Chapter Title: Introduction: the spatial and educational paradox of the long-term refugee camp

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Introduction | the spatial and educational paradox of the long-term refugee camp

At the beginning of 2020, 66 long-term refugee camps[1] existed along the East African Rift.[2] Some, such as Nakivale in Southwest Uganda, were established as early as 1958. Around two million refugees lived in these camps in 2020, with roughly half a million of them being younger than six years old.[3] Over the years, millions of children have been born and have grown up in these camps. Yet, it is unknown how their surrounding built environments affect their learning and development.

I started to work designing and evaluating early childhood development (ECD) facilities – inside and outside the refugee camps – in Rwanda in 2011 when I also began teaching at the country's first school of architecture. Like many professionals involved in humanitarian assistance, I want to understand the impact of my work and ensure that I provide what the users of my

I.1 Nyabiheke refugee camp, Gatsibo, Western Province, Rwanda. September 2015.
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I.1

designs want and need. In 2015, I decided to investigate how the architecture of the formal ECD facilities in the long-term camps in the region affected young children's learning. As I was studying with former architecture undergraduates at the ECD centres of the Congolese camps in Rwanda – which my architectural firm Active Social Architecture (ASA) had built – I realised that their weight on young children's learning was relatively small. The homes, streets, common areas and public sanitation facilities carried the brunt of the influence on the lives of the young refugees.

Indeed, is it not the case that we all remember the feeling of the floor where we played with our siblings when we were young? And how tall the counters were at our grandma's kitchen when we tried to help her cook? That recognition made me recall this quote from Peter Zumthor that highlights how unforgettable our first experiences with architecture are:

'There was a time when I experienced architecture without thinking about it. Sometimes I can almost feel a particular door handle in my hand, a piece of metal shaped like the back of a spoon. I used to take hold of it when I went into my aunt's garden. That door handle still seems to me like a special sign of entry into a world of different moods and smells. I remember the sound of the gravel under my feet, the soft gleam of the waxed oak staircase, I can hear the heavy front door closing behind me as I walk along the dark corridor and enter the kitchen, the only really brightly lit room in the house'.[4]

I realised that I needed to shift focus and explore the whole built environment of the camps – both inside and outside the formal schooling facilities – if I was to understand how architecture was affecting the young refugees. Unfortunately, the camps' spaces seemed to be forming mostly negative skills, attitudes and behaviours. That insight made me want to explore further how architecture could transform what were meagre learning environments into stimulating added educators.

Foregrounding built and learning environments—Over the years, I have noticed an extreme lack of information about East African camps, especially in their built environments. I have indeed suffered from it when trying to develop my work. Apart from a few academic works such as Manuel Herz's about Western Sahara and Chad,[5] Bran Jansen[6] and Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi[7] about Kenya, there is a shortage of scholarship – which also comes mostly from European scholars – about the camps' built environments. These works become almost non-existent when concerning learning settings and when looking at the built realm through a socio-political lens.[8] Moreover, the refugee's voice is missing in most studies, humanitarian policies and interventions, which suffer from an excess of standardised guidelines and toolkits. I thought it was time to create contextualised knowledge – nuanced, situated and participatory – to describe, study and transform the East African long-term camps, to help decolonise the refugee studies field and to uncover biases and hidden agencies in refugee assistance.

I tackled the task by using architecture as a means to create new knowledge collectively, include more local voices and speculate – through highly participatory approaches – on how to improve the current educational landscape for the millions of young children living in these camps. Besides, while practising – especially building ECD facilities – in the refugee camps, I was faced with the moral dilemma of contributing to their creation and maintenance. Participatory approaches help me reflect on the highly political role of practising in the camps.[9]

In this book, the reader will find an architect's take on the questions that many academics and humanitarian workers are already asking.[10] Is it relevant to look at camps through an urban lens and focus on their built environment? Which analytical benefits can architectural and design tools provide to refugee assistance? And which advantages can assemblage thinking and situated knowledges bring about in analysing, understanding and transforming long-term refugee camps?

With this work, I want to build upon what Bran Jansen calls a 'modest urban turn'[11] in refugee camp studies, the emerging attention on the built environment in the last decade. This body of literature aims to bring nuance and contextualisation to the field, focusing on the camps' urbanity.

Especially, the Middle Eastern cases are gaining from the new centrality of the built environment, which is bringing valuable insight about push-pull factors for forced migration, concepts of belonging and the relationships between encamped refugees and direct local hosts and is contributing to exploring the role of the refugees in their own assistance in these settings. Alas, this attention has not yet reached the least visible cases in Eastern Africa. Studies, policies and strategies in the region have for decades largely ignored the built environment's relevance, assuming it as a contextual side topic. This disregard might be due in part to the insufficient humanitarian funding, a focus[12] mostly on what is perceived to be life-saving and resulting from the humanitarian and the space of exception narratives, which have led the scholarship on camps for decades.[13]

You might be wondering why am I – moreover why should you be – interested in the built environment as a learning resource for young children? Humanitarian institutions did not anticipate that camps would become long-term living and learning environments for millions of young children. In fact, my personal experience shows that many camp planners in the region still hardly foresee the physical infrastructures they design as permanent devices. Instead, they mainly plan camps as efficient tools for movement control, epidemic prevention, food distribution and temporary shelter.

Moreover, as camp spaces have been considered non-places, limbo and transitional for decades, not only the built environment but also matters such as child development and everyday life have been left aside. In addition, as humanitarian educational programmes lack enough funding and suffer from an overarching Anglo-European bias – mainly due to a lack of situated knowledges – they promote a narrow approach to education,

emphasising formal schooling with standards devised in Geneva and overlooking the learning that happens outside the school environment. Moreover, as ECD has only recently gathered momentum in refugee assistance,[14] the information available on learning environments for young children is mostly technical, with an excess of standards and construction guidelines focused on formal educational facilities alone.

What really should trigger your interest are the impacts of this neglect. It is now internationally acknowledged that children's initial years are critical for their socio-emotional, cognitive and physical development.[15] It has also been proven that children absorb from experiencing the social and built environments that surround them. The built environment holds a potential that we must understand.[16] Knowing which spatial qualities are relevant to young children's learning can inform policies and interventions as ECD gains momentum and new alternatives to camps are being built. It is a matter that affects millions of young humans globally, and the long-term camps show that it will continue to do so.

To understand to what degree camps are acting as learning environments, I draw from post-structuralist literature that has, over the years, widened the conception of learning, describing it as diverse, composed of direct content-based education and learning by experience.[17] Since the 1950s, work in the learning environments field has increasingly studied the built and natural environments outside the school setting as a useful learning source.[18] This literature is, by nature, interdisciplinary[19] and has included architects and designers[20] since the 1970s.

The body of learning environment works I reflect upon, and I want to collaborate with, consider education and learning environments as complex, nuanced and contextualised – as tools that can be both freeing and oppressive. Especially when there are unbalanced power relations, conflict and extreme deprivation – such as the case of refugee camps – education and learning environments can harm and be used as a tool of the powerful to repress, indoctrinate and eradicate pre-existing and traditional knowledge.[21]

The refugee's role—Not surprisingly, given the decades-long humanitarian consideration of refugees as dependent victims, there is an extreme lack of involvement of refugees and surrounding populations in planning the refugee camp spaces in East Africa.[22] This lack of engagement is exacerbated by a shortage of aid for long-term crises, poor humanitarian institutional memory due to the continuous movement of personnel and short-term funding, restrictive host government policies and economic and geopolitical stakes. In my experience, it is also because most humanitarian relief workers – which count few built environment professionals in their ranks – are unfamiliar with thinking and talking about the built environment as a relevant factor in their work.

Despite refugees not being included in the official management and construction of the camps, they are their primary makers, especially as camps become long term. Yet, there is scarce research about

refugee-led actions. Due to my long-term engagement in the topic, I have been fortunate to observe the refugee-led spatial appropriations in Rwanda's long-term refugee camps since 2011.[23] In particular, I have experienced it in real time in the Mugombwa refugee camp, as I have been involved there from its establishment in 2013.

For the same reasons as those stated above, the refugees' perspective is lacking in knowledge production cycles. Academia and practice rely heavily on foreign-led accounts – mostly Anglo-European researchers and institutions – based too often on short-term engagements in 'the field'. The perceptions, views and actions of the encamped and their direct local hosts, especially children and their support networks – mainly women – are still largely overlooked.

In this book, I want to shed some light on the effects that the inclusion of the refugees' voice – both adults and children – can have for the discussion about refugee assistance, particularly focusing on the built and learning environments. As part of my research and practice journey, together with my teams, we have collected respondents' proposals to make the camps stimulating child-friendly learning environments.[24] The analysis of the information I gathered and created exposes the refugees' crucial role in the production of the camps' built environments and the relevance of their voice to transform the long-term camps and develop real alternatives to camps.

Integrating theory and practice—I strive to stand aware of my baggage and inherent biases throughout my work, creating a constant dialogue with my peers, assistants, informants and contexts. My identity as a young female architect born and raised in Barcelona affects access to certain areas and people, the types of responses I obtain, the information I collect and its analysis. It also limits my position as I seek to decolonise refugee camp research[25] and camp management, as well as architectural design and research in the region. I try to challenge assumptions – the readers', mine and those of the humanitarian system/host government assemblages.

Specifically, writing this book, I was motivated by Bruno Latour's concepts of the 'new deal' and the 'collective experiment'[26] and Dona Haraway's 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism of Partial and the Privilege'.[27] Both authors state that optimal policies cannot be universal or extracted from partial information and views – a common trait amongst humanitarian policies; they should be context specific and draw from various factors. They require local actors' participation to contextualise data and existing knowledge and tailor solutions best suited to their environment. It was relevant to involve refugees, direct local hosts, local artists, architects, academics, institutions, and foreign participants' in order to achieve my goals.

The collective experiment I have tried to undertake is rooted in a post-structural conception of the built environment and the world. I have used assemblage thinking[28] to grasp the interconnectedness of actors and the long-term camps' ever-changing nature. This theory has helped

me understand seven long-term refugee camps in East Africa as proto-urban settlements and learning assemblages in continuous evolution. It has allowed detail and contextualisation, opening the door to create situated bits of knowledge to contend narratives of camps as solely humanitarian spaces, as spaces of exception, limbo and non-places.

Architecture as a way of seeing and learning—My experience is that architecture can be – and should more often be – used as an exploratory and analytic tool of social phenomenon. I will try to persuade the reader about it with the different spatial experimentations that I describe in this book.
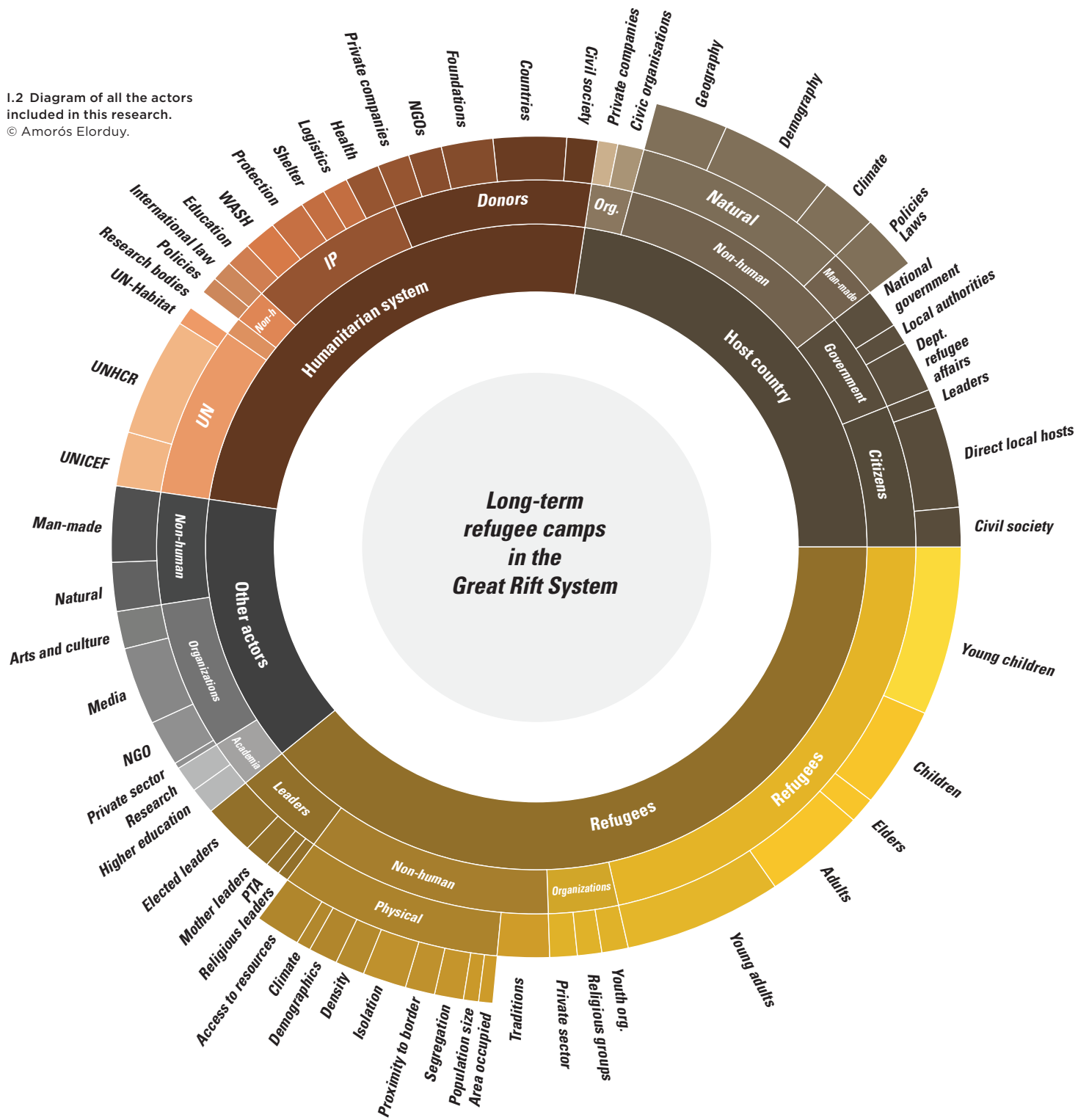
In the first chapter, 'The urban turn: informality, co-modification and assemblage,' I explain how the long-term camp prevalence triggered an urban turn in refugee camp studies at the end of the twentieth century. The urban turn comprises a body of works that use post-structuralist urban theory to explore the camps' power dynamics. I outline the possibilities this movement provides for the study of the phenomenon in East Africa. I make a case for studying the long-term camps as a typology in its own right as proto-urban spaces and as learning environments. I draw from works that analyse the embodiment of Lefebvre's 'right to the city' in urban settings in former colonies – particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa – through local perspectives. I reference Asef Bayat's concept of the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary',[29] James Scott's notions of 'everyday life' and 'survival practices',[30] Teresa

Caldeira's 'peripheral urbanisation'[31] and Edgar Pieterse's 'radical incrementalism'.[32]

In the following two chapters, I try to convey to the reader the considerable challenges that children face living in the long-term refugee camps that I describe, and how they extract both positive and negative learning from their surroundings. I lead the reader through a multi-scalar spatial mapping and analysis of Nakivale, Kyangwali, Kyaka II, Kakuma, Kiziba, Kigeme and Mugombwa refugee camps. These seven camps represent three of the principal conflict areas in the region (the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes and South Sudan),[33] encompass three nation states, 12 refugee origins, six decades of encampment practice and a wide variety of physical characteristics. These long-term refugee camps include various ages,[34] sizes, population densities, regional climates, geographies and host country refugee policies. Moreover, these camps host large proportions of young children.

Particularly, in the chapter 'Ever-evolving assemblages: the built environment of seven East African long-term camps', I map, dissect and finally reassemble the seven camps' spatial characteristics on regional, country and landscape scales. It becomes apparent how their evolution influences, and is influenced by, a complex array of factors, including the education of young children living in these camps and the refugees' agency. I present to the reader six spatial characteristics of the camps as relevant to their evolution: growing heterogeneity and complexity, co-functioning/interconnectedness, ever becoming, porosity, land scarcity and weak

I.2 Diagram of all the actors included in this research.
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Long-term refugee camps in the Great Rift System

Humanitarian system
- Donors
  - Org.
    - Civic organisations
    - Civil society
    - Private companies
  - Countries
  - Foundations
  - NGOs
  - Private companies
- IP
  - Health
  - Logistics
  - Shelter
  - Protection
  - WASH
  - Education
  - International law
  - Policies
  - Research bodies
  - UN-Habitat
  - Non-h
- UN
  - UNHCR
  - UNICEF

Host country
- Natural
  - Geography
  - Demography
  - Climate
- Non-human
  - Man-made
    - Policies
    - Laws
- Government
  - National government
  - Local authorities
  - Dept. refugee affairs
  - Leaders
- Citizens
  - Direct local hosts
  - Civil society

Refugees
- Refugees
  - Young children
  - Children
  - Elders
  - Adults
  - Young adults
- Organizations
  - Youth org.
  - Religious groups
  - Religious leaders
  - Private sector
- Non-human
  - Physical
    - Traditions
    - Area occupied
    - Population size
    - Segregation
    - Isolation
    - Proximity to border
    - Density
    - Demographics
    - Climate
    - Access to resources
- Leaders
  - Religious leaders
  - PTA
  - Mother leaders
  - Elected leaders

Other actors
- Non-human
  - Man-made
  - Natural
- Organizations
  - Arts and culture
  - Media
  - NGO
  - Private sector
- Academia
  - Research
  - Higher education

soils, and isolation and proximity to the border. These characteristics contribute to make the long-term camps ever-changing, proto-urban and learning assemblages for young children.

Exploring an architecture of opportunity, in the third chapter, 'Refugee-led spatial interventions: observed, imagined and speculated', I bring to light the prominent position of refugees in the spatial reproduction of long-term camps and their effects on young children's learning. For example, I show how the camp administrations disregard, allow or encourage refugee-led spatial appropriations. I dig deeper into refugee-led spatial interventions, observing and analysing the current quiet encroachment and everyday spatial transformations that refugees lead in the camps. Participatory action research (PAR) methods using architectural tools allowed refugees to get involved in, and become informed about, decision-making processes regarding their built environments and young children's learning. When pedagogist Paulo Freire first introduced PAR, he also introduced the theory of 'conscientisation' – a process by which participants learn to perceive the social, political and economic forces that influence them and learn to take action against the oppressive components of such forces.[35] Through Lefebvre's 'transduction' methodology, '[to] introduce "rigour in invention and knowledge in utopia" as a way of avoiding "irresponsible idealism"',[36] I tested the speculative potential of architecture to create new knowledge on how camps could become better learning environments. I used architecture to incentivise what Edgar Pieterse terms 'radical

incrementalism' in order to begin the transformation of the camps into stimulating learning environments.[37]

The collective experiment I recount in this book complies specifically with refugee camp research ethics. In 1986, Harrell-Bond emphasised the need to research the humanitarian system's anti-participatory ideologies and practices,[38] which still persist. David Turton took this idea further with his assertion that research on the subject of refugees and migrant populations should, in addition to causing no harm, benefit the research subjects.[39] Finally, Karen Jacobsen and Loren Landau questioned this dual imperative, stating that research on this topic should be rigorous and benefit academia, policy development and refugee livelihoods.[40]

Long-term refugee camps are proto-urban learning environments—I believe that by the end of the book, the reader will agree with me that its topic and approach are both timely and vital. It is of the utmost importance to explore the proto-urbanity of long-term camps and their effect on lifelong learning as new 'alternatives to camps'[41] are created. It is also necessary that humanitarian strategies recognise the centrality of refugees and direct local hosts on young children's learning and in the production and maintenance of refugee assistance strategies. We are in dire need for case-specific theories, policies and interventions based on research grounded on iterative, multi-stakeholder, participatory knowledge creation processes. Moreover, refugee assistance strategies, including ECD, will benefit from considering the

whole built environment as one of its various relevant tools, and from including local creative minds, arts and crafts, both as a universal language and as tools to involve more actors and create positive change. My work might be of use to policy and practice on several fronts, including new refugee assistance strategies, refugee ECD, long-term camp maintenance in East Africa and research by architectural design.

I expect to persuade the reader that a more contextualised, inclusive and participatory approach towards creating and coordinating spatial strategies of refugee assistance is attainable. An architecture of opportunity could improve the lives of those inhabiting the long-term refugee camps and the newly created 'alternatives to camps'. It could transform the long-term camps in East Africa into vibrant schools without walls.

Notes

1. By 'long-term refugee camps', I mean those that have lasted more than three years and host more than 5,000 refugees from the so-called protracted refugee situations. These include refugee settlements (as they are called in Uganda). I encompass refugee settlements and camps because of their primary role in physically containing refugees, even though in the political humanitarian arena they distinguish between the two terms, stating that settlements leave more freedom to refugees.
2. Macgregor, 'History of the development of the East African Rift System', 2015.
3. UNHCR, 'Population statistics', 2020, population figures updated for the end of 2018.
4. Zumthor, 'A way of looking at things', 9.
5. Herz, *From Camp to City*; Herz, 'Refugee camps in Chad'.
6. Hilhorst and Jansen, 'Humanitarian space as arena', 2010.
7. Siddiqi, 'L'historire architecturale d'un territoire non identifie'.

8. Fresia and Von Kanel, 'Beyond space of exception?', 2015.
9. 'Space becomes a medium for politics. Refugee camps are probably the most direct translation of politics into space. Any political strategy or decision has immediate consequence on a spatial dimension in the camp. And any spatial modification, on whatever scale, immediately resonates on a political and demographic level. The camp is politics having become space'. Herz, 'Refugee camps or ideal-cities in dust and dirt', 2005, 318.
10. Jansen, 'The protracted refugee camp', 2015; Minca, 2015; Herz, 'Refugee camps or ideal cities in dust and dirt', 2005; Sanyal, 'Urbanizing refuge', 2014; Grbac, 'Civitas, polis, and urbs'; Ramadan, 'Spatialising the refugee camp', 2013; Agier, 'Afterword: What contemporary camps tell us', 2016.
11. Jansen, 'The protracted refugee camp', 2015, 1.
12. The humanitarian and development modes of aid have different approaches and goals. While the former tends to rely on quick fixes for emergency situations usually in 'fragile' contexts, the latter focuses on sustainable approaches for long-term solutions and works in more stable situations. These two modes of aid are narrowing their positions, affording the recognition of education as a necessary tool in humanitarian relief.
13. On the one hand, humanitarian publications lead the 'humanitarian space and space of protection' reading. These works apply a structuralist and technocratic approach to the creation, maintenance and representation of refugee camps and frame the camps' physical spaces as of almost purely apolitical protection. On the other hand, European political scientists, anthropologists and sociologists initiated the 'space of exception and non-place' reading during the 1990s. Many Euro-American academics and mainstream media publications still use it.
14. Dryden-Peterson, 'Refugee education: A global review'; Dryden-Peterson, 'Refugee education: The crossroads of globalization'.
15. UNICEF, 'Building better brains'; Cappa, 'The formative years'.
16. Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*; Dewey, 'Experience and education', 1986.
17. Dewey; Coombs, *World Educational Crisis*.
18. Ward and Fyson, *Streetwork: The Exploding School*.
19. Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development*.

20. Ward, 'The child in the city', 1978; David and Weinstein, 'The built environment and children's development'.

21. Bush and Saltarelli, *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict*; UNESCO, 'The hidden crisis'; Paulson, *Education, Conflict and Development*.

22. Cooper, 'What do we know about out-of-school youths?' 2005.

23. I first visited Nyabiheke, Kiziba and Gihembe refugee camps in August 2011 for a project to improve primary education facilities in these camps with UNICEF and UNHCR Rwanda.

24. With my research team, we asked respondents about their opinions to improve young children's learning in three different areas: (1) the whole settlement – the streets, common spaces and WASH facilities; (2) the homes; and (3) the educational facilities – ECD, pre-primary and maternelle.

25. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

26. Latour, 'From the world of science to the world of research?', 1998.

27. Haraway, 'Situated knowledges', 2009, 583–4.

28. Deleuze and Guattari presented the assemblage theory in 1987 with the publication of *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*. Assemblage theory presumes that a fixed, linear, hierarchical and stable ontology for the social world does not exist. It rejects the interpretation of the social and natural worlds as made up of finite and definable organisms and considers conceptualisation as a reductionist generalisation and a synthesis to facilitate analysis. Assemblage theory proposes instead that natural and social formations are assemblages of complex configurations that are interrelated, composed of other complex configurations, and that in turn create more extended configurations.

29. Bayat, 'From "dangerous classes" to "quiet rebels"', 2000; Bayat, 'The quiet encroachment of the ordinary', 2007.

30. Scott, 'Preface'.

31. Caldeira, 'Peripheral urbanization', 2016.

32. Pieterse, *City Futures*.

33. The conflicts in the Great Lakes loosely includes Rwanda, Burundi, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda, particularly Rwanda's internal wars (1950s–1990s), Burundi's internal wars (1950s–ongoing), Eastern DRC's decades-long internal and external conflicts (1960s–ongoing) and Uganda's internal conflicts (1960s–1990s). The South Sudan conflicts include South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda, specifically: Uganda–Sudan (1960s–1980s), the South of Sudan conflict against Sudan (1980s–2000s) and the South Sudan internal conflict (2010s–ongoing). The Horn of Africa conflict includes mainly Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea and Djibouti: Somalia–Ethiopia (1990s), Somalia's internal conflicts (1990s-ongoing), Eritrea–Ethiopia war (1990s–ongoing) and Eritrea's and Ethiopia's authoritarian regimes (1990s–ongoing).

34. The seven case studies in this book are: Nakivale (est. 1958), Kyangwali (est. 1964) and Kyaka II (est. 1983) in Southwest Uganda; Kakuma (est. 1992) in Northwest Kenya; and Kiziba (est. 1997), Kigeme (est. 2005) and Mugombwa (est. 2013) in Rwanda.

35. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*.

36. Lefebvre in Petcou and Petrescu, 'R-URBAN or how to co-produce a resilient city', 2015, 256.

37. Pieterse, *City Future*, 6.

38. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid*, 3.

39. Turton, 'Refugees, forced resettlers and other forced migrants'.

40. Jacobsen and Landau, 'The dual imperative in refugee research', 2003.

41. UNHCR, 'Policy on alternatives to camps'; UNHCR, 'Comprehensive refugee response framework'; UNHCR, 'UNHCR policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas'.