Melbourne’s African refugees between identity and integration: Public housing as an incubator

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Africa Think Tank
Challenges for Migrants and Refugees’ integration
Social cohesion outcomes for migrants and refugees

The creation of a **new home** is vitally important for migrants’ and refugees’ sense of belonging and effective integration.

Scholars have identified two key **measures of belonging and social cohesion** for newcomers during the resettlement process:

- **Positive social interactions** (Hebbani, et al, 2017; Somerville, 1998; Mandanipour, 1998)

Both measures are **closely linked** - inappropriate housing has been found to heighten newcomers’ risk of social exclusion (Chitrakar, 2016).
Challenges to securing appropriate housing for migrants/refugees

- Low income levels (Waxman and Colic-Peisker 2005; San Pedro, 2001)
- Discrimination by real estate agents and/or landlords (Drummond and Ransley, 2001)
- Racism (Fawaz, et al, 2018)
- Lack of familiarity with the host country’s housing processes (Fozdar and Hartley, 2014; Alloush, 2001; San Pedro, 2001)
- Lack of research about the specific challenges facing African populations (Francis, 2009)
- Housing and homelessness as an obstacle to integration (Flatau, et al, 2015)

These obstacles increase migrants and refugees’ risk of poverty and homelessness (Johnston, 2001), and have been found to exacerbate social conflict and stress (Flanagan, 2007).
African migrants and refugees have been acknowledged to reside in various public housing complexes within Melbourne’s inner suburbs, these provide opportunities to engage in cultural and social activities, enabling these groups to feel engaged with their local community.

The integration and social cohesion challenges faced by African migrants and refugees living these public housing estates remain under-explored.

This project investigates African migrants’ and refugees’ construction of ‘place’ and how this links to their sense of belonging in Australia.

Key aim:
To provide further insight into the daily life experiences and limitations faced by these groups during their integration, with particular focus on the important role of housing.
Between integration and identity
“adapt to the lifestyle of the host society without having to lose one’s own cultural identity” (UNHCR 2002)

“migrants strive to preserve certain aspects of their identities and cultures which they hold dear” (Al Hurabi 2014)

Housing and neighbourhood is crucial in the reconstruction of people’s identity, as well as their sense of place and belonging as individuals, families and community members.
Methodology

1) Semi-structured interviews with a group ranging from 28 households from African origins
2) One art workshop was conducted with 12 participants, migrants from various African countries.
Inside the Carlton Housing Estate
Making our home

“the Quran, display on the top of my computer shelf and also I have my prayer mats different colours, and then I have a curtains which is replica of African curtains. The middle eastern people uses the same but that is the way I can feel I can be on my own still respecting and feel at home”.

“We keep the furniture look and even the decoration or any other like even curtains similar to what we had in back home…also we have like the TV satellite we watch all the news from back home in Arabic language and African language.”

“getting a Somali like Somali sofas and curtains and maybe prayer mats all these stuffs “
Inside the housing buildings

Floor waiting space

Laundry areas

Corridors as social spaces

Storage

Legend
- Public housing building
- A Medium rise
- B High rise
- C Outdoor meeting space
- D Playground
- E Sports ground
- F Green areas
- G Paths
- H Parking
- I Nursery/ kindergarten
- J Church
- K Primary schoo
Spatial interaction inside the Housing Estates

Playground

Community market

Number of people
- 1 - 5
- 6 - 10
- 10 +

Spaces for interaction
- Community facilities
- Shopping
- Recreation and sports
- Parking
“We together have a big meal during Ramadan. We have festivals during Eid and other and also there's a few meetings with the community”.

“We go together in whenever someone's sick we go together and read the Quran, we learn the Quran on community centre”.

“I have a group call only female group which we do it every Tuesday afternoon. We connect all the females in the building, and other in the surroundings as well”.

“I like living here because I 'am close to wide range of Somali people”
City-housing estates spatial interaction
Findings

Culture difference
Many African migrants are coming from extremely different experiences of ‘home’ (including dwellings, neighbourhoods, communities).

‘Keeping to your own’
Belonging, as a migrant even if they were born in Australia, is often related to being part of a community of migrants from their country of origin.

Isolation and the social design of public housing
While African migrants expressed some warm views of neighbours, there were still issues with how public housing is designed socially, with (sometimes very) heterogenous people living next to each other and little scope for forming deeper relationships.