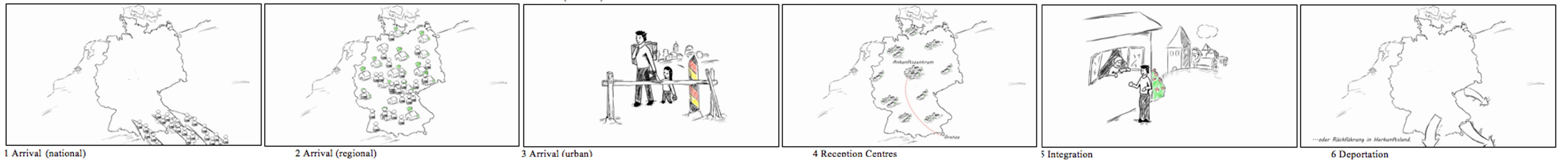


INFRASTRUCTURES OF RECEPTION

THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF REFUGE IN MANNHEIM, GERMANY

How can the spatial politics of refuge be understood through the practice of reception infrastructures?



Film still from official video explaining reception process. Source: BAMF, 2017

BACKGROUND:

Since the 'long summer of migration' to Europe in 2015, the German politics of refuge have received much attention in public discourse and the social sciences. They have juxtaposed the universal promise of Germany's welcoming position with the differentiating effects it holds, elucidating how migrants are excluded from the realm of the nation state. Further, they exposed how depoliticising discourses and discriminatory asylum policy measures that go hand in hand with the humanitarian paradigm advocated by the German state. In effect, however, these studies have ignored the role of space in creating such ambivalence. If at all, space solely figures as a passive backdrop to the politics of migrant reception.

Crucially, though, newcomers and the responding humanitarian gestures are impacting urban processes at different scales and through different actors, thereby creating and shaping actual spaces of reception: to facilitate the new geopolitical order and to control the newcomers' entrance into the urban fabric, the state initiated the creation of hundreds of new reception centres, often located on the outskirts of cities in vacant facilities such as army barracks, hotels and airports, and managed by government authorities.

RESEARCH AIM:

The aim of this research was to counter the lack of spatial engagement with reception politics in Germany by uncovering their tangible impact on city-making in a twofold manner: 1/ treating infrastructure both as a concept and an object of study anchored the analysis in the discipline of urban design, thinking the city not as a neutral place of refuge but as socio-technical networks of a new reception urbanism. 2/ Diagnosing the spatial dynamics of the institutional process of reception offered the opportunity to politicise and question the government's humanitarian discourse, eventually allowing to propose a more inclusive perspective on contemporary spatial politics of refuge by highlighting the inevitable connectedness of infrastructure, opening the possibility to discuss society's concrete responsibility in the reception of migrants.

FINDINGS:

Getting closer to the reception centre through an ethnographic approach revealed the ambiguous nature of the state's humanitarian discourse. Finding that:

- an attention to the situated materiality and locality of the reception centre and the policy framework it is embedded in uncovers that Mannheim's reception gesture towards migrants was the outcome of risk-benefit calculations for a local development scheme
- the urban design of the place contributes to its residents' immobility, containment and suspension.

Finally, the dissertation contended that an infrastructural approach to urban design not only offers a pertinent theoretical and methodological tool to uncover its political trajectories.

By stressing its connectedness, it fundamentally also equips us with the ability to imagine more responsible and inclusive ways of designing – potentially and actually – the urban with regards to the reception of refugees.

METHODOLOGY:

Participant Observation

carried out in 'Benjamin Franklin Village', a 144-acre former US army military base converted into refugee shelter

Semi-structured Interviews

Thematic analysis of the practice of reception infrastructures in Mannheim



Aerial view of Benjamin Franklin Village. Source: Stadt Mannheim



Barbed wire surrounding the site. Source: the author



Main boulevard. Source: the author