

Article

“Wir Schaffen Das!”? Spatial Pitfalls of Neighborhood-Based Refugee Reception in Germany—A Case Study of Frankfurt-Rödelheim

Martina Blank

Department of Human Geography, Goethe-University Frankfurt, Theodor-W.-Adorno-Platz 6, D-60629 Frankfurt am Main, Germany; mblank@em.uni-frankfurt.de; Tel.: +49-69-798-35184

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Abstract: Refugee reception in Germany is a primarily municipal task that relies heavily on neighborhood-based volunteering. This paper asserts that there are fundamental spatial mismatches between municipal policies and neighborhood-based approaches that place additional burden on all of the stakeholders involved. Drawing from the case of Frankfurt-Rödelheim, which is a socially and ethnically mixed neighborhood in Frankfurt am Main, I show how the way the municipality accommodates refugees disregards the politically embraced work of neighborhood-based volunteers and how the ideal of neighborhood-based inclusion creates a spatial fetish that fails the living reality of the refugees. The findings are based on my ethnographic fieldwork as volunteer in a neighborhood-based welcome initiative.

Keywords: forced migration; local refugee reception; refugee accommodation; municipalities; neighborhood activism; Germany; Frankfurt am Main

1. Introduction

When more than one million refugees arrived in Europe in 2015, German chancellor Angela Merkel famously responded with “Wir schaffen das!” (“We can do this!”). However, the “we” who “did it” were the local authorities and civil society, rather than the national government. In fact, refugee reception was a primarily municipal task that relied heavily on neighborhood-based volunteering. This paper asserts that there are fundamental mismatches between the municipal policies and neighborhood-based approaches that place additional burden on all of the stakeholders involved.

Asylum seekers are required to register with a state organization in order to apply for asylum when they arrive in Germany. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) registered 476,649 asylum applications in 2015, 745,545 in 2016, 222,683 in 2017, and 185,853 in 2018 (BAMF 2019, p. 6). Processing the application can take years. In the interim, asylum seekers receive basic housing, food, education, healthcare, and a small stipend to cover their everyday personal needs. The government accommodates the asylum seekers during the asylum evaluation. First, registered refugees are distributed to one of the 16 federal states according to a quota system, and the correspondent federal state’s government provides housing for refugees in reception facilities for up to six months or until the application is decided upon. Thereafter, asylum seekers are assigned by the federal state in question to its constituent municipalities and they are obliged to reside in the assigned municipality until the conclusion of the asylum proceedings.

Municipalities are primarily responsible for “doing it” during these initial stages of the asylum seekers’ reception in Germany: they are required to provide housing and basic protection for the refugees and to facilitate their social and economic inclusion. Municipalities are partly reimbursed by the federal and regional governments, but the management of the reception of asylum seekers is

essentially a local task, whereby each municipality must respond to the conditions that are relevant to their own local context (Schammann 2015; Schammann and Kühn 2016). Providing affordable housing, for example, is especially difficult for larger German cities that are already suffering from housing shortages. As a greater influx of migrants entered Europe from 2015 onwards, many cities relied on emergency planning, resorting to collective and mass accommodation centers in order to fill the gaps.

However, cities do not only have to help refugees meet their basic needs, but they are also expected to facilitate the social and economic inclusion of the asylum seekers. This is the point at which neighborhoods come into play. Neighborhood-based integration of immigrants has been widely discussed in academic debates and local politics for several years (Schnur 2018). German immigration policy remained highly underdeveloped at the national level for many decades (Bendel and Borkowski 2016). Meanwhile, local authorities, especially those of big West German cities with high levels of immigration, and migrant communities themselves managed migration at an everyday level and developed their own integration policies (Pütz and Rodatz 2013; Gesemann and Roth 2018). Of special importance for these policies was the everyday living environment of migrants (Schnur et al. 2013), which became to be considered to be the level where the problems of inclusion became most apparent. Later, a rising political and academic preoccupation with ethnic segregation and discourses on “parallel societies” and “ghettos” (Ronneberger and Tsianos 2009; Yildiz 2014) reinforced this focus on the residential areas of migrants. Thereby, the neighborhood came to be considered as one of the most prominent gateways to integration—also being acknowledged in the Federal Integration Plan of 2007, where the neighborhood level plays a vital role (Bundesregierung 2007).

The recent arrival of greater numbers of refugees has prompted a politically-embraced surge of neighborhood-based volunteering for migrant reception. During the “long summer of migration” (Hess et al. 2017), new volunteering initiatives emerged all over Germany (Hamann et al. 2017). Most of these “welcome initiatives” developed spontaneously and independently of traditional civil society organizations working with migrants (Karakayali and Kleist 2016) and many organized themselves at the local level as neighborhood initiatives. They filled the gaps that were left by state authorities and offered assistance to asylum seekers by teaching German and supporting refugees in their everyday needs. However, the new volunteers have been criticized for failing to develop participatory approaches for the active participation and inclusion of refugees (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017, pp. 21–22). This critique considers the paternalistic practices of helping within some volunteering initiatives as rooted in a “new dispositif of helping” (ibid.).

Nevertheless, as I argue in this paper, inclusionary refugee reception at the local level is also restrained by spatial mismatches between the state policies, volunteering, and living conditions of refugees. These spatial mismatches originate in a national reception system that obliges refugees to reside for years in places that are not freely selected, waiting for the final decision on their asylum application and the subsequent opportunity to settle in the place of their choice. The resulting discrepancy between the demand to integrate, as well as the temporariness and lack of voluntariness and agency on behalf of the refugees, is scaled down to the municipalities and is left to their response. The resulting difficulties are reproduced in the “local production of asylum”, as I am going to show for the case of Frankfurt am Main (Hinger et al. 2016).

The dominant system of asylum is negotiated locally through the social production of specific spaces of asylum that materialize the complex and place-specific social processes accompanying the arrival of refugees in German cities, as argued elsewhere (Blank 2019). In this paper, the focus lies on the socio-spatial dynamics resulting from the current form of accommodation. In the case of Frankfurt am Main, a dearth of sufficient housing prompted the city council to abandon its plan of decentralized refugee accommodation, and the city instead established a series of collective accommodation centers (Frankfurter Stadtverordnetenversammlung 2017, pp. 2, 5, 6). Many of these centers are located in industrial areas that are away from non-refugee residents, thereby creating a spatial exclusion and segregation of refugees. This practice contradicts the official political discourse of Frankfurt as

a city that fosters inclusion and diversity (Stadt Frankfurt am Main 2011). Nevertheless, in many circumstances, civil society demonstrates a great effort to include the asylum seekers in the social fabric of the adjacent neighborhoods. Drawing from the case of Frankfurt-Rödelheim, a socially and ethnically mixed neighborhood in Frankfurt am Main, I am going to show how the way the municipality accommodates refugees disregards the politically embraced work of neighborhood-based volunteers and how the ideal of neighborhood-based inclusion creates a spatial fetish, i.e., an obfuscating spatial abstraction of social relations, which fails the living reality of the refugees.

The findings are based on my ethnographic fieldwork as volunteer in a neighborhood-based welcome initiative since November 2017. Ethnography has proved to be a useful approach in the complexity of migration regimes (Hess and Tsianos 2010). In line with grounded theory approaches (Bryant and Charmaz 2007), ethnographic methods, like participant observation and “ero-epic” conversations (Girtler 2001, pp. 147–68), enabled me to develop my understanding of local refugee reception in Frankfurt “on the ground”, i.e., as close as possible to the everyday practices of the people involved (Müller 2013). At the same time, ethnography served as methodology to reflect my situatedness in the field (Browne et al. 2010; Clarke 2005; Rose 1997), i.e., how my own perspective and the practices and self-representations of the other actors that are involved related to my position as a female German academic volunteer and the power relations embedded in the field. Though the above-mentioned “dispositif of helping” implies hierarchical power relations between volunteers and refugees, researching as a volunteer also meant getting in touch with refugees on a basis of support and assistance. On the one hand, this facilitated developing trustful research relationships, which was of special importance in the context of pending asylum proceedings and the threat of deportation (Hugman et al. 2011). On the other hand, as a volunteering researcher, I could give something in return to the information that was obtained by the players: self-critical knowledge production to my co-volunteers and practical support to the refugees involved.

I volunteered Monday to Friday afternoons as tutor for homework, German language, and literacy in two Christian community centers and two accommodation centers for refugees between November 2017 and June 2018 (Figure 1). In addition, I participated in volunteered leisure activities with refugees, like cooking and attending festivals. I attended the monthly plenary meeting of the volunteering network and other public meetings regarding the reception of refugees in Rödelheim for more than one year (November 2017–December 2018). I developed more intense relationships with particular refugees and assisted them with local authorities, administrative burdens, looking for flats, funding language courses, professional development, and so forth during the course of my fieldwork. I have accepted refugee invitations to join them in their living spaces in the accommodation centers and refugees have visited me at work and at home. I developed one very close relationship to one woman, who, to date, visits me weekly at my home for tutoring and professional development. In order to reflect on my personal entanglement with the subjects of my research I was supervised by a professional coacher specialized in questions of ethics in research and experiences with violence through a program co-developed on the occasion of my research, which is now provided by the university to researchers in similar situations. I kept detailed field notes regarding my conversations with refugees, volunteers, staff members of the accommodation centers, the district manager, members of the municipal unit for refugee accommodation, social workers, and volunteers from other places. I notified all of them of the study and they provided consent to participate. Additionally, I conducted two group interviews with the volunteers of the network, and four in-depth interviews with the district management, the coordinators of a university-based volunteering group, and two social workers in the field. The collection and analysis of the material followed the considerations of situational analysis by Clarke (2005), combined with content analysis following Kuckartz (2016). I summarize my findings in the form of anonymized, aggregated data in the following account.



Figure 1. The author volunteering with homework tutoring (photo credit: Udo Schoeler).

2. Refugee Reception in Frankfurt

Frankfurt has a long history of hosting migrants and it has always had immigrant minorities. Most prominently, the former Imperial Free City of Frankfurt had one of the earliest and largest Jewish communities in Germany dating back to medieval times. The Jewish community was concentrated in a ghetto from 1462 until 1811 despite living under the declared protection of the Emperor. Later, Frankfurt granted civic equality to Jews in 1864 until “the assimilated Jewish community—one of the largest in Germany—was completely deported after the final pogrom in 1938” (Radtke 2003). Moreover, Frankfurt has a long history as a “cosmopolitan commercial town” (Welz 1998), with the Frankfurt Trade Fair first being mentioned in 1150. Since then, Frankfurt has hosted international trading and financial elites and expatriates from mostly western countries. The biggest part of the migrant population living in today’s Frankfurt dates back to the formal guest worker program from 1955 onwards, when Germany signed bilateral recruitment agreements that allowed the recruitment of guest workers from Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia to work in the growing industry (ibid., 37). Since the 1980s, there are also growing numbers of immigrants from other world regions, such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia (ibid.). With the exception of the medieval Jewish ghetto, Frankfurt did not develop ethnically segregated immigrant neighborhoods, as known from other western metropolises (ibid., 38). In 1989, as the first municipality in Germany, it established an Office for Multicultural Affairs and it has since adopted relatively progressive immigration policies (Stadt Frankfurt am Main 2011), although experts have criticized the municipality for its insufficient efforts to implement effective policies for anti-discrimination and inclusion (Radtke 2003; Rodatz 2014). Today, Frankfurt is one of Germany’s first majority-minority cities. According to the statistical yearbook of 2018, in 2017 29.5% of the people living in Frankfurt were foreigners and 23.6% were Germans from an immigrant background, referring to Germans that are born abroad and minors with parents born abroad (Bürgeramt 2018, p. 1).

In 2015, the federal state of Hesse commissioned the city of Frankfurt with emergency supplies for 1000 refugees and, additionally, and in line with the allocation process, assigned 170 asylum seekers per week to the municipality. In order to deal with this situation, the mayor established the “Stabsstelle Flüchtlingsmanagement”, a new special municipal unit for refugee administration (Frankfurter Stadtverordnetenversammlung 2017, p. 2). Since then, the provision of adequate shelter has been one of the most challenging issues facing the municipality. The city of Frankfurt favors, in principal, the accommodation of refugees in private apartments with the objective of fostering

independence and self-sufficiency although collective reception facilities are standard in municipal accommodation of refugees in Germany ([Frankfurter Stadtverordnetenversammlung 2017](#), p. 6). However, this is not the current practice of refugee reception in Frankfurt. Up until the summer of 2015, the city of Frankfurt had mainly resorted to decentralized accommodation of refugees in the already-existing facilities for homeless persons ([Frankfurter Stadtverordnetenversammlung 2017](#), p. 5). From September 2015 onwards, due to the sudden rise in numbers of asylum seekers newly arriving in Frankfurt, the municipality built new collective accommodation centers exclusively for refugees ([Frankfurter Stadtverordnetenversammlung 2017](#), p. 5).

In February 2019, the municipality of Frankfurt officially hosted 4768 refugees in 90 accommodation facilities and 120 private apartments that were scattered all over Frankfurt. About two-thirds of the refugees are men and one-third are women. The primary countries of origin are Afghanistan (33%), Eritrea (20%), Syria (19%), Iraq (6%), and Iran (6%). Additionally, there are 366 unaccompanied minors that are registered in Frankfurt ([Stabsstelle Flüchtlingsmanagement 2019a](#)). Many of the refugees still reside in one of four emergency accommodation centers, where there is little space for privacy and no facilities for self-provisioning, and nine temporary accommodation centers with more than 100 residents each. This includes a rising number of asylum seekers whose application has already been accepted (and thus are allowed to move around in Frankfurt as they wish) but cannot find private apartments due to the financial and racial exclusions of the housing market. Thus, these refugees are forced to stay in the accommodation centers for much longer than officially planned. According to the guidelines of the municipality, refugees ought not to reside in emergency accommodation centers for more than one year ([Frankfurter Stadtverordnetenversammlung 2017](#), p. 5). Hence, the municipality repeatedly reallocates refugees to slightly better accommodation centers in order to improve the living situation of the asylum seekers at least gradually. These relocations usually imply moving from one neighborhood to another.

Social welfare organizations run the accommodation centers on behalf of the municipality. Aside from providing basic shelter, operating an accommodation center also implies, according to the municipal unit for refugee administration, assisting the refugees with their arrival in Frankfurt and “cooperating with volunteering structures and networking with the respective neighborhood” ([Stabsstelle Flüchtlingsmanagement 2019a](#), author’s translation). Usually, there is one staff, the so-called “volunteering coordinator”, who is assigned to managing the contact between the accommodation center and volunteers and neighbors. The municipal unit itself also aims to support and coordinate the activities of different social bodies and actors in the neighborhoods that are adjacent to the accommodation centers ([Stabsstelle Flüchtlingsmanagement 2019b](#)).

Thus, neighborhood-based volunteering is an important factor for the municipal reception policy. The neighbors are needed to fill the gaps in social assistance for refugees. Nevertheless, the logic of accommodation mismatches the ideal and practical efforts of neighborhood-based refugee reception, especially in those neighborhoods, which host emergency and provisional accommodation centers (currently the dominant form of residence for refugees in Frankfurt), as I am going to elaborate in the following section. This mismatch is further aggravated by spatially fetishizing the neighborhood as the social space of inclusion. It ignores the living reality of the refugees and leads to frustration for all of the stakeholders involved—volunteers, refugees, and the operators of the accommodation centers alike. The municipality in this way produces a political paradox: encouraging neighborhood activities for migrant inclusion that are destined to fail given the dominant political practice of refugee reception.

3. Welcome to Rödelheim: Neighborhood, Accommodation Centers, and Volunteering for Inclusion

The city of Frankfurt consists of 46 official neighborhoods (Figure 2). One of these is Frankfurt-Rödelheim, which has formed part of the city of Frankfurt since 1910 and included 18,865 inhabitants in 2018 ([Bürgeramt 2019](#), p. 2). With one-third (33.7%) of the inhabitants comprising foreigners, and assuming an analogous number of people with an immigrant background, Rödelheim

slightly exceeds Frankfurt’s average of residents with some kind of migration history. The neighborhood has a vital civil society landscape and it hosts many cultural activities. As part of the “Frankfurt Active Neighborhood”-program, Rödelheim’s western district has a neighborhood office that is run by a district manager from a Christian welfare organization and funded by the city of Frankfurt. If you enter Rödelheim by one of the bigger access roads, you will be welcomed to “Rödelheim—Neighborhood against racism” (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Map of the location of Rödelheim within Frankfurt (created by Department of Human Geography, Goethe-University Frankfurt, data provided by Stadt Frankfurt am Main 2019).

Thus, at first glance, Rödelheim seems to be an ideal place for housing refugees. In fact, Rödelheim accommodates an above-average percentage of the refugees living in Frankfurt. In addition to a series of shared apartments for unaccompanied refugee minors, most of the refugees in Rödelheim live in one of the three bigger accommodation centers. There is a converted office building that was inaugurated in summer 2016 with about 500 spots occupied in August 2018, a former hotel that was converted into an accommodation center in October 2015 for about 130 refugees, and a rebuilt factory site that was inaugurated in 2017 with about 230 spots occupied in September 2018.



Figure 3. Neighborhood sign saying “Rödelheim—Neighborhood against racism” (photo credit: author).

In the summer of 2015, a neighborhood-based volunteer network for refugee reception emerged before the city of Frankfurt opened the first accommodation center in Rödelheim. Today, “Welcome to Rödelheim” is a prize-winning network of about 40 active and 60 passive members that organize help and social and cultural activities for refugees in the neighborhood. This includes German classes, homework tutoring, lending and repairing bicycles, excursions into the city and its surrounding, individual support with paperwork and administrative authorities, as well as joint leisure activities, like cooking and gardening. Through these neighborhood activities, the welcome initiative provides contact opportunities for what they call “old” and “new” Rödelheim-residents, and it strives to create a welcoming environment in the neighborhood. As the initiative states on its website, it aims to “make a contribution to a successful arrival in the neighborhood” and to support refugees “in order to facilitate their arrival in Rödelheim’s neighborhood society” ([Willkommen in Rödelheim 2019](#)).

Some of the refugees make considerable use of the support that is offered by the volunteers. German classes, homework tutoring, and the bicycle repair shop are frequently attended by core groups of refugees that are accommodated in Rödelheim—very often the same refugees participate in all of these activities or at least several ones. Additionally, there are refugees who only make sporadic use of the support offered. Personal assistance is sought-after by most refugees getting in touch with the initiative, but difficult to sufficiently provide by the volunteers, while leisure activities for community building, like cooking or attending festivals, are less frequented.

Like other welcome initiatives, “Welcome to Rödelheim” has not gained active participation and representation of refugees within its organizational bodies, like the monthly plenum or the particular groups that are dedicated to the various activities. This may be partly due to hierarchical concepts and the practices of helping as identified above as “new dispositif of helping”. It surely roots to a certain extent in the backbreaking decision-making processes that have also alienated many volunteers from the organizational structure of the initiative. Nevertheless, according to various stakeholders, such as volunteers, the municipality, the welfare organizations operating the accommodation centers, and the district manager, the main challenge facing refugee reception in Rödelheim is that only few refugees that are accommodated in Rödelheim even find their way into the neighborhood. The inclusion of refugees into community activities and the contact between refugees and neighbors remains below these stakeholders’ expectations.

The reasons for the disconnect between neighborhood-based offerings for refugee reception and refugee attendance are manifold, and they are rooted in various gaps between refugee needs and the existing support. Nevertheless, the most striking mismatch is the one between refugee accommodation and the ideal of neighborhood-based refugee inclusion. As already stated in the introduction, there is a fundamental spatial discrepancy between the demand to integrate and the provided conditions that roots in the national system of dispersion and is reproduced in the local accommodation policy.

Rödelheim hosts three big accommodation centers, as already outlined above. There are few everyday contact points between refugees and other residents of Rödelheim due to the isolated location of the accommodation centers. Moreover, the neighborhood-based volunteers also have difficulty getting in touch with the refugees and trying to build bridges between the accommodation centers and the neighborhood (Figure 4).

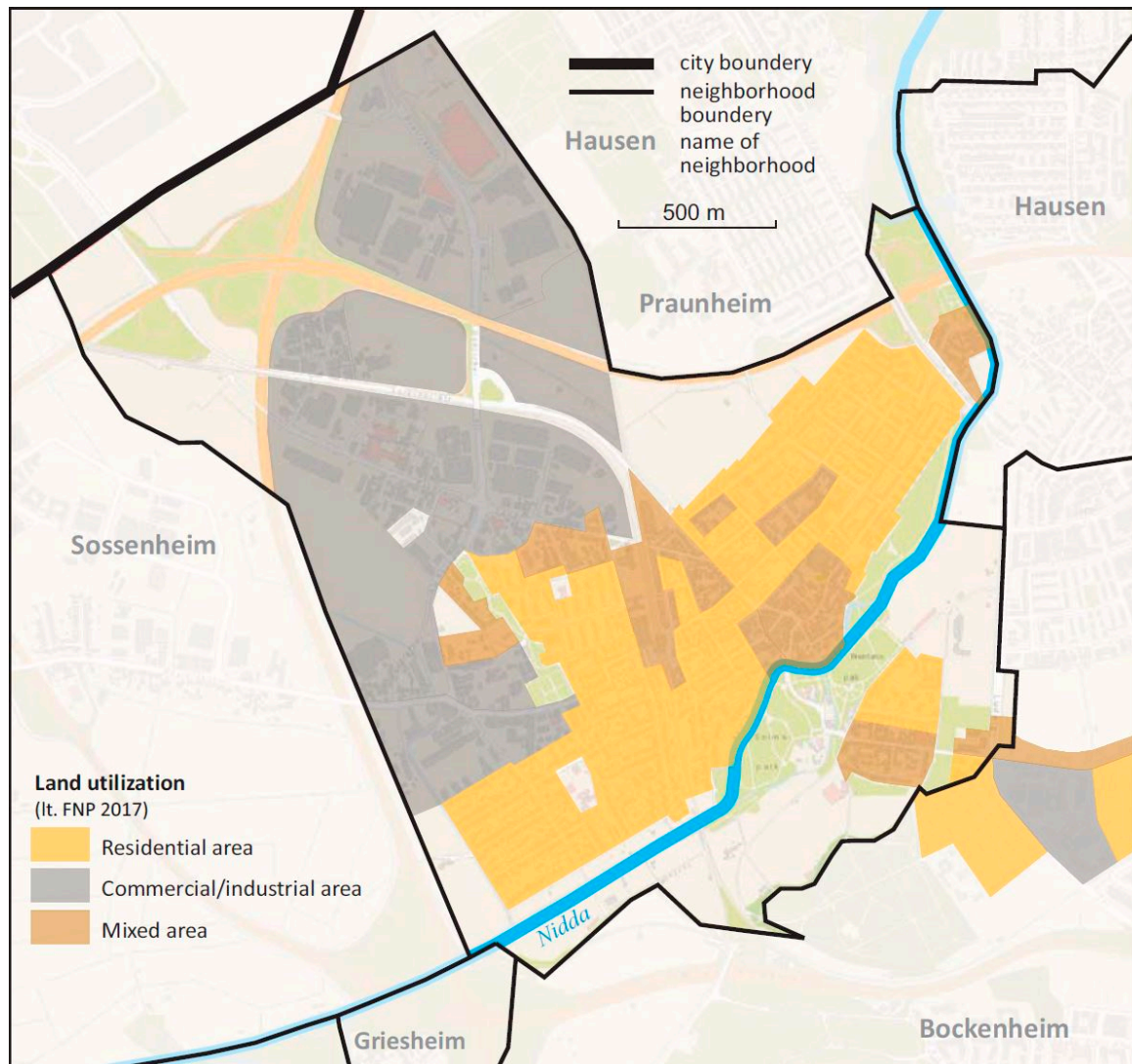


Figure 4. Map of industrial and residential areas in Rödelheim¹ (created by Department of Human Geography, Goethe-University Frankfurt, data provided by Stadt Frankfurt am Main 2019).

The first center, a former office building and the biggest accommodation center in Rödelheim, is located on the periphery of Rödelheim, adjacent to a major road, and an industrial zone flanks it. In fact, the post address of the building belongs to a different neighborhood, Bockenheim, but most of the stakeholders involved, even municipal authorities, share the assumption that it formally belongs to Rödelheim. However, the building does not form part of the social fabric of either neighborhood. As the district manager said to me, it is “some kind of no man’s land”. The bus runs right in front

¹ As there have been abundant racist assaults on refugee accommodation centers in Germany in the past, there is a tacit agreement not to map accommodation centers. Therefore, I am not going to map the accommodation centers in Rödelheim or include pictures of them. For the same reason, the city of Frankfurt does not publish postal addresses of accommodation centers although neighbors get informed and local media report in detail when new centers are planned.

of the house, so refugees living in this accommodation center usually will not pass through adjacent neighborhoods when going to work, to German class, or shopping. Contact points with neighbors are almost non-existent, and social and economic involvement in the neighborhoods remains very low. Many of the refugee residents, who do not have courses or chores to accomplish outside of the center, stay in the building and its premises the whole day. The building provides some space for communal activities. There is a central entrance with a check-in desk and the visitors are only allowed to enter if they have an appointment and they are registered with their identity card. Therefore, the only avenue is participating in a form of official volunteering activity within the center if the neighbors want to make even initial contact with refugee residents. However, the neighborhood-based volunteers do not serve this center, as the area does not form part of their everyday practices. They relay information regarding their activities to the volunteering coordinator of the center, but they do not usually visit the center to pick people up for activities, nor do they offer activities there. As my co-volunteers and the district manager told me, it is simply off their personal map. Consequently, the volunteering coordinator in the center explained to me that it is impossible to find volunteer support from within the neighborhood. Therefore, she recruits volunteers from all over the city who offer their assistance regardless of place. These volunteers may be of great help to the refugees, but they do not serve as a channel for further contact into the neighborhood, as they live somewhere else. This does not mean that the refugees housed in the center never show up in communal activities in the neighborhood of Rödelheim. Some attend German classes that are offered by the network, for example, but those participating are few and far between. Furthermore, attending a German class does not lead to other types of involvement in community activities in the neighborhood. Thus, the biggest of the three accommodation centers is essentially disconnected from the neighborhood and the place-based efforts for refugee reception due to its remote location and its restricted access.

Many of the aforementioned challenges also apply to the second accommodation center, the former hotel. Its location is less remote, but access is very restricted, and, in addition, there is no common room for volunteering activities. However, the volunteering group initially put forth great effort to get in touch with the people living there, as the former hotel was the first of the three accommodation centers in Rödelheim. In contrast to the first center, volunteers stop by to pick up potential participants for special activities, like field trips or other outings. However, as in the case of the first accommodation center, contact between refugees and volunteers relies on individuals' efforts. Volunteers reported to me that the hostile environment in the reception was an additional stumbling block in forging relationships with refugee residents. Moreover, with the opening of a third center in 2017, volunteers split their efforts between the former hotel and the new center. Therefore, over time, the former hotel came to be partially left out of the volunteers' considerations. In almost every monthly meeting, as well as in my group interviews, eventually someone would say: "Let's not forget about the people living in the former hotel". Concurrently, neighborhood-based activities like excursions into the city or cooking together became less relevant to the refugees accommodated in the former hotel. Most of them have already been living in Germany for several years and they face different challenges than those first arriving into a city. They may be working or looking for work, searching for available apartments, or they may have to arrange schooling for their children. Thus, for less-recent arrivals, the most important support would be one-on-one contact with a volunteer who could assist them in their specific needs. A former social worker, for example, helps to communicate with authorities, potential employers, and the like. Two former teachers individually support children with learning difficulties, and other volunteers accompany refugees looking for assistance in their daily struggles with the German asylum system. As several refugees have told me, this kind of assistance is very helpful to them and, while some efforts are embedded in the neighborhood-based networking of the volunteering initiative, it works independently from neighborhood-based community activities. Beyond the individual refugee-volunteer relationships, these efforts do not lead to a broader inclusion of refugees into neighborhood activities. More assistance being offered by neighbors nearby would be

beneficial, especially by accompanying refugees in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, this does not equal or lead to the integration of refugees into the neighborhood.

The third accommodation center can be characterized as an outlier to the other centers. It occupies industrial premises, similarly to the first accommodation center. However, it is located much closer to a residential area than the former office building and it is surrounded by an excellent commercial infrastructure. The city reconstructed this old factory site, at great financial cost, and the new center was inaugurated in 2016. Of the three centers in Rödelheim, it is the one with the lowest living standard. It includes accommodation units in a hallway with only curtains separating the individual living spaces, aside from a women's house with fully-equipped shared apartments and barracks with crowded rooms. In sharp contrast to the most basic living conditions, the center has well-outfitted common rooms and space for volunteering activities. There are two well-equipped classrooms, a women's room, and the so-called "neighborhood café". The volunteers are free to offer enrichment activities in all of these rooms. In fact, by now, a considerable part of the activities conducted by the neighborhood-based volunteering network takes place on the premises. However, access to this accommodation center is restricted, as in the case of the two other centers. The compound is fenced off and an invitation and identity card are required to enter the premises.

Nevertheless, in comparison to the other two centers, there are far more points of contact between refugees and the neighbors. First of all, there are abundant regular volunteering activities where neighborhood-based volunteers and refugees meet, for example, through homework tutoring, literacy courses, a sewing get-together, a bicycle repair shop, and more. Additionally, there are occasional cultural activities open to the neighborhood, though usually these activities do not draw in outside residents. The bicycle repair shop stands out from the volunteering activities, as it is located at the border of the premises and open to the street. In this way, it is an interface between refugees and other neighborhood residents. Not only do volunteers and refugees meet here, but other neighbors also use this shop if they need help with their bicycles. During my field research there was a period when the bicycle repair shop developed into some kind of informal passage into the accommodation center, because, for a short time during the summer, the fence separating the shop from the premises was open when the shop was open. The center's residents drew on it as alternative entrance and children used it in order to play inside and outside the premises. Nevertheless, after a short period, the operators closed this passage in accordance with the city's rules for security.

Last, but not least, there is the so-called "neighborhood café". This neighborhood café is a telling example of what could have been and what opportunities may still arise from refugee–neighbor interactions. It originated from the planning phase of the accommodation center when the district management promoted the establishment of a common space on the premises or close to it, which would be open to the neighborhood. As the district manager reported to me, the idea of the café was some kind of communal center or social meeting point where people could have space for community activities of various kinds—not only for refugee reception. Due to the scarcity of spaces that are designated for this kind of activity in Rödelheim (and Frankfurt more generally), this would have been an innovative opportunity to facilitate conversation and exchange for people from different walks of life and bringing the neighborhood to the accommodation center. Yet, the future operators had different plans. Instead of a community space that is open to the neighborhood, the welfare organization operating the center opened the neighborhood café as an enclosed room on the premises, which was only accessible through the restrictive gate and complicated entrance procedures that are outlined above. As a result, exclusively, the welfare organization itself used the room until the volunteering coordinator motivated some of the neighborhood-based volunteers to utilize the café for homework tutoring. Later, the operator installed the information desk for the center's residents in the same room. This way, it developed into a meeting point between volunteers and people living in the center. Though some volunteers and refugees attending the regular homework tutoring class complain about disturbances and noise in the cafe, they also appreciate the open space that allows for

spontaneous contact and interaction aside from the homework tutoring, as volunteers and refugee also meet by incident and engage in small talk and informal conversation.

Thus, the case of the third center shows how refugee–neighborhood interaction comes about if there is enough space for communal activities, cooperation between the organization operating the center and the volunteers, and—as a result—a physical and symbolic opening of the accommodation center. Volunteers who spend much time here experience the center as relatively open and welcoming, referring to it as a “little village”, though many restrictions remain and the relationship to the operators is therefore unavoidably fraught with conflict. However, this interaction in the accommodation center has little to do with the ideal of refugee inclusion into the neighborhood. One could even say that it is the other way around. The volunteers get integrated into the accommodation center. They develop relationships there, a routine, and even a sense of place (Massey 1991). They have to cross borders that are established through municipal rules and implemented by the welfare organizations running the accommodation centers.

However, this inclusion of volunteers into the social space of the accommodation center is accompanied by a constant problematization of the lack of integration of refugees into the neighborhood by different stakeholders. This leads neighborhood volunteers questioning their achievements. One of my co-volunteers explained to me that, on the one hand, he sees his volunteering as a simple service to people in need and he enjoys forming relationships with refugees. On the other hand, it frustrates him that refugees do not participate in broader neighborhood activities. “Getting in touch” is the reason that is most mentioned by the volunteers for their commitment to volunteering, but the question as to where volunteers and refugees should meet is highly controversial. The rising number of activities in the accommodation center, for example, is a constant source of debate within the volunteering network, especially with regard to the self-conception as network volunteering for the integration of the newcomers into the neighborhood. As one participant once put it in the monthly plenary meeting, “our name is ‘Welcome to Rödelheim’, not ‘Welcome to the accommodation center’!”

Right before the opening of the first aforementioned accommodation center, the former office building, a local newspaper reported on the story with the striking subtitle: “Solidarity is strong, but the site does not seem optimal for the integration of refugees” (Hubert 2016, author’s translation). The newspaper also quoted a member of “Welcome to Rödelheim”, which criticized the remote location and the fact that people living there would have to rely on public transport for their daily duties and would not be part of the social fabric of the neighborhood. The corresponding department of the municipality was well aware of this fact, but, in reply, called on churches and initiatives to “step up to the cause of helping people” (ibid.). In this way, the municipality under-emphasizes the challenges that arise from the geographic and social isolation of the accommodation centers and it creates unaccomplishable tasks for the volunteers. How are neighbors to step up, if even initial contact is made so difficult? How is volunteering to connect spatially disconnected accommodation centers to the social fabric of the neighborhoods? The constant efforts to alleviate this situation are time-consuming and tiring for all of the stakeholders involved. Social workers and volunteers have to remind and organize people living at the accommodation centers constantly about volunteer activities, according to the volunteers and the volunteering coordinator of the third accommodation center. Aside from the additional threat of deportations, which has been a minor issue in this specific case, the repeated relocation of refugees within Frankfurt adds up to this situation. Thus, the ideal of welcoming “new neighbors” does not only miss the fact that refugees do not live in the neighborhood that they will likely settle, but that they will not even stay within the same neighborhood during the assessment process. This way, the above-mentioned discrepancy between the municipalities’ overall progressive immigration agenda and the lack of effective measures for inclusion is being reproduced in the subarea of refugee reception. However, instead of introducing more effective policies, the lack of political consistency is passed onto civil society, which is left with the time-consuming, work-intensive, and frustrating task of neighborhood integration that is almost doomed to fail.

4. Refugee Reception as Neighborhood-Based Process?

Collective accommodation centers, like the ones that are portrayed here, residentially separate newcomers from the rest of society. Thereby, they contradict as much the rise of post-migrant societies with “super diverse” cities (Vertovec 2007) as the paradigm of migrant reception through community activities at the local level (Schnur et al. 2013). The spatial separation of refugees from society through accommodation centers thereby reinforces the dominant asylum system that prioritizes delineation over inclusion. However, the dominant system of dispersion cannot be combated by pressuring volunteers and refugees to achieve integration at the local level.

Political elites have not considered Germany as a country of immigrants until the 21st century, although it has a long tradition of immigration and migrant communities. Now that this is changing, Germany has already developed from a country of immigrants into a “postmigrant” society (Foroutan 2016). We are dealing with a societal configuration that constantly shifts through migration and movement in cities like Frankfurt. While the neighborhood made its way to official national integration policy, the actual demographic development of bigger West German cities calls into question the concept of immigrant integration into a somehow pre-configured society. Thus, instead of “integration”, which has developed into the leitmotif of conservative debates regarding the responsibilities of immigrants, the latest progressive political and academic discourses evolve around the terms “participation” and “inclusion” to highlight racial exclusions and the need to remedy them in order to develop an open and inclusive society (Ataç and Rosenberger 2013; Georgi 2015; Scherr and Inan 2018). Consequently, debates concerning “integration” and “neighborhood management” have also developed towards a better understanding of the complexity of post-migrant societies and the need to open up neighborhoods for diversity (e.g., Beer 2013; Schnur 2018). However, the recent arrival of greater numbers of refugees has prompted a politically-embraced revival of neighborhood-based migrant reception, which tends to fetishize the neighborhood as social space of integration and thereby runs the risk of reproducing outdated concepts of immigrant’s integration into pre-existing societies at a smaller scale.

The refugees that I have spoken to are not looking for inclusion into the neighborhood. They are looking for support. Asylum-seekers lack the intensive personal assistance necessary in order to navigate through the German asylum system and the multiple political, economic, social, and cultural barriers to inclusion. This kind of assistance does not require place-based integration. Yet, the volunteer capacity to provide refugees with this kind of assistance is scarce, and, indeed, many helpers prefer volunteering in low-threshold collective activities in their neighborhoods. These activities nonetheless do serve a purpose, as they place volunteers and refugee in contact with one another and may lead to more personalized assistance and closer relationships. In this way, one kind of assistance may serve as a bridge, or gateway, to other forms of support. In the case of Rödelheim, neighbors who engage in some kind of community activity for refugee reception, and thereby form relationships with individual refugees, provide much of the assistance that refugees receive. Thus, neighborhood-based activities fulfill a vital role for refugees in finding support. Nevertheless, they should not be fetishized as principal gateways to integration. In many cases, participating in neighborhood activities places additional burden on refugees’ daily lives through the time and effort required.

Thus, the overall asylum system and everyday reality of refugees has to improve, instead of focusing on neighborhood integration. Especially, as this paper highlights, the national system of involuntary refugee distribution and long lasting residence obligation, as well as the local practice of relocating refugees to spatially segregated accommodation centers, need to be reconsidered as soon as possible. This issue is also connected to housing policies in Germany, in general, and municipal housing policies of larger German cities, in particular, where a shortage of affordable housing is increasingly causing contention and political conflict (Schönig et al. 2017; Werner et al. 2018). However, there is still much that can be done on the local level, even within the existing institutional structure and housing crisis. For example, the municipal unit for refugee administration (tellingly lately renamed as “municipal unit for accommodation management and refugees”) is working on new concepts to

improve the living spaces for refugees. Currently, they are building a fourth accommodation center in Rödelheim, which will provide shelter to 160 refugees and 120 university students. This kind of mixed-use housing has already been successfully tested in Munich and it seems more promising towards goals of living diversity than the current refugee housing. With regard to the existing accommodation centers, every effort should be made to make them more accessible for volunteers by providing meeting space, supporting the volunteers, and making visitor access as easy as possible, without, of course, putting the safety of refugees at risk. Moreover, the municipality has to invest in more professional third-party assistance for refugees. Instead of fetishizing the neighborhood as social space of inclusion and demanding integration, the better way for refugee reception might be to meet refugees where they are and providing them with the kind of support that they are asking for.

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