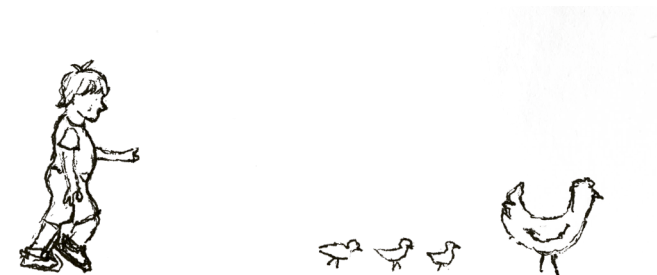




Mapping the Margin: Homemaking Practices of Asylum Seekers in Flanders' Reception Centres

Architectural Storytelling as a Form of Care and Recognition



by Riet Nonneman

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Author:

Riet Nonneman
nonneman.r@gmail.com

Studio:

Other Ways of Doing Architecture

Supervisor:

Dag Boutsen

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Master of Architecture

KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture

Campus Sint-Lucas Brussels

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This thesis explores how architectural practice engages with the socio-political realities of displacement through methods of subjective storytelling and spatial observation. Set within the broader frameworks of temporality and marginality, the focus lies on two reception centres for asylum seekers in Flanders: Opvangcentrum Westakkers – Rode Kruis and Rode Kruisopvangcentrum Beveren. It does so by mapping how individuals negotiate homemaking practices within these temporary and institutionalised contexts.

By adopting a position of critical proximity, the analysis draws on sketching, informal interviews, and on-site presence as tools to map space in both a physical and emotional sense. Through this approach, personal subjectivity is not masked, but embraced as a lens through which to reveal hidden spatial narratives and to question the traditional role of the architect.

This socio-spatial reflection is grounded in intersectional theory, building on the work of researchers such as Luce Beeckmans, Huda Tayob and Seethaler-Wari. It seeks to reframe the architectural gaze towards the margin, as defined by bell hooks, not as a zone of lack or exclusion, but as a space of resilience, improvisation, and agency. Rather than offering a design solution, this thesis proposes a method of architectural engagement that centres listening, mapping, and the empowering of voices that are often left unheard.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to challenge dominant architectural modes by foregrounding the potential of alternative, slower, and more humane ways of reading and working with space, particularly in contexts where uncertainty and hope coexist.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Dag Boutsen, for guiding me throughout this process.

I would like to thank my peers, my fellow students, for sharing their thoughts and ideas with me on a weekly basis, enabling us to improve and inspire each other's work.

I would like to thank my mom for reading my work and helping me reflect on it. And, of course, for just for being my mom. As I would like to thank my dad for being my dad and my brothers for destroying me in table tennis during my writing breaks.

I would like to thank my friends for their help and support.

I would like to thank the managers of the reception centres in Beveren and Westakkers for their trust and assistance.

Most importantly of all, I would like to thank the people living in these reception centres, displaced from their homes, for trusting me, talking to me and sharing their stories, and for granting me permission to retell them.

Thank you.

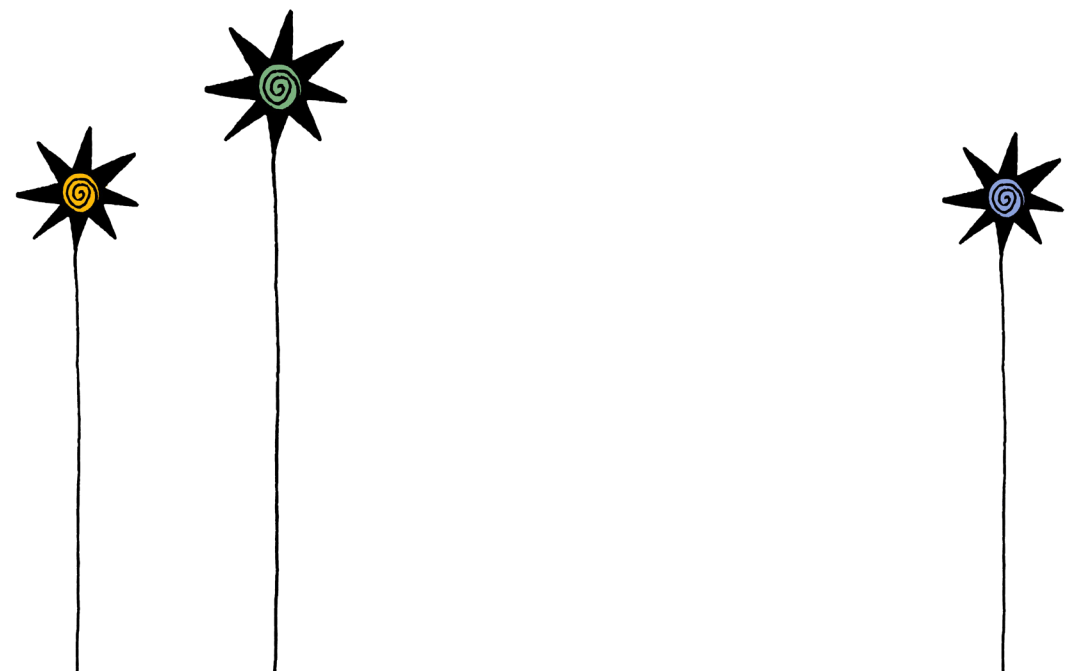


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Introduction

This thesis emerges from the framework of the master studio Other Ways of Doing Architecture, led by Dag Boutsen. At the beginning of this academic year, we collectively engaged with the concept of spatial agency, primarily through reading and reflecting on the Spatial Agency website (Till, Schneider, & Wigglesworth, n.d.). This provided a shared foundation from which each student could define their own trajectory, responding critically to the architectural discipline and exploring alternative approaches to space-making.

My own trajectory stems from a growing interest in the intersection between architecture, temporality and social vulnerability. In contemporary architectural discourse, temporality is often considered in terms of material and ecological sustainability, with a focus on modular, reversible and adaptable structures that fit within a circular building economy. While this represents an important evolution within a capitalist and environmentally damaging construction sector, I set out to explore temporality from a less popular, socio-political angle. In this thesis, I attempt to explore the concept of temporality through the lived experiences of displacement, adopting an intersectional, human-centred approach that foregrounds fragility, agency and adaptation.

This thesis is shaped by two interconnected aims. Firstly, it explores how architectural storytelling can act as a method to reveal and interpret marginalised spatial realities. Drawing from subjective and situated observation, I embrace my own perspective as a valuable tool rather than a limitation, using sketching, on-site presence, and informal conversations to capture the lived experience of space, both visually and socially. The purpose of these methods is not merely to document, but to reveal the everyday narratives and spatial practices that often remain hidden.

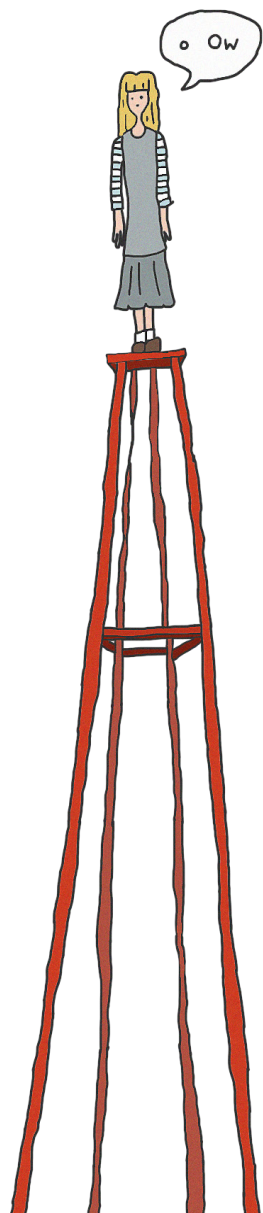
This approach is closely intertwined with the second focus of this thesis: reflecting on homemaking practices in conditions of displacement. Building on the work of scholars such as Luce Beeckmans, I examine how people living in reception centres establish a sense of agency and create moments of stability and comfort, despite the uncertain and regulated nature of their surroundings. To gain a better understanding of these concepts, I carefully mapped and analysed two reception centres near the place where I grew up: *Rode Kruisopvangcentrum Beveren* and *Opvangcentrum Westakkers - Rode Kruis (Sint-Niklaas)*. In doing so, I created a new, more in-depth perception of what can be understood as homemaking practices. To structure this exploration, I will first offer a brief introduction to the organisation and infrastructure of asylum reception in Belgium, providing necessary contextual background. Following this, the *State of the Art* chapter introduces several key theoretical concepts and voices that shaped my approach. I will then elaborate on the methodology, explaining how I worked on-site and how drawing, mapping, and conversation formed the core of my research process. This leads into a detailed analysis of the two reception centres I studied, presented as spatial and narrative mappings. Finally, I will reflect on the key findings of this thesis, both from an architectural and human understanding and perspective.

The aim of this work is to make the margin more accessible, both physically and visually, as well as conceptually. Marginalised spaces are often characterised as sites of exclusion, absence and deficiency, but, as bell hooks argues, they are also places of resistance, creativity and adaptation. These places hold important lessons for how we, as architects, might better understand temporality, agency, and resilience in a spatial context. Through critical and careful mapping, I aim to uncover the often-overlooked practices that unfold in these spaces, and to reflect on how architectural discourse might respond more attentively. Rather than offering fixed solutions, I propose a response that is attentive, humble and shifts positionality.

Positionality

Hi, I'm Riet. I am a white, Belgian-born woman from an affluent family that never was forced to move. I grew up in the same town my parents still reside in. Aside from my move to Ghent for my architecture studies at KU Leuven (Sint-Lucas), I have experienced relatively few changes of environment. In that sense, questions of homemaking in contexts of displacement or temporality might seem to lie far beyond my personal scope.

Nonetheless, I have held a personal and academic interest in the experiences of asylum seekers in Belgium for quite some time. My mother, a professor of applied linguistics, conducts research on the impact of sociolinguistic inequality in asylum procedures, a topic that has often been the subject of conversation in our household. More significantly, I have spent several summers volunteering in reception centres across Flanders, working as an animator for children. Through these experiences, I got to know and encountered multiple people living in displacement. I listened to their stories and witnessed the psychological and material effects of protracted asylum procedures. Some of these connections have endured, and I remain in contact with some peers navigating these ongoing challenges.



I am 22 years old. Over recent years, I have increasingly questioned my position within architectural discourse, both as a student and as the architect I am becoming. I often find myself in moments of reflection, overwhelmed by the rapid societal transformations unfolding around us, such as climate change, the rise of extremism and the increasing scale of global migration. Rather than blaming those seeking to relocate, I recognise the deep privilege of my own birthplace and upbringing. For this reason, since the beginning of this thesis, I have been committed to using my privilege to give a voice to those on the margins and shed light on their experiences. I am writing this both for the people I met who live in this margin, and because I am convinced that we can and should learn a lot from them and from the way they manage the urgent and stressful situations they encounter.

The methodologies adopted in this thesis, which I will explain in detail later, reflect aspects of my personal identity and interests. Since drawing has always been a passion of mine, it feels both meaningful and appropriate to use it as a narrative tool within this work, a method that honours both my own subjectivity and the inherently visual nature of architectural inquiry.

As you will notice later on, I made a conscious decision not to produce a design proposal as part of this thesis. Even within fictional contexts and fictional assignments during my bachelor and master, I always felt a bit hypocritical after the deadlines, after designing spaces for others without their input. The act of designing holds power, it shapes lived experience. I frequently question my authority to determine what a space should look like for people whose realities differ from mine. While architectural training often emphasises rapid ideas and production, I find this pace at odds with the ethical and contextual sensitivity that is required for designing in a real environment. All too often, we are not taught to pause and observe, nor to engage meaningfully with the people and places that will be affected by our designs.

AS A STUDENT, I...

OFTEN FEEL ISOLATED FROM REALITY.

AM SCARED OF THAT SAME REALITY.

LIKE TO MAKE SMALL, PRETTY THINGS THAT STILL HOLD SIGNIFICANCE, AT LEAST FOR MYSELF, IDEALLY ALSO FOR OTHERS.

AM SOMETIMES LOST WITHIN MY OWN SUBJECTIVITY.

FEEL IT IS A NEED TO SOMETIMES FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE TO REALLY LEARN.

AS AN "ARCHITECT"

(DO I EVEN WANT TO BECOME ONE?)

I ...

AM INCLINED TO BELIEVE THAT EVERYTHING HAS ALREADY BEEN BUILT.

AM AWARE THAT SPACE HOLDS POWER, POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY.

THINK WE SHOULD LISTEN MORE.

WILL PROBABLY BE CHANGING MY MIND A LOT.

Therefore, the thesis is an attempt to slow down. To listen. To explore alternative ways of understanding space, ways that prioritise careful mapping, observation, and human conversation over immediate intervention. It does not aim to offer a solution but rather to render visible the spatial conditions and lived realities of those at the margins, including its potential and flaws. In doing so, I hope to challenge dominant modes of architectural authorship and advocate for a more reflective, socially embedded practice, one that recognises the political and ethical dimensions of our role as architects.

The Belgian reception network

This section will introduce the organization of the reception network in Belgium, which is managed by Fedasil, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. First, the reception capacity and infrastructure of asylum centres in Belgium will be discussed. I will then outline the reception trajectory for asylum seekers, followed by a discussion of the role of the Red Cross in organizing reception services in Belgium. Considering this context is particularly relevant for the analysis of the architecture of the two asylum centres in this study in the sense that the strain on the reception network might impact architectural choices made within these centres.

The capacity, the infrastructure

In Belgium, individuals seeking international protection are entitled to receive material support, which includes accommodation, food, clothing, as well as medical, psychological, and social assistance. As of 1 April 2025, the country's asylum system had a total capacity of 35,726 reception places. At that time, 33,487 individuals were residing in these facilities, representing an occupancy rate of 94% (Fedasil, n.d.-b). Since 2021, persistent shortages in available reception spots have led Fedasil to implement prioritisation measures, giving precedence to families and women. Consequently, single men are now required to register on a waiting list to access reception services. As of the latest data, around 3,000 men remain on that list. The growing number of asylum applications poses a substantial challenge to Belgium's reception system. In 2023, Fedasil reported that its reception network was already operating under significant strain, noting that the available capacity was insufficient even in the absence of a rise in arrivals (Fedasil, n.d.-e). By 2024, the situation had intensified, with applications for international protection increasing by 11.6% compared to the previous year. When compared to 2016, the number of applications in 2024 has more than doubled, up from 18,710 cases recorded that year (CGVS, 2024). This upward trend places increasing demands on the existing asylum infrastructure and highlights the urgent need to expand reception capacity.

To effectively respond to fluctuations in the number of asylum seekers, Fedasil proactively searches for new reception locations (Fedasil, n.d.-a). This involves the continuous identification of buildings and sites that can be mobilized either immediately or when demand increases in the future. In order to increase the capacity of their reception infrastructure, Fedasil is attracting different types of housing spaces, including large-scale facilities for collective reception, smaller semi-independent housing solutions, undeveloped land for modular reception units as well as a reserve capacity of 'buffer places'.

First, the key component of Fedasil's strategy involves sourcing large-scale facilities suitable for collective reception. These centres must be capable of housing at least 100 individuals and are operated either by Fedasil itself or in collaboration with partner organizations such as the Belgian Red Cross. Eligible buildings should offer at least 2,500 m² of usable space, be structurally sound, and available for lease on short notice. Former schools, care homes, hotels, student housing, hospitals, or office buildings are considered appropriate. Facilities must include, or be adaptable to include, communal areas, sanitary facilities, and kitchen infrastructure. There are no geographic restrictions within Belgium. Second, Fedasil promotes satellite housing - smaller, autonomous units near collective centres that allow for semi-independent living. These residences must be quickly available, require minimal renovation, and be suitable for self-sufficient use, including self-catering. Third, to meet short-term accommodation demands, Fedasil seeks vacant plots suitable for container-based reception units. Preferred sites measure at least 16,000 m², are available for leases of at least 18 months, and have or can access water, sewage, and electricity. Good transport links and some paving are also desirable. Finally, Fedasil maintains a dynamic reserve of "buffer places" - inactive reception spots that can be activated rapidly in times of need. To manage this reserve effectively, the agency looks for cost-efficient, high-quality, and readily available infrastructure across Belgium (Fedasil, n.d.-a).



Figure 1
Entrance of Klein
Kasteeltje, Brussels.

Source: Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen. (n.d.). *Getuigenissen Klein Kasteeltje*. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from <https://vluchtelingenwerk.be/blog/getuigenissen-klein-kasteeltje>

In their book "Asielcentra herdacht: naar een humane architectuur van aankomst" (2019), Beeckmans and Vanden Houte address the repurposing of institutional buildings, such as former military barracks, schools, or hospitals, into spaces for collective asylum reception. They argue that this "institutional architecture" often falls short of offering dignified, integrative living environments for asylum seekers, who may reside there for extended periods. To ensure a more humane and socially conscious architectural approach to reception centres, it is argued that it is essential to incorporate elements such as access to natural light, the provision of private spaces, the creation of communal areas, and the active involvement of local communities in the design and use of the facilities. These features can significantly reduce social isolation and foster greater opportunities for integration. This thesis will investigate to what extent the adaptive reuse of institutional buildings as reception centres takes into account the wellbeing of residents, by exploring the architectural, spatial, and operational aspects of two reception centres in Flanders.

The reception trajectory for asylum seekers in Belgium

The asylum reception process in Belgium is initiated at the registration centre "Klein Kasteeltje" in Brussels. Functioning as the main entry point into the national reception network, this centre accommodates both Fedasil's initial intake and allocation services (Fedasil, n.d.-c). Upon registration, applicants undergo a preliminary evaluation that includes social and medical screening. This step is essential to determine whether the applicant qualifies for reception services. Those found eligible are granted a temporary stay at the centre while awaiting transfer to a reception facility better suited to their individual needs. Typically, this provisional stay does not exceed one week.

Once the initial assessment is complete, Fedasil allocates a permanent reception location. This allocation provides the applicant with access to material assistance. In this process, Fedasil aims to take individual vulnerabilities into account, such as the presence of children, disabilities, or lack of guardianship, in order to place applicants in facilities equipped to meet those specific requirements. However, accepting a place in the reception system is not compulsory. Applicants who opt to reside with acquaintances or family members waive their entitlement to material support, with the exception of essential medical care. They are not eligible for financial aid in such cases. The Belgian reception network offers a capacity of around 35,000 places, which are distributed across two types of facilities: collective and individual. Collective centres are administered by Fedasil itself or by partners such as the Belgian Red Cross. In contrast, individual reception accommodations are typically private housing managed by local public welfare centres (OCMWs) through Local Reception Initiatives (LOIs), or by non-governmental organizations (Fedasil, n.d.-c).

A core principle of the reception infrastructure in Belgium is its “open” nature: residents are not subject to movement restrictions and may enter and leave their accommodations freely. The services provided include shelter, meals, clothing, social and healthcare support, psychological counselling, a modest daily allowance, legal guidance, interpreting services, and access to education and training. While collective centres are considered the default option, individual housing is reserved for specific groups considered vulnerable, such as pregnant individuals, single parents, people with disabilities, and those whose asylum applications are likely to succeed.

Reception rights come to an end once the asylum application process concludes, including all possible legal appeals. Applicants who receive a positive decision are granted residency status and are expected to transition toward independent living. A two-month extension period allows them to continue residing in their reception facility while seeking permanent accommodation, often with assistance from local social services. Applicants who receive a final rejection are issued an order to leave the country. Since the 2012 introduction of Belgium’s “return trajectory,” those in this category are directed to one of five designated Fedasil centres that host “open return places.” These centres are designed to facilitate voluntary return, offering a humane and non-coercive alternative to forced deportation. Crucially, during the 30-day extension period that follows the issuance of a return order, no forced removals are carried out. Residents are also free to leave the centre at any time, thereby preserving the open character of these return facilities (Fedasil, n.d.-c).



The role of the Red Cross in Belgian asylum reception

The largest reception partner of Fedasil is the Belgian Red Cross, represented by both Rode Kruis-Vlaanderen and Croix-Rouge de Belgique – Communauté Francophone. The two centres where I conducted research for this thesis are both managed by the Red Cross. Under a mandate from the federal government, the Red Cross operates collective reception centres for applicants for international protection. This partnership dates back to 1989, when the Belgian government requested the involvement of the Red Cross in the national reception network. A formal agreement was established between the government and the Red Cross, outlining the responsibilities of each party. According to this agreement, the government finances the reception operations up to a pre-determined limit. Rode Kruis-Vlaanderen does not use its own funds nor does it raise donations from the public for this purpose (Fedasil, n.d.-d). If Rode Kruis-Vlaanderen is appointed to manage the new facility, a coordination meeting is organised with all relevant stakeholders. These meetings are essential for ensuring a constructive and collaborative approach. Discussions typically focus on the planning and launch of the centre, communication strategies, and cooperation with local actors such as the fire department, police, civil registry office, and schools (Rode Kruis, n.d.).

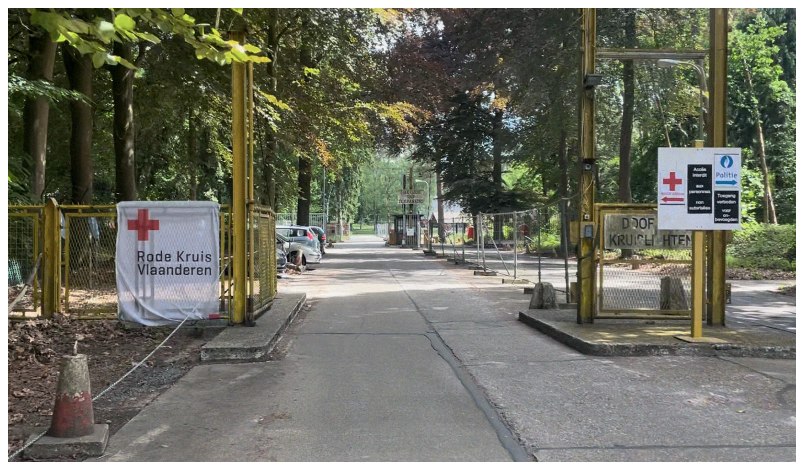


Figure 1
Entrance of Westackers
(Photograph by the author)



Figure 3
Entrance of Beveren
(Photograph by the author)

Reception centres of Rode Kruis include facilities for both residents and staff. While every effort is made to respect the privacy of individuals, the available infrastructure does mostly not allow for private rooms for all. Single individuals are usually accommodated in gender-specific shared rooms, while families are provided with private rooms. Encouraging residents' self-reliance is a key principle throughout their stay. Adult residents are offered opportunities to attend language courses, and children are integrated into regular schools as soon as possible. In addition to language education, various training programmes are available to help adult residents develop or strengthen their skills. Furthermore, they are encouraged to engage with the local community, including through volunteer work or employment, when possible.

Having outlined the research context of reception facilities in Belgium, the subsequent sections will address the theoretical and methodological framework of this study.

State of the Art

Introduction

This theoretical section provides the foundation for critically engaging with the complex, multilayered realities of temporariness and displacement experienced by newly arrived migrants and how these experiences are reflected in the spatial conditions of reception centres. To contextualize these spatial and experiential aspects, the analysis draws on critical concepts and perspectives that have consistently informed and shaped architectural discourse in fields such as critical spatial theory, migration studies, and political philosophy. The selected concepts are directly or indirectly tied to the central research theme of how displacement, temporariness and repurposing are not just conditions imposed on individuals but also embedded in the spaces they inhabit.

Concepts such as *marginality* (Hooks, 1989), *the politics of presence* (Darling, 2016), and *the right to have rights* (Arendt, 1949, 1974) primarily engage with human rights and political dimensions. On the other hand, notions such as *dwelling* (Heidegger, 1971; Lefebvre, 1966), *agency-in-waiting* (Brun, 2015), *temporality* (Crine, Flamand, & Raimondo, 2025), and *homemaking* (Cairns, 2004; Beeckmans, Singh, & Gola, 2022) offer more direct insights into how architectural design and spatial organization within reception centres shape—and are shaped by—the lived experiences of their inhabitants.

This section will introduce and contextualise these concepts, tracing their developments and exploring the ways in which they intersect. This theoretical framework serves as an analytical lens through which the research subject of this thesis is examined, providing the necessary tools to critically analyse how experiences of marginality, agency, homemaking, and temporality are shaped by and embedded within the structures and spatial practices of the asylum system.

Presence in/of the margin

The first and most crucial concept to foreground in the context in which I will be working is the notion of the margin, as articulated by bell hooks (1989). Contrary to dominant interpretations that position the margin solely as a space of exclusion and deprivation, Hooks reclaims it as a site of resistance, radical openness, and possibility. By approaching marginalised sites as grounds for new knowledge production and cultural conversion, rather than avoiding them, a space open for conversation and transformation is being created. In these marginalised spaces, that are marked by uncertainty, liminality and often extreme estrangement, a unique form of radical openness can emerge. This openness not only enables a confrontation with pain and trauma but also the potential to reclaim legacies, of resistance and accomplishment, in ways that actively transform present realities. Thereby, the margin becomes a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse, not just through words, but through alternative ways of living, knowing and being. Importantly, this resistance does not take place in isolation, Hooks emphasizes the need to stand in political power, in solidarity, with the oppressed, by offering our methods of theorising and interpreting, to collectively build on this space where the pleasure and power of knowing is accessible to all, and transformation is being initiated. The margin is thus, referring to Hooks, both a literal and symbolic space, allowing radical subjectivity and envisioning a different, more rightful future (Hooks, 1989).

This view of marginality aligns with Joe Darling's notion of the politics of presence (2016), even though he does not explicitly frame the margin as a site of resistance. Darling explores how individuals situated in the margins, often without a legal status or formal citizenship, can nonetheless assert political agency through their presence in the urban, public life. By being visible, participating and being embedded in community, these individuals can challenge state-based definitions of rights and membership, through their lived experience. While Hooks emphasizes the resistant potential of marginality, Darling extends this by showing how structural realities of exclusion can still become the basis of political claims. Darling, as well as Hooks, thus demonstrate how marginalised individuals can reframe terms of justice and belonging, not through institutional legitimacy, but through the embodied, everyday acts of presence and resistance. Nevertheless, Darling does underline the duality of this presence and visibility, since some groups have to consider the potential harmful consequences against the benefits of political participation (Darling, 2016).

BELL HOOKS THE MARGIN / MARGINALITY AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE
→ RADICAL OPENNESS = CREATING POTENTIAL, POSSIBILITY

STAND IN POLITICAL RESISTANCE WITH THE OPPRESSED, READY TO OFFER OUR WAYS OF SEEING AND THEORISING, OF MAKING CULTURE TOWARDS THAT REVOLUTIONARY EFFORT WHICH SEEKS TO CREATE SPACE WHERE THERE IS UNLIMITED ACCESS TO THE PLEASURE AND POWER OF KNOWING, WHERE TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE

TO CREATE SPACES WHERE ONE IS ABLE TO REDEEM & RECLAIM THE PAST, LEGACIES OF PAIN, SUFFERING AND TRIUMPH IN WAYS THAT TRANSFORM PRESENT REALITY.

POLITICISATION OF MEMORY THAT DISTINGUISHES NOSTALGIA THAT LONGING FOR SOMETHING TO BE AS IT ONCE WAS, A KIND OF USELESS ACT, AND THAT REMEMBERING THAT SERVES TO ILLUMINATE AND TRANSFORM THE PRESENT

AT TIMES HOME IS NOWHERE. AT TIMES ONE KNOWS ONLY EXTREME ESTRANGEMENT AND ALIENATION. THEN HOME IS NO LONGER JUST A PLACE. IT IS LOCATIONS.

MARGINALITY AS A CENTRAL LOCATION FOR THE PRODUCTION OF A COUNTER HEGETONIC DISCOURSE THAT IS NOT JUST FOUND IN WORDS BUT IN HABITS OF BEING AND THE WAY ONE LIVES

The right to have rights

Joe Darling's concept of *the politics of presence* (2016) can be further deepened through Hannah Arendt's reflection on statelessness and the precariousness of human rights (1949, 1974). Both Darling and Arendt argue that rights are not inherent to the human condition, but are rather dependent on visibility, participation and recognition within a political community. Like Darling, Arendt is also concerned with the exclusion and precarity of stateless or rightless persons, and with how to politically re-include them. However, while Darling argues that urban presence and embeddedness can become the basis of political claims, even in the absence of formal citizenship, Arendt reveals the structural limitations of such claims in the absence of legal and political acknowledging. According to Arendt, the loss of citizenship does not only involve the erosion of civil rights, but also the collapsing of human rights (Arendt, 1973). She described this collapse as the moment when individuals lose all affiliations except their bare humanity (Arendt, 1949). The so-called right to have rights depends on belonging to a political community. Human rights presuppose membership to a community, because without, individuals become rightless and invisible to the law. In this regard, the refugee or undocumented person does not only suffer from exclusion but inhabits a condition of legal and political abandonment. Since the decline of the nation-state, which was already starting in the early twentieth century, inhabitants of its territory are no longer guaranteed to be considered citizens (Menke, 2014).

Arendt's critique is particularly relevant in the aftermath of the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 (Beeckmans & Arnaut, 2024), exposing the myth of universal human rights by demonstrating how they are inevitably tied to the nation-state and its legal frameworks. Thus, the figure of the "illegal" migrant becomes a symbol of a broader paradox: despite being human, they are denied the rights that should be granted to them simply because they are human, due to their lack of legal membership. This tension between mere presence and recognised political membership forms the conceptual dilemma at the heart of Darling and Arendt's work. While Darling sees potential in the performative power of presence, Arendt reminds us that without institutionalised belonging, such presence risks remaining politically ineffective.

For Arendt, true equality is not natural but political, we as humans can only become equal through mutual recognition within a community that commits to guaranteeing rights. When this is missing, the human subject is losing their political agency, dignity and the capacity to act, a condition that is familiar to those displaced and dispossessed in contemporary asylum systems (Menke, 2014).

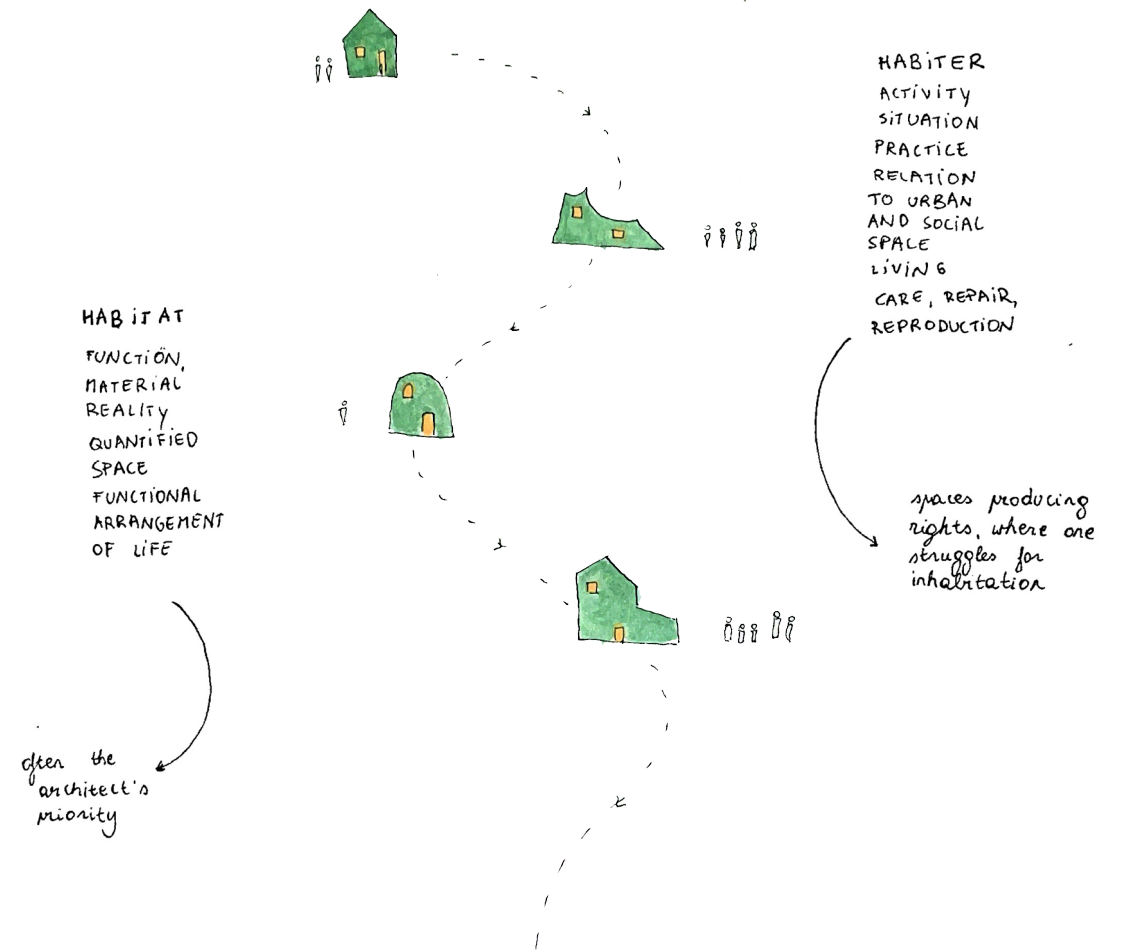
To dwell is to live

Building on these conceptualisations of human rights, marginality, and the political power of presence, I aim to expand the notion of presence beyond its association with visibility in public urban space. Instead, I propose to explore presence in a more embedded and situated sense, through the interconnected concepts of dwelling, agency, and homemaking. This shift allows for a deeper understanding of how marginalised individuals not only occupy space but actively negotiate, transform, and claim it as part of everyday practices of belonging and resistance.

As Heidegger (1971) asserts, to dwell is to live, a fundamental mode of existing that defines our being as humans. Dwelling is thereby not simply residing in a place, it is the happening of history itself, the becoming-at-home on earth. However, this homecoming is not rooted in one fixed geographical location, it rather is an ongoing journey of migration and wandering, defined by what has been and what has to come, by a sense of temporality (Winkler, 2017). Heidegger further emphasizes that to build is to dwell, and to dwell is to think, revealing dwelling as an act of remaining, staying, being in peace and being free (Heidegger, 1971; Burton & Weber, 2024).

This view is also evident in Lefebvre's work (1966), who makes a distinction between 'habitat' and 'habiter'. Habitat refers to the functional, material reality of space, quantified, organised and designed for specific uses, which is often the priority of the architect. In contrast, habitier embodies the act of living, the practice of inhabiting a space, which includes care, reproduction and struggle. It is through inhabiting that individuals exercise agency and produce rights, a social and political claim to space that goes beyond mere shelter (Lefebvre, 1966).

Hence, inhabitation is more than just using or being surrounded by objects and physical space. It is a complex entanglement between self, others and the world, on a broader urban scale as well as on the intimate scale of the house. Central to this is the concept of appropriation, not as ownership in a financial sense but as an emotional, affective relation with space. Appropriation is incrementally achieved through duration and continuity. To inhabit is then seen as an act of agency, a means of demonstrating one's presence, forming a community and enacting change (Sà, 2019).



As Lefebvre argues, architects and urban planners must not only design for habitation but must also cultivate the conditions for inhabiting, conditions that allow appropriation of both space and time. In doing so, they take on their ethical and political responsibility, to empower individuals and communities to dwell, live together and shape their futures (Sà, 2019). Since dwelling is something we, as humans, always have done and always will do, the role of the architect cannot be neutral and architects must recognise and activate their power to support inhabitation as a process of inclusion, care and co-creation, allowing all to claim and employ their right to dwell and let others do the same.

Notions of spatial agency, agency-in-waiting

Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider build on the notion of agency — particularly spatial agency — to advocate for a critical re-evaluation of the architect's role (Schneider & Till, 2009). According to them, architects are one agent among many in the spatial production process, rather than being the sole author. They claim that architectural discourse is inherently exclusionary, favouring the participation of a privileged few. However, true agency lies in the capacity to act otherwise, challenging norms, redistributing power and enabling co-authorship. Spatial agency therefore becomes a political and ethical necessity, requiring architects to adopt progressive political principles rather than merely operating within the parameters of production. Consequently, space itself becomes inherently temporal: although the building, the physical environment might be static, the social space will always be changing, as a dynamic continuity that can be constantly adjusted (Schneider & Till, 2009). As Bell Hooks reminds us, transformation does not begin by confronting the centre, which has failed the margins. Rather, it begins by empowering people in the margins to act, dwell, and imagine differently (Hooks, 1989).

This reframing process gains further complexity through the temporal lens of “agency-in-waiting,” as conceptualized by Cathrine Brun (2015) in the context of asylum seekers. In conditions of protracted displacement and institutionalised limbo, agency persists not only through direct action, but also through hope and the ability to anticipate and re-imagine the future (Hartonen, Väisänen, Karlsson, & Pöllänen, 2022). Waiting, while often imposed and disempowering, becomes an active process: a negotiation of identity, time, and power. Hope sustains this temporality, but it also constrains it, mobilising endurance while potentially postponing current investments. ‘Agency-in-waiting’ thus embodies the tension between immobilisation and transformation, and between institutional stagnation and lived temporality (Brun, 2015).

Moreover, this concept of agency-in-waiting challenges fixed ideas about space and encourages architects to consider how built environments, particularly reception centres for asylum seekers, can accommodate dynamic temporalities by enabling appropriation, even in uncertain and stressful conditions. Through this lens, homemaking and spatial agency become intertwined, representing not only spatial practices, but also deeply social and temporal acts of reclaiming presence, belonging and a sense of the future within transient and often hostile contexts (Crine et al., 2025).

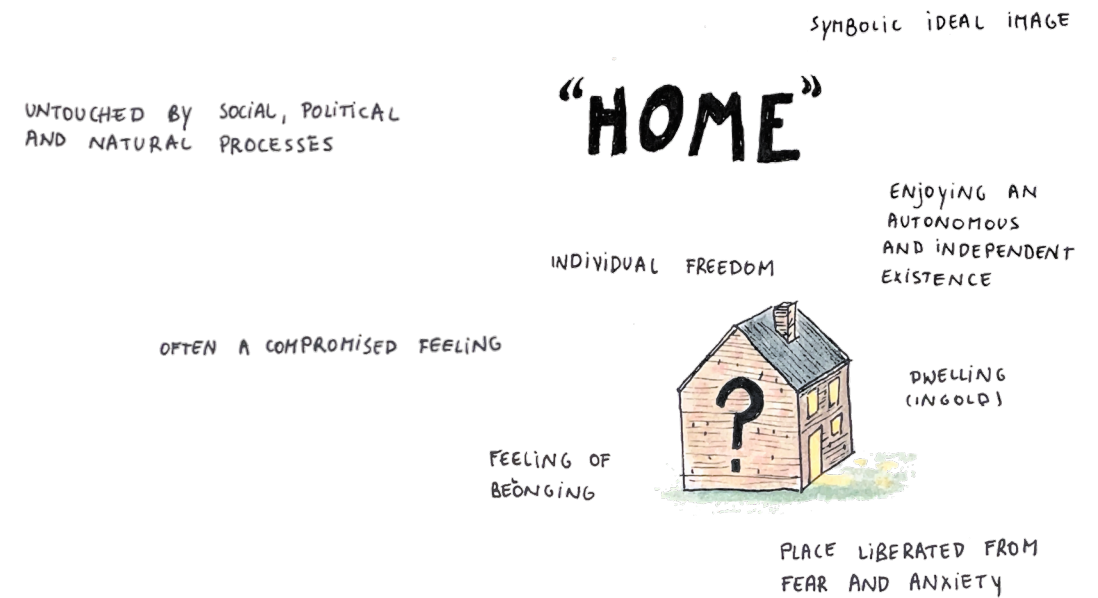
The impact of time

The impact of temporality on the lives of people in displacement is further discussed by Crine et al. (2025). Temporality is never neutral. They argue time is embedded in social practices and produced through institutional and spatial arrangements. Within the asylum regime, time becomes a mechanism of control, a concept that has been termed ‘chrono-politics’ by some. Asylum seekers, caught in administratively imposed timelines, live in a state of “permanent temporariness”: waiting for decisions, interviews, or changes to their legal status, with little agency to influence the pace or outcomes of these processes. This heteronomous time, structured by others, deepens vulnerability and transforms reception centres into spaces of paused life. Here, time is stretched and fragmented, punctuated by unpredictable events, bureaucratic delays and the erosion of future-oriented planning (Crine et al., 2025).

Such institutional temporalities not only involve delays but also produce a specific subjectivity. The asylum seeker becomes a legal category that is suspended between recognition and rejection, between inclusion and exclusion. This liminal status generates psychological stress and spatial impermanence. As Hartonen et al. (2022) note, the legal and existential limbo experienced by asylum seekers functions as a stage of social ambiguity, where identity and agency are often stripped away or reduced. Nevertheless, within this framework, displaced individuals construct meanings, navigate relationships and assert control over their time and space, however limited (Hartonen et al., 2022). The concept of agency-in-waiting becomes essential here, offering a way to understand how hope, anticipation, and small acts of resistance can provide coping strategies for temporal disempowerment (Brun, 2015).

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From this perspective, time itself becomes an architectural and ethical concern. Reception centres are not only physical enclosures but also temporal ones: they can either reinforce disempowerment or allow for appropriation, dwelling, and rest. If waiting compresses space and expands time, the role of architecture must be to reintroduce rhythm, dignity, and possibility into this liminal and transient state. Recognising the temporal dimension of agency reveals how deeply structural injustice is embedded in the politics of waiting and highlights the need for design practices that can respond to, disrupt, or soften these chrono-political dynamics (Crine et al., 2025).



Homemaking practices

As reception centres compress time, they also challenge dominant assumptions about space. The architecture of migrancy, as Stephen Cairns (2004) notes, is too often trapped in a Eurocentric binary that aligns architecture with permanence, settlement and stability, and migration with transience and movement. However, as Beeckmans, Singh and Gola (2022) argue, homemaking is not confined to permanence, it can also unfold in transit. In contexts of forced displacement, home is not a fixed destination, but a set of spatial practices carried out under restrictive conditions. These practices are often overlooked or rendered invisible, but they constitute a form of spatial agency: the ability to inscribe meaning, create a sense of normality and reclaim some autonomy within rigid institutional settings. Through the traces that displaced individuals leave by dwelling, they engage in small yet significant forms of homemaking, often without architectural authorship, but not without architectural impact (Beeckmans et al., 2022).

35

Reception centres, designed by the government, with urgency, efficiency, and control in mind, frequently deprive inhabitants of privacy, intimacy, and identity (Beeckmans & Geldof, 2022). For this reason, they risk becoming 'non-places', as defined by Marc Augé (1995). A non-place is a zone of transit, where individuals remain anonymous, and are reduced to a number or status rather than a subject with needs and desires. Here, the infrastructural logic privileges capacity and regulation over quality and connection. Nevertheless, homemaking does occur within these spatial and temporal frameworks, albeit not as a romanticised ideal, but rather as a political and affective survival strategy and way of coping. Consequently, the reception centre becomes a space shaped as much by top-down policy as by bottom-up adaptations (Beeckmans & Geldof, 2022). In this way, homemaking in displacement is always a process of negotiation between structural constraints and individual or collective efforts to establish a sense of familiarity, control and meaning. It is a spatial practice that reflects and resists the power dynamics of asylum infrastructures simultaneously (Beeckmans et al., 2022).

These practices, existing of arranging furniture for privacy, decorating walls, cooking familiar foods, or cultivating routines, might seem banal, but they carry weight. They challenge the assumption that belonging is impossible within an institution that is temporary by nature. Home is redefined not as stasis, but as a relation: with others, with space and with time (Beeckmans, et al., 2022). As Rottmann and Sezginalp (2024) put it, to live is to leave traces, and these traces undermine the supposed neutrality of reception spaces. When understood as spatialised acts of care and authorship, homemaking becomes a subtle form of resistance, and an affirmation of subjectivity in spaces that are designed to suppress it (Rottmann & Sezginalp, 2024).

Summary

All together, these reflections unsettle the binaries of permanence and impermanence, centre and margin, and architecture and migration. They argue that displacement should be understood not merely as movement through space and time, but as a condition that creates its own spatialities and temporalities, characterised by waiting, improvisation and adaptation. Reception centres are often considered temporary solutions, but they become places where people live for long periods of time. Here, home is created and destroyed under difficult conditions. Within these spaces, displaced individuals act not only as passive recipients of care but as spatial agents whose homemaking practices, however subtle or fragile they may be, challenge the anonymity and fixed nature of the institutionalised architecture. Understanding and paying attention to these practices that emerge in the margin, as well as the complex temporal and spatial dynamics that influence them, is crucial for rethinking the evolving role of architecture, in contexts of displacement and beyond, as a field for negotiation and connection.

In the following parts of this thesis, I will outline my methodological approach and proceed with an in-depth mapping of selected reception centres, exploring the architectural aspects of these centres and how their inhabitants perceive and experience these spaces. This analysis is embedded within the broader conceptual landscape and engages with the different theoretical insights that were central in this section.

Methodology

This thesis is not solely the result of my own experiences and reflections, but is deeply shaped by a broader network of influences - methodological, theoretical, and personal. Unlike previous visits to the reception centres, during which I was involved as a volunteer, my role this time was defined by observation and research. This shift in position prompted a rethinking of how I approach and understand the spaces and people I engage with. In preparation of my fieldwork, I immersed myself in a wide range of research practices, drawing from methods encountered in academic literature, classroom discussions, and public lectures I attended over the past year. These diverse encounters helped me to situate my project within a wider field of architectural and ethnographic inquiry.

Among the many thinkers and practitioners who shaped my approach, two researchers stood out in particular: Huda Tayob and Shadh Seethaler-Wari. Their work strongly aligned with the aims of my thesis. In what follows, I briefly introduce their respective methodologies, highlighting the aspects of their work that inspired me to develop my approach. Their emphasis on attentiveness, critical reflection, and visual engagement deeply informed the way I structured my fieldwork and analysis. Their influence helped me to think about space not only as something that can be described or measured, but also as something lived, negotiated, and continually redefined.

Huda Tayob

This research adopts a qualitative, spatially attentive methodology inspired by Huda Tayob's methods, as articulated in "Subaltern Architectures: Can Drawing Tell a Different Story?" (2018). Tayob, a South-African architect and researcher, foregrounds architectural practices that are marginal, informal, and often undocumented (University of Manchester, n.d.). Tayob's way of critical, subjective mapping, employs storytelling, drawing, and embodied observation as means of surfacing silenced spatial narratives. Furthermore, she questions the role of the researcher, and the unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched, emphasising the need of transparency and trust, to be able to acknowledge the context and to be representational (Tayob, 2018). After all, nobody can, even if they really try to, exist outside of their own context and be completely neutral. Therefore, knowledge production will always be contextual and power-laden. It is important to acknowledge and be transparent about one's own background before investigating someone else's (Tayob & Richard, 2020).

Throughout her work, Tayob uses the tension between detail and impressions to awake the imagination that is sprouted in the margin. Drawing and making notes take more time and requires a longer presence in the space, than taking a picture. The care needed to create an image of a space through this kind of mapping makes it possible to understand and represent marginal sites as complex, multi-layered spaces and to recognise their fluidity and unfixed conditions. In addition, drawings can always be redrawn or altered, making them personal and reflecting the researcher's own subjectivity, background and perhaps even naivety (Tayob, 2018). Since these aspects are inevitably present during research, it seems valuable to use them as a means of fostering interest and transparency rather than viewing them as weaknesses.

Tayob's way of working also questions the active impact of time and space, which is, again, something that is very relevant within the context of this thesis. By redrawing, the alternative temporality of the fieldwork itself is activated. By rethinking and re-interpreting the ways people appropriate space and use their agency, based on previous drawings and notes, which in turn are based on subjective observations that inevitably highlight personal interests, the story and research can and will always remain open-ended. This too is, all things considered, a valuable fact. There is no single truth, so why pretend otherwise?

In line with Tayob's method, my research is less concerned with formal analysis of architectural design, and more with the lived experience and spatial tactics of the centre's residents. I employed sketching, spatial mapping, and field notes, focusing on everyday practices such as the placement of personal objects, repurposing of furniture, creation of privacy, and other informal usage. These were supplemented by the informal conversations with the residents, providing insight into their motivations, constraints, and aspirations in relation to space-making.

This methodology seeks to recognize forms of spatial production that are often overlooked in architectural discourse, attending the ways in which people become active agents in the transformation of their environment, even in stressful, uncertain and temporary situations.

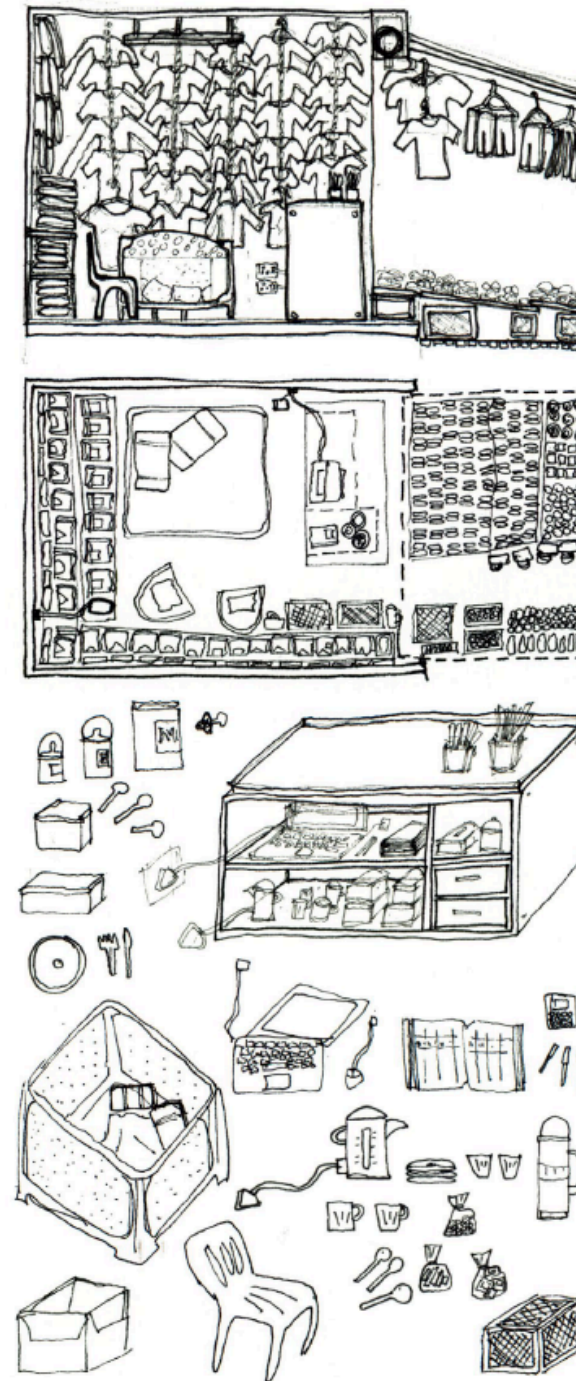


Figure 4
Drawing of Fatima's shop.

Source: Tayob, H. (2018). *Subaltern architectures: Can drawing "tell" a different story?* *Architecture and Culture*, 6(1), 203-222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2017.1417071>

Shahd Seethaler-Wari

In addition to Huda Tayob's methods, this research-based thesis draws heavily on Sahd Seethaler-Wari's work and approach. Seethaler-Wari used to be a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Social and Cultural Diversity at the Max Planck institute. She studied urban planning and urban management in Berlin and architecture in Palestine. Her work focusses on urban rights, alternative and participatory planning, and the role of architecture and infrastructure of accommodation facilities in the daily lives and future trajectories of asylum seekers (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, n.d.).

The socio-spatial analysis of two reception centres, which will be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis, is inspired by the work of Seethaler-Wari, particularly her contribution to the volume 'Inhabiting Displacement'. In her chapter 'Inhabiting Refugee Accommodations: A Comparison of Two Temporarily Transformed Buildings' (2022), Seethaler-Wari conducts a comparative study of two buildings in Germany that were temporarily repurposed to house refugees. Her focus lies on the notion of interiority, understood both physically and socially, and the layered meanings that emerge through the interventions of diverse actors inhabiting these spaces.

By bringing together research practices from both architecture and social sciences, Seethaler-Wari develops an architectural-ethnographical, intersectional methodology. This intersectionality is vital within the marginalised and multifaceted context of reception centres - sites that demand an understanding that goes beyond purely architectural dimensions. Her approach demonstrates that comprehending such complex environments requires an integrated perspective that is simultaneously social, political, and spatial. The social dimension of her research is made tangible through the use of semi-guided interviews, group discussions, informal meetings and participant observation (Seethaler-Wari, Chitchian, & Momic, 2022).

In line with the work of Huda Tayob, Seethaler-Wari also places strong emphasis on the ethical responsibilities of the researcher and the need for transparency, particularly regarding the power dynamics inherent in fieldwork. She stresses the importance of clear communication, to both participants and staff, especially in informal settings where such dynamics are often overlooked. This principle directly influenced the way I approached my own fieldwork. Prior to and during my visits to the centres, I ensured that participants were fully informed about my research. Informational flyers introducing my project were distributed within the centres. In Beveren, a photograph of me was included, accompanied by a note indicating that I was conducting thesis research as a student. This created a sense of familiarity, and on my first visit, several residents recognised me and approached me with curiosity. During conversations, I took care to introduce myself and the purpose of my research clearly, encouraging participants not only to share their stories but also to pose questions and critically engage with my presence and intentions. I made sure these intentions were transparent and asked for permission to make audio recordings using informed consent forms.

Furthermore, another methodological parallel can be found in the process of visualising data. Due ethical considerations and out of respect for the privacy of inhabitants, Seethaler-Wari took hardly any photographs and prioritised hand-drawn representations of the spaces instead. These drawings, often accompanied by annotations, closely resemble my own approach to spatial documentation, as will become evident in subsequent chapters. Moreover, her visual methodology allows these drawings to speak for themselves, as they illustrate not only the space but also the inhabitation processes. This approach enables both the researcher and the reader to engage more intimately with the nuanced and diverse realities of reception centres, capturing their lived complexity at a recognisable, human scale.

Although Tayob delves deeper into the socio-temporal value of her working method, and while privacy is only one of several motivations for capturing people's ways of living and homemaking through sketching, it is nevertheless remarkable that both she and Seethaler-Wari adopted similar techniques. Working within thematically aligned, often marginalised, obscured contexts, both researchers turned to drawing as a means of visualising spatial and social complexity, offering an alternative to more conventional modes of documentation.

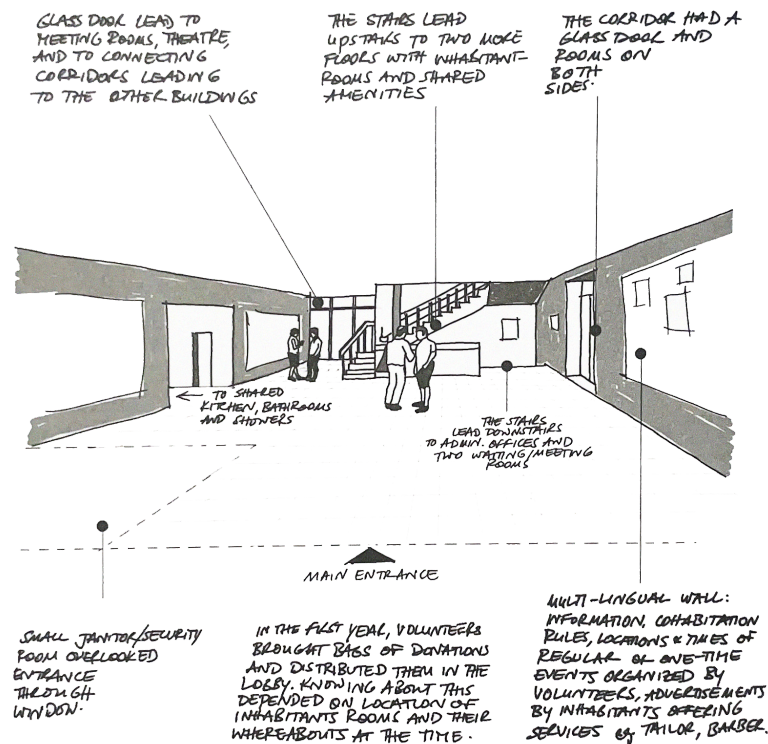


Figure 5
A perspective of the entrance lobby of the main building.

Source: Seethaler-Wari, S., Chitchian, S., & Momic, M. (2022). *Inhabiting displacement: Architecture and authorship*. Birkhäuser.

Applying the methodology

Building on these approaches, I conducted a short period of immersive fieldwork in two reception centres for asylum seekers, both located near the area where I grew up. My goal was to map the ways in which the buildings have been adapted to the needs of their users, and conversely, to what extent the users had to adapt themselves, their habits and way of living, to the buildings. The changes I observed resulted from a combination of top-down decisions, by government actors and the Red Cross during the initial transformation of the sites, and bottom-up, everyday practices initiated by the residents themselves. By exercising their agency, the people dwelling the space that was not meant to be dwelt in, attempt - intentionally or not - to make it more inhabitable, comfortable, even homelike. While such changes may not be immediately visible from the outside, they are unmistakably felt upon entering: the spaces are undeniably lived in. I became interested in understanding how these subtle sign of appropriation could be made readable, and set out to visualise them on site in my sketchbook. To avoid becoming a stranger to the building and its people, I showed enthusiasm for the interests and curiosity of the residents who approached me, and tried to learn from them through informal conversations.

During the conversations I conducted on site, I often sensed an expectation to take the lead. In preparation for the fieldwork, I had developed a set of informal guiding questions (Mortelmans, 2020), roughly sketched on a small piece of paper (see page 46). This outline was deliberately non-prescriptive, intended more as a flexible guideline than a rigid interview script. My aim was to keep the conversations open-ended and dialogical rather than directive or extractive. In an effort to unsettle the conventional power dynamics often embedded in the researcher-participant relationship - a dynamic I acknowledge as ultimately inescapable - I tried to position myself transparently. I introduced myself clearly, articulated the aims of my research, and sought to foster a sense of mutual exchange. This approach was grounded in a desire to be perceived not as an external authority, but as a participant-observer (Copland and Creese, 2015) engaged in shared inquiry. I did not want the interaction to mirror the formal structure of an interview in which only the researcher is legitimized to ask questions. Instead, I aimed to create a conversational space where participants felt equally empowered to guide the direction of the conversation.

The strength of visualising spaces as a means of analysis spoke to me and inspired me to do the same. Almost all of the drawings shown in the continuation of this thesis were drawn on site during my visits. In cases where I was invited into private rooms, I refrained from drawing in the moment out of respect for the participants' comfort. Instead, I observed attentively and sketched the scenes immediately afterwards. While this inevitably introduces a degree of subjectivity and potential loss of detail, I believe the drawings still depict key indicators of spatial agency. These representations highlight elements that I, or the inhabitants I spoke with, found meaningful. As such, they offer a personal and interpretive lens through which socio-spatial transformations in these repurposed buildings can be understood - transformations made by individuals living in conditions of uncertainty yet actively engaging in what might be called agency-in-waiting (Brun, 2015).

Time constraints remain an important limitation of this research. As a student working within the framework of an academic calendar, I was only able to conduct fieldwork during visits spread over five days. While I had previously volunteered at the Westakkers centre, I had never entered the centre in Beveren before this project. Gaining access required formal permission from both the centre managers and the Red Cross, who fortunately placed their trust in me. While in Beveren, one of the inhabitants gave me a tour of the centre, in Westakkers I walked around with one of the social assistants. The nature of my access differed between the two sites: in Beveren, the centre manager played a more directive role, mainly by selecting interlocutors, while in Westakkers, I worked more autonomously for the majority of my time there. As my approach in Westakkers was more ad hoc, I had more formal, audio-recorded conversations in Beveren than in Westakkers. This will be noticeable throughout the following analyses.

The way I transcribed the conversations I had with local inhabitants is slightly inspired by Jozef Wouters' performance text *The Soft Layer* (2022). In this work, an existing courtyard is traced and retraced, across present, past, and future, through the stories and conversations of people who were present in that space. By reading the text or hearing the performance, one can gain a sense of what the space looks like, conveyed through words. I find this approach compelling, and I aimed to reference it in my transcriptions by selecting parts of the conversations that clearly evoke the spatial qualities or emotional atmosphere associated with the place.

In addition to these selected transcriptions, I have chosen to let my drawings speak for themselves, following Seethaler-Wari's example (Seethaler-Wari, et al., 2022). However, I did provide some theoretical framework in the preceding chapter, to offer context for this visual, immersive research. The drawings are supplemented with stories, insights, and observations collected during fieldwork, forming a layered narrative of inhabitation, adaptation, and spatial expression.

1

BEGIN

- SAMEN GEINFORMEERDE TOESTEMMING DOORNEMEN
- IS GELUIDSOPNAME OKÉ?
- BEDANKEN * ER ZIJN GEEN JUISTE/FOUTE ANTWOORDEN

INLEIDENDE VRAGEN

- IK STEL MEZELF VOOR
- KAN JE JEZELF EVEN VOORSTELLEN?
- BEN JE HIER ALLEEN OF MET FAMILIE?
- WAT ZIJN JE INTERESSES?
- HOE LANG VERBLIJF JE AL IN HET CENTRUM?

3

TRANSITIEVRAGEN

- BESCHOUW JE DEZE PLAATS ALS JE THUIS?
- WAAR VOEL JE JE THUIS? HEB JE DAT GEVOEL AL KUNNEN ERVAREN IN BELGIË?
- ZIE JE DIT ALS / VOELT DEZE PLAATS AAN ALS EEN TIJDELIJKE OPLOSSING?
- ZIJN ER CULTURELE VERSCHILLEN DIE VERTAALD WORDEN IN DE RUIMTE?
- OP WELKE MANIEREN NAAR JE JEZELF HIER THUIS? (VERSIERING, ETEN, MUZIEK, ROUTINES)

SLEUTELVRAGEN

- HEB JE HET GEVOEL DAT DEZE PLAATS VEILIGHEID EN PRIVACY BIJDT? (WAAROM WEL/NIET?)
- ZIJN ER SPECIFIEKE RUIMTELIJKE VERANDERINGEN DIE ER KUNNEN GEBEUREN OM JE MEER THUIS TE DOEN VOELEN?

5

BESLUITENDE VRAGEN

- ZIJN ER DINGEN DIE WE NIET HEBBEN BESPROKEN DIE JE NOG GRAAG ZOU DELEN?
- DANKJEWEL!

Translation of the informal guiding questions:

1

- beginning*
- look through the informed consent file together
 - is it okay to record the conversation?
 - thanks already + there are no right or wrong answers

2

- opening questions*
- introduce myself
 - can you introduce yourself? (name, age, background)
 - are you alone or with family?
 - what are your interests?
 - how long are you staying in this reception centre already?

3

- transition questions*
- do you consider this place your home?
 - where do you feel at home?
 - do you consider this place a temporary solution?
 - are there any cultural differences that are translated in space?
 - in what ways do you try to make yourself at home? (decoration, food, music, routines,...)

4

- key questions*
- do you feel this place offers you safety and security? in what ways?
 - are there any specific spatial changes that could help you feel more comfortable and at home?

5

- concluding questions*
- is there anything we haven't discussed that you would still like to share?
 - thank you!

2

4

I sincerely hope that what follows will offer a deeper understanding of the spatial dynamics and precarious conditions faced by asylum seekers in reception centres across Flanders, and perhaps even serve as a source of reflection or inspiration for future research or engagement in similar contexts.



Beveren

Orientation

The Red Cross reception centre for asylum seekers in Beveren is located in an old tax office building on Station Square. Built in 1985, the office reopened as a reception centre in 2020. The building permit application for the original building states the following:

'This L-shaped building is to be constructed between the existing postal building, the gendarmerie and the "Kleine Bosweg", with a car park for 18 cars and an entrance on the station square, in a zone for public use. The three-storey, flat-roofed building comprises offices and service rooms for finance administration, as well as accommodation for the caretaker.'

In 2020, the Red Cross submitted a building permit application that mentions only two adaptations. Firstly, there's the exploitation of a reception centre, which is merely a change of function. Secondly, there's the regularisation of nine new doorways in load-bearing internal walls. The municipality does not have any other details about the building or its new purpose.

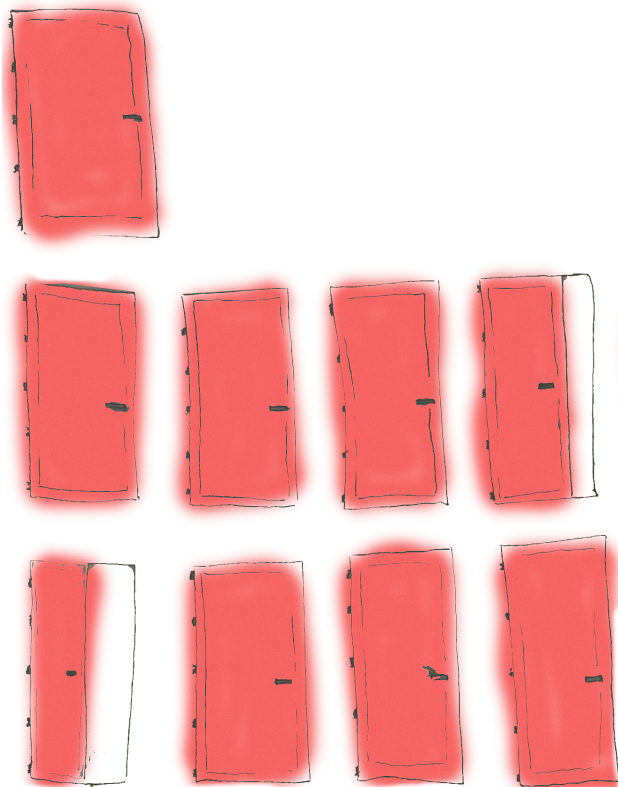
However, the manager of the centre provided me with more information. The building has a capacity of 140 people. Most of the time, fewer people are actually living there since the building is divided into different rooms, not all of which are fully occupied. For example, families get a room to themselves, which sometimes leaves beds free. Most rooms accommodate four people. The centre opened more than five years ago. As it is a temporary reception centre, it will be one of the first places to close when the need for shelter diminishes and the pressure on the reception system is reduced. The centre accommodates families, as well as single men and women, from a diversity of backgrounds and countries. The ideas, quotes and experiences of residents mentioned later are all from adults, who have granted me permission to process and use their insights in this thesis.

The centre is located in the middle of Beveren, occupying a central position in the town. Directly across the street from the centre are both the train station and a bus stop, offering convenient access to transportation. Within walking distance, residents can find a range of essential public services, including a primary school, a secondary school, a supermarket, a shopping street, a park and the municipal administrative offices. The proximity to these services fosters opportunities for social integration and participation. Furthermore, the relatively small scale of the centre contributes to a more human-scaled, potentially less alienating environment, since the residents and staff live and the municipal administrative offices. The proximity to these services fosters opportunities for social integration and participation. Furthermore, the relatively small scale of the centre contributes to a more human-scaled, potentially less alienating environment, since the residents and staff live and act

close to one another. However, this might contribute to a sense of confinement for some of the residents, as the building is not particularly spacious for the number of people it accommodates. As a result, many of the residents spent a big part of their day outside the centre. During my conversations on site, several people mentioned regularly visiting friends in cities such as Brussels or Antwerp or going outside to take their children to the park, to go swimming, or cycling.

To make the building habitable, new sanitary facilities consisting of additional shower rooms and toilets for both men and women were installed on the ground floor. The former dining room and adjacent kitchen, which are both on the ground floor, are now used as the 'restaurant'. Consequently, residents have the option to join communal meals, although two additional kitchens have been installed to enable self-catering – which most of the inhabitants seem to prefer.

As described above, obvious, rational and conspicuous adjustments have been made to adapt the building, as well as the installation of bunk beds, washing machines, wardrobes, etc. However, a large number of informal adjustments can also be noted in the building. These small, informal changes, and unexpected ways in which the building is used, carried over the years by the manager, assistants, and residents themselves, are improving people's sense of comfort. The following pages will shed light on this matter through sketches and notes made during my visits to the centre, taking inspiration from the work of Huda Tayob (2018) and Shahd Seethaler-Wari (2022). In addition, insights drawn from conversations with residents - through which they shared their ideas and experiences - are incorporated into the analysis.



Can a tax office be transformed into a home for 140 people by installing 9 new doors?



INFO OVER OUD BELASTINGS KANTOOR
GEMEENTE HUIS BEVEREN

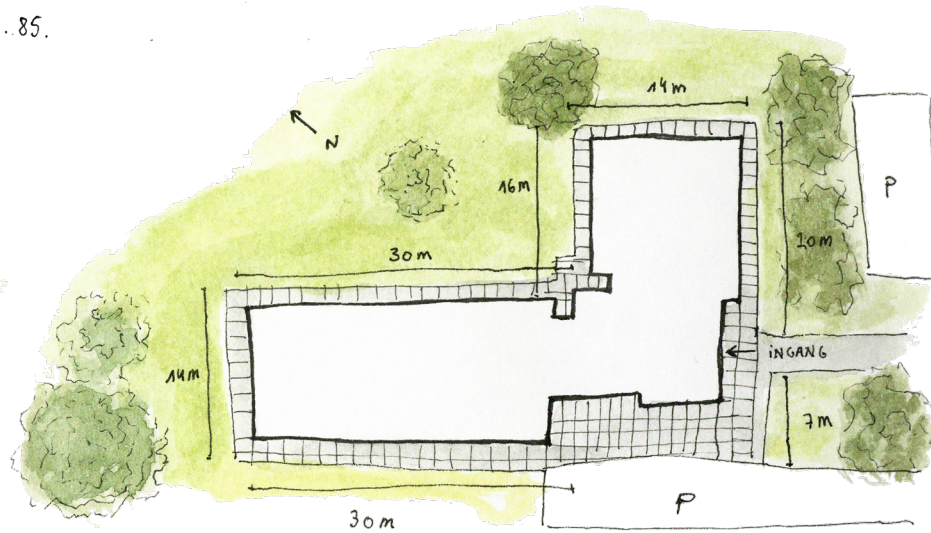
- OM HET KANTOOR TE BOUWEN WERDEN 2 TUINEN + EEN BOOMGAARD ONTEIGEND.
(IN 1975) → BOUWAANVRAAG VERGUND IN 1985

- BOUWAANVRAAG :

Het betreft een gebouw in L-vorm, op te richten tussen het bestaande postgebouw, de Rijkswacht en de Kleine Boverweg, met parking voor 18 wagens en ingang aan het stationsplein, in een zone voor openbare bestemming.

Het gebouw, met 3 bouwlagen en plat dak, omvat burelen en dienstlokalen voor administratie van financieer, plus een woonst voor de huisbewaarder.

28. 5. 85.

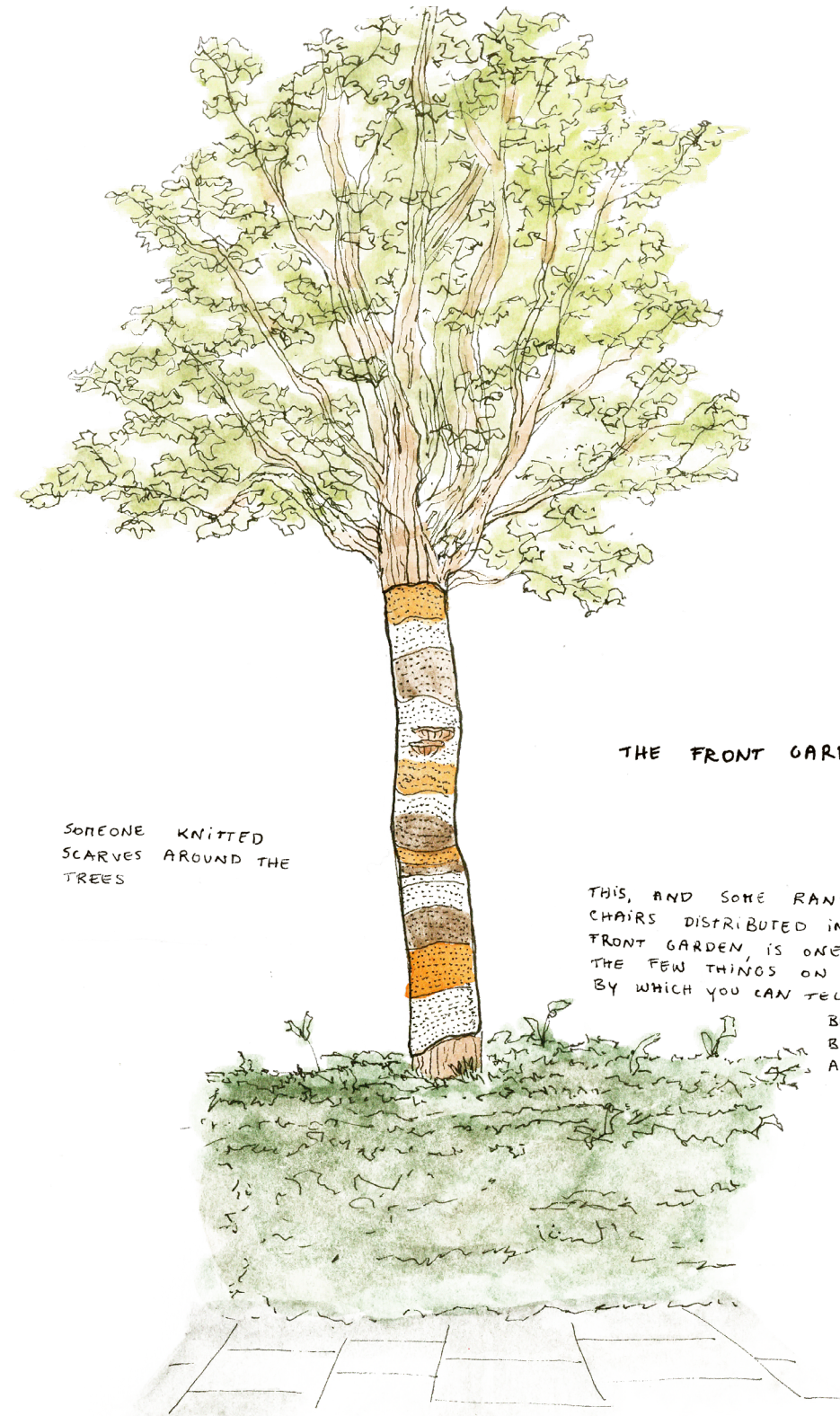


56

- ARCHITECT = DE VOOGDT L.

LIGGING : STATIONSPLEIN

- WOONST HUISBEWAARDER OP 2^E VERDIEPING



THE FRONT GARDEN.

SOMEONE KNITTED
SCARVES AROUND THE
TREES

THIS, AND SOME RANDOM
CHAIRS DISTRIBUTED IN THE
FRONT GARDEN, IS ONE OF
THE FEW THINGS ON THE OUTSIDE
BY WHICH YOU CAN TELL THAT THE
BUILDING HAS
BEEN GIVEN
A NEW FUNCTION.

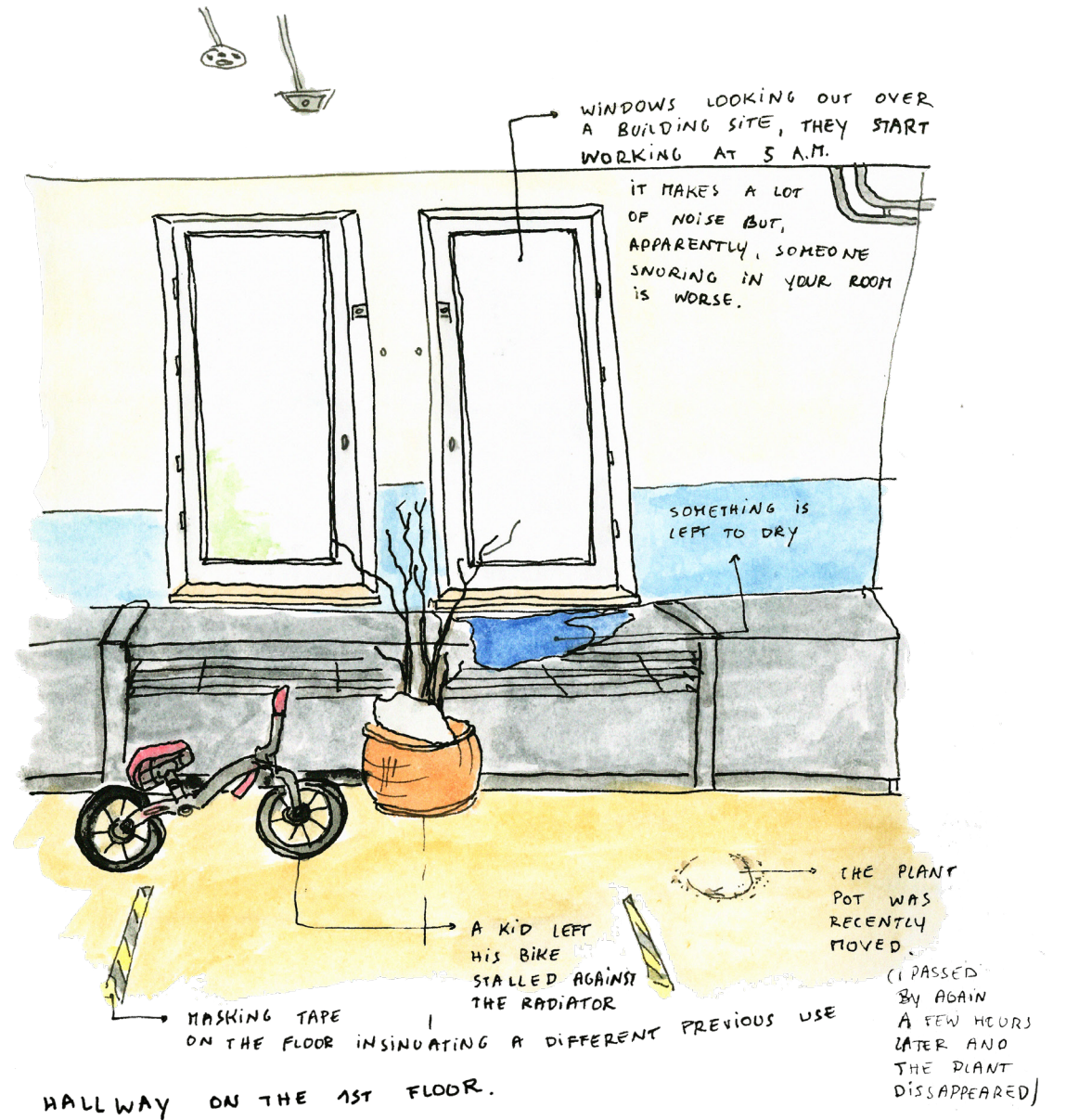
57

THE ENTRANCE.



58

THE FRONT DOOR, WHICH IS VERY STATIC AND HAS FOUR PILLARS IN FRONT OF IT, STILL REMINDS ME OF A TAX OFFICE, RATHER THAN A HOUSE / HOME FOR 150 PEOPLE.



59

WINDOWS LOOKING OUT OVER A BUILDING SITE, THEY START WORKING AT 5 A.M.

IT MAKES A LOT OF NOISE BUT, APPARENTLY, SOMEONE SNORING IN YOUR ROOM IS WORSE.

SOMETHING IS LEFT TO DRY

A KID LEFT HIS BIKE STALLED AGAINST THE RADIATOR
 MASKING TAPE ON THE FLOOR INSINUATING A DIFFERENT PREVIOUS USE

THE PLANT POT WAS RECENTLY MOVED.
 (I PASSED BY AGAIN A FEW HOURS LATER AND THE PLANT DISAPPEARED)

HALLWAY ON THE 1ST FLOOR.

THERE'S A LOT OF NOISE.

A GUY JUST TOOK OUT THE TRASH FROM THE BIN.

(HE WANTED TO TAKE THE ELEVATOR, BUT THE WAITING TOOK TOO LONG SO HE JUST LEFT VIA THE STAIRS.)

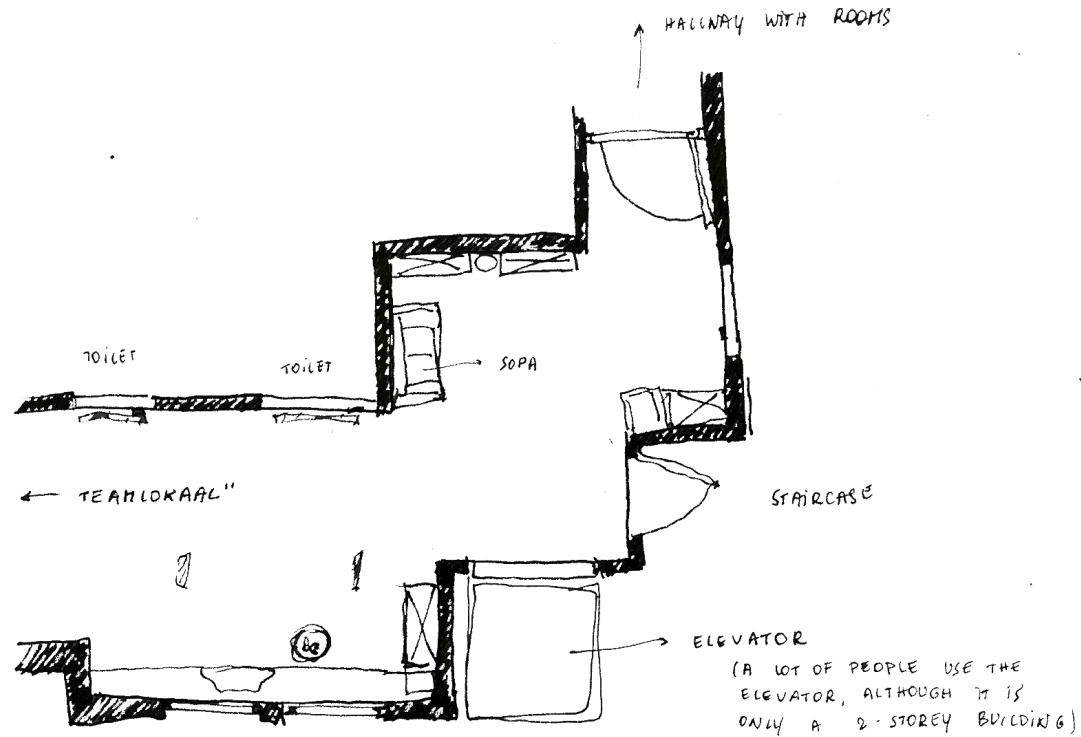
THE WOMAN I WILL FIRST TALK TO PASSED BY 4 TIMES ALREADY.

SHE IS REALLY FRIENDLY.

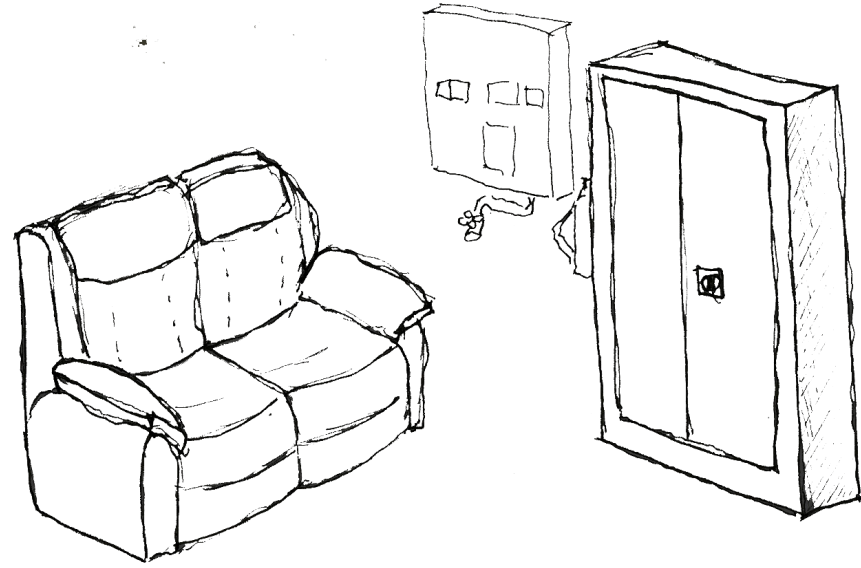
THE ELEVATOR JUST ARRIVED.

SOMEONE ELSE TOOK IT.

PLAN SKETCH OF THE HALLWAY ON THE 1ST FLOOR.

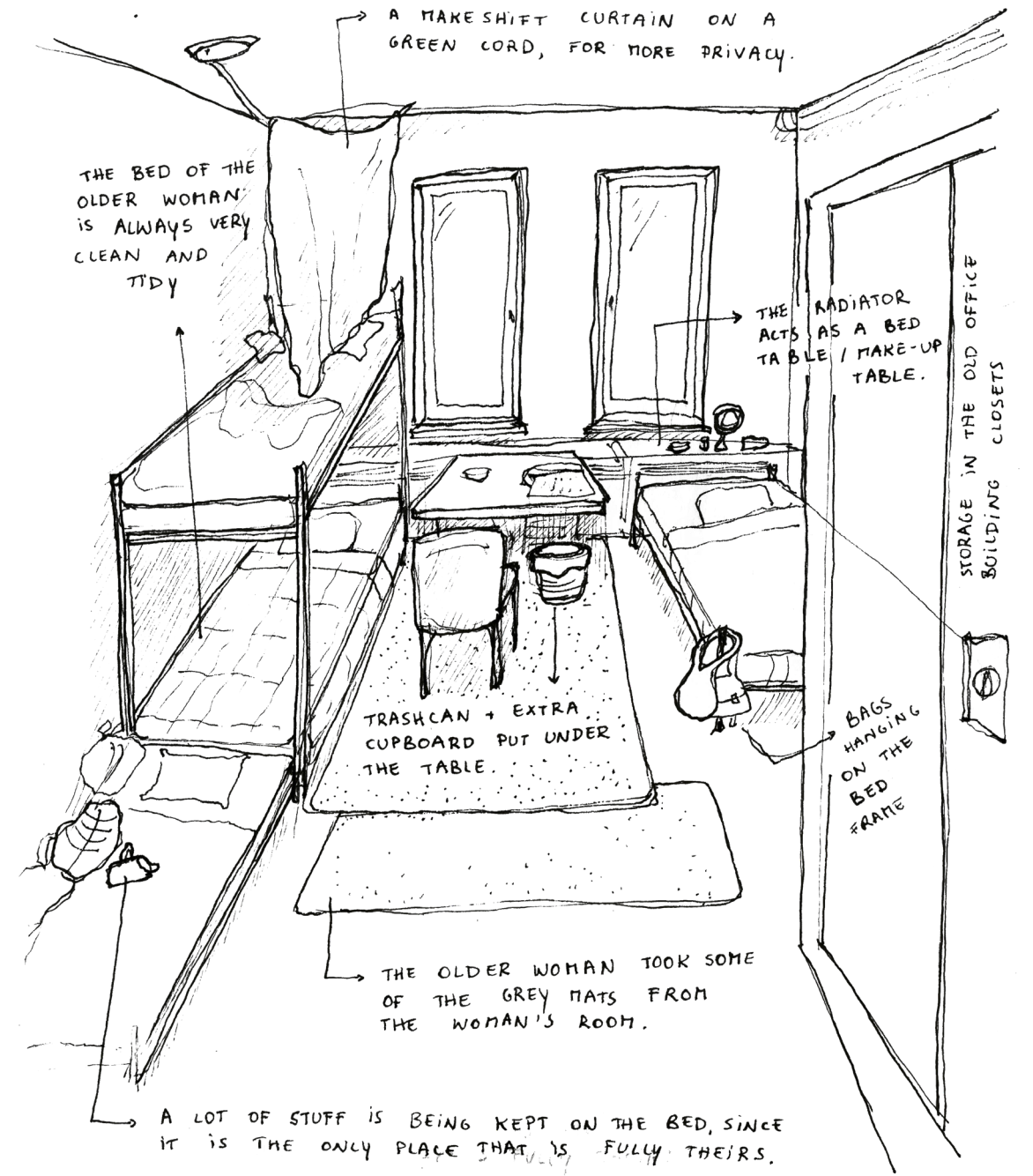


60



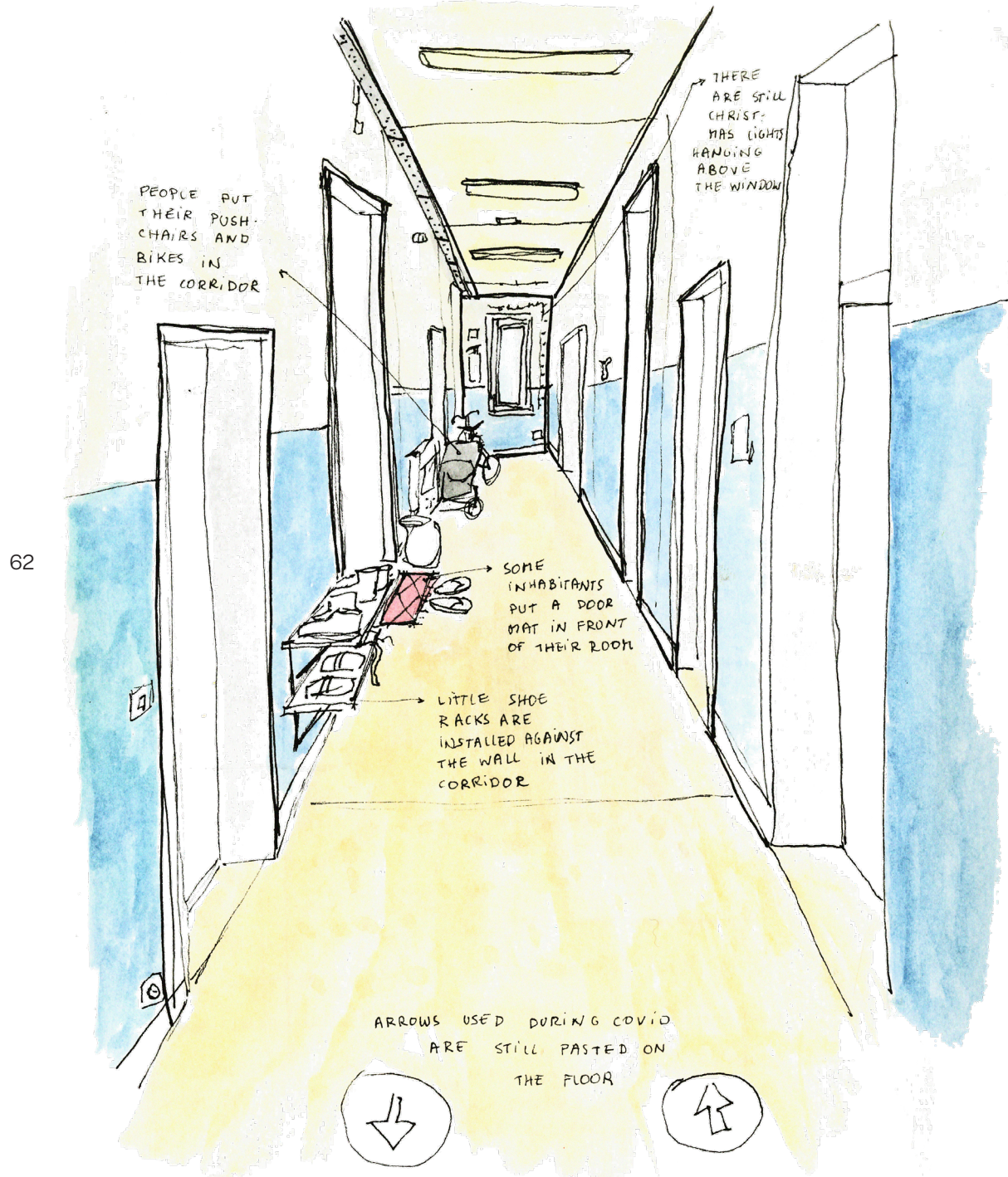
WANTED TO SHOW ME HER ROOM, WHICH SHE IS SHARING WITH THREE OTHER WOMAN.

(I SKETCHED MY IMPRESSIONS AFTERWARDS, FROM MEMORY.)

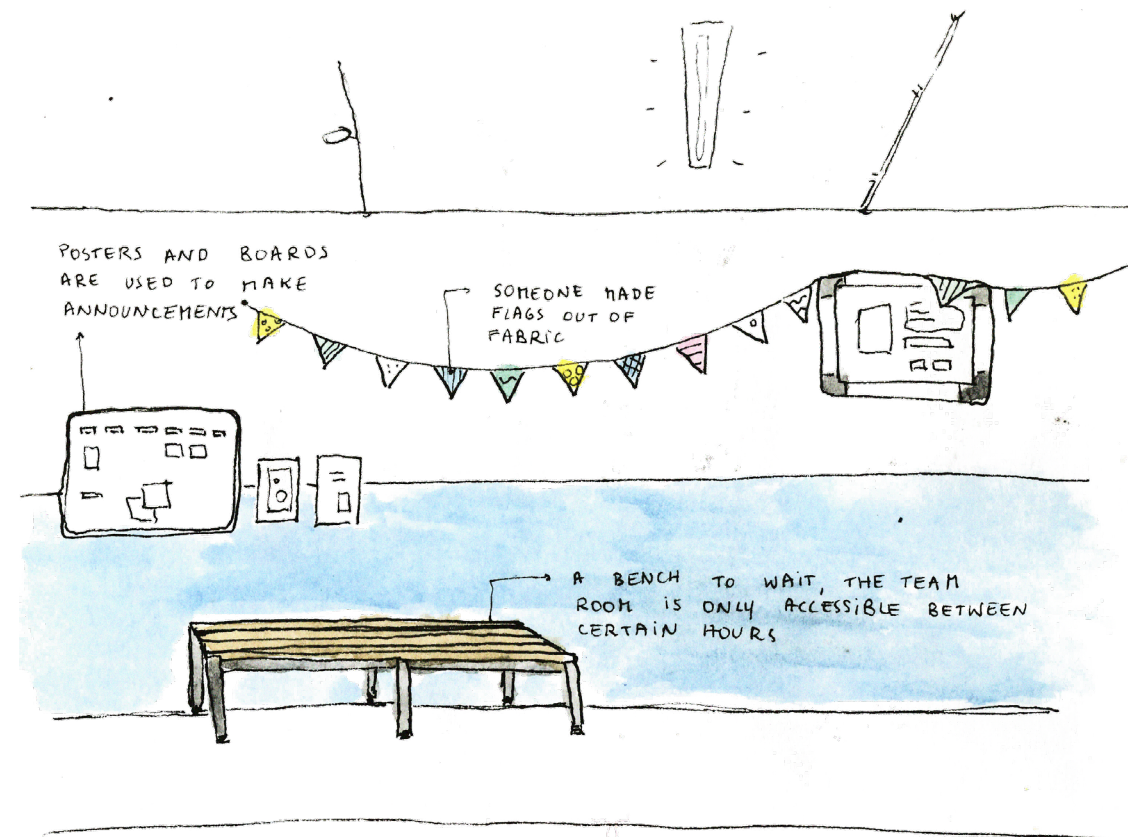


61

HALLWAY WITH DOORS LEADING TO ROOMS

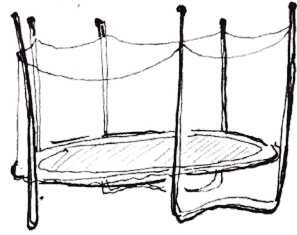


THE HALLWAY IN FRONT OF THE RECEPTION.

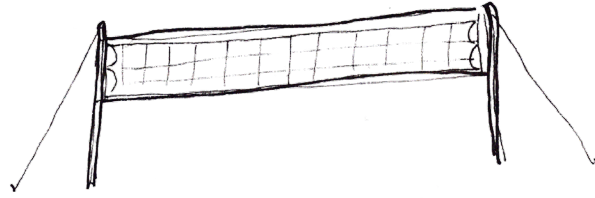


WHEN I ARRIVED, PEOPLE WERE WAITING ON THE BENCH, THE RECEPTION / TEAM AREA ONLY OPENED AT 10.

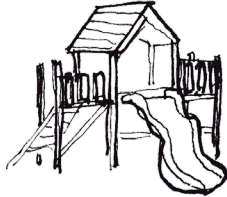
NOW, THE WHOLE HALLWAY IS QUIET AND EMPTY. MOST INHABITANTS LEFT ON A TRIP TO BRUGES. (IT IS ANNOUNCED ON THE BOARD)



THE KIDS OFTEN PLAY OUTSIDE.



AROUND NOON I PLAYED VOLLEYBALL WITH SOME OF THE RESIDENTS.

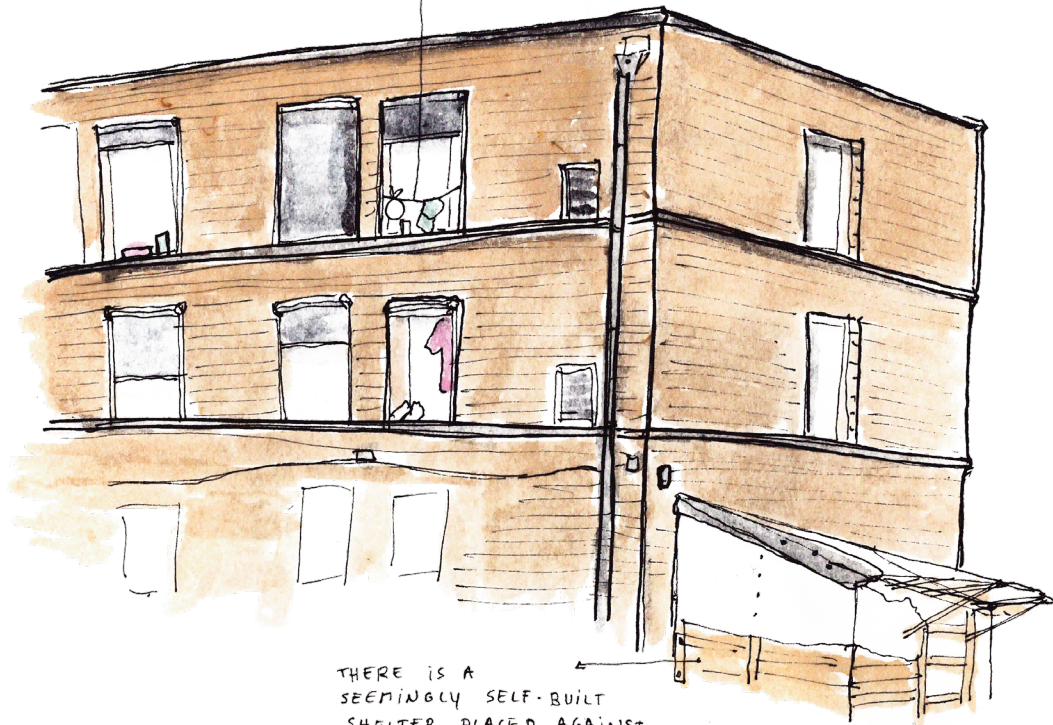


MOST OF THE TALKS I HAD TOOK PLACE ON THIS BENCH, OUTSIDE.

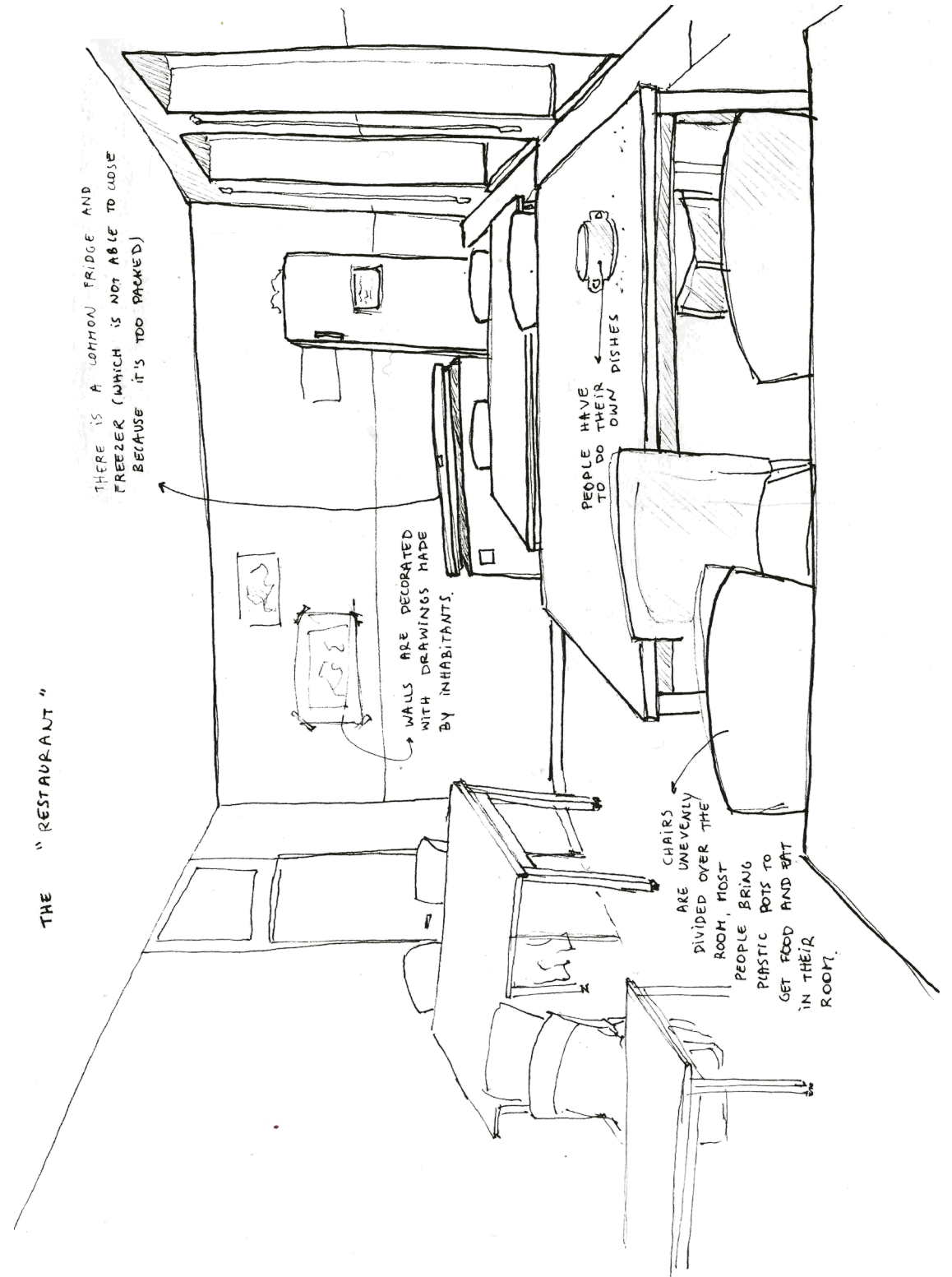


THE BACKYARD.

PEOPLE ON THE FIRST AND SECOND FLOOR LEAVE FOOD OUTSIDE ON THE WINDOWSILL OR HANG CLOTHES / SHOES TO DRY.



THERE IS A SEEMINGLY SELF-BUILT SHELTER PLACED AGAINST THE FACADE IN THE GARDEN (PROBABLY FOR SMOKERS IN WINTER)



THERE IS A COMMON FRIDGE AND FREEZER (WHICH IS NOT ABLE TO CLOSE BECAUSE IT'S TOO PACKED)

PEOPLE HAVE TO DO THEIR OWN DISHES

WALLS ARE DECORATED WITH DRAWINGS MADE BY INHABITANTS.

THE "RESTAURANT"

CHAIRS ARE UNEVENLY DIVIDED OVER THE ROOM, MOST PEOPLE BRING PLASTIC POTS TO GET FOOD AND EAT IN THEIR ROOM.

MULTIPLE SHOE RACKS ARE PLACED / HUNG UP ON THE WALLS OF THE CORRIDOR.



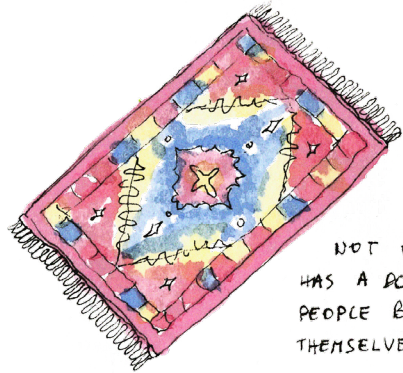
EVERY SHELF IS LABELLED WITH A ROOM NUMBER.

66

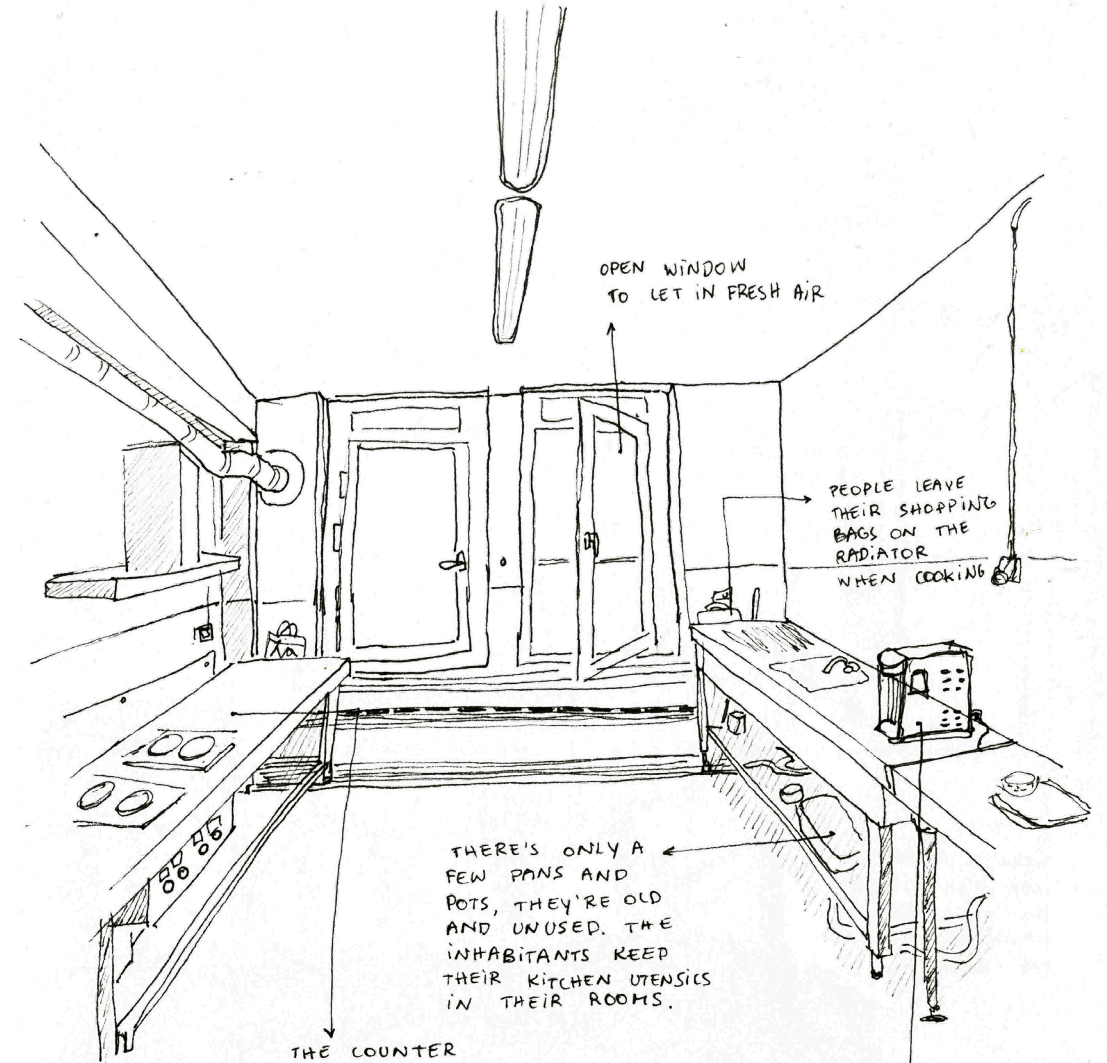
SHOE RACKS
= CULTURAL ADAPTATION & DOORMATS.



SOMEONE PASTED DRIED FLOWERS ON THE WALL NEXT TO THEIR DOOR, WITH DUCTTAPE.



NOT EVERYONE HAS A DOORMAT. SOME PEOPLE BOUGHT IT THEMSELVES.



OPEN WINDOW TO LET IN FRESH AIR

PEOPLE LEAVE THEIR SHOPPING BAGS ON THE RADIATOR WHEN COOKING

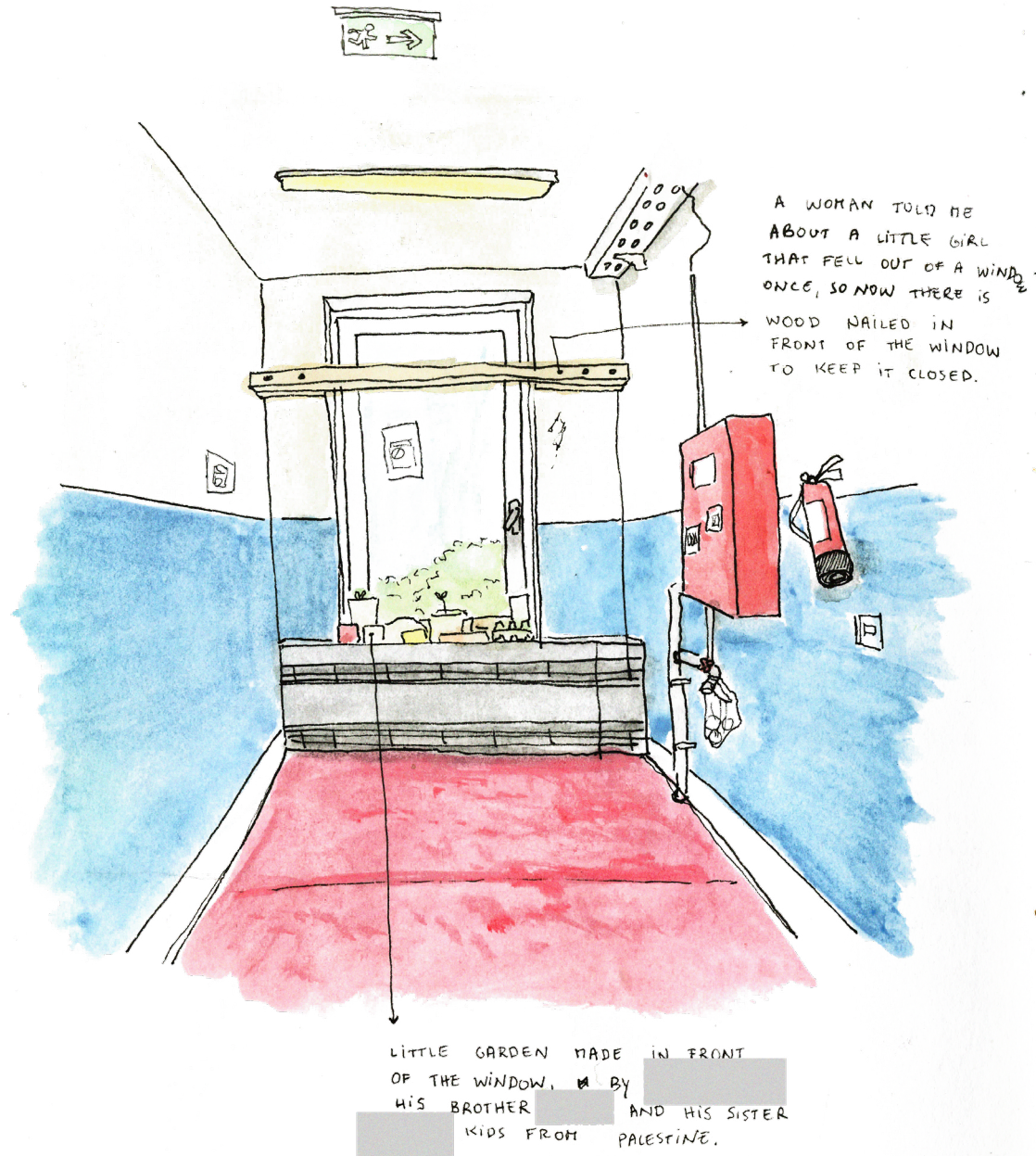
THERE'S ONLY A FEW PANS AND POTS, THEY'RE OLD AND UNUSED. THE INHABITANTS KEEP THEIR KITCHEN UTENSILS IN THEIR ROOMS.

THE COUNTER IS VERY CLEAN AND FREE OF STUFF. (ALTHOUGH MOST PEOPLE COOK HERE)

THIS MACHINE HAS COLD WATER, THE PEOPLE I SPOKE TO TOLD ME ABOUT IT, THEY LIKE IT.

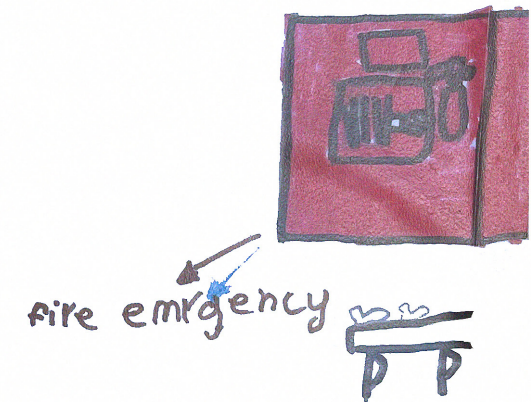
67

THE KITCHEN. (1 OF 2)

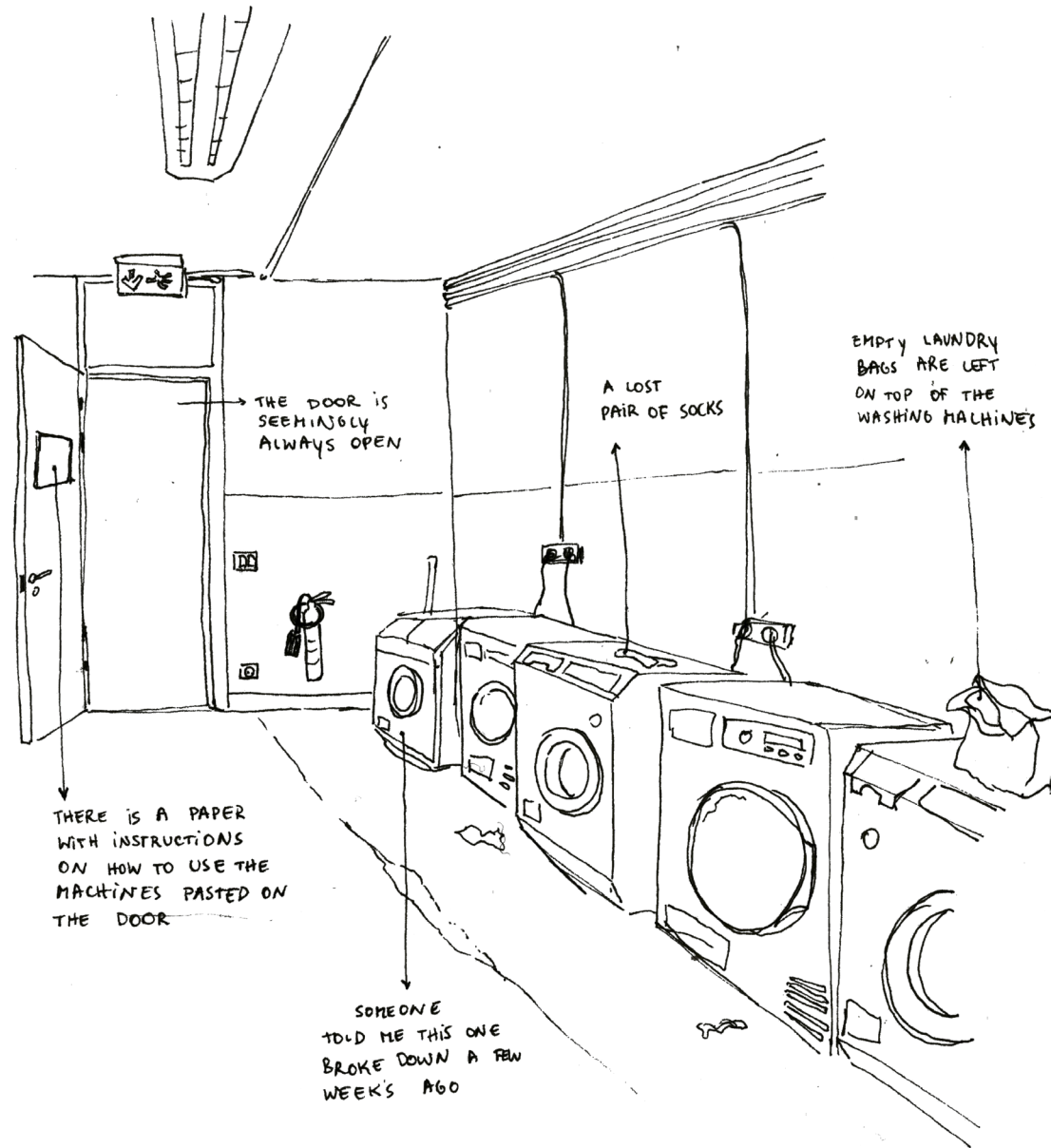


END OF THE HALLWAY ON THE SECOND FLOOR.

THE LITTLE BOY SHOWED ME A DRAWING OF A TREEHOUSE. I WANT TO BUILD HIM ONE.



While I was drawing, the kid who made the little garden on the windowsill was watering the plants. I asked him if he was okay with me drawing it. He told me he also likes drawing. After he was done watering the plants he sat down next to me until my drawing was finished. The next day, I saw him again. He said he wanted to show me something. A bit later he returned, showing me this drawing. After I left the day before, he made the same observations, yet slightly different.



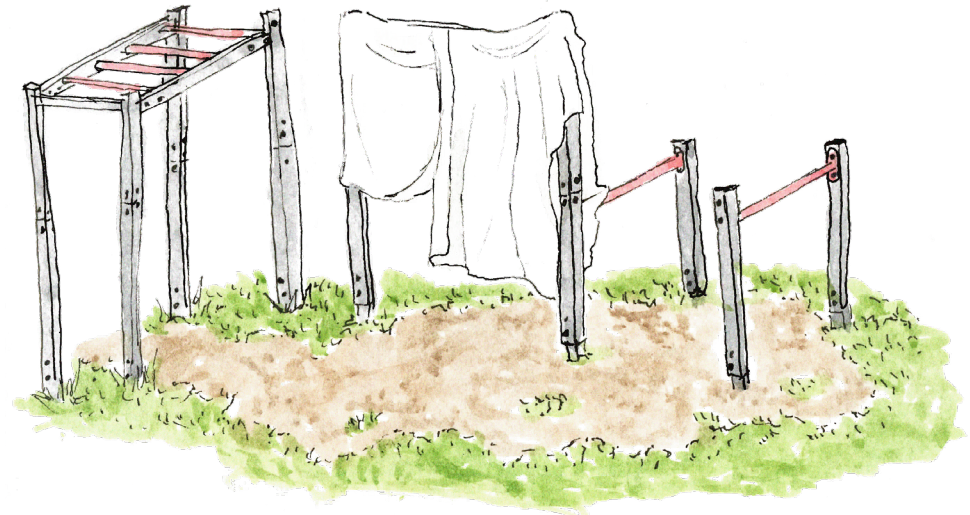
A MAN FROM TURKEY HAD THE IDEA TO BUILD A RACK ON TOP / ABOVE THE WASHING MACHINES TO PUT THE DRYERS ON, SO THERE WOULD BE MORE SPACE.

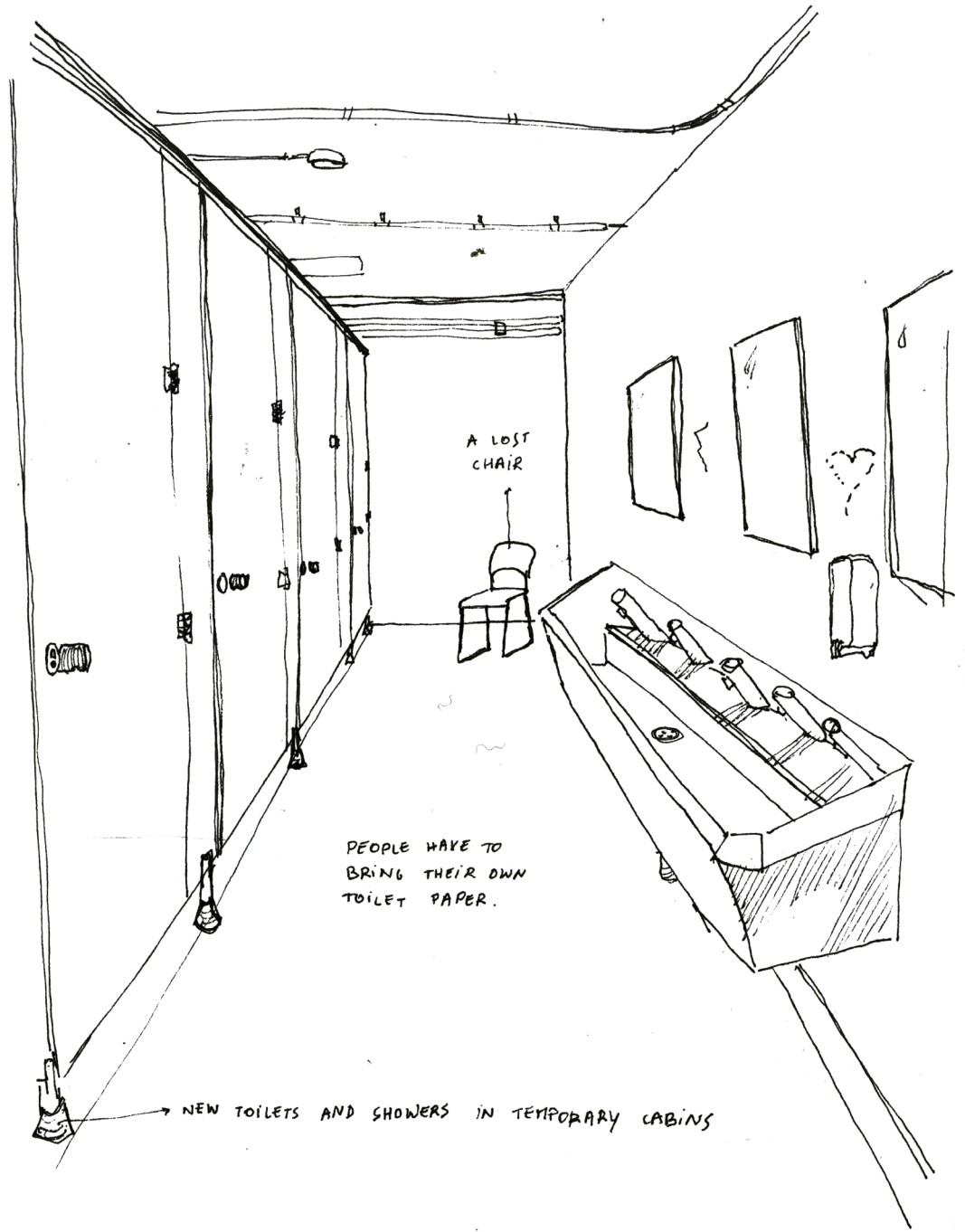
THE LAUNDRY ROOM

IN THE MORNING, ONE OF THE RESIDENTS WAS DOING PULL-UPS

CLIMBING FRAME IN THE GARDEN

WHILST IN THE AFTERNOON, THE CLIMBING FRAME IS BEING USED TO DRY SHEETS IN THE SUN.





A LOST CHAIR

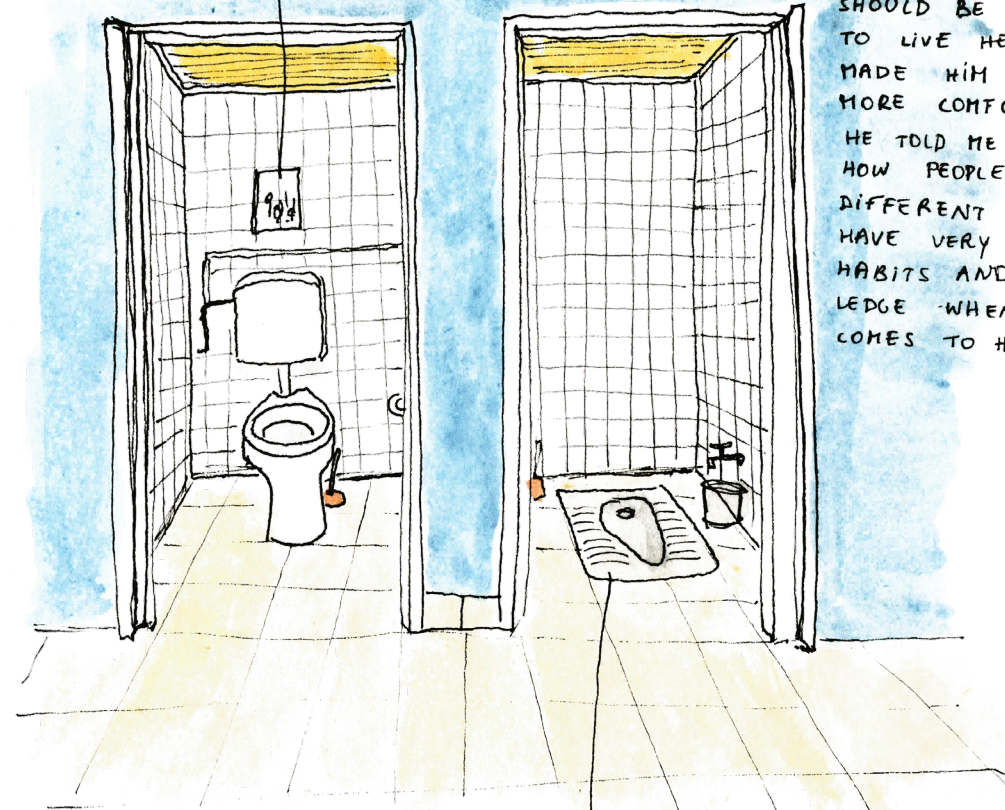
PEOPLE HAVE TO BRING THEIR OWN TOILET PAPER.

NEW TOILETS AND SHOWERS IN TEMPORARY CABINS

THE BATHROOM ON THE GROUND FLOOR

ANOTHER RESIDENT ASKED THE MANAGER TO PUT UP SIGNS EXPLAINING HOW TO USE THE TOILET PROPERLY, SO IT STAYS CLEAN.

WHEN ONE OF THE MEN I SPOKE TO SAW THIS TOILET, HE DECIDED IT SHOULD BE POSSIBLE TO LIVE HERE. IT MADE HIM FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE. HE TOLD ME ABOUT HOW PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES HAVE VERY DIFFERENT HABITS AND KNOWLEDGE WHEN IT COMES TO HYGIENE.



THE MEN'S TOILETS ON THE FIRST FLOOR.

THIS IS CALLED AN ALATURKA TOILET, IT IS COMMONLY USED IN ARABIC COUNTRIES.

1.

The Women's Room

Beveren

ABEER

The first month I came to the camp I asked the manager to open a 'vrouwenlokaal' and she was happy with it.

There are activities for kids, a room to paint in, but she brought new furniture and painted and decorated it just for woman ... and we are free to dance, to sport, to make music, to talk, just for woman.

It is our space to feel free.

I think she accepted immediately and sent red cross and bought new stuff, not second hand, and I appreciate that so much.

....

We have vrouwenlokaal. And the library and park are nearby. So, we can escape sometimes from too many people to a place alone, to write, read, do things we like. But in general, I don't think there should be big changes. It is a good space and a good location, and the effort is made to make it easier for us.

ALI

It is very difficult for the managers. I think this place is like a hostel. It should be hygienic, it should be well isolated. That is the top of the issue.

.....

The other part is about imagination, about dreaming.

But I don't have any dreams about this building.

This place is good. But everyone needs a specific area. For example this woman room, I did not know about it.

ABEER

You did not? Please don't ask for a man room, we don't have space for it.

2.

Temporality Talks

Beveren

ABEER

Of course it is not like your own home, or your own life, but finally we are refugees, and we need a place to sleep in. They provide us with food, with a bed, with medication, taking care of our problems and everything.

As a building, I think, it is a small building, but it is good, for the temporary situation that we are in.

....

I think they are trying hard to make the building suitable, it is not for our long life.

I know it's not our dream, we dreamt about our own houses, own spaces, but I told you, the basic is temporary situation, so we will move, but in the meantime, they divided the building in a way that everyone can live as much as they can.

ALI

Yes this is a good place. For temporary staying.

ABEER

Temporary, this is what I say, it is the base of everything.

-

3.

Hope for Home

Beveren

YASIN

I live here like it is my home, yeah. I care for everything, for cleaning ...

RIET

I saw you clean the other day.

YASIN

Sometimes I help the centre.

If the assistants or director need help with anything, I stand by.

I do everything for this place, I love this place.

Routines are just different about food, it is bad.

Everytime I smile, I don't look for negative things.

No.

I think about positive things. And in my life, I forget the past, everyday is a new day.

And it is good. I think about the future, I think about what will happen.

RIET

ooof there is a lot of noise! (from the construction site nearby)

ABEER

Yes, but that is also temporary.

We manage. Good place. Good building. Good manager. A temporary solution.

After that, our home, our life, our dreams.

-

OSMAN

our home in Turkey ... my family is in Turkey so it is difficult to say that I feel at home here, very difficult. It is not a bad situation for us here, this.

....

I like it here, I like the people here. It is not a problem.

RIET

It is intriguing,
how multiple places can become a home and will always be something
you carry with you, as memories but also a source of information.

SALIM

I already stayed in four different places.

I got attached to the centre in Louvain-la-Neuve, I have memories there, friends.

But everyone moves.

ABEER

Actually, my home, temporally.

Because when I go see my friends for a few days and take my rest, I come back.

I want to come back because I get used.

I get used to my things, my bed, my closet, my everything.

But you know, sharing the same room, a small room, with four people? It is not easy.

....

Some people come from the same family, the same house, and they have problems.

So, what about 4 people, from different countries, from different cultures, different mentalities? They are living in the same room, but everyone has his own business.

It is not easy, but we are doing it, and we manage.

RIET

That is true.

And – because I am trying to investigate the concept of home,
when do people feel at home and how do they make a place their home –
when you think of home, do you also think about Jordan?

ABEER

No. When I think about home, I think about nice, sweet, kind home, here.

With my two kids.

My own home, with my own effort, my own work, and my space, with my own kids.

I don't think about home about Jordan no more.

....

But for me this is my home, if I am honest. My way of life is here. I do feel comfortable.

Especially because of the assistants and the manager, they are so helpful.

With everything, they are so human. I adore them. They listen and give time.

4.

A Sense of Safety

Beveren

ABEER

You have this being flexible.

To accept a new environment. A new culture. A new country.

To live in the camp, to live in Belgium. I feel like I manage more here, I don't know why. People are so normal and natural, and I like that about Belgium. It gives me safety, security, respect, care and they respect me as a woman also.

I have rights and am free to do what I like to do.

-

RIET

Do you feel like this place offers you security?

YASIN

No security. Nee.

Because all doors are open. There are no bodyguards here. The door locks sometimes, sometimes it is a problem.

I remember a guy with a knife that came inside once and that scared the children.

We told before, we need cameras to secure this building.

Some people bring others inside.

I was afraid for my children before. When people have a negative decision, they break everything. The kitchen, refrigerator, they scare the children.

-

OSMAN

There need to be, according to me, a camera in the corridor.

This is very important. A camera.

Here, just in the corridor. I told my assistant but it is not possible because of privacy.

Why do I say this?

Because someone lost their ring in the toilets and the man saw me last.

....

When I was sleeping they knocked on the door, "I lost my ring did you see it?". I went to the toilet but I didn't know. And I felt terrible because he acted like I was a thief, and he found the ring with other people. But I felt terrible because of this. If he wouldn't have found his ring he would have blamed me all of the time.

....

If there is a camera at the corridor. This is important.

5.

Privacy Problems

Beveren

OSMAN

I think privacy is important, but some people don't know what it is.

For example, if you see this man, he is walking in the corridor without dress, naked.

I think this is rude, because this is not the beach and there is woman for example that need their privacy. There is woman and they might not want to see that. So it is rude I think.

RIET

I understand that. And do you feel like you have your own space here, in this building?

OSMAN

Just the room. And there is also an activity room but it is generally closed. But if we say "assistant please open the door" they open. And sometimes I go study there, because I study online. And sometimes in our room my friend is sleeping so it is difficult to study there and then I can use the activity room.

I think the corridor is public area and the room is private.

-

YASIN

In my room my children are with me all the time.

We all live and eat in this room. It cannot do good.

We live in one room, thinking.

We want to get a house.

-

ABEER

The room is small.

ALI

And also sounds

....

I can hear easily next rooms neighbours, because the isolation is poor in this part.

*not enough isolation. For example, you are sleeping, someone turns around and
you hear it against the wall.*

ABEER

For us it is comfortable if we have our own bathroom etc.

*For me for example, I hate that in the morning, when I wake up, I have to put on my
hijab to go to the bathroom.*

....

Your own room, your own house.

*Recently I heard from my friends that they try to find places with a bathroom and
toilet in every room. Only recently.*

But it is a miracle to find a place like that.



Westakkers

Orientation

The Red Cross reception centre for asylum seekers known as West-akkers is located within a former military complex, situated on the border between the municipalities of Beveren and Sint-Niklaas in Flanders. Originally built in 1952, the buildings were still actively in use by the army until 2011. The site was fully vacated the following year, in 2012. Despite its new function as a reception centre, the architectural and spatial traces of its former military use remain highly visible and continue to shape the character and perception of the site. These include the presence of a railway line, the rigid, repetitive layout of the residential blocks, a centrally located parade ground, expansive storage sheds, and broad areas of concrete paving - features that collectively reinforce the site's institutional and regimented past.

Besides, the overall atmosphere of the centre is significantly influenced by its geographic setting. Nestled among forested areas and located in proximity to a major highway, the site occupies a relatively secluded and rural position. This isolation creates a double-edged situation: on the one hand, the surrounding greenery and low-density environment contribute to a sense of calm that many residents find peaceful. On the other hand, the remoteness of the location also brings about a number of challenges, particularly in terms of accessibility and connectivity. Reaching or leaving the site can be difficult and time-consuming. Public transportation options are limited, especially since 'De Lijn' changed their timetable. This infrastructural disconnect contributes to the social and spatial marginalisation of the residents.

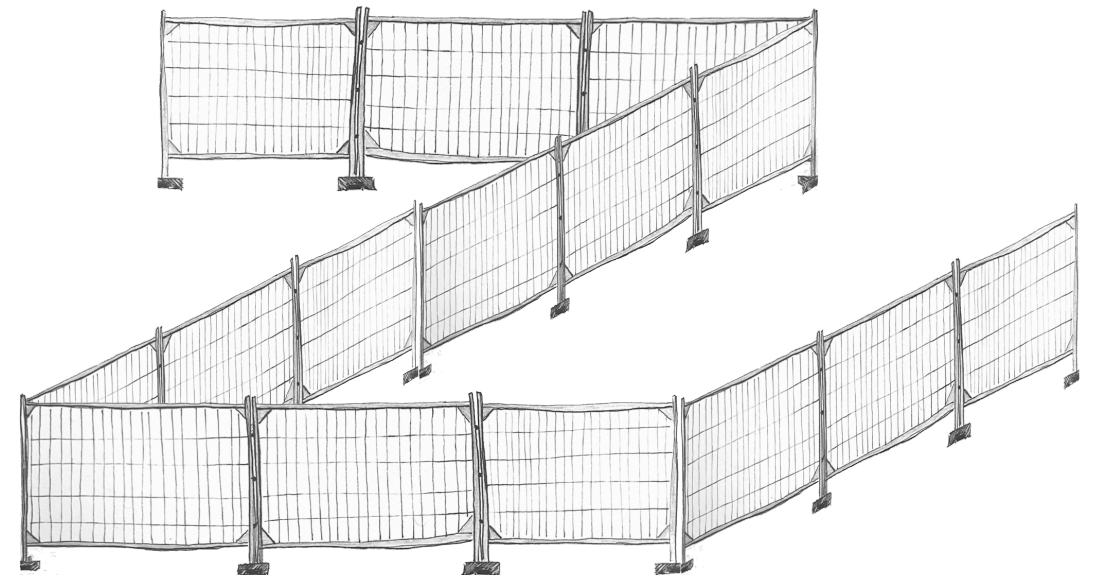


In 2015, the Red Cross repurposed part of the former military site by establishing a reception centre for asylum seekers in the northern section of the domain, within the former residential barracks. The centre was opened on a temporary basis in response to the urgent need for short-term solutions due to the fluctuating demand for shelter at the start of the so-called 'refugee crisis'. At the time of its opening, the centre had a capacity of approximately 250 residents (Van Hoeyland, 2015). However, today the centre has an expanded capacity of up to 450 people and is almost always fully occupied. The building accommodates, just as in Beveren, people from diverse backgrounds and ages. The identity of the place is still strongly influenced by its military history. In 2021, the police opened an exercise field on the south part of the domain. The entrance, as well as the domain itself, is now split up in two, by temporary construction fences.

The residential barracks have undergone a number of changes since the centre opened. For example, the centre initially had large dormitories, which have now been divided into smaller rooms by new walls. In addition, new showers were installed in Block 10, and new toilets were fitted throughout the centre. Most blocks also have new windows.

In 2018 the centre nearly closed down. It had gradually been emptied out to just 45 residents, reinforcing its temporary status. However, rather than closing it, the decision was made to reopen the centre and return it to full capacity in response to renewed demand for shelter. According to the centre manager, the government's current plan is to close as few centres as possible in order to maintain a buffer. Nevertheless, the future of the centre remains uncertain. The police and governance of Sint-Niklaas have expressed interest in reclaiming the buildings, which further underlines the site's instability and contested purpose (Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen, 2024).

Following on from the study in Beveren, this section will explore how residents experience and negotiate this sense of temporariness. Particular attention will be paid to the informal and personal practices that shape the space in new, often unexpected ways. This analysis is based on observations, sketches and conversations conducted during fieldwork.



These fences form the border between the part of the site used by the Red Cross and the part used by the military.

PLAN WESTAKKERS



BLOCK 8.

(ALMOST)

THERE ARE 10^V IDENTICAL BUILDINGS.



Blk 2-5 - 7 qain
Blk 3-8 AlleenMan
Blk 10 -> Couches
Krounch

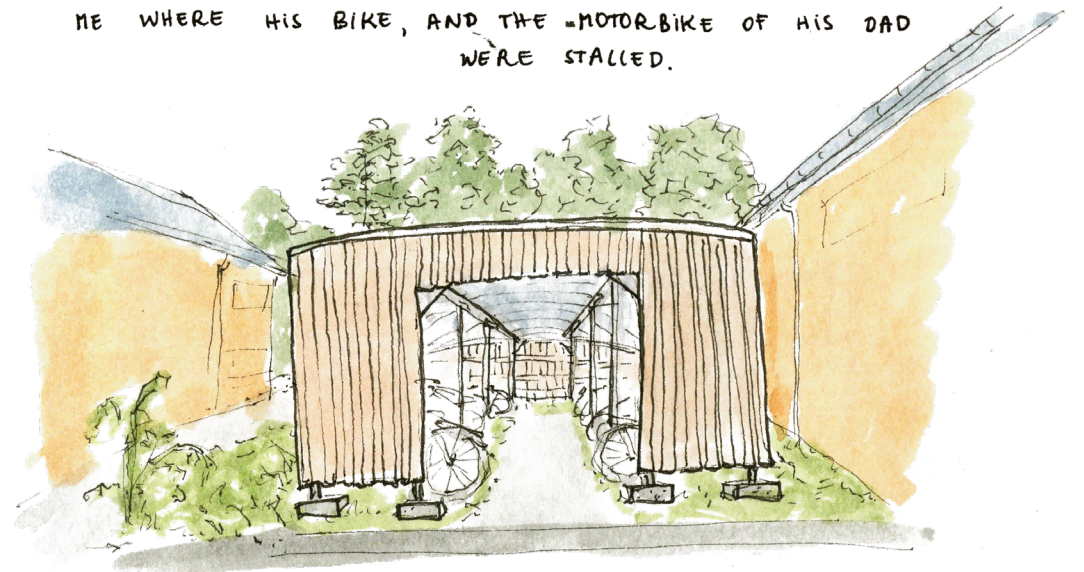
ALL BLOCKS HAVE TOILETS.
SOME OF THEM HAVE THEIR OWN SHOWERS.

ONE OF THE ASSISTENTS WROTE DOWN FOR ME WHICH AGE / DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS LIVE IN WHICH BUILDING BLOCKS.

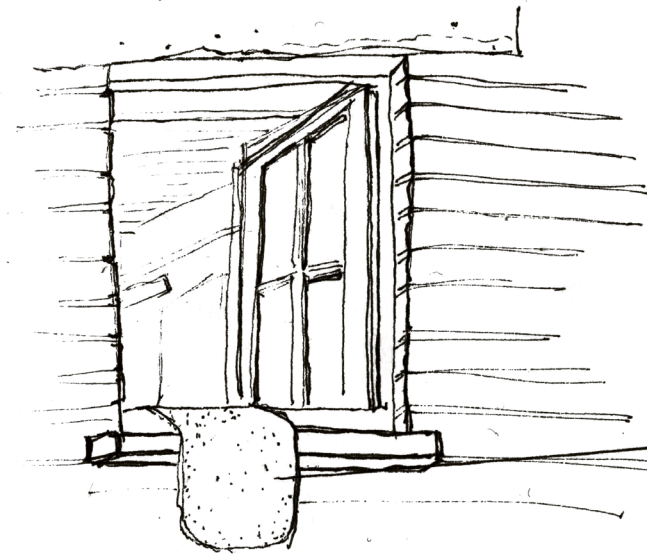
NEW BIKE STALLS

INBETWEEN THE BLOCKS.

ONE OF THE KIDS TOLD ME TO DRAW IT AND PROUDLY SHOWED ME WHERE HIS BIKE, AND THE MOTORBIKE OF HIS DAD WERE STALLED.



(A BOY TOLD ME THEY WERE HERE FOR 4 MONTHS NOW.)



A CARPET HANGING OUTSIDE ON THE WINDOWSILL

A COUPLE OF SUMMERS AGO, I USED TO PLAY VOLLEYBALL HERE EVERY NIGHT.

NO ONE IS PLAYING NOW.

A GIRL TOLD ME THEY STILL PLAY SOMETIMES.

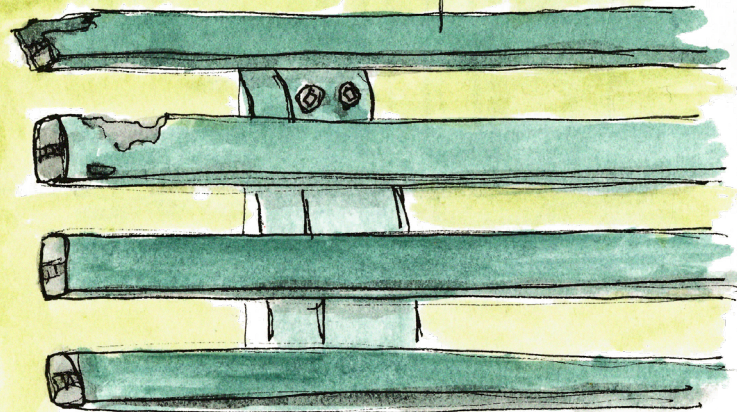
IF THE WEATHER IS NICE, AND IT IS LATER IN THE DAY.

84

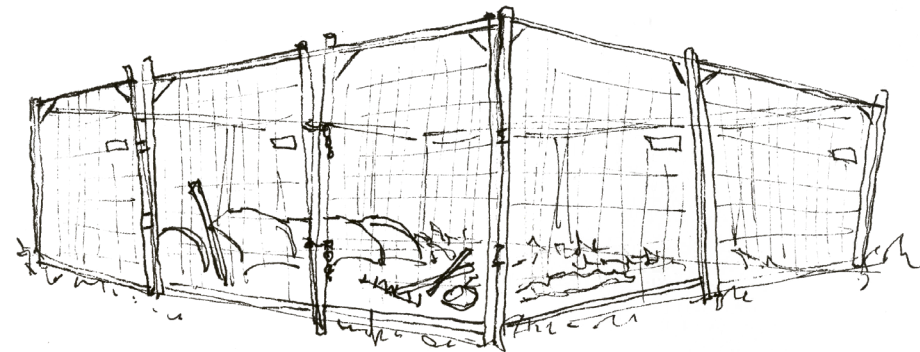


THIS CENTRE ALSO HAS A VOLLEYBALL NET.

THERE ARE A LOT OF GREEN PLASTIC BENCHES OUTSIDE.



SOMEONE IS ATTEMPTING TO MAKE A GARDEN, TO GROW VEGETABLES.



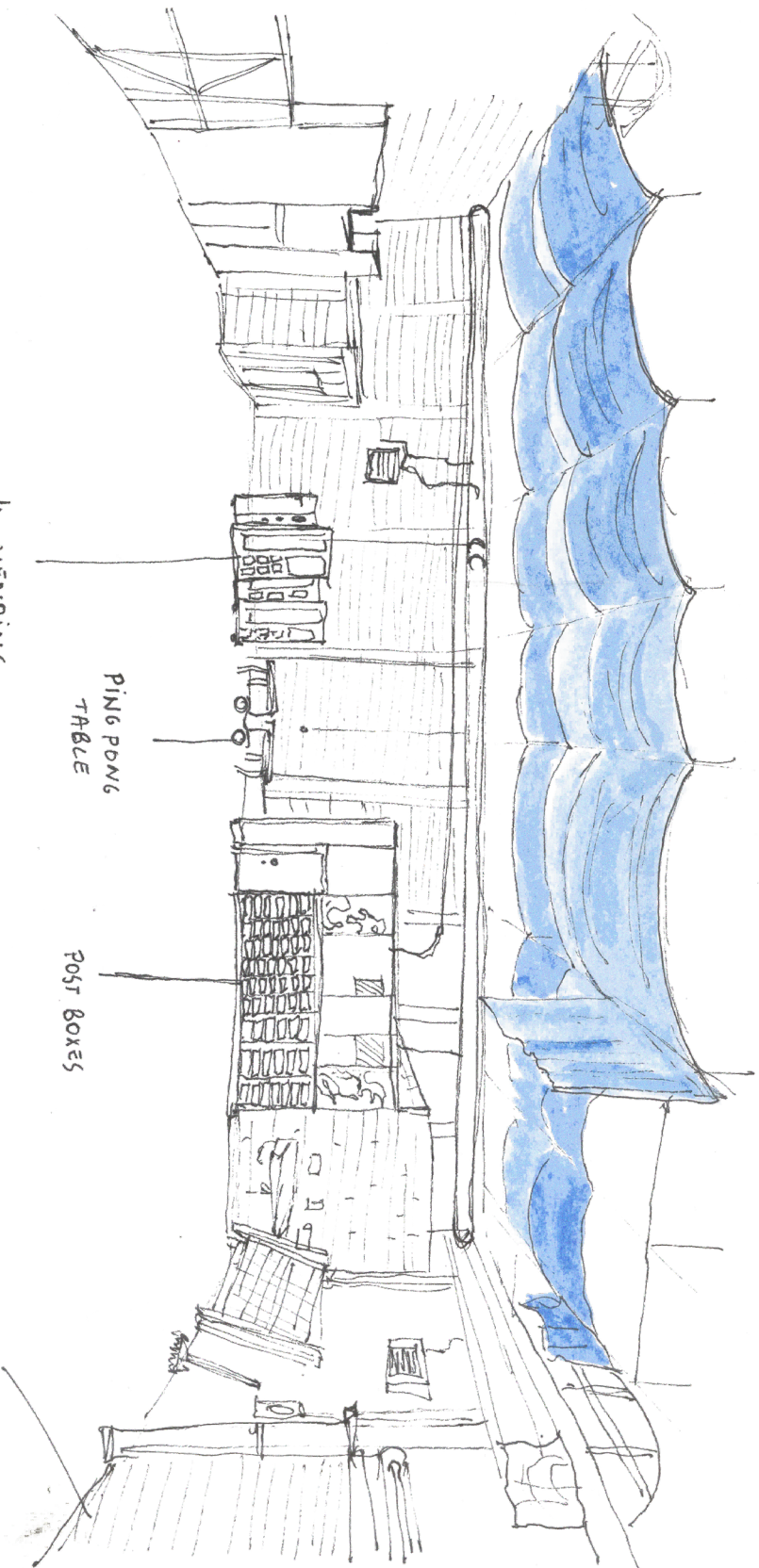
THE SMALL PIECE OF LAND IS CLOSED OFF BY "HERAS" - FENCES, THE SAME FENCES THAT DIVIDE THE WHOLE SITE INTO THE PART USED BY THE RED CROSS AND THE PART USED BY THE POLICE.

A KID IS RUNNING AFTER THE CHICKENS. (THERE ARE MANY, MANY CHICKENS)



GARDENING IS A RE-OCCURRING WAY OF EXPRESSING AGENCY, IT REMINDS ME OF AAA, IN PARIS.

85



TWO KIDS CAME BY,
TO GET SOMETHING FROM
THE VENDING MACHINE.
THEY CAME BY BIKE.

4 VENDING
MACHINES

PING PONG
TABLE

POST BOXES

BIG
GATES

THE BIG HALL IN WHICH THE RECEPTION IS LOCATED.



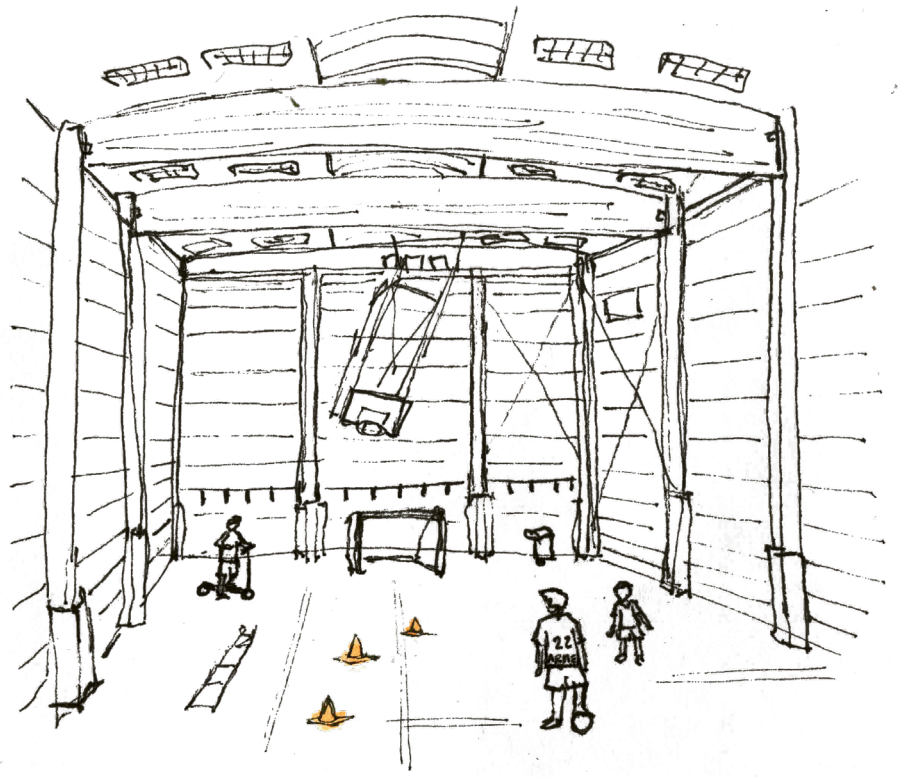
MOST OF THE RESIDENTS PREFER TO COOK IN THE KITCHENS
OF THE RESIDENTIAL BLOCKS.

ACTIVITIES ARE
SCHEDULED ON
THE ANNOUNCE-
MENT BOARD

SOME OF THE INHABITANTS WORK IN THE
RESTAURANT TO GAIN SOME EXTRA MONEY.

THE RESTAURANT.

3 BOYS ARE PLAYING FOOTBALL.
 (ONE IS ON AN ELECTRIC SCOOTER)
 1 SCORED, THEY WERE IMPRESSED.



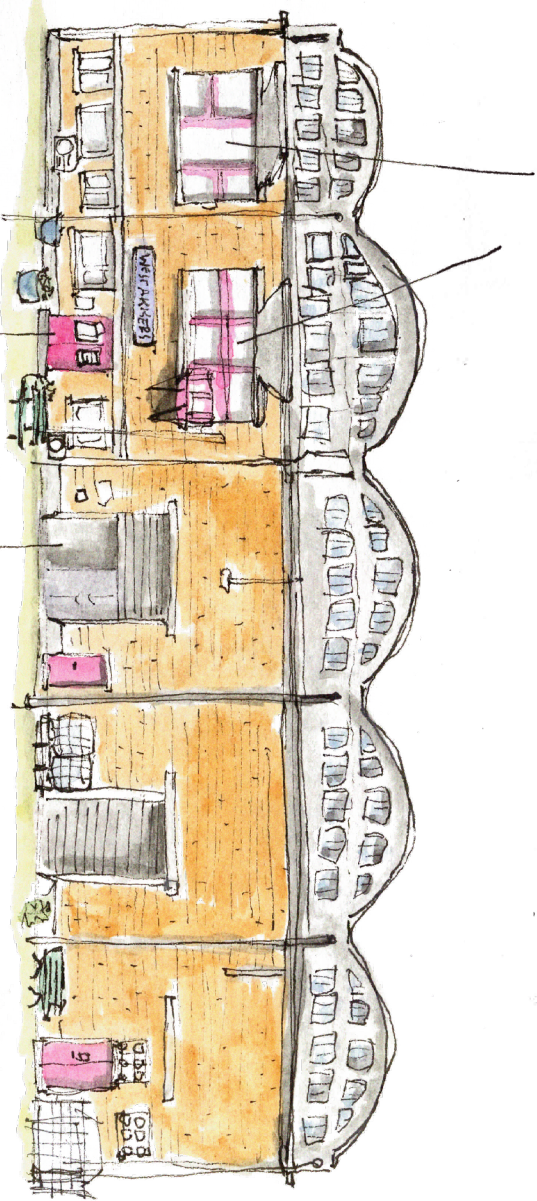
THE OLD SPORTS HALL OF THE MILITARY BASE MARKS THE BORDER BETWEEN THE RECEPTION CENTRE AND THE ZONE THAT IS STILL USED BY THE POLICE.

IT IS OPEN 24/7 FOR THE KIDS TO PLAY. IT IS DIRTY. THERE IS A LOT OF GRAFFITI ON THE WALLS (I DON'T KNOW IF IT WAS DONE BEFORE OR AFTER THE INSTALLMENT OF THE CENTRE).

IT IS A BIG EMPTY SPACE.
 MANY PEOPLE SIT HERE
 TO CALL FAMILY AND FRIENDS
 OR TO PLAY VIDEO GAMES.

THE RECEPTION & TEHLIOKHAL ARE LOCATED IN A SEPERATE BUILDING, THAT LOOKS DIFFERENT.

WIFI - ROOM



RECEPTION

TEHLIOKHAL

THE RECEPTION IS ONLY OPEN AT FIXED HOURS.

RESIDENTS ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO KNOCK ON THE DOOR, THEY SHOULD WAIT UNTIL THE RECEPTION OPENS.

HALLWAY ON THE FIRST FLOOR (BLOCK 2)



THE TOILETS AND KITCHEN ARE LOCATED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CORRIDOR

THERE ARE LOTS OF CUPBOARDS AND STUFF IN THE CORRIDOR

90

PUSHCHAIRS REMAIN AT THE DOOR. (SINCE THIS BUILDING IS ACCOMODATING FAMILIES THERE ARE MANY)

INHABITANTS LEAVE THEIR SHOES OUTSIDE ON THE DOORMAT



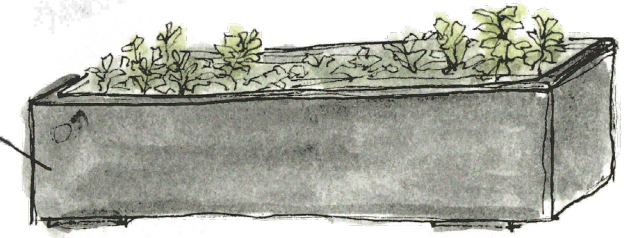
MANY INHABITANTS LEAVE STUFF (FOOD, CLOTHES, PLANTS) OUTSIDE ON THE WINDOWSILL



THERE ARE A COUPLE OF LITTLE SHELTERS BUILT ON THE SIDE OF BLOCK 2, FROM WHICH THEY DISTRIBUTE SOAP, DIAPERS AND OTHER PRODUCTS.

91

THERE ARE SOME PLANTERS SCATTERED AROUND THE CENTRE. THIS ONE IS GROWING MINT.

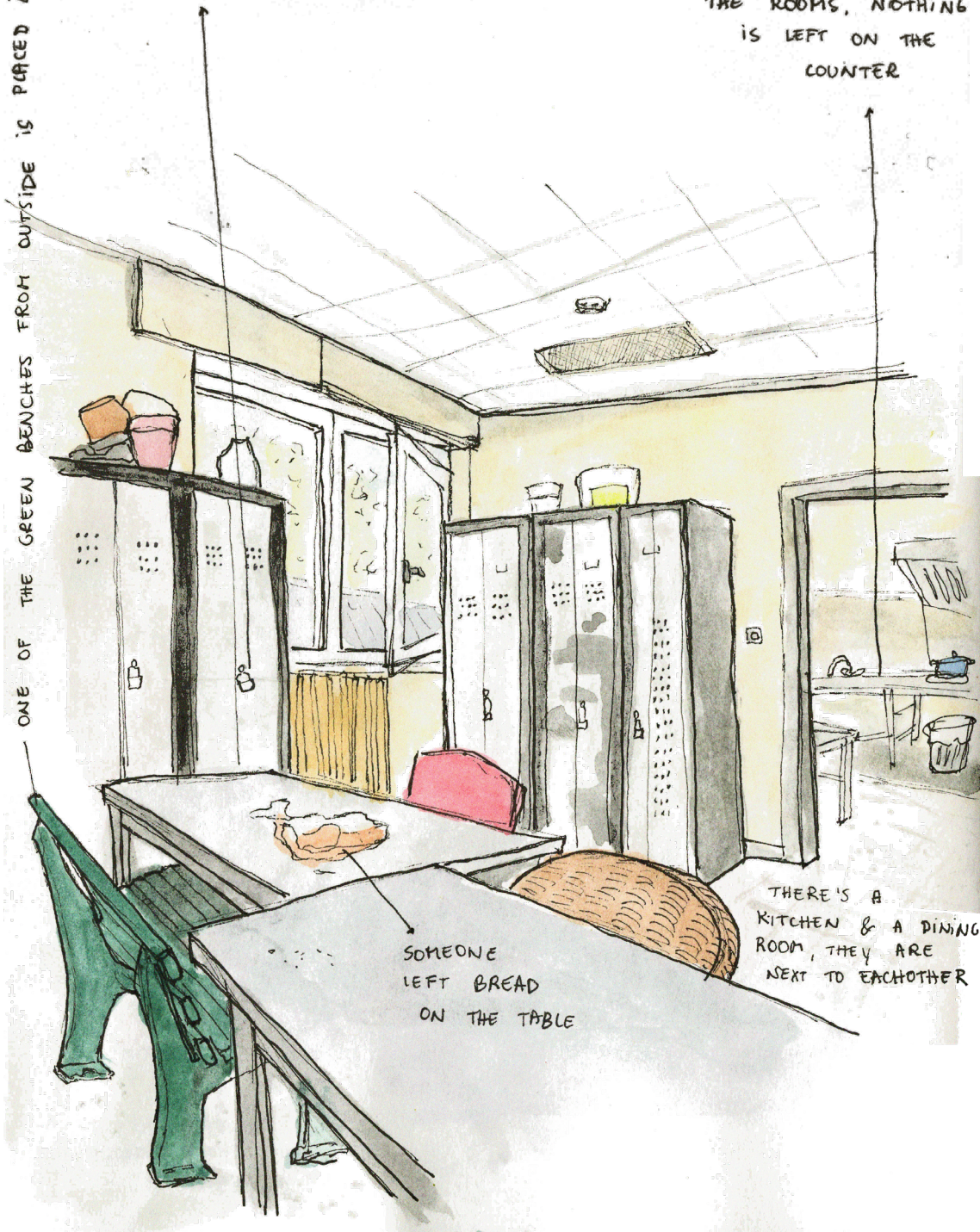


KITCHEN ON THE FIRST FLOOR. (BLOCK 2)

ONE OF THE GREEN BENCHES FROM OUTSIDE IS PLACED INSIDE

THE CABINETS ARE LOCKED WITH SMALL LOCKS

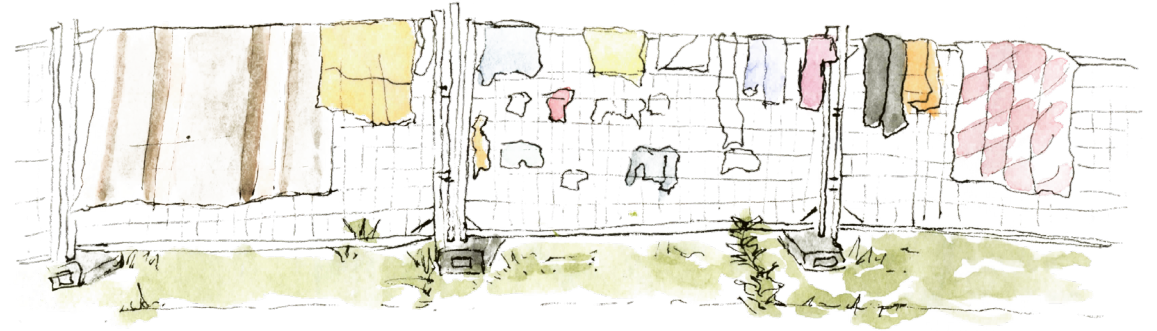
POTS, PANS & PLATES ARE TAKEN BACK TO THE ROOMS, NOTHING IS LEFT ON THE COUNTER



SOMEONE LEFT BREAD ON THE TABLE

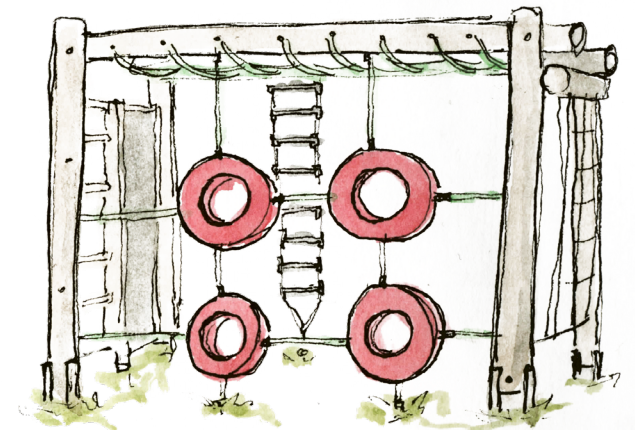
THERE'S A KITCHEN & A DINING ROOM, THEY ARE NEXT TO EACH OTHER

PEOPLE ARE LEAVING THEIR LAUNDRY TO DRY ON THE FENCES IN THE BACK OF THE CENTRE.



THERE ARE SMALL BENCHES ATTACHED TO THE SIDE OF SOME OF THE BLOCKS.

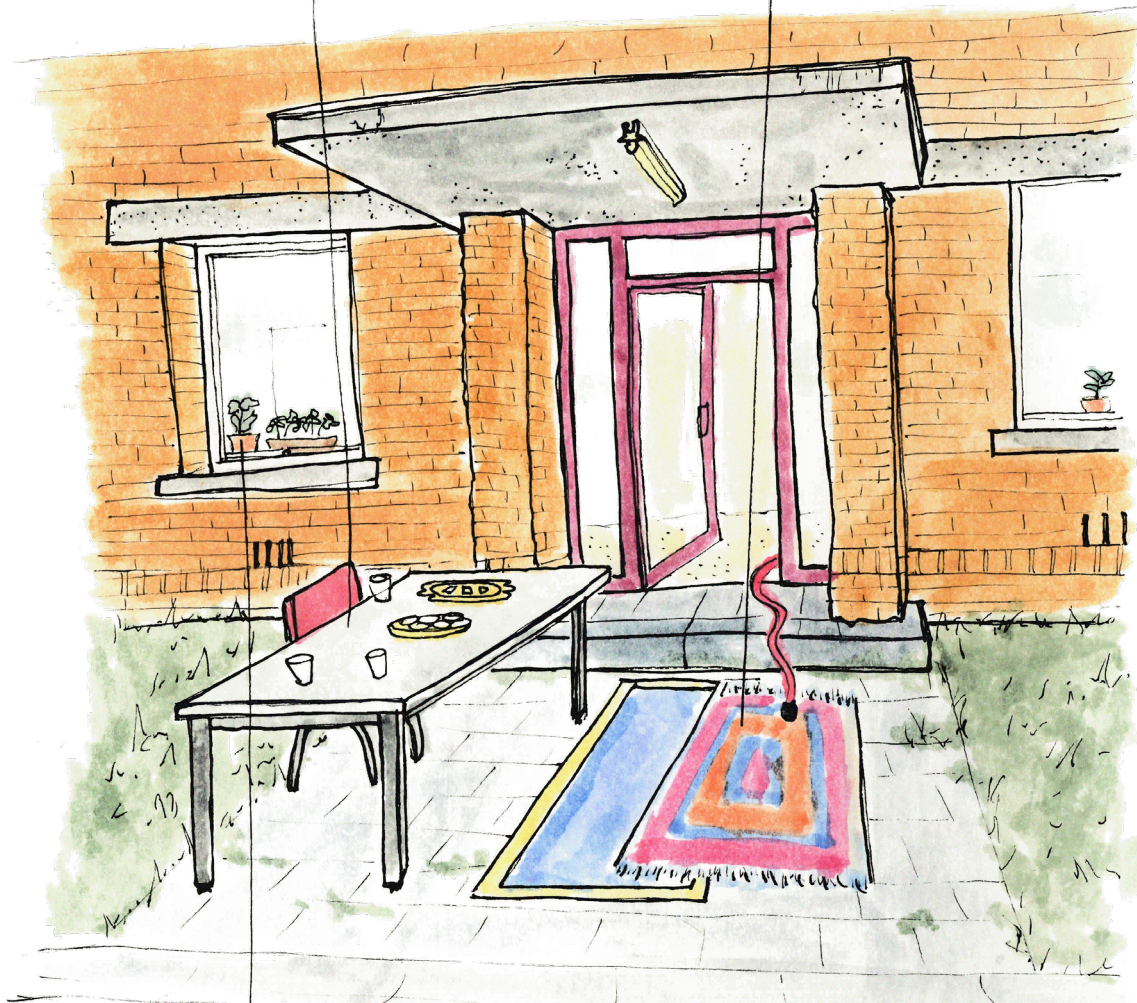
THERE ARE SEVERAL PLAYGROUNDS FOR CHILDREN BETWEEN BLOCKS 2 & 3.



OUTSIDE BLOCK 7.

THE PEOPLE I TALKED TO INVITED ME TO DRINK AND EAT SOMETHING TOGETHER, THEY PUT A TABLE OUTSIDE, IN FRONT OF THEIR BLOCK

ONE OF THE WOMAN WAS CLEANING HER CARPETS WITH THE HOSE, BECAUSE THE WEATHER IS GOOD.



IN THIS BLOCK, A WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN LIVING HERE FOR 6 YEARS NOW, STARTED GROWING FLOWERS ON THE WINDOWSILLS IN THE COMMON CORRIDOR.

94

THIS CORRIDOR ACCOMODATES ONLY SINGLE MEN.



ALMOST ALL OF THE WINDOWS ARE OPEN

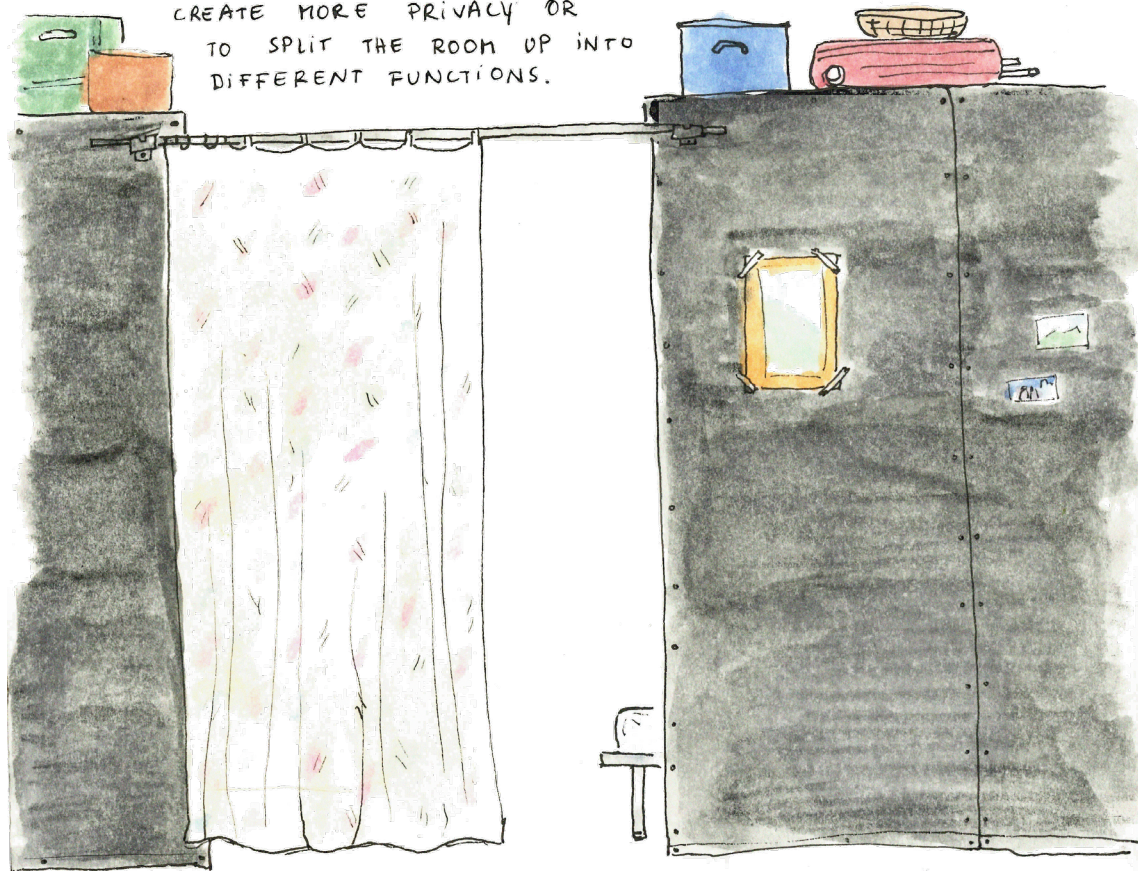
THANKS TO SMALL HALLWAYS IN FRONT OF THE ROOM DOORS, THE MAIN CORRIDOR IS ALMOST COMPLETELY FREE.

HALLWAY ON THE FIRST FLOOR. (BLOCK 3)

95

MULTIPLE INHABITANTS
REARRANGED THE CLOSETS TO
CREATE MORE PRIVACY OR
TO SPLIT THE ROOM UP INTO
DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS.

THERE'S EXTRA STUFF STORED ON
TOP OF THE CLOSETS.



96

THIS FAMILY DIVIDED THEIR ROOM INTO TWO PARTS :
ONE SIDE ~~WAS~~ IS USED TO EAT + THE DAD INSTALLED A GAME
CORNER AND THEY ORGANISED A SMALL LIVING ROOM WITH A
SOFA AND A PLAY MAT WITH TOYS FOR THE KIDS. (WHO ARE
STILL VERY SMALL).

THE OTHER SIDE IS USED TO SLEEP IN.

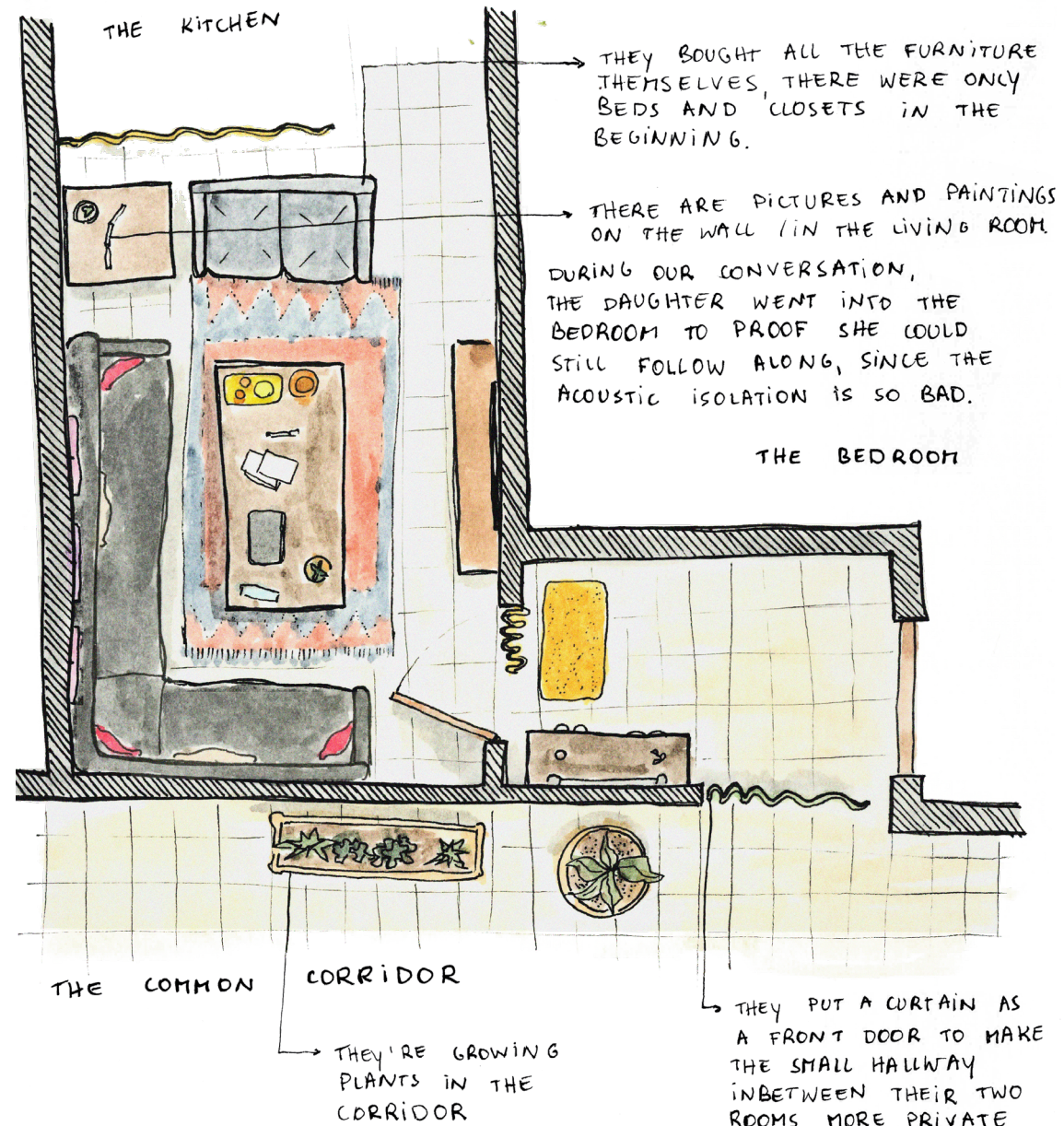
THEY RE-ARRANGED THE CLOSETS IN SUCH A WAY THAT
THEY FORM A SORT OF WALL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM,
AND EVEN HUNG A CURTAIN IN THE IMPROVISED DOORWAY
FOR EXTRA SEPERATION.

THE ROOM DIVISION IS ONLY VISUAL, NOT SOUNDPROOF, AS THE
CLOSETS DO NOT REACH THE CEILING.

ONE FAMILY WELCOMED ME INTO THEIR ROOM, OFFERING ME
PASTRIES AND COFFEE. THE PEOPLE I MEET HERE ARE SO
INCREDIBLY HOSPITABLE.

THEY HAVE 3 CHILDREN AND HAVE BEEN WAITING ON
A DECISION FOR 6 YEARS NOW.

THEY ORGANISED A KITCHEN, BUT THERE IS NO HOT WATER.



97

1.

Orientation

Westakkers

There are a number of signposts, like this one, scattered around the centre. They confirm the scale of the centre, indicating where the restaurant, team room, container park, logistics and resident blocks are located.



2.

Repainting

Westakkers

MOTHER

We have to repaint.

DAUGHTER

No, we have to go.

MOTHER

Therefore we need papers first.

DAUGHTER

It has been a long time now.

3.

Washing Machines

Westakkers

There are two laundry rooms. One for men and one for women.
Located within the same block but on different sides,
with different entrances.



The laundry room for men works with opening hours.
One of the assistants told me that they had to implement such a
system because there is a need for surveillance.
If not, clothes get stolen.

4.

Social Housing

Westackers

translated from French

FATHER

I care for my children. Children outside the centre have laws and are protected by them but the laws don't work in here. My children are not protected.

The space has an impact on my kids, on their social life.

They cannot invite friends here because they are embarrassed. Kids need a room.

Do you understand? If you were a kid and you had friends over, what would you show them?

RIET

My room.

FATHER

It has to change for the kids. They need more privacy, they need a space to develop themselves.

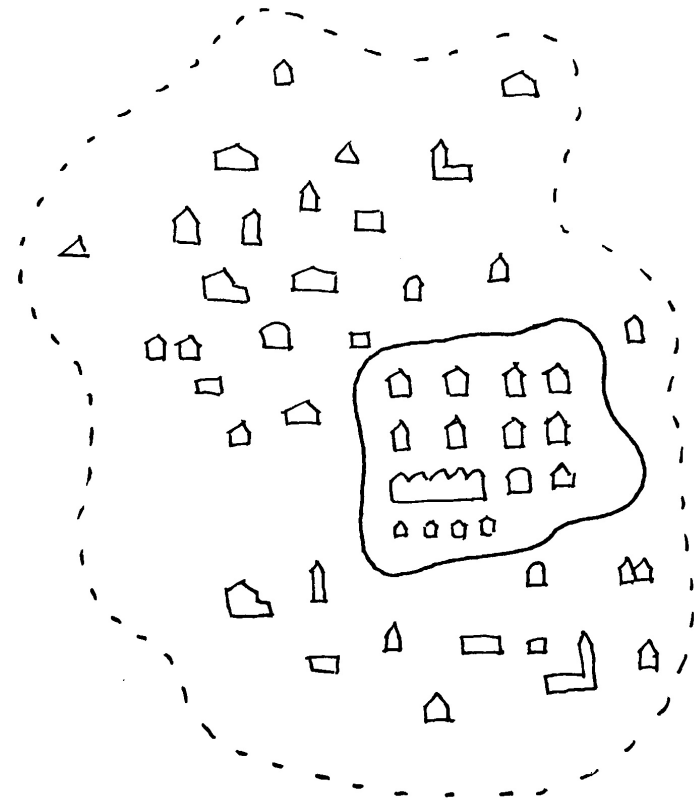
This is not social housing. It is counter-social housing.

2.

Bus Stop

Westakkers

"This is a village within a village."



"We could use our own bus stop."

Comparative reflection

Following a graphic and experiential analysis of the two reception centres, conducted through the application of previously discussed spatial and ethnographic methods, this section will contain a comparative reflection on my findings. The aim is not only to understand each centre in itself but to critically examine how their spatial characteristics and atmospheres influence, and are influenced by, the acts and lived experiences of their inhabitants.

This comparative reflection builds upon the key conceptual frameworks introduced earlier, particularly those of *homemaking* (Beeckmans, et al. 2022) and *temporality* (Crine, et al., 2025), while also engaging with more tangible spatial elements, such as *asscale*, as well as the interrelated conditions of *safety*, *security*, and *privacy*. Although distinguishable, these latter aspects collectively contribute to a broader sense of comfort, a theme that emerged consistently throughout my fieldwork as central to residents' experiences and needs. While some of these dimensions are clearly architectural or spatial in nature, others are more closely related to psychological or emotional well-being – though, of course, they are all inevitably interconnected.

Safety, security, and privacy were repeatedly cited by residents as lacking, and thus as key areas for improvement. Despite the difficult and often stressful nature of their situation, many residents expressed their ability to endure these shortcomings by reminding themselves of the temporary nature of their stay, a coping mechanism that will be further explored in relation to temporality. Nonetheless, these conditions were often the first to be mentioned in conversations about comfort, highlighting the fundamental role they play in shaping not only physical experience, but also emotional wellbeing and daily life.

What follows is an examination of the differences and similarities between the two centres, Beveren and Westakkers, through a series of these interrelated categories. These categories may vary in scope and emphasis, but all speak to the central importance of comfort and the human need for a sense of home, however temporary or fragile it may be.

Scale and build-up

Although geographically close and both repurposed from former institutional functions, the reception centres in Beveren and Westakkers differ significantly both in their spatial configurations as well as in atmospheres. Beveren, smaller in scale and embedded within the urban fabric of the town, contrasts sharply with Westakkers, a significantly larger and more isolated facility situated within a forested area. The latter's spatial layout and aesthetic still reflect its past as a military centre, characterised by a colder, more impersonal design language that seems to discourage social interaction and community formation.

While the Westakkers' larger scale may, from an institutional perspective, support economic efficiency, this comes at a potential cost to the psychosocial well-being of its residents. The design of the Westakkers embodies a policy logic that prioritises control over integration. The structural build-up and design of the centre mirror broader governmental strategies that reinforce the temporariness of asylum accommodation and discourage long-term settlement for the residents. Moreover, these strategies also change the work environment and impose adaptations on the Red Cross and its staff, who must work within the existing framework and architectural conditions. The fragmentation of the site into multiple residential blocks results in varied social dynamics: while some blocks foster a degree of collective care, such as Block 7, where residents have added plants and taken shared responsibility for cleanliness, others are marked by social isolation, with residents largely remaining in their rooms.

In contrast, Beveren's compactness encourages informal encounters and recognisability among residents, facilitating a stronger sense of community. The smaller scale enhances social awareness and familiarity, both of which are beneficial to the development of communal bonds. Despite its central urban location, Beveren has a sizeable garden that is actively used by children and by residents seeking fresh air or space to smoke and eat outdoors in good weather. The Westakkers, though more isolated, is surrounded by forest, offering access to green space that may have a calming effect on its inhabitants, although the psychological benefits of this natural setting are affected by the facility's institutional character.

Practical aspects of the built environment also affect residents' daily lives. In Beveren, sanitary facilities are integrated within each floor, providing convenient access regardless of weather or time. In the Westakkers, however, sanitary facilities are divided among the blocks, and although each has its own, some residents prefer to use the central shared facilities due to hygiene concerns. This layout, however, poses challenges. For example, one young woman described the discomfort of having to walk across the centre in winter with wet hair after showering. This highlights how certain infrastructural choices could be improved to better meet residents' basic needs for comfort.



Abstract scale comparison.

Staff presence and accessibility also differ between the two centres. In Beveren, the staff office is centrally located on the first floor, creating regular, informal contact between residents and assistants. By contrast, in Westakkers, the reception and staff offices are housed in a separate, visually distinct building. Although this is easy to locate, it may act as a physical and psychological barrier, reinforcing separation and discouraging spontaneous engagement. This presents an additional challenge for the staff due to the structure of the site.

These observations demonstrate how architectural scale, spatial layout and planning, and institutional legacy shape everyday experiences of asylum seekers. As Luce Beeckmans has argued, smaller centres tend to foster more humane and home-like environments (Beeckmans & Geldof, 2022).

Safety, security, privacy

The distinction between public and private spaces in reception centres is often unclear and disputed. Many residents express a desire for clearer boundaries and improved security. In Beveren, for example, some of the residents feel that the corridors, which others perceive as a continuation of their personal space, lack the necessary surveillance and regulation to ensure mutual comfort and safety. This ambiguity can generate discomfort and, in some cases, anxiety.

The absence of what might be considered a “front door” adds to these concerns. In the Westakkers, for example, a woman described her fear of theft due to the lack of a lockable barrier between the two rooms that her family was given, which are interconnected by a small hallway, leading to the common corridor. They did informally appropriate this hallway by hanging up a mirror and placing a shoe rack (see page 95), but it could not be secured, since there is no door between the hallway and the corridor. A curtain provides some visual privacy but offers no real protection or sense of ownership.

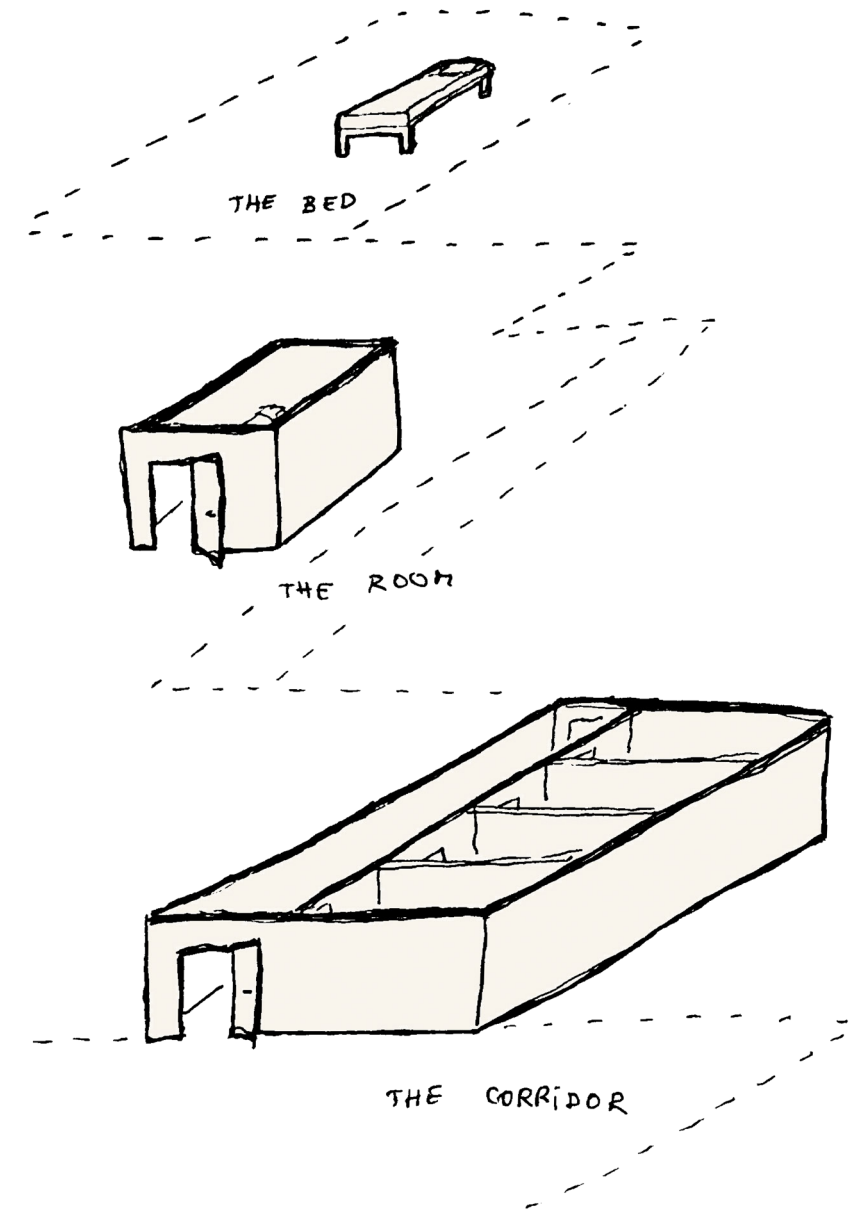
In Beveren, one of the men I spoke to told me that some people inside the centre can become aggressive due to stress, destroying things in the communal areas. This made him feel very protective of his children. He was also concerned that the front door of the building is almost always left open, allowing anyone to walk in.

The structural differences between the two centres are significant. Beveren does not have a formal reception desk, instead, the staff office (teamlokaal) is located on the first floor. On my first visit, the open front door created a moment of hesitation, I was unsure whether I was permitted to enter, or whether doing so might intrude the residents' privacy. Once I entered the building, I was immediately addressed and accompanied to the staff office (teamlokaal). In contrast, Westakkers has a reception where residents are expected to check in and out, reinforcing a sense of regulated entry and surveillance. When I arrived there I had to explain who I was and the person behind the reception desk first called the manager of the centre before letting me through, to make sure I had an appointment.

Although the Beveren resident I spoke to, who questioned the open front door, might appreciate this system, one of the Westakkers residents told me that she found the reception very formal and said that it made her feel as though she were in prison. She understands the need for control, but wondered if it wouldn't be possible to use a digital badge or something similar. Perhaps that would strike a nice balance on the front door issue, because personally, I'm not sure which is better.

Importantly, the spatial configuration impacts the ability of residents to establish boundaries. Once individuals feel unsafe or uncomfortable in their environment, the processes of homemaking are disrupted. Therefore, privacy and safety are thus not only physical needs but pre-conditions for emotional and personal investment in a place.

What is considered public / private? Where to draw the line?



Temporality

Life within reception centres is characterised by a strong sense of temporality, which I encountered equally in both of the centres I visited. Residents live in conditions they perceive as transient, which is exactly the reason why they are able to make compromises relating to their comfort, privacy and expectations - because there is hope for improvement. The notion of temporality is therefore not inherently negative, as it carries a promise (Brun, 2015).

However, since this temporal period of dwelling the reception centre is not clearly defined within time, it comes inevitably accompanied by uncertainty and stress. These factors might foster feelings of being stuck, disempowered and disconnected. Several of the people I had the opportunity to speak with described experiencing a sense of limbo (Hartonen, et al., 2022), in which they are forced to wait indefinitely for decisions that lie beyond their control, whilst having a limited capacity to influence their environment or future.

This experience can on its turn lead to a lack of belonging, replaced instead by a feeling of longing for stability, autonomy and freedom. Many of the inhabitants seem to cope with this lack of a permanent home of their own by dreaming about the future. Many residents would rather retreat into their imagination, picturing their own personal space with their own bathroom and front door, than attempt to change and modify their current environment. After all, adapting or personalising this transient space demands energy and, as disheartening as it may sound, time spent in uncertainty.

In many ways, to live in imagination is to live on hope. While the Red Cross makes efforts to adjust the buildings to improve liveability, these spaces often fall short of meeting the individual and culturally specific needs of the residents, which in turn adds another layer of psychological, space-initiated, stress. This challenge is complicated further by the coexistence of individuals from diverse backgrounds, all inhabiting the same space, yet with vastly different histories, traumas and coping mechanisms, where each person is trying to find their own rhythm and way of living.

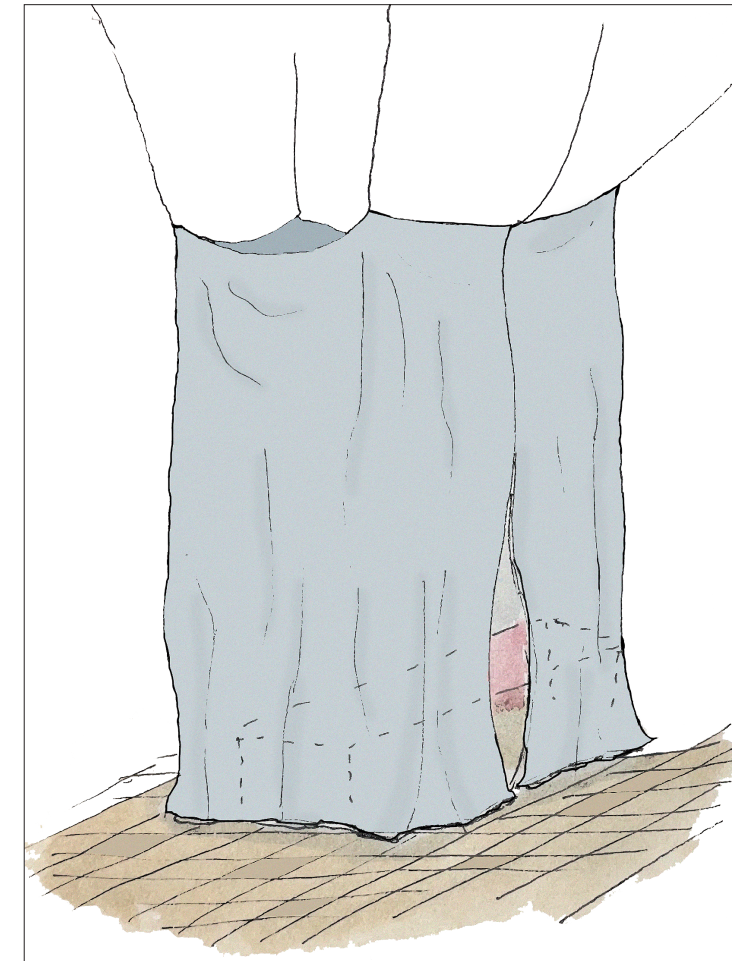
Homemaking

Despite the temporary and often impersonal nature of the centres, many residents engage in homemaking practices (Beeckmans, et al., 2022). During my visits to both Beveren and Westakkers, I was occasionally invited into residents' rooms. This was always upon their insistence and full permission. These personal spaces revealed the ways in which individuals attempt to assert control and create a sense of familiarity within these institutionalised settings.

Small yet significant acts of homemaking were clearly noticeable: mats were placed on the floor; personal photographs, both from their home countries and from their new lives in Belgium, were hung on the walls; flags and other items from their countries of origin were displayed; and improvised curtains were draped around beds to create more privacy. These gestures reflect efforts to humanise an otherwise anonymous environment and to imbue it with personal and cultural meaning.

The bed, in particular becomes a valuable place of refuge, of personal ownership, in an otherwise shared environment. A man in Beveren compared the centre to a hostel, and this is an accurate observation: shared rooms, communal sanitation and communal dining all contribute to a lack of autonomy. However, since the travellers share a room with strangers, many hostels provide curtains for individual beds to offer privacy, which is often lacking in these centres. This seemingly minor design change could have a significant impact on the well-being and dignity of the residents, particularly given that I have observed people (attempting to) hang curtains themselves.

Home, in this context, is no longer a single location but rather a fragmented concept spread across multiple spaces and temporalities. Although the reception centres were never intended to be a home, they become one of several places where people dwell, albeit limited, temporally and often not recognised. As residents repaint walls, grow plants on windowsills, and rearrange furniture, they claim the space and attempt to reassert a sense of normality. These acts of homemaking are sustained partly because humans are designed and used to dwell, but also, perhaps more importantly, because of hope.



Summary

The lived experiences of residents in asylum reception centres such as Beveren and Westakkers reveal complex and ongoing negotiations of space, identity, and belonging. Although these centres are characterised by transience and temporality, residents continually engage in acts of homemaking that demonstrate the universal human need for place-making, privacy, and a sense of security. These everyday practices challenge the often impersonal and institutional nature of the original buildings, highlighting the capacity of even small design interventions, such as the addition of curtains, lockable storage, or greenery, to support a feeling of autonomy and comfort.

In this context, architecture is far from neutral. Spatial configurations and material conditions carry unspoken messages about the temporariness of asylum seekers' presence and their limited ability to claim permanence. However, these messages are not only embedded in physical form, they are experienced and interpreted through social interactions. Conversations with residents emphasise the importance of community ties and personal connections in creating a sense of home. While physical changes do have a significant impact, the feeling of home often seems to arise from relationships with neighbours, assistants, managers, and support staff. Many residents expressed gratitude for the presence and care offered by the manager and assistants, as well as for the organisation of the Red Cross, acknowledging their critical role and contributions in creating a welcoming and supportive atmosphere.

The size of the centre plays a significant role in shaping these experiences. Smaller centres, such as Beveren, foster stronger feelings of familiarity and community more quickly. Their more human scale encourages encounters and interactions between residents and with the surrounding town, making them more supportive of social cohesion and a sense of place. By contrast, the larger, more spatially fragmented layout of centres like Westakkers can hinder such connections, despite offering more physical space and natural surroundings.

However, it is crucial to recognise that the broader context remains one of enforced temporality. This is a condition that is structurally determined by political and institutional frameworks and cannot be resolved solely through spatial or architectural means. Nonetheless, efforts to reduce the psychological stress of uncertainty through thoughtful spatial design, resident participation, and everyday practices of care are far from unimportant. These efforts acknowledge that asylum seekers are not merely occupants of space, but individuals with emotional, cultural, and social needs. Creating environments that support privacy, safety, and personal expression, even within limited and temporary settings, is not just a matter of comfort, it is a matter of justice and shared humanity.

Epilogue

Living in a temporary, undefined, and institutional context is difficult to grasp, architecturally, socially, and emotionally. This thesis set out to explore how asylum seekers in Belgium inhabit these in-between spaces, in reception centres in particular, and how, even in displacement, practices of homemaking, comfort, and agency emerge.

The relationship between temporality and spatial experience proved to be complex and layered. The instability of waiting, of being held in a prolonged state of limbo (Hartonen, et al., 2022), has deep implications on how individuals relate to space. Yet within this uncertainty, people still develop routines, attachments, and small moments of comfort. These moments, however fragile, are humane and meaningful.

Drawing on the work of Huda Tayob (2018), and Seethaler-Wari (2022), I developed a subjective, visual mapping method that aimed to capture not just physical space, but spatial experience. The drawings and notes, made on-site, grounded in personal encounters and informal conversations, offered me a new perspective: one that centres human presence and spatial negotiation, rather than viewing buildings merely in their static form. This thesis does not attempt to offer a straightforward design solution. Instead, it seeks to rehumanise spatial conditions that are often reduced to policy or logistics. Through the two concrete case studies and shared coffee tables, I encountered not statistics, but individuals, people navigating a system that is trying to strip them of agency and clarity. In this context, even small forms of spatial autonomy or dialogue, such as deciding together and trying to find a common way on how to use a hallway or divide public and private space, can restore a sense of dignity.



I propose that conversations between residents themselves and between residents and social workers about space, boundaries, flexibility, and use, should be encouraged and institutionalised where possible. While these discussions may not resolve systemic issues, they can create more humane environments and diminish the original institutional character of the buildings, which is often still strongly present. This is necessary given the current uncertainty surrounding the length of procedures and stays at these reception centres. Encouraging conversation and participation among those dealing with stress and uncertainty can help bridge the tension between regulation and freedom, and try to find a mutual balance, which lies at the heart of comfort in displacement.

I also came to understand that home, in these contexts, is not fixed or permanent. It is often out of reach, imagined, or hoped for. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the significance of in-between places such as reception centres. Despite the lack of alternatives, many residents still attach meaning to the spaces they occupy, because these spaces become their only reality. As the residents are mostly in a state of mental distress, providing environments that are calm, organised and responsive to their needs is not only an architectural challenge, but also an ethical responsibility.

Despite all these important insights, one of the most profound realisations I had is that our sense of comfort and belonging, of home, seems to depend most on the connections and relations we have with others, with the people around us. Comfort is thereby found less in materials or walls than in interactions, routines, and moments of care. Still, enabling people to make even small decisions about their physical surroundings can restore a sense of control, something that is often lost in protracted asylum procedures.

In the end, this thesis is an invitation to embrace slowness, active listening, and spatial consciousness. It proposes that architects should reconsider their role, not as authoritative designers alone, but as listeners, facilitators, and observers who understand the power and politics of space, while being aware of their own subjectivity. There is much left to be done, but perhaps the first step is simply to notice and recognize what is already there, and who is already there, dwelling in the margins.

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*I am grateful that I told this story, seen through my eyes and shaped by my thoughts,
and I sincerely hope you, as my reader, have learned something along the way.*

If you ever pass by a reception centre, please don't look away.

These are places filled with stories, of hope, sorrow, and resilience. Places we can all learn from.

Through the many small narratives that I collected and presented, I have tried to share this perspective.

I have hope, hope for awareness and hope for change.

And I hope you do too.



