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The Housing Response to New Refugee Flows in Amsterdam: a Governance Perspective

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Abstract
To-date, little research has been conducted regarding the governance of long-term housing solutions for refugees. As such, a critical gap remains within academia. This research aims to investigate the importance of housing governance for new refugees in the Netherlands, with a specific focus on the region of Amsterdam. With a pre-

existing tight housing market, upon increased refugee flows from 2015, the city struggled to deal with the challenge of accommodating such numbers of newcomers. By 2016, a significant backlog had formed, with many status holders waiting years in reception centres, or *Asielzoekerscentrums* (AZCs) to be housed elsewhere in the Netherlands. This topic thus warrants greater insight, and will seek to critically examine the nature of housing responses in Amsterdam, identifying a range of stakeholders involved in governance and the formation of networks and issues surrounding common discourse with which to analyse current housing solutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 key stakeholders in order to gain a deeper insight into these governance processes. The resulting findings concluded that whilst Amsterdam's institutional presence has resulted in the establishment of effective networks and a common agenda, challenges remain in interactions between institutions and user communities. In order to address these issues, multi-stakeholder collaboration is essential, alongside knowledge distribution and training amongst providers in order to establish a common discourse. Whilst funding disparities between the national and local level pervade, increased collaborative practices would help to narrow these issues. Amsterdam's pragmatic approach to developing housing solutions during the European refugee 'crisis' has resulted in promising examples of best practice from which other European countries may look to guide future solutions with.

Context

Housing solutions for refugees - whether temporary or permanent - may be seen as the zeitgeist of our time. As we progress into a new decade, widespread global housing shortages and ever-changing refugee flows continue to prevail. This research aims to delve into a deeper understanding of housing responses to new refugee flows in Amsterdam, using a governance perspective.

Prior to 2015, Europe was largely unaffected by the so-called refugee 'crisis'. The political instability of the Arab Spring post 2011 however, resulted in the displacement of 11 million Syrians by 2015 (Otero and Gürcan, 2016). Whilst the vast majority migrated to surrounding countries, many also crossed the Mediterranean to reach Europe. 1,325,505 people lodged a first asylum application in the EU in 2015, with 93,176 refugees living in the Netherlands by 2018 (Ijeoma, 2014).

Challenges in accommodating refugees arose after Dutch municipalities were unable to keep up with the demand for housing for beneficiaries of international protection. Consequently, at the end of 2015 the backlog of refugees waiting in AZCs to receive housing was almost 16,000 people (Klaver, 2016).

Current primary bottlenecks in housing refugees can be segregated into two main challenges: structural challenges in cities and access to housing. Structural

challenges observed include a lack of temporary and permanent housing, the existence of (other) vulnerable people on waiting lists and public anti-immigrant sentiment (Housing Europe, 2016a).

Insufficient knowledge-sharing has resulted in an information gap between the EU and local level and a lack of administrative capacity to allocate housing. Consequently, budgetary issues, language barriers and a lack of awareness of and/or inaccessibility to access relevant information pervade those involved in housing governance (Partnership for the Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees, 2018 in Housing Europe, 2016b).

Transparency and communication between and within institutions is key to ensuring effective stakeholder involvement and providing best practice. Yet, there is little knowledge transfer among cities on evidence-based integration policymaking, despite a wealth of experience existing (Urban Agenda for the EU, 2017).

Access to housing for refugees is hampered by hidden discrimination, high prices and a lack of adequate supply (Housing Europe, 2016a). Social housing prioritises refugees alongside other vulnerable groups and as a result, refugees have no extra rights in accessing housing (Klaver, 2016). The tightness in the local housing market exists in part due to shrinking supplies of social housing (Engbersen et al., 2015).

The types of housing solutions developed to-date vary widely in their approaches and resulting challenges. Short-term, temporary solutions may arise due to time pressures — for instance, prefabricated dwellings (Johnson, Lizarralde and Davidson, 2006) — which then pose as mediocre alternatives to more durable, longer-term housing. Long-term solutions are largely disregarded by practitioners in the field, attributed to the fluctuating nature of asylum seekers' journeys. Yet, governments face pressure to solve this away from the public eye (Culbertson and Constant, 2015).

Adequate governance structures are vital to ensure effective responses to the housing needs of new refugees. Amin and Thrift's (1995) institutional thickness framework notes that in order to address current governance problems in cities, developing an institutionally based set of local networks and alliances places greater emphasis on regional and local housing strategies. The development of these networks fosters the representation of wider interests, allowing national forces to be localised city-wide (Pemberton, 2000). 'Thickness' is comprised of the following elements (Pemberton, 2000: 297):

1. Institutional presence; the range of institutions within a specified area organising a variety of practices.

2. Networking and interaction between institutions; the formation and regularity of contact.

3. A common agenda to develop upon; in order to establish effective networks.

Therefore, the findings of this research will aim to narrow this divide between current discourse concerning short-term solutions for asylum seekers and longer-term, more permanent solutions for refugees who have received their residence permit—henceforth known as 'status holders'. Utilising the institutional thickness framework as noted by Pemberton (2000), the resulting findings will aim to analyse networks and interactions between institutions and user communities and a potential common agenda from which to further develop housing governance in response to future refugee flows.

Objectives
1. To critically examine the nature of housing responses to new refugee flows

2. Through a case study approach — focusing on Amsterdam, in the Netherlands — to identify a range of stakeholders involved in the governance of housing for refugees

3. To critically analyse the effectiveness of existing networks and interactions for shaping housing solutions

4. To evaluate issues of common discourse that may inform the delivery of housing solutions

Methods
Upon interviewing a range of stakeholders involved in the housing governance of status holders throughout the Netherlands, it became apparent that there were particular challenges in Amsterdam given the size of new refugee flows into the city. By identifying a range of organisations consisting of housing corporations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and municipalities involved in housing status holders, the researcher collated a target audience to contact throughout the Netherlands. After emailing 50 stakeholders, the researcher received 23 replies.

Consequently, the researcher conducted 14 semi-structured interviews: face-to-face, via phone and email. After establishing a set of questions to ask in each interview, these were adapted in subsequent interviews in order to adapt to new data gathered and collect other information as deemed necessary. The interviewees were given an information sheet detailing the interview process and a consent form with which to

agree to the interview. Table I demonstrates the characteristics of the researcher's interviewees, detailing their organisation and position. Each interviewee has been anonymised in order to protect their identity.

Organisation	Position	Type of organisation	Relation to specific housing development
Stadgenoot	Strategy Advisor	Housing corporation	Stek Oost
Startblok Actief	Team Member	Foundation	Startblok Riekerhaven
Rochdale	Programme Leader	Housing corporation	Spark Village
De Key	Housing Advisor	Housing corporation	Startblok Riekerhaven/Elzenhagen
Aedes	Representative	Housing corporation	n/a
Gemeente Amsterdam, Project Management Bureau	Project Managers	Municipality	n/a
Gemeente Amsterdam, District South East	Policy Advisor	Municipality	n/a
Gemeente Nijmegen, Social Development department	Policy Advisors	Municipality	n/a
Gemeente Den Haag, Status Holder Programme team	Team Member	Municipality	n/a
Gemeente Leiden, Participation and Social Development department	Policy Advisor	Municipality	n/a
Gemeente Rotterdam, Housing department	Policy Advisor	Municipality	n/a

Housing Europe	Researcher	European Federation of Public, Cooperative and Social Housing	n/a
Stek Oost	Community Builder	Housing development	Stek Oost
Spark Village	Status holder	Housing development	Spark Village

Table I: Characteristics of interviewees

Ethnographic methods were also utilised by field notes and photography, aiming to observe the locality and environment of the key housing sites in the Netherlands. This provided a 'portrait of the people' (Astalin, 2013: 120), contextualising each housing development. However, the researcher did experience etic challenges (Astalin, 2013), finding it difficult to interpret community relations as she was unfamiliar with the user communities.

By mapping Amsterdam, the researcher aimed to investigate spatial patterns of housing institutions and developments throughout the city, collating data in a comprehensible format (World Health Organisation, 2020). However, limited response rates and time constraints precluded systematic exploration of the entire area of Amsterdam (US Geological Survey Publications, n.d.).

Secondary data sources were also utilised in order to contextualise the case study of Amsterdam. This primarily involved grey literature, such as Housing Europe's (2016a) scoping papers; the Urban Agenda for the EU's (2017) Action Plan; and the discussion of *Platform Opnieuw Thuis* (Platform Home Again) by Florijn (2017). Additionally, academic literature by Fermin and Wassenberg (2019) and Czischke and Huisman (2018) are also poignant in observing good practices of housing status holders in the Netherlands.

Despite the insightful data gathered, there were a number of limitations discovered in attempting to contact interviewees. With regards to key stakeholders involved, namely a lack of time and sufficient knowledge to respond to my queries, in particular from the Dutch Council for Refugees, *VluchtelingenWerk* and the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (*COA*) and when interviewing status holders, a low turnout was common, alongside significant language barriers, with many having little knowledge of English and Dutch. This posed challenges in receiving more in-depth responses from status holders living in Amsterdam, and as such only one status holder was able to be interviewed. In order to protect the status holder's identity, he has been given a pseudonym upon citing his subsequent experiences.

By taking an inductive approach to framing the analysis and the triangulation of various methodologies, the researcher drew insightful conclusions concerning the housing governance strategies implemented by institutions and stakeholders in response to new refugee flows in Amsterdam.

Findings

Elements of Amin and Thrift's (1995) institutional thickness framework highlight the governance challenges of relevance to status holders, specifically the importance of institutionalisation and scale. The first element of the framework involves institutional presence: whether an area is well-endowed institutionally (Pemberton, 2000).

The COA are the national body responsible for asylum seekers, who then work with each municipality - the *Gemeente* - at a regional/local level after their stay in an AZC (Robinson, Andersson and Musterd, 2003). Municipalities primarily work in conjunction with housing associations in order to provide housing solutions, alongside *VluchtelingenWerk Nederland,* who continue to support status holders upon receiving their residence permit.
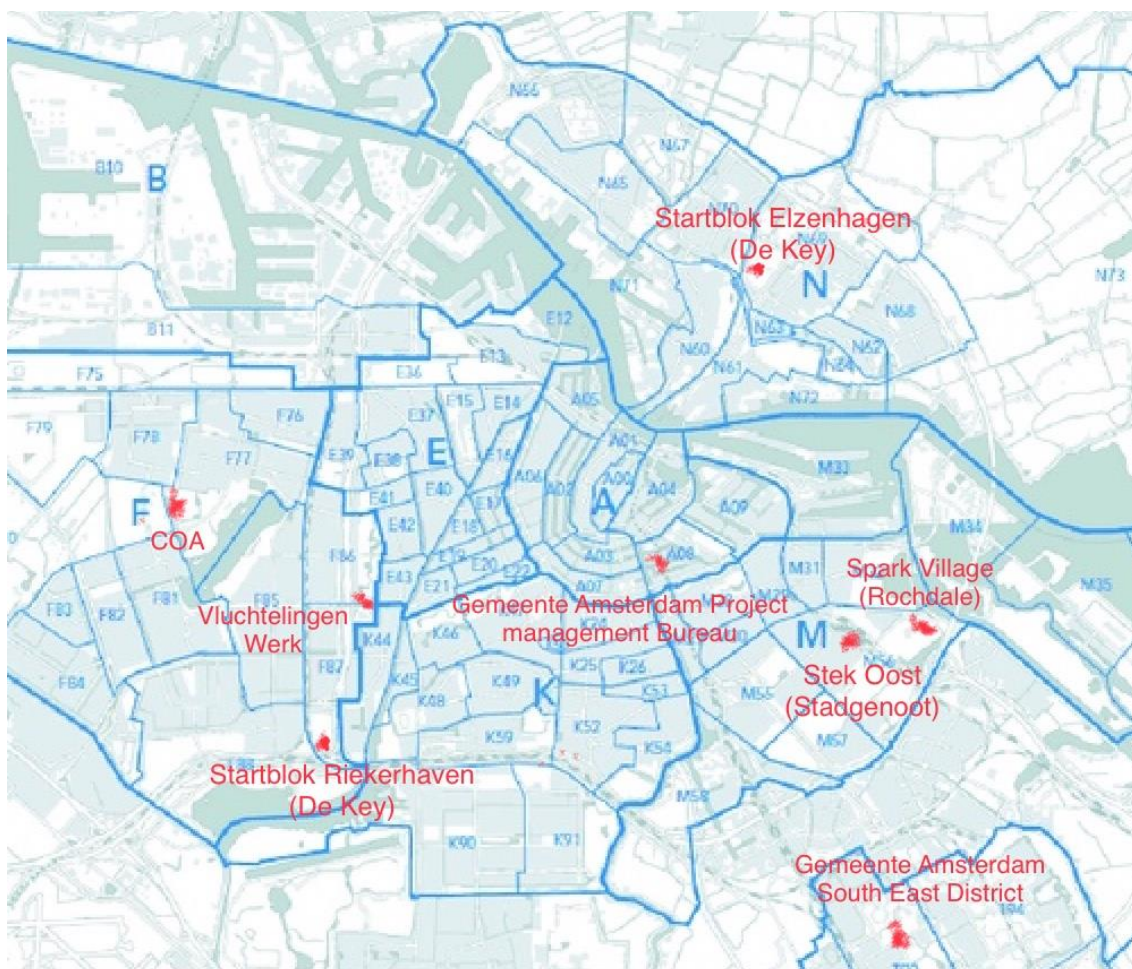

Figure I: A map of institutions and housing developments involved in housing status holders in Amsterdam (Adapted from Gemeente Amsterdam, 2013).

As Figure I demonstrates, in theory Amsterdam seems to be relatively well-endowed institutionally. However, this may over complicate the governance of status holder housing. There is a plethora of organisations existing with differing responsibilities, attempting to serve their own agendas. Accountability seems obscured in housing governance, given that lines are often blurred. As such, there are too many people with fingers in the refugee 'pie' (Pemberton, 2000: 297). There remains insufficient sharing of examples of best practices within housing governance between Member States and local government (Whelan, 2018).

The second element of the institutional thickness framework involves the flow of information and networks between institutions themselves and user communities, which theoretically can establish trust and cooperation (Pemberton, 2000). From the interviews, it became clear that certain factors impinge upon institutional networks and their effectiveness:- primarily, connections and effective communication between institutions and their varying degrees of experience. Multilateral communication and regular contact allows for knowledge distribution and raising awareness of best practices:

> *'Databases — they do exist, as you know, and I think it is just a question of promotion, accessibility and uptake... I feel like a lot of actors are not aware of what exists… there is a lot of repetition and reinvention of the wheel going on!' (Researcher, Housing Europe)*

> *'(Platform Home Again) Monitored the progress of all the areas in the Netherlands and developed brochures for local government and housing associations... they came up with out-of-the-box solutions' (Representative, Aedes)*

The level of experience of institutions also played a role in forming networks:

> *'This was our first project. We did hire a company - Socius (another housing corporation) - to manage it because we weren't experienced with a project like this... maybe my colleagues know (about Platform Home Again), who were there at the beginning of this project' (Housing Advisor, De Key)*

If stakeholders are relatively new to the role, as many interviewees seemed to be, they may be unaware of the roles and responsibilities within institutions in creating housing developments. Contrastingly however, lacking experience may also act as an opportunity to establish training amongst institutions and promote peer-to-peer learning, as corroborated by Housing Europe (2016b).

The second strand of networks appears between institutions and user communities. Whilst there are clearly lots of institutions providing housing for status holders, they are not necessarily picking up the key issues apparent in governance. Due to the proliferation of languages amongst status holders, language barriers appear

commonly amongst the challenges within housing developments, as noted during an interview with a status holder:

> *'James is a status holder living at Spark Village, who cites that his biggest challenge during his time living there has been the language barrier. He attends the Taalcafe every week, but mentions that although the residents do organise weekly activities, they frequently message in Dutch, which is therefore difficult for him to understand and properly integrate with the other residents'.*

This suggests that institutions are either unaware of the issues language barriers pose, or else are not working collaboratively in order to improve this for user communities. Regular meetings with municipal administration may seek to widen discussions regarding language and improving translations, thus ensuring effective governance (Housing Europe, 2016b).

Additionally, there is seemingly a lack of understanding from institutions' perspectives of LGBT+ issues. Openly gay status holders may face challenges in that they must declare their sexuality in order to receive their residence permit and as such, may face discrimination from those less accepting:

> *'People may expect that Amsterdam is quite open-minded, but in these projects you live with a lot of people who aren't from Amsterdam... in Osdorp we have a smaller project, in a neighbourhood with a lot of cultures that don't accept homosexuality'. (Programme Leader, Rochdale)*

Housing Europe (2016a) substantiates these findings, noting that discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiments are among the main barriers faced by status holders. It is apparent that actors need to do much more to address the issues faced by LGBT+ status holders.

A third poignant challenge is a lack of trust and cooperation between the two groups (Hynes, 2003), endowing status holders with a lack of empowerment. Having previously undergone what is often an extremely traumatic journey prior to their arrival in the Netherlands (Chiavi et al., 2017), they may be reluctant to engage in sessions organised by housing corporations:

> *'The main issue is engaging people - coming out of their shell and getting them interested in participating'. (Team Member, Startblok Actief)*

Status holders may also be unaware of activities due to the language barrier as discussed above. Thus, status holders' limited projections of their needs and empowerment may make it more difficult for institutions to respond timely and appropriately.

A third element of the institutional thickness framework revolves around whether there is a local common enterprise and cognitive mapping of place (Pemberton,

2000), so that the actors involved in the governance of housing status holders perceive a common agenda to develop upon. Upon observing Amsterdam, it became clear that a common agenda is apparent, involving several key factors: a pragmatic approach formed in response to the 'crisis' and thus flexibilizing infrastructure and lastly, funding disparities.

A lack of time to respond and pre-existing housing shortages (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten, 2018) resulted in a consensus that additional housing for status holders was needed throughout Amsterdam. It is clear that the feasibility of Gemeente Amsterdam to realise their target allocations as set by COA is at times unrealistic, as demonstrated in Table II. From 2013 to 2015 the municipality severely overestimated their ability to reach these targets, resulting in a backlog of hundreds of status holders. Since 2016 however, the municipality has clearly made progress, having greatly reduced the backlog which will hopefully continue throughout 2020.

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 (expected)	2020 (expected)
Annual target	501	740	1377	2077	1112	1049	1100	1100
Realisation per year	264	400	1006	2057	1462	1500	n/a	n/a
Cumulative backlog from annual target	201	541	912	932	582	131	n/a	n/a

Table II: Annual targets for the housing of status holders, realisation and backlog (red = below target; yellow = almost at target; green = ahead of target) (Gemeente Amsterdam, Project Management Bureau, email correspondence, 2019).

Nevertheless, the adaptation and flexibility of local infrastructure allowed for the quick refurbishment of properties in order to provide timely accommodation for status holders, alongside thinking longer-term for when refugee flows to Europe may be lesser. In 2015, the municipality of Amsterdam sought to convert 15 previously empty municipal buildings and create 9 new-to-build locations at temporary locations. These are available to house status holders for up to 10 years, borrowing land from plots otherwise reserved for other organisations:

> *'We really interfered with other people's projects... so we more or less forced ourselves in as a team!' (Project Manager, Gemeente Amsterdam Project Management Bureau)*

'When you have such a large group as the refugees in 2015 to 2017, you have to look at other solutions than just the available regular housing stock. So what local government and other housing associations did often together, they searched to renew temporary locations - for example, school buildings or empty vacant offices'. (Representative, Aedes)

Each housing development is owned and developed by the municipality, who also work in conjunction with housing corporations. Taking a 'Magic Mix' or 50:50 approach, they house status holders alongside Dutch youngsters, generally 18-27 years old (Van der Velden, Tiggeloven and Wassenberg, 2016). The municipality seeks to house single status holders as they are more suited to smaller dwellings than families:

'Amsterdam is a difficult city to find housing for everybody, let alone families with more than 2 or 3 children - there's not enough proper housing for Dutch people in that segment'. (Programme Leader, Rochdale)

Below are examples of these innovative housing solutions:

Figure II: A new build at Startblok Elzenhagen, Amsterdam Noord (Jan Snel, 2019)

Figure III: Former shipping containers at Startblok Riekerhaven, Amsterdam West

Figure IV: Outside area at Startblok Riekerhaven

Figure V: New shipping containers at Spark Village, Amsterdam Oost

Figure VI: Bike storage at Spark Village

Figure VII: A former hospital now used as housing at Stek Oost, Amsterdam Oost

Figure VIII: A new build at SET, Amsterdam Oost

Figure IX: A new build at LOHuizen, Amsterdam Oost

Despite these clearly innovative examples of housing solutions, approaches to funding appeared to hinder the agreement of a common agenda by institutions. With a lack of time to respond, many municipalities felt it was difficult to create financially viable solutions with funding in such short supply:

> *'It's very expensive - you have to do lots to convert them - so the municipality gave us a subsidy that made it possible for us to do this over 10 years'. (Strategy Advisor, Stadgenoot)*

> *'We have a severe lack of funds. The municipality talks about us a lot, but where is the money to actually do these activities?... If you are going to invest a lot of money in building projects like this, make sure you don't forget about the old ones!' (Team Member, Startblok Actief)*

Cities receive little financial aid from both regional and national governments compared to their given responsibilities (Housing Europe 2016a), lacking upfront funding to local service providers involved in housing status holders. At a regional/local level, this implies a lack of a common agenda towards funding.

However, the agreement towards longer-term funding for housing solutions — as opposed to current discourse surrounding short-term solutions (Soederberg, 2018)— was apparent:

> *'We are in continuous contact with the Directorate-General HOME. We advocated to have funding for long-term housing instead of just reception facilities - result: now the European Regional Development Fund is also*

available for that. The Commission is now also working with the European Investment Bank to see which financial instruments they could put in place for long-term housing for refugees... At the end of the day, it is up to the Member States to implement anything the EU proposes'. (Researcher, Housing Europe)

It is clear that as a consequence of the immediacy of the situation, funding disparities are also evident on the common agenda. Whilst funding constraints are out of regional actors' hands, at an EU level, longer-term approaches to funding are building.

Conclusion
Overall, the research revealed a number of important issues in relation to housing governance. Using Amin and Thrift's (1995) institutional thickness framework, a reasonable thickness was observed in Amsterdam. Despite being relatively institutionally well-endowed however, a multitude of differing agendas and responsibilities resulted in various challenges in providing effective governance, with too many people with their fingers in the refugee 'pie' (Pemberton, 2000: 297). Whilst there is some sharing of experiences and collaboration between institutions, in user communities cooperation with institutions is stilted, hindered by language barriers and a lack of awareness.

Additionally, funding disparities between the EU and local level makes it difficult to create financially viable, long-term solutions. Despite this, the pragmatic, flexible approach adopted by the municipality towards local infrastructure has created housing solutions which may be utilised by other European cities as examples of best practice with which to address future refugee flows.

It would seem that the key to solving these issues of accountability within institutions is at a national level, to provide a framework with which to address responsibilities - whether these are of a regional or local level. In addition, the creation of or improvement upon existing databases; sharing best practices; and utilising existing toolkits and platforms (Whelan, 2018) would also work to further develop a common agenda amongst those involved in housing governance in Amsterdam.

This research also held limitations, namely given the scarcity of academic scholarship on this issue, a reliance upon grey literature was inevitable - predominantly Housing Europe's (2016b) and the Urban Agenda for the EU's (2017) guidance on effective governance strategies, suggesting peer knowledge exchange through databases and skill sharing. There are limited, but outstanding, examples of best practice — Making Heimat; Platform Opnieuw Thuis; and Platform Home Away From Home — but thus it is problematic to predict alternative responses to this research area, as greater exploration is needed. In addition, the contemporary

nature of new refugee flows mean that housing solutions are ever-changing: to keep up-to-date with ever evolving research is laborious.

In future investigation of the governance of housing solutions for status holders in Amsterdam, care could be taken to focus upon housing solutions in particular and the integration process amongst status holders; as Czischke and Huisman (2018) note, given the relative newness of these initiatives, as of yet there is no conclusive evidence on longer-term outcomes of top-down vs bottom-up approaches to governance. Alternatively, further exploration of multi-stakeholder collaboration could be undertaken, querying the extent to which academia guides policymaking within refugee housing solutions and vice versa.

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Appendices