

# Humanitarian Support: Planning Emergency

Rony Brauman and Eyal Weizman in conversation

Additional remarks were added by Weizman one year after the conversation took place—at Columbia University, New York City—and these are placed in the margins of the text.

EW

While it is not obvious why a physician and an architect should speak together or seek to develop a common language, I have to admit that I have been inspired by your work for a long time, searching for ways in which the dilemmas and paradoxes of humanitarian practice can teach us something about the way we think of architectural intervention. Maybe a point of convergence is the moment in which, according to Michel Foucault, the history of modern architecture and planning intersect with the emergence of scientific medicine, through the perspective of a certain medicalisation of space that took place around the end of the eighteenth century. The physical design of the camps is the junction of military and medical principles, and both their spatial regime of multiple separations and their strict regimentation of time and space are somewhat reminiscent of the principles of the eighteenth century *machines à guérir* ('healing machines') of early hospitals. This is when categories such as hygiene, sanitation, and health become informative of new typologies of buildings, institutions, and urban organisations, to the extent that it became the vital logic in the organisation of life. Maybe we shouldn't call the buildings of modern architecture 'machines for living', but 'healing machines'. A refugee camp is perhaps the most extreme contemporary spatialisation of this phenomena that structured the reformed urbanisms of the nineteenth century. When Medecins Sans Frontières organises camps (that are built by UNHCR<sup>1</sup>), it must think spatially. It needs to take into account categories such as the management and containment of plague and other diseases, the vulnerability of people, the best way to organise displaced communities, and, in effect, creating what Michel Agiers called a proto-urban environment.

So, let's start with this moment of intersection of space and medicine: what are the categories and spatial principles you must take into account? How do we think through their precise location and territory? What are their boundaries? How are they organised internally?

RB

The location of refugee camps does not depend on the will of the UNHCR, who is, however, in charge of bringing protection and assistance to refugees worldwide, and does so, in third-world countries, through refugee camps. Refugees are located in refugee

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## Lucy Kimbell

*Free Evaluation Service* (2004–)

These dashboard dials were devised in a *Free Evaluation Service* workshop with Lucy Kimbell. *Free Evaluation Service* is a performance / service devised and delivered by artist Lucy Kimbell, which involves artists creating their own dashboards of indicators of success based on their own criteria. This is a critical space that adopts, adapts, and interferes with tools and techniques from the world of management, but for some participants is also a way of having a reflective conversation about their practice.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations agency for refugees, which is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

camps, but it didn't used to be the case, and is also not the case in first-world countries. A refugee camp is always close to a border because people cross it, fleeing persecution, for their own security: they cross the border and try to find a place. Border areas are always sensitive, especially when there is a war just on the other side; they are heavily loaded political places. Furthermore, one of the first preoccupations of local governments accepting refugees is to protect the good lands for their own population and take refugees to second-rate areas. So when we try to establish general criteria for the establishment of a refugee camp—roads and transportation, transport facilities, water supplies, and good health conditions—we are, in fact, assigned to them, even though some negotiation is possible. We depend on the goodwill of the local government, which is rather normal; they are sovereign in their countries and are defending their nation's interest.

The second thing to keep in mind is that refugee camps are political sanctuaries for people leaving a country at war. This means there are political and activist groups on both sides of the border, waging war on one side and trying to gain or keep control on the population. Any local government, therefore, is also involved, with or against its will, because the war is going on just across the border that concerns it. So, a government always has both an economic and a political interest in what is going on in a refugee camp.

A refugee camp is also an economic unit; tens of thousands of people coming without much money nevertheless creates quite a lot of money. It is important for local business to build roads, to bring pipes, to set up markets. Even though refugee camps are generally located in rather remote areas, they don't remain isolated for a long time, as economic activities grow—with truck traffic, NGOs, UN officials establishing their own premises. So, the location is not only physical, but also a political location, depending on the interest of the government, on trade and economic issues. Lastly, I'd like to remind you that all the conditions in which we assist refugees were established by the 1951 Geneva Convention for Refugees, an important part of international humanitarian law, which invites governments to open their doors to refugees, and gives them the right to choose where the refugee camp is, under the condition that good criteria are mobilised to establish decent living conditions. Amongst these criteria, the distance from the border is a very important one. The government has the right to move refugees away from the border in order to avoid direct relationships with the guerilla on the other side. Governments, however, seldom use this provision, and seem to like having refugee camps on the border, probably because this gives them some kind of power, and input in the situation across it.

Now, there are two limits of the camps themselves: the geographical and the legal, administrative one. Sometimes the refugee camp is an open field, with no clear boundary, where people can move quite freely. In other instances, it's a gated area, which may look like a camp, with towers and so on. The type of limits depends on the decision of local government, which you cannot know in advance.

The administrative limits rely on the status of the refugee, who becomes one after obtaining a refugee ID card showing a registration by the UNHCR or the

relevant UN agency. This is an asset, a good; it can be bought and sold. A few years ago in Angola three million were registered as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), when there were, in fact, probably less than two, but as they had been displaced for decades, they knew how to use the aid system. There was a know-how, and there were entire families living from dealing IDPs cards, who, when food or goods distribution was taking place, had the schedule and could move around and play with the IDPs cards. That is what we, in the indigenous language of the aid system, call the 'pull factor'. The bottom line is that people do play with the rules of the game, and can master them to some extent.

In Chad, it works the other way around. The refugees were established first; they fled from Darfur in 2005, and when they crossed the border, got assistance from local people for ethnic reasons, political support. Once the local population in Chad had to flee due to internal strife, they somehow got paid back with assistance from the refugees. So, it was not the pull factor, but a sort of generosity or return. The refugees assisted displaced persons,<sup>2</sup> which is one of the reasons why the IDPs camps were established around the refugee camps. The other reason was the fact that in the refugee camps were weapons, so people could organise their own safety and security. The Chadian were seeking security and benefited from the weapons in the camp. So, one again knows an exchange is taking place, which, like many exchanges, escapes our vision: it is quite hard to observe. But in general, there is a margin of error due to the fact that refugee cards are subject to some kind of trade.

EW

Emergencies are the way we politically refer to crisis. But it seems to me that emergencies are something that can last for a long time. In the area I have been researching, the obvious example is Palestinian refugee camps, which are now, in fact, urban to a great degree. There is a tension between the desire to build something secure, which appears to reinstate some sort of stability in a world that has been completely put into turmoil for displaced people, while still maintaining a kind of temporariness, one that is thus supporting a political claim for return. Building an apparently durable new city appears like giving up the claim to return to where one has come from, to where one has been displaced from.

Now this tension could be negotiated in space. And we are dealing with a considerable number of people housed in these kinds of situations, several millions refugees worldwide according to UNHCR, and a further twenty million displaced persons. Can refugee camps be considered as cities?

<sup>2</sup> A refugee is a displaced person who has crossed an international border; it is a purely legal distinction.

In his research on refugee camps in Africa, architect Manuel Herz demonstrated the amazingly rapid process by which anonymous rows of prefabricated dwellings evolve into sites of urban complexity. Within days of relocation, barter and commerce is established. Within weeks, markets evolve to exchange goods and labour with the citizens of the host country. Within several months, clusters and districts turn into a 'neighborhood', and temporary shelters become solid structures of adobe, brick, or corrugated sheets. Camps are always 'less' than cities, but have a sense of the urban nevertheless. So while the emergency architecture of humanitarian relief often seeks to communicate temporariness, because camp residents often like to demonstrate their intention to return to the places from which they

were forcefully relocated, these places may linger for decades in a state similar to what Georges Orwell once called the 'endless present' — permanent temporariness without past or future.

RB

The Palestinian example does not really apply, at least not for this particular issue, to the rest of refugee camps. These are not cities, are not built in bricks and cement, but in provisional materials, like plastic sheeting and wooden huts. And the bottom line is that it is, and has to remain, temporary. This is, in fact, also what happens. Since I started with MSF in the late 1970s, I had the opportunity to be in most refugee camps across the world; 99 percent of camps I visited, worked in, and most of the refugees I talked to, have gone back to their countries or found asylum in a third country. But temporary doesn't mean just a few weeks or months; it can last years, decades. It is a temporary permanent life, so to speak, which is established at the scale of a human life. Kids are born and grow-up in the refugee camp before going back to a country they don't know; so they effectively live in a place, which is their home, although it is makeshift.

There is an obsession not to be, from the aid community's point of view, a pull factor, supposedly created by an abundance of food, by schools, nice housing, by a number of facilities offered to refugees. The pull factor I think is rather theoretical, as some facilities can amplify the number of refugees by 10 to 15 percent, according to a number of sociologists, but they do not create it.

Now, for the sake of precise terminology, I avoid using the notion of 'emergency', since an emergency is supposed to be an event that starts and ends very quickly, at least in my own professional culture. I would favour the notion of crisis, i.e. a situation where what is normal becomes abnormal and what is extraordinary becomes banal; this kind of inversion I think is a good characteristic of a 'crisis'. The refugee camp is a crisis, an artificial situation for as long as it lasts, primarily because people cannot make their own living and largely depend upon external assistance. Now can an artificial setting become a town? In practical terms, the answer is 'no, it can't' if we consider the refugee camps, as I said before. Things are quite different when it comes to IDPs.

We might have a response in the coming years in Sudan, as it faces a huge displacement of population: 2.2 million people have left their villages for the margins of the big cities in Darfur. While aid workers at large tend to believe that once the war is over people will go back to their home villages, this is quite unlikely to happen—in fact, it never has, so there is no reason why it should. People will most probably remain in these areas and become dwellers of the towns to which they migrated. After all, contrary to refugees, they are in their home country. But in general, once you've spent years in the urban conditions of a camp, by which I mean the markets, cinemas, health facilities, schools, and interactions with strangers, which all together I think constitute the pleasure of urban life if not of cities, you want to continue to enjoy all this.

But there is absolutely no possibility to envisage any kind of urban planning at the early stages of displacement. In what appears to be mayhem, people start getting

organised, and behind this very messy image we may have in mind, that we see on TV, there is a hidden order, which is very interesting to analyse and understand. As time passes, conditions for urbanisation and planning do come up, which is when there might be a reflection, which to my knowledge has not happened yet. In Darfur, while the first reason why people will not go back is the so-called pleasure of urban life with all the nuances which I think everyone understands, the second reason is more political, i.e. their land being confiscated and occupied by others, so going back means violence again. And that's something that's not going to be fixed by anybody, I'm afraid.

EW

You once interestingly described the refugee camps as a humanitarian bubble, a non-place where displaced persons and the humanitarians are equally out of place. They meet for different reasons in a place foreign to both, which operates according to its own logic and is to some degree disconnected from its surroundings, like a kind of island. In this you recounted the way in which multiple languages are assembled, with humanitarians from all over the world, and displaced persons from larger territories, from different tribes and villages. And all of a sudden, all these people find themselves having to negotiate with this place, and establish some sort of life.

This may work as a counter-image to the very disturbing notion by which the camp is seen as the place where bare life is standing *vis-à-vis* power and some disciplinary form of government, where bodies are managed, rather than political subjects with their various forms of subjectivities and actions. If we accept that the urban is not the hardware of a city, the bricks and mortar, but the heterogeneity or multiplicities that a city has, I would like to argue that even in that humanitarian bubble—in the moment of assembly—there is a form of urbanity. So what kind of life takes place in a camp and what are its politics, which could undermine this view of the 'naked life' in it?

RB

What I meant by this bubble is the humanitarian island itself, in which most aid workers, who spend just a few months going back and forth, stick and talk to themselves, communicate through walkie-talkies and fancy communication devices. Though they are right in the middle of the refugee camp, they are not *in* the refugee camp. They are away from it, maybe, as you might put it, 'on a vertical border': they are above, below, or besides it, but not really in the camp.

Often managed by UN agencies (UNHCR, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, being the largest), national organisations (USAid), or by a combination of more than five hundred contemporary-crisis NGOs, these zones designate the formation of a global generic space for 'humanitarian management'. While they may appear like rather simple physical environments, humanitarian zones rely on complex assemblages of spatial arrangements, infrastructure, means of communication, and legal and organisational procedures. Humanitarian zones are global spaces woven into international networks of information-flow through the media and to the global network of commodity-circulation through the products of aid. At present, the thirteen thousand international aid workers in Darfur—citizens of more than thirty different nations, members of hundreds of different relief organisations—are living in scores of staff encampments built next to refugee camps. Camps are where different nationalities and linguistic groups, refugees of different origins, aid workers, and journalists interact for the first time. A reorganisation of political relations within the displaced communities often takes place during the process of relocation.

The internal layout of many camps folds in complex geographies. After crossing a border, fleeing inhabitants of entire territories are handled by humanitarians and organised into a dense (and sometimes segregated) fabric of districts, blocks, and repetitive shelters. Humanitarian zones, such as those recently established in the Democratic Republic of the Congo after the resumption of hostilities there, quickly give rise to refugee camps, the latter forming the material link between the concept of “humanitarian intervention” and a massive and rapid — although largely unnoticed — processes of migration, construction, and urbanisation.

Through the process of professionalisation and expansion of humanitarian aid in general — which I worked on so have no regrets about it as it was, in my opinion, needed — and as a result of this evolution, we now have huge humanitarian teams which are most of the time very useful. There are, for instance, thirteen thousand humanitarian aid workers in Darfur, of which one thousand are expatriate, and the rest Sudanese. And behind the refugee camps’ apparent chaos, there is, in fact, a hidden order: people settle in particular quarters because they are next to their kin, to the people of their village, with whom they share political or ethnic affiliation. Ethnicity doesn’t explain much, but geography and politics do. The basic organisation is invisible to us westerners who are used to visualising social difference, yet people know the difference, they have it in mind, and it is anything but chaotic. So there are organised neighborhoods with traditional leaders and their authority, but then rival leaders emerge who are able to deal with foreigners and speak to them. This creates difficult tensions, especially as these new leaders may turn out to be exploiters, thieves, rapists, and so on. They exchange money or sex or any kind of asset against soap and blankets, becoming the middlemen between aid workers and refugees. But we never find out directly; we learn about it casually. On the other hand, we have to work with people who are able to exchange and interact with us, which means we sort of feed internal tensions; I think this is the price to pay to organise aid, which is so badly needed in refugee camps to avoid the death of many more people.

And lastly: I don’t think the concept of ‘bare life’ applies to the situations we’re talking about. Of course, we take care of the bodies, as doctors. Except for those who teach and address children’s minds, we as aid workers try to maintain life, and after all I feel quite comfortable with this. I would, on the contrary, feel very uncomfortable if we were trying to do more, to control or penetrate people’s minds. What people ask us, what they expect from us, is to help them survive. For the rest, they can manage by themselves, and do so through a field of forces, through tense or ordinary social relationships, through a variety of levels of life. But that is social and political life, just the opposite of ‘bare life’. The fact that it is highly politicised replicates the ordinary life of neighborhoods, of social interaction.

EW

An important contribution to thinking about humanitarianism appears to be MSF’s realisation that in spite of the good intentions, the results are not always positive. Sometimes the force field of various political or military interests on the ground

Throughout the past two decades, humanitarian interventions have grown to structure Western states’ response to emergency.

can mean that humanitarian intervention is abused, and played to the hands of the perpetrators of violence. And I would like to point to your thinking and actions in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s, in the realisation that humanitarian refugee camps were part of a policy of ethnic reorganisation of the country at the time. You articulated this paradox of humanitarianism very well, as evolving from professional medical work and the possibility for it to bear witness, to a profound questioning of that. This conflict, between taking a public position, and being a professional one, which can sometimes contribute to the perpetration of injustice, is very much a dilemma that architects have to face, and also why it would be useful to hear about the strategies you uncovered to deal with such a problem.

RB

In a few words, what happened in Ethiopia is that at a certain stage, we realised that we were part of a broad political project, which was the brainchild of the Stalinist regime of the country at the time, manufacturing the ‘new man’, and establishing the first authentically Communist regime in Ethiopia. And it could only be achieved through a massive dislocation of peasants and farmers — who were considered backward, a break to the revolution — to be forcefully relocated in order to be under the control of the party. Families were separated and people were isolated in order to be weakened, and more susceptible to the control of the party.

People were deported in terribly harsh conditions, were very weak and further weakened by being taken to new settlement areas and separated from their families. We found out that, as a result, tens and tens of thousands of people died, and while starvation had gone down, mortality continued to increase due to this forceful relocation drive. And we were part of it, because we were attracting people like bait in a trap. Local people knew they should never trust this violent dictatorial government, but as aid workers were permanently dwelling in these so-called relief camps, they gained confidence and walked to them to get, of course, relief. We also brought assistance to the government on another logistical level, as they were taking our trucks, planes, and anything they could in order to accelerate and amplify this relocation. So, we became assistants to crimes against humanity, in legal terms, which is not my favorite lexicon, but seems to me appropriate in this context. We were accomplices of this crime and yet didn’t have to do so: we were

At the core of the idea of ‘humanitarian intervention’ is the ethico-political principle recently framed as ‘responsibility to protect’, which lies at the heart of the humanitarian impulse. The problem is that in order to get to the victims of armed conflicts, protect them and provide aid — or at least claim to do so — states sometimes have to engage in military actions. Increasingly (and in places such as Mogadishu, Kosovo, and Afghanistan), this intervention has bound humanitarian agencies with the logic of war-making. Anyone working in the humanitarian sector should take Colin Powell’s 2001 statement that NGOs and relief workers are “force multiplier for us ... an important part of our combat team” as a cause for serious concern. When soldiers in what George W. Bush has called “the armies of compassion” become proxy experts in humanitarianism, humanitarian concerns could easily become a pretext to justify impartiality with respect to an unjust and brutal aggressions (as in Sarajevo) or an alibi for a political decision to mount a military intervention against sovereign states (as in Afghanistan and Iraq). The paradox in this and other scenarios is that human rights and humanitarian action may actually aggravate the situation for the very people it purportedly comes to aid. This scenario is at the heart of the humanitarian paradox.

In seeking to avoid their instrumentalisation in the hands of military, political, and other interested parties, you have recently defined a certain operational distance from states and their militaries and returned to more traditional humanitarian concepts of

impartiality and neutrality. I understand the term 'humanitarian space', you have coined, as a zone carved out of state sovereignty or the space of war to be kept at a distance from state politics and battle-spaces. Although primarily defined in geographical terms as 'real spaces', these zones of emergency management are spheres of action that could be understood as conceptual as well as a physical inasmuch as they are free of political and military influence, and in which the infrastructure and the technology of aid organisations could facilitate the protecting, policing, feeding, providing health care, but also a place where advocacy and discussion amongst displaced people and between them and international agents can take place.

free. So, an ethical dilemma emerged between speaking out at the risk of being kicked out, and continuing on the ground, at the risk of being accomplices to a crime against humanity. We tried hard to overcome this dilemma by organising a protest against the government, but we failed; for most NGOs, going public means taking political stances and therefore betraying their sacred principle of neutrality. This is an important issue, as the basic assumption was that as long as they remain mute and docile to the authorities, NGOs considered they were not actually involved in politics. Abiding to government politics was not doing politics; it was doing their jobs. Protesting, not against this politics, but the fact that we were involved in it, was becoming political. This logical contradiction was not accepted at the time by the NGOs, even though most later admitted they should have spoken out, and MSF was expelled; this made me realise something very banal in a way, which is that we could be part of the problem, and not only part of the solution.

The first thing I felt we had to take care of afterwards, was to outline our own responsibility in a situation, not that of governments, of the international community, the UN system, the U.S. government ... and ask: what are we doing? Are we serving people the way we intend to? Can we confirm that our noble intentions are translated into actions and not diverted from the track they were supposed to take, that they are not turned against the population? I shifted away from human rights advocacy and public denunciation of local political forces, because there are human rights organisations who can do the job, who are better equipped and in a better position to do so. Human rights organisations can bear witness in a much more fair or balanced way, but our own responsibility is to make sure that what we do serves the population, and not the ruling power.

In Darfur, for example, there was both an issue about the actual figures of people who had died, and of the qualification of what was happening there. MSF decided to take a public position both to prove that we are a humanitarian aid and bring help to everybody, and to try not to play into the hands of the government, or if that was unavoidable, at least not to let it bear consequences on our job. So we came up with our own figures about mortality, after carrying out a number of investigations. We came out denying that it was a genocide, cutting through to the very heated debate about whether there is, or isn't a genocide there and in opposition to the human rights campaign 'Save Darfur'. We certainly played into the hands of the government, because it could then say, 'You see, MSF says there is no genocide', but we also said that two hundred thousand people had died and that it was a very cruel war, in which crimes against humanity were perpetrated. This was strongly denied by the

government who claimed that less than ten thousand people had died. In avoiding being caught by symmetric propagandas, we sort of imposed our own *regime de vérité* (policy of truth). We could grab a more accurate picture of what we were doing, and gained respect from the Sudanese authority, although we were contradicting some of their assertions. This is an example of positioning that can play, at least partially, into the hands of local power, but we don't really care. What matters is that we are doing the job the way we think we should, which means being able to monitor the distribution of goods and services, to move around in order to make sure we're not in a specific place because the local authorities want us to, but because of actual needs, to speak to people and assess the situation, and to consider what local people have in mind. These are the criteria that allow us to establish a minimum margin of freedom to act relevantly, to act in a correct way, to serve people. This is the real issue, and whether certain positions serve the interests of certain political forces or not is secondary, is not important.

EW

The Center for Reflection on Humanitarian Action, which you direct, shows how complicated this intervention has to be, and that, in fact, the professional humanitarian needs to take into account very complex political force fields. And this reflection is folded into your practice, into the way in which you would organise within a particular situation. I find something very consistent throughout this conversation in how you seem to resist all the categories of depoliticising emergency, bare life, and genocide, though operating on a medical level, and accepting the agency of players within a particular situation. And lastly I think that something that appears as such a grave subject nevertheless can still give hope, and at least if this is not something that would make a better world, it would make it a little less bad.