Container life in post-earthquake Croatia

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Abstract: This article focuses on experiences of people in the Banija region and specifically the town of Petrinja, Croatia, after an earthquake hit the area in December 2020. It presents their reflections on being confined to "container homes" in three different situations: living in container settlements on the outskirts of town; spending time in a container shopping center; and finding shelter in containers adjacent to destroyed houses. The study shows that temporary container housing frequently turned into permanent living and working solutions during the three years of post-earthquake reconstruction. It also argues the importance of acknowledging that the sense of isolation in disaster-affected areas and the loss of potential for renovation and development do not merely arise from "container life" but reveal the longer-run "polycrisis" involved.

Keywords: Banija, containers, crisis, Croatia, earthquake, isolation, natural disaster, Petrinja

The term "container" has various connotations that evoke different mental images: from container megaships transporting thousands of tons of goods across the ocean to containers used for waste disposal in landfills. Containers are also livable and can be used as temporary shelters and emergency housing in refugee camps. Many people wish to spend their vacations in luxurious containers—so-called "modular homes." These images paint containers as ambivalent objects that display "structural processes beyond the control of the individual" (Leivestad and Markkula 2021: 3) and reveal relationships between individuals, territory, political authority, and capital (Dzenovska and Knight 2020). This article presents a part of the reality of these images and draws on participatory ethnographic research in local communities of the Croation region of Banija, which have been struggling in the aftermath of the 2020 earthquake. Based on the narratives of people living in containers for prolonged periods of time, it introduces the concept of "container life" as an ambiguous phenomenon that is often presented as a universal solution to crises but also brings many hidden and problematic implications.

According to Picker and Pasquetti (2015), container settlements are unique social, historical and political analytical phenomena that reveal temporal and spatial contexts rooted in the expression of power. These authors focus on different settlements, such as refugee and homeless camps, which are distinguished by four analytical domains: (1) permanent temporariness; (2) spatial positioning of national, racial, and ethnic categories; (3) construction of

borders within and beyond space; and (4) struggle over the meaning of rights and citizenship faced by citizens, displaced persons, refugees, illegal migrants, asylum seekers, and others (e.g., Fontanari 2015; Lebuhn 2013; Herring and Lutz 2015). Malkki (2002) similarly claims that container settlements, along with transit centers, reception centers, prisons, labor camps, ghettos, and other similar constructions are part of the "standard equipment" of modern sociopolitical landscapes, as they are usually erected in liminal, marginal, or isolated spaces for managing "unwanted people." However, the primary feature of a container camp or settlement is its simple and quick construction and organization, as well as its temporary use (Katz 2015; Pasquetti 2015). Paradoxically, despite their origins, container settlements can become permanent formations that aim to displace people, restrict their freedom of movement, and confine them. Container settlements threaten to reduce their inhabitants to abstractions deprived of subjectivity and uniqueness because, much like prisons and ghettos, they forcibly group people and bind them to a "chronic" sociospatial order in which isolation is seen as a necessary response to an allegedly threatening disorder or crisis (e.g., Agier 2002; Bauman 2002; Malkki 2002; Sigona 2014).

The search for a safe space in times of crisis is a central theme of anthropological research, with notions of home and vulnerability of (and in) a private space pointing to the devastating context of natural disasters, pandemics, or migrations (e.g., Bonfanti et al. 2022). On the other hand, Leivestad and Markkula (2021) critically reflect on the way container economies react in times of "crisis." Detailed case studies, for example on container life or economy, emphasize the importance of different theoretical and ethnographic foci (e.g., Grønseth and Thorshaug 2022; Lancione 2020). Based on descriptions and interpretations of different experiences of migration or homelessness, Lancione (2020) and Massa (2022) developed an anthropological understanding of "homemaking" as a coping and resilience strategy. This strategy is triggered by the fundamental human effort toward creating one's own home in a safe living space: People in need can redefine and manage their use of space while highlighting issues with mobility that violate basic social rights (Bonfanti et al. 2022; Lancione 2020).

Several studies (e.g., Leivestad and Markkula 2021) have discussed how container homes move and mediate commodities between the concrete and the abstract, showing that containers are more than just "objects" but also abstract units of value that "speak" to the larger systems in which they operate, activating different levels of meaning as they do so (Leivestad 2021). In addition, other studies have demonstrated how containers mediate and influence people's lives and aspirations for the future at the everyday and local levels by shaping the destinies of communities and spaces (Leivestad and Markkula 2021). Lacking, however, are studies that would include descriptions of precarious accommodation in container homes following any kind of disaster. Critical comparisons and analytical connections are crucial for highlighting similarities or, more importantly, differences between container settlements and other temporary disaster relief measures, most notably camps, but also hotels or other resettlement and post-disaster shelters. Furthermore, there is an analytical void when it comes to better understanding container settlements, beyond mere assumptions about passivity, victimization, and top-down management of everyday life (see e.g., Bauman 2002; Lancione 2020; Malkki 2002). Several authors have taken a critical look at camps in the past (Brković 2018), especially refugee camps (Agier 2002) and urban underground spaces (Lancione 2020) from an urban anthropological perspective and ask a fundamental question: Can a refugee camp, a container settlement, or an urban underground space become a living space or, politically speaking, a *polis* (Picker and Pasquetti 2015)?

The aim of this study is to analyze the strategies for the installation of containers in the private and public space of a Croatian town devastated by a natural disaster and to show how

the residents deal with the newly placed objects that become homes or parts of local infrastructure. In this context, containers can be seen as intermediate or liminal places for those who need to find new homes, but also as a model for coping with global insecurities and local crises (Dzenovska 2018), such as the earthquake that shook a part of Croatia in 2020. After the earthquake, the Croatian state offered people who had lost their homes in the earthquake the option of moving into state properties or container settlements (see figure 1). Several such settlements were built in the cities of Sisak, Petrinja, and Glina, and even more containers were placed next to demolished or damaged family homes. At the time of our research, from 2022 to 2023, approximately fifteen hundred people in the area were still living in containers. Built on the outskirts of rundown cities, they highlight the persisting crisis and, at the same time, establish containers as a relevant solution for coping with it. Moreover, being standardized in shape and size, simple, adaptable, efficient, and profitable, they are indicators of the disintegrating and disappearing regional identities caused by globalization and homogenization trends.

A devastated area in Croatia

The Banija region, also known as Banovina, is located in the east of Croatia, bordering Bosnia and Herzegovina (see figure 2). Despite being only a forty-five-minute drive from the capital city of Zagreb, Banija is one of the most isolated regions in Croatia in several aspects, such as neglected infrastructure, sparse population in rural areas, aging population, high unemployment rates, and a poorly developed economy (Lončar and Pavić 2020: 202).

Before the war in the 1990s that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the establishment of Croatia as an independent state, the demographic structure of Banija was multicultural,

Figure 1. Sajmište is the largest container settlement in Petrinja (March 2023, photo credit: Lana Peternel).
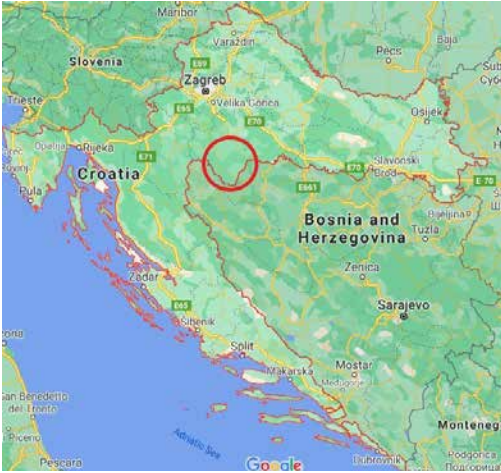
Figure 2. Location of the Banija region in Croatia (source: Google Maps, January 2024).

multireligious, and multinational, with Croats and Serbs forming the largest population groups in the region. At the time, Banija benefitted economically from the Gavrilović meat industry. The preeminent Yugoslav producer of meat products has been shaping the Banija region for more than three centuries, supporting a wide network of cooperative households that kept livestock for meat production.

After the war in the 1990s, however, state subsidies for the restoration of homes, infrastructure, water supply, roads, churches, and schools dwindled. As a result, even more people eventually left the region, both members of the majority Croatian population and national minorities of Serbs, Roma, and Bosniaks. In the twenty-first century, the region is characterized by a "vacuum" of abandoned buildings, dilapidated bus stations, and decrepit railways. The predominantly elderly population, uncultivated agricultural land, and cessation of economic activity have caused a rise in the number of vulnerable and marginalized groups, while unemployment and poverty have increased.

On 29 December, a 6.4 Mw (6.2 ML) magnitude earthquake struck the region, with the epicenter located about 3 kilometers from Petrinja, a town with a population of around 15,000 people. The earthquake damaged or destroyed 41,000 homes and other infrastructure, with total financial damage estimated at 5.5 billion euros (Kersten-Pejanić 2022: 103). The earthquake forced many locals in Banija to find shelter in temporary homes—either in individual containers placed next to their homes or in larger container settlements constructed in Petrinja, Glina, and Sisak.

In early 2021, three large settlements were built on the outskirts of Petrinja, reminiscent of "special reception centers," refugee camps and similar facilities built in postcrisis areas around the world. The settlements were set up on vacant lots with inadequate infrastructure, including issues such as dampness, poor insulation, dilapidated roads, and poor accessibility. In this way, the natural disaster and the "solution" to it actually exposed the preexisting situation in and laid bare the underlying problems of the region, including poverty and inadequate infrastructure (Jansen 2006; Leutloff-Grandits 2008, 2016; Stieger 2021; see figure 3, showing the old and the new face of Petrinja).

Participatory ethnographic research

Doing research in a post-earthquake area requires a high level of sensitivity, as the local population inevitably suffers from constant fear, uncertainty, and distrust (cf. Schäfers 2016). We, the authors of this article, therefore decided against "conventional" ethnography based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and other approaches in order to understand the social reality in the area. Instead, we relied on participatory and action-oriented research that aims to develop "understanding of social and cultural life while helping communities address the challenges they face" (Rubinstein 2018). To implement the approach, we jointly and independently conducted ethnographic field research in container settlements. One of us, Lana Peternel, had been visiting people living in containers in the Banija region during a period of fifteen months, from November 2022 to January 2024, while Dan Podjed conducted

FIGURE 3. Two faces of post-earthquake Petrinja: a ruined house on the right and a container-like structure on the left (March 2023, photo credit: Dan Podjed).

field research in the same container settlement for a week in March 2023. Both of our visits were part of the humanitarian work organized by the Petrinja Red Cross, a local branch of the international humanitarian movement, where the researchers volunteered and documented the living conditions and experiences of the residents experienced on a daily basis.

Our methodology was based on "hybrid" ethnography that relies on "observant participation" by volunteers (Seim 2021) and ranged from informal conversations with container residents, preparing and conducting workshops, sharing humanitarian aid, and shopping at nearby stores to socializing on the benches in front of the Red Cross centre, which is also housed in a container. Taking photos during the interviews, which were conducted in Croatian, provided an opportunity for the interviewees to show how they converted containers into homes. With their consent, we created photo albums presenting aspirations and inner struggles of the locals during the process of not only rebuilding their homes but also their selves, both affected by the material, emotional, and reflec-

tive aspects of their connection to the earthquake-damaged world, their personal histories, and their visions for the future. Through photographs, some of which are included in this article, we have sought to illuminate the "hidden" spaces that do not typically appear in popular, public, or academic discourse regarding people living in post-disaster shelters and container settlements, the "hidden" spaces that provide access to new uses, meanings, and dynamics associated with seemingly familiar spaces (Massa 2022).

Another name for participatory ethnographic research could be "engaged learning" (Carrithers 2005), as we experienced firsthand what it means to volunteer in a post-crisis situation. It allowed us to engage with individuals and communities, as well as explore their notions of home, belonging, and alienation. Comparing stories of people living in containers and understanding different social backgrounds in the town of Petrinja and in the villages in Banija was crucial to understanding the situation in the town and its surrounding area. Finally, the analysis of container homes played a central role

in understanding subjective identities, peoples' sense of belonging, well-being, marginalization, mental health, social inequalities, etc.

Life in container settlements

We focused our research predominantly on the largest container settlement called "Sajmište" (Engl. "the Fair"). Built in early 2021, it numbers eighty-one containers; fifty-six came as a donation from Turkey, the rest were donated by a drilling company. During our first tour of the settlement, a representative of the Red Cross accompanied us and invited the residents to an arts and crafts workshop. We strolled down one of the main "streets" through the container settlement and were greeted by a group of local women who began to tell their stories and present their concerns before we even had time to explain the nature of our research. What surprised us was that they were primarily not concerned about having to stay in their containers indefinitely; on the contrary, their biggest fear was that they would be forced to leave, as the site was already in the process of being dismantled. Their temporary dwellings were being removed and returned to Turkey to help the victims of another major earthquake that had devastated the area on the Syrian border in February 2023. There was no need to ask if we could take a look inside their homes either, as a woman in her seventies invited us in to show us how she had set up her container. The interior, where she lived with her daughter, consisted of a bedroom on the left (as seen from the main entrance), a compact bathroom with a toilet in the front, and another bedroom with a small, improvised kitchen and a washing machine on the right. She showed us, again with much pride, her handmade embroidery that she displayed in several places to decorate the interior—for example, on the table and the walls. As we looked around, we asked about a plant she kept in a flowerpot under the kitchen radiator. She told us it was a sweet potato plant that she hoped would sprout. In fact, many inhabitants of Petrinja as well as

the entire region lived off the land. Therefore, we were not surprised to see a small heated experimental "greenhouse" inside the container, providing room for gardening.

We went on to visit the woman's neighbor in the adjacent container, which the Red Cross volunteer chose to showcase because it was "especially well-kept." We were greeted by a retired art teacher, a woman in her seventies, who offered us sweets and repeatedly asked what we would like to drink. The conversation quickly turned to the question of when she would be forced to leave her container and move to another location. During several visits to the container settlement, we often visited the art teacher who was meeting her neighbors less and less often. Each time we returned to continue our field research, we were greeted with joy, but the conversations and stories were gradually becoming more serious and heavier.

The teacher's neighbor, whom we met on the first day, was in the same age group as the teacher. She seemed cheerful and kept repeating that she did not care what would happen to her if they had to move out of the settlement. However, there was an underlying sad story to her narrative. Her husband, a well-known medical doctor from Petrinja, died a year prior to our visit to the container settlement. Her granddaughter had brain surgery at a young age and attended a special needs school. Later, the Red Cross representative told us that the woman had moved out of her container shortly before we arrived but soon returned, as she was not comfortable living all by herself and experienced anxiety when separated from the other residents of the settlement. Living in the container, we were told, at least fulfilled her social needs, whereas living in a flat nearby would have been lonelier and more isolated. Before the earthquake, she led a dynamic life as a nurse working in Slovenia, Germany, and Croatia. With her savings she built a house in Petrinja, which she later gave to her son as a wedding gift, and moved into a rented flat, which was then destroyed by the earthquake. Since she no longer owned property herself, her case was not prior-

itized when it came to reconstruction efforts. She was given a container, but she soon faced uncertainty, fear, and pain due to the death of her husband, who had once been the head of a hospital, but died homeless.

Another woman of a similar age, whom we met outside her makeshift flat, drew our attention to a similar uncertainty. Her house in the center of Petrinja, where she lived alone as a pensioner after the death of her mother, was reduced to rubble. During the earthquake, she was confined to her bed, almost helpless and struggling with severe symptoms of Covid-19. She described in detail how she experienced the collapsing walls, the scattered objects in the flat and the thick dust that she was breathing in. She was unable to move, breathe, speak, seek shelter, or get to the street from under the rubble. Croatian military personnel dug her out, wrapped her in a blanket and took her to a barracks with hundreds of other victims. Due to her illness, doctors placed her in a small isolated room. The sounds that reached her included ambulance si-

rens, crying, and wailing. She witnessed the recovery of the bodies of those who had lost their lives in the disaster. At the time, she had no documents and no clothes. The Red Cross provided her with food and hygiene products—the first clean underwear she received were a soldier's boxer shorts. After two years of uncertainty, she was in a particularly difficult situation and, as she told us, experienced occasional suicidal thoughts due to the constant insecurity. "Every time someone knocks on my door, I think they are coming to tell me I have to move out," she told us with tears in her eyes, adding that all she wanted for her life was security and certainty, and to know what the future held for her. She could not foresee what would happen if she had to move out: her pension was very low, the home she had built as an investment for her future was destroyed, and she had no one to rely on. While telling her story, she invited us to visit her container home, which was impressively tidy, with walls covered in motivational messages (see figure 4). The messages were written

FIGURE 4. Self-help messages taped to a container wall in 'Sajmište' (March 2023, photo credit: Lana Peternel).

in uppercase, most of them with blue, green, and red markers, and conveyed encouragement and support, mainly to herself. The messages emphasized the strength one can find when in trouble (one message on the wall read, "A person can endure anything and is stronger than they think"). In addition to these motivational messages, there were others next to a drawing of her destroyed home and a poster of Petrinja ("I will start to live happily and overcome my fears. When?" read one message, and her answer was clear: "My roof." In other words, she will resume her life when she gets her house back). Closer to the exit, she hung a homemade calendar titled "The 'Forgotten' Petrinja," with the dates of visits to the town by Croatian politicians: when they came, who was there on important days, for example, a year and two years after the earthquake.

During later, longer visits to the container settlement, we were able to find out what the residents were missing. According to our interlocutors, the absence of mailboxes and house numbers on the containers, of bulletin boards and ATMs in the neighborhood contributed to their sense of isolation, vulnerability, and invisibility, as did the absence of personal belongings. For them, the personal history they lost in their damaged homes was as devastating and isolating as the fact that their containers did not have signs with their names on the door. When the container development was set up, the planners forgot to put up a sign with basic information about transportation to the town center, the opening hours of the doctor on duty, the dentist, the stores. Furthermore, the tenants were never given the opportunity to elect a representative for the purpose of communicating their numerous concerns, wishes, worries, and existential fears to the decision-makers, relevant actors, and municipal institutions. Tenants in the container settlement expressed their frustration over the lack of tenant representatives, which were the norm for most residential buildings in the past, as this meant they were always the last to find out what was going on in the settlement and therefore had to constantly fight

against various types of misinformation or lack of information. For example, a seventy-year-old male interlocutor from Petrinja complained of the lack of transparency in the administration of the renovation process: "People do not know who has priority in the renovation of houses or flats. People wonder whether the houses in villages or towns would be renovated first or whether those living in containers, those rehoused or moved to other parts of Croatia would be the first to receive their keys."

Informational isolation further increased feelings of loneliness and insecurity and contributed to an overall unpleasant atmosphere in the community. In this context, the poor psychological and physical self-image fostered by the residents manifested itself in rising numbers and intensity of depression, alcoholism, aggressiveness, quarrels, and, finally, as could often be heard, "a large number of deaths in a very short period of time." The paradoxical image of a socially isolated life was joined by the desire for privacy, or, in the words of our interlocutors, the lack of "personal peace and a roof over one's head." In this context, the isolation experienced was not the same as the isolation desired. Being confined to one type of isolation led to a longing for another.

Containers as places for work, shopping, and entertainment

Near the "Sajmište" settlement, an unusual construction catches the eye. It caught our attention during our research, as it bore a resemblance to similar "non-places" (Augé 1995) along highways in Italy, Germany, France, and elsewhere, places with no local identity that could exist anywhere in the world. The settlement is a commercial and shopping center made of containers to satisfy the needs of people living in the surrounding containers. The complex, named "New Life Center" (Croat. Centar novog života) was built in September 2021, nine months after the earthquake. It consists of 168 containers and originally housed 50 companies that employed

163 people. "It will truly be a centre of new life," the mayor of Petrinja said at the official opening of the complex, adding that the first businesses that have already set up their stores there will motivate other companies to move their operations to containers (Prerad 2021). Painted in a striking red, black, and white pattern, the building was soon informally renamed to "Šarengrad" or "Colorful City" in English, and while some local residents considered it attractive, others told us they would never set foot into such a grotesque building (see figure 5).

"Šarengrad" is occupied mainly by smaller stores and service companies that moved their businesses from the earthquake-damaged center of Petrinja. With the new stores, the owners were given the opportunity to earn a monthly income that could not be obtained in any other way. On the one hand, the container shopping center was a practical solution striving to provide retail stores, bakeries, fast food restaurants, pastry shops, but also hairdressers, beauticians, and cafes closer to the container settlement. All that is left of the identity of the destroyed town center are the names and designations of the stores.

When we first entered the uncanny structure, we walked through a central "garden" or "square" on the ground floor and took the stairs leading to the first floor, which offers a view of the entire "Sajmište," including a newsstand selling newspapers, cigarettes, sweets, and other goods, as well as serving as an important meeting place. Right after our arrival to Petrinja, we were able to overhear a conversation among locals who were apparently using the newsstand to spill out their emotions. An elderly woman approached the saleswoman, bought a newspaper, and then suddenly went on a rant about other residents and their out-of-the-ordinary behavior. The saleswoman seemed unphased by her swearing. Instead, she tried to calm the woman down and told her not to worry so much. As the customer walked away, an older man approached and the same thing happened: he started to curse almost the moment he arrived, and the saleswoman began comforting him, telling him to relax and not to worry. In our opinion, the seemingly trivial situation revealed a lot about life in the container settlement, including the constant pressure and uncertainty reflected in the gestures and words

Figure 5. The New Life Center in Petrinja consists of 168 containers (March 2023, photo credit: Dan Podjed).

of people forced to cope with the never-ending crisis, day after day.

Popular music reverberates over the loudspeakers throughout "Šarengrad," as it would in any other shopping center. There are benches and a small waterfall in the central "square," but not even the slightest symbol of the town of Petrinja or the Banija region. The container shopping center was set up in a short time, like many other "instant" constructions in other places. However, as the locals say, the quality of the containers in the shopping center is much better than that of the nearby residential containers. The containers in "Šarengrad" have a double roof and double flooring. Therefore, the tenants of the container shops admit that working in the container shopping center is much more pleasant and comfortable than living in the nearby settlement. Their status is contractually secured for an extended period of time, which assures that the container shopping center will continue to exist even after the rest of the "Sajmište" containers will have been cleared away.

The construction of the "Šarengrad" shopping mall in Petrinja is an example of a state intervention in humanitarian matters. However, such an intervention is riddled with paradoxes. For example, the shopping mall is dominated by supermarkets that the residents of the container settlement cannot afford to shop in. Although the state covers all of their living costs, it erected a new barrier to the normalization of life by not providing adequate subsidies for transport, rent, and consumer goods to support the most vulnerable people. This leads to a conclusion that all levels of "container life" include a combination of humanitarian intervention (stores and pharmacies), solidarity through crisis management (NGO offices), consequences of neoliberal crisis management (high prices of goods), and the human desire to normalize life. Various political actors and the state have adopted models that are primarily focused on helping people in crisis but lack the necessary sensitivity to detect the real needs of a stratified population, worn down by prolonged crises and isolation.

Containers in the vicinity of ruined homes

Unlike the larger container settlement on the outskirts of Petrinja, individual containers in villages around the town were not positioned in a planned and systematic way. Instead, the choice of their location was part of early intervention efforts after the earthquake. These containers were donated to individuals and families in need and were therefore positioned next to their demolished or half-demolished homes. This means that these people continue to live next to their homes in containers, use their former homes for some purposes, for example cooking, and their new shelter for others, for example sleep (see an example in figure 6).

Various charity initiatives and organizations of neighboring or nearby countries—for example, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Hungary, Austria, and Italy—provided containers for people who were left homeless after the earthquake. These containers were often placed next to the victims' homes. A basic infrastructure was established in the containers by installing water pipes, drainage, and secure heating, which in most cases is provided by electric air conditioning. This kind of heating became an additional problem during the global energy crisis triggered in 2022 by the war in Ukraine. In 2022 and 2023, a significant increase in monthly electricity and heating bills proved to be a major obstacle for people living in containers. The state continued to cover the costs of electricity and heating, but this kind of support could not solve the problems caused by the "incredibly slow renovation," as the Croatian prime minister Andrej Plenković declared in December 2022 (Ivančić 2023). There is another dimension to the problem, as many people in Petrinja lost their jobs because their workplaces were at risk of collapsing due to the earthquake damage.

The people living in individual containers said they continue to stay there because of their economic activities, agriculture and livestock farming, or because they feel it would be hard for them to resettle. In many cases, they depend

FIGURE 6. An individual container next to a ruined house in the Banija region (March 2023, photo credit: Lana Peternel).

on the support from a number of NGOs that have been providing help on a monthly basis, such as the Red Cross of Petrinja. But this aid, consisting mainly of basic foodstuffs and water, has been a mere drop in the ocean.

While distributing packages with humanitarian aid to the epicenter of the earthquake, we met a family on a cattle farm in the village of Strašnik. According to them, they stayed in the village because they "could not leave their treasure," their cows. Despite the remoteness, isolation, uncertainty, and insecurity that came with living next to the ruins, as well as the constant fear that the earthquake could happen again, this family with ten children could also not be persuaded to stay away from their farm animals. A woman living there told us that in addition to her own domestic animals, she has also been feeding the neighbor's dog. On the other hand, many people living in containers adjacent to their destroyed homes said they only used the containers for sleeping; they did all their cooking and washing in the house, which was scheduled for demolition. The reason for this was that they did not want to leave their property out of fear of thieves. As our interviewees told us, thefts were common at night after the earthquake, and the police were usually unable to find the perpetrators.

Interestingly, people decided to stay in their demolished homes and in nearby containers, even though the Croatian state offered to relocate those whose homes were destroyed and to partially pay for their rent and utilities. However, the cost of rent in Petrinja skyrocketed due to the high demand after the earthquake and the lack of price restrictions. Although living in destroyed homes was far from normal and contributed to feelings of isolation, people were at least able to tend to their gardens, animals, pets, and what was left of their homes. They said they did not feel comfortable being displaced from their homes. They spent all their lives there, and it was easier for them to create a sense of home

and shelter in that location, no matter how ruined and devastated the place was.

Conclusion

A container, as we began to realize after our field research in Petrinja and the Banija region, is perhaps the central metaphor for contemporary space and time. The things we use and eat come to us in containers. Containers are the final resting places for our things after they have served their purpose, as well as for our leftover food that does not get eaten. People in need after an earthquake or some other natural disaster, with no roof over their heads, are housed in containers. Construction workers who have come from abroad to help build our infrastructure also find shelter in them. They can become objects of desire, especially when they are called "modular homes" and are enjoyed by families near the sea.

However, our study raised some additional questions that go beyond a critique of the homogenization, globalization, and standardization of the world through a container-based economy (Eriksen 2014: 70). As this article shows, people in Petrinja accepted containers during the crisis: however artificial, they became signs of survival and strength, of being able to cope with what fate threw at them. Residents of the container settlements exhibited neighborly emotional support and caring, such as sociability, closeness, and mutual aid. Through creative actions, residents have shown that at the end of the day, a tiny container provides a "roof over one's head."

Moreover, their refusal to move out of the containers is also a demonstration of revolt against state bureaucracy and capitalism, which are the main culprits for the slow process of reconstruction. Even though the people refusing to leave their containers are far removed from the centers of power, they are also critical of the global economic system, demonstrating that in-between spaces like containers represent more than just destruction and re-creation (Dzenovska and Knight 2020). The people living in containers did not accept resettlement and accommo-

dation to another location, insisting to remain in their town, village, or hamlet and resisting displacement to other areas.

The article also demonstrated, however, that "container life" inherently has its problems. Living in containers, quickly installed and connected to infrastructure, was meant to provide a temporary refuge and enabled people to remain in the area. It, however, also brought transience, displacement, and confinement. In that sense, our findings connect to how containers are often interpreted in anthropology, as symbols of liminality, comparable to tents in refugee camps, places for migrants and the homeless, a temporary shelter for invisible and neglected people, but also a quick fix in times of need. Container buildings, often placed on the periphery of cities and in places where they do not disturb the original cityscape, underline the "permanent liminality" (Szakolczai 2016).

The intermediate state of living in containers was also extended indefinitely in the case of the post-earthquake area, and people's insecurity became a permanent condition, similarly to how refugees and migrants are "temporarily" housed in asylum and detention centers, their ordeals often extended to months and years of uncertainty as they find themselves in a kind of "limbo" or "regulated temporariness" (e.g., Brković 2014). We also observed such phenomena in Petrinja and other neighboring towns and villages during our research of residents' lives in containers. What was meant to be a temporary solution has become a permanent "one size fits all" response to crisis.

And yet, we should not assume that the problem lies primarily with "container life." People in container settlements or those living in containers next to their ruined homes, for instance, are not as isolated as one might assume. In fact, their feelings of isolation are mainly caused by the lagging reconstruction of the earthquake-damaged area and the lack of governmental support and assistance, by their isolation in terms of being able to influence local and state politics.

We hence suggest that analyzing the containerization of people's lives in the longer run can

reveal the complexity of the crisis that triggered it. The containerization of the Banija region exposed deeper, multifaceted problems that the Croatian state and the European Union have struggled to address, including destroyed infrastructure, unresolved interethnic relations, lack of employment opportunities, depopulation, migration, and resistance to change in local politics. Anthropologically, it makes sense to connect the analysis of "container life" to the notion of "polycrisis" (Henig and Knight 2023). The sheltering in containers after the earthquake in Croatia highlighted the multifaceted nature of the crisis and the need for comprehensive solutions that address not only immediate shelter needs but also underlying social, political, and economic problems. Indeed, the real problem does not so much involve the containers but is instead the idea that their existence and use can solve the underlying polycrisis.

Acknowledgments

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