



(A)WAY STATION: A NARRATIVE OF DOMESTIC SPACE AND URBAN MIGRATION

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the “unhomely” be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres.¹

A recently published report by the United Nations High Commissioner states that 45 million migrants, refugees, and expelledes — victims of poverty, famine, epidemics, natural catastrophes, unemployment, civil wars, and persecutions — are in the midst of flight to new homes.² Most migrants are destined for the city. Of interest for us in this phenomenon is that in the formation of their new communities, peoples in migration do not alter urban form in immediately apparent ways. Instead these transformations originate 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 spare room of a relative or friend, or a refugee center — constitute not only physical but also psychological way-stations, between memories of their homelands from which they recently departed and desires for those places where they aspire to be.

For many, migratory movement disrupts established patterns of domestic life. These sites become way-stations where 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 — for example: “living room,” “bedroom,” “kitchen,” “bathroom” — this interim home becomes a dense amalgam of belongings and overlapping daily activities.

1. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.

2. Gert Mattenklott, editorial, *Daidalos* 54 (December 1994), pp. 22–23.