

A Narrative of Domestic Space and Urban Migration

A published report by the United Nations High Commissioner states that 45 million migrants, refugees, and expellees — victims of poverty, famine, epidemics, natural catastrophes, unemployment, civil wars, and persecutions — are in the midst of flight to new homes. The destination for the migrant is almost always the city. In the formation of communities, peoples in migration do not alter urban form in immediately apparent ways. Instead, these transformations emanate from the confines of their domestic spaces. Unlike Western and particularly American paradigms of domesticity where stability and permanence are implicit, domestic space for many migrants is inherently provisional. For these people it is either the first transition point in a long period of adaptation and assimilation or a place where life is suspended preceding a return to their original home. In both cases, these homes — a hotel room, the residence of a family or friend, a refugee center — constitute way-stations between the memories of the homelands from which they recently fled and the imaginings and desires of the places in which they aspire to be.

For many, migratory movement disrupts established patterns of domestic life. In these way-stations the migrant assembles a temporary home out of material possessions, transported objects of sentimental value and newly acquired objects of consumer culture. Rather than moving immediately into a domestic setting whose spaces are parceled according to specific functions — “living room,” “bedroom,” “kitchen,” “bathroom” — this interim home becomes a dense amalgam of belongings and overlapping daily activities. The (a)way station, the presentation of packed and oddly juxtaposed possessions in transit, cites the temporary home of the migrant, a space that teems with tumultuous emotions: anxiety, longing, relief, . . . waiting. (A)way station’s richly layered visual and aural field allows the installation’s viewer to intuit the mutable domestic space of the migrant.

(A)way Station compresses the space of migratory inhabitation into the scale of architectural representation. Expressing the conditional nature of migration’s architecture, its walls are assembled from possessions taken in transit (furniture, mementos, clothing) and construction materials comprising their interim home (plywood, linoleum, carpet). Its densely packed walls, assembled into fifteen illuminated structures, incorporate sound equipment that relays spoken narratives of migration collected from personal recollections.

(A)way station is predicated on the understanding that it will travel to multiple venues; it is constructed for no exact place. (A)way station transforms itself as it is unpacked, according to the conditions of the space in which it is installed. Spatial limitations may mean that parts of the installation cannot be reconstructed. The “lost” fragments deleted or rearranged due to the spatial particularities of each venue are recalled through drawn representations of the complete installation that are incorporated into each new overall construction. Through a process whereby these drawings that document the project’s siting in its different venues are incorporated within its structure, the project becomes a narrative of its own journey. In its unpacking of the material traces of memory and desire, (a)way station records the history of its travels and speculates on its future domiciles.

(A)way station’s condition of material and spatial indeterminacy is akin to the psychological indeterminacy of the migrant who cannot move fluidly in his/her new context and whose ability to adapt is arrested by unfamiliar social, political, and cultural conditions that provide limited choices. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon, whose own sense of estrangement and affirmation, in this instance prompted by racism, oscillated over the course of his migratory travels between colonized Martinique and metropolitan Paris, has written to this end: “I am for somewhere and for something else . . . in the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.”