

Refugee Camps or Ideal Cities in Dust and Dirt

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Refugee camps are often perceived of as representing extraterritorial zones and tied into a global network of enclaves and *non lieux*, or “non-places” (Marc Augé) that are literally dislocated and disconnected from any immediate context. Their precise location seems to be of little concern. This view, which has gained a certain prominence within architectural discourse and cultural studies, ignores the social, legal, and economic interrelations that exist on the ground and the immediate physical context that refugee camps are located within. It is also blind, firstly, to the problems that are triggered on a political or developmental level, and, secondly, it is blind to these relationships that are implicated in the instrumentalization of refugee camps and the dilemmas of humanitarian aid, ultimately indicating the responsibilities of the planners. Common consensus is that refugee camps should be temporary. Preferably, refugees should be allowed to return to their towns, villages, and homes once the situation no longer presents a danger. Normally, or ideally, the emergency aid delivered to refugee camps is of a completely different nature to the developmental aid delivered in situations of economic plight, urban slum dwelling or reconstruction after disaster. While the latter aims at improving living conditions by upgrading and stabilizing impoverished neighborhoods, for example, the former aims at providing security and immediate care of the most urgent needs, and predominantly at saving lives – again, the emphasis here is on this aid being of a temporary nature. As poverty and a low level of development often characterize the context in which conflicts unfold – and refugee tragedies take place – by necessity, aid for refugees has an impact on non-refugee populations as well as on local culture, local infrastructure, and the whole strata of political life.

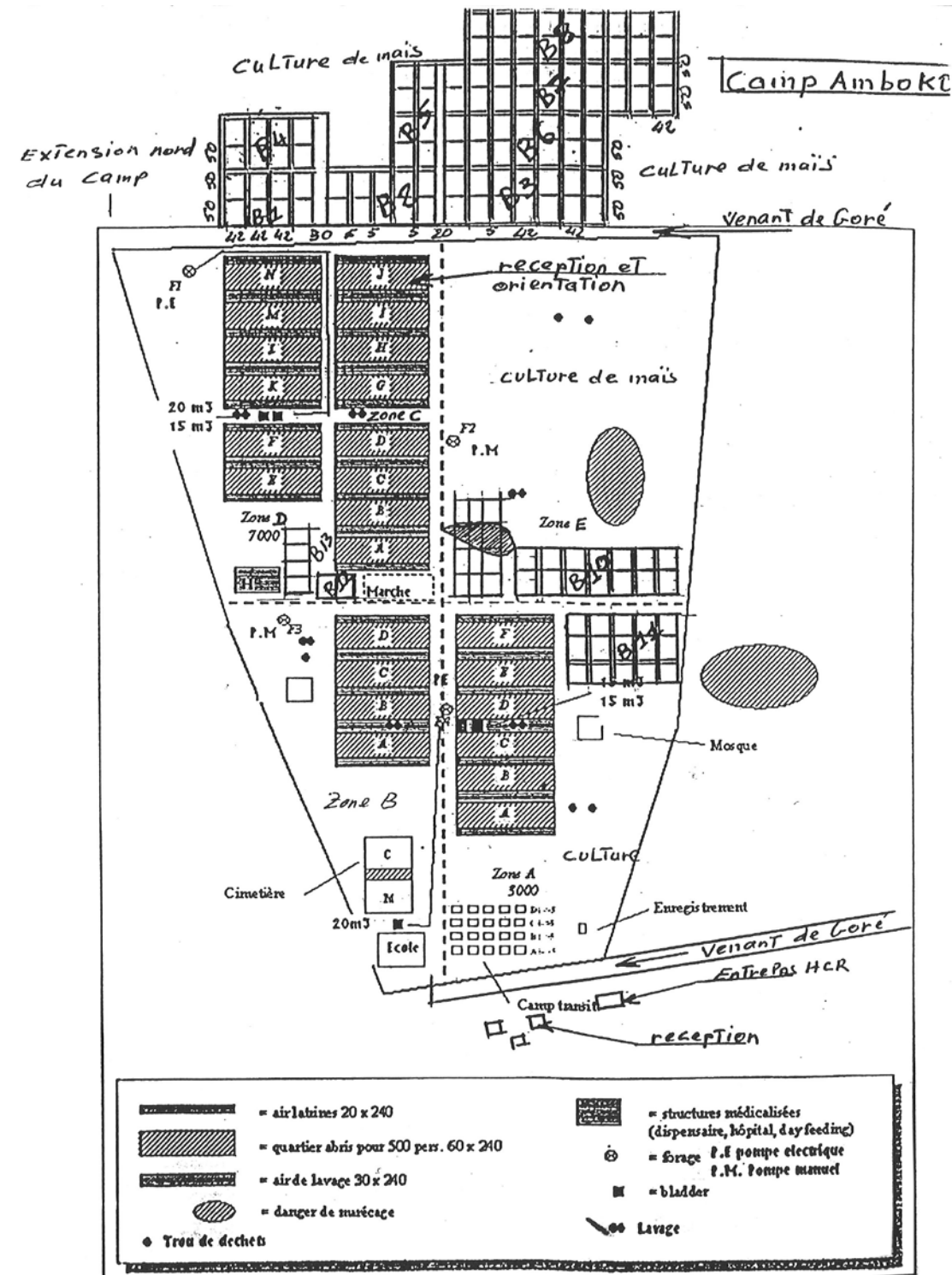


Fig. 1: Plan of refugee camp Amboko, southern Chad, with northern extension added by hand; (c) UNHCR.