‘walls to live behind’: insights into spatial realities of forced displacement and activist potential of contemporary scenography

Nevena Mrdjenovic
University of Technology Sydney
0000-0001-8548-0186

abstract

This essay investigates the liminal stages of inhabitation that emerge in the immediate aftermath of forced displacement — unplanned and improvised domestic sites positioned between ‘home-loss’ and ‘home-making’. It responds to the grievous statistics of displaced individuals around the globe and addresses the ongoing neglect of these critical sites in human experience in contemporary discourses.

Drawing on spatial, cultural, and political theory, the essay unpacks ruptured domestic experiences and defines them as forms of spatial and temporal shock. Violence in war is commonly enacted through speed; thus, survival unfolds in conditions of radical disorientation. In the immediate aftermath of displacement, one’s ability to enact home-making practices is completely constrained. This ‘living in the interim’ is defined as a performative condition in which spatial agency is expressed through gestures of survival. From this perspective, the zones of refuge people inhabit are investigated and presented as scenographic sites in which material improvisation, embodied adaptation, and human agency are actively performed.

The essay employs a scenographic inquiry, which allows for a unique hybridisation of spatial, temporal, and performative insights. Scenography here emerges as an activist lens and a tool, and develops a hybrid methodology that combines testimonial analysis and speculative experimentation. Two interrelated projects, ‘Spatial Triage’ (2021) and ‘In the middle of NOWhere’ (2023), offer an embodied form of witnessing and re-imaging of how refugees navigate temporary sites that are materially and symbolically suspended between past and future. Positioned within the expanded spatial discourse, scenography is capable of exposing the politics of domestic precarity and new spatial taxonomies of care, continuity, and resilience in the face of systemic violence and uprooting.

keywords

displacement; home; temporary interior; scenography; activism

cite as:
Nevena Mrdjenovic, ‘“Walls to Live Behind”: Insights Into Spatial Realities of Forced Displacement and Activist Potential of Contemporary Scenography’, *Idea Journal*, 22.1 (2025), pp. 35–48, doi.org/10.37113/ij.v22i1.609.

introduction

In mid-2025 more than 122 million people are forcibly displaced from their homes, marking the highest number in recorded history.[1] Behind these grievous statistics are people for whom returning home is impossible. Their homes remain in unsafe, conflict-ridden zones, have been heavily damaged, or destroyed in ethnic clashes. Without exception, wars claim atrocious numbers of lives and leave a devastating legacy of psychological distress and deeply inscribed trauma. Notably, all global conflicts also include the violent destruction of homes. Attacks on homes have been prominent throughout history and remain a feature of currently conflicted zones in Palestine, Ukraine, and beyond. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that since the escalation of the conflicts in October 2023 until May 2025 over 92 per cent of homes in the Gaza Strip have been destroyed.[2] In roughly the same period, in Ukraine, 2.5 million homes have been damaged and destroyed — contributing to more than 10.6 million Ukrainians being forcibly displaced.[3] Similar patterns of systemic war against domestic architecture and mass displacement are reported across other active conflicts in Sudan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Syria, Yemen, Haiti, and Sahel.

Forced displacement means abrupt separation of people from their common practices, familiar environments, and sites that are inscribed with a sense of personal and collective identity. In the initial moments of displacement, when a home becomes a site of danger, people are not instantly in search of a new place of belonging. Their first point of arrival is rarely chosen but is imposed based on what is immediately available: camps, collective shelters, abandoned buildings, informal settlements, and, for those ‘fortunate enough’, homes of people they know. Commonly, these unplanned refuges are characterised by material scarcity, regulatory ambiguity, and physical and psychological adaptability. The process and complexity of home-making following forced displacement have been studied from various scholarly perspectives. However, most discourses, including the spatial one, have largely overlooked the initial stage of displacement — one that occurs immediately after people leave their homes. This period is marked by spatial improvisations and suspension of normative social structures in which people, their identities, and belongings are all held in precarious flux. For many refugees, it is precisely this moment when ‘they’re stuck in a present they do not want to inhabit, awaiting a future they cannot reach, a future that is often unpredictable and uncertain’ that defines the traumatic nature of forced uprooting.[4]

This essay foregrounds this fleeting, but formative period immediately after displacement. It employs a scenographic lens aiming to foster a unique hybridisation of spatial and performative insights. Scenographic approach to space is established on concepts of inhabitation, embodiment, transformation, atmosphere, and the relational dynamics of space. Contemporary scenography is ‘(not a thing to be looked at, but) a way of looking’ and is here employed as ‘a tool, a system, a process, and generative organism for understanding the complex environment in which we live.’[5] Its frameworks allow for an exploration of the unplanned interiors of displacement as sites in which vulnerability, adaptability, and agency are materially and immaterially negotiated. The central aim of this essay is to reposition the provisional inhabitation as a critical site of inquiry within spatial, humanitarian, and cultural discourses. It presents a two-act scenographic experiment, ‘Spatial Triage’ (2021) and ‘In the middle of NOWhere’ (2023), on which it establishes a multi-layered investigation into realities of forced displacement and introduces an activist potential of scenography. This activist potential is to raise awareness, provoke dialogue, and inspire action. The two experiments signal activism by moving towards actively incorporating social change as a central focus of their design and spatial methodology. Within them, scenography is utilised as a lens and a tool. As an activist lens, scenography allows us to view the liminal spaces in question from a perspective engaged in social

and political change; as a tool, it enables a powerful utilisation of design and performance strategies to engage with real social and political issues.

for 'the theatre that has survived the theatre'

In his manifesto 'The Theatre is Dead' (1926), Austrian-American scenographer, architect, and scholar Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965) offers a provocation: 'We are working for the theatre that has survived the theatre.'[6] Similarly, in her contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre and Performance*, New Zealand architect, scholar, and visual artist Dorita Hannah claims, 'Theatre has "left the building", [...] making way for spatial performativity.'[7] Hannah urges scenographers to confront how global crisis, including ongoing ethnic conflicts, invades our spaces and imaginations. In the past few years alone, since the seeds of this research were laid, the dramatic nature of everyday experience has transcended the theatricality of staged performances. The heightened sense of theatricality stems from the continuous global state of uncertainty, tension, and intensified conflicts, leading to a collective state of globally prolonged 'dramatic suspense.'[8] We are, therefore, working for the *theatricality* that persists in fractured geographies of war, where we bear witness to real lives caught in suspense.

Contemporary scenography has long escaped the boundaries of theatrical prosceniums. Leading professors, Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer, tell us it '[...] can happen anywhere', and importantly they add, '[...] the role of the scenographer is often now blurred with that of [...] the activist.'[9] Finnish scenographer Laura Grondahl adds to this argument by explaining that expanded scenography is 'increasingly conceived of as an event, experience, and action.'[10] Further, transdisciplinary scenographer, performance maker, and researcher Louise Ann Wilson proposes that 'when it embraces site, life-event and participant, [...] scenography becomes a catalyst for personal, social and cultural change.'[11] Wilson builds her socially engaged scenographic framework as an extension of the concept of 'scenography with purpose' developed by contemporary theatre, performance, and technology professor Christopher Baugh.[12] In her book *Sites of Transformation: Applied and Socially Engaged Scenography in Rural Landscapes*, Wilson uses a series of case studies to define scenography as a distinctive type of applied art and performance practice that seeks tangible, therapeutic, and transformative real-world outcomes.[13] Importantly, this framework gives voice to marginalised individuals, groups, and communities. Baugh defines 'scenography with purpose' as a practice that engages directly with a community and becomes the author of independent works of and beyond performance: 'its skills and technologies are being used to address, through activism and intervention, issues of ecology as broadly as community memory, national identity, globalisation as well as making scenographic responses to asylum, urbanisation, and displacement.'[14]

homes under siege: domesticity in suspense

As global ethnic conflicts wear on, they are increasingly prone to greater extremes, not only in military strategy, but also in the symbolic violence enacted against cultural and domestic life. Violence in war is conventionally associated with physical attacks and territorial conquest. Often, war and violence are even treated as synonyms. One of the most influential political theorists of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), reminds us that violence is 'a phenomenon in its own right', and should be unpacked beyond its immediate material impacts.[15] This encompasses physical, psychological, and emotional harm inflicted upon individuals and their environments. The harm echoes in the lives of the attacked long after the actual act has taken place. This phenomenon is most strikingly manifested through the systemic violence against domestic dwellings. Its traces and effects are commonly overlooked, implying these are accidental or collateral damage. However, ongoing conflicts prove these actions are orchestrated strategies, developed within broader

practices of cultural erasure and ethnic cleansing.

Domestic sites are not inherently political, but they become politicised through their symbolic associations — as markers of cultural identity, personal and collective memory, community resilience, and continuity. In times of conflict, homes become more than dwelling sites and signify the presence of a community marked for erasure. Arendt argues that domestic space *is* essentially political as it 'provides the canvas for all social life.'[16] Destroying the 'canvas' is an attack that ruptures personal, social, and cultural continuity. Echoing this sentiment, contemporary architect and scholar Bernard Tschumi asserts that 'architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses, as much as by the enclosure of its walls.'[17] Here, architecture is conceived as a simultaneity of space and event, inseparably bound to the social relations and lived experiences it accommodates. From this perspective, the destruction of homes is not merely a loss of physical structures. It is an attack on the lived narratives and daily rituals that constitute human dwelling. The destruction of domestic architecture marks the end of a familiar spatial order and the beginning of profoundly complex physical and psychological notions of displacement. When homes are obliterated, what follows is not a process of re-building. Instead, this marks a period of improvisation of domestic life under conditions of loss, trauma, uncertainty, and fear.

French cultural theorist Paul Virilio opens his book *Art as Far as the Eye Can See* with a quote from a philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960): 'The seventeenth century was the century of mathematics, the eighteenth, of the physical sciences, and the nineteenth, of biology. The twentieth century is the century of fear.'[18] Taking this as a departure point, Virilio expresses his own view of the current condition where '[…] fear has become a dominant culture, if not an art — an art contemporary with mutually assured destruction.'[19] This resonates soundly with the present experience when displacement is not only a humanitarian emergency, but a consequence of sustained assaults on domestic life. Virilio acknowledges Arendt as a major post-war thinker, assigning particular significance to her conceptualisation of the 'phenomenon of terror', embracing it as 'the realisation of the law of movement', suggesting that any relationship to terror is interwoven with life and speed.[20]

Virilio interprets Arendt's 'law of movement' as 'the law of speed': 'it is clear that that terror is not simply an emotional and psychological phenomenon but a physical one as well in the sense of physics and kinetics, a phenomenon related to what I call the "acceleration of reality".'[21] He coins the term 'dromology', which originates from the Greek 'dromos' or 'racecourse', and thereby interprets the world and our existence as a product of speed and its logic.[22] For Virilio, this is crucial for understanding the structure of societies and warfare. Within this, the concepts of speed, terror, surprise, and spectacle emerge as highly significant. Precisely, most homes are destroyed in brief military strikes that embody these exact principles. While the overall military operation can be sustained and systematic, the actual act of destruction (airstrike, drone strike, or a military operation) is typically very fast, occurring in minutes or even seconds. Examples of this can be found in both contemporary and historic conflicts. In Gaza or Ukraine, a targeted airstrike on a residential building may occur within seconds, instantly wiping out decades of domestic histories. Historically, the break-up of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFR Yugoslavia) also documents military operations organised on these principles. The Croatian operations 'Flash' (May 1995) and 'Storm' (August 1995) occurred over a day or two and were conducted to cleanse the terrain of ethnic minorities in the shortest possible time. In war, the urge for speed is a key part of the strategy, which creates psychological disturbance, shock, and disorientation in those affected.

This acceleration of reality through destruction generates profound cognitive and psychological disorientation. It is a tactic through which uncertainty

becomes structurally imposed. Catherine Brun, a human geographer whose work centres primarily on displacement, adds, 'uncertainty is not only a characteristic of displacement but becomes a governing principle of everyday life in displacement.'[23] Forcibly displaced individuals lose their homes within minutes, finding themselves thrust into homelessness before they have even grasped the unfolding violence. This rupture is traumatic and affects one's capacity to plan or act with agency. Speed is, therefore, not neutral, but is a form of domination. This governing principle is lived through the body, but also through the improvised acts of domestic endurance in the first interiors people inhabit.

living in the interim: between home-loss and home-making

Housing is a basic human right, recognised in Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.[24] Contemporary interior architecture scholar Tasoulla Hadjiyanni reminds us that, 'home is not only a physical space, but a place of identity, control, and connection.'[25] Hadjiyanni's work extensively explores marginalised communities, including those forcibly displaced, and focuses on the ways people negotiate identity, belonging, and resilience through everyday spatial practices. She argues for a distinction between the concepts of housing and home-making — defining housing as a physical and structural provision of shelter, and home-making as the personal, cultural, and emotional process of creating a sense of belonging. Housing thus involves meeting pragmatic needs, while home-making embodies acts of identity, memory, and ritual that unfold over a longer period through repetition, familiar acts, memory, and emotional engagement. Central to Hadjiyanni's argument is a concept of 'oikophilia', derived from the Greek 'oikos' meaning 'home' and 'philia' meaning 'love' — in its literal sense it translates as 'the love of home'. In her definition of 'oikophilia', Hadjiyanni refers to the universal human need to form deep attachments to space, which is essential to wellbeing, continuity, and the restoration of agency following displacement.[26] She equals home-making processes to meaning-making processes and Illustrates this by defining homes as settings through which 'people create order, shape intentions, form dreams, [...] and relish in their rights.'[27]

Jelena Golubovic and Parin Dossa, Canadian scholars specialising in anthropology of violence and displacement, support Hadjiyanni's definition of home-making and explain that the term itself indicates a process: 'it implies that homes are not simply stepped into, ready-made, and nor are they simply stepped out of: they are cultivated and continuously reimagined in the context of everyday life.'[28] An ethnographer of migration and home-making, Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia further deepens this argument by saying that while displaced people may be physically sheltered, they often remain 'existentially homeless' and estranged from the complex emotional and temporal foundations of home.[29] For Murcia, home-making in displacement is not about spatial recovery, but rather about restoring continuity, meaning, and a sense of future. Croatian ethnologist Jasna Capo also resists a simplified linear trajectory from displacement to home-making. Her theories align with Murcia's in saying that forcibly displaced people live in 'multi-temporal presents' — in which past trauma, present instability, and future uncertainty coexist.[30] From Capo's perspective, home is also not a fixed place, but a set of practices, memories, and relational attachments. Golubovic and Dossa extend this argument by defining home as a 'place that evokes the rhythms, sights and sounds of everyday life [...] It is a place that enables one to imagine a future.'[31]

In the immediate aftermath of displacement, one's ability to enact home-making practices is profoundly constrained. This process is haunted by loss and ambiguity. In acceleration-induced loss, it is not only physical displacement that affects one's ability to build a new sense of belonging, but also an acute temporal disorientation. The speed with which one is violently displaced from home under profoundly traumatic circumstances

makes coherent spatial and emotional response nearly impossible. This disorientation highlights the need for immediate survival strategies, rather than processes of home-making. It also foregrounds the necessity of alternative spatial frameworks, such as scenography, to make sense of how people reorient, adapt, and endure in unplanned interiors shaped by trauma.

scenography as an analytical and political act: act one: unpacking *mise-en-scènes* of survival

The conceptual seeds of this essay lie in fifteen letters written by refugees from the former SFR Yugoslavia. The letters were received as part of a seminar, 'Between Migration and Stasis: Case Studies' (2021), which examined the material and immaterial aftermath of war in this region (1991–1999). This was an online event, organised as a follow-up to the *International Federation for Theatre Research World Congress* (IFTR), which took place in Belgrade in 2018, under the official title 'Theatre and Migration: Theatre, Nation, and Identity: Between Migration and Stasis'. The seminar took place over three days and brought together scholars and practitioners from theatre, spatial, performance, cultural, and media studies. Unique to all participants was that they were all directly or indirectly affected by the ethnic conflicts in the former SFR Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

A panel titled 'Spatial Triage' was held on the second day of the seminar and was conceived as the first stage of a scenographic investigation into spatial realities of forced displacement. This was a research-based workshop, which engaged with written testimonies of refugees from the region and examined the improvised interiors as spaces of physical and psychological endurance. It was developed on the grounds of 'forensic scenography', a method of spatial inquiry that inverted scenographic processes and questioned the meanings and consequences of attacks on domestic dwellings during the conflicts in the 1990s.[32] This workshop foregrounded that 'as scholars in the field of performance studies, we are both uniquely qualified and ethically obliged to explore specific sites of violence as well as larger questions about how violence is specifically performed'.[33] It focused on developing a spatial taxonomy of temporary inhabitation practices through a scenographic lens, and set two key goals: (1) to unpack the fragile transition refugees experience in their journey from home-loss to home-making; and (2) to examine scenographic capacities to be utilised as a tool for activism and advocacy. While motivated by the ongoing waves of forced displacement around the world at the time (Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Gaza), the experiences of refugees from SFR Yugoslavia were framed as a concrete case study. Reasons for this were dual: (1) the temporal distance from the events in the 1990s allowed a necessary reflective space to ethically engage with experiences of trauma, loss, and spatial negotiations — experiences that remain central to all humanitarian emergencies; and (2) since all participants in this panel had personal ties to the conflicts in the region, it was possible to achieve an embodied engagement with the material and to establish a simultaneously critical and empathetic lens.

Inspired by the medical connotation of the term 'triage', the panel hints at the urgent prioritisation of care. 'Spatial Triage' represents an analogy to describe the improvised and precarious spatial conditions that emerge in the immediate aftermath of home-loss. Prior to the event, a 'Call for Participation' was sent to the registered participants [Fig. 01], asking them to write about the first interior they inhabited after leaving their home. Fifteen letters were received in a dedicated digital submission box that did not require any personal details. This allowed the participants to remain anonymous, which prompted more detailed insights into spatial practices [Fig. 02]. The letters were examined from spatial, cultural, performative, and psychological perspectives. The result of this panel was a classification of information into four distinct categories: 'shared domestic interiors', 'residual domesticities', 'civic

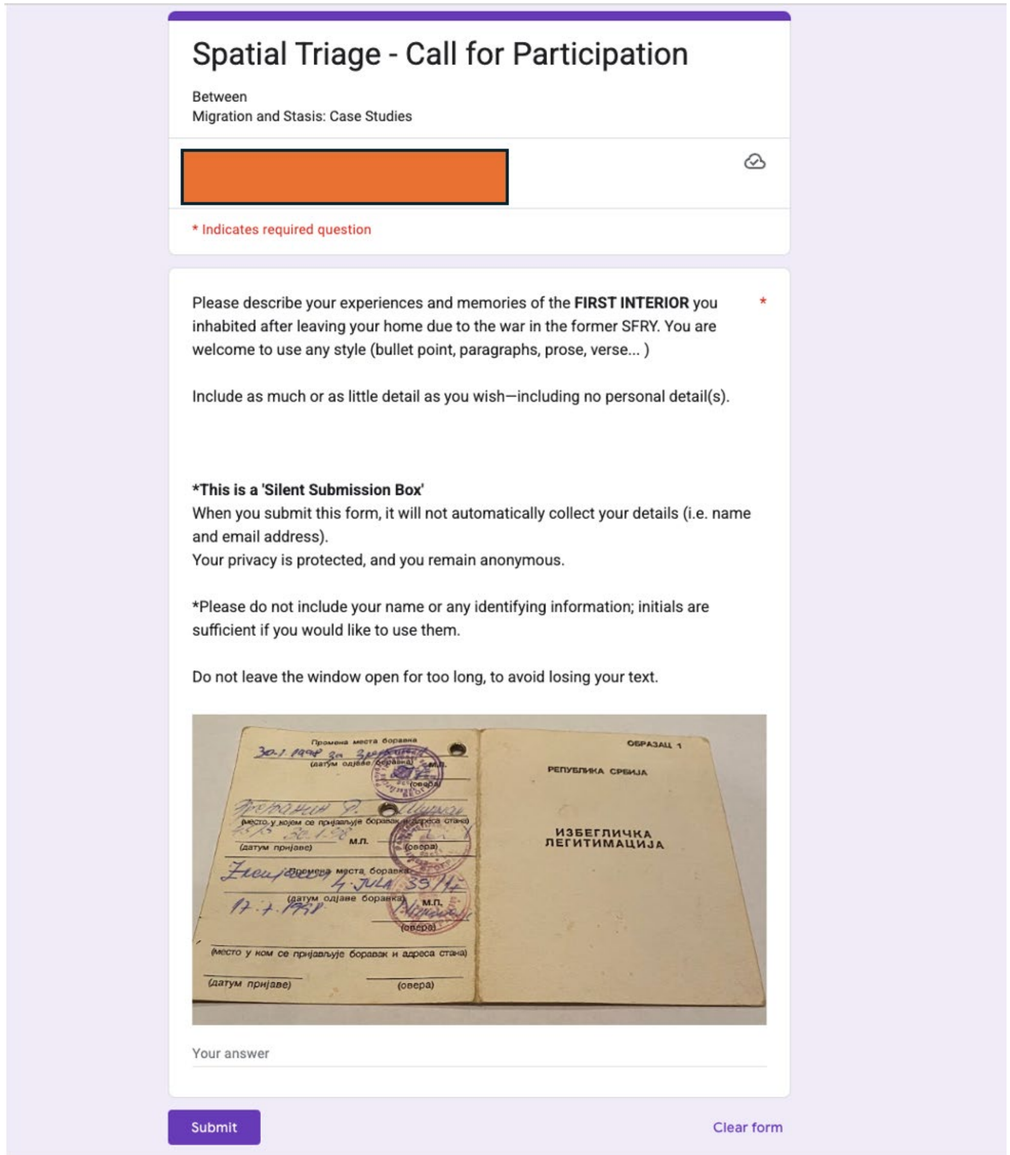

Figure 01.
'Call for Participation' ('Spatial Triage') includes the author's authentic image of Republic of Serbia Refugee Card. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2021.

conversions', and 'institutional thresholds.'[34]

Uniting all descriptions was an acute inscription of traumatic experiences and memories of psychologically charged spatial practices. This unique mode of inhabitation requires a spatial framework attuned to analysis beyond material forms and physical spatial conditions. It requires a discipline capable of profoundly unpacking complex spatial conditions, which involve embodiment, human presence, transformation, temporality, narrativity, performativity, relationality, atmosphere, and sensory engagement. The scenographic form of spatial inquiry embodies all required parameters and is concerned with how environments are composed, as well as how they are physically and psychologically experienced. This offers a vital methodological lens through which to investigate how displaced individuals navigate, adapt, and inhabit temporary interiors. As a practice rooted in narrativity and performativity, it also allows for a reading of the unplanned interiors that goes beyond

'Me, my sister and our cousin stayed with my mother's cousin, her husband and 11-year old son in Novi Beograd, Blok 61. We shared **a studio apartment (garsonjera)** dining room/living room in one, tiny kitchen, enclosed balcony turned into a small bedroom for her son. They adapted the space, turned the balcony into kid's bedroom. Other than this and the bathroom, the rest was **one open space. Three of us slept on a pull-out couch** and a mattress **on the floor** in the main room. During the day, **bedding was folded** and stacked in the corner. Every surface had **a dual purpose** coffee table for meals, later used as a desk for the boy. **Mornings were crowded**, everyone trying to get ready using one bathroom. The kitchen could only fit one person at a time; we took turns. **It was a good time to be alone**. I didn't mind cooking (although I wasn't very good). We had **no privacy**: conversations, emotions, arguments, phone calls – all shared. **Nights were the hardest**, too quiet to ignore the **closeness, too many bodies** in one space, too many memories of home. Breakfast, lunch, dinner - all organised between us, passing stuff to each other, reorganising the space. For three months. We had nowhere to put our clothes, we kept them in the bags, under the dining table. I remember **sitting on a windowsill**, pulling the curtain over me **to be alone, to think or to cry**.'

'my mother collected left-over male **clothes** to **create curtains, partitions, dividers.** She spent hours making them. The patterns on the clothing were familiar.'

'where we stayed was not a house, **just some walls to live behind.**
No electricity and running water, no furniture, barely anything.
But there was a white curtain!'

'In Belgrade for **two weeks with my son**
We stayed with my husband's relatives, I didn't know them.
They gave us **the kitchen**.
Other people were already here. I was a lawyer in Sarajevo, good career and spacious three bedroom apartment.
We **slept on a mattress, on the floor**. In kitchen.

I used **one chair as a wardrobe**. I made coffee for all in the morning. Silently. It gave me a purpose. I avoided leaving the kitchen. They were lovely people, but I was embarrassed. I cleaned the kitchen tops many times a day.

I rarely slept, I would sit at a table at night and wait for sunrise.'

'I didn't give up **rituals**, even **here**. Every morning, I would **turn the chair** to the sun, **pretend** life is **normal,** for 20 minutes. Quietly, imagine this will be over soon, I will go home. It has been 30 years, **I never went home**.'

'I **was 8** when we came to Karaburma. There was **three women and five children** in a small space. We had **one living room, combined kitchen and dining area, bathroom, and a small balcony**. My mum did not even know the woman this apartment belonged to. She was a cousin of one of the women staying with us, she was in Germany at the time. The space **felt like a box**. Us kids spent most time outside. In the **morning** we **would fold everything and push against the walls**. In the **evening**, we would **pull** everything out. My job was **to sweep the floor before bed.** I hated it. We **hung clothes across the ceiling,** to dry when it rained. I was embarrassed, but pretended it was funny. This was useful when we needed privacy. **To hide**. What I **remember the most is waiting**: to use the bathroom, to eat, to sleep. Grown ups were always tense. We lived like this for five months.'

Figure 02.
Excerpts from the letters collected through the 'Spatial Triage'. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2021.

temporary functional shelters, unpacking them as dynamic stages of improvisation, negotiation, and physical and psychological resilience. The interiors described and analysed across the four categories are presented as scenographic sites where survival is performed and witnessed.

‘shared domestic interiors’

‘Shared domestic interiors’ referred to relatives’ apartments and private homes, and, in these letters, participants largely focused on spatial improvisation within family networks — marked by overcrowding, emotional intensity, and negotiation, and informal (often chaotic) support systems. The scenographic framework of ‘Spatial Triage’ defined ‘shared domestic interiors’ as spaces where theatricality was recognised in heightened proximity, emotional intensity, and improvised choreographies.[35] These sites were charged with stages of overlapping routines, with implicit and explicit negotiation of spatial boundaries. These negotiations often occurred silently through gestures and repetition of domestic actions. Described interiors were inhabited in deeply relational manners, and the ordinary ‘overcrowding’ was reconfigured under extraordinary pressures.

One of the letters in this cluster documents three young women, all in their early twenties, arriving from their village in Croatia (1991) to stay with their relatives in Belgrade. A husband, wife, and their eleven-year-old son lived in an adapted studio apartment in a socialist block in New Belgrade. The apartment consisted of a combined living and dining area, small kitchen, bathroom, and what originally was a fully recessed balcony — now a miniature converted bedroom. Five adults and one child shared this space for three months. Another striking one was written by a young man who was eight years old when he arrived in Belgrade as a refugee from a small town in Croatia. His letter describes experiences of sharing a studio apartment on the outskirts of Belgrade with seven other people. Three mothers and five children negotiated life in a single living room, combined kitchen and dining area, bathroom, and a small balcony for five months. The third letter presents an experience of a middle-aged lawyer from Sarajevo, who arrived in Belgrade with her twelve-year-old son, and spent two weeks with her husband’s distant relatives. The elderly couple lived in a two-bedroom apartment in central Belgrade and had already taken in three other cousins from war-torn regions. The mother and son found themselves expelled from reality within days, replacing their spacious three-bedroom, light-filled apartment with a narrow kitchen in which they lived for two weeks.

Scenographically speaking, all letters document the framing of spaces as a continuously fluid condition: furniture doubles in function, thresholds between sleeping and social zones are dissolved, and everyday objects (folding beds, dining tables, window sills, curtains) take on heightened material and psychological significance. Focalisation, a scenographic strategy that utilises spatial, visual and sensory means to direct *what, how, and from whose perspective* an environment or a performance is experienced, emerged as highly significant here. It occurred through seemingly irrelevant daily rituals: the table set up, the rearrangement of bodies for sleep, the moment someone closed a door or moved a curtain to create a sense of privacy. These were the instances in which the performative nature of survival unfolded in the most intimate and seemingly prosaic gestures. TVs and radios were common points of focus, particularly early in the morning and late afternoon, when everyone waited for news from home. Ensuring everyone had a clear vantage point to the TV was an implicit rule at these times.

Inhabitation implied a negotiation in space, ruled by proximity, time, and scarcity. Relationality here had a dual meaning — human interactions and spatial layout: some stood while others sat, someone’s sleep was repeatedly interrupted, and they took turns in preparing meals. Whoever was close to the radio controlled whether it played music or news. In scenographic terms, these

interiors were actively *performed* and *transformed* multiple times a day, and they were also *witnessed*. Performance occurred through the acts of waiting (to change, to use the bathroom, to eat), folding (beds/tables/chairs), washing and rearranging, and withdrawing (sitting on a windowsill, behind a curtain). They naturally produced atmospheres of vulnerability and care — through acts of physical improvisation and psychological resilience. Atmospheres are accumulated through scent, noise, rhythm, and gestures. Materiality was also equally significant, with everyday objects (such as curtains, chairs, sofas, and dining tables) acquiring heightened meanings and significance. In this context, they did not simply serve their prime function, but also became tools to improvise and separate, to achieve privacy and preserve dignity among the chaos. In these spaces, privacy was a negotiated act and was often linked closely to spectatorship. With the limited space, everyone was both a performer and a spectator. The letters document that people quickly accepted their new roles and individual cues — children learnt to turn their gaze when situations got tense, pushing themselves into deep play to avoid the reality of scary news or witnessing adults in distressed emotional states. Women, on the other hand, engaged in domestic activities, almost as a form of meditation and a means of separation from reality.

'residual domesticities'

'Residual domesticities' referred to interiors never intended for permanent inhabitation — incompletely built summer homes and fragmented architectural remains: basements and storage rooms within residential buildings.[36] These spaces highlight temporary adaptive reuse of damaged, incomplete, or abandoned domestic sites. Letters received reveal that experiences in such interiors were marked by fragility, a sense of exposure, fear, and feelings of unease driven by traces of prior fragmented inhabitation. These interiors are a stark opposite to the idea of home; they are stripped of comfort, coherence, or clear markers of domestic functions. However, they each had a pronounced atmosphere, memory, and negotiation of inhabitation under duress. Materiality was consistent across the letters, and many mentioned unpainted or semi-exposed brick walls, minimal furniture that was damaged or with traces of long neglect, dim lighting — often just a single lightbulb in each room, key infrastructure such as heating, electricity, or plumbing that was barely functioning or simply absent.

One of the letters in this cluster describes a family of six, parents with four teenagers, escaping the coastal Croatian town of Zadar, and arriving at an unfinished holiday house near Novi Sad (Serbia) where they lived for three months. The house they lived in had no electricity nor running water. Similarly, another letter documents the experience of a mother and an eleven-year-old daughter who left their spacious second-floor apartment overlooking a local park in Croatian capital Zagreb at the peak of the conflicts in 1991. Their refuge was a damp storage room, located in the lower ground level of a residential building in Belgrade. The mother and daughter spent three weeks in this room, which was once occasionally occupied by a handyman for the building. The daughter, who wrote this letter, describes a barely hanging light bulb as the only source of light — and remembers how it cast long shadows over a pale green dining table and a set of three damaged chairs. The third letter in this group tells a story of a family of four who lived in a basement in a centrally located building in Belgrade for the first two months after they had left their home in a village in Bosnia.

'Residual domesticities' were primarily marked by the compression of function and emotion within interiors. Ordinary domestic activities, like cooking, sleeping, washing, had to be improvised and performed, adapted to the unfamiliar spatial taxonomies. In the basement and storage room, cooking was done on hot plates designed for simple meals only. In the holiday house with no electricity, people had to quickly adapt to burning fires to cook or make coffee or tea. In these spatial

experiences, fragmented spectatorship was one of the most powerful scenographic insights. Partial visibility exemplifies how spatial framing conditions the perceptual field: in a former storage room, nestling between the ground floor and basement, windows were low enough to reveal shoes and lower parts of human bodies, as well as occasional stray cats and dogs, and as such offered contact with the world, but also reinforced human isolation. Scenographically speaking, these windows also become an analogy for this mother and daughter's psychological and physical transition from a safe, upper-class socialist Yugoslav apartment filled with books and family memorabilia to a discarded, 'left-over' space in an unfamiliar city.

Atmospherically, these interiors are dense: concrete walls were often described as damp, the air was still and heavy, and fragmented past inhabitation was inscribed in the material and immaterial qualities of these interiors. Objects in spaces were scarce, but they held symbolic power. Letters document details of an unplugged fridge, faded dining table, a bed with a broken base, and a single white curtain [Fig. 02]. They become props used by displaced inhabitants to enact continuity, evoke familiar domestic gestures, and manage survival. A performative illustration of this is seen in the description of a mother in the holiday house, who continuously reorganised the scarce furniture in the space and placed the white curtain on a window above a dining table to create a familiar scene for family meals. Such acts define these interiors as improvised stages of physical and psychological resilience. Scenographically, these incomplete interiors are more than passive transient spaces and emerge as active spatial agents. They mediate relationality, shape how time and identity are perceived and performed, and reinforce roles within space. Finally, the narrative potential of these sites lies in the balance and tension between absence and presence. They reinforce the unique scenographic capacity to expose and understand the politics of temporary inhabitation — as an embodied and theatrical condition of living in interim.

'civic conversions'

'Civic conversions' referred to school and community halls converted into emergency shelters. Descriptions of such spaces primarily highlighted their temporariness, with formal layouts that commonly lacked order, privacy, and stability.[37] These interiors were originally designed for collective use, rather than domestic life. In the period of the early 1990s, they were recontextualised through acts of survival and spatial improvisation. Only a few letters documented these interiors, yet they all stressed the absence of partitions and thresholds between people. Zones of 'belonging' (to a family or an individual in space) were created through furniture arrangement — beds, chairs, small tables, and occasional storage cabinets. Without proper division between them, each zone was an open stage through which private life became unavoidably open for spectatorship. In contrast to the first two categories above, which were marked by spatial scarcity, these interiors were large, open, and echoing. The letters note that the scale of each space emphasised the human vulnerability in these settings. The overall spatial field was defined by the external walls of the actual hall and, with no proper divisions between people, they had to improvise using available props to create loose partitions out of large pieces of clothing or military blankets. One of these letters is written from the perspective of a boy who arrived at one of these camps with his mother and sister. He describes their experience over three months, and focuses on his mother, a woman in her early thirties who became a refugee and a single parent in a matter of days. He depicts his mother's creativity in collecting leftover large pieces of clothing donated by the locals, sewing them together by hand to create partitions for their 'zone'. The letter hints at the larger significance of this action, as the garments were predominantly male and featured familiar patterns. Details about his father are not revealed in the letter, but, scenographically, this action suggests that these gendered, fragmented garments could signify his

absence. Their seemingly practical use could further be interpreted as a re-inscription of the father figure into the space and the overall experience. Almost ritualistic stitching of male garments to create shelter within an open space could be seen as a re-establishment of the ideological role of men as protectors in war.

Another example of ‘civic conversions’ depicts an emergency shelter created in a school hall, in the town of Sid at the Serbian and Croatian border. Here, we gain insight from a ten-year-old girl who spent three days in this interior with her grandparents before moving to central Serbia. This interior was stripped of all comfort and became a space marked by proximity. Objects acquired new material meaning and scenographic significance: sleeping on improvised beds, her grandmother would set up her purse as a pillow for the two of them, and chairs doubled as dining tables. Moments and events in the space were organised around shared choreography: negotiating sleep times amid noise from the other areas; hiding behind scarves, blankets, and jackets to change; lining up for food, toilets, and showers. These interiors generate fragile notions of context, where people are both performers and spectators of one another’s simultaneous vulnerability and resilience. Scenographically, these interiors were primarily shaped through focalisation: who can and cannot be seen, who is watching, and who manages to temporarily disappear within view.

‘institutional thresholds’

‘Institutional thresholds’ here referred to worker’s hotels and aged-care facilities, which were adapted in times of war.[38] These are semi-public facilities repurposed for refuges, in which the boundaries between care, control, and provisional shelters were often blurred. These interiors were initially designed for transitional habitation and regulated movement. Their layouts were repetitive and rigid: narrow corridors, uniform doors, thin mattresses, coarse blankets, dark wood furniture in each room, and low ceilings that further constricted the space. Described materiality reflected the original spatial function: scarce and straightforward, united through a series of dull brown tones. Mentions of the scent of musty and damp carpets in the hallways signal a persistent atmosphere of stasis in both locations.

One of the letters documents the experience of a young couple, in their late twenties at the time, as they escape a Croatian coastal town and arrive at a workers’ hotel in central Serbia. In their experience, staging was largely fixed, but objects doubled in meaning — beds became tables during the day, chairs were used for sitting, creating spatial zones, and drying clothes. Focalisation was here recognised in small acts of domesticity — carefully placing a chair to catch the morning light or using a closet door as a partition to create privacy. These gestures became embodied acts of reclaiming agency through spatial actions. Another letter describes the experience of a family of four housed in an aged-care facility, in a single room, with a balcony overlooking a park and a private bathroom. Their daily life was choreographed around communal areas: children playing in the courtyard, parents engaging in fleeting encounters with other displaced families and remaining elderly residents. The use of space was negotiated between the old and new residents. Narrow hallways became sites of social gathering but also places where moments of isolation could occur. Similarly, doorways were thresholds of movement between spaces, but also of exposure. Often this revealed states of vulnerability or intimate moments of care. The spatial narrative was shaped by use, more than architectural intention. In both settings, embodiment was heavily restrained primarily through the compression of activities into confined zones.

act two: ‘we (have) finally abandon(ed) our seat as spectators and are prepared to struggle with all our might to participate’[39]

The second part of the scenographic investigation, ‘In the middle of NOWhere’ (2023), extended the inquiry developed in ‘Spatial Triage.’ It took place as part of Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space (2023), and mobilised scenographic strategies

as instruments of intervention and care. The title hints at disorientation and rupture through violent displacement — an abrupt removal from roots and familiar contexts, and a shift into an existential limbo. The wordplay ‘nowhere’ and ‘now-here’ embodied the complexity of losing a home and being urgently forced into present-tense survival when decisions are to be made quickly, often with limited options and resources. This emphasis on urgency mirrors the acceleration of reality when violence was enacted upon homes.

The workshop invited spatial designers and performance makers to explore how scenography can respond to the realities of forced displacement. The exploration was grounded in questions of survival, resilience, and dignity — moving from reflective to speculative practices. The participants worked in two stages for over six hours. In the first part, they worked collectively to explore the capacities of common scenographic strategies of composition (staging, spatial sequencing, and material composition) and relational presence (relationality, atmosphere, focalisation, rhythm, and embodied performativity) to be translated into real-world applications [Fig. 03]. This was a generative phase that centred primarily on large-format collaborative maps [Fig. 04]. Participants employed design thinking approaches and reframed scenographic tools as spatial tactics for ethically engaged presence, care, and adaptation in times of crisis.

They interrogated how scenography can operate in sites like shared shelters, transitional rooms, and unfinished homes. The extended scenographic tools focused on non-visual perception (touch, scent, sound, spatial memory) and spatial improvisation that focuses on preserving dignity (creating environments that preserve agency, emotional safety, and cultural identity). A concept of ‘dignified improvisation’ emerged as one of the key methodological drivers. Through this, participants speculated on how limited or found materials can be used to construct interiors of care, ritual, and belonging without compromising refugees’ sense of self. They documented these explorations through a series of maps in which they explored the layers of connections between people, spaces, and landscapes. This framed scenography as an investigative tool capable of unpacking layers of traumatic memory embedded in spatial experiences.

Figure 03.
‘In the middle of NOWhere’ — mapping stage, Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space, Prague, Czech Republic. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2023.

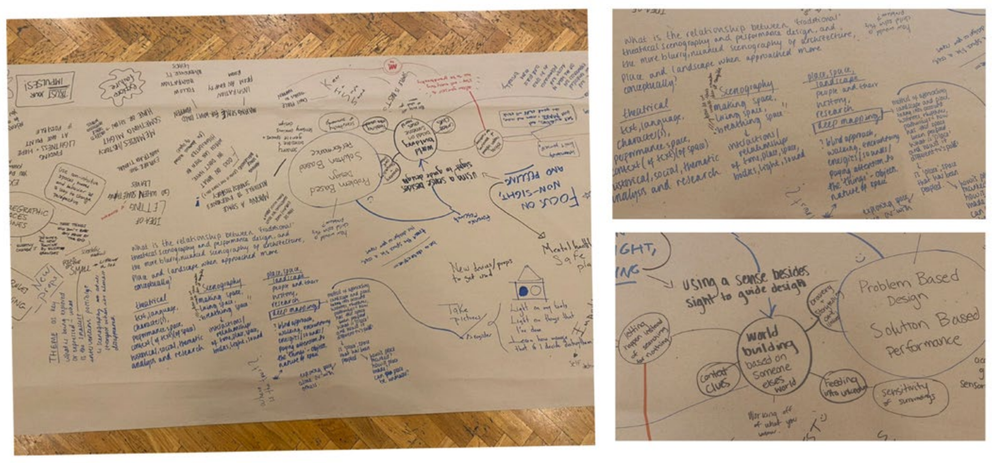

Figure 04.
Maps produced in the first part of the workshop. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2023.

In the second part of the workshop participants were given excerpts from the letters submitted in ‘Spatial Triage’ as scenographic prompts. They worked in haste, but with profound criticality. In small teams, participants applied newly expanded scenographic strategies and focused on producing speculative prototypes [Fig. 05]. These prototypes were aimed at fostering conversations for further action. They were prototypes of ‘dignified shelters’, but also of moments, events, and experiences that need to be taken into consideration during the design process. They built on strategies of staging, focalisation, relationality, embodiment, and materiality to propose spatial gestures that could be activated in real scenarios of displacement. Uniting all proposals was the sense of urgency and advocacy for humane and context-sensitive spatial

response to the ongoing global migration crisis. It asserted the capacity of scenographic discipline to make these crises visible, but also to intervene, reframe, and support.

Figure 05.
Speculative Prototypes focused not on final design solutions, but on unpacking key questions of experience of displacement. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2023.

conclusion

In the face of genocides and widespread ethnic and political violence, as well as unprecedented figures of forced uprooting, scenography's capacity to narrate, frame, and transform the unplanned infrastructure of refuge is critically urgent. Virilio's concept of 'dromology' teaches us that wars are events that operate through acceleration of reality, happening through destruction, displacement, and disorientation. When homes are under siege, they are erased in seconds, rupturing domestic life and casting people into a state of psychological and spatial suspense. This rupture makes a dramatic impact on the journey between home-loss and home-making. The in-between stage is a crucial point in personal and collective history, marking moments in which acts of survival occur, primarily through re-enacting spatial agency. Through its unique capacities, scenography allows spatial discourses to actively respond to and engage with issues of war, ethnic cleansing, humanitarian policy, and uneven geographies of care.

acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the participants of 'Spatial Triage' and 'In the middle of NOWhere'. Their critical and creative insights, as well as their passion for performative and political capacities of spatial studies, have been instrumental in shaping the core ideas of this essay.

I dedicate this essay to all those currently living between 'home-loss' and 'home-making'.

All contributions to the 'Spatial Triage' project were collected anonymously.

author biography

Nevena Mrdjenovic (PhD) is a theorist and designer with expertise in interior architecture and scenography. Her research practice is concerned with the performative, cultural, and political capacities of space. Nevena is a lecturer in Interior Architecture, University of Technology, Sydney. She has previously worked across theatre, film, installation art, and pedagogy in Australia and Europe.

notes

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023', *UNHCR*, 2024 <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends> [accessed 27 May 2025].

2 Dezeen, '92 per cent destroyed or damaged, UN report finds', 22 January 2025 <https://www.dezeen.com/2025/01/22/gaza-housing-92-per-cent-destroyed-damaged-un-report/> [accessed 22 May 2025].

3 USA for UNHCR, 'Ukraine Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and News', 2025 <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/> [accessed 7 May 2025].

4 Cathrine Brun, 'Active Waiting and Changing Hopes: Toward a Time Perspective on Protracted Displacement', *Social Analysis*, 59.1 (2015), pp. 19–37 (p. 19).

5 Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (Routledge, 2019), p. 16; Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer (eds), *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p. 16.

6 Frederick Kiesler, 'The Theatre Is Dead', *The Little Review*, 11.2 (1926).

7 Dorita Hannah, 'Performance Spaces and Spatial Performativity: Theatre has Left the Building', in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre*, ed. by Ralf Remshardt and Aneta Mancewicz (Routledge, 2023), pp. 344–351 (p. 344).

8 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (Routledge, 2006), p. 35.

9 McKinney and Palmer, *Scenography Expanded*, p. 1; 3.

10 Laura Gröndahl, 'Scenographic Strategies and Communication', *in SPACE–EVENT–AGENCY–EXPERIENCE: Open Access E-Publication of the DREX Project* (Centre for Practise as Research in Theatre, University of Tampere, 2012) <https://research.tuni.fi/app/uploads/2020/03/95497ccf-1_grondahl.pdf> [accessed 5 July 2025].

11 Louise Ann Wilson, *Sites of Transformation: Applied and Socially Engaged Scenography in Rural Landscapes* (Methuen Drama, 2022), p. 2.

12 Christopher L. Baugh, 'Scenography with Purpose: Activism and Intervention', in *The Disappearing Stage: Reflections on the 2011 Prague Quadrennial*, ed. by Arnold Aronson (Arts and Theatre Institute/Prague Quadrennial, 2012), pp. 36–49 <https://hull-repository.worktribe.com/output/370635/scenography-with-purpose-activism-and-intervention> [accessed 5 July 2025].

13 Louise Ann Wilson, *Sites of Transformation*.

14 Baugh, 'Scenography with Purpose'.

15 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Penguin Books, 2022), p. 19.

16 Mark Kingwell, 'Modernism à la mode', *Harper's Magazine* (November 2007), p. 86.

17 Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, 3rd edn (The MIT Press, 1996), p. 100.

18 Paul Virilio, *Art as Far as the Eye Can See*, trans. by Julie Rose (Berg, 2007), p. 1.

19 Virilio, *Art as Far as the Eye Can See*, p. 21.

20 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), p. 465; Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear*, trans. by Ames Hodges (Semiotext(e), 2012), p. 21.

21 Virilio, *The Administration of Fear*, p. 21.

22 Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), p. 8.

23 Catherine Brun, 'Active Waiting and Changing Hopes: Toward a Time Perspective on Protracted Displacement', *Social Analysis*, 59.1 (2015), pp. 19–37 (p. 19).

24 United Nations, 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> [accessed 7 April 2025].

25 Tasoulla Hadjiyanni, *The Right to Home: Exploring How Space, Culture, and Identity Intersect with Disparities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 4.

26 Hadjiyanni, *The Right to Home*, p. 4.

27 Hadjiyanni, *The Right to Home*, p. 5.

28 Parin Dossa and Jelena Golubovic, 'Reimagining Home in the Wake of Displacement', *Studies in Social Justice*, 13.1 (2019), pp. 171–186 (p. 173).

29 Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia, 'Physically Sheltered but Existentially Homeless: Losing Home in the Aftermath of Conflict and Displacement', *Migration Studies*, 9.3 (2021), pp. 1361–1379.

30 Jasna Čapo, '"Durable Solutions", Transnationalism, and Homemaking among Croatian and Bosnian Former Refugees', *Ethnologia Balkanica*, 14 (2010), pp. 83–100 (p. 83).

31 Dossa and Golubovic, 'Reimagining Home in the Wake of Displacement', p. 179.

32 Nevena Mrdjenovic, 'War on Architecture: Scenographic Strategies in Tracing Post-War Home in the Former SFR Yugoslavia' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Technology Sydney, 2017).

33 Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon (eds), *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 3.

34 Nevena Mrdjenovic, 'Between Migration and Stasis: Case Studies', *Spatial Triage* (online, 2021).

35 Mrdjenovic, 'Between Migration and Stasis'.

36 Mrdjenovic, 'Between Migration and Stasis'.

37 Mrdjenovic, 'Between Migration and Stasis'.

38 Mrdjenovic, 'Between Migration and Stasis'.

39 Richard C. Beacham, *Adolphe Appia: Artist and Visionary of the Modern Theatre* (Routledge, 2013), p. 238.