A socio-economic exploration of Melbourne’s African migrants: Public housing as an incubator

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The problem
Rationale for the current project

African migrants and refugees have been acknowledged to reside in various public housing complexes within Melbourne’s inner suburbs (e.g. Carlton and Richmond) - 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 have not been explored.

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

Our research plan

• **Literature and context review** (desktop and site, exploring the intersect of social and spatial theories/analysis of migration, place attachment, housing and identity)

• **Interviews** (individual and semi-structured, exploring ‘home’, ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘community’ from origins to resettlement in Melbourne)

• **Visual diaries** (documenting positive and negative aspects of place, from migrants’ perspectives)

• **Workshop/s** (small group and structured/facilitated, exploring the migrant journey to and experiences of public housing in Melbourne)

We wanted to use a variety of methods that would suit participants, tapping into different ways of expressing ideas and experiences of ‘home’ and ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘community’.
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).
Literature review

Challenges to obtaining 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; Hulchanski, et al, 2000; Campbell, 1997; Dickman, 1995)
- **Racism** (Fawaz, et al, 2018)
- **Lengthy wait-times** (Fozdar and Hartley, 2014, Foley and Beer, 2003)
- **Lack of familiarity with the host country’s housing processes** (Fozdar and Hartley, 2014; Alloush, 2001; San Pedro, 2001)
- **Housing and homelessness as an obstacle to integration** (Flatau, et al., 2015)
- **Lack of research about the experience of African refugees** (Francis, 2009)

These obstacles increase refugees’ risk of poverty and homelessness (Johnston, 2001; Tuohey, 2001), and have been found to exacerbate social conflict and stress (Flanagan, 2007).
The Carlton and Richmond estates
Exteriors/form of the Carlton (top) and Richmond (bottom) estates
Interiors of the Carlton (top) and Richmond (bottom) estates
Emerging findings: Culture difference

“... I think language was probably a big barrier [for my parents] but they've overcome that. Another thing is probably like cultural clothing and like the rise of Islamophobia. But then that's just more current, and not a struggle then because Australia was a very safe place before. It was much more welcoming then.” (Ilhan, F20s, Carlton, from Melbourne with Somalian parents)

Back home, it was nice. We have flat and they have free to play around. I'm not the only person I raise my kids safe. My family can raise, my neighbors can raise, my friend she can raise. [Here] I can't trust anyone, I can't leave my kids.... (Faven, F30s, Carlton from Eritrea via USA)

“The nomadic life was fun, but children have very... a very heavy load in terms of responsibility. You have to raise the goats... You have to walk two days to get water from the water catchment” (Myriam, F34, Richmond from Somalia, via Kenya)

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

‘Keeping to your own’

“When I see a Somali person, nothing changed from when I lived in Somalia. When I see a Somali person that I've never seen, I call him brother, he calls me sister. We immediately feel like we have known each other our whole lives and he asked me if, you know, he would immediately move to help, and I would immediately do the same and so I like that.” (Myriam, F34, Richmond from Somalia, via Kenya)

“The good thing, they make it like for us like a family. ...everybody like from Somalia and Ethiopia. The only thing I'm worried about the other people” (Faven, F30s, Carlton from Eritrea via USA)

“...growing up in Carlton, that's where I would describe as my home. I think a strong memory of that would just be the black community, the strong sense of community, all the neighbors sort of become family. I think that's one of the greatest memories that I hold.” (IlIan, F20s, from Melbourne with Ethiopian parents)

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.
Emerging findings

Isolation and the social design of public housing

“I wish neighbours that come to my house, ask for things, ask for something, that we can come and have tea, you know sometimes at my house sometimes at their house, that kind of neighbour. But we are all different cultures. So, when I had a baby, no one even knew about it. They could see I was pregnant, but they didn't know when I had it” (Myriam, F 34, Richmond from Somalia, via Kenya)

“... the Asians are concealed to themselves. Asians are very few as well, but predominantly, people living in old building. Somalis are the greater number, and they're all Muslim. Somalis are Muslim, no Christianity in their country. Ethiopia, there are Christians and there are Muslims. They can interact with you, but Somali are just different, even if we're African. You can't go to their house, like, you visit your neighbor” (Samsu, M51, Carlton from Nigeria via Greece)

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.
Spaces of belonging and encounter?
Dissemination

How we are conveying our research work

**Upcoming conferences**

- National Housing Conference 2019, 27-30 August 2019
- State of Australian Cities (SOAC) Conference, 3-5 December 2019

Reflections

The challenges thus far...

Finding willing participants
- smaller African migrant populations in case study estates
- when ‘yes’ means ‘no’
- the trust-building quotient
- ensuring participation is valuable

The drop off after the interview
- rethinking the camera activity
- planning ahead for the workshop/s...

Your thoughts and impressions?

Some aspects of the original research plan may have been pretty naïve and/or optimistic! By adopting a grounded research approach, we can adapt to circumstances and lean from doing...
Thanks for your time and attention today. Please feel free to get in touch with us:

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