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## At home in the centre?

Spatial appropriation and horizons of homemaking in reception facilities for asylum seekers<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper aims to reconceptualize the debate on the lived experience of accommodation for asylum seekers, as a matter of home and homemaking. Several studies have recently emphasized the influence of housing quality on the ways in which asylum reception centres are experienced, and possibly re-adapted, by the residents. Reception facilities can indeed facilitate the cultivation of some sense of home, at least intermittently, primarily as a grassroots and spontaneous process. However this effort is not without contradictions, including that of being in tension with asylum seekers' legal and existential precarity. Moreover, feeling at home in an alien context would require also gaining recognition, rights and the ability to navigate through the public sphere. The home-evoking potential of housing infrastructures and affordances is closely interdependent with the capability of people-as-dwellers to make the most out of them. Enhancing clients' ability to reproduce a sense of home on the move and attach it to specific places matters as, or more than, the abstract and disembodied home-like features of any built environment.

**Keywords:** Reception centres – Asylum seekers – Home – Homemaking – Housing – Refugees.

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# HOMING: THE HOME-MIGRATION NEXUS

HOME AS A WINDOW ON MIGRANT BELONGING, INTEGRATION AND CIRCULATION



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## Introduction

This chapter aims to advance the study of the lived experience of asylum reception facilities in Europe, by discussing the determinants, potential and impact of homemaking practices in the everyday life of people “in waiting” like asylum seekers. Understandably, refugee reception is mostly addressed in terms of humanitarianism, exceptionalism and surveillance over (undesired) human mobility. However, there is a promise to investigate it also as a matter of homemaking and space appropriation, even in unhomely and temporary infrastructures.

The recent debate on refugees’ housing needs covers a variety of accommodation options, arrangements and strategies. Temporary or even protracted emergency shelters are the most widespread and debated ones (Couldrey & Herson, 2017; Albadra et al., 2018; Scott-Smith, 2020). In the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis in Europe, however, research has increasingly been done on less emergency-driven housing arrangements, primarily in the form of state-funded accommodation. Innovative case studies have illuminated, particularly in Northern Europe, the influence of infrastructural housing quality on residents’ wellbeing (Hauge et al., 2017), on their residential satisfaction (including that of families and minors) (Archambault, 2012; Karlsson, 2019), on the possibility for them to feel “at home” in typically unhomely places (Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2018). All across this literature, the focus on the lived experience of asylum seekers is paralleled with an emerging interest in “what buildings do” (Gronseth et al., 2016): the variety of “affective and emotional states” that the built environment “triggers” among residents (Zill et al., 2019), given their social and legal predicament, but also as a reflex of different views and practices about the functions and aims of asylum centres.

While the development of accommodation for asylum seekers is rather variable and context-specific, due to its path-dependency with national welfare and immigrant policies, there are good reasons to revisit it through home studies (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brun, 2012). In this optic, research has been done on the (un)intended consequences of the ways of designing, allocating and using reception facilities (Willems et al., 2020), but also on their potential contribution to refugees’ recovery of a sense of home or, at least, of domesticity (e.g. Rainisio, 2015). Both questions may seem little relevant wherever far more basic sheltering needs are disregarded in the first place. Yet, their significance as an ideal aim for asylum reception, and the very real need of refugees – as much as anybody else – to make themselves at home (Brun, 2012; Boccagni et al., 2020) are enough for a critical conceptual inquiry. Even in unhospitable housing arrangements refugees tend to assess their conditions, including what is lacking or missing there, through the metrics of what “home” means to them, and of the aspiration to achieve it (van der Horst, 2004; Hauge et al., 2017).

Particularly at the early stages of the status determination process, asylum centres have a relatively narrow mandate (Kreichauf, 2018): control forms of

(unwanted) mobility, ensure residents' basic social protection and, at best, facilitate their socialization into the rules and language of the receiving society. Yet, asylum centres may end up being also sites, and possibly co-producers, of forms of homemaking both from "above" and "below", which I systematically explore in this chapter.

Following an overview of the recent literature on asylum seekers' residential trajectories and on the elusive meaning of home inside them, I analyze, first, how reception facilities can assume relatively home-like contours, whether by design or – more often – following the spontaneous initiative of their dwellers; second, the constraints to which homemaking in asylum centres is subject, but also the need for a non-essentialized and processual view of home, in order to appreciate both refugees' agency and the influence of the built environment. The temporal, spatial and relational bases of their "struggles for home" (Jansen & Lofving, 2008), parallel to their housing trajectories, are critically discussed along these lines. As I conclude, the opportunities for asylum seekers to cultivate and reproduce a sense of home on the move matter as, or more than, the abstract and disembodied home-like features of the built environment in which they are hosted.

## 1. Home, homing, and asylum reception centres

Being forced to leave what used to be home, and having to reconstitute it anew under conditions of more or less protracted uncertainty, is an all too obvious fact at the roots of forced migration. Likewise, the absence of a single and fixed place suitable to be called home in the here-and-now is recurrently emphasized in refugee studies. However, the very notion of home can be problematized and conceived disjointed from its subtext of ascription and fixity (Malkki, 1992), with critical awareness of the over-idealized imaginaries associated with it. Following this reflexive exercise, a space for conceptual reframing emerges: one, which I propose to fill with the concept of *homing* (Boccagni, 2017). This is an invitation to see home as an ongoing need and attempt to attach a sense of security, familiarity and control to the place(s) in which people live. Reframed along these lines, home retains all of its existential significance for the forcibly displaced. At the same time, it operates as a category to make better sense of their potential to interact with the places, built environments and material cultures they encounter over time. Home, then, is no more only a matter of loss or domicile – not even for those forcibly on the move. It is rather an assemblage of meaningful materialities, emotions and relationships; a battlefield in which refugee attempts at *homemaking* are negotiated; a question of complex interactions between refugees' countries of origin, present living conditions and ideals about belonging, inclusion and self-achievement (Brun & Fabos, 2015).

At all of these levels, home may not be one place, but is definitely a matter of relations with places – including those at odds with people's own ideals or memories of home, and, most critically, those where they end up "in waiting"

(Rotter, 2014; Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2018). Such places have an influence of their own, which is more ambiguous than the mainstream representation of refugee camps would entail. Even the most unhomely of asylum centres has something to say on the constructions and negotiations of home among the forcibly displaced. Indeed, the lived experience of refugee centres can be better understood by reading into the intersection of home and forced migration studies (Boccagni, 2017; Hart et al., 2018; Dossa & Golubovic, 2019).

Following this premise, at the core of this chapter is a conceptual investigation into asylum seekers' "struggle for home" (Jansen & Lofving, 2008; Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2018) from within reception centres. A more or less extended stay there is just one step in the "complex and life-long process of recreating home" of the forcibly displaced (Neumark, 2013: 244). Living in a centre provides a degree of material safety, but it also reproduces a sense of protracted, potentially traumatizing uncertainty about residents' future life prospects, directions and locations (Thorshaug & Brun, 2019). It demands, therefore, a conceptual inquiry – and then more empirical research – as a social setting in itself.

While the housing careers of forcibly displaced people are fragmented and discontinuous, an analytical continuum can be traced between all ranges of housing provision: from informal settlements to first-reception shelters and camps for more or less protracted displacement (Turner, 2015), towards more structured and "autonomous" housing facilities, including ordinary dwellings. Each of these arrangements can be explored in light of the interaction between infrastructural qualities and the possibility, ability and interest of residents to draw more than a sense of basic protection out of it.

Against a background of "uneven geography of asylum accommodation" all over Europe (Zill et al., 2019), the focus of this paper is on formal, state-funded reception centres, where asylum seekers are hosted and entitled to some basic assistance while their applications are assessed. Major differences exist between and within countries regarding the "architectural, functional and socio-spatial determinations" of asylum reception infrastructures (Kreichauf, 2018: 18). Yet, their commonalities in social organization, institutional mandate and target populations are enough to form a conceptual framework around notions of domesticity and homemaking, preliminary to comparative analysis.

Exploring the experience of home in formal reception centres for asylum seekers in Europe is obviously not the same as discussing home in refugee camps (e.g. Dudley, 2011; Hart et al., 2018) or in makeshift accommodations in poorer countries (e.g. Kellett, 2002), or in Europe itself (Giorgi & Fasulo, 2013). Although there are functional equivalences between "camps" and "asylum centres", the former category tends to be used mostly for the Global South and the latter is more used for state-funded reception structures in the Global North. For sure, the distinction (as much as the single labels) is politically contentious (Kreichauf, 2018). It has to do less with geography than with a broad difference in infrastructural quality, and possibly in the degree of separateness or interaction with the surrounding environments.



Even in the most inclusive and supportive of refugee centres, the remit of reception initiatives remains limited. Exogenous factors, such as status recognition (and then integration and labour market policies), and endogenous factors, such as the dislocation of refugees' kin ties and of their life projects over time, shape their future life chances far more than housing as such. Even so, exploring the subjective experience of an asylum centre is not a pointless or irrelevant effort. There is a merit in investigating how infrastructural variables, location and interaction (or lack thereof) with the surrounding environment affect residents' wellbeing (Hauge et al., 2017); and under what conditions such an infrastructure, or particular sections of it, can be invested with the "positive" meanings, values and emotions that the word "home" evokes (van der Horst, 2004; Archambault, 2012). A case can then be made for the homemaking capacity of reception facilities to affect newcomers' wellbeing and their ability to "navigate" (Vigh, 2006) the steps of their mobility trajectories.

No one *chooses* to live in an asylum reception centre. While staying there is generally not compulsory, it is still a requirement for asylum seekers to get assistance while their applications are under scrutiny, and possibly in the subsequent stages (e.g. the appeal process). As the literature shows (Zill et al., 2019), refugee reception and housing facilities are generally made out of "left-over", old and vacant buildings under poor maintenance, originally devised for different purposes and target populations (e.g. barracks, motels, hospitals, schools, etc.). Already by way of appearance, these structures exhibit an institutional aim of deterrence – asylum seekers should not feel welcome or encouraged to stay, unless they really need to – and embody the expectation of a provisional and conditional stay. Temporariness and conditionality, i.e. the time and effort needed to "check" if an application is "legitimate", are instrumental to justify the use of sub-standard accommodation for what is treated as a sub-standard population, confined in a spatial and legal "permanent state of exception" (Agamben, 1998: 168).

Nonetheless, the infrastructural and spatial organization of an asylum centre is neither a neutral background, nor one with a function of pure surveillance and differential treatment – were it even Whyte's (2011) "myopticon", i.e. an arrangement instrumental to "keep temporality on hold" in resident's everyday life (Thorshaug, 2019). While the *raison d'être* of these buildings rewards inertia and militates against any substantive investment to improve them, this is not always the whole story about them. As some recent case studies have shown, these infrastructures are sometimes readapted, and ideally made more "domestic", in terms of infrastructural maintenance, but also through organizational aspects: the use of semi-public space for gatherings, the availability of cooking facilities for residents, or the possibility for them to decorate space in meaningful ways (Gronseth et al., 2016; Vandevoordt, 2017; Willems et al., 2020). As or more important, the scope for refugees to cultivate meaningful ways of dwelling is shaped by the relative control on their life routines and use of day-to-day spaces as well as by the possibility to share them with family members, friends or other people with a similar ethnonational, language or

cultural background. From the side of local authorities and service providers, there is then some scope for *homemaking from above*, involving both housing quality and “home-like qualities.” This has constitutive limitations, and yet deserves more attention in an optic of residential “satisfaction”. Moreover, while individuals or families dwell in a centre for a more or less extended (and sometimes undefined) time span, they may develop an emotionally meaningful, if ambiguous relation with the built environment in which they live. This also depends on a variety of influences: the everyday interaction with other guests, the social inclusion programmes (if any) in which they partake, and the broader scope for interaction with the surrounding local communities.

The point, then, is not if an asylum centre can ever be called home in an emotionally ‘thick’ sense as opposed to a merely descriptive one. Instead, the point is to see if and how temporary reception infrastructures, which by definition conflate control and care work, can facilitate meaningful forms of homemaking under circumstances of provisionality (Thorshaug & Brun, 2019), liminality (Ghorashi et al., 2018) and marginality (Boccagni et al., 2020) for their guests-as-dwellers.

## 2. The challenge of housing quality, the lures of home-like qualities

Even in generally unhomely places, housing conditions have their own influence on the well-being of residents. This holds for spatial and infrastructural aspects like the maintenance of a building, its relative overcrowding, its localization, but also the private space available in it. In principle, relatively decentralized and small-scale housing options seem to “provide more homely qualities than institution-like buildings” (Hauge et al., 2017: 12; Thorshaug, 2019). Yet, infrastructural variables tell only a part of the story of housing quality. Equally important is the lived experience inside: how, if at all, a centre acknowledges and is adapted to the routines, needs and tastes of the residents; how open and flexible it is to the use of semi-public space for informal gathering, playing, praying, and so forth. In all of these respects, purposeful attempts can be made to make semi-public spaces intelligible, meaningful and accessible, rather than leaving them as a neutral backdrop or a provisional area of transit.

In essence, the perceived quality of housing has to do with the degree of privacy and autonomy embedded in reception facilities and in their organizational cultures: all that residents are allowed to do there on their own, and the physical and symbolic room for manoeuvre they have in doing so (Willems et al., 2020). Cases in point involve the possibility for them to cook by themselves, possibly recovering their traditional ways of doing so (including the kind of food), or invite outsiders – “guests” of the “guests” – into their own rooms (van der Horst, 2004; Rainisio, 2015; Vandevordt, 2017). This resonates with the literature in home studies, which emphasizes the importance of privacy, autonomy and control for residents to develop some sense of home even in unconventional settings (Dovey, 2005; Giorgi & Fasulo, 2013; Easthope et al., 2015). Achieving a balance

between “privacy” and “connectedness” (Willems et al., 2020) is then a key challenge for asylum centres, whenever the latter aim to be something more than the functional equivalent of a parking lot for people “in waiting” (Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2018).

Of course, a participatory and user-sensitive approach is not without contradictions. This is not only because it runs against the engrained practice of most reception facilities. More fundamentally, it is utterly irrelevant for the essential counterpart of reception – the institutional apparatus in charge for the legal processing of asylum applications, which is hardly intelligible from within the centre itself (Whyte, 2011). Moreover, any top-down attempt to improve reception spaces beyond a basic standard may end up in zero-sum games: what makes some residents feel more at home might make others less so. Housing itself, let alone feeling at home, is generally constructed by residents as far less of a priority than getting “the papers” and “a job”. Indeed, discussing with them “the distance between their current condition and a desirable housing situation, trying to give to this latter a concrete and intelligible form” (Rainisio, 2015: 12) may end up in tokenism or in wishful thinking. Residents’ consultation without empowerment tends to reproduce disorientation and frustration, whenever people articulate housing aspirations that are utterly incompatible with the place they live in; or, more critically, when they fail (or are not in a position) to articulate any positive and focused desire. In turn, residents’ ability and interest in “actively” using these degrees of freedom is highly variable, depending also on their socio-demographics, legal conditions and position in the life course and across migration networks.

All these critical remarks, however, should not obscure another empirical fact: as a number of ethnographies have illustrated (Boccagni et al., 2020), micro-forms of homemaking “from below” do take place and demand more attention, even within the constitutive limitations of everyday life in reception centres.

### 3. Resident homemaking and beautification from below

Over time, as residents find out that their stay, while being temporary, may be less short-lived than expected, there is an increase in likelihood that they engage in active, albeit “reluctant”, forms of homemaking (Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2018). Under the label of *homemaking*, I group here different sets of practices that articulate an endeavour to bring the lived environment closer to a sense of normality, by adapting it to one’s needs, interests, or tastes. These practices make up a pragmatic field of politics of the everyday, out of the micro ways in which people approach their residential circumstances as more than instrumental affordances – indeed, as something they expect to bear the mark of their own use, presence, and possibly appropriation.

Homemaking involves all “attempts”, successful or not, “to make spaces ‘ordinary’ through the processes... that try to reclaim ‘normal’ life and create a ‘home’” (Sanyal, 2014: 570). Within an asylum centre, this results in a highly



constrained, variable and context-dependent process, which still goes some way beyond a simple habituation – the sense of familiarity people gain out of virtually any environment, out of the extended time spent there. The point, then, is not only that residents take initiatives to “fill their days with meaningful activities” rather than surrendering to their structural emptiness (Ghorashi et al., 2018). The question is also how, in doing so, they rely on the built environment and reshape it, by carving out some niche of more or less ephemeral and exclusive domesticity. I propose to group these practices, which can be negotiated on all scales from close corporeal proximity up to an entire infrastructure, into four heuristic categories:

- Ways of *improving* space, thereby making it more comfortable and suitable to the preferences, tastes and needs of one particular resident or a group of them;
- Ways of *enabling cultural reproduction and biographical continuity* (Archambault, 2012), wherever residents shape their everyday activities – eating, dressing, cultural consumption – in ways or through materials that mirror their life styles prior to migration;
- Ways of *privatizing* space, as they try to earmark, in terms of functional or emotional value, some portion of anonymous, impersonal or at best collective spaces, by creating thresholds of privacy and intimacy inside them. This may be done with an aim to gain more space for oneself and one’s belongings, for purposes of sociability and prayer, or anyway to “make the space say something about you” (Cresswell, 2004: 2);
- Ways of *beautification*, out of any attempt to improve aesthetically and sensorially the everyday living space by bringing it closer to one’s tastes and domestic cultures (Neumark, 2013). Wall decorations, curtains, carpets, particular objects being displayed in particular ways are cases in point. In fact, beautification is worthy of more elaboration, if only because the bulk of research on it has been done on mainstream middle-class households (Miller, 2001; see also, on immigrant house interiors, Dibbits, 2009; Levin, 2014). Yet, there is no reason to exclude from its remit more marginal and marginalized housing environments, including refugee centres (van der Horst, 2004), squats (Giorgi & Fasulo, 2013) and improvised informal settlements (Mavrommatis, 2018), not to mention large refugee camps (Hart et al., 2018).

Acts of space appropriation such as ordering one’s personal objects in a purposeful sequence, or attaching a picture or an image close to one’s bed place, provide valuable hints for the study of the residents’ struggles for home. They reveal the resilience of a need to exert some control over everyday space and time, in order to draw from it a sense of predictability and security (Douglas, 1991;

Neumark, 2013). Moreover, space appropriation points to people's attempts to personalize a place by informing it with their own sense of identity and taste, including references to their biographies. This is less a matter of aesthetics than of the retention of some ability and desire to make oneself at home, or of a need and desire for "homing", no matter where.

In fact, refugees' attempts to make their day-to-day life environments closer to their own tastes and desires are severely constrained by their living conditions. Furthermore, any micro-attempt to improve a shared and communal space in aesthetic and value-laden terms can turn out to be contentious. It articulates different and potentially contrasting aesthetics and tastes, but also habits and life-styles. Researching into the fine-grained texture of these micro forms of homemaking reveals symbolic and identity tensions that have latent political implications in everyday interactions within and between groups of residents.

More fundamentally, space appropriation has no single and obvious interpretation (Boccagni & Duyvendak, 2019). The absence of any visible form of beautification in a room does not merely articulate a sense of estrangement and alienation from that place. It can also be an expression of active resistance to accepting it as *one's place*, hence as an ordinary living setting that "deserves" to be beautified (Thourshaug & Brun, 2019). It is, in other words, a form of unhoming in the here-and-now, whereby all that has to do with home is projected in an aspired future that should take place elsewhere. Following this critical point, homemaking in an asylum centre does not necessarily mean that residents are reconciled with it, nor that they draw much wellbeing out of it, even while it is the less worse option available.

While studying homemaking in a centre does illuminate people's identifications, agency and aspirations, it cannot exhaust the field of what home means to them, nor of their efforts and opportunities to achieve it. After all, there is no need to reduce the emotional and practical scope of home to anybody's living place – even less to a temporary and disadvantaged one. Neither the temporality, nor the spatiality of homemaking can be reduced to the qualities of even the best of refugee housing facilities.

## 4. Homemaking and fragmented temporalities: fixed artefacts vs shifting life trajectories

It is important to appreciate, first of all, the intersection between the temporality of refugee housing and life trajectories (Fontanari, 2017) and the temporality of home itself. There is a tension between any attempt to make asylum facilities home-like, including those enacted by residents themselves, and the temporariness of their stay. Fragmentation in housing pathways, legal indeterminacy and temporal suspension all militate against emotional investment in an asylum centre (Thourshaug & Brun, 2019) – although mere habituation may result in people leaving more "traces" than they would possibly admit.

As extensive literature shows, feeling at home in a place has to do not only with the life conditions and opportunities available, but also with the sheer amount of time spent there (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Boccagni et al., 2020). Making oneself at home takes time, even more so under new and disadvantaged circumstances (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2012). There is no inherent reason why people who are, or perceive themselves as, “on the go” – e.g. newcomer asylum seekers, and those who aim to secondary mobility trajectories (e.g. from South or East Europe to North Europe) – should cultivate a strong attachment to any place in particular. Even if they did, this would not be necessarily in their own interest. In this sense, feeling at home is an irremediably long term aim – one that fundamentally depends, in the case of asylum seekers, on obtaining a legal status. In the short term, people with mobile and fragmented life trajectories, and often traumatic past experiences, may see little point in cultivating a meaningful attachment to any place in particular, let alone “beautifying” it. Home in the here-and-now may even be a source of distress which is coped with by means of recollections from the past and projects (or dreams) for the future (Kabachnik et al., 2010).

Having said this, there is no reason to reduce the discussion on homemaking in reception facilities to this basic point. Rather than reading refugee life circumstances as a matter of lack-of-home (following their initial loss-of-home), there is a promise in reframing them along a continuum of *degrees of homeliness*. This leads us to explore if, how and when a place or parts of it are “homely enough” for different users, with different purposes, on different occasions. Temporary hosting facilities can then be revisited as more or less hospitable venues for rehearsing a variety of homemaking practices, potentially transferable elsewhere over time, parallel to refugees’ housing careers.

Once, in a “homing” perspective, we shift from an essentialized vision of home as full and stable achievement to the study of the conditions that make for a good-enough home experience at least intermittently, we are in a position to appreciate “homely bubbles”; that is, the circumstances to which residents do attach a sense of security, familiarity and control, as discussed above. Even inside refugee centres, people produce some form of home as “an ontologically secure microsphere in the here and now, whilst nourishing bonds with a life that was left behind. Home is not so much a place, but a situation where people, objects, scents and tastes feel familiar, safe and warm” (Vandervoordt, 2017: 616). However, any “bubble” rests on boundaries being marked, and possibly on forms of home un-making being enacted, towards other residents or groups of residents. A reasonable aim to be pursued in running reception centres, then, is facilitating meaningful opportunities of homemaking, but also mediating between them. And, indeed, the aim should be less homemaking in itself than cultivating the capability to enact and transfer it elsewhere and in the future.

## 5. Beyond protection and privacy: home as a matter of social relationships, recognition and participation

Along with the temporality of homemaking, it is important to appreciate its multiscale. The constellation of circumstances people associate with home need not overlap fully with their private or domestic space, if any. There is an aspect of feeling-at-home that exceeds domestic life and even the achievement of better housing conditions (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Boccagni & Duyvendak, 2019). Home as a social experience can embrace different social, spatial and territorial scales of reference, including – and most ambivalently, for asylum seekers – the country of origin, or some parts of it, as the only “real home” (Brun & Fabos, 2015).

If making oneself at home rests on decent housing but is not reducible to it, pursuing this ideal aim by focusing only on reception centres would mean to over-emphasize the private and individualized aspects of home, relative to its social and public side. Having access to some private space in an asylum centre is little solace if asylum seekers have no meaningful relationships out of it, ending up stuck in their own “thoughts” night and day (Fontanari, 2017; Thorshaug, 2019). Feeling somewhat at home in an alien context depends on cultivating relationships that reach beyond the walls of a reception place; indeed, on gaining recognition, rights and, increasingly, the ability to navigate through the public sphere of the receiving community.

Many case studies of refugee reception tell about centres that are purposefully isolated or invisibilized from the surrounding neighbourhoods. While this has to do with well-known external pressures and constraints, a major point remains: the success of service providers in facilitating refugee interaction with the receiving communities is critical to the residents’ chances to make themselves at home over time. Investing in community work and development is as (or perhaps more) central to this aim as user-led adaptations in asylum facilities. Even inside the latter, after all, the chances of embedding some sense of home are strongly dependent on the social relationships being cultivated there. It is by no chance that, for instance, the refugee informants of Archambault (2012: 45), who had been recently moved from an asylum centre to an “ordinary” dwelling, deemed it essential to keep in touch with those who had remained there. As the author points out: “feelings of ‘home’ are more closely associated with the meaningfulness of social relationships than the physical environment, in similar quality housing”.

Managing reception centres along inclusive lines, therefore, should ideally enhance their connections with the local community, thus paving the way for the residents’ social inclusion over time (Zill et al., 2019). The potential of asylum facilities as “home-makers” has not to do only with infrastructural aspects, but also with their positive contribution to the homemaking capabilities of residents *in* and *out* of them.

For sure, making oneself at home in the public sphere of multi-ethnic societies under the mounting pressure of nativist or utterly racist politics is no easy endeavour. More fundamentally, it is conditioned by asylum seekers’ legal indeterminacy, which reduces both the scope and the incentives to their civic



participation (Boccagni & Righard, 2020). Nonetheless, there are all sorts of pragmatic, no less than normative reasons for the pursuit of refugees' homemaking to go beyond housing, while being necessarily based on it in the first place. Their "real home", if ever there will be a semi-permanent one, will not be a reception centre anyway. Cultivating their capacity to project new realistic *routes* after it may be more of a priority, for their own wellbeing, than investing in their *roots* in a particular local context.

### **To conclude: home as a place and as a capability to be transferred across places**

A research focus on the lived experience of guests in asylum centres cannot be disjointed, of course, from a broader understanding of the refugee international regime and of people's chances to navigate "internal borders" in the countries where they claim asylum. Over time, obtaining and then retaining a formal protection status marks the main threshold for asylum claimants to be able to make themselves at home anyway. It is *hope* towards a place that informs and nourishes a sense of *home* to grow up there, as research in migration and refugee studies has illustrated (Brun, 2015; Boccagni et al., 2020). That said, what happens in-between is far more than empty waiting – even inside asylum centres – and deserves in-depth analysis in its own right. The argument in this article has been precisely meant as a framework for comparative research along these lines.

Such a framework invites us to study the interplay between three subtexts of homemaking in asylum centres: a *pragmatic* one, related to people's ordinary need to improve the places where they happen to live in their own terms (at least if their habituation is enough to acknowledge that, for the time being, these are *their* places); a *policy relevant* one, since the dialectic between perceived homeliness and estrangement of the built environment facilitates a better understanding of housing quality and residential satisfaction, as a matter of emplaced wellbeing (or lack thereof); and an *existential* one, for everyday life in a reception centre marks a significant transition, although not necessarily a durable improvement, in the housing pathways and in the long-term homing concerns of forcibly displaced people.

In all of these respects, writing about "asylum centres" in general terms is clearly a heuristic simplification. Empirical and comparative research needs to take account of national and local specificities regarding legal frameworks, mandates, infrastructures, educational purposes (if any) and degrees of openness to the broader communities. However, there is no reason to look only at refugee lives *within* a centre. Rather, the relative accessibility of the surrounding urban or rural communities, in terms of infrastructures no less than interpersonal and group networks, requires attention in itself. This also calls for stronger collaboration between research on housing, home and social welfare in order to understand and facilitate refugees' orientation to the local communities of settlement and, over time, their life projects and trajectories. That said, and as



long as the existential question of home can be addressed within a refugee centre, this should be with a long-term purpose – not only making a place home-like, which is bound to be a partial and contentious endeavour anyway, but also empowering people's ability to make (any) place more home-like, as part and parcel of their homing trajectories over time and space.

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