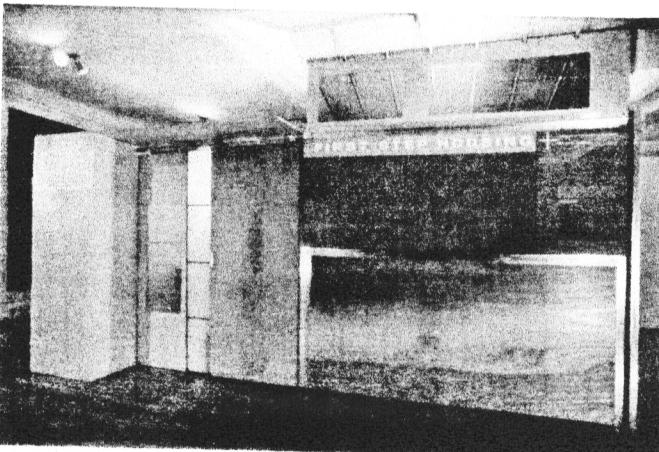


Cities Without Citizens
Ed. Eduardo Cadava & Aaron Lang
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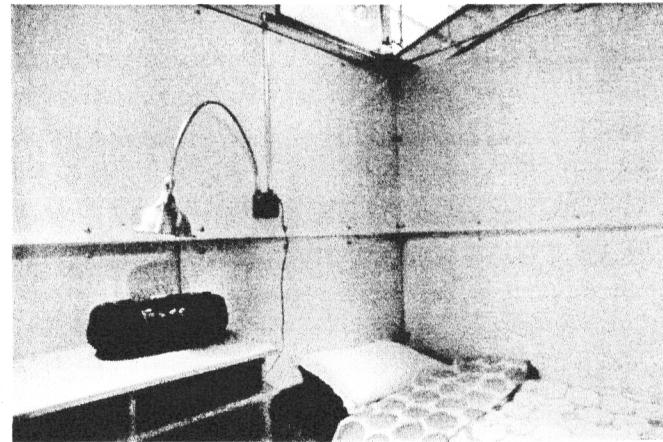
DISPLACEMENT: THE REAL POLITIK OF UTOPIA
Gans & Jelacic Architecture

Unhampered by the red tape of the nation-state, embodying her own cultural identity and stowing its accessories in a carry-on bag, the modern nomad wandered out of the romantic landscape of Goethe's *Young Werther* and into the property-less states of work and leisure of Le Corbusier's bucolic Radiant City before descending into the global network. We encountered her, perhaps for the last time, in a recent design competition sponsored by Alessi who was looking to furnish those perpetually on the move. We designed her a utility belt for personal tools and a portable computer station that would both now fail to make it through airport metal detectors. Detained in the airport lounge since September 11—or perhaps since the most recent global summit—she sits and contemplates the flow of capital as it passes by, siphoning off resources in its wake and forcibly pushing people along with it. By now we are all familiar with Deleuze and Guattari's depiction of nomadology, which sets up two moments: the state asserting its authority through the "striated" spatial grids of power and the nomad using a war machine to expand its "smooth" territory. The tribes left out of this Nietzschean dualism of conquest are the displaced who would not choose to be either nomadic or stationary in their given circumstance.



First-Step Housing, Van Alen Institute, Fall 2000. View of two attached units oriented at 180 degrees. Three sliding panels of interchangeable position and function and varying degrees of transparency compose the front wall. They are set back from the exterior edge of the closet to create a zone of transition and identity like a porch.

The subject/clients of this article are the displaced, the doppelgangers of Alessi's urban nomad, the other product of post-cold war geo-politics inhabiting a society of scarcity beneath our cultures of abundance. Whether the result of internecine struggle, foreign war, famine, or mass unemployment, their displacement has a root cause in patterns of investment that date from the Cold War superpowers' aid to contested territories—such as continuously destabilized Afghanistan—and exist today in public and privatized form.¹ Neither foreign powers seeking control over natural resources nor foreign companies interested in a "cash crop" production like sneakers have tended to invest in the infrastructure or future of their host nation, with the consequence of underdevelopment and displacement more often than the showcase success of towns like Hyderabad, India. One typical pattern of migration in relation to investment begins with the move of subsistence farmers to the local city in pursuit of new jobs, and then to the world city-at-large when the jobs disappear as foreign investment moves on. The accrued mass of individual movement has large



Common Ground's brief requested single rooms for single men, but we conceived a system capable of different occupancies and configurations. The units can be combined to have multiple bedrooms or shared and contiguous living arrangements.

consequences such as the reduced agricultural production and environmental degradation of abandoned land, and the overstressed physical and social infrastructure of rapidly expanding cities. Competition for increasingly scarce rural and urban resources and the political control over them can then fuel the strife that leads to ethnic struggle, regional war, and mass displacement. In its drive to expand, and in its ability to do so without sovereign limits, capital spurs these related human displacements: de-ruralization, migration, emigration, and flight.²

As quantified by the United Nations, the number of people subject to scenarios of displacement are vast—one in every 297 persons on this planet, including a new category officially recognized by the UN, the Internally Displaced Person (IDP), who is forced from home but not region or country. There are at least twenty-five million refugees, the population equivalent to double the world's largest metropolis. The imagined specter of such a vast urban receptacle for the dispossessed haunts an understanding of the real impact of displacement on existing cities. As they wane with

attack, wax through immigration, or emerge suddenly in the debased form of the refugee camp, cities register the phenomena of displacement, and displacement describes the temporality and permanencies of cities. Any strategy for housing the displaced ultimately must envision the new or recuperated urban culture.

The dominant architecture of displacement, that of a refugee camp, seems a dark legacy of an International Style of military operations unaffected by all our postmodern lessons regarding the disruption of regions, cultural memory, and patterns of daily life. There are still few alternatives to the economies and apparent rationality of blue tarp tents arranged *cartus* and *decumana* in relation to group latrines and delivery routes, a plan that dates from nineteenth-century military manuals, which in turn model themselves quite self-consciously on Caesar.³ This arrangement expedites both the surveying and surveillance of the camp. It offers effective protection from military attack and epidemic. The blue tarp is extremely cheap and tough—tougher than even pre-sewn tents, which tend to give at the seams under environmental stress like wind. It is efficient to transport and distribute, even in circumstances with fragile roads that cannot be passed by heavy trucks.

Most importantly, the tarp tent is the sign and the goods of the temporary. In the first months of conflict, the message of the tent, shared by their displaced inhabitants, the camp hosts, and the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) alike, is that the conflict will be brief and resettlement imminent. The investment in both tents and land matches the expected duration of stay. When the conflict persists, the temporality of the tents takes on the quasi-military signification of resistance to the enemy's expanded borders and the political signification of the host's opposition to local resettlement. A tent city in Azerbaijan for 10,000 people who share the ethnicity of their hosts has persisted for a decade, under conditions that the local government admits to be unacceptable, because more permanent accommodations would signal the military acceptance of reduced borders and the local acceptance of a burdensome population.⁴

It is a more than ironic coincidence that the other most popular refugee site is an abandoned military camp. It is in the nature of current warfare, ideally fought by a virtual infantry with cyber intelligence and fast moving deployable structures like inflatable barracks, that the retardataire military setting loses its value. On the other hand, the adaptive reuse of its regulatory structure has a brutal clarity reminiscent of Michel Foucault with a disturbingly appealing ecological twist. The military compound of Nagyatád, Hungary opened as a Bosnian refugee settlement for 3,000 people in 1991 without any dramatic physical change to the original mess hall, infirmary, or four-story barrack buildings of large undivided rooms and gang bathrooms built to accommodate fifty soldiers each. The original barbed wire fence remained, officially to protect the refugees but also to control their movement and to maintain balance with the deprived local population of 12,000, who both coveted and resented the stockpiled cigarettes and fruit that the refugees traded at the local market. The camp's school, mosque, and other formal and informal social structures earned it the epithet "refugee village" but could not overcome its liminal existence, such that after three years the refugees wanted only to go home rather than become Hungarian—and the citizens of Nagyatád would have them go.⁵

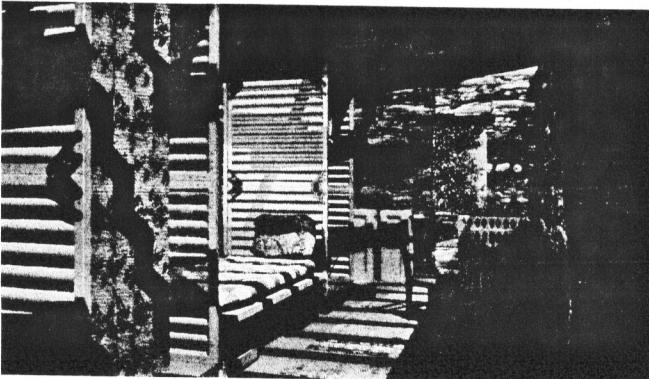
To those responsible for displacement planning, the ecology implicit in reusing the military barrack as a refugee village is not a trivial advantage. Refugee camps can be the size of small cities with physical impacts at the environmental and bio-regional level so profound that the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) describes them as "eco-disasters."⁶ The problems include: deforestation as refugees collect fuel wood and building material, consequent soil erosion and loss of bio-diversity, poaching of wildlife, over-cultivation of soil, water depletion, soil and water contamination from waste, air pollution from cooking fires, and the production of vast amounts of garbage, including shipping and construction materials. The conditions of scarcity that fuel displacements in the first place recur at the sites of relocation.

Taken together, the environmental policies now emerging to control the camps' impact describe a planning vision almost Vitruvian in its combination of quasi-military techniques and ideality. Sophisticated satellite mapping and imaging of the geography determine sites that can accommodate the settlements of 20,000 people with minimal environmental damage.⁷ The rule of thumb is a 15 km radius buffer zone between campsites and natural areas to be protected based on the circumference of refugees' search for fuel. Within the camp, the rule of "no clear felling" of trees and shrubs and the demarcation of areas of protected growth extend the principle of forestation. To accommodate the need for agricultural land while maintaining "bio-mass," planners have developed systems like "taungya" in which crops are planted between trees.⁸ The recommended plot size is a generous 400 square meters per household minimum, in order to encourage management responsibility of the immediate site and the addition of bio-mass through household planting. The cluster of four to six shelters around a shared central space is the favored device of balance between the social benefit of eating and preparing meals within the family unit and the environmental advantage of collective cooking. Collective facilities such as markets and infirmaries are distributed according to criteria of walking distance and room for expansion. In sum, the emergent planning principles of eco-friendly refugee camps bear uncanny resemblance to enlightened urbanisms, such as the New Bombay of Charles Correa or the Majorca Technopolis of Richard Rogers, that challenge the culture of the car by using the pedestrian radius of travel as the basic module for planning, reformulate the modernist garden city tradition as a productive landscape, and envision an equitable society based on equal dwelling plots.

In theory, the socio-political attitude implicit in the new physical planning of the camp extends to its operation by involving the refugees as decision makers. In a form of "grassroots organization" they elect leaders who help to organize the distribution of food, shelter, and jobs. The reality, however, can come closer to social engineering because of the needs for

protection and the effort to modify cultural practices that are not sustainable. While stressing the use of educational workshops to promote good environmental practice, the UN guidelines also suggest economic incentives to shape behavior. UNHCR commonly exacts a fee for firewood, seeds, and solar stoves because they find that the cost of the item creates its value in the minds of the refugees. Cooking practices are often sites of intense negotiation between camp efficiency and cultural mores, seen for example in the resistance of many populations to fuel-efficient solar cooking from the belief that evil spirits will enter the uncovered food; a common compromise is the use of very large heavy-lidded pots. While clusters of tents arranged with the assistance of a refugee representative can offer a closer approximation to tribal or neighborhood structure than the military row, ultimately the opportunities for physical, economic, and social self-determination are limited. The isolated camp exists in a suspended spatio-temporal moment, which defeats the possibility of urbanism.

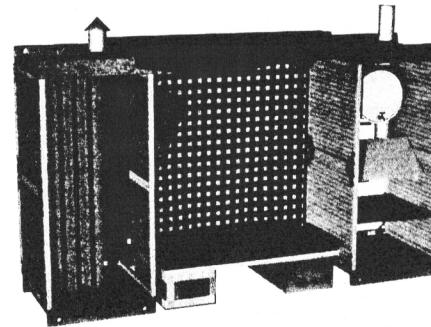
The approach to camp organization that best mitigates the problem of self-determination and in doing so explores an expanded range of physical settings is that of permaculture.⁹ Permaculture, a neologism of permanent and culture from the 1970's, refers to settlement patterns that minimize waste, maximize diversity, and choreograph mutually supportive relationships among the elements of the system—houses, animal units, streams and forests and the like. In the context of refugee camps—which have neither permanence nor culture—the goals of permaculture pertain to the larger lifecycle of the camp and to the roles of its refugee population as stakeholders in their current condition and agents in the future of the place. The intention is for camp residents to manage first their internal and ultimately their extended environmental affairs, as occurred, for example, in the Umpium camp in Thailand, where residents first negotiated the allocation of land and fruit trees for home gardens and then participated alongside local villagers in a public representative body that deals with the Thai authorities on environmental matters.¹⁰ Ideally, camps and villages become political



Interior Perspective of a unit inserted into house ruins where it acts as service core, structural support and scaffold for the construction of a larger dwelling.

and economic partners, as in Jhapa, Nepal, where refugee and local residents first collaborated on erosion controls and then on land reclamation for commercial agro-forestry.¹¹ The strict, ecological vantage point of permaculture requires the camp to be understood as a fragment of a region, the region to be held to the same environmental standards as the camp, and the refugee and host to jointly shape the identity of the place.

The permaculture camp echoes the vision of eco-idealists and green economists in their post-industrial alternatives to corporate globalization. The society outlined is one of small-scaled, decentralized, and self-reliant communities that join together in municipal networks of shared laws and standards in order to maintain bio-regional balance. In the eco-service economy, service replaces commodity through the concept of use-value, such that products are mobility not cars, nutrition not food, cooking not fuel, and—one might add in the context of refugee camps—planting not crop production. As in the closed economy of the camp, the green marketplace uses an eco-incentive system of barter that extends to the recycling of objects. It relies on local currency and exchange values that prevent the siphoning off of capital to remote locations. Granted by an



Assembled Single Unit: At a distance from one another, the separate privy and hearth can initially frame a habitable space between them protected by a photovoltaic tarp.

authority other than the nation state, shaped by its inhabitants for sustained development rather than expansive growth, operated as a service use-value economy with a system of exchange credit based on energy consumption, the permaculture refugee camp aspires to an experiment in the eco-idealist manner with populations that far outsize any of the current eco-idealist communities.¹²

This spatial blurring of the permaculture camp and village, refugee and host, is likewise a temporal blurring in which the site of refuge becomes the site of resettlement, and the settlement a self-determined village where the refugee has, in fact, cultivated her own garden. Still, the underlying condition of displacement remains. Temporized by the idea of return, all such sites are diasporic.

The unending desire of the displaced is to return home, even when acknowledging that home consists of a set of conditions that will never recur or, perhaps, never quite existed. "Were our customs really beautiful or am I just imagining things," is one such refrain.¹³ More than unmet desire, however, the idea of return is a *realpolitik* solution to halt the erosion of the social as well as physical fabric and the loss of property rights. Basically, the

longer one waits the worse things get. UNHCR aids voluntary repatriation by evaluating towns according to criteria of *inter alia* (access to housing, freedom of movement, police protection) and through gifts of tools, seeds, and tarps; but it lacks a strategy for the recuperation of the physical city needed to make return a real possibility.

The problem of urban recuperation drove our thinking in a competition for disaster relief housing for Kosovo. The competition called for an alternative to the tent—that most telegraphic sign of displacement—to be erected within 48 hours from an absolute minimum of materials and to remain in place for as long as two years. Considering the projected duration of the camp set-up, the fundamental issues lay beyond the scope of the tent in questions of infrastructure, planning, and the environment. Rather than create better sites of dislocation, our strategy considered the reuse of the city to avoid the physical and mental waste inherent in building refugee camps. The challenge was to develop a physical device that could reconstitute an urban fabric without the support of a civic scale of infrastructure and that could, as an auxiliary consequence, retool a refugee camp as if it were a city. The proposal employs a condensed infrastructure of a privy and a kitchen with hearth/heat source and integral cistern/shower housed in de-mountable yet load-bearing enclosures.

The design negotiates among issues of cultural specificity, using both the locally available, such as insulating straw, and the imported, such as high-performance ceramic sheathing. It juggles the need to preserve the camp ecology from a strip search for building materials or fuel and the need to minimize the material value of the shelter as resale scrap with the demands of a structure suitable for reuse on the sites of return. Given the variety of refugee lifestyles, the plan required flexibility such that, for example, the kitchen could face the privy, or garden, or not. The style of this object is largely irrelevant; embedded deep within the permanent house, it has little impact on an outward appearance determined largely by the inhabitant. The boxes aspire to the universality of the tent through their

instrumentality alone. To this end, the photovoltaic tarp and its battery supply not just heat or light, but also a TV hookup, the ultimate link from nowhere to everywhere, more desired in the camps of Chechnya, the streets of Calcutta, and the shelters of New York than square footage or a full kitchen.¹⁴

The boxes are seeds of the new city containing all the goods immediately needed, with husks that can be transformed and eventually absorbed within the growth of the house. While they allow the renewed operation of a site, these objects remain incomplete and ultimately dependent on their host city as a form of economy. The urban situation takes on their trace along with that of the pre-existing city but remains somewhat fluid, with the possibility of new kinds of buildings, new relations among them, and the hope of a lush second growth.

The tents still in place ten years after the civil strife in Azerbaijan demonstrate that temporary solutions are not distinguishable from the permanent on the basis of duration. What makes dwelling temporary is its dislocation from site, from political and economic community, and from one's own history. Underlying our project to retool the ruined or limited city so that it can perform in new ways is a belief that the ultimate check to the progress of dislocation is not the literal act of return but urbanity itself. As Scott Anderson suggests, the "historical cosmopolitanism" of Sarajevo and Belgrade, Pristina and Mostar and the Dalmatian Coast was such a cultural and economic urbanity undone by events resembling the pattern of de-ruralization, migration, and flight: "The gulf of experience between city and village in the Balkans is an awful chasm. The cities are emblems of cultural fusion; the typical Balkan village a hard and pitiless place with ancient feuds and primitive blood laws. The leader/villains (Milosevic, Karadzic) are country boys who, when faced with the economic crises, shed their urbanity and return to their village ways."¹⁵ We cannot undo globalization or certain continuing economic crises, but we might imagine a new hybrid city that is more resistant to the epidemics of dislocation.

Coda: A True Story

With the collapse of the Soviet block, a small town on the Dalmatian coast bounced back from a progressive decline in its agricultural economy to emerge as a tourist haven for Europe in the 1980's. Residents eagerly gave up small farms, vineyards and fisheries, moved to town and opened hotels, cafés, and restaurants. They claimed their villas were worth half a million dollars each. The war eventually stopped the tourists, decimated the economy, and drove out the resident Bosnians, destroyed much of their property and with it some coastal beauty, and the real estate value. But because the tourist economy had depended on the scenic appeal of the permanent culture of the area, namely the vineyards, farms, and harbor, traces of the agrarian economy remained. Those who closed their hotels replanted their orchards; those who lost their villas again launched their boats. First they fed themselves with the produce and now they even begin to prosper. Still, they would prefer for the tourists to return and for their houses to be worth half a million dollars. But they know that day will come only after some of the Bosnians return and reconstruct their homes and businesses along the coast so as to calm the fears of the multi-ethnic tourists. Then there will be hotels and cafés, but also working vineyards, fruit groves, and fisheries, in an unpredictable and lush second growth, which they will never be so foolish as to abandon again.