



THE ARCHITECTURE OF BELONGING

From tiny houses in Parisian backyards to vacant buildings in Vienna, community-minded architects are working together to create more inclusive, sustainable housing for the influx of refugees arriving on European shores.

WORDS BY ROSAMUND BRENNAN

Fleeing civil war and persecution in countries like Syria and Afghanistan, millions of refugees have arrived on European shores since 2015. Conflict and human rights violations have led to an unprecedented number of people being forced to leave their homes, and figures from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees show that there are now 68.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world – the highest number on record.

While their long and treacherous journeys across the seas are often the focus of worldwide media reports, the trauma certainly doesn't end once they reach the shore. Many refugees must wait months before receiving their registration papers, living in makeshift shelters in football fields and abandoned airports as Europe struggles to cope with the surge in new arrivals.

But could this crisis be a catalyst for change? According to the Finnish architect Marco Steinberg, director

of Helsinki-based firm Snowcone & Haystack, this extraordinary wave of migration presents an opportunity to revolutionise the way we think about architecture in the 21st century.

"We tend to think of building solutions in a very static manner," he says. "A building is built as a school and will remain a school forever – [that] is the thinking. But what happens when there are no longer enough children in the neighbourhood because that generation matured? Could we use the building for an emerging need? "Interestingly, in cities like Helsinki, we cry because of a lack of housing – while at the same time we have an oversupply of office buildings. Thirteen per cent of our metro region's office buildings are empty. Could we see this as a potential asset rather than a liability?" he suggests.

Of course, this issue is not exclusive to Helsinki. There are 107,000 vacant homes in Paris and more than 247,000 in New York City;

Above: The former Olympic village in Turin was home to the largest occupation of refugees in Italy, with thousands of people living there between 2015 and 2017.

In 2016, Germany received 745,155 applications for asylum.

cities where demand for new housing outstrips supply and homelessness is a real threat for low-income earners.

Other challenges include rent affordability, along with inadequate government subsidies and the general marginalised nature of housing giving rise to social issues.

"Often, our institutions and systems are simply not equipped to tackle society's most critical and fundamental issues," Steinberg says. "Innovation is only going to happen by challenging the current categories, not by working within them."

Steinberg is just one of a league of similarly socially-minded architects, urban planners and artists across Europe. Together, they are all re-imagining our built environment at the micro level: ensuring refugees have not only a roof over their heads, but also a better chance to integrate with the community, find jobs, and regain a sense of belonging in their new surroundings.

GERMANY

With more than 745,155 applications for asylum in 2016 alone, Germany has accepted more refugees than any other country in the European Union.

Berlin-based architect Van Bo Le-Mentzel saw first-hand the difficulties faced by new arrivals, and he decided to do something about it. "Up to 400 people were standing in a line every morning in the freezing cold and snow to get a registration – some sleeping there overnight trying to beat the queue," he says.



Le-Mentzel hatched a plan that would not only provide some respite from Berlin's harsh winter, but also give refugees the registration papers they required to start their new lives in Germany.

"I worked with refugees to build tiny houses made from scrap wood [that are] built on wheels," he states. "Then I thought, 'What they really need is their papers' – so I founded the 'Tiny House University', declaring them as my students so they could get their registration."

Featuring licence plates and a berth no wider than a mattress, Le-Mentzel's tiny homes can be parked anywhere in the city. They provide temporary relief for families who are priced out of Berlin's rental market or are struggling to find permanent accommodation elsewhere.

"We recently built a tiny house for a man from Afghanistan who found a job cleaning a hotel – but they paid him so little that he just couldn't afford to live in the city," Le-Mentzel recalls. "He already had [an apartment], but it was a three-hour return trip from his work."

Clockwise from top left: A café (left) and a small house (right) being built in Berlin – both are on wheels so they can be parked anywhere in the city; Migrant housing at Villaggio Olimpico – the buildings that were used to host athletes during the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics; Hand-sewn sculptures from the Con MOI project; Van Bo Le-Mentzel, head of the Tiny House University, sits inside a small house.

Le-Mentzel has worked alongside a team of eight refugees for the Tiny House University, something that he says has shifted his perspective on the world. "When I started to get to know carpenters and urban planners from Syria, Eritrea and Iraq, I found out that I actually know so little about diversity in architecture," he states. "They taught me how to design a kitchen where you cook on the floor, [and] we designed houses where you don't have a door – you enter through the window."

Le-Mentzel's next project, Co-Being House, is a social housing project that will feature diverse sectors of society living side-by-side in the inner city.

"Co-Being House is almost like the next generation of a commune, where everyone will have their own four-by-six-metre apartment, as well as access to a central living area with a kitchen, bathroom and space to socialise," he explains.

"We need to revolutionise the way we think about architecture," he asserts. "My vision is to create



houses that truly reflect society. [Our] society is diverse – why shouldn't our homes also be like that?"

ITALY

Italy's Winter Olympic stadium in Turin saw some incredible sporting feats – however, it became known for a completely different reason when it housed thousands of northern African refugees during the height of Europe's migration crisis.

The Ex Moi occupation – named after the wholesale fruit market that had once been the main landmark in the area – began in March 2013, when about 100 refugees moved into the Olympic athletes' village.

Within weeks, the occupation had grown to more than 500 people – and it swelled to thousands between 2015 and 2017, as Italy received upwards of 335,000 asylum seekers.

American-born, Italy-based artist and social activist Marguerite Kahrl started a community project called Con MOI ("with me") in 2016, with the aim of strengthening social



bonds among the residents, who had experienced significant “upheaval, isolation and depression”.

Spurred by Kahl’s expertise in permaculture – she’s co-founder of the international collective, Permaculture for Refugees – one of Con MOI’s key activities was sharing and distributing food. This included collecting leftover goods from the market, and organising communal picnics.

Another feature of the project was using art as a catalyst to help the residents process complex emotions around their identity, loss of culture and feelings of isolation. “After they explored ideas about group identity, the members of Con MOI embarked upon the creation of individual self-portraits by transforming donated fabric into hand-sewn sculptures,” Kahl explains.

“The final individual portraits existed as 90-second videos of hands building the sculptures, accompanied by stories or songs by their makers. It was wonderful to see how tough African men, who were at first very negative and suspicious, became excited about sewing a little doll.”

While the occupied buildings are now being evacuated as Turin explores different resettlement strategies, the Con MOI project has lived on – most notably through the creation of the film *Joy*, about an African migrant dancer grappling with her identity while living at Ex Moi.

Kahl also continues her work with Permaculture for Refugees, which helps to alleviate suffering in refugee camps by providing access to permaculture and other sustainable living practices.

“Migration exposes a larger problem of our current industrial economy – and refugees are some of the most visible and vulnerable consequences of this infrastructure,” Kahl says. “If we can transition to an approach that recognises and values all people as essentially resourceful, co-operative and enterprising ... this can have huge social and environmental benefits for all.”

FRANCE

The United Nations estimates more than 220,000 refugees live in France, where the number of people filing asylum requests topped 100,000 in 2017. Médecins Sans Frontières also reported in November 2017 that about 1,000 refugees and migrants were sleeping rough in Paris, exposed to the freezing winter temperatures.



When Dominique Blanc and his partner Charlotte Boulanger heard about In My BackYard – a non-profit organisation building tiny houses for refugees in Parisian backyards – they didn’t hesitate in volunteering.

“It only took us a few hours to make up our minds,” Blanc told media outlet, France24.com. “My partner and I have both been really troubled by the failure of many French people to welcome immigrants and refugees to our country.”

“Sadiq had slept on the streets of Paris for four months & in a reception centre for one year.”

Perched in the couple’s sizeable backyard in the eastern Paris suburb of Montreuil, the 20m² tiny house includes a kitchen, a bathroom and a mezzanine that serves as a bedroom, plus a separate entrance.

Blanc and Boulanger’s first tenant was Sadiq, a 29-year-old man from Afghanistan, who escaped his home country three years ago after receiving threats from the Taliban for working for NATO troops.

Before moving in, Sadiq had slept on the streets of Paris for four months and lived in a reception centre for one year. He has now found a permanent job and a home of his own.

The In My BackYard (IMBY) initiative was originally developed by Quatorze, a French non-profit organisation dedicated to using architecture to address social problems and injustices.

A HISTORY OF TINY HOMES

A social movement geared towards downsizing and reducing our environmental footprint, the tiny house movement first originated in California in the 1970s. Any free-standing residential structure less than 46 square metres is considered to be a tiny home. The movement is increasingly popular all over the world, especially in places where rents are relatively high – such as the US, Australia, Japan, the UK and Germany.



IMBY is meant to express the opposite sentiment of NIMBY (an acronym for Not In My Backyard) – which is used in the US and the UK to refer to people who oppose a new development because of its close proximity to their homes, even though it may be useful to society.

With more than five tiny houses already erected in the Paris region, In My BackYard hopes to extend that number to 50 by 2020.

AUSTRIA

There are also plans to put Austria’s empty spaces to good use. Vienna-based architects Elke Delugan-Meissl, Sabine Dreher and Christian Muhr formed a project team to address the housing needs of the 88,000 asylum seekers who arrived in Austria in

Opposite page, top to bottom: In My BackYard builds tiny homes for refugees in Parisian backyards; The tiny homes each feature a kitchen, a bathroom and a mezzanine bedroom. This page, clockwise from top left: A woman in the “home” Caramel Architects created for her in an old office building; The homes offer a sense of privacy, and the residents can make them their own; People at work at EOOS’s social furniture collective; Workshops help the men feel like they’re contributing.



2015 – many of whom were sleeping in tents and on the streets. While they originally aimed to present the project at the 2016 Architecture Biennale in Venice, their focus quickly switched closer to home, to address the urgent issues unfolding in Vienna.

“We already knew that there were thousands of square metres in vacant office buildings, and so we started to ask for available space in all kinds of directions,” explains Dreher.

They collaborated with real estate firms and private developers, eventually honing in on a 1970s office building, a former training facility for customs officers, a warehouse and a partly vacant office building.

For the 1970s office building, Caramel Architects designed a quick, inexpensive intervention that offered the residents privacy and a “home”.

“Each family’s area was marked off with a large parasol with a curtain hung around it,” Dreher states. “The residents were all able to make their ‘homes’ unique, and feel that they

were in control of their own space. They could even invite other people over for a cup of tea.”

The former training facility had small rooms with accommodation for 600 men. To curtail potential social problems, the design team EOOS devised a “do it together” social furniture collective, where the residents all built furniture in workshops, allowing them to feel useful and contribute to their new community.

In the third project, Next Enterprise Architects developed a solution based on a “room in room” module that can be adapted by the residents, depending on their needs. There are both asylum seekers and students living on the fifth and sixth floors, and recreational areas were created in the adjacent park.

“Social housing works best when architects and urban planners maximise the opportunities people have to communicate and socialise,” says Dreher. “The refugee situation is not a passing phenomenon. Instead, long-term solutions are needed.”



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Anna King was based in the Middle East for five years, working with the UN Refugee Agency to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis. She reflects on the seven-year anniversary of the conflict. mindfood.com/working-with-refugees