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# A tale of three villages: Local housing policies, well-being and encounters between residents and immigrants

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**Abstract**

This article examines how the location, function and quality of immigrant accommodation facilities, regulated by local housing policies, shape the perceived effects of immigration on the well-being of residents and immigrants in three villages in the Netherlands. Drawing on semistructured interviews with local government representatives, residents and Romanian and Polish immigrants, we show how the different locations of the immigrant accommodations condition social interactions between residents and immigrants and, in this process, reinforce social hierarchies and inequalities. We illustrate how, sometimes unintentionally, spatial policies prepare the stage for conflicts to arise between immigrants and residents, shaping the latter's experiences of migration irrespective of the behaviour of the former. For immigrants, the location of their accommodation sets the limits to what they can do in terms of private behaviour and social relations, exposing them to social control and evaluation.

**KEYWORDS**

encounter, housing policies, immigration, new immigrant destinations, place, seasonal migration, well-being

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The impact of migration on receiving countries has been a major concern of policymakers and researchers in the European Union (EU) in recent decades. This trend has only intensified in the aftermath of the 2014–2015 ‘refugee crisis’, the 2008–2009 economic crisis, and the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement rounds, which triggered significant intra-EU movements. It has now become more important than ever to understand how places cope with immigration, and how immigration affects the well-being of individuals, both long-term residents and immigrants. Our understanding of some of these matters is quite mature, with an abundance of studies researching the effects of migration on immigrants themselves (see, for instance, Bock et al., 2016; Marcu, 2015; McAreavey, 2017; White & Johnson, 2016) and on residents and the place (see, for instance, Bock, 2016; Kasimis et al., 2010; McAreavey, 2012). However, much less consideration

has been given to specific characteristics of places that shape these effects. Moreover, we know far less about migration dynamics in rural as compared with urban areas.

Our article, in which we analyse how local migrant housing policies (i.e., the location, function and quality of immigrant accommodation facilities) affect the perceived effect of migration on the well-being of residents and immigrants in three villages in the Netherlands, intends to contribute to and advance this still incipient knowledge. To that end, we first provide a brief account of the housing policies concerning immigrants in the three villages, followed by an overview of the immigrant accommodation facility's location in each area. We show how these location choices are shaped by local housing policies and in turn shape the perceived effects of migration on the well-being of residents and immigrants. In the process, we consider three important factors that mediate the relationship between housing policies and migration experiences, namely, the characteristics of the three

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villages as new immigration destinations, the characteristics of the immigrant population and the nature of the encounters between immigrants and residents.

## 2 | PLACE, LOCAL MIGRANT HOUSING POLICIES AND WELL-BEING

Our article analyses how local migrant housing policies affect the perceived effects of migration on the well-being of immigrants and residents in three locations in the Netherlands. This section presents the theoretical concepts underlying our analysis.

We define well-being as the interplay between the material, the relational and the subjective well-being, following an adapted version of the conceptualisation proposed by McGregor (2007) and White (2008). The material concerns practical welfare and standards of living such as income, employment, education and health; the relational concerns personal and social relations; and the subjective concerns values, perceptions and experiences. Another way of thinking about it is to see it as a combination of what a person has (the material), with whom they can share what they have (the relational) and how they feel about what they have (the subjective) (McGregor, 2007). Importantly, although presented separately, these are not discrete categories, as human well-being requires the coexistence or integration of all these dimensions, which overlap to varying degrees (Wright, 2011).

Well-being, however, regardless of its definition, cannot be considered in a vacuum. The condition of one feeling well and the process that leads to such a feeling depend on one's ability to mobilise a range of material, social and psychological resources, which are essentially and necessarily connected to a place (Atkinson et al., 2012). The natural and built environment, the spatial layout and design of the place, the amenities it provides, the sense of community and trust, all serve as a background for the development of material, relational and subjective aspects of well-being. One particular aspect of place that we are interested in here is the role of local migrant housing policies in shaping effects of migration on the well-being of immigrants and residents. Housing policies regulate the location and function of housing facilities, as well as the quality of the living conditions within, which are bound to affect aspects of well-being for both groups. The location of housing, for instance, may enable or prevent encounters and interactions between residents and immigrants, which may evoke positive feelings and sympathy or negative feelings on both sides. The quality of housing concerns issues such as amenities, leisure activities or the possibility for privacy, which influence the subjective and material aspects of well-being for immigrants. The spatial design of the housing facilities may shape relations of power, structures of inequality, and practices of domination and subordination among the two groups in the place (Tickamyer, 2000). For instance, the geographical placement of immigrants within the locality affects their access to amenities and the costs incurred, as places constitute part of their opportunity structure. We distinguish between three regulatory aspects of migrants' housing policies, which cumulatively form

distinctly different experiences of migration imprinted in the behaviour of migrants and residents, their interaction, their perception of each other, and by extension, their well-being. The three dimensions refer to the location, function and quality of the accommodation. The first dimension refers to where the immigrants' accommodation is placed, where we distinguish between residential and non-residential areas. The second dimension concerns the function the accommodation serves for immigrants, and here, we distinguish between a boarding-house (short-term) and a residence (long-term) function. The third dimension refers, intuitively, to the amenities provided by the accommodation facility.

There are three other important aspects that we discuss here, which mediate the relationship between housing policies and individuals' well-being, namely, the nature of the encounters between residents and immigrants, the characteristics of the place and the characteristics of the immigrant groups. The concept of encounters has been used to examine contact between groups distinct in terms of social identity and categorisation, which imply some form of potential conflict, prejudice or unease (Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2017). Encounters hold the potential for changing intergroup relations, either by chipping away from prejudices and misconceptions about others and producing new convivialities (Leitner, 2012; Schuermans, 2013; Vertovec, 2015; Wilson, 2017), or by reaffirming prejudice, producing resentment, aggravating conflicts and reinforcing unequal power relations (Lobo, 2013; Stouraiti, 2012; Wilson, 2017). Yet these encounters do not take place in a vacuum, but in the presence of historically produced configurations of power and status (Vertovec, 2021). In addition, the characteristics of the place and those of the individuals mediate the nature of the encounters, with important consequences for intergroup dynamics. As Leitner (2012) notes, encounters are framed by historically grounded place identities, which are challenged by the presence of the migrants who may be seen as culturally different. Encounters are also embedded into pre-existing discourses about migrants (from media, from networks and from politicians), and into broader relationships of power, constituted by their class, their gender, their spatial location or their role in societal structures (Leitner, 2012; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). Last but not least, the social construction of places often reflects and reinforces existing power relations between groups (Piekut & Valentine, 2017), framing encounters from unequal positions.

The three places in the Netherlands in which we conduct our analysis are rural areas and represent new immigration destinations. Their rurality implies a different spatial and social background compared with urban areas. Socially, rural communities are tighter, and the social life in the village is more close-knit. Spatially, the residents may have assigned clear meaning to various locations within the village, a gathering spot in the village centre, for instance, while the village itself might be spatially less connected, with farms (where many migrants work) located in relative distance in relation to local populations. Their trait as new immigration destinations often implies limited experience with immigration. On the one hand, this results in little established institutional or infrastructural support for an unexpected influx of migrants (McAreevey, 2017), whereas on the other

hand, it means that, historically, they are rather culturally homogenous communities (Winders, 2014), with a strong cultural identity.

The characteristics of the immigrant group should not be overlooked either; who the migrants are, what they do, where they come from, for how long they are staying; all these attributes can influence perceptions and interactions between residents and immigrants, and by extension, their (subjective) well-being. Immigrants' place of origin matters for three reasons. Firstly, it affects perceptions and attitudes towards them (e.g., Eastern vs. Western European and EU vs. non-EU immigrants vs. asylum seekers and refugees), and it frames their power relations vis-a-vis residents. Secondly, it affects their patterns of migration. EU migrants, given the removal of barriers to movement and the relatively short distances within the EU, are likelier to live transnational lives and to practice circular migration, than non-EU migrants. For some local communities in Europe, (Eastern) European migrants represent large minorities that are harder to ignore (Rye, 2018) and that often-times receive more (negative) media attention. The implication is that short-term migrants will behave differently and have different characteristics than long-term migrants. Thirdly, and relatedly, places of origin guarantee different rights and entitlements for immigrants, which shape their individual levels of agency (McAreevey & Argent, 2018), influencing in turn aspects of their well-being.

### 3 | OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDIES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our analysis is based on 60 semistructured interviews with residents (30) and immigrants (30) in the three villages in the Netherlands. The three villages are located in the municipalities of Steenbergen (Village A) and Noordoostpolder (Village B and Village C). We selected the three case studies because they present enough similarities in terms of their rurality<sup>1</sup> (of population size and density), economic profile of the area, experience with immigration, while at the same time enough contrasts (different geographical locations, different sizes of the immigrant population, different approaches to migrant housing policies) to make for a compelling and revealing comparison.

Steenbergen is a municipality in the province of North Brabant, in the south of Netherlands. In 2019, it registered a population of 25,054 inhabitants (CBS, 2020c), 3,191 of which are first generation immigrants (CBS, 2020a). There are 3,090 immigrants registered in Village A, out of a total population of 13,695 (CBS, 2020b). Immigrants residing in the village are employed mostly in agricultural, horticultural and food production occupations. Noordoostpolder is a municipality in the province of Flevoland, in the centre-north of the Netherlands, with a population of 46,849 people (CBS, 2020c), 4,069 of which are first generation immigrants (CBS, 2020a). There are 130 immigrants registered in Village B, out of a total population of 1,415 inhabitants, and 130 immigrants registered in Village C, out of a total population of 1,435 inhabitants (CBS, 2020b). Like Steenbergen, Noordoostpolder is a region heavily relying on agriculture, dairy farming and horticulture as the backbone of its economy.<sup>2</sup> A particular characteristic of Noordoostpolder is the fact that it was built on

reclaimed land from the sea and it was physically and socially engineered as an agricultural society (Haartsen & Thissen, 2018).

We considered Romanian immigrants in Steenbergen, and Polish immigrants in Noordoostpolder. Specifically, we interviewed residents ( $n = 15$ ) and Romanian immigrants ( $n = 15$ ) in Village A, and residents ( $n = 15$ ) and Polish immigrants ( $n = 15$ ) in Villages B and C. We consider residents to be Dutch individuals who have lived in the area for 10 years or more. We complement these materials with semistructured interviews with two local government representatives in both locations and analysis of local policy documents in relation to immigration.

The Netherlands has experienced significant immigration from both Romania and Poland, which have increased sharply after the countries joined the EU in 2007 and 2004, respectively. Immigration from the two countries further increased after the cessation of the transitional arrangements in 2014 and 2011, respectively. By 2018, Polish and Romanian nationals represented the first and fourth largest immigration flows into the country, respectively (Eurostat, 2020a), and by 2019, Polish nationals represented the fourth largest immigrant group in the country, after Turkish, Surinamese and Moroccan nationals (Eurostat, 2020b). Both Steenbergen and Noordoostpolder register a significant number of Polish immigrants, hosting the second and 12th largest group of Polish nationals in 2019, respectively (CBS, 2019). Steenbergen also hosts the fourth largest population of Romanian nationals in absolute numbers, only surpassed by the cities of Amsterdam, the Hague and Rotterdam. Most immigrants in our sample work in agriculture, horticulture, with repeated episodes of migration.

The interviews in all three locations were conducted in spring 2019. All interviews comprised open questions on demographic and socio-economic characteristics, on reasons for migration or staying, on the migration experience, and on the three dimensions of well-being discussed in Section 2 (e.g., socio-economic aspects relating to the standard of living, employment, social relations and feelings, among others). Interviews were held face-to-face, in Dutch, Romanian and Polish, by native speakers. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, carried out in respondents' private homes or their workplaces and later transcribed and translated into English. Due to the relatively small sample, the data were coded manually, looking for specific keywords or expressions of how space mattered for encounters, experiences, perceptions and well-being. The stakeholder's interview statements were triangulated with information from official policy documents and/or official statements from the municipalities' websites. Recruitment was carried out by approaching individuals on the street, knocking on doors and through snowballing. An attempt was made to recruit interviewees through social media, Facebook in particular, but this method turned out to be less successful. The sample ended up being diverse in terms of age, gender, educational level and occupations.

### 4 | LABOUR RECRUITMENT AND MIGRANT HOUSING POLICIES

In the Netherlands, housing labour immigrants is the responsibility of the employers, but how and where to house them is regulated by the

municipality's housing policy. There are no national guidelines concerning housing regulations for migrants, just a nonbinding joint national statement by stakeholder umbrella organisations (i.e., employers, housing agencies and local governments), recognising the need for cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Municipalities are, thus, autonomous in deciding whether to implement local guidelines and regulations, and on their parameters concerning location, housing conditions, maximum number of occupants, as long as safety regulations and rules of legal contracts are respected. Thus, rules governing housing conditions and housing locations as well as the enforcement of these rules vary between regions and between municipalities, depending on various factors (e.g., the size of the immigrant population and demand for housing, local attitudes towards immigrants, whether the municipality is proactive or reactive to current developments and the temporality of migration).

Employers, who are responsible for housing immigrants, turn to employment agencies as intermediaries. In the three villages analysed, employment agencies facilitate most of the immigration flows. According to a labour recruitment agency representative from Steenbergen, employers prefer to use intermediaries, as it guarantees finding the right person for the job and the ability to terminate contracts easily if the job is no longer available (for instance, an order cancelling or a drop in demand implies lower production needs and thus a lower demand for employees). The representative referred to an ever-increasing list of clients, including in agriculture, horticulture, food production, hospitality, manufacturing and logistics, among others.

The recruitment agencies operate via online websites where they post job advertisements and via recruitment campaigns in target origin countries. According to one of our interviewees, they collaborate with local governments/town halls in origin countries villages, who facilitate meetings with residents, where the agency can present its offer and respond to questions. They also put up flyers around the area, on pillars, trees, or in commuting buses and bus stations. Social networks are a strong determinant of migration, as many of our interviewees declared having chosen a particular recruitment agency at the recommendation of relatives, friends or colleagues who have migrated before. The system is especially conducive to the recruitment of low-skilled, low-educated individuals, who oftentimes cannot speak any foreign languages and who would have few means of migrating otherwise. The agency employs numerous Romanian and Polish nationals as 'coordinators'—agency employees in charge of managing all aspects of the migration process and of acting as interpreters; it offers transportation from the city of recruitment in Romania or Poland to the accommodation provided in the Netherlands (for a cost), and provides accommodation for all employees, for a weekly cost. Our interviewees mentioned that they can find their own private accommodation, outside of that provided by the agencies only after a certain period of time (one respondent mentioned having to live in the agency-provide accommodation for a minimum of 6 months).

Generally, employment agencies prefer large-scale accommodations close to the employment sites. However, because of housing shortages, many times they turn to renting family homes, in residential areas, where they accommodate migrant workers (for a cost).

Whether and where employment agencies can place their accommodation, the size of this accommodation, whether they can rent houses in residential areas, how many people they can house at once, all are aspects determined by the local municipal migrant housing policy.

## 5 | MIGRANT HOUSING POLICIES IN STEENBERGEN AND NOORDOOSTPOLDER

This section presents the main aspects of the migrant housing policies in each municipality. In doing so, we aim to show that (i) the characteristics of the policies reflect the governments' intentions of and perceptions of immigration and that (ii) the location, function and quality of housing in each location are shaped by the local migrant housing policy.

### 5.1 | Steenbergen

In Steenbergen, the local housing policy, which was first adopted in 2010 and revised in 2015, focused exclusively on short-term migrants and stipulated that they are to be housed in large-scale accommodation facilities, located on the outskirts of, or outside residential areas. A local government representative succinctly characterises the aim of the policy:

We see a lot of labour migrants being accommodated in the neighbourhoods, in the centres. Right now, we have a policy of tolerance for this, but our policy says that we don't want that, not the room renting. [...] Do we have control if they are [scattered] all over the neighbourhoods? We want more regulation [...] (Local government representative)

In other words, the local government's intention was to counteract the tendency of employment agencies to acquire family houses in which to lodge immigrants in the neighbourhoods, where there were more chances of encounters with residents, and to allow for better control and monitoring of their presence. In this approach, migrant housing needs to be bounded, and migrants needs to be potentially segregated, if not socially, at least geographically. Moreover, an official document accompanying the policy assessed housing for short-term immigrants as having a boarding rather than residential function (Gemeente Steenbergen, 2015), highlighting their perception of immigrants as only temporarily residing in the area and legitimising their particular treatment which limits their choice of housing. This intention is further entrenched in the official document of a third revision of the housing policy, not yet implemented at the time of our data collection:

[For] labour migrants, who work here for a short time, we strive for housing close to the companies where they have to work. [...] large-scale locations for labour

migrants working here, are preferred because of the clear frameworks we want to set with regard to 24/7 professional management, good housing and living facilities, optimization, and the return policy. (Gemeente Steenbergen, 2019, p. 8)

These housing measures are, thus, intended to enable the local government to better monitor and enforce the provision of what is identified as 'proper' housing conditions, control the number of immigrants housed in the area and ensure the enforcement of return policies. This statement emphasises the temporariness of the immigrant's stay in the area, who have come to work and who thus need a boarding house and not a residence. Moreover, it underlines their particular identities as temporary visitors and not permanent residents, and as guest-labourers and not citizens. Both imply limits in terms of their entitlement to housing and right to residency. The document also perceived short-term migrants as having 'no need to integrate', although this aspect might be revised in the future, also considering potential costs and administrative capacity (Gemeente Steenbergen, 2015, p. 32). Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that the immigrants' accommodation in Village A, in Steenbergen, is located at the edge of the village (see Figure 1). This indeed allows the local government a better overview of the number of immigrants residing at any time, and thus, a better management of the migration process, but it also restricts the degree of interaction between the residents and immigrants residing there.

## 5.2 | Noordoostpolder

In Noordoostpolder, on the other hand, the local housing policy, first adopted in 2010 and revised in 2013, distinguished between short term and *potential* long-term immigrants, and in doing so, had the intention of facilitating the interaction between residents and *some* immigrants. Specifically, the local housing policy introduced the association between a so-called housing career and the immigrant's 'integration career', the latter reflecting the duration of living in the area. Thus, unlike in Steenbergen, where short-term immigrants were to be housed in large-scale accommodation facilities, irrespective of how long they have been working in the area, in Noordoostpolder, the local government proposed flexible housing possibilities, corresponding to the relative stage of integration of immigrants. The options included large-scale housing for up to 100 or 300 migrants on farms and close to the agricultural fields for recent short-term

immigrants, guesthouses and hotels for up to 30 immigrants in neighbourhoods and villages for those who have spent a longer time in the area, or are returning and/or circular immigrants, and shared family housing for up to six migrants in villages and neighbourhoods, for those who need more privacy and have spent more time in the area (Buitengewoon Noordoostpolder, 2012). The local government assumed, thus, that the great majority of immigrants (89%) are short-term stayers, that few will live in the area for a longer period of time (9%–10%) and that only a very small share (about 1%–2%) will eventually settle down in the area. At the same time, the local government, through this policy, encourages and creates a path to integration for a handful of immigrants who have the potential to stay longer term. An excerpt from the document accompanying the policy reflects on the local governments' perceived role of encouraging local integration through housing location:

We see the migrant worker as a (potential) new resident of the municipality. But (s)he is a (potential) resident with a special situation, who is going through a very own 'integration career'. We see it as our responsibility to help the migrant worker to break down the barriers they encounter on this path and to remove them as much as possible. The starting point is a suitable offer for the individual situation of the migrant worker. (Buitengewoon Noordoostpolder, 2012, p. 7)

Consequently, in this case, immigrants' accommodation facilities could have *either* a boarding or a residential function, and could be located in both residential and non-residential areas. Nevertheless, a preference for housing immigrants outside of neighbourhoods and villages transpired from interviews with local government representatives, a result of the local residents' grievances, who refer to 'nuisance', 'parking', 'alcohol consumption', 'walking around in the village', 'differences in lifestyle', among others (Municipality representative Noordoostpolder). These complaints suggest a need for immigrants to either become invisible by no longer 'walking in the village' or assimilate and adapt to the local lifestyle, to no longer exhibit differences.

These housing policies have implications for the location of the immigrant accommodation in each village analysed, locations which, as illustrated (abstractly) in Figure 1, are not accidental. To achieve the desired result of an unburdening, invisible migrant population, the housing policies aim at mediating the nature of encounters between residents and immigrants, and at influencing behaviour and



**FIGURE 1** Location of immigrant accommodation facilities in each village

experiences through regulating where the accommodation of migrants is placed.

## 6 | MIGRANT HOUSING POLICIES, PERCEPTIONS OF MIGRATION AND WELL-BEING

For the purposes of our analysis, and in order to better understand the effects and functioning of the migrant housing policy in this context, we selected one case study in Steenbergen (Village A), where the immigrant accommodation facility is located outside of residential areas, and two case studies in Noordoostpolder, one in which the accommodation is located in a residential area (Village B) and thus the immigrants are further on their 'integration path', and one in which the accommodation is located far outside residential areas (Village C), closer to work places (see Figure 1). We analyse each village in turn, focusing on several dimensions pertaining to the immigrant accommodation and how these affect residents and immigrants' well-being.

### 6.1 | Village A—Housing at the margins

In Village A, in Steenbergen, the large-scale (400 persons) immigrant accommodation is located at the edge of the village, separated through a small plot of land from the residents' houses. Its location, spatially isolated, minimises the presence and visibility of immigrants and limits social interactions between them and the residents. Before being extended to house up to 400 labour immigrants, the accommodation facility was, subsequently, a monastery, an institute for persons with mental issues (a sanitarium), and an asylum and refugee centre. This latter function of the facility was particularly dissatisfying for residents, causing 'a lot of protests in the community' (SR4). The change to housing labour immigrants, who 'leave early in the morning and arrive late at night' (Buitengewoon Noordoostpolder, 2012), and are thus invisible, was, in a sense, a welcome one.

The relatively isolated location of the housing facility, combined with the long working hours of the immigrants themselves and the workplace location outside of the village, means that they are often out of sight and rather invisible to the residents. This state of affairs is reflected in the residents' experiences of immigration into the village, which mostly indicate a lack of inconvenience. They perceive immigration to not have had a negative effect on their well-being (although at no point they consider the alternative, that of immigration having had a positive effect), because they are not 'disturbed' by the presence of immigrants. The accommodation itself is perceived by residents to be fairly self-contained, with many amenities to be found on its premises and all kind of 'activities there; fun, [...] a Polish general practitioner, [...] a restaurant [where] they sell bread' (SR3). Such perceptions are only based on how residents think life in the accommodation is organised. Because they interact little with immigrants, they know little of their actual conditions. Although, indeed, the facility provides a gymnasium where people can train and a recreational area (with a

tennis and football tables), it would be wrong to assume that this is all that is needed for the immigrants' well-being. In fact, most Romanian respondents do not talk about their gym-going or their football scores, but rather reflect on the fact that they 'do not have a social life' (SI12), and that they 'only have one thing, work' (SI6). Other respondents remark on their limited social interaction with Dutch residents, which makes it 'difficult, for instance, to start a relationship with a Dutch resident' (SI1). All of this does not mean that they do not interact with fellow immigrants, don't talk to their families back home or don't use the indoor facilities available to them. Rather, it means that they do not feel a part of a community, both within the confines of the accommodation and within the premises of the village. This corresponds to the findings of Guest and Wierzbocikie (1999) and Mahmoudi Farahani (2016), who point that a significant share of a person's social life is dedicated to communities and friendships, with the neighbourhood and the physical space playing an important role in the creation of a community. By virtue of being excluded from the physical space, immigrants end up being socially excluded as well, experiencing something akin to social poverty and feelings of social disconnection, of not having an adequate number of close, trusting relationships (Halpern-Meeke, 2019).

Moreover, the location and function of the housing facility has further consequences on different dimensions of the immigrants' well-being. Romanian respondents refer to material aspects, such as the surrounding environment, where there is 'not much to see' (SI3), or lack of access to some services, such as the inability to get a mobile telephone subscription on the housing facility's address, the latter aspect emphasising and reinforcing the temporality of their situation.

The location and function of the immigrant accommodation, however, are not the only dimensions that matter. The quality of the housing on the inside, the look of the housing on the outside, thus the building itself and the feelings it evokes, also play a role in shaping dimensions of well-being for immigrants and residents. The former monastery complex breathes peace and space, surrounded by tall green trees, bordering the small forest at the edge of the village. The old church of the building, with large windows, high ceilings and golden candelabras, is now a restaurant where mostly residents dine in and immigrants occasionally order from. The restaurant serves a social function for the residents, who can meet and dine there for a relatively low-price.<sup>4</sup> The big windows facing the inner courtyard allow for an inverse zoo-like encounter between the two groups; the residents dine inside looking at the immigrants smoking or gathering outside.<sup>5</sup> The nature of this encounter underscores the uneven power relations between the two groups. Although the restaurant has reasonable prices, these are still too high for many migrants who are unable or unwilling to spend hard earned wages on dining out. Moreover, this set-up allows the residents to enter (or infringe upon) the private sphere of the migrants, the place where they relax and chat, without a similar possibility existing for the migrants themselves. These encounters, coupled with the occasional sighting of immigrants in the local shopping stores and the limited 'nuisance' they occasion, makes most of the residents perceive the accommodation to be 'the

example of how it can be' (SR4), that is, the example of how immigration can be managed.

In summary, the local migrant housing policy in Village A intends to minimise the presence of immigrants in the village, and by extension their interaction with the residents. It largely succeeds in this endeavour. The relatively isolated location of the accommodation, its nice exterior and the perceptions that everything is provided for within, contributes to the residents' positive perceptions of the impact of immigration on their community. At the same time, immigrants feel excluded from the community and (are made to) feel the temporariness of their stay, which chip away at their relational and subjective well-being.

## 6.2 | Village B—Housing among the locals

In Village B, in Noordoostpolder, the small-scale (30 persons) accommodation facility is located in the centre of the village, a residential area. The location facilitates the interaction between residents and some immigrants, by creating the possibility of encountering one another. Thus, the immigrants living in the hotel have been living in the area for a longer period of time and are on the path to becoming a potential resident. According to the local housing policy strategy, these immigrants should slowly become integrated in the village community. However, the very central location of the hotel seems to have the opposite effect on residents' willingness to include immigrants in the local community, than the one intended through the housing policy. Although the actual number of immigrants might be fairly small compared with other locations, residents 'are not happy with it in the village' (NR1) and are unsettled by the increased visibility of the immigrants because of its central location. Adding to this unhappiness is the perception that residents have been tricked by the owner of the accommodation, who initially promised 'that it would become a low budget hotel, but straightaway rented it to the employment agency' (NR1). Another resident hints at the troubles that the creation of a hotel housing labour immigrants, instead of tourists, has caused within the village, noting that 'time after time, [the issue] has been brought up to the local council', but the hotel 'was allowed to stay', which was 'disappointing' (NR4).

Not only is the accommodation located so visibly central, but it also replaces a café/restaurant, the only one in the village, a place where residents used to meet socially, and where community events were organised. The emotional and relational well-being of the residents is thus negatively impacted both by the loss of a place to socialise and by its transformation into an immigrant accommodation, an undesirable function. Therefore, whereas in Village A, the shift from a very controversial asylum centre to a labour immigrant accommodation might be perceived as positive, in this case, the shift was clearly perceived as negative. The café also had a symbolic meaning, being on the tulip route and providing a pit-stop for cyclists passing through. Now, because of the hotel, 'there is no place where they can go', which is considered a 'pity' (NR6). Even when the residents are not necessarily upset by the presence of the immigrant accommodation, they do perceive immigration more generally to benefit others and to not 'help' (NR7) them financially, but others who profit from it.

The residents' unhappiness with the presence of the hotel does not go unnoticed by the immigrants themselves. Polish respondents perceived the residents to be distant, to keep to themselves and not trust them. Some respondents intuit that the residents 'don't like the fact that there is a hotel here' (NI13), perceiving them to be 'prejudiced' against immigrants, to associate them with uncivilised behaviour, like urinating in public or consuming alcohol and drugs.

Despite the fact that the central location and the residential function of the accommodation are meant to create a pathway to local integration for immigrants, here, too, as in Village A, most immigrant respondents are discontent with their minimal social life and lifestyle, where 'you come from work, you take a shower, you eat and then you go to sleep, and then in the morning you get up again' (NI8). To the perceived lack of these relational aspects of well-being some respondents add material aspects such as the surrounding environment in the village, where 'there is nothing to do' and 'nowhere to go out' (NI5). All these testimonies point, again, to a lack of (a sense of) community, this time not bolstered by the physical isolation of the accommodation, but rather by the rejection and ensuing social isolation from the residents.

Lastly, the quality of the accommodation facility too contributes to shaping perceptions of immigration and thus the well-being of residents and immigrants. Unlike in Village A, where the accommodation itself offers some potential for leisure activities, the hotel in Village B does not provide any such options. With only one bar in the village, which is mostly frequented by residents, the only other option for immigrants to spend some leisure time outside their room, particularly if they want to smoke, is to gather in front of the hotel. Thus, especially when the weather is nice, 'in the summer at night' (NR5), immigrants can be seen outside the hotel, smoking, chatting and sometimes drinking. The lack of private space that the housing conditions entail helps produce the public visibility of the immigrants' behaviour. The behaviour itself is not intrinsically damning, it is its public display that makes it appear offensive. A Dutch resident might behave in a similar way, but the difference is that they would do so in the privacy of their homes or that of a bar.

In summary, the manifestation of the local migrant housing policy in Village B, which intends to pave a way for interaction and integration, seems to achieve the opposite effect. In this case, contact between the two groups does not lead to meaningful encounters. Rather, close proximity generates comparisons and emphasises (perceived) differences, breeding defensiveness and the bounding of group identities (Valentine, 2008; Young, 2011). The residents are discontent with the loss of a community place, its replacement with an immigrant hotel and the presence of immigrants, whereas the immigrants do not feel a part of a community, and rather to the contrary, they feel ostracised by the residents.

## 6.3 | Village C—Housing out of sight and out of (the collective) mind

In Village C, in Noordoostpolder, the large-scale (112 persons) accommodation facility is located about 3 km outside of the village,



surrounded by agricultural fields. The immigrants' accommodation, an apartment complex, replaces a former farm barn, and is intended to be a temporary housing facility for seasonal employees. Immigrants living in this accommodation are further away from the potential of being a resident in the area, having lived here for a shorter period of time. The accommodation in Village C is more self-contained than the accommodation in Village B, offering more scope for immigrants to stay indoors. Even if they do go outside, because of the accommodation's location, they are not likely to meet residents. The difference between the two villages reflects the different implementation and intention of the local housing policy: the setting in Village B is more conducive to immigrants spending time in the spatial setting of the village, allowing for meeting and interacting with residents, whereas the setting in Village C is more conducive to immigrants being out of the sight of residents.

The isolated location of the accommodation negatively affects the emotional well-being of immigrants, who note living in 'seclusion', with 'everything far from here' and 'not even a bus stop in the vicinity' (NI2). Other Polish respondents note the lack of amenities in the village, like the fact that 'the closest grocery store is 6 kilometres away' (NI4). The physical distance translates into a social distance; immigrants living in the accommodation (are made to) feel like they do not belong in the local community/society, as they are not able to easily engage in some of the most mundane activities, like shopping. The isolation of the accommodation, the lack of modes of transportation and the lack of amenities in Village C are further made worse by the lack of leisure options for the immigrants living in the large-scale facility. One respondent notes that 'there is nothing in the vicinity [of the accommodation]' and that 'towns start to appear only 15 kilometres away from here' (NI3), echoing a Village B immigrant in bemoaning the limited lifestyle options of village life. Another respondent refers to the quality of living conditions, the unease of sharing living quarters with 10 other people, the loss of privacy that entails, and the distress that comes with living a life in limbo.

There are 10 people in the apartment. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, because 10 different people say 10 different things. [...] having your own place abroad ... it's different, you live for yourself. And here, it's more like living a rent life. Living on a suitcase, on the bags. Here you cannot do whatever you want. It's 10:00 o'clock, it's time to go to bed. It is curfew time, people are going to work in the morning. Nothing more, nothing less. (NI3)

These conditions, which fail to recognise his rights to a certain quality of life, an entitlement to certain facilities, redefine his own sense of self and of his life.

On the other hand, the isolation of the accommodation minimises the interaction with the residents, who, for their part, do not notice the presence of immigrants, and thus, migration does not generally have an effect on their well-being, whether that is positive or negative. However, when seen, the immigrants become visible because of

differences in behaviour and their un-Dutch-ness. For instance, one resident remembers having been 'scared up' by an immigrant on the side of the road, as unlike 'a Dutch person [who] will wear a reflecting light or shirt, they [immigrants] are wearing a black hoodie' (NR16). These fairly small differences make a strong impression on residents only because they are not exposed to them on a regular basis. By allowing the location of immigrants as far away from residents as possible, the housing policy allows for a perception of migration as a 'potential' disturbance but does not allow for a normalisation of different behaviour. These perceived differences between residents and immigrants in terms of norms and behaviour, their intransigence when it comes to migrants' behaviour, come about often in the residents' interviews. These differences, more than anything else, make immigrants stand out, despite their relative (physical) invisibility. For instance, a resident seems to believe that among immigrants, 'they all smoke and they all drink', and that this 'is something Polish' (NR15). They do not reflect on their own smoking and drinking behaviour or that of their (accepted) community members. Moreover, it does not occur to anyone the fact that, because of the lack of leisure activities, sometimes smoking and drinking is all immigrants can do.

Lastly, as in Village B, here too some residents perceive immigration to 'bring something positive' to those that are 'depending on them [immigrants]', but to not benefit the 'normal citizen' (NR10) in any way.

In summary, the manifestation of the local migrant housing policy in Village C achieves the municipality's intention to distinguish between short-term and potentially long-term immigrants, and by extension, to minimise the interaction between them and residents.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we have analysed how local migrant housing policies, through their location, function and quality of immigrant accommodation facilities, shape the perceived effect of migration on the well-being of residents and immigrants in three villages in the Netherlands. The housing regulations, the specific location of each immigrant housing facility, the aesthetic of the facility at the exterior, the quality of the conditions in the interior, the role each facility plays in the village, the former function of the facility as well as the feelings it evokes for both groups, all are aspects that shape social interactions between immigrants and residents, and by extension the effect of migration on their well-being.

Our article illustrates how certain spatial policies already set the stage for potential conflict between immigrants and residents, shaping the latter's experiences of migration irrespective of the behaviour of the former. The transformation of each type of building into an immigrant accommodation was perceived differently by the residents in each village, depending on its previous role. In Village A, the change from an asylum centre to a labour migrant accommodation was largely perceived as an improvement, because the presence of the asylum seekers caused much friction in the village. In Village B, on the other hand, the former restaurant/bar was 'taken away' from the residents,

a place that hosted community meetings and events. The transition from a community place to an immigrant hotel was thus bound to be perceived negatively, irrespective of how the immigrants living there behaved or who they were. Lastly, in Village C, the former farm was far away from the village to begin with, so what it transitioned to did not concern the residents much.

Furthermore, the location of the immigrant accommodation with its interior and exterior housing conditions, shape experiences of migration for immigrants themselves. The temporariness of residing in a boarding-house and not a residence makes one feel like living in state of limbo. It allows for less privacy and negates one's right to a certain quality of housing, and a certain level of well-being. Thus, the location of and type of housing one lives in sets the limits to what one can do in terms of internal, private behaviour and external, social relations. It also influences one's perception of being recognised and accepted, of being tolerated as a visitor or welcomed as a new resident with rights. The different placements of the immigrant housing facilities, thus, create and reproduce social hierarchies (e.g., residents do not want to live next to the 'Polish hotel') and inequalities between the two groups (e.g., the immigrants employed in low-skilled jobs excluded socially and spatially), reinforcing existing clichés and perceptions about one another (e.g., the Poles smoke and drink; the Dutch are not warm). These clichés are not only reaffirmed by face-to-face encounters, but also from dominant discourses transcending the place (Leitner, 2012). The opinion that all Polish migrants drink and smoke is not only caused by actually seeing them smoke, but by pre-existing stereotypes about Poles drinking a lot.

The quality of the housing conditions also shapes experiences of migration and the well-being of individuals in both groups. Residents in Village A are happy with how things have worked out because they assume the accommodation to be self-contained, offering enough entertainment opportunities so as to keep immigrants in. This allows them a sense of self-satisfaction on how immigrants are treated in their village and enables them to relinquish their own responsibility of taking steps to integrate immigrants into their community. Conversely, the relative lack of amenities in the hotel in Village B means that immigrants spend a significant amount of time outside, which makes them visible and a nuisance to the neighbouring residents.

Three other factors mediate the effects of local migrant housing policies on perceptions of migration and hence aspects of well-being, namely, intergroup encounters, the rural and new immigration destination character of the villages analysed and the temporariness of the immigrant group. Encounters between residents and immigrants in all three villages are laden with the pre-existing histories of each place. Each village has a different history of migration, in light of which the arrival of new immigrants is processed, and a different history of symbolic locations within the village. In Villages B and C, these histories mean that encounters between residents and immigrants incite processes of otherness and elicit strong emotions on both sides. The temporary character of much of the immigration into the villages means that most immigrants are generally less established in the community, living there, but not belonging to it. This state of affairs contrasts with the relatively small world of traditional rural areas where everyone is a

member of overlapping groups through interactions in the school, church, workplace or local civic organisations (McAreevey, 2017). Moreover, large-scale immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon for all three villages, who are reacting to the rapid developments and adjusting their policies in response. Thus, the process of finding a balance between maintaining the well-being of the residents (and immigrants) and satisfying the labour needs of local businesses is still in its initial stages. Local migrant housing policies are instrumentally used to navigate this fragile balance in all three villages. However, although keeping most immigrants away from residential areas might seem like an easy triple-win situation (i.e., meeting the labour demand of farmers, the out-of-sight preference of residents and providing employment opportunities for immigrants), as our study shows, these policies end up undermining the well-being of the latter two groups and threatening the interest of the former.

The article makes several important contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, it departs from the extensively researched urban focus and addresses instead the immigrants' and residents' experiences in rural areas, as 'New Immigration Destinations' (for an overview, see McAreevey, 2017). The distinction is most timely in the context of increasing immigration to non-urban or peripheral destinations, and relevant, considering the socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental differences between rural and urban areas. Secondly, it sheds lights on the role of encounters between residents and immigrants in reducing intergroup prejudice and conflict, and in promoting immigrant integration (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). A burgeoning line of research in Geography and Urban Studies, the role of encounters has been far less analysed in a rural context. Thirdly, it informs about the role of place in shaping experiences of migration and well-being. Although the importance of place in shaping social relations has been acknowledged elsewhere (see, for instance, Cresswell, 2004; Cudworth, 2018; Hubbard et al., 2004; Massey, 2005; Tickamyer, 2000), the ways it is produced through local housing policies and the way it impacts social relations in intended and unintended ways has been far less researched. This aspect should not be overlooked, as migration-related local policies, such as housing, oftentimes have the explicit role of mediating encounters between residents and immigrants, and thus in shaping their experience of migration, of each other, and, thereby their relational well-being. Fourthly, we consider the experiences of *both* residents and immigrants, illustrating how different groups experience the same place differently, which reflects and reproduces their power and status. Lastly, we discuss the implications of specific types of migration patterns—circular and seasonal, and the implications for migrants and residents' well-being. This is most significant; as we shall see, the (mostly) temporary nature of the immigration phenomenon in the villages analysed not only shapes perceptions of migrations but also the type of migrant housing policies that local governments implement.

To conclude, in all three villages, the local governments employed local migrant housing policies to mediate encounters between residents and immigrants, which affected their relational, material and subjective well-being. In Villages A and C, the purpose was to impede encounters, whereas in Village B, the purpose was to facilitate them,

albeit no opportunities were provided for meaningful contact and engagement. The existence of previous histories of place as well as the relations of power between the two groups in each village shaped the outcomes of these encounters and the individuals' feelings of well-being. In Villages B and C, they reinforced prejudice and difference, whereas in Village A, they paved the way for conviviality, at least from the residents' perspective. With the potential exception of the latter, the housing policies had a negative effect on the well-being of immigrants in all three villages, and on residents in Villages B and C. Our findings highlight the importance of considering all factors that mediate encounters, and thus well-being, paying particular attention to the social and geographical context and existing power relations between the groups they target.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rural areas in the Netherlands are defined as localities with less than 500 (non-urban) and 500–1,000 (low urban) neighbourhood address density per square kilometre (CBS, 2021). All three villages have less than 500 neighbourhood address density. Neighbourhood address density is defined as the number of addresses within a circle with a radius of 1 km around an address, divided by the area of the circle. See also Haartsen and Venhorst (2010) and Steenbekkers et al. (2008). This definition is markedly different from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) classification, which defines rural areas according to population density (below 150 inhabitants per square km), percentage of the population living in an area (predominantly rural if 50% of the population of that regions lives in a rural community), and the size of a nearby city (<200,000) (OECD, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Please see <https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/regional-innovation-monitor/base-profile/flevoland/flevoland>.

<sup>3</sup> See the 'National statement for (temporary) housing of EU labor migrants', available here: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/buitenlandse-werknemers/documenten/richtlijnen/2012/04/11/nationale-verklaring-tijdelijke-huisvesting-eu-arbeidsmigranten>.

<sup>4</sup> One of the authors dined in. At the time, in March 2019, the restaurant had some of the lowest menu prices in Steenbergen.

<sup>5</sup> Immigrants do not usually dine in the restaurant; at most, and rarely, they order food and take it up to their rooms.

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