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From Shelter to Home

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of flexibility in post-disaster accommodation as a key element to transform shelters into homes. After a disaster, housing is one of the main factors that can help to re-establish normality (Johnson 2007). In this situation, shelter is not only a secure roof but a covered living space that gives privacy and dignity (Ashmore et al. 2003). Families seek to recover that normality, which is supported by everyday life experiences, routines, familiar objects, and the idea of home. Home is defined both as the physical dwelling and the metaphorical concept (Saunders and Williams 1988; Rybczynski 1987; Moore 2000; Marcus 1995). It is, on the one hand, a tangible object that we own, and on the other hand, it is a concept of belonging to a place that reflects our particular culture, needs, and way of living, a place we are attached to (Lawrence 1987; Altman, Irwin and Setha 1992). Families seek to make their post-disaster shelter a home, either if they achieve to have a temporary, transitional or permanent house. When they receive a repeatable and anonymous shelter, the way to create their own space is through personalising it and differentiating it from the rest (Wagemann 2012). Therefore, flexibility is central to providing families the possibility to adapt their shelters to their specific needs. A house that is flexible can adjust to changing needs and patterns (Schneider and Till 2007) and provides a framework which recognises that the future is not finite and that change is inevitable (Kronenberg 2007).

In order to understand the process of adaptation from shelter to home, specific cases of modified shelters were selected and studied during fieldwork conducted in Peru and Chile in 2014. The aim was to explore the nature of the adaptations beyond abstract concepts, and therefore qualitative analysis was used as methodology. Peru and Chile were chosen because the same type of shelter was provided by the Government and TECHO NGO to both displaced and non-displaced communities, in these two countries. Multiple-case study was selected as strategy, where cases were considered examples that illuminate the theoretical propositions. Thus, twenty-seven cases of modified transitional shelters were studied and compared, in order to understand the changes families do to their houses, the main characteristics of the process, and essential features that support the transition. The examples were drawn at the same scale and analysed using the following analytical themes: timeline of changes; dimensions; materials and costs; use of the spaces; access to facilities; family size; and adaptation to the climate and culture.

The initial hypothesis was that families modify their houses making additions and extensions because they try to make their shelter a comfortable and familiar place, based on the idea of

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creating a home, with the sub-hypothesis that displaced families would modify their houses in a less extensive way, due to their temporary situation. Nevertheless, modifications made by displaced families were in some cases even more extensive and costly than non-displaced families. The need for creating a place appropriate for their needs and customs showed to be more important than the investment of time and resources in a provisional shelter with an uncertain future. In conclusion, to provide effective and flexible designs in a disaster context it is crucial to recognise the existing needs and the sheltering process as a continuum.

Keywords: Post-disaster housing, transitional shelter, flexibility, home

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Elizabeth Wagemann is a trained architect that conducts research on housing after disasters. She graduated from Universidad Católica de Chile with a BArch (2001) and a MArch (2005). She received an MPhil in Architecture (2012) from the University of Cambridge where is currently a PhD candidate. She has experience in designing and researching low-cost and post-disaster housing in Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil and the Philippines. She is part of the Natural Material Innovation Research Group at the University of Cambridge.