

Joint opinion.

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Refugee shelter needs spatial vision.

With emergency decrees and emergency villages, Flanders is getting ready to receive refugees from Ukraine. The whole situation took the government by surprise. Nevertheless, refugee organisations, researchers and spatial planners have been emphasizing it for years: the refugee 'crisis' and its ensuing housing shortage is not an acute crisis but a permanent urgency that requires the necessary attention, also in the domain of spatial policy.

The Flemish Association of Space and Planning (VRP vzw), refugee organisations ORBIT and Mondiale Werken (MoWe) and socio-spatial researchers from Endeavour, KULeuven, Ugent and UAntwerpen have joined forces to put forward this advice to governments. The bottom line of this advice is: shelter and housing for refugees should be organised on a structural basis and should be based on a sound spatial vision.

We put forward five points:

1. Emergency villages should strengthen town and village centres
2. No temporary constructions, but fixed places for temporary housing
3. No 'transit housing', but a through-flow from shelter to housing
4. Experiment with new and diverse forms of housing and living
5. Integrate this vision into local and provincial spatial policy plans.

We will explain these points in more detail below.

1. Emergency villages should strengthen city and village centres.

The Flemish government wants to work on two tracks for emergency shelter: on the one hand, it wants to use vacant infrastructure and on the other hand, it wants to build emergency villages.

As a collective of spatial planners and voluntary organisations that support refugees, we think it is necessary that the first approach — the use of well-located vacant infrastructure — should be fully exhausted before considering building additional infrastructure. Architects and architecture organisations have already launched a proposal to receive refugees in empty office buildings and not in collective shelters that are less well-located.

We would like to widen this search to other forms of vacant infrastructure. We would like to point out that Flanders has a housing surplus of more than 400,000 houses, which is still increasing. In

central towns alone, there are 160,000 more houses than there are households. So why seize any open spaces to build new infrastructure, when there are so many buildings standing empty?

If we consider the refugee issue in the light of the strategic vision of the Flanders Spatial Policy Plan (2018), it is clear that shelter should not be provided in far-flung, isolated emergency villages, but in town and village centres, with a view to maximum integration in the existing residential fabric. This will ensure that refugees are accommodated close to facilities and can take part in local life. From a spatial point of view, we want to avoid any unnecessary claiming of open space. If additional temporary emergency villages should prove necessary, in addition to the use of vacant infrastructure, they should be integrated as much as possible into the existing urban fabric and within the current land use.

We are concerned, both from a spatial and a human perspective, about the so-called 'temporariness' of emergency villages: in practice, 'temporary' more often than not becomes 'permanent'.

We see two reasons for this:

Once the temporary housing needs of a certain group have been met, a new group of people in need of housing often presents itself.

Since there are insufficient opportunities for through-flow, the 'temporary' infrastructure remains occupied by the same residents for too long.

2. No temporary constructions, but fixed places for temporary housing.

Once the temporary housing needs of a certain group have been met, a new group of people will often find themselves in need of housing.

The transit infrastructure we want to provide now will therefore still be needed in the future. Unfortunately, there will always be people who have to flee their country. There are also other groups facing a temporary housing shortage who should be able to benefit from this facility (e.g. due to divorce, financial setbacks).

Let us seize this urgency to 'do it properly, from the beginning' and provide structural housing solutions for people in transition via permanent, high-quality infrastructure for temporary residence. This substantial supply of temporary housing should be a permanent 'facility' in every municipality, alongside other central, strengthening facilities such as schools, cultural centres, libraries, markets, swimming pools and public green spaces.

We do not only have to look at large cities. Smaller towns and medium-sized municipalities also have the potential to receive refugees in a qualitative and sustainable manner and to embed them in the local fabric, as long as they have well-equipped centres. However, a number of smaller municipalities do not qualify due to a limited offer of daily services such as schools, shops, leisure facilities and access to public transport, or even due to a complete car dependency.

3. No 'transit housing', but through-flow from shelter to housing

A second reason why temporary infrastructure rarely proves to be temporary is that there are too few possibilities for transit, so that the temporary infrastructure remains occupied by the same group for too long.

A system of transitional housing for temporary accommodation can therefore only work if it also allows for a through-flow to the housing market. This, however, is often where the problem lies. Experts know from (international) experience that such temporary infrastructure is in fact often destined to last much longer than originally anticipated.

Due to a tight rental market, people often remain stuck in their transit home.

Partly because this housing market, especially in cities, is already under great pressure, there is now an acute housing shortage. A distressing shortage of social housing feeds this acute housing shortage. Because of their vulnerability and low financial capacity, migrants often fall into the hands of slum landlords. They also regularly face discrimination on the private rental market. As a result, newcomers seldom find their way onto the regular housing market. This is also often due to their unpredictable family situation (for example in the context of family reunification).

It is crucial that, after a transit period, they can move onto the regular housing market.

The recent memo from the Flemish government with guidelines about the preconditions of emergency villages, which was sent in April 2022 to the provincial governors, states that the stay in emergency villages can last up to three years. This gives reason for serious concern. Staying in an emergency village for more than a year is not a healthy option. Governments postpone the urgent actions that are necessary for solid structural solutions.

Many newcomers continue to rely heavily on the networks they developed during the first phase of their stay in a new country. These networks often function as a gateway to society and help them on their way to inclusion in the local community. It is therefore important to maintain these networks by providing sufficient housing on the local rental market. The private market usually does not offer sufficient opportunities, so an active intervention in the housing market on behalf of the government is needed to make this flow possible.

More inclusive allocation criteria in social housing also seem to be necessary to facilitate the through-flow. For example, candidates for social housing have to prove they have been residents in the municipality in question for 5 up to 10 years and have to possess a knowledge of the Dutch language. Such requirements make the necessary through-flow more difficult. The step towards a unified housing association per region in 2023 is an excellent opportunity for this.

4. Experiment with new and diverse forms of housing and living

Many refugee families need the privacy of an individual home after a transit period that is as short as possible - hence the importance of a proper through-flow. In addition, there are also refugees who are less able or willing to fall back on their traditional family and are looking for other forms of

collectivity. Often, these people also want to become actively involved in the new community, but find it difficult to find their way because our society is strongly built on traditional families. At the same time, we see that other groups are also showing an interest in collective living arrangements: students, singles, single parents and families who see the advantage of sharing spaces and facilities.

Such housing experiments can offer a completely different perspective on living together with refugees while at the same time providing them with more opportunities. The collective of architects behind the research project Living in Diversity states: *“After all, for the newcomer, secondary facilities are important levers for integration. We are talking, for example, about opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurship, social restaurants, collective workshops, public baths, market halls, sports grounds, etc. However, the development of these facilities is also an asset for the city. In this way, the social capital of the newcomers is not lost and other, more participative ways of developing the city can be considered. Moreover, these facilities also have the potential to develop into forms of new collectivity. They do not only meet the acute needs of newcomers. They are also places where people from different backgrounds can meet and live in close proximity. Integrating these facilities more broadly in the urban fabric creates the opportunity to build an inclusive story and to give diversity a face.”*

Architecture and design therefore play an important role in shaping these facilities as dynamic, lively places in the centre. This includes the granularity of the buildings, the interaction between the building and its surroundings through an active plinth, semi-public indoor and outdoor spaces, the permeability, the lively transition to the public domain, etc. In other words, in designing a place where different groups of people can live and work together, while at the same time having sufficient privacy. They can become breeding grounds for mini-enterprises such as a coffee bar or a play library, with a world kitchen and cultural offerings such as film evenings or an alternative city tour. In this way, you make the contribution from refugees to their host country very visible and create a positive dynamic around diversity.

5. Integrate this vision into local and provincial spatial policy plans.

The current situation demands that we act quickly. On the other hand, we must not allow ourselves to be seduced into making choices that turn out to be undesirable in the future. With this memorandum, we outline how we can organize the shelter and housing of refugees in a way that brings us closer to a desirable future. In addition to short-term actions, this requires a policy with a long-term vision. The lessons we are learning now and the spatial vision we are developing, should therefore also be reflected in our spatial policy plans. This way, we can transcend an ad hoc policy and work structurally on a sound, future-oriented shelter and housing policy. Instead of falling back on the hospitality of families and temporary emergency infrastructure, we can build something that potentially everyone will need and/or be able to use one day.

We're open for a dialogue with all actors involved to discuss the need for a spatial vision on the arrival, shelter and housing of refugees.

Initiators

Kathleen Van de Werf, Chairperson of the Association for Space and Planning (VRP vzw)

Nils Luyten, Staff member 'Woning Gezocht, Buren Gevonden' ORBIT VZW

Tinne Beirinckx, Chairperson Mondiale Werken Regio Lier vzw and urban planner Stramien cv

Tom Van de Vel, coordinator Mondiale Werken Regio Lier vzw

Babette Wyckaert, researcher residential paths for recognised refugees in Flanders, Faculty of Architecture KULeuven

Luce Beeckmans, Professor of Architecture and Urban Planning in relation to Migration and Diversity, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, UGent

Jonas De Maeyer, partner at Endeavour, co-initiator of Living in Diversity.

Els De Vos, architect and spatial planner, senior lecturer at the Faculty of Design Sciences, University of Antwerp (in her own name)

Contact person:

Mieke Nolf, VRP vzw

mieke.nolf@vrp.be

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