Building a Bed for the Night: The Parisian "Yellow Bubble" and the Politics of Humanitarian Architecture

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On May 31, 2016, the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, announced that a new humanitarian center would be opening in the north of the French capital. The idea was to offer accommodation for migrants who had been sleeping in ever-larger numbers on the streets of the city, staying in makeshift shelters and tents, often under elevated metro tracks. The conditions in these camps were terrible—cold, insecure, and insanitary—and Hidalgo considered the situation to be a serious affront to the image of a humane city. Her humanitarian center was meant to solve the problem. Rather than sleeping on the streets, migrants would receive a bed, three meals per day, clean clothes, hot showers, and healthcare. The center was meant to provide a safe and dignified welcome for refugees, expressing the city's Enlightenment values.[1]

Soon after Hidalgo's announcement, the project was implemented with impressive speed and efficiency. Within a few months, an organization was selected to manage the project, an architect was appointed to design it, and a location had been identified in an old railway depot near Porte de la Chapelle at the northern fringes of the city. The center was constructed over the summer of 2016, and it emerged with colorful, playful, and artistic design. Its most dramatic feature was an enormous inflatable structure, made from bright yellow plastic with grey and red detailing, that stood at the entrance to the site. This "bubble," as it was known, became an emblem of the humanitarian center, appearing as a logo on signs and leaflets. It could be seen for miles around, rising over the tarmac of the abandoned industrial site and extending over eight-hundred square meters. It was visible from trains arriving at the Gare du Nord and from cars traversing the Boulevard Périphérique around Paris. Such visibility was crucial to Hidalgo's expression of values.

What happens when refugee camps and other tools for managing migration become a matter of architectural design? What can a focus on the aesthetic and technical modes of architecture tell us about humanitarian interventions? And what is the relationship between politics, architecture, and humanitarianism? The Parisian "Yellow Bubble" began with a simple aim to provide a night of warmth and comfort, but it ended up as a "sorting and dispatching" center for the state, embroiled in the political project of clearing informal settlements from the streets of Paris. For decades now, scholars of humanitarianism have explored these relationships between care and control, developing concepts such as the "politics of life," "minimalist biopolitics," or "the government of threat and care" to illuminate how humanitarianism and politics are inevitably entwined.[2] The academic literature, in more recent years, has also begun to examine the role of design in this process, focusing particularly on the politics of cheap, mass-produced, small-scale devices

that address human suffering through the market mechanism.[3] Much less critical attention, however, has been directed toward expansive architectural interventions, which often literally and figuratively shape humanitarian spaces themselves.[4]

In what follows, I examine the Parisian "Yellow Bubble" as a prominent example of humanitarian architecture, tracing how Mayor Hidalgo's vision was constructed, both materially and discursively, by building a "bed for the night." My title mimics one of the most widely read books on humanitarianism, *A Bed for the Night,* in which David Rieff argues that humanitarian action should be minimal and oriented around basic necessities.[5] Humanitarianism, he maintains, is best focused on simply ameliorating suffering; it should resist becoming bound up with complex ideologies or expansive visions of social change. The title of his book was taken from a poem by Bertolt Brecht, which describes a man in New York seeking beds for the homeless. This simple act, Brecht points out, "won't change the world" or "shorten the age of exploitation," but it could keep people from dying on the street.[6] Hidalgo's center in northern Paris was ostensibly devised along these "classical" lines.[7] It was meant to provide a bed for migrants sleeping on the city's streets, but it soon became entrenched in complex strategies of containment and control. Architecture, in this way, ended up playing a mediating role between the classical humanitarian language and the political functions of the site: a role that is becoming increasingly common when more effective forms of humanitarian action are constrained.

Based on nine months of research conducted in 2017—including participation observation in the bubble and a series of detailed interviews with the main actors involved—this essay examines the politics of humanitarian architecture. In the next section of this essay, I provide an introduction to humanitarian architecture in general, before section two turns to examine the design of the Yellow Bubble in more detail. Section three then explores the political functions of this particular example; the final section returns to reflect on the politics of humanitarian architecture more broadly. In-depth interviews were conducted with all the main stakeholders as part of the research for this essay, including the mayor's office that proposed the scheme, the architectural collective that designed it, the NGOs who managed the center as well as a range of activists and critics who engaged with the idea from its inception. The interviews were held in a mixture of English and French, but have been presented here in English for clarity, with particularly ambiguous terms added in French where necessary.

The Rise of Humanitarian Architecture

The past decade has seen notable growth in architecture with an explicitly humanitarian purpose. A number of books have appeared to showcase these activities, with titles such as *Urgent Architecture, Humanitarian Architecture*, and *Design Like You Give a Damn.*[8] Prominent exhibitions have arrived in major galleries, such as the enormous 2016 Biennale in Venice and the high-profile *Insecurities* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Competitions such as *What Design Can Do* have promoted successful architectural schemes, with trade fairs, such as *AidEx* and *DIHAD,* allowing architects to promote their emergency shelters. The international media have picked up on this trend, with news outlets like *Dezeen* and *ArchDaily* offering stories for a wider audience.

Given this proliferation of commentary and construction, it is perhaps surprising that there has been so little critical reflection on what, exactly, humanitarian architecture really means. This is partly because there is so much imprecision in the term, but also because

architecture has long been connected to social aims. Indeed, many—but by no means all—architects consider their central purpose to be improving conditions of living, arguing that their profession involves not just thinking about engineering, materials, and structure, but also planning for human dreams and aspirations. Perhaps the most epigrammatic articulation of this point comes from Nikolaus Pevsner, who wrote, "A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture."[9] This concept has become a common way of distinguishing the added value of the profession, contrasting the functional lines of a basic structure with more ambitious and aesthetically detailed attempts to engage with the human condition.[10] The social role of architecture has always been contested, not least because architects implicitly and explicitly become engaged in ideological projects from across the political spectrum, yet the idea of "doing good" is in itself nothing new.

When it comes to emergency shelter, architects have for many decades played a role in humanitarian responses to natural disaster and the reconstruction of homes in the Global South. This work has generated a vibrant literature in the humanitarian shelter sector, which goes back at least to the mid-1970s.[11] There have also been many long-established designs for basic refugee shelters in camp settings, including more recent, and highly publicized, flat-pack designs such as the Ikea-funded "Better Shelter."[12] These examples, however, represent relatively modest attempts to contribute to basic shelter. They are the humanitarian equivalent of Pevsner's bicycle sheds: small-scale structures with limited practical purposes. The Yellow Bubble, in contrast, represents a more recent move toward larger-scale, aesthetically influential, and highly emblematic interventions. Indeed, the Yellow Bubble could be seen as a popup secular cathedral in the Pevsnerian sense. Like the vast religious structure at Lincoln, or the many famous and striking works of architecture across Paris, it involves a far more ambitious attempt to engage with the human condition.

The recent expansion in socially conscious architecture intervenes on this wider and more spectacular scale, and the 2016 Biennale in Venice provided a particularly good sense of the zeitgeist. Under the direction of Alejandro Aravena, the enormous exhibition in Italy encompassed everything from temporary living to low-impact housing, from sustainable building to slum improvement. Its program declared that the event was meant to respond to "segregation, inequalities, peripheries, access to sanitation, natural disasters, housing shortage, migration, informality, crime, traffic, waste, pollution."[13] Aravena's aim was to push the boundaries of the discipline, to make it confront ever-broadening social issues. After calling it "Reporting from the Front," he began with the following, all-encompassing statement of purpose:

> We believe that the advancement of architecture is not a goal in itself but a way to improve people's quality of life. Given that life ranges from very basic physical needs to the most intangible dimensions of the human condition, improving the quality of the built environment is an endeavour that has to tackle many fronts: from guaranteeing very concrete, down-to-earth living standards to interpreting and fulfilling human desires, from respecting the single individual to taking care of the common good, from efficiently hosting daily activities to expanding the frontiers of civilization.[14]

As a curatorial statement, these words did not so much focus the mind as expand it, demonstrating scale of ambition alongside frustrating analytical imprecision. As a result, the exhibition featured a bewildering array of designs spread across thousands of square

meters of exhibition space. Some were temporary, others permanent. Some showcased ancient building techniques; others were unapologetically futuristic. Some were small and sustainable; others had significant implications for the environment. The Parisian Yellow Bubble, therefore, is just one of many examples of humanitarian architecture today, but it is a particularly good place to begin unpacking what is at stake in this new architectural movement. It is an example that is oriented around the short-term, classical aims of humanitarian action, while also demonstrating the broader possibilities of the architectural profession. Indeed, one critic I spoke to declared that this was "the first time a talented architect has been called upon to put together an encampment . . . The first time that a public authority has equipped itself with the capabilities, with the talents of an architect who is really worthy of this title."[15]

Building a Bed for the Night

Who was this architect? His name was Julien Beller, part of a radical Parisian collective known as 6B. His studio, when I visited, was located in a rundown building in the working-class suburb of St. Denis, peppered with murals, social enterprises, and youthful energy. Beller has become known in Paris for transforming postindustrial, gentrifying neighborhoods with ephemeral interventions and temporary designs. He expressed his vision to me as follows: "A city should be more flexible . . . A city should be alive, a city should evolve."[16] This emphasis on fast, mobile structures led Beller to start with cultural installations in festivals, at temporary music events, and later with travellers and Romani people. His work expresses the language of impermanence, with a dynamic and rebellious image that was a crucial part of the Yellow Bubble project in the early days. Indeed, he was often photographed and rolled out to publicize the humanitarian center. The *New Yorker* reflected on his style: "Dressed in black, with a glinting nose stud and a terse yet thoughtful manner, he suggests less a Libeskind or a Piano than someone who might chain himself to a fence at a work site."[17]

Beller's image certainly matched the municipal vision of this new humanitarian center, which had also been described as youthful, hip, and alternative.[18] As the city's architectural advisor explained, Mayor Hidalgo had insisted on "an extremely quick response, but one that was also well-thought out." She asked that the center have a "powerful aesthetic sensibility" and a "strong sense of humanity."[19] Beller was an ideal choice as architect because he was "outside the norms of the profession" and had already demonstrated an ability to work on quick, temporary projects. Indeed, temporality was always an important part of his brief, since the city had identified a site for the humanitarian center in an old SNCF railway depot, which was due to be turned into the Condorcet campus for the University of Paris-VIII a few years down the line. Mayor Hidalgo announced the project in May 2016, and Beller was brought on board in June. He had the summer to build the humanitarian center, and it opened for business in November, with a planned lifespan of just two years.

What did this architect create so quickly in the disused railway depot in the northern fringes of Paris? First of all, he divided the site into two distinct halves. At the back of the site he developed an empty, graffiti-ridden and decrepit two-story 10,000m warehouse, which became known as "la Halle," or "the Hall."[2] This was filled with eight "neighborhoods" of chipboard cabins, each with its own communal areas, shower block, canteen, and recreation area. The aim, as he described it to me, was to create a smaller and more

human scale through the use of rough new structures inside the industrial site. This arrangement would ensure that people did not feel industrially housed in huge rooms, "like a camp [of] rabbits, the one next to the other."[20] Beller also used scaffolding to elevate some of the rooms in the Hall, to create new stairs, and made certain that everything was removable (the building, after all, was due to be destroyed). He gave each neighborhood a distinctive color scheme, inviting artists to add sculpture and murals to the giant spaces. He ensured that each cabin only had four beds, which meant that, although the capacity of the hall could go up to four hundred people, inhabitants could live on a smaller, more human scale.

At the front of the site was the second half of Beller's plan: the inflatable structure known as "la Bulle," or "the Bubble." This was where the migrants and refugees were first received, and it was what most people saw from the street. The bubble was located on an old tarmac parking lot, surrounded by a fence, accessed through a pair of turnstiles. It was so large that it loomed over its surroundings. It contained a waiting area and a bank of shipping container offices that were stacked one on top of another where new arrivals were registered and introduced to the facilities. On entering the bubble, the first thing you noticed was the strangely yellow hue. The sunlight filtered through the plastic walls, and the constant sounds of chatting and squeaking generated bizarre acoustic effects as sound bounced off the irregular shape of the structure. In summer, the space was also marked by heat and odor. With no insulation it became unbearably hot, smelling of stale sweat from people who had been sleeping for weeks in the streets. Visually, the design of the interior was simple: around the edge there was seating, on the tarmac there were games, and right in the middle were the offices.

From outside, the bubble looked more impressive. It was tall, wide, colored in intersecting yellow and grey stripes, and highly visible next to the street. Indeed, its prominence, unusual shape, and bright color scheme were all reasons for its use by the architect and mayor. The speed with which this structure could be inflated and deflated was one reason for its selection, but, as the mayor's architectural advisor put it, the city also wanted a symbol, "a sign for the refugees" or, as Beller put it, "a signal in the neighborhood" to show the refugees and migrants where to go. The yellow bubble was certainly visible, so it ended up not just as a sign for the migrants but as a sign for the world. As the architectural advisor for Mayor Hidalgo told me, the bubble was meant to indicate that Paris would "take on the responsibility to welcome and host migrants in good conditions"; it was meant to be "a sign of hope, of joy," a sign to local Parisians who lived in this poor area of the city and needed the message that development and improvement was coming. As the architectural advisor put it, the structure was designed to allow the residents of nearby tower blocks to "look onto a landscape that was a little less bleak (*misérabiliste*) . . . An architecture that was a little less precarious, of a certain quality."[21]

Hidalgo's vision, in short, was to produce "a landmark, a signpost of humanity," which could be seen "from distant vistas in Paris."[22] Members of her administration proudly spoke of how they could see the flash of yellow from an airplane, from the Eurostar heading into Paris, or from the commuter lines connecting the city's suburbs. Even from the "other end of Paris, you can see its colors," boasted one member of the mayor's team.[23] This inflatable structure defined the whole project, and soon the center became known simply as "the bubble" or the "yellow bubble." Its image appeared as a stock photograph on general articles about migration in France, and its distinctive outline

of three intersecting curves could be found on printed and online materials for the center. They even appeared on a mayoral holiday card for the 18th *arrondissement*. Indeed, Mayor Hidalgo's two original requirements were that the site was designed with "goodwill and beauty," with "a lot of humanity and a lot of sensibility."[24] This signaling of humanitarian values became particularly important, because the actual activities inside the center, as we shall see, soon proved to be largely insufficient.

The structure of the Yellow Bubble was not actually created by Julien Beller himself: it was commissioned from the utopian artist and engineer Hans Walter Müller, who had been promoting inflatable architecture since the 1960s. This collaboration was consistent with Beller's whole approach. As he explained to me emphatically, "I'm not God . . . I'm not the architect who decides everything. I try to bring people together with all the skills to make a complex project." This, again, reflects his commitment to the ethos of "festivals, cultural events, artistic installations," filling spaces with temporary ideas made by many hands, not by his ego.[25] In this spirit, Beller reached out to Müller, who was already known to Beller from the festival circuit. Originally from Germany, but a long-term resident in France, Müller was in his eighties and had long been presenting these bubble-like structures as futuristic, ecological visions of a new form of life. This was an architecture that was lightweight, easy to move, quick to erect, and therefore a form of living that could be, in his words, both "alive and flexible."[26] Müller's vision matched Beller's plan for the site as well as attracting the mayor and her architectural advisor, who enthused about Müller's bubbles and their "cheerful exterior." The ephemerality, liveliness, and the "graphic aesthetic" of Müller's bubbles, they told me, could "speak to everyone" with their "bold colors and shapes." "When you enter into the bubble, it's pretty magical . . . It's like you're sheltered away from the world . . . like in a mother's womb."[27]

I soon learned that Müller had lived in one of these bubbles for nearly fifty years, so I decided to take a trip out to find him in the countryside south of Paris to visit him. His home was a tricky place to locate, situated near an old airfield in a pine forest a long way from the nearest public transport—a completely different environment from the postindustrial urbanism at Porte de la Chapelle. It was quiet, rural woodland. Müller's bubble home was situated under a canopy of broadleaf tress and was much smaller than the migrant center. Beneath the plastic hemisphere was not tarmac but a series of rooms buried into the soft earth: his kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom placed beneath wooden flooring. I entered through the airlock and sat there with a glass of red wine as Müller explained his lifelong enthusiasm for this form of living. Birdsong chirped outside the thin walls of the plastic as Müller told me that "inflatable structures, unlike traditional buildings, want to fly away." Most buildings are kept down by the weight of blocks and bricks pushing into the ground, he explained, but inflatable structures are kept up by a small motor that constantly pumps air inside them. This maintains a small difference in pressure, and, as Müller articulated it, gives the impression of weightlessness, a sense that "we leave gravity behind."[28]

To prevent the whole thing from becoming airborne, Müller's inflatable structures have to be lightly anchored around the periphery, and the bigger the bubble, the heavier the anchor to keep it grounded. In the vast humanitarian center, the inevitably large concrete blocks had been turned into seating around the edge. Meanwhile, the motor acted "like a heart that beats continuously"; it was the central element that keeps the whole thing up and alive. This feature gave his architecture an organic quality. "Our

bodies, too, are composed of fluids and tensions and pressures," he told me; the bubble, therefore, can be seen as a "form built by nature."[29] Müller viewed his inflatable structures as living organisms, speaking of how their pressure needed to be checked, just like human blood pressure needs to be checked to stay healthy. Müller got up from his seat to turn off the pump nearby, showing me how the structure would fail without its heartbeat. The gentle hum of the motor ceased and the sheath of his home above us slowly deflated, wilting and dying. The plastic creaked, folded, and fell gently down over our heads. Just as I began fearing for the bottle of wine, Müller turned the motor back on with a start. His house returned to health, its plastic membrane once again becoming taut and tight like skin. This was Müller's romantic vision, his utopia. An architectural form in tune with nature, in tune with him. It was light, ecological, and easy to remove.

How could this structure be appropriate for a migrant center at a busy intersection in northern Paris? Müller's vision was not practical; it was a spectacle. Its protective skin, its organic layer, its very lightness and fragility made it useful mainly as a symbol. When the birdsong was replaced by traffic, when the slow-paced life of a utopian designer was replaced by the screeches and chatter of a constantly fluctuating population of frustrated people, when the cool earthy hollow beneath the broadleaf trees was replaced by dark tarmac and the full power of the Parisian summer sun, the result was—as anyone who spent any time in the bubble could tell you—simply heat, noise, and smell. The manager of the site laughed indulgently when I asked about the design. "It's certainly original," he acknowledged; "it is very attractive aesthetically," but "the cold, the heat—the conditions aren't so comfortable for working inside . . . we're always immersed in noise, the *brouhaha* . . . That can be exhausting by the end of the day when you've welcomed 180 or 200 people, always in that noise."[30]

The center managers tried installing a sprinkler system to deal with the stifling heat, which produced fine sheens of water falling from perforated tubes, spraying around the plastic insides to lower the temperature. This, however, just turned a hot place into a hot and humid place: a tropical greenhouse filled with frustration, waiting, and the unwashed bodies of unwanted migrants. The bubble had been chosen as a symbol, something bright and recognizable, an object that indicated temporality, protection, and lightness of touch. But it also had to fulfill a very practical purpose, and here it ran into some difficulty. Müller had hoped that the bubble would "bring a little sunshine" and "a little joy" to those passing through. In the end, however, the architecture also had to negotiate not just with the heat and smell, but also with the tense, taut, precarious realities of migration politics in France.

Beyond a Bed for the Night

"When we began the operation," I was told at city hall, "we only had one priority: to shelter the refugees so that they could have some calm after their long and exhausting trip." The idea was to create a space where people could "eat, sleep, and have some administrative support," a place where people could receive an "unconditional welcome" in Paris. This notion was important to Mayor Hidalgo. "It's extremely important for the Mayor," one of her advisors told me, "that everyone, absolutely, without distinction, will be welcomed on this site."[31] This laudable ideal drove the whole project; but it was not long before political reality hit home. Despite the mayor's vision that each migrant must receive the basic necessities for a comfortable stay and become informed of their rights, the humanitarian center had to negotiate with politics and power. In particular, the city

had to partner with the state in order to share the cost of building and running the center and, once that relationship had been negotiated, the city then had to accept that the Ministry of the Interior did not agree on the idea of an unconditional welcome. The bubble therefore became a space where residents would enter into a contract and give something back. In return for their shelter, they had to visit the police, register their information, and enter the formal system of asylum.[32]

This obligation was, perhaps, inevitable. Humanitarianism is always involved in politics and always has political effects, despite the many efforts to maintain a distinctive, apolitical terrain. Despite the "classical" attempts to define the field as an impartial and compassionate response to universal human needs, humanitarianism is always bound up in conflicts about who gets access to a range of limited resources—a complication that has been especially well documented in the case of France.[33] The administration of this particular humanitarian center, therefore, was never going to be able to maintain an exclusively classical ideal. It would never remain just a "bed for the night." Like so many other humanitarian projects, it became embroiled in political disputes about immigration, political membership, and the distribution of resources. Rather than trying to simply focus on practical concerns such as time, money, and official commitment, it had to balance these practicalities with a conflict between its purported humanitarian values and the kind of politics it ended up having to represent.[34]

In the case of the Parisian Yellow Bubble, these dilemmas generated a series of important practical questions in the early days. How would the center be financed? Would the refugees and other migrants be permitted to stay as long as they wished? If they were ejected, where would they go? The problem with a "bed for the night" was the inevitable tension between short-term humanitarianism and long-term political realities. In the case of this center, hospitality had to be limited because the flow of new arrivals into the city was increasing, and the center provided only four hundred beds, which were immediately filled. If no one moved out of the center then nothing more could be done for the thousands of other migrants arriving in the city every month. On the other hand, if refugees and other migrants were only allowed to stay for a limited time—say, a week or two—something needed to happen to them afterwards. They could hardly be thrown back out on the streets, since that would leave them with no solution and barely better off than before; but the only other option was to turn people over to the state. This created a dilemma. An unconditional welcome could only ever be extended to a very small number of people, and it would leave many more people unassisted while addressing none of the underlying issues. A conditional welcome, on the other hand, would end up compromised by political realities, leaving humanitarianism a mere arm of the government.

This tension between short-term needs and long-term political projects is intrinsic to humanitarianism, and always leads to dilemmas. In this case, however, the stakes were so high precisely because the site was so visible. When it finally opened, the center had adopted the second option: people were only allowed to stay for a limited period before being processed by the state or discharged back to the streets. The resulting disconnection between humanitarian values and political realities became clear to all who worked there, and so the center became understood not so much as act of unconditional welcome as a "platform for dispatching" migrants to other places. The phrase was part of the official discourse, and I heard it regularly in the mayor's office: the aim of the center, I was told, was to dispatch people. A disillusioned member of staff on the ground, however, put things

more vividly: the place had become a "postbox."[35] Migrants were posted in, registered, and then carried off for delivery elsewhere. Any migrant who entered the revolving doors of the Yellow Bubble entered into a deal. First of all, they agreed to visit the local *préfecture de police*, where they would register and give up their fingerprints. Next, their fingerprints would be checked against the European database, leaving them subject to deportation if they had been registered elsewhere. Then, the migrant had to agree to be transferred out of the center after five to ten days, usually on a scheduled bus that left Paris to one of the many state-run "Reception and Orientation Centers" around France. Finally, they would be processed, and their status finally decided in conditions that were, to say the least, rather variable.[36] If they refused this process, they were ejected from the center.

I spent some days observing the process of arrival and registration in the bubble, where this contract was verbally explained—often very quickly. As the manager of the bubble told me, "When people arrive they sign the contract and they commit to respecting the different appointments we're going to organize." This included the appointment with the police and the appointment to be transferred out of the center on a bus after a period of five to ten days. "If the person doesn't present themselves for these administrative appointments," he went on, "they've broken the contract," and they are ejected from the center. To use the formal, administrative language, they are "APEC-ed: given a notice entitled "*arrêt de prise en charge*." This phrase essentially conveys: "We're obliged to mark the end of our care," and they are put back on the streets with the telephone number of a homeless service.[37]

Legal activists condemned this practice on grounds that the deal was not clear at the beginning, that in some sense it was a forced choice. A simple, visual equation appeared on posters throughout the rooms and halls, its brutal clarity making any question of misinterpretation impossible. It was an image of a fingerprint printed next to the image of a bed, with a simple "=" sign between them. The message was clear: biometric data was required if you wanted shelter. From the perspective of the manager, this deal was necessary to keep the system functioning: "If you don't respect the process," he told me, "there's a grain of sand in the gears. That means that everything else gets jammed and we can no longer welcome new people."[38] The center, in other words, relied on people moving smoothly through the "sorting and dispatching process," or the offer of a bed could no longer be made to new people. This was a long way from Hidalgo's vision of unconditional hospitality: refugees and other migrants had to surrender to the system that had so often alienated them, and if they wished to take up the offer of humanitarian assistance, they had to be registered and processed by the state.

This was how the humanitarian center became a postbox. It involved placing people temporarily in one place before they were sent off somewhere else. The legal activists I spoke to were quite clear that this "sorting and dispatching" feature was closely related to the other key purpose of the bubble: the political imperative to get migrants off the streets of Paris. This, of course, was not conspiracy or speculation: it was the whole aim of the center itself. As Mayor Hidalgo had put it at the very beginning of the project, the idea was to replace the terrible living conditions on the streets with something more dignified and humane.[39] It would be naïve, however, to suppose that this was only in the interests of migrants. Clearing camps in Parisian streets, after all, was a big concern for ordinary voters. As the architect of the center, Julien Beller, put it when we spoke about the site, the project is "not only humanitarian; it's also [about] taking care of the city, security problems, and hygiene problems."[40]

The informal camps on the streets of Paris were perceived as unhygienic and unsafe, they were seen as an obstacle and an eyesore. Many voters felt threatened by their presence, and there was also a sense of embarrassment that Paris, this cradle of Western culture and civilization, could not find a way to manage the very large and visible population of homeless migrants on the streets.[41]

The center, therefore, was not just a benign act of care and control; it served the state's agenda and made the forcible clearing of street camps more palatable. President Hollande had instigated a "zero tolerance" policy on informal camps after the growth of the Calais "Jungle," which led the police to disperse and destroy new settlements in an increasingly regular, violent, and aggressive manner. Accusations of brutality were common. The police were blamed for driving people into the countryside, leaving them without possessions, stealing blankets in the middle of winter, and arriving in the dead of night to bulldoze any tents and possessions on the streets. Early one morning, I went to a large street camp near Porte de la Chapelle to witness a rumored clearance, and although I was blocked from witnessing the actual evacuation I managed to follow the aftermath: teams of policemen and refuse workers in hazmat suits working their way through the detritus. It was a clear, crisp summer dawn, and the roads were strangely quiet. Hundreds of people had made their homes here under bridges, slip roads, and underpasses, but now they had been forced out, their poignant remnants collected with rubber gloves and scissor tongs. Cheap tents, identification documents, sleeping bags, shoes, clothes, bags of groceries, and ingeniously constructed cardboard shelters were all picked up as though they were dangerous and taken to the dump. I heard later from many people subjected to forced removals that the humanitarian center made police actions more acceptable. It enabled the government to say to migrants: You have a place to go now. You have no right to be here on the streets. You are being provided for by the city.

A legal activist I spoke to made this point particularly clearly when she told me that the center "legitimizes violence toward refugees." "Before the creation of the center," she said, "there were already a lot of roundups, arrests, checks, tear-gassing by the police . . . [But] since the opening of this center we have seen police repression become more and more significant." The center, she continued, "is a good opportunity to say: now there is a place where you can be protected. If you are not there, you have no right to stay outside . . . One of the functions of the camp is to sort and to control, but also to disperse."[42] This under-standing had echoes of Haussmann's cleansing of Paris in the 1850s and 1860s, and was a point also underlined by an architectural critic I interviewed, who sketched out how the design itself contributed to this system. The mechanisms for clearing the streets, he said, are part and parcel of the Yellow Bubble. "The space we are discussing is not solely the space that is marked on the map as being the humanitarian center," he said. It is "the bubble, the building, the barbed wire, the barriers, the four and a half kilometers of fences in the City of Paris, the rocks that are put around the center to prevent people from setting up there, the barbed wire to control the center . . . all of that is a whole." This assemblage of objects, he told me, were the *mise-en-scène*: the arrangement of props, scenery, backdrops, images around which the theatre of clearance and control was enacted. The design of the humani-tarian center was crucial, as architecture, symbolism, and politics were all intimately fused.[43]

As the bubble went up, the tents came down. The center created an authorized version of encampment, which made informal street camps unacceptable. It replaced eyesores under metro tracks with the pretty symbolism of the bubble itself. In an important way,

the whole design mediated this tension, its taut and colorful plastic becoming a symbolic disguise for a deeply political project. Ironically, this highly visible statement of benevolent aims actually ended up making the migrants in Paris *less* visible: ordinary Parisians would find fewer informal camps on their streets as migrants were being sorted and dispatched elsewhere. The bubble may have visually communicated the protective space of the mother's womb, but in the early mornings another side of the intervention could be seen. When most citizens of Paris were at home, in their beds, the police embarked upon a set of violent clearances that were hiding behind an image of humanitarian intention. Rendering migrants invisible may not have been the architect's explicit intention, but it did become the effect. This design, in the end, did not just proclaim humanitarian intentions, it also disguised some of the more nakedly coercive features of the site as a whole.

Nowhere was this force clearer than in the fence that surrounded the humanitarian center. A tall, chain-link barrier had been turned into a canvas at the request of Julien Beller, when a pair of visual designers wove colorful adhesive insulating tape through the wire. The artists, known as *Les Soeurs Chevalme*, transformed the fence into a pleasant, joyful pattern meant to resemble Islamic latticework or the bright geometric patterns on a mosque. It was a simple, cheap, and clever intervention that was meant to produce, in Beller's words, something less "carceral." The aim was to make the center more secure and to permeate it with an artistic sensibility. The mayor's architectural advisor explained how this feature tied into her vision for the center as a whole: "This fencing was really something very, very important for us," she said. "Once again, we wanted to approach this in a Parisian manner, signaling that, yes, this is a fence, but it can be a kindly (*bienveillant*) fence . . . a frame for an artistic intervention."[44]

The fence was part of the *mise-en-scène*, an assemblage of objects that knitted symbolisms of care with more controlling intent, a feature in a landscape of "hostile urban design," or "defensive architecture," that prevents people from finding an informal bed on the streets of Paris.[45] The most common examples of defensive architecture are park benches designed to disrupt sleeping bodies, or the subtle use of spiky surfaces under sheltered areas of the pavement. In French, this is known as "bristling" the city streets (*se hérisser*). Other examples existed around the humanitarian center, and the need for such "bristling" became particularly intense after the limited capacity of the bubble led to long queues outside, weeks of waiting, and camps proliferating in the neighborhood. One morning, for example, a collection of "anti-migrant boulders" appeared on a prominent traffic island to stop migrants from sleeping rough. They were spaced precisely so that a sleeping body could not fit between them. The boulders were subtler than the bristles— they aspired to be humanitarian architecture, not just defensive architecture—but they had a similar effect. Beller was asked to turn them into another artistic intervention, but this time he refused. As he recalled, "I said 'no, *please*, I have enough work inside; I won't decorate your stones to say they are nice stones.'" He admitted that he had been "a bit uncomfortable" with the work on the fences, and this was one step too far.[46]

Hostile architecture does not stand in simple contradistinction to the symbolic hospitality of the bubble. The two are closely related, a continuum of forms. As many anthropologists have pointed out, hostility and hospitality are locked in a perpetually close embrace: a kernel of hostility, in other words, exists in every hospitable encounter.[47] Acts of welcome help regulate the spaces guests can and cannot inhabit, shaping the behavior they can and cannot display.[48] This idea has crossed over to the discussion of

migration, whereby receiving societies act as hosts, controlling as well as welcoming their guests and making them comply with numerous rules.[49] The Janus face of hospitality was certainly on display at the Paris humanitarian center, and many of my interviewees described how it provided a welcome for migrants, while also forcing them into a hostile political processing system. This coexistence of hospitality and hostility was evident to those working in the center, but less obvious when the architecture pushed any tension beneath the surface. The center had been built to be fast and symbolic, proclaiming benevolence without acknowledging politics, but it showed only one side of the dyad of hospitality: revealing beauty without recognizing the pain.

The Politics of Humanitarian Architecture

Over the last two decades, many scholars have noticed a decline in the ability of humanitarians to make a real and lasting impact in many spheres of life, with a concomitant rise in doctrines that emphasize self-help through entrepreneurship and resilience.[50] Small-scale humanitarian designs often reflect this new climate, indicating a neoliberal move away from top-down assistance and toward the idea that people should help themselves.[51] In this context, humanitarian *performances* have become more and more important.[52] As professional aid workers become squeezed by political encroachments and the rise of the private sector, many humanitarian programs, in response, have become focused on theatricality and aesthetics.[53]

The case of the Yellow Bubble should be seen in this context. It speaks to the difficulty of acting effectively, to the struggle for classical principles in a politically hostile world. This context is often illuminated through the dilemma of the "camp doctor": a physician who has to work in a highly political and coercive environment such as a detention center, internment camp, or some other location where people are neglected, confined, mistreated, and transported against their will. Here, the camp doctor's role is to heal people, treating the worst cases of suffering, but they cannot intervene to address the root causes of that suffering. Their role is to provide care in clinics, but they ultimately have to release people back into to situations of mistreatment and coercion. The dilemma is not just that the camp doctor is powerless to change the structures of oppression, but that they end up serving these structures as well. In the end, the camp doctor makes the camp somehow more acceptable, providing it with a crucial form of legitimacy.[54]

Many instances of humanitarian architecture can be seen in a similar way. Their aesthetics serve to disguise politics and hide coercion. Using bright, optimistic designs, they add a veneer of humanitarian legitimacy to repressive situations. In the case of the Yellow Bubble, many of the people I interviewed made this point in particularly colorful language. "For the refugees I think it's a big fucking lie," one activist told me. "This looks like the entrance to Disneyland," he continued; but the reality is very different. It was ironic, he said, that this "signpost of humanity," this hyper-visible symbol, was actually making the complexity and violence of the issue far *less* visible.[55] A legal activist agreed, and expressed frustration at the way the design had attracted so much attention from the Parisian middle classes. "Frankly, it does not interest me at all whether it is beautiful," she told me. "What counts is sheltering people, and that is not at all what is being done."[56]

Like the "camp doctor," the "camp architect" must negotiate this dilemma. Architecture can succeed in making a camp more pleasant and colorful, and this is certainly important. Despite the legal activist's assertion that it does not interest them whether a

camp is beautiful, it would certainly be of concern if the camp was actively ugly. Imagine the critical reaction if a camp only provided a grim, gray concrete environment![57] Although architecture can improve spaces such as refugee camps, there is always a suspicion that such interventions are a form of window dressing. There is a danger that architecture ends up contributing to—rather than challenging—underlying systems of power. Esther Charlesworth once described humanitarian architecture as a "healing gesture," but we need to remember that it can be a harming gesture as well.[58] Indeed, the Yellow Bubble shows how humanitarian architecture can communicate compassion while simultaneously facilitating control, revealing a far darker side to the new world of benevolent large-scale design.

On March 31, 2018, the Yellow Bubble center finally closed. The structure was deflated and packed away, and the railway yard where it had been located was prepared for demolition.[59] Visitors walking around the site could still find remnants of this complex technology of visibility, as the colorful murals still flashed on the walls of the remaining buildings, and the remnants of other artworks could be seen illuminated by spring sunshine beyond the fence. Some parts, however, had started to decay. The delicately woven strips of insulating tape that had been formed into Islamic patterns around the fence were turning to shreds. They had been gradually been picked away by bored fingers over many months, and the ends of the tape now fluttered in the breeze. Within weeks another huge street camp was evacuated and destroyed at nearby Porte de la Villette, which brought the number of clearances to thirty-five in the space of just two and a half years. The underlying system of managing migration, therefore, continued. The network of more explicitly hostile architecture remained intact. The "kindly" fence had become just another fence, serving to block a new area of the city from a population who had become quite familiar with attempts to restrict their access, control their movements, and send them away from the Parisian streets.

NOTES

1. Maryline Baumard, "Des villes refuges pour migrants," *Le Monde*, June 20, 2016. Maryline Baumard, "Paris aura un camp humanitaire pour accueillir les réfugiés," *Le Monde*, May 31, 2016. Drawing attention to Paris's history as a beacon of the Enlightenment, the deputy mayor for urban planning said to me: "If we cannot organize a decent way of welcoming these people, well, where are our values?"

2. Didier Fassin, "Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life," *Public Culture* 19, no. 1 (2007): 499–520; Peter Redfield, *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin, eds., *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). For some earlier examples, see Alex De Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997); Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Mark Duffield, "The Symphony of the Damned: Racial Discourse, Complex Political Emergencies and Humanitarian Aid," *Disasters* 20, no. 3 (September 1996): 173–93.

3. Julia Elyachar, "Next Practices: Knowledge, Infrastructure, and Public Goods at the Bottom of the Pyramid," *Public Culture* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 109–29; Peter Redfield, "Bioexpectations: Life Technologies as Humanitarian Goods," *Public Culture* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 157–84; Peter Redfield, "Fluid Technologies: The Bush Pump, the Lifestraw® and Microworlds of Humanitarian Design," *Social Studies of Science* 46, no. 2 (April 2016): 159–83; Tom Scott-Smith, "Sticky Technologies: Plumpy'nut®, Emergency Feeding and the Viscosity of Humanitarian Design," *Social Studies of Science* 48, no. 1 (February 2018): 3–24; Stephen Collier, Jamie Cross, Peter Redfield, and Alice Street, "Little Development Devices/Humanitarian Goods," *Limn* 9 (2017); Jamie Cross and Alice Street, "Anthropology at the Bottom of the Pyramid," *Anthropology Today* 25, no. 4 (August 2009): 4–9.

4. The main exception to this is the extensive academic literature on the design of refugee camps. Such literature, however, rarely focuses on the role of architecture, primarily because practicing architects are rarely

involved. For more on the modernist design of refugee camps, see Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Kirsten McConnachie, "Camps of Containment: A Genealogy of the Refugee Camp," *Humanity* 7, no. 3 (Winter 2016): 397–412.

5. David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (London: Vintage, 2002).

6. Ibid., 1.

7. For more on Rieffian principles of "classical" humanitarianism, see Hugo Slim, "Relief Agencies and Moral Standing in War: Principles of Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Solidarity," *Development in Practice* 7, no. 4 (1997): 342–52; Thomas Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action," *Ethics & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (March 1999): 1–22; Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Redfield, *Life in Crisis*.

8. Bridgette Meinhold, *Urgent Architecture: 40 Sustainable Housing Solutions for a Changing World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013); Esther Charlesworth, *Humanitarian Architecture: 15 Stories of Architects Working after Disaster* (London: Routledge, 2014); Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr, eds., *Design Like You Give a Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

9. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1945), 15.

10. In a more specific sense as well, architecture has long been a social discipline, from the Peabody estates of nineteenth-century London, to the notion of *Existenzminimum* in Weimar Germany, right back to the public buildings of Athens and Rome. Even when architects are building for elite clients, the profession has to negotiate with social constraints and the shape of the wider urban environment. One might note as a response, however, the distinct *lack* of engagement with the social needs of dwellers by some modernist architects, as discussed extensively by James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 103–46.

11. See in particular Ian Davis, "Emergency Shelter," *Disasters* 1, no. 1 (1977): 23–39; Ian Davis, *Shelter after Disaster* (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1978); Ian Davis, "What Have We Learned from 40 Years' Experience of Disaster Shelter?" *Environmental Hazards* 10, no. 3–4 (2011): 193–212.

12. Tom Scott-Smith, "Beyond the Boxes: Refugee Shelter and the Humanitarian Politics of Life," *American Ethnologist* 46, no. 4 (November 2019): 509–21.

13. Alejandro Aravena, *Reporting from the Front: Biennale Architettura 2016* (Venice: Marsilio, 2016), 3.

14. Ibid., 3–4.

15. Sébastien Thièry, Interview in Paris, May 30, 2017.

16. Julien Beller, Interview in Saint-Denis, May 31, 2017.

17. Lauren Collins, "Paris's First Official Refugee Shelter," *New Yorker*, November 7, 2016.

18. Jean-Laurent Cassely, "Le Paris d'Anne Hidalgo: Les Bobos, C'est Fini, Voici Les Sosos," *Slate France*, June 28, 2013.

19. Michèle Zaoui, Interview in Paris, May 29, 2017.

20. Julien Beller, Interview in Saint-Denis, May 31, 2017.

21. Michèle Zaoui, Interview in Paris, May 29, 2017.

22. Michèle Zaoui, Interview in Paris, May 29, 2017.

23. Jean-Louis Missika, Interview in Paris, May 29, 2017.

24. Michèle Zaoui, Interview in Paris, May 29, 2017.

25. Julien Beller, Interview in Saint-Denis, May 31, 2017.

26. Marc Dessauce, *The Inflatable Moment: Pneumatics and Protest in 1968* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

27. Michèle Zaoui, Interview in Paris, 29 May, 2017.

28. Hans-Walter Müller, Interview in La Ferté-Alais, May 11, 2017.

29. Hans-Walter Müller, Interview in La Ferté-Alais, May 11, 2017.

30. Matthieu Mirta, Interview in Paris, June 1, 2017.

31. Michèle Zaoui, Interview in Paris, May 29, 2017.

32. Maryline Baumard, "Camp humanitaire: l'Etat et Paris en quête de compromis," *Le Monde*, June 10, 2016. This tension between the city and the state is an interesting part of this example. Much of the literature on humanitarianism is rather state-centric, but the recent expansion in "Cities of Sanctuary," and the contrasting attitude of mayors such as Hidalgo, can illuminate the many fissures within humanitarian politics. For another example, see Jonathan Darling, "A City of Sanctuary: The Relational Re-Imagining of Sheffield's Asylum Politics," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35, no. 1 (January 2010): 125–40.

33. Didier Fassin, "Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France," *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (August 2005): 362–87; Didier Fassin, "The Precarious Truth of Asylum," *Public Culture* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 39–63; Miriam Ticktin, "Where Ethics and Politics Meet: The Violence of Humanitarianism in France," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (February 2006): 33–49; Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). For a classic articulation of the issue, see Weiss, "Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action."

34. Tom Scott-Smith, "Humanitarian Dilemmas in a Mobile World," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2016): 1–21.

35. Antoine Bazin, Interview in Paris, June 1, 2017.

36. Défenseur des Droits, *Rapport d'observation: Démantèlement des campements et prise en charge des exilés* (Paris: Défenseur des Droits, 2016); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *L'experience des centres d'accueil en france* (Paris: UNHCR, 2017).

37. Matthieu Mirta, Interview in Paris, June 1, 2017.

38. Matthieu Mirta, Interview in Paris, June 1, 2017.

39. Maryline Baumard, "Paris aura un camp humanitaire pour accueillir les réfugiés," *Le Monde*, May 31, 2016.

40. Julien Beller, Interview in Saint-Denis, May 31, 2017.

41. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article noted, this made the example "not about architecture, but also urban planning, since it involves an effort to manage shelter and combat the formation of informal settlement."

42. Caroline Maillary, Interview in Paris, May 30, 2017.

43. Haussmann's cleansing of Paris, interestingly, was also about managing migrants—in that case, migrants fleeing rural poverty from the countryside. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for raising this historical parallel.

44. Michèle Zaoui, Interview in Paris, May 29, 2017.

45. Alex Andreou, "Anti-Homeless Spikes: 'Sleeping Rough Opened My Eyes to the City's Barbed Cruelty,'" *Guardian*, February 18, 2015; Naomi Smith and Peter Walters, "Desire Lines and Defensive Architecture in Modern Urban Environments," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 13 (October 2018): 2980–95.

46. Julien Beller, Interview in Saint-Denis, May 31, 2017.

47. Matei Candea and Giovanni Da Col, "The Return to Hospitality," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. s1 (June 2012): S1–S19.

48. Michael Herzfeld, "'As in Your Own House': Hospitality, Ethnography, and the Stereotype of Mediterranean Society," in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David Gilmore (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 75–89; Andrew Shryock, "The New Jordanian Hospitality: House, Host, and Guest in the Culture of Public Display," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 1 (January 2004): 35–62.

49. Naor Ben-Yehoyada, "'Follow Me, and I Will Make You Fishers of Men': The Moral and Political Scales of Migration in the Central Mediterranean," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22, no. 1 (March 2016): 183–202; Avril Bell, "Being 'at Home' in the Nation: Hospitality and Sovereignty in Talk About Immigration," *Ethnicities* 10, no. 2 (June 2010): 236–56; Katerina Rozakou, "The Biopolitics of Hospitality in Greece: Humanitarianism and the Management of Refugees." *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 3 (August 2012): 562–77.

50. Mark Duffield, "Challenging Environments: Danger, Resilience and the Aid Industry," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 5 (October 2012): 475–92; Tom Scott-Smith, "Paradoxes of Resilience: A Review of the World Disasters Report 2016," *Development and Change* 49, no. 2 (March 2018): 662–77.

51. Redfield, "Bioexpectations"; Redfield, "Fluid Technologies."

52. James Thompson, *Humanitarian Performance: From Disaster Tragedies to Spectacles of War* (London: Seagull Books, 2013).

53. Lilie Chouliaraki, "The Theatricality of Humanitarianism: A Critique of Celebrity Advocacy," *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2012): 1–21; Benedikt Korf, "Antinomies of Generosity: Moral Geographies and Post-Tsunami Aid in Southeast Asia," *Geoforum* 38, no. 2 (March 2007): 366–78. For more on innovation, see Tom Scott-Smith, "Humanitarian Neophilia: The 'Innovation Turn' and Its Implications," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 12 (2016): 2229–51.

54. For an example of this situation, see Ioanna Kotsioni, "Detention of Migrants and Asylum-Seekers: The Challenge for Humanitarian Actors," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 2016): 41–55.

55. Antoine Bazin, Interview in Paris, June 1, 2017.

56. The worst thing about this "designer solution," she continued, is the way that it "contributes to the idea that soon we will be able to put the bubble away because people will stop arriving . . . The City Hall created this camp to hide the misery, and that is what this camp serves to do. It hides the misery." Caroline Maillary, Interview in Paris, May 30, 2017.

57. I am very grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for this perceptive point. The legal activist was dismissing beauty for functionality, but it is also very common for activists to highlight aesthetic violations and poor design as an affront to human dignity. This is part of what motivates humanitarian architects in the first place.

58. Charlesworth, *Humanitarian Architecture*, 6.

59. Maryline Baumard, "Le centre humanitaire pour migrants, une occasion manquée pour Anne Hidalgo," *Le Monde*, April 3, 2018.