

Re-tracing Home - Conversations with Syrian newcomers on the "arrival crisis" in Berlin

The design research project "Re-tracing Home" aims to challenge the contemporary notion of the crisis as a one of politics, not of capacity. The social and spatial integration of newcomers as well as the general issue of affordable housing in Europe is correlated to provide a new perspective - a Syrian perspective - on the perceptions and imaginations of "home" and "housing".

The contemporary crisis is regarded as a political short-term problem. It is therefore exacerbated by temporary architecture which results in an unwelcoming reception of newcomers that hinders their integration. This alleged "arrival crisis" is investigated from an urban design perspective by addressing the discrepancy between government (mass) housing programmes and local grassroots initiatives.

By drawing from the theoretical and conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu's "habitus" (1979) concept, James Wines' "Highrise of Homes" (1981) project as well as the memories and experiences of displaced communities, their old, new and ideal home is re-narrated, re-written and re-drawn.

Based on cognitive mapping workshops with Syrian newcomers, the speculative design proposition of a "fluid home" postulates open and undifferentiated structures that can be appropriated by its inhabitants. In this way, newcomers would be enabled to set the thresholds to the public themselves and become part of the cultural and architectural process of re-negotiating meaning into space.

A new cross-cultural co-design agenda could introduce a new narrative of urban design to openly diminish architectural mystification and call for a new perspective on "refugee architecture" and contemporary housing models. Challenging common preconceptions and dualisms through an ethical approach to sanctify particularities could blur the lines of architectural and cultural boundaries. Migration may have the potential for re-imagining transtopian cities and societies in which every integration starts at home.



Research question

How far can re-tracing memories and imaginations of "home" help to evaluate the socio-cultural and architectural background of newcomers?

Methodological approach - Speaking (drawing and writing) with different voices

My main motivation to criticise standardised ways of thinking and designing of "refugee housing" implies that the "arrival crisis" has been dealt with or even constructed as a "problem" of "numbers" (a generalised mass of people). This justifies a rather quantitative analysis and management of the "arrival crisis" which does not recognise more qualitative aspects (meaning the needs of the individual).

The conventional process of knowledge production in design can be seen as a "methodological journey required to translate a concept to a drawing and a drawing to a building [or final product]" (Hawley, 2013). Even though drawing has been an essential tool for architectural practice since the Renaissance (Hill, 2013), it can be argued that we have to learn how to draw again due to the shift in research paradigms and the need for a new narrative for urban design. This might become a new incentive for practitioners, but does not necessarily address a new role for researchers. So, we might not only want to ask: who is drawing? but also: who is writing?

Consequently, it should be stressed that we also have to learn how to write again. By being aware of one's subjectivity and limitations, the "proper" way of referencing becomes the ultimate instrument of self-legitimation in the supposed objective research realm. Nonetheless, academic references can also be understood as a standardised way of speaking and writing with different voices. Voices which are not "standard" at all, but subjective and individual.

Knowledge co-production

"Re-tracing home" was a drawing and writing workshop with Syrian newcomers from various backgrounds as well as German architects and social entrepreneurs. The purpose was to discuss and exchange ideas on issues around "refugee architecture" in relation to diverging cultural notions of "home" and "housing" in Berlin. In cooperation with two major German migrant organisations and in accordance to the needs and ideas of the participants, a (mixed) group of 6 people was asked to re-draw and re-write their old, new and ideal "homes". On the basis of this individual workshop, the group exchanged their shared and different experiences and stories which were compared with the latest architectural debates and practices of "refugee architecture" in Germany. In the feedback session as well as during the individual interviews in the following week of the workshop, the participants had the opportunity to correlate their personal perceptions with national housing standards and cultural practices from Syrian and German perspectives and comment on the methods and ethics of this research project. The outcome of the workshop and interviews is the basis of my speculative design propositions. Moreover, the workshop in itself is a methodological prototype of how to address the knowledge gap between refugees and the people who aim to work for - an especially with - them.

Tacit conversations

The thematic analysis of my fieldwork focused on the presumed commonalities of the participants' class habitus (Bourdieu) and architectural identities (Wines) in contrast to their subjective notions of "home" and divergent narratives. Moreover, ideas like Mihailescu's (2016) performed identities of Romanian migrants and Yildiz' (2016) transtopias of returning Turkish immigrants as well as Wookey's (2017) statements on ephemerality and the (Estonian) home as a state of mind help to identify and contextualise different figurations of newcomers.

1) Evaluate if people from similar cultural backgrounds and similar societal categories (Bourdieu) have distinctive architectural imprints (Wines).

When I asked the question of distinctive architectural imprints or preferences, I almost always got the response that traditional Syrian architecture is not functional and convenient for contemporary forms of life anymore. Following the Syrian independence in 1946, the country modernised and internationalised so that women started to enter higher education and become part of the public life. Consequently, lifestyles changed and people aspired to have "specifically designed houses by architects and move out of the old city" (MO, 2017).

2) Analyse different methods of cognitive mapping and writing to reveal such imprints based on the memories and imaginations of "home" and "housing".

It appeared that those who stay in their home countries need to re-adapt to predominant norms that might be relatable with Bourdieu's idea of class conform patterns of behaviour but Wines' assumption of particular architectural identities might need to be redefined. In contrast, transtopian diaspora communities seem to disobey any deterministic logic of distinctive cultural or architectural imprints but declare an independent logic on the move to choose what is best and what is not.

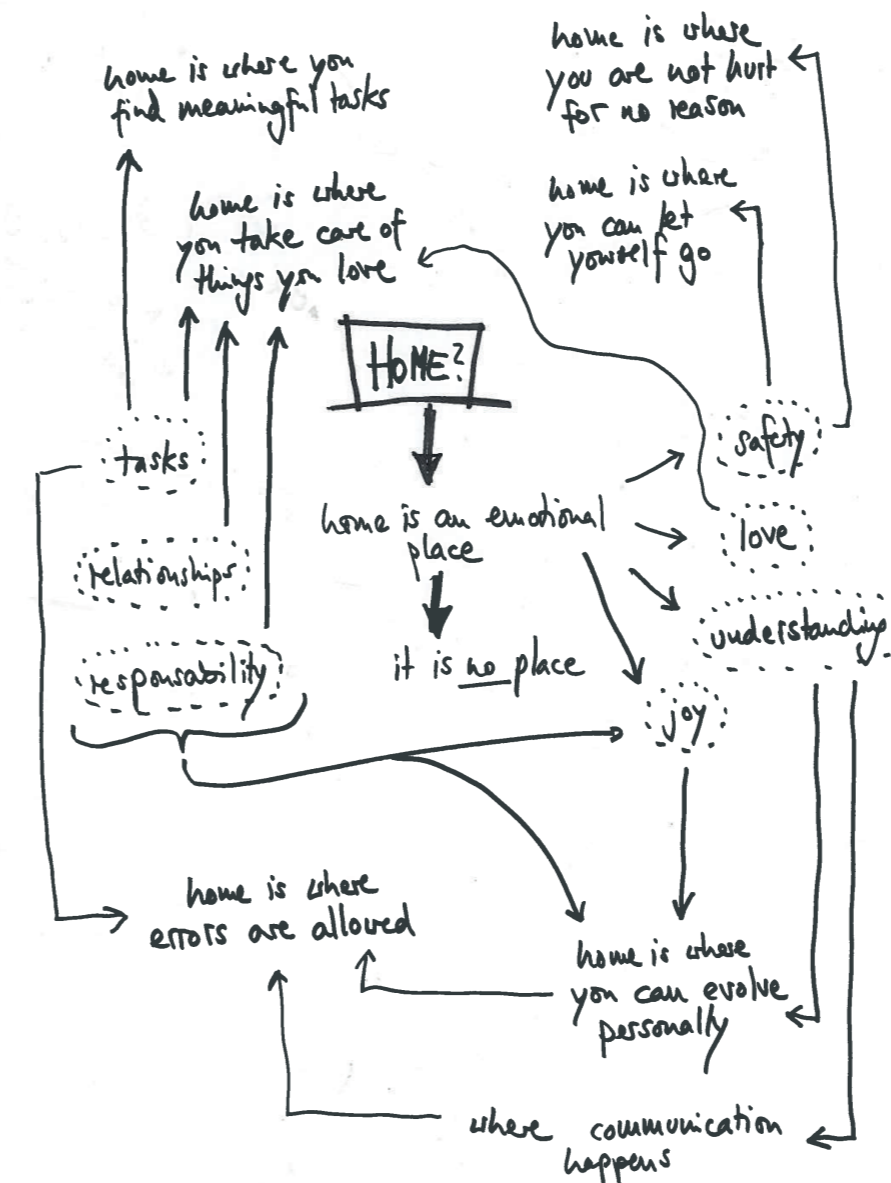
3) Assess if these memories and imaginations reveal a different understanding of for contemporary "refugee architecture" in Germany and beyond.

To sum up, one can say that "expanding architectural cultures emerge from a hybridization of historic (colonial) times and diasporic spaces, and imagination of exogenous standards and transnational lifestyles" (King, 2004) that demand a new understanding of contemporary "refugee architecture" in Germany and beyond.

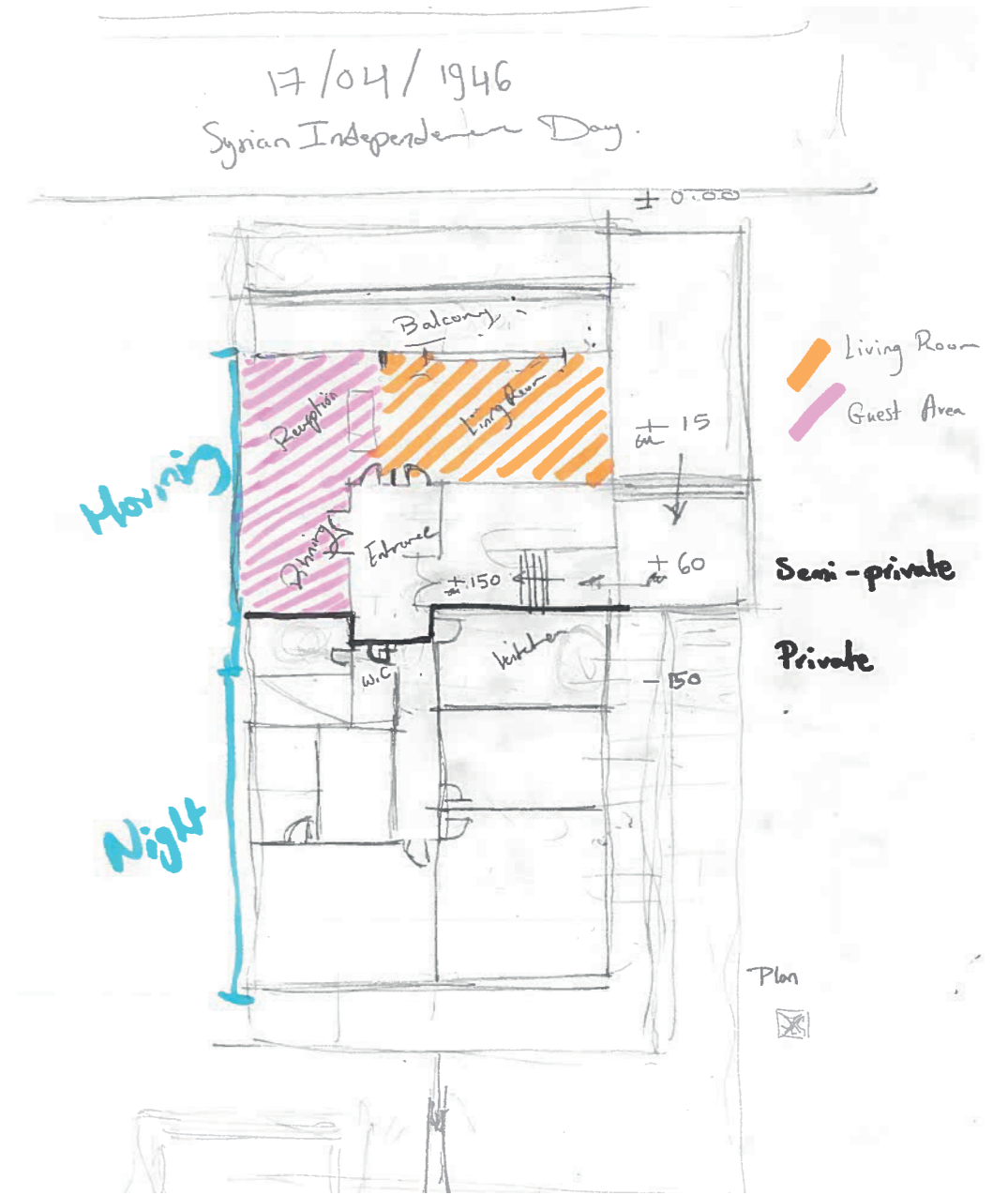
4) Elaborate a new kind of knowledge co-production about housing standards and individual needs to postulate an informed design research agenda of "home-making".

Being Syrian in Syria is different to being Syrian in Germany. The rise of new border realities and identities should lead to a more open and not deterministic reception of newcomers. This new understanding could be the basis of an informed design agenda for contemporary "refugee housing" which could eventually also be considered as one aspect of re-creating home away from home.

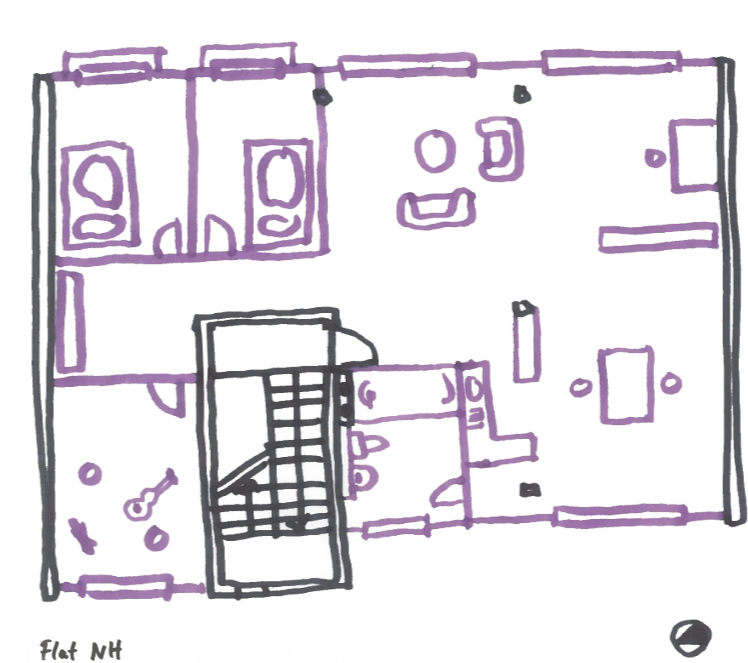
What means „home“ to you? - fieldwork outcome



Invisible spatial practices „at home“ - fieldwork outcome



What is your „ideal“ home? - fieldwork outcome



It's clearly coming from an architectural background but it also represents how I would like to live. I do not mind transparency and I prefer it to the division in Syrian houses where you orientate everything to your guests and how you separate yourself from them. In an open apartment, I simply do not care. (NH, 2017)



Since I moved around a lot, I don't have any ties to a certain place. I can adapt to pretty much any place. The ideal home is an idea and a concept, more than a place to me. Still I can imagine living in a fancy apartment in the big city, where I can decorate it myself and feel like it's mine. (YA, 2017)

Speculative design proposition „The House of Homes“ - a random „modernised“ Berlin block can become a huge potential to not only „update“ Germany's energy standards but also its standards and forms of life and housing in the meantime

