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Sense of place in Middle Eastern refugee camps: The reassembly of cultural identity

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the existing sense of place within Syria's urban environment, and the corresponding sense of place that has been physically reassembled within the Zaatari Refugee Camp. The analysis and discussion of both public and private domains highlight that human subjectivity and personal interpretation of cultural identity are key driving forces behind establishing a sense of place. However, there is a particular emphasis on the notion that this reassembly does not have to be manifested in identical forms to maintain meaning and value. It proves the ever-evolving nature of cultural and personal identity and the importance of accepting the new life within Zaatari Refugee Camp as a part of it to create new senses of place.

Introduction

Methods of conflict and violence are constantly evolving, but their human impact can be argued as devastatingly consistent. Over 37.9 million refugees exist on a global scale (UNHCR, n.d.), and while it is undeniable that the escalated conflict within Ukraine was a primary driving force behind the 2022 surge in refugees, the ongoing humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Palestine, Syria, South Sudan, Sudan and Myanmar, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo highlight that the displacement of refugees and, by extension, their need to rebuild their communities elsewhere, has been a significant consequence of conflict for decades. The cultural phenomena of '*the known*' plays a significant role within our self-identity as both individuals and communities. The maintenance of a relationship with our origin is established as an 'important part of social and cultural sustainability and wellbeing' (Kotradyová et al., 2020), so when millions are being 'born at the camps and have grown up there' (Elorduy, 2021, p. 1), is the visual reassembly of cultural identity within them an inevitable coping mechanism to avoid a complete loss of this identity within current and future generations?

This article intends to explore how a community's identity is reassembled and represented through the physical, built environment of refugee camps. Within the context of identity, the term '*reassembled*' refers to the formation of a new sense of self using previous cultural and historical influences; the visibility of this reassembling within a tangible architectural sense will form the basis of the article. The analysis will be formed through detailed case studies of Syria's urban identity on the public and private scales and the corresponding identity within the well-established Zaatari Refugee Camp (ZRC), enabling clear points of comparison. This study will act as a foundation for further discussions about the extent this identity has been reassembled, despite relocation and limitations. Considering the unfortunate dominating presence of war within

both the historical and present-day reality of the Middle East, the scope of this investigation will be limited to the ZRC within this location, with a specific focus on Syria due to the ongoing state of conflict.

Figure 1. Syria and the ZRC (Author's own image)

Literature review

Refugee camps

Refugee status is synonymous with being forced to leave one's country in order to escape war, persecution or natural disaster (OED, 2009.). This defining identity has remained relatively consistent since the 1951 Refugee Convention outlined a 'general definition' in response to mass forced migration and the accompanying demand for a qualifying description for those displaced (UNHCR, 1967). Author Peter Nyers suggested that the refugee identity existed within a problem-solving discourse, presenting refugees as a 'technical problem in need of rapid solutions' (2005, p. 3). One predominant solution is the refugee camp, which has lacked the consistency of a specific definition. The UNHCR definition uses the terms 'temporary', 'emergency' and 'basic needs' to clearly reject any connotations or expectations to provide permanent solutions (UNHCR, n.d.). However, this is limited not only through the absence of considerations beyond purely functional intentions, but through the self-contradictions of further UNHCR articles[1] exemplifying camps that have evolved past basic survival to the extent it is potentially fairer to categorise these camps as developing cities. Aligning with anthropologist Mary Douglas's arguably de-humanising notion of a container for 'matter out of place' (1966, p. 36), the categorisation of refugee camps as emergency architecture for those displaced is a foundational assumption within several existing arguments (Dorent, 2011; Malkki, 1995). While philosopher Giorgio Agamben's theory of 'bare life' (1998) places a similar priority on sustaining life itself, opposed to prioritising quality of life, he simultaneously pushes the definition further through the multi-dimensioned analysis of space and temporality, which is later developed within Michel Agier's three-tiered definition of 'extraterritoriality, exception and exclusion' (2010). Agamben's argument that a refugee camp instigates the break in 'continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality' (1998) establishes the proposal that the camp cannot only be defined by the inherent qualities of the new space, but arguably more significantly by what it lacks regarding the absent cultural values that play a core part of our identity. While existing arguments use the lens of refugee heritage to validate the camp as an important element of the inhabitant's identity (Hilal & Petti, 2021; Hochberg, 2020), there is a limited focus on this identity prior to their forced relocation, specifically on the cultural influences of their homeland within both public and private domains.

Sense of place

The term 'sense of place' is a similarly multi-dimensional concept that lacks a set definition, although existing literature appears to typically classify it 'under the umbrella of people-place relationships concepts' (Erfani, 2022). Aristotle suggested that 'place' is no more than the physical objectivity of a 'boundary of what contains' (Drum, 2011); however, this almost primordial analysis disregards the instinctual human perception that justifies it as a place, a consideration which has since

been addressed through the counterpart comparison of the term 'space'. The preliminary works of Michel de Certeau used the metaphor of speech and 'pedestrian utterings' to suggest that place to space is 'like the word when it is spoken' (1985), also resembling the approach of Edward Relph's work within *Place and placelessness* (1976). Similar works focus on the concept of human perception as the driving force behind the qualifying characteristic of a place, arguing that it is our sense's ability to 'reveal a context' that enables us to instinctually perceive the 'transition from undifferentiated space' into a 'distinct place' (Cighi, 2008). This focus on human perception subjectivity was perhaps influenced by the works of author Yi-Fu Tuan, who uses it to interpret the term 'sense of place' as an 'experimental process' that similarly depends on individual human interpretation. Tuan notes the experimental work of Warner Brown to emphasise the distinct notion of 'place' through the suggestion that, once familiar with a street grid, humans will automatically know a 'succession of movements appropriate to recogni[s]ed landmarks' (Tuan, 1977). The specific origins of human influence on space can also be analysed through the impact of cultural identity.

Cultural identity

Cultural identity is the amalgamation of two separate constructs: 'culture' and 'identity'. If we accept sociologist Stuart Hall's clear rejection of the multifaceted concept of identity as an 'accomplished fact', and instead consider it as a process which is 'never complete' (1997), this similarly suggests cultural identity as an equal matter of the future as it is of the past. Architect Kenneth Frampton uses the philosophical works of Paul Ricoeur to suggest cultural identity as the paradox of a regional and national spirit that both 'has to root itself in the soil of its past' while attempting to 'sustain and absorb the shock of modern' culture (Frampton, 1983). This is further explored through the analysis of ethnography as a 'form of culture collecting' which highlights the process of detaching traditions and experiences from their existing temporal occasions to provide 'value in a new arrangement'. Despite the specific focus on the genealogy of Western culture, the proposal of cultural identity as a hybrid between traditional and contemporary practices presents historical loss as inevitable, and instead places a wider sense of importance on its ever-evolving nature to exist as a collection of 'what 'deserves' to be kept, remembered, and treasured' (Clifford, 1988, p. 231). Clifford's work also places an emphasis on the 'art-culture system' (p. 232), suggesting art as a crucial manifestation of this identity, which is also seen within the ocular-centric arguments of architect Juhani Pallasmaa. Through the comparison to 'meaningful art' (2005, p. 11), Pallasmaa uses the phenomenological experience of architecture to suggest it as a 'reconciliation between ourselves and the world' through the 'prevailing architecture of the eye' (pp. 70–2). However, alternative literature views architecture simply as a faciliatory medium for cultural identity to be manifested through activities. Architect Amos Rapoport's preliminary rejection of founding anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor's original and arguably vague definition of cultural identity as a 'complex whole' (2005, p. 77) anticipates the further rejection of socio-cultural variables as a united entity, instead suggesting that it is the specific social variables and activities that act as the 'concrete manifestations' of culture (p. 94). While anthropologist Margaret Mead also argues that cultural roots are positioned within symbolic interactions and acknowledges that they are 'characteristically intimately related to their habitat', she also rejects the necessity for this habitat to be a 'single area' (1970, p. 4), instead suggesting that human apperception and redintegration will provide a distinctive cultural identity based on the 'known' (Kotradyová, 2019), regardless of geographical location.

Summary

While this review acknowledges the validity of a refugee camp's intention as a temporal solution to emergency, its purpose and established reality as a potentially permanent substitute for home for those in forced exile will be the assumed focus of this article. While the works of Agamben and Agier are

essential in establishing the camp's preliminary state of 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998) and 'extraterritoriality' (Agier, 2010), the fundamental uncertainty of a refugee's future beyond the camp provides a foundation for exploring the specificities of how life is architecturally reassembled within this empty space of non-life through the subjective influence of cultural identity, which will form a key element of the main analysis and discussion.

A similar approach will be taken within the discussion of 'sense of place'; although the established works of Certeau and Relph could suggest a refugee camp as a 'non-place', the emphasis on individual perception within the works of Tuan and Warner argues the importance of human subjectivity within the transformation from space to place, which will be the assumed focus of this investigation. Despite human subjectivity being a recurring and well-established theme within existing debates on 'sense of place', a more specific argument is lacking in terms of how this comparatively affects public and private spaces, which this article aims to address.

If we consider cultural identity within the context of a refugee camp, Mead's argument that this identity rejects the confines of a 'single area' (1970, p. 4) provides the basis for this analysis. The consideration of culture as an ever-evolving identity of the past, present and future (Frampton, 1983; Hall, 1997) validates both traditional and contemporary influences on the corresponding urban identity of the refugee camp, meaning this article also rejects the misconception of cultural identity as an 'accomplished fact' (Hall, 1997). Although there is evidence within existing works (Clifford, 1988; Pallasmaa, 2005) that discusses the interconnection of art and architecture as the predominant manifestation of cultural identity, there is limited further exploration of how these may be interchanged or the extent to which they are replicated within the same communities in a new location, which is the main topic this article aims to address. This will be supported through the influence of Rapoport's focus on activities as the 'concrete manifestations' (2005, p. 94) of cultural identity, forming an argument of how these reassembled places facilitate an important impact on community life.

Research Question: To what extent do Syrian refugees attempt to recreate the sense of place of their native urban environment within the limitations of the Zaatari Refugee Camp?

Methodology statement

To investigate the aims of this article, the main discussion will take the form of a two-part comparative case study analysis, focusing on the traditional Syrian cultural identity and its manifestation through the predominant Syrian population within the limitations of the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan. The choice of a well-established camp enables a truer comparison of the identity and the extent to which it has been reassembled or reconfigured within a longer time frame.

The specific criterion that will form the basis of the case study analysis has been selected with consideration of the intention for visual comparisons to strengthen key arguments within the article; each stem of case study analysis will therefore specifically look at the following points in the form of a three-layered approach, considering what has been lost, what has been provided and their subsequent human impact.

- Urban Plan and Organisation (Interaction of the Public and Private)
- Public Spaces and Building Organisation (Public)
- Residential Plan and Organisation (Private)

This three-layer approach allows a well-evaluated discussion of whether the spatial and cultural identity of the refugee's homeland has been transplanted into the refugee camp, or the extent to which it has been implemented or adjusted through a visible and tangible lens to reassemble a sense of place. These visual comparisons will be a series of author-drawn maps and floor plans that highlight

the key architectural and urban features relevant to this argument. These will be developed using recent Google Earth maps, as well as the culmination of research into the spatial features representing the typical arrangements of dwellings.

The data collection comprises existing literature and relies on journal articles and research conducted by academics within the relevant fields of architecture, refugees and the cultural sense of place and identity to confidently support this argument. The search was initiated through the Google Scholar, JSTOR and online library platforms, and the chosen data was selected through an iterative research process that analysed key secondary search terms that followed three primary keywords (see later), providing research from a macro scale (a general overview) to a micro scale (the specific application to Syria, the ZRC and the specific aims of this article).

Primary keywords:

- Syrian
- Refugee
- Zaatari Refugee Camp

Secondary search terms:

- Sense of place
- Cultural identity
- Vernacular architecture
- Urban organisation

The journal abstracts and book introductions were key in establishing an early validity of the resource within my investigative aims. If multiple key terms or themes were evident, for example if the journal was on the topic of vernacular Syrian architecture but mentioned cultural identity within the abstract, the contents page and glossary enabled the relevant chapters to determine beneficial use within this dissertation. It was also pivotal that the research collection was conducted with a parallel analysis of both the physical space(s) and the more emotional implications of their cultural identity. This avoided an unbalanced argument and ensured a continued focus on the aim of this article in establishing the extent to which the sense of place, a simultaneously physical and emotional concept, has been recreated. The author's own diagrams act as a visual interpretation of the data collection, which provides the basis for subsequent comparative analysis to determine patterns in spatial organisation and urban layouts. Interviews with refugees within the ZRC that have been conducted by these academics have been referenced to provide an important personal human perspective of how their identity has been translated within the camps, aiding in exemplifying and further justifying the themes highlighted within the diagrams and discussion.

Existing Syrian identity: What has been lost?

Syria (Figure 2) is located within Southwest Asia along the East Coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and adjacent to Jordan along the Southern border (Britannica, 2025). The ongoing internal conflict in Syria since 2011 has resulted in 'new forms of public space'; however, the long span of conflict and frequency of its impact has reshaped the landscape according to the needs of 'specific periods' (Haddad, 2009). Rejecting a clearly defined traditional and modern period, tradition is suggested only as the present-day known existence. It is therefore only urban and architectural features that at least partially remain within the existing Syrian landscape that will be explored within this analysis. The country's three largest cities, Aleppo, Damascus and Homs, will be used as the predominant focus in representing a typical Syrian

sense of place and identity.

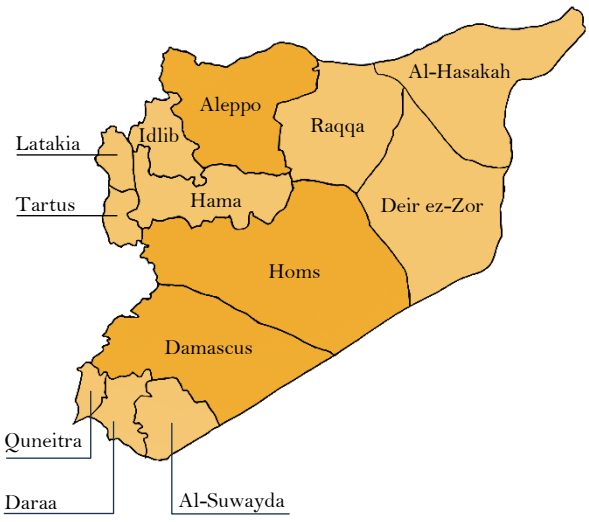


Figure 2. Syria (Author's own image)

Urban plan and organisation

Syria's public and private domains have historically evolved within a framework of endogenous cultural and social norms creating a 'hierarchy of traditional spaces' (Haddad, 2009). They reflected a long-embraced coexistence of 'different traditions and backgrounds' and exemplified principles of harmony and humanity through unifying organisational strategies, such as adjacent churches and mosques, which signified Syria's accepting embrace of the 'multilayered past' (Al-Sabouni, 2016). However, over time, the growing presence of Islam instigated a clear shift towards the dominating Muslim populationwithin Syria today, and consequently Syria's urban morphology began to reflect a similar pattern to traditional Arab-Islamic cities.

Urban growth within traditional Syrian towns (Figures 3–5) is typically due to the 'dense grouping of courtyard houses'. The characteristic non-linear and agglutinative growth creates a network of streets, alleys and maidans[9] typically 'along ethnic or religious lines' to form a 'distinct' hara.[4] The 'irregular' layout rejects the previous Roman-style grid inspired by the cardo maximus and decumanus maximus style of streets bound by North-South and East-West orientations, instead facilitating not only wall-to-wall visual barriers that preserve a sense of privacy and 'desired seclusion' core to Islamic values, but also constructs a balance between unity and segregation that lays the foundations for clearly arranged public, semi-public and private realms (Ragette, 2003).

Key architectural/urban features:

- Grand mosque – centre of the city with public buildings orientated around.
- Smaller mosques – positioned within local residential area.
- Souk[13] – central trading streets typically in proximity to the grand mosque.
- Community Buildings + Spaces, i.e. art galleries, museums or public space.
- Madrasah[8]
- Maristan[11]

Contrasting the urban 'sedentary lifestyle', architectural organisation typical within Syria's rurality descends from the historic nomadic lifestyle that relied on farming the surrounding landscape as a 'daily economic activity'. Syrian rural organisation (Figures 6–8) typically begins from the open space; there is a clear rejection o f the tightly tessellated haras[4] of Syrian urban centres, favouring an organic expansion of 'generally small' homes and public buildings that form a network of separate units. The significance of privacy within the Arab-Islamic culture is demonstrated through the implied space of distance as opposed to physical wall boundaries (Corpus Levant, 2015). However, despite the 'historic urban-rural tensions' (Kilcullen & Rosenblatt, 2014), Syria's rural organisation of private and public domains follows similar identifiable Arab-Islamic patterns found within the urban exploration. While structures vary, there is a maintained importance of the external living space as the core component to the 'daily activities of cooking, sleeping, preparing food and receiving guests' (Al Asali et al., 2019).

Figure 3. Traditional urban layout – Damascus, Syria (Author's own image)

Figure 4. Traditional urban layout – Aleppo, Syria (Author's own image)

Figure 5. Traditional urban layout – Homs, Syria (Author's own image)

Figure 6. Traditional rural layout – Damascus, Syria (Author's own image)

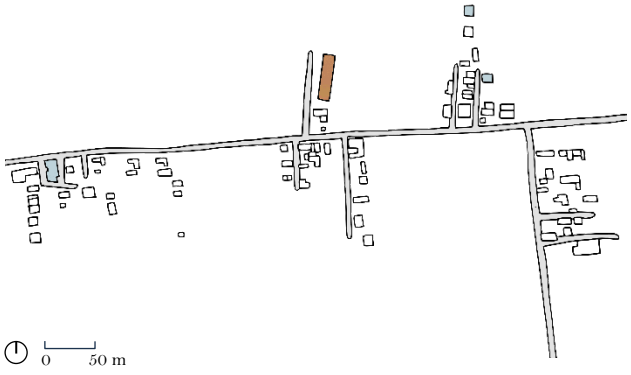


Figure 7. Traditional rural layout – Aleppo, Syria (Author's own image)

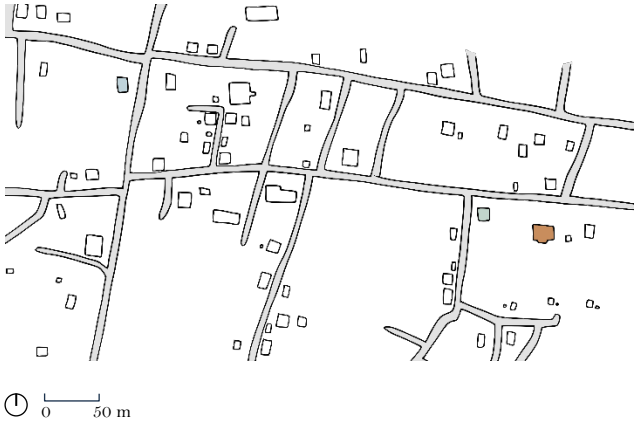


Figure 8. Traditional rural layout – Homs, Syria (Author's own image)

To fully explore Syria's existing identity within the urban landscape, the impacts of modernisation must also be noted. Analysing modernity as almost a weapon to the existing harmony, Syrian architect Marwa Al-Sabouni suggested that the increasing presence of 'brutal, unfinished concrete blocks'

(Figures 9–11) since the French Colonial period has set a precedent for using architecture as a tool for 'divisive urbanism'. This sense of differentiation arguably played a role in amplifying Syria's internal conflict by alienating the community from each other and the place (Al-Sabouni, 2016). Within his book *Domicide*, Syrian architect Ammar Azzouz uses a partially memoir-style lens to provide primary insight into the physical and cultural destruction of the Syrian city of Homs. Analysing the impact of 'waves of gentrification', Azzouz concluded that most of its characteristics were lost through the 'newly built, giant governmental and administrative blocks', creating a new city centre that lacked green or open spaces (2023, pp. 32–3).

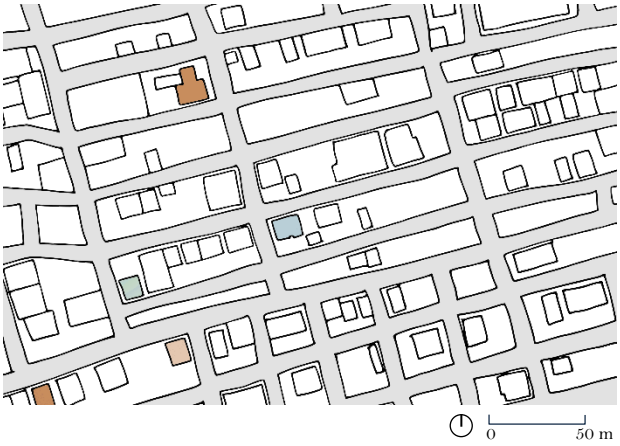


Figure 9. Contemporary urban layout – Damascus, Syria (Author's own image)

Figure 10. Contemporary urban layout – Aleppo, Syria (Author's own image)

Figure 11. Contemporary urban layout – Homs, Syria (Author's own image)

The human consequence of existing Syrian gentrification must also be noted. Exemplified within the Old City of Damascus through the refurbishment of traditional Syrian courtyard homes into traditional homes of the 'elite Shami families', many refurbished units were soon converted into non-residential structures. This resulted in reduced homes and forcing inhabitant relocation into 'slum-like conditions' on neighbourhood outskirts (Totah, 2014).

Public spaces and building organisation

Architect Jan Gehl proposed that public spaces were only meaningful through the 'spectrum of activities' that occurred within them, suggesting that life between structures satisfied our wider human 'need for contact', regardless of purpose (1987, pp. 16–17). This was later developed by landscape researcher Catharine Ward Thompson, who suggested that public buildings and spaces represented the opportunity to 'celebrate cultural diversity' and 'conserve memories' (2002, p. 70). Perhaps this is why 'monuments, synagogues, mosques, churches, museums and libraries become targets in the erasure of the collective narratives, stories and memories of people' (Azzouz, 2019).

Landmarks

If we accept the architectural landscape as a 'system of symbols' that 'express cultural values' (Yilmaz & Maz, 2006), then, considering the broader

connotation of an architectural landmark, it is true to acknowledge the importance of such sites in terms of Syria's identity and senses of place. Existing research on Aleppo's urban identity suggested that architectural places and spaces hold a symbolic dimension through the 'complex interplay between historical context, cultural values, social bond, and aesthetic considerations' (Noaime & Alnaim, 2023). Using these factors as a framework for architectural symbols, this also justifies the significance that sites hold with an ongoing cultural narrative; this includes the 'deliberate destruction' of historic sites such as Palmyra (Azzouz, 2019), as well as the historic public demonstration within the New Clock Tower Square to 'assert their right to the city' (Mourad, 2023).

Mosques

Mosques hold an obvious cultural value within Syria due to the importance of the Islam religion. Regardless of their classification as a 'grand mosque' or a local smaller mosque, they typically follow an 'Arabic hypostyle mosque-type', which consists of Haram[5] and a Sahn[12] (Figure 12), and their external structures also follow a similarly visible pattern (Figure 13) (Jijakli & Jijakli, 2023).

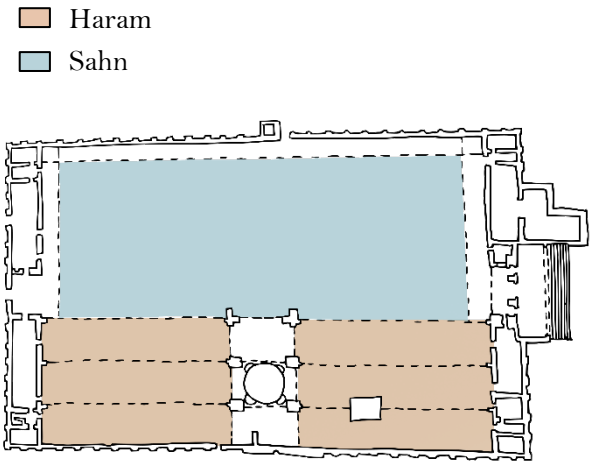


Figure 12. Typical mosque layout (Author's own image)

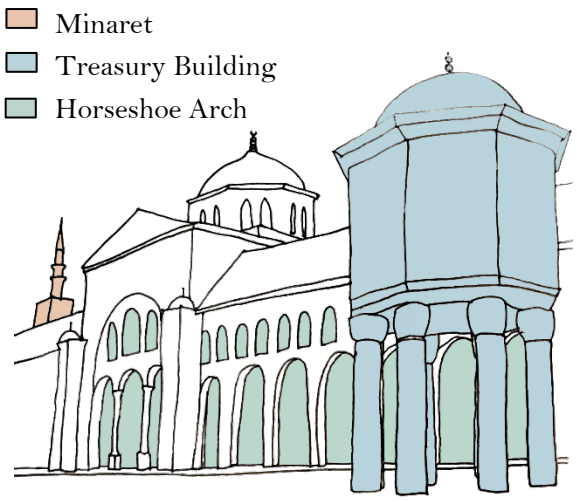


Figure 13. Typical external mosque features (Author's own image)

While the distinct architectural features and sacred religious purpose present mosques as a form of visual landmark on both larger and more intimate scales, their value extends beyond the functional gathering of worshippers to coalesce a clear 'sense of community' (Guidetti, 2016, p. 3). Through the comparison to a 'madrasah',[8] mosques hold a suggested educational responsibility to encourage positive values and changes and to act as the driving force behind social community improvements. However, their predominantly religious function extends into realms of a wider community interest, and typically hosts elections and judicial proceedings (Omar et al., 2019), highlighting the irreplaceable significance mosques hold within both religious and community cultural identities and as a central point within towns and cities.

Souks

The 'urbicide' of Syrian cities has 'not been limited to the destruction of markers of the past and cultural artefacts' (Azzouz, 2019), but also includes the arguably more significant day-to-day public places and spaces, a predominant one being Syrian souks.[13] Though they have a clear architectural individuality which is dependent on location, souks hold an irrefutable sense of 'urban centrality' within Syria's commercial and public spaces as an opportunity for trade and community interaction (Abdulac, 2020). An interview with a local Syrian on

the destruction of Homs further emphasised the significance of providing space for community interaction, as the public domain became a 'fragmented experience' of no longer being able to find the 'same shop-keepers' and 'sustain their connections' (Azzouz, 2019).

Art centres

Another valuable community influence within Syria is the unifying impact of and visible presence of art and art-supporting centres; commenting on the attempted destruction of the Soubi Shoaib Fine Art Centre within Homs, Azzouz attributed its eventual preservation to the 'local outrage' due to the memories it holds, and even notes the significance it holds in his 'own identity and upbringing' that used art to connect people in a place full of creativity (Azzouz, 2023, p. 35).

Residential plan and organisation

Analysing Syrian vernacular architecture through a domestic lens, the evident significance of privacy makes the influence of Arab-Islamic culture indisputable. Anthropologist Fadwa El Guindi argued that privacy holds a certain 'nuance' in an Arabic spatial context, which is typically translated in Syria through the division of spaces into 'two spheres – women and family' (El Guindi, 1999, p. 81). While being 'protected from the public eye' remains the primary intention of the curated privacy, if we analyse traditional Syrian homes on a more intimate scale, there is a specific promotion of gender separation that is manifested through a clear hierarchy of 'male and female turf' (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 167).

Courtyard houses

As the most common typology of residential dwelling within Syria lacks a definitive layout, a clear pattern is formed through space arrangement that has remained historically consistent on both rural and urban scales (Corpus Levant, 2015). Clear internal-external privacy boundaries are reinforced through staggered entrances into the home; this removal of outward visibility emphasises the intentionally 'deceptive' and careful organisation of Syrian homes, perhaps justifying the metaphorical essence of 'architecture of the veil' inherent within Arab-Islamic architecture (Al Fann, n.d.).

Rural courtyard houses (Figure 14)

- Courtyard – typically attached to the house but not necessarily surrounded by inhabited spaces. Used as a private space for agricultural and farming purposes.
- Male Majilis[10]
- Female Majilis
- Bedroom
- Kitchen and service rooms

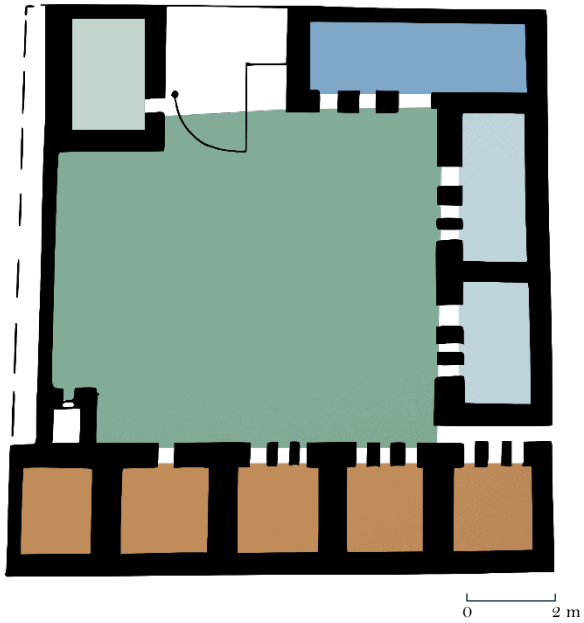
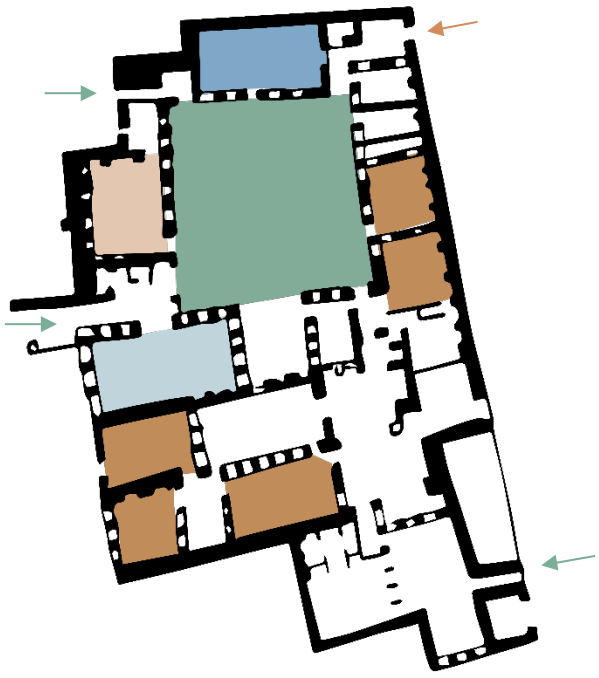


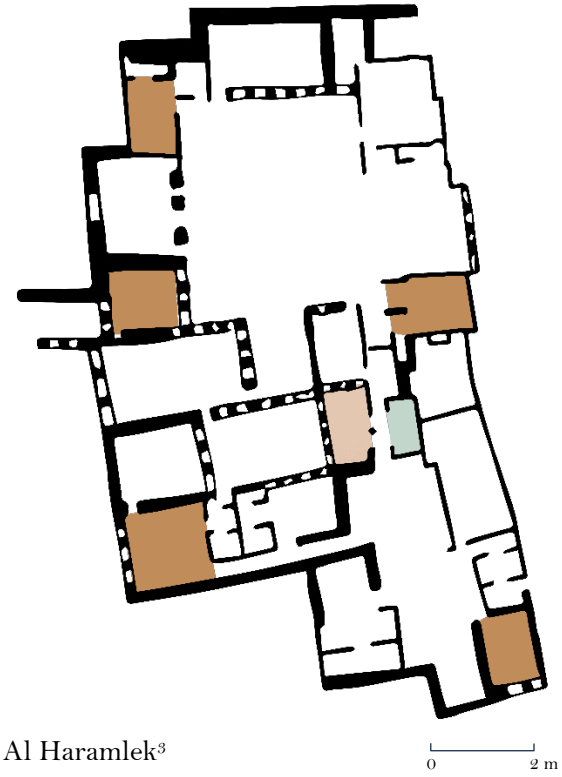
Figure 14. Rural courtyard house plan (Author's own image)

Urban courtyard houses (Figure 15)

- Courtyard
- Kitchen
- Male Majilis
- Female Majilis
- Bedroom
- Shared living
- Primary entrance
- Secondary entrances



Al Salamek[2]



Al Haramlek[3]

Figure15. Urban courtyard house plans (Author's own image)

As the defining feature, the internal organisation is typically centred around the courtyard, an architectural layout inaugurated by Arab nomads by arranging tents around a centre to protect their cattle. While Syrian homes traditionally remain an external 'model of simplicity' in accordance with Islamic ideologies and the influence of the Kaaba's cubic morphology (Khamui et al., 2023), the internal urban courtyard marks a 'contrasting spatial experience' and is typically highly decorated with a central fountain and beautiful façades (Edwards et al., 2006). Within the Islamic religion, the belief in Jannah is of upmost importance; described within the Qur'an as '(g)ardens of (b)liss' (Qur'an 31:8), the courtyard space represents the Muslim interpretation of this sacred paradise in the form of a botanical utopia that holds the precious function of family gatherings.

Typical courtyard features (Edwards et al., 2006)

- Central fountain
- Iwan[6]
- Decorative planting
- Citrus trees
- Intricate patterns, e.g. Qur'an calligraphy, floral or geometric combinations
- Ablaq pattern – alternating black basalt and white stones

Zaatari Refugee Camp: What has been reassembled?

ZRC has provided shelter for thousands of displaced Syrians since its establishment in Jordan in July 2012 (UNHCR, 2022b). The camp's growth from 30 hectares in September 2012 to over 530 hectares by March 2013 has created an almost poster identity for the camp within the media as a visual manifestation of the Syrian refugee crisis and an epitomising symbol of the inhabitant's 'suffering and resilience' (Dalal, 2022, p. 67). The selection of ZRC as a case study in this article stems from the camp's particularity regarding management. The substantial growth of the camp has resulted in almost a mitigation of the strict humanitarian management typical of refugee camps, creating a clear shift in control towards the refugees to dictate

the organisation of their own spaces and become 'masters of their own environment' (Dalal, 2022, p. 196).

Urban plan and organisation

The camp is divided into 12 distinct districts that are further split into blocks with a regularly organised and relatively linear pattern of streets (Figure 16).

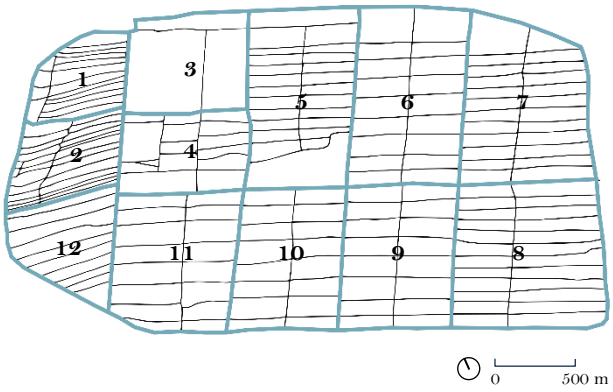


Figure16. ZRC districts (Author's own image)

District boundaries/paved roads
Unpaved roads
X District number

The intended linearity is typical of a refugee camp's 'emergency phase' and is emphasised by the 'unified shelter unit' provided as the standardised form of dwelling by the UNHCR. It creates a modular hierarchal plan, presenting an outward generalisation that the refugees themselves can also be grouped into a 'collective identity' (Dalal, 2017).

The camp's infrastructure has since evolved to the point where it is more appropriate to categorise it as a city with several facilities distributed across the site (Figure 17), with a notable equality among the recreational and non-recreational infrastructure and amenities.

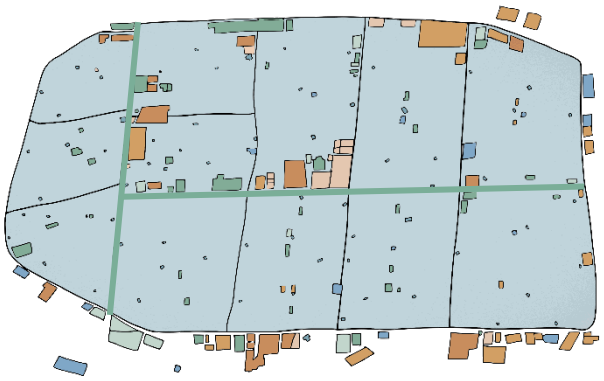


Figure 17. ZRC zones and facilities (Author's own image)

Architectural/urban features:

- Residential zones
- Mosques
- Water facilities
- Health facilities, e.g. hospitals and maternity clinics
- Schools
- Offices/warehouses
- Souks
- Community centres
- Recreational space, e.g. play areas or sports fields

There is an indisputable sense of refugee-driven development within the arrangement of individual districts in the urban organisation. Interestingly, this development appears to follow an increased sense of regular organisation, with the earlier district layouts being more comparable to the organic growth of a typical Syrian urban centre. District 1 exemplifies more organic and tightly clustered arrangements compared to the later organisations of Districts 4 and 10.

There is a noticeable absence of a 'grand mosque' within the camp's organisation, with each block containing or being in adjacent proximity to a local smaller mosque for individual community use. It is, however, interesting to note that this is not due to a lack of what appears to be the centre of the camp, positioned within District 5 (Figure 18). Other camp essentials, for example the schools and water

distribution facilities, seem to follow a more irregular pattern with approximate positioning of one within each district, with Districts 2 and 12 relying on facilities in adjacent districts or external to the camp's boundary. Although this creates an arguably segmented sense of community, it is also comparable to the distribution of facilities and corresponding more intimate senses of place within typical Syrian cities.

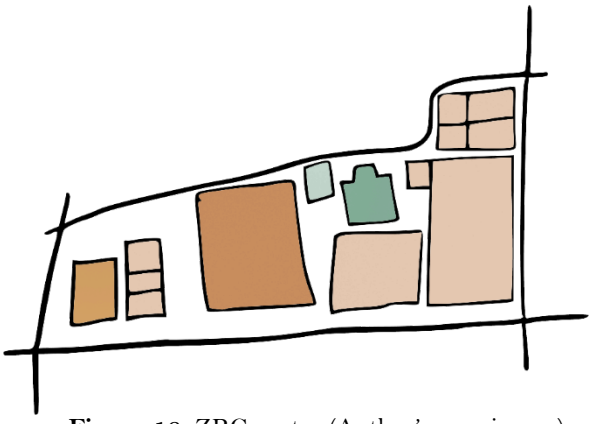


Figure 18. ZRC centre (Author's own image)

Returning to the previously mentioned literature of Ayham Dalal, the author theorises the concept of 'dismantling and reassembling' as the emerging response taken by the refugees towards the ZRC's urban organisation. The lack of forced discipline in the camp promotes the refugees to be architects of their own space, assigning them the power to reassemble a new environment balancing their own 'different needs', 'potential' and 'limitations' (Dalal, 2022, p. 25). Considering the assigned prefabricated dwellings simply as 'building blocks' of the site, the refugees have rearranged them across the camp to create places that accommodate an 'entire array of living activities' (Nabil et al., 2018), a topic that will be explored within a more specifically residential analysis later in this article.

Public spaces and building organisation

Limitations of the ZRC mean the organisational plan does not account for obvious open public space, assigning the majority for dwellings that satisfy the 2011 Sphere Project guidelines of 3.5m^2 per person (Alshawawreh, 2019). However, the previously mentioned refugee-driven 'reassembling' (Dalal, 2022) involved an attempted compensation for this loss of identity through the decoration of curated public and private spaces (Alshawawreh, 2019). A visit to the ZRC by researchers at Newcastle and Northumbria universities observed the techniques of painting and decoration as forming a visual 'backdrop to their sense of self' as well as an 'enactment of freedom' within governmental restrictions and material limitations. Further demonstrations of this were exemplified throughout the camp as artefacts, model sculptures, paintings of Syrian monuments, and Arabic calligraphy that spread messages of 'grief and hope simultaneously' (Nabil et al., 2018).

Community art groups have even emerged, such as the 'Art from Zaatari' group that focuses on the recreation of Syria's most famous landmarks in miniature model form. Comparable to the similar prehistoric efforts of cave paintings and Egyptian hieroglyphs, the group uses the limited available resources of 'clay and wooden kebab skewers' to create iconic symbols such as Palmyra and the Damascus Umayyad Mosque with the aim of preserving the 'soul of Syrian people' (Dunmore, 2016).

> *We made them to remind ourselves and teach our children about our rich civilisation and long history* (interview with a ZRC inhabitant, Nabil et al., 2018).

As previously mentioned, there was no distinct hierarchy of mosques within the camp; instead, functional and traditional prayer spaces that were accessible within each neighbourhood or district were prioritised. Constructed from the available caravan units, refugees took advantage of their modular and dismantle-able form to create larger spaces, while maintaining the important male-female separation. Despite an acknowledgeable effort to recreate traditional mosque infrastructure, such as the minaret, there is a distinct yet almost quiet power through the humble lack of internal and external ornamentation typical of Syrian mosques, emphasising that it is simply their functional presence as a religious and cultural centre for

community gathering that holds the significance regarding their sense of place.

The 3,000 informal shops and businesses (Nabil et al., 2018) within the main commercial strip, known colloquially as the 'Shams-Elysees' after the Champs-Élysées in Paris, has also re-established a growing community identity within the ZRC, becoming a 'renowned symbol of Syrian resourcefulness and entrepreneurship' (Lee, 2018). The 'semi-ordered stalls of tents and caravans' (Maher, 2015) facilitates a functionally recognisable sense of place that encourages the importance of community interaction. Smaller shops are also located across the camp districts, creating an element of recognisability and identity on a local scale, with refugees commenting that specific shops even act as personal landmarks to aid orientation (Alshawawreh, 2019).

Residential plan and organisation

Almost personifying the camp's fight to remain temporary, the predominant form of dwelling is the aforementioned caravan or 'prefab(ricated) container'. Despite the clear connotations of a short-term fix, their movable nature disrupted the original 'disciplinary layout' within the site; they were rotated, relocated and even developed to be equipped with private kitchens and bathroom facilities (Dalal, 2022, p. 80). This created new clearly defined private spaces within a hierarchy that aligns with the Islamic 'psychodynamics of family' (Figure 19) (Dalal, 2022, p. 93).

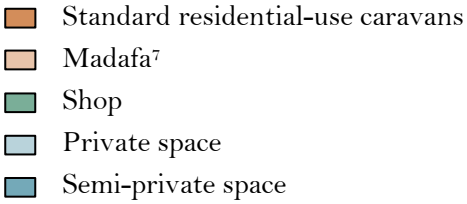


Figure 19. ZRC family clusters (Author's own image)

Singular units were typically assigned per family; however, as the camp developed, multiple units were offered to larger families, and upgraded versions became available, allowing households to maintain the original caravan as an 'extra space to receive guests' (Nabil et al., 2018) and enabling a stronger family cluster formation.

The cultural differences between urban (see Figures 3–5) and rural (see Figures 6–8) dwellings are also visible through specific organisation choices. Refugees originating from urban cities prioritised the construction of a courtyard or fenced garden to establish an external social space where the 'family could sit' that was not usually required within rural settings (Dalal, 2022, p. 103). The internal façades of the courtyard were typically adorned with paintings, calligraphy or inexpensive fabrics in an attempt to mimic the highly ornamented courtyards within traditional urban courtyard homes, with some dwellings even reconstructing a form of fountain as a symbolic reference (Nabil et al., 2018). Further enclosed spaces were also enabled through corrugated sheets for the walls and canvas for the roof (Alshawawreh, 2019). In comparison, rural dwellings prioritised the recreation of the Madafa as a separate and crucial guest space for 'maintaining and regulating social relations' (Dalal, 2022, p. 103). They also gravitated to enhancing their caravans with tent sheets to 'demarcate space and construct

the dwelling', a strategy that was not atypical of the traditional nomadic lifestyle (Dalal, 2017, p. 3).

An interview with a refugee conducted by Dalal also notably highlights that the refugees did not automatically replicate their previous homes, instead relying on their accumulated, subconscious and borrowed knowledge of their personal experiences to inform new social dynamics. This is exemplified within the interview through the construction of an 'American kitchen' that was justified simply as personal desire: the war prevented it so he 'did it here' (Dalal, 2022, p. 101). This proposes that the ZRC dwellings become the manifestation of an arguably more unique sense of place within the private realm in comparison to the cultural homage resulting from the carbon copy of a previous dwelling.

Comparison and discussion

The cultural identities manifested within the Syrian landscape to form senses of place share many similarities to those of the curated ZRC landscape in its existing form, and an overwhelming link is that of the Arab-Islamic influence, notably the integral display of family and privacy values. The precedence that these hold within the Syrian-built environment acts as almost a subconscious pull towards an objective recreation by the refugees in the ZRC, exemplified through the repetitive rearrangement of family units within clusters or neighbourhoods seen across the camp. The inherent ability for the caravans to be rearranged has enabled the inhabitants to construct their own hierarchy of private, semi-private and public spaces while maintaining the option for distinct physical boundaries typical of the Syrian urban landscape. Though it could be argued that the ZRC origins as an empty space resembles Syria's typical rural identity, the government-introduced camp boundaries limited expansion options and removed the possibility for rural farming activities or any physical space separating residences or neighbourhoods. Though some refugees have maintained a more similar visual connection to their cultural identity than others, through their own rearrangements and the camp limitations, the overall urban organisation has created a form of shared and equal living that suggests a shared identity of existence, disregarding the previously established social hierarchy and tension between urban and rural inhabitants. This removes an element of individual subjectivity regarding space and place connections, instead suggesting the reassembly of a new and more uniform sense of place.

The overall ZRC architectural organisation similarly stems from the expansion of residential units, and the initial camp organisation clearly rejects the encouraged systematic homogeneity. However, the more recent urban organisation (see Districts 3–12 in Figure 16) appears to mimic the Roman-style grid of both early Syria and the contemporary landscape (see Figures 9–11).

ZRC public spaces mirror the pattern of distribution within typical Syrian towns and cities to a certain extent yet present a notably increased disregard for ornamentation. This is particularly evident in the comparison of traditional Syrian mosques to those found within the ZRC; the highly visible attempts to personalise private and public spaces with art throughout the camp suggest the distinct lack of ornamentation within mosques as an intentional inhabitant choice, reinforcing the mosque as a primarily functional agent for community change. Though the mosque's sense of place regarding religious identity and purpose has been arguably maintained post-relocation, it has been visibly reassembled within a humbler form.

A more traditional sense of place in terms of Syria's landmarks has also been clearly reassembled in a differing form. The cultural significance of art is evidently preserved within the ZRC through the artistic recreations of Syria's historic landmarks; however, their presence represents a sense of acceptance of their new senses of place. Through reinforcing the educational purpose of the models and paintings, it is acknowledged that they are part of their national and personal heritage but are not necessary within a duplicated physical form. A

similar essence is found through the categorisation of smaller, basic structures as a form of personal landmark within the camp; however, further exploration of this lies within the topic of psychogeography, which is beyond the scope of this article.

The sense of place curated in typical Syrian souks is arguably one of the most indistinguishable reassemblies within the ZRC. Although the camp is spatially restricted for multiple individually styled souks found typically throughout Syria, their shared and underpinning modest nature using locally sourced and simple materials allows an almost identical sense of place to be recreated within the 'Shams-Elysees' that focusses simply on enabling public interaction.

On a residential scale there is another dominant display of family and privacy values through the rearrangements of caravans to mimic the organisation of Syrian courtyard houses. Despite the natural subtle differences between them that could be attributed to their personal or family identities, it is interesting to highlight that, again, all new spaces revolve around the improvement of social, and specifically family, life. This almost emanates Philosopher Vincent Descombes's proposed notion of a 'rhetorical country', suggesting that a person can be considered 'at home' when they are 'at ease in the rhetoric of the people with whom [they] share life' (Descombes, 1980). This highlights the significance family holds in terms of their identity, as well as the importance of human connection in establishing a sense of place.

If we further consider Syria's existing conflict and gentrification, the informal settlements and forced relocation argue that the Syrian urban identity already encompasses the necessary reassembly of sense of place. Hence this suggests a more identical reassembly than is initially assumed through a refugee camp's connotations of loss.

While this article remains limited through the inability to draw more generalised conclusions about the approach to reassembling across several refugee camps, there is an undeniable value within this specific choice of the ZRC through the sense of freedom in rearranging their spaces. It represents the important essence of choice in reassembling a sense of place based on cultural and personal identities. The article establishes the human adaptability to reassemble an equally or arguably more valuable sense of place through the unity of a refugee's acceptance of the new situation with the elements of cultural and personal identity they take with them through this crucial notion of choice. This provides a foundation for further research into the reassembly of sense of place within other refugee camps, such as those with an existing infrastructure or a higher diversity of refugee culture.

Conclusion

There is irrefutable evidence that Syrian refugees attempt to recreate the sense of place of their native urban environment within the ZRC to a certain extent; however, the main finding within this article is the distinct lack of necessity for these to be manifested within an identical form, as a result of both limited resources and the acceptance of a new sense of place as part of their evolving cultural identity.

The cultural Arab-Islamic identity is maintained as a strong driving force of reassembly on both public and private scales; the emphasis on art suggests a sense of community comfort is provided through a visual connection to known landmarks and national symbols and the effort to maintain privacy, and guest spaces reinforces the important psychodynamics of family. However, the ZRC also exemplifies the established definition of cultural identity as ever evolving through the simultaneous acceptance of the camp as an opportunity to form a new identity, and therefore newly reassembled senses of place.

Landmarks and public spaces such as the mosques and souks will arguably always hold a distinct sense of place through their prominence within the community as important places of identity and

human interaction, and material and resource limitations does not mean they hold any less value as a known sense of place. The establishment of human subjectivity as a core determining factor within sense of place could argue that it is fully reassembled into the ZRC and it is only the medium of this reassembly that varies.

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Footnotes

1. Inside the world's five largest refugee camps (UNHCR, 2023).

2. Al Salamlek – the ground floor of a traditional courtyard house, comprising the main living areas.

3. Al Haramlek – the first floor of a traditional courtyard house, comprising the private areas.

4. Hara – translates as 'quarter' and refers to a neighbourhood.

5. Haram – translates as 'sanctuary' and refers to prayer rooms within a mosque.

6. Iwan – a covered open space on an elevated platform within a house courtyard, typically comprising two symmetrical rooms facing each other and marked by a multicoloured, marble, patterned floor.

7. Madafa – translates as 'hospitality' and refers to a separate space for welcoming guests.

8. Madrasah – translates as a 'place of study' and refers to a school.

9. Maidans – translates as a 'marketplace' or other 'open space' within the city or town.

10. Majilis – translates as 'council' and refers to a hospitality space to receive and entertain guests.

11. Maristan – translates as a 'house of healing' and refers to a hospital.

12. Sahn – the formal mosque courtyard.

13. Souk – translates as 'bazaar' and refers to an Arab marketplace.