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HAS '*HEIMAT*' BEEN MADE?:

Centralized refugee
accommodations in Germany

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Student: Vijay Gopal VAZHOTH PALLIYIL

**Master of International Cooperation in Sustainable Emergency
Architecture**

Supervisor: Apen Ruiz MARTINEZ

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Master thesis by Vijay Gopal Vazhoth Palliyil

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Acknowledgement	3
Abstract	4
List of Tables	5
List of Figures	5
List of Photographs	6
1. Introduction	8
2. Conceptual framework	11
2.1. The concept of integration	11
2.2. Housing; a major factor for integration	12
2.3. Housing, Health & the concept of ‘home’	14
2.4. Refugee Policies in Germany	17
3. Case Study and Methodology	20
3.1. The Gemienschaftstunterkünft in Hofheim am Taunus	20
3.2. Methodology	28
4. Findings - description, synthesis of collected data and analysis	29
4.1. The layout of the Housing units in Gemeinschaftsunterkünften	30
4.1.1. Privacy	30
4.1.2. Layout and Size of the Housing Units	33
4.2. Location & Access to Services	35
4.3. Safety	46
4.4. Social Connections	47
4.5. Reasons for protracted stay at the GU	52
5. Conclusion	54
6. Bibliography	57

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Abstract

According to UNHCR, Germany hosts more than a million refugees. Asylum seekers in Germany, live in the collective accommodation facilities called Gemeinschaftsunterkünften run by the respective municipalities while waiting for their application to be processed. Moreover, many refugees who have acquired official status continue to live in these facilities because of difficulties in finding decentralized accommodation in urban areas. This thesis focuses on the effects of living in the Gemeinschaftsunterkunft on the well-being of the inhabitants through a case study by using ethnographic methods and mapping. Interviews were conducted with 10 inhabitants and also with the official social worker of the Gemeinschaftsunterkunft at Hofheim in Germany. The main findings show that the inhabitants lack privacy and space; which is the consequence of the absence of binding standards regarding the size of GUs; where many refugees continue to live for prolonged periods because finding suitable, affordable and decentralised housing is challenging. Moreover, living at the GU for a prolonged period prevents social integration. The lesson from the thesis is that enforced standards in terms of size and occupancy are required for GUs. Furthermore, affordable housing stock generation is needed to enable the residents to move out of GUs and integrate better.

Key words: Refugees, asylum seekers, collective accommodation (*Gemeinschaftsunterkunft*), health, well-being, integration

List of Tables

Table 1. <i>Yearly global refugee statistics. Source; (UNHCR, 2021).</i>	7
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List of Figures

Figure 1. <i>Number of asylum seekers with different types of recognitions, classified by the countries of Asylum (UNHCR, 2020).</i>	8
Figure 2. <i>Domains of Refugee Integration. Source: (Ager & Strang, 2008). Adapted by author</i>	11
Figure 3. <i>Housing as a major Factor of Integration. Adapted by the author from (Ager & Strang, 2008).</i>	12
Figure 4. <i>Framework for Housing Evaluation. Synthesised by the author from the listed sources: (Ager & Strang, 2004; Basok & George, 2020; Bonnefoy, 2007; Kearns et al., 2000; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008; Rolfe et al., 2020; Ziersch et al., 2017).</i>	15
Figure 5. <i>The asylum seeking process and accommodation changes. Synthesised by the author from sources: (Almarishriki & Kip, 2017; Asylum Act, 2008; BAMF, 2021).</i>	15
Figure 6. <i>The aerial view of the GU and the surrounding context. Adapted by the author, 2021. (Aerial image from Google Maps).</i>	21
Figure 7. <i>Map of Hofheim marking the location of the GU. Edited by the author, 2021. (Image from Google Maps).</i>	23
Figure 8. <i>Satellite aerial view of the context surrounding the GU. Edited by the author, 2021. (Image from Google Maps).</i>	23
Figure 9. <i>Elevation map of Hofheim and the surrounding context. The Taunus mountain range can be seen on the North-Western side and the Main river which is at a low elevation can be seen on the South-Easern side . Source;(floodmap.net, 2020).</i>	24
Figure 10. <i>Inter-town mobility - Bus and train connectivity. Adapted from: Google Maps</i>	34
Figure 11. <i>Map of intra-town bus connectivity at Hofheim Am Taunus (selected three main bus routes). Adapted from: Google Maps; (Moovit, 2021).</i>	34
Figure 12. <i>Schematic map showing the broad nature of land use around the GU. The natural land mostly consists of forests and is part of the Taunus mountain range. Adapted from: Google Maps</i>	35
Figure 13. <i>Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and surrounding open spaces. Adapted from: Google Maps</i>	37
Figure 14. <i>Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU. district administration and the police station. Adapted from: Google Maps</i>	38
Figure 15. <i>Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and nearby</i>	

<i>supermarkets. Adapted from: Google Maps</i>	39
Figure 16. <i>Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and surrounding schools. Adapted from: Google maps</i>	41
Figure 17. <i>Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and surrounding healthcare related facilities. Adapted from: Google Maps</i>	42
Figure 18. <i>Radial diagram marking all the mapped amenities around the GU. Adapted from: Google Maps</i>	44
Figure 19. <i>Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and points of social support. Adapted from: Google Maps; (Main-Taunus-Kreis, 2015)</i>	48

List of Photographs

Photograph 1. <i>A typical street in the residential part of Hofheim Am Taunus. Source: Author, 2021</i>	19
Photograph 2. <i>The street in front of the GU. The entrance to the GU can be seen across the road. The public playground can be seen on the right side of the GU. Source: Author, 2021</i>	19
Photograph 3. <i>The entrance gate of the GU from the street in front. Source: Author, 2021</i>	21
Photograph 4. <i>The view upon entering the GU compound - Common room (grey) on the left, double storey residential blocks (red) on either side of the courtyard. Source: Author, 2021</i>	21
Photograph 5. <i>The prefabricated construction uses corrugated metal panels and wood. Source: Author, 2021</i>	22
Photograph 6. <i>The view from outside the social worker's office - common room on the right and laundry room on the left. Source: Author, 2021</i>	22
Photograph 7. <i>A corridor on the second floor of the residential block. Source: Author, 2021</i>	23
Photograph 8. <i>The passage between two residential blocks - The grey single storey blocks are mostly meant for singles and the red double storey ones for families. Source: Author, 2021</i>	23
Photograph 9. <i>The agricultural fields on the rear side of the GU. Source: Author, 2021</i>	25
Photograph 10. <i>A view of the GU from the side, showing the agricultural fields behind and on the sides of it. There are trees planted all around the GU along the boundary. Source: Author, 2021</i>	25
Photograph 11. <i>Many families had personalised the corridor outside their door with plants and</i>	

furniture. Source: Author, 202129

Photograph 12. *A room in a housing unit that has been kept empty for quarantining in case a resident is tested positive for Covid-19. Usually the rooms have only two beds, the previous tenants had rearranged the furniture and brought in a bed from the next room to this room. Source: Author*.....29

Photograph 13. *The post box at the GU. The surnames of residents are pasted on the respective boxes. Some boxes have many names as they are individuals sharing the same unit whereas families usually share the surname and have only one sticker on their box. The names have been blacked out to maintain the anonymity of the inhabitants. Source: Author, 2021*31

Photograph 14. *A kitchen in one of the family housing units. There is a compact dining area within the same space (bottom-left corner). Source: Author, 2021*32

Photograph 15. *The playground right beside the GU consists of a table to play table tennis, courts to play basketball, football and volleyball. Source: Author, 2021*36

Photograph 16. *The skater park, close to the GU. Source: Author, 2021*37

Photograph 17. *Outdoor furniture at the GU painted by the children living there and other children from a nearby school. The paint and equipment were provided by the volunteers. Source: Author, 2021*49

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of forcibly displaced people across the globe has increased dramatically, even almost doubled. Migration patterns have been shaped by various political and socio-economic situations around the world. With the onset of the pandemic, there has been an appeal from the UN general secretary for a global ceasefire, but the displacements have not stopped. Covid-19 has led to implementation of many restrictions including border closures, which have consequently led to a significant reduction in migration but it has still not ceased (UNHCR, 2020).

Year	Country of Origin	Country of Asylum	Refugees under UNHCR's mandate	Asylum-seekers	IDPs of concern to UNHCR	Venezuelans displaced abroad	Stateless persons	Others of concern
2013	-	-	11,698,238	1,162,934	23,925,555		3,469,268	836,073
2014	-	-	14,384,302	1,794,703	32,274,619		3,492,255	1,052,746
2015	-	-	16,110,280	3,223,460	37,494,172		3,687,759	870,688
2016	-	-	17,184,291	2,729,521	36,627,127		3,242,206	803,084
2017	-	-	19,940,568	3,089,503	39,118,516		3,853,982	1,596,125
2018	-	-	20,359,556	3,501,627	41,425,168	2,592,947	3,851,981	1,182,756
2019	-	-	20,414,675	4,170,548	43,503,362	3,582,202	4,161,980	6,140,622
2020*	-	-	20,676,358	4,176,545	45,940,575	3,581,926	4,158,375	5,793,516

▲ **Table 1.** Yearly global refugee statistics. Source; (UNHCR, 2021)

Not all of the displaced people are granted asylum by the host countries. Forcibly displaced persons include both asylum seekers and refugees. Asylum seekers are defined as people who are outside their country of origin and seeking formal protection but have not had their claims to refugee status assessed (Ziersch et al., 2017). Germany has been a prime destination for asylum seekers migrating to Europe. In the first quarter of 2016, Germany was where 61% of first-time asylum applicants were registered during the period, the highest among all European states. Subsequently, in 2017, Germany had accounted for 31% of all first-time asylum applicants in the EU. In 2018, Germany hosted 28% of asylum seekers in the EU, and in 2019, it came down to 23%. There is an observable decline in asylums given to applicants but there is a big population of refugees and asylum seekers in the country (Eurostat, 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020). According to UNHCR (2020), Germany hosts 1.1 million refugees, more than any other European nation, and is the fifth biggest host country in the world in terms of the number of refugees hosted. Surveys conducted could identify the reasons for Germany being a preferred destination country. The respect for human rights in the country was the main reason among other reasons like the educational system, the welcoming culture, economic situation, and

national social welfare system. Personal networks were not so often a reason but rarely the presence of family or friends in the nation was the motivation for some asylum seekers to choose Germany as their destination (Brücker et al., 2016).



▲ **Figure 1.** Number of asylum seekers with different types of recognitions, classified by the countries of Asylum (UNHCR, 2020)

In Germany, once the asylum seekers are given refugee status, they are permitted to move into urban areas and live in shared or individual apartments. Prior to this, they live in the collective accommodation facilities called *Gemeinschaftsunterkünfte*¹ run by the respective municipalities, while waiting for their application to be processed. Yet, many refugees who have acquired official status continue to live in these facilities because of difficulties in finding decentralized accommodation in urban areas due to various reasons.

Taking into consideration that housing is a basic need, this thesis examines the living conditions of the asylum seekers and refugees, as the health of the refugees and asylum seekers is highly influenced by the housing they live in (Bonney, 2007; Rolfe et al., 2020; Ziersch et al., 2017). Housing has been listed as one of the means and markers for achieving the integration of refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008). The more specific research questions addressed by the thesis are the following; What are the living conditions in the experience of the residents of the *Gemeinschaftsunterkunft* at Hofheim am Taunus? How does the absence of uniform standards for the design and construction of *Gemeinschaftsunterkunft* (GU)² manifest on the ground? How do various aspects that are physical, social or administrative, related to housing affect the

¹ The plural form of the German word *Gemeinschaftsunterkunft* which translates to ‘collective accommodation’ is *Gemeinschaftsunterkünfte*.

² The abbreviation of *Gemeinschaftsunterkunft* is GU and used throughout this document.

well-being of inhabitants? How does living in the GU affect the ability of the inhabitants to socially integrate? In order to address these questions, in this thesis, I developed a framework of housing evaluation criteria connected to health reviewing existing literature. I also designed a twofold strategy of data collection: a) interviews with the residents of the GU and a staff member who works there; b) mapping the GU and the different amenities around it, like schools, hospitals, and other social support systems, physical access and proximities were analyzed.

‘Heimat’ is a German word that has no literal, direct translation in English. According to the curators of the German national pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale of 2016, *Heimat* is something internal to human beings, it is “more than home and not only an architectural but a mental situation” (Plane-Site, 2017). The pavilion was linked to the refugee crisis and the exhibition was called ‘Making Heimat; Germany, Arrival Country’ and the title of this thesis is inspired by the same, as the exhibition also featured a publication focusing on the living conditions of refugees in Germany and documented selected housing projects in each German federal state (Baus et al., 2017).

As a first step, by reviewing existing literature produced by scholars, the concept of integration and the role of housing in achieving integration will be examined. Simultaneously, health being an important factor in achieving integration, the connection of health and housing conditions is explored. Then a framework for housing evaluation will be created as a lens to examine the case study of the GU at Hofheim. Using ethnographic methods, namely, interviews and observation, relevant data will be collected from the inhabitants of the GU. The results from mapping the location of the GU and amenities around it, will be correlated with and compared to the data collected through interviews.

Although the findings from this thesis cannot be completely generalized as the absence of uniform standards (Cremer, 2014, as cited in Aumüller et al., 2015) results in each GU being different, the thesis can inform the policymakers in developing standards for the design and construction of GUs. Most importantly, the thesis is meant to create knowledge on the living conditions of asylum seekers and refugees in the GUs, adding to the existing literature on the subject, which can inform the governments to improve the refugee housing policies. The subsequent chapter, ‘conceptual framework’, will examine the work of scholars relevant to the research questions, starting with the concept of integration.

2. Conceptual framework

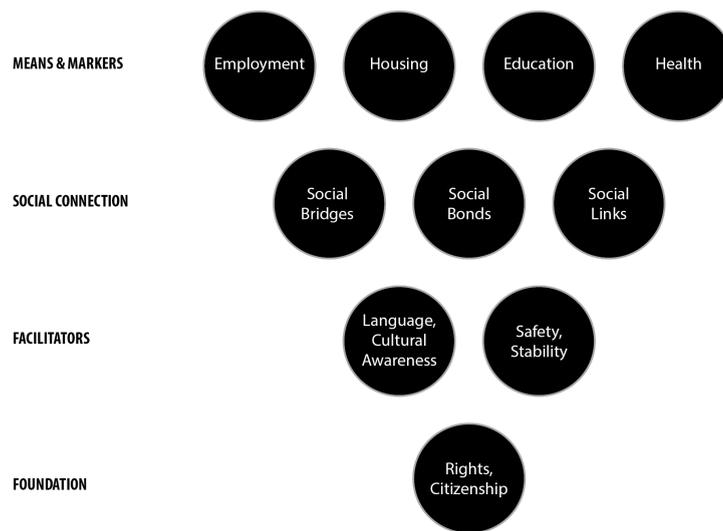
Firstly, the conceptual framework aims to understand the concept of integration. Secondly, by examining existing literature, the connection between housing and integration was explored while simultaneously investigating the links between housing and health. Based on the different criteria identified, a framework for housing evaluation was synthesized. Finally, this conceptual framework also synthesizes refugee policies in Germany to better situate the thesis case study.

2.1. The concept of integration

Integration of migrants or refugees as a concept has been defined very broadly by scholars from different disciplines and has been evolving. For example, Castles and Davidson (2000) went on to call it a ‘contested term’ while Robinson (1998) termed integration a ‘chaotic concept’ because of the multiple ways in which integration was interpreted. Favell (1998) relates integration with ‘progressive-minded, tolerant and inclusive approaches to dealing with ethnic minorities. Moving to a more cultural domain, for Berry (1991), integration is a strategic choice of the migrants and is a form of acculturation, which takes place because of continued contact between distinct cultural groups. For some authors, the concept of integration moves away from a linear definition to a multi-dimensional one, therein which it is seen as a process in which individuals, society, and the state have roles (Mestheneos and Ioannidi, 2002; Schibel et al., 2002). Along these lines, Zetter (2002) attempted to structure the idea of integration by listing domains in which it should ideally take place, namely, the legal, statutory, functional, and social domains. However, academicians emphasize how the focus of states has been more on the functional or practical aspects of integrations rather than social integration, as the influence of the state in the social realm is lower (Baubock 1994; Korac, 2003; Portes 1997, 1998; Zetter et al. 2002).

The discussion about integration becomes more defined as specificities like education, training, the labour market, health, and housing are listed as prerequisites to initiating the integration process (Fyvie et al., 2003). For example, Coussey (2000) proposes using indicators to measure integration to compare the situation of refugees and the regular citizens in terms of ‘jobs, education, housing, political representation, and participation’. Ager and Strang (2008) formulated a conceptual framework for integration consisting of four core domains. As depicted in *Figure 2*, the domains include firstly, the ‘means and markers’, which consists of ‘Employment’, ‘Housing’, ‘Health’ and ‘Education’, which were the recurring themes in the analyzes. Secondly, the domain of ‘social connection’ included ‘social bridges’, referring to connections between the migrants and local host population, ‘social bonds’ which refers to

connections within the migrant community, and ‘social links’ are how the refugees interact with the government and official state bureaucracy. Thirdly, there is the domain of ‘facilitators’ which includes aspects like learning the local language, gaining cultural knowledge which would enable social assimilation. Finally, the domain of ‘foundation’ which refers to rights and citizenship.



▲ **Figure 2.** *Domains of Refugee Integration.* Source: (Ager & Strang, 2008). Adapted by author.

Although this integration framework is very detailed, it neither proposes a process for facilitating integration nor does it explore the relations among different domains (Ager & Strang, 2004). Moreover, the framework still does give some direction on what are the main issues to be tackled while addressing integration. This research addresses that gap by examining the relation of housing specifically, as a major factor for integration, to other domains and specific factors.

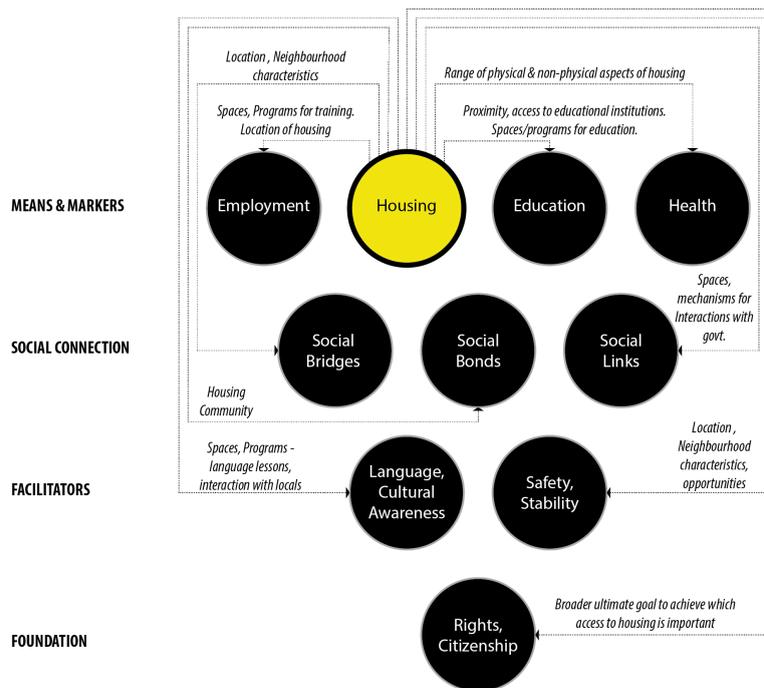
2.2. Housing; a major factor for integration

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and subsequently, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1966 recognize ‘adequate housing’ as an important part of the right to adequate standards of living. Adequate housing is related to various factors such as ‘security of tenure, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, cultural adequacy, and availability of services, materials, facilities, and infrastructure’ (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UNECE], 2021).

Some authors have pointed to the central role of housing in refugee integration. For example, Phillimore and Goodson point out, “for those seeking refuge, it could be argued that the importance of finding a home is particularly symbolic as it marks the end of a journey and the point at which refugees can start to consider their wider needs” (2008, p. 316). Furthermore, safe and secure housing is a prerequisite for participating actively in or accessing other domains like education, vocational training, employment, healthcare, and social networks (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008; Ager & Strang, 2004). In this section, I will explore how the other aspects that have been listed as crucial to enabling the integration of refugees are linked to one specific aspect, namely, housing.

Scholars highlight the importance of social integration, which refers to the levels to which the refugees are engaged in social networks. A higher level of social participation can enable the refugees and asylum seekers to access other integration enablers such as building local cultural knowledge, getting employed, and accessing education (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2013). However, the main factor that can affect the ability of refugees or asylum seekers to build social relations is the location of housing, meaning that if housing is located far away from the urban areas or the workplace and if there is a lack of transportation infrastructure, the consequence can be social isolation (Basok & George, 2020).

As Ager & Strang (2008) illustrate the domains of refugee integration, as shown in *figure 2*, I go a step further to examine the relations among domains, specifically analysing how housing is connected to other factors in all domains. Nonetheless, the analysis is synthesized in *figure 3*, and the physical, social and administrative aspects related to housing have a big impact on how much the other domains are aiding or hindering integration.



▲ *Figure 3. Housing as a major Factor of Integration. Adapted by the author from (Ager & Strang, 2008).*

2.3. Housing, Health & the concept of ‘home’

The World Health Organisation (2006) defines good health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Good health, both mental and physical, of the incoming population is very important to facilitate good integration. Poor health can manifest as lower levels of social participation, which in turn inhibits the integration process (Wilson, 1998). This reasoning when combined with the concept of integration as a two-way process requiring efforts from the side of the hosts as well as migrants (Berry, 1997), reinforces the need for the good health of the migrant population.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines social determinants of health are defined as the “conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life” (World Health Organisation, 2011, as cited in, Ziersch, et al., 2017, p. 2). Housing is an important parameter that determines the physical and mental well-being of the inhabitants. Health, especially of refugees and asylum seekers, is of high relevance, considering also the increased vulnerability due to the psychological and social effects of being displaced to a new context (Ziersch et al., 2017). There exists no commonly agreed-upon definition of ‘healthy housing’, but the World Health Organization elaborates on housing being more than the physical shelter, but ‘adequate’ housing would mean to possess a ‘home’, which positively cultivates physical and mental well-being while aiding the

‘development and social integration of inhabitants’ (Bonney, 2007). Bonney (2007) also attempts to structure how WHO understands ‘housing’, by categorizing different parameters under ‘four dimensions of housing’, namely the ‘home, dwelling, community and immediate environment’.

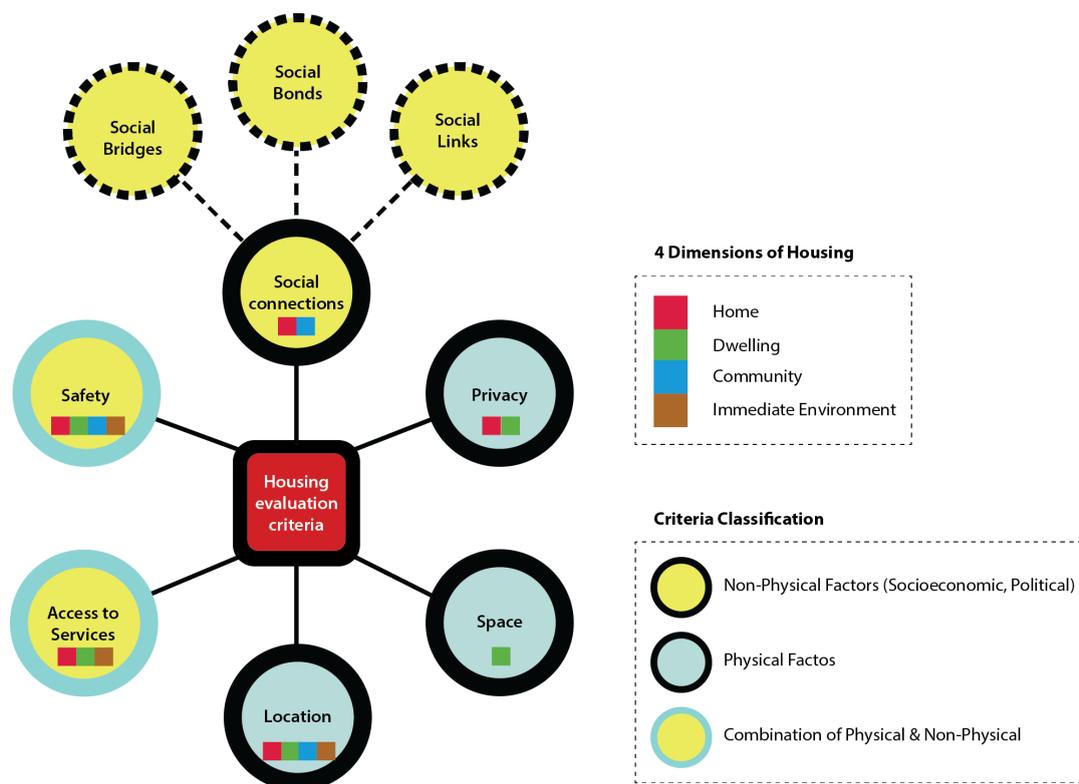
Firstly, the ‘home’ is the primary dimension of housing and has been explored in many works of research. The centrality of the home in situations of migration and exile was already advanced by the Palestinian author Edward Said who defined exile as a forced separation “between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (as quoted by Fozdar and Hartley, 2014, pg.2). Moreover, a home is perceived to be more than a house, as it helps the inhabitants to develop a sense of identity and attachment, offers protection, while also enabling them to be autonomous. Home, according to some scholars, is the secure and safe centre of an individual’s universe (Fozdar & Hartley, 2014), and includes not just the physical abode but the relationship within it and around (Kearns et al., 2000). External stresses can inhibit the psychosocial benefits of having a ‘home’ and negatively impact the feelings of ‘safety, intimacy and control’. In order for the refugees or asylum seekers to ‘feel at home’, housing has been observed to be key by researchers and the housing needed to be of suitable typologies, located well, permanent, clean and of good quality (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008).

Secondly, the ‘dwelling’ refers to the physicality of housing and inadequate conditions of the same can consequently manifest as poor health in the inhabitants. Physical aspects of housing such as low-temperature levels, dampness, inadequate area, the inappropriateness of layout were seen to affect health and well-being, inversely. Other factors like prolonged high noise levels and inadequate privacy have impacts on the mental health of inhabitants (Ziersch et al., 2017). Many more reasons that influence the health outcomes of the residents negatively are listed by scholars are the presence of infestations, lack of hygiene and sanitation amenities and inadequate accessibility. Design and layout impact the level of privacy of individuals and families, and the social functionality of the complex as well (Bonney, 2007).

Thirdly, the ‘community’ dimension consists of a collection of factors that can affect health but are not related to the physicality of the housing. For example, socioeconomic characteristics of the neighbourhood, level of access to education and ethnic compositions within the migrants and in the wider context can play a major role in how migrants experience the place (Bonney, 2007). Furthermore, scholars emphasize the importance of the surrounding social context when they argue that ‘neighbourhood quality’ and ‘social support networks’ play a major role in determining the well-being of the residents (Rolfe et al., 2020) and in developing a sense of ontological security (Ziersch et al., 2017).

Finally, the ‘immediate housing environment’ refers to the surrounding urban environment which plays a major role in the health outcomes of migrant populations. Access to open spaces, green infrastructure, walkable areas and other services can impede the chances for physical activity, increased obesity levels and cognitive problems in children. Location of housing is thus an important aspect that can distance the residents from services (Bonnefoy, 2007).

There are many aspects of housing, both physical and non-physical, that affect the health and well-being, both mental and physical, of the inhabitants. These aspects are listed and classified, as shown in figure 4, into physical and non-physical (social, functional, administrative) characteristics, much like how a computer has hardware and software. Some aspects are not strictly just physical or non-physical but related to both. Each criterion of housing evaluation also falls under one or more of the four dimensions of housing. The dimensions of housing and evaluation criteria are interconnected, so is mental and physical health. The framework diagram is developed in an attempt to identify the data that needs to be collected.



▲ **Figure 4.** Framework for Housing Evaluation. Synthesised by the author from the listed sources: (Ager & Strang, 2004; Basok & George, 2020; Bonnefoy, 2007; Kearns et al., 2000; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008; Rolfe et al., 2020; Ziersch et al., 2017)

2.4. Refugee Policies in Germany

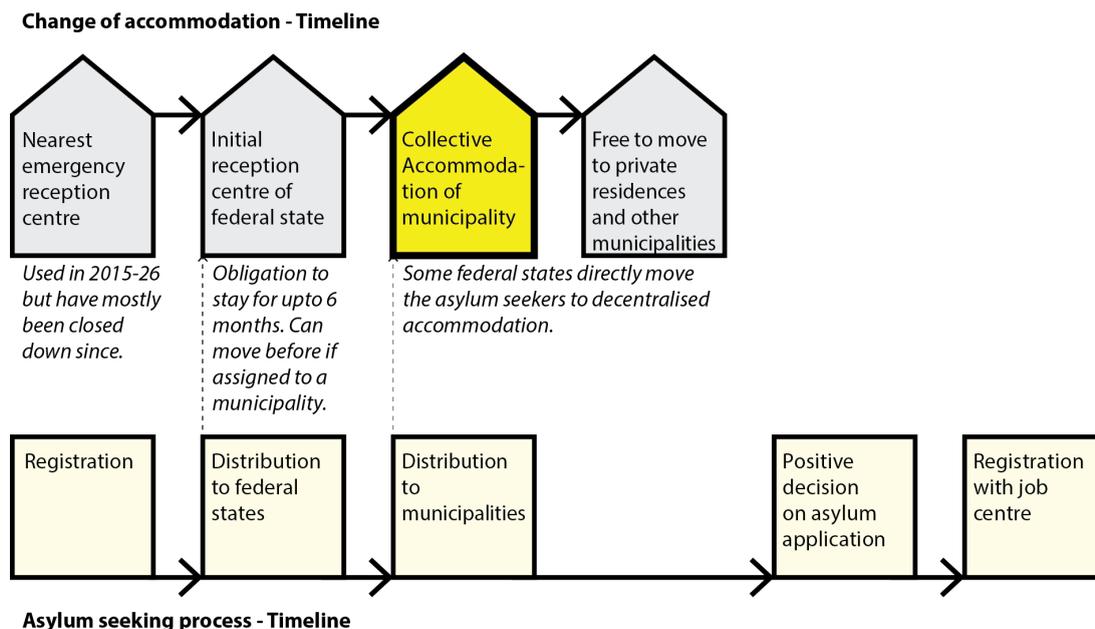
Before diving into the case study, to develop an understanding of the national context, through literature review, the policies related to refugees and asylum seekers in Germany are inspected, especially in terms of the steps of the asylum application procedure, different protection statuses and provision/change of accommodation at different stages of the process. In Germany, there are different levels of government sharing the responsibilities regarding asylum seekers and processing their applications. Those undergoing the asylum-seeking procedure and those who have been rejected asylum do not have the right to choose their accommodation (Aumüller et al., 2015). Once the asylum seeker is assigned to a municipality, it is responsible for the housing and provision of basic services to them. (Almarishriki & Kip, 2017; Aumüller et al., 2015).

The processing of asylum applications is time-consuming as each case needs to be examined thoroughly. At all points of time, in not just Germany but all European host nations, there are pending asylum applications³. For instance, 47% of the pending asylum applications in the EU were in Germany in 2016. In 2018, there was no significant change, as the share of pending asylum applications in Germany was 48% and in 2019, 44% (Eurostat, 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020). The asylum seekers are provided with housing and some benefits during their stay in Germany which might be the duration of processing their applications. Hence, there are not just refugees who have been granted asylum but a big population of asylum seekers who are waiting for their applications to be processed in the country.

During these different stages of the asylum-seeking process and often even after being granted the status, asylum seekers and refugees are housed in three main types of accommodation. Firstly, upon the arrival of asylum seekers in Germany, they are housed in initial reception centres, called *Aufnahmeinrichtung*. These are maintained and run by the federal states and they can impose an obligation on the asylum seekers to live in these facilities for a period of up to two years. If the asylum seeker is from a safe country of origin, he or she is obliged to live in an initial reception centre for the entire duration of their stay in Germany. There are some reception centres called arrival centres or *Ankunftscentren*, which have an additional branch office of BAMF⁴ attached to the accommodation building(s) for the fast track processing of asylum applications. Once the period of obligation to stay in these reception centres is over, the asylum seekers are moved to “collective accommodation” (GU) centres (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2021).

³ An asylum application which is being processed by the authorities and hence awaiting the result.

⁴ *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge* (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees)



▲ **Figure 5.** The asylum seeking process and accommodation changes. Synthesised by the author from sources: (Almarishriki & Kip, 2017; Asylum Act, 2008; BAMF, 2021)

There has been a discourse around the ‘welcoming culture’ (*Willkommenskultur*) in Germany, in the context of the refugee crisis but scholars have also questioned whether a ‘welcoming architecture’ or ‘*Willkommensarchitektur*’ exists (Keijser & Kip, 2017). The process by which accommodation is provided to asylum seekers and also refugees differs from state to state (Aumüller et al., 2015). However, the municipalities had to create housing options for the asylum seekers, for those who were granted asylum and also other disadvantaged groups to prevent social envy (Almarishriki & Kip, 2017). Despite this, there were no nationwide, uniform standards created for refugee accommodations. Moreover, this is absent even at the state level, as only some states have the minimum standards for refugee accommodation and the standards vary in terms of their ‘binding nature’ and ‘content’ (Cremer, 2014, as cited in Aumüller et al., 2015). However, in recent years, numerous cities and administrative districts have developed their concepts for housing asylum seekers and implemented them. Although these concepts are designed differently at the local level, they practically always mean an improvement in the housing situation compared to the standards required by state law (Aumüller et al., 2015).

Decentralised housing in this context refers to providing accommodation to asylum seekers and refugees in private housing units distributed across urban areas with access to basic services. The effect is avoidance of concentration of asylum seekers or refugees in a particular place or facility (Kip, 2017). Centralised housing on the other hand refers to facilities where asylum seekers and/or refugees are collectively accommodated. A critique of some of the existing

centralised housing for asylum seekers and refugees is about their locations being peripheral because often, they are situated in industrial areas in the outskirts or the rural areas, isolated to an extent from the local communities. This leads to a disconnection from the local population as the interactions with the natives are minimised. Other issues include sharing of housing units by people of different origins and cultural backgrounds, as individuals without families share multi-bed spaces, kitchens and sanitary facilities. Lack of space, privacy and forced coexistence with others who suffer from trauma creates a massive psychosocial burden (Aumüller et al., 2015). In addition, there is the question of safety in the initial reception as well as the subsequently shared accommodation. Women, in particular, pointed out the increased risk of harassment and sexual assault in shared accommodation to the German Institute of Human Rights. In the case of children, often, they lack opportunities to play and exercise and also an appropriate learning atmosphere (Cremer, 2014, as cited in, Aumüller et al., 2015). The advantages on the other hand are that the inhabitants' increased access to social services and creation of a 'safe place' (Schamman and Khün, 2017, as cited in, Aumüller et al., 2015).

Most asylum seekers are housed in shared housing units but the decentralised individual apartments are advantageous for humanitarian reasons. Scholars state that the costs incurred by the municipalities in providing decentralised housing are also relatively less. However, the quality of accommodation is not entirely dependent on whether it is centralised or decentralised. In most Kommunen, there is a combination of centralised and decentralised housing, catering to asylum seekers. Moreover, the provision of decentralised housing is more difficult in urban areas than in rural ones because of the prevailing housing shortage (Aumüller et al., 2015). According to Schamman and Khün (2017), as cited by Friedrichs (2016), most experts and government officials consider decentralisation to be a better alternative than collective housing. Increased interethnic contact nurtures social cohesion and a favourable outlook towards minorities. Although the numbers in each federal state are different, a study showed that a little more than half of the refugees in Germany lived in single accommodation while the other half lived in shared accommodation. Furthermore, in comparison, the shared accommodation facilities were more frequently located in rural, commercial or industrial areas. Also, living space per person was in most cases found to be higher in single accommodations than shared accommodations. Naturally, the satisfaction levels were higher among the inhabitants of the former than the latter. Moreover, the fact that around half of the residents in shared accommodation did not have access to 'separate, self-contained housing units' also negatively impacted the satisfaction levels (Baier & Siegert, 2018).

3. Case Study and Methodology

3.1. The Gemienschafstunterkünft in Hofheim am Taunus

Hofheim am Taunus, commonly referred to as Hofheim, is a town of population nearing forty thousand (Stadtverwaltung Hofheim am Taunus, 2019). It is situated in the South of the German state of Hesse in the district of Main-Taunus Kreis. With Taunus hills on the North, Hofheim has Frankfurt, 17 km to its East. Furthermore, 17 km to the West of Hofheim are the cities of Mainz and Wiesbaden. The Taunus mountain range runs along the northeastern side, adjacent to Hofheim and hence there is a lot of forest area on and nearby the mountains. The town is well connected by road and rail, with two autobahns going along it and an active railway line passing through. The town is part of the Rhine-Main Area, which is Germany's fastest-growing area both economically and in terms of population as it is an attractive place to move to (op-online, 2016). Hofheim is also designated to be the administrative centre of the District, Main-Taunus-Kreis which consists of several adjoining towns. In terms of the economic situation, Hofheim's population has a relatively high purchasing power index, making it one of the richer towns in Germany. The district of Main-Taunus-Kreis is also known for its high housing rent levels (Growth from Knowledge, 2020).



▲ **Photograph 1.** A typical street in the residential part of Hofheim Am Taunus. Source: Author, 2021.



▲ **Photograph 2.** *The street in front of the GU. The entrance to the GU can be seen across the road. The public playground can be seen on the right side of the GU. Source: Author, 2021.*

I have selected the Gemeinschaftsunterkunft which is the collective accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers⁵, located along Frankfurter Straße in Hofheim am Taunus as the research case study. It is a very relevant case as this specific facility has not yet been studied through any form of academic research. Even though the nature of these collective accommodations (Gemeinschaftsunterkünften) vary greatly across the country because of the absence of uniform standards, studying a specific one can help identify precisely the living conditions of the inhabitants, who are primarily asylum seekers and refugees. There has been documentation of several other GUs in Germany and this thesis can contribute to the existing pool of knowledge. Moreover, such ethnographic studies can highlight the differences in living conditions at different GUs and also highlight the shortcomings of the absence of binding standards to follow while designing and constructing these facilities.

The GU at Hofheim Am Taunus is constructed and operated by the Main-Taunus-Kreis district. Currently, approximately 130 inhabitants are living there and it can accommodate up to about 150 persons. There are four residential blocks, constructed around a central courtyard, out of which two are double-storeyed and meant mostly for families currently and the other two are single-storeyed and meant mostly for individuals without families, although there are a few

⁵ Even though the vast majority of residents are asylum seekers and refugees, there are also other categories of residents; i) people from Russia who have German ancestors and can prove it, and, ii) Jews. People belonging to these categories are rare but they can apply & acquire an official status to live in Germany. Generally, during the time of processing their application, they live in the GUs.

exceptions. In the former blocks meant for families, there are units with two, four and six rooms. There are several common facilities apart from the residential units at the GU. There is a common room for gatherings and activities like conducting language classes or meetings. Across the common room, there is the office of the social worker and a common laundry room meant for the inhabitants. The prefabricated construction has mostly made use of materials such as metal sections, joinery, sheets and wood (interview with the social worker, 2021).



▲ **Photograph 3.** *The entrance gate of the GU from the street in front. Source: Author, 2021.*



▲ **Photograph 4.** *The view upon entering the GU compound - Common room (grey) on the left, double storey residential blocks (red) on either side of the courtyard. Source: Author, 2021.*



▲ **Figure 6.** The aerial view of the GU and the surrounding context. Adapted by the author, 2021. (Aerial image from Google Maps)



▲ **Photograph 5.** The prefabricated construction uses corrugated metal panels and wood. Source: Author, 2021.



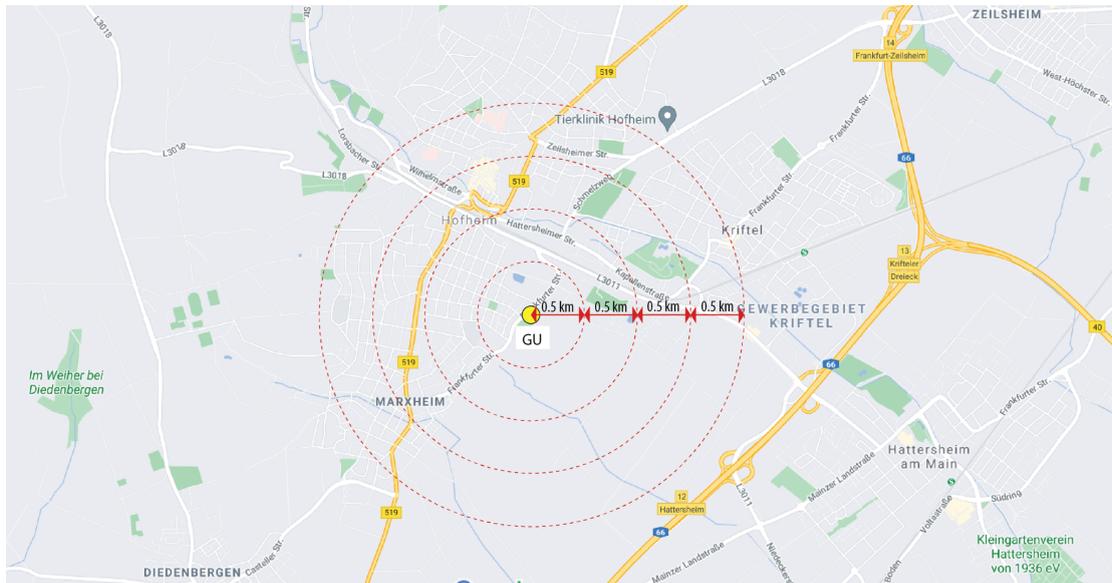
▲ **Photograph 6.** The view from outside the social worker's office - common room on the right and laundry room on the left. Source: Author, 2021.



▲ **Photograph 7.** A corridor on the second floor of the residential block. Source: Author, 2021.



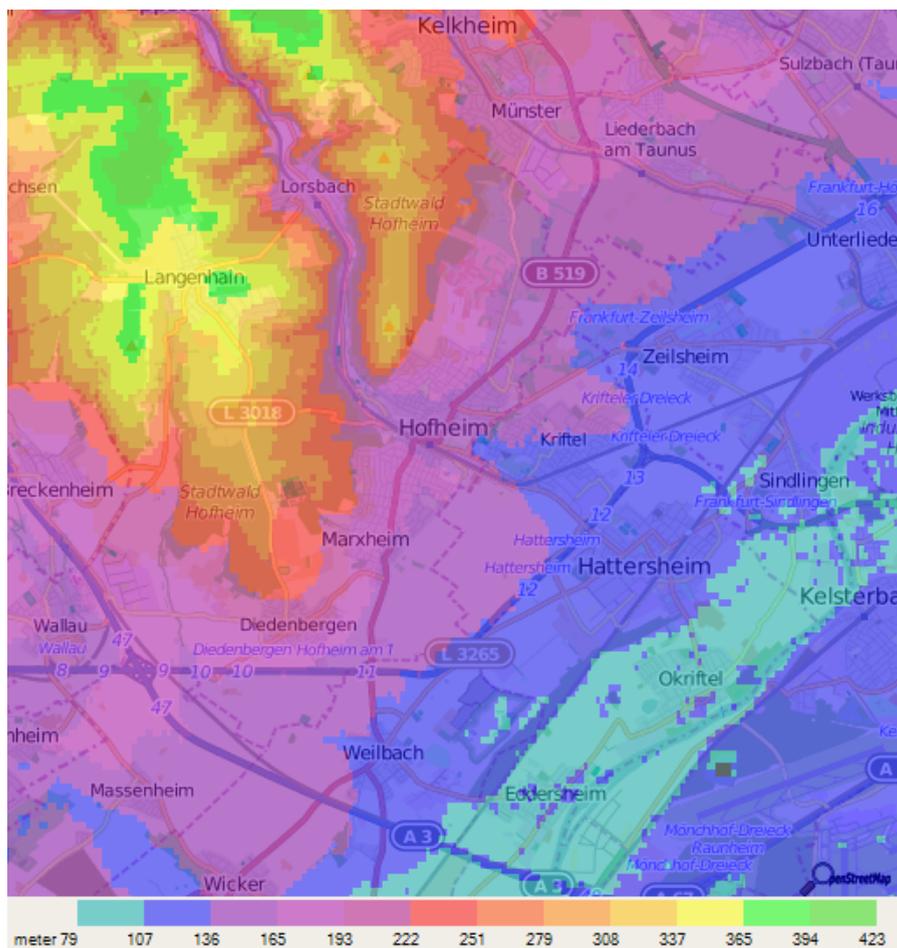
▲ **Photograph 8.** The passage between two residential blocks - The grey single storey blocks are mostly meant for singles and the red double storey ones for families. Source: Author, 2021.



▲ **Figure 7.** Map of Hofheim marking the location of the GU. Edited by the author, 2021. (Image from Google Maps)



▲ **Figure 8.** Satellite aerial view of the context surrounding the GU. Edited by the author, 2021. (Image from Google Maps)



▲ **Figure 9.** Elevation map of Hofheim and the surrounding context. The Taunus mountain range can be seen on the North-Western side and the Main river which is at a low elevation can be seen on the South-Eastern side. Source; (floodmap.net, 2020)



▲ **Photograph 9.** *The agricultural fields on the rear side of the GU. Source: Author, 2021.*



▲ **Photograph 10.** *A view of the GU from the side, showing the agricultural fields behind and on the sides of it. There are trees planted all around the GU along the boundary. Source: Author, 2021.*

3.2. Methodology

In order to address the relation of housing and its characteristics to the social integration of its inhabitants, I developed two methodological strategies. On one hand, using existing maps and simultaneously visiting the site, I plotted the amenities and the infrastructure and services that the inhabitants have access to such as schools, hospitals, centres of social support, open spaces including playgrounds, public transport connectivity and other amenities. This would become the basis for analysing the accessibility in terms of distance and connectivity to the services. As a second strategy, I conducted semi-structured in-person interviews with refugees and asylum seekers who are inhabitants of the GU at Hofheim. The interviewee sample consisted of asylum seekers and persons who had already obtained any of the official protection statuses, including in some cases, the status of refugee. The interviews were loosely structured to be based on the housing evaluation criteria but often, the process transformed into ‘ethnographic hanging out’ (Weber, 2018). The questions raised mainly pertained to the social connections, location, privacy, layout within and of the buildings, spaciousness, open spaces, access to services, and safety. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the *Sozialarbeiterin*⁶ working at the GU as well.

The interviewees were randomly approached in the open spaces in and around the GU. Six interviews with the residents were with individuals, whereas four were conducted in groups. Since each of these groups has a key person who was answering the most, for the sake of analysis, the group interviews and individual interviews are not distinguished. The persons apart from the key respondent, during the group interviews were mostly supporting the key respondent with smaller points or acting as translators.

While interviewing the inhabitants of the GU, since they were all of different countries of origin, different languages, namely, English and Hindi were used to converse with them. The majority of the interviews, six to be precise, were conducted in English. In the interview with the man from Chechnya, the respondent was speaking in his mother tongue and I, in English, but his son was able to translate for both of us. Four interviews were conducted in Hindi as three Afghan respondents and the Pakistani interviewee were all more comfortable with it. The site visits to the GU at Hofheim and interviews occurred during the months of May and June 2021. The result of the mapping will be coupled with the analysis of the qualitative data collected through semi-structured, individual and group interviews, in the next section to draw inferences.

⁶ Each GU has an appointed official ‘social worker’.

4. Findings - description, synthesis of collected data and analysis

This chapter reveals the results of the case study conducted on the GU at Hofheim am Taunus. Firstly, based on the conceptual framework developed for housing evaluation, semi-structured interviews conducted primarily with the inhabitants of the GU provided qualitative data that has been analysed. Simultaneously, the findings from interviews are connected with the mapping of the different amenities, namely, hospitals, schools, police stations, supermarkets, public transportation networks and city administration centres, around the GU to understand the proximity levels. Since the goal of the thesis was not to obtain an exhaustive and large sample of how housing affects the integration and well-being of refugees, but more to understand the meanings, feelings and self-understandings about housing and integration that refugees had, in the analysis, I have prioritized the interpretations of their words.

The analysis is approached in a structured fashion. Firstly, a description of the data collected through interviews with the inhabitants of the GU is made, theme by theme. As each theme or housing evaluation criterion is addressed, relevant information from the mapping is included. As the data is described, simultaneously, it is analysed and correlated with the literature review done initially. The description and analysis of qualitative data from the interview of the official social worker are also inserted into the appropriate sections.

As mentioned in the methodology section, ten inhabitants of the GU were interviewed. Four interviewees were from Afghanistan and one interviewee each from Chechnya*, Pakistan, Russia, Somalia, Syria and Zimbabwe. The sample consisted mainly of middle-aged people, but there were also some school-going respondents, young adults and senior citizens. Four people in the sample, the Pakistani, Russian, Somalian and an Afghan were at the GU, unaccompanied by family. Among the remaining six, two families, from Afghanistan consisting of three and four members, were by religion Hindus whereas the other Afghan family of nine, were Muslims by religion and Pashto was their primary language. The family from Chechnya has seven members and the Syrian family has nine members. All of the above-mentioned families consist of two parents and the rest are their children. All children of school-going age have access to education. Very few are older and are acquiring vocational training in nearby towns and just one young adult among all of them is working. The woman from Zimbabwe was the only exception who was a single woman with two young daughters. One of her daughters is just about to start going to primary school while the other daughter is younger and is differently-abled⁷. Eight respondents interviewed were males, the only exceptions being the women respondents from

⁷ As mentioned by her mother, she had a learning disability and had difficulty speaking.

Zimbabwe and Russia. In addition to the inhabitants, the social worker who works at the GU was also interviewed.

4.1. The layout of the Housing units in Gemeinschaftsunterkünften

In this section, I analyze the responses that were given by residents at the GU regarding the layout of the housing units. As mentioned in the conceptual framework, several authors have pointed out how physical aspects of the housing affect the well-being of its inhabitants (Ziersch et al., 2017).

4.1.1. Privacy

One of the questions asked to refugees was how they experienced **privacy** while living in the GU at Hofheim. Six out of ten respondents, who were all living with their families of varying sizes, said that they do have self-contained residential units and hence also privacy for the family. Nevertheless, individual privacy was limited especially when the family was bigger. For instance, an Afghan family had nine members and lived in the biggest housing unit available which had four rooms. In such cases, rooms were shared by mostly two members and often even three. On the other hand, the situation was not always the same because even families had to share housing units with others. The reduction in the number of asylum seekers has been detrimental to all families acquiring exclusive, self-contained housing units. A refugee from Afghanistan who moved here with his wife and daughter shared his experience of having lived in the GU at Hofheim for over five years;

“Two years ago and before, the number of people here was much more and we had to share our house with other families initially. There was a family from Iran initially, then a family from Pakistan after them. After they moved, we had to share with only individuals. One from Uzbekistan and then a girl from Russia. When they allot people to different houses, they try to put people who can speak the same language together but it doesn't always happen. But now that we have our own house, things are much better.”



▲ **Photograph 11.** Many families had personalised the corridor outside their door with plants and furniture. Source: Author, 2021.



▲ **Photograph 12.** A room in a housing unit that has been kept empty for quarantining in case a resident is tested positive for Covid-19. Usually the rooms have only two beds, the previous tenants had rearranged the furniture and brought in a bed from the next room to this room. Source: Author.

When housing units are shared by families, individuals or both, the allotment of residents to different housing units is done by the authorities at the GU. Three respondents, who were all individuals without a family accompanying them, mentioned how if they were discontent with who they have to **share the house** with, they could request for a change to authorities but oftentimes without any result. As the young Somalian male refugee puts it;

“I complained (about the people sharing the house) sometimes because the situation in the room was not good. They (authorities) never change the allotment.”

In spite of families having self-contained housing units at this point, individual asylum seekers and refugees, who are without their families inevitably have to share housing units with several others. All four respondents who belonged to this category expressed their disapproval of sharing the house with others. The above mentioned Somalian respondent elaborated on the same;

“Sharing the room with two other (random) people is bad! There are sometimes tensions in the house because some do not clean the kitchen or some people like to play music while others do not. Some are unemployed and hence they stay at the house all the time.”

An Afghan refugee who is a young male added to the argument of sharing being problematic because the common spaces are used by many residents;

“It (sharing the living unit) is difficult.. (At the moment) six of us share a single bathroom and a kitchen.”

The *Sozialarbeiterin* (social worker) who is officially employed at the GU confirmed what the single respondents said;

“Every room that single persons unaccompanied by family live in has (an attached) toilet and a washbasin. But, the bath and the kitchen are shared by (the inhabitants of) three (such) rooms.”

The Zimbabwean mother of two, who is an asylum seeker points out indirectly the **absence of any uniform, operational design standards** for such accommodations when she compares the two GUs she has resided at;

“Here we have privacy. We have two (bed) rooms, a bathroom, a toilet and a kitchen. But at (the previous GU of residence at) Kelkheim, we had no privacy. The three of us were in a room and the kitchen and toilets were commonly shared by many others.”



▲ **Photograph 13.** The post box at the GU. The surnames of residents are pasted on the respective boxes. Some boxes have many names as they are individuals sharing the same unit whereas families usually share the same surname and have only one sticker on their box. The names have been blacked out to maintain the anonymity of the inhabitants. Source: Author, 2021.

UN Habitat (1996) lists adequate privacy as an important aspect of adequate housing. From the interviews, it is evident that sharing the living space has meant limiting privacy which consequently has a significant negative impact on the well-being of the residents. Inadequacy in terms of privacy has been observed in other studies to impact the mental health of inhabitants (Bakker et al., 2016; Ziersch et al., 2017). At the moment, as the number of asylum seekers has reduced in comparison to the past, at the GU at Hofheim, all the interviewed families residing at the GU at Hofheim have been able to acquire exclusive, self-contained housing units and hence, more privacy. However, this privacy is still only as a family unit and not as individuals, especially when the families are bigger and rooms, shared. Nonetheless, all the individual resident asylum seekers and refugees who are not with families are sharing housing units with, escalating interpersonal tensions and consequently deteriorating their mental health. The design or layout of the building, which is addressed in the next section, has a direct effect on privacy levels (Bonney, 2007) but in the case of the GU at Hofheim, the prime reason for reduced privacy levels is lack of living space or overcrowding.

4.1.2. Layout and Size of the Housing Units

As discussed in the previous section about privacy, sharing of the housing unit is an existing issue that impacts well-being. The interviews then progressed to the question related to the

layout and size of the housing unit. All respondents were either satisfied or had no complaints about the layout of the housing units in terms of the arrangement of spaces, lighting and ventilation. However, in terms of the size of housing units, nine respondents said that the housing units were not spacious enough.

For instance, the Syrian refugee who lives in the GU with his wife and their seven children, elaborated on the housing unit being small and also compared it to the regular German housing standards;

“The house is very small! We are a big family and according to the normal German standards, we are supposed to have a housing unit of more than 120 square metres but here the housing unit is just 42 square metres.”

The social worker also talked about the space standards that have been followed in the case of the GU;

“The (architectural) standard (in terms of area per person) used to be 6 square metres per person and now it is 7 sqm/person excluding the common spaces like the kitchen and bathroom. If the common spaces are to be included, then it becomes 9 sqm/person.”



▲ **Photograph 14.** A kitchen in one of the family housing units. There is a compact dining area within the same space (bottom-left corner). Source: Author, 2021.

Furthermore, an Afghan refugee family of nine who lives in a housing unit with four bedrooms finds the living situation is quite crowded. Similarly, the refugee from Chechnya who is living in Hofheim with his wife and five children added to the narrative;

“It is difficult as we are a big family. It (the dwelling) is a bit small, but we can live here.”

The problem of space shortage is more acute when the family size is bigger. Nevertheless, another Afghan refugee who has a smaller family of 4, which includes his wife and two school-going children, also stated that the size of the dwelling was limiting;

“(In the dwelling)..there are two rooms, a kitchen, a bathroom and a toilet. It is small because when the children are studying, they use the bedroom. It would have been nicer with one extra living room!”

The situation of individual asylum seekers and refugees, unaccompanied by their families, is not very different. And according to the answers, size is directly related to privacy. For example, the young male refugee from Somalia during the interview said;

“It’s (the dwelling) very small. I live in a room of 11 square meters and now 3 people live in it. There are two bunk beds and maybe they’ll let another person move in at some point.”

The Pakistani refugee says; *“There is no storage space. We’ve kept things everywhere. Under the beds, on top of the cupboards. There are shoes and bags all over the place.”*

One of the physical aspects of housing that has been observed to influence health and well-being negatively is the inappropriateness of layout (Ziersch et al., 2017). According to Phillimore and Goodson (2008), in order for the refugees or asylum seekers to ‘feel at home’, housing has been observed to be key by researchers and the housing needed to be of suitable typologies. Nevertheless, the interviewees did raise the issue of lacking a living room and storage spaces, which is not just a shortcoming of the layout but connected to an overall lack of space. The residents of the GU face major difficulties in terms of lack of space but not so much because of the layout itself. Furthermore, scholars have clearly established the negative relationship between overcrowding and mental health (Ziersch et al., 2017; Ziersch & Due, 2016) and this is also evident from the interviews that there is a lack of space at the GU and it has negative effects on the well-being of the inhabitants.

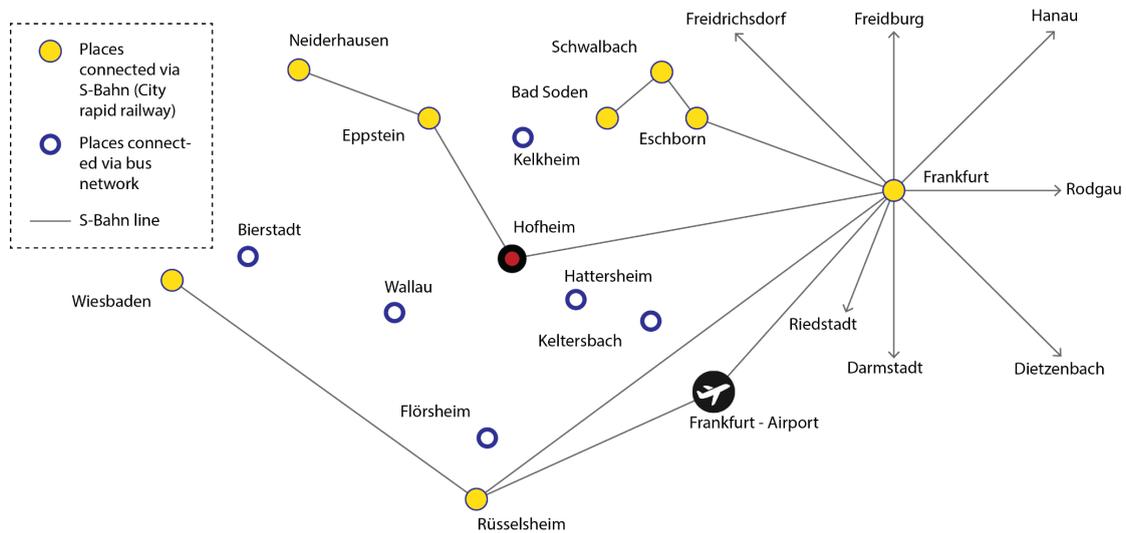
4.2. Location & Access to Services

In this section, I analyze all the questions related to the **location** of the housing units and the **access to services**. Seven out of ten interviewees expressed their satisfaction with the location

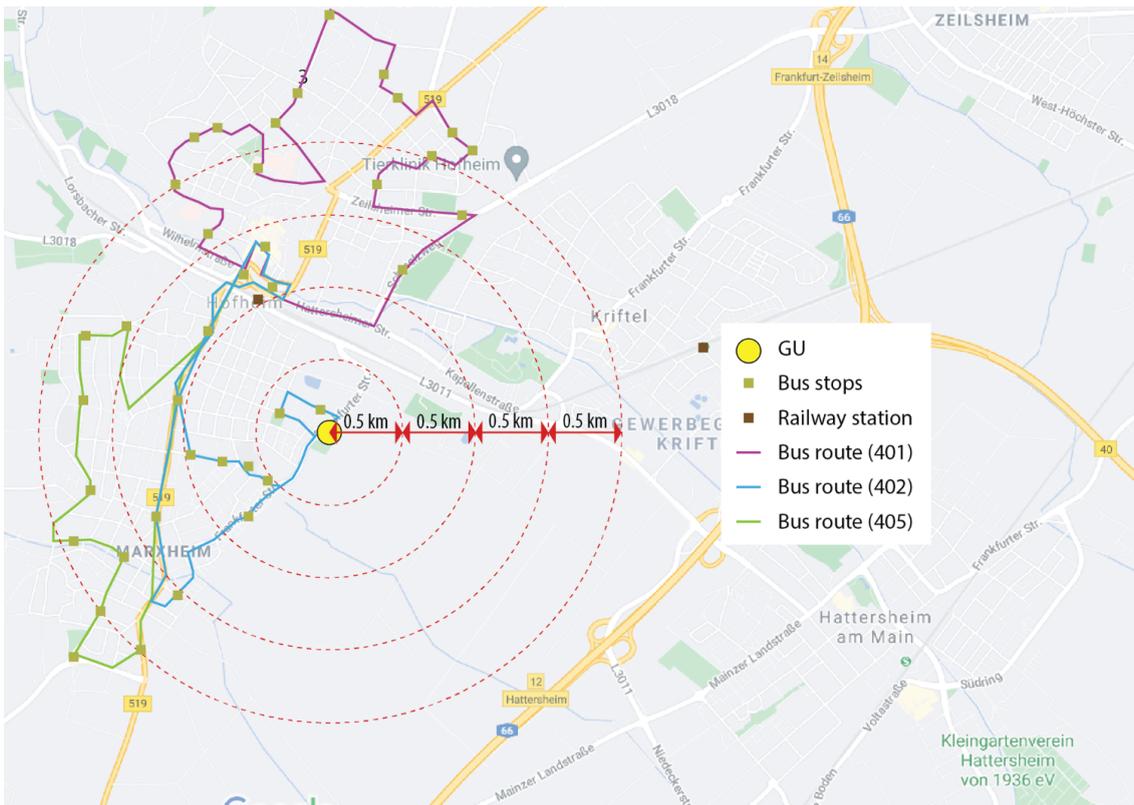
of the GU while the remaining three were dissatisfied. In the former category, the reasons given were however different. For instance, a young Afghani refugee living in the GU who is acquiring vocational training at an institution in a nearby town highlighted the transportation connectivity told me:

“The location is awesome! The railway station is at a walkable distance and I used to take the train every day (to go to the educational institution) before everything became online (due to the pandemic).”

From *figure 11*, it is evident that the railway station is at a walkable distance of about 1 km from the GU, strengthening the above-mentioned respondent’s statements. In addition, a very accessible public bus transport network enhances the connectivity. A lack of transportation infrastructure can lead to social isolation (Basok & George, 2020) but that is not the case here.



▲ **Figure 10.** Inter-town mobility - Bus and train connectivity. Adapted from: Google Maps



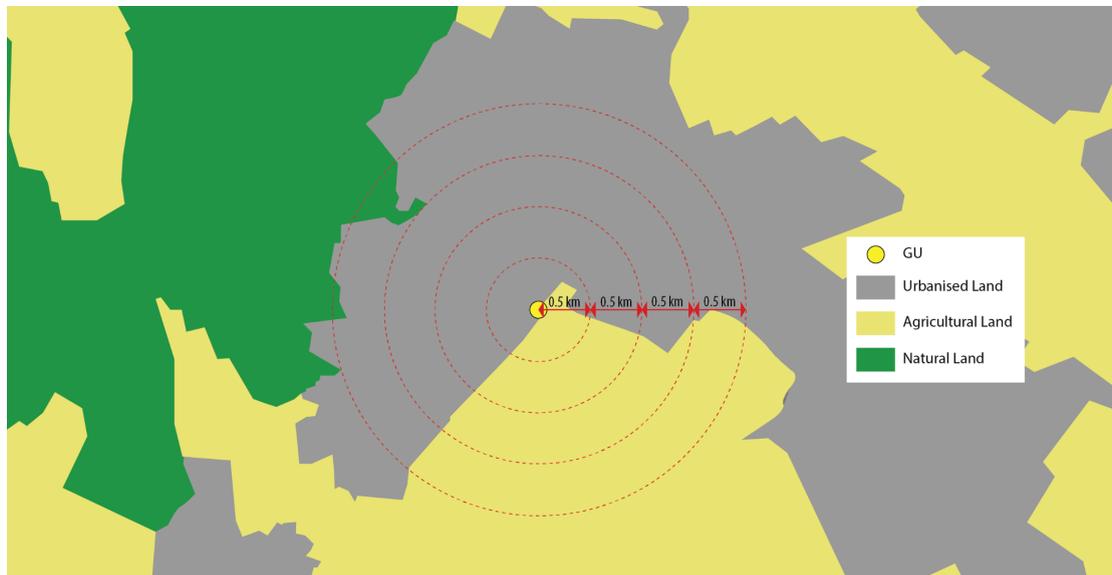
▲ **Figure 11.** Map of intra-town bus connectivity at Hofheim Am Taunus (selected three main bus routes). Adapted from: Google Maps; (Moovit, 2021)

Other positive responses about the location came from six out of the ten interviewees who were residents of the GU mentioning that amenities like, for example, supermarkets, schools for children, police station, hospitals and the city administration were in close proximity to or at a walkable distance from the GU. For instance, the middle-aged refugee from Pakistan says;

“It (the location) is good. There’s the play area, the fields and also the market nearby.”

The GU is located along the road, Frankfurterstrasse, that marks the Eastern boundary of Hofheim and beyond it is a vast area consisting of just agricultural fields. Often peripheral locations of GUs, as they are usually situated in the outskirts of urban areas, are criticized. On the contrary, lack of open spaces and play areas in urban areas can impede the chances for physical activity, thereby, increasing obesity levels and cognitive problems in children (Bonney, 2007). However, in the case of the GU at Hofheim, there is a public playground adjacent to it with courts to play basketball, volleyball, football and table tennis. Three of these six respondents specifically highlighted the proximity to play areas or open spaces like the asylum seeker from Chechnya who migrated to Germany with his wife and five children;

“The location is good, the people are friendly, there are really nice open spaces and play areas for the children. I’ve been living here (with my family) for five years and I have no complaints (about the location).”



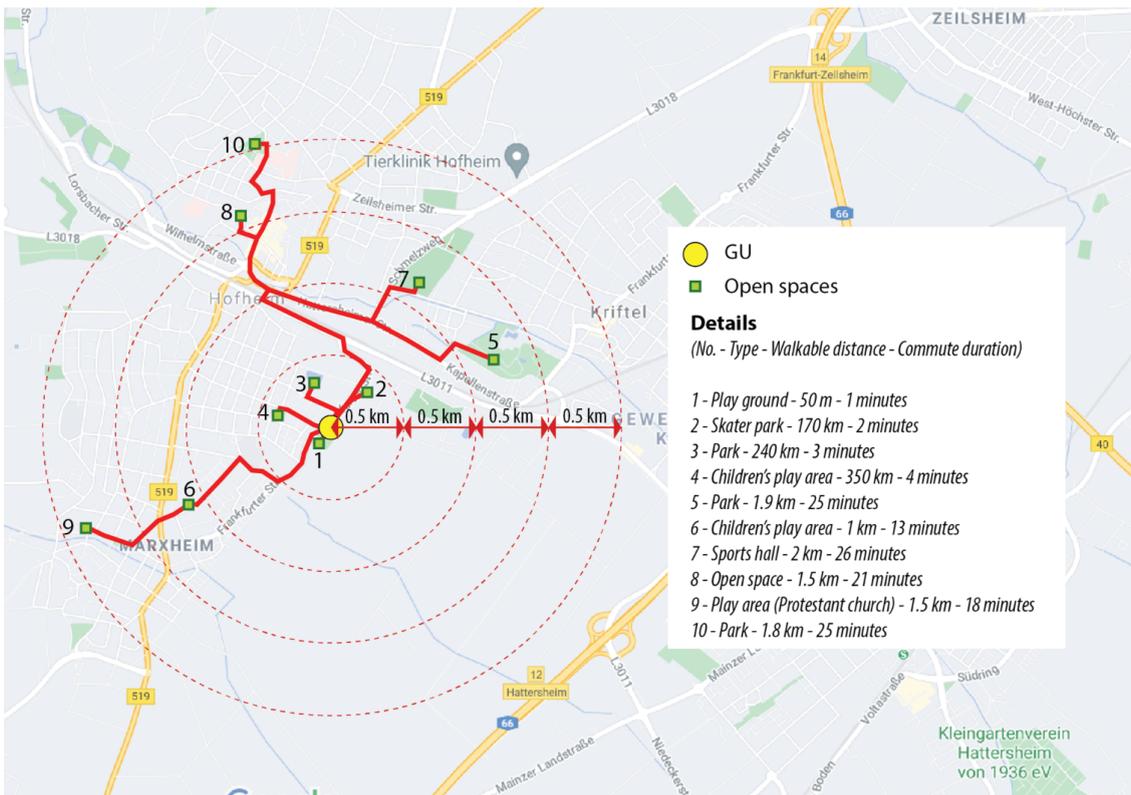
▲ **Figure 12.** Schematic map showing the broad nature of land use around the GU. The natural land mostly consists of forests and is part of the Taunus mountain range. On the South-Eastern side of the GU is a vast stretch of agricultural fields. Adapted from: Google Maps.



▲ **Photograph 15.** The playground right beside the GU consists of a table to play table tennis, courts to play basketball, football and volleyball. Source: Author, 2021.



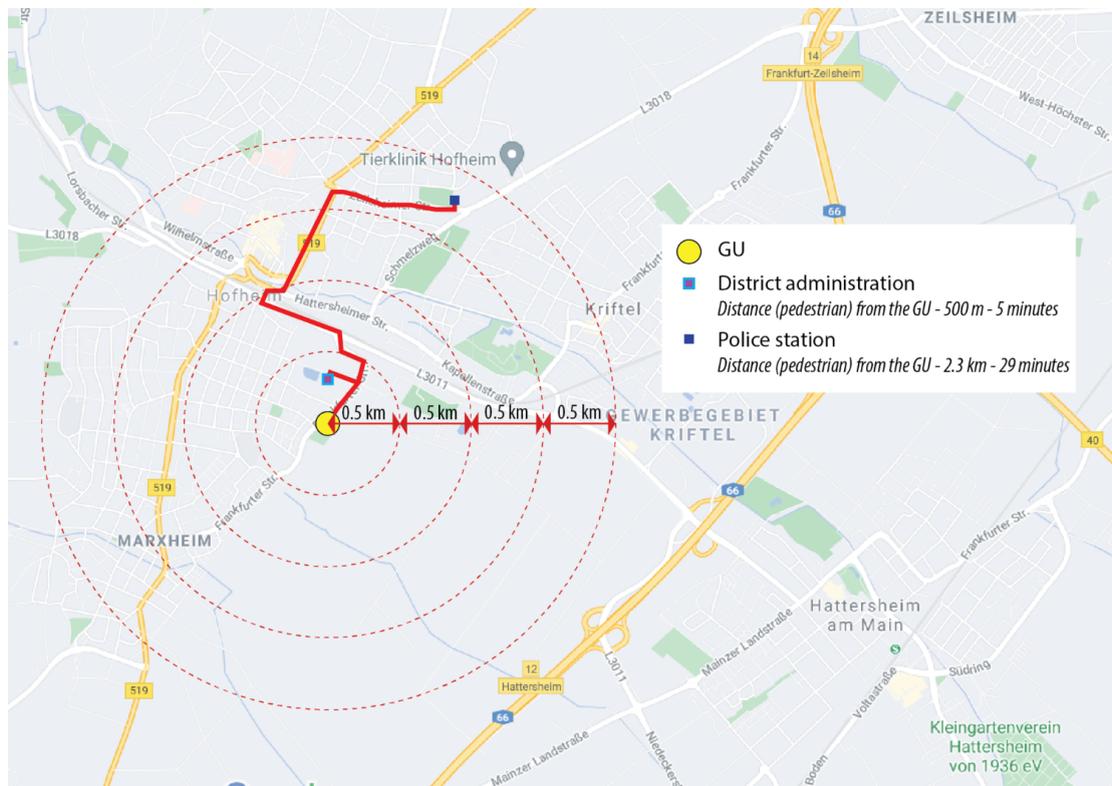
▲ **Photograph 16.** The skater park, close to the GU. Source: Author, 2021.



▲ **Figure 13.** Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and surrounding open spaces. Adapted from: Google Maps

The social worker underlined another reason for the location being convenient;

“Living here is a luxury as the district administration office is right across the street. The residents find it very easy to go there for appointments. I can contact the officials there, if there are any (paperwork) related problems that the residents are facing. Sometimes if some paper has a mistake, I can quickly send the correct one in two minutes with a person and solve the issue.”



▲ **Figure 14.** Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU, district administration and the police station. Adapted from: Google Maps

Moreover, another respondent, a middle-aged woman from Zimbabwe who was the mother of two girls, had a similar perspective but highlighted that the previous GU and also the reception centre she was accommodated at were located poorly;

“Here I cannot complain (about the location). My daughter can now go to a Betreuer⁸ within the neighbourhood and also the hospital is nearby. I was too stressed out at (the previous GU of

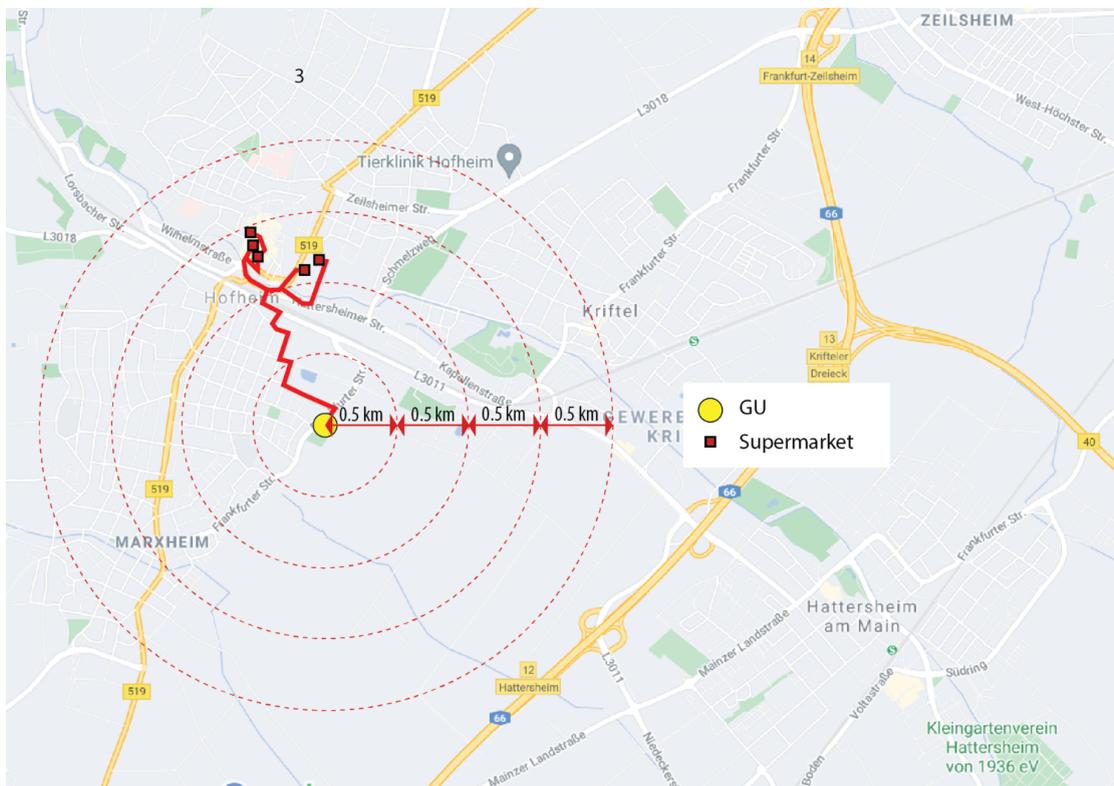
⁸ *Betreuer* is the German word for caretaker.

residence at) Kelkheim, there was no space to take the children out. They need to run and jump!”

This disparity between different GUs exists due to an absence of nationwide, uniform standards created for refugee accommodations. Moreover, this is absent even at the state level, as only some states have the minimum standards for refugee accommodation and the standards vary in terms of their ‘binding nature’ and ‘content’ (Cremer, 2014, as cited in, Aumüller et al., 2015).

Even though most of the interviewees expressed their satisfaction with the location, the rest, three respondents out of ten to be specific, contradicted, to various degrees, the popular opinion that the location was good. One of these respondents expressed general dissatisfaction with the location without giving a clear rationale, while the remaining two out of these three respondents shared the perspective that the GU was located far away from the commercial centres. For instance, a Russian woman in her early twenties, who was previously a resident of the GU at Hofheim in 2018 recollected about the location being not so prime in her experience;

“I remember that the location was quite far from the city centre. Even to go grocery shopping, I had to walk for 15 to 20 minutes, one way. Would have been more convenient to have a supermarket closer to the residence.”



▲ **Figure 15.** Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and nearby supermarkets.

It could be suggested that there are differences in terms of how people experience the location and proximity of utilities. It is possible that refugee women who have families prioritize or value the proximity to open spaces and playgrounds while women who do not have kids would prefer to live closer to city centres with more options.

A young male refugee from Somalia had a similar outlook on where the GU was placed;

“(The location is) Not good! This is a village and not a city. Everything is far away, including supermarkets. If I want to go out for some drinks with friends or for shopping, there aren't many options nearby.” This opinion is strengthened by the mapping diagram, *figure 15*, which reveals that the supermarkets are located at a distance of around 2 km.

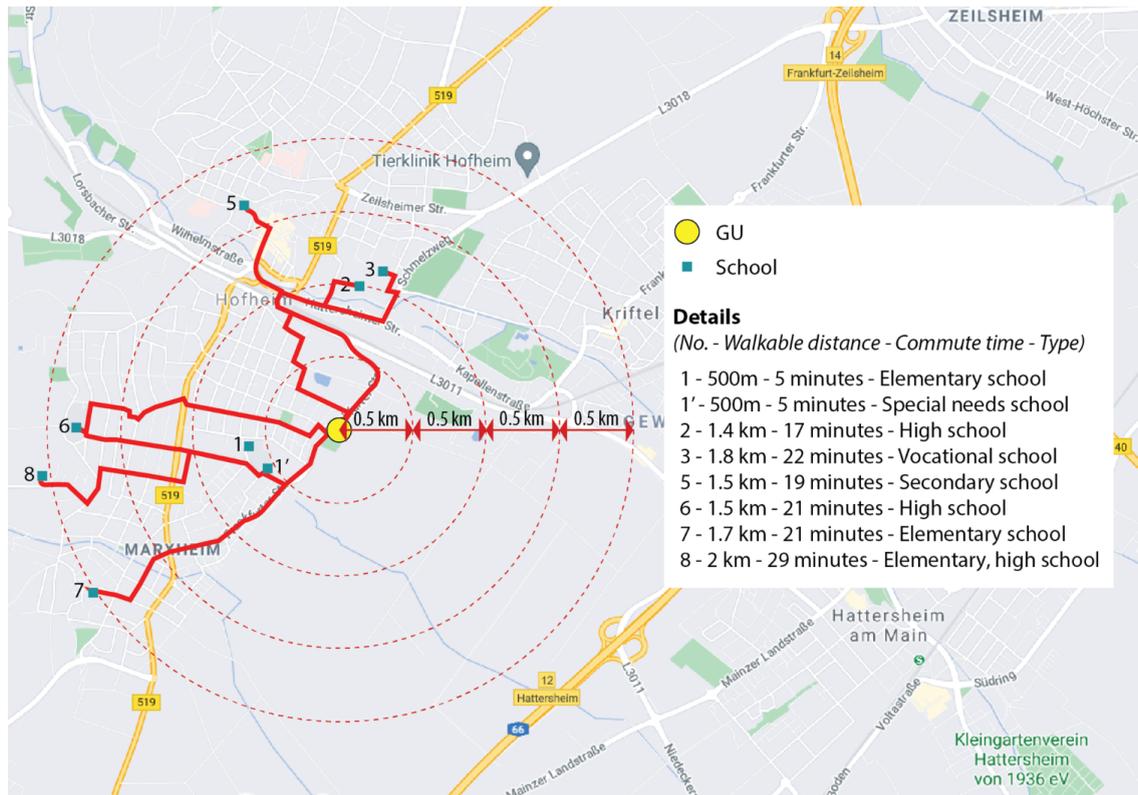
Conflicting perspectives were expressed by the residents of the GU about the location of the accommodation. It has to do with the concept of a good location being subjective. However, the majority of the interviewees agreed on the location being satisfactory. Major reasons provided for the same are high public transport connectivity, proximity to amenities like schools, hospitals and supermarkets. As Phillimore & Goodson (2008) point out, being located well is a precondition for migrants to feel at home. It helps to develop a sense of ontological security if the ‘neighbourhood quality’ is good (Ziersch et al., 2017).

As elaborated in the discussion about location, there are schools, hospitals and also commercial outlets located at accessible distances from the GU. However, this section is not intended to examine the physical proximities to educational institutions, healthcare facilities and centres of commercial activity. Neither is it focusing on access to basic services like water supply, heating and electricity as they have all been observed to be intact. The upcoming paragraphs examine how the refugee policies in the context of Germany and specifically pertaining to the GU at Hofheim, facilitate or impede the residents’ access to education, healthcare and the job market. Even though the policies are not related to housing, it is important to understand them. For example, mere proximity of the GU to a school does not ensure that the child of an asylum seeker can study there.

Firstly, according to the social worker who works at the GU, not all asylum seekers and refugees have access to the formal German language course and the integration course. It is reserved for those who are permitted to stay for longer. There is a common space at the GU where volunteers

provide unofficial language classes that any resident can attend, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these classes have been suspended until further notice. Seven out of ten respondents said that they have one or more family members who are minors and acquiring formal education from schools in and around Hofheim, including kindergartens, elementary schools and high schools. The Afghan refugee, who is accompanied by his family of four said;

“Both my kids go to school here. These are normal schools which are of really good quality and they study with German children.”

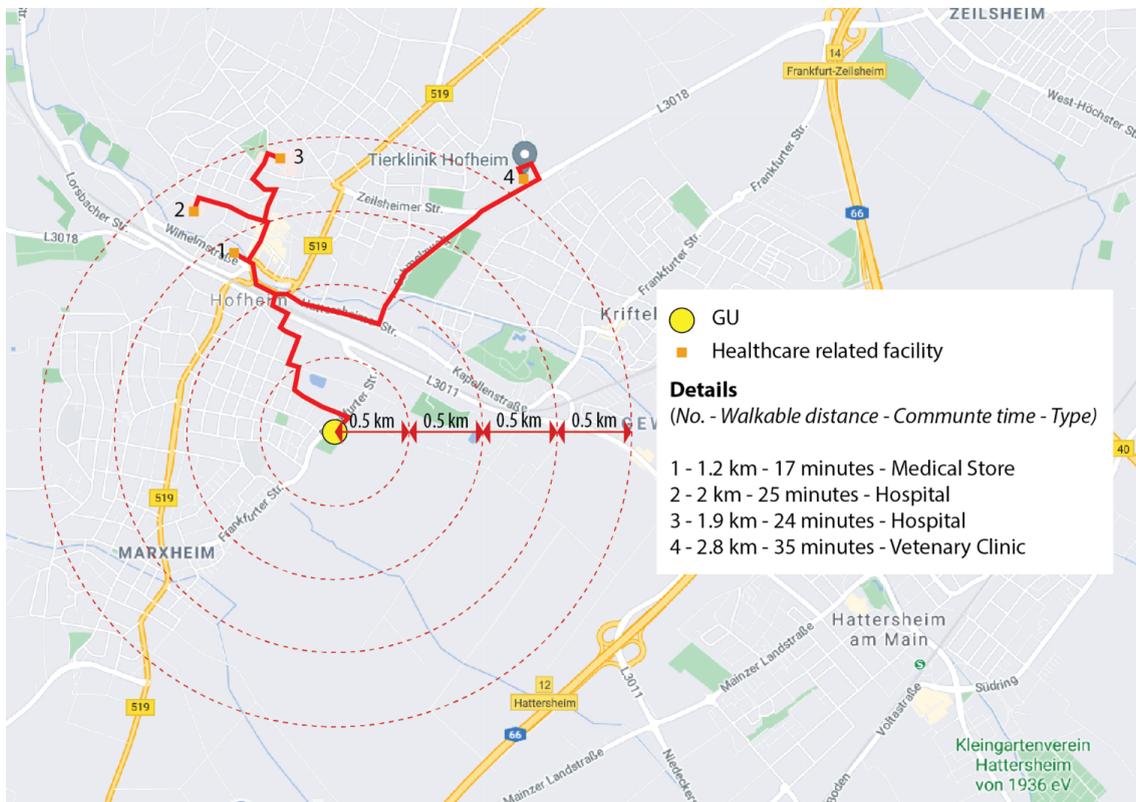


▲ **Figure 16.** Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and surrounding schools. Adapted from: Google maps

Three out of ten respondents were adult men unaccompanied by family, who were more focused on getting employed and hence not interested in acquiring formal education. One of them, a youngster from Afghanistan, who has been in Germany now for five years, completed his schooling and now is attending a vocational training (*ausbildung*) institute in a nearby town. In general, it is very easy for asylum seekers to get into elementary and high school, but it requires efforts from them to get admitted into universities for higher education.

All interviewees expressed that they have access to healthcare. No dissatisfaction was expressed in this regard. Several volunteer organizations help out with the bureaucratic procedures and

even financially at times for the refugees to access healthcare facilities. Some volunteers who are trained, provide counselling and psychological support through therapy, free of charge to the asylum seekers and refugees. There are very specific support groups meant for just women and children also.



▲ **Figure 17.** Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and surrounding healthcare related facilities. Adapted from: Google Maps

But on the other hand, when talking about the job market, some issues were raised by the respondents. A respondent said,

“I am an electrical engineer from Syria. I learned German for six months and then the coronavirus pandemic happened. Language is very important here to get a job, I need a B1 (qualification) level. Also, being an asylum seeker, I have to first get a contract from the employer and then submit it to the authorities here. They have to approve the contract for me to get the job. Sometimes, it takes a month for this and by that time, the job is already taken by someone else.”

A female asylum seeker elaborated on her situation and aspiration;

“Learning the language is difficult for me. It is the first step to getting a job. I am allowed to work but at this moment, my two children are my priority. I will get the required skills and I want to take care of the elderly as a profession. It is my passion.”

Another young respondent who already has refugee status said,

“I’m looking for a job but it’s difficult. They (the authorities at the GU) told me to first do a praktikum (internship) at some company in Frankfurt and that would help to get a job later.”

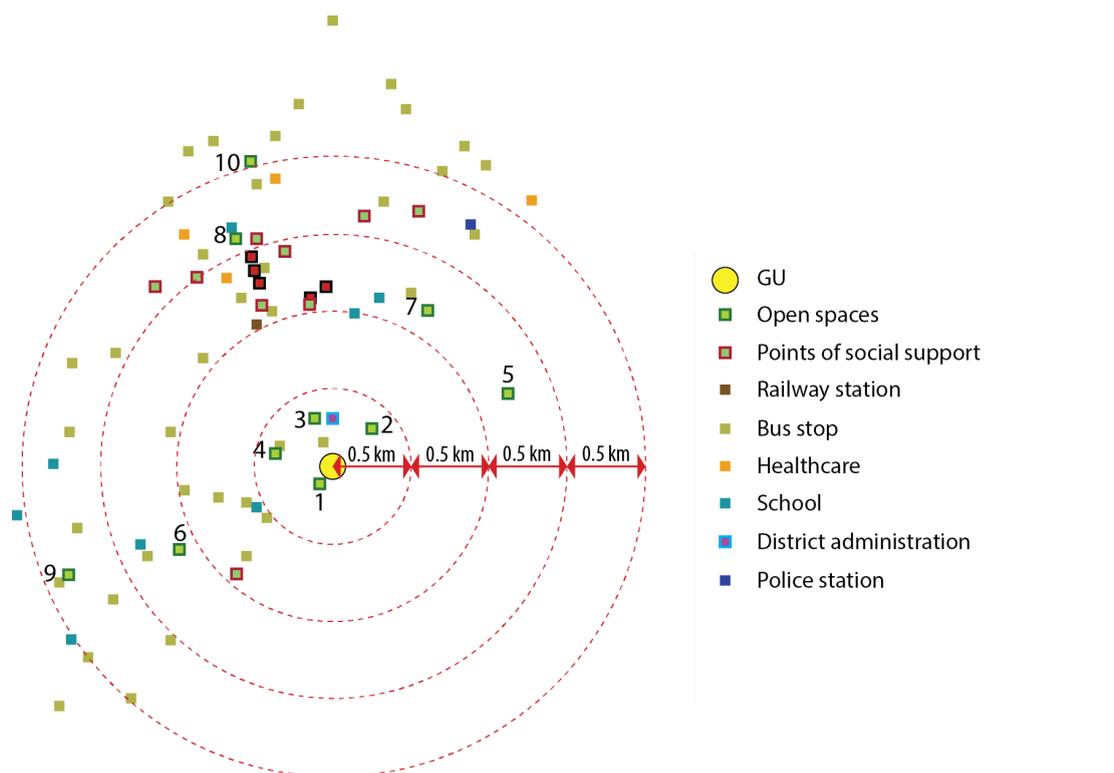
The authorities at the GU help the resident asylum seekers and refugees in this regard by guiding them, but also, bureaucratic delays in processing the papers related to employment, as expressed by the asylum seeker, often diminishes the chances of being employed. In some cases, age is a barrier for finding employment as the older refugee from Afghanistan put it;

“I am now 71 years old. I tried to get a job in the beginning for about six months and then I gave up. I learned the basics of the language but nobody wants to hire me as I am old.”

Moreover, another asylum seeker from Pakistan mentions how he is able to find only low-end jobs;

“Finding a job is very hard when you are an outsider with limited language skills. I work at Amazon (the company) in a godown (warehouse). It does not pay a lot.”

Numerous scholars list employment, education and health among other things as means and markers of integration (Ager and Strang, 2008; Ziersch & Due, 2018; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). Many objective indicators developed to measure the level of integration are also based on these parameters as a component of integration is to enable the refugees to “achieve public outcomes within employment, housing, education, health etc. which are equivalent to those achieved within the wider host communities.” (Ager & Strang, 2004, Pg. 5). Firstly, the policies in Germany give access to education to all school-going children who are refugees or asylum seekers but it is up to them to navigate the system to attain higher education. Secondly, in terms of access to healthcare, all refugees and asylum seekers have access to the healthcare system and also additional voluntary support in terms of psychological care. Finally, moving onto employment, the problem with accessing the job market is that learning German is necessary and also the educational qualifications from the home countries might prove not to be of value in Germany because of the difference in standards.



▲ **Figure 18.** Radial diagram marking all the mapped amenities around the GU. Adapted from: Google Maps

4.3. Safety

Another important aspect that the interviewees were asked about was how **safe** they felt, living at the GU. Eight interviewees out of ten said they felt completely safe at the GU and there were no problems regarding the same. The remaining two did not state that it was unsafe but shared some insights. One of them said she did feel safe but said;

“As a woman, I had two or three strange encounters. Nothing violent or so, just slightly uncomfortable.”

The other respondent referred to incidents of theft at the GU;

“Sometimes, the neighbours steal some things. There were a couple of bicycles that were stolen. Also when you forget something outside, it can easily disappear. In this sense, the place is not safe.”

However, the social worker talked about occasional scuffles between certain residents which transformed even into fist-fights sometimes;

“Sometimes we have to call the police because of fights (between residents). It doesn't happen very often. The problems are created by specific persons and other households do not cause any trouble. When there are more young men, usually there are more conflicts.”

A major constituent of the concept of home is the feeling of safety. Home is the secure and safe centre of an individual's universe (Fozdar & Hartley, 2014). The psychosocial benefits of having a home can be adversely affected by external stresses which negatively impact the feelings of 'safety, intimacy and control' (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). In the case of the GU at Hofheim, the majority of the inhabitants feel safe living there.

4.4. Social Connections

Social connections are further classified by scholars into **social bonds, social bridges and social links**. Firstly, social bonds in this context refer to not just the intra-ethnic relations, but also all connections between families and individuals living in the GU at Hofheim. Secondly, social bridges refer to the relations between the residents of the GU and the local population around them, who are predominantly native Germans. Finally, social links refer to how the residents of the GU interact with the governmental machinery and the social connections formed in the process.

The respondents while talking about social bonds within the GU expressed that people who speak the same languages are naturally able to communicate and form bonds with one another. Five respondents agreed on the relations being good in general between the residents of the GU. The young Russian woman recollected about her time at the GU;

“I remember that there were groups who spoke the same languages, but also they would support and help each other...The Afghans were always helping me by fixing my bike. I was also always invited for tea and cake by everyone there.”

The Afghan refugee adds to this when he says;

“The people are very good. They are always up for helping out with something and everybody greets everyone else. There are several people from Afghanistan and I can easily interact with them because I speak the languages (spoken in Afghanistan).”

The asylum seeker from Zimbabwe had a good impression of the other residents;

“I am new here, it has only been two months. I mind my own business but people smile and seem to be nice. I made one friend and talk to her sometimes.”

Nevertheless, two respondents expressed neutral opinions, saying there are no problems with other residents, but also they have not formed many social connections with other residents. The asylum seeker from Chechnya said;

“We have no problems (with others), maybe sometimes a little bit but it still works.”

Moreover, three respondents expressed that there are some conflicts between the residents of the GU. The Syrian asylum seeker said;

“Some people here are racist! They call me Arab and say bad things about me. I don't know why they think like this but others are okay.”

The Afghan refugee also mentioned the existence of a conflict;

“Our neighbour always makes a lot of noise, even late at night and that is a problem for us. He also throws his garbage down (as he lives above us) and this makes the front of our house dirty, the courtyard.”

The Somali refugee pointed out that the reason for such tensions arising could be ‘cultural differences’.

‘Social support networks’ are important (Rolfe, Garnham, Godwin, Anderson, Seaman and Donaldson, 2020), especially in the case of vulnerable groups such as refugees and asylum seekers. Ager and Strang (2008) write about the advantages of having ‘like ethnic’ groups for integration and also health. The interviewees who expressed that they have friendships within the GU at Hofheim also mentioned confidently that they would easily get help from the neighbours if there ever was a need. As scholars have written, home “includes not just the physical abode but the relationship within it and around”, which refers to not just the social bonds but also social bridges, (Kearns, Hiscock, Ellaway & Macintyre, 2000) which the next section covers.

Moving onto social bridges, the interviewees were asked about their relations to the surrounding local host population. Four interviewees responded by saying that they had established active social connections with native members of the society in Hofheim. Two respondents said that they had connections but after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interactions have been reduced or even stopped. Three respondents had a mixed perspective on the same, saying that they have had both good and bad interactions with the locals. Lastly, one respondent said that he does not have any connections with any locals as he finds no time.

A majority, four out of ten, of respondents stated that some people from the local population were actively involved in helping the asylum seekers and refugees out. The young Russian woman stated;

“There were many German volunteers always helping (the residents of the GU) out with various things. There are many volunteer groups like the Familie Nord who are connected to the GU. I remember that I also joined a local Orchestra as I play the violin.”

A similar outlook was shared by the asylum seeker from Chechnya;

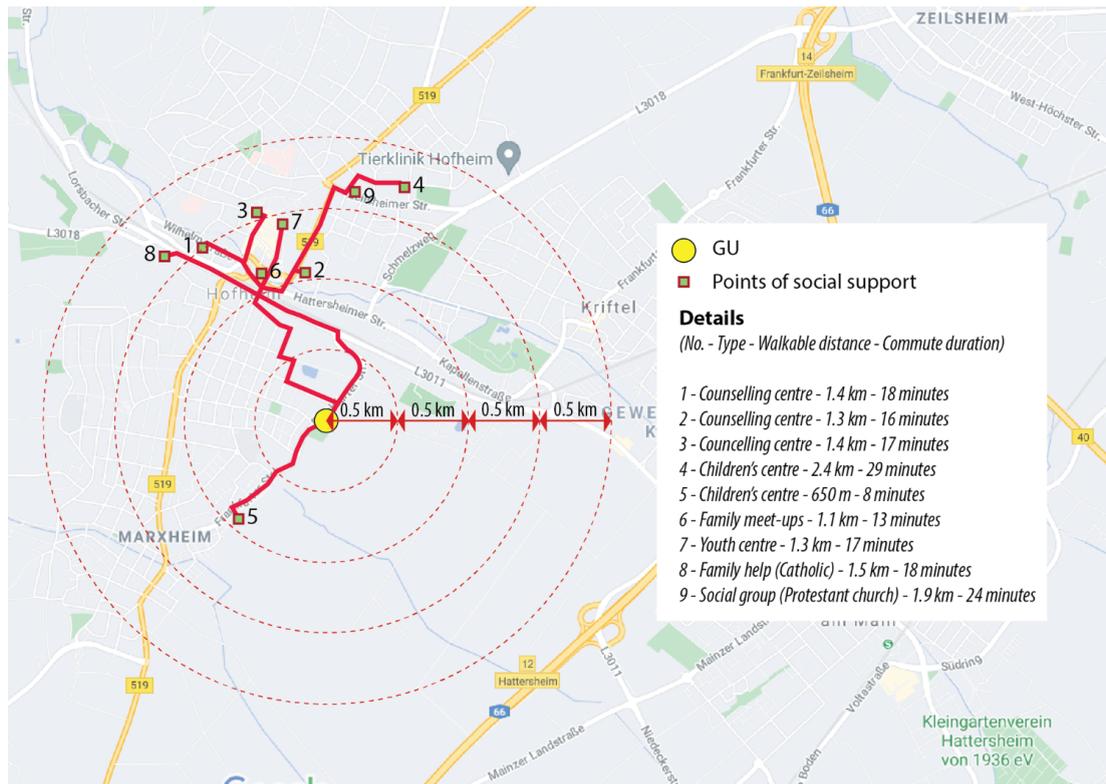
“I have German friends. Also, the volunteers help my family with things, like for example, with the admission at the school and so on.”

The Afghan refugee highlighted the role of the schools in creating these social bridges when he said;

“The local people do help. We don't come across any bad people. Our children have made friends with German kids at school. So when we need some help, the parents of these children help us out and very quickly too.”

Another young Afghan refugee expressed how some (refugees/asylum seekers) make more connections with the local citizens than others;

“I have no friends (who are local citizens). I do not go out a lot. But my brothers have a lot of friends and they go out and play. People are nice but I just go to my school and when classes are done, I come back.”



▲ **Figure 19.** Map highlighting the pedestrian routes (red) between the GU and points of social support. Adapted from: Google Maps; (Main-Taunus-Kreis, 2015)



▲ **Photograph 17.** Outdoor furniture at the GU painted by the children living there and other children from a nearby school. The paint and equipment were provided by the volunteers. Source: Author, 2021.

The three respondents had mixed views about the local population. For instance, the single refugee from Pakistan said;

“There are good people and bad people here (in Germany), just like everywhere. The social workers do help me out now and then.”

The level of participation of refugees in the social networks is a measure of their social integration. This would mainly involve forming social connections with the members of the host society. A higher level of social participation is advantageous as it can help the migrants access employment, cultural knowledge and education (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2013). The majority of the interviewees exhibit low social participation levels as their only interactions with the host population are through volunteers or colleagues. Social bridges are crucial for achieving integration. Ager and Strang (2008) quote The Refugee Council Working Paper published in 1997 that defined integration as; “a process which prevents or counteracts the social marginalization of refugees, by removing legal, cultural and language obstacles and ensuring that refugees are empowered to make positive decisions on their future and benefit fully from available opportunities as per their abilities and aspirations” (p. 179, 180).

Finally, I want to elaborate also on the social links, referring to how the refugees and asylum seekers interact with the governmental structures, which is very closely linked to social bridges, which is described in the previous section. Often, foreigners are helped by friends or acquaintances who are natives or native-language speakers to fill out forms and write letters to communicate with the government. From the interviewee sample, five respondents stated that they are self-sufficient as an individual or in some cases as a family unit to navigate the bureaucratic governmental procedures. The refugee from Afghanistan said;

“We used to take help from the social (workers)...But now my daughter does it all. She is currently undergoing vocational training and speaks German perfectly.”

The Syrian asylum seeker also finds himself in a very similar situation. He said;

“My daughter helps me (to do bureaucratic things). My German is not so good, but I still do all the required paperwork for the family with the help of my daughter.”

An Afghan refugee reinforces the idea of children learning the local language and helping the family out in dealing with the government when he said;

“I still have not learned German. Because my children go to school with Germans, they learn quickly in some months. Now they help us to fill forms and understand letters.”

A woman respondent from Zimbabwe talked about how she was denied asylum once and has filed an appeal with the help of a lawyer. Now she is waiting for the result but the point is that there are lawyers who are accessible to asylum seekers and refugees. Apart from these formal institutions that they can rely on, asylum seekers also rely on informal resources. For example, the interviewee from Pakistan proves this when he said;

“I take help from the officials but not that often. My friends help me out. I look at how they fill forms, we compare our forms. It is convenient to get help from the community.”

Moreover, two respondents said they avail help from the social workers frequently. The single man, who was an asylum seeker from Afghanistan said,

“Often, I try to use google translate and read the letters (from officials). But the social workers always help me out.”

Another refugee from Afghanistan said something very similar;

“They (the social worker and volunteers) help out with the papers. There is an official at the GU but also my family now has two contacts outside. We ask them for help with all the paperwork.”

Although the asylum seekers and refugees face difficulties in interacting with the governmental structures because of the language barrier and inability to navigate the new system, the volunteers and other social connections prove to be highly resourceful in these circumstances. Apart from this, there is also the state-provided assistance, as there is a social worker employed at every GU.

4.5. Reasons for protracted stay at the GU

Some residents have been living in the GU for several years, even after their legal obligation to live there expired. One interviewee’s family had lived there for eight years and another one’s for more than five years. Several others had been living there for around three or four years. This is primarily because the residents are not able to find other houses to rent in the urban areas. There is an existing housing shortage in Germany, which adds to the severity of the problem.

The Afghan refugee with a family of three said;

“I have been living here for five years. I have applied for housing outside but never could make a successful deal. The social worker helps me but still, it is hard to find a house.”

The Pakistani respondent who was unaccompanied by family gave reasons for the difficulty in moving out of the GU;

“I pay a rent of 350 Euros here (at the GU) as I have a job. It is hard to get an apartment outside (the GU). My job does not pay well and rents are expensive if I want to rent a private apartment or house.”

The social worker also highlighted the issue of affordability when she said;

“After getting a letter, the resident must move out (of the GU). But they cannot until they find a place. We help them out by listing options and providing details. The main problem is that the flats are expensive. There are not so many social (housing) flats. They can look for private apartments but the price must be okay.”

The social worker also mentioned another reason for the protracted stay of bigger families at the GU;

“When the families are big and have many children, sometimes seven, eight or even more, people do not want to rent flats or houses to them. There are not many houses with enough rooms to accommodate such families.”

During the interview, the social worker shared an anecdote on how a family of seven was unable to find any housing to move out from the GU to and how an activist published an article in a local newspaper regarding the same. This caught the attention of the local population and a housing company came forward offering the family a house for rent.

Even though the Accommodation at the GU is intended to be temporary, often the inhabitants end up living there for longer durations because of various reasons. The financial support the government provides to the refugees is inadequate because of the high living expense at Hofheim, especially in terms of the housing rent. Another reason that applies in certain cases is the bigger family sizes. These findings match up well with existing literature, in which the reasons preventing refugees to find private rental housing include unaffordability, big family size and discrimination (Ziersch et al., 2017).

5. Conclusion

The previous chapter described the collected data while simultaneously analysing it. In this chapter, I answer the research questions using the completed analysis of data. This chapter consists of a brief background in which the research questions or objectives are again highlighted. I then summarise the findings & conclusions before moving onto recommendations derived from the same. Limitations of the research and a brief self-reflection are also included at the end of the chapter.

The main objectives of the thesis which are directly derived from the research questions were;

- 1) Understanding the living conditions of the residents of the GU at Hofheim,
- 2) investigating the effects of different aspects of refugee housing on the well-being of inhabitants, and
- 3) examining the on-ground effects of the absence of standards for design and construction of GUs,
- 4) exploring the impact of residing at the GU, on the ability of inhabitants to socially integrate.

The GU in its concept is intended to be temporary housing for asylum seekers to live at during their initial months in Germany and hence are usually constructed using prefabrication techniques. The GU at Hofheim also follows prefab construction and according to the social worker, it is of the 'container housing' style. In terms of the living experience, there is a lack of privacy which arises out of a fundamental lack of space. Even though families have apartments for themselves, within the apartment, rooms are often shared, especially when the family has many members. Moreover, in the case of individual refugees and asylum seekers, this is even more severe as they have to share the bedrooms with one or two persons and the kitchen and bath with even more people. The housing units in GU are thus inadequate in terms of the amount of space. However, in terms of location, even though the GU is situated right at the periphery of the urban area and adjacent to the agricultural fields, most amenities like schools, hospitals, supermarkets, open spaces, play areas, district administration and points of social support are all at a walkable distance. Furthermore, the public transport network enables the residents to easily move around within the city or to surrounding towns.

The different aspects related to housing like privacy levels, layout and space have been proved by various scholars to have an effect on the well-being of the inhabitants. In the case of the GU

at Hofheim as well, the interviewees expressed that the overcrowding has been impacting their well-being, even though access to basic services like water supply, electricity and heating are taken care of. Moreover, the location of the GU is in proximity to fundamental amenities as mentioned before which helps the inhabitants to develop ontological security to some extent.

The limitations such as lack of space arise out of the absence of legally binding standards for the design and construction of the GU. This results in a lack of uniformity and living conditions in GUs being very different. The interviewees who had previously lived in other GUs evaluated the GU at Hofheim to be better than other GUs they have lived at. The lack of standards in terms of the size, however, leads to the problem of overcrowding at even the GU at Hofheim which is considered to be one of the better GUs in the region. These residential facilities are meant to be temporary but again, many families end up living at the GU for prolonged periods. Either, the housing policy environment needs modification to make housing accessible and affordable for refugees, or the standards at the GU should be improved and enforced.

Finally, in terms of social integration, the residents of the GU interact very little with the host population, and mostly with just the volunteers. Living in a collective accommodation with just migrants minimises the integration with natives. However, the children who live at the GU and go to schools make friends with children who are part of the host population. This is a strong social bridge as even parents of these children can form connections and facilitate cultural exchange. As Berry (1991), for integration to take place, there needs to be continued contact between the migrants and the host community. Moreover, the process of integration being multidimensional, requires efforts from all stakeholders involved, mainly the migrants, natives and the government (Mestheneos and Ioannidi, 2002; Schibel et al., 2002).

After drawing inferences from the analysis, I will now move on to list a few recommendations that can improve the current scenario. Firstly, binding standards for the design and construction of GUs should be formulated. Secondly, there needs to be more housing stock generation, especially social housing which can cater to lower-income groups. This will ensure that the refugees are able to find accommodation outside and avoid the prolonged stay at the GUs. Also, similar ethnographic research needs to be conducted on other GUs in different parts of Germany to understand the range of living conditions which in turn can help formulate an ideal way forward. Only, after similar research on these facilities can all the problems be identified and this can equip policymakers to frame the standards and other binding regulations.

I would like to list down the limitations of the research also in this section. Among the ten inhabitants interviewed only two are women. When I approached different households to conduct interviews, it would always be the men who interacted with me. There are so many children, around 50 of them according to the social worker, living at the GU. It is a limitation that their perspectives have not been captured by the thesis. Moreover, the findings are specific to the GU at Hofheim and because of the absence of standards, each GU is different. This makes it difficult to generalise the findings. There was also a lack of time to do more in-depth data collection and analysis. The thesis revealed a lot of insights from the inhabitants, it is also recommended that members of the host population and volunteers also be interviewed, thereby widening the perspective.

Moving on from limitations, this paragraph is about self-reflection regarding the process of writing the thesis. Identification of the topic was easy because I wanted to do ethnography. However, I did drop the two initial ideas. The initial topics were replaced because one was extensively researched upon already and there seemed to be no gap in the knowledge that I could fill. In the case of the second one, the research problem was relatively not that prominent. Coming back to this thesis, the conceptual framework for identifying the type of data to collect was made early on and in a very structured fashion. This was very useful while conducting the interviews as there was a list of topics to be addressed. The framework was useful for the analysis of data as well as responses from interviews could be grouped under sections. The conceptual framework had to be revisited and modified several times as parts of it were straying away from the main research topic. Identifying the sections which seemed irrelevant and omitting them at the end was challenging. However, it was necessary to do the same to have a focussed and cohesive thesis. Editing the conceptual framework and deleting the less relevant sections early on in the writing process is highly recommended. Moreover, I focussed on answering all the research questions in the conclusion section.

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