‘To lose all that is familiar – the destruction of one’s environment – can mean a disorienting exile from the memories they have invoked. It is the threat of a loss to one’s collective identity and the secure continuity of those identities.’ Robert Bevan

Populations are on the move everywhere, yet we give them different names: refugees, displaced persons, asylum seekers, working migrants. It is not movement which characterizes these people, but the space they enter into. The word, however, immediately implies the status of the newcomer and their social standing. Just as the word is a matter of choice, subject to ideology and political view, so is the structure that accommodates these people. There is a politics to it, which results in a specific type of housing and spatial planning. In Barda, a small village about a four-hour drive from the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, a disenchanted example of such political architecture can be found. The population of this village consists mainly of Azeris who were forcibly removed from nearby Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Azerbaijani regime, which lost a third of its territory in the war, purposely appropriated the fate of these individuals to use as a wedge in the international political debate on Karabakh and in so doing feeding their hopes and desperation. In addition, not only has the uncertain political status of these individuals and their fragile economic situation become a crucial element in the process of Azeri nation-building, the memories of their homeland have as well. The evolution of settlements in Barda points to a more organic and humane usage.

For a long time, the Azeri exodus from Karabakh formed an unmet challenge to Azeri society. Therefore, the initial housing of the displaced depended on their own inventiveness and survival strategies. Most of these refugees improvised shelters for themselves. In addition to squatting in old train wagons, people created huts by digging holes in the ground and covering them with mud or with sticks, plastic and cardboard. In this way, the landscape of Barda was remolded: thousands of self-made mud huts created an endless, warty landscape.

In the years after the conflict, the supposedly temporary housing situation started to slowly mutate into different forms of spatial configurations. Contemporary Barda presents various survival typologies, such as squatted public buildings (mostly schools and hotels) and new towns financed by the World Bank or with local oil funds. Each of these new forms symbolizes a specific kind of politics and an accompanying problem-solving strategy.

Schools and new towns
Barda has 73 school buildings, of which 55 are currently in use as temporary housing. The smallest school hosts approximately 50 families, the largest about 100. These buildings were designed and constructed in the Soviet period, so their architecture is very similar; they have, for example, ten classrooms of approximately 30 square meters on each floor. The classrooms form the basic grid of the transformation of the schools into a residential block.

The cubic rooms have been divided several times among the new inhabitants of the school: sometimes ten classrooms have been made into 50 or 100 ‘housing units’. The rigid Soviet grid is altered in flexible ways. The interior is transformed by using thin cardboard walls to divide the rooms into separate spaces, one per family and as many as necessary. By doing this, the new improvised style changed the building’s character drastically. The severe communist exterior and structure have been replaced by a more organic and humane usage.

The downside of the new design is obvious: overcrowding. Besides the lack of privacy, the biggest problem is the absence of a proper plumbing infrastructure. The schools function as highly concentrated city blocks, while the playgrounds are used as parking space, storage area and fields for chickens, cows and sheep. Hygiene and fresh water are a constant concern. Nevertheless, the organization of these settlements is incredibly efficient. The elderly, for example, have separate living areas. Displaced people have a clear image of the possibilities of their environment. A process which incorporates their vision of their home could prove to be an important contribution to the further development of alternative housing solutions.

Temporary housing in school buildings has had an impact on a broader scale as well. The influx of people from Karabakh meant an immediate suspension of normality in Barda. Since more than 70 percent of the schools were occupied by refugees, education in the Barda region has collapsed. The authorities’ response was to change the layout of the city: they
separate the ‘indigenous’ inhabitants from the newcomers. As a result, new towns have been constructed in the middle of nowhere and the refugees were displaced once again.

These new housing units were built on a rigid grid in an open, flat area. All homes are the same. The interior consists of a kitchen (3m²), a dining room (3-4 m²) and the main room (15-17 m²), which is used as a living room during the day and a bedroom for the whole family at night. These houses symbolize a new political stage in dealing with the fate of the refugees. The international aid system takes care of them now. Yet, the humanitarianism of the World Bank and the oil funds reproduce a reality of conflict, as their approach to the problem of displacement in Barda does not relieve the disorientation of living in exile.²

Indeed, not only were the inhabitants of the new towns forcibly removed from Karabakh, integration into Azeri society was also made impossible by the very location of their homes. In contrast to the organic appearance of the schools, the new towns look disciplined, as if built by force. The displaced are separated from normal society and their dignity and independence remains in the hands of others. Their lack of economic sustainability and self-worth, as well as the impossibility of reconciliation, are closely related to the fact that food, water, electricity and medicine are being supplied to them.

A real set of alternatives and solutions needs to address the daily living conditions of this community in relation to an analysis of the politics of displacement.

**Politics of displacement**

The evolution in the settlements of the Azeris from Karabakh is paralleled by changing political attitudes. It points to the further institutionalization of the resolution in the South Caucasus in general and the problem of displaced individuals in particular. Indeed, the presence of international governmental and non-governmental organizations in Barda is not only evidence of a more hands-on approach to the lack of housing, it also exposes the strategy to resolve this community’s fate as a neo-liberal form of humanitarianism.

Whereas aid and reconstruction should contribute to reducing conflict, the political and military struggle for Karabakh has merely been transformed into an economic conflict.³ As a result, the problem of displacement in Barda is not linked to the undemocratic nature of the Azeri regime or discussed in terms of the right to return, regional reconciliation and the traumas of those forcibly removed.

A critical design approach is needed as a response to temporary housing solutions, one which relieves the needs of the displaced, but also takes the politics of displacement into account, its types of settlements and the ways it appropriates memory.

When thinking about a different approach for housing in Barda, one should consider the home and its sustainable development. Living in a refugee camp is not necessarily experienced as a temporary solution. Interestingly enough, in Western cities people move every 5 years on average, yet still regard each one as their home. Moreover, some refugee camps in the world have existed for more than half a century now, during which time people’s living conditions have been constantly manipulated by politicians and national leaders. Turning people into refugees was a choice made by belligerents. Denying these same people a home now is equally a matter of choice. In order to make the right choice, a different set of tools is presented here.

Focusing on the human scale of the home – taking as a starting point the time frame of five years as a non-temporary solution – will create a totally different set of typologies of settlements and opportunities. Moreover, it will provide a new way to deal with the trauma of displacement.

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DIY Camps

Entrance to Barda region
Community house

Showers
Train wagons

Mud houses

Photos: F.A.S.T. (1, 2, 3, 4, 8), D.J. Visser (5, 6, 7)
New Towns...
...after three years
Post Soviet migration and displacement of population in the South Caucasus

Population movement and migration linked to:

- Conflict
- Economic drivers

- Georgians
- Azerbajians
- Armenians
- Ossetians
- Russians
- Chechens

Post Soviet ethnic divisions in the South Caucasus

- Abkhaz
- Talysh
- Ossetian (Iranian)
- Georgian
- Azeri
- Avar (Dagestani)
- Lezgin (Dagestani)
- Tsakhur (Dagestani)
- Armenian
- Greek
Infrastructures and the oil pipeline route

Distribution of refugee camps in the South Caucasus