



Living on the move, dwelling between temporality and permanence in Syria

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Abstract

Although the international displacement of people caused by the Syrian conflict has dominated the media for the past several years, an inside story that is less visible requires more attention: that of internal displacement. More than half of the population of Syria has been forced to flee their houses. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in December 2017 accounted for more than six and a half million, more than a third of the total of population of Syria in 2011 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 2012. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/>). Displaced Syrians have experienced constraints in getting adequate housing for the short- and mid-term inside and outside the country. However, internal displacement, in particular, adds a dimension to the complex notion of mass sheltering. Sheltering policies, or lack thereof, as well as the shelter itself as a design and construction product all express the power of those who govern more than the aspirations of those who inhabit. Affected groups find solutions by themselves, via national or international organisations, or a combination of both. However, such solutions function under the influence of authorities controlling the area in which IDPs are received. Among the alternatives available to displaced communities, this paper reviews two cases of internally displaced families in Syria: a collective centre in government-controlled Damascus (schools) and a planned camp in Afes village in a rebel-held area near Idlib.

Keywords Internally displaced persons · Temporary housing · Mud villages · Post-disaster housing · Shelter · Syrian conflict

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1 Introduction: home away from home

Adequate housing is recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25) as part of the right to an adequate standard of living (United Nations 1948). Nevertheless, over a billion people worldwide are not adequately housed (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2014). Housing is more than a shelter. Houses provide human dignity, personal safety, security, cultural identity and protection from the climate and diseases (Ferrer et al. 2009). The loss of one's house implies more than the absence of shelter; it also implies the lack of home, in the broader sense. Somerville defines seven dimensions of home: shelter, hearth, heart, privacy, roots, abode and paradise (Somerville 1992, p. 532). If home encompasses these complex dimensions, homelessness can be understood as the lack of them, which results in a detachment from society due to the lack of connecting bonds. Homelessness implies a lack of belonging rather than not having a place to sleep (UNCHS/HABITAT 2000, Cited in Kellett and Moore 2003, p. 126).

'Home' has been defined as a place (physical structure, location) and a set of feelings (meaning and emotion) and also as the relationship between the two (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 22; Moore 2000, p. 213; Rybczynski 2001, p. 232). Therefore, home is a tangible object and also represents the concept of belonging to a place that reflects our particular culture, needs and way of living: a place to feel attached to (Lawrence 1987, p. 155). In summary, the concept of shelter for displaced people is challenged through the ideas of home, memory, identity and belonging as well as the design, application of materials, construction and infrastructure (Blunt and Dowling 2006, pp. 23, 128, 254). However, such psychological and architectural frameworks fall short in cases of IDPs during armed conflicts, when shelter and sheltering policies are also a political expression of authority. While rightly criticising the one-fits-all shelter, migration studies make few, if any, distinctions between different types of displacements.

According to UNHCR's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internally displaced persons are 'persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border' (UNOCHA 2004, p. 1). Due to its nature, internal displacement implies an extensive use of legal and socioeconomic frameworks in which the definition of state sovereignty must be broadened to include responsibility (Cohen and Deng 1998, p. 13); internally displaced movement is not only a result of a conflict, but also a cause of subsequent conflicts (Rajput 2013); and IDP sheltering and reception centres can be an extension of the violence (Zea 2011, pp. 6–8). This prompts an examination of the notion of home within the IDPs in the case of Syria not as a product, but as a process that produces different typologies of temporary housing. What are these typologies? How do they reflect the politics behind their design, material, location and infrastructure? How were this politics manifested in sheltering temporality and permanence?

2 Internal displacement in Syria

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2012) points out that one in 15 Syrians has been internally displaced due to the civil war (NRC/IDMC 2012, p. 1). By mid-2014, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA)

estimated that 10.8 million out of a population of 22 million Syria were affected by the conflict. This number has risen to 13 million in 2018, of which 6.5 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR/Global Focus 2016). More than half of Syria's population have been forced to leave their houses in one of the most massive displacements since the Second World War (OCHA Syria 2016). The movement of people exploded in mid-2012 and early 2013 with the escalating violence around the two main Syrian cities, Aleppo and Damascus. Many of the six and a half million IDPs came to these cities from their outskirts. From 2013 until December 2017, the number of displaced Syrians fluctuated around 6.7 million. However, due to the lack of access to the country and the nature of the conflict, these figures remain estimates.

Many civilians leave their houses due to extensive and indiscriminate attacks, including murder, massacres, torture, rape and bombardment (Mooney 2014, p. 44). Concerning shelter, fewer than 3% of IDPs have found refuge in official collective centres coordinated by the government or opposition groups, while the rest live with host families, in private accommodation, or informal settlements (Mooney 2014, p. 44). Humanitarian assistance has encountered limitations in moving around the country due to security risks, bureaucratic and administrative obstacles and barriers defined by warring groups (Mooney 2014, p. 45). All this has hindered the implementation of refugee camps similar to those in neighbouring countries. It allowed, nonetheless, for the emergence of a different form of sheltering such as short-term reception centres deployed in education and public buildings, the spontaneous clusters of camps in gardens and public spaces, the use of structures under construction, or the construction of new houses.

3 Two cases of internal displacement: the collective centre and the village

The regular process of housing is complex because many issues need to be considered, such as available land and materials, the involvement of affected communities and coordination. This process gets more intricate during conflicts, when political issues add new layers of complexity. Also, the process does not follow a unique path, and different options are available for dispersed settlement: host families, rural and urban self-settlement; collective centres (mass shelter), self-settled camps and planned camps (Corsellis and Vitale 2005a, pp. 2, 8). In this article, we have reviewed two options for internally displaced in Syria: a collective centre in Damascus (school) and a planned camp in Ages village in the north of Syria.

The case of IDPs in Syria suffers the lack of accessibility to collect data, resulting in the absence of investigations that adequately cover the case. Consequently, it becomes a shadowy subject. As researchers, we have faced similar limitations. Both schools and mud villages that shelter IDPs were inaccessible; the schools are only accessible for personnel and relatives; mud villages are in rebel-held areas where formal and legal access is not possible. However, it was possible to collect data from three sources. The first is the numerous press, articles and reports about IDPs in Damascus in both national and international newspapers with various political stances about the war in Syria. Press articles cover personal stories with people's testimonies about their needs and aspirations and also review how local and international media present those shelters. The second source comes from three semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016 with former volunteers in one reception centre, focusing on administration and architecture. Another set of interviews was conducted

with architects and engineers who direct and project from Gaziantep the mud villages in Idlib, Syria. Finally, our direct involvement working on the urban concept of the mud village allowed for a third source, which is a design case that prompts new thought in the research such as the use of outdoor spaces and the interpretation of rural housing in Syria.

The content from these sources was examined via a search for three key factors: location and accessibility, policy and objectives, and design and typology. Finally, a comparison of the two seemingly different cases offers yet another tool with which the findings can be both consolidated and contrasted.

3.1 Case 1: collective centre. School in damascus

Collective centres are temporary facilities, generally situated in existing buildings that are used to shelter large numbers of displaced persons in a city (Corsellis and Vitale 2005b). These mass shelters are appropriate for short-term accommodation while displaced families find other shelter. The length of time that families stay in a collective centre is crucial because a prolonged period in them can create a lack of independence and privacy and trigger stress, depression, social rowdiness or other psychosocial problems (Corsellis and Vitale 2005a, p. 105). However, the lack of shelter opportunities in Syria has led to the use of mass shelters for the mid-term, as is the case of schools in Damascus.

(a) Location and Accessibility

With the escalating violence in urban and rural areas in Syria, the movement of IDPs started in early 2012. In Damascus, the first wave of 5000 families of IDPs was from the centre (Homs) and south (Daraa) of Syria, but the number exploded in the second half 2012, with many IDPs coming from nearby, mostly eastern and southern Ghouta. Schools served as reception centres for what was estimated to be around 15,000 families, some receiving as many as 600 families (Thomson Reuters 2012; UNICEF Ireland 2012).

In 2015, 140,000 displaced families in Damascus were registered, most of whom could afford to rent a house or live with relatives (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) 2014). Around 3% of these families were accommodated in reception shelters, and the number of IDPs living in schools hovered around 15,000 between 2013 and 2016 (Albaath 2014).

IDPs were distributed in 21 collective centres, of which 15 are schools (Damascus Department of Education 2015). In the initial set of schools, leaving the centres is limited to going to work, children of IDPs studying in nearby schools, and visiting relatives. There was spatial isolation between the IDPs in the school and the neighbourhood. Syrian officials explained that regulating who enters and exits the schools is necessary for a just distribution of food and services (ORTAS 2013). However, most of the IDPs were coming from what became rebel-held areas, so they were treated as a possible threat (Salem 2018).

Since 2017, the Syrian government has started to restore the areas around Damascus. Masses of civilians were received from those areas as part of truce agreements. The pattern of hosting IDP families in urban areas has drastically changed from scattered small urban centres to mass centres outside the city. The Damascus governorate has worked to close all centres in Damascus, claiming that a return of IDPs is now possible (Al Salhani 2017). Small schools have closed, and IDPs were moved to two big camps in the suburbs of the city (Salem 2018). In a very similar fashion to cross-border dis-

placement, IDPs were finally accommodated in two large camp-like sites: al-Duwayr in the eastern countryside and Harjalla in the western countryside.

(b) Policy and Politics

When centres started to proliferate, the local civil society responded to the initial needs by providing food and clothing and by volunteering in groups and donating to schools. Volunteering was based on self-organised groups that started to collect food, blankets and medical materials for the displaced families arriving at the city. However, in late 2012, the administration of collective centres passed to the hands of a specific governmental body, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, with two large NGOs channelling the relief aid, Syrian Red Crescent and Syria Trust. Only via a collaboration with these two organisations were other smaller NGOs allowed to provide assistance to families.

Since 2012, reception centres have always been described as relief emergency points where only essential goods and services are provided: food, psychological support and health care. Little has been discussed about resettlement programs or the ways with which IDPs can find accommodation within the city. To the contrary, stories about IDP schools usually refer to the iniquitous rental market as an alternative (Alabd 2012; Ruhayem 2016).

(c) Shelter

The schools have been re-organised internally to shelter the displaced families. At Mamoun Mansour in Mazzeh, classrooms were turned into two or three family rooms, initially by random divisions with fabric or curtains for privacy, and later were transformed with fixed wooden partitions with sealable doors. There was no provision for furniture, and therefore the rooms were usually filled only with mattresses, and a small corner was allocated for food preparation. While a common kitchen was provided in the school, it was almost abandoned, and each family created their kitchen in their private areas. The schools' original toilets were not adequate for the constant demand, and thus toilet caravans have been installed in the yard. IDPs spend most of their time outdoors, either in the corridors or the schoolyard. The schoolyard is where children play during the day and families socialise in the evening.

Families and neighbours fled together, heading to the next safe point. They stayed in the same school and sometimes asked to be next to each other in classroom areas. Most families lived in these collective centres for an average of one year, although some families stayed for more than four years. This collective centre became a temporary camp inside the city of Damascus, where families live in a state of crystallised temporariness. The school has been transformed into a small version of a village, with private 'houses' and shared spaces. The schoolyard has become the public space where families socialise. However, IDPs live under curfew and with the uncertainty of having access to a real house in the future, making more evident the artificial situation in which they live and affecting those displaced in different ways.

3.2 Case 2: planned camp. Design of a transitional village

Planned camps are purposely built sites for displaced populations that in general provide full services, including water, food, non-food items, education and medical care (Corsellis and Vitale 2005a, p. 124). Although planned camps are the last option for many

organisations because they promote dependency and require more coordination, they are the most appropriate alternative for some specific situations (Corsellis and Vitale 2005a, p. 124).

(a) Location and Accessibility

In 2015, Qatar Red Crescent initiated a campaign to provide a large housing project for IDPs in northern Syria (Qatar Red Crescent 2015). The initiative aims to build 2200 mud houses for the most vulnerable displaced families who lost their homes and fled to remote areas. The project is comprised of several mud villages to be built in several phases. A pilot project of 100 units was constructed in summer 2015 in Afes village near Idlib. The Syrian NGO Binaa for Development, based and registered in the south of Turkey, took on the technical study and led the project as a local NGO with the coordination and supervision of international earth construction specialists from CRAterre (2015).

Being inside rebel-held areas, the nature of this project as temporary housing inside Syria, where scenarios of destruction are still possible, is unique and differs from conventional relief housing operations. First, accessibility to the site by international experts and members of the humanitarian sector is difficult. Second, the families will build their houses with help from local experts, and they also will have to deal with and solve many on-site issues that might alter the overall planning of the project. This seems to be an obstacle that would hinder the construction or, at least, compromise its quality control. However, the pilot project showed strong commitment from families to be engaged in the construction and maintenance of the houses. A third dimension about the specificity of this case is the fact that unlike regular camps in nearby countries, it is not in a safe zone. It is true that the location of the proposed mud villages is not on the frontlines, but the threat of bombing is always there.

(b) Policy and Politics

The pilot project of the mud villages demonstrates that the physical absence of the relief organisations provides a wider margin for the families to act as both owners and executors of the initiative. The work on the village turned from being merely relief work into being an act of resistance by IDPs to fleeing from Syria and stating that life can be possible in the country. Framed as tools to provide ‘an honourable life’ (Qatar Red Crescent 2015), mud was advocated as a better material than the textiles that are used to make tents. In other instances, the discourse about mud was linked to the ‘roots’ of rural Syria, the way with which ancestors built. All these arguments were directed against the stigmatisation of mud as a primitive and not sufficiently strong building material. All this resulted in a contradictory stance towards whether what was being made is a village or a temporary camp.

(c) Shelter

The pilot project succeeded in accommodating 100 displaced families and created around 200 temporary job opportunities and several training courses in construction. Both the materials and the construction systems were tested in the pilot project with several roofing solutions. However, the pilot project followed the regular grid plan that is used in refugee camps to place housing blocks, each block comprised of four houses in a back-to-back fashion (Fig. 1).

The second phase of the project aims to create a 200-unit village, also in Idlib. We have participated in the architectural design and urban planning of the site. There are two main challenges in the project from an urban perspective. The first is to understand

rural housing in a Syrian social and cultural context and to incorporate that context into the design together with the systemised relief/humanitarian mind-set. The second challenge is related to the uncertainty of whether the village development will serve as the first station for displaced people or as a village for those in need of housing now. Arguably, these challenges alter the thinking about emergency housing from being 'provided' to being 'assisted'.

The social centre of a rural Syrian houses does not start from the built but from the open space (Aljundi 1984, pp. 13–15). An outdoor living space is essential to the daily activities of cooking, sleeping, preparing food and receiving guests. The type and name of any rural vernacular house in Syria depend on this space (Fig. 2), whether it is internal (courtyard house), external (Riwaq house) or in-between (Iwan house) (Helmedag 2012, p. 15). Therefore, instead of starting from the house as a unit to repeat, the project suggests that the outdoor living area can be the core of the urban planning and the essence of the architectural solution. In this case, the Iwan is one more module that was added to the relief house prototype in the pilot project, with a podium two to three steps higher than the street level and a direct connection to the indoor living area. Space for family farming is provided at the entrance of the houses, while the Iwan stands beyond the farm.

Examining a list of prospective families, their original villages or towns and their needs revealed that many of them are part of extended families. The outdoor living, Iwan, helps avoid designing several prototypes of housing units to meet all families' sizes and requirements (Fig. 3). Instead, the variation of the number of houses that share the Iwan space

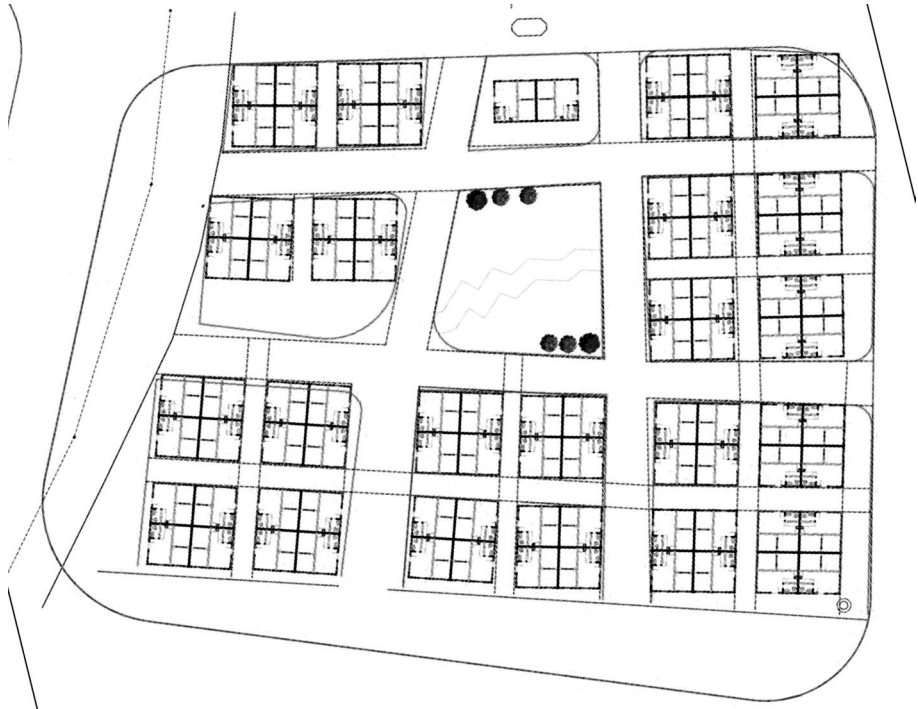
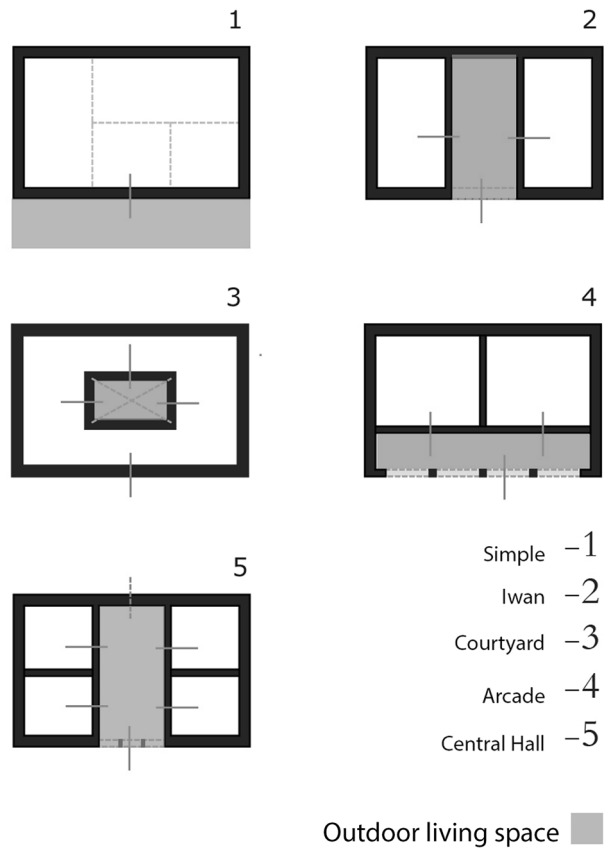


Fig. 1 Mud village pilot project – Idlib Syria. *Source:* Binaa for development (2015)

Fig. 2 Rural housing typologies in Syria. *Source:* Jäger (2012)



allowed different sizes and types of families to be equally accommodated in the village. While relatives and large extended families can be settled next to each other so they can share more than one Iwan if necessary, smaller families can have the individual Iwan unit (Fig. 4). For functional needs of space, families self-built extensions to their houses that usually affect the outdoor spaces; it is possible that the future expansion of the house is towards the open area of the Iwan by either entirely or partly enclosing it as part of the indoor space. When this is the case, the open outdoor area will be shifted from the Iwan to the inner area of the shared courtyard, between the houses. A courtyard house is another typology of rural housing in northern Syria (Fig. 5). This maintains the concept of outdoor living areas while extending the houses.

4 Conclusion: on temporality and permanence

The nature of internal displacement movements presents an additional challenge in the concepts of relief work. The need for mediation or the difficulty of direct intervention and the application of refugee shelter protocols, which are commonly seen in cases of external asylum, produce new patterns in the nature and form of temporary housing.

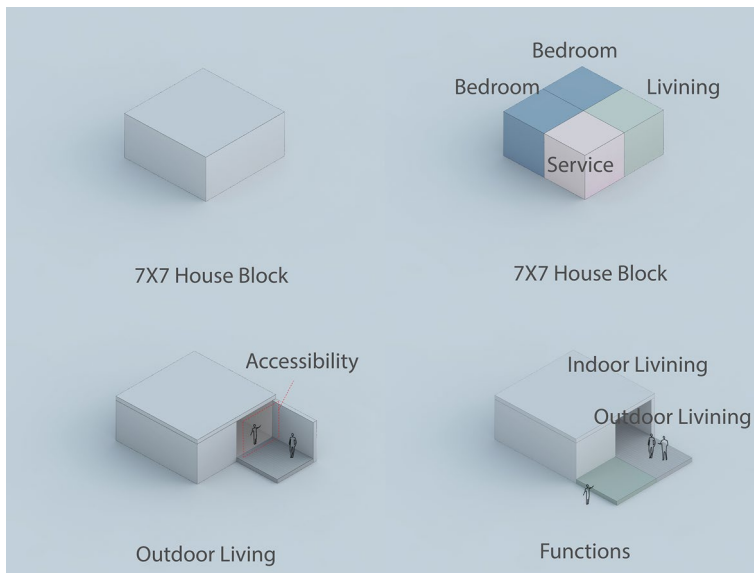


Fig. 3 Studies of housing functions and outdoor areas. *Source:* The authors

These patterns are also political means of expression, showing how the institutions of governance see the concept of displacement, especially as they manage these temporary shelters.

Table 1 summarises the two reviewed cases of reception schools in Damascus and a mud village in Idlib, examining the three concepts of location, policy and shelter typology.

Although the locations of the two cases are different spatially and geographically, the way in which the facilitators handle these situations is based on the principles of containment and integration. Schools are set up as stations to organise displaced movements to the city. The isolation of schools from their urban surroundings is more than an attempt to organise; it is an exclusion of what is considered a possible threat posed by the population coming from rebel-controlled areas such as eastern Ghouta, Daraya, and the south of Damascus. This resulted in the transfer of the remaining refugees in 2017 to camps away from the city. In the case of the mud villages, the houses represent a new beginning for newcomers without thinking about whether these houses are stations on a longer road and whether the arrivals are actually looking for a new start, especially when the last waves of displacements were also organised as parts of truces and are considered a mass demographic change.

The policies in these two situations are also different, with different definitions of the basic needs of the displaced. While talks about reception centres are based on relief services such as food and psychosocial health support, the mud villages offer the status of 'honourable life', of which a shelter is its main incubator.

Finally, the discrepancy between the two cases appears in the nature of the shelter as an architectural expression of politics. In the schools, buildings are divided by light structural elements such as wood partitions, families try to make an individual smaller kitchen and bathrooms and services for displaced people appear as temporary units or caravans. In the case of mud houses, the shelter becomes a future home, and the material overcomes the weather conditions.

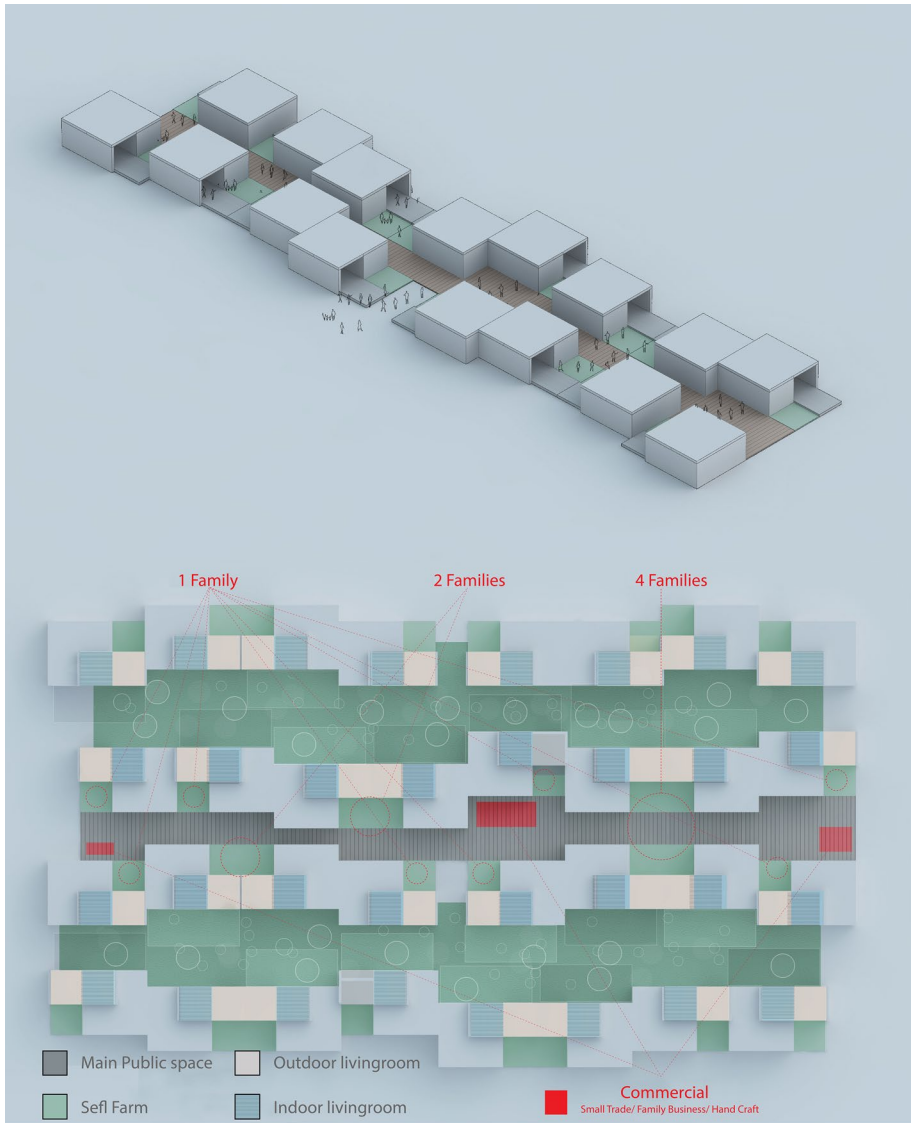


Fig. 4 Housing composition and urban articulation. *Source:* The authors



Fig. 5 Beehive housing villages in Northern Syria. *Source:* Mecca and Dipasquale (2009)

These two types of shelters show different responses to the need for rapid and efficient shelter to house displaced populations inside Syria. As a product, the two cases seem very different. However, what unifies them is that they operate on the level of sheltering as a process in which the home becomes politicised. The collective centres, which initially were set up for temporary use, have been extended to mid-term usage (around four years). On the other hand, houses designed to be permanent are arranged in a camp-like fashion and exposed to the possibility of being bombed at any moment and therefore destroyed and vacated later (Fig. 6). This could alter the discussion about the temporary and permanent. It is not merely a dilemma of relief economics and inhabitants needs, but also a tool of control. Perhaps the discussion should include a concept of temporalities and permanences that transcend the idea of materiality and the design of temporary housing to include the meaning of temporary and permanent as political expressions, if not tools of oppression.

Table 1 Comparison summary between two shelter solutions in Syria

	Location and accessibility	Policy and politics	Shelter type and materials
Reception centres	Urban centres Controlled accessibility Relocation of IDPs to larger centres	Relief-centred policy Donations regulated through centralised NGOs and governmental bodies	Short-term reception centre Divisions of existing buildings Lightweight material (wood partitions, mattresses etc.)
Mud Villages	Rural lusters Difficult accessibility for NGOs Unsafe zones	Resettlement policy A replacement of camps Better shelter against weather	Mid- to long-term houses Building new facilities with new infrastructure Extensive use of materials (earth, wood beams, etc.)



Fig. 6 The destruction and bombing damages in the pilot project, Ariel photo. *Source:* Binaa for development (2016)

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