
AS IT IS

Students in Amsterdam Share Housing With Refugees

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Finding quality, low-cost housing can be a problem for university students, especially in The Netherlands.

Last year, the average cost to **rent** a house in Amsterdam rose to over 2,000 euros a month.

Now, students have another choice: they can live with refugees.

The "Startblok" project is a group of city-owned **apartment** homes that opened in July 2016.

The project has 463 studio apartments and 102 rooms. Half of them are for Dutch students and recent university **graduates**. The other half are for refugees who have official permits to live there.

In exchange for low-cost housing, the students and refugees are expected to take care of the property together. The goal is to mix the two sides together so they learn more about each other's culture.

Everyone in Startblok is between the ages of 18 and 27. The Dutch are mostly students or those who recently finished their studies. Of the refugees, two-thirds come from Syria and Eritrea.

City officials hope that as the young people share the responsibility of operating the apartments, the refugees will become a part of the local community sooner.

Nahom Berhane is a 24-year-old Eritrean refugee. He arrived in Europe after crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat. He says he is happy the local government found a place for him in Startblok.

"The life here is more of observing from a lot of people around me. When I see them, I can learn a lot of things from them. Whenever I have problems with **translation**, homework or anything, everyone is open to help you any time..."

A graduate student in architecture, Abdellah Zkert fled the war in Syria. He enjoys living with other students much more than living in a refugee shelter.

"We got something so important, it's the friendship. We have a lot of friends in here, and maybe if we are out of Startblok, we will not get these friends..."

Tequisha Begeer is a Dutch university student. She moved to the project because she could not find low-cost housing in Amsterdam. She says she had never met a refugee before living here.

"In the beginning, I had my thoughts about it because of the culture difference. But from the beginning (that) I was living here, it was all gone."

Other European cities are interested in the Startblok model.

Fleur Eymann is a graduate student who also takes care of public relations for the project. She is surprised by how much good attention they are receiving.

"So there's, for example, the municipality of Antwerp, Berlin, Athens, Vienna. They all came over here and showed interest..."

The Netherlands has accepted large numbers of refugees. Other programs in Amsterdam have given refugees space for a short period in old prisons.

I'm Jill Robbins.

Marthe Van Der Wolf wrote this report for VOANews.com. Dr. Jill Robbins adapted her report for Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

Now it's your turn. Does your country host refugees? How are they becoming part of the communities where they now live? Write to us in the Comments section.

Words in This Story

apartment - *n.* a usually rented room or set of rooms that is part of a building and is used as a place to live

rent - *v.* to pay money in return for being able to use (something that belongs to someone else)

graduate - *n.* someone who has completed a study program

translation - *n.* the act or process of taking one language, and changing the words into a different language
