The homing of newcomers in Brussels at the intersection of bordering and urban speculation:
From survival strategies to infrastructures for civic imagination and urban inclusion

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Abstract

Informed by a year of participatory action research in Globe Aroma, an artistic work and meeting place for artists and art lovers with a background as newcomers in Brussels, Belgium, this paper examines how newcomers negotiate their homing at the intersection of the bordering and securitisation apparatus on the one side, and gentrification and urban speculation on the other. We argue that these processes do not only challenge newcomers' homing by making access to decent and affordable housing difficult, but also by the precarious conditions of the organisations that offer them support, community, and social services, and that are often housed in low quality, insecure, temporary infrastructures.

Our research explores how, under such conditions, solidarities begin to form between organisations (often working in housing, socio-cultural, or educational fields) that are feeling the pressures of gentrification and speculation and their different communities that are experiencing different forms of precarity or exclusion. The survival strategies of coalition-building

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and space-sharing between these groups start as a common claim for access to secure and permanent infrastructures, then gradually transform into tools for building solidarity and making home in a hostile urban setting. Together they articulate an intersectional struggle that reflects an alternative vision of urban citizenship grounded in community-building and decent housing and services for all, one which includes aspects for cross-sectoral alliances and collaborative participatory design. The findings of our action research with and for Globe Aroma highlight that the incorporation of housing in infrastructures of urban inclusion with complementary functions that facilitate work, services, and community, is central for the development of our civic imagination of the inclusive city.

Keywords
Homing, bordering, urban speculation, coalition-building, space-sharing

1. Introduction

In the first months of 2021, Globe Aroma —an artistic work and meeting place for artists and art lovers with a background as newcomers— was facing eviction from their building in Brussels' city centre. The former warehouse they had been renting for eight years needed renovations and the owners did not consider it a profitable investment. A leaking roof and very poor insulation and ventilation conditions were in the meantime challenging the art practices of Globe Aroma's communities of artists. Globe Aroma shares their infrastructure with a small non-profit language school for newcomers that have particular attention for people excluded from formal language education such as undocumented and/or illiterate migrants. The warehouse is separated by a courtyard from a front building in which a social housing association provides (assisted) rental housing for those experiencing housing precarity, including very diverse profiles of people with a background as newcomers (see Figure 1). The future of all three organisations and their strategic position in the city centre came under pressure when the building's owner set the infrastructure up for sale.

Upon Globe Aroma's request, the interdisciplinary research collective U/A (pronounced 'wa'), a temporary collective of researchers from Ghent University[1], and members of the Brussels-based Action Research Collective for Hospitality (ARCH), started a participatory action research (PAR) process to analyse the infrastructural needs of the organisation and of their hybrid and continuously changing artist community. From there they would develop infrastructural scenarios to prevent the organisation's displacement and its disruptive impact on their communities' homing. The kind of PAR that was developed follows the notion put forth by Kindon et al. (2007) for 'a democratic and non-coercive research approach with and for, rather than on participants' (p. 2). In this specific case, it involved the collaboration between U/A and both Globe Aroma's team and artist

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[1] All authors of the article were part of the research collective, and were supported during the PAR process by Dounia Salamé and Mahsa Kamalzadeh from Ghent University, and Brecht Theunis and Elli Vassalou from Globe Aroma. By the time of writing, all researchers from Ghent University have changed affiliation to KU Leuven, Belgium.

Figure 1

Current building of Globe Aroma,
which they share with a language
school for newcomers (yellow), and
with a social housing association in
the front building (gray).
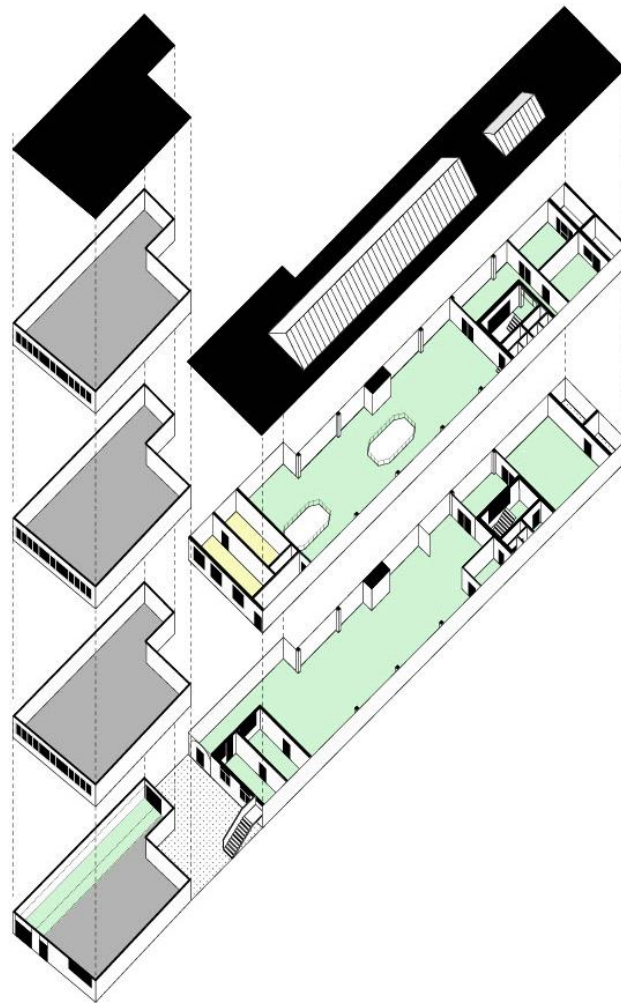
community to work together towards the common goal of acquiring a central and permanent place in the city, each contributing with their own expertise.

Globe Aroma operates as a low threshold socio-cultural organisation where art serves as a medium for welcoming and connecting newcomers with opportunities and networks in the cultural scene. Having a central location in the city that is shared by a cross-sectoral coalition of organisations that support newcomers is important for the organisation, as it links their communities with other hubs of new arrivals to Belgium as well as with a broad network of social, cultural, and educational organisations in the city (see Figure 2).

In their struggle against eviction and urban displacement, Globe Aroma remains adamant about prioritising the needs of their community, which they articulate as 'all persons with a background as newcomers, regardless of legal status, artistic experience or length of stay in Brussels'. In this article, we will adopt Globe Aroma's use of the term 'newcomers'[2] to transcend the legal distinctions between undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Although the term allows little rendering of these diverse and multiple forms of

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[2] Globe Aroma speaks of 'artists and art lovers with a background as newcomers'.
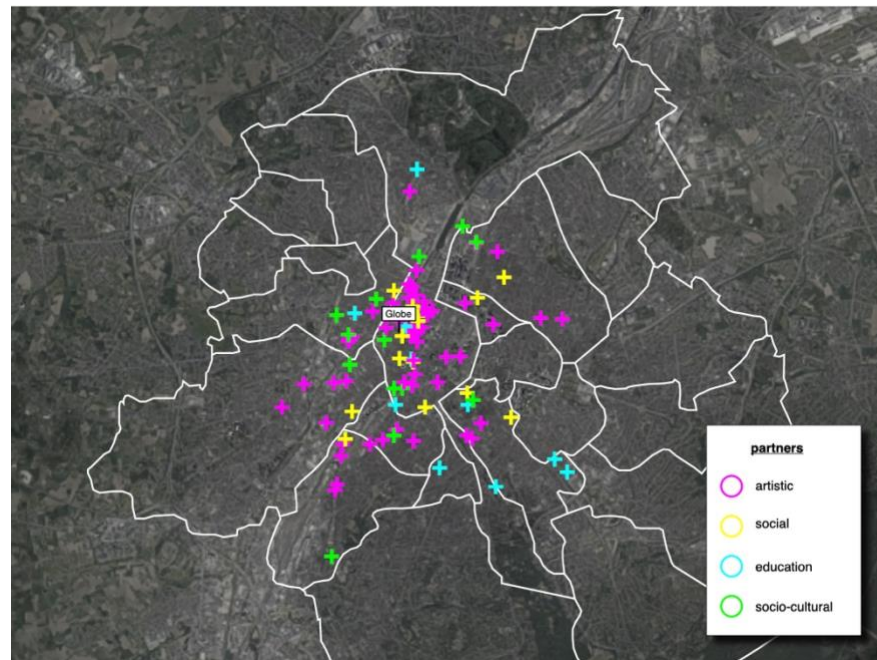
precarity and homing experiences within the community, the use of the term became a tactic
for Globe Aroma to render invisible and hence protect so called 'illegal' persons in their
community from detention and institutional violence.

By following an organisation working with artists and art lovers with a background as
newcomers, we zoom in on how newcomers' homing processes are not only challenged by
the difficult access to decent and affordable housing but also by the precarious conditions
of the organisations that offer support, community, and social services. In this article we
frame homing practices against the backdrop of multiple, overlapping and intersectional
structures of exclusion, which we experienced while assisting Globe Aroma to secure a
permanently safe and affordable place in the city centre when it was about to be evicted. We
explore how varying degrees of precarity caused by multiple, overlapping, and intersectional
structures of exclusion have inspired (formal and/or informal) organisations in Brussels to
form coalitions in order to secure permanent infrastructure that allows newcomers to home
in the city. By looking at their survival strategies of coalition-building and space-sharing with
other organisations in precarious infrastructures, we highlight homing possibilities 'that
move beyond liberal economic understandings of the role and function of housing'
(Thompson, 2022, p.17), enabling new visions on urban inclusion and civic imagination
(Mitrašinović, 2018; Cruz, 2016).

2. Homing at the intersection of interlocking exclusionary structures of power

Two main exclusionary structures of power affecting the housing experiences of
newcomers in the city and instigating an extended experience of displacement are directly
linked to bordering and urban speculation. Many scholars have underlined the
interconnectedness between housing financialisation and urban speculation on the one hand,
and bordering and securitisation on the other hand. Sowa (2020) invites scholars to further

explore the role of the state in both the asylum system and housing market 'focusing on the interrelation of racism and repression for the former, and on financialisation and speculation for the latter' (p. 117). Similarly, Bhagat (2020) points to refugee governance in the European Union as part of a racialised neoliberal market that promotes the self-reliance of refugees while 'avoiding the material politics of access over resources, particularly shelter and income' (p. 2). Our work supports these positions and explores how they play out in practice through our PAR in Brussels. Newcomers are confronted in their everyday lives with multiple forms of bordering and securitisation during their journeys leading to Brussels as well as in the city itself. On the other hand, processes of urban speculation and gentrification put pressure on the access and availability of affordable housing as well as on community spaces and service organisations that are supportive to newcomers. In the following sections, we conceptualise and contextualise this intersection more in depth.

2.1. Bordering and securitisation

The bordering of 'Fortress Europe' has been widely critiqued and this for: the practices of the European Border Agency Frontex (Abolish Frontex, n.d.; Benedicto, 2019; Leonard and Kaunert, 2020); the criminalisation of saving lives in the Mediterranean (Mainwaring and DeBono, 2021); the externalisation of European borders to police and restrict the mobility of migrants in regions well beyond Europe (Frelick et al., 2016; Walia, 2021); and all the other forms of violence implicit in border maintenance.

The practices of bordering and securitisation do not remain at the (externalised) border, but evidently extend into European urban centres. They enact a multi-scalar politics of mobility (Cresswell, 2010) that controls newcomers by establishing internal borders that may not be initially recognised as such (Fassin, 2011; Thorshaug, 2019). Such a bordering apparatus significantly hinders the possibility for newcomers in Belgium, even those who have been accepted as refugees and have papers, to access housing. This is in part caused by Belgium's multi-level government in which migration is a federal responsibility and housing a regional one, creating a quite rigid divide between the accommodation of refugees before and after acceptance in the asylum process (Beeckmans and Geldof, 2022). During their procedure, asylum seekers in Belgium are most often housed in large collective asylum centres, frequently taking the form of converted and decayed buildings like military barracks or holiday camps, isolated from the surrounding (urban) environment. This follows the framing of Thorshaug (2019) and Fontanari (2015) of asylum centres as materialised and internal border spaces, where the 'campisation' of refugee accommodation in Europe, with laws and policies enacted socio-spatially, extends forced migration into an experience of forced arrival (Kreichauf, 2018).

Walia (2013) frames how the precarities of displacement are created and maintained as 'border imperialism'. She argues that border imperialism is enacted not only through the securitisation of the border but also includes aspects of migrants' criminalisation, the creation of a racial hierarchy within the nation state, and the exploitation of migrant labour. Many newcomers in Brussels, including those who have entered the asylum process granting them

the right for protection, have suffered repeated evictions from housing forms that they had organised themselves when the state had failed to do so. Following the eviction of *Palais des Droits*, a squat of about 1000 newcomers and homeless Brussels residents (d'Auria et. al., 2023), a series of evictions took place, including one in April 2023 of an encampment of homeless asylum seekers that formed in front of *Le Petit Chateau* reception centre (Colinet et al., 2023). The frisking of racialised young men by police in Brussels, particularly around areas where newcomers concentrate, violent checks on public transport and trains, as well as police raids and arrests of newcomers in community spaces, all constitute parts of such bordering and securitisation apparatus.

Bhagat (2020) similarly argues that the increased emphasis on refugee self-reliance in EU policies is but a reflection of refugee disposability. After their acceptance, refugees in Belgium only have a short period of two months, extendable to four months, to find themselves a home. With limited social or professional networks, and without any form of support, refugees suffer severe discrimination in the private rental housing market (Verhaeghe et al., 2017) and/or experience exploitation from malicious middlemen and often end up in very precarious housing conditions. This is worsened by the dramatically low share of social housing In Belgium compared to neighbouring countries (only 6%)—and in Brussels only 12% of the housing stock—and more importantly the inaccessibility of social housing to refugees due to political decisions that hinders their access (such as the requirement to have a residence in the municipality for five years minimum), as well as a more general withdrawal of the welfare state in this sector (Winters, 2019).

However, as Lancione (2019) reminds us, 'the *affects* of alterity nonetheless cut through machines of control' (p. 283, original emphasis). There are indeed many critiques present in everyday practices of newcomers in the city, that at times culminate in recognisable moments in urban memory. Notably, the *sans-papiers* (undocumented) movement in Brussels has strategically occupied vacant buildings demanding decent housing under the banner of *Collectif Zone Neutre* (Neutral Zone Collective), thus claiming a form of urban citizenship similar to Darling's (2017) proposition of a 'politics of presence', where presence itself is a political claim. The *sans-papiers*' project highlights the nuances in how newcomers experience displacement, where people who have lived in Belgium for decades remain undocumented and share status with others in earlier stages of displacement. This highlights the shortcomings of legal categories in reflecting the lived and everyday experiences of displaced persons. The *sans-papiers*' solidarities with newcomers who arrived more recently in Brussels, including offering housing in squats to unhoused asylum seekers expands the imagination for mutual aid and support and possibilities to further notions of urban citizenship.

Likewise, the occupation of Maximiliaan Park by newcomers who do not wish to, or are not allowed to, apply for asylum in Belgium, and who are hence unable to access housing, has created multiple forms of solidarity, including a large-scale campaign to be hosted in private homes organised by the *Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Refugiés*, born as a citizen-led movement in the aftermath of the war in Syria and ensuing influx of asylum seekers (ARCH, 2020; Vandevoordt, 2021). There are also some urban networks and organisations (both governmental at regional or city level, and NGOs) that offer transit housing or provide

support in navigating the housing market. This highlights the tension between the direction of national migration policy in contrast to what the regional or city government is willing to support, and more importantly what urban residents themselves, newcomers and citizens, are proposing and practicing. Even though they lack government support and resources (or can only count on sporadic and intermittent backing), spaces, organisations and collectives that act as a landing space for newcomers to orient and connect themselves within the urban context play an important role in homing trajectories.

2.2. Gentrification and urban speculation

Urban speculation and the financialisation of the housing markets doubly harm communities living in precarity, especially newcomers. The gentrification of Brussels city centre pushes newcomers, together with more established migrants, to low-income neighbourhoods where they often end up in very precarious housing conditions (El Moussawi, 2023). However, the gentrification of the city centre does not only affect access to housing for newcomers. It also gradually erases spaces for socio-cultural initiatives and organisations that work with many precarious groups such as low-income residents, artists, as well as newcomers (Beeckmans, 2020). Market pressures, especially in Brussels' city centre, are constantly pushing these groups into temporary or insecure spaces—a condition shared by many comparable organisations advocating for solidarity spaces for newcomers in Europe (d'Auria et al., 2018). As a result, these organisations have to put a lot of time and energy into securing a permanently affordable place in the city, time they often do not have and that hinders their core work of inclusion.

In contrast to their efforts to prevent the displacement of the very groups they are working with, Globe Aroma and similar organisations are often confronted with narrow urban planning visions that do not sufficiently address the exclusionary nature of the housing market economy and its impact on the displacement of newcomers in particular. During our action research, we witnessed how official Brussels' planning discourses stimulated and celebrated diversity, yet often by prioritising investments that aim to attract tourists, international expats and higher income groups. By planning diversity through the lens of city branding (Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022), policymakers hope to reposition their cities globally as cosmopolitan. In the rescaling process, however, cities often increasingly become unaffordable and inaccessible to the very groups that make up the city's diversity (Caglar and Glick Schiller, 2018). The role of architects and planners in these processes is often overlooked. During our PAR for example, an important government official stated that the role of the urban designer and planner was limited to provide infrastructures for mixed use, while diversity was seen as a social agenda that can be added later through programming. By consequence, developing infrastructures for urban inclusion was not viewed as a spatial agenda, but only as a social one.

These limited visions on urban planning for diversity and inclusion are reflected in the planning instruments available to practitioners at the moment. The most common concept and related policy instrument at the nexus of urban planning and diversity is 'social mix'.

However, evidence is rich that these 'social mix' strategies do not lead to more *lived* mixity, nor to an increased social mobility of the vulnerable, and neither to more inclusive cities. 'Social mix' is often reduced to 'income mix', thus bringing higher income people in the area and leading to gentrification (Bridge et al., 2011; Lees et al. 2013; Musterd, 2002).

Newcomers in Belgium describe the process of looking for housing as 'an illness' (El Moussawi, 2023). This also impacts other sectors facilitating the homing of newcomers such as culture and education. In Brussels, low-threshold spaces that facilitate the creation of community and cater specifically to newcomers often struggle to remain open, particularly in the city centre. In a city with six million square metres of vacancy (Communa, 2022), such spaces continue to be priced out by gentrification, or have to remain in temporary occupation or partly supported by pilot experiments. A few collectives in Brussels have repeatedly criticized the stimulation of temporary occupation by developers and the government in order to stimulate neighbourhood gentrification. The Permanent collective's main concern is securing spaces for artists in the city without contributing to processes of gentrification. They critique the pressures of gentrification in Brussels, especially linked to the activation of artist spaces by local governments aiming to prepare buildings and neighbourhoods for development. What Permanent is doing ties in with what Cruz refers to as 'community-based anti-gentrification urban development' (Cruz, 2016, p. 20). In February 2021, the *Requisition Solidaire* campaign, which assembled several collectives of housing rights activists like the *Voix Des Sans Papiers* (which translates as The Voice of the Undocumented), started a political occupation of the *Grand Hospice*, a former elderly home owned by the city of Brussels that had been empty since 2017. They contested the plans for the temporary activation that relied on private operators and that did not consider space for housing in spite of the ongoing housing crisis.

2.3. Homing

The intersection between bordering and urban speculation became tangible in Belgium when statutory refugees of the so-called 2015 'refugee crisis' started entering the already exclusionary and oversaturated housing markets. This has made the relationship between housing and refugee inclusion more strained and at the same time more critical to disentangle. Through our work with Globe Aroma and observing the many initiatives and collectives that seem to operate at this intersection, we trace the varied attempts to grapple with both exclusionary structures in order to advance the homing of newcomers in the city.

Scholarship that explores the relationship between home and displacement often emphasises the process of home-making or *homing* (Beeckmans et. al., 2022; Boccagni, 2017; Boccagni, 2022). Putting forth the notion of home (rather than house) is to propose, in the words of Boccagni (2017), an understanding of both 'a bounded place—hence a matter of living and housing conditions, affected by structural variables and inequalities—and as a meaningful and emotionalised kind of relationship with place—an experience that should be based on a sense of security, familiarity and control'. By combining these material and emotional aspects, in making home within a condition of displacement, the meaning of

homing extends then beyond accessing shelter and could be defined as 'the social process of constructing and making home as a critical source of insight on human mobility, space appropriation and inter-group relations' (ibid.).

In this sense, homing does not happen only within the confines of a home, but rather also connects to urban space. Indeed, for newcomers, homing is a process that takes place at multiple spatial scales, from the domestic scale of the home itself to the urban scale. It therefore also encompasses a feeling of belonging to the city as a whole, for instance through accessing essential urban amenities and services, but also through connecting to safe and hospitable spaces in the city such as Globe Aroma. This process of dwelling and inhabitation on an urban scale has been persuasively coined 'homing the city' by Setha Low (2016), however without much unpacking what exactly enables such homing process on an urban scale. This article expands on this concept by highlighting the role of organizations such as Globe Aroma in newcomers' processes of homing the city. Globe Aroma proves to be an excellent case to develop Low's concept as the organisation's workings are situated at the intersection of interlocking scales and at the nexus of the private and public sphere. In fact, Globe Aroma combines housing with other functions such as communal and cultural spaces as well as an ambition to radically rethink urban citizenship through its infrastructure.

In this line, Lancione (2019) suggests to 'look for "radical housing" within everyday practices of dwelling at the margins' (p. 275). The homing experiences of newcomers in particular may be read through the lens of 'dwelling as difference', where an epistemological shift allows a recognition of embodied everyday practices as politics, which are 'not simply about being resilient, but fundamentally about articulating modes of being that, in their makings, in their mundane acts of resistance and care, question prevailing forces and modalities' (p. 283). Lemanski (2020) similarly draws our attention to everyday forms of civic action through her framing of 'infrastructural citizenship', arguing '[h]ow the state plans, delivers and maintains infrastructure, and how citizens engage with infrastructure (and how the state responds to that engagement) changes the nature and texture of the city in both material and political forms' (p. 123). The concept thus offers a dynamic framework to understand how the city and urban dwellers can mediate their relationship through public infrastructure, by contributing to the vitality of urban life via the appropriation of infrastructure (Amin, 2014).

By combining this interpretation of homing with an infrastructural perspective, which encapsulates the significance of everyday mundane acts of home-making and integrates attention to the scales of home and city, we hope to take a step further than what Mitrašinović (2018) describes as 'infrastructures of inclusion'. In our PAR we observed practices that emerge from and within precarity. They are made up of alliances between newcomers and citizens, combining housing, cultural and educational collectives and organisations that try to facilitate their collective survival by sharing physical spaces and infrastructures. Recognising these coalitions' seemingly fragile alliances as an infrastructural take on homing, is 'taking desperation seriously' —as per Lancione's invitation (2019, p. 277). It allows the reading of their survival practices and subtle tactics as forms of care and

resistance against the structures that produce the liminality of collectives and organisations as well as of their communities.

We therefore find it important to explore how the varying degrees of precarity experienced by those affected by bordering and urban speculation have inspired (formal and/or informal) social organisations in Brussels, working in housing, socio-cultural, and educational fields, to form coalitions in order to secure *permanent* infrastructure in the city— referring to both permanently affordable places that resist market pressures *and* to permanent infrastructures of hospitality for transient groups such as newcomers (Beeckmans, 2017). In the following sections, we will first contextualise the discussion by zooming into the methods and process of our PAR in Brussels. Next, we will elaborate on the specific strategies adopted by the groups we encountered in our work, namely coalition-building and space-sharing, and explore their potentialities. Finally, we will conclude by elaborating what alternative vision to city-making practices they propose and what that entails for our civic imagination.

3. Participatory action research with Globe Aroma

Threatened by eviction, the U/A team was invited by Globe Aroma to co-conduct a PAR project to explore the organisation's infrastructural needs and support the search for a permanent and centrally located infrastructure in the city centre.

3.1. Methodology

The PAR's first part consisted of mapping the infrastructural needs of Globe Aroma and their communities of artists newcomers. This was informed by various ethnographic and architectural research methods like participant observation, semi-structured interviews, (participatory) mapping and focus groups with graphic artists, musicians, womxn and staff. Using research-by-design methods, we then developed scenarios for various potential sites in Brussels, and analysed possible coalitions to acquire them via space-sharing. This resulted in a timeline with an overview of short- and long-term infrastructural scenarios (see Figure 3). Design workshops and in-depth interviews with potential coalition partners informed the scenario development. Each of these scenarios was accompanied by an elaborate stakeholder mapping that revealed responsible governments, opportunities for funding, and power relations, and a mapping of the broader urban context that visualised neighbourhood and partner organisations and the sites' spatial characteristics. A few months down the line, the need to lobby key urban actors became urgent to prevent Globe Aroma's eviction. Upon this urgency, we started a series of presentations and challenging conversations with urban actors operating at different spatial scales (street, neighbourhood, city, regional and national level) to advocate for Globe Aroma's support and for the importance of securing spaces in the city for organisations working with people in precarious conditions. This included conversations with other activist groups and organisations, urban planners, government architects and other public officials.
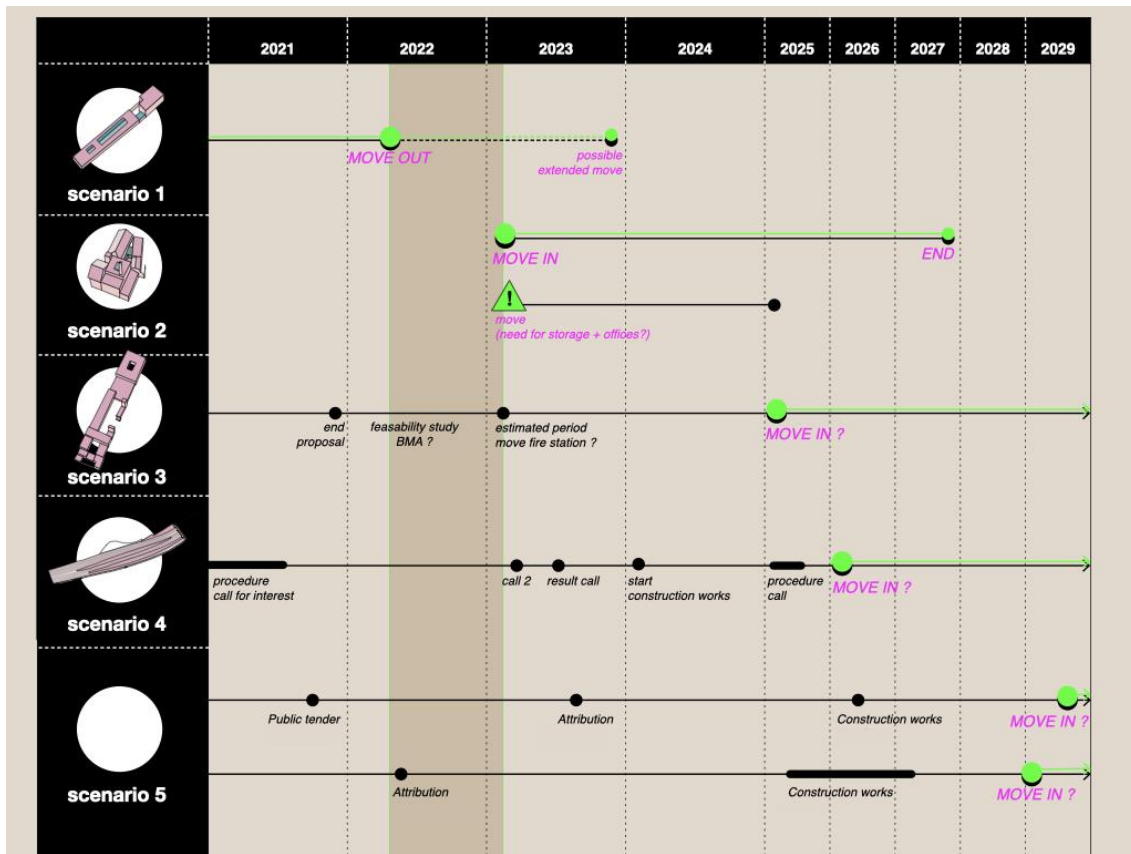
Figure 3

Overview of short- and long-term infrastructural scenarios that would prevent Globe Aroma's eviction.

The kind of PAR we developed 'involves researchers and participants working together to examine a (problematic) situation to change it for the better' (Kindon, 2007, p. 1). During our year of engagement, we held regular meetings with Globe Aroma's coordinator to discuss next steps, to share doubts and to exchange on ethical considerations. By participating in Globe Aroma's activities, and by sharing lunches and workspaces, we built relationships through presence, allowing for a 'collective and relational practice' (Hoskyns et al., 2007, p. 24) to emerge and consolidate. In doing so, the researcher-participant divide was not always strictly delineated and binary. Some of the concepts and critical reflections in this paper were first expressed by the coordinator of Globe Aroma and co-author of this article, An Vandermeulen. Our research with and for Globe Aroma tries to 'recognise the existence of a plurality of knowledges in a variety of institutions and locations' (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 9). This is reminiscent of Lancione's (2020) 'weird alliances', by which he refers to 'a practice of using our institutional positions to open up spaces for contestation and horizontal solidarity across and beyond the academy' (p. 274). By doing so, we aim to 'subvert the critical division between thinking and doing' (Petrescu, 2007, p. 5), between 'the production of theory and

the reflexive and situated approach to practice' (ibid.). Therefore we frame the *acting* involved in our action research between *thinking* and *unknowing*[3].

We differentiate the PAR on the level of Globe Aroma's organisation from the participatory methods used with the community of artists and art lovers with a background as newcomers in order to understand their infrastructural needs. As Kindon et al. (2007) describe, 'PAR constitutes a counter-hegemonic approach to knowledge production' (p. 9), by assuming that 'those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed or denied, carry specifically revealing situated wisdom about the history, structure, consequences and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements' (Fine, 2010, p. 213). We therefore follow Jeremy Till's (2005) outlook on the architect, 'moving between the worlds of expert and citizen' (p. 8) by engaging in two-way collaborative processes where 'the user should have the opportunity to actively transform the knowledge of the architect' (ibid.). In our case, we exchanged knowledge with and learned from newcomers, as well as with an organisation that has been supporting these people for 20 years. We engaged with the broader community of artists by communicating our presence and our research to them, through the organisation of focus groups, by participating in Globe Aroma's activities, and by having informal conversations. Speaking Arabic with some of the artists in Globe Aroma reminded some of us of home and influenced the importance of those conversations. Engaging Globe Aroma's hybrid community of artists with their diverse interests and capacities, required finding a critical balance between informing and engaging the artists from Globe Aroma without overloading them with unpaid participatory engagement. We tried to navigate this balance by engaging persons of the community based on their capacities. It seemed important for example, to invite one of the artists in Globe Aroma who is an architecture student, to partake in one of our meetings, as well as in a design workshop with coalition partners.

In order to 'include geographies and epistemologies beyond our own' (Strauss, 2021, p.15), we had to slow down our research. Following Carolyn Strauss' (2021) concept of 'slow research', we tried 'looking more closely and listening more deeply, noticing fine details and attuning to processes, and at the same time adopting a wider, more holistic view that situates our experiences within larger webs of relations, spaces, and times' (ibid., p. 15). This process of slowing down was crucial to understand the complexity of Brussels' urban conflict at the intersection of bordering and speculation and to develop alliances between researchers and organisations like Globe Aroma in contesting this. We were privileged as researchers to adopt a slow research approach, while time was very precious within Globe Aroma. The multitemporal collaboration within a PAR between academic researchers and organisations with limited time and resources became therefore an important means for a productive and multiscalar contestation of urban conflict.

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[3] This refers to the discussion panel 'Pedagogies of Alterity: "Doing" between "Thinking" and "Unknowing".', that was organized during the Alterities conference in Paris in 1999, co-organized by l'Ecole d'Architecture Paris Villemin and l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts.

3.2. Positionality

We are an interdisciplinary team of six researchers from Ghent University and the Brussels-based Action Research Collective for Hospitality (ARCH). Together we formed the temporary research collective U/A (pronounced 'wa') (see Figure 4). Although we write this paper as a collective, 'we' are a 'heterogeneous and multiply situated subject' (Petrescu, 2007, p. 9). Four of our researchers have a background as newcomers to Brussels, coming from Sudan, Lebanon/Canada, Iran and Italy. Two of us came especially to Belgium to start a PhD (of which this action research was part) and had just arrived in Brussels when the project started, while someone else moved to Brussels 19 years ago. This diversity of the researchers' backgrounds and their knowledge traditions was an important requirement for Globe Aroma's coordinator who stressed the importance of having researchers involved in the research team that could relate with Globe Aroma's community and genuinely understand the often very complex homing experiences and desires of displaced migrant communities.

We all live in Belgium (for now), but have followed unique professional, emotional, and cultural pathways and therefore have different embodied experiences of migration and displacement. We are: black, white, queer, cis, woman, mother, partner, doctoral researcher, university professor, and also racialised and othered. This multiplicity of subjectivities is complex at times, but has also allowed for an empathic recognition of different epistemologies beyond our own and to learn from each other. We all share an interest in the domains of urbanism, housing and displacement, and we are all women and feminists. This caused a connection and ressemblance, while we also have a considerable number of differences. Some of us have a research approach that is rooted in epistemologies from the South and activism; others are deeply rooted in the Belgian context and have over the years built a broad network of urban stakeholders that we could mobilise for advocacy. Some of

Figure 4

The participatory action research team, consisting of U/A and Globe Aroma. Picture taken at Globe Aroma, Brussels.

us have a lot of affinity with ethnographic research methods or writing, while others are more experienced in (graphic) design. The various language capacities within the team (Arabic, French, Dutch, and English) were mobilised differently during the action research, sometimes to connect with Globe Aroma's community of artists and on other occasions to negotiate with government officials.

Throughout the PAR, our own positionalities were important and variedly mobilised to enact mediation, community building and advocacy. Our lobbying supported Globe Aroma in gaining credibility towards the owner and various public officials such as ministers and government architects. It was a challenging process aimed at building legitimacy while navigating the very contrasting logics of our interlocutors, including extremely competing visions of what diversity and inclusion mean, and whether it should have priority in processes of urban transformation. This provoked some reflections on our positionality and on the role we should take to support Globe Aroma. Hence, our research also became a political act, with no illusions of neutrality.

As all six researchers from U/A, as well as the coordinator from Globe Aroma, are young women, this caused power struggles in the context of strategic conversations over the future of Globe Aroma with older, male (white) profiles in powerful positions—even when some of them were very closely involved in Globe Aroma's own organisation. The power dynamics that often come with researcher-participant relationships were somehow balanced because various degrees of privilege and precarity were shared on both sides. Some of our researchers being newcomers to Belgium, Globe Aroma's coordinator spent some important time and extra meetings on explaining the Belgian political context to us. Some of us have known displacement linked to bordering and speculation on a very personal level. The search for housing in Belgium was difficult for some because of the discrimination experienced on the housing market, or the difficulty of finding community within times of COVID-19. In that context, Globe Aroma evolved into an ambivalent place by being both a case study site and a welcoming place of arrival for some of our team members at the same time. This mutual need and care for each other dissolved very strong bilateral power relations between the researchers and the participants.

3.3. On the search for permanence in Brussels

Quite early in the process, it became evident that the position of Globe Aroma was far from being unique in Brussels. In fact, many other organisations—particularly those supporting persons and groups in precarious conditions—often reside in precarious infrastructures and were looking for space(s) in the city. Most of the scenarios that we developed included partners that either experienced a precarious housing condition in common, or shared a degree of liminality as artists, newcomers and low-income persons, and most often both.

In its quest to provide low-threshold spaces in the city to access services, community building, and belonging for newcomers, Globe Aroma was forced to operate at the intersection of neoliberal, exclusionary market dynamics and the discriminating apparatus of

bordering and securitisation, which places their community under a perpetual threat of displacement. Illustrative of the exclusionary market dynamics at play, is the fact that Globe Aroma, the language school and the social housing association were not considered as legitimate buyers by the owner when the buildings that they shared were put on sale. Instead, the owner aimed to sell for profit and the use of these organisations was clearly undervalued in comparison to the market value of the spaces they occupy (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). During the various conversations in the coalition-building process, Globe Aroma was sensitive to the aspect of gentrification and was very concerned about organisations co-opting their mission to work on potentially gentrifying projects. One of the short-term infrastructural scenarios that we mapped during the action research with Globe Aroma was to apply for a call for the temporary activation of the abovementioned *Grand Hospice*. In solidarity with the *Requisition Solidaire* movement that had occupied the building to protest the exclusive and gentrifying character of the call, and out of fear for the co-option of their mission by some of the coalition partners for the call, Globe Aroma did not consider this as a viable scenario.

Apart from the competition over urban space in Brussels, Globe Aroma's search for infrastructure was sensitive to the real danger their community often comes under by virtue of their citizenship status. The organisation had already experienced a police raid in 2018 where some of their artists were arrested by immigration authorities. The harsh realities of bordering at work make Globe Aroma very careful in examining both the coalitions and spaces they consider, and the politics these coalitions adopt. It became crucial for the organisation to seek out partnerships that explicitly want to address both the crisis of space created by neoliberal urban developments as well as the unequal ways it impacts communities with specific vulnerabilities who are simultaneously facing other forms of exclusion. Hence the PAR did not only have the ambition to find a permanent infrastructure for the organisation, but also for the permanent presence of newcomers in Brussels' city centre, validating their right for centrality.

After carefully developing several infrastructural scenarios in different parts of the city, it appeared that none of them were likely to become operational before Globe Aroma's eviction. Neither were they able to guarantee Globe Aroma's vision on inclusion nor could they offer a long-term and safe solution. Moreover, the current location and infrastructure of Globe Aroma seemed to best respond to their needs. The strong network of partners and community they had established in the neighbourhood over the years, as well as their claim to the right to the centre of the city (Tsavdaroglou, 2020) and the risk of losing subsidies from the local communal government if they would move, impacted the decision to focus on scenarios that could keep Globe Aroma in their current infrastructure—be it through buying, renting or long lease.

After many delicate negotiations by U/A and Globe Aroma's coordinator, we were able to convince the owner to sell the buildings to a coalition that we helped form between Globe Aroma, the language school and a housing cooperative. To do so, we supported the coalition in applying for funding via a call for projects by the Flemish Government. This provided resources for renovations and helped elevate the project as a pilot initiative supported by the

regional government. Although this strategy crystallised Globe Aroma's legitimacy, it also showed the ambiguous role of the owner and of the government, underlining the risks of co-option and gentrification of certain programmes and urban spaces instead of foregrounding the significance of permanent infrastructure in the city centre for populations in transit.

Globe Aroma is now in the process of purchasing the back building through a mortgage. It is preparing the space for renovations, while the housing cooperative is buying the front building. The coalition composed of Globe Aroma, the language school and the housing cooperative will soon decide on how to share the space and is currently speaking with other partners to set the ambition for the housing programme. With this comes an important shift towards the materialisation and the co-construction of a shared urban infrastructure that aims to support the challenging homing pathways of many excluded and displaced communities in the city. Unlike its earlier repartition, with three separate rental contracts with the same owner, the coalition can more deeply engage on how to collaborate, plan, and actualise the strength that comes from working together as arts, education and housing organisations that support hybrid publics. The government fund offers the possibility to renovate the building and ongoing conversations are gauging novel housing typologies that may cater for some of Globe Aroma's community needs, such as transit housing for short stays or larger family units. However, the process is still underway and carries a lot of challenges and risks. Obviously, the negotiations among the coalition partners will determine the final outcome.

4. Coalition-building and space-sharing:
From survival strategy to intersectional resistance

The case of Globe Aroma demonstrates how independent actors with limited influence have to harbour collective power as a solidarity group when making claims for an infrastructure that they intend to share. These practices begin as (and always remain to a certain extent) a survival strategy, as they are pushed to share the tightening affordable space available in the city and pool subsidies from the varied government levels to shoulder the costs. This improves their chances when applying for infrastructural support rather than competing with one another, although antagonisms over space and partnerships are always around the corner. However, it puts them in the difficult position of being dependent on the policy-makers they actually want to criticise with and through their coalition.

Within such a context, Globe Aroma and similar organisations that we have encountered seem to employ two main strategies in their effort to secure safe and permanent space: coalition-building and space-sharing. We observe these two strategies through our action research as not separate but rather co-dependent on one another, as we will now elaborate. These strategies, we believe, have potential in advancing processes of homing in the city. Alongside the homing practices of newcomers themselves, they offer a potential for a homing infrastructure as they address both the apparatuses of bordering and the displacements triggered by urban speculation.

4.1. Coalition-building

During the search for alternative spaces for Globe Aroma, the groups we came across showed us that there were many different forms of precarity and displacement taking place simultaneously in the city. While organisations that play a role as infrastructures of urban inclusion are undervalued and struggle to be regarded as a legitimate actor in city-making (Beeckmans, 2020; Çaglar and Glick Schiller, 2018), they were not the only ones encountered. We also came across groups of artists on the search for permanently affordable atelier spaces, frustrated by how their appeal has been used to gentrify areas through temporary use; mainstream and unconventional educational organisations struggling for classroom space; and, within a housing affordability crisis, there were housing organisations that follow social rent or cooperative models, on the lookout for space to create additional units or support the rehabilitation of decaying ones.

The process of reaching out to these organisations and trying to scan available space together slowly morphed from developing potential infrastructure scenarios for Globe Aroma to avoid eviction into a process of mutual recognition and support. This evolution showed how integral space-sharing is to coalition-building, since it is through space and in space that coalitions are built. Each scenario came with a different set of partners, scale and politics (see Figure 5a and 5b). For example, one coalition with long-term partners in the cultural scene started from exploring the possibility of sharing space and in the process opened up a conversation on social mobility for newcomer artists, creating moments for recognition of what it means to programme for communities that are diverse in their citizenship status and migration history. A second coalition was built around the permanent collective that brings together art organisations, a cooperative housing association, a

Figure 5
Figures 5a and 5b: Anonymised stakeholder mapping of one of the developed coalition-building scenarios.

university, and neighbourhood residents campaigning to claim a major infrastructure that will soon be vacant. Here, with a clear shared focus on urban inclusion, the process of negotiation on what such inclusion looks like among actors with varying capacities and expertise became the central focus, and the power positions of actors constitute a major factor in mediating a genuine participatory process.

Indeed, the attempt to align visions, under the immense pressure of displacement, and with limited time and resources, reveals pre-existing inequalities and highlights the challenges of coalition-building. As concrete examples, the varied literacy of coalition partners around the use of online co-working programmes in times of quarantine, free time to engage in the participatory process, and shared language are issues that become at the forefront of facilitating a meaningful conversation to determine common goals and advocacy strategies. Here, organisations working with newcomers come with a significant edge; an experience in working with multiple languages and navigating differing availabilities and accessibilities of community members. Globe Aroma has a full-time employee with the title Community Octopus whose sole purpose is to manage such communication. However, they may not always have the capacity to lead the participatory process in the coalition. This struggle or conflict has at times been productive, reflecting blind spots to each other, and offering a deeper understanding of the needs of different groups, and improving organisational skills. Even in the instances where the coalition did not end up materialising, there were increased levels of networking and collaboration. These networks become significant for future referrals, shared advocacy, and political action.

In the coalition-building process, it was evident that the organisations had a truly holistic understanding of the needs of their communities that transcended a sectoral view. While the interconnectedness between the offer of different organisations was implied, the coalition enabled an even further exploration of areas of collaboration and exchange. Housing almost always becomes central to this, as most of the coalitions we encountered included a housing actor, or actively searched for one, reflecting the needs of their communities and the homing role they inevitably end up adopting in their varied sectors. This is not surprising as Madden and Marcuse (2016) argue 'no other modern commodity is as important [as housing] for organising citizenship, work, identities, solidarities, and politics' (p. 12).

After this process, it becomes clear that deep within these attempts that begin as survival is an intention to survive a certain way alongside those who are allies in realising a compatible vision for the city. Through Globe Aroma's notion of urban citizenship through presence, other coalition partners become encouraged to show solidarity through different ways of programming their own work and through their shared advocacy to claim a space within the city for themselves as well as newcomers. The coalitions become a space to create collaboration between housing actors and activist organisations supporting newcomers. In this way, as Sowa (2020) argues, 'a unified critique against the border regime and against neoliberal housing shortages is possible' (p. 117).

4.2. Space-sharing

In the section above we emphasised the iterative relationship between space-sharing and coalition-building. Indeed, the coalition-building processes illustrated 'how space can simultaneously work as an empowering tool for community practices of inclusion and as demanding a sufficient communal capacity to use it' (De Clerck, 2018, p. 309). The very practical act of sitting together to plan spaces opened up new understandings of inclusion. One of the infrastructural scenarios that was developed during the action research was based on the option of sharing a theatre space for performance arts in a coalition with other artist-led organisations. We held in-depth interviews with potential coalition partners to gauge their ambition, their vision on inclusion and the use of the current spaces they occupied. Conducting a design workshop then fostered an exchange on common values and shared spaces (see Figure 6). It foregrounded a common ambition to share ateliers between newcomers and artists who were not as new to Brussels, offering opportunities for artistic collaboration. In this sense, collaborative design facilitated a shift away from individual needs to collective aspirations, and opened up conversations on how to create infrastructures of urban inclusion.

The collective programming of spaces often fostered rethinking normative forms of service provision and designing spaces beyond a mere programmatic perspective of mixed use. As an example, the notion that inclusion and sharing requires the removal of walls and barriers was challenged by *Espace Fxmme*, a collective of women and femme artists within Globe Aroma. They held a series of workshops exploring what makes them feel safe in a male-dominated environment and excogitated a series of movable walls and textiles creating instances of enclosure and privacy. As many of the potential coalitions explored during the PAR included housing actors, envisioning inventive housing typologies that could respond

Figure 6

Design workshop imagining the possibilities for space-sharing between the coalition partners.

to the specific needs of newcomers and/or homeless people was considered by organisations which do not commonly provide such an offer. Ideas were explored to transform some of the existing housing units in the front building into a 'Bed & Breakfast' that would be run by and for undocumented migrants, while providing training and professional opportunities in the field of catering and cooking. During other conversations, the idea was explored to imagine novel housing typologies to facilitate family reunification processes, since the current housing offer available for newcomers lacks the imagination to respond to their specific needs. Through research-by-design and collaborative design, the discussions allowed a reconceptualisation of housing beyond shelter, linking housing to other functions such as art, education or small industries, in a broader understanding of homing the city. Sitting together to discuss which spaces can be shared and how, offered a very concrete pathway towards the consideration of new urban and civic imaginaries. The process of space-sharing allowed us to imagine forms of housing that built into existence the possibility of an otherwise (Povinelli, 2014), 'beyond liberal economic understandings of the role and function of housing' (Thompson, 2022, p.17).

The process of collectively envisioning—through both discussion and drawing—how an infrastructure can be shared, appears therefore as crucial as the sharing of spaces itself. During our action research, we were involved in various match-making events organised by the Brussels and Flemish governments to stimulate cross-sectoral and mixed-use projects. The match-making platforms started from the question of how many square metres and which types of spaces each organisation requires, but they failed to understand the significance of a collaborative design process as opposed to a participatory consultation. Instead, we experienced that collaborative design could provoke broader, intersectional discussions on urban inclusion when the partners were invited to think of a new, collective programme, beyond the accumulation of individual needs and square metres.

'What would happen if we all had the opportunity to think creatively about space in an unconstrained way?' is a central question to the curators of this year's British Pavilion for the Venice biennale (Okundaye, 2023). Their question is inspired by bell hooks' (1995) outlook on imagination in "Art on My Mind", a book where she frames art as a form of creative resistance against social inequalities and as a political act. Or as Quizar (2022) puts it when referring to Black grassroots claims to home in Detroit, 'to refuse creatively. That is, even as they refuse, they do not merely assert an opposite. Rather, they build alternative logics, alternative categories, alternative organisation of space' (p.17). During the action research, imagination was mobilised as a tool to provoke discussions on ownership, citizenship and urban inequalities. In order to advocate for Globe Aroma's stay in their current infrastructure and for the presence of their communities in the city centre, we created a graphic narrative that contained design scenarios about housing imaginaries that gave credibility to Globe Aroma and helped them in gaining support from various urban actors. Following Chitchian et al. (2020), we then understand 'architecture beyond its association with the design and the materiality of the built environment alone, but rather as a domain, zone, or plane of arrangements (Povinelli, 2014, 2017) through which power, politics, and subject positions are constantly formed, encountered, and negotiated' (p.250). During the action research we

were confronted many times with the power that comes with decisions over space regarding who to include or not, who to displace, who to give ownership or access to profit. Exposing the drivers of urban inequality and challenging exclusionary policies was the first act to propose new spatial and civic imaginaries (Cruz and Forman, 2022).

In exploring the survival strategies of coalition-building and space-sharing, we recognise them as 'claim-making practices' in that they are indeed, as Çaglar and Glick Schiller (2018) contend, 'situations, sites, institutions and social relations in which displaced people, migrants and non-migrant, build sociabilities that can form the basis for new kinds of political action' (p. 13). By coalescing together, the coalitions attempt to uncover the potential of building hybrid communities that facilitate a sense of belonging, foster possibilities of social mobility, and activate a form of 'open urban citizenship' (Oosterlynck et al., 2018), between groups that do not all have national citizenship. Through the sharing of space, these coalitions are 'expanding notions of design beyond aesthetics for aesthetics' sake and toward the design of political and civic processes' (Cruz, 2016, p.10) for mediation in urban conflict, 'reorganizing institutional protocols as well as the urban space where it is inscribed' (ibid., p.12). In utilising the two strategies of coalition-building and space-sharing together, which are interdependent in their processes, potential infrastructures for homing in the city are established, where experiments of different formations of coalitions as well as spaces, centred around experiences of newcomers, open up our civic imaginations towards alternatives ways of inhabiting the city.

5. The Lighthouse for Civic Imagination:
A counter-narrative to dominant city-making practices

Throughout our work with Globe Aroma, and now moving into the co-creation of their final space together with their coalition partners, what was striking is that the organisation had a clear vision for their ideal infrastructure, endearingly referred to as 'The Lighthouse for Civic Imagination'. It is envisioned as an infrastructure that is co-owned and co-managed to bring together many publics with low thresholds to entry: for housing, for artistic practices, for inventive forms of education, for health services such as addiction treatments, for food, and for community building. The Lighthouse for Civic Imagination embodies a vision of homing the city. It is a space that allows city dwellers to reimagine citizenship as an inclusive and dynamic concept that is activated through their collective pursuit to access services, irrespective of their backgrounds or legal status.

In this article, we examined how newcomers are forced to negotiate homing at the intersection of market-driven urban development and the apparatus of bordering and securitisation. Here, we centre the notion of 'homing' as it encapsulates access to home both as a material and an emotional place that can provide a sense of security and familiarity, which is reflected in access to housing as well as homing the broader urban space. We also regard 'housing as a gateway' (Lancione 2019), where the embodied everyday lived processes of dwelling and homing are recognised as world-making practices that resist both bordering and urban speculation. We draw parallels between newcomers' homing processes and the

survival practices of the collectives and organisations that offer support, community, and social services, which experience precarity and are often housed in low quality, insecure, and temporary infrastructures.

Our research explores how, under such conditions, solidarities begin to form between organisations that are feeling the pressures of gentrification and speculation (often working in housing, socio-cultural, or educational fields) and their diverse communities that are experiencing different forms of precarity or exclusion (such as newcomers, artists, and/or low-income residents). The survival strategies of coalition-building and space-sharing between these groups start as a common claim for access to permanent infrastructures, and gradually transform into tools for building solidarity and homing the city. In recognising these mundane strategies, initially geared towards survival, we untangle the potential for an infrastructural take on 'dwelling as difference' (Lancione 2019), where infrastructures for homing are formed between communities and organisations that both exist in precarity, employing mundane politics of care and resistance. Together they articulate a common, intersectional struggle that reflects an alternative vision of urban citizenship grounded in community-building and decent housing and services for all.

In recognising that the Lighthouse for Civic Imagination acts, not just as a space that contains Globe Aroma's activities, but as an infrastructure that facilitates urban inclusion, the search and claim for space in the city and the strategies adopted gain new meaning. We may think of these processes of coalition-building and space-sharing, following Lemanski's (2020) notion of 'infrastructural citizenship', as negotiations, mediated through infrastructure, for an understanding of citizenship that goes beyond nation-state citizenship to also include newcomers. It becomes a platform which ultimately enables spaces for 'mobile solidarities' (Squire, 2011), and necessarily entails a shift from a narrow nation-state citizenship understanding into an open urban citizenship claim.

Paying enough attention to and learning with the everyday survival practices of newcomers and supportive collectives and organisations alike, against the tides of bordering and speculation, allows us to regard these attempts as articulations of a counter-narrative to dominant city-making practices. This can only emerge from deep processes of collaboration and through constructing 'weird alliances' (Lancione 2019). It is through these experimentations that we may begin to enact our collective desire to find home in the city otherwise.

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