

A SPACE FOR EVERYONE

Amsterdam Forest
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Climate change is fueling migration to cities. How do we organize this process in a way that is supportive of intercultural integration?



Marta Piechocka-Nowakowska, MA

is a sociologist of culture. She works at the intersection of architecture, design, ecology, and digital culture.

marta.piechocka@frsi.org.pl

Marta Piechocka-Nowakowska

Information Society Development Foundation
in Warsaw

According to scholars from the US National Academy of Sciences, the Earth's temperature may rise by more in the next half-century than it has over the past 6000 years. Scientists predict that by the year 2070 extremely hot zones like the Sahara could make up 19% of the Earth's surface. To put this into perspective, they currently cover less than 1% of the globe. This may endanger entire populations that have inhabited a specific area for thousands of years – they may be forced to migrate for reasons related to water and food shortages and the resulting political chaos.

Migrations for reasons related to climate, the environment, the economic situation, war, and persecution are a growing phenomenon. According to the World Migration Report 2022, there were around 281 million migrants in the world in 2020. It is estimated that by the end of the twenty-first century, the number of asylum seekers in the European Union alone will rise by 23%. Importantly, the report was released in December 2021, before Russia invaded Ukraine, so it does not account for migrations triggered by that conflict.

In light of such data, the question arises as to whether urban spaces could help integrate foreign communities, build identity and a sense of community, and enhance security. If we look at public space from a global perspective in the context of migrants and people with a refugee background, the picture that emerges is not optimistic. This topic is not widely discussed in the planning and design of urban spaces. Instead, many places in multicultural cities, for

example in Europe, are falling into disrepute. They are associated with rising crime and drug trafficking.

However, some activities in public spaces demonstrate that things can be different: streets, parks, squares, and backyards can foster integration and help people become accustomed to otherness. All the projects listed below – which are examples of successful experiments in this area – share one goal: to build a strong local community based on understanding and respect.

#refugeeswelcome in parks

#refugeeswelcome in parks is the name of a research project that resulted in the publication of a resource book for NGOs supporting refugees, designers, and managers of green spaces in cities. Researchers from universities of Sheffield and Manchester, in collaboration with the London-based Young Foundation and the Berlin-based organization Minor, hypothesized that parks could play an important role in the adaptation of people with a refugee background to new living conditions. This includes the impact of green

tial community and jointly manage it. The decision to carry out this social and residential experiment was influenced by the negative experience that the Amsterdam authorities had had with placing migrants in housing estates separated from the local community. As a result of this situation, migrants could not speak the language even after living in the Netherlands for several years and became increasingly isolated. In the first year of its operation, Startblok Riekerhaven became home to 550 people aged 18–28, half of them from Africa and the Middle East. Today, the residential community offers 463 studios and 102 rooms with a rental period of up to five years. Each floor has a communal living space, and the outdoor spaces around the building foster leisure and integration. In Startblok, special attention is paid to respect for diversity, which is treated as an opportunity for personal development. The community's website offers tips on living in a multicultural environment, as well as an explanation of 10 cultural differences, such as the perception of time and space. Knowing them can make it easier to understand some of the behaviors of other residents, according to the motto: “what is normal for you is not necessarily normal for your neighbor.”

Other options are possible too

Mr. Friday – this was the name of the boat that carried 282 refugees from Egypt to the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2013. Three years later, the Mr. Friday was again a gathering place for refugees, on the IJssel River in Amsterdam, symbolically commemorating its previous, very dangerous journey. This time there were just fourteen people onboard (the maximum number allowed on a boat of this size under Dutch law) – half of them Syrian refugees, who had recently had experiences similar to the many who had originally crossed on the Mr. Friday, the other half native inhabitants of the city and the people who came up with the idea of the commemorative cruise. The event was the culmination of the project “Welcome to the Living Room!” The concept was born in September 2014, when Laura M. Pana, a Romanian emigrant living in the Netherlands, started a blog about her experience, using her own story as a point of departure. Through her work, she encourages other people to share their experiences, which helps her to conduct research into identity, mobility, equality, and the concept of home. Those were the beginnings of the Migrationlab, a blog that a few months later turned into an NGO with offices in the Hague and Vienna. Back then, the issue of migration was already generating a lot of emotion and causing social unrest in Europe. The public sphere was dominated by a negative political and media discourse, even though the migration crisis had yet to reach its apex in 2015. There was no genuine discus-

Multicultural cities are shrouded in notoriety and associated with crime and poverty. But this can be prevented.

areas on improving mental health and the creation of a meeting place for people with similar traumatic experiences. The researchers conducted a total of 51 interviews and many informal conversations with refugees, the people who supported them during their initial stay, and those responsible for green spaces in the city. Examples described in the resource book include open-air French language classes organized by the NGO BAAM in various places in Paris. In addition to learning the language, the students have the opportunity to meet and exchange information. Also, the visibility of migrant-learners in urban spaces provides a counterbalance to their dominant public image as drug dealers and criminals who live at the expense of the citizens of their host countries.

When Achmed Baâdoud, chairman of the Amsterdam district of Nieuw-West, was asked in 2016 to designate an area for new residential units for refugees, he suggested an innovative solution: young Dutch citizens looking for affordable housing in which to start their adult lives and young refugees needing housing should live together in a newly established residen-

sion in which all stakeholders – migrants, refugees, and citizens – could express their points of view. The Migrationlab decided to fill this gap with its flagship project “Welcome to the Living Room!” The organization transforms urban spaces (especially art galleries, museums, and cultural and educational centers) into “public living rooms,” or places where local residents and communities from different cultures could meet. Such places help people feel safe and establish relations. Informal workshops involving education through a variety of shared leisure activities (picnics, city games, educational activities for children) allow participants to work out new ways to communicate and live in the same city and neighborhood or on the same street.

In Israel, the number of asylum seekers in 2020 was nearly 30,000. Most of them were migrants from Sudan and Eritrea who had fled their countries of origin to escape persecution and genocide, the majority of them living in extreme poverty and struggling to make ends meet by doing hard manual labor. However, the Israeli government’s policy prevents them from claiming refugee status. By the same token, they are unable to take up legal employment and have no access to health and welfare benefits. The media discourse concerning this group is largely based on prejudice and xenophobia.

Neve Sha’an an is a neighborhood in the south of Tel Aviv with a large community of African migrants, giving the district notoriety among the residents and city authorities. Neve Sha’an an suffers from ongoing socioeconomic deprivation, institutional neglect, and a complete lack of cultural and art centers. But in that neighborhood, in the heart of Levinsky Park, there is a place called the Garden Library. It has no walls or doors, but it offers 3,500 books in 16 languages. It was created out of the belief that culture and education act as a bridge between different communities and impact on lasting social change. The library holds numerous events aimed at helping migrants and refugees acquire new skills, for example by boosting their chances in the job market and improving their ability to stand up for their rights and fostering mutual understanding with Israeli society. Every weekend, volunteers teach an intensive, free course of Hebrew and English at the library. The open space allows students to join the classes at any time, and they learn through conversations, reading, and exercises.

“New” old stairs

In Lebanon, the Chaarani Stairs are located in a low-income neighborhood in Tripoli, 85 kilometers north of Beirut. The facades of the nearby buildings still bear scars from bullets, making it impossible to forget the clashes between Alawite forces, supporting the Bashar

al-Assad government, and Sunni forces. Seen as a side effect of the Syrian civil war in Lebanese territory, those violent events ended in 2014. The steep stairs, where armed snipers once ruled during the fighting, again became the center of local life where children play, women drink coffee during the *sobhiyyeh* (the morning chat), and bakers prepare zaatar manouche (traditional bread with a mixture of spices). The London-based Emergent Vernacular Architecture Studio (EVA Studio) in collaboration with the humanitarian organization Solidarités International and with the support of the UN implemented a project to rehabilitate the stairs. Although the residents were determined to revitalize this public space, the EVA Studio team faced numerous challenges, including integrating the Lebanese community and the Syrian refugees, who account for about 15% of the neighborhood’s population, and restoring relations after years of conflict. To understand the local context and the needs of the community, the team conducted a number of interviews in a variety of focus groups. They talked to Syrian and Lebanese men and women of various ages. Consequently, the Chaarani Stairs were renovated us-

The goal of the projects described here is to build communities based on understanding and respect.

ing locally produced cement tiles in a wide variety of colors and patterns. The space additionally included fruit trees, invoking the historical traditions of citrus growing and processing, as well as urban furniture to encourage people to stop and rest. The project also included collaboration with the artist Alfred Badr, who painted a mural showing an anonymous local girl who had died several years earlier (the mural was agreed with the girl’s family and neighbors). This “new” old place was received enthusiastically by members of the local community. They stressed the increased sense of security and welcomed the esthetic features of the site and its cleanliness. All the actions taken by the EVA Studio were aimed at boosting the sense of identity and common heritage and at encouraging the residents to care for the neighborhood.

All these examples show solutions at the intersection of architecture, spatial planning, and community life. The problems mitigated in each of those places were related to war, refugees, and cultural conflicts. Such initiatives are worth examining, popularizing, and being treated as a source of inspiration. ■

Further reading:

World Migration Report 2022, <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022>.

Van Gent W., Musterd S., Class, migrants, and the European city: Spatial impacts of structural changes in early twenty-first century Amsterdam, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 2016. #refugees welcome in parks – case studies, refugeeswelcomeinparks.weebly.com/case-studies.