

Ecaterina Stefanescu

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

Introduction

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

Figure 1.

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



Opposite:

Figure 2.

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

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

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

Migrancy

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

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

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

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

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

³ Ritivoi, p. 9.

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

⁵ Halbachs, p. 128.

⁶ Ritivoi, p. 8.





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



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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

¹¹ Bachelard, p. 155.

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

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

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Biography:

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

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