Permanent Temporality of Refugee Camps

Architectural expectations and dilemmas in humanitarian urban spaces

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This project is part of a Masters thesis by Nikita Gyawali at Aarhus School of Architecture in Denmark. Its aim is to reinvent refugee camps as urban catalysts, humanitarian and political agencies. The site is a camp for Syrian refugees in the south-eastern part of Turkey.

Of the estimated 11 million people displaced by the war in Syria, over four million are displaced externally, with Turkey being the biggest receiver with over one million. This project addresses the possibility of long-term stay and integration of Syrians into Turkish soil, focusing on issues of self-reliance through employment and education. The test site is located on the Syrian border in south-eastern Turkey along the river Euphrates in Karkamis district. Despite the existence of a refugee camp close to the chosen site, there are around 160,000 Syrians and families living outside of camps, unregistered and in squalid conditions, with an obvious need for more camps around that area.
The majority of Syrian refugees in this area come from Aleppo, until recently the biggest city in Syria. With the city’s history rooted strongly in trade, the souks were one of the most important elements of the urban fabric there, the site of one of the longest covered markets in the world. In addition to serving as a space of commerce, the souks also accommodated important monuments. The project takes the old city of Aleppo as inspiration for the spatial quality of the new camp.

Mappings of the old city fabric of Aleppo including the souks or the markets and the old citadel became the basis for the new camp layout and the structure of the souks from Aleppo become marketplaces on the new camp. The transitional space between the Citadel and city of Aleppo
becomes an important public plaza on site. The structure of the Great Mosque in the Citadel now becomes a school in the camp with the extension of the school housing workshop spaces. The project also aims to rekindle the ancient craft of soap making in Aleppo through manufacturing facilities and workshop spaces. The aim is to try to bring back the everyday sight and smell of soap to the displaced Aleppans in Turkey, a direct connection to their homeland.

The new urban camp focuses on markets as series of semi-public spaces leading up to a large public plaza, schools as important structures in organising the settlement, and the possibility of converting growth and settlement into a city. The project incorporates a cluster planning method of layout, encouraging and re-enforcing viable social communities. It also takes into account the organic growth pattern of informal settlements, which are already present in existing refugee camps. It acknowledges the way of life and everyday spaces used by people in this part of the world, and adjusts the size/structure of the layout accordingly.