



Home-Making under Revocable Housing: Appropriation and Futurity after the Nagorno-Karabakh Displacement in Yerevan

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Abstract: *This article examines how internally displaced persons from the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh negotiate the distinction between house and home in Yerevan, Armenia, through a study that draws on 30 narrative interviews conducted in 2022 and 2023. The study explores participants' movement across three dominant post-displacement housing settings: collective housing, co-residing with family, and rental housing. It examines how participants' experiences are shaped by the distinct conditions of entry, legitimate use, and temporal security afforded by each setting, rather than treating these settings as mere "options" that differ only in comfort and quality. By bringing together phenomenological ideas of home and materialist ideas of housing, the research develops a conceptual model of home-making that is grounded in practice and shaped by the interrelationship between housing settings, appropriation, and futurity. The research demonstrates that 'not feeling at home' is a practice that participants undertake in response to revocability in housing settings, and that participants' actions of cleaning, repairing, and organising a space and the establishing of routines are all done amidst considerations/expectations of disruption. The research identifies distinct temporalities in institutional, relational, and market settings and demonstrates how constraints on spatial appropriation generate non-investment in a sense of home, even in housing that is materially sufficient. The research concludes with a discussion of the implications for housing policy that is grounded in a realist understanding of how to enable home-making, and how this requires moving beyond merely providing housing towards focusing on how to reduce revocability and to enable legitimate forms of appropriation that are modest and inexpensive.*

Keywords: forced displacement; Nagorno-Karabakh; home-making; appropriation; futurity; tenure insecurity; Yerevan.



Introduction

Research on displacement and home shows that the loss of home cannot be reduced to the loss of shelter, because home refers not only to a physical structure but also to routines, recognition, attachment and continuity (Boccagni, Perez Murcia, and Belloni 2020; Perez Murcia 2019, 2020, 2021). However, the latest debate in the field of housing research emphasises the need to move beyond the reiteration of home as symbolic and emotional the reiteration of home as having symbolic and emotional significance, and to ask more pertinent and important questions, such as inquiring into how certain housing settings either support or prevent home-making, and why people may refuse to experience a provided shelter as home.

This article explores how forcibly displaced Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh navigate the boundary between house and home in their experience of living in Yerevan. Using narrative interviews, it examines how participants experienced moving between three housing settings: *collective living in dormitories and institutional spaces, living with relatives, and living in privately rented housing*. These settings differ not so much in terms of comfort and amenities, but rather in terms of the orders of access and control they establish, who can enter, what can change, and how secure the immediate future is.

The key question guiding this paper is: *how do displaced people experience and navigate the boundary between shelter and home in these different housing settings?* Empirically, the article shows that ‘not feeling at home’ is not merely a subjective side-effect of traumatic experience as it can also be a rational strategy of attachment management in revocable housing contexts, where continuity cannot be taken for granted and where attachment is managed in relation to anticipated interruptions (institutional exit, host withdrawal, or rental insecurity).

Analytically, the originality of this paper lies in three points: (1) distinguishing between different types of temporality in various housing settings (institutional, relational, and market-based); (2) bridging materialist and phenomenological approaches by analysing how tenure forms, permissions, and affordability relate to symbolic forms of home; and (3) identifying practices of appropriation (cleaning, repairing, reorganising, routinising) as key mechanisms by which shelter is transformed into lived space and instability is rendered visible.

Theoretical framework

The article brings together the housing studies literature focused on lived experience and the literature focused on material conditions such as tenure and commodification. Through critical phenomenology (Handel 2019) and post-phenomenological home studies (Gibas 2019), we propose home-making as a practice-based process shaped by housing settings, appropriation, and futurity.

Housing settings, access, and control

This article focuses on housing settings at the meso-level of everyday dwelling and displacement. Unlike macro-level analyses of post-socialist housing systems that examine broader institutional patterns and welfare structures (Stephens, Lux, and Sunega 2015), it uses



the term housing settings to refer to the socio-spatial arrangements of access and control that shape life in the post-displacement city. Following Gurney (1999) and Saugeres (2002), tenures are seen as an ideological construct that normalises specific forms of domestic behaviour. This is particularly visible in the Yerevan case, where the Soviet-era allocation and obtaining of apartments operated as ideological and cultural practices that distributed not only units but also recognition and legitimacy (Vermishyan 2021). Tenures can thus be seen as a regulatory system of precarious inclusion (Blomley 2020; Cowan and Hardy 2020) that governs the micro-world of home in terms of entry, regulation, and revocability. This understanding is in line with political studies of housing (Handel 2019) and with Després's (1991) understanding of home meaning as being inescapably related to socio-political constraints.

Appropriation

In the context of this paper, appropriation refers to the practical process of translation, whereby a space is converted into a lived-in space through cleaning, repairing, and regulating access. It concerns the interests of people and not just aesthetics. It is in line with the notion of 'homing' as a practice focused on attributions in the past and futurity (Boccagni, Perez Murcia, and Belloni 2020). Empirically, autonomy in appropriation is associated with home attachment (Elizondo 2024), while constraints in temporary settings hinder home-making (Harris, Brickell, and Nowicki 2020; Hoolachan 2022).

Futurity

This term refers to a condition of time that allows for appropriation and determines whether a resident can extend themselves into a particular space without anticipating interruption. This is a form of 'symbolic anchoring' related to security of investment. While futurity is well established as part of general practice theory, its relationship to home and temporariness, as explored by Steigemann and Misselwitz (2020) and Dalal (2022), is extended here by examining how it is narrated in relation to particular housing settings.

The framework resituates conventional theory as an empirical diagnosis. Brun (2015), Brun and Fábos (2015) and Perez Murcia (2019, 2020) show how shelter provision does not in itself resolve existential dislocation, which is treated here as a product of the housing setting rather than of individual characteristics alone. Heidegger's (1971) distinction between shelter and dwelling helps frame the empirical question of what is required for life to be meaningfully stabilised in space. Lefebvre's (1991) threefold distinction is useful for showing how conceived space and perceived space can coexist, but the experience of lived space may be constrained. Finally, critiques of commodification by Madden and Marcuse (2024), Baeten et al. (2017), and Bormanis (2019) clarify how market discretion can undermine a 'right to dwell' even where physical shelter is available.

Methodology

This study utilises a narrative inquiry methodology to examine the impact of forced displacement from Nagorno-Karabakh on the formation or absence of 'home' in a range of housing contexts in Yerevan, Armenia. Narrative research is a fitting methodology for this



research because it acknowledges that participants' stories are not merely a form from which to obtain data; rather, they reflect a practice that is deeply embedded in meaning-making, where disruption, adaptation, and moral judgement are co-constituted in a temporal sequence (Clandinin and Connelly 2004; Eastmond 2007; Riessman 2008).

This research, conducted between 2022 and 2023, is based on 30 in-depth narrative interviews with participants who were forced to move from Nagorno-Karabakh in the wake of the 2020 and 2023 escalations in the conflict there. The participants were selected through a process of purposeful and iterative sampling, where existing connections in the community and snowball sampling were used to gain access to a range of households that are outside the existing support systems. The participants are from a diverse range of gender, age, and housing trajectories, and reside in three different systems: *collective institutions, kin-based co-residence, and individual rental housing*.

The interviews were semi-structured but narrative-guiding and began with the prompt, 'Start from the day you realised you had to leave'. Subsequent prompts centred on issues such as housing transitions, spatial constraints, appropriation strategies, and landlord/host relations. The material was analysed through case-based narrative summaries and cross-case comparisons, with attention given to event sequences, moral claims, and recurring justifications for non-investment in place.

To incorporate the narrative dimension into the analysis and findings, in the Findings section below vignettes are used to present scenes and contexts and composite characters are employed to ensure anonymity.

Reflexivity and ethics

As sociologists in Armenia, we were aware of our positionality as 'insiders' in this research and were sensitive to how the participants might frame their responses in relation to policy requirements. The research was carried out with rigorous ethical standards in mind, taking into account issues such as voluntariness and open-endedness in relation to ethical requirements.

Findings: home-making under three housing settings

The interviews show that the meaning of 'home' in post-displacement Yerevan cannot be reduced either to a psychological state, such as feeling settled or unsettled, or to a housing issue, such as simply having or lacking a roof over one's head. Rather, they reveal home as a practice-based process shaped by specific housing settings that differ in privacy, control, and recognition. After leaving Nagorno-Karabakh, most of the participants had moved through at least two, and often all three, of these settings: collective accommodation, co-residence with family members, and rental housing. These settings are not merely different physical environments; they organise access to, the legitimate use of, and the degree to which residents can invest in space without anticipating interruption.



Dormitories: institutional temporariness and restricted appropriation

Dormitories and similar collective spaces are, for many internally displaced persons, the first point of settlement in Yerevan. Such spaces are often repurposed buildings, such as former schools, dorms, or social care facilities, where displacement is organised around a model of placement and institutional oversight. While providing a space for immediate settlement, participants consistently described such spaces as environments that do not presume privacy, continuity, or the right to make one's own space. Thus, home-making does not occur as 'settling' into a space, but as an effort to make an already defined and controlled institutional environment minimally liveable for everyday life.

One dominant theme is the way in which living in a dormitory space renders domestic routine accountable and visible. Several participants discussed a practice in which monitors would enter the space in the morning and conduct a routine count of objects such as bedding and room space:

'Every morning they would knock on the door, count the mattresses and blankets, check the pillows ... things like this made me leave.' (male, 54 years old, dormitory)

What is significant in this account is that intimate objects, such as blankets and pillows are perceived as countable objects that are part of an inventory. The participants described this as more than just inconvenient, as it reminded them that they were not settled in a space but were being accommodated in it. The spatial constraints of such a space is summarised by another participant in the following way:

'They wouldn't let you make changes.' (male, 42 years old, dormitory)

This prohibition on change was a recurring theme throughout the interviews and field notes as a line distinguishing shelter from home. While changes such as moving furniture, putting up a shelf, or hanging something on a wall may appear to be minor, they were seen by participants as a form of practical language. In the context of a dormitory, this kind of personalisation can be read as a sign of permanence and thus something suspicious or 'not allowed'. Participants also made a distinction between material comfort and home as a relationship:

'Even if beautifully renovated, if it's not mine, it's not home.' (female, 60 years old, dormitory)

Dormitory participants spoke to their relationship with their dormitory space as a kind of measured response. Knowing they could be asked to leave at a moment's notice, they did not wish to become too comfortable or too attached. One young participant spoke to this feeling of not belonging as a morning routine:

'I wake up and realise it's not my home. I'm in someone else's home.' (male, 25 years old, dormitory)

While it is possible that the dormitory is not technically 'someone else's home', this formulation captures well the participant's perception of an institutional space as owned and controlled by others and thus psychologically as not home.



As an illustrative example of how these processes play out over a sequence of arrival, liveability, renovation, and governance, the following vignette presents one participant's narrative of life in the dormitory as a shift from making the space minimally liveable to living under conditions of permission.

Vignette 1: 'A roof, but constant permission'

One woman who had already experienced different forms of displacement prior to her arrival at this camp spoke of her experience of arriving at a dormitory-style facility as a moment of shock and then instant improvisation. Her description of her experience of the place during her initial days there was not about 'settling' into the place but about making it minimally liveable by removing dirt, odour, etc., and restoring a certain dignity to the communal facilities. She spoke candidly of her experience of the place:

'When I came here ... it was like a madhouse, like a barn... I couldn't even enter the toilet. I cleaned everything.'

In this narrative, the process of rendering a place liveable marks a turning point, it signals a move from seeing the dormitory as merely a place to actively working to make it a liveable space, a sign that there is a move from merely being in a place to actively working to make it a place where one can live. Yet, the woman goes on to say that a real turning point came when improvements came from outside sources. The place was renovated, including the bathrooms and the common areas, and the physical space became more conducive to living. She nevertheless emphasises that this has no effect on the moral legitimacy of the residents' presence in the space, and that it is still a place that people have conditional permission to be in, rather than having any sort of secure tenure. The ability to enter the space is controlled, visitors are monitored, and permission is needed to receive visits, even from a family member:

'We are not free here at all ... if my sister comes, the director has to allow it. If the guard doesn't call and say "her sister is here", they won't let her in.'

The narrative culminates in the residents' decision to invite a journalist into the dormitory. In the view of the participant, this is no mere event, but rather a political reaction to the current insecurity and control situation. Yet contrary to expectations, the result of this act was more control over both residents and visitors. Thus, the story comes full circle: the roof is offered, but always under conditions of authorization.

The key to this narrative is that the turning point is not merely that a better space is provided or a more commodious space is obtained. It is that there is a recognition that no matter how good the space is, the structure of control remains in place, that entry, visitation, etc., is still controlled, and so, in a sense, the actions that the resident takes in appropriating the space, in making it a place where she can live, is a space that is "not inhabitable" in a structural sense, a sense that is repeated in the experiences of many residents in the space.



Living with relatives: moral belonging and spatial marginality

While dormitories made temporariness manifest and obvious via supervision, co-residing with relatives made it latent and invisible via hospitality, gratitude, and the spatial ethics of not occupying too much space. The second form of housing involved residing with relatives or extended family members. In contrast to dormitories, co-residing with relatives promised emotional support, safety, and familiarity, and the interviewees expressed gratitude towards relatives for providing them with a roof during a crisis: ‘We resided with relatives at first. They were very kind.’ However, their gratitude and appreciation always co-existed with a sense of imbalance and asymmetry. While residing with relatives, the interviewees felt they held the status of a ‘guest’. This meant they were morally included but spatially excluded. One interviewee described it as follows:

*‘I could not invite anyone over or cook freely. But still, we felt like guests.’
(male, 50 years old, living with relatives)*

While constraint is an obvious theme in these descriptions, it is not an institutional constraint but rather a constraint imposed by hospitality and gratitude. Spatial marginality is a common theme, where the interviewees felt they were occupying too much or too little space or were disturbing others. One interviewee said:

‘I sleep in the kitchen. I know it’s a temporary solution, so I try not to get used to it.’ (female, 25 years old, living with relatives)

Sleeping in the kitchen means something beyond mere crowding; it means a conditional spatial presence: a person is present and provided with shelter but without full settlement or at-ease status. This was described in terms that were emotionally richer than those used to discuss the dormitory, but it was also a situation in which autonomy was achieved through relational obligation. It was possible to make the space into a home but in a manner that was always circumspect – through contribution rather than transformation. It was home-making through legitimate means but always with the status of a guest.

While the dormitory prevents home-making through formal means, co-residing with relatives prevents it through informal means – through the quiet discipline of being a ‘good guest’. The following vignette illustrates how gratitude and constraint can coexist without conflict.

Vignette 2: ‘Kind people - and still, too many’

The older woman described her first weeks in Yerevan as being in ‘in-between’ places, each one safer than the highway, but none of them easy in which to make a home either. Her first place was in a church community arrangement, in which help was immediate and morally positive, food was provided, doors were opened, and initial settlement was facilitated. However, the question of where to live was never really answered; it was simply moved to the next location. Her description changed to one of gratitude when her family moved to the house of a relative, but this again was a situation in which constraint was spatial rather than emotional in nature. She described why they did not stay in the church community, despite the positive atmosphere:



'We didn't stay for even a month ... because we were too many – seven people ... we couldn't stay there.'

From an analytical point of view, this event is noteworthy in that the 'failure' of co-residence is described in an unaccusatory way. The hosts are not portrayed as unkind; rather, the problem stems from the density of the living arrangement and the exhaustion of living without separate spaces and having to sleep, cook, rest, and speak all in one small space. In this narrative, leaving is not a repudiation of hospitality but rather the moment when gratitude cannot substitute for routine, privacy, or the boundaries of the household. The new arrangement is not simply 'the next option' but rather the search for an arrangement in which the routines of the household can be stabilised without constant negotiations of presence.

Rental housing: partial home-making under insecure tenure

For many families, the move to rental housing is represented as an attempt to escape 'guesthood' and regain household sovereignty; yet, it is a move that also introduces market insecurity. Many displaced participants described renting as the first arrangement in which they were able to '*close the door*', '*organise daily routines without continual negotiation with others*', and '*establish a household on their own terms*'. Several interviewees framed this move as a 'turning point', and not so much as the end of displacement, but more as the partial return of everyday normalcy.

At the same time, rental housing also introduced the insecurity of the market as a new form of constraint for the participants. Several participants described the unaffordability of renting apartments in Yerevan in terms of disrupted livelihoods, pensions, or temporary assistance. Even if the participants managed to pay the rent, the rental housing was portrayed as conditional in nature and dependent on the landlord's decisions and the participants' ability to pay the rent. One participant summarised the whole situation in one powerful sentence:

'I rent, I pay for everything, but still, I can't hang what I want on the walls. I know I will leave one day, so I don't invest myself.' (female, 36 years old, rented apartment)

This sentence can be seen as a summary of the whole situation of home-making in the context of displacement: there is autonomy, but it is tied to the notion of a rupture in the future. The inability to 'hang what I want on the walls' can be seen as a metaphor for the inability to make improvements to the rented space because of the insecurity of the place of residence in the future.

At the same time, rental housing proved to be the best-suited for routine stabilization. This can be seen from the way interviewees talked about the reconstruction of the routine infrastructure of everyday life that includes cooking, child care routines, sleeping, quietness, and access control. Although these actions are very common, they are always portrayed as parts of 'normal life' in stories of displacement. Rental housing is rarely described as a place where routine and stability are attained. Instead, it is described as a new form of routine calculation, in which autonomy and risk are entwined. The following vignette captures a common narrative across multiple interviews.



Vignette 3: 'A home you assemble as though you might pack up tomorrow'

Across multiple interviews, tenants spoke of rental housing as a place where a household could close the door and start to rebuild routine, but where routine was always coupled with considerations about the possibility of having to move again. Rental narratives often begin with a sense of relief and the rapid reconstruction of a basic domestic routine, but this early stabilisation is immediately shaped by considerations.

This type of thinking characterised (decisions in) the early period:

'We always decided what not to do: not paint, not fix, not buy furniture that would stay behind.'

This same logic appears elsewhere in the material: renting did not eliminate the need for caution, since any visible or lasting change still felt risky in the context of an uncertain future.

The turning point in these stories is not necessarily eviction, but rather the anticipation and awareness that the rent might rise, the landlord might change the conditions, support might be withdrawn, or income might not be sustainable. The result is that home-making is done lightly. The participants in the study shared stories that involved keeping boxes or bags around for a longer period than usual or making no changes that might be considered irreversible, not because the participants rejected the process of making a home, but because they recognised a need to protect themselves from the pain of loss and gain. Rental housing is the situation closest to that of living in one's own home, and it is in this situation that a unique mode of home-making is created.

This narrative pattern reveals that rental housing is a unique situation that creates a specific mode of home-making that is routine-rich, materially 'light', and emotionally attuned to a future that may be interrupted. The participants in the study created a domestic order, a routine, and a rhythm, and at the same time they showed a reluctance to make changes that could be considered irreversible because their future depended on their having a rental agreement. The market temporariness of housing has reshaped the mode of home-making into a form that is deliberately reversible because there is a recognition that housing can potentially become temporary again.

Cross-cutting patterns of home-making

Across all three housing settings, appropriation emerged as the mechanism through which physical space was linked to the experience of home. Cleaning, doing repairs, organising space and furniture, and establishing routines were seen as ways of making a place inhabitable and turning an unfamiliar place into a home. These practices were not primarily aesthetic; rather, appropriation functioned as a form of dignity work through which the environment became inhabitable enough to be endured and, at times, partially recognised as one's own. One participant captured this connection clearly: 'Here you can feel free ... you can consider it a home, live as you wish' (male, 42 years old, dormitory). Here, 'feeling free' referred not to an abstract emotional state, but to the practical capacity to decide who could enter, what could be changed, and how the space could be used.



However, appropriation took different forms depending on the housing setting. In dormitories, appropriation mainly involved making collective life more manageable by cleaning corridors, negotiating the use of toilets and kitchens, and repairing damaged facilities to create habitable conditions in an almost uninhabitable environment. The idea of ‘starting from scratch’ expresses the effort required to make spaces habitable in an institutionalised environment. In co-residence with relatives, appropriation involved more indirect practices, such as taking care of one’s personal space, participating in domestic labour, and reducing one’s spatial visibility as ways of legitimating one’s presence in the family without violating boundaries between the host and the guest. In rental housing, appropriation became easier because of the higher degree of freedom; however, people remained cautious in their actions because they wanted to avoid making any changes to the space that could lead to a violation of the lease agreement. Thus, appropriation was a way of managing both habitability and the process of appropriating space as one’s own in all housing environments; however, it was also incomplete. People engaged in cleaning, making repairs, and organising their spaces, but stopped somewhere in the middle because of some fears or limitations.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that displaced persons in Yerevan do not move linearly from temporary accommodation to a sense of permanence. Rather, they move through different housing settings that shape home-making through distinct forms of access, control, and temporal security. In all three housing settings, home appears not as an emotional idealisation of a space, but as a continued presence in a space despite the threat of interruption. In other words, home is a place that provides an opportunity to extend oneself into it safely, without the immediate expectation of further disruption. This explains the prevalence of rhetoric about not owning a space even among those making efforts to stabilise their environments: ‘If it’s not yours – whatever it is – it’s not yours.’ The essence of the idea is not only the lack of ownership per se but rather the awareness of the fragility of occupying a particular space, when occupancy of a space is mediated by permission, hosting, or renting. From this perspective, ‘not mine’ becomes less an attitude than a practical theory of dwelling under conditions of revocability.

Each setting governs temporary occupancy differently. In dormitories, temporary occupancy takes the form of institutional fragility: everyday life in these places includes being constantly watched, avoiding making any changes to the environment, and waiting for a disruption. In co-residence with relatives, temporary occupancy appears through conditional belonging, as a person experiences emotional inclusion that is coupled with a lack of spatial freedom and with the requirement to behave like a proper guest. In rental housing, temporary occupancy is shaped by market uncertainty: greater independence is achieved, but the scope for changing space remains limited by financial pressure and the insecurity of continued tenure. Taken together, the findings confirm that home-making depends on the interaction between housing settings, appropriation, and futurity: housing settings structure access and control, appropriation provides the practical means for making a space liveable, and futurity determines whether residents can safely invest themselves in a place. Home-making, therefore, is shaped not by shelter alone, but by the conditions under which people can make their environment inhabitable, meaningful, and sustainable for continued residence.



Conclusion

In reference to displaced Armenians in Yerevan, this paper argues that while shelter does not necessarily equate with home, home may, at any rate, be made through a relationship between housing, appropriation, and futurity. More specifically, the findings show that dormitories, cohabitation with relatives, and rental housing differ not just in their material quality, but also in the forms of access, control, and temporal security they establish. In this sense, housing settings shape the practical scope of appropriation, while futurity determines whether residents can invest themselves in a space without expecting interruption. From this perspective, ‘feeling not at home’ should be understood not so much as a psychological problem but as a rational reaction to precarious living conditions.

While different types of temporality are experienced in dormitories, in cohabiting with relatives, and in rented housing, the point is that what unites these three sites is the precariousness of their continuity. In this case, housing policy should go further than simply providing accommodation and should create the conditions that allow for home-making in a place including more predictable housing support, clearer tenure prospects, municipal mediation in landlord-tenant disputes, clearer visitor policies in collective accommodation, permission for modest spatial modifications and repairs, greater resident involvement in the management of shared facilities, and support for households hosting displaced relatives. These initiatives will not automatically create conditions of belonging, but they can mitigate revocability and facilitate appropriation and futurity.

Ultimately, it is clear that in the case of displacement housing policy rests on a politics of futurity, since not only who is to be housed but also who is going to live in a particular place are decisions made in advance. Therefore, the question about what house and home signify then becomes a sociological question about how people's lives are organised in certain spaces depending on various inequalities.



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