



Gastvrij Oost

East Amsterdam makes room for refugees

The arrival of refugees in the Netherlands arouses a lot of resistance, but a grassroots initiative in the eastern part of Amsterdam is welcoming refugees. Truus Ophuysen reports from Amsterdam Oost.



Two social entrepreneurs, in collaboration with a growing group of volunteers that call themselves *Gastvrij Oost* ('Welcoming East') managed to bring over around 30 Syrian refugees, most of whom have or will soon have a residence permit. A group of 31 refugees have moved into their new temporary home, an old office building in the eastern district of Amsterdam. The refugee authorities did not like the idea, but eventually the district council and the City of Amsterdam supported the initiative. The group's previous residence was a tent camp near Nijmegen where 3,000 refugees lived until recently. They had left family and friends behind in the war, made the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean and ended up dealing with the rather bureaucratic Dutch asylum system, filling out registration forms and then waiting, waiting, waiting...

Gastvrij Oost started by organising two neighbourhood meetings where residents could voice their questions and concerns about welcoming refugees in their neighbourhood. The group aimed to mobilise support from local residents and to create a practical commitment to helping refugees living in their neighbourhood. "People especially wanted to know what they could do and when they could start, says Ramon Schleijsen, one of the initiators. Concerns were expressed, but

these gradually evaporated when the newcomers moved in. People who at first had reservations come along sometimes. They encounter a group of 30 people they can relate to, have a chat with and see that they are just ordinary people.



Refugees have room for initiative

"In Nijmegen it was like a prison," says Oussama (39), a Syrian-Palestinian artist from Damascus. He was one of the first residents in the building on the Mauritskade (<http://gastvrijooost.amsterdam/huisvesting/>). He has set up a makeshift studio in one of the offices upstairs and is painting again. The people living in the building are diverse, consisting of men and women who arrived on their own in Holland, sometimes leaving behind relatives in Syria or in another region. They also include two families with children. Unlike in large-scale shelters, the refugees are for their own environment: they have to make their own decisions on how to spend the day and what to eat, instead of being totally dependent on the Dutch state. "We waited five months," says one refugee. "We could not do anything because we did not have a residence permit. We had no rights, but here we can learn, work and start building a future".

The group know each other from an Amsterdam emergency location where they spent some weeks. "There was no privacy, and it was cold," a lawyer from Homs says. She left her children, aged 14 and 16, behind in Lebanon. She travelled from Turkey to Greece and took the plane to the Netherlands. She hopes that she will be allowed to bring her children to Amsterdam. Recently she acquired a residence permit and moved into an apartment with enough space for her children, who she hopes will join her soon. One family reunification already took place. On 13th June 2016, Adnan Moudarres's wife and two children arrived in Holland and they live in HOOST for the moment.

Large reception centres are huge enclaves. Waiting and doing nothing breaks people, especially since they have just escaped from the war, where they showed so much strength. After such a long period of waiting they find it much more difficult to integrate than when they can start right away. Recently a survey was started, which compares the state of mind of refugees living in large shelters with those living in HOOST. The first results clearly show that the resilience of refugees is highly dependent on their opportunities to enter into emotional connections and develop their selves. HOOST clearly shows an upward spiral to self-determination and a normal life.



Pointing the way to a nationwide solution

In theory, the Dutch government promotes small-scale refugee shelters, but strangely enough until now no such initiative has been started anywhere in the Netherlands. Now the Oost district and the City of Amsterdam are collaborating well. Unfortunately, it is much more difficult to develop a good relationship with the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), responsible on behalf of the Dutch government for the reception of refugees. The COA refuses to provide the refugees with the money that is available for them. That leaves Gastvrij Oost with a funding problem, making the project largely reliant on crowdfunding and volunteers. Amazingly enough, it has survived until now thanks to generous gifts from local residents and some other sources of funding.

The Dutch Minister of Integration, Lodewijk Asscher, recently visited HOOST, where the refugees shared their experience with him: "I have friends here. I can go wherever I want. Overall I live a normal life," said one. Another expressed his appreciation of "just everyday things like groceries". The minister appreciated the fact that this initiative started from the neighbourhood itself and said that the residents' support gives it an "extra quality". He said that we can learn from this and possibly should allow refugees and residents to set up joint initiatives elsewhere. Gastvrij Oost also made it clear that a small-scale initiative makes it easier to discuss local residents' legitimate concerns and get people engaged in the project.

Whether the project will be rolled out nationwide is not yet known. It is however under discussion whether the project in Amsterdam can be extended. In the meantime, refugees living in HOOST are starting to move on because they have received an official status. Gastvrij Oost is also moving on to new challenges as new locations in eastern Amsterdam will be built where refugees with a residence permit will be housed for a longer period.

Now that the authorities are preparing new plans, the local community's Gastvrij Oost network is taking on the job of ensuring a human approach, self-management by the residents and a fruitful collaboration with the neighbourhood.

This report is based on interviews which Gastvrij Oost conducted with local and national papers. With thanks to Loes Leatemia and Ramon Schleijpen.



Further information:

Launched in September 2015, **Gastvrij Oost** is a growing, active network of over 100 committed residents, initiatives and entrepreneurs in the eastern part of Amsterdam. Its guiding principles are the self-determination of people and the strength of the local community, focusing on cooperation between society and refugees in areas such as housing, activities, learning Dutch, meeting, training and work. To a wider audience it shows a positive movement in which it collectively makes room for refugees in the city.

Website: <http://www.gastvrijooost.amsterdam>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=gastvrij%20oost>

E-mail: <mailto://gastvrijooost@gmail.com>

15/07/2016