BELONGING BEYOND BORDERS: the role of recreational spaces in migrants' belonging in the Netherlands

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The Role of Recreational Spaces in Migrants' Belonging in the Netherlands

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Submitted on: 20-06-2024
Word count: 29508

Met opmaak: Koptekst, Inspringing: Links: -0,2 cm
Met opmaak: Koptekst, Centrum
Met opmaak: Koptekst, Rechts, Rechts: -0,2 cm
Met opmaak: Koptekst
Met opmaak: Koptekst, Inspringing: Links: -0,2 cm
Met opmaak: Koptekst, Centrum
Met opmaak: Koptekst, Rechts, Rechts: -0,2 cm
Tabel met opmaak
Met opmaak: Voettekst

‘*’One cannot begin to estimate the impact of such cultural spaces to people.”*

-Yetunde, Nigerian migrant, coordinator at De Voorkamer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the organizations that hosted me during my fieldwork period. De Voorkamer, thank you for welcoming me into your unique space. I have never felt more comfortable and at home in a new environment. A special thanks to Yetunde for taking me under her wing. Your positivity and calmness are truly inspiring. Additionally, I want to express my appreciation to Rasmus at BOOST for looking out for me. You not only made me feel welcome but also safe and comfortable. Furthermore, I am particularly grateful to Des for connecting me with De Voorkamer, which was the catalyst for this entire project. Lastly, I am thankful to my supervisor, Radhika. Despite your busy schedule, you always made time to meet with me and accommodate my desire to submit early. Your support has been invaluable.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As I step through the red sliding doors which resemble an arrow leading to the vivid yellow structure with innumerable windows, I enter a different world. Just moments ago, outside in the bustling streets of Amsterdam, I felt seamlessly integrated into the fabric of the city, as if it were an extension of myself. However, within this new space, a fleeting sense of estrangement washes over me. While my Dutch

heritage typically grants me insider status in the outside world, within these walls, it renders me an outsider. Looking around, I see a lively place full of people from many cultures and countries who, in contrast to me, appear to feel like they belong. They navigate the space with a familiarity and effortlessly that is yet to attain for me. I wonder whether this profound sensation could even remotely mirror the emotions felt by those standing around me when they initially stepped into this new world.

I start this thesis with my experience of first entering one of the two recreational spaces for migrants where my ethnographic fieldwork took place. The vignette is written from my notes on entering the space in Amsterdam, named BOOST. The profound feeling started a positive and intense experience of forming relations with the migrants who visited the recreational spaces. This personal engagement highlights the complex dynamics of human connections within the context of migration. Although migration has always occurred, in the contemporary period it has led to new questions relating to belonging within national policies of integration. Forced or in the pursuit of a better life, driven by economic, political, or personal reasons, individuals and families are compelled to uproot themselves from their native lands and embark on a journey to foreign shores. However, this transition is far from a simple geographical relocation; it carries profound emotional and psychological implications.

As some governments in Europe have referred to the chaos brought on by the large-scale unauthorized immigration of refugees as a "crisis" (De Genova and Tazzioli, 2016: 3). Almustafa (2022: 1066) defines the real crisis to be the suffering and conditions that forced migrants into vulnerability from displacement, followed by the neglection of commitments by the European governments. By establishing various frameworks of governance that primarily aim to contain refugees in their own regions and deter them from accessing the territories of Europe, governments have been involved in reducing their obligations towards refugees, rather than providing them with protection (Almustafa, 2022: 1068).

Samatar (2008: 3) emphasizes in his piece “Beginning Again: From Refugee to Citizen” that rather than being limited to obtaining documentation proving resettlement, the process of migration ought to be viewed as a more comprehensive idea that includes agency and empowerment. As Van Gorp and Smets (2015: 72) put it, migrants "do not only leave their houses – they leave their homes." This observation underscores the complex emotional landscape traversed by migrants as they navigate the unfamiliar terrain of a new country, culture, and environment. The very essence of 'home' and 'belonging' takes on new dimensions in the lives of these vulnerable individuals.

Migration inevitably sparks discussions on integration, as host countries, like the Netherlands, impose assimilation of migrants into their societies. However, this emphasis on one-way integration overlooks the intricate process of rebuilding that migrants must undertake to establish a new sense of home, a deeper sense of belonging that transcends the mere physicality of a house. Home, in this context, extends to a broader notion of connection and belonging to a place, a country, and a new life (Ahmed, 1999; Antonsich, 2010; Ralph and Staeheli, 2011; Van Liempt and Staring, 2021).

The feeling of being at home in a place is not solely a personal matter but is intricately linked to social dynamics (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Antonsich, 2010; Taylor, 2013; Van Liempt and Staring, 2021). If an individual feels rejected or unwelcome by the people in that place, it inevitably affects their sense of belonging. Therefore, I argue that personal feelings of belonging should be considered in conjunction with socio-spatial in- and exclusion discourses prevalent in that place, shaping one's sense of place-belongingness.

Throughout the thesis the concept of conviviality (Gilroy, 2004: 153) shows as important in understanding how recreational spaces in host countries can foster migrant belonging. The study of conviviality involves a broader exploration of society, encompassing its interrelations with sociality, diversity, and social tensions, as well as notions of space, place, citizenship, and belonging. In environments where different cultures meet, like the recreational migrant spaces discussed, conviviality transforms difference into something 'unremarkable,' challenging the conventional perception of diversity as a notable or problematic aspect (Heil, 2014: Valluvan, 2016).

Recreation, whether pursued individually or communally, becomes particularly challenging in a new country where language and cultural barriers pose formidable obstacles to engagement in such activities. Recognizing the pivotal role of recreation in cultivating a sense of belonging for migrants, some organizations have consciously incorporated recreational elements into their initiatives to help newcomers feel more at home (Peperkamp, 2018: 256-261).

By focusing on two physical recreational spaces that facilitate interaction between migrants and their new neighbourhoods, this research aims to add to an understanding of how these spaces facilitate various forms of social-spatial practices. The thesis' primary objective is to shed light on the practices and negotiations involved within these sites that cultivate migrants' sense of belonging and how this could translate to the broader dynamics within the host community.

The two sites in The Netherlands, De Voorkamer in Utrecht and BOOST in Amsterdam, were chosen due to some similarities and differences between them. Both sites are organizations led and founded by the local resident community, aim to provide a physical space to foster social interactions and sense of belonging for "newcomers" (as named by them, including migrants and refugees). The sites differ mostly in size, where De Voorkamer is a small living room-like space and BOOST is a bigger more school-like complex. BOOST offers a sense of migrant profiles from their visitors in 2022, with the most common countries of origin to be Eritrea, Syria, and Iran. Sixty percent of the visitors have a residence permit, twenty-five percent are undocumented and fifteen per cent are still in the asylum procedure. De Voorkamer does not have data on their visitors' profiles, though they explain most of their visitors to be from Syria and Iran. They also claim to have several migrants who moved for economic reasons and some who moved within Europe. De Voorkamer thus has a more diverse group of newcomers and their motivation for migration.

In comparing these sites, this thesis endeavours to illuminate the intricacies of migrants' belonging practices, and the role of these centres in fostering a sense of belonging among migrants in

their new environments. This undergirds the research question: *Can recreational spaces in host countries foster migrant belonging?*

To address this research question, I developed three subsidiary questions aimed at bridging the analytical aspects with practical fieldwork.
(1) What activities organized within recreational centres seem conductive to building a sense of belonging?
(2) What spatial features within recreational centres support the social processes of belonging?
(3) How do recreational spaces for migrants reflect broader socio-spatial dynamics within the host community?

This first question aims to comprehend how involvement in these activities leads to the formation of feelings of belonging among participants by looking at the structure and ethos of the programmes these recreational centres offer. Knowing what kinds of activities help people feel like they belong gives us important information on how to effectively promote social cohesiveness in these environments. The second question focusses on the significance of the spatial environment within recreational centres for migrants, and directly addresses the physical and experiential aspects of these spaces. Analysing the spatial dynamics sheds light on how the design and layout of recreational centres impact migrants' sense of belonging, providing valuable information on the tangible elements that contribute to or hinder the cultivation of a shared identity with the community of the space. Lastly, the third question expands the focus by examining the ways in which migrant recreational areas mirror broader socio-spatial processes in the host-community. This sub-question considers the impact of societal issues on the efficacy of recreational places, acknowledging the interdependence of these areas and the greater social milieu. By placing the recreation centres in a larger context and identifying potential outside influences that can affect migrants' sense of belonging, an understanding of socio-spatial dynamics is helpful.

To get an in-depth answer on these questions, I first dive into the existing literature on migrants in the Netherlands, how the concept of belonging is defined and what components can foster a sense of it, and how space and all it entails influences social processes such as belonging. In the chapters that follow, I present my empirical data. I structured this in four chapters, each of them representing a component of space. Though I categorized certain ethnographic data under one chapter, does not signify it has no variables or importance in other categories or chapters. The chapter are all intertwined, and I aim to show the common thread running through this thesis.

''So, you arrive, having left a lot behind you. You've likely endured a pretty miserable journey, invested a lot of money in it. Your family often isn't here yet. And then you find yourself on the outskirts of the city, maybe on a cruise ship. How do you move forward? You're not engaging with the Netherlands, not with the language, not with the Dutch…"

- *Rasmus [Dutch volunteer coordinator at BOOST]*

PROBLEM DEIFINITION AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Migrants in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has had a complex immigration history, characterized by shifts in policy and patterns of migration. Following the Second World War, immigration to the Netherlands stemmed from three primary sources. Firstly, the decolonization of Indonesia and Suriname led to substantial immigration flows, concentrated between 1949 and 1957 for the former, and 1979 to 1980 for the latter. Secondly, the post-war economic growth demands invited guest workers from Morocco and Turkey, assuming foreign labourers would leave when their economic utility ceased. However, this assumption proved inaccurate, since many fully settled in the Netherlands. Lastly, significant flows of applicants for refugee status emerged after the mid-1980s (Zorlu and Hartog, 2001: 21). By 2003, the country was home to substantial populations from countries like Iraq, Iran, and Somalia, which had been virtually absent a decade earlier. The total population of non-western origin in the Netherlands grew by forty-four percent between 1995 and 2003, amounting to 1.6 million or ten percent of the overall population (CBS 2003 as cited in Doomernik, 2005: 33). With this flow of migrants of various regions, some moving for economic benefit, others to flee war, the individuals of this massive movement were categorized by their personal histories and motivations. A ubiquitous differentiation on the moved individual is visible in conversations, the news, in policymaking, and in scientific literature. The Dutch policy on migration seems to primarily relate to non-white and ethnic others. Wekker (2016) argues in her book White Innocence that this is a misrepresentation of migration to The Netherlands. She asserts that this policy hides the fact that the Netherlands has a longer migration history and that a large per

centage of the White Dutch population are descendants of migrants. Therefore, the context of the migrants in the Netherlands, and the conceptualization of the migrant is necessary to discuss.

In the Netherlands, a prominent socio-political policy known as the pillarization model has played a significant role. Originating in the early twentieth century, this model was initially developed to allow peaceful coexistence and governance despite deep societal divisions. The model divided society into separate pillars, based on religion and ideology. The four main pillars were Catholic, Protestant, Socialist, and Liberal. Each had their own institutions but cooperated at the political level to govern the country. In the 1960s the depillarization of religious groups in politics began, nevertheless the Dutch government now still takes an active role in promoting the formation of migrant organizations, recognizing them as potentially valuable tools for facilitating social and political integration, as well as advancing the interests of the migrant communities they represent. This has led to a diverse range of migrant organizations emerging along ethnic and religious lines, with many of them receiving financial support from the state (Roggeband, 2010: 944).

Conceptualizing the migrant

In the field of anthropology, the conceptualization of migrants and refugees has long been a subject of intense academic debate (Esquinca Verea, 2020; Colson, 2003; Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 1992). The conceptualization of migrant or refugee not only shapes our understanding of these individuals' experiences but also influences policies, practices, and the broader humanitarian response. The debate on how to define migrants and refugees is multifaceted, with differing positions taken by scholars, and these positions have evolved over time. One fundamental aspect of this debate revolves around the agency of those individuals who are on the move.

One key argument within the broader debate on the use of categories within conceptualization is made by Brubaker (2013: 6). He emphasizes the need for scholars to adopt a critical and self-reflexive stance towards the categories they use. Applying this stance to the debate on migrants and refugees, the goal is to emphasize the importance of not taking these categories at face value but rather to scrutinize how they are constructed, employed, and contested.

Historically, as highlighted by Fassin (2013: 42), asylum was perceived as an exceptional circumstance, embodying a complex attitude towards foreigners. It was considered a form of special protection, reflective of the duty of hospitality and protection. This traditional perspective differentiated between those seeking asylum due to violence or persecution and those pursuing economic opportunities, establishing a dichotomy between refugees and economic migrants.

In line with this initial approach, Colson (2003: 4) argues that before World War I, when no restrictions on immigrants were yet implemented, most research focused on migrants' life upon starting in a new country and the means through which they integrated themselves in a host society. However, as the world witnessed a surge in stateless individuals and complex migratory patterns in the twentieth century, the debate evolved. In more recent literature, authors like Esquinca Verea (2020: 7) emphasize

the agency of individuals and the ‘definitional dilemmas’ that have a profound impact on their lives. These dilemmas arise from the various disciplines in social research that are incongruent with the conceptualisation of migration-asylum. The agency she emphasises comes from the perceived difference in voluntary or forced move. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain fleeing from direct persecution or through generalized instability and lack of opportunities. The distinction between the migrant or refugee label often determines the resources, rights and protections offered by the host society. Therefore, Esquinca Verea argues that the debate over migrants versus refugees is essentially a humanitarian debate rather than a purely literary or policy matter (ibid.).

Haile (2020: 34) argues that the problematics of the refugee label are that it fails to reflect the dynamic and fluid nature of identity, which evolves through interaction with society and personal experiences. The rigid label of "refugee" does not accommodate the diversity and changing nature of individual identities. Furthermore, the label of refugee is particularly powerful due to its social implications and the way it shapes perceptions, deeply influenced by societal attitudes often characterized by negative stereotypes.

I suggest that the key arguments in this debate revolve around the concepts of agency and necessity. Proponents of the traditional perspective (as discussed in Schlegel, 2019: 3) argue that distinguishing between refugees and migrants is essential for crafting specific policies and responses tailored to each group. They contend that blurring the lines between these categories can lead to challenges in acceptance or refusal. On the other hand, proponents of the more inclusive view stress the importance of recognizing the agency and diverse motivations of individuals on the move. They argue that it is essential to move beyond rigid categorizations and embrace a humanitarian approach that prioritizes the needs of the individuals on the move. Hereby, they focus on the migrant as an individual rather than on group level.

Providing a different perspective, Ramsay (2020: 390) critically examines the anthropological perspective on displacement. He discusses the unintentional exceptionalization of refugees in anthropological work, attributed to the discipline's tendency to prioritize suffering. The exclusive focus on identified refugees presents a categorical paradox. Despite attempts to move beyond the migrant/non-migrant binary, anthropologists often unintentionally maintain these distinctions. Ramsay (2020: 405-406) critiques prevailing theories that render displacement exceptional, challenging the use of organizing categories like refugee and migrant. Ultimately, Ramsay (2020: 407) encourages anthropologists to focus on future politics, portraying dispossession and displacement, as anticipated rhythms rather than exceptional events.

Drawing inspiration from Brubaker (2013) and Ramsay (2020), I integrate these perspectives into the conceptual framework of my research. This research endeavours to adopt a critical stance towards categorical distinctions, questioning the unintentional exceptionalization of certain groups, and emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding individuals on the move. Questions that arise when thinking about this debate are issues of implementation and the black-

and white thinking on necessity and agency of these individuals. For example, economic migrants: how does one decide whether it is a necessity to flee, or when is it 'just' someone's dream for a better future? When is their present life bad enough to long for something better? Fleeing from violence seems more legitimate than due to economic reasons, however similar questions arise: can we decide what violence is bad enough? What about structural violence that is not as visible?

Chatterji's (2013: 274) exploration of the Bengal diaspora offers valuable insights that resonate with these raised questions. Focusing on the aftermath of upheavals following the partition of Bengal, where most refugees stayed within the region, this study challenges claims about nation-making as a refugee-generating process and emphasizes the regional stay of refugees, aligning with larger global patterns. Chatterji (2013: 278) challenges the assumption that forced migrations due to political upheavals are fundamentally different from economic migrations driven by labour market demands. The legitimacy of fleeing, becomes a subjective matter, influenced by individual circumstances and the multifaceted nature of the challenges they face.

Ralph and Staeheli (2011: 520) offer another crucial point for this research to contemplate, arguing that migrants who possess legal authorization to reside in the countries they've relocated to may find it relatively easier to navigate the spatial relationships and networks that define and anchor their sense of home. This could be explained commonly by the fact that they are assured of their stay in the Netherlands and thus can start investing in practices to rebuild their lives.

The ongoing debate seems far from resolved, at least in the context of a theoretical consensus. This debate touches my research since the individuals who visit the recreational centres are categorized under one of those concepts. Both the organizations studied in this research chose to name their visitors 'newcomers', including refugees with or without papers and all types of migrants.

Literature on refugees, such as Besteman's (2016: 289) exploration in *Making Refuge*, questions how individuals (in her case, Somali Bantu refugees) who have survived war and displacement rebuild their lives in a new country where their world has fundamentally changed. My research focuses, as Colson (2003: 4) suggests, on the lives of those who have moved, emphasizing their experiences after crossing borders. I aspire to underscore the necessity of considering voices of those who left and need to rebuild a home, and, in doing so, contribute to the ongoing dialogue in the field of anthropology.

Migrants' belonging

Migrants face many difficulties prior, during, and after their move. The aftermath of their journey puts them in a new society where they naturally not belong. Belonging, while inherently a subjective feeling, is socially defined and shaped by both personal and societal factors. The subjective side of belonging is closely linked to the dimensions of place and identity, often synonymous with migrants' sense of fitting in 'at home.' However, the social element of belonging goes beyond individual feelings and involves frequent experiences of exclusion, and some of inclusion. Belonging is not just about warm fellowship

but is intricately tied to the ability or inability of some individuals to participate in mainstream societal practices. The legitimacy of one's claim to membership in a particular home depends on recognition by the wider community or group. In essence, belonging emerges from intertwined social processes of incorporation and exclusion, shaped both by self-definition and external validation (Ralph and Staeheli, 2011: 523).

Antonsich (2010: 645) proposes an analytical framework to define belonging more concisely, including various disciplines. He argues that even though belonging primarily represents a personal, intimate sense of being at home in a place (place-belongingness), it is inevitably influenced by power dynamics (politics of belonging), and thus should both be integrated when researching (Antonsich, 2010: 653). Both authors above opt for the combination of researching both the individual feeling as the social dynamics of belonging. In this thesis, I use Antonsich's conceptualization as a guideline to distinguish the two dimensions.

"Place-belongingness" is a complex emotional concept that revolves around the attachment of an individual to a specific location, transforming that place into a feeling of home. In this context, the term home does not necessarily refer to a physical space but rather symbolizes a space characterized by familiarity, comfort, security, and deep emotional connections (Antonsich, 2010: 646). The spatial dimension of home encompasses not only the physical structures where people reside but also the spaces where their daily routines unfold, including streets, places of worship, stores, and social gathering spots.

In the work of Egos and De Nardi (2017: S79), migrants' relationships with their everyday surroundings take centre stage, emphasizing place-attachment and the development of a sense of belonging. They argue that the connection with everyday places is established by attributing symbolic meanings to landscapes, shaped through a dynamic interplay between past memories, present experiences, and future expectations. This intricate process involves habits, daily movements, imagination, and emotional or psychological conditions that intricately intertwine life events, individuals, and places. The researchers underscore the role of significant memories, hopes, social relationships, quality of life, and legal status in migrants' attachment to places. Importantly, the sense of belonging is found to be influenced by symbolic meanings, with residence duration alone insufficient for place attachment. Instead, it must become a meaningful context for one's life in relation to present purposes, past events, and aspirations for the future.

In addition to space, the idea of home is deeply intertwined with relationships, going beyond the conventional connection between citizens and the state or the sense of belonging to a broader national community. Instead, the experience of home is a daily reality shaped by a series of interactions, negotiations, intimacies, and exchanges with close family members, extended relatives, and acquaintances. These reciprocal relationships foster the development of social capital and define the character of home life (Taylor, 2013: 138). Similarly, Antonsich (2010: 647) presents the relational factor as one of the key contributors to place-belongingness, centred around personal and social connections that enrich an individual's life within a particular place. These connections can range from

emotionally close relationships with friends and family to what are termed as 'weak ties', which encompass occasional interactions with strangers encountered in public spaces.

According to the belongingness hypothesis proposed by Baumeister and Leary (1995: 500), not all relationships have the same impact on generating a sense of belonging. To foster a strong sense of group belonging, relationships should be enduring, positive, stable, and significant. Additionally, these relationships should involve frequent physical interactions. Place-belongingness is rooted in these meaningful and long-lasting connections that help individuals feel truly at home in a particular place.

The relational factor explained forms a bridge to the concept of politics of belonging. This concept is used in theorizing the discourses and practices of socio-spatial in- and exclusion. This is in line with Ralph and Staeheli (2011: 523) who also stress that external validation is significance to belonging. This validation is argued to be inherently spatial and thus visible in the physical environment (Trudeau 2006: 423 as cited in Antonsich 2010: 650). The politics of belonging comes into play, emphasizing the power relations involved in claiming and granting belonging. This concept includes a negotiation at individual or collective level between the already-there society and the new inhabitants (Antonsich 2010: 649). Belonging thus is argued to be a two-way street, even when concerning one individual.

Rebuilding a home

Homemaking processes are impacted by external opportunity structures, with social capital playing a central role. Social capital (Ostrom, 2009: 17) refers to the networks of relationships, shared norms, and mutual trust that facilitate cooperation and collective action within a community or between different groups. There are two fundamental types of social capital: bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital serves to connect disparate groups, fostering relationships and interactions between individuals from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, bonding social capital operates within a specific group that shares commonalities, reinforcing ties among its members.

Social cohesion and social capital play a vital role in wellbeing, where the former pertains to the general condition of society, and the latter involves interpersonal and group-level interactions (Peperkamp and Haumahu, 2023: 2). Public spaces, including semi-public ones like libraries and community centres, are highlighted as essential for fostering social interactions and trust. Peperkamp and Haumahu (2023: 4-5) underscore the significance of meeting places that provide opportunities for social interaction in developing social capital. They introduce the concept of social infrastructure, encompassing spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups facilitating social connections.

Though, Boon and Farnsworth (2011: 508) assert that within the concept of social capital, the significance lies not in merely having social connections but in the ability to convert these connections into accessible resources. They argue that the focus should shift from the mere presence of social networks to the potential to leverage these networks for resource accessibility, as this determines the likelihood of social inclusion. Through their study situated in a southern city of New Zealand, they

highlight the experiences of individuals who face social exclusion precisely because they have been unable to translate their social connections into tangible resources.

In the context of the two chosen organizations, their role extends beyond mere facilitation. They actively contribute to both bridging and bonding social capital, providing spaces that encourage social practices between migrants themselves (migrant to migrant) and between migrants and the host community (migrant to host). In doing so, these organizations become catalysts for the development and exchange of social capital, fostering a sense of belonging and interconnectedness.

Within these practices rebuilding a sense of home, Van Liempt and Staring (2021: 309) present an argument that creating a sense of home for refugees involves diverse connections to places and people. Through their study on homemaking practices of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, they argue for more attention on the effects of the physical environment, as concrete places, on creating social and spatial relationships. Homing refers here in a broader sense not only to housing but includes places like the local supermarket too. Lastly, they emphasize that, beyond the physical aspects, feeling at home is influenced by the social relationships formed in a specific place. The interactions with other refugees, neighbours, and volunteers become crucial factors in understanding refugees' processes of creating a sense of home (ibid.).

Similarly, Ahmed (1999: 330-331) reflects on the complex nature of home as a concept that extends beyond a singular place. She argues that home is not confined to a specific location but exists in multiple spaces, challenging the idea of a fixed destination for the subject. Leaving home creates multiple homes, forming a complex relationship between memories and the concept of home. She nuances the concept, going beyond mere fantasies of belonging. Home is portrayed sentimentally as a space of belonging, and being at home is a matter of how one feels. The lived experience of locality suggests an immersive relationship between the subject and space, like inhabiting a second skin. Leaving a space that has developed the self, prompts a reconsideration of the transformative impact of migration on one's identity and relationship to home. Thus, migration alters the very skin through which the body experiences the world (Ahmed, 1999: 341).

Ahmed (1999: 336) then poses the question of how migrants can reclaim space and identity by refusing to conform to a specific place. She argues that the act of leaving home and embracing the status of 'becoming a stranger' fosters the emergence of a novel 'community of strangers.' This community forms a shared bond among those who have undergone the experience of migration. She emphasizes the connection between the suspension of a traditional sense of home and the establishment of these new communities. This communal bonding provides a sense of stability through the language of heritage, where individuals inherit a collective past by mutually acknowledging the absence of a home rather than sharing a physical space. Here, estrangement (Ahmed, 1999: 345) is presented as a crucial condition for the emergence of a contested community, where migrant bodies exist within the uncommon estrangement of migration, fostering the recreation of commonalities within the community.

Examining different views on home and home-making practices, I concur with van Liempt and Staring (2021) on the importance of a physical environment utilized for social interaction helping to form what Ahmed (1999) names a community of strangers.

Conviviality

Racialized minority identities are often ideologically attributed as inferior to European, white normativity (Gilroy, 2004: 153). Valluvan (2016: 207) asserts that just recognizing differences among people, especially those in minority groups, is not enough. The problem lies in our existing ideas about these differences, which have historically favoured certain groups, often considered the 'majority'. He suggests that acknowledging differences without changing the underlying ideas about them is not very effective. In fact, it might unintentionally support the existing norms that benefit the majority. The conviviality discourse describes the notion of 'everyday diversity' as a frame for understanding urban coexistence and tolerance, emphasizing the peaceful coexistence of diverse groups in proximity without insurmountable tensions. The emphasis is on recognizing the unremarkable reality of differences in people's lives, acknowledging that conflicts and racism persist but are part of everyday existence (Amin, 2008; Heil, 2014).

However, this emphasis on normalizing everyday diversity is critiqued by Beebeejaun (2022: 2) who argues that this focus renders the invisible structural and institutional discrimination that migrants continue to face. She asserts that diversity is often exploited as a marker of European progressiveness, which ultimately undermines a genuine appreciation of the ongoing racial and ethnic struggles encountered by non-white, non-European individuals. Contemporary narratives that celebrate the normalization of difference in diverse neighbourhoods fall short of addressing the underlying dynamics of structural racism that shape ethnic and racial categorizations.

In the context of this thesis, I use the concept of conviviality within the enclosed spaces of the recreational centres. Agreeing with Beebeejaun on her critiques of the concept situated within a broader societal context that holds European colonialist structures, I do believe that the concept is valuable to describe these sensitive spaces. So, within the recreational spaces, conviviality may enhance a hospitable atmosphere that recognizes, respects, and appreciates migrants on a regular basis.

Space

In the context of delineating the concept of space, it is essential to encompass both the physical attributes of the space and the social dynamics that unfold within it. This perspective underscores the intricate interplay between the tangible characteristics of the space and the social interactions that both shape and are shaped by it. Recognizing this interconnectedness is crucial for capturing the intricate relationship between space as a physical entity and the social dynamics that exert influence on it.

Lefebvre (1991: 286) argues that the intricate and paradoxical aspect of space lies in the idea that it is deeply intertwined with social interactions. Space doesn't merely exist because of these social

interactions; it is both a product of them and a producer of them. In other words, space is not a passive setting; it actively influences and is influenced by the social relationships and activities that take place within it. In line with this, Beebeejaun (2017: 327-331) argues that rather than perceiving space as fixed or static, individuals actively shape it through their movements and everyday practices. Everyday lived spaces are overlooked as political sites, yet a thorough examination exposes their crucial role in constructing a sense of belonging. Within these frequently neglected spaces, one can identify ongoing processes of negotiation, challenge, and appropriation that influence everyday spatial practices.

Another view on space and belonging is proposed by Leach (2002: 129), who presents three theoretical models for understanding individuals' sense of place, which include architectural identifications. His initial model suggests a process of territorialization, where physically engaging with and exploring a space serves as the initial step in deriving its meaning. The second model proposes that a sense of place and belonging emerges through storytelling and the creation of narratives. Lastly, Leach suggests that identification with a place is established through a reflective process, where individuals mirror themselves and envision their identity within the space they inhabit. Finally, he asserts (2002: 132) that architecture emerges as a promising tool for embedding oneself within the environment. It has the capacity to foster identification and nurture a profound sense of belonging.

The recreational centres arguably take the form of "free" spaces, an idea explored by Evans and Boyte (1992: 9). They characterise these spaces as public areas in communities where people can foster the development of new skills, a stronger sense of collective identity, and a newfound sense of self-respect. These open, dynamic spaces that foster participation work as bridges between the private life and larger institutions. These spaces are further distinguished by a fusion of wider public contacts and deep communal ties. They go beyond a person's close social circles to include a wide variety of individuals and viewpoints. Egalitarian standards of discourse, openness, dissent, and interchange predominate in these settings.

Anderson (2021: 286) extends the concept of "free" spaces, which he terms "safe" spaces, by introducing the notion of epistemic value. While conventional safe spaces focus on fostering self-expression and providing protection for marginalized groups against oppression, Anderson advocates for the development of epistemically safe spaces (2021: 287). These spaces aim to empower marginalized individuals by promoting their epistemic agency and amplifying their perspectives rooted in subordinated knowledge and intersectional experiences. Anderson contends that nurturing epistemic agency within these spaces not only ensures emotional safety but also enhances the ability of marginalized students to express themselves freely (ibid.). The recreational centres stress these elements of safety too, which forms a base for the other experiential processes.

Within the discourses on space, multiple authors link the concept of conviviality (Brudvig, 2013; Neal et al., 2019). Brudvig (2013: 11) links conviviality to the experience of space, through sensory feelings and reactions within a common place. This connection between conviviality and space implies that the physical environment plays a significant role in shaping the conviviality of social

interactions. Conviviality within social interaction, where marginalization is replaced by negotiation, can positively impact politics of belonging.

Ultimately, in this thesis I focus on the social construction of space (Low, 2016: 4) within the recreational centres that I argue to operate as free or safe spaces for migrants. The concept of social construction of space, in theory, is employed to describe the way individuals perceive and interact with space, influenced by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control. In essence, the social construction of space refers to how space is transformed through the social exchanges, memories, mental associations, and daily utilization of the physical environment, imbuing it with symbolic significance. Examining this process helps to uncover how local discussions over space shed light on broader societal issues (Low, 2016: 69). The present research zooms in on this dimension of space as it highlights the social processes it accommodates. It connects to the theories on the relational and social processes of space to the sense of belonging this can create.

Recreational spaces for migrants

Space have proven itself to be important in the current theory on migrants' belonging. When zooming in more specifically on what those spaces should comprise and what kind of spaces matter significantly, less literature is found. Numerous authors (Ruiz-Tagle, 2013: 394 citing Karp et al., 1991 and Joseph, 2006) emphasize the significance of combining housing opportunities with investments in social services, education, transportation, job preparedness, training, and placement.

Mansfield's (2020: 3) exploration of the intricate link between recreational activities and wellbeing underscores the varied and positive emotional impact that a diverse range of recreational practices can have on individuals. This understanding becomes particularly pertinent in the context of research on migrant recreational spaces and belonging. As migrants navigate various phases of post-migration, stress can significantly impact their mental well-being. However, when migrants experience receptivity and warmth from both the host society and fellow migrants, it relieves the challenges of cultural adaptation, thus easing the coping process for migrants (Bhugra, 2004: 247). Recreational centres can take on a crucial role in offering this warm welcome, ultimately promoting migrants' well-being. The dynamics between recreation and wellbeing, encompass terms such as life satisfaction, meaning, purpose, and happiness. Mansfield (2020: 7) asserts that these leisure experiences, whether individual or collective, contemplative or sociable, play a vital role in contributing positively to the well-being of individuals navigating new cultural landscapes.

Within the literature on refugees' well-being, Chatterjee et al. (2020: 323) explore their chapter of the book Refuge in a Moving World, if cultural and creative activities can ease the transition of settlement and integration for migrants. They focus on the well-being of post-migration as a sense of resilience and flourishment, rather than solely surviving. When it comes to post-migration issues like

racism and animosity, social and emotional isolation, the social component of engagement in creative activities is argued to be helpful (2020: 326). Through their study in the UK and Jordan, the authors (2020: 339) suggest that participation in community-based creative arts helps build social capital, reduce loneliness and social isolation, and foster personal confidence and empowerment. Additionally, the social and collaborative nature of these activities allows individuals to address personal and psychological issues, such as anxiety and depression, through non-verbal creative methods.

The value of creativity on well-being is further studied by Swan (2013: 25), who examined a creative space in a small town in rural Northwest England, aimed at encouraging social inclusion among people with mental health disabilities. The study underscored the significant impact of the environment on fostering a positive and inclusive atmosphere. Drawing on 'Artspace' as a model of success, Swan proposes that organisations seeking to improve inclusivity should adopt a non-institutional strategy, actively include participants in conversation, and tailor their programmes to suit specific requirements. One of the most important factors that was emphasised was the flexibility that allowed individuals to participate at their own pace. Even though organisations may have goals in mind, like hiring, keeping things flexible can help foster a welcoming and laid-back atmosphere. Lastly, Swan argues the importance in recognise the significance of creating a pleasant physical environment (ibid.). This focus on creativity mainly connects to the space of DVK, where most of their program is based on creative activities. The laid-back atmosphere that Swan describes, I observed at both recreational spaces.

Within the literature on leisure, Peperkamp (2018: 256) explores how such activities, specifically nightlife activities like clubbing, contribute to the sense of belonging among Polish labour migrants in West European countries. Her focus is on understanding the experiences of migration and assimilation through this lens of leisure. She introduces the perspective of interaction rituals that can create emotional energy and solidarity, influencing a sense of belonging irrespective of ethnic identity. The study aligns with the concept of conviviality, focusing on ordinary, daily interactions where ethnic differences may matter less than shared tastes and lifestyles. Peperkamp does not include in her argumentation the notion of intersectionality. There is often a class dimension to shared tastes and lifestyles, thus one cannot separate ethnicity from this argumentation. Furthermore, Peperkamp (2018: 261) notes language to emerge as a significant aspect, impacting respondents' choices in leisure activities. A lack of language skills can hinder participation, emphasizing the role of language in shaping leisure experiences.

Neal et al. (2019: 80) also turn their attention to social leisure organizations, arguing that these intentional and structured social spaces offer valuable insights into established and participatory social life. They highlight the purposeful seeking, expectation, and maintenance of social connections within these organizations, moving away from a focus on transient urban landscapes to more intentional and

structured social spaces. They (2019: 77) further argue that social leisure organizations contribute significantly to shaping and defining specific places. They acknowledge the iterative nature of place, with social leisure groups influencing and being influenced by the places they inhabit. These groups depend on coordinated and ritualized time and space arrangements, fostering shared encounters among members with common interests or activities. The authors observe a recurring pattern in members' narratives, highlighting that participation in these organizations contributes not only to social connections but also to a sense of connection with a specific place.

One common activity that both recreational spaces facilitate is situated around food. Prior to my research I did not implement a review on the concept of food. However, it emerged as an important element in my fieldwork. The importance of food practices I found in the reconstruction of ethnic identities and relationships post-migration. Here, food embodies a continuity with the past and adaptation to new circumstances (Abbots et al., 2016: 117; Parasecoli 2014: 420).

Neely and Walton (2015: 435) clarify that food practices comprise a variety of food-related actions, such as cooking, sharing, and giving or receiving food as gifts. They argue that these customs, which frequently take the shape of rituals in both daily life and exceptional events, are crucial in forming social bonds. They go on to say that rituals, which are rich in cultural meaning and symbolism, are essential elements of everyday communication practices. Because rituals are conducted inside social circles and serve to create intimacy, they contend that they are vital to the upkeep and strengthening of relationships. Shared food practices thus serve to deepen connections and cultivate a sense of belonging within the peer cultures of young people.

In conclusion, how spaces are defined, utilized, and imbued with meaning by a society can either foster a strong sense of belonging or, conversely, lead to feelings of exclusion and marginalization. Combining the theory discussed, this thesis adopts a multifaceted approach to provide a comprehensive understanding and serve as a bridge for community centres to effectively tailor their spaces to meet migrants' needs.

Demarcating the field

This section introduces two organizations that serve as the sites for this research. The first is 'De Voorkamer' (DVK), a small community-led organization situated in Lombok, Utrecht. This community consist of migrants and Dutch volunteers. DVK has striven to ensure that the initiative is not only for the community but created by them. This initiative is dedicated to facilitating interactions, fostering understanding, and encouraging collaboration among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Since the set up in 2016, it has gained recognition for its innovative approach to achieving these

objectives, which includes the organization of a wide array of activities such as art exhibitions, workshops, cultural events, and design projects. These initiatives involve both newcomers and locals and employ art and design as mediums to promote mutual understanding and collaboration. DVK operates from a physical space in Utrecht, serving as a meeting point where individuals from various backgrounds can convene to share their experiences and participate in creative projects.

The second organization 'BOOST', located in Amsterdam Oost, is a larger entity committed to promoting a society where active participation is accessible to all. BOOST welcomes newcomers and was established in 2017 by a group of active individuals from Amsterdam who believe in the shared responsibility of the community in fostering integration. The organization believes in the potential of both new Amsterdam residents and long-time inhabitants to engage with one another's lives in an informal and mutually enriching manner. Notably, BOOST emphasizes the significance of a physical space where people can meet, engage in activities, feel a sense of welcome, and express their authentic selves.

The initiative of DVK is possible due to the ongoing support of funds and partners, namely: the municipality of Utrecht*, Stimuleringsfonds, Stichting Doen, VSB fonds, Kansfonds* and *Oranjefonds*. BOOST gets support from the municipality of Amsterdam, the subsidies from the *Regeling Sociale Basis*, the programme *Duurzaam Perspectief voor Ongedocumenteerden*, and the new *Regeling Integraal Maatschappelijk Initiatief*.

Both DVK and BOOST have a broad inclusive approach, welcoming individuals from all backgrounds, but they primarily serve migrants and refugees, including those with or without legal documentation. They actively promote integration in all aspects of life and strive for mutual understanding and social cohesion. These organizations align closely with the research's core objectives, as they share similar values and aims. This research seeks to demonstrate the potential significance of community-led organizations in enhancing the sense of belonging among migrants, and both DVK and BOOST serve as ideal research sites to explore this theme comprehensively.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF RESEARCH

Prior to writing this thesis, I conducted a three-month ethnographic research project, encompassing investigations at two recreational centres aimed at collecting comprehensive data. As I navigated through my fieldwork experience, I found myself constantly reassessing and readjusting my approach to ensure productivity. One significant change I made was in my agenda structure, transitioning from a half-week at BOOST and a half-week at DVK to dedicating an entire week to each organization alternately. This adjustment has provided me with a more immersive experience within each setting, allowing for deeper engagement and understanding. It has also made possible to see more of the activities they offer, so I got a broader sense of what the spaces entail.

Participant observation

I used participant observation for gathering data on the social dynamics, uses of space, and the everyday life within the recreational centres. This method provided an in-depth view into the practices and social interactions happening in the centres and formed the base of the rest of the methodology.

Considering trust and comfort in my relationships with the migrants was important for my research, I have dived into my fieldwork and participant observation by what Bernard (2017: 368) defines as ‘’hanging out’’. Building trust by ordinary presence, I started with attending meetings at the recreational centres without an intense drive to collect data. I define my position as a partially participating observant considering that I participated in the main activities of both recreational centres, and I was at the space every day it was open. In the context of my research sites this was either during the day at BOOST or in the evening at DVK. Due to the nature of time limited spaces, I slept at my own house, which only partly immersed me in the world of the migrant population I studied.

Interviews

Secondly, after the participant observation helped with forming sensible questions, and conducting some ordinary conversations, I planned interviews. Considering the first data gaining period, this influenced the interview in forming the structure (from open to semi-structured). To gain an overview of perspectives on the subject, I interviewed seven interlocutors of various social context. The roles of migrants where not limited to labelling as visitor, or participants, rather they too encompassed the roles of volunteer and organization staff. I thus have interviewed position wise, speaking to individuals that solely visited the space, those who frequently participated, who volunteered, and who officially worked. Due to the multiple roles the interlocutors enacted, were they able to inform me on multiple perspectives. The interviews were held with the individuals that I spend most of my fieldwork time with, making the conversations comfortable and without much social boundaries. I tried to speak to people from various perspectives, however I am aware that my circle was somewhat limited to those who visited the space often. This is likely to have some impact on the outcome of the interview as a more positive vision, since I spoke to individuals who spend much of their free time there, something that speaks of their liking of the space. Their countries of origin range from Syria, Nigeria, Yemen, and Iran to Dutch. I interviewed one woman and six men, most of them started as participant and evaluated to volunteer or staff. Set aside, the main interlocutors will be introduced throughout the chapters that they helped devise.

The constructivist approach (Hiller and DiLuzio, 2004: 3) guided my interviews, emphasizing the active and dialogical nature of the research process and valuing the perspectives and experiences of the interviewees. The interviews and my main interlocutors had a profound impact on writing this thesis, whereas the words they gave to their perspectives and experiences formed, moulded my argumentation throughout.

Extended case method

To answer my final sub-question (*How do recreational spaces for migrants reflect broader socio-spatial dynamics within the host community?*), I also reached out to the Extended Case Method (ECM) by Burawoy (1998: 5). Using reflective science, the extended case approach builds on existing theory to help ethnographers navigate from the micro to the macro, separate the unique from the general, and link the past and present to shape the future. By immersing myself in the daily activities of both Boost and DVK, this provided an in-depth understanding of the social dynamics at play within these spaces. Through participant observation, I unravelled the intricacies of their operations and the interactions among community members. Then moving back and forth between the specific cases and the broader social theories, I refined my understanding of the broader socio-spatial dynamics within the host-community.

Spatial data collection and analysis

Spatial analysis involved a comprehensive collection of data not only on the physical layout, design, and usage of spaces within the recreational centres but also on the socio-spatial practices that occur within these spaces. This data encompassed the arrangement of seating, the presence of artwork, the placement of amenities, as well as the observed social interactions and activities. Spatial data was analysed with a specific focus on understanding how the physical environment within the recreational centres influences migrants' experiences and their sense of belonging in a socio-spatial context. It identified the social dynamics that contribute to or hinder a sense of belonging within these spaces. This direct observation method provided empirical data about the spatial environment, allowing for comparisons with migrants' perceptions. The two recreational centres were compared in their spatial structures and their socio-spatial practices. Amidst my fieldwork, I discovered a book that delves into the design aspects of DVK, illustrating how it is constructed as an inclusive space. This book assisted me in taking a closer look into the specific features of the space, and the intentionality behind it.

Data analysis

The principal data sources consisted of comprehensive fieldnotes that were obtained through in-depth observations and audio recordings that were verbatim transcribed. The methodological approach provides transparency throughout the process by carefully documenting the findings through analytical and descriptive notes. Through adopting Bernard's (2006: 492) grounded theory approach, I analysed by forming by categorizing and interpreting data considering emerging themes, forming a bottom-up investigation that speaks to the experiences of the participants. Practically, I used NVivo to make sense of the large pile of data collected. This helped me to get an overview on the themes that emerged throughout observations and interviews. The next stage was to connect these themes to the more general ideas presented in the theoretical framework. In this process I aimed to create a coherent story that tied small-scale observations to larger-scale theoretical ideas.

Ethics and positionality

In exploring the dynamics of cultivating a sense of belonging among migrants within recreational centres, it was imperative to anchor this research in a strong ethical framework. First and foremost, this entailed following the AAA Code of Ethics (The American Anthropological Association, 2023) underscoring the importance of informed consent, confidentiality, and the duty to "do no harm" to research subjects, and additionally the WAU (World Anthropological Union, 2023) Code highlighting the need to engage in ethical collaborative relationships with communities, recognizing the agency of research subjects and involving them in the research process. In applying this, I opted the importance of consider the cultural norms of the community I studied, what was challenging, since the migrants all had different cultural backgrounds. For my research it was important to build a level of trust and respect, which led to cooperation and a more open access to the community. I found important here the notion of clarity, which goes in hand with informed consent or transparency. This clarity was implemented by having one easy to understand story on what my work and topic as researcher is. This made sure the expectations of the research subjects did not vary from the reality.

Along the more generally implemented codes of ethics, Bourgeois (2012: 52) argues that especially when researching humans in vulnerable positions who often face power inequalities, anthropological ethics should not only ‘do no harm’, but also help to empower them. For my own research, I negotiated access with the migrant community centres by discussing how I could help the migrants, by doing something back for them such as volunteering at the bar or during language cafe. Especially BOOST explained by first contact that this was important for them, otherwise they would not want to host my research.

Since my research includes many different voices, such as the migrants, the organization, the community, in writing I considered Clifford (1983: 137) article on processes of writing. He explains the polyphonic process to be closely related to the dialogical one and emphasizes the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives in ethnographic writing. Clifford advocates for the incorporation of diverse voices, including those of research participants, informants, and even other scholars, in the text. This approach challenges the idea of a single authoritative voice and encourages a richer, more nuanced representation of the culture under study. For my research, I found it important to have many different voices heard, such as the migrants, the organization, the community. In line with the many voices I mentioned, reading Hiller and DiLuzio (2004: 20) put my mind to wondering the interviewees perspective. He made clear that the migrants likely see these interviews as a validation process, which can, linked back to Bourgeois (ibid.), thus empower them.

During my fieldwork, my position as a young, white, Dutch woman became clear. Especially at the space of BOOST, where most migrants were men still living in the asylum-seeking centre. My presence did not go unnoticed to them, neither did their attention go unnoticed to me. Throughout the period I volunteered at this space, I had multiple conversations with volunteer coordinator Rasmus on

this topic. Rasmus is a thirty-year-old, Dutch men that always dresses fashionably and walks around the space carrying his notebook. To him it stood out that my presence attracted some, questioning their intentions. The positive side to this was that from the start, it was easy to connect to the migrants, since they were eager to talk to me. The more negative side was that after a few weeks, their desires and forms of seeking attention became distracting. Due to these circumstances, I had to readjust my stance as a researcher and create a more distant position.

As described in the very first part of this thesis, the fieldwork experience made me more aware of my general position as an insider in this country, and an outsider in this study. Several components of my positionality could have sparked some power relations. Firstly, my proficiency of the Dutch language defied me to integrate as a fully equal participant to the migrants at BOOST. Being and speaking Dutch meant I could never fully undertake the language activities as one of the migrants. After a few times of observing and participating in their level, I started as a teacher. My proficiency in Dutch meant I had something to offer the migrants. Multiple times I got the question if I could be their personal language coach. Furthermore, my proficiency and appearance made that some newly visiting migrants mistook me for organizational staff. This perception again meant I could offer the migrants knowledge on the organization. Regularly, newly visiting migrant asked me questions on the ins and outs of the space, e.g., if I could show them around or tell them about practicalities. The problem of the perceived position I occupied is the influence this could have had on the interactions I encountered with the migrants. How they interacted with me depends on their view of my position and their intention. Viewing me as someone who has knowledge, recourses or power would likely spark their interest in connecting with me. Ultimately, these power relations should be considered as a bias of the social relationships I encountered and thus my view on the thesis subject.

''So, you arrive, having left a lot behind you. You've likely endured a pretty miserable journey, invested a lot of money in it. Your family often isn't here yet. And then you find yourself on the outskirts of the city, maybe on a cruise ship. How do you move forward? You're not engaging with the Netherlands, not with the language, not with the Dutch… ''(quote on page 2)

At ours (BOOST), you do come into contact with all of that. And that also offers a lot of opportunities for people to learn the language. But also, to get back to work if you're a cook, to start cooking again.

Or if you want to become more proficient in the language, to work at the reception. It's a kind of halfway point.
-Rasmus

II. PHYSICAL SPACE

Through this first chapter, I hope to not only analyse the spatiality but also to paint a lively picture of the recreational spaces to enhance understanding. DVK had been a design project by students on the subject inclusivity. About this project Raviv and Van Der Mijl (2021) have written a book named BY&FOR, explaining the concept of DVK and the practical form it takes. Here, the very intentional 'designing inclusive spaces' is explained and this gave a thorough view of the space. The book helped me to review my observations and spatially analyse both BOOST and DVK. Raviv and Van Der Mijl (2021: 6) argue that "when considered, the principles of the physical properties of a space can aid and facilitate the aims of an initiative." Through an examination of their spatial arrangements, decor, and utilization, I uncover how these spaces facilitate connection-building and promote inclusivity among their diverse participants.

Building the space: design features that foster connection

Looking at their windows, the two spaces appear as parallel worlds, both featuring portrait pictures facing outwards to the neighbouring environment. Upon entering the space of BOOST, photographs of individuals with different backgrounds smile at you. Once entering the building, one can quickly spot some of those portraited faces in real life, since these are all volunteers and participants of BOOST. Across places, at the space of DVK, the narrative unfolds in a similar fashion. Here, too, photographs line the windows, inviting passersby to look at the variety of lives portraited. Though disparate in origin, these images share a common purpose - to bridge the gap between strangers. The photographs at DVK

form an exhibition of individuals living in the neighbourhood, Lombok. The artist in residence, as DVK frames it, contacted twenty-five residents with different nationalities, ages, and life stories.

Figure 1. photograph taken from within BOOST, showing the portraits facing outwards.

In both spaces, the photographs served as more than mere decorations; they were windows into the lives, stories, and aspirations of the migrants who called these centres home, if only temporarily. Through these images, the boundaries between insider and outsider blurred, fostering a sense of community that transcended cultural and geographical divides. The design feature of large windows that both spaces hold, make their programs highly visible to the surrounding area, inviting curiosity from passersby. Where Boesen et al. (2023: 6) explored conviviality, they understand its socio-structural factors through social visibility. Social visibility is often uneven and asymmetrical, as are the relations of inequality and power Here, conviviality suggests culturally informed ways of seeing and revealing, influencing a sense of social recognition (ibid.). These photographs, aimed at the outside neighbourhood reveal the diversity and cultural differences in a convivial manner.

Upon entering DVK's main space, visitors are greeted by a vibrant scene where an open kitchen and bar are adorned with colourfully decorated wooden planks, each bearing unique drawings contributed by participants. I discussed these physical elements with Yetunde, the volunteer coordinator at DVK, who I would describe as a force of positivity and happiness. She is in her fifties but looks younger, originally from Nigeria, and has been living in the Netherlands three years now with her husband. They moved here because of a work opportunity he got. During the past years, she has found DVK and started participating, to now, obtaining an organizational role as coordinator of Project Mini. Yetunde elaborates in our conversation on the creative ethos of the space, highlighting how every aspect—from the tables and chairs to the metal hanging lamps, cups, ceramic ware, curtains, and cushions—has been handcrafted by the individuals who frequently participate: ‘’We have the theoretical

lessons here and then the practical lessons in the workshop, whether it's the clothing workshop or the metal industry or the wood industry.''

From the origins of the space, DVK actively involved participants in the initiative, inviting their input and expertise to assist in renovating the existing space. This collaborative effort instilled a sense of ownership and fostered inclusivity, a trend that has persisted over the last seven years. The diverse aesthetic styles and cultural influences brought by participants contribute to the unique ambiance of the space, celebrating the richness of diversity.

As participants actively contribute to the design and decoration of the space, they invest their time, creativity, and cultural heritage into its physical environment. This process of co-creation strengthens participants' emotional connection to it. This can be connected to Egos and De Nardi (2017: S79) on their notion of place-attachment, which is intricately intertwined with symbolic meanings attributed to landscapes. The physical creations of the migrants are tangible projections of the "past memories, present experiences, and future expectations" Egos and De Nardi (2017: S79) explore.

Ultimately, empowering participants to have a say in how a space is utilized and structured can foster a sense of ownership and attachment to the initiative, thereby enhancing inclusivity. The component of ownership can lessen the power relations (Antonsich 2010: 649) involved in granting and claiming belonging within this space. If space is co-created and shared by all its visitors, lacking restricted areas only for the ''owners'' of the space, perceived spatial power relations lessen. This approach also mitigates any perceived hierarchical dynamics that participants may associate with the official organization of the initiative. When I asked Yetunde to elaborate the reasons for DVK's strong emphasis on co-creation, Yetunde turns the inquiry back, asking, ''Why do you consider a place your home?'' Responding, I suggest, ''Because you build it.'' Yetunde affirms:

''That's precisely what we're doing - building, for us and by us. So, everyone that comes here, you're welcome to leave your mark here. Like what we're looking over there is an embroidered logo of De Voorkamer. One of the crafting and textiles people just thought I could do it and it was done. So, all ideas are welcome. And those lovely wooden low tables over there. And even the backgammon wooden games were designed by us. So, it's ownership. And that's why I hear when people come in, they kind of immediately know what to do. They're helping out. They're helping to clean; they go to the kitchen. What can I do? What can I do? Once you learn how to work the space, you go for it. Do as if you're in your house. Keep it clean. Keep it cool.''

The wooden tables, adorned with African-inspired patterns and motifs, accompanying a narrative that provides insight into the heritage and motivations of its co-creators, Sapin and Pim. On one side, Sapin shares his Congolese roots and the significance behind elements such as scissors, pencils, a dancing boy, and a car tire, offering a glimpse into his personal journey and creative inspirations. On the other side, Pim, one of the founders of DVK, reflects on his own motivations for the design characteristics,

enriching the narrative of collaboration and community that permeates the space. These narratives humanize the space, making it more than just a physical environment but a reflection of the diverse individuals who inhabit it. The processes shown here, align with Leach's (2002: 130) three models of making sense of place. The narrative combines with their identity, belonging to a place by doing things that show who they are. And with that, over time they can see themselves into the space, feeling attached to it. It shows a way of how people build connections with the spaces around them and create a sense of identity through their interactions with these places.

This unique approach of physical co-creation that DVK fosters, is not equally apparent at BOOST. Whereas participants are allowed to fill the space with their own efforts and visions, there is less everyday emphasis on the togetherness of crafting the space. Differences in managing these spaces stem from variations in building size and daily visitor count. DVK is a singular space, with visitor counts loosely rating between five and thirty visitors. The smaller size of DVK brings its own advantages. By opting not to implement a reception area or impose restrictions on space accessibility, such as allowing all visitors into the kitchen, DVK fosters a homely atmosphere. This inclusive approach cultivates a sense of shared ownership among all visitors, minimizing hierarchical structures within the space. This approach aligns with Antonsich (2010: 649) view on the politics of belonging having visibility in the physical environment, where DVK limits power relations involved. Having no restricted areas, even for first-time visitors, negotiates and grants belonging.

The physical elements of DVK are arguably like those of Swan's (2013: 21) Artspace. Swan described that site as a ''light'' and ''homely'' building, where ''participants' artwork is regularly displayed on the walls (ibid.)'' He alludes that the space lacks an institutional feel due to the absence of signs that show regulations. I experienced this too at DVK. Swan (2013: 25) concludes that the importance of the building as a non-institutional space emerges when striving towards inclusion.

In contrast, BOOST faces the challenge of managing a larger volume of visitors, exceeding a hundred during lunchtime. Consequently, stricter regulations are enforced to ensure a controlled environment despite the high volume of guests, restricting access behind the bar and in the kitchen to volunteers only. Visible is more spatial hierarchy since the organization working upstairs have a separate office room. The space of BOOST can be viewed more as a school-type building, having diverse rooms with that hold their own purpose. To host diverse activities despite of their singular space, DVK adapted a flexible layout, as shown in de drawings below. This versatility enables the space to serve as an exhibition venue, workspace, host to music events, and more.

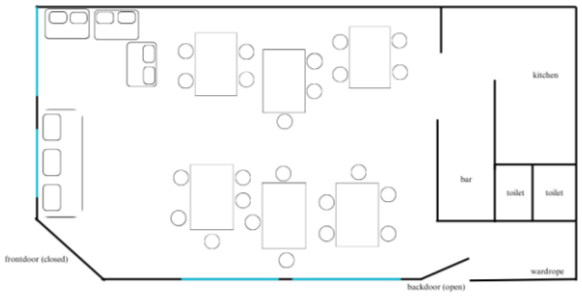

Figure 2. layout of DVK's space.

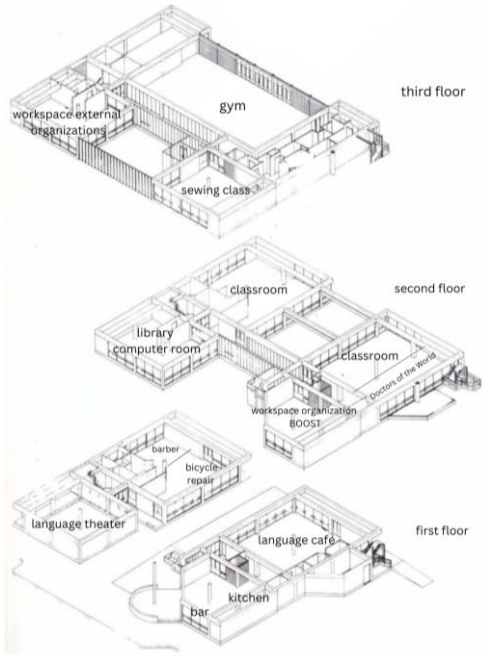

Figure 3. Layout of BOOST space [old architecture design of the building transformed to the present situation].

One spatial observation at BOOST was the difference between social interaction at the small round tables in their café area, where people gathered and interacted through conversations, verses, the large,

squared table near the entrance. This table was sized thus large that interactions could only take place when seated at the corners. Here, individuals sat solo, scrolling on their phones. Like the BOOST's café, the layout of DVK—with its small, round tables and cosy atmosphere—seems to encourage intimate conversations and interactions among participants.

Figure 4. the main rooms of De Voorkamer (left) and BOOST (right).

While DVK's emphasis on physical co-creation cultivates a sense of shared ownership and belonging among participants, BOOST's management of a larger visitor volume necessitates a more regulated environment. Transitioning to the concept of approachability, I will examine how these spaces navigate accessibility and engagement.

Approachability

One similarity of the two recreational centres can be found not at the spaces themselves, but in their surroundings. Situated at the Kanaalstraat in Lombok, Utrecht, DVK find itself in arguably the most multicultural neighbourhood of the city. Written in their design book, the creators of DVK explain their strategic choice of location to enhance approachability (Raviv & Van Der Mijl, 2021: 54). Located near the asylum-seeking centre, the central station, and the city centre, it facilitates equal engagement from both locals and migrants. By embedding itself within a smaller neighbourhood, DVK fosters direct connections with neighbours. While a city centre location might attract more foot traffic, it raises questions about whether it would promote integration and a sense of community as effectively. This, since many of the visitors could be passersby, instead of intentional participants.

BOOST is located in the multicultural Amsterdam-Oost, within a residential area. They are further away from the asylum-seeking centres, partly due to the peripheral position that these centres hold in Amsterdam. Through the interviews I held at BOOST, I came to discover that its migrants live either at the Galaxy boat, the Osdorp ASC, or the Zaandam ASC. These locations all exceed 35 minutes of cycling, with last being 50 minutes away. Somehow this does not stop them from visiting the space three to five times a week. Chef Mohammed expressed in our interview how BOOST has introduced

him to the neighbourhood of Amsterdam-Oost, which is now his ‘’favourite region in Amsterdam’’, explaining he cycles thirty minutes to go shopping at the multicultural Javastreet. Other motivations I heard, lie in the gratuitousness of BOOST. The migrants explained they do not mind paying the six euros of public transport costs since BOOST provides them with free food, lessons, and activities.
To promote connecting migrants to their neighbourhood, BOOST hosts some monthly events, such as fairs, that welcome plenty of neighbours. DVK takes a different approach and organizes ‘migrant tours’, a project that gives tours around Lombok ‘’so that people can know more about their environment where they live (Yetunde).’’ Hereby, they additionally focus on the migration heritage of the city’s Lombok neighbourhood.

Both spaces address the exclusivity of the asylum-seeking centres, by including all who want to participate. Whereas in the asylum-seeking centres, locals who wish to interact with newcomers are unable to engage in many activities due to the restrictive access. Through welcoming locals too, the interaction between locals and migrants becomes more normal. I believe that the reoccurring informal interaction makes the migrants feel more as normal participants of society, since they are not kept separate. Saleh, a migrant I met through DVK confirms similar feelings. He is forty-four years old, originating from Yemen, and now in the Netherlands for only ten months. He is tall, skinny and has a big moustache. But mostly, he is very considerate and well educated, hoping to finish his PHD in the Netherlands. In an interview he explained that he longs for feeling normal:

‘’ To complete the procedures, to complete studying, to just feel like the others in your country. Not just foreign or asylum seeker or just waiting for the money. Every week we wanted to live as we used to. To work, to go to study, to be normal life.’’

The interaction created by nurturing a low threshold where locals are always welcome, makes for a less segregated and more normal feel to life for him. His statement aligns with Ralph and Staeheli (2011: 523), arguing feelings of belonging partly arise from the ability to participate in mainstream societal practices.

As the perception of a space profoundly influences how individuals interact with the programs and people within it, behaviour in formal, private settings often differs from that in informal, public environments. Embracing this concept, DVK fosters a literal "open door" policy, allowing visitors to enter freely without the need for formalities like ringing a doorbell or passing through a reception desk, thus promoting a sense of inclusivity and openness within the community.

Translating the low threshold of approachability to the activities both BOOST and DVK offer, this entails an intentional notion of no pre-registration. With this low threshold of approachability, I define as the easiness to approach and engage with the organization, entailing an accessible and available component. Overall, a low threshold in approachability implies minimizing barriers and making it as easy as possible for people to initiate interaction, seek help, or use the space’s services.

Multiple migrants I had conversations with, expressed their appreciation of the easily accessibility of the activities, by comparing other migrant's spaces that differed did require pre-registration. This non-strict organizing furthermore creates an equal environment, where everyone wants to help. Volunteers are visitors and vice versa, all come and help with preparing and cleaning up after an activity. This variable of fostering a low threshold was also praised by the author Swan (2013: 25) who in the Artspace he studied, explained how their participants were free to drop into watch, chat to others, or enjoy a hot drink at times even if a scheduled activity was happening at the same time. This always-welcome-feeling cultivate a sense of belonging. The environment created can also impact the hierarchical structures that occur in spaces. Antonsich (2010: 649) strongly argues for the necessity of actively negotiating power relations between the existing society and new inhabitants, emphasizing the importance of minimizing hierarchical structures as much as possible. As hierarchy is often visible in spatial structures, the freeness to drop in at any time, walking through an open door with spontaneity, these spaces lessen the power relations.

Network hub

'"Then there were people from some company at Zuidas. Painting a wall with participants from our group as well. So, that's just a really nice exchange. That's also what BOOST is all about, of course. That people connect with each other who normally wouldn't connect."

The quote by Rasmus refers to BOOST joining the initiative NL Doet, an annual event organized by the Oranje Fonds, a Dutch organization dedicated to social welfare and community development. NL Doet encourages individuals, organizations, and businesses to volunteer their time and efforts to participate in various community projects across the Netherlands. Here, the regular participants and volunteers of BOOST were invited to join, as well as the extra volunteers assigned by NL Doet to renovate the space. During this busy-visited day, the migrants helped painting most of their building in vibrant colours like yellow, red, and blue. Each having their own task to do. The following week, I heard multiple migrants proudly tell others what part of the space they had painted. Containing components of sense of ownership and co-creation building in this event, rather I opt to highlight the network factor included. BOOST frames itself as a hub, also facilitating their space to other organizations like Refugee Talent. This networking feature has been positively rated in the interviews, where participants liked that they could find everything they needed or wanted in the same space. The importance and difficulties for migrants to build a network, is what Rasmus explains when I asked about their qualities as a hub:

''But also, simply the network you build. Sometimes there are people who used to work in radio in their own country. And a language coach who also worked in radio. They go to Hilversum together sometime,

you know. Things like that. Such a network is super important in the Netherlands. And you don't build that if you're sitting in your container home in Nieuw-West, in the bubble with other refugees."

Rasmus's emphasis on the importance of networking underscores the role of BOOST as a hub for social connectivity and resource-sharing among migrants. By facilitating interactions between individuals with diverse backgrounds and skill sets, BOOST enables participants to access valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth. BOOST uses their physical space by accommodating nine other organizations focused on newcomers. Dokters van de Wereld, which was addressed in a previous chapter shares this opportunity with career orientated organization like Refugee Talent Hub who bring refugees and employers closer together with paid jobs as a goal, and NewBees, who matches newcomers with traineeships at local entrepreneurs and organizations, focusing on talent and equality. They also host the Regenboog Groep that organizes buddy programs for both status holders and undocumented migrants, and more. This allows their space to develop to an expertise centre for newcomers. DVK is also connected to partner organizations, they only do not share a building, rather they advertise and host together. Sometimes this means that the event of DVK takes place somewhere else, like at the asylum-seeking centre. Yetunde elaborates on this:

‘’So, if you're asking, you know, we're connected with other organizations, and we are all Plan Einstein. At the end of the day, we're all connecting people, new people to locals. But each one has its own unique way. So, where we can work together, we do, if we have similar events. Or we can use each other's spaces for events or collaborate more.’’

The collaboration between DVK and other refugee supporting organizations like Plan Einstein and Welkom in Utrecht reflects a collective effort to support asylum seekers and promote social integration. By providing a platform for dialogue and engagement, these partnerships facilitate the exchange of ideas and resources, ultimately enriching their knowledge on connecting migrants to the community. Furthermore, both recreational centres offer their space to singular events or meetings that have similar missions. BOOST advertises that on their website by saying ‘’are you also working towards an inclusive city and looking for a space for your meeting, or for your event? Let us know’’, and Yetunde explains it to me through our interview:

‘’Depending on what the organization wants to do. We have a space. If it's an event that aligns with our activities, they're welcome to use our space. And if it's going to impact people positively, especially in their mental health and stimulating their talent, they're welcome.’’

The willingness of DVK and BOOST to open their spaces to singular events or meetings that share similar missions highlights their commitment to building a community network that can support the migrants at all levels.

In conclusion, the analysis of design features at both spaces illustrates the importance of physical environments in facilitating connection and community. Participants may shape the space, imbuing it with their stories, cultures, and identities. This process of co-creation not only strengthens participants' emotional connection to the space but also fosters a sense of ownership and inclusivity, as they actively engage in its development. The emphasis on approachability further underscores the commitment of these centres to inclusivity. By situating themselves within multicultural neighbourhoods and adopting open-door policies, they create environments that encourage interaction and engagement among diverse communities. This approach not only promotes integration but also normalizes the presence of migrants within society, offering them opportunities to feel like active participants in their new communities. Additionally, both centres serve as network hubs, sharing resources with other organizations. Here, they again facilitate bridging social capital with networks of good resources (Boon and Farnsworth, 2011: 508). By partnering with other initiatives, and opening their spaces to external meetings and activities, they contribute to building a broader community network that supports migrants at various levels.

III. LEARNING SPACE

In the pursuit of understanding the dynamics of the spaces DVK and BOOST, I was struck by the eagerness to learn expressed by the migrants visiting these recreational centres. This chapter delves into the intricate layers of learning experiences within focusing on the acquisition of language skills, cultural exchange, skill development, and the cultivation of a supportive community.

Finding the space

When I enter the DVK, the space is relatively empty. It is one hour before the start of an activity and the only other person in the room is Joseph, lying on the cushions on the ground eyes closed with a bag of crisps next to him. Joseph is a Syrian men aged around his sixties, who has been in the Netherlands for five years now. He arrived here with his family but got a divorce within the first year. This divorce made him homeless for two years, with the local authorities unable to find him a new house. Finally, a house in Gorinchem was offered to him. The house itself, he alludes to be content with, however, the location is a burden to him. Having no work or other obligations, he seems to rely on DVK. Everyone who has visited DVK knows him, he sometimes even is framed 'as' De Voorkamer, him being their every day for the past four years. Joseph greets me with a hearty smile and cuddle, offers me some crisps and we sit down at one of the tables for our appointed interview. During small talk before recording, he asked me if I had noticed the new artwork hanging on the wall in which he took part in creating. It was a large, embroidered cloth with seven small pockets containing old recording tapes. On most of the tapes the environmental sound where recorded, from the nature park and the busy Kanaalstraat where DVK is located, however one of the cloth's pockets had the name ''Lombok, deur naar de hemel'' [Lombok, the door to heaven]. Joseph took this one out and together we listened to his voice expressing how in a stroll around the neighbourhood Lombok, looking for language classes, he came across a light-blue building which unknown by that moment would change his life. This space, DVK, later turned out to be ''his heaven on earth, his home, and his beginning to build a new life.''

Figure 5. The embraided cloth Joseph worked on.

The story Joseph tells here contains two components are illustrative to the stories of the other migrants finding the spaces of DVK and BOOST. How the desire to learn Dutch served as the initial draw for them, and that what they ultimately find extends far beyond language acquisition.

A similar view was discussed at the other centre, BOOST. Speaking to their organization about their program, Rasmus articulates his view where ‘’language is what attracts people the most to Boost, to participate in language café or language classes. But ultimately, what they find is much more than that. It's much more of a place to call home." This statement, even though expressed about a different centre, seems reciprocated by Joseph who further explained in the interview that DVK is different to other places in Utrecht where he visited the language classes: ‘’I found my family here. Everyone who is here, is kind. I can practice and share my hobbies here. It's more than just language.’’

The components of what these spaces entail to make them more than just a language learning space will be discussed throughout all the following chapters. Though, providing Dutch lessons and language café’s, language does occupy a large part of the activities hosted.

Language learning

Amidst the vibrant tapestry of BOOST's language café, a newcomer's voice emerges, resonating with gratitude and newfound opportunity. The narrative unfolds as a white American woman, attending the language café for the first time, her arrival in the Netherlands now three months ago. She moved here for her husband’s work and is yet to find her own place within this new environment. Learning Dutch therefore becomes her primary focus. She thanks me, as I volunteered as one of the Dutch coaches, and explains that it has been difficult to learn Dutch from everyday encounters. The example she gives is that in settings like supermarkets, the people she tries to speak to immediately switch to English, which renders immersion and practice of the Dutch language for her. Through interactions with fellow participants, she feels comfortable to trial and error, sharing mutual growth.

In the group conversation we had during the language café, the American took up a peripheral view at first listening to the others, though too participating partially by joining the group in the first place, to an active engagement of joining the conversation. observing to participating. Immersion acts as a bridge to social integration in both cases, allowing newcomers to go from being observers to active participants.

On BOOST’s website, I found a reinforcing quote by Ayman, a Syrian mid-twenty years old participant. He has been following the language classes for a year now. Whilst being mindful of the bias that this quote could have, since BOOST would only put up the more positive quotes on their website, I find it exemplary for the importance of learning in a socially safe environment:

"You learn a language through both schooling and social interaction. Newcomers in the Netherlands do receive schooling, but they often lack opportunities to apply the language: making

contact with Dutch people is challenging. That's why BOOST is so crucial. Seventy percent of my interactions with Dutch people happen at BOOST."

Throughout my fieldwork, migrants consistently sought interaction and connection with me due to my proficiency in Dutch. Many expressed a desire to practice speaking with me, highlighting the significance of language in fostering connections. The recreational spaces offer an ideal environment for language acquisition, facilitating the establishment of lasting connections through communication. Language learning in these settings, such as the cafe, not only promotes social bonding but also serves as a bridge between migrants and Dutch society. This social bridging process, as highlighted by Ostrom (2009: 17), could promote interaction among migrants and between migrants and the broader Dutch community, through the acquisition of Dutch. During a language café at BOOST, the five migrants at my table alluded that language was the main factor that was holding them back in connecting to Dutch individuals. Here, one can argue that the acquisition of the Dutch language serves a dual purpose, enhancing both interpersonal connections and integration into the wider societal fabric, thereby promoting interconnectedness within the community.

However, as Ayman expresses ‘’making contact with Dutch people is challenging’’, this raises questions on the theory that language acquisition facilitates integration. After knowing Dutch, what are the limits of integration and acceptance?

Extra et al. (2009: 65) shed light on the difficulty that stems from tightly maintained boundaries between insiders and outsiders through the concept of "allochtoon" within Dutch cultural archive. The term categorizes individuals based on their foreign origins or ancestry, highlighting distinctions between those considered insiders (autochtoon) and outsiders (allochtoon). This categorization is not merely descriptive but also serves to reinforce social hierarchies and power dynamics. The use of labels like "allochtoon" reflects processes of othering, wherein certain groups are marginalized or stigmatized based on perceived differences. The concept also demonstrates how citizenship and belonging are constructed and negotiated within a society. Despite legal recognition, individuals labelled as allochtoon may still face exclusion and discrimination, as their identity is framed in contrast to the dominant autochtoon group. The challenges of making contact with Dutch people are not just interpersonal, or related to integration, but are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Ultimately, in arguing that language acquisition and the further integration into Dutch society is limited through lack of acceptance from the host-society, this potentially becomes a critique of the push for integration.

Dukes and Musterd (2012: 1989) further assert that in the context of Dutch society, the discourse surrounding cultural diversity often adopts a negative perspective, portraying immigrants as sources of problems rather than opportunities. This emphasis on the perceived negatives of immigrant communities overlooks their potential positive contributions, such as knowledge production and cultural exchange within cities. They (2012: 1993) propose that shared spaces provide opportunities for

encounters between diverse groups, where migrant can negotiate their sense of belonging and membership in society. Similarly, Martinovic et al. (2009:871) posit that "third parties" possess the capacity to either promote or hinder interethnic contact, acting as external influencers in the interaction between immigrants and natives. These parties establish the norms of behaviour regarding social interactions, thereby playing a pivotal role in facilitating positive social integration. DVK and BOOST serve as examples of such third parties in this context. Thus, the mainstream Dutch society is inaccessible, caused by the tightly maintained boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Therefore, I argue in line with Dukes and Musterd (2012: 1989) that the significance of these recreational spaces is heightened.

Learning exchange

Every Monday evening DVK hosts an Arabic language café. This activity is run by Joseph, who frames himself as the toughest teacher of the group Arabic speaking volunteers. It is the first time joining this activity for me, and since my knowledge of the Arabic language is close to nothing, he appoints me to the table where Ahmed sits. Ahmed is Moroccan, now in his late 70s, and had been a university professor in the Arabic language and culture. He proudly shows me pictures of him as a young man teaching at the university of Utrecht. As he begins to explain the alphabet to me, I glance around the space of DVK and notice how bustling this activity is with visitors.

Central to the ethos of DVK and BOOST is the principle of exchange. Unlike traditional one-way integration approaches, these learning spaces emphasize equality and mutual learning. Rather than only providing Dutch classes, both BOOST as DVK offer Arabic classes too. These classes are mostly visited by individuals from the mainstream Dutch society. Several Dutch volunteer coaches at BOOST, who have also been volunteering for multiple years, participate in these classes. The Arabic language café exemplifies this mutual exchange through mentorship, where the roles of teacher and student switch, fostering a sense of shared ownership and importance: giving an equal important feeling to all, the migrants also have something to bring.

Other than being a meeting place where one can learn a language, both DVK and BOOST focus on broader ways of growth. BOOST program promotes developing skills such as learning how to cycle, computer skills, learning sewing, and how the Dutch society works (e.g., how to get around in the city, how the political system works with voting, what renting entails, applying for healthcare allowance, what are cultural norms). One example is the cycling class, where a senior Muslima teaches cycling to six middle-aged women in the school-style gym located within the BOOST building. Most of the women wear a Hijab; however, the origins of the mix group are not clear. Through the communication style, the teacher switching from Arabic to English or Dutch, it is apparent that the group consists of various cultural backgrounds. The cycling class begins with theoretical lessons from the instructress, who advises on the fundamentals of cycling and traffic. After this, they safely practice within the gym space before they go around cycling in the neighbourhood. Two of the women have not cycled before,

and struggle getting on the bicycle. Once one of them successes, gives the instructress supportive gestures, such as verbal affirmations and gentle pats on the shoulder. Witnessing the success of their fellow participant, the other woman redoubles her efforts, spurred on by a newfound sense of motivation.

Beyond the acquisition of practical skills, this example embodies the ethos of empowerment, fostering confidence, and a shared sense of achievement among participants. The cycling activity embodies cultural sensitivity since the teaching woman is relatable to most of the participant group, ensuring that the participants feel comfortable and respected within the learning environment.

Engagement in various activities within these spaces leads to the discovery of latent talents and the acquisition of new skills. DVK's program has some fixed activities such as language café and creative arts such as drawing and offers some room for singular or reoccurring cursus such as storytelling. Joseph explains about his journey to storytelling:

''In the past, I never drew, but now I create drawings. I never engaged in storytelling before. I didn't know how to share my life story. But now I've taken three storytelling courses in the front room. I shared three of my life stories here.''

His expression reflects the transformative potential inherent in these environments. Through participation in activities such as storytelling workshops, individuals like Joseph discovers new opportunities of self-expression and personal growth.

Critical to the efficacy of these learning spaces is the provision of ample time, patience, and individualized attention. Participants express gratitude for the opportunity to ask questions freely and receive thoughtful responses. Bassam, a twenty-somewhat year old from Syria, explained that in BOOST you may always ask many questions on any subject, and you always get an extensive answer. He feels there is '' time, patience, and attention.''

These spaces empower individuals to share cultural knowledge, acquire new skills, and forge connections, ultimately enhancing their sense of belonging and agency within the host society. Through forming a learning community, that practices together in a shared goal, fosters a collective identity that transcends cultural differences. Though, cultural differences are not hidden or repressed. In these processes of negotiation of differences, at times set aside whilst at other times celebrated, they show a convivial tone (Boesen et al., 2023: 6).

Cultural exchange

Next to the window in the language café area of BOOST, a table is placed at an uncommon spot. Intrigued, I walk towards it as the Iranian receptionist Leila passes me from the left side, placing a Hyacinthus on its corner. As she arranges the various items on the table, I inquire about her composition. She explains that today marks the Iranian New Year, which they are celebrating with the Haft-Seen

tradition. She elaborates on the significance of the seven items beginning with the letter 'S', such as a seeb [apple] seer [garlic], and somagh [sumac], each symbolizing various aspects of life. Leila, being Iranian herself, organized this event to include those who may be residing in the asylum seeker centre or lack family in the area, allowing them to partake in the festivities. Typically celebrated collectively in Iran, she expresses her desire to recreate the sense of communal celebration here.

Here, the space facilitates cultural exchange and celebrates culture. BOOST allows Leila to express herself and her cultural background, sharing its meaning with others. This fosters mutual understanding and appreciation for diverse cultures, nurturing a dynamic interconnection of experiences and perspectives. During the fieldwork, migrants expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity to share their cultural heritage, from culinary delights to cherished traditions. Through shared meals and conversations, barriers dissolve, and friendships flourish, enriching the collective tapestry of the community.

Two of the migrants I interviewed mutually expressed their appreciation for the cultural sharing. Both occupy the role of volunteer chef, a role enacted by only migrants. Mo, who is a middle-aged Syrian and one of the most dedicated volunteer chefs, assures me that the cultural differences within BOOST are one of the reasons he keeps on coming to the space after seven years. He shares: ''You learn everything about (for example) Iranian people, about culture, about language, about food. Yeah, it is wonderful.'' Mustafa, the other volunteer chef, from Iran, explains to me why he still comes to BOOST, even though he has a job as chef in a restaurant. Firstly, he mentions, smiling, that doing the volunteering makes him sleep good at night. For the past three years, he has been a frequent visitor to BOOST alongside his brother, who works as a barber there. He then further expresses about culture that:

''`Now I know people from all countries and cultures. I can share my culture through cooking, and they can too. Eating together, talking, becoming friends. I think it is a good thing for me personally. I like it that people who never eat Iranian food now say how delicious it is.''

Where Mo and Mustafa share light-hearted feelings about cultural exchange, Saleh argues more its necessity of understanding for sensitive interaction. Sitting in the coffee bar next to the asylum-seeking centre for our interview, he argues the importance of knowing other cultural habits, to avoid being disrespectful or impolite. After the interview, he insists on paying my cappuccino, and when I slightly resist, he adds: ''No, in my culture, whenever someone visits your place, you must pay'', ending the argument immediately.

Saleh's reflections underscore the importance of cultural literacy in navigating social norms and interactions, highlighting the significance of such exchanges in fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. To meaningfully interact within these cultural spaces, it seems necessary to foster openness and curiosity. Feeling valued and accepted for one's cultural identity, might

help in nurturing a sense of belonging. This links to Amin (2008: 18) condemning the prevailing trend of urban, western society to enforce sameness or conformity requirements on minorities or to deny them the freedom to be different. My interlocutors have not shared negative experiences with me outside of these spaces on this account. However, the norm within Dutch culture remains homogenous. Essed and Trienekens (2008: 58) argue that in the Dutch society, whiteness in combination with the 'right' cultural determinism form who without friction belongs in the Dutch society. The freedom to be different here, I argue is partly denied, if one yearns for a belonging. As Essed and Trienekens (2008: 69) conclude, it is possible to be white (as defined by race) yet not have the proper social standing or Christian values, which tarnishes your claim to be truly Dutch. On the other hand, you may be too ''coloured'' to be considered a ''true'' national, even though you may have social rank and totally identify with the Dutch ideals and culture.

Both BOOST and DVK seem to illustrate Amin's (2008: 18) view by understanding, tolerating, and celebrating the differences of the migrants and their varies backgrounds, personalities, stories, and cultures. This mentality can facilitate and cultivate a sense of belonging for the migrants within the space, not having to conform to the mainstream Dutch society to feel accepted.

Ownership of learning

As I sit in the computer area at BOOST, I come across Ben, the English teacher. Originally from the United Kingdom, Ben has been a resident of the Netherlands for a decade. Over the years, he has been a regular visitor to BOOST, initially frequently visiting the space and then less so for a period. During those less frequent visits, he dedicated time to writing a novel. Now, he's returned to teaching two days a week. Though, almost every week I spot him more often than those two times. Throughout the past months, he had been proudly showing his novel to the many familiar face. BOOST's volunteer coordinator once introduced Ben as a connecting force within BOOST, his presence as the only white man that hangs around the space does not go unnoticed to me. During some small talk, Ben shares that he is currently leading a new project focused on the topic of motivation, where migrants share their goals and support each other. He explained how he initiated this new project after noticing during a language café session that people were enthusiastic and expressed a need to discuss topics related to motivation. The motivational group has been running for a few weeks now, and consists of a consistent group, where the migrants help each other with their personal knowledge, like how to build a routine. Ben explains that his knowledge on the Dutch society, gathered through ten years of living here, can help the migrants often with practice issues. However, whenever I ask if it is him who helps the others, he contested that '' it is a mutual practice.''

This setting up of a new activity shows the recreational centre's flexibility and diversity in program, but mostly speak to their promotion of ownership. In the book By&For (Raviv & Van Der Mijl, 2021), written about the design concept of DVK, the concept of ownership plays a major role. It explains how their goal is to encouraging participant agency in the design and development of programs.

By entrusting migrants with responsibility and ownership over specific aspects or even entire programs, there is a greater likelihood of stimulating contributions and agency. Empowering them to pursue their own interests also facilitates meaningful interactions between locals and newcomers, shifting the focus from refugee label to an individuals' abilities and contributions.

Ludwig (2016: 7) discusses the burdens imposed on individuals when they are labeled as refugees. This label is often assigned to them rather than chosen by themselves, effectively denying them agency. She refers to this as the ‘’objectification’’ of refugees, where they are perceived as mere recipients of aid. For refugees, other identities are frequently overshadowed by their position as refugees. She (2016: 12) further contends that refugees view themselves as active participants in shaping their destinies, rather than as passive victims. The label of passive victimhood burdens refugees by underestimating their resilience and perpetuating social dependence and economic marginalization, thus hindering their social integration. Arguably, continuing to label individuals as refugees perpetuates a process of othering, thereby undermining their potential to become members of a new society.

The promotion of ownership helps imbue migrants’ daily routines with a sense of purpose and meaning, giving them the agency that they feel denied. During the interview I held with Rasmus, he asserted from the organization perspective that BOOST serves as an in-between place, a safety net, and a steppingstone:

‘’The main idea behind that is that we find it crucial that all participants have their own control over how they want to use BOOST. Since many people already have to deal with so much in various areas, like in the process of integration, up until Thursday morning, having to give your fingerprint just to prove you haven't run away from the asylum-seeking centre. It's just a very strict framework of having to do all sorts of things. While so much has already been taken away from you. And we believe that... Yes, indeed, the most important thing is that people are allowed to determine their own pace and direction.’’

This quote from Rasmus shows the organizations ethos in giving migrants their agency back. The frequent voluntary presence of the migrants’ points to the active stand they hold in shaping their future. This organizational ethos too plays a role in the shaping of a low threshold, relaxed space. Swan (2013: 25) noticed in his research on Artspace, where he stresses that community-based organizations should strive for a non-pressured environment, even if that does not comply with the organization’s specific focus.

Every Wednesday DVK hosts an activity under the name of Project Mini, which is a flexible program giving stage to all individuals who wish to organize an activity. The aim of this program is to encourage social interaction between the DVK’s community and residents of Utrecht, fostering meaningful connections through creativity. A consistent group of participants engage with each other in

enjoyable ways, exchanging cultural knowledge. Examples of the activities that this overarching project ranged from dance classes, poetry, and discussion nights to informative climate change workshops.

In my fieldwork I observed during these activities often hosted by one of the migrants sharing their knowledge, the nervousness of the hosts explaining in the beginning that they had never done such a thing before. And I observed the ending, them always enthusiastically being thanked by the participants of that activity, with great relieve from the host. Here, the self and external validation that arises from exploration in organizing an activity can foster a sense of belonging as argued by Ralph and Staeheli (2011: 523).

The recreational centres studied both encompass discourses of learning. This signifies for many migrants a renewed sense of purpose. The emphasis on mutual exchange and ownership within DVK and BOOST fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment among participants. By providing opportunities for individuals to contribute their skills and knowledge, these spaces empower migrants. This combined with the cultural differences celebrated creates a convivial atmosphere. Additionally, the flexibility and diversity of programs within DVK and BOOST allow participants to learn at their own pace and pursue their interests. This approach not only fosters a sense of purpose and meaning but also promotes a relaxed, non-pressured environment. Ultimately, I provide a deeper understanding of the migrants' exceptional eagerness to learn.

IV. SOCIAL SPACE

BOOST and DVK first and foremost goals are to facilitate social interaction, creating a physical meeting spot. In this chapter, I will explore these recreation centres as social spaces and how these spaces create an ambience for the flourishing of social life for migrants.

Friendliness and remembrance

One coincidental afternoon, I took the train from Amsterdam to Utrecht. When the doors opened and I got off the train, I recognized a man queuing outside the train to get in. It was one of the migrants that regularly visits BOOST and even though we had not spoken before, he greeted me ‘’see you Monday, Eva!’’. As I find myself outside of the central station, still astound of his remembrance of my name, someone taps me on the back. It was another migrant, this time, someone I met at DVK, who wanted to say a quick hello, before continuing our own ways again.

At first, I doubted if this was connected to my standing out in the organization as only young white woman. Within the organization of BOOST, except for the Dutch language coaches who are mostly retired Dutch men and women, the volunteer positions are occupied by the migrants themselves. This seems partly due to the active hours of the space, weekdays from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon, when most Dutch people have obligations of school or work. I had spoken multiple times with Rasmus about my position in a dominated space of young asylum-seeking men. Firstly, he elucidated that the asylum-seeking centre in Amsterdam facilitates only one-person stays, no households. Since most migrant women do not travel alone, the asylum-seeking centre is mostly occupied by men, which translates to the population that visits BOOST. Rasmus and I spoke about the interesting duality of the attention I got within the recreational centre. In my advance, during the fieldwork it was easy to get in contact with the migrant population. However, it hindered made my position as an insider.

The friendliness and positive attention that I got from the migrants was not only a mode of interaction with me. All individuals within the space interacted with each other with this friendliness in a manner that was outstanding to me. I reflected on why the simpleness of a friendly gesture could surprise me. Again, this had to do with my own cultural background. In Dutch culture one does not normally greet or treat others like the encounters I had within the recreational centres. With others I mean persons that are not close acquittances or already established friends.

In an interview with Rasmus, he articulates how making people feel seen is a crucial aspect of fostering a sense of belonging. This sentiment is reflected in the core values articulated to the volunteers at BOOST, where being seen is acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of their community ethos. Rasmus instructs the new volunteers ‘’to greet everyone kindly’’, and that ‘’offering a warm welcome is actually the most important part of your role.’’ He then posits scenarios where individuals might base feelings of their belonging based on whether they feel missed in their absence or if someone acknowledges their personal experiences. Interestingly, he uses an example of asking about their ‘inburgering’ (official integration) process. He lastly elaborates that as an organization, they maintain a

significant presence within the space, showing their face, lessening power relations through spatial practices (eating the same lunch and at the same table mixed between the migrants, not organization only).

In Rasmus's story, there is an underlying assumption about what these "feelings of belonging" are. The example he gives on inquiring about the official integration process, seems to conflate belonging with integration. I stress that these two concepts are important to keep separated. Reflecting on Rasmus's intentions, and the further course of the interview, I do not think Rasmus conflates them. My argument lies in a quote by him stating:

''Integration is a word that's often used in a kind of formal sense. You have to find your way in society, etc. Whereas we look more at what we call the integral view of integration. And that actually goes much more into well-being and feeling at home. Just a dignified existence. Having a sense of meaning and belonging is also part of it, actually. We find that much more important than whether you are already at the right level to get your certificates.''

Rasmus's observation underscores the intentionality behind creating spaces where individuals are emotionally recognized and valued, affirming their place within the community of the recreational centre. The emphasis on recognition and acknowledgment highlights the organizations commitment to creating an environment where every individual's presence and experiences are valued and validated. It also links to the devaluation of migrants in the larger society. Randeria and Karagiannes (2020: 5) clarify the realistic position migrants often have within the receiving society. Migrants are framed as a problem for the state and thus undesirable. They are seen as persons that have solely needs, not as individuals that have value and can offer the state something. This perception lacks not only agency, but too forgets the resilience and strength of those who are displaced.

The organizations efforts to make the migrants feel seen, valued and welcome contradicts this position. In line with this importance, Saleh expresses that the establishment of a welcoming atmosphere contributes significantly to his sense of belonging, stating:

'' That's why we go many times. As you know, we don't know anyone here, but they are so polite to us. And you feel that they didn't just do it for us. It's a real feeling, we are not just welcome. It's not just as a routine or fake, they know you by name.''

His remark about feeling genuinely valued and recognized, rather than just being subject to routine politeness, highlights the transformative power of authentic emotional connection. Saleh's sentiment reinforces the importance of going beyond superficial gestures to truly engage with individuals on a personal level, thereby deepening their sense of belonging within the formed community of the centres and fostering genuine inclusion.

The atmosphere created by the recreational centres as experienced by the migrant is not to be taken for granted. Through Derrida's (2005: 7) exploration of hospitality, he clarifies the intricate process creating a hospital environment. Hospitality has a contradictory character, and within the processes of migration it often takes a conditional form. Conditional hospitality refers to a practice where migrants must adhere to specific regulations and conditions set by the host state. This form of hospitality often involves monitoring and controlling the mobility and rights of migrants, segregating them spatially and socially, and requiring them to prove their worthiness through cultural assimilation and legal compliance. Such conditions can create an atmosphere of exclusion and control, where migrants are treated as outsiders and their existence can be deemed illegal if they do not comply. On the other hand, 'unconditional hospitality' is an idealized form that Derrida describes as welcoming individuals without imposing any conditions. It means accepting newcomers without prior knowledge, demands, or expectations, emphasizing an ethical openness and acceptance. This form of hospitality rejects the hierarchical dynamic where the host holds power over the guest, advocating instead for an approach that prioritizes human dignity and unconditional welcome. In the context of the recreational centres, this literature suggests the importance of moving towards practices that align more closely with 'unconditional hospitality'. Where this form of hospitality should be recognized as an ideal, I feel that both recreational centres strive to, and succeed, to create such environment.

As I delve into discussions of inclusivity in the next chapter, Saleh's words serve as a reminder of the impact of genuine human connection in creating spaces where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.

Inclusivity and self-expression

Every Wednesday, I volunteered at Project Mini. My task was hosting the everchanging activities of this weekly project, setting up the space of DVK, providing food and drinks, but most importantly, to actively include everyone.

Including everyone was challenging. With a group of migrants speaking various languages, it required some extra effort. A group of Portuguese speakers visited DVK during an activity on discussing mental health in relation to the war in Gaza. The discussion formed itself around following the news and what the gruesomeness of the portraited images can impact you. As the woman hosting the event spoke English, it appeared that only one man in the Portuguese group understood her. This created an interpreter situation, where he would translate the woman’s questions to Portuguese. Whilst at the same time, I would translate them to Dutch for Joseph, and Joseph would translate to Arabic for other participants. Laughingly, seeing the inconvenience of the situation, collectively we made it work.

Inclusion does not always require language. Many second and third generation Dutch of migrant origin who speak fluent Dutch still don’t feel included in society. Slootman and Duyvendak (2015: 157) reveal that second and third generation Moroccan and Turkish migrants in the Netherlands

struggle with their sense of belonging. Despite being born and raised in the Netherlands, speaking fluent Dutch, and having Dutch social and cultural preferences, these individuals often feel they are not perceived as Dutch by the broader society. This external perception as solely Moroccan or Turkish affects their self-identification, leading them to adopt a reactive identity where, despite considering themselves Dutch, they are compelled to identify primarily with their ethnic origins.

Similarly, Kian and Ghorashi (2018: 335) examine the experiences of second-generation Iranian-Dutch women in the Netherlands, highlighting how societal othering affects their belonging. One participant even expresses to feels more Moroccan than Dutch due to their shared experience of being Othered (Kian and Ghorashi, 2018: 343). They are frequently perceived and labelled as "allochtoon" or foreigners, primarily because of their appearance. This embodiment of ethnicity becomes a source of othering, and so feeds feelings of exclusion, undermining their sense of belonging (Kian and Ghorashi, 2018: 353). Ultimately, the limits of language proficiency become a push against the national integration policy. The focus should be on increasing inclusivity, changing societal attitudes. With creating an inclusive environment, the two-way street of belonging gets paved.

Including migrants starts at recruiting them. Yetunde advertises the activities of DVK every Thursday at the asylum-seeking centre nearby. One Thursday I joined her standing outside of the weekly stamping spot, explaining the concept of DVK and its activities. Yetunde argues that the people in the asylum-seeking centre need new connections, and whereas the asylum-seeking centre hosts some activities themselves she argues ‘’ they also need to be aware of what is happening in their surroundings and meet more local people.”

In her quote Yetunde refers to local people to those who have been living in the city or in the Netherlands for some time now, including Dutch but also non-Dutch inhabitants who have settled. She stresses that the migrants who live in the asylum-seeking centre should connect with individuals that do not live within the same centre.

On inclusivity, Anthias (2006: 21) argues that belonging and social inclusion are closely intertwined, although the presence of belonging does not automatically ensure social inclusion. Instead, it is through practices and encounters of social inclusion that individuals develop a sense of belonging and acceptance within a society. To belong entails being recognized as a part of a community, feeling secure within it, and having a vested interest in its future. It involves sharing values, networks, and practices, extending beyond mere identification.

When combining the safe space with the inclusive environment, which could be argued as intertwined, self-expression can flourish. The following quote of Yetunde encompasses all components of this, speaking of DVk:

‘’ You're not scared that someone is judging you because of whatever race, colour, orientation of sex or for whatever reason or how you're dressed or how you walked in or whatever your beliefs are. So, I felt that when I came here and yeah, I just and I think we still try to maintain that same pattern. Like just be

yourself but be respectful. Of course, people can have different beliefs or ideas or other things that make people feel divided or feel different. But at the end of the day, we are all human. And that's what we want to stay connected to, stay grounded with. Like just be human and be there."

Here inclusivity and safety are combined by allowing everyone to be themselves and express that, and at the same time, focus on an underlying sameness of all. What effect this approach has, I find in visible in the mix of individuals who visit the space. All visitors are seemingly extremely different from each other however they all feel at ease within the space. A feeling that cannot arise without the feeling of acceptance. The underlying sameness is the base connector that we are in the end all human, and through this perception we dismantle the stigmas that relate to racial and other hierarchies that migrants experience. Koskela (2014: 25) asserts that migrants face categorization on hierarchical bases. She argues that these categorizations are not formed concepts but rather actions that become concrete in social interaction. A migrant hierarchy is formed through ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic factors, education, religion, and gender. These variables of hierarchical categorization are visible in Yetunde's statement. The classification of the hierarchy groups an individual migrant is in, has consequences on their identity and how their experience the world (Koskela, 2014: 31).

Further analysing the powerful statement of Yetunde 'just be human and be there' gestures to the sense of dehumanisation migrants must experience in broader society. Blythe (2022: 22) argues that dehumanization can be viewed as the act of removing an individual of its individuality. Through hierarchical categorization and defining migrants as groups rather than individuals, their identity and agency are stripped away. I argue that while it is crucial to acknowledge individual diversity, it is equally important not to let these differences dictate everything. Ultimately, at our core, we are all human, transcending the categories we have constructed and imagined.

McLoughlin and Over (2019: 104) indicate that limited knowledge of and contact with migrant groups can exacerbate perceived intergroup differences and facilitate the adoption of dehumanizing beliefs. I argue that through facilitating contact between host society and the migrants, the recreational centres thus limit the forming of dehumanizing beliefs of the host society that is involved.

Anthias (2013: 8) emphasizes the significance of focusing on the commonalities among individuals to foster a sense of belonging. She argues that belonging stems from shared daily experiences such as values, culture, and language. This often involves strong intersubjective elements, including bonds, friendships, and community connections both locally and transnationally. She further contends (2013: 13) that the concept of 'diversity' tends to overlook these commonalities and the structural contexts, presenting cultures as static, historical, and bounded entities. This leads to an essentialist and culturalist understanding of belonging, where culture is seen as a static attribute that people possess. This perspective isolates culture from structural and material contexts, treating it as a carried baggage rather than a dynamic process or a set of tools we employ to interpret the world. Ultimately, Anthias (2013: 18) argues that fostering participation involves acknowledging the inherent

diversity in society and avoiding rigid distinctions between "diverse" migrant populations and a presumed "normal" homogeneous population. Effective participation requires opportunities for engagement at various levels of governance and creating conditions that support meaningful involvement.

Yetunde's quote, aligning with Rasmus who alluded that he does not name BOOST's visitors 'migrants', instead he mentions them as ''people with migration background'', contemplatable adds argumentation to the debates on conceptualizing migrants. Connecting this to Randeria and Karagiannis (2020: 2), who argue that the term migrant is not a descriptive term, rather one of exclusion. Migrants are framed as a problem for the state and undesirable; thus, it is never a neutral term (2020: 5). Being out of place, the migrants' background conditions acquire prominence enquiry. Distinctions of unwantedness are made through elements of race, religion, place of birth. Through the normalization and promotion of mobilization within the EU, the perception of European migrants has become non-problematic. This leaves the discourse and unwantedness to the non-European migrants (2020: 7). Furthermore, they argue that migrant's culture is seen as completely dictating their behaviour. This perception not only lacks individual agency, but it also views any deviation from the cultural norms of the receiving country to be understood as being in line with the norms of the migrant's country of origin. Discourses on cultural incommensurability replace the racial hierarchies in the justification of politics of exclusion (2020: 9).

Yetunde and Rasmus too seem to stress the importance as seeing this framing of a human being as migrant as non-conductive. Both spaces carry out a principle to not inquire if their visitors have a resident permit. By doing this, they implement the focus on the future lives of those who moved as commended by Colson (2003: 4) and Ramsay (2020: 407). Treating them as people first, and migrant second, limits the othering (Ramsay, 2020: 390) that occurs with the categorization of individuals.

Connection building and social capital

Amidst the hustle of the lunch break, I found myself drawn to one of the round tables at BOOST's café, where four individuals were engaged in lively conversation. Seizing the opportunity to immerse myself in their world, I joined them listening attentively to their exchange. The diverse group of one woman and three men, originating from Syria, Afghanistan, and Baluchistan were familiar with each other from their language classes. The conversation they had was predominantly in Dutch, even though they could have spoken Arabic with each other. I wonder if this had to do with my presence, and their efforts to not exclude me considering the table consisted of only them and me. Or, that they try to adopt the Dutch language in their conversation as a way of practice. The conversation included forms of banter traversing topics ranging from the music scene at Melkweg to their experiences in Dutch language lessons. Laughter echoed through the room as they exchanged anecdotes and good-natured teasing, nurturing a bond that surpassed cultural divides. Feeling welcomed into their circle, I interjected occasionally, adding my perspective to the discussion. In a moment of curiosity, one of the men turned

to me and asked, ‘’could you share something about yourself?’’ His question elicited laughter from the group, breaking down any remaining barriers between us. As I divulged my role as a volunteer and researcher, their reactions were overwhelmingly positive, infused with genuine interest and warmth. Our brief interaction, punctuated by smiles and nods of understanding, underscored the power of human connection in transcending linguistic and cultural differences. Since this small encounter, the individuals of the group have since felt familiar to me, with them greeting and having small talk every time we ran into one another since.

While seemingly insignificant, small interactions like those fostered at BOOST and DVK are highly valued. Whether during breaks between activities, during self-study sessions, or simply over a cup of coffee, these organizations recognize that it is in these informal moments where connections thrive, and relationships begin to form. According to Ahmed (1999: 345), migrants reclaim space and identity by embracing their status as strangers. The bond that migrants form within this community of strangers is grounded in the shared experience of leaving behind their home and the sense of alienation in a new environment. This phenomenon exemplifies Ahmed’s (1999: 335) concept of a community of strangers, where the common thread is the estrangement experienced in a new country, language, and way of life. The commonality that bonds the migrants is their past experience of leaving their home and their country of origin, and the present of navigating through the new society of the Netherlands partly through their visits of the space of BOOST.

Another lunch in the same setting, I listen to three men catch up. The older Dutch teacher speaks about his holidays, and the two younger migrants listen. Then, the conversation turns to a practicality, a subject of moving houses. One of the migrants had stayed in the old teacher’s house during his holiday and was now moving in with the other migrant sitting next to him. The three of them discussed about renting a car, and the old teacher asked around some tables if no one had one they could borrow. They further joked on the change in living conditions the moving migrant would have to endure as his new housemate was framed messy by all sitting at the round table.

Their interactions demonstrate the development and utilization of social capital (Ostrom, 2009: 17). It illustrates how social capital operates through the sharing of recourses, the mutual trust, and the cooperation within this social network. It showcases both bonding components between the migrants as bridging components between the Dutch teacher and the migrants. As Boon and Farnsworth (2011: 508) argue that not all social connections offer the same resources, they stress the importance for migrants to not only bond, but also bridge. Bonding helps form the community of strangers that Ahmed (1999: 336) proposes, which has positive notes through feelings of recognition in one position or struggles. Though the value of bridging lies in the opportunities it creates, generating better resources by connecting to those that have knowledge on how this society works. Through these spaces that facilitate migrants to connect to each other and to locals, social capital creation flourishes.

Food as concept and instrument

During one of the first days of volunteering behind the bar at BOOST, a young man, made his way to the coffee station. He nodded with a smile, noticing me, perhaps noticing my newness in the environment. Later, he approached me with a mandarin in hand. Without uttering a word, he extended the fruit towards me across the counter. Taken aback by his gesture, I accepted the mandarin confused, to which he simply said ‘’Enjoy’’, before walking away. This spontaneous act of sharing food felt intimate and warm.

Such spontaneous gestures of sharing food are common in non-northern European societies. The encounter I had speaks to notions of generosity, hospitality, and community that may not be as prominent in Western European cultures. My initial surprise at the gesture prompted for self-reflection on my own positionality as a Western European researcher. Growing up in a culture where interactions tend to be more formal and reserved, such spontaneous acts of kindness felt unfamiliar. This moment served as an opportunity to question how my cultural background shapes my perceptions and interpretations of my fieldwork. Furthermore, my experience aligns with Holzman (2008: 373), who states that the act of sharing food, accompanied by rituals and exchanges, leaves a profound impact on individuals, underscoring the belief in food's crucial role in establishing and nurturing social connections. An intriguing aspect lies the inherent duality of food, as it traverses both public and intimate spheres. While eating inherently involves a deeply personal component, unlike many other private activities, food is fundamentally shaped by its openness to sharing, whether through communal rituals, feasts, reciprocal exchanges, or commercial transactions.

The theory by Neely and Walton (2015: 435), as discussed on page twenty-two of this thesis, regarding food practices as embedded within social relationships appeared in my fieldwork experiences at BOOST and DVK. In this context, food and its sharing emerged as integral components of everyday life within the centres. The presence of food permeated the atmosphere of these spaces, from the aroma of freshly baked cookies and homemade popcorn at DVK to the provision of daily lunch for a hundred twenty individuals at BOOST. This observation aligns with their argument that food practices extend beyond mere sustenance, encompassing activities such as meal preparation, sharing, and gifting (ibid.). The rituals associated with food serve as significant aspects of everyday communication practices, imbued with symbolism and cultural significance. Within the recreational centres, the act of sharing meals becomes a ritualistic practice that fosters intimacy and strengthens social bonds among individuals, thereby contributing to a sense of belonging.

Parvathi Raman (2011: 165), social anthropologist specialized in the field of Migration and Diaspora, reflects in her memoir how food served as a mediator of her present migrant life and her memories of pre-migrant life. Her family migrated from India to Britain in the 1950s, and in this time, food connected them to their cultural identity, emerged as source of comfort amidst uncertainty, and as a framework of memories. She argues that ultimately, her example of food practices illustrates its role in migrants’ negotiation of their sense of self and belonging, continually reinterpreting, and reshaping their identities within the ever-evolving tapestry of migration.

As I entered the kitchen, the Iraqi chefs greeted me with smiles, eager to involve me in their culinary endeavours. They called me over repeatedly, asking for assistance with small tasks like adding yogurt to the tzatziki. Today's menu featured Iraqi-inspired rice with chicken. Whether it was sampling a dish or setting up plates, my assistance was welcomed with genuine appreciation. It was evident that they relished the opportunity to collaborate and share their craft with me. Here, I felt embraced as a valued member of their kitchen team. Curious about the cuisine they were preparing, I inquired if it was their own creation. One of the chefs mentioned that he takes charge of selecting the ingredients and crafting the recipes himself, though he acknowledged the challenge of juggling both cooking and grocery shopping due to the labour-intensive nature of the tasks. Then, amidst the hustle, the chefs proudly presented six pieces of freshly baked baklava, inviting me to indulge in the first taste. Their generosity extended further as they eagerly explained their baklava-making process, sharing their passion for their craft.

The above paragraph contains various elements of ownership in creation of the meal, as well as the inclusivity the chefs offered me by involving me in the preparations and tasting. The act of cooking is a connector here. The experience of the Iraqi chefs cooking and sharing their food from their home country, I argue to be a component in creating a sense of belonging. Similarly, Bailey's (2017: 53) study on the food practices of Indian migrants in the Netherlands highlights the significance of commensality, or eating with others, as a fundamental aspect of fostering a sense of community within transnational contexts. For these migrants, cooking Indian food served as a central mechanism for cultivating feelings of belonging and connection to their cultural roots. The act of cooking not only provided a means of coping with the dislocation experienced through migration but also served as a tangible link to the daily rhythms and sensory experiences of home in India (Bailey, 2017: 55). Bailey's study emphasizes that migration entails not only physical relocation but also a departure from embodied sensorial environments. Using spices and family recipes, and through recreating sensory experiences, migrants in this study actively construct a sense of home. These practices not only reflect the cultural traditions migrants bring with them but also serve as a means of maintaining continuity with their past while navigating their new surroundings (Bailey, 2017: 58).

Joseph, who sometimes cooks at DVK, corroborated this view: "When I cook with help from people of other cultures, each person brings a different ingredient. And I can share from my culture what I cook, and they can too." And what this entails for the bond they form: ‘‘And together, we eat, talk, get to know each other more, and become friends."

In his expression, it becomes clear that food practices serve as an instrument in fostering social relations. In a study by Lin et al. (2020: 2), they found that Taiwanese migrants living in Belgium used food to mitigate feelings of loss and uprootedness, while strengthening their connection to both their host society and their immigrant identity. They (2020: 3) argued that many immigrants view sharing traditional or ethnic foods from their home country with friends and neighbors in the host society as a valuable means of expanding their social circles and fostering interpersonal relationships. This practice

underscores the role of home or ethnic foods as essential tools for immigrants to navigate and cultivate friendships within their new environment. Through cooking, people participate in a cross-cultural common activity that upholds social norms and fosters ties within the community.

Ultimately, food can be seen as a means of building connections, as it provides a common topic for conversation and creates an informal environment for interaction. The act of sharing food plays a vital role in fostering connections, bridging cultural differences, and creating a sense of togetherness and unity among individuals.

Home

Throughout this thesis, the notion of "home" emerges as a recurring theme intertwined with various practices and experiences. This sentiment is evident from the outset, as Rasmus, in discussing the learning space, alludes to the unexpected sense of home that many visitors discover. This sentiment echoes within both BOOST and DVK, where migrants frequently describe these spaces as such. For Joseph, in particular, the notion of home extends beyond physical space to encompass the relationships and interactions fostered within DVK:

‘‘I can't do without De Voorkamer. Very important for me and for everyone. De Voorkamer is a very important place for everyone. They help me with everything. They become like my family. My children. I consider De Voorkamer my home.’’

Joseph’s statement shows how relationships and interactions contribute to his place-belongingness to DVK. This aligns with Antonsich’s (2010: 647) observation of home being deeply intertwined with relationships. Mohammed uses the word comfort in describing his sense of home and links it to how he perceives BOOST: ‘’I don't go anywhere. I just stay home or come to BOOST. I'm very comfortable here in BOOST. Both are actually my home.’’ Comfort is closely related to the concept of home because home is typically seen as a place where one feels safe, relaxed, and at ease. When we think of home, we often associate it with feelings of comfort, familiarity, and security. Comfort encompasses both physical and emotional aspects. Emotionally, home provides a sense of belonging, acceptance, and emotional support.

Next to these highlighted personal statements of home, Rasmus adds that a communication employer collected data months earlier on “how people speak about BOOST” and found that many of the participants and volunteers used the word ‘home’ and the word ‘family’. He went on to argue: “And you can actually see it. People are at BOOST on average three to five times a week. And then it automatically becomes almost like a sort of home, I think’’.

Rasmus suggests here that the regularity of visits to BOOST forms enduring and meaningful relationships among migrants, contributing to the space's transformation into a communal home for

many. The regularity component has been mentioned by Baumeister and Leary's (1995: 500), who assert that frequent physical interactions foster a sense of group belonging.

Home as a concept is understood in various ways, the concept is dependable. Mallet (2004: 84) did an empirical study on how home is understood, defined, and described in the literature. Home can be a space, a place, a feeling, a practice, a state of being. Mallet (2004: 71) shows that home is also considered as haven with a private sphere and family realm, distinctly separated from the public space. Linked to this perspective is an intimate feeling of a space where close and caring relationships are fostered. I would argue against the notions of home being a private and family-based space, seeing how the recreational centres bring up home for the migrants without containing those elements.

Others argue home to be an expression or symbol of the self. An emotional environment where one feels at ease and can express uniqueness (Mallet, 2004: 82). This perception of home I find in the quote of Yetunde: "Home is a place where you are able to be yourself. For me, De Voorkamer is home. I tell people it's home.'' Combined the four quotes all show a different part of feeling at home. In the forming of a new home, the factors that arose thus were the frequency of physical interaction, the accepted expression of the self, the comfort and a sense of ease, and the social relationships that come with. Massey (1994: 119) asserts that there is no truth of an actual or imagined place is by definition a home. A home is constructed through particular social relations in a specific location, and thus is permeable. It shows to be a localizing idea, rather than a distinct place, involving an immersion of oneself in a locality (Mallet, 2004: 79). The idea of home is multifaceted, intertwined with safety, sociality, and physicality. A combination that both recreational centres I researched seem to have managed to master.

In this chapter I delved into the social life within BOOST and De Voorkamer. I found that recognition transcends mere politeness, offering an affirmation of migrants' presence and acts as a form of social inclusion. By fostering environments where individuals are seen, heard, and valued, BOOST and De Voorkamer lay the groundwork for genuine human connection and inclusivity.

Meanwhile, inclusivity emerges as a deliberate effort to overcome cultural barriers, establishing spaces in which everyone is encouraged to engage and contribute. Through this, the recreational centres promote conviviality, fostering a sense of belonging that transcends differences. Through these built conditions, connection building and social cohesion flourished within these spaces. Discourses of food serve as a significant means to build on cultural exchange and a sense of togetherness. Both researched spaces create environments where individuals can find a sense of home amidst the challenges of displacement. My time in these social spaces reminds me of the profound impact that genuine human connection and community support can have in shaping the migrants' rebuilding of their lives.

V. SAFE SPACE

The explicit notion of safeness astonished me. Not often do spaces promote their vision and its importance of this subject. I wondered if in the creation of spaces for migrants, this was more profound due to the lack of safety one can feel in a new environment. In this chapter I delve in to the intricates of a safe space and the value for those who immerse themselves in it.

The creation of a safe space

Entering DVK, one is immediately greeted by an array of posters adorning the walls and windows, each announcing various activities and cultural events hosted by diverse organizations. Among them, a particular poster stands out, its message written in bold capital letters: SAFE(R) SPACE. Illustrated with artistic flair, it depicts a pathway alongside numbered steps: 1. Odd feeling? 2. Approach the event coordinator and/or the safer space coordinator (with provided contact information) 3. Describe the incident 4. They take it from here. Beneath this, a declaration reads: "safe space = brave space." A second poster nearby elucidates DVK's values, captioned as "When in De Voorkamer." Six drawings accompanied by text articulate the core principles: "Connect and engage respectfully," "Recognize and celebrate our differences!" "Take care of one another," "Notice others' needs and boundaries," and "No harassment tolerated: verbal or non-verbal," with a link provided for reporting discomfort.

Figure 2. The Safe(r) Space poster of De Voorkamer

Next to the visual representation, Yetunde always starts the Project Mini activities with shortly introducing the space and mentioning it abiding safe character. In the interview she also states ‘’we especially explain why our space must remain safe’’. I asked if they often experience issues with this and she answers that:

“Once this has been explained, I think most people just adjust. And people that maybe still want to hold on to their own beliefs or do not want to listen to what the other person say, they eventually change and be a bit more acceptive or adaptive to other people's cultures. Or if it's not for them, then they find another place to be… So, I would say it's working because most people know that. Yeah, just respect the other person. That's what we say here. And if not, yeah, change or just stay away till you're ready to accept the other people despite their differences and beliefs or whatever.’’

There is a strictness in Yetunde’s voice I had not heard before when she states the above. It appears to be of serious importance to her. Further shedding light on DVK’s approach to cultivating a sense of safety amidst cultural diversity, she shares insights into the organization's practice of hosting women-only events, acknowledging the cultural sensitivities that necessitate such spaces: ‘’So sometimes we have these separate events for that or for any group that desires to be unique in their own way.’’ The safe space DVK promotes for the bigger audience and sometimes for smaller marginalized groups,

aligns with Evans and Boyte (1992: 9) ‘free space’ idea where self-respect, skills and a deeper group identity assemble, though spaces with open and participatory character.

In the cafe area of BOOST, flyers announce a participant meeting focused on social safety, inviting individuals to join and share their experiences: ‘’We are going to talk about social safety. Will you come and join us? We want to hear from you.’’ These participant meeting about the values and futures of BOOST had been previously mentioned by Rasmus in an interview where he elaborated on how BOOST practically fosters a warm and safe atmosphere. He highlighted the bottom-up approach taken by the organization, where they strive to involve everyone in decision-making processes, such as drafting a code of conduct and defining ethos by ‘’how we treat each other and what are the core values?’’ This involved consultations with the team, volunteers, participants, and interpreters to ensure inclusivity and engagement at all levels. This involvement can be argued as what Anderson (2021: 287) links to epistemically safe spaces, where promotes agency for marginalized individuals in actively engaging with their knowledge. The epistemically safeness, I also find in the cultural exchange of knowledge explained in the chapter learning space.

Lastly, both DVK and BOOST facilitate a zorgcafé, organized by Dokters van de Wereld. Their aim is to support newcomers with questions about health and the Dutch healthcare system. Here, one can talk to healthcare professionals or cultural coaches for free, and the volunteers can help them with finding the right kind of care. At BOOST, one Iraqi doctor, who first visited the space as migrant has joined the Dokters van de Wereld, not having a legal medicine permit in the Netherlands. Dokters van de Wereld is fully voluntary work, which allows for a looser set up with doctors that have a legal permit but allow space for cooperation with professionals without a permit. At BOOST the Dutch doctors expressed their appreciation of the Iraqi volunteer and valued his importance as medical translator.

The recognition of his expertise by the Dutch doctors shows the acknowledgement of valuable contributions migrants themselves make to the community. This shows how BOOST offers migrants the chance to participate in society by recognizing their skills. Lindert et al. (2008: 18) showed how in European regular healthcare, caretakers are made to feel intercultural incompetent. This concept describes a personal feeling of a lack of the necessary skills, awareness, and knowledge to engage with individuals from different cultural backgrounds effectively and appropriately. Lindert et al. phrase that curiosity, cultural sensitivity and empathy, and ability of adjustment are general necessary skills in intercultural caretaking (ibid.). Zorgcafé tries to overcome these issues by having accompanied an interpreter of language and culture. The importance of this health consultation both spaces offer, elaborating its necessities in the following part.

Mental health challenges

Following the national Christmas break, a period of closure for DVK, I approached Joseph asking how he has been. With candid honesty, Joseph revealed the loneliness he experienced during these weeks. As he lacked familial ties and found his social milieu that consist mainly out of other volunteers from

DVK, occupied with holiday festivities, Joseph expressed his reliance on the space. Commuting daily from Gorinchem, he sought solace within the confines of DVK, yearning for human interaction and connection.

“Actually, I'm here because I'm lonely’’, Joseph confessed, “I live alone, and I need people to sit with me. I know almost everyone here in Lombok. So, when I'm here and someone from here passes by, they can see me, say hello, have a chat. And sitting together, then we are united... All my children and acquaintances are here. That's why I come here every day.’’

His openness about feeling lonely during the holiday closure underscores the significance of DVK as a social lifeline for individuals like him: ‘’I can't do without De Voorkamer. Very important for me and for everyone. De Voorkamer is a very important place for everyone.” Joseph sheds light on the profound impact of loneliness, particularly among migrants distanced from their homeland. His statement underscores the stark reality faced by newcomers grappling with isolation and disconnection in their adopted communities.

For Joseph, DVK transcends its role as a venue for activities; it serves as a lifeline where he seeks solace and human connection. Despite DVK's closure during the holidays, Joseph's unwavering commitment to visiting the space speaks volumes about the significance of community spaces in alleviating feelings of loneliness. His determination to seek out familiar faces, even in an empty environment, reflects a deep-seated yearning for human connection and validation. The simple act of someone noticing him and engaging in conversation holds immense significance in combating feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of belonging. In essence, Joseph's narrative emphasizes that the essence of community spaces lies not solely in the activities they offer, but in the opportunity for shared experiences and companionship. The tangible activities merely serve as conduits for the intangible sense of togetherness that permeates spaces like DVK.

Saleh, the political PHD migrant from Yemen, too offers a view into his life, when asked why he joins the activities of DVK, sharing the struggles he and other around him face:

“To live in asylum seeking centre, it's not easy. I mean, for someone just come from his country, foreign people, doesn't speak the Netherlands language, doesn't know anyone… Doesn't know even the city, the main streets name. And there is no reason to talk to people. No walking, no studying. Just sitting at home, so you feel boring. At first time, you didn't find any reason to be in touch with the people. For this time, you can't study because you didn't have the five years resident permit. You can't work. You can't go to anywhere, I mean, to do something, even the money, you didn't have enough. So, you just stay at home, then you lose control of your routine. You didn't have schedule for your meals time. Then you lose your sleeping time, you didn't know what time you should sleep, what time you woke up. I mean, step by step to more difficult life. ‘’

As Saleh highlights, the transition to life in an asylum-seeking centre can be daunting for those who arrive with limited knowledge of the local language, culture, and community. The lack of opportunities for social interaction and meaningful engagement exacerbates feelings of isolation and boredom, leading to a gradual decline in mental well-being. Saleh's description of the downward spiral from boredom to a loss of control over daily routines underscores the detrimental impact of isolation on mental health. Without external stimuli or opportunities for social connection, individuals like Saleh find themselves trapped in a cycle of monotony and disorientation. The absence of a structured daily routine further compounds the challenges, leading to disruptions in sleep patterns and meal schedules. This topic of conversation shows why one would attach themselves to a space that hosts activities, gets them out of their house, and ultimately offers a renewed sense of purpose. Saleh further builds on this importance with:

‘’So, as soon as you go De Voorkamer, you find your way. You start to break the tides. I think it's the most difficult thing to be at home for all time. So, when you go De Voorkamer, you become busy with the activities, you think about them. You check the WhatsApp application, what we have tonight, what we have tomorrow.’’

This explicit statement of Saleh gets amplified by Yetunde, sharing her own journey from a bustling city like Lagos, Nigeria, to the quieter streets of Utrecht, and the contrast in social dynamics and daily routines that was disorienting and isolating for her. In the interview, she explained how she recounted her connections with fellow migrants, each searching to fulfil their own aspirations and dreams. Yet, she observed with concern how many of them spiralled into depression when confronted with the stark reality that their professional qualifications were rendered ineffective without proficiency in the Dutch language. Yetunde argues that the transition to a new life isn't automatic; it's a journey fraught with challenges and adjustments. Imagine arriving with your hard-earned degrees and professional background, only to realize that language proficiency is a prerequisite before you can even contemplate practicing your chosen profession. For some, this entails settling for low-status jobs that they never envisioned themselves doing in their home countries. Khosravi (2021: 203) proposes the question: if the motivation for migration is either the desire for a better life or the fear of persecution, then who can say when it begins? In the context of rebuilding life after migrating, many individuals wait and long for a “normal life’’. Here, Khosravi (2021: 206) asserts that the normalcy in a migrant’s milieu is waiting itself. He therefore proposes that they are not waiting to belong but to participate. The struggle of having the right to participate, I argue is visible in the process of searching for a normal life, with a decent job, and the ability to follow the path the migrants want for themselves. Working at DVK now, Yetunde has found her own purpose that is in line with her drive to connecting people:

"And really, I just love connecting people, like, yeah, being happy with people, being myself, making them feel free to be themselves. That's what I do and that's what I'm about. So, it was important for me to find a place like that here."

Now, she explains her sense of how spaces like DVK can help individuals like Joseph, Saleh, and herself:

"So, it's a whole lot of mental health relief. You help fight depression. You give people something else to do. You redirect their talent or stimulate their talent… We're doing something for the community and the people. And as long as there are many people that are happy or have these connections and are able to have a good mental health level, then everybody's safer."

As the struggle to adapt to new norms, such as language barriers and unfamiliar customs, can exacerbate feelings of frustration and anxiety, it is likely to impact one's mental well-being. These stories align with Bhugra (2004: 253) in viewing cultural identity changes as factors in potential culture shock, adding sense of alienation and isolation, as experienced by Saleh. Placing the cultural shock or conflict and discrepancy in aspiration and achievement as vulnerabilities to mental health. Yetunde expressed how this discrepancy impacted those around here negatively.

The spaces of BOOST and DVK seem to build resilience, where Bhugra (2004: 247) shows that fostering a positive cultural identity, and offering social support prevent depressive symptoms. Attitudes of open and friendly relations between the two cultural societies, and knowledge about both societies makes the post-migration process easier. Hospitality and welcoming attitudes of the new society is important for migrants' acculturation process and mental health. Bhugra (2004:255) argues that relationships play a crucial role in providing migrants with a sense of place and social significance, aiding them in navigating through unfamiliar environments. In the process of overcoming their losses, the significance of attachment is highlighted.

The narratives of Yetunde, Saleh, and Joseph shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by migrants as they navigate the complexities of cultural transition and integration. Ultimately, both recreational spaces seem to have positive impact on mental health of the migrants visiting.

Availing safety

Arriving at the improv dance workshop at DVK, the space had changed. All tables and chairs were set aside, and the heating was turned on. Shoes had to be left at the door, and everyone followed the host in taking a seat on the ground. A few participants collected pillows and handed them out for comfort. The first wave of participants arriving was female, however a few men from the asylum-seeking centre arrived later. Their presence initially seemed hesitant, as if unsure about the activity. The workshop started with rolling around on the floor, for it to end in a blinded dance where one closed the eyes and

the other leaded them around the space by hand. Visibly within the hour, the vibe within the space and between the participants had changed from slightly ill at ease to vibrant.

Here, by creating a non-judgmental space for self-expression and exploration, DVK empowered individuals to connect with others authentically. It challenged stereotypes and promoted inclusivity and creativity. This example shows to social space of DVK, but even more, the safe space, feeling comfortable enough to get out of the comfort zone.

The feeling of safety and acceptance within these spaces seemed to have a ripple effect extending beyond the recreational centres, to positively impact migrants' experiences in other areas of their lives. This became clear through some interviews, where migrants expressed how they gained confidence in approaching people since they came to the recreational centres. At BOOST, the concept of safety takes on a nuanced dimension for Mustafa. Through interactions with strangers from diverse cultural backgrounds within the sanctuary of BOOST's safe environment, Mustafa undergoes a transformation in his perception of others, transcending previous apprehensions to embrace a newfound trust:

"In the past, for example, I was afraid of Muslims. Now, not afraid. Now, it's easy to talk to everyone. Syrian people, Iraqi people, Eritrean people, African people. The whole world is good."

His statement shows a type of anxiety or even xenophobia that he overcame through his visits at BOOST. Bassam, a younger guy from Syria who is now works as participant-coordinator, explains his anxiety he had before joining:

‘’Before I came to Boost, I was always afraid to talk to people or something like that. Maybe those people wouldn't understand me or something. I kept a bit of distance from people or something... But here, if they know the person, they will also explain like no, you can better say it like this. People like to help here. So, I’m not afraid to just try here."

The safety these spaces create has some positive impact on the newcomers that attend. The feeling of safety can help with feelings of being oneself and having the guts to exploring new talents and relationships. The recreational spaces serve as catalysts for personal growth, resilience, and well-being. Ultimately, the ethos of BOOST, encapsulated in the phrase "wij zijn een springplank en een vangnet" [we are a stepping-stone and a safety-net], underscores their hope in offering migrants to explore their potential and as safety nets, providing a sense of security and belonging amidst life's uncertainties. It is within this nurturing environment that transformative journeys unfold, as individuals reclaim agency over their lives and reimagine their futures with newfound hope and optimism.

Thus, this chapter on safety emerged as a central ethos of the spaces I researched, encompassing a seriousness of nurturing not only physical safety but also emotional and psychological well-being.

The participatory approach adopted by BOOST in defining its code of conduct and ethos reflects a togetherness of prevailing the safety of the space. By involving all in shaping the culture of the space, BOOST cultivates a sense of belonging among its diverse community members. This bottom-up approach not only ensures that the needs and perspectives of all are considered but also promotes agency and empowerment among marginalized individuals. Through creating environments where individuals feel accepted and valued regardless of their background or beliefs, DVK and BOOST serve as catalysts for personal growth and resilience. The spaces function as a steppingstone for migrants to reimagine their futures, taking control over their process to a new life soothed by the thoughts of the recreational space as safety net.

VI. DISCUSSION

This thesis was structured through various components of space; its physicality, its social and learning function, and its safety. To sketch a lively image and understanding of the recreational spaces, I started this thesis with the chapter on the physical space of both recreational centres. It firstly explores how the physical layouts and features influence the sense of belonging of migrants. The sense of ownership plays a detrimental role at DVK, where the whole physical space (e.g., the art on the wall, the tables, the pillows) is created by the migrants. An important quote in this chapter explains the intention behind this: ''why would you say a place is your home? Because you built it.'' The chapter furthermore explores the hierarchical structures of the spaces, such as restricted areas, and the ''open door'' policy. In fostering an easy approachability and informality of the space instead of an institutional feel, the migrants feel more connected to the space. A sense of place-belongingness showed to be positively experienced and cultivated through the physical design and socio-spatial inclusivity of the recreational spaces. Lastly, both centres lend their physical space to other organizations that have similar goals to theirs, enhancing connectivity and collaboration. Through this, the spaces connect migrants to their new societal environment. This can help in rebuilding their lives in components such as employability. Ultimately, I argue that the social capital this builds could foster a sense of belonging that reaches further than the centres.

One of the recreational centres' primary functions, is the learning of a new language. It is the reason why migrants searched for the space. The value of a learning space lies in the sense of purpose it gives in the new lives of the migrants. The component of learning stretches itself to not only learning new skills, but also to sharing or teaching one's own knowledge and skills. The principle of a learning exchange rather than a one-way process can be found throughout the ethos of both recreational centres. Given the many cultural differences the spaces host, the centres aim to acknowledge and celebrate all through practices of cultural exchange. Furthermore, this chapter examines the notion of ownership within these learning spaces, exploring how individuals assert agency and autonomy in their learning and teaching processes. Ultimately, this chapter shows how the common goal of learning can foster connection, facilitated through a convivial environment where migrants are equally valued. These factors, in combination with a sense of ownership that migrants experience in the program, makes the space more 'theirs', fostering a sense of belonging within the recreational centre.

The recreational centres naturally function as a social space; however, the centres studied in this thesis intentionally foster social connection. I explore how these centres serve as meeting spaces, fostering interactions and relationships among migrants. I delve into seemingly small acts of friendliness such as the remembering of one's name and personal life events, that build up to not so small feelings of validation. These feelings are further cultivated through the active fostering of inclusivity and encouraging of self-expression. Furthermore, I argue that these centres build bonding and bridging forms of social capital. Additionally, the role of food arose to be pre-eminent as an instrument for connection. The sharing of culture, as explored in the first chapter, gets combined here with the facilitating of informal social interactions. Finally, the sentiment of home gets explored in this

chapter. As van Gorp and Smets (2015: 72) put it: migrants ‘’do not leave their houses – they leave their homes’’, the recreational centres showed to recall feelings of home for the migrants.

In the social and learning space chapters I discussed, are processes made possible through the foundations of the recreational centres. The core foundation that permits this, is the safety of the environment. Creating a safe and supportive environment shows to be important in promoting a sense of belonging. In this chapter, I firstly address the policies of the recreational centres and their approaches to creating a safe space. Then, I delve into the mental health challenges that migrants expressed through the interviews, in connection to the resilience they get from the recreational space in dealing with them. The chapter discusses the significance of destigmatizing these mental health issues and promoting open dialogue within the spaces. Lastly, I explore ethnographic examples of how the migrants’ feeling safety made them grow in confidence. This chapter ultimately is of importance in my thesis of sense of belonging, since it forms the base condition for an ‘at ease’ feeling for the migrants, which facilitates the other processes in the space in a positive manner.

Throughout this thesis, conviviality vibrated as the creation of inclusive and harmonious social spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to interact, share experiences, and build connections. Through establishment of an environment that promotes positive social practices, mutual understanding, and a sense of community among migrants and between migrants and the host community flourished.

In conclusion, this research underscores the profound impact of recreational spaces as catalysts for migrant rebuilding of a sense of belonging. Migrants find a sense of belonging in their new homelands through these centres, but it is less convincing that they find a sense of belonging in Dutch society as they are still considered the ‘Other’ structurally. It becomes evident that these spaces serve as bridges, connecting a diverse population to each other and to their new society, nurturing a sense of community and belonging. The comparison between BOOST and DVK reveals different emphases in fostering belonging. BOOST succeeds in fostering a sense of belonging within their community and its physical space, through highlighting commonalities. Since language activities serve as their main program, less Dutch individuals join. The space has a more serious development approach when it comes to career and networking, and that showed in the resources of bridging social capital. DVK seems to foster a sense of belonging that reaches more to the neighbouring society. Their program is more attractive to the local Dutch community through their focus on creativity rather than language skills. I would like to stress organizations that aim to connect migrants to their new societal environment to critically review their programming. Language acquisition, though useful, has proven to not foster full inclusion. I argue that regular positive interaction between locals and migrant could be more beneficial in this case, thus urge organizations to shift away from solely language activities.

While my observations and interviews have largely answered my research questions, it's crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The language barrier posed constraints on the inclusivity of interviews, limiting the depth of understanding among non-proficient speakers. The limitation

through language barriers can be found at two levels. Firstly, I only spoke with migrants that had some proficiency in English or Dutch. In not working with an interpreter, I limited my range of interlocutors. Secondly, within the interviews and during the analysation of them, I found vast differences in depth that were due language proficiency. During some interviews, I noticed that the interviewee did not understand all questions, even after reformulating. This resulted in a more interpreted data analysis by me instead of the literal words formulated by the migrant. However, I do want to stress on this limitation that the lesser in-depth interviews still led to valuable knowledge. Hiller and DiLuzio (2004: 21) argue against the biases towards those who are more articulate and reflective, thus providing more interesting data. I agree with this note, asserting that the interviews with lesser explicit data still provided interesting implicit data.

Furthermore, the two recreational centres I chose to research appeared to be experienced exceedingly positive by those who I spoke to and by myself. Through my own positive experience, however telling of the spaces too, this thesis presents that. To take a critical stand when both participants as I experienced the spaces very positively was difficult. Potential bias must be acknowledged due to the subjective nature of the ethnographic study conducted by a single researcher. This could have limited the understanding of the spaces' perceived impact. Both recreational centres were very intentional with forming their figurative and literal space, which is likely not representative. Thus, this thesis should be used as an illustration of how spaces can intentionally tackle social problems.

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