RICE UNIVERSITY

Passing Through:
Repatriation Bureaucratically Considered

by

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Abstract

Separation is common in our world even though it is often neglected. While much architecture attempts to minimize spatial separation, there are situations where separation is considered a necessity. These spaces are usually those of extraordinary or unfortunate circumstance. They are essentially exceptions to the norm, zones of legal limbo that ought to have a physical definition that is enriched by separation. The recent outbreak of Ebola and the current refugee crisis remind us of the precarious position we are in, especially with the dearth of institutions that can handle the complex human cases that emerge. Combining the bureaucratic side of humanitarianism with a presence-in-the-field in the global south, a UNHCR Global Service Center takes root in West Africa. As a flagship model of an architecture for transient conditions, this thesis posits a building that is both humanitarian transit center and bureaucratic edifice.
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1 in every 122 humans is either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum.
In the 21st century, it is no longer the case that only those who find themselves in the proximity of an international border when a crisis erupts have the option of fleeing. In a world where mobility is the norm, humans in crisis know that there is much to be gained from escaping to a far-flung abodes. Movement is no longer confined to a specific geographic locale, but is truly global. The refugee crisis has been globalized, repatriation expanded to any country willing to accept those who are not welcome elsewhere. To this end, an international bureaucracy in place since the end of the Second World War is responsible for documenting, relocating, and advocating on behalf these afflicted populations. This administrative and humanitarian schemata is increasingly stressed and distant as an increasing number of crises erupt the world over. Yet, on foot, by vehicle, or braving the sea, the humans in the midst of these crises will make the perilous trek whether facilitated by these organizations or not.
Repatriation Bureaucratically Considered

The modern world is rife with separatory methods and procedures that have become a norm without which life would not function as we know it. In order to run smoothly, modernity labels people and separates them into groups so that bureaucracy can have its due process. Yet one often finds that the separation of a group from another undermines its architectural experience. This is usually due to the accommodation of separation from without the logic of the design. In the past, separation as a spatial tool has been accommodated in architecture at the expense of the user’s experience. Rather than dealing with separation as a design constraint or an afterthought to which a design must adapt, this thesis taps into the power of this tool in engendering the diversity of spatial experiences.
Separation is common in our world even though it is often neglected. While many architectural attempts try to minimize spatial separation, there are situations where separation is considered a necessity. These spaces are usually those of extraordinary or unfortunate circumstance. They are essentially exceptions to the norm, or are posited that way, to ensure that such separation is tolerated by the populace. Often segregatory spaces are those of transition. Holding facilities such as prisons and camps, and transitory facilities such as airports and border crossings accentuate the division of people, space, and place. These zones of legal limbo have yet to be given a physical definition that is enriched by separation, not diminished.
The recent outbreak of Ebola and current refugee crisis remind us of the precarious humanitarian position we find ourselves in, especially with the lack of institutions that can handle the complex human cases that emerge. Combining divergent programmatic aspects into a pertinent investigation of pressing global concerns, this thesis posits an international humanitarian center in West Africa, a new Global Service Center for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This humanitarian center is part repatriation facility and part administrative hub. These components are integral to the functioning of critical emergency services across international borders, yet have discrete requirements and autonomies that need to be kept separate, and which in turn serve to enrich the spaces people use. As a new architectural type, the center hybridizes the paperwork and fieldwork facets that are integral to the international institutional reaction to humanitarian crises.
By the end of the decade, Abidjan, the Ivory Coast’s economic capital, will be the largest port in West Africa. As air travel becomes more tenuous especially in the extreme circumstances brought on by crises, sea travel comes to renewed importance. Lying between the North and South Atlantic and straddling the Gulf of Guinea, Abidjan is an ideal mediation point between the Global North and South. Located on the city’s waterfront, a multifunctional facility can flexibly accommodate various scenarios addressing international humanitarian transit and administration. It regulates the exit of evacuees and manages the response to crises in coordination with international bodies, serving as a point of reference located in a major West African city accessible by air and sea.
This architecture renders transparent what is often opaque—bureaucracy. And it offers locally what is often considered to be foreign—international aid. It concretizes the presence of the worldwide apparatus of repatriation in a specific African locale, thereby lending ownership to what hitherto was distant and often regarded by local populaces as imposed. Combining the bureaucratic side of humanitarianism with a presence-in-the-field in the Global South, a UNHCR Global Service Center takes foot in West Africa and becomes a flagship model of a steadfast architecture for transient conditions.
One unfortunate characteristic of the modern world is strife. Over the past decade, man-made and natural disasters have afflicted a substantial portion of the world’s population.
Yet, and especially since the advent of the 21st century, most humanitarian crises have taken place in the Global South.
However, the bureaucratic apparatuses that are charged with responding to and managing these crises are situated exclusively in Europe.
A more equitable and engaged response to humanitarian crises entails the contextualization of this international bureaucracy by introducing it to the Global South.
A multifunctional facility that can flexibly accommodate various scenarios addressing humanitarian transit and administration.
Hybrid Repatriation Center
A New Type in West Africa

Proposed UNHCR Centre in Abidjan

Current UNHCR Centre in Budapest
Site: Abidjan, Ivory Coast

Location: Plateau, Abidjan’s administrative quarter
Geography: Tip of a peninsula within a series of lagoons
Current use: Fruit terminal
Context: Opposite of presidential palace in the CBD
Access: Waterfront accessible by boat and expressway
Size: 800,000 sq ft
Hybrid Repatriation Center
A New Type in Abidjan

Site Connections
As a building mediating city and sea, the repatriation center makes use of its location to create varied waterfront areas in interplay with landscaped open spaces. Rather than lying parallel to the coast, the building extends into the sea, creating an expansive green space between itself and the expressway that rings the city center. This open space is landscaped, serving as an area of congregation and defining an approach towards the building. The open space provides an ample amount of surface parking, and is relatively flat in grade to accommodate large gatherings of people. It may also be used as a spillage space during high-volume situations. The building is situated close to the embankment, defining an esplanade on its west that is distinct from the landscaped open space on its east.

The cuts through the mass of the building, articulating its constituent programmatic volumes, is mirrored by the crenelations at the water edge. The interface between the dock and the buildings creates two zones on the waterfront, restricted and public. At the northern end of the building, a restricted quay connects to a large intercolumnar passage through the repatriation section. It is here that large crowds of repatriates may access an exclusive zone dedicated to their repatriation via seafaring vessels. The rest of the waterfront areas south of the building are public, providing access to the public and administrative sections of the center. Thus, the site is divided into three zones, leading from the city into and through the building and finally reaching the waterfront.

Program Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repatriatic</th>
<th>Bureaucratic</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mass Shelter</td>
<td>Visitors Lobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Hall</td>
<td>NGO Information Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dining and Recreation Hall</td>
<td>Auditorium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission Lounge</td>
<td>Food and Beverage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible Diagnostic Space</td>
<td>Public Liaison Centers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation Rooms</td>
<td>Administrative Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Space</td>
<td>Loading Bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrooms</td>
<td>2,000 sq ft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage</td>
<td>Data Banks</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The site of this intervention is located in the symbolic heart of Abidjan, directly across from the presidential palace and in the vicinity of the central business district. Here, within the country’s economic nerve center, an institution catering to the most disadvantaged lies amongst the country’s most revered institutions. By the sea, it announces itself ready to receive and dispatch across the globe.
Local Visitors
Employ
Critical Repatriates
Mass Repatriates

Parking & Landscaping
Restricted Waterfront
Bureaucratic
Public Waterfront

User Type Distribution in the Center

Site Relationships
Formal Studies

The relationship between the two sides, the bureaucratic and the repatriatic, was explored through a series of studies in which a pair of interlacing programmatic ribbons ossified, mediated by a service zone. The intermediary zone is not merely a dividing line; rather it is thickened such that it may itself define space and shape the bi-ribbonic relationship.
The relationship between the two sides was not solely explored as a planometric strategy but also as a volumetric one in which a series of walls engage and intersect one another to create a variety of spatial conditions—moments of expansion and contraction, cavities and punctures, repetition and rhythm. The result is a three-dimensional construct that emphasizes different vectors of movement at opposite ends. The repatriatic sector embodies horizontal movement through voids in and through the building. The bureaucratic sector embodies vertical growth from a public base to a position from which to oversee the repatriatic process.

**Volumetric Studies**

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On the bureaucratic end, the first two public floors are connected by terraced seating serving programmatic and circulatory needs. For example, this space can serve as an auditorium or as a grand waiting area for visitors to the center. Above this public podium lie several stories of administrative spaces, also accessible through a roof garden reached by the vehicular passageway. Throughout the whole building, a series of repeated elements create a series of spacious spaces and long hallways that are at once steadfast and bathed in light.

A series of large congregational spaces, interior and exterior, predominate the ground floor. On the repatriate end, a flexible open-air hypostyle space leads to a grand interior hall the spiral stair of which leads to a dining hall. Cutting through between the two public spaces on the first floor is a large double-height passageway through which evacuees can unimpededly access the waterfront. The second floor of this end is a restricted isolation area. A vehicular passageway allows cars to bypass the first floor and directly drop people and material off on the second floor.
Staff are ready to meet repatriates as they arrive at the outdoor congregation point.

Refugees begin to arrive by bus, car, and foot and gather outside. After checking in with the staff outside, the refugees proceed through the large passage towards the waterfront. The elderly and infirm can rest inside as the group moves through and people can use the restrooms and inquire with staff if needed.

The group exits onto the dock in order to board awaiting seacrafts. 1000 displaced refugees from neighboring Liberia arrive via multiple modes of transportation to be processed and subsequently board ships.
A critical patient harboring meningitis arrives by helicopter to stay in an isolation room for 1 day until boarding ship for home country.
A high school class arrives by bus for a 1 hour presentation and Q&A
Two friends arrive by car, park outside, and enter through the east entrance. After waiting for 20 minutes, the two friends have a half-hour-long conversation with the HR manager and register as local volunteers. They inquire at the reception and are directed by the receptionist to the fourth floor.
A group encompassing dozens of refugees arrive at the center on foot without any prior arrangements and enter through the north side. They leave most of their belongings in the open-air hypostyle space, which they set-up as a temporary encampment. They then proceed to the interior grand space to relax while members of the group register with center personnel in the reception space. As the days go by, the group spends time relaxing inside and outside, with food and services provided by the center, until they board transportation to a more permanent destination.

40 Refugees arrive on foot to take shelter for a week or so until a repatriation destination is determined.
Several families who have been separated from loved ones are dropped off at the north entrance and proceed to check in with the staff. Some family members register with reception and are given appointments with UNHCR representatives, while other members of the group relax in the grand hall.

Two days later, one parent attends his appointment with UNHCR reunification specialist to be informed that his lost children are found and that they will be leaving by bus to meet them the next day.

4 Separated Families arrive by UNHCR bus to inquire about their relatives’ whereabouts and leave to be reunited as soon as they find out.
2 Ebola Patients referred by a medical institution arrive by mobile quarantine vehicle to be isolated for 5 days until special evacuation ship accommodation is ready.
The Minister of Cooperation and African Integration arrives by motorcade for a 2 hour meeting with the director.
The UNHCR Global Service Center in Abidjan is an Ivorian institution. As a permanent outpost of the world’s largest refugee agency, it constitutes an unprecedented administrative presence in the Global South—a presence that is rational, dignified, and contextual without sacrificing flexibility. It is an architecture that gives weight to the adversity of those who are in search of home. Straddling land and sea, it offers the public physical access to a humane bureaucracy that touches so many lives. Signalling its presence to the world, this hybrid repatriation center is a waterfront icon for this city, in this world.
Appendix: Physical Model
Credits

Thesis Advisor
Carlos Jimenez

Thesis Coordinator
Scott Colman

Photographs
AlJazeera News: city in ruin, refugee registration, train transportation
Pinoy News: overcrowded refugee ship and dock
The Guardian: refugee boat at sea
Wikimedia Commons: UNHCR Global Service Centre in Budapest
United Nations Photo: Aerial view of Abidjan