Urban Matters



Back to camp life

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Issue: Evictability- Displacement as a systemic condition and an everyday lived experience

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In the wake of the long summer of migration in 2015, the Swedish government presented a new law to speed up the transfers of refugees with granted permission to stay in the country from state-financed asylum centres to municipal housing. Due to a prolonged affordable housing crisis in many of the larger city-regions and scarce access to public housing, the municipal governments and administrations offered the new denizens temporary solutions. In Stockholm County, these solutions consisted of workers' barracks, container dwellings, rooms in refurbished elderly homes and entire areas with modular houses, easily erected on temporary building permits. The so-called Settlement Act (2016:38) intended to speed up resettlement, create conditions in which refugees with asylum could settle down, make themselves at home and integrate faster.

However, the temporary housing solutions did not feel like homes and neither did they create a more efficient transition from asylum to integration. Many tenants experienced them as a step backwards rather than forward, from the asylum centres to a life they had experienced in camps, where confinement, suspension and insecurity imbued the everyday. In some cases, residents insisted on calling the temporary dwellings where they had been resettled "camps". These experiences challenge the notion of linear trajectories from asylum centres to processes of settling down in cities and towns. Rather, they point to temporal enmeshments of acceleration and deceleration, interruptions and contradictions stemming from inclusive policies, on the one hand, and hampered "existential mobility" and "stuckedness" on the other (Hage, 2009; Missbach, 2013). Furthermore, the experiences challenge the conceptualisation of the camp as a spatial configuration at the border between nation-states and a marker of a straight line between non-status and status holders. Instead, as will become clearer in the following, camp life is articulated as an existential state of being connected to a multiplicity of temporal ruptures and tensions and ensuing uncertainty and delays. In this paper, I present an excerpt from my PhD thesis that illustrates a temporal element of what Huub van Baar (2017) has called evictability. Defined as the constant threat of being removed from a sheltering place, I contextualise this threat here in one of a chain of recurrent situations of uncertain habitation along the migration route that does not end with asylum status.



Rather than departing from a socio-legal framing of the camp, I draw from the experiences of two tenants living in temporary housing, who I call Gabriel and Fareed, to situate camp life within what has been somewhat problematically referred to as the "arrival city" (Saunders, 2011). By doing this, I challenge the teleological notion of departure and arrival (Meeus et al., 2018). From the conversations with Fareed and Gabriel and their way of describing their accommodation, the temporary modular houses appeared as a prolongation of the camp rather than a site of arrival. Hence, the camp and the experience of camp life do not always naturally become an obsolete designation of people's living conditions after obtaining permission to stay. Arrival, thus, needs to be problematised and discussed beyond legal framings of inclusion and conceptualised as a non-linear trajectory.

Gabriel and Fareed lived together with 20 other men in a facility composed of two rows of red, wooden modular barracks. The facility was discretely located at the edge of a middle-class suburban residential area, detached and separated from the family houses. I had scheduled an interview with Gabriel, a young refugee from Syria. Gabriel showed me his room. It had a tiny bed wedged into one side of the room, a desk and a toilet, all cramped into a space of nine square metres. Gabriel had, in addition, managed to squeeze a refrigerator into one of the corners. These were standard barracks which I had seen in several municipalities. This was not the first provisional accommodation for Gabriel, who had been on the move for three years since he left Syria. It was just the current one in a chain of provisional shelters. In Sweden alone, he had stayed in two asylum centres before moving to Stockholm. Before that, he stayed more than a year in the basement of a cafeteria in Istanbul, where he also worked twelve hours, six days a week, with a monthly wage of 60 Euros, money he saved up for the trip to Sweden.

Gabriel did not know what he had agreed to when he signed the papers transferring him

from the asylum centre to the municipality in Stockholm County. The papers were in Swedish; the interpreter seemed ill-informed or in a rush, giving unprecise summaries and encouraging him to just sign the papers. Gabriel thought he would be given a small apartment, or a studio at least. In his mind, with a residency permit, whatever he was offered by the Swedish Migration Agency had to be better than being in an asylum centre. But he did not get the information about what kind of home he was being offered or how long he would be able to stay. In regard to living standards, the asylum centre was much better according to Gabriel. During the interview, Gabriel told me that his neighbour and friend Fareed wanted to talk to me. I had noticed a man in red sweatpants wandering up and down the hallway, the tap of his flip flops as he went back and forth from his room to the kitchen. Fareed was critical of the situation in the barracks, to say the least. He was told he would get a flat and that he would be able to bring his family. But upon his arrival, he understood that this would not be the case.

> *Kommun* [municipal administration] called us there and tell us congratulations, we are now responsible for you. We have one flat for you because you have family and when your family coming, you will get the flat. After one month I come to this camp. And as you see, the room is 3 metres…so my family, actually can't come…because I have a bad situation.
>
> You feel you are not a human. You are a dog. Because you put me in this room. And they know…the government. And…the *kommun* know that they can give us good room, a good house with kitchen, at least a big room with kitchen and a toilette. But these people…they are taking money from us. The government pay money to the *kommun* to take us, but he is taking that money and not giving us anything. Also, now, this guy [Gabriel] is working, and he pays *skatt* [tax] now for one year, more than one year. He pays *skatt*, he is working, from morning until night, when he comes here, he needs a good place to sleep. The neighbours here, they live in houses… his dog has a bigger house than my room. I can take you and show you! His doghouse is bigger than my room. I can't bring friends here…I am not a human being? Why you told the government, yeah, we will take this person if you don't have place? Just take the money from the government and you give me…put me in this camp? We are human, even if we are Arab.

We sat in the shared living room next to the shared kitchen on a worn-out leather corner sofa. Besides the couch and the table in front of it, the room was unfurnished. Fareed continued explaining, agitated about the situation in the barracks. He stayed in his room most of the time to avoid people and the everyday commotion. He avoided many of his neighbours, and he felt that many of the officials treated him as less than a human.

> And here in this camp. This camp, but the same all the camps, we have drugs, we have marijuana, we have heroine, we have hashish, we have everything. And sometimes we fight, don't do this, don't do this, you say I pay rent, I do too. I don't care! This is not your business.

Fareed excused himself for his bad English. To compensate for our inability to fully communicate with each other, he recited dialogues and illustrated vividly with gestures. Fareed explained that he had tried to find a job to be able to move to another place. So far, he had not had any luck. All available jobs were in the service sector, in restaurants and the like. He had been to a couple of interviews, but nothing that had led to employment. Fareed thought that he was too old. He felt trapped in the barracks, barely getting by on integration benefits. Most of it, he used to pay the rent, which was equivalent to about 500

Euros a month. Even if the situation was bad here, Fareed emphasised that this camp was not unique. He had seen other camps where friends of his stayed, and they were all similar.

Fareed's account offers a transversal gaze on the camp as an experience not solely connected to legal status or to the camp as a spatial articulation at the frontier of the nation-state. Instead, the experience embodied by Fareed and others exemplify a threshold existence that transcended the distinct spaces of refugee camps, asylum centres, and now, transition housing. From the tenants' perspective, the conditions of temporariness, hampered mobility and uncertainty commonly associated with refugee camps, transit camps and reception centres (see e.g., Drangsland, 2020b; Hyndman, 2019; Mountz, 2011) were reproduced through the local implementation of a supposedly inclusive settlement state policy.

The temporary modular houses were not camps because they were not part of a formal institution detaining people or keeping them from moving. In fact, it was quite the opposite. The municipal administrations offered the refugees homes for a short period and forced them to move afterwards, keeping them on the move. The resettlement process and the municipal administrative structures offering stopovers thus did not hamper people's mobility through captivity but rather by creating circuitous displacement (Bhagat, 2020) in which people were threatened by removal. The camp or camp life is, in Fareed's case, rather a disposition that keeps him from 'moving well' (Hage, 2009, p. 98). In Ghassan Hage's term, moving well refers to the emotional and existential dimension of mobility. The physical mobility involved in migration implies existential mobility, a desire to feel that one is moving according to one's desires. Fareed had plans and dreams of starting a small restaurant, a small business. But he had difficulty finding the motivation and energy when he could not plan the next few months ahead. In his case, immobility lay less in the restriction of movement and more in existential and social immobilisation. From this viewpoint, confinement and forced mobility are not opposites. Instead, they should be seen as operating in pairs, producing stagnation, control, deceleration, acceleration, immobilisation and forced hypermobility (Tazzioli, 2019, p. 3). In the case of the implementation of the Settlement Act, migrants' mobilities were obstructed partly by unclear rules, housing contracts and ensuing uncertain futures. Like Gabriel and many other migrants living in temporary housing, Fareed did not know precisely what he had agreed to when he signed. Fareed explained that when the Migration Agency called him to sign the papers for his relocation, he was not informed about the rules or his rights. But he understood that he would have to leave the asylum centre almost immediately and find a place of his own if he did not sign. Since he had nowhere else to go, there were no options. It was not a matter of choice. On the other hand, he wanted to leave the asylum centre and reunite with his family as soon as possible. Staying at the asylum centre would not bring him closer to his family. In order to bring his family to Sweden, Fareed had to find an apartment that the Migration Agency recognised as adequate for housing a family. However, he was not aware that the transfer to Stockholm would bring other kinds of quandaries, further mobility and insecurity. Upon arrival at his temporary shelter, he had more papers to sign.

> The municipality gave us more papers, sign here, sign here…We don't know what's in the papers at first. But then we understood that it said that they could kick us out when they wanted and that we could not say anything. We could not go to court… We didn't know about that! And the first contract, we signed for six months. Now…two months, two months and two months.

Fareed's lease was renewed two months at the time after the initial half-year lease. The discontinuity and insecurity kept Fareed in constant fear of removal and displacement, which elicited a double relation to the temporary substandard home. While Fareed and many in the same position as him were upset and disenchanted by their housing conditions, they lacked alternatives and feared eviction. Due to previous marketisation and privatisation of a large part of the public housing stock and the exploitative informal rental market, the dwellers feared continuous precarious existence in structural homelessness.[1] This uncertainty, accentuated by the municipal squeeze inflicted upon Fareed and his neighbours through two-month leases elicited a desire to hold on to this place. This paradox was not uniquely experienced by Fareed. In fact, it was one of the more common experiences among the people I talked to when collecting data for my thesis. This contradiction was never more evident than during the protests and political mobilisation against evictions that I followed during my fieldwork. During a week or so in November 2018, tenants from an area with temporary housing modules erected tents outside the facility under the banner "We won't move!", demanding the right to stay put in their high-rent yet substandard temporary homes. This shows how widespread the forced reaction to stay put in substandard housing was among the people residing in the temporary housing. In Fareed's case, staying in the barracks meant that he could not reunite with his family and had to forcibly reconcile with being in a state of suspended life. On the other hand, he had no other options in sight. Without a steady income, preferably permanent employment, finding another apartment would be almost impossible. This kept Fareed captive in the camp and in a state of evictability, in constant fear of becoming homeless.

Moreover, the two-month prolongation precluded Fareed and his neighbours from continuity and establishing social networks; it fragmented their everyday life. The imminent threat of displacement deprived them of the "stillness" required to build community relationships (Gill, 2009). Fareed and Gabriel and many of the tenants I talked to could not anticipate what would happen in the next few months. According to Fareed, the destructive environment in the "camp" stemmed from this uncertainty, which resulted in a lack of motivation.

I end this paper here. The account is an excerpt of a larger argument in my doctoral thesis about the circuitous management of migrant settlement and logistical rationality. In this short piece, I have isolated the account to highlight the paradoxical sensation of embodied conflict concerning the threat of forced removal and future uncertainty while simultaneously being frustrated by being captured in a camp-like existence.

NOTES:

[1] Structural homelessness denotes people who, for structural reasons, have difficulties

accessing the housing market and are forced to live in overcrowded, short-term housing solutions (Socialstyrelsen, 2021, p. 26).

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