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Ambiences of Empathy and Fear

Cartography of Refugee Encampments in Mainland Greece 2019

Sophia VYZOVITI¹,
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Abstract. Divergent social sensitivities deriving from the ongoing since 2016 refugee crisis in Greece have undoubtedly redefined the landscape of ordinary life accentuating contradictions to the extreme. Focusing on the largest refugee reception facilities of mainland Greece Eleonas in Athens, and Diavata in Thessaloniki, we discuss social and spatial practices responding to refugee accommodation and integration, three years past the peak of the crisis. Featuring original architectural documentations based on situated research, the paper addresses methods of investigation within camps and speculates on the impact of the spatial layout on the redefinition of refugee identity.

Keywords. European Refugee Crisis, Camps, Shelters, Inhabitation, Agency

Uncanny Protocols of Philoxenia

By mid-2016, European Refugee Crisis had stirred a controversy in collective sensitization. A dichotomy in public opinion, extrapolated to the extreme as an impossible compromise between the “humanitarian idealization of refugees and the fear of Islamization of Europe” (Žižek, 2016). While anti-immigration far right parties capitalized their political assets on the overwhelmingly growing fear of refugees, solidarity movements across Europe cultivated empathy, best exemplified by the practices of *Refugees Welcome International*. Autonomous solidarity initiatives around Greece eagerly responded, while many cases of individuals hosted Syrian families in their own homes. That is what Derrida calls an ‘unconditional hospitality’: the capacity to “open up my home and give not only to the foreigner, but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking them either reciprocity or even their names” (Derrida, 2000).

However, the institutional answer on migrant accommodation was far from the creation of a welcoming ambiance. It is also true that media and extreme right parties in Greece exaggerated segregation, cultivating exclusion and xenophobia. The humanitarian apprehension of refugees as victims of enforced displacement suffering of personal loss and trauma, appears to be annihilated in their encampment, their treatment as *urban outcasts*, as *undesirables* that need to be kept in *places apart*, out of civic sight. Yet, under the circumstances of a rather prolonged situation of emergency, encampment is an impossible but necessary compromise.

Philoxenia, the ancient Greek virtue of hospitality expressed in the cultural archetype

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of Xenios Zeus, presupposes the creation of a lasting bond of friendship between the stranger (*xenos*) and the local (*xenistis*). The ambiance of *philoxenia*, the set of situated practices and ideas enhancing a place as *philoxenos topos* - a place of respect and honor bestowed to strangers- denoting an a priori empathetic stance to the other, is challenged in the protocols of refugee reception. Saturated with the fear of transgression and abuse of its bounds *philoxenia becomes uncanny*. In this framework *alloæsthesia* refers to the divergent social reflexes, the cultivation of contradicting sensibilities of empathy and fear, taking place within and around the landscape of emergency habitats.

In their constitution refugee camps in mainland Greece today combine securitarian and humanitarian principles. Managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camps are secured enclaves of registration and identification yet open reception facilities. There are strict protocols of entry to be followed by external visitors, while daily mobility of registered inhabitants is free. Despite their overtly mediated image of closed enclaves that demarcate exclusion, discrimination and marginalization, within them there is a plethora of activism; grassroots solidarity, artistic practices, national and international NGOs, that invigorate life in the camps and enhance their connectivity to the city.

The Janus-faced ambiance of camp environments

As Jean-Paul Thibaud claims “the notion of ambiance involves rethinking the relationship between the human organism and its environment,” grasping the “feeling of a situation” unleashing the potential of its “affective value” and establishing an “activist relationship with the world” by “sensibilising practice” (Thibaud, 2015). In this framework investigating camp ambiance encounters two methodological difficulties: overwhelming mediatization and limited access to the field. The mediated feeling of the camp conditions captured in the prolific number of photographs available on the world wide web is divergent and contradictory, it ranges from empowering to intimidating.

In the emblematic imagery of the newly erected refugee reception facilities in mainland Greece circulating in the national press and television, we encounter architectural expressions of what Mike Davis has described as an ‘ecology of fear’; dense cohorts of living containers, whose austere and immaculate whiteness behind barbed wire fences recalls incarceration facilities rather than dwelling settlements. The creation of such a generic image of the camps, a military spatial layout with impermeable borders, and day long surveillance, that nurtures fear produces a feeling of vulnerability and fragility among their residents, demarcates a sterile and disinfected environment were strangers (*xenoi*) are received. On the other hand, Al Jazeera’s article (Kritikou and Myrillas, 2015) praises the Eleonas open hospitality and promotes its connectivity to Athens ethnic communities, capturing in heartwarming photography their engagement in festivities such as the celebration of the Muslim holiday of sacrifice, Eid al-Adha.

Investigating inhabitation within encampments is a challenge to the researcher lacking the possibility of full immersion in the field that a volunteer, an NGO/UNHCR employee would be granted. The engagement with the social fabric necessary in ethnographic approaches was not possible in our case. We were limited to escorted visits within the camps of Diavata in April 2019 and Eleonas in November 2019, abiding to the visitor protocol of first reception facilities administration. During our four-hour-long field trips, we conducted unstructured interviews with camp management staff, observation through silent walks in the territory and employed photography to document

strictly urban and architectural features. It was clearly prohibited to photograph people or interact with them. The uncanny, heterotopic ambiance of the camp settlements affected us deeply, our time spent within was in fact an intense sensitive experience. Having delivered our passports at the gate we felt temporarily incarcerated. Observing life within the camps and gaining insight by discussing with staff encouraged us. Since the production of architectural models denoting patterns of inhabitation was our research objective, capturing the camps' ambiance became a medium of interpretation.

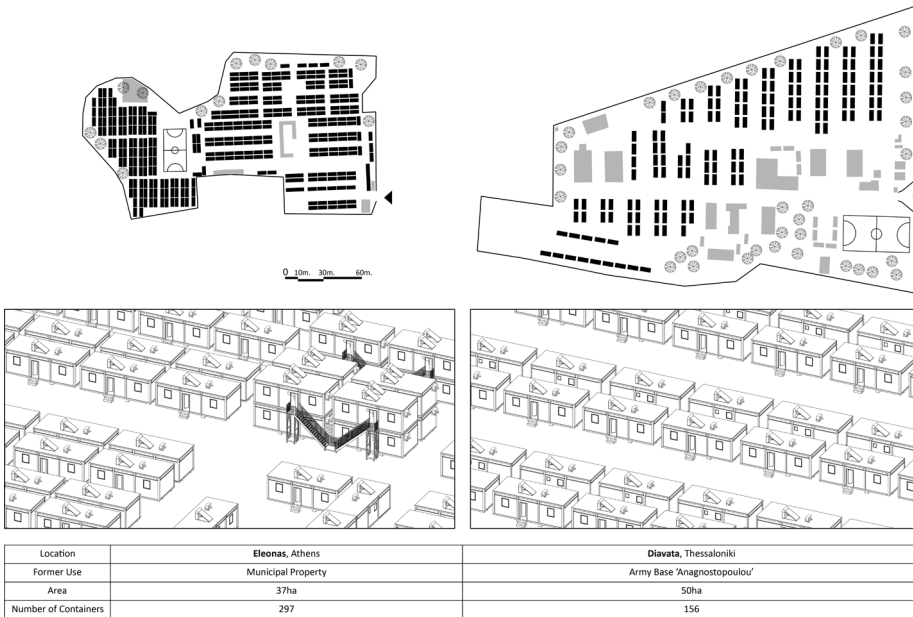


Figure 1. Urban Fabric Samples of Eleonas and Diavata Refugee Reception Facilities, Vyzoviti and Chalvatzoglou and Emseeh 2020

New Towns of Permanent Temporariness

Eleonas was established in August 2015 at the peak of European refugee crisis. It was designed as a model accommodation facility, open to host 700 people in 96 containers for a 3-day maximum stay (OECD 2018). Four years later, its capacity has tripled into 297 containers and its area has expanded hosting a multinational population of 1470 (UNHCR 2018). Diavata was set up in February 2016 in the premises of a former military base. Initially consisting of UNHCR Tents and IKEA Better Shelter units it got refurbished with container homes in 2017. At the beginning of our research project, it hosted 816 people (UNHCR 2018) in addition to 600 unofficially (according to interview). The necessity of refugee accommodation in Greece has not decreased since 2015. Project ESTIA, the Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation Programme, funded by the [EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid](#) provided 25.000 places within existing apartments and houses in the mainland and the islands. While both camps have reached their maximum capacity, they are most popular accommodation choices among the incoming population, receiving hundreds of applications.

Literature proves that emergency shelter frequently evolves into long-term settlement. Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti exemplify the condition of 'permanent temporariness' in the Palestinian Refugee Camps, some of which have withstood since the 1948

conflicts. In their words “Camps are established with the intention of being demolished. They are meant to have no history and no future; they are meant to be forgotten... Yet life and culture in the camp exists, and should be understood, beyond suffering and marginalization” (Hilal and Petti, 2018). The evolution of camps prolongs temporality, into a situation of emergency that becomes permanent.

Eleonas is highly congested, presenting a dense fabric in a military layout of rows, with few yet vibrant open spaces. Diavata presents ample open spaces and areas of green and it is well equipped with public facilities. As prefab dwelling containers replaced the UNHCR tents and IKEA better shelter units, a landscape of uncannily Cycladic-white volumes was created, perceived by the distanced observer as an elusive reminder of vacations past. The generic dwelling container depicts the extreme living conditions of refugees in these two largest camps of mainland Greece. A floorplan of 8,50 by 3,70 meters includes two bedrooms, a small kitchenette, and a bathroom. Originally designed to host 8 people, it can serve up to two families, groups of single mothers or single men. A double decker version is seen in Eleonas, adopted to cover the increasing need for shelter. The container is equipped with the necessary electric appliances, bunk beds, cooker, sink, air-condition units and hot water solar panels. It is plugged into the electricity and water networks of the camp.

Inhabitation as Agency

Michel Agier daims that camps should be considered “as new forms of urbanity,” as the “marginal borderlands at a global scale and as loci of politics beyond the existing national and urban frameworks” (Agier 2016). Therein lies the necessity to produce a cartography of their urban and architectural constitution. We speculate on the impact of spatial conditions upon the redefinition of refugee identity, not only as a victim whose liberty may be compromised in a humanitarian life support system, but as a biopolitical subject with origins, history, culture and intentions. We document the physical environmental setting of the camp recognizing its potential to support *agency*. We observe the camp’s *inhabitation* where subjects gain initiative through appropriations, customizations and modifications of the standard shelters and compounds.

During our field trips to the camps, we documented a series of additions and small expansions of the dwelling containers. In most cases, the metal frames of the bunkbeds provided were moved outside, freeing space in the bedrooms where mattresses were laid on the floors and lined with carpets. Relocated and dismantled the bed frames were used as building material to form storage and seating, to outline areas at the front of the dwelling combined with wooden pallets, chicken wire and recycled UNCHR tent material. In this way, porches and yards were created demarcating a threshold between the living interior and the public space. These typical vernacular in between spaces reveal the residents need to place making, to acquire a sense of belonging, expressing agency in the rearrangement and recombination of their allotted household goods. We can also note that a standard piece of furniture - the bunkbed- becomes a vehicle of transforming boundaries between private and public, an element to be reconfigured, unravelling an unintentional yet empowering aspect of Western design standardization.

Further appropriation patterns observed in Diavata include the conversion of a dwelling container into a mini market and one Falafel restaurant with a nylon covered open-air dining area. Small-scale business development capitalizes the awareness of a prolonged accommodation in a state of emergency. Toleration of ad hoc modifications can be appreciated as empathy from the side of camp managers, as if solidarity

towards refugees is expressed in allowing residents' appropriations that acquire the agency to transform their living environment.

In the self-made porches and front yards we observed ambient traces of inhabitation; humming birds in cages, occasional plant pots and cats, small groups of men having a coffee or others taking the sun in solitary dazed contemplation, women hanging washing and children playing between containers. The atmospheres emerging here, in their uncannily idyllic conduct are composed of the physical presence and the material expressions of refugees' cultural backgrounds. They are affective, dynamic, and fragile.

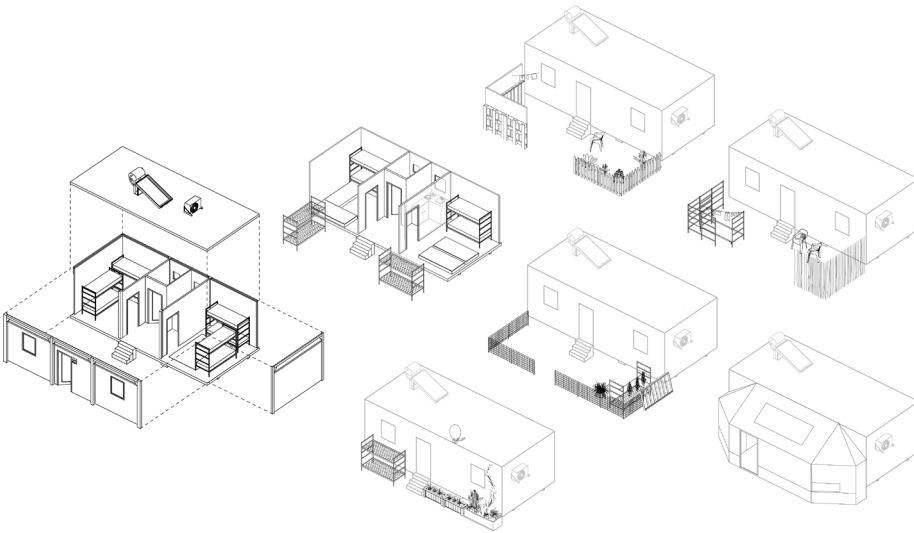


Figure 2. Generic Container Shelter and Modifications made by the Refugees. Vyzoviti and Chalvatzoglou and Emseeh, 2020

Between Camp and City

As new towns of permanent temporariness, Eleonas and Diavata have become the most popular accommodation choices among the incoming refugee population. Not only due to their allocation in proximity to urban centers but also by the quantity and quality of social integration programs taking place within their premises. Eleonas has incorporated in its operation a plethora of notable social integration and assimilation programs by creating powerful bonds with international and Athens based NGOs, non-profit organizations, local volunteer groups and artistic practices. In addition to those focusing on encouraging refugee agency in collaborative projects that humanize the arid, intimidating camp environment, there are a number of groups operating as bridges between the camp and the city. These practices contribute to the creation of belonging among the displaced subjects, the temporary and transient residents of the camps providing craftsmanship skills, know-how and opportunities for social integration. They verify the openness of these refugee reception facilities, mitigating their status as an apparatus of control that generates exclusion and marginalization. In addition to the residents self-made structures, NGO driven small-scale projects humanize the military architecture of the settlements through ephemeral structures and installations, creating clusters, neighborhoods and thresholds within the panopticon street layout, providing opportunities for social interaction and cultural exchange, establishing public spaces.

We could argue that Eleonas and Diavata, despite the extraterritoriality of their camp status, may be considered as places of belonging, with a brief history and a future of becoming interlinked with the city. Refugees social engagement is articulated in a dense solidarity network, demonstrating a non-hegemonic stance towards integration and assimilation, genuine empathy, and an almost unconditional hospitality.

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