

*Echoes Of Home: Cultural
Memory & The Design of Life
in Exile*

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Synopsis

This essay asks: how do displaced Syrians and Ukrainians use culture, identity, and memory to recreate a sense of home in temporary housing, and what do these differences and similarities reveal? In answering this, I will do so through five chapters using different research methodologies, such as my own personal account and secondary sources

Chapter One discusses Gaston Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space' and other related theories about how this addresses the human experience, proposing that domestic spaces act as containers of culture and tradition, and carry emotional and symbolic meanings that become even more significant during displacement.

Chapter Two introduces contextual background, using factual research to outline the specific forms of temporary housing available to Syrians and Ukrainians.

Chapter Three focuses on Syrian adaptations in camps and informal shelters.

Chapter Four examines Ukrainian adaptations in modular housing in Europe and within Ukraine.

Chapter Five offers a comparative discussion of key differences and themes, before concluding with considerations on how these challenges could be approached in future designs.

Contents

List Of Illustrations	3
Introduction	4
Chapter 1 - 'The Poetics Of Space'	5
Chapter 2 - Context Of Syrian And Ukrainian Temporary Housing	9
Chapter 3 - Syrian Interior Adaptation	14
Chapter 4 - Ukrainian Interior Adaptation.....	19
Chapter 5 - Comparative Discussion	23
Conclusion.....	25
Bibliography.....	27

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Mcdonnell, A. 2012. Located in a Windswept Desert, the New Za’atri Camp in Northern Jordan Can Eventually Host up to 113,000 Refugees., UNHCR
<<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/jordan-opens-new-camp-syrian-refugees-amid-funding-gaps>>

Figure 2: Hawari, Mohammad. 2012. an Aerial View of Za’atari Refugee Camp, Jordan., UNHCR
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/jordans-zaatari-refugee-camp-10-facts-10-years>

Figure 3: Dennaoui, Abdul . 2022. A Visit to an Informal Settlement in the Bekaa Valley, MEDAIR
<https://www.medair.org/news-stories/creating-home-in-impermanence-a-visit-to-an-informal-settlement-in-the-bekaa-valley>

Figure 4: Cortes, Gema. 2022. School 6 in Uzhhorod, Ukraine Repurposed as Temporary Shelter’, IOM Ukraine Response <https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/school-western-ukraine-offers-comfort-after-loss-and-displacement>

Figure 5: Madi, Zeid , and Nabil Sayfan. 2017a. Enterance Hall of a Shelter in Azraq Camp, Design to Live

Figure 6: ——. 2017b. Majlis of a Shelter in Azraq Camp, Design to Live

Figure 7: Philippou, Melina. 2019a. Courtyard in Azraq Camp, Design to Live

Figure 8: ——. 2019b. Kitchen Cabinets in Azraq Camp, Design to Live

Figure 9: Bureau, Balbek. [n.d.]. Visualisation of Modular Neighbourhood, Balbek Bureau
<https://www.balbek.com/reukraine-eng>

Figure 10: Kovalsky, Denys. 2023. Iryna and Her 2 Children in Their New Home after Living in a Shared Space for 1 Year, UNHCR <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/news/collective-sites-private-homes-unhcr-enables-forcibly-displaced-people-find-dignified-housing>

Introduction

With around 117 million people globally forced into displacement as of the end of June 2025¹, it is evident that war and conflict disrupt far more than the physical world around us. When a building is destroyed, it is often dismissed as “just a building,” but the real impact runs much deeper. For millions of displaced people, the essential human experience of a home is destroyed, and these spaces become unstable and redefined by the necessity of survival. Yet even when displaced individuals are confined to temporary shelters and camps, the desire to recreate familiar spaces and emotions persists. This essay will focus on how culture, identity, and memory influence the way displaced communities humanise temporary housing, drawing on two modern conflicts: the Syrian Civil War (from 2011) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (from 2022). These two countries provide a contrasting perspective on how geographical, cultural, and socio-political factors shape the ways people adapt to spaces of exile.

Though often treated as a technical or logistical issue, temporary housing holds much more emotion than statistics can show, for it is a “new home” people have been forced to move to rather than choose. The idea of wanting to feel at home does not disappear in displacement; if anything, it grows stronger and serves as an act of resistance to preserve memories and a sense of self. As Gaston Bachelard says, “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace,”² thus supporting the idea that domestic interiors carry emotional weight going beyond their physical form. This theory helps frame my point that displaced people do not simply occupy their spaces but transform them, drawing from memories, traditions, and cultural practices to create environments that feel familiar, and with familiarity comes a sense of safety. However, the ability to adapt and personalise temporary housing is not uniform. Syrians displaced to neighbouring countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey often face conditions of extreme scarcity, including tents and overcrowded apartments, with many also living in camps.³ Their ways of adaptation rely heavily on self-built solutions, textiles, found

¹ UNHCR. 2024. ‘Figures at a Glance | UNHCR’, *UNHCR* <<https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/figures-glance>>

² Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press), p.6

³ 2025. ‘Syria Refugee Crisis Explained’, *Unrefugees.org* (The UN Refugee Agency) <<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>>

materials, and the use of small personal objects. While over 5 million Ukrainian refugees are recorded globally, many have been accommodated in NGO-supported modular housing units across European countries, while others remain internally displaced, often with very limited access to state-provided housing due to funding constraints and the recentness of the conflict.⁴ This contrast highlights not only geographical differences and disparities in humanitarian response, but also varying cultural expectations surrounding domestic life. Despite these differences, a shared reality persists: these individuals are never merely statistics on a page but rather people whose lives have been forcibly disrupted, highlighting the importance of humanising these statistics, which forms a central focus of this essay.

Chapter 1 - 'The Poetics of Space'

The idea of home is inherently complex, as each person experiences it differently; in this context, understanding how displaced individuals recreate that multifaceted sense of home in temporary accommodation requires a framework that extends beyond the physical boundaries of a shelter. This chapter introduces the theories underpinning this study: the phenomenological concepts of home, cultural memory, identity formation in domestic spaces, and material culture. These ideas together will help explain how people adapt to unfamiliar environments during displacement.

⁴ Operational Data Portal. 2024. [Ukraine Situation - Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Ukraine Situation](#)

As mentioned, 'home' is not just a physical cover but also an emotional and psychological space. Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological approach in *The Poetics of Space* is vital for understanding the memory and emotional resonance of home. He emphasises that homes shape our memories, emotions, and daydreams, writing: "For the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism."⁵ He describes the home as being a vessel of memory, where one constructs a stable inner life. Concepts such as 'nests,' 'corners,' and 'drawers' represent minor pockets of intimacy and safety, spaces in our daily lives filled with personal meaning. For Bachelard, these intimate nooks are central to the feeling of being at home, regardless of their size or material quality.⁶ We often take for granted how much of our lives is tucked away or forgotten, until we open a drawer or stand in a space we do not usually occupy and are overwhelmed by the flood of memory. In the context of this essay, these small but meaningful spaces are amplified, as people strive to recreate likenesses to the corners of their homes within temporary shelters.

Bachelard's concepts also illuminate how displaced people cultivate a sense of familiarity within unstable environments. For instance, his discussion of the "nest" helps explain how refugees personalise tents or modular units; even when these spaces are standardised and uniform, individuals instinctively create moments of intimacy, using whatever resources are available as a means of preserving personal and collective memory. Bachelard states that the house is a nest in the world⁷, thus suggesting that the emotional function of a home can be both portable and a reminder of how small we are in the universe. He goes on: "and we shall live there in complete confidence if, in our dreams, we really participate in the sense of security of our first home,"⁸ further illustrating that, even when faced with harsh realities, displaced people can instinctively reconstruct a sense of emotional belonging in spaces not designed for long-term domestic life. The phenomenological lens, therefore, shifts the conversation of this essay from physical acceptability to the lived experience of home and security, rather than mere shelter.

⁵ Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press), p. 13

⁶ Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press)

⁷ Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press), p. 103

⁸ Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press), p. 103

Cultural memory is another key concept in understanding how displaced communities adapt to new environments. The groundwork laid by Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory describes how personal experiences are integrated into, and sustained by, the shared memories of an entire community.⁹ This process can occur through cultural practices, daily rituals, or symbolic activities that allow individuals to maintain their identities even when they are removed from their homes. Cultural memory as a whole is something that has been carried through generations, and in displacement, this memory can replace the lost physicality of home. Jan Assmann states that "in order to function as memory, however, its symbolic... must be circulated and re-embodied in a society."¹⁰ He argues that in times of chaos, people rely on familiar cultural practices to remain rooted. In temporary housing, this preservation of memory may appear in simple ways, such as a person's everyday routines: traditional textiles, religious practices, food preparation, and even conversational habits shared with neighbours. These community actions can transform any unfamiliar setting into one that feels as close to home as possible; cultural memory acts as an anchor, supporting resilience and stability during displacement.

Identity is closely tied to one's home and memory. It is important to note the difference between identity and cultural memory: identity focuses on an individual's sense of self and personal experiences, while cultural memory is shared among a community. Therefore, the interiors we create are a curation of both personal and collective identity. From Daniel Miller's book 'Stuff', he states, "objects are used to make visible and stable the values and identities that people hold,"¹¹ which clarifies how physical objects can hold meaning just as strongly as the theoretical emotions of Bachelard's previously discussed. Although small or makeshift, these objects act as a form of resistance against the erasure of displaced people's homes. Such personal items as photographs, fabrics, religious items, and drawings become extensions of the self, connecting refugees back to their identities and roots. For example, as an immigrant from Syria myself, something that connects me back to my home is a simple coffee mug that I brought with me from my childhood home; an object as simple as a

⁹ Dinter, Martin. 2023. Introduction: What Is Cultural Memory?

¹⁰ Meusbürger, Peter, Michael Heffernan, Edgar Wunder, and Springerlink (Online Service. 2011. Cultural Memories : The Geographical Point of View (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands), p. 17

¹¹ Miller, Daniel. 2010. *Stuff* (Cambridge Polity Press), p. 62

mug that's used in everyday life can still evoke a memory of oneself after migration. Therefore, even when adapting to new environments, the longing for one's previous sense of self remains. As a result, decorating a small room, hanging a photograph, or arranging bedding in a particular style are acts that assert belonging. Identity expression through interiors and objects helps rebuild a sense of control in situations where people have little social or political power. Hence, theories of identity explain why individuals adapt differently, as everyone comes from distinct backgrounds and homes, shaping their own version of what "home" should feel like. I will apply this theory in real-life examples in the coming chapters three and four.

Together, these theories develop a framework for analysing adaptation in temporary housing. Bachelard offers a phenomenological view of home as an intimate and imaginative space, which is significant because such intimacy and normality are often assumed but not always guaranteed for displaced people. Cultural memory explains how individuals recreate familiarity and continuity amid displacement. Identity theory emphasises how interiors can convey dignity, whilst the objects people carry show how they can function as tools for rebuilding emotional stability. Collectively, these concepts provide a deeper insight into how displaced Syrian and Ukrainian communities adapt to temporary housing, a process that will be examined in the upcoming chapters.

Chapter 2 - Context of Syrian and Ukrainian Temporary Housing



Figure 1. A.McDonnell, UNHCR. 'Zattari Camp Tents', 2012.

Understanding the housing conditions experienced by displaced Syrians is essential, as these environments shaped what people were later able to personalise and emotionally connect to. Before analysing how Syrians

adapted these interiors and designs, it is necessary to outline the physical structures provided, the limitations of humanitarian infrastructure, and the differences between established refugee camps and informal settlements. This background will establish the practical foundation for later chapters that will analyse their cultural and emotional adaptations.

The Syrian civil war began in March 2011, after groups took to the streets to protest the arrest of students who had graffitied anti-government messages. The Assad regime immediately suppressed the protests with violent arrests and shootings¹², sparking a civil war that has lasted over thirteen years. According to UNHCR, this conflict has caused more than 14 million Syrians to be forcibly displaced from their homes and more than 6.8 million to become refugees, primarily hosted in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt.¹³ However, the rapid scale of displacement overwhelmed national housing systems, creating an urgent need for temporary shelter solutions¹⁴. As a result, about 5 percent of displaced Syrians were resettled in emergency camps, and the remaining were in informal settlements.¹⁵ Due to limited time and planning, living conditions would have been shaped by scarcity because of constraints on land and resources. These pressures directly influenced the physical form of temporary housing as well as the degree of stability it offered.

In the early stages of displacement, most Syrian refugees were housed in standard UNHCR emergency tents [Fig.1]. These structures measured between 3.5 m² and 5.5 m² and were

¹² Ford, Robert. 2019. *The Syrian Civil War A New Stage, But Is It The Final One?*

¹³ 2025. 'Syria Refugee Crisis Explained', Unrefugees.org (The UN Refugee Agency)

¹⁴ Alhawarin, Ibrahim, Ragui Assaad, and Ahmed Elsayed. 2021. 'Migration Shocks and Housing: Short-Run Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan', *Journal of Housing Economics*, 53

¹⁵ 2025. 'Syria Refugee Crisis Explained', Unrefugees.org (The UN Refugee Agency)

constructed from lightweight canvas, plastic sheeting, and aluminium poles¹⁶. According to the UNHCR Emergency Handbook, there are many considerations, including the potential for personalisation of tents, that inform their design. However, even with these considerations, the tents are designed for rapid deployment rather than long-term residence. Due to limited funding, the tents had minimal insulation and low resistance to extreme temperatures, creating challenges in both hot and cold weather.¹⁷ Privacy was difficult to achieve due to the standardised design, and the structures required constant repair because of weather exposure, placing constraints on families and limiting their ability to establish stable domestic environments.

The Zaatari camp in Jordan became one of the largest and most well-known formal refugee settlements, established in 2012. At its peak, it housed over 120,000 residents, though this number had stabilised around 80,000 by 2023.¹⁸ The camp was organised in a grid-like system [Fig.2], with each section

forming a neighbourhood-like structure. It housed the main residential blocks, communal water points, shared sanitation blocks, and limited access to electricity. Initially reliant on tents, the camp later transitioned



Figure 2, Mohammad Hawar, 'Zaatari Camp Aerial View', UNHCR, 2012.

to prefabricated caravans, small container-like units of roughly

10–15 m².¹⁹ Although more durable than tents, these caravans still offered limited insulation and space. Families would often combine multiple units to create slightly larger living spaces over time.

¹⁶ UNHCR. 2019. 'UNHCR | Emergency Handbook'

¹⁷ Ashmore, Joseph . 2014. A -Using Tents B -Technical c -Standards Annex OFFICE for the COORDINATION of HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS a Guide to the Use and Logistics of Family Tents in Humanitarian Relief.

¹⁸ Carlisle, Lilly. 2022. 'Jordan's Za'atari Refugee Camp: 10 Facts at 10 Years', UNHCR

¹⁹ Dalal, Ayham. 2022. From Shelters to Dwellings (Transcript Verlag), p.67

Unlike the Zaatari camp in Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley differed significantly because the country does not permit formal refugee camps²⁰ and, from personal accounts, is strict in allowing Syrian nationals to enter Lebanon without specific reasons such as work, travel arrangements, or hotel bookings. As a result, more than one million Syrians settled in informal tented settlements across areas such as the Bekaa Valley [Fig.3]. These sites typically consisted of makeshift shelters constructed from materials displaced people brought with them, such as blankets, plastic sheeting, wooden frames, scrap metal, or reused materials provided by Non-Governmental



Figure 3, Abdul Dennaoui, 'Bekaa Valley Informal Settlements', MEDAIR, 2022.

Organisations (NGOs).²¹ These structures were highly vulnerable to winter storms, flooding, and snow, making them less resilient than planned refugee camps. Overcrowding and frequent evictions further contributed to instability, as families faced greater limitations in space, resources, and durability in their living environments. Understanding the differences between formal and informal settlements is crucial, as it highlights how infrastructure, planning, and support affect the ability of displaced communities to establish stable and meaningful homes.

While many Syrians experienced displacement through camp and informal settlement systems, Ukrainians encountered a different set of conditions shaped by European legal frameworks. These structures are valuable, as they influenced the quality, stability, and type of temporary housing available. Recognising the differences in humanitarian support and understanding how Ukrainians were able to adapt and personalise their living spaces compared to Syrians is important, given their geographical differences.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, launching rocket attacks on Kharkiv and a renewed assault on the capital, Kyiv, killing and injuring thousands.²² This attack resulted in

²⁰ Medair. 2024. 'Creating Home in Impermanence: A Visit to an Informal Settlement in the Bekaa Valley

²¹ Medair. 2024. 'Creating Home in Impermanence: A Visit to an Informal Settlement in the Bekaa Valley.

²² Kusa, Iliya. 2022. 'Russia-Ukraine War: Harbinger of a Global Shift', *Policy Perspectives*, 19.1: 7–12

one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in Europe since the Second World War. According to the UNHCR, an estimated 3.7 million people remain internally displaced in Ukraine, while 6.9 million refugees have fled abroad, as of early 2025.²³ The resulting humanitarian crisis has put intense pressure on housing infrastructure and has driven a rapid response from international agencies to find an adaptable solution.

In response to the scale of displacement, the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). The TPD requires EU countries to provide immediate and temporary protection for displaced people from non-EU states who cannot safely return home.²⁴ For Ukrainian refugees, this meant being granted immediate legal residency, the right to work, access to healthcare, and, critically, the right to housing. This framework created a more regulated and structured approach to temporary sheltering than in many refugee contexts.

By 2024, over 4.2 million Ukrainians were registered for temporary protection within the EU, enabling host countries to coordinate housing through public systems, NGOs, and private sponsorship schemes.²⁵

The types of housing available to Ukrainians varied significantly depending on where they sought safety. Inside Ukraine, the destruction of over 2.5 million homes meant that many people had to rely on temporary fixes, emergency shelters, or converted public buildings



Figure 4, Gema Cortes, 'School 6 in Uzhhorod, Ukraine Repurposed as Temporary Shelter'. IOM UN Migration, (n.d).

[Fig.4] for accommodation.²⁶ However, by mid-2025, the UNHCR had supported the structural repair of more than 40,000 homes in regions such as Kharkiv, Chernihiv, and Odesa, offering a degree of stability for families who remained in the country.²⁷ In European host countries, displaced Ukrainians were accommodated in collective reception centres, modular or

²³ Operational Data Portal. 2024. Ukraine Situation - Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Ukraine Situation

²⁴ European Commission. 2022. 'Temporary Protection', Migration and Home Affairs

²⁵ 2023. 'UNHCR Welcomes the Extension of Temporary Protection for Refugees from Ukraine | UNHCR Europe'

²⁶ Group, World Bank. 2025. 'From Ruins to Recovery: Restoring Ukraine's Housing through HOPE', World Bank (World Bank Group)

²⁷ Lindholm Billing, Karolina . 2025. 'Resilience amidst Destruction: UNHCR's Ongoing Commitment to Support the People of Ukraine | UNHCR Ukraine'

prefabricated units, and private homes funded through state allowances or sponsorship programmes. Many countries prioritised modular housing due to its speed of construction and ability to meet European living standards.²⁸

Despite these protections, the Ukrainian housing situation continued to experience significant pressure. UNHCR reported that around 42% of households living in collective centres inside Ukraine were facing serious challenges, including overcrowded conditions and insufficient heating.²⁹ In the EU, many reception centres reached capacity quickly, and several countries found it difficult to sustain long-term housing options, especially as rental prices continued to rise.³⁰ Even host-family schemes, which were widely relied upon during the early months of the crisis, declined over time, leaving many Ukrainians dependent on short-term solutions such as hotels or temporary rentals. These challenges illustrate that, while more structurally stable than many other refugees, it is important to examine these two modern conflicts together: although they differ in their responses and solutions to the same situation, the longing for one's identity and sense of home does not disappear.

²⁸ Operational Data Portal. 2024. Ukraine Situation - Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Ukraine Situation

²⁹ Kuras, Tetiana . 2024. 'Providing Safe Shelter, Community and Hope: How Collective Sites Support Displaced Families in Ukraine | UNHCR Ukraine'

³⁰ Fóti, Klára Fóti. 2024. Social Impact of Migration: Addressing the Challenges of Receiving and Integrating Ukrainian Refugees Promoting Social Cohesion and Convergence, p.29.

Chapter 3 - Syrian Interior Adaptation

Displacement caused by the Syrian civil war has resulted in millions of people navigating life inside temporary shelters, tents, and prefabricated caravans, a stark contrast to the comfort of their former homes and homelands. This chapter examines how Syrian refugees adapted to these constrained environments to recreate a sense of home and belonging in an otherwise lonely and deserted setting. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of Bachelard's ideas of "corners" and "nests," along with the previously discussed frameworks of cultural memory, identity, and material culture, this chapter analyses interior practices in camps such as Zaatari and Azraq. These examples illustrate how Syrians use creativity and cultural expression to transform temporary "non-places" into personalised and humanised living spaces.

Displacement disrupts an individual's relationship with familiar architecture and routines. Temporary housing becomes the only site of psychological negotiation, where the interior environment serves as a stabilising mechanism. While shelters in camps like Azraq are strictly shaped by the limitations of the surrounding land³¹, the desire for personal expression remains strong. As Bachelard underlines, intimacy within domestic spaces protects "the dreamer."³² Refugees will accordingly modify the interiors of their shelters despite restrictions on the land and limitations on materials to restore a sense of comfort and continuity amid hardship. Design to Live documents many such adaptations in Azraq, showing that from the moment families and individuals arrive, they begin altering their shelters to reflect their identities and past environments.³³ One of the most prominent strategies Syrian refugees use is adapting interior spaces with textiles. Rugs, blankets, curtains, and donated fabrics are used to divide spaces and soften the harshness of the rigid metal structures. They are also used to create privacy within shared environments.³⁴ For

³¹ Reader, The MIT Press. 2022. 'At the Azraq Refugee Camp, Restoring Humanity through Art and Design'

³² Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press)

³³ Azra Aksamija, Raafat Majzoub, and Melina Philippou. 2021. *Design to Live: Everyday Inventions from a Refugee Camp* (Cambridge: The MIT Press)

³⁴ Dalal, Ayham. 2022. *From Shelters to Dwellings* (Transcript Verlag), p.46

example, the entrance hall [Fig.5], as explained in *Design to Live*, is separated from the main living space and acts as an in-between area for guests, allowing them to be received without



Figure 6, Zeid Madi, Nabil Sayfan. 'Majlis of a Shelter in Azraq Camp.' *Design to Live*, July 2017.

Figure 5, Zeid Madi, Nabil Sayfan. 'Entrance Hall of a Shelter in Azraq Camp'. *Design to Live*, July 2017.

entering the main family room.³⁵ This is particularly important for the Muslim

women of the household, as it enables them to continue their daily activities in the private interior space without the need to remain veiled in front of visitors. These textile partitions also help regulate social interaction, functioning not only as visual enhancements but as practical tools for managing privacy and movement within the shelter. Similarly, in the Zaatari camp, porch areas were often fully wrapped in fabric, creating an additional semi-private space that families could use throughout the day.³⁶ Patterned rugs and colourful fabrics also help recreate the warmth and cultural familiarity of Syrian domestic interiors. The rugs that families obtain inside the camps are not merely decorative; they organise the interior by defining distinct zones. From my time in Syria, I learned that such rugs are traditionally placed at the centre of family rooms, where relatives socialise, creating a focal point in the rooms where families gather. By reproducing this familiar spatial layout within temporary shelters, refugees maintain important social practices and preserve a sense of continuity with their former homes [Fig.6]. This aligns with material culture theory: even simple fabrics hold personal and symbolic meaning.

³⁵ Azra Aksamija, Raafat Majzoub, and Melina Philippou. 2021. *Design to Live: Everyday Inventions from a Refugee Camp* (Cambridge: The MIT Press), p. 122

³⁶ Dalal, Ayham. 2022. *From Shelters to Dwellings* (Transcript Verlag), p.98

Improvisation and creative construction also play a crucial role in personalising temporary shelters. Due to the scarcity of materials and restrictions on structural changes, refugees repurpose whatever objects are available; wooden pallets, cardboard, plastic crates, and leftover metal pieces can be used to create a variety of functional items within the home. For example, in *Design to Live*, it is stated that seating is constructed from vegetable crates, yoghurt containers, and sleeping mattresses to create a layout resembling an outdoor living room³⁷ traditionally found in old Damascene homes. This resourcefulness reflects both necessity and cultural identity, as homes in Syria often featured similar imaginative craftsmanship. Material culture theory helps explain this behaviour. Objects and arrangements not only serve functional roles, but they also express values and memories of pre-war life.³⁸

Small personal objects act as memory anchors and play an essential role in transforming these stark shelters into meaningful homes. Often, refugees arrive at camps with few or no personal belongings³⁹; therefore, even a small object, such as a photograph, a trinket, or even a drawing, serves as a reminder of their previous lives. Despite the constraints of camp architecture, families may often display these objects on shelves or other improvised surfaces, showcasing their value to everyone. They function as tangible links to lost homes, sustaining emotional continuity, and helping to preserve personal and familial identities even when geographic roots have been severed. Within this process, the creation of intimate 'corners' becomes equally significant. Drawing on Bachelard's notion of the corner as a protective and inward-oriented space.⁴⁰ Syrian refugees often designated small areas for moments of solitude, whether for prayer, rest, or reflection. Prayer corners are among the most common examples: a prayer mat, a Qur'an stand, or a cluster of meaningful objects are carefully arranged, even within the limited space of caravans or tents. In Azraq, many families maintain these corners with particular care, using them to anchor daily routines and cultivate a sense of stability amidst displacement.⁴¹ Memory anchors and

³⁷ Azra Aksamija, Raafat Majzoub, and Melina Philippou. 2021. *Design to Live: Everyday Inventions from a Refugee Camp* (Cambridge: The MIT Press), p. 182

³⁸ Miller, Daniel. 2010. *Stuff* (Cambridge Polity Press)

³⁹ Committee, International Rescue. 2017. 'What's in My Bag?', *Uprooted*

⁴⁰ Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press) p. 136

⁴¹ Azra Aksamija, Raafat Majzoub, and Melina Philippou. 2021. *Design to Live : Everyday Inventions from a Refugee Camp* (Cambridge: The Mit Press)

intimate corners, together, demonstrate how refugees actively inscribe cultural memory onto an otherwise standardised humanitarian space.

Hospitality and food preparation act as central pillars of Syrian cultural life, and they continue to shape how shelters are organised under restrictive spatial conditions. Taking my own family's homes' courtyards as an example, in traditional Damascene homes, these spaces function as semi-outdoor living areas, designed for large gatherings, extended family interactions, and keeping residents cool during the summer. In the Azraq camp, residents within the same plot came together to create a shared courtyard at the centre of their neighbouring shelters.

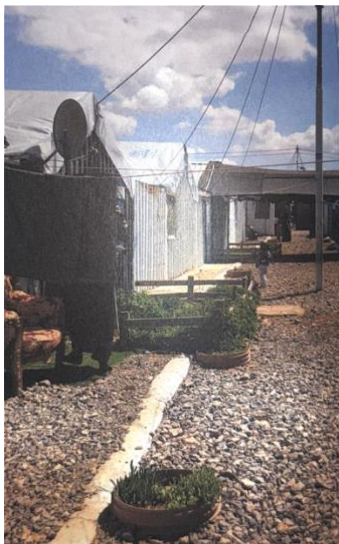


Figure 7, Melina Philippou. 'Cortyard in Azraq Camp.' *Design to Live*, April 2019.

Working within UNHCR guidelines, they paved, planted, and built using on-site materials, such as stones collected from the desert.⁴² This recreated a sense of neighbourhood and community, forming an inviting and warm social space that contrasts with the harshness of the surrounding desert [Fig.7]. According to reports, kitchens were not really considered in the design of the shelters.⁴³ Therefore, refugees adapted their shelters to create makeshift kitchens both indoors and outdoors. One family in Azraq camp constructed an extension between two shelters, using metal beams, columns, plastic sheeting, and textiles to form covered storage

units.⁴⁴ These fabric-covered cabinets, used as drawers or doors, closely resemble those found in many older Syrian homes [Fig.8]. Preparing meals together is a central aspect of Syrian culture, as many dishes are traditionally made collectively. Because of this, the kitchen becomes a key site for preserving cultural memory, which as previously established, is

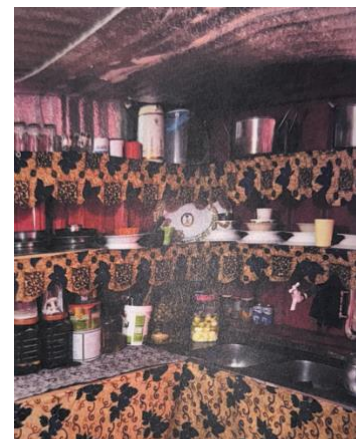


Figure 8, Melina Philipou. 'Kitchen Cabinets in Azraq Refugee Camp.' *Design to Live*, April 2019.

⁴² Azra Aksamija, Raafat Majzoub, and Melina Philippou. 2021. *Design to Live : Everyday Inventions from a Refugee Camp* (Cambridge: The Mit Press), p. 130

⁴³ Guardian staff reporter. 2013. 'Life in a Syrian Refugee Camp: "You Have to Walk over an Hour to Get Bread"', *The Guardian* (The Guardian)

⁴⁴ Azra Aksamija, Raafat Majzoub, and Melina Philippou. 2021. *Design to Live : Everyday Inventions from a Refugee Camp* (Cambridge: The Mit Press), p. 70

especially important in displaced communities. Together, these practices demonstrate how Syrians rebuild cultural rituals through spatial organisation and everyday routines, transforming temporary spaces into meaningful domestic environments.

Syrian refugees' ability to personalise their shelters must be understood within the constraints of humanitarian infrastructure.

Overcrowding, scarce materials, extreme temperatures, and strict camp regulations, including rules that prohibit permanent structural alterations, like Azraq' controlled electricity boxes⁴⁵, significantly limit the scope of modification. Despite these restrictions, refugees continue to reshape their temporary units, demonstrating how spatial practices are sustained by a deep reliance on cultural continuity. These adaptations reveal that, even under severe limitations, displaced Syrians creatively reclaim domesticity and reassert autonomy within their environments. This chapter establishes how culture, memory, and identity drive interior adaptation under scarcity, providing a foundation for comparing how Ukrainian displaced households personalise their temporary accommodation under very different material and institutional conditions.

⁴⁵ Azra Aksamija, Raafat Majzoub, and Melina Philippou. 2021. *Design to Live : Everyday Inventions from a Refugee Camp* (Cambridge: The Mit Press), p. 260

Chapter 4 - Ukrainian Interior Adaptation

Displaced Ukrainians, whether internally displaced or refugees in European host countries, face the challenge of securing shelter but also making these spaces meaningful, cultural, and continuous, like refugees worldwide. Unlike Syrian refugee displacement, Ukrainian temporary housing has been comparatively under-researched. Consequently, this chapter relies on limited empirical studies, including modular housing projects, UNHCR programmes, and journalistic accounts. While also applying theoretical insights from identity, cultural memory, and phenomenology to understand how these temporary spaces are adapted and humanised.

For Ukrainians, displacement did not merely force them to leave their homes; it also necessitated the recreation of the very concept of home. For many, the psychological impact of displacement shaped how they experienced and interacted with their new surroundings. Although many housing units were designed with efficiency in mind rather than comfort or long-term use, some architectural and humanitarian responses have prioritised dignity. Returning to Bachelard's notion of the nest, the idea that even small temporary spaces can hold emotional significance, we can see how Ukrainians use their new homes to re-establish a sense of safety and continuity. Modular housing systems and renovated collective sites offer tangible frameworks for personalisation and adaptation.

One architectural response that directly embodies this principle is Balbek Bureau's RE-UKRAINE modular housing scheme. The system is based on modules that can be combined into a neighbourhood-like structure [Fig.9], with communal kitchens, recreation zones, and private rooms.⁴⁶ Balbek's website states that these homes are designed explicitly with dignity in mind: "It is possible to take away a person's house, but it is impossible to do it with a person's dignity."⁴⁷ This design principle highlights that even in temporary dwellings, architecture can prioritise modularity, flexibility, and social interaction, enabling the recreation of both public and private zones. By providing a stable and thoughtfully planned

⁴⁶ Cutieru, Andreea. 2022. 'Balbek Bureau Develops Temporary Housing Scheme for Displaced Ukrainians', ArchDaily

⁴⁷ 'RE:UKRAINE'. [n.d.]. *Balbek Bureau*

base structure, the scheme gives residents the space and flexibility to embed their own cultural values and personal identities into their living environment.



Figure 9, Balbek Beureau. 'Visualisation of Modular Neighbourhood.' (n.d).

At the same time, UNHCR has actively upgraded collective accommodation to create more dignified living conditions. In Dnipro, one site underwent a major renovation to improve heating, water access and shared communal spaces, giving IDPs greater comfort and stability. They replaced windows, refurbished living spaces, and fixed the water and heating supply. They carried out these refurbishments with the clear intention that when they are no longer needed as temporary housing, the buildings will last several generations.⁴⁸ Such improvements in collective housing indicate an institutional recognition that emotionally supported spaces matter, not just the shelter. Through the 'From Collective Sites to Private Homes' program, the UNHCR also assisted families who found it difficult to

Figure 10, Denys Kovalsky. 'Iryna and her 2 children in their new home after living in a shared space for 1 year.' UNHCR, 2023

⁴⁸ 2024b. 'UNHCR Renovates Collective Site for Displaced People in Dnipro, with Six More Facilities to Be Completed This Year across Ukraine | UNHCR Ukraine'

live in collective spaces and provided private housing that can give families with young kids the privacy they need [Fig.10]. In these circumstances, families can create these homes from scratch, filling them with personalised touches, reintroducing normalcy in the place of chaos.

“Throughout the ancient histories of Ukraine until today, the home remains one of the most important symbols of Ukrainian culture.”⁴⁹ This quote illustrates how significant and



symbolic the home is within Ukrainian identity and reinforces the idea that, in preserving cultural memory, many Ukrainians continue to value traditional layouts, textiles, and belongings from their pre-war lives. Such attachments show how domestic objects and spatial arrangements act as carriers of memory, grounding people during displacement. Design researchers are therefore investigating how modular housing can support the emotional well-being of displaced Ukrainians by accommodating these cultural practices and material expressions. A 2024 study by Malik and Severenchuk highlights how interior elements, such as carefully selected colour palettes, multifunctional spatial zones, and ergonomic layouts, can significantly enhance a resident’s psychological comfort. Their finding suggests that modular architecture should not be viewed solely as a rapid solution but as a potential way for the gradual reconstruction of identity.⁵⁰ This resonates strongly with Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenological insight that individuals instinctively seek “corners”, intimate protective spatial enclaves that nurture the inner life.⁵¹ Even within the uniformity of modular housing units, Ukrainian residents create such corners by using curtains, shelves, or furniture to carve out spaces that offer emotional grounding.

⁴⁹ Yuliia Hrushetska. 2024. ‘Homes and Selves in Times of War: Ukrainian Rituals and Analytic Practices with Children Who Are Surviving Russian Aggression; All You Have Is This Small Backpack’, *Psychological Perspectives*, 67.3 (Taylor & Francis): 236–47

⁵⁰ Malik, T., and K. Severenchuk. 2024. ‘Features Of Interior Space Formation In Residential Complexes For Internally Displaced Persons’, *Theory and Practice of Design*: 388–95

⁵¹ Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press), p. 146

These spatial adaptations are closely tied to cultural memory and material identity. Many Ukrainians personalise their units with embroidered cloths (*vyshyvankas*), potted plants, religious icons, and family photographs. These items are more than just decoration; they demonstrate continuity and belonging in environments otherwise defined by estrangement. Such practices align particularly with Miller's arguments that everyday objects "make visible and stable the values and identities that people hold"⁵² In this sense, the emotional reconstruction of home within displacement is achieved through architectural design but also through intimate acts of curation, where personal and cultural objects transform standardised units into recognisable domestic spaces.

Despite the creativity residents bring to their surroundings, personalisation in Ukrainian temporary housing is always shaped by significant structural limitations. Collective centres, where dozens or even hundreds of people share the same converted buildings, often allow only minimal individual modification. Overcrowding, shared sleeping areas, and the absence of private rooms restrict the degree to which residents can add personal identity to the space.⁵³ Even more private modular units impose strict boundaries as their structural elements cannot be altered. These constraints emphasise the tension between the desire for meaningful personal expression and the institutional frameworks that govern temporary housing. They illustrate how far individuals can go in transforming their environment, but also where the limits of autonomy are drawn by humanitarian infrastructure.

In summary, while Ukrainian displaced people actively recreate a sense of home through cultural objects, familiar routines, and improvised spatial adjustments, their ability to do so is shaped by the constrained nature of collective centres and the fixed design of modular units. Therefore, this chapter highlights both the resilience of displaced communities and the gaps in existing research. Demonstrating that the emotional, cultural, and psychological dimensions of Ukrainian temporary housing are still underexplored and require further study.

⁵² Miller, Daniel. 2010. *Stuff* (Cambridge Polity Press)

⁵³ Viktoriia ZAPOTOTSKA, Andrii PANKIV, and Danila SHPAK. 2024. 'Social Housing In Ukraine: Challenges And Prospects', *Bulletin of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv Geography* (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv): 31–37

Chapter 5 – Comparative Discussion

This final chapter reflects on the material discussed and what the research has revealed about homemaking in displacement. By comparing the Syrian and Ukrainian case studies, it identifies shared themes and key differences. Rather than introducing new material, it critically examines previous conclusions.

A primary difference between the studies is geographical location. Some Ukrainians remain internally displaced, while many have fled to European countries and beyond. They likely needed to learn about local cultures while maintaining their own identities.

Syrians mostly stayed in the Middle East, often living in camps that formed neighbourhood-like communities. Their living spaces aimed to preserve cultural elements despite their circumstances.

The key takeaway is that Ukrainian interiors will need to be adapted to different cultures, suggesting a blend of influences and non-traditional décor. In contrast, Syrian refugees' interiors tend to reflect the essence of their original homes, experiencing less cultural displacement. However, despite this difference, both wars began suddenly, requiring humanitarian aid to respond accordingly. It can be suggested that the housing provided to both groups was more of a temporary space rather than a stable environment.

Another key difference is the availability of resources for Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. It can be argued that Ukrainian modular housing would have been about modifying its interiors to resemble their homes by adapting existing resources to customise them as a means of upholding cultural memory.

While Syrian camps often relied on scraps of materials found in their surroundings, they focused on handcrafting and improvising furniture and fixtures rather than customisation. Together, these approaches reveal how differing material conditions shape the form of adaptation, while the underlying impulse to preserve identity and continuity remains constant.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore how displaced communities adapt and humanise temporary housing, asking: How do culture, identity, and memory shape the way Syrians and Ukrainians recreate a sense of “home” after displacement? The findings demonstrate that homemaking in crisis is not a superficial or decorative act, but an essential psychological and cultural process. Temporary shelters, no matter how limited, become meaningful through the ways people personalise them and embed memory and identity. Across both case studies, the creation of “home” emerges as an act of resilience.

The Syrian case shows how homemaking becomes an act of survival under extreme scarcity. In camps such as Azraq, the Bekaa Valley, and Zaatari, refugees rely on whatever materials are available; textiles, found objects, and improvised structures, to instil privacy and cultural meaning into bare shelters. These adaptations demonstrate how Syrian identity, memory, and spirituality continue to shape domestic life even when resources are minimal and regulations limit autonomy.

By contrast, displaced Ukrainians typically inhabit modular units, collective centres, or private accommodation where infrastructure is more stable and material resources are accessible. Here, looking mostly at the theoretical studies, personalisation often draws on cultural symbols supported in some cases by design-led interventions like the proposed RE: UKRAINE modular system. Although research on Ukrainian interior adaptation is still emerging, available evidence suggests that design plays a significant role in supporting psychological comfort and continuity of identity.

Despite their differences, the two cases reveal a shared human imperative: the instinct to rebuild a sense of home through memory, culture, and personal expression. Syrians may improvise out of necessity, while Ukrainians personalise within more structured environments, but both groups use interiors to restore dignity and resist the emotional dislocation caused by displacement. These practices show that temporary housing is never only a technical solution. It becomes a site where individuals implement the need for belonging.

To conclude, this study highlights that humanitarian design must consider more than just physical shelter. It must also recognise that the people in need of shelter require spaces that

allow for privacy, cultural memory, and personalisation, supporting emotional resilience as much as daily living. Across contexts, displaced people remake their environments not simply to live in them, but to feel human while doing so.

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