

# Keeping Faith: Faith-Based Organizations as Urban Migration Infrastructures for Illegalized Migrants in Rotterdam

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## Abstract

In recent years, scholarship on arrival infrastructures has refocused attention to the importance of the local level as the main site where the social in- and exclusion of newcomers is negotiated. However, this focus on newcomers has relatively overlooked the plight of long-term residents like illegalized migrants (IMs) who are "stranded" or "stuck" in their cities of residence. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) have historically functioned as sanctuaries that provide services and resources to IMs. Based on ethnographic research at the Pauluskerk in Rotterdam, we argue that the processes whereby FBOs are able to negotiate and contest the in- and exclusion of IMs in hostile environments can better be grasped by conceptualizing them as "urban migration infrastructures." By introducing this term, we open up the debate about the relative orientation of migration infrastructures beyond arrival and emphasize their relational and spatial embeddedness within broader "infrastructural fields." On the one hand, our analysis demonstrates that FBOs mediate access to material resources via providing shelter, healthcare, and possibilities for volunteering. On the other hand, we show that FBOs provide immaterial resources by stimulating a sense of belonging, assisting IMs legally, and engaging in political advocacy. Extending the lessons learned from this case study, we argue that FBOs need to constantly navigate the symbolic space between in/formality when engaging in infrastructuring work towards IMs. Our findings simultaneously indicate that the unique role that FBOs play as "safe havens" in hostile political environments comes under pressure as local governments incorporate their efforts into local reception policies.

## Keywords

faith-based organizations; illegalized migrants; migration infrastructures; sanctuary cities

## 1. Introduction

On 29th of February 2024, the Protestant church “Pauluskerk” in Rotterdam organized the third edition of the “Right to Rest” (Recht op Rust). The “Right to Rest” was conceived as a protest in solidarity with homeless people, including many illegalized migrants (IMs), by erecting tent camps on symbolic places like the Central Station and the City Hall. The third edition took place in the Wijkpark located in “Oude Westen,” a super-diverse neighborhood where 70% of the inhabitants have a migration background. The chosen date was symbolic, as a representative of the church explained, “for a lot of people it’s nice to have an extra day...but for others it is an extra day to survive.” During the protest, a soapbox stage (*zeepkist*) was installed where solidary citizens, professionals, bureaucrats, and IMs alternated taking the floor. Ayoub, an undocumented man, gave an emotional testimony stating how he was a long-term resident of the city and how “tired” he was of constantly being on the move and living on the streets. “I am looking for a home, I just want to go home,” he repeated like a mantra. Free food was provided by a neighborhood community kitchen and at the end of the night tents were set up in the park to make sure that all participants had a place to sleep. As the press release made clear, the goal of the action was to:

[O]ffer...unconditional shelter for one night, which we demand from the Municipality of Rotterdam....Not everyone is welcome in regular overnight shelters. This leaves many undocumented migrants and migrant workers on the streets....We show the city what we want: a city where everyone can find rest, feel safe, have space to meet each other, and take care of each other. (Pauluskerk, 2024d)

While their action drew public attention to the “right to rest” for homeless IMs in a hostile environment, it also prefigured the Pauluskerk’s vision of the sanctuary city. At the same time, the fragility of the tents as a form of “shelter” symbolizes the ambivalence of sanctuary practices in hostile urban environments.

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) like the Pauluskerk have long been recognized in the scholarly literature as spaces of urban sanctuary that provide protection to people on the move (see Bauder, 2017). In a globalized world wherein the hyper-mobility of transnational elites stands in sharp contrast to the forced (im)mobility of the precarious poor, FBOs evoke their religious mission to offer refuge to IMs in Western countries (Bauman, 1998; Lippert & Rehaag, 2013). Although the sanctuary practices wherein FBOs are involved in differ, the oppositional stance they take towards exclusionary national policies is a common denominator (Squire & Darling, 2013; Yukich, 2013). Hence, existing scholarship on sanctuary cities treat urban sanctuary as “an important political critique of the nation-state from within” that tests the limits of state sovereignty (Darling & Bauder, 2019, p. 9). FBOs are hereby conceptualized as spaces of confused sovereignty whose sanctuary practices are directly opposed to—and largely beyond the reach of—formal state logics (Nagel & Ehrkamp, 2016).

However, the “well-intentioned forms of pastoral support or charity-like work” that FBOs are engaged in can inadvertently contribute to the hostile politics of waiting and the reproduction of anti-migrant hostility (Bagelman, 2016, p. 6; Mosselson, 2021). Furthermore, the criteria that FBOs use to provide access to support well-defined target groups can reinforce categorical fragmentation between IMs as “deserving” and “undeserving” (Swerts & Nicholls, 2021; Yukich, 2013). The meaning of sanctuary practices becomes even more blurred when FBOs become incorporated into formal migration policies. This is well illustrated by the

case of the Netherlands, where the national government has attempted to regulate irregular migration via stringent external and internal bordering policies over the last two decades. Most notably, the 1998 Linkage Law (Koppelingswet) excluded IMs from service provision by linking welfare state access to citizenship status (Hajer et al., 2024). FBOs who had historically provided sanctuary towards IMs were thereby forced to comply or risk being criminalized (Kox & Staring, 2022).

Cities have become crucial sites where migrant irregularity and in/formality are constantly being produced, negotiated, and contested (Darling, 2017; Swerts, 2017). The concept of arrival infrastructures (Meeus et al., 2019) provides a useful lens to investigate how FBOs help channel IMs through the urban landscape by selecting, giving direction to, and retaining or accelerating certain migrants. However, the focus on arrival and newcomers in this literature has relatively overlooked how FBOs engage in infrastructuring work by providing sanctuary to long-term residents like IMs who are “stranded” or “stuck” in their cities of residence. Furthermore, the tendency in this literature to privilege studying informal spaces and initiatives for newcomers overshadows the interrelations they have with formal organizations like FBOs (Loomans et al., 2024; Schillebeeckx et al., 2019). Building on the existing work on migration infrastructure(s) (Hall et al., 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), we try to overcome these shortcomings by introducing the term “urban migration infrastructures” to highlight the relative orientation of migration infrastructures beyond arrival and emphasize their relational and spatial embeddedness within broader “infrastructural fields.”

By adopting an urban infrastructural perspective, we can grasp the unique yet ambivalent role that FBOs play in navigating and maneuvering between formality and informality in the quest to provide services towards IMs in a highly differentiated infrastructural field. FBOs are an integral part of what Felder et al. (2023) have called the “assistance circuit” of service provision towards IMs. Churches, libraries, community centers, and homeless shelters thus function as social infrastructures, or the physical sites and facilities within this circuit that enable IMs to access resources and networks (Klinenberg, 2018; Wessendorf, 2022). Institutionalized infrastructures tend to be interconnected to non-institutionalized infrastructures like camps and squats since “informality is what makes a certain space immediately accessible, and also what allows the transit through it” (Bovo, 2020, p. 27). At the same time, infrastructuring work can have a more formal or informal character depending on whether service provision is situated within or beyond the legal boundaries set out by the state.

In this article, we rely on ethnographic research at the Pauluskerk in Rotterdam to argue that FBOs operate as urban migration infrastructures for IMs. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we situate our contribution within the literature on urban sanctuary and arrival infrastructures. Second, we outline the relational and spatial embeddedness of the Pauluskerk in the Rotterdam infrastructural field. Third, we demonstrate that FBOs mediate access to material and immaterial resources to IMs in a hostile urban environment by strategically navigating back and forth between formal and informal infrastructuring work. Finally, we argue that the unique role that FBOs play as “safe havens” in a hostile political environment can come under pressure as local governments increasingly seek to incapsulate sanctuary practices into local reception policies.

## 2. Conceptualizing FBOs as Urban Migration Infrastructures

### 2.1. *The Role of FBOs in Negotiating Urban Sanctuary*

Over the past few decades, people on the move who defy state restrictions on mobility have been systematically subjected to criminalization, stigmatization, and illegalization (De Genova & Roy, 2020). In a globalized world wherein national sovereignty is severely eroded, the stringent governance of irregular migrant mobility has become a symbolic arena for nation-states to re-assert their continuing relevance (Schinkel, 2009). Elected governments in Europe and North America have rhetorically adopted a strict stance on irregular migration, promising their electorates to “end the problem” once and for all through deterrence and migration enforcement (McNevin, 2017). To turn tough talk into tough action, a multiplicity of governmental actors at various scales is involved in the attempt to curtail the mobility of IMs within and beyond state territory. Illegalization depends on bordering practices involving the creation of physical borders and symbolic boundaries between “legal” and “illegal” migrants (Fassin, 2011). State distinctions legally sort and categorize people on the move into desirable/undesirable, thereby justifying forms of legal violence like apprehensions, detentions, and deportations (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Internal bordering practices also proliferate at the subnational level, as precarious legal status cuts access for illegalized residents to various social benefits and services associated with the welfare state (Fauser, 2024).

Due to these developments, European cities have become urban borderlands where “the dividing line between insiders and outsiders, citizens and non-citizens, and the growing number of fine-tuned categories of non-citizens, along with divisions of racialisation and ethnicisation, class, gender, sexuality, and health” is enacted, (re-)produced, and contested (Fauser, 2024, p. 2478). Struggles over who fits into or falls outside national citizenship and belonging are increasingly re-scaled to the urban level (Darling & Bauder, 2019). On the one hand, scholarship on internal bordering practices has highlighted how urban actors like city governments, police forces, and NGOs are enlisted by national governments to implement restrictive migration policies (van der Woude & Staring, 2021). On the other hand, scholarship on sanctuary policies and practices has highlighted how, under certain conditions, urban actors create a “safe space where migrants will be at least temporarily protected from political authorities whose aim is to remove them from their territory” (Bauböck & Permoser, 2023, p. 3673). Such sanctuary practices range from formal actors like municipalities making use of their discretionary power to create bureaucratic firewalls to informal actors like migrant self-organizations engaging in anti-deportation campaigns (de Graauw, 2021; Kocher & Stuesse, 2021). Urban borderlands are thus essentially two-faced, as they visualize the capacity of the city to expel and absorb IMs into the social fabric.

FBOs have been historically at the forefront when it comes to providing urban sanctuary to people on the move since the Middle Ages (see Bauder, 2017). This ancient tradition underwent a revival in the eighties in North America and Europe when Christian churches provided sanctuary to migrants facing deportation (Lippert & Rehaag, 2013). In the US context, the New Sanctuary Movement involved hundreds of churches that evoked their moral mission to “break the law” by offering sanctuary to Central American migrants (Yukich, 2013). In the Netherlands, the first sanctuary initiatives that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s were also primarily taken by FBOs that were dissatisfied with asylum decisions taken by the state and with IMs sleeping rough (Kox & Staring, 2022). This has led the existing literature to mainly interpret the role that FBOs play in providing urban sanctuary as a facilitative one, stressing how their inclusive practices defy direct orders

from state authorities (Squire & Darling, 2013; Yukich, 2013). However, critical scholarship has argued that sanctuary can reinforce anti-immigrant hostility by increasing dependency of IMs on care (Bagelman, 2013). Furthermore, certain scholars (Bauder et al., 2023) argue that the application of concepts of sanctuary in the migration literature risks perpetuating Eurocentric perspectives. We therefore pay explicit attention to the relational and often conflictual processes whereby the meaning of sanctuary is locally negotiated and—at times—gets jeopardized (Lambert & Swerts, 2019).

## ***2.2. Towards an Urban Infrastructural Perspective on FBOs***

In recent years, scholars in migration studies have increasingly adopted the conceptual language of “migration infrastructure(s)” to unpack the processes of mediation that facilitate and condition mobility (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). In urban studies, the concepts of “migration infrastructure” and “arrival infrastructures” have been used to capture how newcomers’ mobility is mediated in cities (Hall et al., 2017; Meeus et al., 2019). Adopting an infrastructural perspective promises to capture arrival as “the move from the margins to becoming part of the social, economic, and cultural fabric in which migrants end up, thereby also shaping the place that they are joining” (Wessendorf, 2022, p. 175). This move is facilitated by a variety of “infrastructures” in the city that selectively offer access to resources, thereby shaping the mobility trajectories of people on the move. Despite the promise this perspective entails to see the role that cities play vis-a-vis migrant mobility in a different light; the literature that takes inspiration from this perspective interprets the meaning of arrival infrastructures in vastly different ways (see Bovo, 2020). As Bovo contends, these different interpretations converge regarding the temporariness of arrival infrastructures “which may not necessarily be linked to further settlement” and their functionality to “be accessible for newcomers and allow further transit” (2020, p. 30). Conceived in this way, however, the concept fails to capture the blocked mobility trajectories of immobilized IMs who are forced to settle themselves long-term in their cities of residence due to legal and bureaucratic obstacles (Nimführ & Sesay, 2019). Furthermore, the assumption that migration infrastructures are primarily oriented towards further transit is hard to rhyme with the historical function that FBOs have played for IMs in providing sanctuary and opportunities for settlement.

In an attempt to delineate the concept on arrival infrastructures, Meeus et al. (2020, p. 13) emphasized the need to adopt a “multi-actor” and “multi-sited” perspective on arrival infrastructures since newcomers tend to make use of “a network of arrival infrastructures distributed over the city rather than just one arrival infrastructure.” This network includes “a variety of actors, including architects and urban planners, state-employees, citizens, civil society organisations, newcomers, and more established migrants” and “variety of housing typologies (including asylum centres and squatting), shops as information hubs, religious sites, facilities for language classes, hairdressers, restaurants, international shipping, and call centres” (Meeus et al., 2020, p. 14). Building on the insights of the Chicago school, the related literature on arrival neighborhoods argues that such infrastructures tend to be concentrated in specialized neighborhoods that provide newcomers with access to resources (Schillebeeckx et al., 2019). While we agree that connections between actors and places need to be taken seriously to grasp how migration infrastructures function, the broad range of actors and spaces included risks turning anything and everything into a potential arrival infrastructure. Furthermore, conceptualizing aggregated networks of migration infrastructures as arrival neighborhoods risks reifying the neighborhood level while overlooking networks that reach beyond the neighborhood.

To overcome these shortcomings, we put forward the notions of “urban migration infrastructures” and “infrastructural fields” in this article. The concept of urban migration infrastructures is better attuned to the complexity of IMs’ mobility trajectories because it keeps the relative orientation and functionality of migration infrastructures in urban settings open. Therefore, it is able to critically investigate how such infrastructure are implicated in migration processes beyond arrival such as settlement, transit, and exit. Building on the work of Wessendorf (2022) and Kloosterman et al. (1999), we argue that we need to consider how urban migration infrastructures are spatially and relationally embedded within what we propose to call the infrastructural field. For Bourdieu, fields denote “arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation and exchange of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate, exchange, and monopolize different kinds of power resources” (Swartz, 2020, p. 322). The interconnected services across different actors and localities that together make up the “assistance circuit” for IMs constitute such a field (Felder et al., 2023; Schiller et al., 2023). In the Rotterdam case, this infrastructural field is highly differentiated as it is characterized by the tension between state infrastructures that try to formalize—and thereby control—sanctuary and make it conditional upon return. Characteristics and dynamics within such infrastructural fields help to explain why actors operating in a hostile environment need to learn how to strategically maneuver the liminal space between in/formality (Darling, 2017; Swerts, 2017).

### 3. Methods

In this article we aim to generate insights into how FBOs engage in infrastructural work towards IMs in hostile environments based on an ethnographic case study of the Pauluskerk in Rotterdam. The Pauluskerk can be considered a “critical case” to study this question due to the unique position it occupies within the Rotterdam infrastructural field as an FBO who was involved in providing sanctuary to IMs before, during, and beyond the LVV (Landelijke Vreemdelingen Voorzieningen; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Data collection for this article occurred via participant observation and interviewing. In 2024, Carola Vasileiadi did four months of participant observation at the Pauluskerk by doing weekly evening shifts in the shelter of approximately 7 hours, taking part in group activities like cooking sessions, communal dinners, meetings with churchgoers and volunteers, and attending public events. During participant observation, informal conversations with residents and unstructured interviews with volunteers took place. Fieldwork findings were written in a notebook after visits to the church which were often about informal conversations and observations during volunteering shifts. These notes led to more general statements, while personal ones without formal consent were avoided. Visual ethnographic data like photographs which help to “set the scene” and analyze infrastructure processes were also gathered during participant observation (van den Scott, 2018). In terms of interviewing, Thomas Swerts was involved in coordinating several interviews with migrants (10) and employees at the Pauluskerk (5) on sanctuary practices in 2018. In addition, authors 1 and 2 performed structured interviews with three employees, including the pastor-director, of the Pauluskerk and two interviews with representatives of the municipality who are involved with the LVV to discuss local policies and practices towards IMs more in depth. Formal interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Anonymity was guaranteed throughout the research and this article does not mention names, age, or ethnic characteristics that could be traced back to respondents.

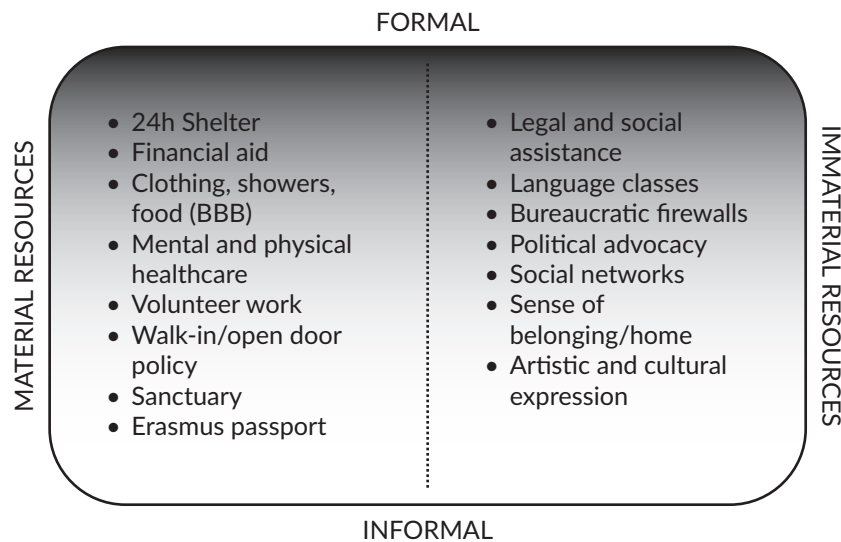
Critical reflections on positionalities played a crucial role during the fieldwork in navigating social dynamics and underlying power imbalances between the researcher and IMs (Moralli, 2024; Swerts, 2020). Before entering the field, the authors openly discussed the research process and aims transparently with the church. Carola Vasileiadi is a young female scholar who offered to support the practices of the church as a volunteer in order to build trust among volunteers and residents and spend a prolonged intimate time in their private everyday space (Cîrstea & Pescinski, 2024). This positionality required constant reflexivity and renegotiation as the power differences between a researcher with institutional backing and vulnerable IMs could influence interactions, the information shared, and the knowledge generated. Volunteers carefully informed Carola Vasileiadi about the residents' behavior and situation before approaching residents themselves. In this way, we tried to take into consideration the vulnerable position of our respondents. Being a female researcher among predominantly elderly male residents added another layer of complexity (Vanderbeck, 2005). Some residents occasionally sought attention through jokes and their intentions were sometimes unclear, further highlighting the need for careful navigation of these dynamics. Despite the many differences in identities, conversations often veered into everyday life topics. Similarities and mutual interests were found, reflecting the development of an informal but transparent relationship.

#### 4. FBO's Infrastructuring Practices of Sanctuary in Rotterdam

In this section, we argue that FBOs like the Pauluskerk provide material and immaterial resources respectively referring to tangible benefits that are enabled through accessing shelter, healthcare, and other support services and intangible benefits that are mobilized via social networks, information flows, and recognition. By making this distinction, we neither intend to imply that material resource provision is devoid of symbolic qualities, nor that immaterial resource provision is independent from physical infrastructures. We rather do so to analyze how FBOs like the Pauluskerk strategically navigate the differentiated infrastructural field in Rotterdam to make material and immaterial resources available to IMs. More in particular, we argue that the conflicting logics of the Pauluskerk's vision on sanctuary and the local government's emphasis on conditional aid and (voluntary) return stimulate the need to strategically move back and forth between in/formality. This resonates with the literature on "social shadow work" which points out that FBOs and other faith-based solidarity practices towards IMs often take place informally under the radar (Van Dam et al., 2022). While we regard the distinction between formal and informal infrastructuring work to be blurry and messy, we uphold this distinction to point out how FBO's sanctuary practices can be situated within an infrastructural field dominated by the state. Formal infrastructuring work pertains to organizational practices and service provision towards IMs that are well situated within the legal boundaries set out by the state and often involve cooperation with state actors. Conversely, informal infrastructuring work pertains to organizational practices and service provision towards IMs that take place despite of or without explicit state authorization and exceed or go against legal frameworks (see Figure 1).

##### 4.1. *The Relational and Spatial Embeddedness of the Pauluskerk Within the Infrastructural Field*

In relational terms, the embeddedness of FBOs within the infrastructural field is shaped by the ongoing efforts of the Dutch national government to get to grips with the local presence of IMs in cities like Rotterdam via the criminalization and formalization of sanctuary practices (Hajer et al., 2024). Since the implementation of the Linkage Law in 1998, societal organizations and churches were subsidized by municipalities to offer emergency shelters, although against national policies to exclude IMs from public



**Figure 1.** In/formal infrastructuring work and access to resources for IMs.

services. In a 2014 report by the European Committee of Social Rights, the Council of Europe subsequently condemned the Dutch state for this situation and after the FBO Church in Action (*Kerk in Actie*) filed a complaint, this political crisis resulted in the installation of Bed, Bath, Bread (BBB) policies (Kalir, 2017). To tackle the sprawling sanctuary practices that ensued, the Dutch state curtailed and integrated these BBB practices with the roll-out of the nationally coordinated LVV program in 2018. Within this program, access to shelter became conditional upon IMs cooperation to work towards “a sustainable future solution” that could lead to regularization, onward migration, or departure. While cities oversaw its local implementation of formal policies, the national government dictated cooperation with voluntary return as one of the main conditions to get access to service provision for IMs (see Kuschminder & Dubow, 2023).

Rotterdam was one of five municipalities that collaborated with the national government, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, and the service for return and departure in this pilot. Compared to other Dutch cities, Rotterdam is characterized by its strict and hostile political climate towards IMs where service provision gets problematized as risking a pull effect (*aanzuigende werking*). The Rotterdam counselor holds the national government responsible for financing the LVV and consistently maintains that there is no funding available for IMs from the city of Rotterdam. Hostile architecture, the removal of benches and fining sleeping outside exemplify municipal measures taken to combat the “threat” that IMs pose to public order and safety (Algemeen Dagblad, 2024). The Pauluskerk joined the LVV pilot indirectly as a partner and reception location for the Nico Adriaens Stichting, a care organization who entered a direct contract with the municipality and also received the funding for participation in the LVV. In their public communication, the Pauluskerk explained this decision by stating that the church “decided, despite justified hesitation, to participate constructively in the pilot” while “emphasizing that the new arrangement must not degenerate into a glorified deportation scheme” and that “the starting point is and remains the interest of undocumented people themselves” (Pauluskerk, 2024a). When the Municipality cut the number of beds from 75 to 45 in January 2024, the Pauluskerk effectively stopped being a part of the LVV. A representative of the municipality involved in the LVV reflected on tensions between partners as follows:

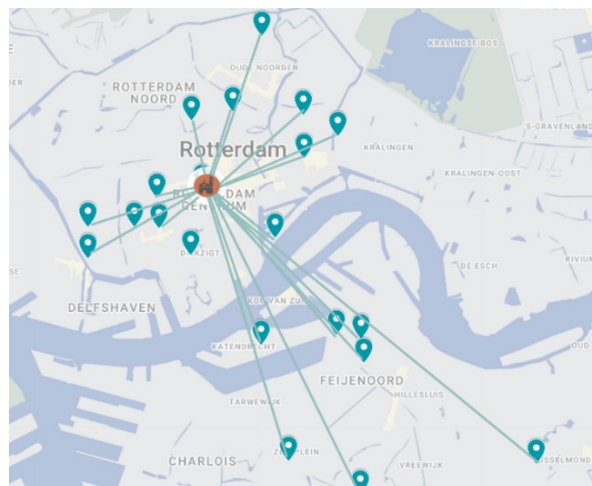


The LVV is a kind of partnership of actors with different backgrounds and visions. And well, I think especially the Paulus Church and [mentions organization X]. They just have a certain ideology, of course, in their minds about how they want to help people and what they think is humane aid. And so does that always match with how we as a local government look at that or how the national government looks at that. Where we say, illegal existence in the Netherlands is not a perspective....So there are definitely tensions around this. (Municipal representative 1)

Despite this retreat from the LVV due to conflicting visions, the Pauluskerk still occupies a central position within the infrastructural field (see Schiller et al., 2023). This has to do with the fact that in 2023, more than 90% of their total annual budget of roughly 1.6 million euros came from private funds and donations (Pauluskerk, 2023). Since then, the church decided to provide permanent shelter for elderly (55+) IMs. The Pauluskerk's service provision necessitates considering interconnections with other infrastructures in the city:

What exactly is our role in the whole of facilities and institutions and organizations in this city? I think you have to be informed by that. It's not that you always have to make yourself dependent, but you do have to take advantage of the knowledge of the environment, of the context. If, for example, the municipality of Rotterdam treated undocumented people like other citizens in this city, we would have to adopt a much less fierce tone. If [mentions others non-state actors] would advocate and campaign for the rights of undocumented in public space, we could neatly join in instead of taking the lead. (Employee 1)

Based on an analysis of the contact details of 26 collaborating organizations that the Pauluskerk has on file, Figure 2 below shows how the church's network radiates outwards across the city. Each organization works with their own target groups, clients, and flows of money. Yet they share a common goal to direct their sanctuary practices towards people excluded from the services of the welfare state. To co-ordinate between forms of service provision within the Rotterdam infrastructural field, the core actors meet four times a year at the Pauluskerk.



**Figure 2.** Relational embeddedness of Pauluskerk. Twenty-six partner organizations, some of them have multiple purposes for food distribution (13), healthcare (9), clothing (6), housing and shelter (5), legal aid (7), psychosocial aid (3), return (3), education (1), and domestic violence (1).

In spatial terms, Figure 2 illustrates that the relational networks of the Pauluskerk reach well beyond the neighborhood where the church is located. These networks extend to the regional, national, and transnational scale. However, for the purpose of this article, we choose to focus on the local scale since these networks are particularly important with regards to enabling local access to resources to IMs. The spatial embeddedness of the Pauluskerk in the city center within walking distance of the Central Station is crucial to understand its nodal position within the infrastructural field in Rotterdam. As a place of transit, the urban area surrounding the Central Station has always been known for attracting marginalized residents who suffer from drug use, mental health problems or illegalized status. When the old church had to make way for a new high-rise building, the developer agreed to erect a new building symbolizing “a crystal that has fallen of a rock” in exchange for the land. The building stands out in the urban landscape and is designed as a welcoming space centered around a “church square and open house” (see Figure 3). Despite this welcoming design, employees of the church explained that the Pauluskerk is also a place that people are often a bit ashamed of since it symbolizes the “last resort” for people who experience trouble fending for themselves.

As Respondent 3 indicated, the presence of the Red Cross “three doors down” in the same street facilitates the referral of IMs with medical problems. Likewise, the church collaborates with solidary restaurants and ethnic entrepreneurs from the nearby West Kruiskade for food provision. Despite such benefits of its spatial embeddedness, the neighborhood has also been gentrifying as more high-rise buildings arise and businesses, shops, and restaurants are settling in. While the streets are crowded with commuters and tourists, the Pauluskerk confronts passers-by with, as one of our interviewees put it, “the raw Rotterdam, the naked Rotterdam in a sense, the hurt Rotterdam, also, you could say the Rotterdam of the street.” Hence, residents regularly voice concerns over nuisances caused by the Pauluskerk’s visitors. However, other residents respond to its presence by becoming involved as one of the 200 volunteers (Pauluskerk, 2024b). While the municipality is committed to polishing away the reality of IMs, the Pauluskerk aims to “stand beside people who live on the margins” and “be there, for everyone who is vulnerable, including undocumented people and [others] who fall outside the established order” (Employee 1).

#### 4.2. Material Resource Provision

The Pauluskerk relies on its relational and spatial embeddedness to provide material resources to IMs like shelter, healthcare, and physical security (see Figure 1 for overview). Examples of material resources that are accessible for visitors during the day include showers and washing machines, clothing, and food. Residents



**Figure 3.** Spatial embeddedness of Pauluskerk. Photo courtesy of Weedaarchitecten, 2012.

in the shelter have access to 12 two-shared bedrooms, two kitchens, bathrooms, and a communal area and receive 60 euros per week for living costs. Figure 4 below depicts a typical shelter and the kitchen for residents.

Enabling access to material resources requires the Pauluskerk to navigate strategically between formal and informal infrastructuring work. Between 2018 and 2024, access to shelter for a period of up to six months for IMs at the Pauluskerk became subjected to the LVV's formal criteria. Access to shelter required IMs to cooperate with a "realistic" process aimed at finding a "durable solution" ranging from getting a residence permit, migrating to another country, to return to the home country. IMs who got a bed in the church were also offered counselling. The downside was that the church was not allowed to supervise them as they were labelled as a shelter institution. The residents were accommodated by the church but supervised by a partner institution in the city. Additional access criteria included age, being from an "unsafe" country, not having participated in a LVV shelter, having a connection with Rotterdam and the absence of the right to stay in an asylum center, an EU residence permit, or having a Dublin claim. The implementation of these criteria reinforced the precarious and conditional nature of sanctuary at the Pauluskerk (see Bauder et al., 2023). Formal infrastructuring work involved more nighttime surveillance due to safety risks and controlling measures to get a grip of who uses their services like participants having to sign in and out every time they left the church as residents were not allowed in the residency area during the day. Employees and volunteers painfully stressed how they had to refuse IMs at the door with whom they had built trustful relationships and who had been secured of shelter in the church before the implementation of the pilot. This led one volunteer to state that "you have to grow calluses on your soul otherwise you won't be able to continue." However, employees also frequently engaged in informal infrastructuring work by using their discretionary power to stretch the criteria, granting access even when IMs "were not really qualified." In addition, they sometimes put up bureaucratic firewalls to protect IMs by not saying "where that person lives, so they just see how they're going to issue that [return] invitation" (Employee 2).

Physical safety is another issue that constantly requires negotiation between in/formality, since drug use, dealing, and mental health problems frequently escalate into violence. To combat these risks, formal rules have been implemented like the prohibition of alcohol. Informally, however, volunteers tend to turn a blind eye towards it. The Pauluskerk tried to cope with safety issues by installing a specific volunteering team, called "Team Attention" (*Team Aandacht*), to be present in the visiting area to avoid escalation. The building was also made safer by installing a safety alarm and cameras, implementing a security key system for residents, and



**Figure 4.** Shelter and kitchen. Photos taken by Carola Vasileiadi.

having a night guard. An employee acknowledged that while at first it was a no-go to work with the police, this changed:

Well, they [the police] did say “we are not going to ask people in here for an ID card or do things like that. We only come in really targeted if we’re looking for someone for a crime and ask if we can go in.” (Interview 2)

Hence, to safeguard the physical safety of its visitors, and residents, the Pauluskerk made informal agreements with the police allowing them to intervene in circumstances of imminent security threat without jeopardizing sanctuary.

Since the Pauluskerk left the LVV, the fourth floor has been reserved for the long-term hosting of elderly IMs who are unlikely to exit the country and have little perspective to perceive a residence permit (Staring et al., 2022). Informal access criteria are based on age (55+ years old), length of residence (in the Netherlands for 15 years or longer), not having a support network, and medical problems. The church’s criteria of “deservingness” to access this shelter demand constant informal infrastructuring work to negotiate their in- and exclusion (Aru & Belloni, 2024; Yukich, 2013). A Pauluskerk employee legitimized these criteria by arguing that they “do not have an unlimited number of sleeping places so we want to dedicate those sleeping places to the most vulnerable...elderly people, undocumented people and homeless people with medical problems.” Residents express that they prefer the situation now that the church stepped out of the LVV because the regulations are more relaxed which makes them feel more welcome. They expressed hope they can stay as they have nowhere else to go. Even though these sanctuary practices instill hope among elderly IMs who are in limbo, they fail to provide long-lasting solutions for the underlying issues of dependency on care and insecurity for the future that elderly IMs experience (Bagelman, 2013).

The “stranded” group of elderly IMs is especially in need of medical attention, since they often suffer from health issues like diabetes, kidney problems and knee problems resulting from living on the streets. A nurse employed by the church is practically in charge of healthcare provision and street doctors employed by another organization offer appointments four times a week, referring clients to specialists if necessary. The service includes a physiotherapist on Tuesday mornings, a dentist on Fridays, and a psychologist on Thursday evenings. This way, the medical service of the Pauluskerk has about 2500 consultations per year, helping about 250 people (Pauluskerk, 2024b). The Pauluskerk also created an informal “Erasmus Passport” which indicates that the person is known by the church, has the right to medical emergency care and costs can be declared by the organization CAK (see Figure 5). An employee of the Pauluskerk noticed that even though the passport is not legally valid, it facilitates IMs’ uptake of medical rights.

Due to the Linking Act, IMs are not allowed to work and mostly end up working in the informal economy under precarious labor conditions. While the Pauluskerk cannot legally employ them, the church engages in informal infrastructural work by allowing IMs to volunteer for cleaning shifts, handing out coffee, and cooking for visitors. Through volunteering, IMs make an active contribution to the Pauluskerk as an employee explained:

Some of our visitors, they develop into volunteers, pillars of the Pauluskerk even, but [we] cannot give them an employment contract. They also often depend on the Pauluskerk which is very different from other volunteers. What [we] can do is accommodate someone in occasional cases. (Interview 1)



**Figure 5.** Erasmus passport. Photos taken by Carola Vasileiadi.

The Pauluskerk thus informally “repays” IMs for their volunteering by offering accommodation, reimbursing monthly expenses, providing legal assistance, and on occasion, giving a bike when needed. As an IM volunteer explained to Carola Vasileiadi, volunteering to cook and clean is good for his wellbeing because it keeps him busy and “out of his head.” Volunteering also stimulates a sense of responsibility and agency among IMs.

### 4.3. Immaterial Resource Provision

The Pauluskerk also provides a wide range of immaterial resources towards IMs (see Table 1). As discussed above, immaterial resource provision again requires infrastructuring work that navigates between in/formality. Examples of immaterial resources that rely on the mobilization of institutional knowledge by employees and volunteers include social assistance, socio-legal aid, and political advocacy. Informally, residents and visitors find a sense of home and belonging and create safe spaces for artistic self-expression in an otherwise hostile urban environment. Although we focus on the provision of immaterial resources here, the infrastructuring work involved is intimately tied to physical spaces in the building. Figure 6 below depicts a participatory art installation created at the Pauluskerk as well as the “living room” for residents.

Every day from nine till nine the Pauluskerk opens its doors for on average 250 visitors (Pauluskerk, 2024b). The first and second floor constitute a welcoming public area where volunteers serve food at five, and coffee until nine in the evening. The space subtly invites visitors and residents to socialize with each other. Stepping



**Figure 6.** Art installation (left; photo courtesy of Kunsthal, 2022) and resident living room (right; photo taken by Carola Vasileiadi).

into the building, one encounters people playing games or chatting around the tables, while others sit alone or sleep with their heads on the table. The area encourages companionships and building a social network while overcoming a sense of social isolation. In the Pauluskerk, people can just come and go and be as they want. As one employee put it, “there is no other place like the Pauluskerk” in the hostile environment of Rotterdam. This has to do with the fact that the Pauluskerk is a low threshold, accessible safe space:

The idea of our open house here is that people can be there as they want. And if that means they don't want any help at all, just a cup of coffee, that's fine. If it means they want to sleep with their head on the table all day, fine....So we are not going to impose and we don't need anything from them, but they are always welcome to ring the bell, to ask for help or offer something. So that it's a low threshold safe place then, that's what we try to do. (Interview 1)

While some residents can be found downstairs socializing in the visiting area, others prefer to stay upstairs. The third and fourth floors have a communal space serving as a living room for residents (see Figure 6). During the volunteering shifts, the living rooms are mostly used by volunteers while residents retreat to their private rooms. As one volunteer commented, the wallpaper of a Dutch landscape with a windmill and the colored chairs can give the impression of a rather sterile “dentist waiting room.” Nevertheless, residents develop feelings of belonging and being “at home” through relationships that develop over time with volunteers. For example, volunteers check the medical condition of residents and sometimes engage in practices of care like nursing their feet and nails. The kitchen also offers opportunities for informal and spontaneous encounter. Here, practices of care can be observed when residents check in with each other to see whether they have eaten and make coffee or cook pancakes for each other. Some residents call each other “brother” or “best friend” while a resident calls one of the volunteers his “father.” Residents also find room for self-expression during cultural and artistic activities like writing, singing, guitar lessons, photography, and a Dutch language café. During a gathering in the church, an IM stated that “art is what makes him human” (23rd of May 2024). Informal infrastructuring work therefore revolves around practices of care, encounter, and self-expression.

In terms of formal infrastructuring work, the Pauluskerk offers socio-legal aid to IMs on a weekly basis. During these weekly consultation hours, trained social workers use their institutional knowledge to build towards a sustainable perspective with for example support regarding CV building and the search for housing. Legal aid also helps IMs navigate the complicated legal and bureaucratic procedures they face in, for example, renewing their asylum requests. IMs have the right to legal assistance but often lack the financial resources or proof of income. Although they can ask for free advice at the legal desk, social lawyers struggle due to the lack of compensation from the government. An employee explained that most people have exhausted all legal remedies when they come to the Pauluskerk in the hope they can help them. When individual legal cases are too complicated, employees refer IMs “to Vluchtelingenwerk [Refugee Work] or ROS....And for some people I try to provide legal guidance, for instance I was just at an appointment with the lawyer for a visitor of ours.” Because the Pauluskerk cannot take on all the cases themselves, the employees hold monthly meetings with a lawyer to assist some of their clients.

Finally, the Pauluskerk engages in political advocacy for the right of (homeless) IMs to access long-term accommodation, care, and regularization. It is important to recall here that the Pauluskerk operates largely independently from state fundings. This increases the autonomy of the Pauluskerk to “speak freely” and take



**Figure 7.** “Right to Rest” announcement (left; Pauluskerk, 2024c) and tent camp in Wijkpark Het Oude Westen (right; photo taken by Carola Vasileiadi).

a stance against state policies. In this regard, an employee argued that the church sees itself as a “public advocate” for IMs that tries to “represent their interests in the public sphere” by raising public awareness and taking a stance against exclusionary policies. As another employee mentioned, one of the main tasks that the church fulfills for IMs in Rotterdam is “advocacy, advocacy, advocacy.” Creating political awareness is stimulated, for example, by exhibiting artistic photos and stories about the everyday life of IMs in public spaces. A group of long-time city residents also form an expertise team in the church to tell their story at public events and in the media. Influencing policymakers depends on public protests like the *Recht op Rust* actions (see Introduction and Figure 7). By actively turning public space into a “frontstage for citizenship,” the Pauluskerk makes visible the situation of IMs and makes calls for recognition and solidarity (Swerts, 2017; Swerts & Oosterlynck, 2020). Supported by the church, IMs at the protest spoke up to tell their stories, stressing that they are Rotterdammers too. They thereby accentuate how irregularity can take on a long-term nature beyond arrival and give rise to claims to urban citizenship based on inhabitance (Purcell, 2003). The visibility and interaction with other residents that ensued offers a way of connecting and building community with neighborhood residents and other initiatives in the city.

## 5. Conclusion

Ever since people on the move have become immobilized and illegalized due to mobility restrictions, FBOs and other local actors have stepped in to create urban sanctuary (Bauder, 2017). The rise of sanctuary cities in North America and Europe has been extensively documented by now (Darling & Bauder, 2019). The tendency in the literature to highlight progressive, liberal cities as prime examples of “the sanctuary city,” however, relatively obscures how FBOs strategically negotiate the inclusion of IMs in less welcoming urban environments. This is especially important since right-wing populism is on the rise and solidarity initiatives towards IMs are increasingly criminalized (Rygiel & Baban, 2019). The lessons learned from examining the case study in Rotterdam can therefore potentially be extended to other European cities characterized by anti-immigrant hostility (Mosselson, 2021). Recent attempts by the Dutch state to formalize, control and curtail the sanctuary practices of the Pauluskerk came into conflict with the church’s religious mission to protect IMs (see Hajer et al., 2024). The church initially cooperated with the LVV initiative that aimed to make access to service provision for IMs dependent on voluntary return (Kox & Staring, 2022). However, the

church simultaneously circumvented the exclusionary logic of state-defined criteria for service provision “from within” through the covert continuation of informal service provision and, more recently, overt protest to the state.

Building on the literature on migration infrastructure(s) (Hall et al., 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), we argued that adopting an urban infrastructural perspective is key to fully grasp how FBOs function as places of sanctuary for IMs who are “stranded” or “stuck” in hostile urban environments. On the one hand, we contend that the notion of “urban migration infrastructures” is better equipped to grasp the blocked mobility paths of long-term undocumented residents than perspectives that focus on short-term arrivals (Loomans et al., 2024; Meeus et al., 2019, 2020). On the other hand, we argued that the ability of FBOs like the Pauluskerk to facilitate access to material and immaterial resources to IMs depends on their spatial and relational embeddedness within a differentiated “infrastructural field” (Schiller et al., 2023; Swartz, 2020). The central location of the Pauluskerk in the vicinity of transportation hubs and its welcoming architecture confirm the importance of emplacement and physical accessibility to serve as a “safe haven” (Schillebeeckx et al. 2019; Wessendorf, 2022). Furthermore, the Pauluskerk’s multiple outward relations with partner organizations as well as municipal actors that extend all over the city fuel the service provision within the Rotterdam “assistance circuit” for IMs (Felder et al., 2023). Zooming in on infrastructuring work, we highlighted that the Pauluskerk must maneuver between in/formality to provide material and immaterial services due to hostility that characterizes the infrastructural field (Swerts, 2017). Material resource provision encompassed providing shelter, food, showers, safety, and volunteering, while immaterial resources ranged from social contacts, a sense of belonging to legal assistance and political leverage.

At the same time, our findings indicate that the role that FBOs play as “safe havens” comes under pressure as national and local governments increasingly seek to incorporate their efforts into local reception policies or criminalize service provision towards IMs all together. Further research could explore the “limits to sanctuary” that seem to arise as sanctuary practices become professionalized or coopted by municipal actors. While FBOs try to be a beacon of hope for IMs in a hostile urban environment, their sanctuary practices risk increasing the dependence of IMs on service provision while perpetuating the state of being in limbo (Bagelman, 2013; Mosselson, 2021). Infrastructural fields could also be mapped even more comprehensively by more explicitly exploring the state perspective, state-society interactions and how networks reach beyond the local scale. It could also be fruitful to study how changing relations within urban infrastructural fields lead to shifting patterns of in/formality in service provision and differential outcomes for irregular migrant mobility. Moreover, the rolling back of sanctuary city policies and the effects that this might have on IMs’ access to resources should be investigated in further detail. While we have tried to consider the subjective experiences of IMs regarding accessing forms of service provision, follow-up research should be done to document this more systematically while paying attention to its impact on mobility trajectories. Research that aims to support urban sanctuary in hostile environments needs to acknowledge such tensions because, as one of our respondents from the Pauluskerk put it, “we are no angels that can perform miracles” but just try to “help where there is no helper.”

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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