

# At Home in the Centre?

## Spatial Appropriation and Horizons of Homemaking in Reception Facilities for Asylum Seekers

Paolo Boccagni  
Università di Trento – ERC StG HOMInG, Italy

### 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 of (undesired) human mobility. However, there is a promise to investigate it also as a matter of homemaking and space appropriation, even in unhomey 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 (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), and on the possibility for them to feel “at home” in typically unhomey places (Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2018). Throughout 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 hardly 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 inhospitable 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): to control forms of (unwanted) mobility, ensure residents' basic social protection and, at best, facilitate their socialisation into the rules and language of the receiving society. Yet, asylum centres may end up also being sites, and possibly co-producers, of forms of homemaking from both "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 analyse, first, how reception facilities can assume relatively home-like contours, whether by design or – more often – following the spontaneous initiative of their residents; second, the constraints to which homemaking in asylum centres is subject, but also the need for a non-essentialised 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 much as, or more than, the abstract and disembodied home-like features of the built environment in which they are hosted.

## **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 root of forced migration. Likewise, the absence of a single and fixed place



**Figure 1.** A drawing behind a bench in front of the entrance to a refugee centre, taken by author.

suitable to be called home in the here and now is recurrently emphasised in refugee studies. However, the very notion of home can be problematised and conceived as disjointed from its subtext of ascription and fixity (Malkki, 1992), with critical awareness of the over-idealised 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 longer just a matter of loss or domicile – even for those forcibly on the move. It is rather an assemblage of meaningful

materialities, emotions and relationships; a battlefield in which refugees' 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 unhomey 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 and 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 traumatising 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), to more structured and "autonomous" housing facilities, including ordinary dwellings. Each of these arrangements can be explored in the light of the interaction between infrastructural qualities and the possibility, ability and interest of residents to draw more than a sense of basic protection from it.

Against a background of "uneven geography of asylum accommodation" all over Europe (Zill et al., 2019), the focus of this chapter 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, p. 18). Yet, their commonalities in social organisation, 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 accommodation in poorer countries (e.g. Kellett, 2002) or in Europe itself (Giorgi & Fasulo, 2013). Although there are functional equivalents 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. Certainly, 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" the steps of their mobility trajectories (Vigh, 2006).

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 obtain 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", poorly maintained old and vacant buildings, 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, that is, the time and effort needed to "check" whether an application is "legitimate", are instrumental in justifying 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, p. 168).

Nonetheless, the infrastructural and spatial organisation 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", an arrangement instrumental to "keep[ing] temporality on hold" in residents' 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. 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 organisational 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; Vandevordt, 2017; Willems et al., 2020). As or more important is that 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 of sharing them with family members, friends or other people with a similar ethnonational, language or cultural background. From the viewpoint 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 live in a centre for a more or less extended (and sometimes undefined) time span, they may develop an emotionally meaningful, if ambiguous, relationship with the built environment in which they live. This also depends on a variety of influences: everyday interaction with other guests, the social inclusion programmes (if any) in which they take part, and the broader scope for interaction with the surrounding local communities.

The point, then, is not whether 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 whether 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-residents.

### **The challenge of housing quality and the lures of home-like qualities**

Even in generally unhomey 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 location, but also the private space available in it. In principle, relatively decentralised and small-scale housing options seem to “provide more homely qualities than institution-like buildings” (Hauge et al., 2017, p. 12; Thorshaug, 2019). Yet, infrastructural variables tell only 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 organisational 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 to invite outsiders – “guests” of the “guests” – into their own rooms (van der Horst, 2004; Rainisio, 2015; Vandevordt, 2017). This resonates with the literature on home studies, which emphasises 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 they aim to be something more than the functional equivalent of a car park for people “in waiting” (Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2018).

Of course, a participatory and user-sensitive approach is not without its contradictions. This is not only because it runs counter to the engrained practice of most reception facilities. More fundamentally, it is utterly irrelevant for the essential counterpart of reception – the institutional apparatus in charge of 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 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, p. 12) may end 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 to use 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.

## 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 increased likelihood that they will engage in active, albeit “reluctant”, forms of homemaking (Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2018). Under the label of *homemaking* I group 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” – whether successful or not – “to make spaces ‘ordinary’ through the processes... that try to reclaim ‘normal’ life and create a ‘home’” (Sanyal, 2014, p. 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 lifestyles prior to migration;
- Ways of *privatising* 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 the aim of gaining 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, p. 2);
- Ways of *beautification*, out of any attempt aesthetically and sensorially to improve the everyday living space by bringing it closer to one’s tastes and domestic cultures (Neumark, 2013). Wall decorations, curtains, carpets, par-



ticular 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 marginalised 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 spatial 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, spatial appropriation points to people's attempts to personalise a place by infusing 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.



**Figure 2.** A prayer rug hanging on the balcony of a refugee centre, taken by author.

In fact, refugees' attempts to bring 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 lifestyles. Research 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, 2021). 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.

### **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 – although mere habituation may result in people leaving more “traces” than they perhaps would admit (Thorshaug & Brun, 2019).

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” – for instance, newcomer asylum seekers, and those who aim at 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 necessarily be 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 whether, how and when a place or parts of it are “home-ly 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 essentialised 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 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, p. 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.

### **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 multi-scalarity. 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, 2021). 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 over-emphasising the private and individualised 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 outside 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 purposely isolated or invisibilised 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 of making 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 not by chance that, for instance, the refugee informants of Archambault (2012), who had recently been 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” (p. 45).

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 to do not only with infrastructural aspects, but also with their positive contribution to the homemaking capabilities of residents *in* and *out* of them.

Certainly, 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 of and the incentives for their civic participation (Boccagni & Righard, 2020). Nonetheless, there are all sorts of pragmatic, no less than normative reasons for the pursuit of refugees' home-making to transcend housing, while necessarily being 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.

### **Conclusion: 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 dissociated, of course, from a broader understanding of the international refugee regime and of people's chances to navigate internal borders in the countries where they claim asylum. Over time, obtaining and then retaining formal protection status marks the main threshold for asylum claimants to be able to make themselves at home anyway. It is the attachment to a sense of *hope* to 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 on 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 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 refugees' 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, in itself requires attention. 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 to make (any) place more home-like, as part and parcel of their homing trajectories over time and space.

## Acknowledgements

Research for this chapter was done within the scope of HOMInG-The Home-Migration Nexus, a project funded by the European Research Council (ERC-StG 678456, 2016-2021), and of HOASI, a MIUR-funded project on home and asylum seekers in Italy. Both projects are based at the University of Trento, Italy. More information is available at [homing.soc.unitn.it](http://homing.soc.unitn.it).

## References

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Albadra, D., Coley, D., Hart, J. (2018). Toward healthy housing for the displaced. *The Journal of Architecture*, 23(1), 115-36.
- Archambault, J. (2012). 'It can be good here too': Home and continuity in refugee children's narratives of settlement. *Children's Geographies*, 10(1), 35-48.
- Bendixsen, S., & Eriksen, T. (2018). Time and the Other: Waiting and Hope among Irregular Migrants. In M. Janeja & A. Bandak (eds.), *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty* (pp. 87-112), London: Bloomsbury.
- Boccagni, P. (2017). *Migration and the search for home*. New York: Palgrave.
- Boccagni, P., & Duyvendak, J. W. (2021). Homemaking in the public. On the scales and stakes of framing, feeling, and claiming extra-domestic space as "home". *Sociology Compass*, 15(6), 1-14.
- Boccagni, P., Pérez-Murcia, L. E., & Belloni, M. (2020). *Thinking Home on the Move: A Conversation across Disciplines*. London: Emerald.
- Boccagni, P., & Righard, E. (2020). Social work with refugee and displaced populations in Europe. *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(3), 375-83.
- Blunt, A. & Dowling, R. (2006). *Home*. London: Routledge.

- Brun, C. (2012). Home in temporary dwellings. In S. Smith (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Housing and Home*. London: Elsevier.
- Brun, C. (2015). Active waiting and changing hopes. *Social Analysis*, 59(1), 19-37.
- Brun, C., & Fabos, A. (2015). Making homes in limbo? *Refuge*, 31(1), 5-17.
- Couldrey, M. & Herson, M. (eds.). (2017). Shelter in displacement. *Forced Migration Review*, 55.
- Cresswell, T. (2004). *Place*. London: Blackwell.
- Dibbits, H. (2009). Furnishing the salon: Symbolic ethnicity and performative practices in Moroccan-Dutch domestic interiors. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 33, 550-57.
- Dossa, P. & Golubovic, J. (2019). Reimagining home in the wake of displacement. *Studies in Social Justice*, 13(1), 171-86.
- Douglas, M. (1991). The idea of a home. *Social Research*, 58(1), 287-307.
- Dovey, K. (2005). Home as paradox. In G. Rowles, H. Chaudhury (eds.), *Home and identity in later life: International perspectives* (pp. 361-369). New York: Springer.
- Dudley, S. (2011). Feeling at home: Producing and consuming things in Karenni refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. *Population, Space and Place*, 17, 742-55.
- Easthope, H., Lui, E., Judd, B., & Burnley, I. (2015). Feeling at home in a multigenerational household. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 32(2), 151-70.
- Fontanari, E. (2017). It's my life. The temporalities of refugees and asylum-seekers with in the European border regime. *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*, 1, 25-54.
- Giorgi, S. & Fasulo, A. (2013). Transformative homes: Squatting and furnishing as sociocultural projects. *Home Cultures*, 10(2), 111-34.
- Gram-Hanssen, K. & Bech-Danielsen, C. (2012). Creating a new home: Somali, Iraqi and Kurdish immigrants and their homes in Danish social housing. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 27, 89-103.
- Gronseth, A. S. & Thorshaug, R. (2018). Struggling for home where home is not meant to be. mimeo.
- Gronseth, A., Stoa, E., Thorshaug, R., & Hauge, A. (2016). *Housing Qualities and Effects on Identity and Well-being: Theoretical perspective for interdisciplinary research on asylum seeker reception centres*. Lillehammer University College, Research Report no. 169/2016.
- Hart, J., Paskiewicz, N. & Albadra, D. (2018). Shelter as home? Syrian homemaking in Jordanian refugee camps. *Human Organization*, 77(4), 371-380.
- Hauge, A. L., Stoa, E. & Denizou, K. (2017). Framing outsidership: Aspects of housing quality in decentralized reception centres for asylum seekers in Norway. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 34(1), 1-20.
- Jansen, S. & Lofving, S. (eds.). (2008). *Struggles for home: Violence, hope and the movement of people*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Kabachnik, P., Regulska, J. & Mitchneck, B. (2010). When and where is home? *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(3), 316-36.

- Karlsson, S. (2019). You said 'home' but we don't have a 'house': Children's lived rights and politics in an asylum centre in Sweden. *Children's Geographies*, 17(1), 64-75.
- Kellett, P. (2002). The construction of home in the informal city. *Journal of Romance Studies*, 2(3), 17-31.
- Kreichauf, R. (2018). From forced migration to forced arrival. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6, 1-22.
- Levin, I. (2014). Intersectionality in the migrant house. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 35(4), 421-41.
- Malkki, L. (1992). National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 24-44.
- Mavrommatis, G. (2018). Grasping the meaning of integration in an era of (forced) mobility. *Mobilities*, 13(6), 861-75.
- Neumark, D. (2013). Drawn to Beauty: The practice of house-beautification as home-making among the forcibly displaced. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 30(3), 237-61
- Rainisio, N. (2015). These places do not understand us: Environmental psychology of the refugee centers. In E. Giunta, A. Rebaglio (eds.), *Design research on temporary homes. Hospitable places for homeless, immigrants and refugees* (pp. 72-89). AADR.
- Sanyal, R. (2014). Urbanizing Refuge: Interrogating Spaces of Displacement. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38(2), 558-70.
- Scott-Smith, T. (2019). Beyond the boxes: Refugee shelter and the humanitarian politics of life. *American Ethnologist*, 46(4), 509-521.
- Thorshaug, R. O. (2019). Arrival In-between: Analyzing the Lived Experiences of Different Forms of Accommodation for Asylum Seekers in Norway. In B. Meeus, K. Arnaut & B. van Heur (eds.), *Arrival infrastructures: Migration and Urban Social Mobilities* (pp. 207-227). London: Palgrave.
- Thorshaug, R. O., & Brun, C. (2019). Temporal injustice and re-orientations in asylum reception centres in Norway. *Fennia*, 197(2), 232-48.
- Turner, S. (2015). What is a refugee camp? *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 29(2), 139-148.
- Vandevoordt, R. (2017). The politics of food and hospitality. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 30(4), 605-21.
- Van der Horst, H. (2004). Living in a reception centre: the search for home in an institutional setting. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 21, 36-46.
- Vigh, H. (2009). Wayward migration. *Ethnos*, 74(1), 91-109.
- Whyte, Z. (2011). Enter the myopticon: Uncertain surveillance in the Danish asylum system. *Anthropology Today*, 27(3), 18-21.
- Willems, S., De Smet, S., & Heylighen, A. (2020). Seeking a balance between privacy and connectedness in housing for refugees. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 35, 45-46.
- Zill, M., van Liempt, I., Spierings, B., & Hooimeijer, P. (2019). Uneven geographies of asylum accommodation. *Migration Studies*, mny049.