Building now and building back. Refugees at the centre of an occupant driven design and construction process

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ABSTRACT

Forced migration is not a recent phenomenon, nor is the reality of the amount suffering of the displaced population fleeing from armed conflict. Finding housing for refugees has not only become an acute obligation for hosting countries but it is a situation predicted to continue, and possibly increase, in the future. This study is discussing and showing the results of the first phase of an ongoing project for designing and constructing an eco-cycle refugee shelter. The project discussed how an environmentally low impact shelter could be provided that pays respect to social norms, religious beliefs and cultural traditions of refugees. The study is applying a transdisciplinary participatory methodology using an occupant centred approach. It is looking at current post-conflict housing issues in hosting countries with a focus on Syrian refugees in Sweden, and it depicts a phase of the project where a foundation for subsequent phases – including constructing a physical house prototype through involving refugees in a construction training – was laid. The project aims at fulfilling refugees’ needs and involve them in the design and construction process as well as raising the awareness of a cost efficient and climate responsive way of building back better in the refugee’s home country.

1. Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2016, 65.6 million people worldwide were displaced due to conflict or persecution, among whom 22.5 million were refugees residing in another country than their country of origin (UNHCR, 2017a). Over the last decade several organizations – UNHCR, UN-Habitat, Oxfam, and many others – have taken responsibility for finding proper shelter for those in need after natural or man-made disasters (Aquilino, 2011a), but despite all efforts, the international humanitarian systems are still unable to effectively meet the needs of affected populations (Hidalgo and Tammenga, 2009). One reason for this is that housing which is intended to be temporary only rarely remains temporary. Dwellers in such housing end up staying much longer than anticipated, which makes the situation extremely difficult to manage and goals of integration and equity almost impossible to achieve (Mullins and Jones, 2009; Zetter and Pearl, 1999). This alarming situation constitutes a global challenge.

Of all countries, Syria has recently seen the worst devastation, due to the massive destruction of buildings and infrastructure following the civil war that started in March 2011 (Lawson, 2014). By 2016, 5.5 million Syrians were refugees in other countries (UNHCR, 2017a) and 6.6 million were living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria (UNHCR, 2017b). In Syria’s neighbouring countries Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, quick relief camps have been set up to host the vast numbers of Syrian refugees living in temporary shelters, which have oftentimes been tents (UNHCR, 2017c). Between April 2011 and July 2017, more than 970,000 Syrians sought asylum in Europe, and 64 percent of these have found their way to Germany and Sweden (UNHCR, 2017c). Different European countries have found temporary solutions for housing refugees, such as the Netherlands, where old abandoned prisons have been opened, and Austria, where empty office buildings have been appropriated as acute solutions to accommodate refugees. As for Sweden, and in proportion to the country’s population (10 million), there has been an exceptional influx of Syrians immigrants during recent years, culminating in 2015, which saw an historic high in the arrival of new asylum seekers to Sweden: in all, 163,000 people, of which almost one third had Syria as their country of birth (Migrationsverket, 2017a, 2017b). In 2016, close to 150,000 Syria-born people were residing in Sweden (Delmi, 2017), and an additional nearly 40,000 Syrians remained asylum seekers, i.e., awaiting a permit of residence (UNHCR, 2017b). The latest available figures (from September 2017) regarding all asylum seekers in Sweden – from Syria as well as other countries – show that close to 80,000 people still await a residence permit, among whom over 30,000 are housed in temporary accommodation facilities (Migrationsverket, 2017b). With civil war
ongoing, the Syrian refugee crisis has not slowed down. Beside the refugee situation puts a pressing demand on the country, the settlement and housing of refugees is high on the Swedish agenda. Furthermore, it is probable that refugee migration will become a permanent and perhaps growing challenge even after the Syrian crisis has eventually ended. Naturally, this is not only a problem in Sweden; it is a worldwide issue that necessitates innovative solutions so that the people fleeing from conflicts have a safe and decent place to live.

1.1. Problem definition

The Scania (Skåne) region in the southernmost part of Sweden and bordering the Øresund between Sweden and Denmark has been the first stop-over for most refugees arriving in Sweden. Municipalities in Scania are striving to find suitable temporary housing. They have been accommodating asylum seekers in temporary accommodation facilities like hostels with commonly shared conveniences. The public authorities often try to separate families with children from single refugees, keeping each in different housing facilities; sometimes, however, housing is instead allocated based on gender. After that first period of time, refugees are moved to other forms of temporary housing in different municipalities. Here, priority is given to families with children. If and when a residence permit is received, the refugee has the option to find housing on their own, or to wait in the municipal housing queue. The Swedish legislation regarding planning and building is strict. Therefore, to cope with the housing shortage to which the recent influx of migrants has significantly contributed, a new regulation for temporary construction permits had to be introduced, allowing new homes to be built with an expected lifespan of only 15 years (Regeringen, 2017a).

From preliminary observations made during the prelude to this study, conflicts and tensions have started to rise in temporary accommodation facilities due to the long waiting time for receiving asylum in Sweden, for which the average wait is now 18 months. Frustrations heightened among refugees in July 2016 when the Swedish parliament introduced a new law, stating that instead of granting Syrian asylum seekers a permanent residency as a standard measure, it would grant a large number of them only a temporary 13 months residency (Regeringen, 2016). This regulation has made refugees feel much more insecure about their future in Sweden, and with residence permits remaining temporary, refugees also continue to be locked out of the public housing market. We have also come to understand that for some newly arrived Syrian refugees to Sweden, encountering the differences in climate and culture has been something of a shock. Furthermore, refugees are physiologically affected by their displacement, and it takes time for them to adapt. Some continue to find it very difficult to blend into a new culture. Those who have already been granted a permanent residence permit may see the new situation as a good opportunity for better living, but many who have been given temporary residency are suffering from the uncertainty of the situation.

1.2. Study aim and objective

This study in hand is discussing an ongoing project that works on the cutting edge of solving urgent needs for quick-fix temporary shelters while simultaneously examining sustainable and resilient housing solutions for vulnerable refugee groups in Sweden. The project proposes a low tech, energy efficient and low ecological impact refugee shelter that respects the refugees’ cultural and social needs and their future aspirations. The project’s main challenges are: time efficiency of building a shelter, cost efficiency, the quality of the shelter unit, and the shelter’s methods of meeting the needs of the refugees with respect to their cultural norms, religious beliefs, and social backgrounds. At the same time, the proposed shelter unit should be resilient and sustainable, with minimal impact on the environment after the temporary shelter is no longer in use. It should also be able to transform into a permanent residence if needed. The idea is based on involving refugees in the design and construction process while they are still waiting for their asylum decisions in Sweden. Thus, this project is considered to be ‘do-it-yourself’ – although in a regulated way – while applying environmentally friendly and zero impact construction methods. Above all, the project is considered a post-conflict re-construction and re-building training for refugees, focusing on social and environmental rehabilitation. The concept of ‘build back better’ housing relates to the sustainability of the process, both in terms of what is produced (the buildings) and how refugees become involved in and learn from the construction process. The idea is that the refugees will be the ones building their temporary homes in Sweden, and if they one day return to Syria, they will be equipped with the awareness, knowledge and experience to re-build their homes while encouraging sustainable building practices.

This article discusses and describes the first phase of the project through a transdisciplinary participatory investigation and site survey with target Syrian refugee groups. This phase of the project sets up a fundamen for a subsequent phase, referred to as an “experimental living lab” phase for the house prototype construction. In addition, this phase acts as a testing bed for refugees’ acceptance of the project notion, and for determining how much they would like to be involved in the design and building phases. The outcome of the initial steps of the study have informed the project’s design development phase. Its transdisciplinary and participatory methodology is meant to be reproducible in other hosting countries, in different climatic zones and with other possible building materials, using the same production process. Looking at the current housing issues with a focus on Syrian refugees in Sweden, a house that fulfils refugees’ social and cultural needs, and one that involves them in the design and construction process of sustainable housing, is likely to become an effective tool for accelerating the integration process and facilitating healing after forced migration and displacement. Thus, the article addresses some urgent issues following in the wake of the ongoing refugee crisis, specifically issues concerning how to solve the housing demands for refugees in their new hosting countries with consideration of their social norms, religious beliefs and cultural traditions, while building in an environmentally sustainable, fast and cost-efficient way.

2. Literature study

With growing waves of migration in many parts of the world, researchers have been actively investigating housing and integration problems (Aquino, 2011a; Sigona, 2005), especially after the Syrian forced migration crisis, wherein researchers have studied the correlation between inadequate housing and social exclusion (Dean, 2016). Refugees’ and migrants’ integration strategies are diverse and they differ from one country to another, even in neighbouring countries like Denmark and Sweden (Myberg, 2017). The same goes for housing provisions which, according to Borevi and Bengtsson (2015), differ widely even between similar welfare regimes like the Scandinavian countries. Sweden has been developing integration approaches for immigrants on both state and municipal levels since the mid-1970s, with a predominant focus since the late 1990s stating that integration is about “equal rights and opportunities for everyone, regardless of ethnic or cultural background” (with, however, a later amendment of equal obligations alongside rights and opportunities) (Prop. 1997/98:16, 1997, p. 21; Prop, 1997; Regeringen, 2017b). Within this general integration framework, the Swedish government has recently been putting more or less all integration efforts into what is referred to as introduction of new arrivals, which signals that the present situation with regard to the refugee migration constitutes something of a state of national emergency, putting measures for integration which are more thoroughgoing and long-term on a temporary hold (Regeringen 2017b).

Several studies have shown concrete examples for humanitarian housing projects that involve refugees in the housing design, or through
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