

# Planning not refugee crisis: Questioning the narrative of the “plan”

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Frank Eckardt, Professeur de sociologie urbaine à l'Institut pour les études urbaines européennes de la Bauhaus-Universität Weimar (Allemagne), répond à la question d'actualité posée par le blog

« Migrants, réfugiés, camps d'urgence : les urbanistes n'ont-ils rien à dire ? ».

It is true that urban planners have been left outside of the debate on how to host refugees in the last months. Only slowly, architects have started to put themselves into public debates, which are mostly predominated by political actors and all sorts of experts. This appears more than strange because the hosting of refugees affects directly the work of planners. From my experience in our research project about “Welcoming cities” in East Germany, there are a few factors which are shading light on this phenomenon and which are raising more profound questions about our understanding of “planning”.

Firstly, it is more than frightening to see that most cities have not been planning anything for the hosting of refugees. It would be unfair to blame planners more about this failure than the rest of the society. Although refugees have tried to enter the European Union via Lampedusa and other dangerous ways, the most countries turned a blind eye to these desperate attempts. Even after four years of war in Syria, there was no talk about that the war victims might be hosted in our cities. Being totally unprepared for the influx of refugees in 2015 however points also at the fact that “planning” has become an inward looking process while possible challenges from the outside world have not been even thought about it. While since the 1990ties, many scholars made the point that urban planning has to consider cities as part of globalization, the practitioners seemingly have not taken much notice of this fact. Despite the obvious criticality of the limits of the “local”,

urban planning is seemingly still a foremost territory oriented field of expertise. The production of the “plan” as a defined field of activity for urban planning has thus remained the core of planning practice.

The plan is secondly not regarded as a tool for a wider agenda for societal development but an objective in itself. In the cases that we have observed, all cities had an “Integrated plan” (ISEK) that was meant to include all fields of urban development. Looking more careful on the production of these ISEK, most cities have hired external offices to develop these plans with some elements of participation. The outcome are detailed recommendations and description for projects. These then were argued by with reference to a wide range of good intentions like “coping with the demographic change” or the “provision of affordable housing”.

When the busses with refugees arrived late at night, these plans were of no use. The immediate help for hosting them came from social worker and civil society. These ad hoc solutions served the very basic needs for the moment but had severe impacts on the perception of the refugees in the eyes of the hosting citizenry. This became even more serious as in the following months the refugees have been treated in the same mode of day-to-day muddling through. Decisions over the opening up of public buildings, former military barracks and hospitals were taken in a heated up situation where NIMBY-effects were produced. Arriving exhausted and apparently in a needy state, stereotypes and prejudices against foreigners were reinforced by a total absent urban planning. From September 2015 until now, the regional states and many cities have made far reaching decisions where to place refugee camps, which neighborhood to select, what kind of local infrastructure to relate to it and where to organize the next phase of the asylum procedure. While some German states tried to control the refugee housing more, others have chosen a “decentralized approach” allowing more integration into the existing housing market. It is clear that these decisions will have a major impact on the future development of neighborhoods, cities and regions. In the general public, many voices call for a more strict plight for refugees to live equally dispersed over Germany and not to concentrate in the metropolitan areas. This would mean that refugees would even be forced to stay in areas where they are not welcome but where their presence would counteract the decline of inhabitants as a consequence of the demographic change.

In the cities that we have been observing, urban planners were partly integrated into the decision on where to build future refugee housing or they were part of “round tables” where officials from different city hall departments are working together to coordinate the refugee integration. What is nevertheless striking is that this seems to happen with little or no reference to the existing plans and without much recognition of the special expertise of urban planners. Urban planning as such became rather invisible in the most local debates. This has led to a very defensive position where planners were only asked to take over responsibility when the decisions were taken and detailed planning was requested for example for the conversion of an emptied housing estate into a refugees home.

When we ask the question, why planners had so little to say to the public and to politics about the issue, we have to recognize the fact that the broader urban planning discourse has nothing to offer on the subject of integration. In the logic of the holistic planning as the ISEK demonstrates, societal perspectives come at the end for the legitimation of projects. It should be the other way round: planners should suggest projects for challenges in society. What was missed at the momentum of “refugee crisis” was a political neutral expert who could have proposed projects that acknowledge the needs of refugees and the concerns of the affected citizens at the same time. Architects started to work out ideas for a more innovative and sustainable building of homes for refugees. Working on a larger scale, urban planners have not yet made any proposal which would holistically all aspects of an inclusive neighborhood.

The reflection of the silence of a whole discipline needs careful consideration. Planning is in crisis if it has nothing to say when it is needed most. Painfully we can see in the mirror of this crisis the recent state of planning which appears to be

characterized by powerlessness and a lack of competences to offer new narratives instead of reproducing again and again the story of a plannable and certain future. Neither its actual role in the governance of cities, nor its self-understanding represents what a highly mobile, flexible, fragmented and conflictious Europe needs.