



Migrant accommodation as a housing question, and how (not) to solve it

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Abstract

This paper looks at migrant accommodation in Berlin. In recent years, there has been a visible increase in camps to accommodate migrants. Rather than solely considering this as a reaction of repressive state actors aiming to contain the movement of migrants, the paper emphasizes another factor to explain the proliferation of camps: a neoliberal city and the resulting shortage of affordable housing. The budget cuts, austerity and privatizations in the 2000s converge with a border and asylum regime that reacted to an increase in arriving migrants since 2015. In this way, a new relational understanding of the camp and the city is configured: camp accommodation becomes part of a broader housing question. This housing question is materialized in a peripheral and substandard form of accommodation, as well as in the increasing permanence of camps. Based on in-depth field research, this paper adds new empirical knowledge to explore this context. The paper looks at current attempts to solve the housing question and problems of camp accommodation. Official approaches of planning 'better' camps are problematized as they do not engage with the roots of the housing question: the political economy of the city, a capitalist city that shapes urban space in terms of exchange rather than use value. Finally, alternative attempts are presented. Some aim to create practical solutions like shared housing projects, while others are targeting broader levels of the housing market in Berlin. By opening the question of camp accommodation to housing movements, another political perspective arises: to include migrants in the call to create a Right to the City and housing for all.

Keywords

Berlin, camp accommodation, housing, migration

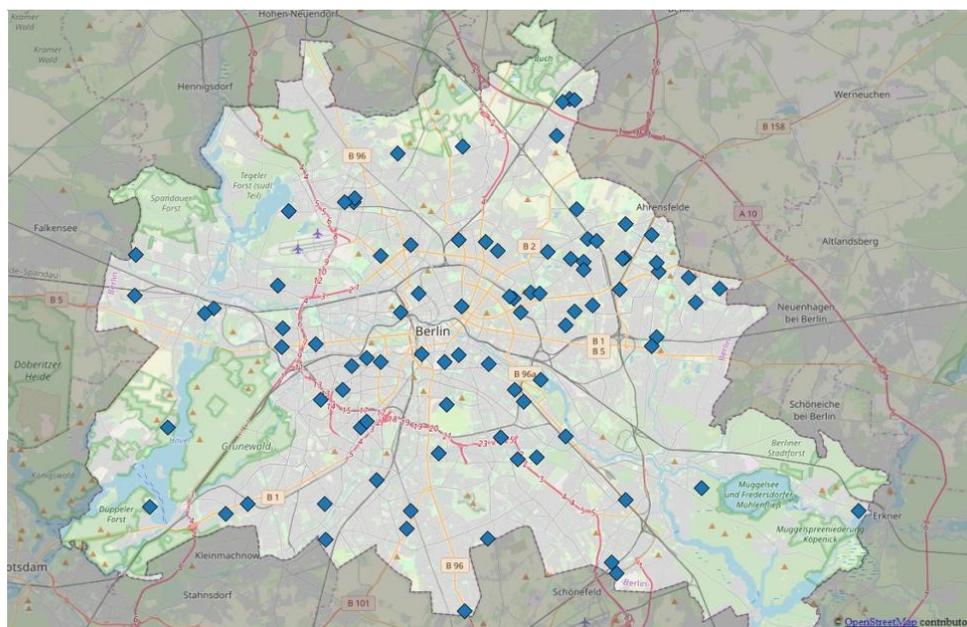
1. Introduction

2015 was a crucial moment in the recent history of migration in Europe. During the ‘long summer of migration’ (Hess et al., 2016), many migrants¹ crossed borders, created corridors across states and moved towards cities such as Berlin. Numbers of migrants increased and local governments responded to this movement by opening camps to accommodate the migrants. In Berlin, the management of migration and accommodation significantly transformed. Compared to the time before 2015, a massive proliferation of these camps is visible. The map below (figure 1) shows the locations of all camps managed by the *Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten* (LAF), Berlin’s ‘federal agency for refugees’, in June 2019. At that time, 89 camps existed accommodating around 21,000 migrants. In contrast to this, only 7 camps existed in 2010 (Muy, 2016). How can this proliferation be explained? And furthermore: why are there still so many camps, five years after the ‘long summer of migration’?

Current literature on migration and camps primarily focuses on two interrelated dynamics: on one side, the autonomous movement of people, and on the other side, repressive state actors of the border and asylum regime, which aim to manage and contain the movement of people in camps, hotspots and detention centers (e.g. Tazzioli, 2017; Tazzioli & Garelli, 2018). Despite the relevance of these accounts, I argue that other factors have to be added to fully make sense of the proliferation as well as the endurance of camps in Berlin. Based on existing research, the paper highlights the role of the neoliberal city, the political economy of the city, and as an outcome of this, a massive shortage of affordable housing. Opening up the camp to debates around housing not only contributes to a better understanding of camps, but it also adds new insights to the study of housing and today’s

Figure 1

Map of all 89 camps in Berlin (June 2019).
Source: Map created by the author based on Openstreetmap in the background (<https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>).



¹ I use the term migrants instead of ‘refugee’, ‘asylum seeker’, etc. The latter are categories of the asylum process which do not reflect the broad range of statuses and the variety of people who live in the accommodations I speak of. For this reason, I use the much wider term migrant.

cities. In this way, the paper aims to re-read the developments of 2015, bring together literature on camps and cities, and explore the relationship between them in a new and innovative way.

The article is structured into two main parts. After referring to literature on camps, cities and housing, I analyze how the accommodation of migrants in Berlin is related to the political economy of the city and to real estate. In other words, I look at how it can be described as a housing question. In the second part, I look at attempts aiming to solve this question. Here, I make use of the work of Friedrich Engels and others. This helps me to problematize current mainstream approaches and to call for more radical and broader solutions related to, and emerging from, housing movements. This opens a political perspective of a combined struggle for the Right to the City and for housing for all.

The paper is based on 12 months of in-depth field research in Berlin between 2018 and 2019. In total, I conducted 80 qualitative interviews with camp managers, bureaucrats, support groups and migrants living in camps. The questions addressed aspects such as the current camp management, the situation of living in camps, the location of camps and the relevance of individual housing. I visited 20 of the 89 camps and focused on five camps and their neighborhoods in depth. In addition to this, I carried out participant observation, followed the media coverage and analyzed official data. Looking at overall developments and at dynamics on the ground as well as comparing the perspectives of different interview partners allowed me to get a detailed picture of camp accommodation in Berlin. But my positionality as a white, male academic affected the research and located myself in a certain relation to interview partners. It was both a study of the city, where I have lived for more than 10 years, but also about camp accommodation which I studied as an ‘outsider’. At the same time, being involved in activism around housing allowed me an engagement in current debates and questions without necessarily making use of formal method-tools. During the research, I constantly crossed both roles as an academic as well as an activist. Both positions became blurry and partly overlapped. This created challenges, but it also allowed me to cross debates and disciplines. In this way, while contributing to a reframing of the camp-city relation and exploring housing through camps, the paper also provides new empirical material pointing to current developments in the housing movements of Berlin.

2. Camps inside cities and the aspect of housing

Critical migration studies on the events of 2015 focus on two main elements. The first is the autonomous movement of migrants to Europe, which created a corridor along the Balkan route towards places like Berlin (e.g. Kasperek, 2016). Secondly, the existing literature shows how camps, hotspots and detention centers are used to control the movement of migrants (Andrijasevic, 2010; Tazzioli, 2017; Tazzioli & Garelli, 2018). These accounts are useful to understand important patterns in the management of migrant mobility. A central question is the containment and housing in camps.

Similar to these discussions, literature on camps focuses primarily on questions of power, citizenship and (state) actors managing and containing the movement of migrants.

Camps are a ‘technology of power’ (Malkki, 2002) often discussed in relation to inclusion and exclusion. Many accounts point to the enclosed and controlling character of camps (Herscher, 2017; Maestri, 2019; Turner, 2016; as well as Pieper, 2013 and Täubig, 2009 on camps in Germany). Agamben (1998) considers camps as exceptional and extraterritorial spaces in which bare life, life stripped of its political subjectivity, is managed (picked up by Minca, 2015). However, the line of in/exclusion, of in/outside, is more complex than presented by Agamben. Scholars have emphasized the highly political character of camps (Ramadan, 2013; Rygiel, 2011; Sigona, 2015). They have shown that camps are not entirely separated from their surroundings. The enclosure is contested (Isin & Rygiel, 2007) and people are differentially included into society and the labor market (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Studies on camps inside cities underline the complexity of in/exclusion. Moving away from the extraterritorial aspect of camps, the distinction of camp and city becomes increasingly blurred (Martin, 2015; Oesch, 2017; Qasmiyeh & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013). Furthermore, the emergence of camps inside cities allows us to explore the city itself, opening up questions of politics and citizenship (Sanyal, 2014). In this way, camps are not totally extraterritorial and exceptional. Camps are related to their surrounding environment and to larger transformations in society.

In this way, it is necessary to cross debates, geographies and disciplines in order to understand issues of forced migration (Pasquetti & Sanyal, 2020). Tofighian highlights how migrant detention is inextricably linked to other forms of violence and larger systems of oppression (Tofighian, 2020). As he continues, this not only a call for new perspectives in academia, but also about connecting this analysis to political action. For me, the attempt to create new trans-disciplinary approaches goes hand in hand with looking at activism and movements crossing fields of struggles. Literature has shown that movements exist which are bridging, for example, migrant and feminist struggles (e.g. Kullrich, 2017) and scholars are pointing to of the intersections of housing and issues of racism, migration and no-border activism (e.g. Danielzik & Bendix, 2016; Hamann & Türkmen, 2020). At the end of this paper, I will pick up on this and show that a combined movement-building is crucial when addressing issues of camp accommodation.

In this paper, I emphasize the relational character of camps. I argue that the political economy is important to further explore the camp-city relation and to understand the developments of 2015. Despite the overall tendency in the literature on camps and migration mentioned above, some scholars have explored other aspects, such as how the asylum regime is shaped by neoliberal austerity (Darling, 2016) or how migration governance is based on a ‘racial neoliberalism’ (Bhagat, 2019). Work on migrant accommodation in Berlin underlines these aspects, especially in the context of 2015. Budget cuts and other austerity measures in the 2000s, as well as a massive housing shortage, are some of the critical factors impacting camp accommodation in recent years (El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018; Lebuhn, 2016; Soederberg, 2018). Moreover, certain actors such as construction, catering and security companies made enormous profits thanks to the emerging camps (Pai, 2018). When addressing the problems posed by these accommodations, Lebuhn argues that ‘the current crisis of accommodation is a result of long-term austerity policies’ (Lebuhn, 2016, translation

by the author). I aim to contribute to and expand upon this argument to show that the issue is not only about power and repressive state actors. It is also important to consider the neoliberal political economy of the city, especially pertaining to housing, in order to understand the emergence and proliferation of camps in Berlin. By analyzing the camp inside the city and by framing it as a ‘housing question’, I move away from an exceptional understanding of camps and further develop a relational understanding. I argue that this not only reframes the concept of camps, but also opens up an analysis into cities that allows us to investigate urban transformations around housing.

The discussion of the ‘housing question’ derives from the work of Engels (1872/1973), who argued almost 150 years ago that housing is inextricably linked to the structures of capitalism. Recent publications picked up on this (e.g. Madden & Marcuse, 2016, Rolnik, 2019). In German-speaking debates, scholars made use of Engels’ ‘housing question’ to analyze the current situation in cities such as Berlin (LuXemburg Magazin, 2019; Prokla Redaktion, 2018). The editors of a special issue on the ‘(new) housing question’ write: ‘The “housing question” discussed by Engels did not remain a phenomenon that was limited to the 19th century. On the contrary, the question occurs anew with a certain regularity ever since, because societies with a capitalist housing supply face a fundamental contradiction.’ (Prokla Redaktion, 2018, p. 175, translation by the author)

This paper picks up on the interest in the (new) housing question. But in order to explore and to grasp the ‘fundamental contradiction’ of housing it is important to make use of more recent literature. First, it is critical to ask: what is the city and how is the city related to housing? Based on an understanding of space as a product of social relations, not as a static container (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994), the city and urban space are relational: the city is not a thing in and of itself. It is not solely an administrative territory either, but rather a way of spatially organizing society in capitalism. In this way, I locate this paper in a Marxist reading of urban space. Cities are shaped by capitalism and are central to its reproduction. As a consequence, urban space is increasingly framed in terms of exchange value rather than use value. This concept derives from Marx’s value theory of labor and was further developed by geographers such as Lefebvre (1991 & 1996) and Harvey (1973). Money and exchange shape every piece of land in the city. Space is capitalized and imbued with value. At the same time, use value continues to exist. The city’s inhabitants make use of space in their everyday life, such as for housing. Yet, this use value increasingly diminishes over time (ibid., p. 157). The conflicts of use and exchange value point to the ‘fundamental contradiction’ mentioned above. Housing is a central area in which commodified (urban) space clashes with the need for dwelling.

The commodification of urban space is not a new phenomenon in capitalism. However, this process intensified under neoliberalism; the city became even more crucial for capitalism, investments and speculation (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Governments pushed these transformations by facilitating privatizations, outsourcing, austerity and an entrepreneurial governance of the city (Harvey, 2001). Real estate in particular is a central site for investment and these kinds of policies (Harvey, 2013; Stein, 2019) with the ‘hyper-commodification’ of housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 26). For example, many urban centers are shaped by

empty apartments solely used for speculation as well as by an increase in holiday apartments (Gant, 2016; Sassen, 2017). But the more urban space turns into exchange value, the more conflicts emerge. The use value of housing is increasingly sidelined, and many cities face massive shortages of affordable housing, urban fragmentation and segregation, as well as gentrification, evictions and displacement (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Pull et al., 2020; Sassen, 2014; Smith, 1996). People are impacted by the ‘hyper-commodification’ of housing. The violent consequences of those developments are especially felt by marginalized people; housing shortages are increasingly understood as racialized (Vincze & Zamfir, 2019) and current developments such as of gentrification reproduce the gendered character of cities (Kern, 2020). Potts speaks of a ‘global’ housing crisis (2020), and Berlin is not the exception to these trends. Market-oriented development and the wave of neoliberal policies have increased social fragmentation and segregation in the city (Häußerman & Kapphan, 2000). Especially in recent years, gentrification has flourished (Bernt & Holm, 2005) and the city’s housing shortage has intensified.

This paper draws from the work of Engels, Harvey and other Marxist geographers. However, literature on housing and the political economy of cities has paid little attention to the question of camps and migrant accommodation. Some contributions exist that refer to (racial) neoliberalism, housing and migrant accommodation (Bhagat, 2019; Mattern, 2018; Soederberg, 2018) but the majority of the accounts mentioned above do not discuss this aspect in depth. At the same time, policy-oriented studies exist that point to the importance of housing for integration but without discussing underlying structures of the political economy (e.g. Bolzoni et al., 2015; Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, 2017). This paper points to gaps in the literature and the need to expand perspectives. First, it is critical to open literature on camps to issues of housing and the political economy; that is, to read camps as a housing question. Second, it is imperative to infuse housing debates with the realities of migrant accommodation in camps today.

3. Migrant accommodation as a (neoliberal) housing question

3.1 Existing camp accommodation

This section looks at current camp accommodation and why it has to be seen as a (neoliberal) housing question. What are camps like on the ground? First, camp accommodation is characterized by substandard housing conditions. Camps, such as the container camp seen in the photo above (figure 2), are not individual housing. A central point is the sharing of space and issues of privacy. In interviews, migrants frequently criticized these conditions. In the case of the containers, a room of less than ten square meters is shared by two people. In addition, low-quality furniture, noise, poor insulation and construction defects are characteristic of many camps. Containers in particular are known for extreme heat during hot summer days and nights. Finally, camp residents do not have a lease and cannot claim tenants’ rights. Strict regulations limit the possibilities for residents to furnish their places, while controlling when they are permitted to have visitors (all camps have a security booth at the entrance). Migrants can be moved from camp to camp (for

example if one camp is closed down) and people can be banned from camps if they do not comply with the regulations and rules. In interviews, several migrants used the term ‘prison’ when talking about these conditions. Clearly, camp accommodation is much more precarious than individual housing in apartments.

Second, camps are unevenly distributed in Berlin. On this map (figure 3), two main characteristics are visible. The first is about the center of the city, the so called ‘Ring’ (orange circle). Whereas 33 per cent of the 3.7 million inhabitants of Berlin live inside the center, only 12 per cent of accommodated migrants live there. Most camps are located outside the city center, but the distribution outside is not homogeneous. As a second characteristic, only a few camps are located in the southwest of the city (green circle) which is rather wealthy, with low unemployment rates and a high overall income. Contrary to this, about 50 per cent of the accommodated migrants live in three districts in the northeast of the city (red circle),

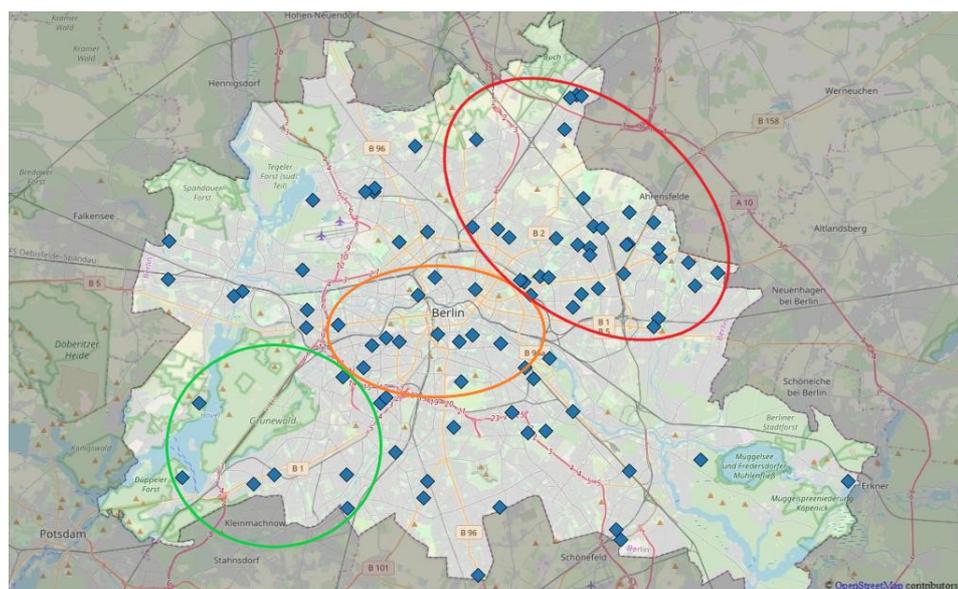
Figure 2

A container camp.
Photography: Author.



Figure 3

Patterns of the distribution of camps in Berlin. The orange circle marks the *Ring*, the center of the city. The green circle points to a district in the southwest, the red circle to the concentration of accommodation in the northeast. **Source:** Map created by the author based on Openstreetmap in the background (<https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>)



mainly in residential and industrial areas. Compared to 12 districts in total, these three districts accommodate a very high number of migrants. As a result, the concentration of migrant camps in the northeast is visible. Whereas the southwest is rather wealthy, the areas in the northeast are shaped by high rates of unemployment and poverty. In this way, it is not only about camp concentrations in the northeast of the city but also about social divisions within the city. A camp manager addressed this point in an interview when talking about educational structures in her area:

‘Somehow this mix is missing. [...]. The schools cannot absorb all of this, because there is simply not enough pedagogical staff. Why don’t they build an accommodation in the nice Charlottenburg [wealthy area in the center-west]? Some accommodation exist there and they are partly building new ones there. But why not more of these central and mixed accommodations? For me, it seems that such accommodation is preferably built in the outskirts or in industrial areas. [...] At times, I have the feeling that it is always at the city boundary, where so many problems already exist.’²

In Berlin, the increasing social divide and the un-mixing, or segregation, of neighborhoods is noticeable, especially since the reunification of the city in 1990 (Häußerman & Kapphan, 2000). The spatial distribution of camps indicates patterns of segregation that are similarly visible when looking at housing in general. But camps do not only mirror segregation. They also seem to increase existing patterns of segregation especially in the peripheral northeast of the city. These areas are shaped by social marginalization and more precarious services like education. In this way, the substandard housing conditions are not only materialized in terms of the architectural form and regulation inside the camps, but also in the peripheral location of the camps.

Third, camps proliferate and become enduring. Many migrants living in camps have been there for four to five years. If the substandard housing conditions continue over a long period of time, the effects on people are even harsher. One migrant pointed to the lack of privacy and the many regulations. He told me, ‘You cannot live in a Wohnheim [hostel] forever [...]. In a Wohnheim you always have problems, always stress’. Thus, the demand for housing becomes more important the longer people have to stay in camps. Several migrants said that they would even prefer a much more peripheral apartment, if this would allow them to leave the camp.

One interview partner told me: ‘Without an apartment, you don’t have a life’. Another said: ‘If I have a flat, everything is fine. The mind is relaxed.’ Similar to many interview partners, he pointed to the impact of enduring camp accommodation and the resulting high level of stress. Finally, a migrant at another camp told me that ‘Berlin is beautiful and not expensive, but the problem is the apartment [...] I can’t start anything now.’ He described his plans to take up a vocational training course but the stress and lack of privacy did not allow him to do so. He said that he needs an apartment, ‘and then I can start a new life’. These are examples of housing as one of the most important topics in the interviews. A

² All interviews were translated by the author.

principal demand of those interviewed is to move out of camps and into a more private living space that allows them to arrive and to ‘start a new life’ in the city.

In 2018, a study about people who claimed asylum between 2013 and 2016 showed that 83 per cent were still living in camps in Berlin (Baier & Siegert, 2018). This was the highest percentage among all states in Germany. Today, more than half of people living in those camps already passed their asylum application and had received status. On paper, these people should be living in apartments by now. Authorities only allow these people to remain in camps in order to prevent homelessness, given the lack of other available options. Moreover, Berlin has a rather liberal legislation permitting asylum seekers to look for apartments even during their asylum application (El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018). Given this, why are people not moving into apartments? Despite legal frameworks allowing migrants to leave camps and despite the principal demand for housing, it is very difficult for migrants to find an apartment. This is mainly a result of the extreme scarcity of affordable housing in Berlin. In addition, public rent allowances (subsidies for people with no or a low income) are often too low to rent an apartment, and precarious asylum statuses make it hard to obtain a tenancy agreement. Some interview partners referred to racist behavior on the part of landlords who prefer white German tenants instead of migrants. This makes the scarce access to housing even more limited for this group of people.

3.2 Neoliberal austerity urbanism

The shortage of affordable housing is a central factor in why camps proliferate and become enduring. Rents are skyrocketing in Berlin. The average rent increased from 2005 to 2019 by 50 per cent.³ The price for newly rented apartments increased by 83 per cent between 2008 and 2018.⁴ Two factors make this increase in rents even more drastic. First, around 85 per cent of people rent their homes and are directly impacted by rent increases. Secondly, compared to other areas in Germany, the average income is very low in Berlin and did not increase much during recent years.⁵ A recent study has shown that only a very small amount of housing is affordable, especially in the center of the city, and that people with a low income have to spend a higher amount of their income on rent (Mietenwatch, 2019). In addition to spending more and more money on housing, displacements and evictions occur when people are not able to afford their apartments anymore, indicating increased precarity in the housing market for tenants.

Berlin’s housing market has increasingly turned into a financialized space of high-value plots and apartments, and of exchange rather than use value. Gentrification impacts many areas of the city (Bernt & Holm, 2005; Helbrecht, 2016). This development was boosted by neoliberal policies carried out by Berlin’s city government. In the 2000s, the collapse of a local public bank (which heavily speculated in real estate) led to rising public debts. The city government was pushed to implement austerity measures: cutting social services and welfare,

³ In May 2019, it was 6.72€ per m2. Data from RBB (2019).

⁴ In 2018, it was 9.50€ per m2 on average. Data from Schönball (2018).

⁵ The income increased by only 1.3 per cent between 2000 and 2016. On average, the income was 19,719 € per person per year in 2016. Data from Seils & Baumann (2019).

and privatizing public assets, including public housing (Holm et al., 2013). The percentage of public housing in relation to the total housing stock dropped from 28 per cent in 1995 to 16 per cent in 2008 (Uffer, 2013). New owners of the privatized housing stocks are mainly large financialized housing corporations. On average, each unit was sold for less than 20,000€, a very low price as Holm and Aalbers noted (2008). In their article, they relate this trend to a larger change in the welfare system and argue:

‘In Germany, the restructuring from welfare to a workfare and the general trend towards deregulation resulted in a reduction of housing subsidies and lead to a significant change of the housing policy.’ (ibid., p. 13)

Austerity intensified this change in the city’s welfare system and the rising commodification of housing. The 2000s reflect what Peck calls ‘austerity urbanism’ (2012): cities are pushed to implement massive budget cuts leading to market oriented transformations. A resulting lack of public housing significantly contributes to the difficulties people face in finding affordable apartments and leaving the camps.

In addition, these austerity policies impact existing migrant accommodation in other ways. Current camp accommodation is highly expensive. At a camp, an interview partner mentioned that accommodation for a family of six costs 5500€ per month. As both parents were taking a full-time language course and were not able to work, the sum was paid by the state. This is not an exceptionally high number but rather common. Even if this sum includes costs such as security, public officials confirmed that accommodating people in apartments is actually much cheaper and provides higher standards. When the numbers of migrants increased in 2015, the bureaucratic structure and social welfare system of the city were precarious and slow in reacting due to prior cuts and privatizations in the 2000s. As there wasn’t enough public housing or other facilities to accommodate people, the city had to react ad hoc by renting, buying and building camps at a very high price, an official involved in this process told me. Thus, as a result of austerity and the previous transformation of the welfare system, the city spends a great deal of money for the current substandard housing. In this sense, the developments in 2015 were a trigger, indicating the fragility of the city’s welfare system. Migrants did not create a crisis; the crisis of the welfare system was created by prior cuts and neoliberal governance.

Furthermore, Berlin did not only sell off public housing. Much of its public land was sold in the 2000s as well. This not only boosted financialization and speculation in the city’s real estate market, but it also impacts possibilities of re-using public properties and real estate for migrant accommodation, as well as building new camps on available public land. Public officials and planners mentioned in interviews that they would like to use more central locations, but public property inside the center is almost unavailable; most of these plots were sold off in the 2000s as they were the most valuable. One official said:

‘[...] for many years, the guideline was to sell off property in order to balance the budgets. At that time, things were certainly sold which were marketable. Today, you sometimes look with tears in your eyes at the one or the other that was sold back then. Where some investor builds some expensive condominiums now.’

In 2015, the city made use of remaining public land and properties to set up camps, mostly located in the periphery of the city. In this way, the political economy of the city and neoliberal transformations during the 2000s set the stage for the current spatial organization of migrant accommodation in Berlin. A shortage of affordable housing leads to the proliferation and endurance of camps. This shortage, combined with a precarious welfare system, pushed the government to establish an expensive yet peripheral and substandard camp system. It thus becomes clear why camp accommodation must be seen as a (neoliberal) housing question rooted in the political economy of the city.

4. How (not) to solve the housing question

4.1 How planners and officials aim to solve it

How do public officials and bureaucrats react to this situation and the demand for decent housing? In my interviews, I spoke to several officials and most of them highlighted individual apartment-housing as the ideal situation for accommodation and integration. Some added the fact that individual housing would actually be much cheaper for public budgets compared to the high costs of camp accommodation. But the authorities are not offering apartments as alternatives to camps. All interview partners mentioned the shortage of affordable housing as the main problem and obstacle for this. In this way, officials acknowledge that the proliferation and endurance of camps is related to the overall housing situation in the city. In response, they are aiming to improve the existing accommodation by building more and ‘better’ camps, given their prediction that there will be very little ‘outflow’ of migrants into more permanent housing in the coming years. One official pointed to one type of camp (called shared accommodation, *Gemeinschaftsunterkunft*) and said:

‘You always have to add: these shared accommodations, these hostels, are only a substitute for missing apartments. After the obligation of living in first reception centers, all people certainly have the right to look for an apartment. But the housing situation is very tense in Berlin. Even people with an average income have great difficulty finding a central place in the city. So these shared accommodations are a protected segment that we create in order to provide a humane accommodation situation which we can control on a qualitative level. They are withdrawn from the market, so to say. But yes, certainly it is an institution and not a private setting.’

In Berlin, MUFs (modular accommodations for refugees) are the answer to this housing question proposed by public planners and architects. MUFs are modular structures of prefabricated elements and some are already built, such as the one seen in the picture above (figure 4). According to officials, building regular public housing would take too long. Instead, planners make use of specific building regulations for migrant accommodation to speed up the construction process. But again, these MUFs are separated from the outside neighborhoods, identifiable by a fence that surrounds them. MUFs are also characterized as

Figure 4

A newly built MUF.
Photography: Author



substandard shared spaces, with excessive regulations and no provision of tenants' rights. Looking at the location of these places, most MUFs are built on the outskirts of the city and often in marginalized areas. The majority of MUFs are located in the northeast of the city. This increases the concentration of migrants at the periphery even more.

The city's 'way forward' in terms of migrant accommodation for the coming years is continuously shaped by the problems mentioned above. Planners are aiming to build MUFs at more central locations, but this process is much more difficult given that public land is rare in the center and many other stakeholders are competing for the remaining plots (such as for building schools). In this way, MUFs are not 'withdrawn from the market' as mentioned by the official. Rather MUFs are deeply embedded in a 'hyper-commodified' housing and real estate market. MUFs indicate how the government is reacting to a situation that is shaped by a lack of public housing and a scarcity of public land, problems that were exacerbated by neoliberal policies in the early 2000s. Moreover, officials told me that the city government plans to re-use these MUFs for other groups of people. They aim to use MUFs for about 60 years. Students and homeless people are mentioned as possible groups to accommodate in the future. MUFs are not only related to migrant accommodation per se, but also to the accommodation of people with low or no income. MUFs are a part of solving the housing question on a larger scale. Yet it is a strategy reliant on substandard buildings in the peripheries of the city.

4.2 Does this really solve the housing question?

Accommodating marginalized groups of people at the outskirts of the city, as well as in substandard forms of accommodation, are not new phenomena. Here I return to literature on housing and to the work of Friedrich Engels in particular, as it is helpful in understanding the current developments in Berlin. In *Zur Wohnungsfrage* (on the housing question) (1872/1973), Engels engages with the housing shortage, which was widely discussed at the

time, and criticizes attempts by libertarians and the bourgeoisie to solve this issue. For him, neither are addressing the roots of the question, but are rather focusing on legal aspects, trying to go back to pre-capitalist times, or calling for individual property ownership. Contrary to these approaches, Engels emphasizes the capitalist mode of production as being at the core of the housing question. He argues that:

‘In such a [capitalist] society, the housing shortage is no coincidence. It is a necessary institution and together with its backlashes on health etc., it can only be abolished if the whole social order, from which the housing shortage emanates, is fundamentally reordered.’ (ibid., p. 236, translation by the author)

Solving the housing question can only take place by changing capitalist social relations. This idea is useful when looking at the case of migrant accommodation in Berlin in two ways. On the one hand, the current shortage of affordable housing can be seen as a direct outcome of capitalist urbanization. Based on more recent literature and in emphasizing the overlap between housing and neoliberal transformations, this paper is framing migrant accommodation in this way.

On the other hand, Engels’ text helps us to analyze the proposed solutions to the problem of migrant accommodation in Berlin. These solutions echo the positions Engels criticizes; officials in Berlin agree on the shortage of housing and frame the accommodation of migrants as a housing question, but they aim to solve the problem without addressing the inherent inequalities of capitalism. Rather than relying on low level architectural and technocratic solutions, it is necessary to re-politicize camp accommodation and to talk about changing central elements of the ‘hyper-commodified’ housing system.

However, Engels calls the housing question a ‘secondary’ misery and phenomenon (ibid., p. 213). For him, the production of surplus value is the main logic of capitalism and the factory is the central site of this process. It is important to not simply recite Engels’ work, but to adjust it as well. In terms of value production, Engels rightly points to the fact that no extra value is produced by paying rent to a landlord. All money paid was previously produced. However, based on Harvey’s argument about ‘spatial fixes’ (1973), the process of value production by labor is not the only relevant part of value that should be addressed. It is also crucial to look at processes of value realization after production.⁶ Here, the real estate market plays a central role as capital is stored in it. Similarly, Madden and Marcuse (2016) question Engels’ classification of housing as secondary because of the increasing relevance of real estate as an object of speculation in financialized capitalism. Scholars such as Lefebvre (1996) and Harvey (2013) have emphasized that urban space is a significant site for capitalism, but also for emancipation and change. The factory is not the only site of resistance. As cities and real estate become more important for the reproduction of capitalism, the importance of housing as a site of struggle increases as well. In this way, calling the housing question

⁶ Furthermore and as feminist scholars have emphasized, social reproduction is crucial to understand production, labor and value (e.g. Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012). Reproduction is an integral part of production. This adds another point of critique to the writings of Marx and Engels. In terms of camp accommodation, this raises questions for further discussion: such as about social reproduction inside camps, about care and everyday lives, but also about the gendered access to housing.

‘secondary’ tends to lead to a political analysis which dismisses struggles and movements around housing and cities. Engels’ writing has limitations. More recent studies provide more detailed analyses of the real estate market, housing and capitalism (such as by Madden and Marcuse, 2016 or Harvey, 1973). However, Engel’s text continues to shape debates on the ‘(new) housing question’ (LuXemburg Magazin, 2019; Prokla Redaktion, 2018). Despite its aforementioned limitations, I consider Engels’ discussion of the ‘housing question’ relevant and a useful base for the analysis of the current housing question in Berlin. Furthermore, Engels reflects on what a solution to the housing question could look like:

‘In the big cities, enough residential buildings already exist to immediately, with rational use of them, remedy any actual ‘housing shortage’. Certainly, this can only happen by the expropriation of the current owners, respectively by housing in their buildings homeless people or workers who are excessively crowded together in their present homes.’ (Engels, 1973, p. 226 et seqq., translation by the author)

Similar to Engels, Madden and Marcuse (2016) underline the point that fundamental changes in structures of ownership are necessary in order to create a ‘right to housing’. They argue that:

‘More than a simple legal claim, a real right to housing needs to take the form of an ongoing effort to democratize and decommodify housing, and to end the alienation that the existing housing system engenders.’ (ibid., p. 197)

Solutions to the housing question need to focus on housing as a use value, which is not a commodity but which is democratically controlled. This paper makes use of these works to show that the current accommodation of migrants can only be changed by larger transformations of ownership structures in the city. Expropriation (mentioned by Engels), community land trusts (Marcuse, 2020; Moore, 2018) or community planning and control (Stein, 2019) could be parts of this effort. But as Madden and Marcuse argue, ‘we can obviously not offer a set of policies or blueprints. Precise demands need to be tailored to specific conditions and be proposed by local actors’ (2016, p. 201). In this way, it is important to turn to the various alternatives, demands and movements that currently exist on the ground.

4.3 Alternatives in Berlin

In Berlin, camp accommodation came under fire during several self-organized migrant protests. The most visible was the occupation of the central square Oranienplatz in 2012 (Bhimji, 2016). Migrants demanded changes in the asylum system, including the abolition of camps. After 2015, people protested against the living conditions of gymnasiums and other emergency shelters used as camps (for example Loy, 2016). Responses to the recent Corona pandemic made the substandard quality of accommodation even more visible. Some camps were put under quarantine with insufficient supply of services, and the general lack of private space and the sharing of rooms are not allowing sufficient protection from the virus (Riese et al., 2020). This situation triggered criticism and new protests. I argue that the demand to

end camp accommodation, observed in self-organized protests and present in several interviews with migrants, is the base to start asking for change and housing alternatives.

Based on these demands as well as on the detour into the work of Engels and others, current attempts to solve the problems of migrant accommodation in Berlin appear to be neither sufficient nor sustainable. Even though planners and officials agree that the shortage of affordable housing impacts migrant accommodation, they do not fully engage with the roots of this shortage and instead plan the construction of new camps and other substandard accommodation. If MUFs are not an appropriate way forward, what could a solution to the housing shortage in Berlin look like?

Beyond the mainstream proposal to build ‘better’ camps, other alternatives are emerging in Berlin. Some are more practical, while others look for broader solutions. Different activists and groups are pushing ideas for shared housing projects at more central locations, creating an alternative to the segregated and substandard camp accommodation. They are creating links to housing cooperatives (*Genossenschaften*), for example, to include migrants in newly built projects. In the initiative Campus Cosmopolis, future tenants of old and new Berliners collectively plan a shared house. But it is more than just building the house; based on many workshops and plenaries, the group seeks to reimagine and redefine how people can live together. It becomes a project which emphasizes collective planning rather than just the outcome of a building in the end. The result would be a shared house, centrally located and without the substandard conditions and separation found in the camps. Even though these projects are constrained by the housing market and have to deal with land scarcity, certain amounts of rent to pay, etc., they nonetheless provide an alternative to the current camp accommodation. One migrant living in a shared housing project underlined this point and told me:

‘The camp is completely another thing. Because the camp is just a place to sit and you wait for nothing, and there is nothing to do. But here it’s like any *Wohnung* [flat], like any flat you rent, you know.’

In addition to shared housing projects as alternatives to camps, other movements are pushing for long-term, more fundamental changes by addressing the housing market as a whole. Several housing movements organize against the increasing shortage of affordable housing in Berlin, and these movements are growing. In April 2019, 40,000 people marched against ‘rent-madness’ (*Mietenwahnsinn*) and for housing for all. Additionally, groups against evictions, tenant organizations and social centers are working to create alternative visions of housing. In terms of ownership structures in the city, the group *#besetzen* (occupy) brought attention to the recent increase of empty apartments and holiday flats (e.g. Schönherr, 2012) by occupying empty buildings in the city. The campaign *Deutsche Wohnen und Co. Enteignen* (Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen and Co.) calls for the expropriation of all private housing companies owning more than 3000 apartments in the city. The largest of them is Deutsche Wohnen SE with more than 110,000 apartments. The campaign is centered on a public referendum that would push the city government to implement legislation for expropriation. In June 2019, the first step was taken and more than 77,000 signatures were collected. This

initiated a large debate about housing injustice and about expropriation as a mean to reduce inequality.

Movements such as the expropriation campaign push for radical changes in the ownership structure of housing. This is crucial for solving the housing question. As camp accommodation is inextricably linked to the ‘hyper-commodification’ of housing, this attempt is also creating a base for alternative forms of migrant accommodation in the city. Furthermore, by reading camp accommodation as a housing question, new political perspectives arise. First, the idea of collective struggle emerges, a struggle that blurs the migrant/non-migrant divide and calls for housing for all. This was already visible in the city. For example, in the neighborhood of Kreuzberg in 2014, tenants were able to unite under the slogan ‘*United Neighbors – Bleiberecht und Wohnraum für alle*’ (right to stay and housing for all) (Danielzik & Bendix, 2016). In this way, the protest created a political perspective that moved away from the more common paternalistic and victimizing approach to migrants.

Second, the call for housing for all implies a critique of the structural roots of this shortage. It is a call for a city owned by its inhabitants, not by capital. It emphasizes use value instead of exchange value. It is a Right to the City (Lefebvre, 1996), to be able to have access to and participate in the city. Solving the housing question does not mean just increasing the quantity of substandard housing. It is about creating better quality housing for all. In this way, a combination of both practices seems important: creating more practical and needed shared housing projects, and at the same time, struggling to change the structure of ownership in the city. The most important demand is to provide the means for all people, regardless of citizenship status, to live a decent life in the city. This approach acknowledges the demand that was visible in many interviews with migrants living in camps: to be able to leave the camp, find an apartment, settle down and start a life in the city.

5. Conclusion

This paper makes two central arguments. The first is that migrant accommodation in Berlin must be seen not only as a result of repressive state actors and power, but also of the political economy of the city. The proliferation of camps after 2015 and their enduring presence over time are inseparable from the neoliberal transformations and policies implemented in the 2000s. As a result, a substandard, peripheral and separated system of camp accommodation emerged, making it hard for people to arrive and settle down in the city. As such, camp accommodation must be read as a housing question. The analysis of camps points to the consequences of a shortage of affordable housing for people with precarious citizenship statuses. But camps are not exceptional; this analysis also generates important insights for the study of housing in general. Mattern argues that ‘the huge difficulties in terms of refugee accommodation are not a ‘refugee problem’ but a problem of the housing-market which matters to the majority of people in cities.’ (Mattern, 2018, p. 338, translation by the author).

In this article I cross disciplines to reconfigure a relational understanding of camps and cities. The perspective of migrant accommodation as housing should be included in further

research, as there is still much more work to be done on the topic. For example, camps in Berlin are shaped by neoliberal policies as well as an asylum and border regime that became more repressive after 2015. The state is not only visible in the tightening of asylum laws but is also a central actor for implementing neoliberal transformations. Research on migrant accommodation could further analyze the complex role of the state in the asylum system and in the housing market, focusing on the interrelation of racism and repression for the former, and on financialization and speculation for the latter.

In the second part of the paper, I focus on proposals to solve the housing question and the problems of camp accommodation. Despite acknowledging the shortage of affordable housing as a reason for why people have to stay in camps, planners and public officials stick to the idea of building ‘better’ camps that continue to reproduce substandard and segregated living conditions. The paper problematizes these attempts towards a solution and stresses that more sustainable options are needed that go to the root of the housing question and the very structure of capitalism. This is the second central argument of the paper. Despite mainstream solutions, alternatives do exist in Berlin, and they are vibrant, and growing. Further research could develop this argument. In Athens for example, migrants and support groups created squats as an ‘antithetical space’ to camps (Raimondi, 2019, p. 197). This shows that alternatives to camp accommodation exist in several forms, and it is useful to compare and discuss them in more detail.

Finally, the paper does not only seek to address new perspectives and further research in academia. By framing the question of camp accommodation as a housing question I am relating migrant struggles in the camp to the struggles of urban housing movements, such as to the expropriation campaign. This helps visualize alternatives to create a better city centered on its inhabitants and committed to housing for all. A close collaboration and exchange between housing movements and anti-racist, no-border struggles seems central to this effort. Housing movements could pay more attention to questions of camp accommodation. Solidarity and migrant support groups could discuss questions of housing, expropriation and tenant organizing more explicitly. In this way, a unified critique against the border regime and against neoliberal housing shortages is possible. The connection between struggles is not created by itself, but examples of this connection exist and it is crucial to follow this path moving forward.

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