Room(s) for children?

Children's everyday practices in a "community shelter" in Switzerland today

Clara Bombach

Introduction

For now, in Central Europe at least, accommodating refugees in gyms, former airport buildings, exhibition halls and underground bunkers seems to be a thing of the past. New construction projects have emerged over recent years, but the structures are often built quickly, with limited financial and spatial resources, and they tend to be container-like in an architectural and spatial language of transition. Consequently, the difficult living conditions of refugees during the processing of their applications for asylum – as well as their future prospects – have remained depressingly unchanged, despite heavy criticism from, among others, the UNHCR.[1] For an undefined period of time, they are forced to live in cramped, transitional spaces that often fail meet minimum living standards, far from urban centres, in industrial areas on the peripheries of cities. Forced migration/refugee studies assess this reality as a (historically longstanding) strategy of deterrence and sanctioning that aims to immobilise individuals and control them while simultaneously guaranteeing the state's administrative bodies unrestricted access.[2]

1 UNHCR, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019 (Geneva: UNHCR, 2020).

2 Thomas Berthold, In erster Linie Kinder. Flüchtlingskinder in Deutschland (Berlin: Bundesfachverband Unbegleitete Minderjährige Flüchtlinge e.V., 2014); Benjamin Etzold, Auf der Flucht: (Im)Mobilisierung und (Im)Mobilität von Schutzsuchenden (Bonn: International Center for Conversation, Institut für Migrationsforschung und Interkulturelle Studien, 2019); Rose Jaji, "Social Technology and Refugee Encampment in Kenya," Journal of Refugee Studies 25 (2012) 2: 221–38; Ronald Lutz, "Der Flüchtling woanders. Verletzliche Orte des Ungewissen: Ein Leben in Lagern," in Flüchtlinge. Multiperspektivische Zugänge, edited by Cinur Ghaderi and Thomas Eppenstein (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2017), 367–80; David Werdermann, "Rechtliche Grundlagen der Teilhabe und Ausgrenzung von Flüchtlingen," Neue Praxis. Zeitschrift für Sozialarbeit, Sozialpädagogik und Sozialpolitik Special Issue 13 (2016): 86–95.

In Switzerland, thousands of people who apply for asylum are centrally housed until official decisions are reached regarding their status. They are not permitted to choose their place of residence, and they sometimes live for several years in temporary facilities that were not designed for the long-term accommodation of people.

How do accompanied children experience everyday life as refugees in Switzerland today? This question is at the centre of my ethnographic dissertation. Using participant observation, I met and studied children in a so-called "asylum shelter." They were invited to discuss their lives, how they lived, what worried them and what made them happy. What do the words "room" and "space" mean to them? Which rooms can they access? Which remain closed to them? Are some rooms specifically for children? This article addresses these questions.

Following this brief introduction, the study outlines its conceptual framework then presents empirical data relating to the children's everyday practices and the spatial organisation of the asylum shelter, following Muchow and Muchow's distinction between spaces *in which* children live, spaces they *experience* and spaces they *live*.[3] Finally, it asks whether the asylum centre should be described as an "activity space," given the children's everyday practices in relation to where they live.[4]

It is important to note that the children refer to the house where they live not as "shelter" or "centre" but the "camp," which is why the latter term is preferred for the remainder of this article. "Camp" implies that the children are unhappy about their confinement in an administered and temporary place of transit, yet hopeful that their stay will soon be over and that they will "finally live in a private home."

Everyday practices of children in camps

The ethnographic study has a multi-method design. This article presents results from participant observation and ero-epic conversations that were transcribed immediately on site, whenever children spontaneously addressed me and wished to share something.[5] All citations are from these ero-epic transcripts.

---

3 Martha Muchow and Hans Heinrich Muchow, "Recherchen zum Lebensraum des Großstadtkindes" [1935], in Der Lebensraum des Großstadtkindes, edited by Imbke Behnken and Michael-Sebastian Honig (Weinheim – Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2012), 75–156.

4 Baldo Blinkert, Aktionsräume von Kindern in der Stadt. Eine Untersuchung im Auftrag der Stadt Freiburg (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus Verlag & Media, 1993).

5 Ero-epic interviews are conversations that arise spontaneously, in my case during participant observation on site in the camp, for example when a child feels comfortable and seeks a conversation with me on topics that interest her/him and that she/he wishes to discuss. In childhood sociology, this form of conversation with children is considered particularly useful as the children can play, draw, and decide for or against the conversation, which should arise as naturally and "along the way" as possible. See: Roland Girtler, Methoden der Feldforschung

The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Zurich. In addition to the usual complexities of undertaking research with children, in this particular context of coercion, the question of what constitutes voluntary participation was at the centre of the committee's discussions about research ethics. These and related questions have been intensively debated in refugee studies, so I shall address them only briefly here.[6] Particular dimensions of power asymmetries may be repeated in research contexts; dependencies, hopes and fears may impact participation; and there may be insecurities about the consequences of sharing information. I asked children and adults who had expressed an interest in participating to watch me first, see what I was doing and assess my involvement in everyday practices prior to making a final decision and signing the consent form. From the outset, many of the children and adults were keen to share their experiences and let the "outside world" know about their experiences of camp life. Written consent forms (in Arabic, Dari/Farsi, English, French, German, Tigrinya and Turkish) outlined the process, methodology and aims of the study, how data would be protected, the rights of the participants and the obligations of the researcher, including contact information for a member of the Ethics Committee with whom participants could share any concerns about my work and behaviour in the field. In addition to signing forms prior to the start of the study, as stipulated by Ethics Committee guidelines, all of the participants were asked if they were willing to continue throughout the research process as an ongoing process of consent.

I negotiated a contract with the responsible authorities that allowed me to conduct wholly independent and unrestricted research. For example, I was able to move freely around the house and its surroundings, which enabled me to gain insights into the activities that the families and children wanted to share with me. The study was conducted in a camp where up to ninety people may live at any given time, based on its proximity to the city centre. Staff were on site throughout the daytime and conducted regular checks during the night. Residents had unrestricted access

---

(Wien – Köln – Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2001); James P. Spradley, Participant Observation (New York – Chicago – San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980).

6 For further details, see, for example: Christina Clark-Kazak, "Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration," Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees 33 (2017) 2: 11–17; Peter Hopkins, "Ethical Issues in Research with Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children," Children's Geographies 6 (2008) 1: 37–48; Richard Hugman et al., "When 'Do No Harm' is not Enough: The Ethics of Research with Refugees and Other Vulnerable Groups," British Journal of Social Work 41 (2011) 7: 1271–87; Ulrike Krause, "Researching Forced Migration: Critical Reflections on Research Ethics during Fieldwork," Working Paper Series 123 (2017): 1–36; Refugees Studies Centre, "Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice," Refugee Survey Quarterly 26 (2007) 3: 162–72; Hella von Unger, "Ethische Reflexivität in der Fluchtforschung. Erfahrungen aus einem soziologischen Lehrforschungsprojekt," Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research 19 (2018) 3: Article 6.

to the camp and their rooms; adults had keys to the house and the family room. Bathrooms, communal areas and the kitchen were shared and most of the families occupied a single room, although an extra room was sometimes provided if a family had a large number of children.

Forty-four children, with ages ranging from a few months to eighteen years, from twenty different families agreed to participate in the study. The field research took place between July 2019 and July 2020 on weekends, weekdays, in school hours and during school vacations and holidays. I was on site for a total of 356 hours spread across 42 daytime and 8 night-time visits. The resulting data were analysed sequentially and reconstructively in an abductive analysis procedure.[7]

This paper presents preliminary results and is only an excerpt of the comprehensive ethnography that remains ongoing.

Childhood in a non-place camp

This study is informed by the social and cultural anthropologist Marc Augé's notion of "non-places"[8] – that is, places that defy people's attempts to form any sort of relationship with them. Camps are often prime examples of this concept: "In the non-place, the functionality of the local is the centre of attention; the individual is successively reduced to the purpose of the place."[9] In addition, the concept is relevant to the struggles that families and children face as they try to settle and introduce daily routines in a place they have not chosen, where they have been forced to stay. During my research, I witnessed numerous children laying claim to a particular room, trying to create favourite or private areas and attempting to appropriate the little space that had been offered to them. Yet, they continued to insist that they did not belong, that the place where they were living was not – and never would be – a home, so they wanted to leave as soon as possible.[10]

Children employ three main strategies to cope with camp life: a) distraction and staying active; b) withdrawal and immersion in another world (dreams, sleep, fantasy and online games); and c) running away. They may use one or more of these cop-

7 Gabriele Rosenthal, Interpretative Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung, 5th ed. (Weinheim – Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2015).

8 Marc Augé, Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity (London – New York: Verso, 1995).

9 Daniel Göler, "Das Lager als Nicht-Ort. Anmerkungen zum Bamberger Ankerzentrum," in Praktiken der (Im-)Mobilisierung. Lager, Sammelunterkünfte und Ankerzentren im Kontext von Asylregimen, edited by Julia Devlin et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2021), 281–300.

10 Clara Bombach, "'Come to My House': Children's Homing in Swiss Asylum Centres," in Migration and Social Work: Approaches, Visions and Challenges, edited by Emilio J. Gómez-Ciriano et al. (Bristol: Policy Press, forthcoming).

ing mechanisms to varying degrees depending on their age and personal resources. Due to space limitations, this paper will focus primarily on the first strategy – distraction and staying active.

Childhood studies have demonstrated the importance of power and order relations in children's development. Adults have the power to increase or decrease children's access to resources, so children rely on adults making spaces available to them.[11] However, children are also competent social actors: they "actively create spaces and are not victims of their circumstances!"[12] In her research into children's lives and play in Hamburg between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, Martha Muchow identified three distinct categories of space that children inhabit, shape and appropriate.[13] In the next three sections, I use this categorisation as a framework to present some of the empirical data I have collected in the course of my own research.

Spaces in which children live ...

can be objectified in cartographic sketches and recorded accordingly. In her study, Muchow explored not only where children resided but also "where they played and roamed," and drew maps of their neighbourhoods.[14]

Children in the camp had contrasting attitudes to its internal and external spaces, family rooms and communal areas. Outside, there is a terrace, a courtyard, a rather derelict playground and a grassy area where they sometimes play soccer. They like to ride their bicycles in the courtyard and sometimes incorporate natural features (blossom and leaves, stones, soil, etc.) in their play. Children's and adults' bikes are stored alongside dustbins. Weeds are growing in the potholed, uneven ground, and some rubbish is usually lying around. The lower windows of the camp are secured with metal grilles to shield them from the children's enthusiastic ball games. Meanwhile, metal railings on the slightly elevated terrace are designed to protect the children themselves from falling over the edge. A flight of steps and a single wooden bench are the only seating areas. Both are usually occupied by adults

11 Burkhard Fuhs, "Mediale Räume von Kindern," in Kindheit und Raum, edited by Rita Braches-Chyrek and Charlotte Röhner (Opladen – Berlin – Toronto: Barbara Budrich, 2016), 328–53.

12 Christian Reutlinger and Bettina Brüschweiler, "Sozialgeographien der Kinder – eine Spurensuche in mehrdeutigem, offenen Gelände," in Kindheit und Raum, edited by Braches-Chyrek and Röhner, 37–64, at 58. See also: Leena Alanen, "Rethinking Childhood," Acta Sociologica 31 (1988) 1: 53–67; Doris Bühler-Niederberger, "Intergenerational Solidarities: Towards a Structural Approach in Childhood Sociology," in The Future of Childhood Studies, edited by Rita Braches-Chyrek (Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich, 2020), 54–69.

13 Muchow and Muchow, "Recherchen zum Lebensraum."

14 Ibid.

while they watch their children play. However, the bench lacks a slat, which makes it uncomfortable or even painful.

The interior space consists of two main sections that can be further subdivided according to function. First, there are communal areas that can be used by all residents and staff, including a large common room equipped with sofas and a foosball table as well as staircases, kitchens and bathrooms. In addition, this part of the camp has three children's rooms: a schoolroom, a playroom and a homework room. Second, there are the individual family rooms, to which only members of the resident family have access. These are furnished with metal-framed beds, cabinets and fridges. Infants have access to cribs, strollers and nappies. Bedding, cleaning products, bin-bags, soap and toilet paper are provided by the camp administration.

Spaces that children experience …

are reflected in their memories and in how they talk and think about particular places.[15] Muchow encouraged the children she was studying to write essays about "typical" Sundays to learn more about these aspects of their lives.[16]

As mentioned above, at the time of my research, the camp's playground was in a state of disrepair: sometimes there was a swing set in need of renovation, but at other times there were just ropes hanging from a frame. Children often pointed in the direction of the playground, mentioned how important it was to them and complained that the equipment was usually broken. There was a general reluctance to draw pictures of the camp, but any images the children did produce tended to focus on the playground. These could be either positive or negative: while some children incorporated depictions of spiders, smelly toilets and dirty, broken equipment in their drawings, others drew fully functioning swings and suggested that it would be lovely to have a larger playground with a slide, too. Many fights broke out among the children because the most popular items were always scarce, and too many of them wanted to sit on the swing at the same time.

The yard could be an exciting place for the younger children. They used sticks to draw patterns in the dusty sand and splashed in the muddy puddles when it rained. Sometimes the puddles would freeze in the winter, to the great delight of the children, who slithered across them in pyjamas and flip-flops. While playing in the mud, six-year-old Madihah recalled playing in the yellow sand of her country of origin, which was "much more fun than the dusty soil" of the camp garden. She also

15 Rita Braches-Chyrek and Charlotte Röhner, "Kindheit und Raum," in Kindheit und Raum, edited by Braches-Chyrek and Röhner, 7–33.

16 Muchow and Muchow, "Recherchen zum Lebensraum."

found the small brown birds in the trees quite disappointing in comparison with the "beautiful, big, colourful birds" of her homeland.

Nevertheless, there were all kinds of interesting items between the trees and the lawn – mainly stones and sticks that were either fashioned into weapons or cherished like holy relics. Three-year-old Abia celebrated her brother's birthday by offering him several objects she had found in the yard and singing "Happy Birthday." Her brother happily mimed opening his presents as the other children joined in the song. The celebrations attracted the attention of a member of staff, who asked whose birthday it was. The children ignored him, continued singing, then set about blowing out imaginary candles on an imaginary cake.

The yard's sandbox was always covered and occasionally served as a makeshift seat for the children and their parents. Five-year-old Saafia shared her greatest wish with me while she was sitting there, watching the father of one of her friends grilling meat on the fire: "You know, I have a father too. I don't know where he is, but he will be here soon."

The children spent most of their time outside the family rooms, in the camp's internal and external common areas, looking for friends, distractions, something to do, play or discover, away from their parents' prying eyes. For example, nine-year-old Ena pretended to be busy on TikTok (an activity her parents allowed), when in reality she was playing online games with some of the older boys (an activity they had banned).

Inevitably, all of the children were especially fond of the three rooms that had been earmarked for their use (the schoolroom, the playroom and the homework room), which meant these rooms' gatekeepers – who could be members of staff, teachers or volunteers – possessed considerable key power. The children's excitement intensified whenever they realised that one of the rooms was about to be opened. They would knock constantly on the door if they saw adults preparing games or lessons inside, and would get up early in the morning to take advantage of opportunities to draw, play or even bake cookies. However, adults not only locked and unlocked the rooms but determined how the children should behave once they were inside. For instance, as they entered the schoolroom, the teacher would stand at the door and demand an appropriate greeting for the time of day: "Good afternoon, *not* good morning." After school, once the teachers had ensured that the room was properly locked, the children would watch them leave and scream goodbyes in their direction until they disappeared from view. In the long hours before the next lesson, some children would repeatedly try the locked door handles or jump up to the height of the windows to make sure that nobody had managed to sneak inside without them noticing.

En route back to the family rooms, the children had to pass through two heavy fire doors that would slam shut behind them with a loud bang. The doors' weight made them difficult to open, especially for the younger children, who sometimes

found themselves trapped in the passageway between them. For instance, after waiting patiently in the corridor for several minutes, three-year-old Sada was grateful when her slightly older but much stronger friend came along and opened the second door for her. She slipped straight through and ran to her family room, where she was able to open the much lighter door herself and enter. At its best, the family room could be a haven for a child like Sada, provided there was good communication between the family members. It was generally a quiet environment where family activities took place in a confined space.[17]

Spaces that children live ...

are related to how children behave in particular environments and how they access and moderate the spatial realities they face.[18] Long-term observations can shed light on these processes.[19] The "sociology of space" describes the interactions between those who inhabit particular spaces and the structures they encounter within them. "Spacing" conceptualises the individual construction of space and demonstrates that spaces are created by the actors who act (in) them.[20]

In the camp courtyard, the children sometimes discovered small treasures that had fallen out of the windows, such as colourful hairclips. They also watched butterflies and birds in the fields and trees outside the confines of the camp. Eight-year-old Karima's favourite spot was the wall that surrounded the camp, as this gave her a good view of passing cars. She would sit on a rough woollen blanket, invite her friends to join her, then they would all play "market." Karima explained that she enjoyed "gossiping with my girls and selling stuff, looking at the things other people sell."

Although the children were confined within relatively small spaces, they laid claim to them and used them creatively. For example, the communal room was their indoor playground: they would swing back and forth on the side panels of an old chalkboard and use the sofas as makeshift trampolines. They invented communal games, devised their own vernacular for use during interactions with their peers (e.g. "Du not meine friend" [You are not my friend], "You crazy," "She said fuck you stupid bitch"), engaged in physical competitions (e.g. fastest runner, furthest jumper, coolest dancer) and sometimes – although not always – shared their favourite snacks (e.g. ice-cream, chips, soft drinks). A child could be befriended, unfriended and befriended again within the space of a few minutes.

17 Bombach, "'Come to My House.'"
18 Muchow and Muchow, "Recherchen zum Lebensraum."
19 Braches-Chyrek and Röhner, "Kindheit und Raum."
20 Ibid.

Most of the children were ambivalent about life in the camp: they liked the fact that there were plenty of other kids around and lots of distractions both inside and outside the house, but this meant they never had a break and it was loud all the time, with doors banging throughout the day and night. If it became too loud – or the play became too boisterous – in the communal areas, some of the children would retreat to their respective family rooms and hide behind curtains, under blankets or even under beds to give themselves a few minutes of peace and quiet. A number of them had turned the upper bunk beds in their family rooms into play corners or erected homemade tents so they could relax and play on their own without being disturbed. Most of them regarded the clothes they wore and the toys they played with as their own, cherished possessions. When I enquired about their favourite things, they would often show me free gifts from the pharmacy or balloons advertising the opening of a new store. Toddlers slept or sat in car seats for hours on end during the day, and sometimes slept in their strollers at night. Younger children were often reluctant to sleep on the upper bunk bed because they were afraid of falling off and wanted to be close to their parents. When I moved into the camp, five-year-old Bader "checked" my bed by lying on it and warned me, with wide eyes, that I might fall out, especially as my mum wasn't there to prevent me from falling.

As mentioned earlier, the family rooms were discrete spaces, isolated from the rest of the camp. The doors could be locked from the inside, and visitors were allowed to enter only if it suited the residents. Otherwise, knocking tended to be ignored. This was fine with the other residents, but not with the staff, who argued that they had to have unrestricted access. Windows were often covered with curtains and blinds were kept closed, so light in the family rooms could be scarce. One member of each family always seemed to be asleep or at least in bed and about to fall asleep. On one occasion, five-year-old Saafia invited me to visit her family room when it became too noisy and raucous for her in the communal area. We drank tea and ate some nuts with her mother for a few minutes until Saafia crawled into bed, put her thumb in her mouth and fell asleep.

By and large, the children's spheres of activity increased as they aged. Infants and toddlers up to the age of three tended to spend most of the day inside their respective family rooms, especially when the family consisted of a single mother with one or more children. The toddlers would scream and cry until they were finally permitted to go outside, usually in the company of an older sibling. Others would try to escape the moment the door was opened. For example, two-year-old Laela would routinely run into the corridor, but she could not get any further as she did not have the strength to push open the heavy fire door in front of the staircase. She would stand there, helpless, and burst into tears when her mother told her she had to return to the family room. On one occasion, her brother, Bader, left the room shortly after one of these incidents to play with the other kids downstairs and ride his bike in the courtyard, which made Laela cry even more.

Bader and some of the other children would occasionally leave the confines of the camp and ride their bikes in a parking lot behind the house or even along the public roads and pavements, towards the city centre or the local shopping mall. Their parents usually accompanied them on these outings, for instance to buy groceries, although they were sometimes trusted to run these errands alone. Older children, especially teenage boys, left the camp much more frequently. For example, they would visit local sports clubs, go (window) shopping, sit in the parks or the train station or just walk around to give themselves a break from camp life. Some families made trips to the city specifically to use the (clean) public toilets, where soap and toilet paper were provided, as opposed to inside the camp, where each family had to use their own supplies.

Conclusion

For every resident, whether young or old, the reality of life inside the camp was that they did not want to be there but knew that they had to stay for an indefinite period until a decision was reached about their future. Inevitably, there was a universal desire for that indefinite period to end as soon as possible. For instance, nine-year-old Lida insisted, "I hate it here," and explained that she took every opportunity to join after-school programmes or accompany her parents when they left the camp to attend doctor's appointments. However, she sometimes grew tired of these excursions and simply stayed in the family room, watching cartoons for hours on end, hoping that a friend would visit so that they could play with their favourite dolls.

The children brought life and movement into the dreary daily routine and gloom of the camp. Adults – volunteers, staff and residents alike – frequently described them as "so sweet," "lovely" and "positive" and suggested that they were a valued, lively distraction from an otherwise depressing situation. On the other hand, they were also characterised as "too loud," "disturbing," "dirty" and "annoying."

The children had very limited access to the outside world, which meant their withdrawal and distraction strategies were strictly limited, too. When I asked what they knew of the outside world and where they went most often when they left camp, the most common answer was: "Aldi." They longed for volunteers to visit the camp and take them out on day trips, hoped that the school holidays would soon be over and yearned for the weekend to pass as quickly as possible. Their greatest wish – besides leaving the camp for good – was to attend "normal school."

The camp was a waiting room full of people who had no clear idea about what they were waiting for and who would decide about their future. In this parallel universe, the children lived with a blurred perspective and felt isolated from the world outside, which they observed wistfully but also sometimes quite fearfully. They suspected kidnappers and evil spirits were lurking, and worried about anyone – in-

cluding myself – who left the camp in the evening. For instance, nine-year-old Ena looked at me in disbelief when I explained that I had to leave. She pointed through the window to the dark winter night and asked: "Are you not scared?" Yet, they also experienced a lot of beauty and variety whenever they came into contact with the outside world, especially in "normal school" or when volunteers or their parents took them to the communal swimming pool. They also talked with great joy about excursions to the forest and discoveries in the museum, and longed to return to these places.

In addition to describing the Swiss asylum centre as a "camp," the children used the same term when discussing previous refugee accommodation (e.g. in Greece, Hungary or Turkey) and the experiences associated with it: countless people coming and going; noise; language barriers; conflicts; very limited space; and a lack of understanding about what is happening and what will happen in the future. In Switzerland, the media and especially politicians tend to prefer alternative terms for this type of accommodation, such as "community housing," "integration centre" and "family housing." But all of these euphemisms are misleading. Camps are not integrated communities; they are non-places. The reality of life in a camp is very different from all asylum-seekers' – and especially the youngsters' – conceptions of "home."[21]

Many of the children I met had spent much of their lives in a camp environment. Nine-year-old Lida had been a resident in the Swiss camp for six years. Although some rooms had supposedly been allocated for her and the other children's exclusive use, adults decided when they should be locked and therefore when all exploration must cease. The children respected this and did not question it; at most, they merely expressed regret that the doors remained closed even when they had nothing to do. They knew the rules and abided by them because misbehaving always had consequences. Nevertheless, they did sometimes assert themselves and push the boundaries, such as when calling the communal room "*our* children's room" and demanding preferential access. Some of the older children even had the audacity to remind adults that they always had the option of retiring to their family rooms if the volume became too loud for them. Most of the adults were quite understanding, but if the children were still screaming in the common areas at 1:00 a.m., they would chase them away with shouts of "That's enough! Go to bed!"

Finally, I wish to present a brief assessment of the camp with regard to four important aspects of children's "action spaces": 1) opportunities for interaction; 2) accessibility; 3) flexibility; and 4) safety.[22]

---

21 Bombach, "'Come to My House.'"

22 Baldo Blinkert, Aktionsräume von Kindern in der Stadt. Eine Untersuchung im Auftrag der Stadt Freiburg (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus Verlag & Media, 1993); Baldo Blinkert, "Urbane Kindheit und Räume," in Kindheit und Raum, edited by Braches-Chyrek and Röhner, 65–83.

1) The children in the camp had ample opportunities to interact with their peers.[23] It was easy for them to meet, play and spend time with numerous other children, given the confined space in which they all lived. However, this also meant that it was quite difficult for them to avoid unwelcome contact or have any time to themselves. The children played relatively autonomously and unobserved by adults for long periods of time in the common areas, sometimes until late at night. However, these play sessions were not always harmonious. There were frequent quarrels, arguments and even violent fights in which, inevitably, the stronger or better-integrated children would prevail over their weaker opponents.

2) There are many barriers for children in camp life, such as heavy doors they cannot open or rooms that remain closed to them. For older children, there was usually unrestricted access to both the common room and the playground, but adults exerted total control over access to other areas, including the three rooms that had been designated for the children's exclusive use.

3) Children are able to adapt and shape flexible action spaces to suit their specific requirements and alleviate boredom.[24] In the camp, the children were highly creative in their use of and engagement with their environment. For example, they slid down the staircase banisters, breathed on the windows and wrote messages on the fogged-up glass, popped blossoms between their fingers and jumped up and down on a warped manhole cover to make it clang. Nevertheless, there were repeated complaints of boredom, especially during the school holidays, exasperation over the lack of organised activities, and annoyance when other children copied a game or made an unpopular suggestion for a new one. These frustrations sometimes escalated into wilful destruction of personal possessions, older children holding the toilet door shut so that younger ones were trapped inside, jumping on sofas until they collapsed or even violent confrontations that ended in serious injury because no adults were present to break up the fights.

4) Clearly, then, the camp could be a dangerous place, especially for the younger children. In addition to the risk of physical attack, they were exposed to a host of spatial dangers, including heavy fire doors that might slam shut on their fingers or

23 Unfortunately, this article cannot outline the specific challenges for children with mental or physical disabilities growing up in camps. For further information, see, for example: Clara Straimer, "Between Protection and Assistance: Is There Refuge for Asylum Seekers with Disabilities in Europe?" Disability and Society 26 (2011) 5: 537–51. Also, measures introduced during the Covid pandemic have changed children's interactions dramatically. Families were asked – and wanted – to reduce children's contact to a minimum. As a consequence, families withdrew to their family rooms even more.

24 Blinkert, "Urbane Kindheit und Räume."

trap them in the corridor, windows from which they might fall, and ropes that could twist around an ankle or, even worse, a neck.[25]

The various spaces of the camp were enlivened by their inhabitants, not just filled by them. The children dealt proficiently with their circumstances and negotiated the theme of their stay: current limbo but also great hope of a decision that would enable them to leave the camp and finally "arrive." Nevertheless, none of those I met after they had left wished to return. Rather, they expressed sympathy for those who were still living there, especially during the Covid lockdown, and were eager to know how friends and foes alike were coping. My replies were news to them as they often had ceased all contact with the camp and its remaining residents after moving out.

25 Additionally, I would like to draw attention to some recent studies that have found evidence of discrimination and violation of refugee children's rights in camps. See, for example: Berthold, In erster Linie Kinder; Franziska Eisenhuth, Strukturelle Diskriminierung von Kindern mit unsicheren Aufenthaltsstatus. Subjekte der Gerechtigkeit zwischen Fremd- und Selbstpositionierungen (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2015); UNICEF, Uprooted: The Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children: Executive Summary and Key Findings (New York: UNICEF, 2016); Sarah Fichtner and Hoa Mai Trân, "Lived Citizenship between the Sandpit and Deportation: Young Children's Spaces for Agency, Play and Belonging in Collective Accommodation for Refugees," Childhood 27 (2020) 2: 158–72. In addition, there is evidence of a lack of opportunities for play and retreat. See, for example: Susanne Johansson and David Schiefer, "Die Lebenssituation von Flüchtlingen in Deutschland. Überblick über ein (bisheriges) Randgebiet der Migrationsforschung," Neue Praxis. Zeitschrift für Sozialarbeit, Sozialpädagogik und Sozialpolitik Special Issue 13 (2016): 73–85; Christine Rehklau, "Flüchtlinge als Adressat_innen Sozialer Arbeit? Sozialarbeitswissenschaftlicher Zugang," in Flüchtlinge. Multiperspektivische Zugänge, edited by Cinur Ghaderi and Thomas Eppenstein (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2017), 305–22. Similarly, Berthold, "In erster Linie Kinder" highlighted barriers in the education system. Finally, several studies have explored refugee children's health burdens and the inadequate medical and psychological care they receive. See, for example: James Reavell and Qulsom Fazil, "The Epidemiology of PTSD and Depression in Refugee Minors who Have Resettled in Developed Countries," Journal of Mental Health 26 (2017) 1: 74–83.