulaye and some of his relatives, being one of the few survivors, tried to escape to safety. The refugee camp 'Goz Amer', located in close proximity to the ambushed village, has been set up for the refugees coming from Sudan, fleeing similar attacks by the same Janjaweed. Abdulaye was denied access to the camp, as he and his family within their own country only carry the status of 'internally displaced people'

In the central convention of 1951, UNHCR defines the refugee as a person who, exposed to a fundamental threat, has fled from his home into a different country, thus crossing an international boundary.¹⁷ If, when fleeing, one remains within one's own

¹⁷ UNHCR defined the refugee in its founding convention from 1951 as "... any person who: [...] 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." This convention included

country, the status of a refugee does not apply according to this definition, and one is 'only' classified as internally displaced, a category that the international community and UNHCR has only limited responsibility for. Especially in Africa, where the boundaries of countries go back to colonial powers and are mostly ignorant of social and tribal structures, this differentiation between refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) is extremely problematic.

Very often coherent population groups are living on both sides of an international border, and can at times move freely within the border area, as the exact location of the boundary is frequently not demarcated and not controlled. What is invisible in the landscape, and had remained mostly irrelevant for local population, becomes the decisive factor at the time of greatest danger and precariousness. The borders decide how a fleeing and protection seeking person is treated.

Left without food and water, in one of the most inhospitable areas of the world, Abdulaye and his family were faced with two options, one worse than the other: One possibility was 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 camps¹⁸. However, this flight meant an escape into the midst of the Sudanese civil war and into the hands of those Janjaweed who had just days before razed his home and killed his fellow villagers, thus into greatest danger.

The other possibility is the attempt to get to Goz Amer or one of the other camps in the region even without enjoying the official status of refugees. Having reached those camps, the so-called internally displaced people then settle in the most miserable conditions just outside of the official refugee camps. They squat densely packed in large numbers underneath some rags of plastic foil, and, being without protection, are directly exposed to the hot desert wind and temperatures of 50 degrees. They are not provided with tents, food nor water, or any other kind of support. But they can observe how their fellow tribespeople from Sudan are at least provided with this basic assistance.

Even though the refugee camps in eastern Chad are not fenced off by a physical boundary, the access to the facilities of the camp, to its infrastructure, food provisions and tents are prevented through a system of control, using the refugee's registration cards. The spatial limits of the camp, that are easily overcome in their physical reality, obtain an absolute status through organizational means, in situations of bitter need. The two-class society of fleeing people, based on the differentiation into refugees and internally displaced people, finds its spatial equivalence in the informal structures just outside the gates of the official refugee camps. The camps develop their own ghettos or shantytowns, the slums of the slums for the banished of the banished. In medieval manner the unwanted are expelled out of the gates of those virtual cities.

conditional clauses that limited its validity geographically, to events occurring within Europe, and historically, to events related to World War II. Even though these qualifications were amended by a protocol in 1967, the current definition of refugees remains thoroughly inscribed in a post-war European logic of state boundaries and their invulnerability.

¹⁸ In a most recent development, UNHCR has called upon Sudan to recognize the Chadians fleeing into Sudan as refugees. (UNHCR press release, 8. August 2007: UNHCR and Sudan Commissioner for Refugees recommend recognition of Chadian Refugees newly arrived to Darfur).

Camps for the western world

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 change or modification, at whatever scale it occurs, immediately resonates on a political and demographic level. The camp is politics having become space.

Apart from all 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 more and 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 organizations 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 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.