

# Non-Durable Solutions: The Harm of Permanently Temporary Refugee Habitation

Micah Trautmann | Boston University

[Article preprint. Full article: <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12718>.]

## Abstract:

The notion of ‘durability’ plays a central role in the discourse, policies, and practices surrounding forced displacement. Yet, for all the talk of ‘durable solutions’ to refugee situations, durability is in many ways the quality most conspicuously absent in refugees' everyday lives and living spaces. As the world has grown progressively more inured to the practice of using provisional spaces of transit as permanent sites of residence, displaced persons are increasingly finding themselves trapped in spaces marked by a kind of permanent temporariness. In this article, I sketch three different ways in which living for long periods of time in temporary spaces can harm inhabitants: first, I argue that non-durability in the home can undermine cognitive function; second, that it can attenuate various forms of agency; and third, that it fails to furnish a ground on which refugees can build meaningful lives and futures for themselves. I conclude by arguing that the deprivation of durable living conditions is not only harmful, but wrongful.

## Introduction

The notion of ‘durability’ plays a central role in the discourse, policies, and practices surrounding forced displacement, yet the emphasis on it has, of late, become somewhat paradoxical. The goal of finding ‘durable solutions’ for refugees is a cornerstone of most major global frameworks and compacts regarding forced displacement — indeed, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees defines its work in those terms. Yet the ‘solutions’ to displacement that the international community has become dependent on over the past few decades have become increasingly provisional, temporary, and makeshift.<sup>1</sup> And these characteristics have come to pervade the everyday lives and spaces of displaced persons. Indeed, in spite of the UNHCR’s aspirations, non-durability has become a defining quality of everyday life for refugees

---

<sup>1</sup> The promise of durable solutions has, in fact, become all but a false beacon: in any given year, less than two percent of officially recognized refugees are able to avail themselves of any one of the three solutions that the UNHCR deems ‘durable.’ (Betts and Collier (2017, 8)).

— most notably via the habitation spaces to which most displaced persons are consigned. As emergency camps ossify into long-term habitation, and processing delays turn purportedly provisional spaces of transit or processing into permanent sites of residence, displaced persons are increasingly trapped in worlds defined by a kind of permanent temporariness.<sup>2</sup>

What are the costs of living indefinitely in conditions of pervasive infrastructural non-durability? I sketch three different ways in which living for long periods of time in temporary spaces can harm refugees: first, I argue that non-durability in the home can undermine cognitive function; second, that it can attenuate various forms of agency; and third, that it fails to furnish a ground on which refugees can build meaningful lives and futures for themselves.

For all the talk of durable solutions to refugee situations, durability is in many ways the quality most conspicuously and perhaps unnecessarily absent in refugees' everyday lifeworlds. And that widening gap between the distal goals of the refugee regime and the everyday realities of displaced persons has been sustained, in part, by a collective failure to properly acknowledge and seriously contend with the consequences of living long-term in conditions of pervasive non-durability. This essay does not attempt to argue that temporary refugee habitation spaces such as camps and their various cognates are, all things considered, unjustified. Instead, it attempts to develop a richer picture of the harms that such spaces engender, which must be taken into account in any broad consideration of their moral standing.

## **I. The Durability Gap**

### *I.1 Forms of Non-Durability*

Most philosophical work regarding refugees to date has focused on whether individual states — primarily wealthy, Western states — have a moral obligation to resettle refugees, and how far-reaching that obligation might be. Scarcer attention has been paid to what Serena Parekh

---

<sup>2</sup> To be clear, the term 'durability' is being used in two distinct senses here. Juxtaposing those two senses — the discourse of 'durable solutions' with the non-durable living conditions of most refugees — reveals, as I detail in the next section, a cruel irony that can usefully draw our attention to and conceptually frame those conditions. The focus of this essay will be the latter sense of the term.

has called “the second crisis” — the inability of most displaced persons around the globe to find genuine refuge, and the conditions of their lives in the face of its scarcity.<sup>3</sup> As such, the actual everyday lives of refugees have remained somewhat discursively invisible within a discipline that is, I think, particularly well-suited to articulate the harms of a life lived without political protections.<sup>4</sup> Where that vulnerability has been addressed, scholars have primarily focused on the legal and political precariousness of refugees and the harms involved in the loss of large-scale place-based relations (shared cultural backgrounds, homelands, political communities, etc.).<sup>5</sup> Less attention has been paid to the costs of displacement from smaller-scale physical environments such as the home.<sup>6</sup> Where philosophers have attended to the significance of smaller-scale places, they typically have focused only on the harms involved in their loss, and have not addressed the seemingly unique harm of persistent precariousness in one’s living environment. I will attempt to fill in that lacunae here.

Displaced persons’ lives and living spaces are marked by various forms of non-durability. I will canvass three basic types in this essay. First and most obviously, there is the pervasive material non-durability of refugees’ homes and habitation spaces. Refugee camps and their cognates are, irrespective of their actual use, intended to be temporary, and that temporariness is realized in their infrastructure. While there is tremendous diversity of living conditions in camps around the globe, refugees’ homes and social spaces are typically constructed out of non-durable or semi-durable materials, and the use of durable construction materials is often prohibited. In Kenya’s Dadaab camp, for example — the world’s largest refugee camp for much of the 21st century, with over half a million residents — most of its residents live in simple UNHCR-issued tents. Many continue to do so despite having arrived when the camp opened in 1992. Those who came during later surges or amidst funding shortages have often had to construct their own homes out of sparsely available thorn bushes and mud.<sup>7</sup> Some are less fortunate: the roughly 200,000 internally displaced persons in Zamzam Camp in Darfur live primarily in rickety

---

<sup>3</sup> Parekh (2020, 3).

<sup>4</sup> That discourse has been growing within the discipline more recently.

<sup>5</sup> The literature on the former is vast. For the latter, see, for example, Moore (2015) and Stilz (2013).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Nine (2018), and Kohn (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Rawlence (2017).

shelters made of spare sticks and loose fabric, some having been there for almost two decades now.<sup>8</sup> And in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh — the cluster of settlements for Rohingya refugees that is now the largest camp in the world — the infrastructure is largely composed of what the term ‘refugee camp’ typically brings to mind: tottering shacks sheathed in tarpaulin. Around the world, it remains rare for refugees and asylum seekers to be housed in durable, non-temporary structures, despite the reality that their encampment is often indefinite, and the use of more durable building materials is often explicitly proscribed.

A second form of non-durability is the frequent secondary displacements many refugees, IDPs, and asylum seekers face. Internally displaced persons are often especially subject to recurrent or cyclical patterns of displacement and migration within their original state, either in response to the same pressures that cause their original displacement or newly emergent ones. Even in politically stable host states, though, camps and settlements are frequently moved, consolidated, or abruptly closed in response to political exigencies, local resentments, or security concerns. In such cases, refugees — who have already lost their homes once — are made to lose once more what meager structures of a life they have been able to erect in exile.

Perhaps the most visible form of secondary displacement, though, is the unsettling frequency with which displaced persons’ homes and communities are razed to the ground by camp authorities or host states. This is most common in informal refugee settlements, such as the widely-condemned dismantling of the Calais “Jungle” in 2016, or the ritualistic clearing of tents in Paris, Berlin, Lesbos, or along the Rio Grande.<sup>9</sup> But such practices are not uncommon in formally managed camps as well, where they are often bound up with mandates regarding the durability of building materials. Bangladeshi authorities, for example, demolished over 3,000 “illegal” shops and community-run schools in Cox’s Bazar in the first months of 2022 alone.<sup>10</sup> Such secondary displacements are in many cases occasioned by what we might consider to be legitimate — or at least justifiable — reasons, but the effects of recurrent displacement are no less devastating.

---

<sup>8</sup> Dunn (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Gentleman (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch (2022).

Finally, displaced persons are increasingly becoming trapped for considerable periods or even indefinitely in what are essentially transitional spaces. That transitional character often redounds to various forms of infrastructural inadequacy. Refugee camps -- along with various forms of detention, reception, processing, transit, and pre-departure facilities for asylum seekers -- are the most obvious example. Such spaces are meant to be transitional, serving either as temporary housing for the displaced until a more durable solution can be found, or as makeshift holding sites while asylum applications are being processed. But widespread bureaucratic sclerosis and political intransigence have ensured that they are increasingly being called upon to serve as long-term refugee housing. As one would expect, the compounding stresses of overcrowding and heavy use on inadequate infrastructure have at times led to large-scale infrastructural collapse within such spaces. An illustrative example is the Moria processing center in Greece. Initially built in 2013 to house only 3,000, mostly Syrian asylum seekers while their applications were being processed, it swelled to over 20,000 people within a few years. Single tents began accommodating up to 150 people at a time, and the sanitary system was quickly overwhelmed, such that raw sewage flowed through the camp for years, leading to rat infestations and epidemics of skin infections.<sup>11</sup>

Even short of such broad collapse, though, most camps and processing centers lack much of the infrastructure we usually consider essential to ensuring basic levels of human dignity, precisely because they are intended to be transitional spaces. Why build schools, hospitals, or community spaces like shared kitchens, economic centers, or religious structures if no one is supposed to be there for very long? While camps and cognate spaces vary widely, most are marked by infrastructural inadequacy that stems in large part from the use of provisional spaces of transit as permanent sites of residence.

These, then, are three critical ways in which non-durability pervades the habitation spaces of displaced persons.<sup>12</sup> They are not the only ones, but they should suffice to get the relevant syndrome on the table. By ‘non-durability,’ then, I mean the various ways in which refugees’

---

<sup>11</sup> Miller (2018).

<sup>12</sup> For the sake of clarity, I will refer to them from now on as, respectively, ‘material non-durability,’ ‘secondary displacement,’ and ‘infrastructural inadequacy.’

living spaces are produced and continually maintained as *temporary*. While each of these forms has been documented in academic and non-academic literatures, there has been little work that shows in a systematic way how dwelling long-term in temporary housing harms those relegated to them — a project I will turn to shortly.

### *1.2 Causes of Non-Durability*

We might think that such living conditions are simply the result of a tragic tension inherent in emergency humanitarianism — namely, that the very same qualities that allow camps to meet refugees’ most critical needs in rapidly developing emergencies prevent them from meeting refugees’ more robust, long-term needs. Camps have to be built quickly, cheaply, and often in remote border regions lacking key infrastructure. But suitably modular, inexpensive, and transportable materials typically have a drawback: they are not very durable. The reasoning goes, then, that the non-durability of refugee habitation is not a failure, but a byproduct of our best efforts to supply emergency assistance to those in need.

This argument, however, belies two important points. First, while non-durability may be a necessary trade-off in the short-term, there is nothing necessary about continuing to house refugees in such conditions long-term. That fact is a consequence, instead, of limited funding, limited political will, and widespread international acceptance of a harmful status quo. But second, and more importantly, while non-durability may indeed be a byproduct of humanitarian rescue efforts in certain cases, it is also quite often a design artifact, one that is imposed upon and maintained within refugee spaces in order to promote the interests of various stakeholders. Non-durability, that is, is often a feature of the system rather than a bug.

Consider Azraq camp in Jordan, purpose-built as a “model” camp in 2014 to house refugees from the Syrian Civil War. The UNHCR, by its own admission, had an uncommon amount of time to plan and develop the camp, whose construction was also buoyed by an unusual amount of international financial support.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, shelters in Azraq were constructed primarily out of zinc sheathing rather than concrete — which would have been more insulating against the fierce desert sun and sub-zero nighttime temperatures — because the

---

<sup>13</sup> Knell, 2014.

Jordanian government was keen “to prevent a sense of permanence.”<sup>14</sup> A similar situation played out in Dadaab in Kenya in 2010 when a UN plan to build 15,000 new houses out of cheap, durable, quick-construction soil blocks for refugees who had been living in tents or mud and thorn huts in the unforgiving desert for, in many cases, two decades was blocked at the last minute by the Kenyan government over the fear that such housing would look too nice to native Kenyans.<sup>15</sup>

Far from being an ineluctable, tragic byproduct of good intentions, then, the non-durability of refugee housing is in fact produced and continually maintained by a host of policies, practices, and motivations that vary widely in their justifiability. My aim in raising those motives is not to broach the question of whether non-durable habitation spaces like refugee camps are, all-things-considered, justified. Rather, opening up the conceptual space for an honest consideration of the harms of living long-term in non-durable housing seems to require putting some pressure on the persistent narrative that such conditions are simply an unavoidable catch-22 of humanitarianism.

### *1.3 Protraction*

In the short term, camps and other provisional spaces may seem like a fair trade-off: temporarily non-ideal living conditions in exchange for emergency relief during a crisis. But as more and more refugee situations become protracted and the amount of time that refugees spend in camps and cognate spaces unravels into years and decades and generations, the moral calculus regarding such spaces must change as well. Refugees now spend, by some calculations, 17 years on average outside their homes before they are able to access one of the UNHCR’s three durable solutions.<sup>16</sup> As camps and other emergency spaces have ossified into long-term habitation,

---

<sup>14</sup> Sweis (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Rawlence (2017, 113).

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR (2004, 2). A more recent study funded by the World Bank found that, for the year 2015, refugees had been displaced for 10.3 years on average, though for the roughly two thirds of refugees in protracted situations, the average duration of exile jumped to 21.2 years (Devictor and Do 2016, 12).

millions of refugees have become mired in a state — in Michel Agier’s evocative phrase — of “permanent temporariness.”<sup>17</sup>

Given that protraction does indeed alter the moral calculus here, we must ask what the costs are of living long-term in non-durable spaces.

## **II. The Harms of Long-Term Non-Durability**

### *II.1 Two Kinds of Harms*

In this section I identify a number of oft-overlooked but nonetheless significant harms that accrue to displaced persons living in conditions of non-durability. Some of those harms are concrete and conspicuous. Tents provide little protection against scorching desert heat or freezing nighttime temperatures, seasonal flooding or heavy snow. The lack of privacy provided by non-durable structures has been linked to increases in sexual violence within camps; the overwhelmed temporary infrastructure at the Greek hotspot in Moria has led to massive rat infestations in refugee housing; and the mud and thorn huts in Dadaab often simply melt in torrential spring rains.<sup>18</sup> Such affronts to human dignity involve self-evident harms that do not require sustained philosophical analysis to be illuminated.

Other harms, however, are less self-evident. The spaces in which we live — their form, their materiality, their stability — are not incidental to how we move through the world. Rather, in often invisible yet profound ways, they shape our lives and our possibilities: facilitating or frustrating our agency, supporting or subverting cognitive function, providing the ground upon which we can build a life or constantly shifting beneath our feet. Moreover, some harms are cumulative, such that short-term inconveniences and indignities can, over time, become profound deprivations. In this section, I analyze the ways non-durability affects more abstract human interests like cognitive function, agency, and the ability to build toward a future. In doing so, I

---

<sup>17</sup> Agier (2011, 13).

<sup>18</sup> Logie, et al. (2017); Miller (2018); Rawlence (2017, 152).



show how the pervasive non-durability of contemporary refugee spaces undermines refugees' interests and well-being in a distinctive way, and so constitutes a *pro tanto* harm.

## *II.2 Non-Durability and the Loss of Cognitive Function*

The first argument I develop here is that stability and durability in one's immediate spatial environment — particularly in one's home — are integral to cognitive function, and thus that various forms of housing non-durability can be cognitively frustrating. To do so, I draw on phenomenologically-informed theories regarding the ways in which we outsource cognitive function to our spatial environment, particularly the extended mind thesis. The philosopher Cara Nine has persuasively argued via that theory that moving home can impair cognitive function. In this section, I extend that argument from the loss of home to the long-term deprivation of stable and durable living conditions, such as we find in much refugee habitation.

The extended mind thesis proposes that cognitive processes and functions do not solely occur within our heads, but are routinely outsourced to our physical environments. Consider the humble shopping list: rather than attempt the complex mental task of recalling and collating our weekly alimentary needs, many of us offload that cognitive work to a sheet of paper. We might, similarly, use a pen and paper to do complex mathematical work, set alarms to remind us of appointments, fastidiously maintain our calendars to keep us on schedule, and place framed photos around our homes to remind us of loved ones. Andy Clark and David Chalmers have argued that, functionally speaking, performing a complex chain of addition in our heads is no different from scratching the numbers out on a piece of paper. This suggests that the paper and pen are in fact part of our mental processing, and thus that objects outside of our heads can be part of our cognitive systems.<sup>19</sup>

Mental extension does not consist solely in a one-off outsourcing of cognitive labor onto a single object in our immediate environment. Rather, as the calendar and photo example indicate,

---

<sup>19</sup> Clark and Chalmers (1998). Note that, for the purposes of the present argument, we need not understand the notion of the extended mind in terms of the stronger (and more controversial) metaphysical claim that the mind actually extends beyond the confines of the skull. Rather, all we need is the more moderate claim that external objects and spaces *function* instrumentally in our cognition.

we also seem to store cognitive functions in our spatial environment over the long term where we can repeatedly or habitually retrieve them to support various overlapping mental operations. Such referents become, as it were, stable elements in the diffuse orbital arrays that are our cognitive systems. Indeed, Cara Nine has used this observation about the perdurance and interdependence of environmental supports to argue that we can also conceive of small-scale spaces as extensions of the mind.<sup>20</sup>

Like other animals, we humans construct small-scale niches for ourselves that facilitate our general functioning.<sup>21</sup> The home is an obvious example. Such niches typically consist of complex webs of functionally interrelated objects configured in space in ways that tend to aid not only our practical activity but also our cognitive processes. Take a kitchen: I might, as Nine suggests, keep a meal plan on a board in the kitchen, storing my memories and plans about what I will cook that week externally.<sup>22</sup> I might also leave out the cookbook with the relevant recipe to remind me to start cooking when I get home, organize various ingredients on the counter in a certain order to aid recall of the recipe's order of operations, and maintain labels on spice jars or cabinets to jog my memory about their contents. That is, I outsource memory functions to my physical environment by accumulating and arranging objects in certain ways within that niche.

And it is not only memory that we outsource to our environment — we also store values, beliefs, and plans in our homes, arrange objects to facilitate various forms of practical reasoning, even organize our spaces to encourage complex mental activity like the evaluation and revision of beliefs and values.<sup>23</sup> We might, for example, populate our homes with religious symbolism to impart certain beliefs to our children or reinforce them for ourselves, organize objects in particular ways (for example, placing a matriarch's chair at the head of a dining table) to transmit values or norms, make aesthetic choices that represent who we are or remind us of where we came from, and arrange the home to facilitate practical rationality (e.g. by removing snacks from the house to make sure we adhere to a new diet or putting a book on the bedside table to

---

<sup>20</sup> Nine (2018, 244).

<sup>21</sup> Stotz (2010).

<sup>22</sup> Nine (2018, 247).

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, (246).

encourage reading at night rather than screen-time). As Nine puts it: “our constructed niches feature as cognitive supports—they represent, remind, facilitate, and obstruct various behaviours, beliefs, values, and plans.”<sup>24</sup> Those cognitive processes are often complex, overlapping, and scaffolded (that is, they build on one another), and our home-spaces are usually created and continually recreated in complex configurations in order to aid that cognitive activity.

The fact that external spaces like the home and the objects within them often serve as environmental cognitive supports means that we can come to rely on those supports for our general cognitive functioning. And that means that general cognitive function can decline when stable access to such cognitive supports within the home environment is lost. Consider an Alzheimer’s patient who leaves labels or reminders around her home to facilitate recall and aid her negotiation of the space. Were those environmental crutches to be removed, we should expect her general cognitive function and ability to negotiate the home-space to suffer quite dramatically. The same is true — though typically to a lesser extent — of us all: without scratch paper, many of us would falter in adding up a long string of numbers; stripped of our reminders and alarms, we might find ourselves missing appointments. And because we rely on our homes to store memories, values, and plans, the loss or significant disruption of a home can trigger small but cascading declines in cognitive function. We might, for example, struggle more in preparing meals after moving house because of the unfamiliarity of the cooking environment. Losing access to separated spaces might upset norms regarding gender separation or familial hierarchies, and frustrate the communication of those values to younger generations. Being unable to hang photographs can weaken our tethers to meaningful past experiences or relationships, even diminish the sense of personal identity we derive from them. While seemingly small, such frustrations of cognitive activity are often cumulative and tend to have secondary effects that ripple outward through the rest of our lives, negatively impacting general well-being.<sup>25</sup>

The implications of this argument for some of the forms of non-durability in refugee habitation that I have described should be obvious: secondary displacements — including host

---

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, (249).

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 251.

states moving refugees between camps and detention centers, or the razing of informal settlements and structures, even where presumptively justified or justifiable — can, as the above examples evidence, have profoundly negative effects on refugees at the level of cognitive function. When those disruptions of niche construction are recurrent, not only will existing cognitive supports or one’s connection to them be weakened or severed, but refugees’ *trust* in their home environments can be eroded as well, such that they are less willing to outsource cognitive processes to their homes in the first place.

But what of the other major forms of non-durability I have canvassed here — are they vulnerable to the same critique? I believe a robust account of the way we outsource cognitive functionality to our spatial environments puts pressure on the material non-durability of refugee housing and the poverty of camp infrastructure as well. The pivotal point for developing that argument is that, as Clark and Chalmers observe, “a high degree of trust, reliance, and accessibility” is imperative for any external object to serve as an effective cognitive crutch.<sup>26</sup> All of those conditions are compromised, in various ways, by the two remaining forms of non-durability. And this means that refugee housing often cannot function, or functions poorly, as an external cognitive support for its inhabitants.

Consider the material non-durability of refugee housing. Much of the kind of niche construction that, as we have seen, can be integral to communicating and reinforcing beliefs and values is simply not possible in a tent or a shelter constructed out of twigs and fabric. For example, religious practices that insist on some manner of gendered separation will be frustrated by home-spaces in which durable spatial separators are not permitted or possible. Identity- and value-reinforcing photographs or religious symbolism often cannot be hung on tarpaulin walls. And refugees are unlikely to be able — or willing — to reliably outsource cognitive processes to a home that is barely able to provide sufficient privacy, security, and protection from the elements.

Indeed, the material durability of a home itself is often a condition for particular objects within that home being able to function as cognitive supports. As Nine observes, because the functional roles of environmental supports are often overlapping and scaffolded, many household

---

<sup>26</sup> Clark and Chalmers (1998, 17).

items are only capable of serving as cognitive crutches when placed within a coherent and familiar system of household organization.<sup>27</sup> But without material durability — solid walls, elevated flooring, weather resistance, at the very least — the background conditions within which and in reference to which the home is organized into a cognitively supportive system will be more precarious and unreliable, and that unreliability will in turn make individual cognitive supports within the environment less accessible and dependable as well. Consider, for example, a young girl in a refugee camp using a mathematics workbook while studying for a secondary school entrance exam. The workbook would serve as a cognitive support, allowing her to do more complex math problems outside of her head, but since her household responsibilities require her to work all day and the small, crowded tent is never quiet, the only time she can study is at night. But the tent cannot be wired for electricity, and there is nowhere stable for her to rest or hang a torch. As such, the workbook is simply unusable as a cognitive support, and she risks falling behind at school.<sup>28</sup> Non-durable housing tends to be recalcitrant, in myriad ways, to the outsourcing of cognitive activity, and can make potential cognitive crutches unreliable and even inaccessible (conditions necessary for cognitive outsourcing, as I highlighted above). Moreover, as we have seen, refugees are often prevented (via proscriptions on the use of durable materials) from engaging in the kind of niche construction that would allow them to create the durable background conditions within which they could organize a cognitively supportive home.

Indeed, not only are non-durable homes unable to serve as cognitive crutches in various ways, they often end up frustrating cognitive function rather than supporting it. Permanently temporary housing that is always leaking or needs constant repairs, that is too hot to sleep in or too cold to comfortably rest in, that is subject to routine flooding or that must have someone in it at all times for security reasons, is one that will end up being a cognitive drain rather than a cognitive support.

Finally, displaced persons are less likely to regard materially non-durable, ostensibly temporary, or constantly-threatened homes as trustworthy, and that loss of trust in their physical environment often means that refugees are less willing to engage in the kind of niche

---

<sup>27</sup> Nine (2018, 254).

<sup>28</sup> I adapt this example from a story in Ben Rawlence's *City of Thorns* (2017, 156-161).

construction that would allow them to outsource cognitive processes to their homes in the first place. Exposure to the elements, lack of privacy, susceptibility to violence or disruption — all of which attend material non-durability — can erode trust in one’s home, making it a source of frustration, anxiety, and stress rather than support and refuge.

Thus, it is not only the loss of one’s home that can undermine cognitive function; chronic instability and non-durability in the home can do the same. And of course, the recurrence and protraction of such deprivations compound the issue. As I noted earlier, repeated displacements, disturbances, and breakdowns in household function can have cumulative and knock-on effects, not only impairing cognitive function but also rippling out through the rest of one’s life and diminishing overall wellbeing. Simply put, a tent may be a tenable living space for short durations, but living in one for years or decades is likely to result in compounding frustrations and potentially widespread decline in one’s mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing. And already vulnerable populations like refugees are likely to have an attenuated capacity to cope with such disruptions and the cumulative effects they can have on their lives.<sup>29</sup> Because humans have an interest in maintaining cognitive functionality, that curtailment of cognitive function must be considered a genuine, *pro tanto* harm.<sup>30</sup>

### *II.3 Non-Durability and the Loss of Agency*

Habitational non-durability tends to undermine refugees’ agency as well. We depend upon our environment for the affordance of action in general, and upon objects in that environment to act and to carry out our plans.<sup>31</sup> I can only drive in a nail to the extent that a hammer or comparable tool is available to me. I can only prepare food to the extent that my environment affords some sort of cooking flame and various other implements for cooking. Thus, as recent work on disability has shown, certain spatial environments can frustrate action if they are recalcitrant in various ways, acting as obstacles for activity rather than facilitators.<sup>32</sup> Just as

---

<sup>29</sup> Nine (2018, 250-3).

<sup>30</sup> Assuming an interest-based theory of well-being. See Nussbaum (2000) and Raz (1986, 297–306) for accounts of functionality as a distinct human interest.

<sup>31</sup> Gibson (1977).

<sup>32</sup> Gallagher (2018) and Dokumaci (2019).

moving house can frustrate cognitive efficiency as one negotiates, say, cooking a meal, so too can implements being inaccessible or one's home being unreliable frustrate our capacity to engage in those actions or perform them efficiently, well, or in the way we planned. As Gallagher and Janz (2018) suggest, then, declines in the scope and quality of the affordances in one's physical environment are broadly tracked by declines in one's agency.

Home spaces are often particularly significant to agency: we construct, organize, and continually re-create our homes in ways that facilitate various forms of activity. The material non-durability of refugee housing can frustrate such agential reliance on the home in very basic ways. For example, a lack of solid walls and doors means that frequently used household goods often need to be stored away to prevent theft, such that they are rarely at-hand and thus affording of efficient action. But material non-durability can undermine more complex forms of agency as well. Consider the example from above about studying for a school test. In that example, the studying was part of a much larger set of nested, goal-directed activities — namely, passing an entrance exam that would have allowed her to continue her schooling and eventually apply to a college outside the camp. But studying is an action that cannot be effectively performed absent certain environmental conditions: if the home is the only space available for studying, but the tent is too hot to study in during the day and lacks the right kind of infrastructure to allow for electricity or hanging a torch at night, then studying is rendered effectively impossible. And because studying, in this case, is integral to much broader projects and life-plans, the material non-durability of refugee housing has undermined the girl's agency in a far-reaching way.

And it is not only actions inside the house that can be frustrated by non-durability. Moving out into the world as an effective agent seems to depend in various ways on having a relatively reliable, familiar space of privacy from which to emerge and to which to return. The private and public, as spheres of human action, are in this sense complementary: our plans and projects take us out into the world, and our homes are the launching pad from which that movement originates and toward which it can retire. There is thus an important connection between a supportive and restorative home space and an inhabitant's capacity to act efficaciously in the broader world.<sup>33</sup> But non-durable housing that is always leaking or in constant need of repairs, that is subject to

---

<sup>33</sup> Jacobson (2011), Bachelard (1964), and Arendt (1958, 71).

routine flooding or that must have someone in it at all times for security reasons, is not one from which one can dependably move out into the world as an agent. Homes typically function as a space of rest and recuperation as well, which makes possible the subsequent re-emergence into the space of daily activity.<sup>34</sup> But an uninsulated, floor-less tent that is simply too hot or too cold to sleep in at night is not one particularly conducive to effective agency during the day.

Secondary displacements can also undermine refugees' agency beyond the home. In the lead-up to France's planned bulldozing of the Calais Jungle in 2016, many refugees were unwilling to leave their homes at all out of the fear that doing so would mean losing them to the planned demolitions.<sup>35</sup> Whatever plans and projects they may have hoped to carry out in the world beyond their houses was, as such, forestalled, their agency undermined obliquely by the insecurity of their housing. Refugees are also less likely to engage in agency-facilitating niche construction in the first place when the home is, aptly, regarded as unreliable, insecure, or impermanent due to the potential for secondary displacements, a tendency that can have wide-ranging effects outside the home as well.

The species of non-durability most deleterious to refugees' agency, though, is surely the general poverty of camp infrastructure beyond the home — both its inadequacy and the simple lack, in most cases, of the kinds of infrastructure integral to a dignified, flourishing life. The broad undermining of refugees' agency is often discussed in terms of the idea of “enforced idleness,” a passivity typically analyzed in terms of restrictions on work and the humanitarian provision of the basic necessities of a refugee's life.<sup>36</sup> But one important way that idleness is enforced and reinforced in refugee spaces is through the paucity of their infrastructure. With little infrastructure for commercial or subsistence activities, few or no schools or community centers or houses of worship, camps tend to offer refugees, quite simply, very little to do. And that infrastructural poverty also operates at a symbolic level: the paucity of infrastructure insists on the temporariness of refugees' inhabitation, and so continually indicates that waiting for something else is the principal, or even sole, option.

---

<sup>34</sup> Bachelard (1964).

<sup>35</sup> Mandhai (2016).

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Smith (2004).



No home or broader living-space will ever facilitate and support all forms of activity within it, and we should not expect or require it to do so. But that does not entail that we need also uncritically accept the ways in which the non-durability of refugee habitation actively frustrates refugee agency. Non-durability is capable of undermining, as I have tried to show, a broad range of refugees' interests, including both their ability to carry out basic activities and their ability to pursue vital projects and life-plans.<sup>37</sup> In contravening those interests, non-durability harms refugees.

#### *II.4 Permanent Temporariness and Building a Life*

There is one further way that the temporariness of refugee habitation harms its inhabitants, one further loss — abstract, but I think fundamental — that attends the deprivation of durable living conditions: the ability to build a *life* for oneself. The Liberian activist and Nobel laureate Leymah Gbowee, describing a visit to Jordan's Zaatari refugee camp, wrote the following:

[M]emories came flooding back of my own experience as a teenager, living in a refugee camp in Ghana. The scenes were immensely familiar: homes insufficiently built to protect families from the sweltering sun and infrastructure focused solely on keeping people alive but *not providing any space to truly live and thrive*.<sup>38</sup>

Mzia Khizanishvili, a woman from South-Ossetia in her sixth year at an internally displaced persons camp in the Republic of Georgia, echoed that sentiment: “This isn't living; it's just existing.”<sup>39</sup>

What does it mean to exist, but not live? And what is it about refugee camps that allows for the former, but not the latter? The distinction here is common amongst refugees and critics of the current status quo: camps and their cognates are designed to provide for the biological needs of refugees (food, shelter, water), but fail to address their needs as *persons*. The latter surely

---

<sup>37</sup> See Raz (1986, 288-320) for a prominent plan-based theory of human interests.

<sup>38</sup> Gbowee (2018, emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> Dunn (2015).

involves the ability to exercise those capacities that make us human (including the distinctive cognitive and agential capacities we have already canvassed), but also, I think, a certain way of orienting ourselves toward our own lives via plans and projects, of building toward a future that is meaningful to us. To live, then, is to do more than preserve; it is to grow as well.

As I suggested at the end of section I, what is owed to refugees changes as the amount of time they are displaced extends. Relief from violence, emergency shelter, and food may suffice in the short term, but it is not adequate for a refugee who will spend years or even decades outside of their state. Refugees are owed a future, and not merely in the form of some hoped-for, but perennially deferred ‘durable solution.’ And that means that part of what the displaced are owed is the infrastructure upon which a meaningful life can be built. Notice that, for Gbowee, this distinction between existing and living is indexed to the space of the camp, its infrastructure and its non-durability — camps like Zataari, Gbowee says, do not provide “any *space* to truly live.”<sup>40</sup> Life, as we have seen, takes place: our lives are shaped by the spaces we inhabit, and those spaces also often serve as the foundations upon which we build our futures. I will suggest that the kinds of transitional, precarious, non-durable spaces Gbowee is addressing fail to provide a stable ground upon which refugees can — or can reasonably be expected to — construct meaningful lives and futures for themselves.

At one level, as we have seen, the simple paucity of infrastructure in most refugee habitation spaces means that there is precious little future to build *towards*. You need a school to get an education, a market to be able to engage in commerce, arable land to build toward subsistence if you are a farmer. Not having spaces in which those kinds of comprehensive projects can occur — and, in many cases, being prevented from creating those spaces themselves — means that for refugees many significant life-pursuits simply are not possible. The long-term projects and life-plans constitutive of building a life for oneself depend in other ways on the places in which they are located as well. Reliable access to the spaces in which our life-plans are located is integral to our ability to pursue our most basic interests.<sup>41</sup> Frequent secondary displacements, especially where they involve being shuffled between different camps or

---

<sup>40</sup> Gbowee (2018, emphasis added).

<sup>41</sup> See Stilz (2013, 335).

settlements, deprives refugees of reliable access to the particular shared spaces in which plans and projects integral to their identities, relationships, and futures are located. The reliability of those spaces at a material level matters as well. We saw earlier how non-durable structures can frustrate activities, like studying, integral to larger life-plans and projects, thus undermining them as well. More generally, our homes often serve as a kind of material and psychological support for our life-pursuits, a foundation of reliability and routine that undergirds us as we take the kinds of risks involved in building toward a future. Materially non-durable spaces, as we have seen, often fail to provide the same level of reliability and routine. Put another way, while tents and tarps may provide shelter, they often fail to be a space where one can drop the kind of roots that are often necessary for building toward a substantive future. The displaced are often simply unable to build the edifices of a flourishing or even minimally dignified life on barren soil that is constantly shifting beneath their feet.

Such reliability is perhaps even more important at a psychological level. We saw earlier that vulnerable people like refugees and asylum seekers are often less willing to engage in meaningful niche construction, and so may fail to outsource cognitive function to their home spaces.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, endeavoring to build a life for oneself requires a certain amount of trust that the landscape of one's activity, projects, and plans will not shift suddenly and dramatically beneath one's feet, that one will have continued access to the spaces in which those plans and projects are located — in effect, that one is safe to build and commit within that landscape. The precariousness of refugee housing often deprives the displaced of the sense of security and reliability that makes building a future seem feasible. Even more corrosive is the way that lack of a future is written into the fabric of refugee spaces themselves. The material non-durability and impermanence of camp infrastructure means that the landscape of refugees' lives continually insists on the temporariness of their lives there, that they have no future in that place. Why, then, attempt to build a life for oneself — where that's even possible — when one has no future in that space? As Ben Rawlence observes regarding camp life for young Somali refugees in Dadaab, “Life was only waiting...Nothing had any permanence, there was no building anything.”<sup>43</sup> For

---

<sup>42</sup> Nine (2018, 254-5).

<sup>43</sup> Rawlence (2016, 107).

refugees, the spaces they inhabit insist that the future always lies elsewhere, but always in some space to which they do not have access. And that means that life for many refugees can consist only in waiting, in existing, in staying alive — that the future, indeed *living* in the rich sense Gbowee signals, is continually deferred.

### III. Objections

We might worry what this analysis would mean for (non-refugee) communities who live in non-durable housing by choice. Do the claims here about the costs of long-term non-durability imply that, for example, nomadic communities that live in non-durable housing are harmed by their choice to do so, or that they experience cognitive decline because of it? I do not think they do. First, there is an important moral difference between choosing to dwell in non-durable housing and being compelled to do. As we have seen, the non-durability of much refugee accommodation is enforced through prohibitions on using more durable building materials, or an artificial lack of access to such materials because of restrictions on movement and employment. More importantly, nomadic peoples inhabit their non-durable housing within rich and complex cultural contexts that support and facilitate their cognitive and agential flourishing, cultures that often have developed around the non-durability of their housing. In most cases, the displaced cannot draw upon such a cultural background, so the non-durability of their housing inhibits their flourishing.

We might also worry about the implications of this argument for other non-refugees who dwell in non-durable housing not by choice. The United States, for example, has a large homeless population, many of whom live long-term in tent encampments. And millions (if not much more) world-wide live in what many wealthy observers would consider to be inadequate, non-durable housing — shanties, shacks, favelas, etc. Neither of these groups are guaranteed durable housing — why should things be different for refugees?

First, recall that I am not (at the moment) making the claim that more durable housing must be provided to refugees, but only that there are harms associated with living in non-durable

housing — what that argument implies about the obligations of various stakeholders is largely beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, one implication of this argument is indeed that homeless people in the US living long-term in tent encampments or Bangladeshis living in shanties are harmed by their lack of access to more durable housing. This may, depending on one's other commitments, also indicate that they are wronged or failed by their respective governments or the social and economic structures that shape their access to housing — a view that is, in some of those cases, widely held. Again, what that wrong would indicate about the obligations of various state and non-state actors in each case is a further question.

Nonetheless, I believe that it is morally salient that most forcibly displaced persons are under administration to a degree that those in the other cases typically are not. We have good reason to think that an individual or institution assumes certain obligations when they enter into an administrative relationship. For example, we tend to think that convicted criminals must be provided with durable, protective housing by the state managing them, even where that state does not guarantee housing for ordinary citizens. This is particularly the case where that administration involves otherwise unacceptable limitations on autonomous activity — for example, prohibiting the use of durable building materials, or restricting movement or employment such that access to such materials becomes difficult or impossible. In the case of displaced people under administration by humanitarian institutions and host states, then, the argument I have developed here suggests that the displaced may indeed be owed more than what is currently provided.

## **Conclusion**

As the world has grown progressively more inured to the idea of using provisional spaces of transit as permanent sites of residence, displaced persons are increasingly finding themselves trapped in a kind of permanent temporariness. Beyond more obvious affronts to human dignity, we have seen that such conditions can undermine some of refugees' most vital long-term interests, including their interests in cognitive functionality, successful agency, and the pursuit of

a genuine future for themselves. Thus, ‘durability’ has always been a watchword of the international community’s response to displacement, over the past few decades it has transformed into an empty shibboleth, one whose lingering invocation betrays, ironically, one of the most persistent and pernicious failures of the contemporary refugee regime.

My aims in this essay have been moderate. I have focused on detailing an overlooked set of harms issuing from the non-durability of refugee housing, rather than showing that non-durability is an all-things-considered wrong. Regardless, as I suggested at the end of section III, we have good reasons to think that more is owed to the displaced than what is currently provided. If, as has become the norm, the displaced are not to be promptly resettled or integrated into local communities, it ought to be a priority of the global refugee response to provide stable, durable housing and functional community spaces for those whose lives have been upturned. Simply put, durability cannot merely be an end goal of displacement; it must be an enduring condition of it.<sup>44</sup>

### **Bibliography:**

Agier, Michel. *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*.

Translated by David Fernbach. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2011.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Bachelard, G. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by M. Jolas. New York: Orion Press, 1964.

Betts, Alexander and Paul Collier. *Refuge: Rethinking Refugee Policy in a Changing World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Clark, Andy and David Chalmers. “The Extended Mind.” *Analysis* 58 (1998): 7–19.

Devictor, Xavier and Quy-Toan Do. “How Many Years Have Refugees Been in Exile?” Policy Research Working Paper 7810. The World Bank, 2016. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/549261472764700982/pdf/WPS7810.pdf>

---

<sup>44</sup> I am deeply grateful to Daniel Dahlstrom, Susanne Sreedhar, Serena Parekh, Paul Katsfanas, and three anonymous reviewers for this journal for helpful comments and discussions regarding earlier versions of this article.

- Dokumaci, Arseli. "A Theory of Microactivist Affordances: Disability, Disorientations, and Improvisations." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (2019): 491–519.
- Dunn, Elizabeth Cullen. "The Failure of Refugee Camps." *Boston Review*, September 28, 2015. <http://bostonreview.net/editors-picks-world/elizabeth-dunn-failure-refugee-camps>.
- Evans, Kate. *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*. London: Verso Books, 2017.
- Gallagher, Shaun. "The Therapeutic Reconstruction of Affordances." *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 4 (2018): 719–36.
- Gallagher, Shaun and Bruce Janz. "Solitude, Self and Autonomy." *Discipline Filosofiche* 28, no. 2 (2018): 159-175.
- Gbowee, Leymah. "To Change the World, Let Refugee Women Lead." *Refugees Deeply*, August 29, 2018. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2018/08/29/to-change-the-world-let-refugee-women-lead>.
- Gentleman, Amelia. "Last of Calais Refugee Children Evacuated As Camp Clearance Ends." *The Guardian*, November 2, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/02/calais-refugee-children-evacuated-as-camp-clearance-winds-up>.
- Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- Human Rights Watch. "Bangladesh: New Restrictions on Rohingya Camps," April 4, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/04/bangladesh-new-restrictions-rohingya-camps>.
- Knell, Yolande. "Azraq: How a Refugee Camp Is Built from Scratch." *BBC News*, April 30, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27205291>.
- Kohn, Margaret. "What Is Wrong with Gentrification?" *Urban Research & Practice*, 6, no. 3 (2013): 297-310.
- Logie, Carmen, Carol Ann Daniel, Uzma Ahmed, and Rebecca Lash. "'Life under the Tent Is Not Safe, Especially for Young Women'" *Global Health Action* 10, sup. 2 (2017): 14-22.
- Mandhai, Shafik. "France Resumes Demolition of Calais 'Jungle' Camp." *Al Jazeera*, March 7, 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/3/7/calais-jungle-destruction-resumes>.
- Miller, Anna Lekas. "Nowhere to Go: Refugees Fear Closure of Greek Camp That Has River of

- Sewage and 12-Hour Waits for Meals.” *The Intercept*, October 9, 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/10/09/greece-refugee-camp-island-moria/>.
- Moore, Margaret. *A Political Theory of Territory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Nine, Cara. “The Wrong of Displacement: The Home as Extended Mind.” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 240–257.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Women and Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Parekh, Serena. *No Refuge: Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Rawlence, Ben. *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World’s Largest Refugee Camp*. New York: Picador, 2017.
- Raz, Joseph. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Smith, Merril. “Warehousing Refugees: A Denial of Rights, a Waste of Humanity.” *Washington, DC: World Refugee Survey*, US Committee on Refugees and Immigrants, 2004, pp. 38–56.
- Stilz, Anna. “Occupancy Rights and The Wrong of Removal,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 41, no. 4 (2013): 324–56.
- Sweis, Rana F. “New Refugee Camp in Jordan Tries to Create a Community for Syrians.” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/31/world/middleeast/new-refugee-camp-in-jordan-absorbs-flood-from-syria.html>.
- Stotz, Karola. “Human Nature and Cognitive-Developmental Niche Construction,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 9 (2010): 483–501.
- Thompson, Marnie. “Mud, Dust, and *Marougé*: Precarious Construction in a Congolese Refugee Camp.” *Architectural Theory Review* 19, no. 3 (2015): 376–392.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “Protracted Refugee Situations”, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, Standing Committee, 30th Meeting, UN Doc. EC/54/SC/CRP.14, 10 June 2004.