

Beyond the Boxes: Refugee Shelter and the Humanitarian Politics of Life

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Abstract: Humanitarian agencies often reach for new designs and technologies in order to meet basic human needs. In the field of emergency shelter, one of the most widely publicized new designs is the IKEA refugee shelter: a flat packed, mass-produced structure that can be shipped and constructed wherever it is required. This shelter aspires to be a universal solution, but since its formal launch in 2013 it has been subjected to criticism and numerous challenges in the field. Deployed in political contexts where people have very different expectations of basic shelter, the shelter demonstrates the limitations of universal standards, the inequities of humanitarianism, and the way that biopolitics and the politics of life become entwined.

Keywords: Humanitarianism, Refugees, Architecture, Shelter, Design, Politics of Life, IKEA, Sweden

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I first saw the IKEA refugee shelter on the flawless green lawn of an Oxford college: a small structure made of steel and plastic that had been disconcertingly placed next to the thick brick walls of an old quadrangle. It created a striking contrast. The refugee shelter was temporary, fragile, and very basic; the surrounding college was permanent, solid, and opulent. This, I supposed, was part of the point. The exhibit was part of a conference on humanitarian innovation – an event that expressed the hopes and limitations of new technologies – and the placement of the IKEA shelter demonstrated both its potential and its shortcomings. It had been erected quickly from two small boxes, yet seemed insubstantial in its surroundings. Over the next couple of years, I encountered the shelter again in a number of other exhibitions. At the technology museum in Stockholm, it was surrounded by an audio-visual installation. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it was guarded by an officious attendant. At the Design Museum in London, it appeared strangely amputated, with only an end panel mounted on a wall. The shelter had, at this point, not been manufactured on a large scale, but it attracted curators, reporters, and conference organizers for a similar reason: it raised important questions about the nature of home.

Social and cultural environments have always shaped our most basic forms of shelter, generating great diversity across the world (Oliver 1969, 1987; Vellinga 2011). Rather than seeing such structures as “primitive” or “advanced,” (see for example Morse 1886), it has become common for anthropologists to focus on shelter as a vernacular adaptation to local conditions (Rapoport 1969; Rudofsky 1964). In structuralism and symbolic anthropology, houses reveal the deeper structures of social life, illuminating themes such as kinship, food, and political organization (Bourdieu 1973; Gudeman and Rivera 1990, 39-53; Kuper 1982, 140-56). In the more recent spirit of “studying up” (Nader 1972), architecture *itself* has become a topic of anthropological inquiry, with the process of “making” subjected to scrutiny (Buchli 2013; Ingold 2013). Shelters are generally treated in anthropology as a window onto

society, a “prime agent of socialization” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 2). As Bachelard (1969) put it, they are not just as places to retreat from the elements, but products of the heart and soul.

Where does this leave a shelter that aspires to universality? A shelter that aims to meet the needs of people living in different cultures, climates, and regions with a rational production, a single solution? Anthropologists could be forgiven for being somewhat suspicious of the IKEA shelter and its relevance for the discipline, not least because shelter, if it is rooted in local context, is surely not amenable to this kind of treatment: designed centrally, flown anywhere, and manufactured to universal specifications. This does not seem to help us understand the lived experience of displacement in the anthropological tradition. One cannot say, for example, that the IKEA shelter illuminates the norms and values of its residents in the manner promoted by classic anthropological approaches to displacement (Chatty 2014; Colson 2003; Hirschon 1998, 106-133). My starting point, however, is that the IKEA shelter *does* illustrate social norms, but not those of the people who will inhabit it. Instead, it reflects the worldview of its humanitarian designers. Analyzing this shelter contributes to the anthropology of humanitarianism (Redfield and Bornstein 2011; Ticktin 2014) as well as the study of “innovative” objects and technologies (Collier et al. 2017; Cross 2013; Redfield 2012, 2016; Scott-Smith 2018). In particular, it shows how this design, which aspired to apply universal standards of shelter, ended up illustrating both the limitations of design and the limitations of humanitarian standards. It demonstrated how biopolitics and the politics of life converge, and how, by seeking to nurture and normalise, aid programs consistently fail to address the unequal valuation of life.

What does the IKEA shelter look like? In its basic form, it resembles a flimsy and small, yet stereotypical, European house. It has straight sides and a pitched roof, a single door, and four small windows. Structurally, it is based around a demountable steel frame onto which

lightweight panels have been clipped. These panels have the weight and texture of swimming floats, and are made from a material now known as Rhulite, a polymer foam developed specifically for the purpose. When I asked the main designer to describe its basic form, he said it was the kind of shelter a European five-year-old would draw. Much about the IKEA refugee shelter is disputed, but most people agree on this basic point. One critic pointed out how its form resembles the design of a simple, Swedish summerhouse with a gable roof. “Everyone builds what they know,” he told me. “IKEA are very good at designing for mass manufacture, the Swedes have a decent understanding of the outdoors, and here they have made a model of what shelter looks like.” He pointed to the way that the shelter aspires to universality but is still rooted in its specific context, how it captures a set of particularly Swedish preoccupations in a simple form. These include a one-size-fits-all model of welfare, a distinctively modernist aesthetic, a commitment to affordable good design, and an egalitarian and social democratic vision, all aspects of Swedishness that are familiar to anthropologists (Garvey 2017; Gullestad 2002; Mack 2017; Murphy 2015).

Despite its Swedish origins, however, the most notable feature of the IKEA shelter is that it claims to be *universal*. In this respect it is similar to many other products on the market, which seek to meet the basic needs of refugees in a portable, lightweight, and easily deployable form. When I asked the curators of the London and New York exhibitions what attracted them about this object, they all highlighted these universal aspirations: as they put it, an affordable, portable, and temporary house is something everyone can relate to. They liked how the IKEA shelter comes flat packed in two boxes, how it has a manual with cartoon diagrams like IKEA furniture, and how it speaks to a series of universal experiences. As one curator put it, the product channels cheap, modernist design while reflecting our world of flexibility and fluidity. Audiences in London and New York can relate to the idea of an IKEA home, drawing on their own experiences of moving between rented homes and struggling to

construct flat-pack products. The shelter also implicitly draws comparisons between different forms of mobility, helping us think about shelter as a common human need while providing a positive and uplifting story. For the curators this was particularly important, as it helped to counter the sense of powerless and compassion fatigue that is so often associated with the European “refugee crisis” (Holmes and Castañeda 2016).

The IKEA shelter, however, is more than just a symbol of global fluidity or a purported solution to the refugee housing crisis; it is also a material manifestation of the humanitarian “politics of life.” This notion, developed by Didier Fassin (2007), refers to the hierarchies of humanity that relief work creates. It captures how international aid agencies institutionalize inequality while at the same time claiming to treat people equally and impartially. Between 2016 and 2018, I interviewed the designers of the shelter in Sweden, visited exhibitions and humanitarian trade fairs where the shelter was marketed, and conducted fieldwork in countries where the shelter was deployed, including Lebanon, Switzerland, Greece and Jordan. Through this research I found that, while the designers sought to manufacture a product that can shelter anyone, anywhere in the world, their product was perceived as either insufficient or excessive depending on the location. The designers’ attempt to create a universal shelter that meets everyone’s basic needs, in other words, ended up drawn into political calculations about what humans need when it came to shelter. The drive for an affordable design, meanwhile, generated a recurring dilemma, because the cheaper the product became, the more limited its design and the less it could improve people’s lives, but the more expensive it became, the fewer purchases it received and the less it could achieve overall. The designers of the IKEA shelter tried to choose a middle ground between these poles, focusing their efforts on producing something affordable yet adequate, yet they were still squeezed from both sides. Some critics claimed they had done too much, and others claimed they had not gone far enough.

It was in this middling space that the politics of life emerged. The distribution of a standardized humanitarian product to vastly different landscapes ended up revealing how adequacy changed with context. It revealed how the very idea of humanitarian standards became violated by local conditions. The politics of life emerged from a disconnection between the universal aspirations of the shelter and the specifics of the environments it was inserted into. Indeed, by seeking to meet a universal basic need, the shelter revealed that what was appropriate in one location was not appropriate in another.

Origins

Architects and designers have been proposing emergency shelters for many decades. In the modernist architectural tradition alone, the twentieth century has seen the arrival and departure of Jean Prouvé's demountable house, an early version of the collapsible, 'flat pack' home (Siegal 2002), Le Corbusier's "Dom-Ino" system, a standardized housing unit that could be joined end to end like dominos (Turner 1977), and Alvar Aalto's proposal for organic shelter units that could be developed and expanded for devastated post-war Europe (Aalto 1941). These three proposals were precursors of the IKEA shelter, but their high modernist ideals included utopian projects of human improvement, situating shelter designs alongside ambitious new arrangements for culture and society. None saw the light of day, yet they evoked the dream of a simple, efficient, replicable dwelling: a prefabricated house that could be erected quickly, was flexible enough to be developed over time, and was capable of almost limitless adaptation. Alejandro Aravena's "Half House" is a more recent manifestation of this long-standing aim, albeit in a different register. His project involves constructing half a house, with the other half to be completed by its occupants. Similarly, Shigeru Ban has promoted emergency architecture based around lightweight cardboard tubes, drawing on the idea that if

people love a building then they will care for it and will give it some kind of permanence through their care. More recently, Aravena curated the vast Venice architecture biennale in 2016, which showcased a wide range of emergency architectural projects along these lines. Other, similar exhibitions have generated a range of books, articles and commentary on the topic (Charlesworth 2014; Meinhold 2013; Sinclair and Stohr 2006).

Since the large-scale movement of refugees in 2015, humanitarian architecture has gained even more prominence in the aid industry. This was particularly noticeable during the “summer of migration,” when new designs began to emerge on an almost daily basis. As a long-standing observer of the humanitarian sector, I started receiving regular emails from my contacts over that summer: aid workers who were complaining about “shelter spam” that featured bizarre and unworkable ideas from designers who believed they had found a solution to refugee housing needs. I responded by collecting these proposals and indexing the growing number of suggestions, commentaries, books, and articles in the press, forming the skeleton of a new research project. About a year into this work, I was invited to speak on a panel organized by the Museum of Architecture in London: an event, like many others at the time, which involved an enthusiastic celebration of “What Design Can Do.” By this point, however, I had become something of a cynic. Having seen so many naïve ideas flood through the sector, I used the opportunity to point out, instead, the things that design *cannot* do. Design, I argued, is often limited by its inability to solve underlying political predicaments. In the case of refugees, it cannot make states invest in welfare, it cannot build the necessary legal frameworks to protect forced migrants, and it cannot counter the militarization of borders, change public perceptions, or challenge political discourse. The structures we should focus on, I concluded, are political rather than architectural, since many governments have an interest in excluding refugees or keeping them in a liminal, precarious state. The growing tendency

towards the triumphant celebration of design, I argued, risks obscuring these political projects, or, worse, ends up facilitating them (Scott-Smith 2013, 2016).

When I finished my comments, an elderly architect rose from his chair and reprimanded me for my pessimism. I should stop politicizing the issue, he said. This is a simple problem with a simple solution: we need a shelter that meets basic needs; a shelter that is adaptable and easy to transport; a shelter that, above all, is inexpensive; it's not rocket science. We know what is needed, and we have years of expertise. We just need to get to work and produce something that checks all the boxes. I entered into a bit of an argument with my interlocutor before another member of the audience intervened by stating, simply, that design was always the product of negotiation. It had to deal with social as well as material limitations. The aim, he went on, is indeed to "check all the boxes," but the real challenge is deciding what boxes needed checking. He agreed with both of us, but the issue is always partly technical, partly textual, and partly political. It sounded like the kind of thing Bruno Latour (2005) would say: highlighting a variety of elements that needed to be considered together and that were difficult to pull apart.

This philosophical speaker, who was appealing for balance and calm, turned out to be the main designer of the IKEA shelter: he had been responsible for producing one of the most well-publicized refugee shelter products on the market, and he had concluded that the biggest challenge, in the end, was not just checking the boxes but defining the boxes. What, in other words, *were* the basic needs of shelter? What *were* the fundamental requirements for human life? I was so intrigued by these questions that, a few months later, I travelled to Stockholm to discover more about his project. I settled myself in the Swedish capital and began to meet individuals involved in the creation of the IKEA shelter, a project that seemed to get to the very heart of my fascination with emergency shelter. The first thing I was told when I arrived was to stop calling it the IKEA shelter. This was something of a surprise as it was and remains

a common name that is widely understood by humanitarians. I was told, however, that the term is a misnomer. The product is properly called the Better Shelter, and was previously known as the Refugee Housing Unit, or RHU. Perhaps more significantly, it is not designed or manufactured by IKEA, but by a social enterprise, also called Better Shelter, which had been led by a group of independent industrial designers who began the project at a now-bankrupt institute called *Formens Hus* in 2008.

The connection with IKEA, I soon learned, emerged only gradually. Lennart Ekmark, a well-known designer for IKEA, was on the board of *Formens Hus* and he suggested they approach IKEA for funding. The answer, initially, was no. As the managing director of Better Shelter recalled, the company told them “what we make is in the house, not the house itself.” In 2010, however, the IKEA Foundation began to expand its humanitarian work and agreed to fund the fledgling scheme with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR shared information about their requirements in the field, and committed to buying and testing the units, while the IKEA foundation invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in development, offering advice about flat-packing and manuals. A new social enterprise, also called Better Shelter, was then established in 2015, with further support and finance from IKEA. I was patiently informed that there is therefore a big difference between IKEA and the Better Shelter because they had several degrees of institutional separation and very different histories. Moreover, the Better Shelter social enterprise is owned by a philanthropic foundation called “Housing for All,” of which the IKEA Foundation is just one investor. The IKEA Foundation, in turn, is institutionally distinct from the multinational company IKEA.

Given this background, it is easy to see why the designers wanted to distance themselves from the common name. The problem, as they saw it, was that the phrase “IKEA shelter” did not reflect its independent origins but implied that the product had been manufactured and sold by the giant multinational corporation in an insidious example of the

private sector profiting from human misery. It immediately struck me, however, that the name “Better Shelter” appeared to close off precisely the issues that needed to be opened up. It was, at root, a publicity exercise that attempted to blur the clear institutional connections between IKEA and the shelter itself. The degrees of separation I had been told about, after all, were to a large extent illusory: the IKEA foundation have a controlling stake in Better Shelter and is also the owner of the multinational company (a complicated corporate structure whose complexity, as *The Economist* (2006) has pointed out, is a way to avoid paying taxes). It is not exactly far-fetched, therefore, to see IKEA’s involvement in refugee shelter as a rather cynical form of corporate social responsibility. Using the term “Better Shelter,” moreover, seemed to deny these connections as well as involving an uncritical acceptance of the company’s public relations campaign. Most importantly, it involved positioning this product as “better,” when this is precisely what we need to question. Is it genuinely better? If so, how? And, more subtly, what it is better *than*?

When I sat down with the three main designers to ask these questions, they each had similar comments about their original aims and brief. Their shelter was designed to be better than the UNHCR tent, they told me, but beyond that there *was* no detailed brief. The terms of reference emerged only gradually. UNHCR became engaged in the idea because they recognized that tents had a limited life in the field and that refugees were spending longer and longer in exile. The statistics are sketchy and disputable, but it is often cited that refugees can spend an average of 17 years in a camp; in contrast, tents last barely one year and need regular replacement or upgrading (DeVictor 2016). Shelter specialists in UNHCR, therefore, were sympathetic to the central idea of manufacturing a longer-lasting and improved basic shelter, but they were cynical about the Swedish designers’ ability to truly understand the scope of the problem. The Swedish design team had very little field experience and the UNHCR aid workers knew that there were two huge barriers to the adoption of any new shelter: portability

and price. Many designers had already tried to come up with alternatives to the tent, but their products were either too expensive or too difficult to transport. Gradually, through discussions with UNHCR about these limitations, the basic idea of the IKEA shelter began to emerge. It was going to be better than a tent, but still affordable, simple, and deployable.

This was where another actor came into the story: an organization called Shelter Centre, which was a hub for expertise, reports, and discussion about improvements to the tent. Founded in Cambridge, UK, and later based in Geneva, the Shelter Centre had long been promoting something called a “transitional shelter,” or “T-Shelter,” which was a structure that could evolve from an emergency shelter into a more personalised and permanent home (Corsellis and Vitale 2005; UN OCHA 2010). Rather than all the waste and replication involved in deploying tents, which are later replaced by medium-term shelters, which are later replaced by something more permanent, the idea of the T-Shelter was to design adaptability from the very beginning. It was a concept based around a good quality frame, which could be adjusted and developed incrementally. This frame might be expanded to produce more space; the material covering the frame might be upgraded and improved; the foundations and floor might be strengthened. Through many small adjustments like these the T-shelter was meant to prevent people ending up living for years in structures that had been rushed out for short-term, emergency use.

The incremental ideal of the T-Shelter became central to the IKEA shelter as it developed. By 2011 the design team had finalized a basic frame manufactured from good quality steel tubes held together with sturdy brackets, and their aim was to take this frame and then think about how it could be packed up and wrapped in various ways. In their recollections, which I recorded in Stockholm, the crucial test came when a senior UNHCR employee performed a very public pull-up on one of the crossbars of the frame at an exhibition. This served as a demonstration of the engrained cynicism on the part of

experienced humanitarians who expected the frame to fail. As the design team recalled, the public pull-up became a crucial turning point in the shelter's development because, against many people's expectations, the frame held up, UNHCR were impressed, and they began to take more seriously the idea that the freestanding IKEA shelter might work. If the price was right and the product was portable, they recalled, UNHCR felt that an alternative to the tent may have been found.

It was at this point that a decision had to be made about how to surround the frame, which at that point had been left deliberately vague. T-Shelters had been designed with the idea that shelter is a process rather than a product, suggesting that frames be finished and improved in situ with local materials. The IKEA shelter, however, evolved in a rather different direction. Rather than producing something unfinished and adaptable by its residents, the design team soon decided to produce something complete and universal: a product that contained everything in two boxes. Plastic panels were prototyped, which were light enough to be shipped out or transported by air relatively cheaply. Fittings and attachments were designed, so that no particular expertise or equipment was required once the package had been delivered. A small lamp, photovoltaic panel, and thin tarpaulin were all included in the boxes, as well as a "user-friendly" manual based on images rather than text in case users were illiterate. This approach to complete design became the hallmark of the IKEA shelter, driven partly by the desires of the funder, partly by the aid agency buyers, and partly from a growing discourse of "humanitarian innovation" (Scott-Smith 2016). This movement, which tended to fetishize technological products, had been sweeping through the aid industry in the previous decade and was driven by the idea that innovators in the marketplace of ideas could design humanity out of its most intractable problems by coming up with clever new products and processes.

By the middle of 2013 a material had been identified for the panels, the design was completed, and the IKEA shelter was being tested in Ethiopia. It started being promoted as a better shelter, a “home away from home” with four improvements over the tent. First, the promotional material pointed out, it had straight sides and firm plastic walls, which meant that inhabitants felt a sense of stability. Second, it had a full-size lockable door, giving inhabitants a sense of security. Third, it had a photovoltaic panel, which powered a small lamp and a cellphone charger, allowing inhabitants to stay connected. Finally, the Better Shelter lasted significantly longer than a tent: up to four years. These four improvements were all packaged up in the language of dignity. Refugees could stand up inside the shelter thanks to the straight walls; they could enter it without ducking; they could see at night thanks to the lamp; and they could communicate with family on their freshly charged mobile telephone. Once inside the shelter they could lock the proper plastic door and feel enveloped by its walls, which were far firmer than canvass (see figure 1). The shelter was made from an innovative material, which was light but “knocky” when tapped, and which created a clearer division between inside and outside as visitors had to knock before being granted permission to enter. The walls increased privacy. All this came in just two simple boxes, and a new website was launched that advertised these features, declaring that the shelter was an example of “smart design, innovation and modern technology,” a “universally welcoming... safer, and more dignified home away from home for millions of displaced people across the world” (Better Shelter 2015, 13)

[Please insert Figure 1 here]

Criticisms

Once the IKEA shelter burst onto the humanitarian scene, criticisms began to emerge from two opposing directions. Some critics suggested the shelter did too little, arguing that it was a mean little space that looked like a garden shed or, due to its plastic panels, a chemical toilet. This usually came from architects, who filed the object contemptuously under “product design” and declared that it involved no architectural thinking at all. Architecture, they pointed out, should respond to the site and local environment, not mass-produce a universal design with no adaptability or control. Architecture should create sensitive and carefully planned responses to specific problems, not ignore basic elements such as insulation, flooring, and natural light. Architecture should provide a high-quality living space, should be pleasing to the eye, and should be based around the Vitruvian triad of architectural virtues: *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*. The IKEA shelter failed on all counts: it was flimsy rather than firm; flawed rather than useful; ugly rather than beautiful.

The other criticism came from humanitarians, who argued the opposite: not that the shelter did too little, but that it did too much. The IKEA shelter, they argued, provided a fully integrated, flat-pack solution when this was rarely required or appropriate, as there were better opportunities to work with from the bottom up. Some aid workers told me that the IKEA shelter provided a solution to a problem that did not exist: tents, they argued, were perfectly suitable in emergencies and remained the best solution when money was short and time was scarce. The IKEA shelter was too expensive and complex, and it took too long to build. I was given many examples of practical problems to back up this assessment, such as the experienced aid worker who complained that it had “an unimaginably enormous component count” and that parts always got lost, or the UNHCR employee who described the difficulty and time it took to build, involving a confusing set of instructions and tricky procedures. The standard UNHCR family tent can be erected in 30 minutes, I was told, but the IKEA shelter took hours and hours. One aid worker showed me a scar on his thumb that had been caused by

installing the poles into the sharp metal brackets during a long and frustrating day (see figure 2). The IKEA shelter, perhaps most significantly, was criticized for breaking the humanitarian mantra that shelter is a “process not a product.” This idea, originally promoted by Ian Davis (1978), was a reminder that disaster-affected communities have their own techniques for finding and building shelter, so humanitarians should focus on providing basic building materials rather than flying in unsustainable packets of prefabricated plastic and steel.

[Please insert figure 2 here]

The IKEA shelter was caught between these two broad criticisms from the moment it was formally launched in the middle of 2013. It was clearly more a product than a process, so was “too much” for humanitarians who concluded that it was overwrought, too complex, and top-down. At the same time, it aspired to be cheap, universal, and portable, so ended up “too little” for architects with more expansive ideas about what design can achieve. The name “Better Shelter,” which was adopted two years after its launch, seemed to encapsulate this tension. The product aspired to be better, but it was only ever a shelter. It offered real improvements, but far from a perfect place to live. When I told the designers my interpretation of these criticisms, they responded by reaching for the Swedish word *lagom*. This is tricky to translate, but means something like “the right amount,” or “neither too little nor too much.” It was a distinctly Swedish, and rather hackneyed, celebration of what I had told them. By using the word *lagom*, the designers sought to situate the IKEA shelter in the valuable “middle ground” with resonances, again, of that central ethos of Swedish design: the balance of utility and price (Murphy 2015, 69-70). The idea of *lagom* had also appeared in an IKEA campaign at the time, called “Live Lagom,” which suggested that the values of modesty, sufficiency and sustainability underpinned all IKEA’s operations. The designers of the Better Shelter, in a similar way, were expressing what was good about their shelter, defusing the criticisms that it was both “too much” and “too little.” These views were taken as proof that they had achieved

the right balance, producing something that was cheaper and more universal than architecture, yet more dignified and complete than tarpaulin.

By 2015, when the Better Shelter was distributed to a range of new locations, what it meant to be too much or too little profoundly shifted in light of events. The trigger was the summer of migration, which saw the shelter distributed more widely, and there were two events, in particular, that illustrated the changing landscape. One took place in Switzerland, and in the other in Lebanon. The Swiss case was by far the more spectacular. It began with a fire test in a number of cities where local municipalities sought convenient emergency housing for new asylum seekers. These municipalities had purchased the IKEA shelter to place in empty urban spaces such as sports fields, the tarmac of vacant lots, or warehouses at the edge of cities. In Zurich, the shelter had been subjected to a particularly detailed testing regime, which it failed. Within hours, the videos appeared online. They showed a small fire illuminating the translucent sides of the shelter before engulfing the scene in flames and molten plastic. The international media picked up on the story and, as the head of the communications for Better Shelter recalled, the event generated an internal crisis at the company. Orders were cancelled, the phone was ringing off the hook, and, according to one designer, the company ended up “standing still” for one and a half years while the shelter was redesigned with slightly different materials and features (see figure 3).

[Please insert Figure 3 here]

Some critics argued that the Swiss fire tests proved their point: it demonstrated that the shelter offered “too little” and that it was unsafe, insufficient, and limited. At the very least, it showed that the shelter did not live up to the standards that had been established in Switzerland. In contrast, the second event, which took place in Lebanon, demonstrated that the IKEA shelter was too complete, too permanent, and even too comfortable. At the time, Lebanon was a country with the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, with

Syrians scattered throughout the country in a wide variety of accommodation types. Local shelter specialists had started to experiment with new approaches and UNHCR accepted a small shipment of IKEA units to test in more rural areas. I spoke to one of the main aid workers involved in this experiment, who had taken some units to Akkar in the North of Lebanon. As he told me the story (which several others confirmed), the team were halfway through the first day of construction, putting the frames together, when a group of locals approached: armed, angry, and demanding that the shelters be removed. My informant entered into a discussion and quickly realized that the IKEA shelter was politically unpalatable to whatever group pretended to represent the local population: its comparative solidity suggested that the refugees would be staying permanently, and many of its features appeared too luxurious, with bright white plastic, solar panels, and solid steel tubes. Standing beneath the half-completed frames, he tried to reason with the angry neighbors, pointing out that the IKEA shelters did not have foundations, that they could be removed within a day, and that the material would degrade within 3-4 years. His pleas were unsuccessful. Construction had to be abandoned. In the highly fractured political environment of Lebanon, a fragile consensus had been reached, and the IKEA shelters were considered “too much” in this context, where refugees could be given only the most temporary and restricted forms of residence.

The Swiss and Lebanon examples not only demonstrated the central criticisms of the IKEA shelter; they also, as I shall explain, illustrated Fassin’s idea of a politics of life. When I spoke to the managing director of Better Shelter about these two cases, he agreed that their experiences raised thorny questions about universal standards and the way humans were judged. In Switzerland, the shelter was insufficient. In Lebanon, it was excessive. With refreshing candor, he told me that they had embarked on the whole project assuming that they were designing a shelter for “refugee camps somewhere far away in Africa,” where “it is not explicitly said, but there is some conception that [an IKEA shelter] is better than anything –

that they should be glad for the shelters they are provided.” He went on: “if we could put refugees in buildings meeting Swiss building norms, then we wouldn’t have the refugee problem as it is today.” The shelter had been imagined for African camps, in other words, but presented as universal and so transported to Switzerland in 2015, where the basic needs and frameworks were different. Here it was perceived as unsafe, poorly insulated, and dangerous in fires. In other contexts like Lebanon, meanwhile, the very same shelter was perceived in the opposite way: as too solid and structural, turning informal camps into formal settlements. It was clear, therefore, that the IKEA shelter had tried to be universal but had powerfully demonstrated that standards of shelter are very different around the world. Lives in some places, to put it simply, were worth more than in others.

The Politics of Life

This is the paradox in humanitarian action that Didier Fassin (2007) described in the terms of a “politics of life.” Aid agencies declare that everyone is equal while perpetuating inequalities that undermine their most basic humanitarian principles, and this contradiction operates in medical organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Expatriate aid workers in MSF, Fassin pointed out, have their risks carefully managed: they are protected from harm and repatriated when in danger. This level of protection is denied to staff members who are nationals of beneficiary countries, who are never evacuated so readily. Beneficiary populations, meanwhile, are treated as even more disposable and MSF can withdraw life-saving aid at very short notice. Such unequal treatment, Fassin argued, constitutes a politics of life, which is hidden behind a statement of universal values. It is a politics that concerns “the evaluation of human beings and the meaning of their existence” (Fassin 2007, 500-1). Since humanitarian actors are involved in saving lives, their action “presupposes not only risking

others but also making a selection of which existences it is possible or legitimate to save” (Fassin 2007, 501).

Since it was originally outlined in 2007, the concept of politics of life has been taken up and applied to a range of humanitarian situations, many of which relate to HIV and AIDS. A particularly clear example concerns access to anti-retroviral treatment, which bluntly determines who lives and who dies (Nguyen 2010, 89; Prince 2012, 537). More subtly, the politics of life operates in how health workers relate to patients, apportioning sympathy according to social markers and offering assistance accordingly (Heckert 2017, 160). In contexts of aid and migration, again, patterns of inequality in protection and assistance are particularly visible. Eligibility assessments for asylum seekers, for example, reveal a politics of life by assisting some people but not others (Cabot 2013, 453). The decisions made by search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean determine who lives and who dies (Holmes and Castañeda 2016, 18; Tazzioli 2016, 7). Perverse situations even arise when migrants place their *own* lives at risk in order to increase their access to protection (Ticktin 2011, 75).

These situations all concern how aid agencies calculate the value of life, but they differ from Fassin’s original example because they tend to focus on how humanitarian agencies create inequalities *within* a recipient population. In other words, humanitarian aid generates winners and losers by deciding whom to assist. Fassin’s original idea, however, focused on a slightly different phenomenon: the differential in value between recipient and aid worker lives. This might be described as a vertical, rather than horizontal, politics of life. The vertical politics of life has also been the subject of some fascinating analyses over the past few years. Adia Benton (2016), for example, has criticized Fassin’s work for ignoring racial dynamics in the aid chain, highlighting the role of identity in the way that organizations value white aid workers more highly than their black and brown frontline staff. Ilana Feldman (2012), has developed the concept by pointing out that those at the receiving end of aid do not just

passively accept the differentiation imposed on them by aid workers, but engage in what she calls the “politics of living”: disputing and subverting inequalities from the ground. Vertical inequalities have also operate in new humanitarian technologies such as the Personal Protective Equipment in the treatment of Ebola, a technology that protects expatriate aid workers yet is unavailable to local communities (Pallister-Wilkins 2016, 511).

The horizontal politics of life is about inequalities *between* recipient groups, concerning the way that humanitarians assign an implicit value to life through decisions about who to prioritize for assistance – something that is particularly fraught for humanitarians. Hierarchies up and down the aid chain can be justified on grounds of efficiency, or bracketed off as a structural feature global politics that aid agencies are unable to resolve. Inequity between recipient groups, in contrast, violates the most basic humanitarian principle of all: impartiality. This principle states that assistance should be given in proportion to need alone. It allows discrimination on the basis of needs but not on the basis of any other consideration, such as race, religion, sex, nationality, or political opinion. For example, “it would be contrary to the principle of impartiality to run relief programmes for women solely because of their sex, but where it is evident that they are especially vulnerable the principle of impartiality requires that they be given special attention” (Harroff-Tavel 1989, 538).

Operationalizing the principle of impartiality is notoriously tricky, as it requires an objective assessment of needs, a huge amount of information about living standards, and a common metric against which beneficiaries can be judged. To take a relatively straightforward comparison, the human need for food is usually defined by humanitarian agencies with reference to a chart of basic nutritional requirements, which specifies the quantity of carbohydrates, fats, protein, and so on required for bodily functioning (Sphere Project 2011, 227-8). The extent to which different humans have met these basic requirements, meanwhile, is usually measured through anthropometric techniques such as the Mid-Upper Arm

Circumference, which quantifies the amount of fat and muscle wastage caused by malnutrition (WHO 2000, 2004). This approach is designed to objectively define what humans need, measuring when people fall below this standard.

At first glance, systems like the Mid-Upper Arm Circumference do not appear to involve a politics of life. They resemble, instead, an instance of biopolitics, promoting collective wellbeing amongst a population. Biopolitics has already been applied extensively in the study of humanitarianism (Scott-Smith 2015) but Fassin was careful to distinguish the politics of life from biopolitics. As he puts it, the politics of life is concerned with “the evaluation of human beings” whereas biopolitics related to “the way populations are governed” (Fassin 2007, 500-1). Humanitarian aid “is a biopolitics insofar as it set up and manages refugee camps... develops statistical tools to measure malnutrition and so on,” yet this is distinct from the politics of life, which instead draws attention to the individual (Fassin 2007, 501). Biopolitics involves a normalizing judgment, whereas the “politics of life” involves differentiating people. Biopolitics is about nurturing collective wellbeing, whereas the “politics of life” entails evaluating the relative worth of different lives (Fassin 2009).

The distinction between these concepts has been overstated, and in reality biopolitics and the horizontal politics of life remain deeply entwined. Universalizing technologies generate dividing technologies, fostering life involves risking life, and normalizing populations facilitates differential treatment. Fassin recognized this to a certain extent, pointing out that the politics of life concerns the *reverse* of biopolitics: by nurturing collective wellbeing, certain people can be excluded and “rejected into death” (Fassin 2009, 52; referencing Foucault 1979, 138). Yet in many cases – and particularly in the case of the IKEA shelter – the two concepts are entwined. Again, it is helpful to contrast the case of nutrition, since biopolitical technologies are involved in setting a universal nutritional standard (Redfield 2008; Scott-Smith 2015). These processes appear objective and non-political, but

they have a contested and uncertain history, and the correlation between physical size and underlying nutritional status is particularly politically laden (Aronson 1982; de Onis and Yip 1996; Glasman 2018; Weindling 1995). Shelter is a more recent humanitarian sector and its procedures are far less stable, so products like the IKEA shelter illustrate a political attempt to negotiate humanitarian standards *before* they have been black boxed (Latour 1987, 131). Indeed, the IKEA shelter reveals the connection between biopolitics and the politics of life so clearly because, as the designers discovered, the shelter sector has no equivalent to the standard list of nutritional requirements found in the nutrition sector. There is no comprehensive summary of what every human needs to be sheltered from the elements; there is no straightforward procedure to measure and compare the human need for shelter. One can find some standards in the well-known Sphere Handbook (2011), such as the minimum requirement of 3.5 square meters per person and a floor to ceiling height of at least 2 meters, but such measures leave a great deal out of the picture. What constitutes a comfortable internal temperature? An adequate floor? A sufficient level of fire resistance? A dignified space to live in?

Many features of the IKEA shelter that claim to be “better” lie in these areas, where standards are not defined. Whereas the human need for nutrition has been relatively successfully squeezed into to a set of minimum biological requirements, the need for shelter remains far less developed. This is a sector where standards of life, politics, and what constitutes a “well-balanced” response are still in motion, and it is in this uncertain space we can see the close connections between biopolitics and the politics of life emerge. The best way to illustrate these connections is to return to the Swiss fire tests, which caused the IKEA project to stand still for so long. In response to the negative publicity that accompanied this event, the design team doubled down on the detail. Rather than rethinking the concept of a universal shelter or pushing back against the high standards their product was being judged

against, they spent over a year on complex technical refinements. They developed a new material that responded slightly better to fire. They redesigned the door. They optimized every component to make the shelter more stable, rethinking the bolts, vents, and clips (see figure 4).

[Please insert figure 4 here]

Throughout this process, however, the designers were working without clear and specific standards. They knew they were aiming for a more fire-resistant shelter, but did not receive detailed advice from UNHCR, their main client, on what basic standards their shelter had to meet. They knew they had to “check all the boxes,” but it was unclear, exactly, which boxes needed checking or how they were to be defined. The design team was left in the curious situation of tinkering with materials and sending them off for fire tests without knowing what was insufficient, what was “good enough,” and what might constitute something “better.” The deeply political decisions about the value of life and the extent to which lives could be risked were being transformed into a series of loosely organized technical procedures that had not yet been stabilized.

At the end of the process, the social enterprise presented a new version of the shelter, which had a slightly different color and claimed to have addressed the problem of fire resistance. Drawing once again on a discourse of universal needs and basic standards, this new version involved not just a form of biopolitics but a horizontal politics of life that came increasingly into view. The central frustration of the designers was that *any* emergency shelter would have failed the Swiss fire tests. A standard-issue UNHCR tent or a self-built shelter certainly would have. As the main designer for Better Shelter put it, “a wooden shelter, a tent, a container: you fill it with furniture and of course it will burn down aggressively!” It seemed that the reluctance of the UNHCR to specify certain standards had originated in the knowledge that any universal metrics would be locally contested and that any particularly high standards would cause most shelters to fail. Other aid agencies watched the Better Shelter struggle but

did not help lay down the detailed shelter standards in case these opened a Pandora's box and revealed how many *other* shelters were insufficient.

The team was caught in a bind. They could hardly point out the double standards publicly, because they had staked so much on the idea that their shelter was “better” and could be universally applicable. But nor could they defend themselves against the Swiss fire tests by saying that the municipality had made an unfair comparison with a permanent residential building. After all, that would be to acknowledge that these shelters were designed for a different category of person: a refugee who should be “glad for the shelters they are provided” rather than a Swiss citizen. Both of these responses were impossible, because the politics of life would come bubbling to the surface, puncturing the image of a technical, objective response that was in all their interests to incubate so carefully. Yet they could not be suppressed either, because everyone on the inside was becoming acutely aware that the humanitarian notion of “standards,” when put into practice, was emerging as minimal, mythical, or deeply flawed.

Conclusion: Beyond the Boxes

It has become common to point out that humanitarianism claims to be apolitical are in fact saturated with politics (Barnett and Weiss 2008; DeLauri 2016; Hoffman and Weiss 2017; Hyndman 2000; Ticktin 2011; Weiss 1999). The “politics of life” is just one of many ways to articulate this basic point, showing how even seemingly rational, efficient, and transparent systems for measuring and meeting human needs involve political judgments about the value of human life. In the case of the IKEA shelter, it is tempting to believe that the politics of life originated from external conditions, emerging *despite* the designers' best efforts to create a universal product. These politics, however, were part and parcel of the project from the very

beginning. The politics of life emerged not despite the designers' universal aims, but because they were pursuing these aims in a world where life is anything but universal. It was the team's very desire to create a single standard for everyone that ended up generating the politics they were so keen to avoid: a situation where it was clear that something adequate in one context would be excessive in another, and insufficient in a third.

When I first began to study the IKEA shelter, I took a trip to New York to see a new exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art. The IKEA shelter had been placed in the very center of a space called *Insecurities*, erected and aestheticized, with none of the big questions about politics or inequality raised in the accompanying commentary (Museum of Modern Art 2016). It was, however, given a small label, a spotlight, and a gallery attendant. Above the sound of an air raid siren from a nearby audio installation, I could hear the attendant's refrain echoing around the exhibition hall: Don't touch. Don't touch. It seemed that many of the visitors wanted to interact with the object, to feel it, and to get a sense of what it was like to inhabit this place, yet the attendant was constantly reminding them that this was a museum. It was an exhibition that celebrated innovation in the aid and shelter sector, giving a reassuring sense that designers had solved the problems the world's most vulnerable people face, but visitors did not really have to confront the gulf between their lives and those of the refugees. They were not even able to get close enough to the exhibits to imagine what living in a Better Shelter might feel like.

Looking back at that exhibition, it occurred to me later that only here could the IKEA shelter be truly *lagom*, as the designers had wished. From the very beginning, the aim of the project was to design a perfectly balanced shelter that "checked all the boxes," but recurrent criticisms and contextual circumstances placed obstacles in the way. Some critics argued the shelter did too little, others that it did too much, and the intrusion of real-world events in Lebanon and Switzerland showed that the same shelter could be perceived as either lavish or

insufficient, depending on where it was situated. A product that aspired to foster universal life, in other words, ended up embroiled in environments that valued humans differently, which meant that the most satisfying location for the IKEA shelter was in a gallery. Here it did not need to negotiate with the difficult and compromised act of sheltering real human beings. Here it could retain a purity of purpose and be framed as a success. Perhaps the designers realized this. Throughout 2015 and 2016, an impressive public relations campaign by Better Shelter and the IKEA foundation placed the shelter in public view, and in 2017 the Design Museum in London awarded the IKEA shelter the accolade of worldwide Design of the Year. One of the jurors told me they had chosen the “obvious winner” because the IKEA shelter had tackled “one of the defining issues of the moment,” providing “not only a design but secure manufacture as well as distribution.” Yet the jurors had never seen the shelter in the field. They had never tried to build it. They had not spoken to anyone who lived in it. Like so many other commentators, they had read the promotional materials and engaged with the IKEA shelter as an idea, experiencing it in a place where it was perfectly possible to maintain that the right balance had been found.

Expectations of basic shelter differ around the world and what it means to provide adequate protection is deeply uneven. Any supposedly universal shelter inevitably butts up against these realities at some point. Any attempt to design a space that meets anyone’s basic needs in any location becomes drawn into a realm where biopolitics and the politics of life are entwined. Humanitarian designers can try and rationalize their way out of this situation, but even if they manage to agree on a set of metrics that defines the universal need for shelter, this cannot remove the politics. At most, it just temporarily buries them. The drive to define and check what is required of a shelter will end up destabilized by critics, circumstances, and contexts that go beyond the boxes. In the end, it is only in places like the Museum of Modern

Art or the lush green lawn of an Oxford college that humanitarian designs can retain their purity.

Back in New York, it seemed that the gallery attendant knew this. She was trying to protect the IKEA shelter from interaction with the real world, repelling any attempts to engage with it as a real place where real people might live. I tried to thwart her, sneaking inside the shelter when she was distracted, entering the clean and clinical space to get a sense of how it was built, but I was discovered and reprimanded. I retreated guiltily into the corner of the gallery. People approached. They tried to tap, knock, and bring the IKEA shelter back to reality. They tried to get closer. Yet the attendant's refrain continued: Don't touch. Don't touch. Don't touch.

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