

Dimitrios **Voulgaris**  
London School of Economics and Political Science  
d.voulgaris@lse.ac.uk  
Giulia **Meli**  
Aalborg University  
gmeli16@student.aau.dk

## **Spatial structures and the future of refugee camps in Lesvos (Greece)**

### **Abstract**

The last years, the island of Lesvos has become the main entrance to Europe for many refugees and migrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and African countries. This ongoing humanitarian crisis has changed the socio-spatial landscape of the island, challenging the local and national authorities as well as the EU. Looking back on the island's modern history, refugees from the Minor Asia arrived after the Catastrophe of Smyrna (Izmir) and some of them eventually settled in. Their adjustment to the environment and their integration with the existing population has changed the urban and socio-economic landscape creating a new era for the island.

This paper questions the urban future of refugee camps in Lesvos through interviews. The key informants, somehow involved in the humanitarian response, are asked to analyse the situation and to reflect on the future of Moria and Kara Tepe camps. Conceptualising the camp as a spatial structure, the interviewees are asked to elaborate on whether or not refugees and migrants will be part of the island within the next 20 years as it happened approximately a century ago with the first wave of refugees. We take into account the differences in terms of customs, traditions and culture and the new policies implemented in Greece. We conclude reflecting on the "urban futures" for Moria and Kara Tepe camps.

Keywords: refugee camps, urban future, Lesvos

### **Introduction**

*"The massive forced and unforced migrations of people now taking place in the world, a movement that seems unstoppable no matter how hard countries strive to enact stringent immigration controls, will have as much if not greater significance in shaping urbanisation in the twenty-first century as the powerful dynamic of unrestrained capital mobility and accumulation."*

Harvey (1996: 416)

With the above words, David Harvey, in his book "Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference", describes a situation at the end of the last century, while simultaneously predicting the results of migration flows in this century. Indeed, fortunately, or unfortunately, this "situation" remains more than two decades after Harvey wrote this text, and our urbanised societies change each and every day.

According to the European Commission (2017), more than 1.000.000 refugees and migrants have passed into Europe in the last four years, while thousand others have died during their journey. The epicentre of this unprecedented crisis, is Greece, and in particular the islands of the Aegean Sea which are close to the Greek-Turkish border. One of these islands is Lesbos, where there are currently two refugee camps.

This island is the third largest island of Greece and it is located at North-eastern Aegean Sea, close to the Greek-Turkish border. The last couple of years, Lesbos has become the main entrance to Europe for many refugees as well as migrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and African countries. This ongoing humanitarian crisis has changed the socio-spatial landscape of the island, challenging the local and national authorities, as well as the European Union, to face this situation. This essay questions the urban future of refugee camps on the island of Lesbos in Greece; through interviews we will discuss and analyse how people involved with the modern refugee crisis in Greece imagine the future of Moria and Kara Tepe camps. We will also reflect on to imagine refugees and migrants as part of the island's society within the next 20 years and compare that with the first wave of refugees in the island. We will take into account demographic elements since we are referring to different populations in terms of customs, traditions and culture. We will also consider the new policies governing these places that did not exist a century ago when the first wave of refugee settled in the island. We will finally reflect with the interviewees on whether or not this scenario is realistic or simply a utopia. To conclude, we will discuss the possible "urban futures" of Moria and Kara Tepe camps.

## Refugees on the island of Lesbos

### The phenomenon

*"(...) the barriers to refuge are often acute. It is hard for people to escape, hard to cross borders, hard to survive extended and hazardous journeys, hard to find even a temporary refuge, and harder yet to find a durable one."*

Haines et. al. (2017: 3)

Given that the terms "migrant" and "refugee" will be discussed throughout the remainder of this essay, it is vital to define and discuss their meanings.

The topic of migration, despite has been constantly in the media spotlight in the last few years, is not a new phenomenon. According to Kniff (2010: 39), *"modern humans have always been a migratory species as far as geography and ecology permits"*. In addition, there is evidence that migration may have existed even during the prehistoric era (McConvell, 2010).

The 1951 UN Refugee Convention defines a refugee as: "A person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UN General Assembly, 1951). The Dictionary of Human Geography (Gergory et. al., 2009: 628) mentions that the term refugees refers to "people who have been involuntarily displaced from their homes and disposed of their livelihoods, normally without the protection of their own government." Regarding migrants, McConvell (2010: 155) describes migration as: "One

type of explanation of such a distribution is migration: people moved from one place to another and took their artefacts and styles of life and/or their languages with them". For the purposes of this essay, we will not analyse the terms "refugee" and "migrants" and their legal implications. Our aim is to analyse the situation of a person who is forced to flee his or her country and try to build a future in a new country.

First modern-21st century refugees arrived on the island of Lesbos during the year 2000 (Papataxiarchis, 2016). However, the first peak point of the arrivals is observed in 2015, when more than one million refugees and migrants, crossed the borders seeking asylum with the hope to build a better future. The following section briefly analyses the modern history of Lesbos as well as the conditions of refugee sites in the previous century.

### **The area of interest – a brief history of refugees**

Lesbos is a Greek island located in the North-eastern Aegean Sea, less than 10 kilometres away from the Turkish coastline. Due to its position, it has long-been known as the place where refugees cross (and stay) as part of their trip before they arrive at their destination. As previously mentioned, human beings tend to migrate from the time they started organising into societies. Looking back at Greek modern history, in the first half of the previous century (1922), approximately 1.3 million refugees moved from Minor Asia (Western part of Turkey) to Greece (a number of them in Lesbos). Of course, this caused an important transformation of the socio-spatial national landscapes and created many challenges for the country (Youngblood-Coleman, 2015). Refugees settled around the city, trying to become a part of the local society, although the locals did not welcome them. They first created informal houses (most of them were skilled builders) and as time passed, through governmental benefits and policies, they finally converted these to legal homes and became part of the city. In some neighbourhoods, this type of housing adjusted to the local architecture of the city of Mytilene. Furthermore, it was helpful that they used their skills in industry, expanding the existing standards. As a result, people, as well as their places, adjusted. (Tsoukala, 2016)

### **Methodology**

To analyse the future of the refugees' camps on the island of Lesbos, a qualitative method will be deployed. Employees, employers and volunteers working in the camps will be interviewed. The choice not to approach refugees and migrants is given due to ethical considerations; considering that they are personally involved and affected by this situation, we did not want to cause further distress or generate uncomfortable feelings.

More specifically, regarding the interviews, interviewees were first asked some personal questions regarding their backgrounds as well as their experience in Lesbos. The character of the interviews was unstructured, with flexibility in the questions; this method was helpful to understand better some topics around the phenomenon. The interviews are separated in two parts: the first part includes questions concerning the past and/or the future of the place in relation to their experience as well as the social and spatial landscape of the camps from their point of view. The second part is a discussion about the future of these places. In all cases, we made sure the interviewees were familiar with the history of the island and the first wave of refugees that settle in the island in the previous centuries.

The former part aims at making interviewees think more specifically about camps and space as a society. The purpose of the latter part of the interview guide is to create a discussion around the (urban) future of these places. Before continuing further, it is important to mention that there are many differences in interviewees' descriptions of the camps. This is due to the different periods they accessed the camps and the level of emergency at that time.

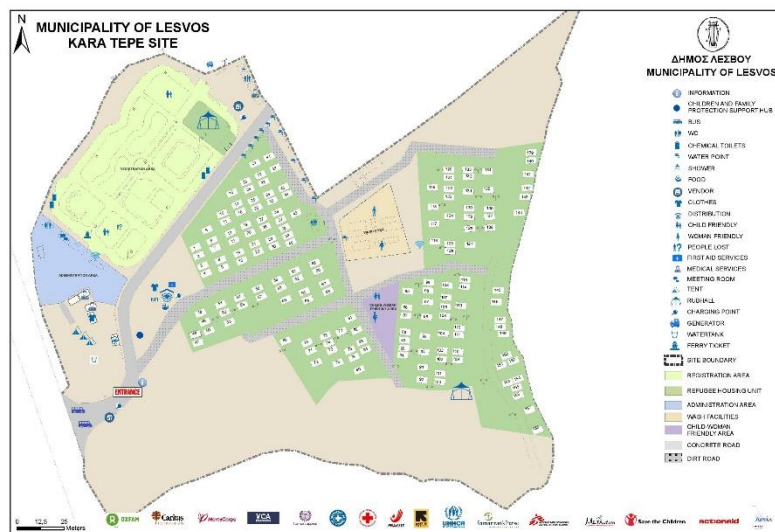
## Results

As aforementioned, interviews were conducted in order to gather information about the future of refugee camps on the island of Lesvos. The interviewees have different backgrounds and have worked or volunteered in one or both camps. Some of the interviewees have been living on the island throughout the past years and who got involved with refugees in different ways.

### The past and the present situation of the camps

#### Kara Tepe camp

Most of the interviews started with a conversation about the way that camps are currently organised. Interviewees were able to describe in details the physical and social landscape of the camps. What it is important to mention and take into consideration is that the way these camps are organized spatially depends on the needs of the period, which are highly related with the amount of refugees and the migrant population on the island. For this reason, all the "buildings" are containers and not stable structures.



Map 1: Kara Tepe camp as of 2/2/2016. Map was created by the Greek Government. Available online at: <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean?page=1&view=grid&Type%255B%255D=1> [visited on 10/12/2017]

According to Iva, a volunteer who visited both camps during the summer of 2015, Kara Tepe camp "because it's socio-spatial structure is less complicated than Moria camp". When she first visited the camp, she observed a lack of essential infrastructure like electricity. Now the camp is more organised and it's like a "village with a clear urban structure". Following Iva's interview, Kara Tepe has a main entrance (which controls the entrance to the camp) and on the left side, there is everything related to the bureaucracy. In front of the gate and the offices is the main road, constructed so that there is enough space for each type of vehicle (like ambulance, fire brigades etc.). Around this road there are containers which host the

camp's facilities. Consequently, a small amphitheatre for events, a playground, a football court was built and a container for educational purposes was placed in this area.

It was interesting that Iva commented on some planning failures for this camp. More specifically, when the camp was constructed, there wasn't a (town) planning study in order to evaluate the needs and the dangers of different facilities. For example, with funds from the European Union, a kitchen was built, making the camp self-catered. Ultimately, the kitchen was never used because the administration of camp was concerned about an accident, and moreover, the camp's population at that time was not staying long term. At the entrance's right side, there are medical services and facilities.

Anonymous T worked as doctor in this camp. Doctors offered first aid, and when needed, patients were transported to the island's hospital. The medical service was partly equipped, but in some instances he had to buy his own medicine. In some cases, patients pretended to have an emergency situation in order to gain priority at different types of services due to the large amount of people queuing to access the facility. As confirmed by Anonymous T, these camps are living organisations where residents continue their life and cases of early pregnancy and women giving birth were reported.

## Moria

Moria is an ex-military base, which was transformed into a camp in 2010. It is the first place refugees go when they arrive on the island after their registration<sup>1</sup>. They are then assigned a place in one of the camps according to their gender, nationality, age and family composition. The camp never had a good reputation because of its conditions and there are not many NGOs involved since part of the administration is up to the Greek Military Services (B. Hatzimichail on 2/1/2018 and N. Sounsel on 20/1/2018). Iva portrays this place as a "prison and slum" because the entrance is restricted and controlled, while the camp is surrounded by a wire fence where cleaning services are not provided properly (Annex: Image 1). Barbara noted that behind this benchtop, inside the site, "the situation is terrible, horrible conditions. It can host approximately 2500 people and the latest estimations have encountered 6-9.000 on the island<sup>2</sup>. There is also a huge amount of rubbish in and out of the camp; in Barbara's words "everything negative you can think of." There are



Map 2: Moria camp as of 2/2/2016. Map created by the Greek Government. Available online at: <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean?page=1&view=grid&Type%255B%255D=1> [visited on 10/12/2017]

<sup>1</sup> Registration period depends on the number of people who arrived. During 2015-2016 one could wait up to three days.

<sup>2</sup> Because the camp is the only registration point, everyone who arrives on the island have to go first to Moria camp for registration

also some gates with guard rooms which separate the different sections of the camp. People are trapped in different spaces - one is used for unaccompanied minors, one for vulnerable members, and a third one for males who face psychological illnesses. The remaining people who do not belong to these categories live in another section of the camp (free to move between the camp and the rest of the island) in tents and in some cases in containers. (personal communications with I. Vougiouka on 16/12/2017 and Anonymous V. on 15/7/2018). The inadequate conditions and the low living standards of the camp were confirmed by all our interviewees.

The structure of the camp, as shown on map 2, is composed by a main entrance where there is an assembly point under a tent under a mud ground. In the same area, there are some containers for medical services and one that hosts police officers. What Iva and Anonymous V mentioned during our discussion, is that in late 2016 and early 2017, next to the gate, there was a container for EASO which is responsible for dealing with the asylum cases. After some protests which caused fire in a part of the camp, the area was burned and moved to another place on the island (in Pagani village).

A real prison is also located into the camp, which houses those who are considered “illegal” and going to be deported because they are not eligible for asylum and are therefore treated as prisoners (communication with I. Vougiouka on 16/12/2017).

Toilets are shared and few, since some of them are replaced by “housing facilities” in order to give space to an additional number of refugees who arrive on the island.

Anonymous V during the interview noticed that there was an informal market into the camp. “Police turned the blind eye and allowed some locals to enter the camp and have a small kiosk selling goods, of course, illegally.”. According to the same interviewee, the harsh conditions were rapidly transformed to the better, when it was announced that a notable person (e.g. Angelina Jolie, the Pope etc.) will visit the site.

## **The future**

Barbara lives in Moria village and she used to walk her dogs in the area. In 2010, when the first flow of refugees from Syria arrived in the island, she could never have imagined the current dystopia and the huge impact this phenomenon could have on the existing space and how it could transform the habits of the locals.

Reflecting on the future of the place, Barbara believes that people will continue coming to the island and that the situation will continue to be tense in the coming years. At the moment there are not visible improvements in the area. According to Barbara, it is unrealistic to think that in terms of architecture and urban planning the camp can be incorporated into the existing village to have one single entity - mainly because of the differences between the local and host society - but she is positive in terms of the formation of a mixed community in which the priority is given to human beings (Barbara interview).

Discussing with Iva about the infrastructure on the camp, we found that due to the increasing criminality rates on the island, locals hamper the possible extension of camps. Michalis mentioned that locals have been protesting closing some of the main roads on the island, trying to block tracks which were carrying containers for the improvement of the camps.

Iva mentioned that because of the country’s geographical position, Greece has always been a “bridge” which connects the East with West. Because no government, or policies can

build a “wall” on the sea, people from Eastern and African countries will continue to use this route to reach Europe. She is not able to predict or imagine the future of the place in spatial and urban terms, even though she is an architect. Unfortunately, these areas are governed by a variety of policies which depend on different (political) interests and therefore this will also influence the future of the area in terms of urban spaces.

Anonymous T. believes that refugees and migrants will not become part of the island because this is not their aspirations. Indeed, the majority of them are on the island waiting for asylum in order to be able to move into a European country with more favourable policies for refugees and/or to get reunited with relatives who have already settled in other countries.

Ilias, comparing 21<sup>st</sup> century refugees on the island to the ones from the previous century, comments that their relation with the place now is different. The 20<sup>th</sup> century refugees wanted to stay, while the current refugees are trapped on the island because of geographical restrictions. That is why the infrastructure for refugees on the island is not suitable for long-term stay. However, he continues, since this is ongoing phenomenon the camps will remain in the future. Everything is dependent on the EU and its policies. Michalis has the same opinion and he adds that through these policies which create a dystopian place (and urban future), the local society will become more fearful.

Another interesting point raised by Anonymous V is that Moria will not exist in the future because these types of camps cannot be considered “societies”, but rather resemble prisons. These places are governed by political decisions so everything depends on these. Although camps will not exist anymore, some people will be absorbed by the local society and urban landscape. He thinks that in this era, “history will not repeat itself” since nowadays building informally is more likely to be prohibited; because of policies and urban plans which organize through rules the spatial landscapes.

A very interesting view was given by Co who proposed a project for an urban area able to host refugees. He argues that the structure of the camps is not suitable and do not offer a good quality of life as the camps are not “humanised”. There are approximately 18 billion Euros spent on the migration crisis between 2015-2017 (European Commission (2017) and infrastructures is still unable to fulfil basic human needs. So, if this budget could be invested in a different way, he imagines an area, called ‘refugopia’ which will extend to be 400-500 km<sup>2</sup> and will have all of the infrastructure needed for a high-quality life. Through this, he believes that refugees will have agency and responsibilities and they will create a new society which defer from current horrible situation. However, as this thought is not scientifically researched or implemented anywhere, he thinks that it would be more realistic for the political authorities to understand the benefits of the incoming population, to improve the infrastructure and to better manage more carefully the process of adaptation of refugees in the island’s society so that locals will accept these people in or out of camps.

Reflecting on the future of the camp we wonder if this urban scenario is a Utopia. According to Friedman (2000: 462) “Utopian thinking is the capacity to imagine a future that departs significantly from what we know to be a general condition in the present. It is a way of breaking through the barriers of convention into a sphere of the imagination where many things beyond our everyday experience become feasible. (...)” To some extent, imagine an improvement of the situation in the near future, as some of the interviewees hope to see, seems to be a Utopia.

It might be more realistic to talk about its opposite, dystopia. Moria camp in particular, as portrayed by the informants is a clear example of dystopian space since it is characterized as dehumanized and its immediate future seems to be extremely pessimistic.

However, there is no doubt that refugees arriving in Lesvos have succeeded in transforming a whole island in spatial as well as social terms. They crossed borders and changed the meaning of “citizenship” and “locality”. Some interviewees mentioned that the urban futures of these camps depend on the policies which will govern the island during the coming years. Indeed, policies and their implementation have a huge impact on the future of the camps and the surrounding urban areas.

As Peter Van der Veer (2016:3) mentions, a desirable urban future would connect migrants’ motivations to governmental development policies; this idea is to some extent also the result of the interviews we conducted in relation to the future of the island.

## Conclusion

Realistically speaking, the migration flows will never stop around the world. Mobility is a continuous process typical of the human kind (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013) and it is intensified as a result of violent conflicts. Strict and violent policies cannot deter it; however, policies will continue to govern the existing space and partially determine the future of people on the move. This paper investigated the future of refugee sites on the island of Lesvos through the eyes of those who have been in the island and have witnessed life in the camps. Interviews provided material that creates and enforces the academic conversation of the urban and social future of these places on the island. Both camps are living organisms because people conduct their life and interact with the surrounding area. Following the interviewees’ experiences, living conditions and standards in Moria camp are worse than Kara Tepe. The former is overcrowded, dirty with less facilities, usually characterised as a prison, while the latter provides more facilities, is populated by families and is usually characterised as a “village”.

Tough (1991: 4) notes that *“humanity’s long-term future is a huge mystery of puzzle.”* We simply have no idea how it is going to turn out and what repercussion it is going to have in the urban settings of the host community. We can speculate about the future of refugee camps, we can conduct empirical research on trends and causal forces, but we cannot predict the future of these areas. Through the interviews, we discussed different options about the urban future of refugees camps; most of them have, as a central idea, that migrants will continue to arrive to the island. People involved in the crisis also hope that the condition of existing camps will be improved and that refugees’ flows will be decreased when the situation in their home country will be stabilised. There is also a shared desire that current refugees will become a part of the island’s community either they live in or out of camps. We personally believe that the policies and people which govern the space eventually, acknowledging the gravity of the situation, will implement a suitable planning procedure transforming the existing dystopia into a utopia.

## References

European Commission (2017) The EU and the Migration Crisis, Retrieved from <http://publications.europa.eu/webpub/com/factsheets/migration-crisis/en/>

Friedmann, J. (2000) The Good City: in defence of Utopian thinking, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 24: 460–72.



Glick Schiller, Nina and Salazar, Noel B. (2013) 'Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39, 2: 183-200

Gregory, D., Johnston, R., Pratt, G., Watts, M. J., Whatmore, S. (Eds) (2009). *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (5th ed.). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (1996). *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*. Malden: Blackwell

Kniff, d P. (2010) Population Genetics and the Migration of Modern Humans (Homo Sapiens). In J. Lucassen, L. Lucassen and P. Manning (Eds), *Migration in history in world history* (pp39-58). Leiden, Boston: Brill

McConvel, P. (2010) The Archeo-Linguistics of Migration. In J. Lucassen, L. Lucassen and P. Manning (Eds), *Migration in history in world history* (pp39-58). Leiden, Boston: Brill

Papataxiarchis, E. (2016). Being 'there': At the front line of the 'European refugee crisis' - part 1. *Anthropology Today*, 32(2), 5-10.

Tough, A. (1991). *Crucial questions about the future*. London: Lanham: Adamantine Press; University Press of America.

Tsoukala, A. (2016) *The design of a Syrian Refugee Camp as part of the community of Perama, Lesvos, Greece* (Masters Dissertation), Politecnio di Milano, Milan. Available online at:

[https://www.politesi.polimi.it/bitstream/10589/126326/1/Tesi%20Book %20Tsoukala.pdf](https://www.politesi.polimi.it/bitstream/10589/126326/1/Tesi%20Book%20Tsoukala.pdf) [visited on 20/11/2017]

UN General Assembly, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 28 July 1951, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, ( available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3be01b964.html>)

Veer, van der P. (2016) The Future of Utopia, *History and Anthropology*, 27:3, 251-262, doi: 10.1080/02757206.2016.1167051

Youngblood-Coleman, D. (2015) 'Greece 2015 Country Review', pp. 1-341, Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 3 January 2018

## Annex

The following table illustrates some characteristics of the interviewees like their background, how they get involved with the camps and the day I conducted the interview. Interviews were carried out in Greek or in English and were not recorded.

Interviewee	Background	Relation with the phenomenon	Day of interview
Iva Vougiouka	Architect	Local, Volunteer in a local NGO which acts in both camps	16/12/2017
Michalis Bakas	Environmentalist/ Human Rights	Local, political active with the Greens	17/12/2017
Barbara Hatzimichail	Economics and Development	Volunteer in Moria camp/Resident of the village of Moria	2/1/2018

Co Van der Hoek	Sociologist	Volunteer Kara Tepe	5/1/2018
Ilias Pistikos	Dr. in solidarity movements for refugees and migrants	Local, Volunteer in a welcome centre	5/1/2018
Anonymous V.	Doctor	Worked as a doctor in Moria camp	15/1/2018
Anonymous T.	Doctor	Worked as a doctor at Kara Tepe camp	17/1/2018
Nik Sounsel	Education	Volunteer out of Moria camp	20/1/2018



Image 1: Picture from an entrance at Moria camp (27/1/2018) by jennybartsch on Instagram. Available on: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BecjtV1A9WA/?taken-by=jennybartsch> [visited on 27/1/2018]