Architecture Culture, Humanitarian Expertise: From the Tropics to Shelter, 1953–93

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In the middle of a summer week in 1993, temporary shelters, tents, and prefabricated structures littered the manicured grounds of the Château de Penthes in Geneva, just a short distance across the park from the Palais des Nations (Figure 1). The installations formed a backdrop for the First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees, an initiative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to study the problem of shelter and settlements in refugee contexts. The world’s largest agency designated to protect displaced persons, this office is one of the oldest and most deeply established in the United Nations system, tracing its origins not only to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees but also to Fridtjof Nansen’s appointment as the first high commissioner by the League of Nations in 1921, thus predating the institution of the United Nations itself. The primary mandate of the UNHCR is to provide legal protection to individuals fleeing from their countries of citizenship because of fear of persecution. That it hosted an event attended primarily by architects and planners, whose professional thrust ostensibly lay well outside that mandate, suggests an alternate narrative. This essay recovers a history of the intervention of these and other professional architects and planners into the field of humanitarian relief.

While the practice of humanitarian relief has no doubt produced distinctive architectures, a history of its participants, their work and discourses, and the shelters and environments discussed in this workshop and others like it remains elusive, for two reasons. First, the logics of urgency dominate the study of this subject; politically, the relief rather than the humanistic or historical examination of emergency necessarily occupies the first priority. Sites of activity are dangerous and difficult to visit, and research not directly related to the alleviation of suffering demands special justification. Second, the epistemological scaffold for such an investigation is typically missing; the documents or buildings that might serve as primary historical evidence are often destroyed in political conflict or abandoned in emergency, or they lack the material durability or institutional provision to survive. The papers on the First International Workshop are rare and thus significant documents of architecture culture in the UNHCR archive. I argue that the presence of these detailed proceedings among the technical records, and the bureaucratic absorption of the expertise to be developed in such a workshop (marked linguistically in its overwrought title), may be understood as meaningful traces of a professional and cultural momentum. They demonstrate an elaborate framework through which architects and planners entered into the fold of an agency that sought distinct work from them. Through this example and others, this essay distinguishes a path by which architects and planners began to engage the professional field of international humanitarian action.

To delineate the role of formal architectural and planning practice in the history of humanitarian relief and mass forced migration, in the following pages I stake out the contours of the development and institutionalization of this field. I chart the extent to which two humanitarian agencies, the UNHCR and the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (also known as the United Nations Disaster Relief Office, or UNDRO, the predecessor to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), and
the architecture and planning professions developed a mutual interest in each other. In following the protagonists and events in this history—the architects who sought engagement with humanitarian relief projects and the international institutions, such as UNHCR and UNDRO, that sought their putative knowledge—I seek to verify the extent of this joint work. Rather than focusing extensively on specific designs or projects, I offer a survey, seeking a coherent frame within which more specific historical investigations of forms, technologies, figures, discourses, movements, and institutions might be undertaken.

At the heart of this essay lies a narrative of the construction of expertise, the vehicle for this relationship between architects and humanitarians. I draw this narrative from official archives; a body of informal documentation (such as drawings, maps, and video documentation) that I collected from humanitarian offices, refugee camps, and individual holdings; and approximately two hundred interviews I conducted with architects, aid workers, and refugees. If these materials suggest a formation of humanitarian expertise, it was constructed in a much wider sphere than that configured by the institutions and figures to be discussed here; it incorporated several other humanitarian organizations and emergency relief sites, involving a wide body of actors that included not only architects and planners, humanitarian agencies, and states but also refugees and other forced migrants who may have found or placed themselves within the aid system, formally and informally. However, in this essay I limit my focus to the UNHCR and UNDRO, figures engaged with these two agencies, and the institutionalization of expertise related to them, in order to delineate three key stakes for modern architectural history.

First, this history notes a return to a disciplinary preoccupation with modern tropical architecture—especially hitching development and climate together as the social and scientific telos for building design and the rationalization for modern architecture. As Jiat-Hwee Chang has noted in discussing the Architectural Association’s prominent School of Tropical Architecture, “The application of technoscience to architectural subjects in the 1950s . . . meant an important shift in the manner in which architectural problems were framed and solved: every problem began to be approached anew based on fundamental technoscientific principles, as if there was no precedent.” I argue that this principle of irreducibility further joined the logics of emergency undergirding disaster relief, not only to determine architectural forms and practices but also to reproduce the technoscientific project: the cycle of disasters and their effects on increasingly urbanized settlements across the world called for better solutions, improvement in relief practice, more study of the tropics. If this process may be understood as emerging part and parcel with the rise of the development state, it should also be noted that the strand of work represented here was linked directly through a set of protagonists to one of its key sites, the School of Tropical Architecture, particularly in its later incarnation, not at the Architectural Association but at University College London, as the Development Planning Unit. In the first section of this essay, I track this genealogy and discuss the professional biographies and orientations of figures responsible for shaping international disaster relief practice. I begin with the 1953 Conference on Tropical Architecture and trace the connections among Otto Koenigsberger, Ian Davis, and Frederick Cuny from 1953 to 1978.

In the second section, I lay out the history of the institutionalization of architectural expertise in the world of humanitarian aid, which occurred in two channels: the academy and industry. I survey the former through knowledge transfers in university contexts and the latter by following Davis and Cuny through their work for UNDRO and UNHCR.

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section demonstrates how professional meetings and publications form crucial sites for the development, establishment, and dissemination of this expertise, as well as for the construction of a professional culture around it. I follow Arindam Dutta’s skepticism regarding expertise “steeped in rule-based judgments and verifiability,” believing as he does of the post-1950 shift in architectural discourse toward the “technosocial” that any legitimacy conferred by such expertise, which also reinforces the authority of the development state, indeed masks aspirations toward or claims on that authority: a “tacit positivism,” which is certainly recognizable in writings by Cuny and Davis. Nevertheless, with this caution, in this section of the essay I aim to build a historiography for a little-studied field by focusing on the institutionalization of architectural expertise on humanitarian relief, in no small part through the establishment of a professional culture. The presence of this culture—limned by the richly illustrated proceedings of the First International Workshop—suggests that such expertise fulfilled mutual desires: on one hand, a desire by the humanitarian field to gain architectural knowledge toward the spatial iteration of its activity and thus the enactment of its (abstract) ideal, and on the other, a desire by modern architects and planners to operate with political relevance and thus realize the promise of modernism, expanding their remit into the realm of the social sciences, as Dutta argues, in order to achieve its problem-solving potential.

This section begins with the 1978 conference Disasters and the Small Dwelling and outlines the thinking and discourse in the period from 1978 to 1991, standardized in significant publications by UNDRO and UNHCR in 1982 and systematized through the establishment of academic departments from Oxford to Johannesburg, Cambridge to Cairo, in the years to follow.

Third, in this essay I attend to a yet-unresolved tension between development and humanitarian relief, which, in architectural terms, has pitted “dwelling” against “shelter.” Each raises the stakes for expertise differently: the former by enrolling the shared mission of architecture and humanitarianism, and the latter by reducing it to functionalist, instrumentalized science. By the time the UNHCR held the First International Workshop in 1993, “complex” emergencies, in which political, ecological, economic, and social insecurities compounded one another, had replaced the putatively monadic “disaster”; the shelter and settlements of the humanitarian relief response had superseded the small dwelling of the development approach. The objects and even the language of the humanitarian community had altered, as perhaps best underscored in the UN General Assembly’s adoption of UN Resolution 46/182, “Strengthening of the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations.” This resolution was aimed at systematizing international humanitarian action, in part through the streamlining of expertise. To examine this turn, in the third section of this essay I trace the history of the 1993 First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees, interrogating its reflection of the value and stakes of architectural expertise (with an echo of disaster relief and tropical architecture, for example, in yet another reclamation of climate). I see this workshop as an artifact of a moment of paradigmatic geopolitical and historical change, during which architects and planners still situated within the structuring aspirations of development practice were no longer located at humanitarianism’s periphery.

**Tropical Architecture: The Studio in the Field**

The Conference on Tropical Architecture serves as the starting point for this microhistory of architecture and humanitarianism. In 1953, Adebokun Adeyemi, a fourth-year student at the Manchester School of Architecture, asked Otto Koenigsberger, a research fellow at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and newly arrived from his post as independent India’s first director of housing, to design a course for architects in which they would learn practices relevant to the climate, culture, economy, and other particulars of Adeyemi’s home country, Nigeria. The conference took place that March, with Adeyemi serving as secretary for the Organizing Committee. It led to the 1954 establishment of the Architectural Association’s Department of Tropical Studies, which was headed by Koenigsberger during the years that it achieved its international reputation. It was renamed the Department of Development and Tropical Studies in 1969, and in 1971, Koenigsberger and several Architectural Association faculty members moved to University College London and opened the Development Planning Unit.

The naming of the department reflected preoccupations with problems of development and climate in the global South that the founding conference had targeted. While many of the 1953 papers dealt with construction materials and techniques or with building design for passive climate control or natural lighting, a few concerned themselves solely with social and economic development. In his paper on planning, Koenigsberger focused almost entirely on development issues, from urbanization to infrastructure, asserting, “The countries of the tropical regions have awakened to the need for development, their needs are urgent, their impatience is great, and the number of people qualified and capable of doing the work is small.”

For much of his tenure as an educator, Koenigsberger served in the UN technical assistance program, working as a development adviser for half of each year and teaching for the other half, using his fieldwork to inform curriculum and vice versa. He would later impart this model of practice to...
Ian Davis, an architect who became a disaster and development expert during the 1970s and 1980s. Davis credited Koenigsberger with launching this career, with a research project for the Development Planning Unit in 1972.12 This orientation toward development issues and sites in the global South might be understood through this genealogical connection alone.13 During the 1970s and 1980s, a period marked by the creation of UNDRO and the UN Conference on Human Settlements, better known as Habitat, Davis and the planner Frederick Cuny worked to construct a practice and discourse around disasters and development.14

In a 2011 talk on “disasters and the role of the built environment professional” at the Architecture Sans Frontières “summer school,” Ian Davis, by then recognized by many practitioners as the “graybeard” of the field of “disaster shelter,” suggested that only forty years prior, this form of practice had not yet even been conceptualized.15 He happened upon his own inquiry as a lecturer and coordinator of the third-year course in the architecture school at Oxford Polytechnic in the early 1970s, when a colleague approached him to supervise a studio investigating the problem.16 He issued a group of second-year students the boisterous assignment of designing and building shelters out of cardboard and polyurethane to sleep in overnight, in one of the fields on the road to Oxford. Hard rain and wind drove them to abandon their assemblages, and the police were summoned to clear debris from the Oxford Road in the middle of the night, but the experience led Davis to a topic that would become the focus of his PhD dissertation.17

Davis based his dissertation on field research on emergency shelter and postdisaster reconstruction.18 As cyclical disasters threatened stability and growth around the world, his work converged with development interests and the programs of institutions such as the Development Planning Unit. Two days before Christmas in 1972, an earthquake registering 7.5 on the Richter scale devastated Managua, Nicaragua. Davis arrived on the scene with a camera, inaugurating his career as a “built environment professional” specializing in “disaster.”19 According to Davis’s account, Koenigsberger planted an important seed prior to his mission by asking him “not to design anything” and instead to think like a facilitator.20 Indeed, he worked in part to photographically capture the failure of the built fabric, which produced an archive for this disaster, enabling the recuperation of the case for study, as seen in the “historical” section of a humanitarian response guide published decades later (Figure 2). The focus of this photograph is not necessarily the standing ruin of the building in the background, but the rubble in the foreground. The image contributed to a sense of the scale, volume, and materiality of damage to the built environment, adding greater precision to the disaster risk and planning study, as well as documentary artifacts, all of which served as metrics and instruments of expertise.

Taking on the role of engaged observer as a method of intervention followed the principles of action research, a tactical practice applied widely by the 1970s and supported by universities and institutes investing significantly in the collection of field-based evidence on disaster response and its relation to development. Action research typically invoked the direct participation of locals when it did not stem directly from such participation; in the case of Davis, it reversed the role of architect as auteur and thus countered the architect’s training to intervene formally. For an architect with mostly conventional practical experience (including a stint in Minoru Yamasaki’s firm that ended on the day the office received the commission for the World Trade Center) and only a little background in humanitarian work (with the British Christian relief organization Tearfund, whose annual
budget of fifteen thousand pounds disallowed much travel), this path of applied research opened considerable avenues for new forms of practice as well as international exchange.\(^{21}\)

Precisely such research, and its concomitant networks, brought Davis into collaboration with Frederick Cuny.

According to the frequently hagiographic literature on Cuny, the “outspoken and impolitic” disaster management consultant from Texas began his career with efforts to organize Mexican migrant labor communities in the mid-1960s. He entered international relief work in 1969 during the Biafra civil war and founded the consulting firm Intertect (aka International Architects) Relief and Reconstruction Corporation in 1971. His career ended in mystery thirty years and several storied missions later, when he disappeared in the Chechen foothills while on assignment with the Open Society Institute to assist refugees.\(^{22}\)

Cuny’s demonstrations of courage, ingenuity, and an uncommon capacity to marshal resources and effect solutions in the field fueled a mythology of humanitarian work during the Cold War generally and in his person specifically. Indeed, the aura around his venturesome life and untimely death eclipses Intertect’s vast workhorse contributions to technical expertise in disaster relief, reconstruction, and planning as factors for development.

With Intertect, Cuny sought an approach that combined technical effectiveness with political accountability, representing this as the critical method of a new generation of first responders. “The zenith of the old approach,” according to Cuny, was achieved by CARE, Oxfam, and the other World War II-era behemoths claiming political neutrality in crises in Biafra and Bangladesh in the early 1970s and yet pivoting to retool their core development expertise toward humanitarian crisis response.\(^{23}\)

Cuny’s broad practice of disaster management included micro- and macroeconomic intervention, postdisaster recovery phasing, architectural design and construction, and development of educational training programs to teach owners to build or reconstruct their own homes; however, he is most often associated with advocacy.\(^{24}\)

In person and in writing, he underscored the need for foreign interveners to respect the agency of individuals affected by disaster. In his words, “In disaster response, the term victim should be coterminous with participant.”\(^{25}\)

The cultural and discursive impact of Cuny’s empowerment ideology, one imbricated with the action research approach, became as meaningful and influential as Intertect’s technical expertise and process of field research, to be discussed further in the next section.
Intersect's innovations and the complexity of Cuny's politics appeared early in his writings, in a 1977 article on the state of the art in refugee camp planning, which was commissioned by the Relief and Development Institute for the first volume of the journal *Disasters*. One of his findings was that spatial layout factored as a major determinant in the "successful operation of a camp." This example of his discursive framing of the camp, among others, demonstrates his naturalization of the premise and terms of the camp—he questioned only its technological efficacy. Nevertheless, the acuity of the planning study remains remarkable; it registers the development of expertise put not toward the support of technocratic governance but instead toward better enabling the displaced and those who would aid them. Cuny's article put to work detailed case studies, elaborate recommendations on site selection, planning, and maintenance, and studious renderings of ideal layouts as a scientific data set and body of adaptable standards (Figure 3). For example, Cuny recommended the "circular camp plan" for inhospitable terrain and uneven topography, noting that it reduced the distance for drainage and sanitary lines, centralized services, enabled the retention of interior lands so that refugees might develop resources for self-sufficiency, permitted social integration through spatial distinction for refugees of varying identities, and enabled modular regional planning through the reproduction of circular camp forms erected adjacent to one another. While the merits and demerits of this specific form and others in the text may be debated, again, the innovation in this artifact is its representation of complex technical expertise; it draws at once from nuanced comprehensions of the social dynamics of displacement and from a vocabulary of canonical town planning strategies. (Cuny acknowledged that "development plans for refugee camps should be considered with the same detail as a master plan for a town," and aspects of this idealized layout quoted Ebenezer Howard's garden city concept, even though Cuny did not reference it.)

Cuny argued at once against uncontrolled encampment and overdetermined planning. His article depicted the former in an emergency camp for war refugees from Bangladesh, established by the Indian government in 1971, and the latter in the military-style grid planning of two settlements erected by the U.S. Army for earthquake refugees after the 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua. These examples speak to the geographical and social range of Cuny's case studies—that is, his own international mobility across hemispheres as well as the types of crises (political, environmental) and range of actors (state, military, nongovernmental, civilian) of concern to him.

Intersect developed Coyotepe camp near Masaya, outside Managua, to assist Oxfam, the Catholic Institute of International Relations, and the Nicaraguan government in a camp planning program in response to the 1972 earthquake. For this camp, the team selected a “modified cross-axis plan” consisting of communities of ten to sixteen housing units each, arranged around central shared open areas, clustered around a central administrative core (Figure 4). Cuny strongly recommended a "community unit" camp, in which "design encourages the development of a 'community' feeling among the residents." The design at Coyotepe followed the ideal of the modified cross-axis plan, if not the exact form (Figure 5). Shelters opened onto central "squares," which enabled residents to communicate, care for young children jointly, share domestic tasks such as cooking or washing, and enjoy a sense of physical protection. A diagonal layout of housing clusters was mirrored on either side of a central administrative compound to reduce travel distances and maintain density. The form was modified to take into account the site's natural features and terrain, as well as the needs of the actual population, demonstrating Cuny's assertion that field conditions should ultimately dictate planning.

Coyotepe camp provided an operational and morphological prototype that would be seized upon and disseminated widely. James Kennedy, a leader in a later generation of humanitarian architects, framed it as offering "the vocabulary and the foci of what would be subsequently advocated and adopted by a wider humanitarian response community." According to Cuny, much of this stemmed from the social and technical advantages of the design, enumerated in terms of a range of criteria: savings in operating costs, lower morbidity rates, greater political involvement, "a strong refugee council," and good quality of life. "By orienting the opening of each shelter inward, it was felt that a sense of community could be provided. . . . By every account, Coyotepe was a relatively happy and industrious camp. Photos show small cottage industries in the camp, children playing, and women working together on household chores." Arguments such as these read retrospectively as unapologetically positivist—certain of the life- and cost-saving effects of good planning—and lacking intersectional analysis of gender, ethnicity, class, or many other of the categories through which camps inhabit a social and political space. However, Cuny was convinced that the fieldwork offered the testing ground and evidence for the assessment of the camps as a technology, and he saw the potential of the technology's spatial and architectural articulations to effect a politics of solidarity, enabling "refugees to recover faster and look after their own welfare sooner."

This practice dovetailed with broader development research agendas and the concurrent work that Davis undertook. Davis recollects his first encounter with Cuny:

In 1976 I met Fred Cuny when he got off the plane in Guatemala about a week after the earthquake. We participated in some exciting early meetings with the Oxfam Field Director, Reggie
Figure 4  Modified cross-axis plan for a refugee camp (Frederick C. Cuny, “Refugee Camps and Camp Planning: The State of the Art,” *Disasters* 1, no. 2 [1977], 140).

Figure 5  Coyotepe camp, near Masaya, Nicaragua, 1972 (Frederick C. Cuny, “Refugee Camps and Camp Planning: The State of the Art,” *Disasters* 1, no. 2 [1977], 128).
Norton, as the initial builder training courses in safe construction were being devised. . . .

The developmental approach, to sell building materials to families (only to give them corrugated iron roofing when families had no cash to buy) and to train them in safe building was regarded as totally bizarre by agency directors who were embarking on the delivery of tents as well as traditional contractor based approaches to reconstruction. Families used the corrugated iron sheet to improvise temporary accommodation. And then later they reused the roofing on their permanent dwelling, thus avoiding the waste of “double reconstruction” by building an interim transition house.35

This story illustrates one of many instances of collaborative thinking and practice between Cuny and Davis, humanitarian agency relief practitioners, and multiple, if unnamed, displaced persons that reframed the disaster discourse from the perspective of development, and especially from the view of the participant at the end of the aid chain. Davis and Cuny would return to Managua after its worst earthquake in five hundred years, as well as to a host of other sites, as part of a commission tasked with assembling and analyzing evidence and developing planning and policy guidelines for UNDRO. They produced the first such international study, a comprehensive analysis of emergency shelter and postdisaster reconstruction, encompassing the cycle from preparedness to relief to reconstruction to prevention.36 According to Davis, it was written “from the point of view of the survivor, rather than through the traditional perspective of the donors and other assisting groups.”37 This statement was among the many tonal contributions attributable to the two consultants, whose research, travel, and collaboration on disaster and development research—in areas of the world increasingly referred to as “the global South” rather than “the tropics”—laid substantial groundwork for an architectural disciplinary concern and field of practice around humanitarian work in the decades to follow.

Disasters and Development: An Architecture Culture of Humanitarian Practice

The institutionalization of humanitarian architecture and planning expertise occurred in multiple frameworks, and in this section I survey knowledge transfers in academic contexts as well as the standardization and systematization of the humanitarian aid industry. I follow the work of Davis and Cuny through three sets of landmark events: the 1978 conference Disasters and the Small Dwelling, which brought forth state-of-the-art research and produced a professional platform for discourse; the research and publication in 1982 of the UNDRO document Shelter after Disaster: Guidelines for Assistance and the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies, which had far-reaching impacts through standardization and professionalization of the aid industry; and the establishment in that year and the decade to follow of academic centers dedicated to this research.38 Against three entropic forces—the dispersed nature of humanitarian crises and aid efforts, the rise of nongovernmental culture in this period and consequent diffusion of knowledge bases, and the Cold War political geographies that produced institutional archival silos—these forces may be understood historically as performing a consolidation of expertise.

By the mid-1970s, state-based, private, and academic initiatives together contributed the fine grain of analysis to a growing professional culture concerned with relief and disaster. In July 1975, the International Union of Architects, a federation of professional associations that provided planning experts for United Nations missions in postcolonial contexts, selected “Emergency Shelter” as the subject for a student competition.39 From 31 May to 11 June 1976, the United Nations convened its largest gathering to date, the Habitat Conference on Human Settlements. At this conference, which addressed sustainable population growth and development, uncontrolled urbanization, involuntary migration, and the ecological deterioration of the planet, Davis heard papers on the relationships among urbanization, vulnerability, and poverty. The emphasis Davis and Cuny placed on local knowledge, enabling the indigene in refugee contexts, and dweller control of the housing process owed a debt to self-help urbanization discourses to which their colleague John Turner had contributed.40 “Self-build” and “self-settlement” models for disaster reconstruction and refugee shelter planning formed their theoretical cornerstone. These positions echoed an ideology of democracy, human rights, and individualism with broad appeal in a rising human rights culture.

During this period, this humanistic interpretation of the self-build paradigm also converged with architectural discourses on society, politics, and culture that spanned the ideological spectrum. Amos Rapoport’s idealized cultural arguments for vernacular form and Paul Oliver’s concerns with the social quotient in anonymous dwellings appeared in foundational texts in 1969, House Form and Culture and Shelter and Society, respectively.41 Within the decade that followed, Turner’s Freedom to Build and Housing by People presented his 1960s studies of informal housing in Peru.42 These works were read widely, even though they were originally published for the specific audiences of the journal Architectural Design.43 They do not escape a critical retrospective view. Oliver and Rapoport, at the Architectural Association and University College London, respectively, were affiliated with institutions whose agendas were, as C. Greig Crysler notes, “not least connected to the immediate post-imperial role of developing programs in architectural education for ‘students from developing countries.’”44 Ijlal Muzaffar analyzes several debates on Turner’s work and the political problematic of the economics of self-settlement.45 These debates
spawned a veritable cottage industry of Marxist criticism of his work for providing an alibi for state-based capitalism and the international system of economic structural adjustment, which often advocated a minimal “sites and services” approach for housing the poor and reduced governmental responsibility for people’s welfare. Nevertheless, Oliver’s, Rapoport’s, and Turner’s discursive positions remain useful for mapping architectural arguments for a common humanity onto parallel humanitarian claims. Rapoport saw traditional society as fundamental: “The traditional housing and settlement forms, and their associated social and cultural patterns, should be seen as the point of departure rather than being ignored.” Oliver adhered to a position close to Davis’s, and Turner, in asserting the “human value of housing. Oliver and Turner, as attendees at a conference chaired by Davis, would have heard similar language from Cuny, who called disasters “a human problem.”

The aforementioned conference, Disasters and the Small Dwelling, held in April 1978, was cosponsored by the International Disasters Institute, Oxfam, and the Disasters and Settlements Unit at Oxford Polytechnic, where Davis was based. Most of the attendees came from the United Kingdom, with some from the United States, India, Italy, Thailand, Australia, and Iran, and the papers presented comprised an analysis of the state of the art in disaster management. Participants possessed technical experience in disaster mitigation, preparedness, and postdisaster recovery and reconstruction; expertise in land-use planning, seismic protection of masonry, and building construction education; and concerns with the broader cultural, social, and political contexts of disaster assistance. Oliver differentiated the “indigenous culture” from the “relief culture,” arguing empathetically that the former is “prone to a double trauma: the traumatic experience of the disaster and the trauma of having an external body assume responsibility for its welfare, and for its shelter, a humiliating experience which in itself can do irreparable damage to the cohesion of its social system.” He urged that “proposals for permanent shelter provision in disaster areas should be advanced... with extreme caution.” Cuny’s keynote address on the state of the art shared Intertect’s experience of intervention and advocated for greater understanding of the social and development context of disaster: “Too often, housing is examined simply as an artefact—a design or a structure—rather than as an end-product of a very complicated process.” This echo of the argument for “housing as a verb” in the seventh chapter of Freedom to Build was extended by that chapter’s author in the Draft Conference Resolutions, as Turner underscored the “unique opportunities” presented by disaster relief as “a critical phase influencing and even determining long-term consequences” for development, affirming that “this conference recommends that disaster relief agencies, acting in concert with governments, orient their short-term actions to long-term development goals in accordance with their actual responsibilities.”

Rapoport’s work, which often advocated a minimal refugee camp planning and disaster shelter during these years constituted important professional milestones, this conference represented the apex of a professional culture, schematizing the thinking that would drive later humanitarian ideascapes and the development of standards. The professional community’s collective memory of the conference supported a second meeting in 1990 by the same name, which expanded the previous focus on traditional rural structures to include urban dwellings. It was organized by Yasemin Aysan, a student of Davis and an architect and planner at the Disaster Management Centre at Oxford Polytechnic (who would participate three years later in the UNHCR’s First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees from her new post at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). Her conference notes redefine the “small dwelling” as “a metaphor for a social and economic unit, a cultural and political entity and, ultimately, a physical process and product.” This second Disasters and the Small Dwelling conference did not catalyze a third, but the persistence of the questions being asked in professional humanitarian contexts attests to their centrality within the vexing relationship between emergency and development: with emergency forever reproducing conditions of underdevelopment. Perhaps to no small degree, this persistence also testifies to the discursive reach of the figures at the center of this discourse.

This reach was not only a function of Davis’s and Cuny’s notable personal charisma, but also of the wide dissemination of their research through two 1982 publications. As for the first, during two phases, from July 1975 to September 1977 and from November 1979 to May 1982, the consultants collaborated on a Dutch-funded UNDRO study of earthquakes, hurricanes, and cyclones in Yugoslavia, Turkey, Peru, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Italy, India, and Algeria. Shelter after Disaster: Guidelines for Assistance included cases from Davis’s 1978 book Shelter after Disaster, many compiled for his 1985 doctoral dissertation, as well as some of Intertect’s studies, published in Cuny’s 1977 article in Disasters, “Refugee Camps and Camp Planning: The State of the Art,” with lessons abstracted for his 1983 book Disasters and Development.
The UNDRO document was inflected by the particular research methods Davis and Cuny used, legible in the books they wrote independently. Davis took a historical case study approach, examining a chronology of disaster response from antiquity and analyzing cases in local social and political contexts. Cuny took an ethnographic and typological approach to disasters as models, mining practical and political lessons from the analysis of acute details of catastrophes. Pictorially, his analysis treated the earthquake, cyclone, drought, or other disaster as scientific artifact; diagrams explained the phases of an earthquake’s action, the focus of its mechanical energy, its resonance and liquefaction, its process of damage to a structure, and potential secondary effects (tsunamis, fire) on dense, precariously developed areas (Figures 6 and 7). The UNDRO document drew from the concrete experiences in relief and camp planning that these two consultants had cultivated since the early 1970s, such as Intertect’s “community unit” approach to the design of Coyotepe camp in Nicaragua.

As for the second, several sources note Cuny’s “best practices” contribution to the UNHCR field guide, the Handbook for Emergencies, as well as the wide dispersion of this instrument and its persistent impacts on standards and practice. Many agencies and organizations, such as the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), published field guides addressing physical planning, but inasmuch as any guidebook directed field activity, the original UNHCR handbook remained the standard for more than fifteen years. It was updated only in 1998, following a massive political push for norms and accountability following controversies in refugee crisis management in Bosnia and Rwanda; even then it incorporated updated versions of many of Intertect’s recommendations. As an expert on the role of international actors, which the dense expository under the heading “Some Concerns” in Disasters and Development demonstrates, Cuny further advised on the social, political, and economic ramifications of humanitarian intervention and its effects on local social and community coping mechanisms, strongly discouraging centralized control by host governments and the creation of parallel economic and infrastructural systems, which could exacerbate refugee dependence on aid, and emphasizing refugee self-administration and site specificity in camp design and physical planning. The year the Handbook for Emergencies was published, Cuny began delivering the physical planning component of the mandatory UNHCR Emergency Management Training Program at the newly established University of Wisconsin Disaster Management Center. Moreover, the UNHCR continued to distribute Intertect’s guidelines on shelter and settlement planning to consultants setting out for the field a decade later.

In the years after these two industry standard documents were published, two academic contexts furthered the consolidation of expertise and the process of integrating and institutionalizing emergency shelter design and settlement planning. Two programs emerged in architecture schools: the Special Interest Group in Urban Settlements (aka SIGUS), established in 1984, which grew out of the Urban Settlement Design Program founded by John Turner, Horacio Caminos, and others at MIT, and the Centre for Development and Environmental Planning (aka CENDEP), which Davis and others founded at Oxford Polytechnic in 1985. These paralleled the international institutionalization of the refugee studies field itself. In the establishment in 1982 of the Oxford Refugee Studies Programme (later renamed the Refugee Studies Centre), Barbara Harrell-Bond, an anthropologist in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford, underscored the attempt to locate “academic centers wherever there were refugees,” leading to the establishment of the Centre for Refugee Studies at Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya, in 1991, and others in the following decade at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, Makerere University in Kampala, and the American University in Cairo.

As argued in the study of MIT by Arindam Dutta and others, architecture and planning expertise was often consolidated within broader academic orientations toward social scientific studies, as the proximity of the Oxford Polytechnic department to the Oxford Refugee Studies Programme illustrates. This institutionalization of expertise follows the striving for rigorous, technically sophisticated atmospheres, as in the transatlantic construction of the “two Cambridges” design research milieu in the 1960s and 1970s that Mary Louise Lobsinger identifies. As she argues, this epistemic transformation framed and was framed by “a socio-cultural dynamic that crossed institutional milieus and extended beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries,” gathering design disciplines, among many others, under the category of “environment” and, through this shift, privileging the production of scientific rationales over outcomes. While this could never have been the goal of figures engaged in humanitarian fieldwork, particularly Cuny and Davis in their work with actual refugees, this institutional milieu, in which “architecture became a variable within a constellation of environmental practices dedicated to the development of rational techniques,” set the stage for the discourse to follow on environment and shelter.

Shelter: Constructions of Expertise

In spite of the dissemination of the Handbook for Emergencies by the UNHCR, as the largest designated agency administering refugee camps in the world, the agency’s resulting internal production of expertise was limited. In 1993, Wolfgang Neumann, senior physical planner/architect in the Programme and Technical Support Section and the first professional architect in a UNHCR post, convened the First
Figure 6  “Description of an Earthquake” (Frederick C. Cuny, Disasters and Development, ed. Susan Abrams for Oxfam America [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], 24).

Figure 7  “How an Earthquake Damages a House” (Frederick C. Cuny, Disasters and Development, ed. Susan Abrams for Oxfam America [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], 25).
Commissioner Jean-Pierre Hocké, in an unprecedented financial crisis, with a deficit higher than $100 million and alush fund scandal that would lead to High Commissioner Jean-Pierre Hocké’s resignation. In a humiliating turn, the United Nations appointed a committee to overseeing the UNHCR’s administration, and donor governments expressed their diminished faith by approving only a partial budget based on the agency’s assessed needs. These voluntary contributions fell short of the growth in refugee numbers at the very moment the UNHCR anticipated unprecedented population movements following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

By the early 1990s, with the assumption of the office of high commissioner by Ogata, a Japanese academic woman (three new categories for the agency’s senior post), the UNHCR wished to capitalize on a fresh image and build new relationships to enhance its public relations and fund-raising capacity. During this time, it established the Public Information Office, with a professional news staff that built strong relationships with the press, placing Ogata’s visage in human-interest articles in the pages of international magazines like *Time* and *Vogue*. Moreover, her name appeared regularly in major press coverage as an unrelenting series of high-profile refugee crises unfolded, establishing the UNHCR as a prevailing authority through the “CNN effect” precisely at a time when humanitarian affairs figured centrally in geopolitics, and when the UN General Assembly itself was undergoing reforms to develop an international emergency response and coordination apparatus. The agency sought technical expertise that would build its capacity and visual strategies that would reviv e its standing, revitalize its image, showcase its work and personnel, and expand its diplomatic and professional networks, as it sought crucial financial support from diverse new government and private sources in a shifting donor landscape. For this, it sought new professional connections, commodities, and expertise in the fields of architecture and planning. Because the UNHCR was mandated to provide protection through legal channels rather than through the implementation of aid, the agency’s staff was endemically nontechnical. During the first major refugee crisis of O gata’s tenure, as Iraqi Kurds fled into the snowy mountains on the Turkish border in March 1991, the UNHCR’s conspicuous lack of capacity in the area of emergency response forced the agency to defer to international coalition forces, which led Operation Provide Comfort to deploy resources and build camps and shelter. While no international civil body could have matched the logistics capacity of this coalition military, the situation was further complicated for the UNHCR by the politics of accessing a population fleeing internally rather than across national borders, as the agency’s purview depended on individuals crossing that territorial threshold. Such experiences contributed the fine grain to the institutional atmosphere in the early 1990s, underlying an acquisitive orientation toward expertise in physical planning.

In 1993, expertise in emergency settlement planning and shelter design, such as it was, lay largely in the academy and private sector, the research of UNDRO discussed above, and humanitarian organizations with a public health and hygiene specialty, such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Oxfam.
The latter organizations had been able to remain active in regions where Cold War politics limited access for the United Nations agencies, and they had been informally gathering field knowledge in emergency response, even codifying it in an ad hoc manner. Outside of the minor repositories these created, professional architects and planners appeared to be the custodians of this expertise, and as the examples of Cuny and Davis show, their entry into the international humanitarian agencies brought into those bureaucratic yet urgent landscapes not only technical concerns but also humanistic and aesthetic orientations.

In 1993, the UNHCR was ripe for new institutional approaches. It had formed a new section to handle emergency coordination of operations, which had established major refugee settlements in the preceding months; for example, at Dadaab, Kenya, the UNHCR had administered three camps for ninety thousand refugees fleeing the civil war in Somalia. German architect Wolfgang Neumann, who was serving as head of the Programme and Technical Support Section, raised the possibility of new formal and informal relationships through an initiative to bring together an international professional community around the topic of cold-climate architecture for refugees. At a meeting on 16 February at the UNHCR Geneva headquarters, a small working group of architects, logisticians, engineers, and other emergency response and planning professionals identified the need for “a comprehensive shelter strategy with appropriately developed standards, supply methods, [and] specifications and production capabilities related to local needs and circumstances,” seeding the idea for the three-day meeting that was held a few months later at the neighboring Château de Penthes.

This “first” event in Geneva was never followed by a second, but in theory, it promised to build professional momentum and community, linking academics, practitioners, and vendors in the building trades. Teams in working sessions were tasked with developing an emergency shelter concept, a policy framework, and a means for implementation that would consider emergency response protocols, standards, and technology, and establish a standing forum for the dissemination of information and knowledge (Figure 8). Attendees arrived from countries around the world: Malawi, Australia, Pakistan, the United States, Norway, and the former Yugoslavia, to name a few (Figure 9). In total, sixty invited architects, logisticians, manufacturers, and diplomats attended, including the anthropologist Barbara Harrell-Bond (the founder and head of the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre, whose scholarship offered a scathing criticism of encampment as a practical, ontological, and ethical problem wrought by refugee policy). A trade exhibition of shelter products and prototypes accompanied the meeting (Figure 10). In practice, this working session may have resembled less a systematic consolidation of technical expertise than a gathering of competing interests. Nevertheless, inasmuch as the attendees shared an interest in the capacity of architecture and planning to intervene in matters of politics, society, and human need, the workshop evoked the origins of CIAM, another international effort initiated at another château sixty-five summers earlier in nearby La Sarraz with the aim of convening on problems that modern architects might solve.

Neumann engaged two of the leading architecture and development think tanks concerned with disaster management and urban settlement to lead the workshop in the contemplation of operative and theoretical issues. Nabeel Hamdi from the Centre for Development and Environmental Planning at Oxford Brookes University (formerly Oxford Polytechnic) and Reinhard Goethert from the Special Interest Group in Urban Settlements at MIT organized the conference, one among several collaborations they undertook during this period. They commissioned a state-of-the-art overview

Figure 10  Installation at the First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees, Château de Penthes, Geneva, 29 June–1 July 1993 (Mandinda Zimba, rapporteur, “Summary of Proceedings: First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees,” 1993, UNHCR Publications Files, UNHCR archive, Geneva.)
paper from Hamdi’s colleague and codirector Roger Zetter, who had founded the Journal of Refugee Studies five years earlier and later became the director of the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre. In his keynote address, Zetter offered a broad analytical perspective rather than the practical—and provisional—thinking reserved for refugee environments. He reconceptualized several matters of professional interest to an audience concerned with the physical planning and architecture of humanitarian response, some of which would perhaps unrealistically involve changing hardened architecture of humanitarian response, some of which to an audience concerned with the physical planning and humanitarian practice or at the macro level of development economics. His analysis offers a conceptual and historiographical landmark in the linking of the discourses of humanitarian relief with those of architecture and planning.  

Architecture Culture, Humanitarian Expertise: From the Tropics to Shelter

The First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees offers a meaningful punctuation mark in this half-century map of humanitarian and architectural discourse. Through the workshop, the thinking and a professional culture coalesced immediately prior to unprecedented crises in Bosnia and Rwanda that would produce a sea change in humanitarian self-reflection, a massive international push for reforms, and new scales of emergency for which architecture and planning solutions would be systematized. Humanitarian reforms took root in the formation of the Sphere Project consortium in 1996, “the first attempt to produce globally applicable minimum standards for humanitarian response services,” part of an international initiative on the part of agencies and organizations to establish norms, hone core professional competencies, and codify expertise. This initiative included work in areas of spatial practice, such as “camp management” and “shelter”; that year, a research group called shelterproject began developing a field manual for transitional shelter and settlement of refugees, an exercise from which the organization Shelter Centre emerged, in a coach house behind the Department of Architecture building at the University of Cambridge. Many credit Shelter Centre’s director, Tom Corsellis, with forging the contours of a contemporary field through the organization’s unmatched technical proficiency, resource database, and professional network. The review process for the field manual initiated the biannual Shelter Meeting in 2004. As a highly systematized avatar of the First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees, the Shelter Meeting integrated and institutionalized expertise within the international humanitarian system.

That a discursive space forged in the postcolonial tropics and developed through disaster landed on the iteration of “shelter” speaks to the act of figuration by the architect at the center of this history. However, Zetter’s later contemplation of the UNHCR workshop suggested a mixed assessment of this figuration. According to him, the systematic approach in his overview paper could ultimately frame policy, but it left its audience both excited and frustrated. For many, it was too theoretical and did not offer enough technical advice. For others, it did not clear the larger obstacles that would thwart realization of its goals, for example, the inertia of institutions in following new technical or technological directions, the incapacity or lack of remit among architects and planners to forge changes in professional practice, and, perhaps most insurmountable, a fundamental visual problem: that the more sophisticated the shelter response, the more resistance many host countries would mount, out of concern that humanitarian solutions should not encourage permanent settlement. Zetter’s recounting identifies a tension in his audience, between arousal and pique. That tension illuminates a desire as well its vexation, for the architectural and humanitarian to be realized together—perhaps embodied in shelter or, rather, shelter’s aporia.

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Notes

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5. Ibid., 6.


21. Ibid.


23. Frederick C. Cuny, Disasters and Development, ed. Susan Abrams for Oxfam America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 20. In humanitarian history, the Biafra crisis is viewed as a watershed, marking a shift in sensibility as a new generation of politically activist first responders condemned an old regime: notably, the French doctors who left the Red Cross to found Médecins Sans Frontières.

24. Cuny’s reputation for advocacy surfaced in multiple oral histories I conducted and informal discussions I had with aid workers and others in humanitarian agencies and organizations such as the UNHCR and Oxfam.


27. Ibid., 141.

28. Ibid., 127.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 140.


33. Ibid., 127, 129.

34. Ibid., 129.


37. Ian Davis, in ibid., iii.


43. For more on Turner’s writings, see Gyger, “The Informal as a Project.”
49. Ibid., 4.
52. Aloysius Fernandez, “The Relationship between Disaster Assistance and Long-Term Development,” in Davis, Disasters and the Small Dwelling.
54. Many of these questions were discussed at the annual meeting of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies held in Geneva on 19 March 2012, which I attended.
55. UNDRO, Shelter after Disaster; Davis, Shelter after Disaster, xiii; Davis, “Historical Introduction,” 85–86.
56. Davis, “Historical Introduction,” 85; UNDRO, Shelter after Disaster, iii; Davis, Shelter after Disaster; Richard Bauer, “Guidelines for Post Disaster Housing,” version 1 (unpublished paper, Oxfam GB Humanitarian Department, 2003); Cuny, “Refugee Camps”; Cuny, Disasters and Development.
61. I am grateful to Per Ivansson for sharing documents that confirmed this information. Per Ivansson, architect and former consultant for UNHCR, interviewed by author, 24 Mar. 2012, Lund, Sweden.
63. Lobisinger’s analysis offers historiographical context for the thinking in the period and the institutions discussed in this essay, in this section and the next. Mary Louise Lobisinger, “Two Cambridges: Models, Methods, Systems, and Expertise,” in Dutta, A Second Modernism, 653.
64. Ibid., 656.
68. Although technical and professional workshops on operational themes had been elements of standard practice in the UNHCR Programme and Technical Support Section and the Engineering and Environmental Services Section that grew out of it, few records of events convening built environment professionals remain. In 1981, the UNHCR Workshop on Rural Refugees in Africa included a talk on implementing rural settlements. Physical planning modules were included in two training workshops for emergency managers, one led by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Nairobi in 1985 and one held in 1987 at the Disaster Management Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where D. K. Hardin from UNHCR presented and distributed a paper. See Corsellis, “The Selection of Sites for Temporary Settlements,” 95–96; Roger Zetter, Refugees—An Overview of Shelter Provision and Settlement Policy” (paper presented at the First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees, Geneva, 29 June–1 July 1993); D. K. Hardin, “Physical Planning” (paper presented at the UNHCR/Disaster Management Center Emergency Managers Workshop, 1987). Corsellis refers to Hardin’s paper as “Refugee Camp Planning.”
70. Loescher, The UNHCR and World Politics, 262–68.
73. For the UNHCR, “protection” refers to the legal rather than the physical sort, and for technical expertise on the latter, the agency has generally relied on external consultants or professionals seconded from other United Nations agencies. Dale Buscher, senior director for programs, Women’s Refugee Commission, interview by author, 9 Mar. 2012, New York. However, in the 2000s, the agency extended its mandate toward developing physical forms of protection through internal initiatives to study and prototype shelter designs.
the United Nations system, or even across a single agency.

Many humanitarian agencies and nongovernmental organizations, academics, and the following trained architects: Wolfgang Neumann and Sabine Währing from UNHCR, Piet Goovaerts of MSF Belgium, François Rueff from the International Committee of the Red Cross, Max Hofer from Swiss Disaster Relief, and others from the School of Architecture at Oxford Brookes and the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT. Zimba, Author, 30 Apr. 2012, Cowley, England.

Several of the oral histories I collected as part of this research confirmed that no comprehensive knowledge base on architecture and planning in emergencies had been developed or codified by 1993. Internal institutional knowledge seemed to be stunted by the frequency of emergencies, which hindered the memorialization of staff experience, as well as by a lack of programs or technologies for archiving knowledge across the humanitarian field, across the United Nations system, or even across a single agency’s headquarters and field stations.

Maureen Connelly, former UNHCR emergency coordinator at Dadaab, Kenya (retired), interview by author, 3 May 2012, Brockenhurst, England.

The Château de Penthès Working Group included participants from humanitarian agencies and nongovernmental organizations, academics, and the following trained architects: Wolfgang Neumann and Sabine Währing from UNHCR, Piet Goovaerts of MSF Belgium, François Rueff from the International Committee of the Red Cross, Max Hofer from Swiss Disaster Relief, and others from the School of Architecture at Oxford Brookes and the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT. Zimba, “Summary of Proceedings,” 2, 43.

Ibid., 2–3.

Ibid., 36–43; “Workshop Folder: First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees,” participant’s copy, courtesy of Roger Zetter.


Zetter’s overview addressed the need to examine the sheltering capacities of visiting and host populations, the natural environment, settlement planning for durability, alternatives to encampment involving adaptive reuse of existing building stock or revision of planning codes and financial incentives, spontaneous self-settlement by refugees, the regional context in the response to emergencies, and a macroeconomic perspective of the role of temporary built environments in the cycle of relief to development. Roger Zetter, “Refugees—An Overview.”

Zetter, Shelter Provision and Settlement Policies, 29–106. This publication offers a comprehensive review of the state of the art.

Ibid., 2–3.

Ibid., 36–43; “Workshop Folder: First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees,” participant’s copy, courtesy of Roger Zetter.


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