Economies of Humanitarian Architecture

Abstract: Humanitarian organizations increasingly facilitate the global transmission of architectural services. French and Canadian architects are amongst those contributing expertise in emergency humanitarian contexts but the contribution can be in very different registers. Specifically, postcolonial dimensions of humanitarian architectural practice have forced some architects to wrangle with new professional and personal subjectivities. Contributing their know-how to humanitarian projects involving refugees has helped some architects highlight an apparent disconnect between longstanding norms and standards of the profession on the one hand and, on the other hand, a more personal ethic broadly shaped by a postcolonial consciousness. Making extensive use of design ethnography, the paper is used to compare two forms of humanitarian architectural practice in, respectively, France and Québec. These forms signal how the postcolonial changes notions of what it means and can mean to be ethical in architecture as profession. Codification of a nascent postcolonial ethic in Québec's architecture profession in particular has not appeared in formal documents aligned with the architect’s professional and legal responsibility. Instead, this codification is embodied in the everyday of humanitarian architectural practice as architects do their bit to address current migration crises.