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“Planning Urban Refugee Spaces: A comparative analysis of Beirut and Berlin”

Abstract

In the arrival city of Beirut, and following seven decades of failed management of Palestinian camps that continue to this day, the Lebanese state adopted a Zero-Camp policy regarding the Syrian crisis. While no sheltering alternatives were offered in a city with an already depleted stock of affordable housing, displaced Syrians were left to seek informal ways to access – and to sometimes even produce – shelters. Furthermore, their presence and need for socio-spatial protection prompted landlords, middle-men and developers to produce and rent various types of undignified and unsafe shelters. Even under these very challenging circumstances, tenure security is fleeting for most. In this highly informal housing market and hostile political environment, Syrians continue to be at constant risk of eviction.

The city of Berlin has been a significant destination for displaced Syrians due to its welcoming stance towards asylum seekers. However, providing shelter has also presented complex issues. In response to the surge of arrivals during the 2015 refugee crisis, emergency shelters were established throughout the city, offering temporary accommodation until more permanent housing solutions are found. While the Asylum Seeker’s Benefit Act entitles refugees to receive housing and social assistance, Berlin is struggling with a significant shortage of affordable housing, affecting both locals and refugees. However, overcrowding in refugee emergency shelters that operate under very strict attendance rules, coupled with racial profiling and discrimination in an already scarce housing market, have made it challenging for Syrians to find tenure security in varying phases of their asylum application.

For displaced Syrians, Beirut is an arrival city in a country plagued with political corruption and economic mismanagement, and Berlin is a destination city with compassionate asylum policies. However, both cities have been struggling with a shortage of emergency shelter and long-term housing and have been fraught with questions of how to provide shelter for refugees at the short and long-terms. This proposal is a comparative research project that traces Syrians’ access to socio-spatial and symbolic protection in Beirut and Berlin in the context of protracted displacement in urban areas. The ‘shelter’ itself - as a spatial and symbolic element – is at the center of the research and used as the entry point to data collection. I focus on how displaced people navigate the formal and informal systems to find and access shelter in the hope of achieving tenure security and accessing basic urban services. In the background, the spatial impact of protracted displacement on urban contexts unfolds through the lived-experience of the displaced.