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'The library is like a mother': Arrival infrastructures and migrant newcomers in East London

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Abstract

It is often assumed that migrants settle into contexts populated by national majorities or co-ethnics. Yet, new migrants often move into 'arrival areas', sites settled by earlier migrants of various backgrounds. Such arrival areas can typically be found at the margins of 'arrival cities' which have seen immigration (and emigration) over many decades. Past movements bequeath a wealth of 'arrival infrastructures', consisting of institutions, organisations, social spaces, and actors which specifically facilitate arrival. These include, for example, shops as information hubs, religious sites, language classes, and hairdressers established by people with migration backgrounds. This article looks at the interactions and transfer of knowledge and resources between long-established migrants and more recent newcomers through arrival infrastructures and within a marginalised urban area. By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in East London (UK) and using the example of two recently arrived female migrants, it investigates how newcomers access settlement information and the role played by arrival infrastructures in this process. It specifically focuses on newcomers who arrive with few social contacts and for whom physically visible arrival infrastructures like libraries and shops are particularly relevant. The article aims to open up debate about arrival infrastructures, their manifestation in different urban contexts, and their relation to both new forms of solidarity and new and ongoing forms of exploitation between long-established residents and newcomers.

Keywords: arrival infrastructures, integration, newcomers, inclusion, exclusion

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1. Introduction

Earlier paradigms for examining immigration showed how migrants tend to either move into areas populated by national majorities or join their co-ethnics in the so-called ethnic neighbourhoods (Portes and Manning 1986; Zhou 2009). More recent studies have shown how current patterns of immigration are often characterised by the over-layering of migration from many places of origin (Vertovec 2007, 2015; Kurtenbach 2013; Fiddian-Qasbiyeh 2016). Such areas could also be described as arrival areas, situated within ‘arrival cities’ (Saunders 2011). While some of the earlier migrants have moved on to other places, many of them, their children and grandchildren have made these areas their homes (Saunders 2011; Phillimore, Humphris and Khan 2014). Arrival areas tend to be characterised by socio-economic marginalisation and disadvantage, hosting newcomers who arrive with few financial resources and rely on informal support structures and arrival knowledge provided by those who have preceded them. The long-term functioning of these areas in accommodating ever new and diversifying groups of newcomers relies on formal and informal ‘arrival infrastructures’, 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, van Heur and Arnaut 2019: 11). The notion of arrival infrastructures builds on Xiang’s and Lindquist’s concept of ‘migration infrastructures’, defined as ‘the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility’ (Xiang and Lindquist 2014: S124). Arrival infrastructures thus constitute concentrations of institutions, organisations, social spaces, and actors that specifically facilitate migrant arrival.

This article investigates the role of arrival infrastructures for the settlement of migrant newcomers in East London, UK. By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the article advances debates about the relationship between arrival infrastructures and migrant integration. ‘Integration’, used by many states as a framework to analyse migrant incorporation, refers to the socio-economic, political, social, and cultural incorporation of newcomers, as well as the emergence of shared social relations, values, and practices, including the adaptation of the long-settled population to newcomers (Ager and Strang 2008; Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas 2016). This article refocuses academic and policy discourse around integration by highlighting informal support structures provided by long-established migrants and ethnic minorities, many of whom are living at the margins of society themselves (Goodson and Phillimore 2008; Ryan 2011; Cheung and Phillimore 2013; Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019). It uses the arrival infrastructures framework to move beyond the assumption that assistance for settlement comes through formal channels, agencies, and programmes. By showing how newcomers draw on a range of arrival resources, the article brings into view a wider constellation of actors and highlights the special role played by long-established migrants in facilitating newcomers’ arrival and potentially their social upward mobility. By investigating migrant arrival in an area which, like many arrival areas (Saunders 2011), is characterised by socio-economic marginalisation, the article also shows how it is the very marginality of arrival areas that makes possible these informal support structures. These structures have resulted from the ongoing immigration of newcomers with little cultural and economic capital (albeit varying degrees of social capital), who have had to make do with limited socio-economic resources or state support. By

highlighting the complexity of migrant arrival at the margins, the article thus builds on calls by migration and integration scholars who have questioned the idea of a ‘mainstream society’ into which migrants should integrate, asking the question of ‘integration into what?’ (Castles et al. 2002; Favell 2003; Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2017; Morawska 2018). It thus moves beyond over-generalising and simplistic ideas of ‘mainstream society’ to which newcomers should adapt and highlights informal processes of integration at the local or community level, or ‘integration at the margins’. By doing so, it focuses on the *micro-processes* of integration during the initial phase of arrival, rather than viewing integration as an end state. The article thereby uses Spencer and Charsley’s recent definition of integration as ‘process of interaction, personal and social change among individuals and institutions across structural, social, cultural and civic spheres’ (Spencer and Charsley 2021: 16).

This article specifically focuses on migrants who have few social contacts upon arrival and cannot draw on existing social networks for support. In earlier work, I conceptualise these newcomers as ‘pioneer migrants’ (Wessendorf 2018; see also Bakewell, de Haas and Kubal 2012). It examines the interactions and transfer of knowledge and resources between long-established migrants and more recent newcomers through arrival infrastructures, showing how newcomers draw on a range of arrival resources. More specifically, it looks at two infrastructural realms crucial for initial arrival, namely longer established migrant individuals who act as ‘arrival brokers’, and physical sites where newcomers attempt to find information about settlement.

Section 1 of this article summarises current social scientific discussions on arrival infrastructures and migrant integration. This is followed by an overview of the research sites and the methodology. The second part of the article uses two examples of recent newcomers to illustrate how they accessed social and physical arrival infrastructures, and how these facilitated their settlement.

2. Arrival infrastructures as framework for analysing migrant incorporation

Much of the work on ‘arrival cities’ (Saunders 2011) or ‘gateway cities’ (Price and Benton-Short 2008) is grounded in long-standing urban research undertaken by the Chicago School of Sociology (Park, Burgess and McKenzie 1968). This research showed how certain neighbourhoods functioned as transition zones for newcomers and were better equipped to accommodate newcomers than others because of, for example, cheaper housing, ethnic support networks and institutions, and access to low-skilled jobs (Park, Burgess and McKenzie 1968; Schillebeeckx, Oosterlynck and De Decker 2019). Current social scientific debates on the role of urban neighbourhoods for migrant arrival are still strongly influenced by the idea of the Chicago school’s zones of transition (Schrooten and Meeus 2019). Schrooten and Meeus (2019) underline that focussing on specific arrival areas helps us turn our analytical lens to how the lived and the built environment intersect (see also Burchardt and Höhne 2015).

Since then, there have been ongoing debates in the social sciences on the effect of socio-spatial concentration of people with a migration background on social mobility (Vaughan 2007; Bolt, Özüekren and Phillips 2010; Phillips 2010; Hanhörster 2015). While some scholars claim that high numbers of ethnic minorities and immigrants within specific neighbourhoods limit their social upward mobility and can lead to social tensions (Putnam 2007; Casey 2016), others have found that both downward and upward social mobility can occur among residents of such neighbourhoods. They have shown how, even if commonly perceived as areas of marginalisation, these areas can function as migrant destinations with dynamics of their own that can (but not always do) facilitate social mobility (Finney and Simpson 2009; Zhou 2009, Murdie and Ghosh 2010; Fajth and Bilgili 2018, see also Dunne 2005).

These studies on ‘context effects’ mainly concentrated on the impact of co-ethnic ties and disadvantage on social mobility, while neglecting the role of arrival infrastructures and social relations beyond co-ethnic networks. Furthermore, much of this work conceptualised the neighbourhood as ‘container space’, assuming that residents form few social relations beyond the neighbourhood, and that it is primarily local resources that determine the social mobility of its residents (Van Kempen and Wissink 2014).¹ The advantage of an infrastructural approach to arrival is that it acknowledges the importance of particular spatial contexts, but it also ‘expands and refines the geographies of arrival beyond the territorial approach of the neighbourhood to all parts of the fabric of society that matter for newcomers’ (Schroten and Meeus 2019: 5). For example, a Lithuanian research participant of the project presented here had all arrival specific matters arranged by a friend before moving to London, including housing, work, and an English class.

The view of arrival areas as permeable also relates to the notion of ‘arrival’ as a process rather than an end point. For this article, ‘arrival’ is conceptualised as the process in which newcomers find a foothold in a new place, socially, economically, and culturally. Arrival could thus also be seen as the move from the margins to becoming part of the social, economic, and cultural fabric in which migrants end up, thereby also shaping the place that they are joining. This conceptualisation of arrival builds on definitions of integration as a two-way-process, involving both migrants’ access to social, economic, and cultural resources and changes within the receiving society (Ager and Strang 2008). While arrival thereby refers to the first steps into these various realms of the receiving society, integration could be seen as a longer-term process.

Despite new digital forms of communication, migrants’ long-standing embeddedness within transnational networks, and the existence of migration-specific information hubs on social media (Dekker and Engbersen 2012), physical–spatial infrastructures continue to play a major role in catering for migrants. For more than a decade, the social sciences have seen an increased interest in the role of materiality in urban social life (Simone 2004). This ‘infrastructural turn’ (Burchardt and Höhne 2015: 3) has also inspired migration scholarship, which has expanded its prevailing focus on transnational social networks as the main facilitator of migration movements to putting the spotlight on how institutions, organisations, and actors within such systems facilitate (or hinder) human mobility (Xiang and Lindquist 2014).

Drawing on Larkin (2013: 328), Burchardt and Höhne (2015: 3) understand infrastructures as ‘socio-technical apparatuses and material artefacts that structure, enable and

govern circulation—specifically the circulation of energy, information, goods and capital but also of people, practices and images in the urban realm and beyond’.

Importantly, much of the work on arrival infrastructures not only looks at physical infrastructures facilitating arrival, but also the role of specific actors or groups, conceptualising these 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’ (2012: 8), such individuals and groups could also be conceptualised as ‘arrival brokers’ who provide access to settlement information (Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020). They often operate within physically accessible sites such as libraries, barbers, or religious sites, also conceptualised as ‘social infrastructures’ (Klinenberg 2018) or ‘third places’ (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982).²

Importantly, accessing one type of arrival infrastructure, for example an informal football club in a park, can facilitate access to another (e.g. a job or advice centre). Shops, cafés, street-corners, parks, mosques, or churches can have vital functions as ‘information hubs’ and places of sociability (Özdil 2008; Biehl 2015; Costa 2016; Hall, King and Finlay 2017; Wise et al. 2018).

Such physical arrival infrastructures have received little attention in work on migrant integration. Earlier work on migrant arrival has shown the enormous importance of informal integration mechanisms (Park et al. 1968; Bakewell and Landau 2018; Phillimore et al. 2018). Building on this work, an arrival infrastructural lens strengthens a detailed analysis of where and how migrants access information, where they go when they first arrive, whom they ask for information, and the role played by long-established migrants within arrival areas. This focus on the role of long-established migrants in facilitating newcomers’ arrival, conceptualised above as ‘arrival brokers’ (Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020), also speaks to literature that examines the role of social networks and social capital for migrant integration (Ryan et al. 2008; Ryan 2011; Suter 2012; Phillimore, Humphris and Khan 2014). While much of this research has focused on the role of co-ethnic networks, a recently emerging body of research has shown how newcomers often draw on the settlement expertise of earlier migrants who do not have the same ethnic or national background (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Phillimore, Humphris and Khan 2018; Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019). An arrival infrastructural lens strengthens this approach by looking at how long-established migrants who possess settlement expertise can support newcomers of various backgrounds to find a foothold in a new place. As exemplified in the empirical part of this article, they often operate within infrastructural sites such as barbers, religious sites, cafés, or libraries.

Importantly, however, the presence of long-established migrants can also hinder newcomers’ integration and entail exclusionary practices, exemplified by long-established migrants who own properties and sometimes overcharge newcomers for housing (Biehl 2020; Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020). This can also apply to the realm of the labour market, where newcomers with limited knowledge of the majority language and little awareness of their rights can be trapped in exploitative situations and depend on long-established migrants who speak both the majority and the migrant language and act as

gate-keepers (Meeus and Arnaut 2019). Arrival infrastructures can thus be both enabling *and* limiting for newcomers' integration and potential upward social mobility.

The following section presents the urban contexts within which the research took place and the methodologies used.

3. The research

London has seen immigration from across the world for centuries, ranging from Jews in the Middle Ages, to merchants from Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands, to Huguenots from France in the 17th century. During the time of the city's industrialisation, London saw high numbers of Irish and Italian migrants, as well as Jewish refugees from Russia and Poland (German and Rees 2012). In the 20th century, it attracted labour migrants from the previous British colonies in the Caribbean, South Asia, and Africa, and more recently, the city has seen the accelerated diversification of countries of origin from all regions of the world (Kershen 2015). This article draws on two research projects based in Hackney and Newham in East London. These areas form part of East London's typical immigrant reception areas where newcomers find their feet (Butler and Hamnett 2011). Both areas 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, for example from Vietnam, Turkey, and a range of African countries. More recently, East London has seen newcomers from Eastern and Southern Europe as well as Latin America. These migrants are not only differentiated in terms of countries of origin, but also regarding educational, religious, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds and different legal statuses. Hackney's and Newham's white British population now forms a minority of 36.2 and 16.5 per cent, respectively (London Borough of Newham 2011; Hackney Council 2019). Hackney and Newham are among the most deprived areas of the UK despite noticeable gentrification in recent years and despite only being a stone's throw away from London's financial district (London Borough of Newham 2011; Hackney Council 2019).

Many newcomers in these areas find themselves in economically and legally precarious situations, particularly in the context of austerity over several decades and the closing down of many Civil Society Organisations and other support structures. Especially newcomers who lack social support networks and cannot draw on an already established 'migrant community' struggle to find a foothold in the city and find themselves in precarious work and housing situations.

Fieldwork included participant observation in local community groups such as knitting groups, parents' groups at primary schools, community groups and libraries, as well as 50 in-depth interviews and 11 focus groups with local residents, migrants, and key people such as councillors, religious leaders, teachers, and social workers. Fieldwork also included various informal conversations with people working in sites such as shops, cafés, and libraries, which can take on the role of arrival infrastructures. Importantly, migrants of many different ethnic, national, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds formed part of the studies, including migrants of different legal statuses. Research participants were recruited through civil society organisations, serendipitous encounters, and snowball

sampling. All names have been changed. In terms of legal status and its relationship to arrival infrastructures, it is worth noting that in the UK context, asylum seekers are more likely than others to find information about institutionalised support structures via the Home Office (London Borough of Hackney 2019).

The empirical part of this article examines how newcomers gain access to settlement information and investigates the role played by arrival infrastructures in this process.

4. Arrival infrastructures as people and places

With the examples of Andreea from Moldova and Fatima from Morocco, I will here focus on how migrants with limited contacts and knowledge of English access arrival resources. I have identified three arrival infrastructural realms that were crucial for their arrival and representative of other migrants' arrival trajectories. These are: (1) social contacts in the form of arrival brokers; (2) physical arrival infrastructures and (3) the Internet. While acknowledging the importance of online information (Dekker and Engbersen 2012; Georgiou 2019) and smart phones as 'arrival devices' (Felder et al. 2020), this article will focus on the former two. 'Social infrastructuring practices' have also been conceptualised as 'fluid infrastructures', contrasted with 'robust infrastructures' (Bovo 2020) which I here describe as physical infrastructures. As shown with the examples below, robust and fluid infrastructures are closely connected. The following section captures Andreea's and Fatima's arrival trajectory through the lens of these realms.

4.1 Andreea

Andreea originally comes from Moldova, but she lived in Azerbaijan for many years before moving to the UK in 2018, eight months before I met her. She came to the UK with a Romanian passport due to her Romanian ancestry. In addition to Romanian, she speaks Russian and Azeri, but her English is very limited (the interview was conducted in Russian). Andreea came to East London with her two teenage sons. When first arriving, she stayed with a Moldovan acquaintance who had been living in London for 17 years already. She and her sons slept on the floor in the living room for a weekly fee. This acquaintance also helped her get a National Insurance Number, but she charged her £100 for translating during the interview.

While this acquaintance, who acted as arrival broker, provided crucial help at the beginning, Andreea felt exploited financially and moved to a different accommodation, which she found by asking her neighbours. She now shares a house with four other migrant families, each in a room. Through one of her house mates, she found a GP in the area.

Her first job was cleaning rooms at a large hotel. She found it on the internet via an ad in Romanian. Despite it being an established hotel chain, she describes her first employers as 'Romanian mafia', exploiting her and paying her much less than they should have. When becoming desperate about her job situation and sitting on a bench in Newham crying, someone approached her and spoke to her in Russian. He was a fellow Moldovan. When hearing her story, he gave her a phone number of an organisation that tackles unfair work conditions, telling

her to show this number to her employers. As soon as she did, they paid her. Nevertheless, she left the job because of back problems, and has now found a job cleaning offices.

Her sons have settled into secondary school well. Fortunately, there is a Turkish-speaking teaching assistant who translates for her, shows her around and explains everything. At the beginning, she did not manage to find any information about an English class. So she decided to walk around the area and look for one. She approached a Sri Lankan community centre where the cleaner told her about a nearby school for English learners. This is where she is now learning English and getting support relating to job applications and other crucial services.

4.2 Fatima

Fatima was born in Morocco, but spent most of her life in Barcelona (Spain), where she had moved with her parents when she was seven years old. When she moved to London in 2019, she had no contacts and hardly spoke any English (the interview was conducted in Spanish three months after her arrival). She initially stayed in a hotel in Newham that she had found on the internet before coming over. Because she wanted to find more permanent accommodation as quickly as possible, she asked in a grocery shop whether they knew a place to stay. The shopkeeper knew another shopkeeper down the road and introduced her to him. This shopkeeper knew a Romanian woman who had a room to sublet.

When she first arrived, she worked in the hotel where she was staying, cash in hand. But she stopped working there soon after, as she felt exploited. At the time of the interview, she was looking for work, but not speaking English made it difficult for her to find something.

Fatima's story of arrival is characterised by a number of chance encounters with individuals who were able to help her because they had arrival expertise. The shopkeeper knew someone who was able to informally let a room on the spot. Similarly, when she wanted to open a bank account, she asked a woman at a bus stop who took her to a bank where she could open her account. For her National Insurance Number, someone back in Spain told her to go to a solicitor's office in Elephant and Castle, an area in London with a large Spanish-speaking community. While waiting there, someone told her to check the price first, and it turned out to be too expensive. That person ended up helping her getting the NI number and went to the appointment with her to translate. He did not charge her. A similarly serendipitous encounter also led to a new friendship. Fatima met a Moroccan woman on the street who had heard her speak Arabic on the phone and approached her. They got chatting and she invited her to a wedding. They are still in contact.

I first met Fatima at the library of one of Newham's high streets. She had come into the library to enquire about English classes. Fatima's story of arrival exemplifies the importance of arrival expertise present among an arrival area's population, as well as the importance of physical infrastructures (shops, the library) for accessing information. The following section delves into these arrival infrastructural realms more deeply.

4.3 Arrival brokers

Boost and Oosterlynck (2019) describe social relations that are crucial for migrant arrival as 'soft urban arrival infrastructures', defining these as 'the local and extra-local social

networks that affect migrants' experiences at their place of arrival by providing them with emotional, informational, and instrumental support in both every day and crisis situations' (Boost and Oosterlynck 2019: 158). As noted earlier, there is a range of literature focusing on the role of social networks for migrant settlement and highlighting the importance of existing links to ethnic communities. This article, however, focuses on migrants with few such connections upon arrival. For the research participants represented in this article, there were three types of contacts that were crucial for arrival and settlement: those with people whom they already knew or who had specifically facilitated their arrival; those made through serendipitous encounters post-arrival; and weak ties (Granovetter 1973), namely contacts with people whom they met regularly but did not know very well, but who were crucial in providing support for arrival and settlement.

These contacts could also be described as 'arrival brokers' (Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020). Often, brokers are migrants themselves and therefore have specific settlement expertise (Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019). The notion of 'arrival broker' draws on Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) definition of 'migrant brokers' as a 'party who mediates between other parties', for example between a newcomer and employer or a landlord (see also Hans and Hanhörster 2020). Andreea's arrival broker was a Moldovan acquaintance who let her sleep on her living room floor for a fee, helped her with her national insurance number and with finding a school for her sons. Many research participants had such an arrival broker, most of whom were crucial in facilitating initial housing. A Kyrgyz research participant stated that without having at least one such contact, she would not have moved to London. As shown with the example of Andreea, relationships with arrival brokers can be both friendly and exploitative. Migrants who do not speak the majority language can sometimes become dependent on brokers who might channel them into specific jobs or substandard housing (Meeus and Arnaut 2019). In contrast, friends might act as brokers and help with a range of arrival challenges.

Fatima did not have a broker when she first arrived. For her, serendipitous encounters were more important. For both Fatima and Andreea, serendipitous encounters with people who possessed arrival expertise were facilitated by the fact that they found themselves in an arrival area where there were people who had a migration background themselves and/or who spoke the same language. This is exemplified with Fatima's friendship with a Moroccan woman whom she met on the street, and Andreea's encounter with a Russian speaker who helped her confront her exploitative employers. Serendipitous encounters with people who can help with settlement also take place because of physically present infrastructures such as shops, libraries, and Civil Society Organisations discussed further below. Fatima found housing by asking in a shop, and an English class by asking in the library. Andreea found an English class by asking at a Tamil community centre. Drawing on Small (2017), Hans and Hanhörster (2020) describe such encounters as fleeting forms of resource transfer. Building on Thrift's (2005) work on urban repair, Hall and Smith (2015) have conceptualised these everyday acts of help and kindness as 'infrastructures of kindness', which persist despite or possibly because of an increasingly hostile discursive and policy environment against migrants. These relationships represent another example of how spatial and socio-economic margins have their own social dynamics (Dunne 2005; Landau and Iskander, this issue).

There are other types of social contacts that are crucial for arrival but are slightly different to the serendipitous ones described here. They take place in the context of routine activities, for example, during regular visits to a café, or by attending a football club or a mosque, and they could also be described as ‘weak ties’ with people of differently positioned social groups who do not form part of close friendship networks (Granovetter 1973). Often, such contacts are formed in public or semi-public spaces, and the chances of such contacts are heightened because of the historically present high number of migrants in such areas (Hans and Hanhörster 2020). Hans and Hanhörster (2020: 84) conceptualise the transfer of information at the mosque and other such more institutionalised spaces as ‘institutionally embedded resource transfer’. Angela’s relation with a Turkish-speaking teaching assistant who helps her in regards to school-related matters is an example of this type of resource transfer. Often, these weak ties follow on from serendipitous encounters. For example, Angela found an English class through the cleaner at a Tamil community centre. Once she had started the class, the teacher provided her with further information about other types of arrival resources, for example relating to work. Drawing on Bourdieu (1986), Ryan et al. (2008) make the important differentiation between horizontal and vertical weak ties to highlight the resources that these ties might generate. The examples here represent vertical weak ties with individuals in stronger social positions than Fatima and Angela. Dominguez (2011) has conceptualised such ties as ‘ties that offer leverage’ because they help individuals get ahead, as opposed to social support ties with friends and family who help individuals ‘get by’. Angela and Fatima both lack social support ties, but they are highly skilled in leveraging the few weak ties that they create via serendipitous encounters or within social infrastructures such as libraries and schools.

As a result of the presence of ‘hard infrastructures’ (Boost and Oosterlynck 2019) in their arrival area, for example the English school, the library, and shops with shopkeepers who had arrival expertise, Fatima and Andreea thus made crucial contacts with individuals who were able to act as arrival brokers. This exemplifies how the material and social are interlinked and part of one another (Amin 2014).

4.4 Physical infrastructures

The presence of publicly accessible sites such as shops, libraries, barbers, and religious sites can be crucial especially for migrants who do not have pre-existing social networks upon arrival. Both Andreea and Fatima found English classes by coincidence and by walking around the area and accessing a community centre and a library, respectively. Other migrants similarly reported how by walking around, they found important resources. A Hungarian migrant, for example, found a job centre because of walking around. She had heard of job centres before, but only by seeing one in her area did she make use of it and access its services. Other migrants reported going into pharmacies to ask about nearby doctors’ surgeries. Fatima found housing through a shopkeeper. Not only did he have the right contact to find her a room, but he was also not surprised about her request, which exemplifies how such sites not only serve to sell goods, but also provide other kinds of resources (We Made That and LSE Cities 2017). Hall, King and Finlay (2017) examined

everyday exchanges of goods and services on urban high streets in the UK, describing these as ‘migrant infrastructures’ and showing the existence of transactions that go beyond selling goods, but also include, for example, support for form-filling. Research undertaken by Hackney Council showed that barbers and fried chicken fast-food chains are important places where migrants seek information (London Borough of Hackney 2019). A research participant who runs a kiosk at a local underground station in Newham confirmed that selling things is only part of his job, and giving information is a huge additional part. He described his kiosk as an ‘information bank’.

While Hall, King and Finlay (2017) focused on local businesses, many of the research participants presented here also emphasised the importance of social infrastructures such as libraries and religious sites. For example, the library mentioned as part of Fatima’s story plays a crucial role for a variety of migrants who have been in London for various lengths of time. The library’s physical location at a busy high street, and its set-up, with its large window, posters about community events, and a continuously busy atmosphere, signal that it is accessible to people of all backgrounds. 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’. Pre COVID-19, twice a week, a group of about 15 women used to gather for their weekly crochet group on a large table by the front window, most of them with a migration background. During the many times I attended the group, women regularly came into the library to ask members of the group about crochet, which sometimes led to conversations about how to find other resources. One of those other resources is English classes that take place several times a week at the back of the library. The majority of learners I spoke to had found the class by walking in and asking about information.

Because of its visibility and vibe as community hub, the library has also become attractive to those providing services, for example English classes. At one instance during my fieldwork, there emerged competition between two private providers of English language classes who were seeking to recruit students in the library. Hence, both migrants and arrival brokers use the library to seek or give information. In Hackney, a Senegalese research participant talked about how the local library was her main point of contact whenever she needed information about anything to do with life in London. She originally found out about the library via her son’s school.

Another important type of physical arrival infrastructure is religious sites. For example, many churches have taken on the function of giving newcomers relevant information about services which provide support, including helping migrants find housing or English classes. One of the local pastors in Newham reported that sign posting was one of his main activities when working with new parishioners. Often, newcomers find churches either online, for example via google maps, or through friends.

The sites listed in this section only represent a small selection of places that newcomers might access to find arrival information and support. They form part of a large tapestry of arrival infrastructures, which will vary according to the specific characteristics of arrival areas and their respective populations.

5. Conclusion: arrival infrastructures as first points of access

The arrival infrastructural approach refocuses work on migrant arrival and settlement by highlighting the micro-processes of accessing resources within arrival areas and by underlining the role played by those who have arrived before. Rather than only focusing on the responsibility of the state and civil society organisations in facilitating integration, the concept of arrival infrastructures also highlights the relevance of informal integration processes at the local level. This does not exclude the state, but it neither puts it at the centre of analysis. Rather, it also takes into account more informal sites such as hairdressers, newsagents, money transfer agencies, and so on, including public spaces that might facilitate spontaneous encounters among newly arrived and long-established residents (Kleinman 2014; Bovo 2020; Hans and Hanhörster 2020). Hence, the arrival infrastructures approach starts with the migrants themselves, following newcomers through urban contexts where they live their lives (sometimes just temporarily), and asking where and how integration occurs. This focus on the process of arrival and integration, rather than the outcome, builds on more recent definitions of integration that focus on processes, social change, and interactions across structural, social, cultural, and civic spheres (see Spencer and Charsley 2021).

This article has focused on an arrival area that could be described as ‘typical’ in that it is characterised by socio-economic marginalisation and hence easier access to affordable housing for newcomers. By focusing on migrant arrival and integration into marginalised areas and populations, the arrival infrastructures approach addresses long-standing critics of integration theory who question the notion of ‘mainstream society’ into which newcomers ought to integrate (Castles et al. 2002; Favell 2003; Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2017; Morawska 2018). East London, like many arrival areas, has seen immigration over many decades, but even before that and compared with other parts of London, it was characterised by both socio-economic and geographical marginality.

The arrival infrastructural approach pays particular attention to urban space and the historicity of ongoing immigration into certain areas. It is the characteristics of arrival areas as long-standing areas of immigration (and marginalisation) that make the availability of arrival resources and information possible. These histories of immigration have brought with them the development of what could also be described as ‘care networks’ for newcomers, represented in physical and social infrastructures comprising, for example, medical practices, sanctuary spaces for asylum seekers and refugees, advice centres, crochet groups, fitness classes, and informal social networks (Mosselson 2021). If Andreea had not been in an arrival area, she probably would not have bumped into someone speaking her language who was able to help her with her exploitative employer. Andreea’s example also shows how these support structures and networks exist within a wider context of marginalisation characterised by a hostile environment towards immigrants in regards to the legal system, hostile housing, and work environments (Mosselson 2021).

These social contacts, here conceptualised as arrival brokers, can lead to further resources. They can open up access to a range of information networks that help newcomers settle in various societal realms, or move on to other places. As illustrated with the examples

of Andreea and Fatima, breaking into these networks of support is most challenging for unconnected pioneer migrants. Despite language barriers, Fatima and Andreea were both able to put their social skills to work and use such ties as leverage to get ahead with their new lives in London (Dominguez 2011). Beyond these more practical ways in which arrival brokers offer support, these social contacts can provide care, solace, and emotional support.

Importantly, these processes do not always take place right after arrival, and there are large temporal differences in when and how migrants access resources. For example, a Hassidic Jewish research participant from Yemen found an English class only four years after arrival, resulting from meeting a Jewish midwife who told her about a local class for Jewish women.

However, arrival infrastructures can also block access to resources or have exploitative characteristics, as exemplified with Andreea's acquaintance who overcharged her for initial accommodation and administrative support. When examining arrival infrastructures, attention also needs to be paid to these inhospitable or 'profit-oriented infrastructures' (Felder et al. 2020: 61; see also Simone 2004).

Examining migrant arrival and integration through an arrival infrastructural lens also has practical implications. Reaching out to potentially vulnerable residents is one of many local governments' main challenges. This can potentially be addressed by providing information about public services through arrival infrastructures such as religious sites and local businesses, but also enhancing support for already established institutions such as libraries and schools. By identifying where hard-to-reach migrants go and where information can be shared, information about rights and entitlements, language classes, or welfare support services can be distributed more widely, while being aware that especially migrants in insecure legal situations might not wish to be reached.

Looking at migrant integration via arrival infrastructures helps us to reorient research by putting migrants and long-established residents of both migrant and non-migrant background in the centre of our analysis and highlighting what kinds of informal resources already exist in a given area. Conceptually, the arrival infrastructural lens highlights that, despite transnational connections and support networks, and the prevalence of online platforms and social media, everyday realities of migration and settlement continue to be grounded in place and shaped by the material presence of people, buildings, and public spaces. It is these local spaces within areas of ongoing immigration, and how they function as spaces of inclusion or exclusion, which require further investigation. While these spaces could also be seen as at the margins, both spatially in relation to the city centres of large urban metropolises, and socio-economically and culturally in regards to deprivation and cultural diversity, this article has shown that within this space, we can find new forms of solidarity and support that can enable newcomers to transform their marginalised positions at the beginning of their arrival to somewhat more secure social positions.

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Notes

1. See Hans, et al. (2019), Hahnhörster and Wessendorf (2020), and van Ham and Manley (2012) for a discussion.
2. There exists a range of social scientific literature on ‘brokers’. See for example Lindquist (2015) and Tuckett (2020) on brokers who facilitate migrant incorporation or access to citizenship, and who operate within organisations (e.g. NGOs) and institutions. In this article, I refer to brokers who act as individuals and operate in a more informal manner.

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