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The social front door: the role of social infrastructures for migrant arrival

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ABSTRACT

Much research on migrant arrival and settlement has looked at these processes through the lens of 'integration', investigating how migrants access societal realms such as the labour market, education, civil society and social networks, and mostly focusing on individual migrants' processes of incorporation. A complementary body of work has looked at how socio-economic contexts can shape integration and social mobility. This article expands on this work by highlighting the importance of place in migrant arrival and settlement. It builds on an emerging body of literature that has emphasised that where migrants arrive plays a crucial role in their ability to access resources. Drawing on two sets of ethnographic fieldwork in East London, the article presents a micro-analysis of how migrants make their way into the city with the help of publicly accessible social infrastructures (shops, libraries, barbers, parks, etc.) and individuals working within these. The article demonstrates that social infrastructures are a crucial element amongst a range of arrival infrastructures that can be found in urban areas of long-standing immigration and highlights the role of the built environment regarding opportunities for accessing information about settlement.

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1. Introduction

'It was a tough time, the first two years (...). There was a rule in this house: you needed to be inside by 8 pm, but then at 7 in the morning you had to leave, you couldn't be there in the day. So from 7 am to 8 pm, I was walking around in the street, asking for a job, asking for information, trying to learn how the transport works. (...). Usually this is the most important thing when you come here. Who are the people you are going to meet?' (Daniela, Moldova)

This account by one of our research participants captures how both the neighbourhood in which she lived when she first arrived, as well as the people she first met, were crucial in her settlement process. There is extensive research investigating the experiences of migrants when settling in a new place. Much of this work falls into broader thinking about migrant 'integration', a policy and intellectual debate that has been ongoing in

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Northern Europe since the 1930s (Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas 2016; Phillimore 2020; Spencer and Charsley 2021). Research on integration has focused on aspects of migrant incorporation ranging from structural factors such as labour-market integration and educational achievements, to social integration and the mutual adaptation and acceptance between migrants and long-term residents (Jenkins 1967). The focus of much research on migrant integration is on how migrants access different societal realms such as the labour market, education, or civil society (Ager and Strang 2004). A parallel strand of research has investigated the role of the socio-economic context, asking how living in areas characterised by socio-economic deprivation might affect its residents' social mobility (Musterd, Ostendorf, and de Vos 2003). While this research on 'context effects' primarily focused on socio-economic and institutional factors shaping social mobility, a primarily qualitative strand of research investigated how the existence of immigration-related diversity within a specific area, as well as local attitudes towards newcomers, might affect migrants' settlement trajectories and their sense of belonging (Pemberton and Phillimore 2016; Phillips et al. 2014; Robinson 2010; Wessendorf, 2016).

These bodies of literature recognised the importance of place for migrant integration and inclusion. As exemplified by Daniela's account above, *where* someone arrives matters hugely regarding the potential of forming social relations, the material and institutional conditions migrants face, and the attitudes long-term residents harbour towards newcomers. Nevertheless, empirical research on migrant settlement and integration has been dominated by a focus on migrants themselves rather than place-based opportunity structures. Phillimore (2020) shows how this is also reflected in policy and practice, where the focus of integration strategies and interventions often 'is upon support for migrants to become integrated and to measure success in terms of outcomes in areas such as employment or education' (Phillimore 2020, 3), rather than looking at the crucial role of place and local conditions.

This paper builds on Phillimore's work and that of an emerging community of scholars who are turning their focus on local contexts of arrival (Hans and Hanhörster 2020; Phillimore 2020; Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015; Robinson 2010). These scholars have shown that a range of factors is relevant for migrants when they first arrive, for example legal frameworks, socio-economic and institutional conditions, social networks, the presence of migrant-supporting civil society organisations, and the population history of an area. This article builds on this scholarship and adds an additional dimension to the focus on place, namely the role of 'social infrastructures' (Klinenberg 2018) in facilitating arrival. There is a long tradition of research in urban planning investigating the role of the built environment regarding social relations more generally and, more specifically, social cohesion and conviviality (Çalışkan and Şevik 2022; Jacobs 1961; Mehta 2009). Here, we are particularly interested in what Çalışkan and Şevik (2022) conceptualise as 'thresholds', namely micro-spatial public sites that are accessible to everyone. Rather than investigating the role of threshold spaces for encounters and conviviality,¹ we examine how newcomers use such threshold spaces to access resources and, importantly, how individuals operating in such spaces support those who ask for help. We thereby also draw on the Greater London Authority's conceptualisation of such spaces as 'social front doors' situated within 'social infrastructure ecosystems', referring to the extent to which public spaces and their services

are visible and perceived as accessible to passers-by, and how they are interconnected by signposting (GLA 2021).

By drawing on ethnographic research in East London, this article investigates the role of social infrastructures in providing information and support for newcomers, and how social front doors can facilitate access to resources. The article thereby contributes to current debates on ‘arrival infrastructures’ (Meeus, Arnaut, and van Heur 2019), arguing that informal and easily accessible places can play an important role in providing practical and emotional support. It pushes debates on migrant integration further by highlighting the role of informal support structures in arrival areas and the important role of the built environment in accessing such support structures. Furthermore, it brings to light the crucial role played by long-established residents who operate in such places and provide arrival expertise. Importantly, the article focuses on the very initial stages of arrival and not longer-term processes of settlement.

It is important to note that migrant arrival in the UK context happens against the backdrop of policies that actively intend to create a ‘hostile environment’ for newcomers, and the impact of these policies is powerfully documented elsewhere (Griffiths and Yeo 2021; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019). We recognise that especially for those migrants with an insecure legal status, the UK government’s immigration policies determine all aspects of their lives. In this article, however, we look at the everyday processes of accessing resources within the institutional and legal constraints in which migrants find themselves, and the role played by social infrastructures during the initial period of arrival.

In the following section, we delve more deeply into social scientific debates on the role of place for migrant arrival. This is followed by an introduction to the research site and our methods. We then delve into empirical examples of social infrastructures and the role they can play for newcomers. We first focus on how individuals who work in the area’s social infrastructure ecosystem, for example shopkeepers, civil society actors, and librarians provide support to newcomers and others who approach them, showing how supporting people forms an integral part of working in these spaces. We then show how newcomers navigate these social infrastructures, and how signposting between social infrastructures crucially helps them in finding information and resources. We conclude by situating the role of social infrastructures as one part of ‘integration opportunity structures’ (Phillimore 2020).

2. Integration in place

Broadly speaking, ‘integration’ refers to the socio-economic, political, social and cultural incorporation of newcomers, as well as the emergence of shared social relations, values, and practices and the adaptation of the long-settled population to newcomers (Ager and Strang 2004; Bolzman, Fibbi, and Vial 2003; Penninx and Garcés-Masareñas 2016; Spencer and Charsley 2021). Regarding the initial period of arrival which this article investigates, we here broadly refer to integration as access to functional and social resources such as housing, education, health services and social networks (see also Hanhörster and Wessendorf, 2020).

According to Phillimore (2020), research on integration has primarily focused on individual migrants and ‘integration outcomes’ regarding, for example, labour market

integration and social mobility, neglecting the role of place in shaping integration. In contrast, research on so-called ‘context’ or ‘neighbourhood effects’ has long been interested in how local conditions shape residents’ lives, while somewhat neglecting individual factors. There is a large body of scholarship focused on urban areas with a high concentration of migrant residents that looks at the effects of socio-spatial concentration of people with a migration background on social mobility (Bolt, Özüekren, and Phillips 2010; Phillips 2010; Vaughan 2007).

A separate and more qualitative strand of research investigated how immigration affects local populations, and how attitudes of longer-established residents impact newcomers’ sense of belonging and their potential to form social relations which might enhance their emotional and social well-being and, potentially, their social mobility. Some of these studies more specifically looked at how ethnic diversity affects the settlement experiences of newcomers (Hickman, Mai, and Crowley 2012; Spicer 2008; Wessendorf, 2016).

While the fields of research on integration, context effects and social cohesion all made important contributions to our understanding of migrant settlement and social mobility, only few scholars have attempted to develop explanatory models that consider individual as well as contextual and translocal factors in shaping integration. Phillimore (2020) has developed a complex model that not only highlights the importance of the context within which migrants arrive, but also the role of host societies in providing opportunity structures that support migrants. She differentiates between five domains of integration: locality, relations, structures, initiatives and support, and discourse. Similarly, Robinson (2010) has investigated geographical variations in experiences and outcomes of migration and identified three explanations for these variations that, combined, have a strong impact on the integration experience of migrants. The first is *compositional*, looking at how the characteristics and profile of the established population, including the socio-economic circumstances of settled and newcomers, shape integration. This also includes the role of legal status and migration governance. *Collective* factors include the sociocultural and historical dimensions of place, and norms and values associated with shared identities, accommodation of diversity, etc. *Contextual* factors include the role of the physical environment and locally available resources (services, facilities, housing, transport links, opportunities for interaction, social networks, support and assistance, etc.) (Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015; Robinson 2010). In this article, we specifically focus on these contextual factors and their importance in finding a foothold in a new place.

The importance of place for migrant arrival and integration has become the central focus of recent debates on ‘arrival cities’ (Saunders 2011) and, relatedly, ‘arrival infrastructures’ (Meeus, Arnaut, and van Heur 2019). Building on earlier work by the Chicago School of Sociology (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1968), scholars have described areas characterised by ongoing immigration over several decades as ‘arrival neighbourhoods’ (Hans and Hanhörster 2020). Over time, long-established migrants living in these areas have built arrival infrastructures, constituting concentrations of institutions, organisations, social spaces, social networks and actors which facilitate arrival. Arrival infrastructures have been defined as ‘those parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled on arrival, and where their future local or translocal social mobilities are produced’ (Meeus, Arnaut, and van Heur 2019, 11). While arrival infrastructures are in constant flux and change over time, places such as shops, religious sites, language classes, civil society organisations, hairdressers and

restaurants can function as hubs where people meet and exchange information. These spaces are often set up by people who possess arrival expertise through their own migration experience.

Analysing migrant integration through the lens of arrival infrastructures is helpful as it puts the onus on the role of the receiving context and its institutions and organisations in including migrants, rather than migrants themselves. It thus speaks to some of the criticism of the notion of integration mentioned above and puts the relevance of place-based opportunity structures in its centre. One of the contributions of the arrival infrastructural lens is that it not only looks at physical infrastructures facilitating arrival, but also the role of specific actors or groups within these infrastructures. The importance of social relations for accessing emotional and economic support has been shown in a large body of literature (Phillimore, Humphris, and Khan 2014; Ryan 2023). The arrival infrastructural lens contributes to this research by investigating where *exactly* newcomers form social relations, and how this relates to the places where they arrive (Hans 2023; Wessendorf, 2022). Social relations are thereby conceptualised as an intrinsic part of urban arrival infrastructures, for example as ‘people as infrastructures’ (Simone 2004), ‘migrant infrastructures’ (Hall, King, and Finlay 2017), ‘soft infrastructures’ (Boost and Oosterlynck 2019) and ‘infrastructures of superdiversity’ (Blommaert 2014). Building on Lindquist et al.’s definition of ‘migrant brokers’ as a ‘party who mediates between other parties’ (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012), such individuals and groups could also be conceptualised as ‘arrival brokers’ who provide access to settlement information (Hanhörster and Wessendorf, 2020; Hans 2023). They often operate within openly accessible places such as libraries, barbers or religious sites, also conceptualised as ‘social infrastructures’ (Klinenberg 2018; Latham and Layton 2019).

Klinenberg (2018) defines social infrastructures as any physical place that enables social interactions. They include public institutions like libraries and schools, as well as parks, playgrounds, community gardens, sidewalks, community organisations and churches. They also include commercial establishments like barbers and shops, ‘where people are welcome to congregate and linger regardless of what they’ve purchased’ (Klinenberg 2018, 16). Within studies in the field of immigration-related diversity, the role of social infrastructures has mainly been investigated regarding forms of conviviality and social cohesion in diverse urban areas (Neal et al. 2013; Rishbeth and Rogaly 2018; Wessendorf, 2014; Wise et al. 2018). In recent years, social infrastructures have increasingly been investigated regarding their role in providing information and resources to newcomers and thus functioning as arrival infrastructures (Hall, King, and Finlay 2017; Meeus, Arnaut, and van Heur 2019; Wessendorf, 2022).

The notion of social infrastructures has also been taken up by practitioners and policy makers. For their Social Integration Strategy, the Greater London Authority (GLA) has developed a conceptual framework of social infrastructures as a useful tool to look at social integration. They highlight the importance of the built environment in enhancing social integration, showing how social infrastructures serve different types of needs. Although the GLA’s social integration strategy is not only aimed at migrants but at all parts of the population, many of its features are directly relevant to migrants’ economic, social and cultural needs. They differentiate between formal and informal social infrastructures. Examples of the former are spaces such as educational settings, libraries, community centres, sports facilities and places of worship, while the latter are spaces like

cafés, hairdressers or nail salons. Importantly, accessing one type of social infrastructure, for example a café, can facilitate access to another (e.g. an advice centre). Shops, cafés, street-corners, parks, mosques or churches can thus have vital functions as information hubs and places of sociability (Hall, King, and Finlay 2017; Özdil 2008; Wise et al. 2018).

Hall et al. develop the notion of ‘economies of care’ to describe transactions in shops that go beyond economic transactions and include civic activities (Hall, King, and Finlay 2017). In a study of the ‘social value’ of three highstreets in London, the GLA has similarly identified ‘additional services’ provided by local businesses, including the opportunity to have a chat or exchange pleasantries, but also more tangible acts of support for example for translating, form filling and signposting to council services (GLA 2018).

The interplay of these different social infrastructures could also be described as an ‘ecosystem, where different types of provision form a community of interconnected support’ (GLA 2021, 52). Social infrastructure ecosystems consist of networks and services, some of which are supported by different kinds of buildings, facilities and organisations. Arrival areas are characterised by a particular type of social infrastructure ecosystem shaped by the different population groups that have lived in these areas over the years (Vertovec 2015). These ‘compositional dimensions’ (Robinson 2010) impact both, formal social infrastructures such as public services with specific language provisions, or specific places of worship aimed at one or more national communities, as well as informal social infrastructures such as shops or local clubs. In relation to local shopping streets, Zukin, Kasinitz, and Chen (2016, 4) similarly use the metaphor of ‘ecosystems’ describing how they ‘bring together in one compact physical space the networks of social, economic and cultural exchange created every day by store owners, their employees, shoppers, and local residents’ (see also Hall 2015; Jacobs 1961; Vaughan 2018). Shopping streets contain a multitude of urban threshold spaces (Çalışkan and Şevik 2022) that facilitate encounters and thus provide opportunities for newcomers to ask questions. For newcomers, the interconnections and especially the signposting between social infrastructures are crucial. As we show in the empirical section of this paper, the internal dynamics of a local ecosystem and the social relations within and between social infrastructures can be highly relevant in shaping access to resources.

An important aspect of social infrastructures is also how visible they are in public space, conceptualised by the GLA as ‘social front door’ (GLA 2021). Visibility is especially important for newcomers who might lack knowledge of services available in an area. People’s perceptions of whom a place is intended for are crucial regarding their decision to access this place, be it a library, café, shop or advice centre. This is related to cues such as signage of what is offered in that place, signs in specific languages, and the types of people within the space. In the case of London, hairdressers and cafés are among the most visible examples of spaces of sociality for people of similar backgrounds. As we show in the empirical section of this paper, libraries can be other successful examples of social front doors. The following section introduces the London Borough of Newham and the research methods.

3. The research

The London Borough of Newham in East London has a population of 364,346 (London Borough of Newham 2021). It is a classical arrival area where new arrivals find their feet

(Butler and Hamnett 2011). The area saw considerable numbers of postcolonial migrants from the Caribbean, South Asia and Africa especially since the late 1940s, over-layered by ongoing immigration from across the world, especially since the 1980s. Since EU accession in 2004, the number of Eastern European residents in Newham has increased significantly and currently makes up 15% of the population (Compost London CIC / Bonnie Downs 2021). Importantly, Newham has also seen an increase in migrants of other backgrounds, for example from Latin America and Southern Europe (with many of these European migrants originating in Latin America, Africa or Bangladesh) (Aston-Mansfield, 2017). These newcomers are not only differentiated in terms of countries of origin but also regarding educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, religion, legal status and other such factors. Newham is a highly transient place, with one of the highest population turnover rates in London (Compost London CIC / Bonnie Downs 2021). In 2015, only 44% of Newham's population had been living in the area for more than ten years, while 37% had lived in the area for less than five years (London Borough of Newham 2021). In 2018, 21.5% of Newham's population had either left or arrived in the borough within the last 12 months (Compost London CIC / Bonnie Downs 2021).

Despite some areas being only a stone's throw away from London's main financial district (Canary Wharf), Newham is one of the most deprived areas in the UK, with unemployment at 5.6% (Compost London 2021) and the highest child poverty rate in London (52%) (Trust for London 2023). Residents with limited English skills are particularly affected by poverty, and families of ethnic minority backgrounds live in households with lower net income than those of a white background (London Borough of Newham 2021). Covid-19 had further negative effects on the economic situation in the borough, with 102,000 residents being furloughed or having to claim unemployment benefits. The total number of welfare benefit claimants rose by 200% after February 2020 (London Borough of Newham 2021).

The empirical material presented in this article draws on two stretches of 12-month-long ethnographic fieldwork in Newham undertaken consecutively by the two authors from 2018 to 2019, and 2021 to 2022. Fieldwork included participant observation in local community groups such as knitting groups, parents' groups at primary schools and libraries. Regular volunteering in a local community centre and a primary school was an integral part of building relationships of trust with newcomers and practitioners. A total of 81 in-depth interviews and 12 focus groups were conducted with long-established residents, migrants, and key people such as councillors, religious leaders, teachers and social workers. Interviews were either undertaken in English, in the respondents' mother tongue where spoken by one of the authors, or with the aid of an interpreter. Fieldwork also included various informal conversations with people working in sites such as shops, cafés and libraries, and short face-to-face surveys with 25 shopkeepers on a Newham high-street. Importantly, people of many different ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds formed part of the studies, including adult migrants of different ages, educational backgrounds, legal statuses and more than thirty countries of origin. The diversity of the sample enabled us to identify which factors were relevant in newcomers' settlement process, rather than selecting our sample based on the assumption that certain factors such as country of origin, educational background or gender are more relevant than others. Research participants were recruited through civil society

organisations, serendipitous encounters and snowball sampling. Ethical approval was gained from Coventry University and the London School of Economics and Political Science for both projects in advance of fieldwork, written or verbal consent was received from all respondents, and all names have been changed. Both authors are European migrants new to the area, and our positionality might have affected our research and findings in various ways. As European migrants, we were able to empathise with some of the challenges our interlocutors faced during the arrival process. However, our class and race positions afforded us certain privileges that were most certainly not lost on our interlocutors who, in most cases, did not possess those privileges. Interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was carried out by using NVivo.

4. Social infrastructure ecosystems

Newham is characterised by a rich tapestry of social infrastructures consisting of small businesses, charitable organisations, religious sites, state-funded institutions, etc. We here focus on two types of spaces that played a crucial role for our research participants: local businesses represented on one of the high streets, and libraries. In a place like Newham with a long history of immigration, many individuals working in these places in one way or another have experience of arriving in a new place themselves, having parents who had come to the country, or knowing others who have arrived. Of course, people working in social infrastructures do not just provide help or information to newcomers, but anyone who approaches them. In fact, one of the shopkeepers we spoke to explicitly said ‘I don’t care if people are migrants, I just try to help’. Proprietors of local businesses can thus act as ‘arrival brokers’ (Hans 2023; Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020), with signposting and information provision becoming an integral part of their work.

Importantly, our research as well as existing studies point to a continuum of brokering among proprietors, ranging from simple information about directions, to more time-consuming support such as form filling (Hall, King, and Finlay 2017). Here, we start with more fleeting forms of signposting, and then move on to more enduring types of support.

The proprietor of a kiosk at an underground station describes himself as shopkeeper as well as ‘information point’. Most of his activities consist of signposting and simple information provision, for example about oyster cards.² Similarly, the owner of a mobile phone mini-shop next to a different underground station talks about how people ask him for directions all the time, which he puts down to his strategic location at the exit of a busy station. Various shopkeepers talked about directing people to local amenities such as doctors’ surgeries or schools. They also talked about people asking for jobs and, for example, directing them to fried chicken outlets, which they thought might provide jobs. A builder’s merchant talked about how he often gets approached by men working in the building trade, asking him whether he knows about jobs in the area. Similarly, a hair and beauty salon saw people ask for jobs and give them a CV. Several pharmacists told us that people came to ask for information about hospitals and doctors’ surgeries.

Some proprietors see it as their duty to help their customers. The long-standing proprietor of a newsagent and his colleague are both keen on helping people out,

emphasising that ‘it is normal to want to help people, it’s part of humanity’, describing this as ‘part of our customer relationships’. They said that because they had been in the area for a long time, they had a lot of knowledge about where to send people and how to, for example, find the cheapest public transport route to get to places. They described that ‘helping people out is essential for our business’. These fleeting ways in which proprietors provide information might seem banal, but they can play an important role in migrants’ arrival trajectories, as we discuss further below.

Local businesses can, however, also provide spaces for more than signposting and simple information provision, as exemplified by a Lithuanian shopkeeper who sells Eastern European and Russian products and talks about how people ‘wonder into the shop just to chat in Russian’. Similarly, a Brazilian café is known to the Portuguese-speaking community as a place where information can be sought and exchanged, but also a place to relax and socialise. The Italian Bangladeshi proprietor of a café told us that he signposts any newly arrived person who comes into his café with questions about arrival to an immigration solicitor. He keeps a large stack of this solicitor’s business cards, whom he had known while still living in Italy. Like the Brazilian café, his café serves as a hub for the Italian Bangladeshi community in the area. Similarly, a Romanian-owned restaurant/café on a Newham high-street facilitates information-sharing for Romanian-speaking newcomers. However, the owner’s self-understanding differs from those of the individuals mentioned above, since she insists that ‘we don’t give advice or help anyone apart from when we have a job going, sometimes people come and ask for a free tea or a meal’. However, she continues: ‘but of course this is a place where almost all customers speak our language, and everybody has some information about something so they can help each other’. These spaces are typical examples of community hubs for co-ethnics where mutual support is sought (see also Suttles 1968; Wessendorf and Farrer, 2021).

Sometimes, however, spaces that were originally created to serve a specific linguistic or ethnic community extend their support beyond co-ethnics. For example, a restaurant serving food from the Indian region of Kerala emerges as a hub for information sharing and care, especially for the Malayalam-speaking community. The owner, who is an active member of the local Malayalee association, tells us that a lot of his customers struggle economically due to precarious immigration situations. ‘If someone can’t pay, we don’t charge them’ he explains. Especially the situation of overseas students, who have no access to welfare benefits, is concerning the restaurant owner. He and the association’s leaders set up a foodbank during the pandemic, first operating out of the restaurant and later moving to a rented shopfront that now functions as the association’s headquarters. Importantly, the foodbank was not targeted at a particular group, but accessible to all residents.

Of course, public institutions can play a vital role as social infrastructures, even though they are not as densely spread as the businesses discussed above. For example, a library in Newham represents a place that attracts a particularly large range of individuals from many backgrounds. It is located on a busy high street, and its set-up, with its large shop window, posters about community events, and a continuously busy atmosphere, signal that it is accessible to people of all backgrounds. Twice per week, women gather for their crochet group on a large table by the front window, most of them with a migration background. Women regularly come into the library to ask members of the

group about crochet, which sometimes leads to conversations about how to find other resources. The library also hosts English classes, and many of the students find the class just by walking in and asking about information. One of the librarians emphasised that people come in with all kinds of questions. She said that the library was there for everybody and for all kinds of enquiries, emphasising that ‘the library is like a mother’ (Wessendorf, 2022, 1). The library thus represents a good example of a successful ‘social front door’ (GLA 2018).

This section has focused on how people operating in social infrastructures provide both practical help and sometimes a space for social and emotional connection. While the ‘economies of care’ (Hall, King, and Finlay 2017) provided by shopkeepers are given to a wide range of people seeking support, some of the social infrastructures presented here also function as spaces of support for co-ethnics or people who share a language. Importantly, they represent urban threshold spaces that are clearly visible in public space and enable newcomers to ask for information or support (Çalışkan and Şevik 2022). Their social front doors enable newcomers to assess whether they might be able to find information in these spaces or find someone who speaks the same language. Of course, these spaces are also gendered. The library, for example, predominantly attracts women due to its activities aimed at children and its crochet group. One of the most important functions of all these social infrastructures is signposting and supporting people in navigating their way into the city, thus creating a social infrastructure ecosystem that acts as arrival infrastructure. Whether a social infrastructure is perceived as a place where information can be sought is often contingent on the person running the place and acting as broker. In the following section, we investigate how newcomers navigate their way into the city via social infrastructures, and the role of arrival brokers in this process.

5. Migrant trajectories through social infrastructures

When asking our research participants about how they found information about settlement when first coming to London, a range of resources were mentioned. Of course, social networks as well as the internet were crucial for many in finding information about, for example, housing or jobs. However, these resources were often complemented by seeking information within the area where they first arrived. Physically visible social infrastructures were particularly important for those with few social contacts and little digital literacy. For example, Fatima from Spain, and originally from Morocco, spoke no English and had no acquaintances when first arriving in Newham. She had booked a hotel before travelling to the UK but wanted to find cheaper accommodation as soon as possible. She started exploring the area by walking around. She found a room in a shared flat by asking at a mobile phone shop, the owner of which referred her to a grocery shop down the road. The proprietor of the grocery shop then referred her to an acquaintance who had a room to let. She felt that she could trust someone who works in a publicly accessible place like a shop. We met Fatima in a library which she had found by walking by while looking for English classes. The shops’ and the library’s social front doors were instrumental in Fatima’s information seeking efforts. Fatima’s example shows how both signposting between shops and individuals who provide information, as well as visible threshold spaces were crucial during her first few weeks in the city.

One of our Portuguese-speaking research participants, Lina, found a job simply by walking around a local shopping mall and handing out her CV, a strategy that several research participants employed when first arriving in London. This particular shopping mall is a hub for Portuguese-speaking migrants of various backgrounds. Thanks to this, and although her English was very limited, she managed to get a job at a perfume shop, where she worked for almost two years. In that shop, she encountered a Portuguese-speaking woman who was active in a local church where they hold services in Portuguese. She describes finding the church like ‘finding a home’. Not only did she find a community of like-minded people at the church who speak her language, but accessing the church also enabled her to leave the exploitative job at the shop and take up a part-time job as social worker for the church. Like Fatima, Lina’s arrival trajectory is shaped by the visible social infrastructures she encountered in the area. However, Lina’s trajectory was somewhat easier as she found social infrastructures that specifically catered to people who speak her language. This was confirmed by a Brazilian research participant whom we met through the church that Lina attends. She confirmed the importance of the Portuguese café mentioned in the previous section, stating that ...

... at times, if I went to a café, there is a Portuguese café at the other side of this shopping centre, I don’t know if you have seen it. So, I would stay there for a while, and I would talk to this or the other person ... I was feeling very anxious because I could not speak in English, so I looked for people who could speak ... I would actually approach people who were speaking in Portuguese and asked them for help. (translated from Portuguese)

In contrast, Fatima, who speaks Arabic and Spanish, found it harder to connect to people who speak her languages. Although in Newham, there are considerable numbers of Spanish and Arabic-speaking migrants, only few shops and cafés have visible offers in these two languages. It is due to this lack of social infrastructures catering to her language groups that Fatima had to seek information elsewhere, for example in corner-shops. In fact, she even travelled across the city to an area with visible Spanish-speaking social infrastructures (Elephant and Castle) where she found a Spanish-speaking solicitor who could help her with applying for a national insurance (NI) number. She had heard of the area and the solicitor while still in Spain. In the solicitor’s waiting room, she encountered a fellow Spanish speaker who offered to help her with translating during the interview for the NI number, as she could not afford the high fee charged by the solicitor. Just like in the other examples, by accessing a social infrastructure, Fatima made contact with new people who could provide information or support, which then facilitated the next step in her settlement process.

Often, it just takes one crucial piece of information to access a support network from which many other resources can be accessed, as in the case of Lina who, once she found the church, was able to get support for most of her other immediate needs, including her social and emotional wellbeing. Similarly, a Senegalese migrant stated that once she found the local library, she managed to get answers or referrals to other places of information for all her practical needs, including an English class.

Sometimes, and especially for those with limited knowledge of English, it can take a while to find the right information. Marina from Romania, for example, joined her husband and a group of rough sleepers at a local shopping mall when she first arrived. After four months of sleeping rough, a local pastor approached her and her husband

and signposted them to the Salvation Army where they managed to find emergency accommodation. The Salvation Army referred them to a homelessness charity, which put them up in temporary accommodation in a local hostel. In her new accommodation, Marina found out about a local Civil Society Organisation that provides English classes as well as other services such as a foodbank. Although Marina is still looking for work, her English is improving, and she is hopeful that she will soon find work and be able to move out of the hostel. Although she accessed her existing social networks with fellow Romanians when she first arrived, they were unable to help her as they were homeless themselves and lacked information about support. Only through the pastor who brokered her access to a support organisation did she manage to stabilise her situation.

Similarly, for Nuriya, who arrived in the UK from the Philippines, it was one first contact which then facilitated access to crucial arrival information. Initially, she struggled to find somewhere to live and had very limited information about how to apply for a visa. One day she met a woman she calls Ms. M. in a shopping centre. 'She is Muslim like me, so we got talking and she asked me about my problems. I told her that I didn't have anywhere to live'. Ms. M. ended up taking Nuriya in for a couple of months and helped her to register with a GP and put her in contact with a local refugee charity that helped her to make an asylum claim, after which Nuriya was put into temporary accommodation by the Home Office. Again, it was one crucial broker who facilitated access to a charity that then supported Nuriya in applying for asylum. Building on Small (2017), Hans and Hanhörster (2020, 1) show 'how arrival-specific information relevant to 'navigating the system' gets transferred' by way of serendipitous encounters in public and semi-public spaces. The fact that these newcomers find themselves in an arrival area is therefore crucial. Being in an arrival area facilitates encounters with brokers who have specific arrival expertise as well as empathy with the arrival situation and are thus able and often willing to help. Often, newcomers first meet these brokers in social infrastructures.

In this section, we have shown that it is not only the presence of threshold spaces or physically accessible social infrastructures, and their accessibility via social front doors that is crucial for finding information, but also how these social infrastructures operate as interconnected social ecosystems in which signposting takes place. The role of the individuals, or brokers, who operate in these infrastructures and signpost people to the right places is thereby crucial.

6. Conclusion

This article has highlighted the role of the built environment and the physical presence of social infrastructures for migrant arrival and their access to resources, contributing to an emerging debate on the role of place for migrant arrival (Hans 2023; Phillimore 2020; Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015; Robinson 2010). While smartphones as 'arrival devices' (Felder et al. 2020) and virtual networks are important for many migration and arrival journeys (Dekker and Engbersen 2012), local contacts and infrastructures continue to be crucial aspects of arrival, especially regarding everyday access to support (Hans 2023; Hans and Hanhörster 2020). Physically present and openly accessible social infrastructures are particularly important for individuals with little social capital, limited knowledge of the majority language and limited digital literacy. For

these individuals, threshold spaces with openly accessible ‘social front doors’ can be key to finding information.

For a social infrastructure ecosystem to successfully function as arrival infrastructure that supports newcomers, it is the *links* between social infrastructures that are crucial. Signposting between, for example, informal social infrastructures and services can make an important difference to individuals’ access to financial, emotional and social support.

Rather than looking at individual integration outcomes, the arrival infrastructures lens helps us to analyse the role of the arrival context and what it offers to newcomers. Regarding refugees, Phillimore (2020) has described this as ‘refugee-integration-opportunity structures’, consisting of integration policies and practices, national and local orientations and attitudes towards migrants, local and national economies, and civil society. In this article, we have only focused on one aspect of such opportunity structures, namely publicly accessible places within an arrival area and the individuals operating within these. We have thereby shown some examples of how ‘integration is grounded and embodied in space and place’ (Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015). While we have foregrounded local context, physically accessible public spaces and individual migrants’ trajectories through these, we recognise the important role of different packages of rights and entitlements related to legal status, how these impact access to resources, and that individual dispositions (educational background, language knowledge, etc.) play a crucial role for integration (Phillimore 2020; Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015). Opportunity structures, rights, entitlements and individual dispositions are not only crucial during the initial period of arrival, but especially in the longer term. Here, we have primarily focused on the initial period of arrival, highlighting how the presence of physical spaces as well as brokers with arrival expertise play a role in supporting migrants. We have demonstrated some of the micro-processes of arrival, showing how walking around and asking people in public spaces are important strategies that newcomers employ to find information about settlement. Daniela told us that ‘the most important thing when you come here is: Who are the people you are going to meet?’. It thus matters where someone arrives, who occupies the space, and how different social infrastructures are interconnected. As we have shown with the example of our Portuguese-speaking research participants who found cafés and a local shopping mall dominated by others who speak Portuguese, it is easier for these individuals to access information in contrast to, for example, our Spanish-Arabic speaking research participant who accessed information more serendipitously through corner shops catering to a large clientele, and by travelling to another area of London where more social infrastructures aimed at Spanish-speakers could be found. Brokers who speak the same language and know the system are thus better able to provide relevant information about services or resources. Nevertheless, even fairly fleeting brokering activities such as signposting by shopkeepers can help and lead newcomers to useful information.

Hence, the nature of local social infrastructure ecosystems can play a crucial role in facilitating access to resources via signposting and support or, in contrast, hindering such access due to a lack of interconnections between social infrastructures, as shown with the example of Romanian rough sleepers who had little knowledge about local support structures. We have also shown that it matters who operates in such spaces, and whether these individuals have specific arrival expertise and knowledge about the

area. Sometimes, it just takes one broker to open doors to a range of services, such as the pastor who undertook outreach work with rough sleepers, and the librarian who knew where to signpost people. We still know little about how the built environment, coupled with place-based opportunity structures, impacts on migrant arrival. The arrival infrastructures lens helps us to explore these factors further and sharpen our understanding of why some newcomers are able to access relevant information while others fall through the cracks. Importantly focussing on arrival areas and the social infrastructure ecosystems in them helps take the onus of integration away from individuals and their capabilities to access resources, and puts the spotlight on what a place and the actors and groups occupying it offer. This focus thus speaks to some of the criticisms of the notion of ‘integration’ with its ‘narrow emphasis on immigrants in the forces defining integration progression’ (Kutor, Arku, and Bandaiko 2023, 1; see also Spencer and Charsley 2021).

While this article has focused on the very initial period of arrival and not longer-term processes of inclusion or marginalisation, accessing the right information and resources quickly might prevent newcomers from facing longer-term marginalisation. Understanding the micro-processes of people’s practices when they first settle will help further understand these longer-term processes of marginalisation or inclusion. Our findings also have implications for policy. We have shown that arrival areas can be conducive to the inclusion of newcomers due to the existence of arrival-specific expertise amongst individuals working in arrival infrastructures. Policies that force certain categories of migrants (in the case of the UK, asylum seekers, see Darling 2022) to live in places that are new to the arrival of newcomers might prevent these newcomers from accessing the social, economic and emotional resources needed for their longer-term inclusion.

Notes

1. For literature on the role of encounters for intercultural relations see, among others, Amin (2002), Valentine (2008), Wessendorf (2014), and Wilson (2014).
2. Travel cards for London transport.

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