



## Book review: **From Shelters to Dwelling: The Zaatari Refugee Camp** Ayham Dalal, 2022

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### **Abstract**

**Layla Zibar** is a postdoctoral researcher at the department of architecture at KU Leuven University (BE) working in the fields of forced migration, (post)conflict reconstruction and urbanism. Her academic and professional interests over the years aim to comprehend and unfold the interrelations between crises, forced displacements, urbanization processes, homing and lived experiences.

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Ayham Dalal offers us a spatial repertoire on the radicality of the ‘housing’ question regarding refugees and their built environments. By focusing on the ‘tension between the shelter and the dwelling’, this book offers an exceptional reading of the imposed temporary materiality of the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. Dalal introduces ‘dwelling’ as a spatial practice, highlighting refugees’ spatial agency in resisting and subverting the idea of liminality and, as Malaki (1992) proposes, falling outside the ‘natural order of things’. Through detailed case studies and visual representation, this book brings to the fore the dismantling and reassembling of given temporary structures to describe Syrian refugees’ spatial agency in transforming the tent-furnished desert into ‘the third largest city in Jordan’.

### **Keywords**

Refugee camps, spatial agency, humanitarian architecture, Syria, Jordan

Ayham Dalal's book (Transcript Verlag, 2022) on the spatial transformations of refugee camps as a way of how the temporary is being lived through ‘dwelling’, is a timely contribution to the growing and contested debates on the question of (temporary) housing rights for refugees.

First and foremost, this work is an architectural study, as it offers a visual register of the power of material reality and the built environment. The book pivots around refugees’ dwelling processes in temporary camps: the moment the basic shelter, whether a tent or a caravan, fails to address refugees’ spatial needs. *From Shelters to Dwelling* is inspired by the philosophical frames of ‘being’ and ‘existence’ that Heidegger’s (1971) work and lived experience in both world wars encompass. Dalal departs from these frames to highlight the ways in which the refugees’ material experience of disappearance and loss of home is,

essentially, a material un-being and loss of worldly anchorage. He delves into the question of dwelling by linking the 'being' for Heidegger with Lefebvre's (2003) dichotomy between habitat and (in)habiting as top-down (given) and bottom-up (everyday) forces. As such, he explores the ways in which refugees revert this un-anchorage and spatially reclaim their presence in the camp. In the context of refugee camps, according to Dalal, 'dwelling is inevitable' (p. 50). It mushrooms within the cracks of constant dialogues and tensions between such forces to lay the ground for 'the camp [to] start to disappear, and dwellings start to emerge' (p. 25).

In this book, the ethnographic and the visual components weave together accounts of how 'dwelling' in the camp is a socio-spatial practice. Dalal, a displaced Syrian architect and researcher himself, questions interpretations of domesticity, house, home and dwelling. He moves between his personal encounters to dwell in temporariness and uncertainties, and his field observations in Zaatari refugee camps. Therefore, by tracing how the displaced practice their right to dwell and make place in uncertainties, he challenges the stereotypical rendering of the forcibly displaced figure as homeless and out of place. His work underlines the ways in which the displaced navigate loss and fragmentation through defragmentation processes: using spatial elements as the basis to patch up and move forward to 'become' and hence 'be'. He starts from the temporariness of a shelter where 'dwelling is meant to be suspended' (p. 25), connotating his experience of hiding under design studios tables and refugees under a fabric tent. He highlights that 'protection' through sheltering, legitimized by humanitarian actors, with such material fragility is simply being 'not dead'. Therefore, shelters hardly go beyond the upkeep of temporary human vessels, which fails to align with the lived reality of forced displacements. The extended time-frames crack the (imposed) rigidity of refugees' spatial containers as they resist and claim their rights to appropriate, as Purcell (2002) puts it. This claim for refugees, according to Dalal, is a claim to dwell: a spatial practice of (re)ordering what is given in relation to changing aspirations linked with social and financial realities in specific time-frames.

One of the book's most relevant theoretical contributions to the growing debate on refugees' access to housing is the accentuation of 'the right to dwell', even in a temporary camp, as foundational for existence. In *Zaatari Refugee Camp*, Dalal describes these spatial practices as dismantling and reassembling, which 'distort the homogeneous and disciplinary order of the camp' (p. 89) and inscribe their social order to it. Building on three detailed family trajectories, using ethnography and co-mapping methods, the book provides a detailed description and graphic account of the socio-spatial dynamics of defragmentation. Refugees disassemble the material given to reassemble the fragments and (re)produce a social. As the figure shows and the text highlights, these processes are proactive issues of privacy, changing family relations, resources, and financial means, and deeply intertwined with (former) conceptions of culture, memory and identity.

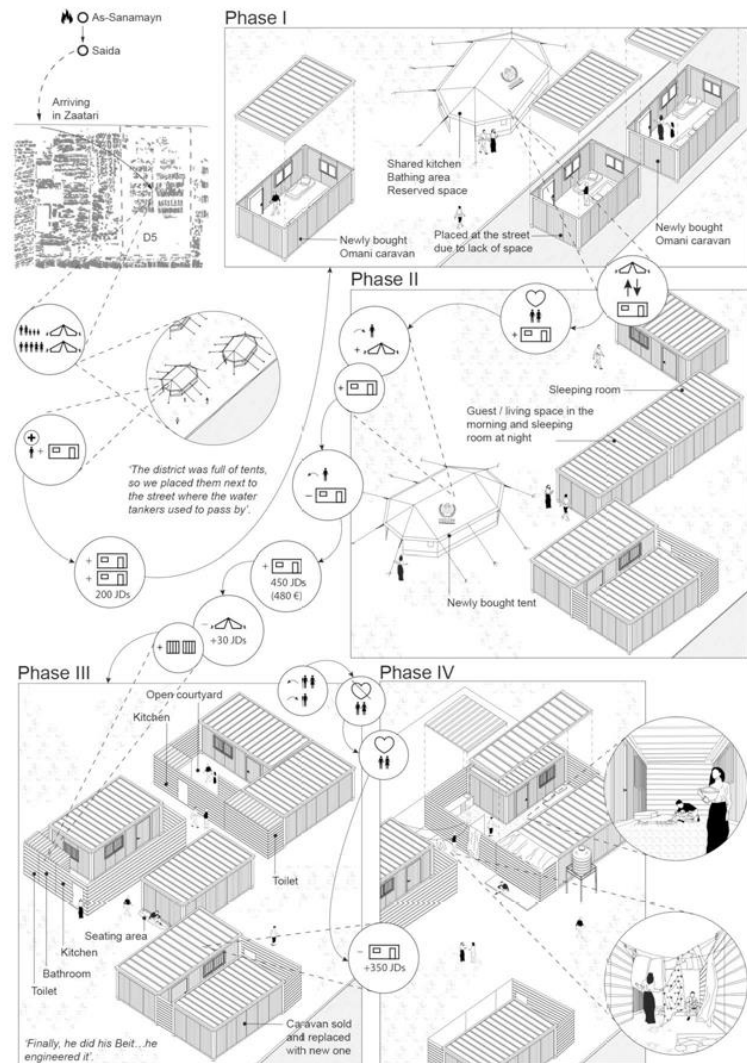
At a macro level, this book provides an overview of the refugee camp becoming a response to a sudden surge of a housing shortage to shelter the displaced. Taking the Zaatari refugee camp as a case study, Dalal traces the situational conditions that led to its existence and evolution: the Syrian refugee influx into Jordan, the setting and planning of the camp

**Figure 1**

This figure illustrates the phased transition from shelter to dwelling in the case of Eyad – A 22 Syrian refugee with a large family (parents, brother and his wife, and their children). It captures the changing familial and financial realities that led to constant spatial (re)ordering through disassembling and reassembling spatial elements.

*Credits:*

*Source: Dalal, 2022, p. 114*



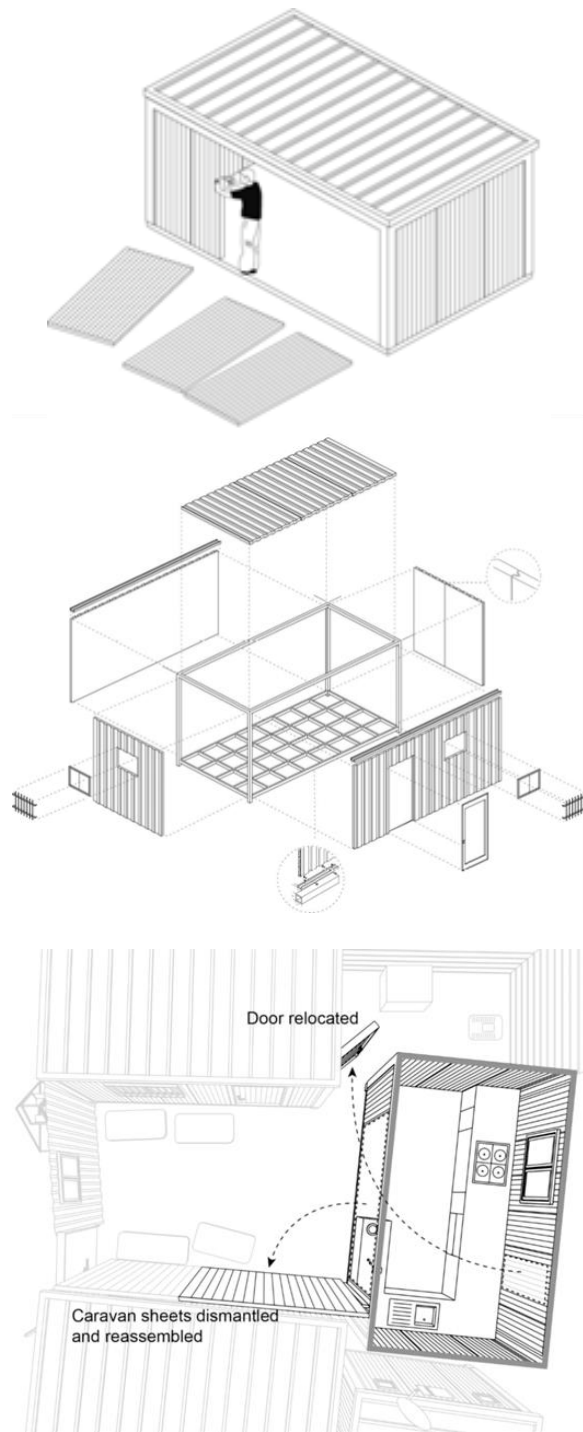
and the material elements of this ‘disciplinary machine’ (p. 75). The material elements they were provided, as the book highlights, went from the ‘tent’ as an immediate temporary response, complemented by additional winterization kits (corrugated sheets, plastic sheets, etc.) as a climatic response, was later substituted by a ‘caravan’ as a more prolonged temporary one. As the book outlines, this ‘caravanization process gave Zaatari camp a very distinctive look’ (p. 81) and indeed enabled and accelerated dwelling processes. Through moving, rotating, relocating, dismantling and reassembling the various provided spatial elements, refugees transformed into camp dwellers, and the planned camp became the palimpsest for their social order.

At a micro level, Dalal brings to fore the changing dynamics between the social and the material. He traces these dynamics by ‘revert[ing] to the impact of the material world’ in Zaatari camp to answer two critical questions. First, ‘how did the materiality of the shelter and the camp influence the ways in which dwellings were constructed’, and second, ‘what role did aspects such as temporariness and politics play in the process?’ (p. 144). In two chapters, Dalal introduces an innovative method to address these questions by highlighting the emergent economic value, the commodification of the shelter and camp market

demands. He then underscores the ways in which spatial flows and dwelling needs created a market for construction materials (whether dismantled, provided or smuggled into the camp), realtors and ‘professional’ builders. Finally Dalal underlines the material characteristics of the built environment of the camp (the caravan, tent, corrugated sheets, concrete blocks, cement) that enacted the dismantling and reassembling processes. In detailing the anatomy of the physical elements and their durability, Dalal contributes through a visualized register to understand how radical housing can be and how the dwelling process stems from the very core of the material world.

This book ends with the dilemma that derives from and transcends architecture as a discipline and a profession, namely, ‘what can we learn from refugees’ self-build practice?’ (p.195). For Dalal, it is clear that the refugees are ‘the real architects of the camp’ (p. 196). His findings indeed accentuate that their spatial agency harness the material power of the provided and develop innovative practices to subvert their abstract image of victims that surrounds their lives. The camp spaces, after all, are patchworks of these forms of resistance: minimum standard designed spaces where the recollection of the ‘remnants of what used to be and [the creation] what could be’ (p. 207) is authored by refugees themselves (Musmar, 2021; Seethaler-Wari, Chitchian, & Momic, 2021).

The book provides a compelling ethnographic and architectural outlook on how dwelling as lived experience is a material manifestation of refugees reclaiming their presence. In my view, the book would have benefitted from a more scrutinized gaze on the Jordanian context in relation to forced displacement: the historical presence of urbanized camps, the power of humanitarian



**Figure 2**

The figures above illustrate the agency of refugees and the structural anatomy of the caravan that allow the dismantling and reassembling processes. *Credits: Dalal, 2022, p. 162,164,167*

actors and social and geopolitical tensions. The author's work in voicing refugees and highlighting their innovative practices is rich and illuminating, yet the factual reality of their temporary 'make-do' presence is hinged on discriminatory policies. Moving forward, for this group, is heavily dependent on donor communities and definitions of 'emergency' by external powers, market dynamics and globalization processes that assert temporary materiality. The book, nevertheless, is one of the rare attempts to provide an architectural anthropology of the oft-dismissed powers of how refugees' forbearance is intertwined with the material world. Though I appreciate the introduction of dwelling as an unquestionable refugee right, I part ways with the author in reading homing/ home-making as 'partial representations' (p. 53) and the home being 'psychological, emotional and imaginative' (p. 54). In my opinion, home is encoded and decoded within the material medium, and dwelling socio-spatially practiced, therefore, dwelling gains its importance by infrastructuring for a 'home' through situational limitations. In homing, refugees re-anchor their 'being' in socio-material articulations, and hence ascribe their future and past vectors, of memories and future possibilities, to a geographical fixity (Zibar, Abujidi, & de Meulder, 2022).

I find this book, ultimately, to be an invitation to embrace the subversion of the image of the refugee as a victim into a powerful actor within and despite the imposed restraints. I believe, like the author, that 'refugees are always, and will forever be, dwellers' (p.207). The recent pandemic, Ukrainian war and unfolding crises all over the world have continuously ushered that the fragility of one is the fragility of all, and Agamben's (1998) 'state of exception' could become our every day at any moment. Nevertheless, within and despite the material fragility, and exceptionality, there will always be room to dwell, as long as we claim our rights to humanize and share it with all.

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