# Chapter 7
# Rooms with Little View: Reluctant Homemaking and the Negotiation of Space in an Asylum Centre

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## 7.1 Introduction

Reception centres for asylum seekers, and "camps" more broadly, have recently been the subject of a burgeoning critical interest in refugee, housing and border studies (e.g. Turner, 2015; Kreichauf, 2018; Willems et al., 2020; Zill et al., 2020). Only a fraction of this literature, however, draws on ethnographies done within the relevant infrastructures, hence on people's everyday practices therein, rather than on indirect or "external" accounts. This chapter builds on one of these case studies, an ethnography within the dwelling space of the residents, mostly West-African males in their early 20s, in an asylum centre in a mid-size town of northern Italy (2018–2022). My research focus was on the lived experience of the indoor built environment (common spaces, rooms, affordances for social reproduction) and on the ongoing boundary-making between the personal space of each resident and the space shared by necessity with other residents and with service providers. Within rooms and kitchens that feel unhomely, and yet operate as proxies of domestic space, asylum seekers do not simply "wait". They engage in meaningful routines and forms of space appropriation that are often inadvertent, at odds with each other (and with top-down regulations and time scheduling), and yet illustrative of a major point – home, and homemaking, matter even in spaces that are temporary and inhospitable by definition (Boccagni et al., 2020; Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2022). Even in an asylum centre, moreover, the social and material inner space is far from homogeneous. In contrast to accounts of camps as undifferentiated ghettos or non-places, this chapter casts light on the lived thresholds of domesticity that refugees as guests negotiate, and that an ethnographer can capture as guest of the guests (cf. Boccagni and Bonfanti, Chap. 1; Bonfanti, Chap. 4).

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Following a brief overview of the recent literature and a presentation of my case study, I first discuss the tensions surrounding the ways to stay in the centre, even before the covid-related "stayhome" orders would come. I then show the value added of doing research inside people's everyday life spaces, including their rooms, to make sense of their routines and ways to arrange and display one's personal space. This reveals an ongoing tension along the boundary between private and semi-public, temporary and settled, individual agency and external constraints. The attendant boundary work informs the lived experience of residents in the centre, and leaves its traces over time. Overall, the rooms in a refugee centre are both spaces of protection and isolation, in which dwellers have little "view" on the surrounding social environments and on their future life prospects. Still, such rooms are invariably turned into meaningful and special places. As such, they demand an inner view for a better understanding of refugees' life conditions and prospects.

## 7.2 Approaching Refugee Accommodations via "Domestic" Ethnography

### *7.2.1 Ethnographies of/in Camps: An Overview*

There is no paucity of literature on facilities for asylum seekers and refugees, often generically referred to as camps, especially after the so-called refugee crisis in Europe. Much of this literature has emphasized aspects like the territorial (Hauge et al., 2017) and social (Whyte, 2011) isolation of these infrastructures from local populations, the "exceptional" character associated with their function of confinement and surveillance (Agier, 2011; Turner, 2015), the lack of control over time inside them (Thorshaug & Brun, 2019), and the permanent impermanence embodied by these settings. Without denying any of these developments, some recent studies have revisited all sorts of refugee accommodation through the interdisciplinary repertoire of home studies. This can be relevant to camps (Hart et al., 2018) and informal settlements (Paju et al., 2023), as much as institutional infrastructures (Archambault, 2012) and dedicated housing schemes (Kim & Smets, 2020). Such a perspective starts from acknowledging the fundamental significance of home, and of the mixed memories associated with it, for forcibly displaced people (Taylor, 2016). While the notion of home opens unique, if often painful horizons of memory, self-understanding and aspiration in the life trajectories of forced migrants (Dossa & Golubovic, 2019), it is also instrumental to revisit their experience of place in the here-and-now (Gronseth, 2023).

For sure, there is often little of a similarity, or even only of a functional equivalence between a temporary accommodation for refugees and a "proper" domestic space. Nevertheless, there is a promise in exploring how people tend to operate elementary, and yet meaningful forms of homemaking under similar circumstances, in several respects (Brun, 2015; Boccagni, 2022): by carving out portions of special

or private space out of impersonal and supposedly provisional dwelling circumstances, also through material readaptations (Hart et al., 2018; Steigemann & Misselwitz, 2020); by enacting distinctive material cultures that articulate continuities with their lifestyles, identities, or ultimate concerns (Dudley, 2011; Vandevoordt, 2017); by engaging in micro acts of beautification within the places in which they spend more time (Neumark, 2013); more generally, by displaying tangible (if "reluctant") forms of place attachment and care for the built environment in which they stay, for the time being (Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2022).

Importantly, homemaking from below operates in critical interaction with the infrastructural characteristics of the built environment and with the ways in which it is designed, maintained and managed over time. It is no coincidence that the study of refugee accommodations "from below" has been paralleled with a burgeoning debate in architecture, urban planning and design on the ways to improve refugee housing, both functionally and aesthetically, for different resident targets and purposes (Kuhl & Behrens, 2018; Willems et al., 2020; Beeckmans et al., 2022; Seethaler-Wari et al., 2022). This perspective, of course, is not without constraints and dilemmas, particularly for dwelling in refugee camps and shelters (Scott-Smith, 2019). It also needs to take into account that housing infrastructures "can trigger different affective and emotional states", and that "the meaning of architecture is not interpreted by everyone in the same way" (Zill et al., 2020: 497). With this premise, several case studies have explored the effects of housing conditions on refugee health and wellbeing (Ziersch & Due, 2018). Nonetheless, little of this literature has reached into the day-to-day use and perceived meanings of quasi-domestic environments for residents themselves (Rainisio, 2015). How do the interior and the everyday organization of a refugee accommodation shape the residents' experience of home? What forms of home-related boundaries, struggles and claims do they reveal?

In addressing these questions, drawing also on the few ethnographies that have systematically engaged with asylum facilities from the inside-out (van der Horst, 2004; Archambault, 2012; Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2022), this chapter aims to a more profound understanding of the interplay between dwelling place and home under asylum. This is done from within a particular centre in which I have tried to make my theoretical concern with home and refuge more anchored in, respectful of, and fruitful for the lived experience of the young asylum seekers I was in contact with.

### *7.2.2 Lived Experience and Inner Thresholds in Asylum Centres: A Case Study*

From February 2018 to June 2022 I have been staying two or three times per week in an asylum centre in Northern Italy (Fig. 7.1) – a four-storey building that hosted young male asylum seekers, as a form of "intermediate" accommodation. Its seventy guests had already been living in the country one or two years before getting

**Fig. 7.1** The centre, seen from the outside. (Author's picture)

there, and were mostly at the stage of "appeal" after an early denial of their applications.[1] In doing so, I was often hosted for a while in the rooms of the residents with whom I had built more familiarity and trust over time. At the core of my self-designed mandate, initially facilitated by my academic status but soon to shift into a "thing" in itself, was simply the possibility to stay there. No particular capacities on my side or expectations about me, other than what I used to do in practice – chatting and getting along with whomever would like to do so.

Once I was allowed in (after the authorization of the local authority and the service provider), as someone interested in writing a book on asylum seekers and supposedly staying for some months, I simply kept attending the place one month and year after another. My way of being there was fundamentally the same across different seasons, organization wise (different service providers taking over); politics wise (different national and local political majorities resulting in decreasing budget allocation); and even history wise (before and during the covid emergency). All across these seasons I gained some legitimacy out of my own irrelevance. Whatever my reasons for being there, which few residents seemed to be interested in, I was an

[1] On the organizational arrangements and local policy-making of asylum reception in Italy, typically marked by low and uneven quality standards, lengthy case assessment and little to no support to recipients after the early accommodation stage, see Marchetti (2020), Campomori and Ambrosini (2020), Semprebon (2021) and Degli Uberti (2021).

ordinary presence – someone people were used to seeing around. If anything, some of my closer contacts seemed surprised whenever I did not show up for a while. As it turned out, the power of habituation (sometimes, of friendship) shaped my rapport with a number of interlocutors more than our mutual distance in terms of legal status and ethno-racial background, but also of age (I was closer to a father than a brother, for most of them), class, education and role to be played out. I was certainly not a caseworker; no power prerogatives on my side, no expectations to be cultivated accordingly on their side. As long as I complied with the routine ways of mutual greetings with residents and caseworkers, my hanging around was not perceived as problematic, not even under the protracted covid emergency, when visits from non-residents were forbidden. This unwritten legitimacy turned into a major ethnographic asset. To an extent, I was part of the ways of apparently "doing nothing" (Ehn & Lofgren, 2010) that are well exemplified by an asylum centre, as long as people stay in rather than searching, and hopefully finding jobs and other things to do outside. Even as they do so, their livelihood is tied to the centre, with its own rules and expected patterns of behaviour.

As is often the case with asylum accommodation (Hauge et al., 2017), this centre has a downward housing history of its own. Originally built as a motel for the gasoline station nearby, still at walking distance from the city centre, it was readapted as a university facility and then "reconverted" at the outset of the so-called refugee crisis. Interestingly, its entrance still bears the signboard of a student dorm and has no mention of its current use. In all these respects, there is nothing really distinctive in this particular asylum centre, relative to many more in Italy (Semprebon, 2021; Dotsey & Lumley-Sapansky, 2021) and elsewhere, in Europe at least (van der Horst, 2004; Kreichauf, 2018; Zill et al., 2020). This is part of its significance as an ethnographic setting; that is, as an ordinary place of shared, free and yet highly controlled dwelling for a number of young male asylum seekers, mostly West Africans in their early 20s. These have effectively made it their provisional home, even as they ended there after territorial dispersion policies rather than by choice, under a supposedly short-term "contract". By staying in and complying with the rules set by the local authority (and to a lesser extent by service providers), asylum seekers have access to free accommodation and basic economic support for some years, parallel to the processing of their applications. This makes the centre a key step in their migration, legal and housing pathways.

The place as such and its interiors are far more than a neutral background. Most notably, the residents' rooms and kitchens have much to do with the reconstruction of a domestic space by proxy, if not a home. In a collective housing arrangement with over 70 people, a room with two beds is a semi-autonomous portion of domesticity, on which one can attach some more sense of comfort and privacy than on the outer environment. Unlike the latter, the room and the adjacent kitchenettes protect residents from the common gaze and control (although, by the centre rules, caseworkers are entitled to get in whenever needed).

Being invited or let in the rooms, as a guest of the guests (Vandevoordt, 2017), was the turning point of my fieldwork. In practice, this often meant sharing food and drinks, or having tea or coffee together under a regime of tacit reciprocity that did

take place regardless of the obvious power differential between us. Whenever I offered first, my counterpart would return the favour in the following round. In a few cases, though, being in a room revealed something different – a very limited sense of privacy and place attachment among my interlocutors. In these particular circumstances, who was in a room for a while seemed to be irrelevant. The formal occupant was hardly interested in anything else than the micro space he was occupying – the physical one of his bed, the sensorial one of his ear phones. In any case, once I was in, typically on the chairs or beds of someone else who was eager to invite me there, my stay was not an issue. Crossing the doorstep – the ways, rationale and mandate to do so – was more of a tacit negotiation that was open to different outcomes. Against the objection that I might abuse my power position, as I could afford to visit people in "their" place and not the other way round, one fact is clear: it was all a matter of invitations. Even my closer informants were more or less inclined to host me in, from one day to the next, depending on their personal circumstances, and I just reacted accordingly. Moreover, I invariably encountered also people who did not trust, engage or hang out with me. As long as they dwelt in the centre, their rooms remained inaccessible to me.

Throughout the chapter, I explore common patterns in the use(s) of the rooms and in the ways to negotiate the centre inner space, rather than focusing on the narratives on individual residents. While this analytical focus is particularly promising for the remit of this book, I expand on the narrative side of day-to-day life in the centre elsewhere (Boccagni & Miranda-Nieto, 2022; Boccagni, 2023). All over, I use the present tense rather than the past one in an endeavor to do justice to the lived experience of the field. This is certainly not meant to "freeze" or "de-temporalize" people in "any ethnographic present" (Hastrup, 1990). Rather, it aims to acknowledge the fact that the centre is no relics from the past – it keeps being operational, here and now. As my follow-up fieldwork shows, it still fundamentally reproduces, with different clients, the organizational and relational patterns that are discussed in this chapter, and that resonate across the lived experience of many similar facilities.

## 7.3 "It's not good to always stay home"

As a semi-private space, a refugee centre is made primarily of rooms, as units of dwelling and, here, of analysis. In this particular infrastructure, the rooms are designed for two guests each. In fact, they provide some degree of privacy, ideally to host adult asylum seekers that have transitioned through collective shelters – and are accordingly expected to have a certain degree of "integration" – rather than newcomers. Part of the mission of the organization managing the centre, initially at least, was to try and "activate" people in a number of respects – learning the language, investing in training, looking for a job – rather than leaving them alone in

their rooms, as long as some of them did. Interestingly, staying-in-the-room is not appreciated much by residents either. Even before covid and the related stay-home orders came, all my interlocutors tended to see “staying always home” as an undesirable and inherently problematic state of things. “That’s not good”, people used to tell me whenever we started to chat about their everyday life in the centre. This was not, however, because their room space was necessarily uncomfortable or felt alien to them. The opposite was more likely the case, as time passed by. Nor was it only for the structural limitations and constraints of a refugee centre: strict rules on the entry and exit time, no right to invite people in, and a constant need to negotiate the right distance and an acceptable division of “domestic” space and tasks with one’s flatmate.

More fundamentally, staying in all the time would mean having nothing to do, possibly falling prey to one’s own “thoughts” – about the past, the journey across desert and sea, the time spent in Libya, the dear ones far away (or possibly passed away) and the failure to meet one’s aspirations, at present at least. The oft-discussed (at least since Bachelard, 1964) social function of a house, not only as an archive of past memories but as an intimate space to nourish them anew, would turn into a negative force for people who have a heavy burden of memories and little space or resources to re-elaborate them. Rather than staying always in, “it’s better”, my interlocutors would repeat, “when you work” – one stays out the whole day, possibly struggles hard, but then is left with little mental room for thoughts. You just come back here for rest, only to move out again the next day. While exploitative work conditions make this inside/outside transition far from smooth or painless, they still make a difference. It is the existence of (or at least the prospect for) something meaningful, tangible and fruitful to do outside what gives a meaning, and a dignity, to the time spent inside. The actual threshold between inside and outside is then defined by the social practices and opportunities negotiated by each resident, rather than only by a concrete boundary (cf. Fig. 7.2).

However, for a number of reasons, including the paucity of job opportunities and of sufficient skills to meet them, the time spent inside is often not so limited. As important, it is not necessarily one of empty and passive waiting, as some accounts of the “refugee condition” might suggest. Things do happen, in terms of routines, practices and material cultures. These belong to the private sphere of everyone, as long as this is retained in an asylum centre. Nonetheless, they can be respectfully approached in ways that allow a better understanding of the residents’ life predicament. People in asylum centres may well live in a sort of warehouse (Vianelli, 2021) that reflects, and contains, their condition of being “stuck” in “waithood”. Metaphors like that of a storage place, or a (free) parking lot, would capture something of the place I have studied. So do other metaphors people are more likely to use, such as prison (some of them, when in a particularly bad mood), or camp, as a general way for the English speakers to call the facility. However, meaningful things do happen inside. The place itself “does” things as a social actor, rather than being a simple background (Gronseth et al., 2016).

**Fig. 7.2** On the threshold between inside and outside: a balcony in the centre. (Author's picture)

## 7.4 Inside the Rooms: Routines, Displays of the Self, Traces

Whenever I entered a resident's room in the centre, I felt like I was crossing a qualitative threshold, from the cold and transitory space of a corridor into a more intensely inhabited one. Room interiors are invariably more lively and sensorially thicker than the surrounding semi-public space. This holds even when a room is messy, untidy, possibly dark or almost suffocating for lack of fresh air. However, as I realized, the difference between common and semi-private space is not only a sensorial or affective one. Being in is also a condition to investigate and better understand routines and ways of coping during everyday life in "waiting" (Rotter, 2015) and in "liminality" (Ghorashi et al., 2018). Even a room in a refugee centre has something of a private and invisible space. It gives people some degree of freedom to do whatever they like – even when this means, as they say, "doing nothing". It is a space of protection, as much as isolation. It is also a setting in which there are higher chances that ordinary, superficial talk turns into deeper fragments of self-disclosure and personal narration, although not necessarily on the topics one would like to prioritize (in my case, migration and everyday life before it, whereas my interlocutors would

prioritize work, papers and housing in the here-and-now, as both more urgent and more "tellable" concerns). Following this premise, a cumulative experience of room visits is a source of insights on topics of deeper and larger significance.

### *7.4.1 Inner Domestic Routines and Cultures*

All rooms in the centre include the same standard and basic furniture – two beds per room, with one shared kitchenette between each couple of rooms. Despite their impersonal layout, most rooms hold some minimal sign of their cumulative dwelling over time, or of the absent presence of past dwellers – writings on the walls, old posters or calendars, stickers, objects that held some function in the past and have been abandoned since. Most visibly, the rooms carry some trace of their present dwellers, through their material cultures and their ways of inhabiting them. This in itself is an experiential aspect of refugee everyday lives that can be appreciated only by being in – by making some respectful, but necessarily proximate efforts to observe people's practices, rather than relying only on their narratives. One visit after another, this leads an ethnographer from a shallow perception of chaotic, semi-empty or worn out interiors, to an appreciation of the inner orderings and domestic cultures at work. These micro-mechanisms of material and social ordering (Bochmann, 2018) operate regardless of the little material resources available and of the residents' unclear prospects to stay in Italy, let alone in the centre (Boccagni, 2022).

At the core of each room and of one's (extra-bodily) personal space lies, unsurprisingly, a bed. Tidying it up or not, staying on it for long or for not-so-long, using the free blanket (or possibly a newly purchased one) to cover some part of one's body or the whole of it are all micro details that match different emotions and ways of being. The space under the bed, and in particular the interstice between mattress and bed springs, is possibly the most separate and less visible region in the room, where one may keep an envelope with his documents or some cherished belongings. The safest place, where the wallet and phones are kept, is instead a small bed table with a locked drawer. That the bed table is a special place and deserves extra care is a feeling some residents display by keeping a clean towel to cover it. Each room also includes one table (which used to be a student desk) and a cupboard (originally, a library) to be shared by the two residents, plus two wardrobes. Every dweller has his own way to distribute and store food – rice, bread, tea, sugar, oil, vegetables – between the room and the kitchen space. This does not necessarily follow any fixed rule or functional requirement. Rather, it has something to say on the degrees of trust, and on the perceived quality of the lived experience with one's flatmate and neighbours (i.e. people in the other room adjacent to the kitchenette).

Within the limitations of a heteronomous dwelling condition, one has certainly more freedom to do things in the room than out of it. Although, many residents would add, there would be little point in staying in the room if only one had something "better" to do elsewhere, a fact is clear: there are many things one can do in

his room, alone or in co-presence with his flatmate. No room in the centre is used or meant only for sleeping – along a timeline shaped by external commitments and by one's own psychological condition – or for eating, whenever one does not use the adjacent kitchenette, the room of someone else or just a bench outside, in summer. A room, or at least a bed inside it, is fundamentally a place to stay separated, materially, relationally and atmospherically, from the outside world. It is a place where one can take a shower, possibly several times a day, and take care of his body and hair. It is a space to relax, watch movies, communicate with people or wander in the virtual world with one's mobile, listen to music, chat and engage in playstation matches with other residents. Sometimes it is a place to stay alone with one's burden of memories, sufferings, and isolation. Or possibly a safe enclave for people to smoke or have alcohol, while being obviously aware that they're not allowed to. On other occasions, a room is a place to pray – generally alone – thereby carving out a timespace of further intimacy and separation within the pre-existing semi-private space. Hardly ever, instead, is the room a place where one reads a book or uses a laptop, as long as there is one, for anything else than gaming or chatting. And never, unless at high risk for the dweller, is it a place for heterosexual intimacy. In several respects, then, what residents do in their rooms is not radically different from what their peers in terms of age, social class and education would do in their own rooms. Except for the fact that this is a place for males only, under 24/7 vigilance (if generally mild) of a porter and a caseworker, inhabited only by people with the same legal status and life predicaments (and still so different from each other, in any other respect). And except for another fact – while "doing nothing" is not necessarily a major issue for native males in their early 20s, it is perceived at best as a violation of trust or a form of ungratefulness for their refugee counterparts.

As long as one dwells in the centre, he marks the area around his bed, or possibly the entire room, as more own and exclusive than the rest. Unless when a caseworker gets in, generally (but not necessarily) after knocking on the door for a while, it is up to the occupant to let in some, but not many more (who would have probably little interest to get in anyway). It is the dweller who lays out his material belongings, typically limited at the outset but far more numerous after a couple of years, in different corners, wardrobes or shelves. In doing so, a dweller sets clear boundaries between what is to be made secret or personal and the rest. It is the dweller who takes care of the room (and kitchen) cleaning, or possibly resists caseworkers' pressures to do so, while also staying indifferent to the disapproval of those – flatmates, neighbours, co-nationals – who would "clean much better", or so they claim. It is the occupant, more fundamentally, that through the ways of arranging and using the room interior tells something about himself and about his needs, tastes and achievements.

There must been some reason, I thought while going across the same rooms again and again, whereby, all other things being equal (i.e. legal status, waithood, lack of a job), some have a very tidy room and make up their beds every single day, whereas others don't. Some leave on the wall some visible sign of their presence, like a poster or a writing, and others do not. Some arrange their belongings in ways that suggest some aesthetic care, as in a mini-domestic museum, whereas most

others accumulate them wherever there is space available, or they are easier to reach out. That "something" may have to do with one's personality, and maybe with the expectation to be highly transient in that place – if so, why bother to take care of it. Whatever the case, it is worth taking up as an object of analysis in itself.

### 7.4.2 *Taste, Aesthetics and Group Alignments*

Even a provisional, barely personalized and shared room in an asylum centre has much to tell of its occupants – of the resident himself, and to some extent of his ascribed national, ethnic or religious belonging. The scarcity of material resources does not prevent people from cultivating their own styles of consumption, taste and aesthetic. At least a part of these are meaningfully embedded in the material cultures of the rooms and in their ways to relate to them. A colorful prayer rug carefully folded on a chair or a shelf, for instance, is enough to say (and display) that the dweller is a practicing Muslim. So does a make-shift nativity, or a cross hanging somewhere in the room (or as a pendant around one's neck), for Christians. However, domestic micro-signs of one's day-to-day activities, and possibly of more profound alignment and belonging, are also attached to more mundane details. The big sports bag of a local football team, or an Islamic calendar of a Pakistani-run grocery nearby, are cases in point. Likewise, a grammar book or a small dictionary on the table, or possibly a collection of tales for beginners, is enough to suggest that people are actively learning Italian, or at least they are expected to. Less frequent, but still more telling, are symbols of national belonging, such as the drawing of a flag, hanging on the wall; of closer religious affiliation, e.g. the text of a religious invocation, or a prayer *tasbih*; or of one's own biography, including pictures of oneself and of some close friends albeit, interestingly, never of left-behind family members, unless in the private space of one's mobile phone. Moreover, it is not so rare, and more surprising to me, to see a teddy bear on the bed. This seems to be a sign of affective reconnection to childhood, and possibly of feeling, sometimes at least, closer to a child than to an adult. People would joke with me about their teddy bears inside the rooms, but they would have never shown one out of that private space.

While all these material objects stay there and send a message of their own, it is relatively infrequent that they are arranged in ways that suggest a deliberate "beautification". As a rule, albeit one with several exceptions, rooms bear little traces of intentional personalization. And yet, signs abound of what really matters for people. Among the objects scattered around in most rooms, shoes are a fascinating example of a good that matters well beyond the basic threshold of necessity, or of an instrumental use. To have eight or ten pairs of shoes (mostly sneakers), all of them accurately laid out on the upper levels of what used to be a bookshelf (in the previous life of the centre as a student dorm), means many things. People like doing sport and playing football, of course, but the affordances for that matter in themselves. As such, they are to be displayed up there, like trophies, rather than be kept in a wardrobe or under one's bed. More fundamentally, young asylum refugees – like

anybody else – have their own styles and myths of consumption. New shoes, as much as mobile phones, are cases in point. Lingering on them might be judged as an unnecessary luxury for people who struggle to make ends meet and have repeatedly risked their own lives, as a necessary condition to make it to Europe. And expanding on them might be perceived as a politically incorrect choice, which diverges from the master narrative of young refugees as victims, desperate people or, just apparently less essentialized, emerging and counter-hegemonic "subjectivities". In fact, for all the young people I stayed with in the centre, becoming "normal", or getting some access to the mainstream – not to question or run against it – was a treasured aim in itself (cf. Hajer, 2021). This was not in contradiction with their keen awareness of, and continuous complaints about, the structural racism and marginalization they were subject to.

In short, having access to a room's material culture enables a more nuanced and diverse account of the life conditions and prospects of its inhabitants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, residents in an asylum centre do value some possessions over others and are very keen to show it. In doing so, they display to the others and to themselves a measure of what they have achieved, everything else notwithstanding. While shoes are the most blatant example in the centre, caps and body lotions seem to perform a similar function. Some rooms include a special corner to lay up a number of caps. Likewise, body creams and hair lotions are well visible on the bed tables even in the rooms with fewer things in. The number of these items in each room, as well as the possession of a TV set or of a cooling fan, are markers of a visible social stratification across rooms, at least as far as consumption and lifestyles are concerned.

### *7.4.3 Tracing Back What Is No More There, over Time*

Like any inhabited space, an asylum centre includes some trace and imprint of those who dwelled there over time (Davidson, 2009). Some of these traces remain utterly visible, and equally irrelevant, for years. And again, they are particularly pervasive and meaningful inside the rooms. For administrative purposes, once an asylum seeker has ended the period of their allowed stay – once they are out, for their own will or for being enforced to – their files are closed and archived. While several former guests retain ties with other residents and caseworkers, institutionally speaking they are no longer relevant for that particular place. They reacquire the same invisibility, or at least irrelevance, they have always had to the eyes of most people outside. Nonetheless, several traces remain inside: menial and often cumbersome objects and belongings, old TV screens or parts of bicycles, but also small writings on the wall, or even only the brunt of a punch into a door or a drywall. Some of these are helpful props for conversation with the residents. Others just stay there, silently and yet visibly, as long as one wishes to see them. While this whole range of material signs can hardly be traced back to someone in particular, it does embody

potential stories to be told. Or at least, it offers some hints about issues, stances or emotions that cut across the lived experience of residents, past and present.

Although a full inventory of material cultures, old and new, is beyond the scope of this chapter, some notes are worth making on wall writings. These are relatively infrequent and yet telling reminders of questions that typically remain silent, intractable, or out of the reach of what caseworkers can afford to do. "Enough with volunteering", someone wrote, for instance, on a wall in the TV room, when this was still a meaningful gathering point. People need a real job and real money – not to get only involved in pro-social activities that are eventually tokenistic, the message was. "Fuck off operators" was another, less surprising message on the stairwell, the interesting thing being that caseworkers deliberately left it there for long, as if to say that they did not feel challenged by it. "I'm thinking of my future – back to my country?", another message said on a wall room, half-hidden by an old calendar. This was a rather uncommon case in which one's interior flow of thoughts and anxieties had found some external and semi-visible outlet (but, by all likelihood, not a solution). Or different again, "Super Mario Balotelli", a large pen writing would say on another room wall, on top of a half-size drawing of the famous and contentious football player – a black, Italian guy who had "made it" and thereby could be taken as a model, at least by one particular dweller in a particular moment.

All these writings are ephemeral, disconnected from each other and, by now, from those who happened to jot them down. In different ways, however, they convey the same message to my eyes – even the background matters, if only to give some fragments of broader stories that no one will be able or interested to recollect fully. And yet the stories, and the people, were there. This in itself demands respect, care, and sociological imagination in trying to combine words, practices and leftovers within one and the same analytical framework.

## 7.5 Across the Rooms: Shifting Boundaries of Appropriation, Attachment and Care

"What is mine?", or "What should I take care of?", are questions that may sound out of place in a refugee centre. No resident would explicitly articulate them, if only because the point-blank response would be all too clear – little to nothing. In or out of the rooms, forms of place appropriation are generally limited (if somewhat expanding over time), pragmatic, and focused only on a few, sometimes status-related possessions. The reach of what should be taken care of is often still more limited. "This is not my place", people would often reply whenever they are asked to be more "responsible" (possibly grateful for their free accommodation) and take "more care for the place", including its common areas. "No reason for me to take care of it", they would typically add. Whether due to social and material poverty, to precarious housing and legal predicaments or to the burden of their past life experience, most residents would hardly show any attachment to the place in which they

are living. However, once again, the time spent in the centre, and most notably in the rooms, reveals a more complex and ambiguous state of things.

It was very clear to me, after staying in for a while, that some forms of "reluctant" homemaking, or of carving some special timespace out of the broader life routines in the centre, do take place anyway (Gronseth & Thorshaug, 2022). Food, music and religious practices are all powerful ways to enact some purposeful readaptation and personalization of one's timespace there. Not a single resident would probably call the centre home, in the normatively positive sense of the term. However, the interplay (indeed, the friction) between place attachment and appropriation (Boccagni et al., 2020) is helpful to illuminate their lived experience in the here and now. All my interlocutors have marked different thresholds of privateness through their day-to-day routines, both inside the rooms and in the common space. Some space, ranging from the bed to the entire room, and beyond, is typically meant as more "special", but also more "theirs" than the others. This generally involves less the place as such than the exclusive use of certain technological goods, including mobile phones, TVs and music devices, inside it. However, place appropriation does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with attachment. Taking care of the place, as far as cleaning or ordering things around is concerned, is often not seen as a worthwhile occupation, beyond a basic threshold to comply with the managers' rules and conditionalities (and often not even up to that, according to most caseworkers).

Some of my informants do perceive their rooms (and more rarely, a broader portion of common space) as a good to be taken care of, judging from the regularity and intensity of their cleaning efforts. However, this is less a rule than an exception. On the opposite of the continuum, in the most radical version, the boundaries of the field of attachment – put otherwise: the space to be taken care of – may narrow down to one's body. Everyday care for the body, in terms of assiduous cleaning, perfuming, moisturizing, hair cutting, shaving and so forth is a constant across the young people I met, regardless of their background. This is often paralleled with a special care for clothing (cf. Parrott, 2004; Schneider, 2022). Taking special care of one's body and clothes – the inn-most home and its walls – is also a pragmatic response to racist stigmas, as well as a way to make the most of the only space that lies under one's full control. All that exceeds that basic unit of space, including one's bed and its surroundings, is for some less of a priority, in a particularly harsh form of "non-home" (Boccagni & Miranda-Nieto, 2022).

The narrow scope for place appropriation and attachment is not only an individual and micro concern, though. It also articulates a faultline between the centre residents and caseworkers. The latter, interestingly enough, had initially made major and almost enthusiastic efforts to facilitate a more convivial atmosphere all around. This included, for instance, providing a sitting room and a shared TV room with some couches, nice wall decorations and books for loan. "We all live and work better in a nicer place", the argument was. Yet, these top-down efforts at beautification encountered mixed reactions over time. Most residents oscillated between mild and no participation in the common spaces, with instances of inappropriate use that multiplied over time, even before the covid emergency would radically desertify them. It seemed that the longer people stayed there (and possibly gained more

resources, out of occasional jobs that stayed often undeclared in order not to lose benefits), the more they would cultivate some private space of their own, as a part of their own autonomy, in their rooms (with their private TV sets, playstations, music equipments, etc.). One year and a half after my arrival at the centre, the common room that was to facilitate conviviality was empty and upside down most of the time. People with apparently weaker amical and support networks were the only attendants, each of them on their own. This was not necessarily bad news for all the residents who had successfully built their own networks, albeit mostly mono-ethnic ones, out of the centre. However, it was a clear demonstration that investing in sociability inside was not so critical for people's construction of their own autonomy and integration outside. The latter aim would almost invariably entail more privatization and self-interest – an attitude that is not unreasonable for their future housing and life trajectories, but is still at odds with any sustained attempt to make the centre a "better" place. "This is no home", most residents would repeat.

## 7.6 Views from the Room: Looking Out, Looking Forward

On the outer wall of every room in the centre lies a spacious window, right opposite to the entrance door. Just as in any residential setting, both the window and the doorstep operate like openings in the borders, or orifices in the body of each room. How these windows are kept, and what they make visible (Garvey, 2005), can be taken from the outside as measures of the decency and appropriateness of the refugee lifestyle (Larsen, 2011). However, what do they reveal, once seen and used from the inside?

None of my informants, I noticed after a while, would hardly spend time watching out of "his" window (cf. Fig. 7.3). While they do lean out to greet or call fellow residents passing by, and possibly to engage in protracted interactions aloud with them, it is infrequent that they would just stay at the window to look around. Maybe the outside is just irrelevant, as long as one has a place for shelter anyway. Or possibly, there is some concern to be seen and "pointed at" by native passers-by. On the back side of the centre, all windows would give some glimpse into the everyday life of "ordinary" families in the small building behind – the same people whose complaints, years ago, had pushed the manager to forbid residents to leave their shoes in plain sight on the window sills. On the front side, the view would open up to a larger panorama, with the gasoline station at the lower boundary and the mountains on the horizon at the upper one. All in-between, the trafficked street ahead of the building and the equally busy railway behind likely transmit the same message – a sense of mobility, progress, and direction that is precisely what people seem to miss, at least while staying at the centre.

More often than not, rolling shutters are down most of the day – in some rooms, almost constantly so. While this may well have to do with irregular sleeping routines, there is more to it, I have realized over time. It is as if people, while staying in, unconsciously wished to be radically protected, separated and invisible from the

**Fig. 7.3** The world outside, seen from a room window. (Author's picture)

outside world. Even a shuttered window can articulate an emotional state – sometimes, a psychological suffering – that feeds into the sense of parallel life, or of parallel (and ancillar) normality, which I have got used to feeling in the centre. It is as if getting some protection and a sense of normality out of everyday routines were possible only through substantive separation from the outside world. How fictitious and short-lived this normality would be, an ordinary walk around the city to search for a job is enough to reveal. In fact, the sense of (parallel) normality holds only as long as people stay in the centre. The more they find ways to build external networks, thereby using the centre as little more than a resting place, the higher their likelihood to gain autonomy and strengthen their social and cultural capital for their future immigrant life out of the centre.

The fact remains that at least for some residents there is little "view" out of the rooms anyway, regardless of window shutters being up or down. This metaphorically points to an ultimate impossibility to envision a horizon beyond the everyday struggles – unless by jumping directly into an imagined, undetermined and long-term future populated with a "good" job, a family, a house, and a certain number of children "like anybody else", people would simply say. No claim for distinction, beyond the one the fate has already forced into their lives in terms of utter inequality (if not of endangered lives), and of the need or obligation to flee in order to redress that. Not much of a view into the way (if any) to get there, however, standing at the window of a refugee centre room.

## 7.7 To Conclude: The Analytical Difference of Being in, the Practical Difference of Being (Also) Out

Living in a room in an asylum facility, in a temporary and heteronomous condition, is more than a parenthesis made of an "empty" or "suspended" timespace. It actually marks a meaningful and not so short-lived step in the housing and life trajectory of an asylum seeker. In a similar vein, having some sensitive and respectful access to that dwelling space marks a qualitative threshold for an in-depth understanding of everyday life in asylum.

For sure, this research option is not without risks and dilemmas. The "protection" of one's informants, and in fact hosts, involves far more than data anonymization. There is a fine line to tread between an empathic and respectful account and an awkward fall into sensationalism, reality show-style reporting, voyeurism or pornography of poverty. Similar tensions and dilemmas creep across all research into the domestic space of someone else. However, they are especially striking whenever that person or group lies at the bottom of economic, racial and legal status hierarchies – up to the point of having little right or interest to call home any space. Having said that, the relational and epistemological promise of this research option cannot be dismissed. Experientially speaking, this is nourished through protracted, non-judgmental and non-instrumental relationships with people. There is some parallel between the neverending time residents feel they are wasting in a centre, and the time researchers that are not ethnographers would feel they are wasting in the same place. Still, that need not be empty or useless time, for either party.

Doing ethnography in an asylum centre room, as my experience shows, is ultimately one more expression of the host-guest relationship (Harney & Boccagni, 2022). It is ambiguous and asymmetrical by definition, and yet potentially relevant to any social setting, regardless of power asymmetries or concerns. Hosting me for a while was a source of pride, or at the very least a not unpleasant way to spend some time, among my key interlocutors in the centre. Telling something of their stories, and making sense of their ways of doing meaningful things while "waiting", may still be a poor form of reciprocity, on my side. It is enough, however, to underpin interpersonal relationships that are not necessarily bound to the here-and-now of one's stay in a centre. It is enough, likewise, to confirm the knowledge-production potential of domestic ethnography on all scales of human dwelling, whenever an outsider is a legitimate, welcome and insightful guest inside it.

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