



# Seeking a balance between privacy and connectedness in housing for refugees

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## Abstract

After having been granted protection by the arrival country, refugees can start settling again. Finding appropriate housing is difficult, however. To increase the availability of housing for refugees in Flanders several volunteers developed housing initiatives. We investigated to what extent these initiatives resonate with refugees' lived experience. To gain insight into initiators' intentions and refugees' lived experience, semi-structured interviews were conducted, once with initiators of three housing initiatives and twice with nine refugees living there. In the timeframe between the interviews refugees were asked to further self-document their experiences by using cultural probes. Comparing intentions and experiences brings to light the social meaning of home and how it interrelates with a dwelling's material appearance. Important for refugees to feel at home is a balance between connectedness and privacy. Finding this balance is not trivial, however. It is affected by preferred personal lifestyle, household structure, and the material environment at the level of the dwelling and living environment. Contact with other refugees and people from different cultures can be stimulated in order to establish and maintain a social network. Privacy inside dwellings creates the possibility to preserve aspects of one's identity and lifestyle, and to personalize the often western houses to make them feel more familiar. Furthermore connectedness as well as privacy is mentioned as helpful to deal with traumas. The insights gained in our study can contribute to housing designs and design processes that support the integration of refugees, and therefore to a more inclusive built environment and society.

**Keywords** Connectedness · Cultural probe · Privacy · Refugee housing · Self-documentation · Social interaction

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## 1 Introduction

Worldwide millions of people are forced to leave their home (UNHCR 2017). Once arrived in the arrival country and having started their asylum procedure, they reside in a reception centre. Those centres hardly aim to make them feel at home (van der Horst 2004). If protection is granted, the refugees can start settling again (UNHCR 1996; European Union 2011). One of the crucial first steps is finding housing, and this in a new society. In Flanders finding housing is often experienced as difficult due to the short period in which refugees have to leave the reception centre, racism in the rental market and their often limited budget.

In this context housing can be more than merely a physical structure that protects from homelessness. The relation between people and objects is non-dichotomous. Immaterial ideas, cultural values and social relations are defined and ordered through the production and consumption of objects. Objects are necessary to create them (Miller 1987). This non-dichotomous relation also applies to the built environment. Architects encode social and cultural meaning in their buildings, causing attitudes and values to be reflected and strengthened by the built environment (Memmott and Keys 2015; Vellinga 2007; Gieryn 2002). The occupants interpret these buildings. They will see possible uses (Clapham 2005: 117–126, 2011; Rapoport 1995; Gieryn 2002) and ascribe meaning to them (Memmott and Keys 2015; Easthope 2004; Clapham 2005: 119–145). Depending on their value judgement occupants can prefer, reject or change a dwelling (Rapoport 1995; Clapham 2005: 153). They can develop an affective bond with it and consider it as a home if the material structure corresponds with their identity and wished lifestyle (Clapham 2005: 25–35). Through this process the built environment is capable of provoking and supporting certain values, lifestyles and social interactions (Vellinga 2007; Clapham 2005: 119–136).

Cultural differences likely influence the meaning of home (Clapham 2005: 142). It is argued that this meaning does not depend on universal human needs, but is rather socially constructed (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2012). The social meaning of home can vary between cultures in terms of the degree to which it relates to the occupants' unique identity or their bond with the community, as well as its openness and accessibility or closeness and avoidance of contact with others (Gauvain and Altman 1982). For example, for immigrants coming from non-individualistic cultures the dwelling as the domain of privacy can be less dominant than in the western culture (Moore 2000; Murdie 2004). Moreover, immigrants link the concept of home with their former and new society, so for them it can mean something different than for local people (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2012). Therefore cultural differences can offer insight into the social meaning of home.

This article seeks to contribute to the understanding of the social meaning of home and how it interrelates with a dwelling's material appearance by elaborating its impact in the context of refugee housing. Refugee housing is interesting in this perspective since refugees' acculturation process, and cultural differences between refugees and initiators, can bring to light the social meaning incorporated in housing design. Moreover, since refugees' social network in the arrival country is often limited soon after their arrival, their experience may be influenced largely by their interrelation with the material environment and through contacts with other people in the arrival country. At the same time insights into aspects that support refugees' resettlement may inform future housing designs and design processes that support the integration of newcomers, and therefore lead to a more inclusive built environment and society. To this end our study focused on the following research

question: to what extent are housing initiatives in Flanders, intended to increase the availability of housing for recently recognized refugees, in line with their lived experience?

The article starts with situating our study within literature. This is followed by an overview of the applied ethnographic methods. In the next sections insights into initiators' intentions and refugees' lived experience are presented. Finally the importance of the balance between privacy and connectedness in the meaning of home and refugee housing is discussed.

## 2 The social meaning of home in a new cultural environment

### 2.1 The meaning of home

In case an affective bond exists between occupant and dwelling, the latter is often called a 'home'. What turns a dwelling into a home differs between people, times and contexts (Rapoport 1995; Easthope 2004; Duyvendak 2011: 106–124). Several authors describe it in different ways, but all seem to relate to the presence and absence of (certain) social interactions.

A home is related with a feeling of familiarity, material and mental safety, predictability, comfort and privacy. It is an exclusive shelter where the occupants can retreat and relax and where intimacy and domesticity take place (Duyvendak 2011: 37–38). It is the spatial setting that constitutes in part the social interactions of the household (i.e. the mode of social organisation distinctive to the home) and it is the place where these interactions occur (Saunders and Williams 1988 in Easthope 2004; Boyd and Nowak 2013). Therefore feelings like intimacy and love, but also fear, grief, regret and guilt can be experienced (Gurney 2000 in Easthope 2004). In addition, control over the space (Kusenbach 2017) and the possibility of personalization are mentioned (Ley-Cervantes and Duyvendak 2017). However, a home can also be a place, for example, for work (van der Horst 2004), of domestic violence and, in the patriarchal home, of domination over women and children (Mallett 2004).

Through mobility and migration the notion of home as a fixed location became challenged. Mobile people are seen as uprooted since they have no bond with any particular place and their identity is de-territorialized (Nowicka 2007). However, a home can be considered as something that becomes, as a permanent process (Easthope 2004; Duyvendak 2011: 11; Rosales 2010; Kusenbach 2017). The feeling of being at home can grow through the daily routines and interactions that take place inside a dwelling (Duyvendak 2011: 27–28). Home-making is an ongoing task continuously subjected to a series of constraints and negotiations resulting from the network of relationships among its occupants and of the occupants with the world outside, and the occupants experience constraints through the material house and the objects inside (Rosales 2010). The feeling of being at home is moreover fostered by emotional and transportable elements (Gurney 1996 in Clapham 2005) like the mentioned social interactions between family members, and culture-related objects and practices (Nowicka 2007; Cancellieri 2017). A home can thus be considered as something that people can take along as they move through time and space and that can connect many locations, the past, the future and the present in its geographical and temporal sense (Nowicka 2007).

A home is associated not only with the dwelling and the household, but also with broader spheres (Duyvendak 2011: 111). People need a community where they can develop

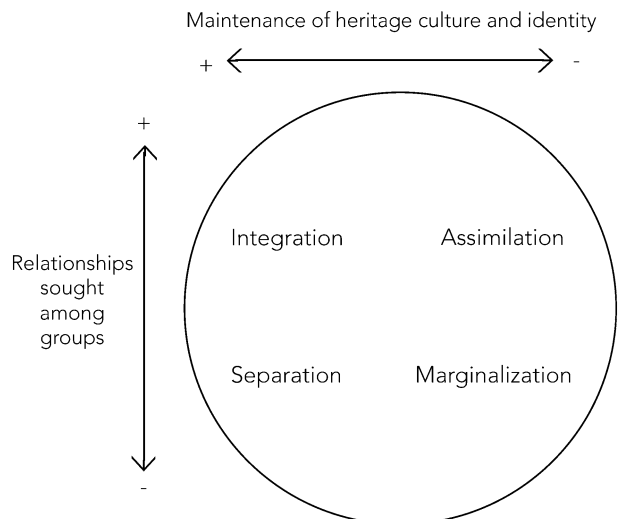
themselves and feel a bond with others (Duyvendak 2011: 37–38). Different communities also want to express their own identity in interaction with others in the public space, resulting in heterogeneity at a public level (Boccagni and Brighenti 2017; Duyvendak 2011: 119–122). This heterogeneity can concern aspects like ethnicity, age, sex, class or lifestyle.

## 2.2 The social meaning of home in the arrival country

For immigrants and refugees—who are assumed to resemble immigrants on a cultural level—the social meaning of home also plays other roles. At the level of the dwelling privacy allows occupants to express their identity and uniqueness (Gauvain and Altman 1982). Immigrants often use transnational objects, which recreate the atmosphere of the country of origin in a symbolic way (Bilecen 2017). Examples include pictures or paintings which depict people and places the occupants are attached to, but also ordinary things that are brought back from their country of origin and carry special meaning for the owner (Cancellieri 2017; Walsh 2015). Compared with immigrants and other people, refugees give less importance to decoration (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2012), but active engagements with the dwelling by aesthetically charged repetitive gestures (e.g., cleaning, washing dishes, bed making) can have a similar effect and they can alleviate the trauma associated with loss of home (Neumark 2013).

Social contacts influence the acculturation process. Acculturation refers to the cultural and personal changes in cultural patterns of two or more cultural groups and their individual members due to intercultural contact (Berry 2005). Depending on the relationships sought with other groups and the level of maintenance of the own identity, the minority group can adopt different acculturation strategies, namely integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation (see Fig. 1) (Berry 2005). Integration is considered as the most positive one on a psychological as well as socio-cultural level (Berry 1997). It denotes an interest in maintaining one's heritage culture and, at the same time, in daily interacting with other groups. The assimilation strategy refers to individuals who do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures. When people hold on to their original culture and avoid interactions with others, this is called the separation

**Fig. 1** Strategies of ethnocultural groups. *Source:* Berry (2005)



strategy. Marginalisation occurs when there is little possibility for or interest in maintaining the heritage culture and little interest in interactions with others. The level of adaptation can depend on the sphere people are in. Someone can, for example, hold on strongly to the own identity and culture in the private sphere of the dwelling, but place this more in the background at work (Van Oudenhoven 2012: 211–218).

The linkages between acculturation and home-making processes in the arrival country allow developing a feeling of being at home at a new place (Duyvendak 2011: 15) and at several places at the same time (Bendix and Löfgren 2007). It is through these linkages that immigrants can refer by ‘home’ simultaneously to multiple locales, material artefacts, and social relationships in countries of emigration and immigration (Bilecen 2017). Whether refugees feel at home in the arrival country and/or in their country of origin, and whether or not they miss their country of origin seems to be an individual matter (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2012), but it is through the relation of their home with other cultures than the one in the arrival country that the social meaning of home gains special importance.

### 2.3 Inclusion or exclusion by architectural design

Architects incorporate values and attitudes into their designs (Memmott and Keys 2015; Vellinga 2007; Gieryn 2002). Housing, for example, is designed with certain lifestyles in mind (Clapham 2005: 126–136). The materiality and spatial layout play a role in the social relations and daily activities that can take place inside (Vellinga 2007; Clapham 2005: 119–136, 2011). The same holds for the living environment. Interactions between different groups can be supported by creating a social mix. However, as different groups may have ‘parallel lives’ (Ratcliffe 2004) also an open attitude, curiosity and self-consciousness towards other groups is necessary (Smets and Sneep 2017).

In this way designers’ values about inclusion or exclusion can show themselves at an architectural level. Designers can tend to design in an ethnocentric manner, resulting in designs that fit their own cultural preferences, but forcing others to assimilate (Martin and Casault 2005; Memmott and Keys 2015). Separation or marginalisation can occur when social interactions in the living environment are not supported. Designers can incorporate the integration strategy by constructing common spaces based on similarities in cultural beliefs and behaviours (Gill 2015; Ember et al. 1973), or by maintaining cross-cultural diversity of behaviours, beliefs, values, customs and meanings associated with the built environment (Martin and Casault 2005; Memmott and Keys 2015). The latter approach searches for designs that support the maintenance of occupants’ long-standing or acculturated habits and customs instead of forcing them to assimilate (Martin and Casault 2005). Supporting the preferred lifestyle through the built environment can foster well-being, while a discrepancy between both can result in stress (Memmott and Keys 2015).

## 3 Methodology

To gain in-depth insight into the extent to which the intentions of refugee housing initiators align with refugees’ lived experience, we opted for a qualitative, interpretative research approach. Desk research allowed distinguishing three types of housing initiatives for



**Fig. 2** Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen



**Fig. 3** House of Colours

recognised and subsidiary protected refugees in Flanders: initiatives that renovate vacant dwellings to make them liveable again; initiatives that focus on cohousing of refugees, or of refugees and local people; and initiatives that develop modular dwellings. For each type one case was selected. Selecting different types was expected to reveal a more nuanced



**Fig. 4** The Refugee Tiny House

view upon refugees' lived experience. Case selection was based on the extent to which the initiatives were developed and (expected to be) in use. This resulted in cases Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen<sup>1</sup>, which renovates vacant dwellings, House of Colours, a cohousing initiative for refugees, and the Refugee Tiny House, a small, transportable house for a single refugee placed in the garden of the owner (see Figs. 2, 3, 4).

For each case one main initiator was invited to participate. In the recruitment of people accommodated by the initiatives, eligible were only those who received the legal status of refugee according to the 1951 Refugee Convention or subsidiary protection.<sup>2</sup> Refugees are, however, still a very diverse population. The meaning attached to their house can change over time due to their familiarity with it, which is an important feature of a home (Duyvendak 2011: 38). Therefore we selected participants who had stayed in Flanders for a relative short time and had moved in recently. Within the bounded group a diversity of people was sought in terms of cultural background, family composition, family situation, age and gender. However, since the initiatives are small, local projects, the number of occupants was limited. During the research only Syrian refugees were accommodated by Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen and, due to unforeseen problems, no refugee could stay in the Refugee Tiny House.<sup>3</sup> For Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen and House of Colours the number of selected households was kept equal. In-depth insight was preferred above possibilities to generalize. This implied a limited group of participants, which should therefore not be considered as representative for all refugees in Flanders. Additionally, efforts were made to

<sup>1</sup> The translation of 'Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen' is 'Housing assistance for refugees'.

<sup>2</sup> In the article the word 'refugee' refers also to participants who are subsidiarily protected.

<sup>3</sup> The Tiny House is about 16.5 m<sup>2</sup>, while the law dictates a minimum area of 18 m<sup>2</sup> for a dwelling for one person. Moreover the house is located in the garden of local people, so the refugee cannot use the owners' address as domicile address. A domicile address is needed to gain access to civil rights, like receiving financial support. However, depending on the willingness of local authorities, the address of the local authority can be used as reference address.

keep the language barrier as low as possible. Participant's age differed between 35 and 50. Table 1 gives an overview of the selected participants.<sup>4</sup>

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted by the first author (henceforth the researcher), once with an initiator and twice with selected occupants. For the initiators questions dealt with the project's intentions, strengths and weaknesses. Refugees were asked about how they experienced their current dwelling, what dwelling they preferred and how housing relates to their culture, identity, inclusion and well-being.

In between the interviews the occupants could document their lived experience by the use of cultural probes. Probes can enhance an empathic understanding of one's personal context by inspiring participants to express their lifestyles, experiences, ideas and thoughts (Gaver et al. 2004; Mattelmäki 2005, 2008; Boehner et al. 2007). They can encourage talking about architectural elements without the need for architectural knowledge (Loopmans et al. 2011). The designed probes were applied as biographical method, which allows understanding lived experiences within the current cultural context (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Housing pathway tasks concerned participants' former, current and wished future dwelling. The probe inquired experiences, behaviours, opinions and values, feelings and sensory experiences (see Fig. 5). It was offered in Dutch, French, English and Arabic since a good fit between a probe and the target group can encourage participation (Mattelmäki 2005). The researcher explained the probes at the end of the first interview by the use of an example she had completed.

During the second interview with the occupants the probe was discussed in the different rooms of their dwelling. By walking together through the dwelling, participants may remember more elements they attach meaning to (Loopmans et al. 2011), while the probe can encourage a spontaneous and personal conversation (Mattelmäki 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed afterwards. The participants' own, sometimes mixed language, was maintained throughout the whole process since it is considered as an important medium to express and understand deeper meaning (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Roughly based on the QUAGOL (Dierckx de Casterlé et al. 2012) the analysis was conducted in several steps. The core information of each interview was summarized in abstract ideas after transcriptions had been reread several times, important expressions marked, and concerns written in the margin. These ideas were compared reciprocally between interviews within each target audience whereby attention was given to similarities and differences between participants. Influences on refugees' answers of their own personal traits, life trajectories and migration patterns were taken into account. In this way we wanted to acknowledge the unique story of each participant, avoid excessive simplification and maintain the integrity of each story. The therefrom resulting overall codes were discussed amongst the authors. In-depth analysis led to a conceptual framework that served as guide to report the results.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Participants' background

Tom, initiator of Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen, Hilde, initiator of House of Colours, and Jan, initiator of the Refugee Tiny House are native occupants. *Tom* helps refugees searching

<sup>4</sup> In order to guarantee anonymity, pseudonyms are used.

<sup>5</sup> The generated data contain confidential information and are therefore not publicly available. They can be asked from the corresponding author on reasonable request.



**Table 1** Participants per case

Initiative	Location dwelling	Sex	Mother tongue	Country of origin	Religion	Legal status	Length of stay in Belgium	Length of stay in current dwelling	Family situation	Family situation	Language interview
Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen											
Mahir and Selima (couple)	Lier	Man and woman	Arabic	Syria	Muslim	Subsidiary protected	1 year	4 months	5 (3 sons, ages 5, 4, some months)	Family in Belgium	Dutch + English
Kardal and Nesrine (couple)	Lier	Man and woman	Arabic	Syria	Muslim	Subsidiary protected	K: 1.5 year; N: 2.5 months	2.5 months	5 (2 sons, 1 daughter, ages between 5, 4–12)	Family in Belgium	English
Akil	Lier	Man	Arabic	Syria	Muslim	Refugee	1 year, 1 month	2.5 months	1	Family reunification is ongoing, (wife and son still in Syria)	English
House of Colours											
Jaafar and Adia (couple)	First: Retie, later: Beerse	Man and woman	French	Guinea	-	Refugee	5 years	1 month	4 (2 daughters, ages: 5, some months)	Family in Belgium	French
Mazal	Olen	Man	Arabic	Syria	Muslim	Refugee	1 year, 2 months	6 months	1	Family reunification is ongoing, (wife and sons still in Syria)	Dutch + English
Harumi	Olen	Man	Tigrinya	Eritrea	Christian	Refugee	1 year, 2 months	8 months	1	Family in country of origin, (wife and two children still in Eritrea)	English
The Refugee Tiny House Maldegem											
-											

**DAILY ACTIVITIES:**

**HOUSE IN HOME COUNTRY**

In my home country this activity took place in the following room: or

Objects of my home country that I consider important in this activity: or

I did this activity in my home country on following moments of the day:

**CURRENT HOUSE**

In the current home this activity takes place in the following area: or

I feel myself in this room while doing this activity:

Sound:

Smell:

View:

Touch/feeling:

**DESIRED HOUSE**

I would prefer to do this activity in the following area: or

I am preferably in this space:  or

alone

with family

+ + 

with other people

+ 

with other families

**Fig. 5** Cultural probe, English version

housing in the arrival country. In these searches, finding housing within two months after recognition seems difficult. *Hilde* experiences as main problem that several people, among which refugees, have a ‘hunger to belong’. According to her, this cannot be stilled by current institutions who focus on individuality. *Jan* realises the big number of single refugees who arrive in Flanders and the support they need to resettle. Tiny Houses, a project his son works on, seems an ideal opportunity to address this problem.

*Mahir and Selima* lived in a house in Syria close to their family. When their region was bombed they fled with their two sons to Turkey. Mahir continued his journey to Flanders in the hope to arrange a safe journey for his wife and children. Since his asylum process took longer than expected, Selima and their sons came on own initiative. Selima gave birth to their third son at the moment she stayed at a refugee camp in Flanders. *Kardal and Nesrine* spent their childhood on the countryside, but, despite their preference for the countryside, moved to the Syrian city Aleppo to study and work. Kardal left Syria first and Nesrine, their daughter and two sons could come through family reunification. *Akil* was born in a village and moved later to a rental apartment in the capital Damascus because it was closer to his work. He left Syria alone and hopes his wife and son can come soon through family reunification. *Mazal* left Syria after being imprisoned during 1 year in inhumane conditions. His wife and children are still living in a house together with Mazal’s brother’s family in Syria, but the process of family reunification is ongoing. During his asylum procedure he stayed in the same reception centre as Haruni. *Haruni* lived in a village in Eritrea, which he left because of the dictatorship. His wife and two children are still living there. Jaafar and Adia lived in a small hut in a village in Eritrea and came to Belgium to escape the unsafety. Before moving into House of Colours they stayed in an apartment in Brussels.

## 4.2 Living environment

For the three initiatives the living environment differs. The dwellings of Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen are located in a small city, whilst the other initiatives focus on non-urban areas. Initiator of House of Colours prefers quiet neighborhoods because she experienced there that neighbors know each other better and people are more tolerant for refugees, their cultural differences and noise. She works with the principle of 'inverse integration'. Whereas integration starts from a weakness of the minority group (c.q., refugees), she organizes activities that make other people curious to meet people from that group: people with other backgrounds choose themselves to come and have a more open attitude towards refugees, while the refugees are in a strong position during the interaction because the others come to them. Initiator of the Refugee Tiny House, however, experienced that almost no refugee is interested in living in Maldegem because the neighborhood is too quiet. According to him a city offers more possibilities to integrate because there are more job opportunities and supporting facilities. Moreover people living in Maldegem are not used to people from other cultures. Therefore he thinks making contacts would be easier in another area.

In their country of origin, most of the refugees interviewed liked their strong community and family connections. Selima, Mahir, Nesrine and Kardal lived close to family members and friends. Jaafars' and Adia's house formed a kind of neighborhood together with the houses of family members. Haruni and Mazal shared their house with the family of their brothers and sisters. All participants, but especially the ones who live in an individual house, experience currently a lack of contacts with people in the neighborhood. Contacts are wished with people from their own culture as well as with others. The former because it gives a feeling of familiarity and the latter because it makes them feel part of the new society, it reduces the missing of friends and family who are left behind and it contributes to their new social network.

"We have a lot of heart breaking. When I came here I cannot do anything. I wanted to live in my country. I miss it. Life is good as a community."

Living in a crowded city is not preferred, however, since all of them like quiet and green areas. The reason for this preference differs: some refer to their preference in their country of origin, others to the need for rest due to traumas and stress experienced by leaving their country of origin. Mazal, Nesrine, Kardal, Mahir and Selima consider quiet areas also as safer for their children. In these areas possibilities to study and to find a job, and easily accessible public transport are needed in order for them to become part of the society.

## 4.3 The dwelling

Social contacts are supported in the Refugee Tiny House and House of Colours through the chosen **household structure**. In the Refugee Tiny House the owner of the garden where the refugee house is located, can help the refugee and a bond between both can develop while they have their privacy inside the two individual houses. Initiator of House of Colours focuses on big houses that make living together possible. According to her, only a sincere bond between occupants can make them feel at home and still refugees' 'hunger to belong'. The house should be a structure that facilitates this:

“A dwelling as such is not a quality. There is nothing as cold as a big, empty building. (...) But what is the point? It is the life inside that house. And actually a house should be designed to support this.”

Although the refugees accommodated by House of Colours admit a bond between the occupants grew, they as well as those accommodated by Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen associate cohousing with a lack of privacy, and of mental and material control. Mahir and Selima, who live with their children in a house of Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen, refer in this context to intimate feelings that take place inside. For these feelings a house needs to be private. In House of Colours differences in cultural and personal lifestyle lead to conflicts. Examples are disagreements about television programs, and quarrels about noise at night and the kitchen not being cleaned up. The conflicts are sometimes difficult to solve due to language differences. Therefore close contacts arise more easily between household members with the same mother tongue and similar lifestyles. Furthermore, a poor fit between the size of the household and the number of available rooms is mentioned. One small bathroom for six occupants creates frustrations in the morning. Haruni lacks a lockable place to store his stuff. Jaafar and Adia miss a private room to invite visitors. As a result, Haruni explicitly mentions that he does not experience his current dwelling as a home.

“The house is good. Really good house. Because something is broken then you can fix it easy. (...). The problem is the company. (...) How many conflicts, because how many behaviors. From how many countries we come here in this [house]. (...) Communities, they are just like family. They have behavior, they have traditions. (...) But this is not community. This is refugees.”

Regardless of their family situation, almost all participants prefer therefore a house for each family. In explaining why he wants to live alone, Haruni refers to his own personality. He describes himself as a quiet person who likes to be on his own. For Mahir and Selima, Kardal and Nesrine, Jaafar and Adia, and Akil there is less need to share a house with others in order to have a feeling to belong since they (expect to) live together with family members. They do not want to avoid social interactions inside the dwelling by rejecting cohousing, rather the level of familiarity with the other household members is of influence. After all, being together with their family members inside the dwelling is for them one of the most important aspects to feel at home. The living room is a meaningful place since there in particular the bond is experienced (see Fig. 6). Moreover, instead of living together with others, they would like to invite friends when suited and this in an appropriate room.

Mazal, on the other hand, prefers to live with others even when his wife and children arrive in Belgium. This wish has to do with his stay in prison, during which he felt very lonely: “I don’t like to be alone. (...). Alone, [my head] works a lot. (...) When I’m alone, I’m crying” “Not have friends, not have my wife and children, maybe I delete. It is good for me smiling inside this house. When you have a problem, just live with me.” Initiator of House of Colours shares this opinion and therefore opts for cohousing. Refugees can support each other, according to her, not necessarily by talking about the past but by knowing they have experienced a similar situation and when they pass through difficulties together, they can develop a strong bond. Living alone would let them relive their traumas in their head. By contrast, Haruni adds explicitly that he needs a quiet and private dwelling to retreat: “We came because we have a problem and cannot live there. Because of fear. Every day you have to watch your back. Live in stress. To live together is than very difficult. (...) Every day I think about my family, my country, my government. It is blowing like a balloon. So explosive.” The need of others in coping with traumas seems thus to



**Fig. 6** Probe Nesrine: the living room is for her the most important room (translation figure: Title: ‘Current house’; mentioned on the paper where the picture is located afterwards: ‘In the current home this activity takes place in the following area:’ under the picture: ‘I feel myself in this room while doing this activity:’; on the right: ‘Objects of my home country that I consider important in this activity’)

**Fig. 7** Carpet of Mecca



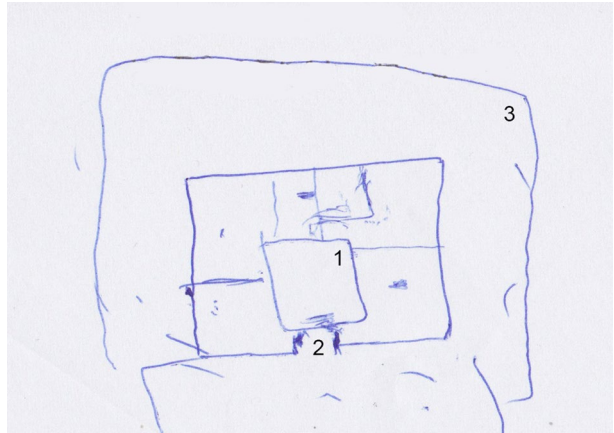
be influenced by what caused the traumas. Mazal felt alone and wants others around him, while Haruni was scared of people with other opinions about the dictatorship and prefers now to be alone.

An advantage of a private place is the possibility to personalize it, which results in a familiar feeling. Actions taken to this end reflect the own identity and are often culture-related. Participants place objects—like a carpet of Mecca and religious statues—in the houses of Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen and in their private room in House of Colours (see Figs. 7, 8). Nesrine planted seeds from Syria in her garden and drawings from the children often decorate the children’s bedrooms. The number of objects is limited, however, since the participants had to leave almost everything behind when leaving their country of origin and consider the dwelling as a temporary housing solution. Next to objects the refugees interviewed adhere to familiar lifestyles, like eating traditional food, listening traditional music, enjoying traditional smells by the use of odor sticks and praying traditions (see Fig. 9). Moreover, transnational contacts are maintained with friends and family they left behind through their mobile phones, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) and other applications (e.g., Whatsapp).

**Fig. 8** Religious objects**Fig. 9** Traditional food

Next to the household structure, the refugees interviewed indicate that their social relations inside the dwelling changed through differences in **building style**. Syrian participants were used to have a visitor room separate from the family's living room. In this way the family could keep their privacy while visitors were welcomed. That the current dwelling was not designed with the intention to maintain this habit, is dealt with in different ways. Mahir and Selima turned one bedroom into a visitors' room although they experience a lack of bedrooms in this way. Mazal would like to have a visitors' room in

**Fig. 10** Typical concentric spatial layout Syrian dwelling, drawn by Akil. The living room is located centrally (1) in the house and is surrounded by the kitchen, bathroom, sleeping rooms and other rooms (1: living room, 2: entrance, 3: garden)



his future dwelling, but is not able to have it now since he shares his rooms with other refugees. Nesrine and Kardal adapted to the western habit to invite people in their living room. Jaafar and Adia had only a small house in Guinea, but one of the rooms was a bedroom for visitors. They miss the possibility to offer visitors the opportunity to stay during the night.

The building style also affects the relationships within the household. The African participants had, next to the bedrooms and bathroom, one living room where most daily activities took place. Therefore the family members often resided all together. The Syrian refugees refer to the concentric layout of Syrian dwellings, which differs from the more linear layout of their current house (see Fig. 10). In the concentric layout the living room was located centrally. Nesrine explains the interaction between this built form and the social relations as follows:

“We have a big living room and also at the same time it is for eating, dinning room. (...) It has a lot of doors, you can go to the rooms by this. (...) When I sit I can know who came in and who go out. (...) You feel with family when you see your brother go and your children coming and your husband. (...) When you see moving in this house, you feel live. (...) I love to see all members of my family around me and I’m happy.”

Kardal, Jaafar and Adia recognize similar interactions in their current house. Kardal refers to the open relation between the kitchen and the living room, Jaafar and Adia to the large amount of space in their living room, which allows for simultaneous activities of household members.

Another difference brought up is the number of bedrooms. In the country of origin Haruni had one bedroom for the whole family. The others had, besides the master bedroom, one bedroom for the girls and one for the boys. Most participants find the latter situation appropriate. Nesrine and Kardal like the western habit to provide one bedroom for each child, enabling their children to become more independent. Additionally, having multiple levels inside one dwelling is new for the participants. While some consider stairs as dangerous for children, Kardal and Nesrine like the fact that, when they stay up longer at night, their children are less disturbed by noise.

The building's envelope has an impact on social interactions too. Syrian participants liked the parties with friends and family on their houses' flat roofs, leading to interactions with neighbors. None of the participants would rebuild the building envelope of their former dwelling, however. Climate differences, like the bigger amount of rain, make pitched roofs seem more appropriate. Nesrine also does not want to distinguish from other people in the street. Mazal adds that, for him, this counts only for the outside envelope. Inside the dwelling he prefers the Syrian style.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 A balance between privacy and connectedness

Interwoven in refugees' wishes and needs, we can recognise features which several authors connect with home and the home-making process. A link between these features and social interactions stands out. **Connectedness** with others helps to deal with the missing of family and friends who are left behind and fosters the feeling of being part of the new society. Relationships are sought with people from different as well as similar cultural backgrounds. After all, people want to develop a community feeling and show this in the public sphere in interaction with people with other identities (Boccagni and Brighenti 2017; Duyvendak 2011: 119–122). **The need for privacy**, on the other hand, corresponds with the wish to relax, to experience mental and material control, and to hold on to one's own identity and lifestyle at home. The latter is illustrated by personalization of the dwelling and the maintenance of religious, cultural and personal practices. Beside this, privacy gives room to connectedness and familiar relationships with family members. After all, a home is a place where intimacy and domesticity can be experienced (Duyvendak 2011: 37–38) and a feeling of being at home can develop through the interactions that take place inside (Duyvendak 2011: 27–28; Rosales 2010; Easthope 2004).

The need for connectedness and privacy even seems to be strengthened by the struggle with traumas or cultural differences. Sharing traumatic events, not always explicitly, as well as being in a soothing, quiet environment can bring traumas to rest. One of both strategies can be preferred depending on the cause of the traumas. Furthermore, through the link refugees indicate between on the one hand privacy and their own identity and on the other hand connectedness and relationships with others, acculturation strategies are interlinked with the established level of privacy and connectedness. A balance can help to integrate (i.e. maintain aspects of the own identity as well as search relationships with others (Berry 2005)), which is considered as the most positive acculturation strategy at a socio-cultural and psychological level (Berry 1997). For assimilation the weight lies more on connectedness with others and adaptation to be like them, and less on the own culture—even in the private sphere. In contrast, separation gives more weight to privacy. The own culture is maintained and no connectedness with others is searched for. Marginalisation does not involve a balance at cultural level. Nor the own culture is kept, neither is connectedness with others experienced.

### 5.2 Factors influencing the balance between privacy and connectedness

An appropriate balance between connectedness and privacy supports a feeling of home. Where this balance lies and how it is evaluated, seems to depend on personal lifestyle, household structure, the material environment and their interlinkages.



Preferred **personal lifestyle** differs among initiators, between initiators and refugees, and among refugees. Preferences regarding privacy and connectedness relate to personal characteristics and background, among which life trajectories and cultural values and practices. Moreover, what is understood by privacy and connectedness can differ. While the refugees interviewed preferred a dwelling for their own family, there seems to be less privacy between the family members inside the dwelling compared with a western culture. This understanding of privacy can influence their opinion regarding an appropriate household structure. How culture influences ideas about privacy and connectedness requires further research.

The **household structure** defines which people, each with their own lifestyle, live together. The bond between the occupants determines whether the dwelling is assumed as the boundary between the private and public sphere, or whether the boundary lies inside the dwelling. The extent to which the preferred lifestyles of the refugees living together match influences the number of conflicts, and thus whether an appropriate balance between privacy and connectedness is reached. In case of conflicts open communication in a familiar language is important. Open communication may be easier with family members than with other refugees. Living alone or sharing a dwelling only with household members is often preferred. As most interviewed refugees have a partner and children who are in the arrival country or expected to come, the need for cohousing with other refugees may be less than for refugees who are single. Future research can investigate whether the latter group has a stronger wish for cohousing.

In all of this the **material environment** has a role to play. When the material environment supports the preferred lifestyle and social interactions, an affective bond can arise (Clapham 2011; Memmott and Keys 2015). In this context refugees' living environment and dwelling seem to matter.

*In the living environment* making social contacts is currently experienced as difficult, sometimes leading to loneliness. Socially mixed areas indeed do not always lead to social interactions (Smets and Sneep 2017). The design of the built environment plays a role due to the interactions it can provoke. In Syria, for example, informal contacts between neighbours arise due to the small distance between their roofs where they stay during the evening. Rethinking the connection between units can thus be valuable.

*Inside the dwelling* the permanent negotiation with other occupants, and how the occupants interrelate with the material dwelling and objects inside are part of the home-making process (Rosales 2010). The refugees evaluate how well the material environment steers their lifestyle and social interactions, and in this way their feeling of privacy and connectedness as well as that of home. Personal lifestyle, household structure and material environment are thus interrelated and their interplay influences the feeling of home. Although privacy and connectedness may be supported by a dwelling, the material environment often does not actualize an appropriate balance between both when the occupants experience conflicts. The connection between rooms influences which people meet and when, and the dwelling should be adapted to the household size, for example through sufficient bedrooms, bathrooms and places to retreat. Often preferred is a private house with private places for the different occupants, a living room where the bond with family members can be experienced and a visitors' room where visitors can be invited. Next to a feeling of home, an appropriate housing design may also improve the bonds within the household.

### 5.3 Ways of influencing the balance between privacy and connectedness

The balance between privacy and connectedness, and the factors influencing it, are not just given but are also influenced by the initiators and refugees. Initiators take decisions regarding the household structure and intended lifestyle, which are reflected in the material expression of their initiatives. On the other hand, refugees decide to maintain or adapt their personal lifestyle and material environment. Values and material expression are thus continuously in flux.

Through **adaptation of the material environment** the dwelling can become a representation of refugees' personal lifestyle and support the household structure and wished social interactions in a more appropriate way. Which adaptations are appropriate are evaluated within the wider social context. After all, regardless of the mentioned climate differences, refugees accept a western building envelope at the outside because they do not want to distinguish themselves. On the other hand privacy inside the dwelling allows the possibility to keep aspects of their own culture. This manifests itself in material form through personalization.

Furthermore, values are objectified through material culture (Vellinga 2007; Memmott and Keys 2015; Miller 1987). Dwellings are **designed** with a certain lifestyle and household structure in mind. Initiator of Woonhulp voor vluchtelingen starts from the assumption that refugees have difficulties in finding their own dwelling, initiator of House of Colours assumes that they mainly have a 'hunger to belong', and initiator of the Refugee Tiny House wants to offer them support while respecting their privacy. This influences choices concerning the lifestyle, household structure and material dwelling. Designers should be more aware of how their designs facilitate privacy and connectedness. Designing with the conscious intention to support social interactions will be valuable. Meeting refugees' needs requires an appropriate balance between privacy and connectedness which leaves space for personal differences. Particularly important are not so much representations of the building style in refugees' country of origin, but more the missed and needed social interactions this or another style supports.

The design process itself can benefit from social interactions with refugees and people in contact with them. Such interactions can offer designers more insight into refugees' perspective, lead to a synergy between different perspectives, caused for example by cultural differences, and thus avoid housing designs based on designers' own assumptions only. Engaging refugees and their networks in an appropriate way may result in designs that support refugees', but possibly also other people's integration and resettlement, and thus their feeling of being at home in the new country. Through the non-dichotomous relation between values and objects like buildings (Miller 1987; Easthope 2004), resulting housing designs may even provoke positive experiences of cultural differences within the dominant group, possibly involving a change in their values and creating a more open attitude towards refugees.

## 6 Conclusion

In the meaning of home, an important role is played by the balance between privacy and connectedness. Privacy offers the possibility to express own preferences and lifestyles, while the bond with others is experienced through connectedness. Especially for refugees

this balance is important due to traumas some struggle with and its influence on their acculturation process. The experienced balance is influenced by (a) personal preferences, the household structure, intentions about lifestyles and household structure inherently interwoven in the design of the dwelling and the living environment, and (b) how occupants adapt and personalise the dwelling. Designing with a more conscious understanding of the social meaning of home can improve future housing initiatives.

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