65.6 million
forcibly displaced people worldwide

Personalization, Territory, and the
REFUGEE HOUSING CRISIS

Introduction

As explained by J. D. Porteous, "If we exclude personal space because of its mobile nature, the average citizen appears to spend more effort personalizing and defending the home than any other level of fixed physical space" (1976, p. 383). The **personalization** of interiors has been a fundamental aspect of design for as long as humans have been creating dwelling spaces. Though the diversity of world culture has led to the rise of vastly different styles of design and ornamentation, all humans respond to the need to differentiate their space from that of others.

This need is referred to as **territoriality**, and vernacular dwelling spaces provide the clearest examples thereof. The psychological principles at play are complex, but research indicates that mental health is best supported by possession of at least one space individuals have total aesthetic control over (Hirschon and Gold, 1982, Porteous 1976).

A growing concern exists globally for **migrant and refugee housing** as natural disasters and armed conflicts continue to devastate populations. As displaced persons move into transitional or temporary accommodations, they experience trauma related to **loss of territory and identity**. The exploration of design as a medium to improve the lives of displaced persons is an important research avenue, particularly with regard to addressing personalization in ways that are culturally sensitive.
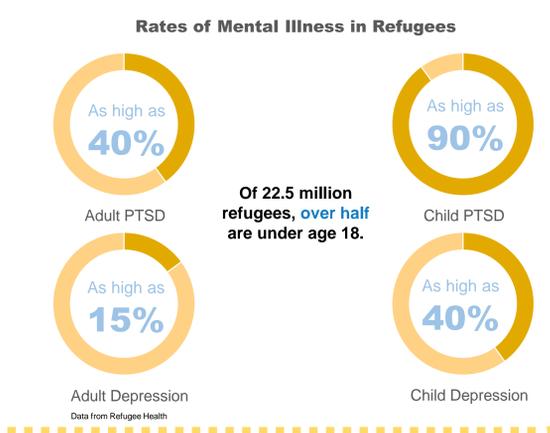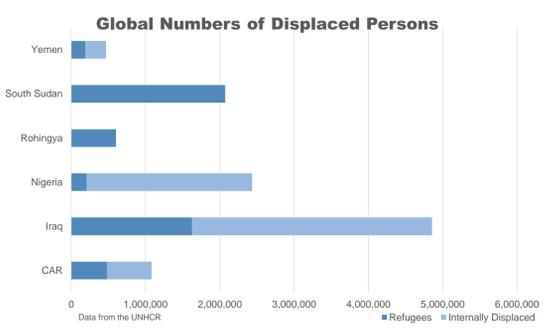
Statistics

The IASC (2007, p. 4) identifies the following populations as being especially vulnerable to mental health and psychosocial problems in the event of an emergency:

- *Women (e.g. pregnant women, single mothers, young women and girls)*
- *Men (e.g. ex-combatants, young men at risk of detention or abduction)*
- *Children (infants to those under age 18)*
- *Elderly people*
- *Extremely poor people*
- *Internally Displaced Persons (IDP)*
- *People who have been exposed to high stress or traumatic situations*
- *People with pre-existing physical or mental disabilities*
- *People in institutions*
- *People facing severe social stigma*

These and other groups may experience such problems as exasperation of pre-existing conditions, extreme poverty, family separation, grief, **depression** and **anxiety disorders**, and **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** (PTSD).

Children and adolescents are especially at risk for developing mental illnesses as a result of experiences common among refugees.

Global Numbers of Displaced Persons

Yemen
South Sudan
Rohingya
Nigeria
Iraq
CAR

0   1,000,000   2,000,000   3,000,000   4,000,000   5,000,000   6,000,000
Data from the UNHCR   ■ Refugees   ■ Internally Displaced

Rates of Mental Illness in Refugees

As high as **40%** — Adult PTSD

As high as **90%** — Child PTSD

Of 22.5 million refugees, over half are under age 18.

As high as **15%** — Adult Depression

As high as **40%** — Child Depression

Data from Refugee Health

Needs Assessment

An estimated 65.6 million people have been forcibly displaced from their communities; of those, less than 200,000 had successfully been resettled as of 2016. The UNHCR reports that over **2.6 million** of the refugees currently living in camps have been **displaced for over five years**, and some have been displaced for over a generation (2017). These troubling statistics raise the question of whether "temporary" refugee housing solutions are truly temporary.

The UNHCR co-leads the Global Shelter Cluster (GSC), an organization dedicated to **distributing tents, plastic sheeting, and matting** to construct shelters. While these shelters provide relief from weather and temperature extremes, they do not constitute appropriate long-term housing. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) notes that those who are not in a position to build, rent, or secure their own shelter, such as the elderly and child-headed households, are particularly at risk of developing mental and psychological problems (2007, p. 174).

As stated by the IASC, "The provision of **safe, adequate shelter** in emergencies saves lives, reduces morbidity, and enables people to **live in dignity without excessive distress**" (2007, p. 174). It is therefore clear that providing such shelter must be a top priority for emergency respondents. Given that personalization activities are closely tied to demarcation of territory, and that territory in turn provides individuals with greater psychological well-being, the question becomes how can shelters be designed to suit not only physical needs for safety, but psychological needs as well.

> **Shelter** is a vital survival mechanism in times of crisis or displacement. It is also key to restoring **personal security, self-sufficiency and dignity**.
>
> - UNHCR, 2017

Challenges

Because **refugee populations are highly vulnerable**, a number of challenges exist in collecting comprehensive data and conducting surveys or other research into their living situations.

Language and other cultural barriers are perhaps one of the most significant difficulties to overcome in research related to displaced persons. Additionally, because so many experience mental health complications, or have otherwise been traumatized, sensitivity is a key concern in gathering data. In order for any future studies to include live subjects surveys, interviews, or etc., careful study will be required to ensure that all requests for information are contextually appropriate.

Review of Literature

TERRITORIALITY

- Defined as "behavior by which an organism characteristically **lays claim to an area** and defends it against members of his own species" (Stillman, 1978, p. 1670).

- "Involves claiming space by occupancy, though this need not be permanent, and entails **personalizing or marking the space** in a way that conveys ownership to other people" (Hirschon and Gold, 1982, p. 64).

- Personalization has a **direct symbolic relationship** with demarcating whose space is whose.

PSYCHOLOGY

- Because the **home is used for private acts** such as sleeping and grooming, it is necessary to feel secure in that space. When an individual has **made a claim to space through visual means**, other members of the household know to respect that zone, either by not entering or by offering such courtesies as knocking (Porteous, 1976, p. 383).

- Personalization is **critical for socialization** and the healthy development of the personality. "Possession of territory serves as a mechanism by which **identity is fostered and reinforced**" (Hirschon and Gold, 1982, p. 64-65).

APPLICABILITY TO REFUGEES

- "Displacement is experienced as being physically present at one place, but … having feelings of belonging somewhere else" (Brun, 2001, p. 15).

- **Reterritorialization**, the process by which a refugee reconstructs a sense of identity in a new place, is by necessity related to the physical space, temporary or otherwise, the refugee comes to occupy (Brun, 2001, p. 19).

- The ability to personalize space contributes to the displaced person's sense of identity and wellbeing.

Opportunities

Limited literature currently exists pertaining to what interior elements are most critical for providing refugees with a feeling of comfort and security. Documentation such as the IASC's Action Sheet 10.1 outlines measures that ought to be taken in site planning and shelter provision for displaced groups, but tends to focus on broad concerns such as overall site safety, discrimination-prevention, privacy, and flexibility. Moreover, such documents are written under the assumption that camps and shelters will truly be temporary. Statistics indicate that this does not always prove to be the case.

In light of this gap in professional knowledge, a number of opportunities for further research exist. Next steps could include overlay of demographic data for refugee camps in established crisis areas (such as South Sudan and Iraq) with cultural studies in territory and design to understand what aspects and modes of personalization might be most effective in territory marking. Additionally, systematic study of the shelter types (size, materiality, construction methods, and regulations for inhabiting shelters) in use by relief organizations could be done to investigate what measures could be implemented to facilitate greater ease in personalization and territory-marking.

Interviews with staff from global relief organizations would be beneficial to gain a deeper understanding regarding the complexity surrounding personalization and "place making" for forcibly displaced people.

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Image Attribution:

[1] UNHCR: The United Nations Refugee Agency. (2017.) Figures at a Glance. Retrieved October 25, 2017, from http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html

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