


# Becoming part of the city: local emplacement after forced displacement

ILSE VAN LIEMPT



van Liempt, I. (2023) Becoming part of the city: local emplacement after forced displacement. *Fennia* 201(1) 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.127425>

 For refugees, arriving in a new place is inherently emotional – fraught with experiences of disorientation and fear of the unknown – but it can also be liberating and result in new connections. This article explores a series of questions around how forced displacement is experienced and turned into local emplacement. It is argued that it is important to recognize that global migration is grounded through attention to the ways in which such processes are locally lived and produced. I acknowledge that, on arrival, forced migrants become entangled in an infrastructure – laid out for them as a special category of migrants – that is directing them towards certain institutions and places; however, at the same time, I argue that this is not the only infrastructure which they use and explore. Starting from the issue of how refugees *themselves* try to build connections and find their way in a new city enables the exploration of potential overlaps, gaps and tensions between the official response to arrival and the everyday lived experiences of refugees. The city as a whole is explicitly taken as the unit of analysis in this article, without limitations to specific places dedicated to refugees or specific neighbourhoods where it is known that refugees arrive and/or are housed. It is argued that a focus on public and semi-public spaces is important as it allows an exploration of spaces that are meaningful to refugees and might result in new insights on connections or disconnections with already existing infrastructures. This approach offers more room for the unexpected – but also the mundane and the everyday – which all play an important part in the production of a counter-narrative against the formal and institutionalized way of framing the arrival of refugees in which refugees' own experiences are the more central focus.

Keywords: forced displacement, local emplacement, refugees, public space, arrival infrastructures

*Ilse van Liempt* (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4978-3101>), Human Geography and Spatial Planning Department, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. E-mail: [i.c.vanliempt@uu.nl](mailto:i.c.vanliempt@uu.nl)

## Introduction

When Ahmed (not his real name), a 30-year-old Syrian man, arrived in the Netherlands he was told to register in Ter Apel. This central reception centre, located in a green village in the north of the Netherlands on the border with Germany, houses up to 2,000 people and can be reached by bus in 30 minutes from the train station at Emmen (see Fig. 1):

I did not have any idea for trains because in Syria we didn't use the train or tram or metro. They just said 'You can go to Ter Apel and this dagkaart is for free'. I looked at the map – I'm very good with maps – but I didn't know what to do with it because I don't know the train, the tram, the metro system. I spoke a little bit of English at the time but I was afraid to ask people because I don't know these people and I heard that European people don't like people from the Middle East, especially those with black hair and a beard. So I thought maybe they would look at me and think 'He is dangerous'. But I had no choice and asked a man how to get to Ter Apel, because I'm afraid to ask women – maybe she will get the police on to me or something. I don't know. But the man did not know anything and then a woman came to me – she was 45 or something – and she said 'Can I help you?'. I told her 'If you would'. I want to go to this address – to Ter Apel – but I don't know how to get there. She told me, okay, follow me. And we sat and she invited me to coffee and she told me 'Okay, take this train and then that one' and I understood a little bit and I went to Zwolle first and then to Emmen and then Ter Apel.



**Fig. 1.** Location of reception centres in the Netherlands.

At the time when Ahmed arrived in the Netherlands (summer of 2015), the arrival of refugees was met with ambiguity and caused significant political turbulence. There was a lot of kindness, like that shown by the woman who helped Ahmed to find his way to the first administrative location. Both the number of volunteers who supported refugees and the donations made also increased rapidly in this period. At the same time, however, refugees were accused of stealing native residents' jobs, occupying advantaged positions within an already tight social housing market and profiting from Dutch welfare-state benefits (van Heelsum 2017). In some cases, riots were organized near asylum-seeker centres.

Young Syrian men, in particular, became stigmatized in media reporting; a rhetoric of othering directed at Arab or Muslim refugee men became noticeable in the general discourse on refugee migration (also Huizinga 2022). Ahmed's quote, above, illustrates that the refugees themselves were also aware of this rhetoric and were even (trying to) adjust(ing) their behaviour to these pre-conceived ideas around forced migration.

Arriving in spaces on the edges of towns, often in industrial/military environments that are highly institutionalized and isolated, makes asylum-seekers feel very disorientated (Kreichauf 2018; Zill *et al.* 2020). Like many other reception centres, Ter Apel also has a military history as a former North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) military base. There are eight courtyards and 250 people live around each one in houses shared by 16 people. There are also offices, a health centre, leisure facilities and a school. Everyday life in these centres is fraught with experiences of surveillance, control, rules and regulations. Asylum-seekers, for example, have no control over who shares their rooms, are often not allowed to cook their own food and must move to another centre whenever they are ordered to. People in reception centres generally suffer from a lack of privacy (van der Horst 2004) and the centres are typically permeated by stress and uncertainty (Ghorashi *et al.* 2018). Research has shown that residing in reception centres as a result of these conditions even has a direct negative impact on people's mental health (Bakker *et al.* 2014).

The ways of forcing people into prolonged waiting are described by Khosravi (2019) as 'stolen time' and by Fontanari (2017) as 'temporal injustice'. Thorshaug and Brun (2019) also apply the concept of 'temporal injustice' to the context of reception centres and show how this injustice is expressed in the 'throwntogetherness' (Massey 2005) of the material conditions, institutional governance and experiences and practices of inhabiting the centres. These environments offer little for people to do and, because they are often located in isolated places such as on the outskirts of towns, people's isolation is increased, in both physical and also mental terms in the form of a sense of isolation (van Liempt & Bygnes 2022). These normative temporal frameworks of modern state systems are sometimes disrupted – as in the case of sanctuary practices (Coutin 1993; Darling 2010; Mitchell 2022) or alternative forms of accommodation (Zill *et al.* 2020). However, the refugees themselves also need to find ways to deal with these systems.

The disorienting materiality of the centres, combined with asylum-seekers' lack of knowledge on legal procedures and rights and their insecurity due to not speaking the local language, results in them often experiencing very limited autonomy to discover the city and meet other people outside the centres. Additionally, these locations are often poorly accessible by public transport and financial constraints highly impact on asylum-seekers' mobility. As a result, it often takes some time before asylum-seekers can look beyond the formal infrastructures laid out for them and explore the new environment on their own terms.

It is important to stress, however, that – even in temporary reception centres that could easily be framed as unhomey – there are examples of homemaking practices that tell us much about the everyday lived experiences of forced migrants (Blunt & Dowling 2006; Thorshaug & Brun 2019; Boccagni 2022). Even when asylum procedures offer an unclear time perspective and reception centres set material and institutional barriers to mobility that is beyond their control, asylum-seekers *do* long for more familiarity with their new environment.

In this article I focus on forced migrants' local emplacement by taking the moments and places of arrival as vantage points and exploring how forced migrants become part of the city. The research is based on fieldwork in Amsterdam and, as such, has an urban focus, although many refugees in the Netherlands also arrive in non-urban areas as a result of Dutch dispersal policies (van Liempt & Miellet 2021).

## Life after Ter Apel

From Ter Apel, asylum-seekers are moved to other reception centres where they have to await the outcome of their asylum procedure. There are 180 reception centres in the Netherlands, all spread across the country (see Fig. 1) and there are regular movements between them. When refugees receive housing on their own, their place in the centre needs to be filled; many centres are also temporary so that, when they close, people are again moved around. This institutional practice makes it hard for asylum-seekers to build attachments to places of arrival and create a home for themselves.

In the Dutch context, dispersal applies to the allocation of housing to refugees after successful completion of their asylum procedure. In other countries, dispersal starts earlier, when asylum-seekers are still going through the asylum procedure (Arnoldus *et al.* 2003; van Liempt & Mielliet 2021; Darling 2022). This means that housing might be offered in yet another part of the country to where they stayed in reception centres and might be a new and disorienting experience.

When legally recognized as refugees, asylum-seekers in the Netherlands receive a one-time housing offer by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) (Arnoldus *et al.* 2003; de Hoon 2017). This is social housing and refugees are prioritized in gaining access to it so they are not on the waiting list. The Dutch Housing Act (Huisvestingswet 2014) lays down the principles and formula of the target setting for housing for refugees; these are set bi-annually for each municipality by the Ministry of the Interior, based on the total population of the municipality and an estimation of the number of permit-holders requiring housing that year (Arnoldus *et al.* 2003; de Hoon 2017). Dutch municipalities are obliged by law to offer housing to recognized refugees and can be penalised for failing to do so.

Although there is no formal obligation to accept the housing offer and refugees can take up residence anywhere and find housing independently, in practice this is difficult due to the, on average, 10-year-long waiting list when they refuse this offer. However, it is also difficult because of an increasingly unaffordable housing market and refugees' lack of social networks which could help them to find housing outside the official system. El Moussawi (2023) shows, in her work on the housing trajectories of refugees in Belgium, how limited access to affordable housing once asylum-seekers have received protection status results in what she calls 'continued displacement'.

The moment when refugees receive their own house keys is important in terms of settlement, especially because the earlier period in reception centres is very stressful. A 34-year-old man from Iraq, for example, explained that he had stayed in several reception centres where he always felt stressed and unsafe. His last experience with reception centres was in the former prison in Amsterdam (*Bijlmerbajes*) where he felt very unhappy and had a difficult time coping with all sorts of different people and conflicts. When he was offered a house for himself it was a turning point in his life:

When I was allocated my own house, I was so happy. It is important to be independent, to have your own room to sleep in, your own toilet. And a kitchen for yourself – not having to share your kitchen feels so good. I was very happy when the news came.

## Arrival infrastructures for refugees

Receiving the keys to your own house is an important moment when arrival really does take shape. Formal infrastructures of arrival like the housing allocation system determine where people are housed and which services are offered to them by the state. In this article I argue that these directive infrastructures shape people's lives, although they are not the only ones which refugees use and explore. Starting from the question how the refugees *themselves* try to build connections and find their way in a new city offers the opportunity to look beyond the architecture of bureaucracy and legalistic logics and practices and enables us to take a closer look at *all* the factors which play a role in starting somewhere new. Arrival infrastructures are defined by Meeus, Arnaut and van Heur (2019, 1) as: "those parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled on arrival, and where their future local or translocal social mobilities are produced as much as negotiated".

The concept of arrival infrastructures allows us to see how refugees use and experience various infrastructures and how they may even produce their own. This makes it a useful concept if we want

to answer the question of how refugees *emplace themselves* in a new environment after forced displacement. It refrains from setting a territorial limit and follows refugees in their everyday, mundane behaviour in new environments. This takes us beyond neighbourhoods of arrival and points out which spaces in the city are important for the process of arrival from the refugees' point of view. This perspective thus allows us to gain an idea of how the various layers of arrival infrastructures, ranging from top-down approaches enacted by supranational, national or local authorities to bottom-up initiatives developed by citizens, volunteers, activists and civil society, are (or are not) interlinked and how they are experienced. Gill (2018), in his work on welcoming refugees, also illustrates how important it is to distinguish between institutionalized, statist ways of seeing and responding and the more organic ways. His work enables us to identify the tensions that arise between the different ways of welcoming refugees in abstract and more solidaristic and autonomous ways.

When asked about their contact with Dutch people, many refugees say that they long for these types of encounter because they are important for them in finding their way in; however, this does not happen automatically and is often experienced as quite difficult. Many of our interviewees experienced unequal power relations in their interactions with Dutch people and illustrated this by saying that the Dutch often expressed their attitudes and ideas about Syrians through stereotypical images, as if all Syrians were backward and uneducated (van Liempt & Staring 2020). These unequal power relations or implicit recognition of discrimination make refugees feel less at home.

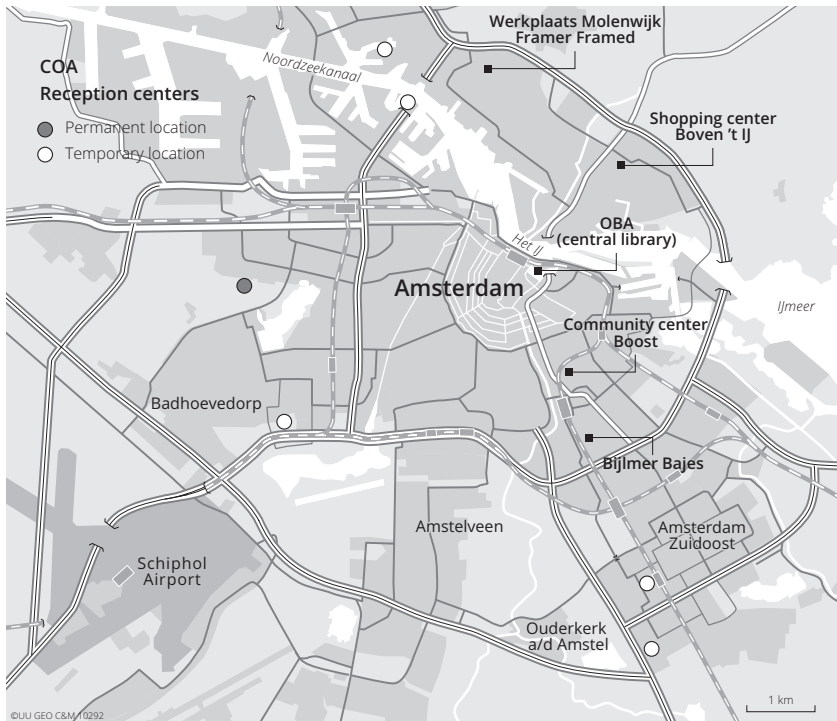
### **Participatory Research in Amsterdam with local organisations and newcomers**

The findings presented here are based on empirical research with people with a refugee background who recently arrived in the city of Amsterdam. The research was part of a European project funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA 2019–2022). Apart from Amsterdam, research was also conducted in Leipzig, Brussels and Newcastle. This article is based only on the findings from Amsterdam and is produced in collaboration with a local arts initiative, Framer Framed (*Werkplaats Molenwijk*) and a community organisation called BOOST (see Fig. 2). This community centre gives newcomers and locals the opportunity to jointly develop its programme through language courses, informal conversation lessons, sewing, cycling lessons and buddy projects to help new arrivals to find jobs and learn the language.

The two organisations were the starting point for this data collection. The organisations are based in neighbourhoods where the different asylum-seekers have typically arrived: *Transvaal* (east Amsterdam) and *Molenwijk* (north Amsterdam). Both neighbourhoods still have a relatively large share of social housing, hence they are an important arrival location for refugees who are offered accommodation within the social housing system. Both neighbourhoods also have relatively high proportions of migrant communities. In Transvaal, 50% of residents, for example, have moved in from outside Europe.

In the east of Amsterdam, participatory observations (210 hours) were conducted in a community centre called BOOST by Mieke Kox, a postdoctoral researcher on the HERA project for Amsterdam. Next to observations and repeated informal conversations with 77 newcomers, 22 official semi-structured interviews were conducted with young visitors having a refugee background. All the interviews except one were held in a room in the community centre, where privacy was guaranteed. One interview took place in the home of the respondent. It often took a while before people consented to a formal interview. Mistrust towards research and recording interviews is common in refugee-related research (van Liempt & Bilger 2018). We tried to reduce this lack of trust by explaining in depth what the research was about – although most of all by spending time with people. Our focus on everyday experiences made the interviews for some more interesting as they were less standard than the refugee research projects they had been involved in earlier, which only seemed to be interested in integration as a pre-defined concept.

In Molenwijk, 172 hours of (participatory) fieldwork were conducted through neighbourhood observations and observations in the library and participation in language cafés and community activities by Rik Huizinga, a postdoctoral researcher on the HERA project for Amsterdam. A total of 21 in-depth interviews were conducted with young refugees in this neighbourhood.



**Fig. 2.** Reception centers and research locations in Amsterdam.

The ages of participants in both neighbourhoods varied between 19 and 37 years. All respondents were generally able to speak Dutch or English at a sufficient level to be interviewed and no translators were used. Most participants were from Syria, Eritrea or Sudan.

Both types of fieldwork demonstrated the importance of taking time to build meaningful relationships with community organisations working with refugees (Huizinga *et al.* 2022) and involved volunteer work by the two researchers. Academic research can often be seen as extractive. In this project, we valued simply listening and learning from those with whom we work (*ibid.*). More than just gathering data, researchers were also present in the organisations, helping with filling in forms, translating and generally spending a lot of time with people. Showing a willingness to talk about 'everyday stuff' that might seem unrelated to research is a useful way to build rapport and trust. In our research, these conversations often also revealed important insights, as we were interested in how people manage to feel at home in a place that is new to them. Leaving the field was challenging, as some participants had built up expectations around friendships that were not continued.

In addition to observations and interviews, a photo-voice workshop was organized in the summer of 2021 in *Werkplaats Molenwijk*. The photo-voice method was designed to document ideas, experiences and emotions around homemaking after arrival. The workshops were conducted in collaboration with a professional and experienced photographer. Five female refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea who were living in the neighbourhood participated. Using the camera on their smartphone, participants were invited to explore how they find their way in. Each week, the participants were asked to take three photographs and to add a few sentences that expressed their points of view on the themes discussed, such as feeling at home, identity, safety and exploring new places. The photos were discussed with the group, which resulted in a lot of additional information on the meanings behind the photos and the intimacies which the photos represented. Emotions were triggered during the workshops and were dealt with in an ethical way.

The workshops resulted in a photo exhibition in the same art-based community centre and attracted visitors from the neighbourhood and beyond. Using the photo-voice method allowed us to

document the role which the public space plays in newcomers' homemaking processes in a creative way. It also resulted in a good sense of how those refugee youth who had recently arrived felt and oriented themselves in a new environment. The meetings were seen by participants as opportunities to learn new skills and meet new people – the exhibition was a great event where people felt proud to share their stories.

All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed in Atlas.ti. This latter was a collaborative experience with some of our participants, as the results were shared and discussed both halfway through and at the end of the project, during a presentation at the community centre.

### **Emplacement by the refugees themselves**

Through conversations, it was found that, in general, arriviers with a refugee background feel secure and safe compared to their country of origin. One of the participants of the photo-voice workshop, for example, explains why she took a photo of the local shopping centre (see Fig. 3) and what this space means to her:

During the war in Syria, it was not safe and was impossible to do your groceries because there was a lot of bombing. Here, in the shopping centre Boven 't Y, I feel safe because I see more people doing their shopping. When I see the crowd of people, I feel safe.

Nonetheless, the participants described many insecurities and anxieties at the local level, always in relation to specific places and sometimes specific times of the day.



**Fig. 3.** Shopping Center Boven 't IJ.

Participants in our research told us that moving away from reception centres or deprived neighbourhoods in order to explore the city on your own terms and to build your own connections to the new place of arrival and feel part of the city is important. It can be liberating to go for a stroll in the city, to dress up, to have a coffee on a terrace, to do touristy things – but also to just sit and watch people or go to a party where nobody knows that you are a refugee.

Visiting the centre of larger cities, especially for those who have an urban background<sup>1</sup>, can be an important part of homemaking – like this 30-year-old Afghan man who likes to walk in the city centre:

When the community centre where I like to go is closed, I go for a walk in the city centre. If the weather is nice, I just take a seat somewhere in the sun and then I watch people. It is always crowded and I like to watch people. It is the crowdedness that makes me forget my problems.

Going to the park and meeting up with friends was also often mentioned as a means to get away from the house and enjoy oneself. Eritrean coffee rituals were sometimes moved from private to public spaces, as Figure 4 from one of the photo-voice workshops shows.



**Fig. 4.** Eritrean coffee ritual in the park with friends.

Drinking coffee with friends is a way to remember home, as it illustrates transnational feelings and practices of belonging. However, it is also a sticky practice that contributes to people's local sense of home.

Puwar's (2004) concept of space invaders fits these descriptions very nicely. Appropriating places in the city centre or other public spaces, spaces from which refugee bodies have conceptually been excluded, is an important part of homemaking and empowerment for the refugees themselves. Schiller and Çağlar (2011) emphasize in their work how migrants can also be seen as scale-makers and



how they organize and evaluate localities on their own terms. In so doing, they shape public spaces, become visible and potentially find recognition and belonging. Puwar (2004, 1) adds to this that “disturbs the *status quo* while at the same time bearing the weight of the sediment past”. Experiences of exclusion should not be overlooked in this process of space-invading. Local places are shaped by certain rules, behaviours and discourses of bodies that fit in and those which do not (Shaker *et al.* 2022). A sense of belonging as such is always relational – it is the result of an interaction between how people see themselves and how others respond to them and the power hierarchies around it.

Refugees in the city have to deal with everyday forms of othering; however, feeling the ‘urban vibe’ can also make a person feel at home, alive and hopeful for what the city might offer them in the near future. Feeling part of it confirms their right to the city and acknowledges their presence. Ahmed’s favorite place in Amsterdam, for example, is the central public library (OBA):

I like to go to OBA, the central library and sit in the café on the rooftop. You can see the city from above, you can see how the city breathes.

He likes to take a more distant look at the city and dream about his future in it. This conceptualization of urban belonging reinforces the importance of looking beyond where refugees arrive if we want to understand how people find their way in a new environment and how newcomers are engaged in remaking their everyday lives in a new context after migration. Global migration is grounded through attention to the ways in which such processes are locally lived and produced (also Massey 1994; Mitchell 1997; Lamb 2002; Hall 2021). And creating a feeling of home and a sense of belonging is not only bound to a person’s house or neighbourhood (Čapo 2015) but goes beyond these spaces. It often takes place in the dynamic space of the city, where there is a wide range of opportunities to make connections with others. It is important to move beyond the territorial trap and the view of neighbourhoods and places of arrival as ‘delimited containers’ (Meeus *et al.* 2019) when homemaking and belonging to the city are analysed.

Some people, especially those who were single, told us that they do not much like staying at home and actually prefer to go outside. As 30-year-old Abdo (not his real name), who is single, said:

A house is just for sleep. You have gas and heat and those I need to cook. If I stay at home I read my book, do my homework or I look at my computer. When I go to my friend’s house we break out, we are doing something. I always try to keep myself busy, to not be inside the house too much, to go outside.

A focus on public space reveals different processes of homemaking and allows us to see when and how refugees take back control over where they like to go and feel at home, especially when feelings of displacement, loneliness and isolation also make up important parts of their everyday experiences. Public spaces can be seen as concrete spaces where people try to make sense of a new life and new relationships and it can even be seen as a form of everyday resistance to a ‘refugee life’ that some people experience as a life ‘stuck away in a neighbourhood with few social interactions’. Going to the city centre can be an important part of the process of gaining control over one’s mobility. Here we refer not only to physical but also to mental mobility in terms of migrants trying to reconnect with themselves and questioning the labels attached to them as refugees (also Suerbaum 2018; Kallio *et al.* 2019).

The refugee label is highly politicized (Zetter 2007) and the ascribed identities that are forced upon refugees through dominant discourses most of all shed light on their position as marginalized groups in receiving societies. Empirical research with refugees shows that there are important differences in how refugees, upon arrival, appropriate the category of refugee. Sometimes it can be a positive experience and ‘refugeeness’ (Malkki 1995) becomes part of a collective identity in exile; however, the label can also be experienced as a burden that overrules people’s social identity in many different ways. As such it is often experienced in contradictory terms. During interviews it was often pointed out how certain spaces made people feel less visible as a refugee and how this was appreciated.

In the context of the 2015 migration flows and the European Union’s ‘migration crisis’, there has been a political and media push to de-label refugees and focus on a new frame of ‘economic migrants’ (Crawley & Skleparis 2018). While this does not seem to reduce the space for protection or hospitality for the already settled refugees in the Netherlands, they did have to deal with resentment, mistrust and stereotyping by Dutch citizens, making it harder for the refugees to find their place in society. The

hierarchies of refugees are played out in policies and also in everyday practices – like, for example, volunteers who ‘prefer to help Syrian refugees over Eritreans’ (van Heelsum 2017).

It is interesting to explore how refugees deal with and try to escape these labels and the meanings attached to certain spaces in the context of emplacement. Spaces are thus of fundamental value to understanding one’s self and one’s social environment (Massey 2005).

### Homemaking in (semi-)public spaces

Public and semi-public spaces in theory offer a great deal of potential for building relationships with the city and with other people, although our empirical research in Amsterdam shows that it is not self-evident for refugee youth who are new to the city to immediately exploit the potential of public and semi-public spaces (van Liempt & Kox 2023).

Abrihet, a young Eritrean who had been in the Netherlands for a couple of years, explained, for example, that he was still afraid to approach Dutch people in the streets:

I’ve asked someone in the street for directions but I got ignored even though I asked it politely. This makes me sad and insecure about whether I should speak Dutch in the streets. People don’t understand me and they didn’t want to try to understand me. Here [in BOOST] people understand that my Dutch isn’t that good yet.

Community centres can fill an important role in providing a safe space where people feel less reluctant to encounter others and where interaction across difference is often commonplace (Wessendorf 2013). Some of the insecurities that come with not yet speaking the language and/or not knowing the norms and rules of behaviour in public spaces can be crossed in these semi-public spaces. Community centres can feel like a second home or even a second family, as one of the interviewees described it.

Another interesting in-between space which we discovered through our photo-voice workshops in a high-rise neighbourhood in north Amsterdam was the meanings attached to balconies. This space can invoke feelings of home because you can furnish it in such a way that it evokes a sense of home (see Fig. 5). From the balcony, you can also observe the public space on your own terms and gradually get to know the codes of the street better and (re)consider old and new uses of public space. In addition, the balcony is a place of rest and reflection that facilitates connections with both the new surroundings and the past.

Homemaking for refugees involves many different contexts and memories of places and people (see Al-Ali & Koser 2002; Ahmed *et al.* 2003; Ralph & Staeheli 2011; Boccagni 2017). Long (2013) conceptualizes home as an interplay between the house and the world, the intimate and the global, the material and the symbolic. This deterritorialization of people and place opens up new and significant ways of understanding the importance of place in a fluid, changing and contested globalized world (Massey 1992; Gieryn 2000; Gustafson 2009). At the same time, this deterritorialization runs the risk of diminishing the important relationship that refugees have with particular places in the new context of arrival and overlooks specific lived experiences. Concrete places and people may trigger emotional and affective responses that are part of homemaking processes, offer opportunities to socialize and be an important part of finding one’s place in a new city of arrival.

Boccagni’s (2017) conceptualization of homemaking as an active process involving efforts to establish security and familiarity – as well as a sense of control or autonomy in a new place – fits the situation of refugees very well. Boccagni’s definition of home incorporates questions around both how home is reconstituted, reimagined and enacted and about home as a special kind of relationship with place, one that revolves around materiality and the realm of social relationships, memories and discourses. Claiming public space by playing football in the park and/or bringing objects/doing activities that remind people of home are illustrative of this. It is important to acknowledge that homemaking for refugees takes place beyond borders, both in transnational fields and also through concrete ‘sticky’ place-making in the public space. One can feel at home in relation to places, specific settings and certain people. Places can trigger memories and emotions and make one feel at home.

Schiller and Çağlar’s (2011, 15) process of “migrant subjective rescaling”, in which migrants grant symbolic value to specific places and develop “their own hierarchies of places based on the value and prestige of localities within migrant transnational fields” fits these experiences very well. Taking



**Fig. 5.** The balcony as an in-between space between public and private.

refugees' agency into account, it becomes clear that, to a certain extent, there is a reordering taking place, when attachments grow beyond the static territories that were defined as their new 'home' by the government.

Younes (not his real name), a 29-year-old Syrian, explained how happy he was when he was allocated a house in Amsterdam after having spent time in Ter Apel and a reception centre in Zwolle and more than a year in another reception centre in Hoogeveen:

The first time I arrived in Amsterdam was so pretty. I went to the centre, just to walk around. I went to a coffee shop and to some bars. It is just beautiful. Later my brother asked me to visit him but I don't like to visit other places. I prefer to stay in Amsterdam. People can visit me but I don't leave Amsterdam. When I visit family, for example in Germany for two or three days, I always want to go back home. I love Amsterdam.

## Conclusion

The interviews revealed that asylum-seekers often feel quite disoriented and lost on arrival because of the specific institutional and material aspects of asylum accommodation, the dispersal policies which force them to relocate many times and the language barriers. In order to be able to understand the everyday experiences of forced migrants in new places of arrival, it is argued that a focus beyond the infrastructures laid out for them is needed and that people's own explorations of spaces that are meaningful to them result in new insights on homemaking and belonging to new places of arrival.

Through interviews with refugees it was shown that emplacement (Schiller & Caglar 2016) goes beyond bureaucracy and occurs in many different settings and places. The local level as such is a more appropriate scale at which to think about integration than the national level, as the local level is where real interactions take place (also Huizinga & van Hoven 2018). Moreover, by engaging actively in reorientation strategies while in a disorientating situation, refugees also challenge the temporal injustices forced upon them.

Community-based and participatory art-based research methods (Lenette 2019) are fitting ways to examine these experiences of arrival, disorientation and re-orientation. Emphasizing how people experience the urban fabric instead of using an inward-looking concept such as integration is the way forward. Cities change as a result of migration; thus, by focusing too much on how people fit into already existing infrastructures, we overlook the dynamic layers of urbanity that shape how our urban landscapes look as well as the participation of refugees in economic/cultural/public life. Experiences in this landscape are both positive in terms of micro-connections and negative in terms of micro-aggressions (Peterson 2020).

Our research also shows that it is important to not always be reminded of the refugeeeness of a person's identity and to move beyond the ethnic lens (Dahinden 2016). The notion of emplacement (Schiller & Caglar 2013, 499) emphasizes that "all individuals live within a social nexus composed of all those to whom they are connected by various forms of interaction". As such, the city can also be a very liberating space for refugees where people can re-invent themselves and settle as well as build new connections.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Most Syrians in the Netherlands come from larger cities and are used to living in an urban environment (van Liempt & Staring 2020).

## Acknowledgements

This essay is based on a keynote lecture I was asked to give at the Finnish Geography Days in Tampere (2022). I want to thank the organisers Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Jouni Häkli for inviting me. The empirical research that the lecture was based on was conducted in the context of a project called 'The everyday experiences of young refugees and asylum seekers in public spaces' which was financially supported by the HERA Joint Research [Programme](#), co-funded by AHRC, BMBF via DLR-PT, F.R.S- FNRS, NWO, and the European Commission through Horizon 2020. I am grateful to the field researchers involved in the Dutch part of the project: Mieke Kox and Rik Huizinga and I want to thank Karine Versluis who facilitated the photo-voice workshop and all participants who spent their time talking and sharing their valuable stories and photos with us.

## References

- Ahmed, S., Castaneda, C. & Fortier, A. (eds.) (2003) *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*. Berg, Oxford.
- Al-Ali, N. & Koser, K. (2002) *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*. Routledge, London.
- Arnoldus, M., Dukes, T. & Musterd, S. (2003) Dispersal policies in the Netherlands. In Robinson, V., Andersson, R. & Musterd, S. (eds.) *Spreading the 'Burden'? A Review of Policies to Disperse Asylum Seekers and Refugees*, 25–64. Policy Press, Bristol. [https://doi.org/10.46692/9781847425782\\_004](https://doi.org/10.46692/9781847425782_004)
- Bakker, L., Dagevos, J. & Engbersen, G. (2014) The importance of resources and security in the socio-economic integration of refugees: a study on the impact of length of stay in asylum accommodation and residence status on socio-economic integration for the four largest refugee groups in the Netherlands. *Journal of International Migration & Integration* 15 431–448. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-013-0296-2>
- Blunt, A. & Dowling, R. (2006) *Home*. Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203401354>
- Boccagni, P. (2017) *Migration and the Search for Home: Mapping Domestic Space in Migrant's Everyday Lives*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

- Boccagni, P. (2022) At home in the centre? Spatial appropriation and horizons of homemaking in reception facilities for asylum seekers. In Beeckmans, L., Gola, A., Singh, A. & Heynen, H. (eds.) *Making Home(s) in Displacement: Critical Reflections on a Spatial Practice*, 139–154. Leuven University Press, Leuven. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv25wxbv9>
- Čapo, J. (2015) Durable solutions: transnationalism, and homemaking among Croatian and Bosnian former refugees. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 31(1) 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40139>
- Coutin, S. B. (1993) *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. Westview Press, Boulder.
- Crawley, H. & Skleparis, D. (2018) Refugees, migrants, neither, both: categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's "migration crisis". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(1) 48–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224>
- Dahinden, J. (2016) A plea for the "de-migranticization" of research on migration and integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39(13) 2207–2225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1124129>
- Darling, J. (2010) A city of sanctuary: the relational re-imagining of Sheffield's asylum politics. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35(1) 125–140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2009.00371.x>
- Darling, J. (2022) *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum*. Pluto Press, London. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2k4fx1d>
- El Moussawi, H. (2023) "Finding housing was an illness": refugees' sense of continued displacement in Belgium. *Housing Studies* 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2023.2180493>
- Fontanari, E. (2017) "It's my life". The temporalities of refugees and asylum-seekers within the European border regime. *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* 10(1) 25–54. <https://doi.org/10.3240/86886>
- Ghorashi, H., de Boer, M. & ten Holder, F. (2018) Unexpected agency on the threshold: asylum seekers narrating from an asylum seeker centre. *Current Sociology* 66(3) 373–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392117703766>
- Gieryn, T. F. (2000) A space for place in sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 463–496. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.463>
- Gill, N. (2018) The suppression of welcome. *Fennia* 196(1) 88–98. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.70040>
- Gustafson, P. (2009) Mobility and territorial belonging. *Environment and Behaviour* 41(4) 490–508. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916508314478>
- Hall, S. M. (2021) *The Migrant's Paradox: Street Livelihoods and Marginal Citizenship in Britain*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. <https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452966571>
- van Heelsum, A. (2017) Aspirations and frustrations: experiences of recent refugees in the Netherlands. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(13) 2137–2150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1343486>
- de Hoon, M. (2017) Dispersal and residential mobility of asylum migrants in the Netherlands. In Geurtjens, K. (ed.) *Beyond the Refugee Crisis: A Reflection from Different Perspectives on the Dutch Case*, 10–13. Institute for Transnational and Euroregional Cross-Border Cooperation and Mobility, Maastricht.
- van der Horst, H. (2004) Living in a reception center: the search for home in an institutional setting. *Housing, Theory and Society* 21(1) 36–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036090410026806>
- Huisvestingswet (2014) wetten.nl - Regeling - Huisvestingswet 2014 - BWBR0035303 <<https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0035303/2022-01-01>> 2.6.2023.
- Huizinga, R. P. (2022) Carving out a space to belong: young Syrian men negotiating patriarchal dividend, (in)visibility and (mis)recognition in the Netherlands. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2156805>
- Huizinga, R. P. & van Hoven, B. (2018) Everyday geographies of belonging: Syrian refugee experiences in the Northern Netherlands. *Geoforum* 96 309–317. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.09.002>
- Huizinga, R. P., Hopkins, P., De Backer, M., Finlay, R., Kirndörfer, E., Kox, M., Bastian, J., Benwell, M. C., Felten, P., Haack, L., Hörschelmann, K. & van Liempt, I. (2022) *Researching Refugee Youth*. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), London. <https://doi.org/10.55203/VCAT7733>
- Kallio, K. P., Häkli, J. & Pascucci, E. (2019) Refugeeeness as political subjectivity: experiencing the humanitarian border. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37(7) 1258–1276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654418820915>
- Khosravi, S. (2019) What do we see if we look at the border from the other side? *Social Anthropology* 27(3) 409–424. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12685>
- Kreichauf, R. (2018) From forced migration to forced arrival: the campization of refugee accommodation in European cities. *Comparative Migration Studies* 6(7) 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-017-0069-8>
- Lamb, S. (2002) Intimacy in a transnational era: the remaking of ageing among Indian Americans. *Diaspora* 11(3) 299–330. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.2011.0003>
- Lenette, C. (2019) *Arts-Based Methods in Refugee Research Creating Sanctuary*. Springer Nature, Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8008-2>

- van Liempt, I. & Bilger, V. (2018) Methodological and ethical dilemmas in research among smuggled migrants. In Zapata-Barrero, R. & Yalaz, E. (eds.) *Qualitative Research in European Migration Studies*, 269–285. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76861-8\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76861-8_15)
- van Liempt, I. & Bygnes, S. (2022) Mobility dynamics within the settlement phase of Syrian refugees in Norway and the Netherlands. *Mobilities* 18(3) 506–519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2129030>
- van Liempt, I. & Kox, M. (2023) The inclusionary potential and spatial boundaries of (semi-) public space: refugee youth's everyday experiences in the urban fabric of Amsterdam. In Backer, M., Hopkins, P., van Liempt, I., Finlay, R., Kirndorfer, E., Kox, M., Benwell, M. C. & Horschemann, K. (eds.) *Refugee Youth: Migration, Justice and Urban Space*, 65–80. Bristol University Press, Bristol. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1011738.10>
- van Liempt, I. & Miellet, S. (2021) Being far away from what you need: the impact of dispersal on resettled refugees' homemaking and place attachment in small to medium-sized towns in the Netherlands. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(11) 2377–2395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1845130>
- van Liempt, I. & Staring, R. (2020) *Nederland Papiereland. Syrische Statushouders en hun Ervaringen met Participatiebeleid*. Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, The Hague.
- Long, J. (2013) Diasporic dwelling: the poetics of domestic space. *Gender, Place and Culture* 20(3) 329–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.674932>
- Malkki, L. H. (1995) *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226190969.001.0001>
- Massey, D. (1992) Politics and space/time. *New Left Review* 1/196.
- Massey, D. (1994) *Space, Place and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. Sage, London.
- Meeus, B., Arnaut, K. & van Heur, B. (eds.) (2019) *Arrival Infrastructures. Migration and Urban Social Mobilities*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91167-0>
- Mitchell, K. (1997) Transnational discourse: bringing geography back in. *Antipode* 29(2) 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00038>
- Mitchell, K. (2022) Migration, memory and the insurgent temporalities of sanctuary. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2022.2150672>
- Peterson, M. (2020) Micro aggressions and connections in the context of national multiculturalism: everyday geographies of racialisation and resistance in contemporary Scotland. *Antipode* 52(5) 1393–1412. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12643>
- Puwar, N. (2004) *Space Invaders. Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*. Berg, Oxford.
- Ralph, D. & Staeheli, L. (2011) Home and migration: mobilities, belongings and identities. *Geography Compass* 5(7) 517–530. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2011.00434.x>
- Schiller, N. G. & Çağlar, A. (2011) *Locating Migration. Rescaling Cities and Migrants*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.
- Schiller, N. G. & Çağlar, A. (2013) Locating migrant pathways of economic emplacement: thinking beyond the ethnic lens. *Ethnicities* 13 494–514. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796813483733>
- Schiller, N. G. & Çağlar, A. (2016) Displacement, emplacement and migrant newcomers: rethinking urban sociabilities within multiscale power. *Identities* 23(1) 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2015.1016520>
- Shaker, R. van Lanen, S. & van Hoven, B. (2022) "I'm trying to give them my face". Everyday embodied agency of the Muslim other in Amsterdam. *Sociological Forum* 37(1) 27–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12777>
- Suerbaum, M. (2018) Becoming and "unbecoming" refugees: making sense of masculinity and refugeeeness among Syrian refugee men in Egypt. *Men and Masculinities* 21(3) 363–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17748170>
- Thorshaug, R. Ø. & Brun, C. (2019) Temporal injustice and asylum reception centres in Norway: towards a critical geography of architecture in the institution. *Fennia* 197(2) 232–248. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.84758>
- Wessendorf, S. (2013) Commonplace diversity and the "ethos of mixing": perceptions of difference in a London neighborhood. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 20(4) 407–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2013.822374>
- Zetter, R. (2007) More labels, fewer refugees: remaking the refugee label in an era of globalization. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20(2) 172–192. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem011>
- Zill, M., van Liempt, I., Spierings, B. & Hooimeijer, P. (2020) Uneven geographies of asylum accommodation: conceptualizing the impact of spatial, material, and institutional differences on (un)familiarity between asylum seekers and local residents. *Migration Studies* 8(4) 491–509. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mny049>