

## Ghata – A Cover against Herculean Odds

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As an architect born two years after the breakout of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), I witnessed lots of destruction (three times my family's same house) and flawed reconstruction processes, repetitive waves of displacement, and the rise and fall of grandiose ideologies. My perception of space and place has become tied to uncertainties. This perception applies to my clients who are at the same time the end users. The specificity of each project that I have designed in the past decade is based on the nature of the *struggle* facing my 'clients' where politics, anxieties, longings, and capacities intersect to develop *the built environment*. My latest project Ghata (cover) has been conceptualized to address the plight of Syrian refugees during their protracted and temporary stay in Lebanon, and to draw on the significant role of proactive architecture in response to unfolding crises.

### The Struggle

The seismic pressures that followed the up-rise movements have caused deep rifts among local constituents of the 'Arab Spring' countries and in many cases, contravened to the covert and overt aspirations of the 'New Middle East'. Syria is a stark example of the inherent complexities of the region that cannot simply absorb hasty transformational agendas without paying a high bloody price.

Since the breakout of protests in March 2011,

almost half of the Syrian population underwent internal displacement (7.6 million) or have sought shelter mainly in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (4.5 million). With the direct engagement of regional and international players in the Syrian war(s), refugees' stay in neighboring countries is expected to prolong while abilities to host are diminishing. Accordingly, the past year witnessed a new trend of displacement as thousands of refugees march across Europe in search for naturalization. Meanwhile, millions are enduring severe conditions living in collective shelters, formal camps, or in informal tented settlements that are supported by humanitarian agencies that operate with conventional methods, in unconventional times.

To date, Lebanon is hosting the largest concentration of refugees per-capita worldwide. Around 1.2 million registered Syrian refugees and an unknown number of unregistered are dispersed along 1,700 locations of the country's geographically small (10,452 square meters) and politically fragile landscape. Fatigue in the structural governance body is rendered with vacancy in Presidency since May 2014, postponing of Parliamentary elections twice since May 2013, and absence of a well structured national response plan for the Syrian refugee crisis.

Following the first year of the crisis and the engagement of regional and international forces in the Syrian quagmire, the protracted nature of the civil war



loomed as a palpable fact. Although many humanitarian programs modified their operations in order to respond to the critical repercussions of the long-term stay of the refugees however, applications didn't yield impactful results.

### The Cover – Ghata

As a director of the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCECS) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), I launched the Syria Relief Project (SRP) in December 2012 to address the refugees exacerbating conditions. During the first phase of the project, CCECS collected and distributed clothes donations, and supported students' initiatives and activities. The project unfolded to engage most faculties across the university tackling a wide number of sectors that include water sanitation and hygiene, education, food safety and nutrition, trauma and mental health, and shelter.

In my expertise as an architect leading the SRP, I designed the Ghata, meaning “cover” in English, to serve as a multifunctional structure for refugees. The guiding principles of the Ghata are based on the (a) simplicity and portability, (b) adaptability and scalability, (c) climatic responsiveness, (d) economic efficiency and endurance of the design that is aimed to ensure decent shelter conditions for Syrian refugees facing a protracted stay within the Lebanese mired grounds.

AUB student volunteers assembled the first unit in August 2013 in an Informal Tented Settlement (ITS) in South Lebanon. This basic 20 sqm structure was modified and adjusted by the user refugee family to correspond to their daily needs. Unit 2 was assembled on the campus of the American University of Beirut (AUB) for further testing and modifications. Units 3 and 4 were assembled in ITS's as classrooms and literacy programs were delivered by local partners to refugee students. Children constitute the highest percentage of Syrian refugees in Lebanon (53.2%), out of which only 14% (90,000) are accommodated within the already overcrowded Public schooling system.

### Assembling Portable Schools

In May 2014, CCECS partners with the local NGO

Kayany under the project titled “Ghata: Bringing Education to Refugees in Informal Tented Settlements”. To date, 6 Ghata schools have been assembled in Beqaa, the district hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Each school is built to cater for an average of 700 refugee students (age groups 4 to 14) on a double shift-basis. A unit of 40 sqm proved to be the most efficient to function as a classroom that accommodates for an average of 40 students. The ground floor area needed for a Ghata school campus is around 1200 sqm. Each school includes: 9 classrooms, 1 office space, 4 dry sanitation latrines, a kitchen, and a storage area. Structures are laid out in a U form maintaining an outdoors activities area.

Malala foundation funded a Ghata Vocational Training Center that was assembled in Beqaa and that consists of 6 workshops (60 sqm each). Each workshop is equipped with tools and machinery with an objective to train female refugees (age groups 14 to 18) on skills that will help them find suitable jobs in the host country, and that will prepare them for active engagement in the reconstruction of Syria in the aftermath of the notorious war. Malala Yousafzai inaugurated the Center on June 12, 2015 and celebrated her 18th birthday with the refugee students.

Situated within tented settlements, Ghata schools also serve as distribution hubs used by relief agencies during school breaks. The schoolyards are fit to unload shelter equipment and supplies, clothes-donations, hygiene kits, food rations, wood logs, and the like. Awareness campaigns are frequently held in Ghata classrooms addressing practices that include, hygiene, child protection, gender based violence, and resilience. The open outdoors central area (school yard) of every Ghata campus hosts events that are celebrated by refugees in commemoration to their traditional cultural values. Schools shift function to community shelters in times of severe weather conditions. Following a snowstorm that hit Lebanon last winter (causing four children to freeze to death in Beqaa), refugees residing in settlements adjoining the portable schools sought warmth in the Ghata classrooms. The physical and mental well being of refugees came out as essential needs to be addressed within the holistic approach of the





project. Accordingly, a Ghata clinic with an area of 60 sqm is designed to be situated within every school campus with a focus on primary and mental health care.

Currently there are more than 3000 refugee children that have been able to enjoy a sense of normalcy in the Ghata schools amidst the surrounding madness. However, more than 700 thousand Syrian refugee children are “unable to attend school because the overburdened national education infrastructure cannot cope with the extra student load” in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan according to UNICEF.

### Healing for the future

Ten years ago I founded and directed Beit Bil Jnoub (House In The South), a non-profit organization that was heavily involved in the reconstruction process following the 2006 Lebanon War. Working closely with hundreds of families who lost their memories, and in many cases their beloved ones, under the rubble of their destroyed houses, enabled me to realize the significance of design and architecture in the recovery process of war-torn societies. Designing for refugees who are enduring a protracted stay on mired grounds has been a more challenging task to achieve. In addition to the needs and requirements of the end users, the design had to respond to inherent local concerns and to political complexities.

Accordingly, architecture in contested landscapes is the composition of a design that absorbs deep-seated anxieties, and a spatial configuration that is the direct product of resilience. It is imperative to institutionalize this process into the design and architecture theory in an era where we are witnessing the emergence of a nation of 60 million refugees, according to UNHCR's gathered data in 2014. The psychological profile of the ‘rising’ user groups is charged with tensions and would require healing environments that are constructed by this responsive, progressive architecture. The practice needs to embrace unconventional users, who represent at the same time the clients, and who own nothing but shattered memories and undetermined future.

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