Humanitarian Urbanism under a Neoliberal Regime

Lessons from Kabul (2001-2011)

Marianne Potvin

Graduate School of Design
Harvard University
48 Quincy Street, Gund Hall
Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
mariannepotvin@fas.harvard.edu

Abstract:

This paper situates the figure of the urban camp in the larger context of what it calls humanitarian urbanism. Humanitarian Urbanism refers to the production of space through humanitarian action, of which camps are but one early formation. To test and contextualize the hypothesis of humanitarian urbanism, this paper proposes to define the relationship between the spatial and political dimensions of the humanitarian urban project and neoliberal hegemony. It first delineates the evolution and current contours of humanitarian urbanism, in relation to contemporary practices of capitalism and humanitarianism. Then, drawing on recent observations from Afghanistan, it observes the unfolding of this mode of urbanism in Kabul over the first decade of the twenty-first century (2001-2011). More precisely, it examines how, in the interstices of splintered sovereignties, humanitarian institutions, the state and local power structures negotiate complex urban re-configuration processes. The fragmented urbanism that results from these processes reveals how the neoliberal capture of humanitarian ideals can serve to augment the disjuncture between the rhetoric of globalization and its social effects. The paper concludes with brief considerations on resistance, on the politics of 'protected' populations, and on their claim to a right-to-the-city.

Key Words:

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between the spatial and political dimensions of the humanitarian project in relation with neoliberalism. It introduces, and attempts to define, the concept of 'humanitarian urbanism' and situate it in the context of "the aggressive extension of neoliberal institutions [...] in the face of repeated crises, and the continuing erosion of pockets of political and institutional resistance to neoliberal hegemony" (Peck & Tickell, 2002).

The paper first briefly delineates the earlier formations and current contours of what it calls humanitarian urbanism, and thus locates the figure of the urban camp in the larger context of contemporary humanitarian spatial practices. It then explores how the notion of humanitarianism is being dismantled in essence and in practice by the neoliberal project, and exposes how the neoliberal capture of humanitarian ideals highlights and augments the

disjuncture between the rhetoric of globalization and its social effects. Drawing on recent observations from Afghanistan, it observes the role of humanitarian strategies in profit oriented urban development. The paper concludes with brief considerations on resistance, the politics of 'protected' populations and their claim to the right-to-the-city. Albeit focused primarily on situations of armed conflict, the findings contained in this research are relevant for understanding the transformation of urban realms in other situations of chronic instability and in times of natural disaster. Humanitarian urbanism can serve to inform other situations where humanitarian institutions play a predominant role in the administration of urban space.

I.   Definition

The concept of Humanitarian urbanism, introduced in this paper, refers to the production of space through humanitarian action. It lies at the intersection of two major force fields: the evolution of the humanitarian project and the dynamics of urbanization processes. The concept offers a new analytical lens to explore a novel urban condition that results from the expansion of the spatial, chronological and ideological scopes of humanitarian interventions; as Kabul, Baghdad, Aleppo and other cities would testify. Humanitarian urbanism also raises questions about the reciprocal impacts that humanitarian practices and new terrains of interventions have on one another; it points to a shift in humanitarian practices: a shift from intervening in the city to governing the city and much larger disempowered populations.

Humanitarian urbanism includes a broad set of interventions to the built environment, at multiple scales, that are part of the humanitarian response to crises. Premised on principles of universalism, humanism, neutrality and solidarity, the humanitarian project is driven by values enshrined in International Humanitarian Law (particularly in the Geneva Conventions, 1949), and, to a certain extent, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It is primarily concerned with the protection of 'bare life' of individuals affected by violent conflicts. The emergence and consolidation of the major humanitarian institutions and regulations that we know today occurred in the aftermath of World War II and coincides with the onset of the

development project, which, in a certain way, epitomizes the then Keynesian welfarist tendencies of the 'first world'. If the origins of humanitarian spatiality can be traced back to the Enlightenment or to Colonialism, this discussion centers on its evolution since the end of World War II and more specifically under the neoliberal regime.

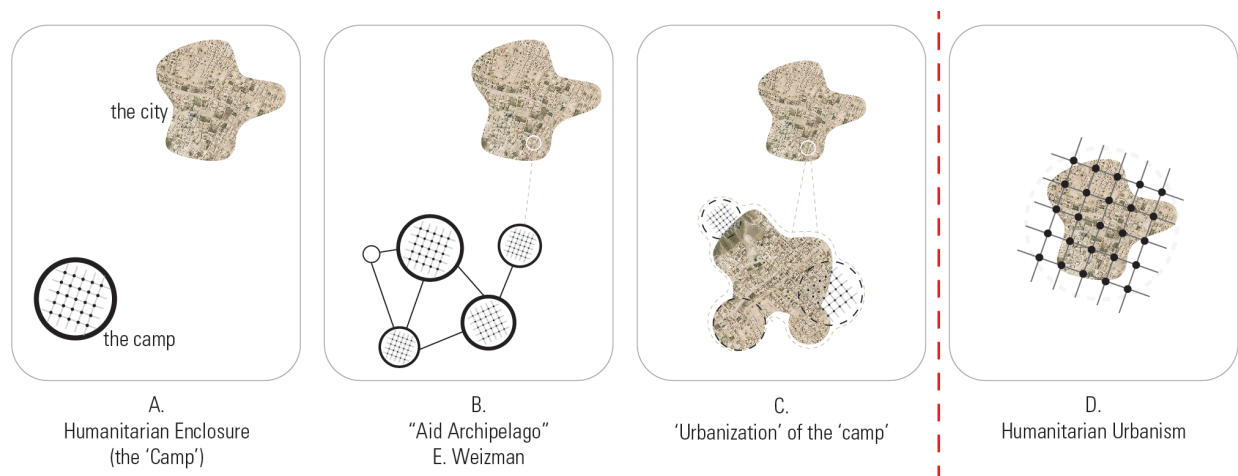## II.   Earlier formations of humanitarian urbanism

Traditionally neutral and impartial, humanitarians have conventionally construed 'humanitarian space' as a tool for measuring their distance from political power, in other words, not as a term referring to a "territorial zone, but rather a set of operational categories, or space-bound circumstances" (Rony Brauman, in Weizman, 2011). The common understanding of the term remains centered on the notion of an "operating environment" where "the independence of humanitarian action from politics" is to be preserved (Collinson & Elhawary, 2012, pp.1-4). It lacks a concrete physical dimension.

In the wake of post-colonialism, stringent respect for norms of state sovereignties dictated the spatial location of humanitarian enclaves, as well as their minimal physical hold on territories. Initial humanitarian enclaves thus made their first appearance *outside* the sites of persecution, that is, outside the international borders of the 'perpetrator states', thus relying on a clear distinction between 'victims' and 'perpetrators', and displaying a strict interpretation of International Humanitarian Law, or *jus in bellum* (Geneva Conventions, 1949).

The infrastructure of choice of early humanitarianism remained the prototypical 'refugee camp'. Remote, impervious, and controlled humanitarian enclosures, stationed out of harm's way (i.e. in the middle of nowhere – in what Marc Augé calls "*non-lieux*"), allowed for the simultaneous protection and exclusion of threatened and disempowered populations. In his recent work, Eyal Weizman introduces the term 'aid archipelagos' to describe the entire web of relief institutions, camps, humanitarian corridors and attendant infrastructures that weave humanitarian zones

"into the global network of commodity circulation through the product of aid and to the international networks of information flow".

Subsequently, the figure of the camp has been used as the embodiment *par excellence* of the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of humanitarianism. For example, in "Managing the Undesirables", Michel Agier (2011) articulates his critique of 'Humanitarian Government' around a sustained focus on the refugee camp model. There is a tension between the distinct uses of the camp metaphor, which alternates between references to socio-spatial formations, actual places, modes of government, types of sovereignties, and philosophical concepts. Nowhere is the use of the camp figure more problematic, however, than within the realm of contemporary spatial studies. Indeed, I would contend that there is a vigorous tendency among spatial practitioners – a fetish almost – to think about the physicality of humanitarian space solely in terms of 'camps'[1].

| A. | B. | C. | D. |
| Humanitarian Enclosure (the 'Camp') | "Aid Archipelago" E. Weizman | 'Urbanization' of the 'camp' | Humanitarian Urbanism |

Figure 1. Evolution of humanitarian spatiality and the frontier of knowledge

This tendency permeates other disciplines, which repeatedly refer to 'camps' (or other spatial containers) when assessing physical sites of humanitarian intervention. Figures 1.A., 1.B. and 1.C. diagrammatically explain the conventional understanding of the spatial evolution of these

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[1] See for example recent Herz, M. (2012) From Camp to City: Refugee Camps of the Western Sahara " "ETH Zurich; Hailey, C. (2009) Camps: A Guide to 21st-Century Space. See also Agier's description of camps as cities in the making.

humanitarian enclosures — from the simple camp (1.A.), or the network of multiple humanitarian enclosures (1.B.), to the growth, expansion and perpetuation or the so-called 'urbanization' of the camps (1.C.).

The obsession with the camp as a frame of reference, however, entails restricting one's sites of analysis of humanitarian spatiality to well-defined enclosures, thereby overlooking vast (unbounded) landscapes that are increasingly shaped and reshaped by the variegated spatial practices of humanitarianism. As a consequence, architects, urban planners and geographers concerned with the production of physical space have limited means of thinking about both spaces of care, protection and control beyond the enclosures, and the ethical component of their interventions on the built environment beyond the temporary.

As opposed to traditional camp-formations, humanitarian urbanism is characterized by active negotiations between the once-restricted extraterritorial humanitarian space and the state space (See Figure 1.D.). From a spatial perspective, humanitarians no longer govern bounded (and neutral) territories but rather dispersed populations; their protective and constructive functions permeate the daily workings of the city. Initially mandated only to protect and assist, humanitarian institutions are now substituting municipalities (and even sometimes states) on prolonged durations. As a result, humanitarian epicenters and the "city" no longer stand as isolated entities, but now physically and politically coalesce. In the absence of traditional physical perimeters and normative buffers zones, the necessary distinctions between the 'protected' populations (the displaced, the refugees) and the "ordinary" citizens – a distinction without which protection cannot effectively occur, and vulnerable populations cannot be cared for – is blurred.

This 'atomization' of humanitarian 'zones' reveals the need for spatial studies to develop new ways of thinking about humanitarian spatiality, ones that would not only revolve around humanitarian camps and other spatial containers, but also describe broader humanitarian geographies, that is, the multi-scalar, unbounded spaces and spatial processes that result from

contemporary humanitarian interventions, as well as the spatial strategies that humanitarian actors deploy when they operate in the urban realm. As the Kabul case study will illustrate further in this paper, humanitarian institutions have a tendency to reshape the urban realm through specific spatial traditions, often very much influenced by the camp model.

III. Neoliberal restructuring of humanitarianism

In theory, humanitarian action, premised on principles of universalism, humanism, neutrality and solidarity, is solely concerned with the protection of individuals affected by violent conflicts, and, by extension, with alleviating the suffering of populations at the confines of an uneven geopolitical order. Today, one must nevertheless wonder whether or not humanitarianism's moral project can be left untouched by the logic of neoliberalism? It is recognized that humanitarian operations are often criticized for their tendency to prolong crises rather than alleviate them. Their potential for destruction (and, consequently, for profitable reconstruction) is therefore immense; to be sure, 'humanitarian cities' (such as Peshawar, Kabul, Nyala, Goma etc.) offer new opportunities for localized one-off capital accumulation, but also for renewed source of destruction if instability is sustained. Proper neoliberal control over humanitarian reconstruction processes can thus insure the perpetuation of capitalism's cycles of "creative destruction". Here, it could be argued that the reconfiguration of humanitarian processes, and spaces, brought on by the severe restructuration of humanitarian institutions, are the ultimate expression of "capital's relentless quest to open up fresh space for accumulation" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

Since the 1970s, humanitarianism, as an ideology, a movement and a set of institutions, has come to resemble a variegated landscape of international NGOs, civil society actors, donor and private sector agencies, more partisan and political, thus less neutral, than in earlier formations (Donini, 2010). In this new institutional landscape, respect for national sovereignties has severely eroded; indeed "governments around the world [have begun] recasting their own

political projects and military adventures as humanitarian ones" (Weizman, 2011) and the humanitarian project has become one of interventionism. In that regard, scholars further note that "the roots of today's human rights-based humanitarianism lie in the growing consensus of support for Western Involvement in the international affairs of the developing world since the 1970s" (Chandler in Harvey, 2005). It thus becomes obvious that under the all-encompassing human rights flag and human security narrative, humanitarianism is recasting its mandate and shifting its focus from protecting (or sustaining) 'bare life' to exporting western versions of peace, democracy, and economic development.

Describing the meta-functions of humanitarianism in a globalized world, Donini writes:

> *"Humanitarian action makes countries safe for capital. Humanitarians [...] perform essential functions to prepare the terrain for the return of international industry and finance. The gold-rush feel of Kabul and Baghdad in the months after the US-led interventions had little to do with the human security of ordinary Afghans or Iraqis and everything to do with the (re)-integration of these two states into globalized capitalism. Because humanitarian action has replaced many state like services in countries in crisis, it contributes to the fallacious notion that such countries can pull through with imposed donor-driven strategies that are fundamentally at odds with an indigenous logic of modernization."*

As relief and reconstruction are increasingly being captured for market gains by the neoliberal apparatus, the humanitarian project's humanist goal is increasingly being reduced to a for-profit enterprise. This claim presupposes that humanitarian values, protected by (and for) nation-states and their citizens as a basis for fundamental rights, are a form of common property, of universal public good, by extrapolation of Harvey's "other forms of common property" (knowledge, cultural assets, heritage, etc.). It follows, then, that this particular public good is currently being commoditized. Some authors refer to the "radical privatization [...] of the most sensitive and core functions of government", including here the sectors of humanitarian relief and reconstruction. They note that "pioneered for Iraq, (the privatization of) for-profit relief and

reconstruction has already become the new global paradigm, regardless of (how and where) the original destruction occurred" (Klein, 2007), referring to the emerging proliferation of for-profit reconstruction firms, private security contractors, insurance companies, etc.

We must thus consider two possibilities. First, the possibility that humanitarian urbanism could be construed as just another instrument in the neoliberal arsenal. One that serves to extend capitalism's reach and accentuate unevenness and exclusion, in yet another manifestation of "the blatant disjuncture between the ideology of neoliberalism and its everyday political operations and societal effect" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). The second, and more dramatic, possibility is that humanitarian urbanism is one of neoliberalism's "spatially variegated, institutionally specific and historically changing forms". In other words, it is an expression of roll-out neoliberalism, demonstrating the extent to which neoliberalism is "more adaptable and robust than was previously acknowledged" (Peck, 2002). The following section seeks out to test these two claims. It also explores how this rescaled humanitarianism is translated into the built form, and how the relations between the once-restricted extraterritorial humanitarian space, the state-space and the urban space are negotiated.

IV.   Humanitarian urbanism in Kabul (2001-2011)

The urban reconstruction of Kabul allows us to test the above claims and reveals how humanitarian reconstruction and resettlement policies are being (re)structured. It uncovers a pervasive agenda within contemporary humanitarian urban practices, one that is preoccupied with capital production rather than social reproduction (or even social 'survival'), and one that caters to the aspirations of upper socio-economic groups while neglecting the poor.

The exclusionary strategy adopted by humanitarian agencies to manage the resettlement of massive waves of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and ex-refugees, returning to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban Regime provides a first example. Upon their landing in the country,

and in concert with local governmental objectives, international humanitarian agencies (led, in this case, by the UNHCR) instantaneously unrolled vast "Land Allocation Schemes" (LAS) far from urban centers. Albeit humanitarian in essence, this generously funded program was designed to ensure that 'populations of concern'[2] never reach cities – as returnees and IDPs were 'coerced' into 'rural' relocation and denied assistance should they attempt to relocate elsewhere. The LAS was also framed in a political narrative of national stabilization, thus rhetorically linked to peace building. The LAS thus not only resulted in granting ownership to remote, insecure and unwanted lands without a "coherent legal system and authority structure that promise effective enforcement of the rights inherent in, and implied by, the title" (Bromley, 2008) let alone real employment opportunities – but it also generated secondary waves of displacement to urban areas, where populations in dire need of assistance were met with political contempt and little international assistance. Beyond being programmatically flawed and betraying an insidious narrative, such policies greatly affected the rehabilitation of Kabul's built environment.

In parallel to these exclusionary mechanisms, set in motion at national level and lubricated by humanitarian intentions, other reconstruction strategies at the urban level offer perplexing examples of humanitarian rescaling. One of them, the official plan to build a new city on the outskirts of the Kabul, the New Kabul Master Plan (NKMP), may exemplify a free-market capture of the urban reconstruction project and reveal a clear prioritization of profit-oriented urban development, catering to the aspiration of local elites, over an urbanism preoccupied with meeting the overwhelming needs of devastated populations. In a way, the delusional New Kabul projected in the new master plan could even be construed as a form of post-conflict 'peace-building' version of gentrification. Most troubling is the allocation of the bulk of the urban 'reconstruction' resources towards that particular project and its orchestration through

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[2] 'Population of concern' is the official term used by the UNHCR to refer to populations that fall within the agency's mandate, for example refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons, forced to migrate due to conflict or sudden natural disasters.

international[3] recovery policies whose proclaimed goal is human development, including the restoration of basic services for all. Furthermore, the actual 'post-conflict' qualification of this type of urbanism tends to be misleading – the NKMP suggests a form of 'peace-building version of gentrification', which implies a stable urban realm. It deliberately ignores the surrounding violence. This in itself represents a narrow vision of the urban realm that parallels the exclusivity of the camp approach. Furthermore, the NKMP focuses on a delimited segment of the population and perpetuates a non-inclusive vision of the city. More than a denial of the massive urban rehabilitation effort that is needed, it betrays a will to abandon Kabul's most vulnerable population to its own fate.

Attention must also be paid to humanitarian agencies' traditional modes of engaging with the urban realm. Indeed, when forced to intervene in existing (and often highly neglected) cities, humanitarians have struggled to understand the urban dynamics and thus far resorted to easy carvings of the urban into neatly distinct formal and informal/illegal areas. In Kabul, as remnants of 'camp bias' linger in their institutional 'psyche', humanitarian actors have attempted to circumscribe sites of intervention in the complex urban fabric, revealing a lack of understanding of the spatial configurations resulting from crises and forced displacement, and of the city as a cohesive whole. They have, for instance, targeted their few piecemeal short-term interventions solely at informal urban neighborhoods, ignoring the needs in the more formal yet greatly underserved neighborhoods, thus deepening the formal/informal divide instead of addressing the continuum of urban vulnerabilities. By doing so, they have mirrored the biases of the Kabul Municipality which has been starkly opposed to receiving returnees or IDPs in the Capital. Consequently, urban shelter (humanitarian) programs, never mind urban housing, for the poor remained gravely underfunded by the aid community – while barely tolerated by municipal authorities.

As shown through these examples, humanitarian aid in Afghanistan has thus been tightly linked to a deliberate negation of the right-to-the-city for all vulnerable populations. This insidious

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[3] A large part of the New Kabul City Master Plan was funded by the development arm of the Japanese Government (JICA).

recalibration of humanitarianism distorts the meaning of relief and the values it is supposed to convey. As a result, nation rebuilding is scaled-down to mere physical rebuilding, with all the sociopolitical consequences that such institutional shift entails.

V.   Splintered sovereignties

The fragmented urbanism that has occurred in Kabul during the past decade highlights a key characteristic of the spatial processes associated with the humanitarian project. It illustrates how humanitarian urbanism unfolds, by definition, in the interstices of splintered sovereignties, and all too often, in the absence of a sovereign state (whose splintering is what caused the initial activation of a humanitarian response in the first place). Such contexts offer two essential ingredients for the implementation of a neoliberalizing agenda: weakened national sovereignty and a humanitarian umbrella ("a perfect system of justification and legitimation" (Harvey, 2005)) under which to operate without scrutiny. In that sense, it could be argued that humanitarian urbanism is proving an entry point of choice for neoliberalism to roll itself out, facing very little resistance at the national level (opposition is more likely to come at both the supranational (global) and local levels, and this is discussed later). This section discusses how this occurs at the state scale, but more importantly, at the urban scale.

State

In the midst of protracted crisis, legally or morally mandated supranational institutions (highly dependent on major funding agencies, themselves governed by neoliberalizing interests) step in and substitute themselves to the state as guarantors of basic individual rights. Circumstances provide them with institutional carte blanche to impose the ideological program of their choosing on the state they claim to lift out of misery. This situation echoes the dynamics of what McMichael names "Globalization World Bank Style", taking it to an extreme.

The US occupation of Iraq exemplifies how this occurs at the state level. It provides a case in point of free-market take-over under the aegis of a "humanist" mission and soaked in "freedom" rhetoric (Harvey, 2005). Harvey notes the "what the US evidently sought to impose by main force on Iraq was a state apparatus whose fundamental mission was to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital" (Harvey, 2005). For the pre-existing Iraqi state, the US government's artificial appointment of a 'sovereign' Iraqi government constitutes an example of the imposition of a "lasting evolutionary ruptures within institutional frameworks, policy environments, and geographies" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

Urban

As noted above, humanitarian urbanism's modus operandi has been based on a 'camp approach', and humanitarian institutions have been ill equipped to engage with the urban realm's struggles, let alone oppose the capture of their fundamental principles by the free-market forces of privatization. The early humanitarian containers - the camps described earlier in this paper - were (and for those that remain, still are) governed by "relief sovereigns". In other words, they were exclusively controlled by experts from "different organizations pursuing each a different task in the division of labor of contemporary emergencies" (Weizman, 2011). Such sites thus allowed for a complete institutional autonomy on the part of global actors. Michel Agiers characterizes this mode of governance as a "government without citizens" and qualifies humanitarians of "low-cost managers of exclusion on a planetary scale" (in Weizman, 2011).

Today, contemporary humanitarian urbanism describes a distinct context, one that is defined by a protracted state of turbulence and by the ubiquity of extraterritorial agents in the very core of the cities they self-mandated to protect or pacify. As the battlefield penetrates and occupies dense urban realms, the perimeters of humanitarian enclosures dissolve and their 'protective' functions become diffuse into the daily workings of the city. Similar to the 'relief sovereigns' that governed the extraterritorial aid archipelagos of early humanitarianism, contemporary

humanitarian urban policies are now substituting themselves to local municipal ones (as observations from Kabul have shown). Furthermore, not only does humanitarianism's renewed allegiance to individual rights exposes it to potential exploitation by the neoliberal doctrine, but the legal basis on which it operates also enables it to hide behind an 'emergency/life-saving' mandate to avoid having to deal (and understand) the complex power plays taking place in spaces of extreme uneven development. However, as Harvey rightly points out, "values of individual freedom and social justice are not necessarily compatible". And we are left wondering what happens when individual rights are protected, but the 'commons' are not, and when the collective appropriation of the space of the city is not addressed at all by those responsible for its rehabilitation.

Conclusion

In spite of the considerations on sovereignty briefly sketched above, current practices of humanitarian urbanism continue to presuppose that humanitarian spaces are apolitical, and that emergency interventions on the built environment will not outlast the temporary presence of international relief institutions. Thriving on best practices, lessons learned, and "fast moving, silver-bullet policies or models" (Peck, Theodore, Brenner, 2012), these practices fail to address the limitations of the fast-peace-building and fast-poverty-alleviating policies they impose. Yet, if their policies of participatory local governance, western-flavored democracy and human rights promotion are not always openly opposed, local resistance does occur - violently or subtly. In Kabul, for example, everyday urban resistance has taken the form of parallel, 'shadow' local governance arrangements, very reminiscent of traditional governance forms, on which the local population almost exclusively relies for justice and protection.

In reference to refugee camps and "relief sovereignties", Eyal Weizman writes on the possibilities for the "politics of the humanitarianism […] to give ground to the politics of the displaced", thus suggesting spaces where the displaced and the disempowered can "reclaim the

rights to politics, to practice it oneself, and not be the political object of others". In doing so, although he does not address the question of cities specifically, he may well be suggesting new avenues for a post-interventionist humanitarian urbanism. Perhaps this post interventionist humanitarian urbanism echoes what Harvey calls a "genuinely humanizing urbanism" (Harvey, 2003). In his "right-to-the-city" piece, Harvey notes that "a different right to the city must be asserted, (...and that) derivative rights (like the right to be treated with dignity) should become fundamental and fundamental rights (of private property and the profit rate) should become derivative" (Harvey, 2003). Perhaps this is what is required for humanitarian enclaves to become cities, and for cities to become true asylums.

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