FRAMEWORK FOR REFUGEES SHELTER

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ABSTRACT

Refugee camps serve as critical lifelines for displaced populations, providing essential shelter, safety, and stability in the wake of conflict, persecution, or natural disasters. However, these camps often fall short of their potential, leaving residents in states of uncertainty and vulnerability. This paper explores the multidimensional challenges faced by refugees, focusing on the interplay between physical infrastructure, emotional well-being, and social integration. Drawing on international standards and ethnographic research, the study highlights the limitations of existing solutions, such as overcrowded shelters and rigid management structures, which fail to address the long-term needs of displaced individuals.

The research emphasizes the need for holistic approaches to camp design and management that balance economic, social, and environmental dimensions of livability. Key recommendations include integrating health, education, and livelihood development into camp infrastructure, encouraging community participation, and creating gender-sensitive designs to address safety concerns and empower women. By prioritizing dignity, autonomy, and opportunities for growth, refugee camps can transition from temporary shelters to platforms for resilience and recovery. This paper underscores the importance of reimagining refugee camps not only as spaces for survival but also as environments where displaced individuals can rebuild their lives sustainably, with hope and nobility.

KEYWORDS: *Refugees, Shelter, Displacement, Physical and Psychological Well-being, Cultural Appropriateness, sustainability*

I. INTRODUCTION

With over a billion families worldwide facing inadequate housing due to war, disasters, and poverty, the need for sustainable solutions is urgent (Ohlson & Melich, 2014). Among them, more than 6.6 million refugees reside in camps, seeking safety and stability as they navigate solutions to their displacement (USA for UNHCR, 2021). Shelters in refugee contexts provide essential safety and stability for individuals displaced by conflict, persecution, or natural disasters. While both man-made and humanitarian-led camps aim to create safe spaces, many fall short of addressing refugees' long-term physical, emotional, and social needs. Temporary solutions, such as tents, often fail to meet the challenges of extended displacement, leading to overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and increased vulnerabilities (Ohlson & Melich, 2014; Sphere Association, 2018).

Beyond physical protection, shelters play a vital role in providing psychological stability. They offer privacy, safety, and a foundation for rebuilding lives, but systemic barriers and risks faced by vulnerable groups, particularly women, highlight the need for more comprehensive approaches (UNHCR, 2024).

This paper examines the challenges and opportunities in designing livable and sustainable refugee camps. It emphasizes the importance of holistic strategies that integrate health, sustainability, education, and social inclusion to transform camps into spaces of resilience and recovery. The first chapter explores the concept of shelter and the importance of creating a sense of belonging. The second chapter delves into designing livable refugee camps, addressing both tangible and intangible needs. The final chapter highlights the importance of sustainability and self-sufficiency within shelters and refugee camps. All findings will be synthesized into a comprehensive framework presented in the conclusion of this research paper.

II. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

2.1. Problem statement

Refugee shelters, while essential for providing temporary safety and stability to displaced individuals, often fail to meet the multifaceted needs of their residents. Current solutions, such as tents and camps, are designed for short-term emergencies but frequently become long-term accommodations due to protracted displacement (USA for UNHCR, 2021). This mismatch results in unsanitary conditions, security risks, and limited opportunities for residents to rebuild their lives.

Additionally, many shelters neglect critical psychological and social dimensions, leaving refugees, especially vulnerable groups like women and children, at risk of exploitation, violence, and social exclusion (Yousuf et al., 2021). Systemic barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, gender-insensitive design, and limited access to education, employment, and healthcare, further exacerbate these challenges.

To address these shortcomings, there is an urgent need to reimagine refugee camps not just as places of shelter but as platforms for resilience and recovery (Rashidi & Hosseini, 2017). By integrating sustainable, physical, emotional, and social needs into their design and management, refugee shelters can become places that restore safety, encourage growth, and create pathways to long-term stability.

2.2. Objectives

This research seeks to establish a comprehensive framework for designing ideal refugee shelters that address the social, physical, psychological, and cultural needs of displaced populations. The study focuses on identifying essential shelter features to ensure safety, sustainability, functionality, and durability while promoting psychological well-being through privacy and a sense of belonging. It seeks to enhance social inclusion by integrating education, employment, and participatory decision-making and proposes gender-sensitive and culturally appropriate designs to protect vulnerable groups. Finally, the research emphasizes creating a holistic model that balances economic, social, and environmental sustainability to transform refugee shelters into spaces of resilience and recovery. This come with the following main research question: *How can a framework for refugee shelter design address the physical, psychological, social, and cultural needs of displaced populations while ensuring safety, sustainability, privacy, and a sense of belonging?* To answer the main questions, the following sub-questions are defined: (1) *What factors contribute to the physical safety and emotional well-being of displaced individuals in shelter environments? (2) What are the tangible and intangible needs of displaced populations in refugee camps? (3) How can principles of sustainability be effectively incorporated into the design of refugee shelters?*

III. SCOPE

This research mainly focuses on developing a framework for designing refugee shelters that address the physical, psychological, social, and cultural needs of displaced populations, it also explores durable and sustainable shelter solutions that ensure safety, morality, and privacy while encouraging a sense of belonging. The study emphasizes social inclusion, gender-sensitive designs, and strategies to mitigate risks for vulnerable groups, such as women and children. By integrating eco-friendly materials and promoting community-building opportunities, the research focuses on creating liveable, sustainable environments adaptable to diverse geographic and climatic conditions. The findings will provide actionable insights for architects, engineers, humanitarian organizations, and policymakers, transforming refugee shelters into platforms for resilience and long-term recovery. The study is limited to the design of shelters within refugee camps and does not address broader political or economic systems influencing displacement.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to comprehensively analyse and develop a framework for designing optimal refugee shelters. The methodology addresses both physical and psychological needs while exploring sustainable solutions to improve the liveability and functionality of refugee camps.

4.1 Literature review

A desk research of existing studies, international guidelines (e.g., Sphere Standards, UNHCR frameworks), and case studies of refugee camps worldwide is provide for a foundational understanding of shelter design challenges and best practices. This review is focussed on identifying key physical, social, and psychological needs that shelters must address and examining innovative design methodologies relevant to refugee contexts.

4.2 Case study analysis

Real-world applications of shelter designs are analysed through case studies of selected applications and one of the largest existing camps, Zaatari in Jordan. This camp offers valuable insights into infrastructure effectiveness, social dynamics, and environmental adaptation. Data collected from these settings will help identify strengths, limitations, and opportunities for innovation in shelter design.

By integrating these methods, this research seeks to generate actionable insights for the design and implementation of refugee shelters, focusing on sustainable and self-sufficient solutions that address both immediate needs and long-term challenges.

4.3 Framework development

Findings are synthesized into a hierarchical framework that categorizes key design parameters into physical and psychological requirements. This framework serves as a guideline for creating shelters that meet basic needs, promote social inclusion, and ensure sustainability.

This methodology ensures a comprehensive and evidence-based approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges of refugee shelter design.

V. SHELTER AND BELONGING: BRIDGING PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Refugee shelters provide safety, protection, and stability for those displaced by conflict, persecution, or disasters. They offer refuge from violence while encouraging security essential for mental well-being. Both man-made and humanitarian-led camps aim to create safe spaces, though their success varies. This chapter explores the dual role of shelters in refugee contexts, focusing on their capacity to provide both physical safety and psychological stability for displaced populations. It examines how well-designed shelters can address immediate needs such as protection from violence and harsh weather while encouraging resilience and a sense of belonging.

Although tents are cost-effective and quick to deploy, they typically last only six months, despite refugee camps often remaining in place for years or even decades. This disparity leads to overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and increased risks of disease and crime, further amplifying the vulnerabilities of displaced populations (Ohlson & Melich, 2014).

By redefining the role of shelters, new solutions can be developed to address immediate safety needs while laying the groundwork for long-term resilience and growth.

5.1 Shelter as a physical and psychological foundation
Besides the primary function of a shelter to protect individuals from external threats such as harsh weather, violence, and crime, its role extends far beyond mere physical protection. A well-designed

shelter also provides psychological stability by offering privacy, safety, and an environment where families can begin to rebuild a semblance of normalcy (Szilágyi, 2021).

Key features such as access to water, sanitation facilities, and opportunities for livelihood are critical in creating stability and morality for displaced individuals. As Béla Szilágyi (2021) emphasizes, shelters must serve not only as physical refuges but also as platforms for rebuilding lives. This dual purpose, addressing immediate survival while paving the way for long-term recovery, makes shelter a vital element in bridging the physical and emotional gaps created by displacement.

By providing a physically stable shelter design, refugees are better equipped to achieve emotional stability (Szilágyi, 2021). Such shelters address essential needs, offering displaced individuals the foundation to move forward, ensuring their safety while building their resilience and emotional well-being.

5.2 Emotional struggles and the need for belonging

The experience of displacement extends beyond the physical loss of home; it profoundly affects refugees' mental and emotional well-being. The challenges they face, from disrupted social networks to cultural adjustment, create a complex web of difficulties that hinder their ability to rebuild their lives.

Refugees often endure profound losses of loved ones, identity, autonomy, and community, leaving lasting impacts on their mental health. Displacement disrupts access to resources, social networks, and livelihoods, weakening overall well-being and leading to feelings of helplessness and uncertainty about the future (UNHCR, 2024).

Resettlement introduces additional challenges, including language barriers, fragmented social networks, and unfamiliar healthcare systems. Systemic discrimination and xenophobia often exacerbate these stressors, amplifying emotional distress. Men, for example, frequently experience mental health struggles tied to employment barriers, such as credential non-recognition and language limitations (Yehuda & Bierer, 2009).

Beyond physical shelter, belonging is deeply connected to emotional attachments and the familiarity of home. Antonsich (2010) describes "place-belongingness" as a strong emotional connection to spaces that provide comfort and security. Symbolic items like heirlooms or photographs help refugees anchor their identities to their past, reinforcing their sense of self amid displacement (Szilágyi, 2021).

Cultural adjustment further complicates emotional well-being, straining personal identity and family dynamics. For some, resettlement can trigger past trauma, as experiences echo earlier losses or adversity. Holistic support, including pathways to education, employment, and community inclusion, is essential for encouraging resilience and rebuilding lives with morality (Szilágyi, 2021).

This psychological burden is especially heavy for young refugees navigating both migration upheaval and the transition to adulthood. This "double liminal status," as described by Camino and Krulfeld (2005), leaves many feeling isolated, uncertain about their future, and struggling with homelessness and societal rejection (Couch, 2017).

To support refugees in overcoming these challenges, integration programs must address the systemic and structural barriers that impact mental health challenges. These include reforming credential recognition processes, combating discrimination, and creating accessible healthcare systems. By reducing daily stressors and providing refugees with resources and opportunities, host societies can contribute to their resilience and recovery. Addressing these needs holistically not only benefits displaced individuals but also strengthens social cohesion and mutual understanding, creating more inclusive and harmonious communities (Szilágyi, 2021).

VI. DESIGNING LIVABLE REFUGEE CAMPS: ADDRESSING TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE NEEDS

A truly liveable refugee camp is more than a temporary refuge; it is a space where displaced individuals can meet their basic needs, regain stability, and rebuild their lives. Many camps fall short of these goals, leaving residents in prolonged states of uncertainty and deprivation (Gale, 2012). Achieving dignity and autonomy in refugee camps requires a holistic approach to design and management that addresses both tangible and intangible needs (Szilágyi, 2021).

This chapter explores key challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and gender-based vulnerabilities, while emphasizing the importance of integrating health, education, and social inclusion into camp environments. By shifting priorities and reimagining refugee camps as platforms for recovery and empowerment, it highlights how thoughtful, holistic design can transform these spaces into environments that support safety, resilience, and long-term growth.

6.1 Minimum standards and practical challenges

International standards, such as those outlined by the Sphere Association and UNHCR, define the minimum requirements for shelter and facilities. For example, a family of six is typically allocated 25 square meters of living space, barely enough to maintain privacy and functionality. Providing refugees with organized camps divided into blocks of approximately 1,000 people does little to help them create a sense of community, because of the lack of social structures and shared spaces. Establishing a hierarchy within these camps is essential to ensure greater stability and build a stronger sense of belonging and cohesion (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2007).

Shelters must do more than protect against physical threats like harsh weather and violence. Thoughtful design, including adequate ceiling heights, accessible water points, and sanitation facilities near homes, ensures both physical and psychological safety. Addressing these basic needs while integrating structural foresight can mitigate risks such as gender-based violence, disease, and crime (Kenrick et al., 2010; Sphere Association, 2018, Szilágyi, 2021).

6.2 Safety concerns for women

Safety concerns in refugee camps are a critical issue, as residents often face risks such as violence, harassment, and inadequate protection from external threats. Refugee women face intersecting challenges that exacerbate their vulnerability. As Rabeya Yousuf (2021) highlights, social divisions such as gender intersect with systemic barriers, compounding difficulties in mobility, leadership, and access to resources. For example in the Rohingya camps, women often encounter harassment and sexual violence while performing daily tasks like collecting water or accessing sanitation facilities, especially in poorly lit areas at night (Yousuf et al., 2021).

Creating women-only spaces, improving camp lighting, and designing gender-sensitive infrastructure are essential steps to mitigate these risks. The persistent issue of sexual violence underscores the need for tailored solutions that address the specific challenges faced by women and girls in camps, providing a safer and more inclusive environment (Yousuf et al., 2021).

6.3 A Vision for liveable refugee camps

Refugee camps should strive to be more than places of shelter, they must provide residents with opportunities to rebuild their lives. Holistic approaches to camp management can integrate health, education, and economic infrastructure while reducing rigid control mechanisms that limit personal agency. Programs that combat discrimination, promote social inclusion, and empower residents are critical to achieving this goal (The International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2016).

The UNHCR's minimum standards for a 'liveable' refugee camp reveal significant limitations in supporting individuals striving to rebuild their lives toward normalcy. Living conditions that require six people to share just 25 square meters fail to provide the safety, privacy, and space necessary for a sense of security. Small, cramped spaces that lack protection from external threats undermine residents' ability

to feel safe. Refugees need lockable doors, room to move, space to store personal belongings, and the flexibility to adapt their living environments to their needs. Additionally, they require the opportunity to establish safe communities where they can work together to create stability and continue their lives, even if it is not in their preferred location (The International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2016).

As Rashidi & Hosseini (2017) suggest, liveability requires balancing economic, social, and environmental dimensions to create spaces that are not only safe but also empowering. By addressing these needs comprehensively, refugee camps can serve as platforms for recovery, resilience, and hope, helping displaced individuals envision and work toward a brighter future.

VII.   SUSTAINABILITY IN REFUGEE SHELTER DESIGN

Sustainability is a critical consideration in the design and implementation of refugee shelters, addressing not only the environmental impact of displacement but also the long-term needs of vulnerable populations. With over a billion families facing inadequate housing due to conflict, disasters, and poverty, sustainable shelter solutions are no longer optional but essential (Ohlson & Melich, 2014). This chapter explores the limitations of traditional solutions, such as temporary tents, and highlights the urgent need for durable and resource-efficient alternatives. By examining innovative designs like solar-powered and modular shelters, it demonstrates how sustainable approaches can improve living conditions, reduce environmental strain, and empower refugees to rebuild their futures

Sustainable refugee shelters aim to balance environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Traditional approaches, such as temporary tents, often fail to meet these needs. They degrade quickly, require frequent replacement, and contribute to resource depletion, particularly in protracted crises where camps last for years. Environmentally, the use of renewable materials, such as flax, recycled plastic, or compressed earth blocks, minimizes resource consumption while reducing waste. Socially, sustainable shelters enhance morality by providing durable, weather-resistant structures that promote safety, privacy, and well-being. Economically, long-lasting materials reduce maintenance costs and frequent replacements, allowing for more efficient use of humanitarian funds (Sphere Association, 2018).

Examples like IKEA's Better Shelter, which integrates solar panels for lighting and power, demonstrate how renewable energy can be a practical and scalable solution. Solar-powered shelters not only improve living conditions but also reduce reliance on external energy sources, which are often costly and environmentally harmful (IKEA Foundation, 2023). Additionally, modular designs enable incremental upgrades, making shelters adaptable to changing needs and contexts.

The connection between sustainability and resilience is clear: well-designed shelters improve the quality of life for refugees and empower them to rebuild their futures. Integrating sustainable features into camp infrastructure, such as water recycling systems and energy-efficient cooking stoves, can also benefit host communities by reducing environmental strain and encouraging cooperation. Sustainable shelter solutions are pivotal in achieving this goal, transforming camps into environments that support recovery, self-reliance, and environmental stewardship.

VIII.   CONCLUSION – UNDERSTANDING REFUGEES' NEEDS

Examining the needs of refugees uncovers a multifaceted connection between physical, social, and psychological factors, influenced by culture, context, and individual circumstances. It becomes clear that in terms of seeking for shelter in camps the most important aspect are the **Physical needs,** followed by the **Social needs** which then enhances the **psychological needs** of displaced populations. Insights from diverse frameworks and theories reveal both shared patterns and distinct differences, underscoring the importance of flexibility and adaptability in developing effective solutions.

8.1 Physical needs
Shelter provides the foundation for meeting physical needs and is essential for protection, security, and participation in daily activities. Béla Szilágyi (2021) highlight the layered requirements for shelters, which include:
- **Functional efficiency:** Safety and security tailored to gender, age, and social circumstances. Security encompasses protection against natural disasters and violence.
- **Shelter performance:** Physical elements such as walls, roofs, and materials must ensure comfort, thermal regulation, and resilience to environmental conditions.
- **Functional efficiency:** Safety and security are foundational.
- **Shelter performance**: Comfort and environmental adaptation are critical.
- **Sustainable solutions:** Renewable materials (e.g., recycled plastic, compressed earth blocks, natural fibres)
- **Integrating self-sufficiency:** Designs such as IKEA's solar-powered Better Shelter, enhance safety, privacy, and dignity while reducing maintenance costs and environmental impact (Sphere Association, 2018; IKEA Foundation, 2023).
- **Modular and adaptability**: shelters provide adaptability to changing needs, and features like water recycling and energy-efficient stoves benefit both refugees and host communities.

Refugee shelters must go beyond providing physical protection; they should encourage a sense of stability and identity, enabling users to integrate into host communities while maintaining morality and cultural practices (Kenrick et al., 2010).

8.2 Social needs
Social needs within a refugee camp are essential for creating a sense of community, inclusion, and connection, allowing residents to rebuild relationships, access support networks, and regain a sense of normalcy in their lives. The most essential social needs consist of:
- **Community-building opportunities**: for community-building and social connections.
- **Interconnected population structures/hierarchy**: Smaller, interconnected population structures to enhance belonging.
- **Access to education, employment, and inclusion programs**: Opportunities Access to education, employment, and social inclusion programs.
- **Communal spaces for shared activities**: Creation of communal spaces for shared activities.
- **Camp hierarchies for stability and cohesion:** Organized hierarchies within camps for stability and cohesion.
- **Aesthetic needs:** Formal and textural elements, along with color schemes, influence refugees' perception of their environment.
- **Language and communication:** Barriers often complicate diagnosis, coping, and treatment of mental health conditions.
- **Local context:** The shelter's design must respect cultural norms, environmental conditions, and the social system of the host community.

8.3 Psychological needs

Psychological needs are essential for refugees to feel included and develop a sense of belonging. Achieving psychological stability is crucial for them to rebuild their lives and enabling personal growth. Important psychological needs for refugees are:

- **Privacy needs:** Refugees require spaces that respect personal and social privacy, minimizing acoustical and visual intrusions.
- **Emotional support:** Emotional support to address trauma, loss, and uncertainty.
- **Targeted protection:** Targeted programs for vulnerable groups (e.g., women and children) to reduce risks like harassment and violence.
- **Systemic barriers to restore autonomy:** Reduction of systemic barriers, such as language challenges and credential recognition, to restore autonomy.
- **Belonging and resilience:** A sense of belonging and opportunities to regain stability and resilience.
- **Cultural integration:** Respect for social norms, beliefs, and customs ensures that shelters meet psychological and social needs.

Global displacement challenges for refugees requires more than the provision of minimal shelter standards; the reduced benchmarks set by the UNHCR fall far short of supporting pathways toward normalcy and resilience. The conclusions of this research are prioritized into a hierarchical framework, outlining key parameters for effective refugee shelter design. So answering the main research question: *How can architecture provide basic needs within a shelter while creating a foundation for a liveable environment where displaced populations can begin rebuilding their lives toward normalcy?* Leads to making a framework addressing the physical, social, and psychological needs of refugees and requires a comprehensive approach to shelter design and camp management. Physical safety provides the foundation, social inclusion strengthens community bonds, and psychological support nurtures resilience and recovery. By meeting these interconnected needs, refugee camps can turn into platforms for recovery, resilience, and hope. Beginning with providing shelters that are both livable and safe.

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