

An innovative building technique gives hope to Syrian refugees in Jordan

Hasan fled the violence in Syria in 2013. Now he is working with Oxfam as a builder. His newfound passion for the SuperAdobe method gives him hope in one day returning to Syria and building similar homes.



Hasan Al Tarsheh, shapes Za'atari's future by working in the SuperAdobe project with Oxfam. Photo: Nesma Nsour/Oxfam

In early 2013, Hasan fled the war in Syria with his wife and son, seeking safety and shelter in Jordan. When they first arrived, people still lived in tents and these were slowly being replaced by more sturdy caravans made of prefabricated metal sheets.

Back in Syria, Hasan had worked with mud, bricks, cement and carpentry. His experience in construction began at the age of 12 when he had to drop out of school to work and help support the family.

His knowledge of construction often helps him find unique solutions to problems in the built environment. For instance, Hasan said about Za'atari, "When we came here, everyone used to live in tents and the people were just starting to receive caravans, and the bathrooms were far from the caravans. My father and mother were old and we had to take them to the bathroom almost every hour."

To make life easier for his parents and for himself, Hasan started to construct an outhouse out of available scrap materials so that his parents could access a bathroom more easily. Adapting shelters in such a way is not allowed by camp authorities, but in this instance it was, right up until permanent facilities were built.

In 2017, Hasan started working in Oxfam's SuperAdobe construction project, applying a creative building approach that uses freely available materials (sandbags and barbed wires), to construct buildings that remain cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

"Jordanians in the nearby communities asked us if it is possible for us to build houses outside of the camp. If there was ever the possibility, it would be amazing," Hasan said.

"Hopefully when we get back to Syria we'll build like this. It's cheap and the material is available anywhere. We were always worried about going back to Syria, how we won't own anything. Now I can build a house until I'm able to find a place to live in. Anyone who worked in this project can now build this fast shelter themselves."

The vast majority of refugees surveyed in Jordan, want nothing more than to return home. Yet Syria is neither safe or ready for large-scale returns of refugees. Much of the country's civilian infrastructure – schools, hospitals and water supplies – has been damaged and reduced to rubble.

Should there come a time when it is safe to return to Syria in safety and dignity, refugees trained in SuperAdobe construction can be self-reliant in building a new home.