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Refugee Homes and the Right to Property: Sunk Costs and Networked Mobility

Jordan Hayes

University of Pittsburgh, jch77@pitt.edu

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SPHR 2021

Refugee Homes and the Right to Property: Sunk Costs and Networked Mobility

For refugees outside their state of origin, access to humanitarian protection can come at the cost of the right to own a house. Following Anneke Smit’s scholarship on the possible contradictions between humanitarian protection and property rights, this paper explores the case of refugee homes built in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) by Syrian asylum seekers. Interviews with Syrian refugees collected in Iraq from 2018-2019 reveal the paradoxical situation faced by refugees who invest time, expertise, memory, hope, and money in a house—yet do not own it. While non-citizens in the KRI rarely have the chance to secure legal title to real estate, these home-building projects are often completed in humanitarian spaces, such as those of the Arbat UNHCR camp. The resulting dwellings have a liminal legal status yet advance a tacit claim to permanence, a material argument composed through cinderblocks, paint, and the routine power of residence. And while these homes materialize nodes within transnational networks of belonging (Diminescu), they also represent sunk costs. Thus, these homes have the paradoxical effect of enabling further movement for some while tethering others to a camp community which forbids their sale. When resources are invested in a house that cannot be sold, such a dwelling is likely to inhibit future freedom of movement, despite the general protection of refugee rights in the KRI. Regarding the Arbat camp, the public expectation of refugee repatriation is confounded by the fact that these homes tend to tether families to a site 25 kilometers from the nearest major city, Sulaymaniyah. This case study urges us to consider how humanitarian policy can, in plotting a course between the right to property and humanitarian protection, constrain the mobility of those it is designed to protect.

Jordan Hayes received his PhD from the University of Pittsburgh after completing his dissertation, *Trajectories of Belonging: Literacies and Intersectionality in the Mobile Phone and Home Building Practices of Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. The project used a transnational literacy studies framework to engage issues of migration, intersectionality, technology, infrastructure, and affect in the case of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Now a Visiting Lecturer in Pitt’s English Department, Jordan also holds an MA in English Literature and graduate certificates in writing and post-secondary reading pedagogy from San Francisco State University.