

REDESIGN OF A RECEPTION AND IDENTIFICATION CAMP FOR REFUGEES ON THE
AEGEAN ISLANDS

Reflection

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At the start of the graduation year I had a completely different idea on what my graduation project would be about. Through research and discussion with my tutors the focus changed from emergency response shelters, to the subject of refugee camps. During that time, Reception and Identification Camp Moria on Lesbos Island, Greece, had just burned down.

Reading about the horrible living conditions in this camp and hearing about this first hand from friends who had the chance to help out at the camp before it burned down, the desire grew to find a way to (re)design refugee camps in a way to 'humanely' house people with 'good' living quality.

1. Relationship research-design

This is a huge topic. Throughout the overall process, I used my research to narrow down and define the graduation project and research/design questions.

It started with research into the political background, and how a situation with such horrible living conditions like in camp Moria could exist on European soil. The gained knowledge from this research helped not only to situate this project into its larger social and political context (**see ethical issues and dilemmas**), it also made clear that the poor living conditions in Moria were not a result of lack of means. Rather those living conditions are the result of policies and a purposeful lack of willingness to invest in proper housing for asylum seekers/refugees at the 'forefront of the battle', which due to the Dublin Regulation are the border countries of the EU. This opened up the opportunity to situate this project in a way that it could serve as an example in the larger (political) refugee debate; it does not take much resources to create a camp which can provide quality housing.

From here an understanding on what is needed to design refugee camps is gained through case and literature studies. Through this research into the state of the art of camp design theory and development, it was possible to distil four main points needed in order to design and build a new camp. These points are the possibility for refugees to be (economic) active, interdependence (between refugee and host-country/community), cocreation (by refugee and host-country/community) and integration (spatially and socially).

At that time, thematic research into straw as a building material was done, since the hypothesis going into this research was that straw, being a by-product of wheat, could aid in these four points mentioned and be an essential part in redesigning camps in a way that would provide quality living conditions in a refugee camp with minimal means.

The conclusion from this research was that straw could be an innovative and suitable way to design and build refugee camps, not only Moria, but it could serve as a model to create quality camps around the world, with slight changes to the proposed design.

From here on, the foundation was laid and the design could take shape through applying the knowledge gained and adhering to the framework created in the previous steps of the research.

In conclusion, this has been a process in which the research has truly guided the outcome of the design. While this might seem logical, it is something I have been struggling to do in the past, where it is tempting to have a certain outcome in mind, and tailor your research to aid to that. All of the research has been

used for the design in one way or another. Be it for contextual political understanding or selecting and applying building material for the design.

2. Relationship graduation topic – studio topic – master track

While the studio of architectural engineering officially has three main themes, I opted to pursue my interests instead of religiously adhering to one of those topics. During the process of formulating my graduation project, I realized that the theme of harvest and the proposed domains of make and flow (flow of material of straw) fit my theme. But these themes were not guiding for the choice of the graduation topic.

The relation between my topic and the studio becomes more apparent when looking more in depth into the studio mission. Prof. Thijs Asselbergs' introduction into the studio at the beginning of the year clearly states that technology needs to be applied in a way to aid in a more sustainable and improved building process. The question is posed; 'if technology is the answer, what is the design question'. In my case, a sustainable building material (straw) is used in a *low-tech and innovative* way to improve the living conditions of humans living in the specific place of a refugee camp. For this improvement there is not only the need to address the technological, but also social and spatial aspects, which ties into the master track of architecture.

3. Research method and approach in relation to the graduation studio

The studio of architectural engineering requires students to formulate their own graduation project. Students start by presenting their technical fascination in combination with a topic and go from there. My road was slightly different: I had the topic of redesigning the refugee camp early on, while the technical aspect of possibly using straw as a building material came later on. While this is not the order the studio presents, it had the pleasant consequence that my topic was clear from the beginning: while other students struggled to define a certain design challenge fitting their technical fascination, mine was clear from the beginning. It was more a matter of narrowing down the huge topic into a project that was feasible and fitting into a one year graduation project. Neither of these methods and approaches are wrong, the important aspect is that research guides the outcome with an open mind and not a predetermined result in mind.

4. Relationship graduation project – social, professional and scientific framework and its transferability

(Forced) migration is a phenomenon present throughout the history of mankind and there is no sign that it will stop soon. Past years, the amount of people forcibly displaced has only increased. There is a call by an increasing number of aid worker professionals to see migration and refugee camps as something permanent, not something temporary. In turn, it is also necessary to construct refugee camps in a way that can provide quality in a permanent way. This is something my project aims to do, as well as providing needed humane quality (as defined in the project) housing while leaving room for individual expression in the great cultural variety present in a place like a refugee camp. Due to this flexibility and very low-tech approach, in its core the project is transferable to other regions of the world. Adjustments would have to

be made in accordance with the availability of power and fresh water, more emphasis would have to be put on self-sustainability of the camp.

5. Ethical dilemmas and issues, putting the project into context

This theme of migration is highly complex, multifaceted with many stakeholders involved; politics, policy, host-country, host-community, refugees and their families, living conditions and so forth.

One of the biggest ethical dilemmas and/or issues is the fact that I myself have not been directly affected by any of this, and yet I am designing a whole camp for refugees in a country which is not my own. This can be explained when putting this project into its proper context. It should serve as a conversation piece, as part of the migration discourse. The project clearly takes a stance in this discourse; there is need for humane housing for all, also for refugees. No policy of deterrence or lack of interest and/or investment can justify treating other human beings the way the EU treated the people in camp Moria. Not only on moral grounds, but also when looking at the human rights as defined by the European conventions of human rights are being violated.

I do believe this project has real-life application potential, where with this method qualitative living conditions in camps can be created with minimal resources, not only in Europe, but other parts of the world as well. The proposed strategy takes not only the refugees but also the needs of the host-country into account.

Concluding remarks

Building on the last paragraph, the next step for this project would be the involvement of other disciplines as sociology, international affairs and so forth. While I researched these subjects and implemented the results of this research to the best of my ability, the input of the expertise of these types of fields are crucial. After all, I am an studying to become an architect. Ideally the involvement of these disciplines would be in an early stage in the process of the design.

The most notable aspect of the research of the tutors was their capability to help me reduce the enormous topic into a project that is feasible to complete within one year of studies. Helping me narrow down the vast amount of information and filtering relevant from irrelevant lines of research.

This also ties into what I have learned from my own work; being more confident in my research and design skills. And in turn, let the research guide your outcome, in which you can make small bite sized chunks of work, without having to be able to tackle everything at once.