FOR ALL!
ALSO FOR US!
18 Perspectives on Designing Cities for All
PDZ
18 Perspectives by Laura Adèr & Ariana Rose, Galit Ariel, Rudy van Belkom, Dark Matter Labs, Aminata Cairo, Maurice Crul & Frans Lelie & Bernardine Walrecht, Simon Dogger, Marie van Driessche, Sennay Ghebreab, Nyasha Harper-Michon, Lyongo Juliana, OluTimehin Kukoyi, Maggi Leung, Nica Renoult, Nishant Shah, Jacquie Shaw, Rut Turró, and De Voorkamer on Designing Cities for All
DESIGNING CITIES FOR ALL

Co-creating Welcoming Spaces

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When we talked about (re)creating a home in one of the Designing Cities for All livecasts, we asked our speakers to bring an object that would convey a sense of belonging. In this essay, Maggi Leung shares how her family heirloom embodies the same elements needed to create welcoming spaces.

Bringing an object that would convey a sense of belonging was not an easy exercise; belonging can mean so many things.
I thought of very big items that I could not bring. I thought of invisible things that cannot be shown. Finally, I decided on a ring that my mother gave me. As you see in the photo in this essay, it is a simple and beautiful ring with a piece of green jade on it. This piece of jade is much other than the ring. It belonged to my grandmother.

My mother thought that I would not wear the ring as it was — with a traditional, elaborate gold mount. In Chinese culture, jade is believed to protect the wearer and bring good health. So I always carry this ring with me when I fly. And jade lives - depending on who is wearing it, its colour, hue, tone, and translucency can change.
To me, the jade ring embodies many key elements of 'sense of belonging': it links to histories, openness to new experiments and changes, relational, and giving a sense of security.

Welcoming Spaces

These elements echo some of the first insights we have gathered since the start of Welcoming Spaces in 2020 — the research programme I'm working on. In this project, researchers and non-academic partners in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain collaborate to understand the role of migration in the future-making of 'shrinking regions' in Europe. We prepared our proposal at the time when migration from non-EU countries, especially refugees, was seen as a threat to Europe's future. At the same time, we received worries about the 'dying villages' in marginalised regions across Europe.

It is a paradox that billions of euros are being spent to keep migrants away (Frontex, migration deals with Turkey and other countries), while investments are needed to revitalise shrinking regions. We put the two challenges together and explore possibilities of how they can be connected in positive ways, providing solutions that will bring inclusive and just development. There are already many of such welcoming spaces across Europe and the world. In our project, we have mapped out these welcoming initiatives. Many of them are found in urban settings.

We aim to broaden our policy and practice discussion beyond the cities. In this spirit, my contribution here is less on designing cities for all, but — as important — on envisioning sustainable futures also for the rural, the depopulated, the peripheralised places. **While the essence of welcoming and inclusion is shared across the urban-rural and core-periphery spectrums, the geographies (as in location, resource base, position in the broader political-economic system, connectivity or lack of) of marginalised regions call for other considerations, which might not be issues in multi-cultural cities.**

Think more critically

One of the welcoming initiatives is the social farming project of Thüringer Ökoherz e.V. in Germany. The initiators emphasise they are 'not a migrant welcoming initiative *per se*', but engaging unaccompanied minor migrants as an extension of their on-going work with people of other social backgrounds. Through farming, they teach these young people skills and hands-on work, bring them closer to nature — that is found to have positive effects on (mental) health — and facilitate community-building. Since the location of this initiative is in the rural area, transportation and communication infrastructure are important factors that are in general less of consideration in metropolitan settings. In a workshop on 'learning from good practices', our colleagues from Spain and Italy underlined the challenges posed by the lack of connectivity in, for instance, mountainous and other peripherised regions in attracting newcomers.

We are looking for solutions that will bring inclusive and just development

Let's think more critically about how welcoming initiatives that are dedicated to migrants are like

The comment made by Ökoherz that their project is 'not a migrant welcoming initiative *per se*' pushes us to think more critically about how welcoming initiatives that are dedicated to migrants are like. **Often, politics, policies, and civil initiatives welcome newcomers with the goal of integration or even assimilation — hence being one of 'us' — with a list of imagined, pre-defined, homogeneous, and idealised characteristics.** Coming from this notion, newcomers are often seen through the lens of deficiencies (e.g. in the Netherlands not speaking Dutch, not knowing how things work).

The welcoming effect

The Eurocoop Servizi in Italy helps illustrate one of the pathways toward building welcoming spaces. The social cooperative was established in 1999 with the aim to stimulate local development and socio-professional enhancement in Camini, which had been affected by depopulation and abandonment for decades. The opening of a reception centre for asylum seekers in 2011 injected new energies into the community. The reception project has contributed to the renovation of the houses in an ecological way, recovery of cultural heritage, opening spaces for bridging local and new culture (e.g. Syrian cooking courses), recultivation of abandoned lands with organic oil and wine production. Women's well-being is also in the spotlight. The Ama-La project is dedicated to supporting refugee women through training and the creation of textile handicrafts. In addition, childcare services and after-school courses are made available for all. With this new vitality, Camini has also become a tourist destination. Through this story, we can see how welcoming is multi-directional and dynamic. Newcomers are welcome to build their new homes, and they, in turn, co-create welcoming spaces for others, from tourists to students and researchers, to new migrants, or those who have returned, perhaps because of the COVID-19 pandemic that has made life in cities more difficult.

This dynamic perspective is important. Often, welcoming initiatives are seen as failures when newcomers leave again. Our colleagues in Spain have presented us an inspiring case in Arenillas, a village in the Province of Soria. While long being a depopulated place, it has been able to maintain basic social services such as schools with medium-term stayers, of different nationalities and mobility biographies. They typically stay in Arenillas longer than two to five years but shorter than twenty years. Mobility is accepted; there is no expectation for people to stay 'forever'.

Residents' translocal identities and livelihood/lifestyle are not seen as limitations. A high level of ownership can be observed. Residents take an active role in the community. The city hall and a cultural civil organisation work together continuously to facilitate reception for newcomers, supporting them with the search for housing and work. The village also organises the Boina Fest, a summer festival regularly hosted to raise awareness about depopulation and raise funding for their activities.

Welcoming can be multi-directional and dynamic

Vulnerability and resilience

We should not romanticise these initiatives and processes though. The building of welcoming spaces is challenging. It entails vision, investments (of all kinds), and commitment. One of the aims of our research is to identify factors for success and bottlenecks. Welcoming spaces can be politicised and volatile spaces. Many researchers need to consider continuously if it is ethical to reveal the location and identity of the people, place and particular initiative because such publicity might bring threat.

The building of welcoming spaces entails vision, investments and commitment

The story of Riace helps illustrate the vulnerability and resilience of welcoming spaces. Riace is a town in Calabria, Italy, neighbouring Camini which we 'visited' earlier in this essay. Like Camini, out-migration had characterised Riace since the postwar economic boom when many moved to the cities. At the beginning of the 2000s, the city decided to change its fate by welcoming thousands of migrants, giving them abandoned homes and work, in the hope that the newcomers would rejuvenate the community and economy. And it worked!

Together, newcomers and the locals renovated the empty houses, they worked together on communal projects. School, the grocery, other shops, and bars were opened again. Riace became a famous welcoming space and a symbol of solidarity. The 'Riace model' or 'Riace experiment' was seen as an inspiration near and far. Its Mayor Domenico 'Mimmo' Lucano (in office from 2004 to 2018) became a global celebrity. The tide turned when the interior minister of the then right-wing government put the Riace experiment to an end. In October 2018, the police put Lucano under house arrest for allegedly assisting illegal immigration, embezzlement, and abuse of office. Funding for the project was canceled and most of the migrants moved away. As the political tide changed again, Lucano was able to return to Riace in September 2019. Since then he has been working to revive the Riace experiment, which has inspired neighboring villages and further away places.

Perhaps now you can relate more to the associations I have made between my jade ring, about (re)creating a home, and the welcoming spaces that I have come across. As we are putting this essay book together, we are confronted by reports on the many people — right now, but not only in Afghanistan for example — in search of a safe and better life. **It is more timely than ever for us to connect, think and co-create welcoming spaces, in cities or villages, here and there.**

CURIOUS FOR MORE?

Maggi Leung speaks about belonging and (re)creating a home in the DCFA livecast *(Making) Sense of Belonging.*

ADDITIONAL BITS AND BITES

PROJECT: WELCOMING SPACES

The European research programme (H2020) that dives in to the world of migrants and local initiatives in European rural depopulating regions.

PROJECT: MAKERS UNITE

Makers Unite provides equal opportunities to newcomers through the collaborative design and production of sustainable products, while shifting narratives around migration globally.