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Ecaterina Stefanescu

Rooms: Modelling the Quotidian and Revealing the Enchanted of Berlin's Immigrant Spaces

Introduction

Scale models play roles of proposition, speculation, and fiction within architecture. This paper situates the model as a means of observation, documentation, and engagement with migrant communities. It investigates how studying the material culture of migrants through the medium of Ethnographic Model-Making showcases and validates the migrant's liminal condition. The paper will outline how this methodology encourages access and participation from the point of view of participants, the maker, and the public.

Figure 1.

1:20 interior model of the flat of a Romanian pensioner, "Rooms", Berlin. Ecaterina Stefanescu, 2021-2022. Photo: Ecaterina Stefanescu



Opposite:

Figure 2.

Site sketch of Romanian shop, "Rooms", Berlin. Ecaterina Stefanescu, 2021-2022. Photo: Ecaterina Stefanescu

This research describes *Rooms*, an artistic project examining the Romanian migrant community inhabiting the city of Berlin through the spaces they occupy and the objects with which they surround themselves.¹ The case studies – a Romanian shop and two domestic spaces (figure 1) – were documented, drawn, surveyed, and then carefully recreated through 1:20 paper models.

For migrant communities, the nostalgic association with native objects and places helps to build identity. Modelling the everyday spaces of migrants not only visualises and offers new insight, but also gives a sense of value and recognition to the lived realities of individuals and communities often ignored and marginalised. The project reveals everyday spaces that migrants appropriate as objects of beauty and atmosphere by the dedication to this form of three-dimensional representation.

Migrancy

Researching the experience of diasporic communities through literature, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi writes about the conundrum that immigrants face when arriving in a new country. They are forced to change their way of being to adapt and integrate into a host society and culture, but this adjustment is often experienced as a kind of 'loss'.² According to Ritivoi, feelings of nostalgia are a marker of the journey for the migrant, and 'a defensive mechanism designed to maintain a stable identity' in the face of this inevitable loss.³

Material objects emerge as symbols of stability for migrants, when personal uncertainty occurs as their surroundings change or move.⁴ The domestic spaces occupied by an individual are identified by sociologist Maurice Halbachs as bearing the inhabitant's imprint, through furniture, decorations, and objects.⁵

Ritivoi further describes that an individual's identity is dependent on their environment, so migrants seek to recreate their habitat in the image of their place of origin – but more than that, in the image of their inner self.⁶

¹ This project and research have been undertaken as part of the Urban Nation Museum for Urban Contemporary Art – *Fresh A.I.R.* – artistic residency in Berlin between October 2021 and March 2022. The residency, titled *Reflecting Migration*, was intended to replace common stereotypical portrayals of migrants.

² Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday's Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), p. 1.

³ Ritivoi, p. 9.

⁴ Maurice Halbachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. by Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 129.

⁵ Halbachs, p. 128.

⁶ Ritivoi, p. 8.



By re-establishing the world of home in their new surroundings – through objects of nostalgia, buying produce imported from their country of origin and preparing traditional food – they attempt to halt the inevitable change and loss, and as a form of nostalgic enchantment, transform their new surroundings into the places from their past for which they long.

The models of the domestic spaces created for *Rooms*, therefore, are not only physical representations of the spaces and objects within, but also of the complicated, liminal identities of their inhabitants. The focus on recreating the mundane minutiae in the rooms – socks, a stack of papers, homeware, sweets – validates and renders this liminal condition tangible.

Ethnographic research

To study and document these everyday spaces and observe the rituals associated with them, the project applied an ethnographic research approach, including situated actions of visiting Romanian commercial places, meeting and conversing the people there, and participating in the acts of consumption.

To allow one to register not only the physical material environment but also the behaviour within that environment, architect Lee Ivettt advocates for a performative act of making, which situates the artist/researcher as a participant.⁷ A similar method that utilises a public process of making was

⁷ Architect Lee Ivettt, through his work with(in) marginalised communities in Glasgow, has designed and led on projects which focus on the act of making as a participatory activity that has the potential to gather meaningful data and impact directly on a place. *I am from Reykjavik* is an artistic project by Sonia Hughes for which Ivettt co-

a key part in *Rooms*. Although the act of making was a one-side activity, it allowed me to occupy and embed myself in the spaces further.

I used site sketching, drawing and spatial surveying as durational methods through which I not only observed and documented the spaces in two dimensions, but which were also the catalyst for further conversations and informal interviews with project participants: a young woman working in the Romanian shop, and a pensioner frequenting it to socialise with other Romanians (figure 2). Over a period of a few months, their interest in the project grew, allowing me to gain trust and access, into their spaces and into their lived realities.⁸ (figure 3)

Models

The reproduction of the spaces was another form of analysis: through physically re-making the domestic interiors, I was forced to re-inhabit the spaces studied, and embed myself in the lives of the people whose spaces I was depicting (figure 4). By manually constructing the interiors and all the items within, the level of insight amassed about the rooms and their inhabitants could not be replicated by simply observing or documenting the spaces in two dimensions.

The haptic and participatory benefit of models, together with their didactic potential, has been utilised in the on-going artistic and research project *The Giant Doll's House* run by Catja de Haas Architects. Started in 2014, the social arts project asked participants to create models of their past, present or imaginary homes within the confines of a shoebox. The international project involved people from different backgrounds, including schoolchildren, community members and refugees, aiming to raise awareness about the importance of home and utilising the act of making to explore 'ideas of identity, both shared as well as personal'.⁹

The project quotes Gaston Bachelard, who talks about the condensing of value within miniatures. He suggests that the scaled-down version of the

designed the structure and the artistic act, which tests the methodology of making as performance in a public space. See Lee Ivettt, *The Act of Making as Participation and Enquiry* (2021), *I am from Reykjavik* <<https://www.iamfromreykjavik.com/portfolio-item/the-act-of-making/>> [accessed 16 October 2022].

⁸ Both participants were forthcoming and interested in the research, allowing me to gain access. No names or addresses were to be used within the academic dissemination of the project, and a verbal agreement was made to document their spaces and some of their personal objects.

⁹ About the *Giant Dolls' House Project* ([n.d.]), *The Giant Dolls' House Project* <<https://giantdollshouse.org/about>> [accessed 8 January 2023].

Figure 3.
Site survey of the flat of a Romanian pensioner, "Rooms", Berlin. Ecaterina Stefanescu, 2021-2022. Photo: Ecaterina Stefanescu

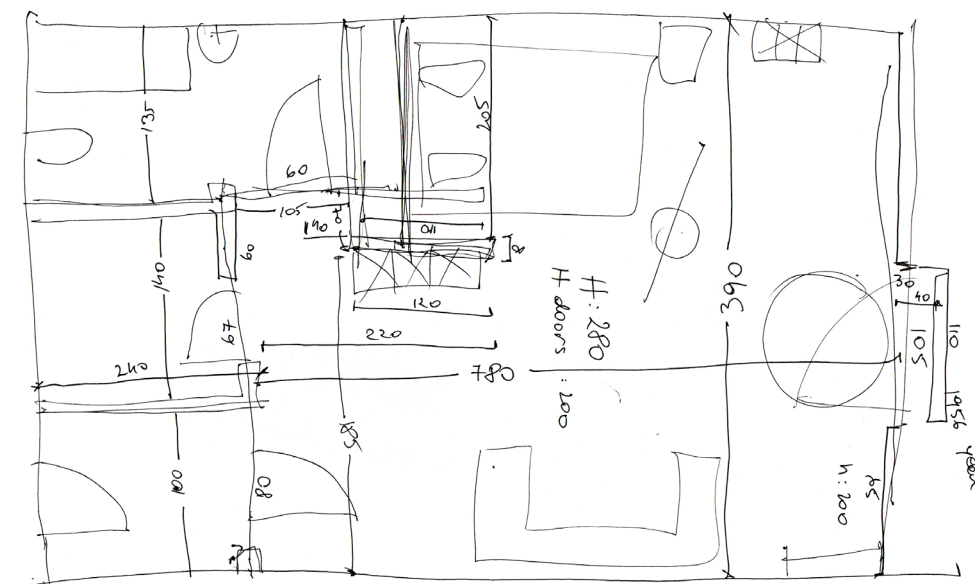




Figure 4.
 Making of one
 of the domestic
 interior models,
 "Rooms", Berlin.
 Ecaterina
 Stefanescu,
 2021-2022. Photo:
 Sam Eadington



Figure 5.
 1:20 interior
 model of the flat
 of a Romanian
 shop assistant,
 "Rooms", Berlin.
 Ecaterina
 Stefanescu,
 2021-2022.
 Photo: Ecaterina
 Stefanescu

object is richer and more packed with insight than the real object.¹⁰ But more so than this, the miniature increases the importance and value of the object being depicted, revealing it as a 'refuge of greatness'.¹¹

Rooms similarly uses the act of making to explore ideas of identity. Moreover, the care and attention employed in the making of the miniatures for *Rooms* implies an engagement that goes beyond the ordinary, therefore emphasising their importance. Through the extreme level of detail, external observers and the public were encouraged to occupy and embed themselves in what Sarah Pink terms 'the ethnographic place' of the model, forcing an empathetic response that simply visiting the actual, quotidian spaces would not provoke.¹² This form of representation reveals the simple, ordinary spaces as objects of beauty and enchantment (figure 5).¹³

Conclusion

Experiencing a sense of loss through the change in their surroundings, migrants seek to replicate the nostalgic past through everyday objects and spaces that speak not only of their place of origin, but also of their identity. The culture of origin, representing the longed-for, enchanted realm of their nostalgic past, is projected onto the quotidian of the host culture through material possessions. But in a foreign context, this produces a liminal identity when the culture of origin, recalled through nostalgic associations with objects and physical artefacts, is juxtaposed onto new surroundings. The models of the domestic spaces are not only a representation of the places themselves, but also of the liminal identity of migrants. The focus on everyday objects and the mundane aspects of their lived realities validates and renders their condition tangible, revealing the interiors as the enchanted recreations that the inhabitants desire them to be. The models become objects of atmosphere and beauty, which recognise, acknowledge, and bring value to the feelings experienced by the community and their lived reality within this transitory condition.

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 150

¹¹ Bachelard, p. 155.

¹² Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, (Los Angeles: SAGE Publishing, 2009), p. 42.

¹³ The work was exhibited as part of the "Reflecting Migration" group exhibition in the gallery space Bülow90 in Berlin between March and July 2022.

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Biography:

Ecaterina Stefanescu is an architectural designer, artist and academic based in Preston, where she teaches architecture at the Grenfell-Baines Institute of Architecture within the University of Central Lancashire. Her practice Estudio ESSE, co-founded in 2015, creates site installations and bespoke design work. Ecaterina uses live-build, model-making and drawing in her artistic and research work to respond to the place and material cultures of people. Her research interests include the act of making as a tool for exploration, investigation and participation, model-making and the material culture of migrants.

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