

Years in the Waiting Room

A Feminist Ethnography of the Invisible Institutional Living Spaces of Forced Displacement

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“Be careful, dear! And call me when you get home...” My mom is anxious on the other side of the phone. She’s calling from South Africa while I’m on my way to volunteer for the first time at a skillshare evening at a Direct Provision centre, an accommodation centre in Ireland where asylum seekers¹ receive shelter and sustenance while waiting for their application for international protection to be processed.

Introduction

Changes in migration patterns, together with a global increase in the “securitization of migration” (Huysmans, 2000), have led to a growing number of people worldwide finding themselves in situations of forced immobility – waiting for indefinite periods of time. Asylum seekers who have sought international protection in a host country, but whose claims for refugee status have not been determined, are often caught up in the uncertainty of such prolonged conditions of displacement (Doná, 2015). Large-scale accommodation in camps and institutional settings provided by governments and humanitarian organisations are often intended as temporary measures to provide for an immediate need for shelter, but many asylum seekers end up in these settings for years. In these liminal spaces, displaced individuals are faced with the challenge of turning shelter into home (Boccagni, this book; see also Szczepanikova, 2012; Van der Horst, 2004; Vandevorrdt, 2017).

Hyndman and Giles describe in their article, *Waiting for what? The feminization of asylum in protracted situations* (2011), that asylum seekers on the move are

viewed by governments in the global North as a potential liability or even a security threat. State policies aim to immobilise asylum seekers and fix them to place in refugee camps or institutional accommodation centres. In these spaces asylum seekers are feminised by rendering them as “passive, helpless, static” (p. 363) in order to reduce the threat that temporary status poses. While reception or “welcome” centres – as the institutional settings providing shelter for asylum seekers are also referred to – lack the iconic typological characteristics of the refugee camp, these more formal spaces of displacement, together with the experiences of their residents, are less frequently acknowledged and studied (Sanyal, 2019).

This chapter aims to provide insights into the socio-spatial regulation of the asylum applicants within one such institutional setting in Ireland and reflects on the relational aspects of space that shape each individual’s subjective experience. The research focuses on Hatch Hall, an accommodation centre situated in Dublin, where I volunteered at a skill-share initiative between June and August 2016. Data generated during this time were in the form of a reflexive journal in which I documented my observations, thoughts, experiences and critical reflections as researcher. Instead of focusing on the physical features of space, extracts from my journal are employed throughout this chapter to initiate explorations into several theoretical themes and concepts I encountered within the space.

The Irish asylum application system

In Ireland the State fulfils its obligation towards basic subsistence for asylum applicants by providing board and lodging in several State-funded Direct Provision centres scattered around the country. Although Direct Provision was introduced in 2000 as a temporary measure to provide short-term shelter, the inefficiency of the asylum application process has led many applicants to wait for years in Direct Provision for a final decision on their applications (McMahon Report, 2015).

A host of rules regulate life in Direct Provision. Besides the routine expected from institutional living, “house rules” in Direct Provision centres include that residents are required to obtain permission to sleep out, decorate or make use of any electrical equipment in their rooms, or leave children in the care of another adult. Residents do not have a say about with whom they share a room and are expected to move when required by management – that could be to a different room or even a different centre altogether (RIA, 2019). All meals are served at specific times and many residents have complained that the food is not culturally appropriate (McMahon Report, 2015).

The majority of the centres are located in buildings that were originally intended for short-term accommodation, such as former hotels, hostels, con-

vents, military barracks or mobile homes. Consequently, most residents do not have access to private living space or cooking facilities. The accommodation comprises mainly bedrooms, unable to house the activities that long-term living entails (McMahon Report, 2015).

Residents are not detained in these centres and are supposedly ‘free’ to come and go. However, several factors confine them mostly to the centre and its immediate surroundings, contributing to the marginalisation, social isolation and exclusion of Direct Provision residents from society in general:

- lack of finance and income due to regulations around joining the work force, insufficiency of the personal allowance provided by the state and being excluded from social welfare entitlements (O’Reilly, 2013);
- institutional regulations which prescribe the protocol for receiving visitors, meal times and rules regarding overnighing elsewhere (Reception and Integration Agency, 2019);
- spatial considerations such as the remote location of some centres and lack of facilities for inviting people to their homes (McMahon Report, 2015).

Unlike in other European countries, the accommodation centres are not operated by non-profit organisations and private operators have made a lucrative business of providing accommodation for asylum seekers (Thornton, 2014). Mounting public criticism of Direct Provision has highlighted the major issues of the system to be: uncertainty; lack of autonomy and privacy; marginalisation and isolation; negative impacts on emotional and mental health; and the extended period of time people spend in Direct Provision while their applications are being processed (McMahon Report, 2015).

Hatch Hall

“How bad can it be?” I think to myself, looking up at the façade of the lovely old redbrick building. We sign in at security and follow one of the residents down the hallway to the communal lounge. There are security cameras everywhere! Am I really allowed to be here? A few women are waiting for us in the communal lounge. It’s a large room with high ceilings, a brownish carpet, obscured glass panel doors on two sides and large sash windows lighting up the room. It looks as if it could have been beautiful in its days – maybe it used to be a ball room? The walls are now painted a bright custard yellow. There’s an old box TV, a few coffee tables and chairs and a couch standing about incoherently. The furniture is too small for the size of the room, making the room feel empty – even with the people in it.

The first time I visited Hatch Hall, I was rather surprised to find that this accommodation centre for asylum seekers was situated in the heart of Dublin in – what was from my perspective – a lovely neo-Gothic building from 1912 (Fig. 1.). Until 2004, Hatch Hall was used as a student residence for privileged third-level male students, most of whom studied medicine at University College Dublin. In 2004 the property was sold to a developer and contracted out to the Department of Justice as a Direct Provision centre (RIA, 2016).



Figure 1. Street façade of Hatch Hall, Dublin, Ireland; photo taken by author.

During the second half of 2016, when I volunteered at the centre, the number of residents in Hatch Hall varied between 108 and 128, and included couples, single people and families. There were also about thirteen children, all living with at least one parent. Two thirds of the residents were men and one third women. Although the capacity of the centre was determined as a maximum of 200 residents, an outbreak of chickenpox temporarily prevented new residents being admitted (RIA, 2016, 2017). Due to the building's previous use as a student residence, asylum seekers were accommodated in shared bedrooms, some with *en-suite* bathrooms. Residents had no access to private living spaces or cooking facilities. Food or cooking was not allowed in the bedrooms. As far as I could establish, communal areas included the lounge where we met on skill-share evenings, a dining hall, a games room, laundry area and an outside chil-

children's play area. Single adults were accommodated in multi-occupancy rooms, sharing the space with several people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, often unable to speak the same language. Families were accommodated in one or more rooms, depending on the size of the family and the gender of the children (McMahon Report, 2015). This meant that for most of the residents personal space was limited to their bed and the area immediately surrounding it. This resulted in an extreme lack of privacy and autonomy.

In 2019 the Direct Provision centre at Hatch Hall was closed and the building sold with plans for it to be developed into a luxury hotel (Quinlan, 2019).

Methodology and method

The women are surprised to hear that I'm from South Africa.

"*You're too light!*" Precious² exclaims. We all laugh.

While in Ireland on a year-long research mobility, I came into contact with an ad hoc group of volunteers who had somehow obtained permission to host what they referred to as "skillshare evenings" at a Direct Provision centre. The sessions were arranged as weekly informal gatherings around an arts and crafts or physical activity in the centre's communal lounge – the only public area where visitors were allowed. As an architect and novice feminist scholar, I joined the group as a visiting participant with the intention of doing research into the living conditions of Direct Provision.

Typically, skill-share sessions were attended by a small group of four to ten women and children from the centre, and around six or eight volunteers. Some men living in the centre, especially the younger men, occasionally joined in if we were doing a physical activity such as dancing or learning how to *hula hoop*. They also stopped by regularly at the end of the session to socialise, always eager to share the story of how they ended up in Hatch Hall. In contrast, women rarely shared where they were from and never mentioned how they came to be in Ireland: our conversations were slow and interrupted while we were focused on making flowers out of toilet paper rolls or weaving mandalas; we limited our interactions to the weather, our families, how we miss the sun in Africa, but mostly to "please pass the scissors".

My choice of a data collection method for this research was predominantly determined by the limitations of my position as a guest participant/researcher within the group. Although several participatory and emancipatory methods could probably be considered more appropriate for doing research within a sensitive context such as Direct Provision, my options were restricted to ob-

serving and participating in whatever activity was planned for the evening. An ethnographic method such as participant observation thus seemed to be a feasible option.

Ethnography

Creswell and Poth (2018) define ethnography, in general, as a qualitative research method in which sensory observational techniques are employed to study, describe and interpret social organisation patterns of a group of people in a specific context. Ethnographic data collection often involves doing fieldwork whereby the researcher meticulously records observations while being immersed as a participant/researcher in the day-to-day lives of the group being studied. Collected data are analysed and interpreted by applying a theoretical lens, and finally written up and published as an objective account of the studied culture.

Standard ethnographic research methods have, however, proved to be problematic for many feminist scholars. In fact, Visweswaran (1994), Abu-Lughod (1990) and Stacey (1988) have even questioned whether it is worth pursuing a feminist ethnography at all while it may be impossible for this method to meet all feminist research aspirations. Feminist theories are typically based on a shared epistemological perspective that knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988) and produced in encounters between an embodied self and other(s) (Davids & Willemse, 2014). This implies that what a researcher can come to understand or know is always subjective, partial, relational and thereby entangled with power hierarchies (Hesse-Biber, 2012). This foundation serves as an epistemological and methodological lens that guides both the selection of subject matter and how the researcher approaches a method (Pillow & Mayo, 2014). From a feminist perspective, the main concerns with ethnography are therefore frequently associated with a range of interrelated issues including the relationship between the researcher and researched, the authority of the researcher, representation and a claim to objectivity (Behar et al., 2011; Pillow & Mayo, 2014).

These factors could be particularly problematic within contexts where substantial power imbalances exist between the researcher and those researched. This is often the case in research focussed on displaced people, where power imbalances are regularly left unacknowledged by academics and aid organisations alike. In these circumstances, where ethnography is often used as a research method, ethnographers should be mindful that their research is not “perpetuating colonial control of ‘distant’ peoples and places” (Rosaldo, 1989, pp. 30-31). In other words, with the legacy of colonialism implicated in many contexts of displacement, *how* we do ethnographic and other research with displaced people is of particular significance.

Reflexive journal

Based on the considerations above, I made use of a reflexive research journal as a data collection tool for my ethnographic exploration into the space of Direct Provision. Instead of a linear research process, the “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983; 1987) that the use of a reflexive journal requires necessitates a continuous back and forth interaction between the different stages of the research. According to Schön (1987), the ability to “think about what you are doing while you are doing it” is particularly useful in situations of “uncertainty, uniqueness and conflict” (p. 16), as is often the case when doing research in a sensitive context such as Direct Provision. Thus, my journal became a written record of the evolution of the research.

While collecting data, I attempted to concentrate specifically on capturing the spatial qualities of my experience, while being aware of how space and social interaction influence each other. However, making use of a reflexive journal also provided me with an opportunity to respond to several feminist research goals – most of which are focussed on highlighting the researcher’s subjective presence within the research. Etherington (2004) proposes that keeping a reflexive journal can develop the researcher’s self-awareness by providing a platform for “reflecting and processing our internal and external responses and behaviours” (p. 128). She explains:

We reflect on our roles, on the impact of the research upon our personal and professional lives, on our relationships with participants, on our perception of the impact we may be making on their lives and on our negative and/or positive feelings about what is happening during the research process. (ibid., p. 127).

Such a process of interrogation of feelings and emotions that takes place within the private space of a journal can lead to new insight as it provides a researcher with the opportunity to openly and honestly become aware of their biases. Dauphinee (2010) argues that conventional academic writing practices do not adequately provide a way for researchers to express and process the emotions they might experience while conducting research. Such experiences could, for instance, include emotionally loaded or compromising situations:

[W]hat we end up doing is privately remembering, rather than publicly writing [such experiences] into our publications. This divides our experiences in the field into public and private and, quite predictably, results in a silencing of the private. (p. 805).



Figure 2. Surveillance in Direct Provision. Source: Asylum Archive, photos taken by and courtesy of Vukasin Nedeljkovic, 2007.

Consequently, personal experiences are often simply excluded from research, resulting in the “writing out” of the complexity of the author’s involvement under the guise of objectivity. A reflexive research journal creates a space for the researcher to connect with the research process in a personal, authentic and multi-dimensional manner. Hence, in an attempt explicitly to demonstrate that my thoughts, decisions and actions regarding the study were not objective, but rather produced by my identity, assumptions and past experiences becoming interwoven with the research, I deliberately wrote my subjective self into the data from the outset. In addition to meticulously documenting my observations during each skill-share session, I also engaged critically with other more personal aspects of the research process. This was done by adding reflections

on my actions as well as the thoughts, feelings and emotions I felt during and after each visit to Hatch Hall. Subsequently, data emerged as detailed narrative descriptions of people, events, emotions and spatial qualities within Direct Provision, interwoven with my personal reflections in the process of trying to make sense of my experience of doing the research.

Post-colonial perspectives on representation

Post-colonial theory advocates for an awareness of “who is speaking” in research. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1987), Gayatri Spivak considers the role of agency involved in representation and problematises speaking on behalf of others. She suggests that those in positions of power or privilege should rather provide opportunities for marginalised groups to speak for themselves. Davids and Willemsse (2014) question whether reflexive writing techniques are indeed capable of shifting power dimensions. Speaking about or on behalf of others always involves authority and privilege. This is supported by Pillow and Mayo (2014) who argues that “[...] no textual experimentation removes the fact that we are writing ‘about’—whether it is about others or ourselves or ourselves and others” (p. 15). Therefore, while the reflexive techniques I implemented to write myself explicitly into the research might be an adequate reaction to the notion of seemingly “objective” research, they do little to resolve the problems involved with representation.

Further problematising the complexities of representation, Sara Ahmed argues in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000) that creating knowledge about cultural others in less powerful positions inevitably sets them up as “strangers” or someone who is different from “us” – an “Other”. As she explains, through encounters between “us” and “others” in local contexts “the figure of the ‘stranger’ is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as ‘a stranger’” (ibid., p. 3). Strangers are thus not people that we do not know; they become strangers exactly because of what we already know about them, and this, in turn, determines how we react to them. Encounters between embodied others are always shaped by historical encounters. “[C]ontemporary discourses of globalisation and multiculturalism involve the reproduction of the figure of the stranger, and the enforcement of boundaries, through the very emphasis on becoming, hybridity and inbetweenness” (ibid., p. 13). The knowledge produced about the stranger therefore also has spatial implications, as it ultimately enforces boundaries by determining who are included as “us” and who form the margins of the excluded “others”.

In this way, the ethnographer is thus automatically implicated in the production of “the stranger” when creating knowledge about a group of marginalised

people. The short introductory vignette shared in the opening paragraph of this chapter, where my mother expresses her concerns about my safety within the Direct Provision space, is testimony to the colonial history of what we think we know about asylum seekers. Even from another country, my mother senses the supposed threat – or “stranger danger” as Ahmed (2000, p. 78) refers to it – that these “bodies out of place” pose. What is “known” about asylum seekers sets them up as strangers, while my “knapsack of privileges” (McIntosh, 1989) positions me, a white South African in Ireland, as less of a danger. The legacy of colonialism that my identity represents places me in a position of power within Direct Provision that allows me to create knowledge about others. By producing knowledge about asylum seekers I am inevitably perpetuating the rhetoric of *them* as out of place “others” and ultimately reproducing colonial inequalities.

The theory discussed in this section on methodology and methods urged me to reconsider ways in which research is conducted within contexts of displacement. I questioned whether it was appropriate – or even possible – for me, as a privileged white South African woman, to do research based on ethical feminist values in Direct Provision. In an effort to navigate at least some of the complexities of representation and power imbalances inherent in ethnographic research methods within the constraints of the skill-share initiative, I focused my research on the *space* of Direct Provision in particular. However, as will be discussed in more detail in the following section, social behaviour and space are interdependent. An exploration of space will thus not be complete without a consideration of personal experiences and broader social dynamics.

A feminist interpretation of space and place

“Hatch Hall was a home from home [sic], a place where one could make friends for life. It was a place where one could test and discover who you were but, most of all, a place where you could be part of a piece of history. The building really was an institution [...]. It was a haven where great minds and talents came together at the dawn of their adult lives”, writes a former resident who lived in Hatch Hall during his student years (Dugdale, 2009).

My spatial investigation into Hatch Hall started by juxtaposing this description by a student during Hatch Hall’s more privileged past with my own observations and what I had read about the experiences of asylum seekers in Direct Provision. From this, two observations emerged as a starting point: firstly, that

the colonial – and from my initial perspective, *pleasant* – appearance of the building from the outside could contribute to feelings of disconnect and nullify the experiences of asylum seekers; secondly, I noted that if two groups of people could have completely different spatial experiences of the same place, this could not simply be attributed to physical space or the built environment alone. This insight supports Hilde Heynen's (2013) model of "space as stage" that allows for our experience of space to be determined by both the architecture and the social interactions within a space.

In her article, 'Space as Receptor, Instrument or Stage: Notes on the interaction between spatial and social constellations', Heynen (2013) proposes that multidisciplinary research is needed in order for one to acquire a more holistic understanding of the interaction between the built environment and social behaviour. She distinguishes between three different models that could possibly explain this interaction: firstly, architectural space is mostly understood in the social sciences as a passive *receptor* within which social interaction takes place. This method takes "the existence of actual architectural and urban space as a given background, rather than as an active factor that in itself is capable of producing such behaviour" (p. 344). Secondly, from an architectural perspective space is often believed to be *an instrument* with the ability to shape the social interactions that take place within it. "They focus on the capacity of space to impose certain desired behaviours on subjects, which effectuate a-symmetrical power relations between domineering and oppressed groups" (p. 346). However, both these models fail fully to explain the complex interaction between people and the built environment. My research therefore aims to investigate space as described by Heynen's third model – the multidisciplinary perspective she defines as 'space as a stage'. This conception proposes that space can, on the one hand, afford certain social constructs and disallow others, while on the other hand also being influenced and changed by the agency of its inhabitants. As stage, space can thus both "accommodate and condition social behaviour" (Heynen, 2013, p. 346).

Doreen Massey's work (1994; 2005), which applies gender theories to existing concepts and methods of theorising space and place, sheds further light on my observation that the same space can be experienced in completely different ways. Feminist theorists frequently argue that gender characteristics are not stable and attributable to a fixed essence, but rather socially constructed and relational (Butler, 1988). Massey (1994) draws on this concept to question the essentialist and stable conceptualisation of space and place. She maintains that the dichotomous nature of the dominant theoretical understanding of space and place supports the exclusivity and boundedness of place as well as the sentimental associations with place as *home* or *motherland*. Massey (1994) therefore suggests a feminist strategy to "thinking in terms of relations" (p. 7)

in order to reconceptualise our understanding of space and place. She argues that both space and place should be conceptualised in terms of social relations such as class and gender. Massey (2015a) stresses that, “while space is socially constructed, the social is spatially constructed” (p. 254). In this way, space can be acknowledged as much more than a passive backdrop or container for social interaction, while the important role of social interaction in the subjective experience of space becomes evident.

All spaces therefore change depending on the identity of the occupants and obtain significance through social relations and interaction, and through this process of signification space becomes place (Tyner, 2012, p. 16). Space, when regarded as relational, can simultaneously hold different meanings for different individuals or, in other words, be a different place to several people. Rather than stable and definite, place is “a dynamic ensemble of people and environment that is at once material and experiential, spatial and social” (Dovey, 2010, p. 7). The particular combination of social relations which are part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means included within that place itself. Therefore, places cannot exist without people; they are lived and embodied spaces (Tyner, 2012, p. 18). As it is constituted through “reiterative social practice, place is made and remade on a daily basis” (Creswell, 2004, p. 1). This draws attention to the important role that socio-political power relations play in our subjective experience of place.

Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely [...] through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that ‘beyond’. Places viewed this way are open and porous. (Massey, 1994, p. 5).

Instead of being linked to one demarcated geographical position, place thus stretches over several locations and incorporates physical, emotional, social, economic and cultural qualities. According to Brun and Fábos (2015), opening up the conventional conception of place as explained above can create new possibilities for understanding the interaction between displaced individuals, place and home.

Home

On several occasions one of the volunteers who was aware of my research and a former resident of Direct Provision himself, had asked some of the women in the group to show me their rooms. The question was always met with the same answer: *"It is not allowed. You know I will get into trouble"*.

One evening, after the skillshare activity, Elijah offered to show me his room: Very conscious of all the security cameras [Fig. 2.], I follow him down numerous corridors and up several flights of stairs, into the part of the building that is restricted to visitors. I'm rather anxious, so I nervously chat along the way. *"If you don't take me back down, Elijah, I'll never get out of here,"* I comment, trying to hide my uneasiness with a feeble joke. I'm not supposed to be here. The hallways are clean and empty. It looks like hospital corridors with linoleum floors and light walls. No pictures, no curtains. *Nothing that says "home"*.

Home is a much debated and contentious subject. Early western feminist debate problematised home as an institution of women's oppression in which gender norms and power relations are upheld (De Beauvoir, 1949; Friedan, 1963) by confining women to a life of endless housework. However, there are also feminist theorists who maintain that home could also be conceptualised in a more positive way. According to bell hooks (1990) the concept of home holds powerful political potential for change that should not be overlooked. According to her, home has the potential to be a place of healing, where one could recover to wholeness. Iris Marion Young supports this position in her article, 'House and Home: Feminist variations on a theme' (2005), by suggesting an alternative perspective on home and, more specifically, housework. She maintains that home is a place of "remembrance" where positive as well as negative experiences from the past are "preserved" and subsequently framed and reframed, through the mundane activities of everyday life. By enactment of often-gendered household tasks, home is created and recreated through the continuity of identities, families and cultures – irrespective of location. Young explains, for instance, that preparing food maintains culture and produces home: "She prepares the sauce according to her mother's recipe in order physically to nourish her children, but at the same time she keeps alive and old cuisine in a new country" (Young, 2005, p. 143). This leads to a more fluid and dynamic conception of home by introducing the idea that home does not need to be fixed to a specific place at all,

but is rather produced by the everyday embodied actions of homemaking. For asylum seekers the continuation of such familiar household tasks could provide opportunities to reduce feelings of temporariness and dislocation by encouraging relational and emotional connection to place as open and dynamic, rather than attachment to a fixed location. Brun and Fábos (2015) propose that home in forced migration “focuses more on the relational and emotional perspectives of home rather than the territorial connections to a home” (p. 8). For asylum seekers home can thus consist of a complex trans-local system where both “place of origin and place of refuge” (p. 8) work together to create a sense of belonging. Home can as such incorporate far-reaching social and emotional connections that span several continents at once: “from the material and territorial to the imaginary and symbolic” (p. 9).

Intersectionality and embodiment

“*This is my room,*” Elijah announces. A single bed and bunkbed are moved tightly together on one side of the room to create space for a small table with a computer and speakers, a wardrobe and some shelves with clothing. He explains that he doesn’t have to share his room like the other men as he is not an asylum seeker anymore. He’s just staying here while finding alternative accommodation in Dublin. “*The others don’t have extra belongings such as shelves or computers,*” he clarifies. I ask about privacy and lockable cupboard space. “*Privacy is good.*” He has his own bedroom and bathroom.

Our experience of space relies to a large extent on our bodies. It therefore follows quite naturally that each person’s experience of space will be unique, determined by their specific height, size, health, age and physical abilities. Other characteristics that make up each person’s unique identity, such as gender, race, socio-economic position, motherhood, marital status, culture etc., also play a role in an individual’s experience of space. Within the context of Direct Provision, space and place take on a particular significance as these concepts are complex – entangled with the politics of power, oppression and belonging.

In his book, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault explains that power can play out at microlevels of society. Minor incidents of power are expressed as complex layers of privilege within the space of Direct Provision, where some residents, such as Elijah, are treated as superior to ‘the others’. This constitutes internal hierarchies amongst the residents, whereby privileges are determined by each resident’s intersectional identity. “Intersectionality”, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), refers to an analytical framework that makes

use of diversification in order to deconstruct collective identity and explains the multidimensional nature in which oppression, marginalisation and exclusion work. Building on this theory, Bürkner (2012) argues that identity categories that play a particular role in social inequality within the context of migration are class, gender, race and body, where ‘body’ includes features such as age, appearance and ability. This explains how power relations in Direct Provision are determined by the embodied experience of each person’s unique combination of identity characteristics. Additionally, in Direct Provision asylum application status in particular plays a very important role in determining the level of autonomy individuals are granted. This is evident from Elijah being allowed to stay alone in his room and personalise it to a certain extent, while ‘the others’ do not have these privileges; by the women being unable to show me their rooms, while Elijah could do so; or the men spontaneously telling their stories, while women kept conversation to the minimum.

Young (1990) explains that oppression manifests itself in five different ways: through exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. The space of Direct Provision subjects asylum seekers in varying degrees to at least marginalisation, powerlessness and cultural imperialism. The residents are not a homogenous group and experience different levels of oppression in Direct Provision based on their intersectional identity traits.



Figure 3. Children playing at a skill-share evening in Hatch Hall, photo taken by and courtesy of Marluce Lima (All We Need is Love), 2016.

Emancipatory power of making a home

“The other guys struggle with privacy, as they can’t choose who they share a room with. Here, let me show you.” He gets up, leads me outside to the next room. He knocks: *“Hi Somali, my friend Somali, open up. We have a visitor. She wants to see your room. Just cover yourself up.”* I feel mortified at just how inappropriate the situation is. I shouldn’t be here...the door is opened cautiously from the inside. Except for the different arrangement of the furniture, the room is identical to Elijah’s. Even the curtains and bedding look exactly the same. However, in this room it is obvious that there is not enough storage space, making it seem cramped and claustrophobic. *“See there’s place for three single men in this room,”* Elijah explains. *“At the moment, the centre isn’t full, so there’s only two men sharing the room for now”.* I cannot imagine that there could be space for another man and his belongings in here. *“The men are from different countries. They have different cultures and speak different languages. Sometimes there’s conflict if one man wants to sleep and another wants to watch TV and they can’t speak the same language...”*

Most of the everyday activities performed at home, such as cooking, eating, cleaning, sleeping, bathing, socialising and celebrating, are culturally determined and have spatial implications. The repetition of these tasks in a specific, familiar way has the potential to recreate home, irrespective of place or geographical location. In some cases space needs to be modified or personalised in order to accommodate the movements specific to an action.

Direct Provision is not an environment conducive to meaningful attachments and a feeling of belonging as the most intimate detail of residents’ lives are controlled and scrutinised by the system. In Direct Provision bodily movement is determined and controlled through rules and surveillance, but also the affordances of the space. This creates additional disconnect as asylum seekers are unable to re-enact habitual embodied routines – such as eating, sleeping, religious practice and caring – in the familiar way they used to back ‘home’. The supposedly ‘neutral’ space of the centre affords most residents few to no opportunities to modify and personalise their living spaces or to determine how they would want to carry out activities such as sleeping, for instance. This creates feelings of alienation. For an asylum seeker the colonial architecture of this centre thus becomes a “space of Otherness, which strip[s] her of her dignity and personal power” (hooks, 1990, p. 83). Although from an outsider’s perspective it might look like a comfortable refuge and suitable solution to accommodate

asylum seekers, the space of Direct Provision is so alien and impossible for most residents to connect or relate to that residents might never feel comfortable in the space. In this excessively controlled environment, forced assimilation into Western ‘neutrality’ transforms residents’ lives into meaningless waiting, evident in the way one resident describes her day:

“I sleep...I wake up, I eat breakfast, I go to my room, I wait for lunch, after lunch, I go to my room, I wait for dinner, after dinner, I go to my room. I sleep...”

Conclusion

Due to the increasing securitisation of migration, growing numbers of displaced people are currently forced to wait for long periods of time in environments intended to be temporary solutions. The most iconic spatial representations of such temporary spaces are refugee camps. However, forcibly displaced people find shelter, are accommodated or make their homes in a variety of different ways. Institutional contexts of displacement are less often studied and thereby even more obscured, further marginalising the inhabitants of these spaces.

One such context is the seldom researched spaces of institutional living that some countries provide for asylum seekers waiting for their refugee status to be decided. At face value, institutional living might seem to be a workable solution for a difficult situation. I argued, however, that spaces providing large-scale accommodation for asylum seekers such as Direct Provision in Ireland instead work to marginalise and alienate residents and to invalidate their experiences. Within the space of Direct Provision, the stringent control and surveillance of residents’ everyday lives serves to segregate them from the rest of society. By providing culturally inappropriate accommodation with little to no opportunity to adjust space or to recreate home by doing homemaking activities, residents are stripped of their agency and it further engenders asylum seekers as docile, static and helpless.

Feminist theory on space, place and home can provide insights into spatial practices and making homes in situations of displacement. The act of making a home – be it constructing it, adjusting it, by homemaking tasks, or recreating home by doing and redoing seemingly simple daily acts such as sleeping and eating in a familiar way – has emancipatory potential for displaced individuals. It can counteract feelings of uncertainty, dislocation and unsettledness.

Domesticity, as the performance of everyday life, has the potential to transform abstract space into meaningful place or, ideally, even into home. Dis-

placed people need the autonomy to make decisions regarding their own lives and the spaces they inhabit in order to recreate a sense of home. In Direct Provision, however, even the most trivial details of residents' lives are regulated to such an extent that forming any attachment to place is reserved for only a privileged few.

Intersectionality can be a useful framework for understanding how asylum seekers in situations of displacement might be affected in different ways or intensities. I considered the social regulation of the asylum applicants within a centre in Dublin and discussed the formation of internal hierarchies that uniquely shape each individual resident's spatial experience. Through this investigation it became evident that several identity characteristics – and in this case, asylum application status in particular – plays an important role in the level of autonomy or exclusion of residents.

Research on displaced people has a history founded in colonialism and is still often conducted by outsiders: academic researchers and humanitarian organisations who do not have first-hand experience of living the life of the researched group. Moreover, large power imbalances with regard to economic, cultural and political capital often exist within these contexts between the researcher and the researched. Feminist and post-colonial critiques of the authority of the author and representation in research argue that alternative approaches should be explored. I proposed the use of a reflexive journal as part of an ethnographical study that aspires to feminist research ideals. Keeping a reflexive journal assisted me to become aware of and critically reflect some of the complexities and contradictions that my personal identity as researcher within the Direct Provision space introduced into the research. By superimposing theory on displacement, space and power with the reflexive data from my personal experience within the Direct Provision centre during skill-share events, I came to acquire a better understanding of the relational qualities of space that shape each individual's unique experience.

In the light of this, and building on a recent article by Xue and Desmet (2019), who argue that introspection is a valid and powerful method in experience-driven design research, I propose that reflexive ethnographic methods should similarly be regarded as an effective approach in architectural research. Future research could include more mixed methods to simultaneously incorporate both visual and reflexive data in order to obtain a richer understanding of the ways in which space and social relations influence each other.

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Notes

1. In general terms, “refugee” refers to a person who flees their country of origin or fears persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a social group (Thornton, Glossary of Terms: Irish Asylum Law, 2013). The term “asylum seeker” refers to a displaced individual who has sought international protection in a host country, but whose claim for refugee status has not been determined (UNHRC, 2015). Based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (UN General Assembly), the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (UN General Assembly, 1951), every asylum seeker is entitled to accommodation and subsistence while their application for international protection is being reviewed.
2. In order to protect participants’ identity, data have been anonymised by removing direct identifiers and making use of pseudonyms.

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