

Migratory Homes: Redesigning Group Identity, Prototyping Social Change

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Abstract

This paper describes Migratory Homes, two collaborative projects that investigate the notion of home/land and belonging in conditions of displacement. The fundamental question that Migratory Homes asks is “how can the disparate identities that constitute mixed societies collectively and equally participate in the creation of a common ‘home/land’ that would be co-designed, co-produced, and co-owned”? Through iterative engagements with conditions of everyday materiality, and by activating processes of co-design as research, Migratory Homes attempt to prototype conditions for social change.

Keywords: Migration, Multiple belonging, Co-design, Social innovation, Participation

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*Migratory Homes*¹ are two collaborative projects conducted between the US and Europe that investigated the notion of home/land and belonging in conditions of displacement. These projects interrogated engagements with space both as a material practice and as a mental territory by using co-design and practice-based research methodologies that involved wider constituencies. *Migratory Homes* examined and enacted homes that are *migratory* because, on the one hand, they concerned, rather literally, experiences of mobility and border-crossing.² Even though the scale of the projects was

that of a home the micro-spaces they enacted may be seen as homelands in miniature, functioning as microcosms of today’s mixed societies, and bringing together individuals with disparate backgrounds. But, on the other hand, these projects were of *migratory* character because their methods of operation, their disciplinary basis, and the aesthetic experiences they evoked were in a constant process of re-contextualization, adaptation, and transition.

The *Migratory Homes* project emerged from the intersecting research backgrounds and research interests of the groups’ founding members.³ But as

¹ I have chosen to call this project series *Migratory Homes* for the purpose of this essay, as a means of articulating their commonalities and continuities. This name is of a tentative nature, and it has not been used in the publicity material for any the projects. The name attempts a conceptual reframing of the projects under discussion, reflecting my own understanding of their premises, aspirations, and potentials.

² The use of the modifier *migratory* here is in reference to Mieke Bal’s understanding of the term as a “quality of the world in which mobility is not the exception but on its way to becoming the standard, the means rather than the minority”. Mieke Bal, *Lost in Space*, *Lost in the Library*, in: Sam Durrant/Catherine M. Lord (eds.),

Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Thamyris/Intersecting, Place, Sex and Race, Amsterdam 2007, 23.

³ These included: Dr. Eleni Tzirtzilaki’s interest in urban space and displacement, and work experience in projects of architectural activism; Professor Lydia Matthews’s theoretical interest and curatorial experience in participatory projects that involve cultural identities at the intersection of local cultures and global economies; Dr. Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani’s investigations of place attachment through photographic, ethnographic, and experiential methods; and my own work on post-national identity, as well as on relations between displacement and design.

we will see below, the group's membership gradually expanded to form a broader network of scholars, students and practitioners who were interested in the subjects of migration and belonging. This paper will present the theoretical premises (part 1), a critical description (part 2) and a reflection (part 3) of the *Migratory Homes* project.⁴

Migratory Homes derived from theoretical and empirical research on the conditions of migration that characterize an ever-increasing number of populations across the world today, and on the ways these processes affect identity formation of individuals and groups. Even though the motivation for these projects was conceived primarily in theoretical terms, we have chosen to investigate them by means of collective action that involved the participation of non-expert publics. The reason is simple: instead of trying to extrapolate theoretical propositions in an analytical manner, these projects had an activist dimension and attempted to establish a dialectic relationship with their public, initiating opportunities for critical pedagogy. In this, they belonged to broader but disparate genealogies of approaches that included theories of progressive pedagogy on the one hand, and participation of non-expert public in art and design processes on the other. Examples of these are: ideas on experiential learning as a means of empowering the civil society founded upon the progressive pedagogy of educational reformers' John Dewey⁵ and Paulo Freire⁶; experiments in participatory design as a means of mitigating the obscurity of the design process by members of the Design Methods movement⁷ and recently by advocates of co-design⁸; art works that evoke what Nicolas Bourriaud has called *relational aesthetics*,⁹ and most importantly works of territorial activism by collectives,

such as Osservatorio Nomade¹⁰ and Network of Nomadic Architecture¹¹ in Italy and Greece respectively. These last mentioned groups sprung out of architects' initiatives, to include members of diverse professional backgrounds that ranged from artists to social scientists. Their work has primarily focused on unearthing the voices and claims of marginalized others in today's societies, such as migrant populations or other socially excluded groups, and providing them with means of self-representation.¹² Some of their projects had an ephemeral function, in bringing diverse communities together through the organization of a common celebratory or grieving event.¹³ A connecting element of these projects is what philosopher Simon Critchley has called "hetero-affectivity," or "heteronomous demand,"¹⁴ in other words, the demand of the "other." But during these processes, it is not only the service to the marginalized "other" that matters. What is even more significant is the merging of the participants' diverse backgrounds and subject positions into new collectivities that transcend their prior professional or social categorization.

As part of this genealogy, the fundamental questions that *Migratory Homes* asked were "how can the disparate identities that constitute mixed societies collectively and equally participate in the creation of a common 'home/land' that would be co-designed, co-produced,

⁴ These will inevitably be partial, as they derive from my personal perspective. Thus this paper will not necessarily and always account for my partners' understandings of the projects, but, hopefully, it will not betray our collective intentions.

⁵ See among others: John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York 1916; The Macmillan Company and Dewey, *Experience and Education*, New York 1938.

⁶ Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York 1977;

⁷ See for instance: Cross, Nigel (ed.), In: *Design Participation: Proceedings of the Design Research Society's Conference 1971*, London 1972.

⁸ See Taylor and Francis journal *CoDesign* (published since 2005).

⁹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris 1998.

¹⁰ Osservatorio Nomade, a subset of the collective Stalker, is a multidisciplinary research network of artists, architects, video-makers and researchers that was founded in Italy in 2002. Osservatorio Nomade encourages intercultural dialogue among migrants and minority groups, and promotes the participation of non-specialist populations in the management of urban issues. <http://www.osservatorionomade.net/>; <http://www.stalkerlab.it/>.

¹¹ The Network of Nomadic Architecture was established in Athens in 2005 by Eleni Tzirtzilaki. It deals with issues of migration and public space in contemporary Athens and undertakes participatory, community-based projects. It is "interested in public space, territories under crisis, urban transformations and their cultural, social and political extensions. It tries to find methods, practices and conceptual tools for architects to intervene in the contemporary city."

¹² An example was the "Imaginare Corviale" project in Rome by Stalker-ON. <http://www.roulottomagazine.com/demo/?p=128>.

¹³ One such example was the organization of a funeral of two stow-away Kurds who died of suffocation while traveling illegally by boat from Patra (Greece) to Otranto (Italy), hidden inside a truck. The funeral took place within the framework of the meeting L'Egnatia sul Canale di Otranto organized by Osservatorio Nomade, 14-20 July 2005.

¹⁴ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London 2007, p. 88.



and co-owned"? Can migrant subjects be co-designers of the identity of their new homelands? The projects' aim was to set up conditions for investigative action which would initiate encounters among strangers, and at the same time provide opportunities for participatory observation for the event organizers and others interested in the same questions.

The mixture of cultures through processes of encounters among strangers is not unprecedented. Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book *Cosmopolitanism* discusses several cultural forms that have been produced as results of cosmopolitan encounters, rather than through processes of ethnically singular practices of cultural production.¹⁵ Nevertheless, immigrant populations today largely operate as members of their distinct ethnic or religious groups, and they often devolve into alienating or exploitative relationships within the processes of cultural production in which they participate either as a work force or as consumers. *Migratory Homes* aimed to generate alternatives to the cultural segregation that characterizes migrant societies, acting as an antidote to the fetishization of the ethnic that obtains high commodity value within the global marketplace, and to "the mechanization of social processes that have reduced the relational space between individuals and groups."¹⁶

Part I

The Theoretical Trajectory of the Projects:

Revealing Plural Identities, Activating Routed Perspectives

Over the last several years, a major part of my scholarly work has focused on the relationship between design and national identity.¹⁷ Research on case studies in Greece and Japan has made clear that

national identities are neither natural nor stable. Who is included and who is excluded from national narratives is always a cause of contestation and negotiation. In the contemporary world of increased mobility, the demographics of most nations are in constant flux. Newcomers claim their membership in already established communities that often tend to reject them, while often their presence evokes processes of alterity that community members refuse to undergo.

As anthropologist James Clifford noted, today there is "no return for anyone to a native land."¹⁸ Cultural purity is an illusion, and every place in the world has been marked by encounters with "others." For those who tend to essentialize identities, these encounters may be seen as "contaminating" the native identity. Despite this, we know today that preserving a culture in its pure, singular form is neither possible, nor always desirable. As Arjun Appadurai has emphasized, heterogeneity outpaces uniformity,¹⁹ and indeed processes of hybridization or mongrelization have produced enriching variety across the world. Such phenomena have urged anthropologists to change their paradigm of research. Rather than assuming the existence of pure, singular, authentic cultures of communities that are rooted in a place, anthropologists look instead for routes, or trajectories, that bring disparate cultures together.²⁰ A "routed" perspective involves locating otherness and strangeness within a given culture or territory, and thus revising the certainties that constitute the identities of individuals, groups, and places.²¹ Today, as multiple identities proliferate and various types of displacement become pervasive, the emphasis on routes begins to frame an ethical as well as political position. *Migratory Homes* adopted a perspective of "routedness" by advocating the participation of migrant subjects in the production of space as well as material culture and in the domain of representation.

¹⁵ Appiah points out that the Ghanaian kente cloth has been a product of pluralism rather than of cultural uniqueness: "the silk was always imported, traded by Europeans, produced in Asia." Similarly, "the traditional dress of Herero women derives from the attire of the 19th century German missionaries" (even though "its fabrics have an un-Lutheran range of colors"). Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York 2006, 107.

¹⁶ Bourriaud, 58.

¹⁷ See Jilly Traganou, *The Tokaido Road: Traveling and Representation in Edo and Meiji Japan*, London 2003; Jilly Traganou/Miodrag Mitrasinovic (eds.), *Travel, Space, Architecture*, Farnham, England; Burlington, VT 2009.

¹⁸ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge 1988, 173.

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, public lecture, Parsons The New School for Design, on 6 February 2007.

²⁰ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 1988.

²¹ Jilly Traganou, For a Theory of Travel in Architectural Studies, in: Traganou/Mitrasinovic.



Migratory Homes also advocated the development of post-national identities.²² The overarching narratives of most nations today are not reflective of the needs and allegiances of their citizens and residents. Populations nowadays link themselves to wider constituencies of religious, ethnic, or gender affiliation beyond national borders. Their realms of operation, and the new public spheres in which they unfold, even though often interstitial and invisible to most, transcend national borders. It is by allowing these new post-national allegiances to find their expressions and by bringing them in contact with each other that the collective narratives of a given territorial space may be rewritten. These territorial spaces may belong to a specific nation-state, such as Greece or USA in the “*Spatial Imaginary and Multiple Belonging*” and “*Routes and Homes*” projects described below, or may cross national borders forming broader transnational networks.²³ *Migratory Homes* endeavored to act as contact zones that brought disparate identities in contact with each other, providing the possibilities for imagining a new common ground for expression and belonging.

Part 2

Projects Description

[Project 1]

Spatial Imaginary and Multiple Belonging: The Open House Workshop

“Spatial Imaginary and Multiple Belonging: The Open House Workshop” was a research project conducted in 2008 in Athens, Berlin and New York, culminating in a workshop stationed in the courtyard of the Christian and Byzantine Museum of Athens.²⁴ The project aimed to explore the “imaginary” dimension of inhabitation in the case of migrant

populations, focusing on the agency of women. Women and female politics have been traditionally associated with the domestic realm standing in opposition to the realm of the public. However, in conditions of economic migration, migrant women sometimes find themselves occupying alienated and un-homely positions, often in homes where they do not belong, destined to inhabit the role of the “other.” Rather than offering an aesthetic apotheosis of “banal cosmopolitanism,” or situating women and cultural “otherness” in the realm of privacy where they are rendered “indiscernible, blurry or even invisible,”²⁵ this project sought to disrupt insular conceptions of nationhood and womanhood that have historically prevailed in Greece and elsewhere.



Figure 1. Group discussion during the *Spatial Imaginary and Multiple Belonging: The Open House Workshop*²⁶

The project included an initial phase of ethnographic research conducted in the Fall of 2007 through the Spring of 2008. During this phase we focused on understanding the notion of home for migrant women of different ethnic, age and religious groups. Printed panels with the stories of various immigrant women in Athens, Berlin and New York, and photographic or material fragments of their homes became elements of an ephemeral, migrant, home, that was installed at the courtyard of the Byzantine Museum in Athens (figure 1). This migratory home hosted a workshop that took place on the 27th and 28th of June 2008. The aim of the workshop was to form a community of women of various ages, classes and nationalities: women who had experiences of

²² For a discussion on relations between post-national identity and design please see Jilly Traganou, National and Post-national Dynamics in the Olympic design: The case of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, in: Hazel Clark/Karen Fiss (eds.), *Design Issues* 25: 3, Summer 2009 Special Issue on design and globalization, 76-91.

²³ An example is the project ON Egnatia. A Path of Displaced Memories, organized by the Osservatorio Nomade in collaboration with various European agencies in 2004-5. The project investigated the experiences of immigrants who cross the ancient Appia-Egnatia Road as they immigrate from the Middle East to Europe. <http://www.egnatia.info/egnatiascrittaineraindex.swf>.

²⁴ Project organizers were Lydia Matthews, Eleni Tzirtzilaki and Jilly Traganou. Project collaborators for the Athens event were sociologist/activist Katerina Nasioka and artist Stefanos Chandelis. The project took place within the framework of the architecture research series *Unbuilt*.

²⁵ Efthimios Papataxiarchis, Prologue, in: Efthimios Papataxiarchis (ed.), *Oi Peripeiteis ths Eterothtas*, Athens 2006, X.

²⁶ Photo by Courtesy of Open House project organizers, Athens, June 2008

displacement, yet have had few opportunities for exchange with one another in their daily life. It included the event organizers, women who were interviewed during the period of ethnographic investigation, as well as several new members. The questions that the project sought to investigate were the following: What would happen if migrant subjects of different ethnic backgrounds inhabited a common space in the heart of Athens? What kind of culture would be produced by their co-habitation and what would be the conditions necessitated for allowing a common ground to be established? The project aimed to set up a framework for these conditions to emerge, and to register the results of these encounters through participatory observation. During our ephemeral domestication of the migrant home that was installed in the museum courtyard, women from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, United States and United Kingdom who at that time resided in Greece, together with Greek women who had experiences of migration in various countries—including Italy, France, Japan and the United States—talked about their itineraries across the globe and their multiple experiences of home, engaging in a collective process of map-making (figure 2).



Figure 2. Mapping exercise during the *Spatial Imaginary and Multiple Belonging: The Open House Workshop*²⁷

Participants were also asked to bring with them spices and herbs that had been important for maintaining a sense of continuity with places they had lived in the past. In the last stage of the workshop they collectively devised the recipe of a rice dish that combined several of these ingredients (figure 3).



Figure 3. Collective Cooking during the *Spatial Imaginary and Multiple Belonging: The Open House Workshop*²⁸

During the story-telling session, we realized that home is an elusive notion, which is not associated with a building's physical attributes, but rather with the practices and relationships that are constituted in it. Many of the participants divided their lives between more than one homes, feeling more attached to homes they had lived in the past or where their family members reside. The ephemeral home enacted in the museum became a symbolic, common home for our brief encounter in Athens, as well as a migrant home that expressed the entanglement of the given locality with various networks of flow across the globe. The collaborative map of figure 2, with its numerous intertwined lines that represented the participants' itineraries, was the trace of these geopolitical entanglements.

The location of the project in the Christian and Byzantine museum gave the opportunity to several of the event participants—especially those of non-Greek decent who worked in Athens as domestic workers—to visit for the first time a major Greek national institution. But the nature of this national institution was also temporarily altered by the event. The transformation of its courtyard into a domestic environment, with the placement of a cooking stove in it and with the scents of food cooking, surprised both visitors to the museum and museum staff. At the same time, the nature of the museum as a stronghold of a significant aspect of the Greek identity (Greek Orthodox religion, and Byzantine past) was challenged by the presence of the numerous non-Greek and non-Greek Orthodox women who domesticated its environment. The idea of a Greek post-national identity, which is inclusive of its internal otherness, found a temporary testing ground in

²⁷ Photo by Courtesy of Open House project organizers, Athens, June 2008

²⁸ Photo by Courtesy of Open House project organizers, Athens, June 2008

the very heart of Athens, the courtyard of a major national institution.

But it would be a mistake to narrate this process of participation as simply an opportunity for a happy encounter among strangers. Participation and discontent are inseparable. The elements of joy, relaxation or pleasure that appear to be the main means of conduct adopted in events of this kind, are often being accompanied by elements of conflict, resentment or misunderstanding. These moments of crisis are often the results of the different socio-cultural backgrounds, and the “strangeness” of the events' members. In the “Spatial Imaginary” project, a point of conflict emerged when the conversation touched upon home as the par excellence locus of child raising. Opposed world-views were expressed polarizing the participants, between those who have chosen to leave their children in their native country, dividing thus their lives between two homes (one of which is sometimes impossible to visit due to visa problems), and those who find this improper.²⁹

²⁹ Below is an excerpt of a conversation that is indicative of the divergence of opinions among project participant as it relates to the raising of girls:

--Clik (woman from Zimbabwe, currently residing in Greece): My names is Clik, I am from Zimbabwe. I came here 15 years ago, I lived here by myself, I have children at home. I am a widow. I am good at knitting and most of the time when I am in the house I do knitting. I came here to learn Greek embroidery. My house is just a small apartment I live underground, that is what I can afford. It is a comfortable house for me. I always feel I want to be in my house. Because it is clean, I clean it, I love the quality of it. ...I have two sets of twins. My sister takes care of them. The first set is 27, they are boys, the second set is 16, they are girls.

--Jilly (woman from Greece, currently residing in the USA): Do they want to come here?

--Clik: I want my boys to come. I cannot allow the girls to come. In our tradition we don't allow girls to leave home just like that. Because they will start having new friends, new attitude, which is against our tradition. But for the boys they can come.

--Maria (woman from Greece, currently residing in Greece): What is the thing that bothers you the most in Greece?

--Clik: I think that Greek girls the way they behave. Sometimes when I go around at 10:00, you will see small small small gills walking, smoking. So I am afraid that my children will take that habit. Especially for girls, because you know in Africa, a girl as long as she is under my roof, she has to do what I want to, she has to obey me. She cannot just go around ... We girls, we women we are people who are always under control

--Giorgi (woman from the USA, currently residing in Greece): What you are describing now was quite similar in Greece 30 years ago. So what has happened has happened quite recently.

--Clik: Small girls I see them smoking. I see the way they are dressing. What will my child do tomorrow? I want her to be a good mother.

Capturing and reworking these elements, rather than letting the processes of social interaction take a delusional sense of consensus is paramount for the process of inclusion to be truly activated. As political scientist Chantal Mouffe has stated, “consensus without exclusion will always be unattainable.”³⁰ Nevertheless, the important elements that were surfaced indicative of the participants' cultural differences and commonalities could not be further tackled and reworked. Due to the different places of residence of many of the event's participants, the project had to be discontinued, leaving us with a feeling of discontent.

Another cause of dissatisfaction was the fact that “we”, the organizers of the events, kept our role as the “hosts” unchallenged during the project's duration. Even though we all shared the status of migrant, a clear distinction was established between hosts and guests, which was further accentuated by a range of other differences, such as those of nationality, class, and residence status. These deeply ingrained differences are hard to overcome, despite the good will of participants and organizers to establish their commonalities. The event left us with a sense of accomplishment in that we initiated productive encounters among individuals who were previously strangers to each other, and shared, even temporarily, our points of view and experiences. However, it also left us with the wish for a deeper enmeshment between organizers and participants; a wish for a move towards a new social landscape that would operate beyond the polarities and inherited subject-positions in which each of us dwelt prior to our brief encounter at the museum's courtyard.

Last, but not least, a condition of contestation was caused by the gender and ethnic difference between our group participants and the museum's staff that was guarding the facilities. The unexpected presence of these predominantly Greek male staff who shared the museum's courtyard with us during the event's

--Giorgi: Sometimes it is a matter of fashion. Sometimes you see girls that they look sexy-dressed, but they are serious students, and they dress like that because it is the style to dress like that.

³⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London 2000, 105; According to Chantal Mouffe, “the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism. This requires providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary.” 103.



duration, yet were excluded from our ad hoc community as non-members, was reminiscent of the unavoidable social hierarchies and exclusions which are (re)-enacted even in conditions that aim precisely at questioning such hierarchies. These male service personnel were now those who did not belong. Our “Open House” had inadvertently created an exclusive space, one in which the “unaccounted” could not feel “at home.”

[Project 2]

Routes and Homes: Migrant Tree

A second project titled “Routes and Homes: Migrant Tree” began in New York in Fall 2009.³¹ The Lower East Side of Manhattan, an area of a strong immigrant history, was selected as the focal point for the project. As the previous project, “Routes and Homes” looked at the notion of home within conditions that destabilize the sense of “belonging”. It aimed to investigate forms of domestication, hospitality, and collectivity that emerge in conditions of migration and multiple belonging, by looking at the micro-structures of support that are constructed by self-organized groups. If the previous project had a very short duration, in this one we sought to establish more durable social relations. For this, we thought as more appropriate to tap into an existing community, rather than initiate the formation of a new group (a hypothesis that, as we will see below, was at the end proven to be untrue). The Lower East Side has a very strong history of neighborhood organizations, and an impressive number of community gardens many of which have been established since the 1970s.



Figure 4. Tree planting during the *Routes and Homes: Migrant Tree* project³²

We chose to work with El Jardin Del Paraiso, a community garden and a park in the Lower East Side of Manhattan (between C and D Avenues and 5th and 6th Streets) which has members of various ethnic backgrounds.³³ Aware of our position as strangers seeking hospitality, we decided to mark our arrival to the community with the gift of a Mediterranean tree, one that we planned to bring from Greece by our member Eleni Tzirtzilaki during her scheduled trip to New York in June 2010.

“Do trees need passports?” “Is the migration of plants as contested as of people?” And “how do migrant societies relate with their surrounding natural life in their new home/lands”? Such questions were the starting points of the project. Even though our wish to bring an actual tree from Athens to New York was not realized, the process of investigating this possibility marked an interesting departure for the project. During our investigation we learned that trees as well as all plants or seeds need special permission from the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service of USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) to be allowed entry into the United States, and trees need to stay for two growing periods in quarantine before being allowed to be planted in other sites. Besides the prohibitive dimensions of these prescriptions, which made it impossible for us to bring a tree in a timely manner from Greece, this project made us realize that most natural life in the garden (as well as beyond the garden) is also of migrant descent.

³¹ Initial project organizers were Lydia Matthews, Eleni Tzirtzilaki, Gabrielle-Bendiner-Vianni and Jilly Traganou. This project was a subset of the “Routes & Homes: Prototyping Socio-spatial Micro-structures in Conditions of Migration and Multiple Belonging” project that was supported by the Design and Social Science fund of the New School. Project collaborators were members of the Network of Nomadic Architecture, architect Natalia Roumelioti and artist Stefanos Chandelis.

³² Photo by Courtesy of Migrant Tree project organizers, New York, June 2010

³³ Latino is the predominant ethnicity due to their history in the neighborhood. Along with them are numerous Americans and Europeans of various religious and ethnic backgrounds that have lived in the areas since the 1970s.

Either as species that originated in areas beyond New York, or as actual plants that were informally brought to the allotments by their users from other countries, most plants have a history of migration. Even though, habitually, we tend to think of natural species as having an autochthonous relationship with the land in which they grow, this assumption holds no validation. As a broad array of scholarly works indicate, during various migration periods, in the era of colonization and beyond, travelers have brought their “native” trees with them as they travelled across oceans. This process continues, albeit illegal in the US until our days as migrant populations travel from their old to new homes and back. Through this realization, we decided to dig further into the migrant character and multiple belongings of the plants of El Jardin Del Paraiso (focusing on both the trees of the park and the vegetables grown in the allotments), while we also pursued the idea of planting a “migrant tree” in the garden. The findings of our research on plants’ migration were presented on June 22nd, 2010, during an event that culminated in the planting of our migrant tree in the garden, a locally grown pomegranate tree (one of the climatic Zone 7 of New York) (figure 4).

Through methods of oral history and field research, our group members recorded the various practices in the garden, from its inception to the present, revealing their relations with a global framework. During this investigation, we learned of plants that have been brought by gardeners to New York, such as the caballero, a hot chili pepper characteristic of Puerto Rican cuisine that, Nelson, a garden member had brought to New York at a recent trip. At the same time, through research of natural history sources we learned about the origins and the migration patterns of the specific species of the garden. Ailanthus, for instance, historically prevalent in struggling industrial communities in urban US, is a tree native to east and south Asia and to northern Australasia, rather than to the US where it can be found today in abundance.



Figure 5. “Story harvesting” using notepad areas of the placemats during the *Routes and Homes: Migrant Tree* project³⁴

At an early meeting with the members of the community garden, some expressed an interest in a system of signage that would indicate to the visitors the names and stories of their plants. After numerous discussions, we concluded that the signage system would be printed on ephemeral utilitarian objects that would be given out to the participants, rather than on permanent signage systems that would remain in the garden after the end of the event. The objects we chose to use as printing surfaces were placemats. These placemats included a site-map of the Jardin Del Parairso with the migrant stories of its various plants, as well as provided empty space for new stories to be captured by the event participants. The aim was to avoid the format of the wall-mounted exhibition, or book, as indicative of a finished process of inquiry. The ephemeral character of the objects would also allow for a dialogue with community garden members, many of whom we had not met in the early stage of research, and would, thus, signal an iterative process, in which the placemats would be the first attempt of recording the garden’s story. We were aware that there was nothing conclusive in this research. Not only did the plants change continuously in the garden, but also their stories were too numerous to record in our limited time of research. Thus an important element of the event that took place on June 22nd was the act of “story harvesting” (figure 5). Acknowledging the incompleteness of our research, and the inconclusiveness of the garden-as-process, the placemats/maps were intentionally unfinished and including notepad-like areas to be filled out by the event’s participants through the gathering of new stories on-site. Indeed, new stories (migrant

³⁴ Photo by Courtesy of *Migrant Tree* project organizers, New York, June 2010

and not) that were not exposed to us in our period of research were revealed on the event's day.

During the final days of event preparation, while completing the writing of the invitation cards, we had an epiphany: we felt uncomfortable about singing it with the names of the core group members as we had intended. At this point we realized that we were no longer a team of four designers/scholars, but that we were part of a much broader network which included people of various professions, ages and backgrounds, some of which were members of the community garden. The distinctions between host and guest, author and audience had been diffused, and almost everyone participating in the event could have a sense of ownership of one aspect or another. This diffusion remained in no way contested. The gathering of many of the garden's established members, and also of new ones, challenged the static definition of what constitutes a community and the narrow definition of a group's identity ("us" and "them"). At the same time, the expanded network of scholars/designers/activists, who participated in the event, brought new ideas that were not foreseen by the initial members. This process was inevitably accompanied by the formation of subgroups, each trying to identify a sense of commonality around a specific interest or point of view, precisely at the moment that the community's changing constituency challenged pre-existing ideas about who "we" are and what "we" were all doing together. This process of new subgroup formation was in a constant state of flux. The various sub-groupings operated almost like in a shifting magnetic field, allowing for multiple voices to be heard and new points of interest to rise, beyond what was predicted or conceived a priori. Even though our initial interest was the plants' migration, in the course of the event other related interests came on the surface, such as plant ecology, the perception of seeds as national asset, community resilience, and urban farming as a means of resistance to commodification. From a scholarly perspective, this fragmentation of opinions and points of view seemed as compromising the coherence of the project, as diluting its focus. But at the same time, this unexpected condition was to be embraced, and to be given the opportunity to develop in full, in order to bring the "what if" question, that is in the core of the *Migratory Homes* project, into fruition. Despite and because of such tensions, these different points of view were ultimately seen not in opposi-

tion, but as working in alliance with each other. As Anna Marie Smith writes in reference to Ernesto Laflau's and Chantal Mouffe's work, there is a specific form of solidarity between the various social movements that relate with today's struggles: such as the urban, the ecological, the anti-authoritarian, the anti-racist, the ethnic and the regional. Laflau and Mouffe insist that

*"the radical democratic pluralist form of unification would bring movements together through articulation while simultaneously preserving their autonomy... Each progressive movement would renegotiate its identity by incorporating the others' demands, and by forging temporary blocs according to the tactical condition at hand"*³⁵

In the end of the project, we all found ourselves in a much broader (than initially imagined) terrain of latent discourses and struggles "without imposing the disciplining leadership of a preselected dominant group" — or of a singular point of view (such as, for instance, that of migration as the prevailing discursive framework of the project chosen by "us", the organizers). Moreover, we realized that, even though the collectivity implied by the pronouns "we" or "us" should be the core value of the project, group membership should be seen as inconclusive, and open to revisions, rather than be taken for granted.

Part 3

Migrations of Discipline and Method

(a) From Relational Aesthetics to Transformative Participation through Co-Design

Migratory Homes, standing between installations and events, workshops and dinner parties, strike similarities with the type of artwork that Nicolas Bourriaud discusses in his writings on relational aesthetics. These projects, by artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Philippe Parenno, operate within the sphere of inter-human relations; they involve relational procedures (invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user friendly areas, appointments, etc.³⁶). They are processes of social exchange that evoke the participation of the spectator, and include moments of sociability or objects pro-

³⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *The Radical Democratic Imaginary*, London 1998, 26.

³⁶ Bourriaud, 46.



ducing sociability.³⁷ According to Bourriaud, if in the 1960s the goal of artists was to broaden the boundaries of art, in the post 1990s generations, what is being investigated is “art’s capacities of resistance within the overall social arena.”³⁸ Bourriaud’s observations converge with opinions of design thinkers, such as by John Wood, in claiming that social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias.³⁹ Most of the art works analyzed by Bourriaud encompass the presence of a micro-community, creating momentary groupings of participatory viewers.⁴⁰

Migratory Homes shared some of these intentions; their premise had been to understand but also to establish structures of support that keep micro-communities together. But at the same time they were not framed by the distinctions that characterize the works described by Bourriaud. Even though *Migratory Homes* were affiliated and cognizant of relational artists’ practices, they were not based on the traditional separation between creators and audiences, galleries and living places. *Migratory Homes* were enacted not as participatory, community-based artistic practices, but rather as acts of co-design, and therefore dealt with different types of divisions, and sets of “others.” The designer’s “other,” formerly thought of as the “user,” becomes a partner in the process of co-design. In the case of *Migratory Homes*, co-design facilitated not the production of a final product or form, but the prototyping of a new social condition that aspired to bridge existing divisions. Nevertheless, a further inversion occurred. Even though these projects started motivated by empathy towards the “other” (the non-expert, or the socially excluded subject), during their course of action, they could not but reveal the antagonism among the various subject-positions occupied by their members. With this, they brought into light the broader political landscape that is accountable for these antagonisms, and, evoked the need for reworking the inherited subjectivities that bounded their members. This is a necessary process in order for new synergies, new alliances and new subjectivities to arise, and, for new social constellations and forms to

come into being. *Migratory Homes* are also cognizant of the fact that a broader social unit is being separated for the sake of such micro communities to arise. In the “Open House” workshop this was accentuated by the exclusion of the male museum staff. But at the same time, *Migratory Homes* also questioned the very notion of community as a pre-established coherent unit;⁴¹ their aim was to seed new social constellations that might hold the capacity to overcome established divisions and hierarchies. As discussed above, during the process of conducting the “Routes and Homes” project, our group identity came under question: Who were our members? What was our relation with the members of the community garden? Was it possible to work together in order to intersect and hybridize our interests? Gradually, the membership of our group expanded to include individuals from a broader network of gardeners, scholars, designers and activists who were invested in plant migration, edible gardening and community-based work.

Unlike the temporary audience participation in the art projects described by Bourriaud, participation in the *Migratory Homes* projects aspired to be what architectural theorist Jeremy Till has named “transformative participation”. This is opposed to the passive nature of placatory participation that is often part of processes of urban planning.⁴² Rather than isolating the process of designing and decision making in a realm untouched by reality, transformative participation undermines the tenets of professional design practice by bringing it into contact with the contingent world. The participatory process confronts designers with realities and the expectation of conflicts to come, with issues that they would have preferred to hide from or delay dealing with.⁴³ In order for this type of participation to take place, all parties, including the architect/designer or project’s curator, need to be open to the process of transformation that may occur. For this the expert should

³⁷ Bourriaud, 41, 33.

³⁸ Bourriaud, 31.

³⁹ Bourriaud, 31. Also see John Wood, *Design for Micro-utopias: Making the Unthinkable Possible*, Hampshire 2007.

⁴⁰ Bourriaud, 58.

⁴¹ This is in agreement to Miwon Kwon’s suggestion of “the impossibility of total consolidation, wholeness, and unity” in a community, institution or discipline, and her view of “such an impossibility” as “a welcome premise” of “collective praxis.” Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA, 2002, 154.

⁴² Jeremy Till, *The Negotiation of Hope*, in: Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (eds.), *Architecture and Participation*, New York 2005, 27.

⁴³ Till, 26.



not assume authority over the layperson. After trial and error, in our projects we discovered that in order the *Migratory Homes* to be welcoming to their “inhabitants” and allow for their desires and actions to be expressed, “we”, the organizers, should try not to assume any position of superiority. The “languages” chosen for conducting the projects avoided those that we as the organizers were fluent in. The project put aside the skills and knowledges that we knew as experts in our fields (design, architecture, or art), and rather chose languages and practices that were common to all. Simple acts of conversations and story-telling (that were often conducted in environments of polyglossia), line-drawing, cooking and gardening were found to be suitable as common denominators in conditions of everyday materiality and cultural exchange that would bring the participants together without intimidating them due to their lack of knowledge of a particular skill.

This attempt to create an environment of participation for people of diverse backgrounds and skills comes close to urban planner John Forester’s search for an alternative paradigm for the design process. This paradigm replaces the normative metaphor of design as the search for a solution, with the idea of design as sense-making.⁴⁴ According to Jeremy Till, “as opposed to the instrumentalist knowledge of problem solving, sense-making is developed through knowledge of the third kind—knowledge from within, in which the participatory process is founded on the will to achieve mutual understanding.”⁴⁵

For Till, storytelling is one such form of communication. Stories encapsulate the new type of knowledge generated by these encounters, which according to sociologist Michael Billig, grows “from the voices of ordinary people in conversation.”⁴⁶ *Migratory Homes* project shares Till’s interest in stories. Spice stories, narratives about herbs that the inhabitants brought with them or sought after they left their native land, were the starting point of the “Spatial Imaginary” project that led to the collective act of cooking—an everyday practice that, as Michel de Certeau has put it, “simultaneously organizes a

network of relations.”⁴⁷ The act of “story harvesting” was also the means that enabled our group to connect with members of the El Jardin Del Paraiso community garden whom we had not met during the initial period of research, while at the same time enriched our understanding of the micro-structures that keep the garden together. These acts of “making sense” together transformed the power dynamics within the group, and led to an expansion of identity both in individual and collective terms. Processes of exchange and negotiation as those identified by Forester (review, evaluation, criticism, modification, partial rejection and partial adoption) were constant throughout the course of the projects, and became the very material that constituted *Migratory Homes*.

(b) From methods of qualitative analysis to the realm of praxeology

From a research perspective, *Migratory Homes* began by setting up questions concerning otherness, alterity, and identity formation. These questions, instead of being approached through analytical means, formed instead the starting points of participatory, performative projects that undermined the conventional separation between author/designer and audience/user. Nevertheless, *Migratory Homes* is motivated not only by an interest in understanding but also by the recognition of the need to intervene. The aim was not simply to record reality but also to model change. Rather than asking “what is,” we asked “what if.”

From an epistemological perspective, *Migratory Homes* migrate from the realm of qualitative analysis to that of praxeology, by initiating processes of practice-led research. If qualitative research aims at understanding the meaning of human action, relying primarily on the use of inductive approaches and “nonnumeric data in the form of words,”⁴⁸ practice-led, research, according to Brad Haseman, is “intrinsically experiential.”⁴⁹ Practice-led researchers, often re-purpose established methods from the qualitative research tradition, such as interviews, reflective

⁴⁴ John Forester, *Designing: Making Sense Together in Practical Conversation*, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 38:3, Oxford, Spring 1985, 14.

⁴⁵ Till, 34.

⁴⁶ Till, 37.

⁴⁷ Michel de Certeau, General Introduction, in: Steven Rendall (transl.), *The Practice of Every Day Life*, Berkeley 1984, XV.

⁴⁸ Thomas A. Schwandt, *Dictionary of Qualitative Research*, California 2001, 213.

⁴⁹ Brad Haseman, A Manifesto for Performative Research, in: *Media, International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 118 (theme issue “Practice-led Research”), 100.



dialogue techniques, journals, observation methods, practice trails, personal experience, and expert- and peer-review methods to complement and enrich their work-based practices.⁵⁰ In the words of design theorist Terry E. Rosenberg, projects of this type are not concerned with an “epistemology on the certainty of the given.”⁵¹ Their objects of attention are “somehow deferred—lying in the future; and, possessed by the uncertainties of the future.”⁵² These deferred objects are only engaged as a *prospect* or an *expectation* of what is yet to happen, an innovation, which is akin to Arjun Appadurai’s notion of *imagination* as a collective process of becoming.⁵³

Within the *Migratory Homes* our role as the designers had to be modulated by our work as observers, while at the same time our role as observers was transformed by our acts of intervention. For such reasons, we see these projects as standing at the intersection of design and the humanities/social science scholarship: they are both analytical and propositional; both exploratory and instrumental. Unlike most works in the humanities and social science, that operate largely in the mode of critique and exhibit a high degree of caution towards actions of intervening, *Migratory Homes* attempted to link critical analysis with propositions. With minimum physical configurations, in the course of these projects, we orchestrated conditions of “investigative action”. These were processes of collective imagination during which new roles and relations were configured. The redefined sense of our collective identity, the constant iteration of our collective “we,” were the unexpected outcome of this process.

Migratory Homes as Incubators of Social Imagination

Migratory Homes are situated at frontiers between different spatial conceptions. They were located in specific geographical locations and dealt with the

micro-physics of life in given territories, but they were at the same time multi-sited, being entangled in broader global networks and trajectories. They were both tangible and intangible: involving conditions of everyday materiality but also referring to mental qualities of space, such as processes of identification through border-crossing. *Migratory Homes* aimed to question the fixed meanings of home/land, identity and belonging in their specific locations, and to unbind the exclusive relations between identity and place. If homes, neighbourhoods, cities, nations have been conventionally considered as spatial realms of identification and belonging, one nested within the other in concentric relations, such relations are now becoming unstable and incoherent. There is a need for developing new types of consciousness and allegiance in order to accommodate these changes. *Migratory Homes* involved the participation of itinerant subjects, as organically grown teams of people, who did not form pre-existing communities, who did not share values, lifestyles, aspirations, or even languages. Their participants carried complex, plural identities. During their course of action, participants were not asked to represent their ethnicity or original realm of belonging; in fact the very notion (or value) of “rootedness” in a specific place was being undermined. *Migratory Homes* promoted methods of engagement that included the voices of multiple “others,” challenging the singularity of established national narratives. The contingency of the real world, the incongruity of migrant experience, and the constant need for negotiating the participants’ often antagonistic positions became their material. During the course of their formation, participants in the *Migratory Home* projects realized that none of them can safely claim a project’s location (be it a community garden or a museum courtyard; a city or a nation) as one in which they hold exclusive rights; their roles as hosts or guests, natives or newcomers were being questioned; their identities were being reworked.

Even though their objects of production (which have ranged from cooking to gardening and map making) did not fall neatly into the conventionally understood domain of “design,” the practices that *Migratory Homes* enacted were of *designerly* nature: standing at the *fuzzy front end* of the design process where “it is often not known whether the deliverable ... will be a

⁵⁰ Haseman, 106.

⁵¹ Terry E. Rosenberg, *Designs on Critical Practice? in: Reflections on Creativity: Exploring the Role of Theory in Creative Practices*, Dundee 2007, 8.

(<http://imaging.dundee.ac.uk/reflections/pdfs/TerryRosenberg.pdf>)

⁵² Rosenberg, 8.

⁵³ Arjun Appadurai discusses the role of imagination in several publications. See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis 1996; See also Appadurai, *The Right to Participate in the Work of Imagination*, in: L. Martz (ed.), *Trans-urbanism*, Rotterdam 2002, 32–47.



product, a service, an interface,”⁵⁴ they initiated “courses of action aimed at changing situations into preferred ones.”⁵⁵ Their practices incorporated both communicative systems and physical objects, and aspired to cultivate a change in our consciousness of home/land, an altering of behavior towards the “other”. The outcome of these projects was the formation of a grammar, that sought to redefine collective notions of identity and belonging by means of engaging with basic designerly practices. This shift from the making of the material world to engagements with immaterial processes and behaviors is suggestive of design’s potential role in the contemporary post-industrial condition: As architect and design theorist Ezio Manzini has advocated, material goods need to be supported or even replaced by immaterial systems.⁵⁶

By maintaining their engagement with the material world, as a terrain of collectivity and identity formation but also by alluding to the idea of home as an immaterial, mental category, members of the *Migratory Homes* projects orchestrated situations that aspired to prototype social change. Through iterative processes of trial and error, and means of symbolic action, *Migratory Homes* endeavored to function as microcosmic incubators of social imagination for new collective becomings.

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⁵⁴ Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers, Co-creation and the new landscapes of design, in: *CoDesign*, 4:1, 7.

⁵⁵ Herbert A. Simon, *The Science of the Artificial*, Cambridge 1999.

⁵⁶ Community products (such as collective kitchens) are indicative of these dematerialized design operations that are process-oriented rather than object-oriented. Ezio Manzini, in: Terfik Balcioglu (ed.), *The Role of Product Design in Post Industrial Society*, Kent 1998, 50-57.

