Adhocism, Agency and Emergency Shelters: On Architectural Nuclei of Life in Displacement

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Abstract: By drawing on the pre-fabricated timber shelters in the migrant camps of Dunkirk and Calais in northern France, this chapter investigates the emergency shelter as an ongoing spatial process designed for and by imagined and real users. While it is first designed as a mass-produced standardized structure for anonymous users, it is then re-designed ad hoc by its real users who appropriate it according to their specific needs, abilities and preferences. The chapter discusses the significance of agency of those adapting their shelters while arguing that displaced people need more than only a minimal structure to cope with their precarious realities.

Keywords: Adhocism, agency, camp, France, pre-fabricated, shelter, user.

On the very same day that La Linière camp was opened by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Grande-Synthe near Dunkirk, its prefabricated emergency shelters had begun to change shape. Many of the standardized identical timber structures that had originally been built according to an accurate set of instructions were given, by their new residents, additional layers and extensions created ad hoc, some almost doubling their size. Insulation was added, entrances were porched, kitchens and extra rooms were constructed, and the gaps between shelters were adapted to become external storage spaces. Some of the temporary shelters were carefully decorated internally, while the external walls of others became publicly exposed canvases, manifesting the cultural and political identities of their inhabitants – mostly Iraqi Kurds. In addition, these timber prefab units, some of which were also erected in the Jungle makeshift camp in Calais, were appropriated in both camps to serve functions other than dwelling, transforming into grocery stores, barber shops and other spaces that met the economic needs of their inhabitants and the everyday needs of the camps’ residents. While those who accommodated the shelters intended to live in them only temporarily during their attempts to cross the English Channel to the United Kingdom, they nevertheless invested significant time and efforts to adapt them to the needs of living in the camp.
‘House’ or ‘home’ usually refer to permanent dwellings, but ‘shelter’ is a notion that tends to refer to a more provisional structure, a place that provides more minimal protection. While today displaced people live in a wide range of shelters, from rented apartments to squats in abandoned buildings, emergency shelters are often created following the destruction of, or the lack of, available structures for protection. In such cases, two main types of temporary shelter can be identified: the self-built freely fabricated makeshift shelter created by local resources and skills, and the prefabricated shelter created from readymade flatpack kits and assembled on-site (see Katz 2017a). As these shelters are usually constructed on vacant and often unserviced sites, they often provide only basic protection, while the other needs of their residents – such as food and sanitary facilities – are answered in separate structures. These shelters, camps and other similar sites and spaces that are supposed to be dismantled as soon as the emergency situation ends are initially created to take care only of the essential needs of their residents, who are often conceived as anonymous people with identical features and necessities, and are seen as passive recipients of aid. However, as in the case of La Linière camp, these residents are often discovered as active and creative agents, who form very different environments from those originally planned for them.

By focusing on the ‘MSF IPERJUNGLE’ timber prefabricated shelters erected in Calais and Grande-Synthe during 2015–16 (see also Katz 2017b, 2019), this chapter examines the emergency shelter not as an end product, but as an ongoing spatial process. This process is divided into two main stages: the first stage is the top-down design, production and construction of the shelter as a standardized structure, while the second stage is the appropriation of the shelter by its inhabitants. These phases are explored in this chapter with a focus on the ways in which the shelter’s spatial and functional roles are perceived in relation to the changing figure of ‘the user’. This ‘user’ is differently perceived by the various actors involved in the design and inhabitation of the shelter. As the architectural historian Kenny Cupers (2013: 1–2) argues, rather than being a universal figure, the user is ‘a historically constructed category of twentieth-century modernity that continues to inform architectural practice and thinking in often unacknowledged ways’. Meanwhile, the user’s role as an ‘agent of change’ is too often marginalized and overlooked. This chapter shows that, similar to other cases of modern architecture, the actual users of the prefab MSF shelter and their specific needs were quite different from the categorical users the shelter was designed for, changing these shelters in unexpected manners.

In what ways were these ‘users’ so different? Prefab emergency shelters tend to be primarily designed for an anonymous universal user with standardized biological and human features: a ‘user’ that is itself a product
of rationalization, industrialization and standardization. However, these shelters are inhabited and appropriated according to the particular needs, capabilities and resources of their actual specific users, whose potential role as agents of significant spatial change is completely absent from the design process. This chapter illustrates these differences, while arguing that displaced people need structures of protection that are always better than only a basic shelter, structures that will enable them to re-establish their lives, even temporarily, in their precarious environments and realities. The argument proceeds in two main sections: first, I examine the manual for the MSF prefabricated shelter to illustrate the designer’s view of the ‘user’, and then I look at the way the actual users engaged with and changed the shelters in the camp.

The Shelter and the Manual

This first version of the manual is intended to summarize and systematize the information collected from the field, for the production and assembly of a new type of transitional family shelter ‘IPERJUNGLE’ used for the first time in Calais and Dunkerque, France, in 2015/2016 . . . By proposing a time/resources effective solution, this manual is intended to be a practical tool to support the logistic construction activities in the field when facing emergency/post emergency shelters interventions.


Prefabricated emergency shelters, such as the MSF IPERJUNGLE shelter, are usually conceived from the very beginning as a manual-based product. Based on mass-produced components that should be easily and quickly transported and assembled on-site, the shelters need to be designed for two complementing situations: the situation of the flatpack, in which they are delivered, and the situation of the assembled shelter. The manual is the set of instructions needed to create the shelter and transform it from one situation to the other, and should be legible to those who will put it together wherever it will be needed. From the early twentieth-century Nissen Hut to today’s IKEA shelter, the principles of the prefab shelter remain generally the same: while technologically these could be ‘state of the art’ structures, they are designed to meet the generic needs of no particular user or location (see Katz 2017b).

Looking at the table of contents of the IPERJUNGLE shelter manual, it is possible to identify all the measurable qualities that are considered important for such a shelter. These are all communicated
through measurements, quantities and timetables, and are presented in great clarity, in opposition
to the disorder and ambiguity of the emergency situation. The manual opens with two photos
presented next to one another: the first is of the deplorable Basroch makeshift tent camp in Grande-
Synthe in November 2015 and the second is of forced migrants – mainly women and children –
entering the newly assembled and neatly organized timber shelters at the MSF La Linière camp in
March 2016. The stark before-and-after difference, which connects the manual to the reality of a
specific site, gives the document a clear humanitarian logic. In the pages that follow, the manual
describes a step-by-step process for the construction, delivery and assembly of the shelters, which
leads the refugees and humanitarians from a chaotic situation to a well-organized space.

The manual’s introductory chapter presents the shelter’s objectives alongside key figures, such as
the size of the structure and its plywood boards, the number of workers required for fabrication, the
number of shelters that could be installed per day, the number of shelters that could fit in certain
sizes of container trucks and so on – all the possible information required in order to plan the
successful logistics for an emergency operation. The first chapter, which describes the concept of the
shelter, presents its main principles: low-tech, high value, modularity, flexibility, local production,
rapid assembly and transportability. These communicate a product that answers various aims in
simple methods. The second chapter, ‘Ingredients’, describes the materials, tools and security
equipment needed for producing the shelters, while the third chapter, ‘Fabrication’, is accompanied
by annotated illustrations with specific dimensions and details, showing how the shelter’s
components should be constructed in the workshop and how the transportable flatpack kit should
be assembled. The fourth chapter, ‘Transport’, illustrates the sizes of trucks required for the
transportation of different number of shelter kits, while the fifth chapter, ‘On Site’, is a step-by-step
description of the assembly process. The sixth chapter presents the training required for those who
build and assemble the shelter, while ‘Flexibility’, the concluding seventh chapter, describes the way
in which the shelter could be adapted to different sizes and objectives. These adjustments are
limited to a few options such as sanitation blocks, communal kitchens and larger shelters for an
extended family. Yet, this flexibility of the shelters was later interpreted very differently by those
who inhabited them.

This manual, similar to many other architectural manuals, communicates the shelter as a structure
manufactured and assembled as an industrial ‘type model’. This has been identified and historicized
by Blau (2013: 25) as a postwar concept conceived in relation to the standardization and
rationalization of the building process ‘from the design of the individual spatial unit and architectural
object, to the organization of its construction . . . based on rational analysis of the efficient and cost-
effective organization of space and production’. As Emmons and Mihalache note on earlier industrialization processes:

before mass production, devices may have been very well crafted individually, but the part of one product would not have worked in another of the same sort because each was created as a singular totality [...] To standardize in the early twentieth century was a positive value associated with being efficient, hygienic, and modern. (2013: 37–38)

Just as architectural handbooks ‘mark a radical separation in architecture between functional fact and aesthetic expression’ (Emons and Mihalache 2013: 39), this shelter manual embraces a strictly technocratic approach that optimizes building practices while eschewing relationship to articulations developed through a more elaborate individual use. Design here is not about aesthetics but means a problem-solving practice based on a defined need calculated according to previously determined factors and measures. Importantly, the standardized buildings expressed through the manual are based on the assumed elementary needs of the standardized human body, which both assembles and inhabits them. This is clearly illustrated by the human figures drawn on both the assembly and configuration sheets of the manual, representing the number of people needed to produce and assemble one shelter and the maximum number of those who can accommodate it. Both of these building elements and sizes are predicted according to what Emmons and Mihalache (2013: 39) call the ‘dimensional routinization of the human activities [...] based upon the presumption of the essential dimensional similarity of humans’.

Such shelter manuals and their biologically based standards are directly linked to modern architectural studies of the human body in relation to space. Le Corbusier’s Modulor (2004 [1954, 1958]) is probably the most famous example. The Modulor is an anthropometric scale of proportions used to calculate dimensions in architectural design, and it represents an ideal human ‘proportioned’ body according to which the generalized standardization of objects and the mathematization and geometrization of space is calculated. This, and similar abstract perceptions of the ‘user’, were developed as ways to regulate how people should use buildings and interact with the built environment. This modernist use-value, rather than being created by the users and occupants, is predetermined by abstract values. Such abstract space, as recognized by Lefebvre (1991), creates users who cannot recognize themselves within it. ‘Authority’, meanwhile, remains with the built object and its designers rather than with its occupants.

The MSF IPERJUNGLE shelters, which created La Linière camp, were enthusiastically received by the forced migrants who moved into them from the deplorable Basroch makeshift camp. However, the
nickname ‘chicken houses’ was immediately attached to these shelters by the migrants, which aptly implies the strictly biologically animal-like environment they created (Katz 2017b: 11; Woensel Kooy 2016). This response to the institutionalized camp environment and its repetitive shelters is very similar to that of the residents of the container camp opened at the heart of the Calais Jungle in January 2016. The migrants here complained that they lived ‘like animals’, warehoused in its rigid grid of identical and overcrowded shipping containers (Katz 2017b: 4), and although the heated containers provided residents with much-needed warmth in the cold European winter, they were also isolated and isolating spaces that did not allow for meaningful human interaction. While being essential for the physical protection of their residents from the elements, they did not provide sufficient privacy or an appropriate space to socialize. Externally, the containers formed an impersonal space that was easy to logistically create and manage, yet they did not provide a sense of identity and belonging. Residents in the container camp spent most days in the makeshift Jungle addressing their social, cultural and other essential everyday life needs with the camps’ informal schools, churches, mosques, grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, barber shops and community shelters. Meanwhile, the containers were used mostly for sleeping (Gueguen-Teil and Katz 2018).

Unlike the shipping containers, which could not be inhabited comfortably or spatially adjusted by the migrants, it turned out that the timber shelters in Grande-Synthe were much more flexible than they were originally intended to be.

Adhocism, Agency and the Shelter as a Nucleus of Everyday Life

It is the first day of the move [from Basroch camp] and I am in the new [Linière] camp . . . It catches my eye how many people are already building extensions to their shelters. Despite the emergency structure of the camp, refugees seem to realize already that their stay in this camp may probably take longer than a couple of days, if not months.

—Eelke van Woensel Kooy, a volunteer and researcher in Grande-Synthe’s Basroch and La Linière camps, 7 March 2016

The broad media coverage of the opening of La Linière, ‘France’s first ever internationally recognized refugee camp’ (Samuel 2016), was accompanied by panoramic photos of the camp’s new identical timber shelters. However, this sight changed very rapidly, as most of its shelters went through an all-encompassing process of informalization. The shipping containers in Calais could not be appropriated due to their physical features, materiality and the strict form of management of the camp itself. In contrast, the MSF timber shelters could be easily adjusted and the manager in charge
on building La Linière camp was satisfied with their appropriation, mentioning that beyond the provision of larger spaces for the camp’s residents, the extensions also stabilized the shelters, making them more resilient to winds (interview, April 2016).

The migrants in the camp added bedrooms, kitchens and porches to their shelters, each with the help of friends and volunteers. Others took ownership over areas in-between and outside their shelters. Many shelters were also insulated with blankets and tarpaulin sheets, improving the ability of the structures to protect from the cold. The shelters were adjusted not only for specific functional needs, but also for aesthetic purposes, and many were decorated by their inhabitants to create more homely environments: the floors were covered with carpets, the walls were decorated with posters and other ornaments, and planters were fixed to the external walls and balconies, beautifying the shelters with carefully handled flowering houseplants. Many external walls were also covered by posters, murals, graffiti and flags of the migrants’ home countries and desired destination. These expressed their identities, wishes and political call to treat them humanely.

The architectural term ‘adhocism’ coined by Charles Jencks as a response to ‘pure’ and blank modernist architecture and planning could accurately describe the spatial practices in La Linière. ‘The phrase ad hoc, meaning “for this” specific purpose’, write Jencks and Silver (2013 [1972]: 16), ‘reveals the desire for immediate and purposeful action which permeates everyday life’. Adhocism denotes a principle of action ‘having speed or economy and purpose or utility’, which in architecture ‘involves using an available system in a new way to solve a problem quickly and efficiently’ (Jencks and Silver 2013 [1972]: vii). This includes the use of what are perceived as closed and completed systems, such as the MSF IPERJUNGLE timber shelter, as a starting point for spatial change. Adhocism privileges the moment, the short-term need, while the old and the new function are seen together. The prefab emergency shelter, an anonymized space used for a temporary purpose, is the natural architectural candidate for adhocist appropriations. These adjust it to the needs of its particular residents in their specific emergency situation.

Beyond its functional meaning, adhocism is also fundamentally about participatory social, cultural and political meaning. As opposed to the completed architectural building or product that carries the authorized signature of a specific author/designer, adhocism means that ‘everyone can create his personal environment out of impersonal subsystems’ (Jencks and Silver 2013 [1972]: 15). This turns architecture – as a practice, a product and a term – from ‘the protected domain of the architect’ into a radically democratic and pragmatic spatial practice (Awan et al. 2013: 28). Adhocism means that architecture does not end with a permanent and rigid outcome, but is open-ended and,
as such, also more plural and inclusive, taking into account the ability of nonprofessionals to participate in its creation. Like Lefebvre’s famous argument that ‘(social) space is a (social) product’ (1991: 26), the concept of adhocism releases space and its production from the solely professional world of architects and engineers, placing it in a much broader social context that makes the idea of solely expert authorship redundant. The fact that social space is also a dynamic space links adhocism’s social meaning to its embedded temporariness and creation over time. This contrasts powerfully with single-authored architecture, which is perceived as being fixed at its moment of completion.

The point at which La Linière camp was formally completed, and its prefab shelters occupied, was also the beginning of a new phase in the camp’s spatial life. This worked as an evolving sequence, an assemblage in which the residents turned from the anonymous abstract biological bodies assumed by the designers into human inhabitants who actively and creatively transformed their shelters according to their specific needs, preferences and talents. The literal meaning of the idea of inhabiting a space (in-habit) is particularly meaningful here. Adhocism is therefore also about the habits, skills and creativity of its assemblers, assuming that this creativity does not belong only to a limited number of chosen practitioners, but to all, being an embedded part of human life.

With these ad hoc spatial actions, the residents, instead of being anonymous users, became active spatial agents who negotiated with existing conditions in order to change and reform them. ‘Spatial agency’, argue Awan et al. (2013: 31), ‘implies that action to engage transformatively with structure is possible, but will only be effective if one is alert to the constraints and opportunities that the structure presents’. Indeed, the residents of the shelters worked with the materiality of the shelter’s structure, made of timber and therefore easily adjustable, and also with the management structure of the space of the camp itself and its administrators and volunteers. Agency – the capacity for action – is well explained by Anthony Giddens. ‘Action’, he writes (1984: 14), ‘depends on the capability of the individual to “make a difference” to a pre-existing state of affairs’, while ‘agency’ for him ‘means being able to intervene in the world . . . with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs’. By changing their shelters, the residents in La Linière camp, who had a very limited ability to influence their difficult situation as refugees or irregular migrants who try to cross the border, have managed to influence and improve the minimal conditions of their shelters and their camp environment.

It is important to note that these changes were not merely spatial or cosmetic. While people in the camp, like many other refugee camps around the world, were mostly dependent on others for their
provision, some opened small businesses, adjusting their shelters accordingly. Often these were small commercial stalls selling soft drinks, cigarettes and other everyday necessities, using shelters as storage space. Others converted their entire shelters in order to run their business; one shelter in La Linière became a barber shop, while another MSF timber shelter in the Calais Jungle has turned into a grocery store with adequate spatial adjustments. These business-oriented appropriations of the prefab shelters have continued the actions of many residents in the Jungle, who developed their makeshift shelters into more than seventy informal businesses in the camp (Chrisafis 2016; Katz 2017b).

As Betts et al. argue about refugee economies (2017: 9), ‘economic outcomes are not only shaped by institutional structures but also by the agency and capacity of particular individuals – “innovators” – to transform constraints into opportunities for themselves and others’. Commercial spaces are very common in camps and they are often developed by residents (such as in Za’atari in Jordan and Kakuma in Kenya), but it is the management, context, spatiality and materiality of the camp that either allow such commercial activities to happen or prevent them from happening. Emergency shelters, as seen in the MSF IPERJUNGLE shelter, can be therefore used as nuclei for such activities that not only provide financial support for their residents and allow them to partially and temporarily reconstruct their livelihoods, but also provide relief and meaning to their life in the camp.

The conversion of the shelters into small businesses significantly changed their original use for accommodation. The users have therefore transformed not only the form of their shelters but also their function, together with the social, economic, cultural and political meaning of living in the camp. The specific ‘adhocist’ visual appearance of each shelter therefore also had a political meaning, presenting the residents not as anonymous bodies, but as human beings who can and want to take back control over their lives and re-establish their autonomy and freedom in any possible way.

A Conclusion with Two Warnings

The MSF’s IPERJUNGLE shelters were created to provide minimal relief to the forced migrants, who lived in squalid conditions in the area. Yet by being flexible, they became nuclei for their inhabitants’ everyday life. Originally, these prefabricated timber shelters were designed as manual-based minimal structures according to preconceived principles of functionalism and standardization: their scientifically based design was calculated and rationalized according to specific standards, so they could be efficiently mass-produced, easily transported and quickly assembled on-site. While the
designers and manufacturers of these shelters were on the one end of the production line, acting as the qualified professional authority, the future residents of these shelters were positioned on the opposite end of the line, perceived as unknown abstract users/bodies whose only elementary needs must be taken care of. The shelters were therefore as anonymous as their imagined users, and their repetitive production and deployment on-site created an abstract camp space of multiple unified units.

However, these sterile shelters continued to evolve spatially as soon as they were occupied. Although in the MSF manual, their flexibility, adaptability and various configurations were limited only to their preconceived modules, the adhocist adaptations by their inhabitants turned them into unique spaces of specific everyday needs. From anonymous biological beings, their users became human beings, each with his or her own creativity, agency and capacity to intervene and change his or her very limited conditions. ‘Agency’, argues Giddens, ‘presumes the capability of acting otherwise’ (1984: 216). These basic shelters enabled their residents to act differently from the mere abstract users that had been imagined by the designers. Instead, they became resourceful people who actively changed their immediate surroundings and reality while abandoning the cherished designer-user hierarchy. In the end, the materiality of these shelters and the support of volunteers and the camp’s managers allowed the forced migrants to participate in the creation of their spaces and transform their constraints into opportunities.

‘Use has been a critical motor for architectural invention’, argues Cupers (2013: 1). In this example, it is clear how the alternative use of the forced migrants has invented not only the shelters but also the camp environment as a whole. Such form of use should invite professionals to rethink not only what emergency shelters are, but also what they can be. However, before jumping to the drawing board for the design and development of new shelters that could be easily appropriated by their inhabitants and be more suitable for their particular lives, it is important to reflect on two important issues highlighted with clear warning signs.

The first warning relates to the one posed by the feminist science and technology scholar Donna Haraway in her seminal piece ‘Situated Knowledges’, contending that there is a ‘serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their position’ (1988: 583–84). Researchers, planners, architects, engineers, humanitarian actors and spatial thinkers must remember their positioning when studying and reinventing spaces inhabited by weak populations such as displaced people who are heavily controlled and limited in their precarious
situation. This is evident in the fact that while the shelters were creatively appropriated, La Linière camp has remained an extremely unstable and harsh environment until it was destroyed by fire in April 2017.

This is related to the second warning, posed by Lefebvre when reflecting on the ambivalent meaning of the user as both an instrument of control and a potential generator of a revolutionary political form of collectivity. Users’ participation in spatial creation, stated Lefebvre, should be based on self-management. If participation is abstracted from a process of community self-management, he argued, then it is not real and ‘has no meaning; it becomes an ideology, and makes manipulation possible’ (Lefebvre 1976: 120). Therefore, the participation of inhabitants in crafting their emergency shelters should not be divorced from processes of self-management, empowerment and agency with real social and political meaning, otherwise it could risk becoming an empty tool of spatial playfulness or, worse, an instrument for their manipulation on behalf of some kind of an external architectural, economic, social or political ideology. While it is important to develop shelters that would be better than only minimal and inflexible shelters, it is also important to ensure that they will be used as part of an approach that will enable not only participation but real collaboration and agency in places of displacement and refuge, rather than being used as sophisticated professional experimental playgrounds imposed on vulnerable people out of a make-do ideology or other visions of sorts.

Finally, it is important to remember that agency, as ‘acting otherwise’, is not only about an agreeable and predictable change, but also about the capacity to act and exert power. Agency is therefore always political, and shelter as a nucleus of a real spatial change should happen in tandem with building capacities and creating opportunities for other real social, economic and political changes for supporting forced migrants in their new environments. A shelter that is ‘better than a shelter’, then, will never be only an architectural, engineering, planning or design question. It also needs to be a social and a political question, which must be addressed by more encompassing policies and practices to support life in displacement.
References


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